

Inseparable virtue and the *imago Dei* in Augustine: a speculative interpretation of *De Trinitate* 6.4

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Abstract

In *De Trinitate* 6.4, Augustine compares the inseparability of virtues within the human soul to the divine attributes within the simple divine substance of the Trinity. In this paper, I will suggest that this is more than a convenient analogy. Rather, I contend, the soul's virtues become inseparable as the soul itself conforms to the image of God through the primary virtue of love. My argument includes an analysis of the history of inseparable virtue in Graeco-Roman philosophy and a comparison of Augustine's use of the concept in *Trin.* 6.4 with his more extended treatment in *Epistle* 167. In the face of a seeming conflict in these two texts, I argue for a 'soft' or 'imperfect' version of inseparability in Augustine's view of the virtues. Finally, I suggest that the cultivation of the virtues within the unity of love may be understood as the way we come to image the Trinity.

Keywords: Augustine, *imago Dei*, inseparability, Trinity, virtue

In the sixth book of the *De Trinitate*, Augustine compares the inseparability of virtues within the human soul to 'that of' the divine attributes within the simple divine substance of the Trinity.¹ In this paper, I will suggest that

¹ At present only two articles tackle the subject of inseparable virtue in Augustine: John Bowlin, 'Augustine Counting the Virtues', *Augustinian Studies* 41 (2010), pp. 277–300; and John P. Langan, 'Augustine on the Unity and the Interconnection of the Virtues', *Harvard Theological Review* 72 (1979), pp. 81–95. Langan helpfully observes that Augustine 'replaces the standard philosophical thesis of the interconnection of the virtues with his own view of the identity of the virtues with charity, together with a gradualist and progressivist notion of virtue' (92). He does not engage, however, the passage on inseparable virtue in *Trin.* 6 that would problematise this reading. As I will argue below, it is not just a shift from inseparability to identity, but a more nuanced adaptation. He also situates Augustine within the philosophical context of Aristotle and Aquinas but ignores the Platonic tradition that, I will argue, accounts for much of Augustine's approach. Bowlin offers a compelling theological interpretation of the unity and plurality of the virtues in this life, such that 'temporal enjoyments and eternal yearnings are brought together with time's many virtues and eternity's singular love' (280). Much of Bowlin's understanding of the relationship between the virtues and beatitude and between heavenly unity and earthly plurality

this is more than a convenient analogy. Rather, I contend, the soul's virtues become inseparable as the soul itself conforms to the image of God through the primary virtue of love.

I say that I will 'suggest' this connection because, despite my best efforts, I cannot prove it. A purely historical approach does not preclude this reading, but it cannot provide the necessary support for an unqualified claim. Hence my subtitle description of 'a speculative interpretation'. I am not arguing that this is what Augustine is doing. I am arguing that we have warrant to choose to read the text this way, and that such a reading is theologically consistent with Augustine and constructively fruitful.

I begin first with a look at *Trin.* 6.4 and a discussion of its proximate context. I then provide a summary of the philosophical background to the idea of inseparable operations, including the role of virtue in deification, before turning to Augustine's other, more extensive treatment of the topic in *Epistle* 167, which evinces some problematic differences in its presentation. After attempting to reconcile the two depictions of inseparable virtue, I return to *De Trinitate* to show how my reading allows us to see inseparable virtue as a significant analogy for divine simplicity, as the cultivation of proper love serves as the means through which human souls are conformed to the image of God.

Inseparable virtue in *Trin.* 6.4

Before discussing the paragraph in question, it will help to identify the textual context for Augustine's discussion of inseparable virtue in *Trin.* 6.4. The sixth book of *De Trinitate* takes up the exegesis of 1 Corinthians 1:24 in which Paul identifies Christ as 'the power and wisdom of God'.² An earlier

is consistent with the reading I will provide below. But I do not think he takes seriously enough the challenge of reconciling *Trin.* 6.4 and *Ep.* 167, deciding to read the latter as determinative of the meaning of the former. As with Langan, Bowlin lacks a substantive engagement with the larger philosophical context that, I will argue, helps explain these texts better. For existing studies of the unity of virtue in other early Christian figures, see Grant Bayliss, *The Vision of Didymus the Blind: A Fourth-Century Virtue-Origenism* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), pp. 145–73; Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, 'Gregory of Nyssa on the Reciprocity of the Virtues,' *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 58 (2007), pp. 537–52; H.-J. Horn, 'Antakoluthie der Tugenden und Einheit Gottes', *Jahrbuch für Antike Christentum* 13 (1970), pp. 5–28.

² For the significance of *Trin.* 6, see Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), pp. 221–7; Michel Barnes, 'De Trinitate VI and VII: Augustine and the Limits of Nicene Orthodoxy', *Augustinian Studies* 38 (2007), pp. 189–202; Anne-Marie La Bonnardière, 'Recherches sur les antécédents, les sources et la rédaction du Livre VI du De Trinitate de saint Augustin', *Annuaire de l'école pratique des Hautes Études* 83 (1971), pp. 202–11.

generation of Nicenes read this text as signifying that the Son is the Father's power, without which the Father never was.³ While this interpretation supports the eternal generation of the Son, Augustine is now concerned that it threatens the integrity of divine simplicity. For if the Son is the Father's power and wisdom, then the Father 'is not wisdom and power itself, but only the begetter of wisdom'.⁴ Further, if the Father has no power other than the Son whom he begets, then we cannot proclaim the latter to be 'God from God, light from light'. These concerns turn on a key distinction Augustine makes in trinitarian predication between those names that apply to the persons individually or in relation (such as 'Son' or 'Word') and those that apply to the divine substance (such as 'power' or 'wisdom'). The latter are necessarily identical with the substance of God because in God there are no accidents, or, as Augustine puts it, 'for God to be is the same as to be strong'.⁵ In short, because of his pro-Nicene conception of divine simplicity, Augustine cannot embrace the earlier Nicene reading of 1 Corinthians 1:24 that would identify the power of God as the Son, and so he needs to reconceive scriptural predication about such divine attributes and their possession by all three divine persons.

Next Augustine demonstrates, through a reading of John 17:11 and 1 Corinthians 6:16–17, that the Father and Son are one God by a unity of substance. This move then allows him to begin to reinterpret 1 Corinthians 1:24 in light of the pro-Nicene doctrine of divine simplicity by challenging any notion of inequality among the divine persons. Given a unity of substance and the simplicity of that substance, one is forced to admit, Augustine claims, that 'the Son is at least equal to God in a concrete attribute', and if a single attribute is admitted to be equal in both persons then it must be the case that 'the Son is equal to the Father in everything that is predicated of the substance'.⁶

This discussion of the equality of divine attributes is the context for Augustine's turn to inseparable virtue:

The virtues are in the human soul in a similar way. Although each of them has a fixed and clearly defined meaning, yet one can in no way be separated from the others, so that those who are equal to one another, for example, in fortitude, are likewise equal in prudence, temperance,

³ E.g. Athanasius, *C. gentes* 46. See Michel Barnes, *The Power of God: Δύναμις in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), pp. 125–72.

⁴ Augustine, *Trin.* 6.1.2. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

⁵ *Trin.* 6.4.6.

⁶ *Trin.* 6.3.5.

and justice. For if you say that they are equal in fortitude but that one excels in prudence, then it follows that the fortitude of the other is less prudent and they are not really equal in fortitude when the fortitude of the one is more prudent. You will find that this reasoning applies to the other virtues if you examine all of them from this same point of view. For we are not concerned here with the powers of the body but with the fortitude of the soul.⁷

First, it is important to clarify that when Augustine says ‘the virtues are in the human soul in a similar way’, he means in a way similar to the way divine attributes are ‘in’ God. This passage does not, as Bowlin has claimed, depict ‘the relations among the virtues of the soul as analogous to those that abide among the Persons of the Trinity’, although Bowlin is not far off.⁸ It is rather, as Ayres observes (although he quotes the paragraph that follows and not the discussion of inseparable virtue) the necessary ‘equality in all “qualities” predicated of’ Father and Son to which human virtues are analogous.⁹

More important, though, are the questions of why Augustine chooses inseparable virtue here to be his analogy for attributes in divine simplicity and what other implications might be brought to bear upon his understanding of the Trinity through a better understanding of inseparable virtue. In what follows, I explore, first, the history of the concept both in Graeco-Roman philosophy and elsewhere in Augustine. I then suggest that the trinitarian key lies in his use of the term *inseparabile* to describe the virtues, a term he uses quite sparingly aside from the pro-Nicene principle of inseparable operations.

The unity of virtue in Graeco-Roman philosophy

When Augustine describes the virtues as ‘inseparable’, he is taking sides in a debate about moral psychology that goes back at least to the Socratic tradition.¹⁰ In fact, ‘inseparable’ is only one option among several under the larger umbrella concept of the ‘unity’ of the virtues. In this section I will trace the origins and permutations of the idea of the unity of the virtues, especially highlighting the role of the doctrine in Stoicism and imperial Platonism. This will allow us to see how Augustine’s version of the virtues

⁷ Trin. 6.4.6.

⁸ Bowlin, ‘Augustine Counting the Virtues’, p. 286.

⁹ Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, p. 222.

¹⁰ For a more thorough and extensive history of the concept in ancient and Hellenistic philosophy, see John M. Cooper, ‘The Unity of Virtue’, *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15 (1998), pp. 233–74.

draws upon these traditions even as he adapts them to fit his reading of scripture and understanding of the Christian life. It is to that adaptation that I will turn in the next section of my argument.

We can trace the idea of the unity of the virtues back to Plato's early Socratic dialogues, the *Laches* and the *Protagoras*.¹¹ In the former, Socrates identifies 'knowledge of all goods and evils' as 'virtue as a whole' such that courage and the rest are merely parts of the whole (199c–e). Earlier, Socrates and his interlocutors had established that a complete definition of courage required the presence of wisdom because an act performed in folly would not be a 'fine thing' but, likely, injurious such that it could not be deemed courageous. From this logic it can be extrapolated that courage would similarly not be fine and noble without temperance, prudence and justice. Thus, the reader is left, at the end of the *Laches* with an *aporia* in which virtue itself is 'knowledge of all goods and evils' but the discrete virtues are parts of 'virtue as a whole' whose own definitions require the presence of the others. This articulation provides the basis for what we may call the 'inseparability' thesis of the unity of the virtues.¹² Possession of one virtue entails the possession of the others; absence or loss of one virtue entails the absence or loss of the others.

Unfortunately for later interpreters, both classical and modern, Plato proved inconsistent on this matter. Another early dialogue, the *Protagoras*, takes up the issue of the unity of the virtues but moves away from the inseparability thesis and towards what we may call the 'identity' thesis in which the different virtues are but names for a single reality.

We see both options for the unity of the virtues arise as Socrates sets the primary question for the discussion: 'Is virtue one thing, and justice and temperance and piety parts of it? Or are the things I just said all names of one and the same thing?' (329c). From the start, Socrates sets the inseparable/parts-of-a-whole thesis from the *Laches* in opposition to

¹¹ On these dialogues and debates on how to discern Socrates' or Plato's actual positions, see Daniel Devereux, 'The Unity of the Virtues', in Hugh H. Benson (ed.), *A Companion to Plato* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 325–39; Cooper, 'Unity', pp. 235–47; Gregory Vlastos, 'The Unity of the Virtues in the *Protagoras*', in *Platonic Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 221–69; Terry Penner, 'The Unity of Virtue', *Philosophical Review* 82 (1973), pp. 35–68.

¹² This same idea (or slightly nuanced versions of it) has been termed 'reciprocity', 'mutual entailment' or 'bi-conditionality' in other scholarship, but given Augustine's Latin terminology, I will use 'inseparability'. To be precise, 'inseparability' is not identical to 'mutual entailment' and the rest. Rather, it is a concomitant consequence of the logic of mutual entailment. Thus, 'inseparability' should be read to represent not just the inability to be divided one from another but the more general affirmation that the presence or absence of one virtue entails the presence or absence of all others.

a new possibility, the identity thesis. When Protagoras responds à la the *Laches* – ‘This is easy to answer, Socrates: Virtue is one thing and the things you named are parts of it’ (329d) – the reader knows what to expect. Socrates spends much of the rest of the dialogue erasing any real, substantial distinctions between the different virtues such that the names reflect diversity in the one virtue’s manifestation, not in its constituent elements.

While modern scholars continue to debate how to read these seemingly disparate accounts, the ambiguity of Plato’s descriptions of the unity of the virtues meant that it remained an open and disputed topic, both for the immediate successive generation and for centuries of Graeco-Roman philosophy. Aristotle, for instance, added important qualifications to the inseparability thesis by distinguishing between ‘natural’ (*φυσικὴ*) and ‘true’ or ‘proper’ (*κυριή*) virtue (1144b16). While the former refers to the natural dispositions that even children and animals possess to varying degrees, the latter requires the presence of practical wisdom to perfect them. Thus, Aristotle says, ‘the virtues can be separated from one another’ if we are talking about the natural virtues (1144b33–6). Only the true virtues are inseparable. With this new nuance, Aristotle embraces the inseparability thesis while also suggesting that the unity of the virtues is a matter of moral progress.¹³

The debate about the unity of the virtues continues through the Hellenistic schools, with the Stoics, after Chrysippus, becoming particularly associated with the inseparability version of the doctrine. Plutarch reports a range of options in early Stoicism. Some teachers, like Menedemus and Aristo, moved to ‘deny the plurality and the differences of the virtues’, suggesting an intensification of the ‘identity’ thesis.¹⁴ Zeno, however, affirms the four virtues ‘since they are both inseparable from one another and other than and different from each other’, even though this distinction arises only from a change of context, suggesting perhaps only a single true virtue that manifests as courage or prudence.¹⁵ Chrysippus, Plutarch alleges, criticises Aristo’s ‘identity’ of the virtues but defends Zeno’s explanation,

¹³ For debates on how to read Aristotle on this theory as well as its continued legitimacy, see R. W. Sharples, ‘The Unity of the Virtues in Aristotle, in Alexander of Aphrodisias, and in Byzantine Commentators’, *Etica e Politica* 2 (2000); <http://hdl.handle.net/10077/5561> Neera K. Badhwar, ‘The Limited Unity of Virtue’, *Nous* 30 (1996), pp. 306–29; Paula Gottlieb, ‘Aristotle on Dividing the Soul and Uniting the Virtues’, *Phronesis* 39 (1994), pp. 275–90.

¹⁴ Plutarch, *Virt. mor.* 440E–441D (L&S 61B). See Cooper, ‘Unity’, pp. 247–53.

¹⁵ Plutarch, *St. rep.* 1034c (L&S 61C). See Cooper, ‘Unity’, pp. 261–4.

which, given the ambiguity in Zeno's position, leaves some uncertainty about the unity and plurality of the virtues in Chrysippus' version.¹⁶

Nevertheless, Chrysippus definitively moves the larger Stoic tradition away from the 'identity' option and towards the 'inseparability' option. Despite their previous disagreements, the Stoics later become identified with this version of the doctrine, as Diogenes Laertius reports: '[The Stoics] say that the virtues are mutually interdependent (*ἀντακολουθεῖν*) and that whoever has one of them has them all.'¹⁷ According to this version, the virtues are not mere names for a single reality. They remain distinct and discrete; but they do mutually entail each other. A person cannot have courage without justice or any of the rest, for much the same reason that Plato's Socrates explained in the *Laches*. Therefore, to have one virtue is to have them all, and to lack one virtue is to lack them all. Further, the term *ἀντακολουθεῖν* and its cognates become technical philosophical terminology for discussing such inseparability, or, as others have translated it, reciprocity.¹⁸

This Stoic version of inseparability, as I will show, resonates with what Augustine says in *Trin.* 6.4., and although it will become apparent how much he diverges from the Stoics, there is no doubt that he was familiar with this articulation. For instance, he would have known it from Cicero, who describes the issue as follows:

Are you then unaware that, if you lose one of your Corinthian vases, you can possess the rest of your goods in safety, but that if you lose a single virtue (and yet virtue cannot be lost) – still if you once admit there is a virtue you do not possess, do you not know that you will possess none at all?¹⁹

Ignoring for now the question of whether virtue can be lost,²⁰ we find in Cicero a clear articulation of the inseparability of the virtues with which Augustine would have been familiar.

But the Stoic theory of inseparable virtues is accompanied by another doctrine that will separate Augustine from their school's position, namely,

¹⁶ *St. rep.* 1034c-d (L&S 61C). See Cooper, 'Unity', pp. 253–61.

¹⁷ Diogenes Laertius 7.125.

¹⁸ For a more nuanced analysis of Stoic positions on the unity of the virtues, see Christoph Jedan, *Stoic Virtues: Chrysippus and the Religious Character of Stoic Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 75–80.

¹⁹ Cicero, *Tusc.* 2.14.32.

²⁰ Diogenes Laertius 7.127 reports that Chrysippus and Cleanthes disagreed on this, with the latter believing it to be irremovable while the former allows for the influence of intoxication and other temporary mental states.

the immediacy of the virtues. For many Stoics, virtue was not a state that admitted of degrees.²¹ No middle ground existed between virtue and vice. Thus, the Stoics may be seen to contrast with Aristotle and his nuanced degrees of virtue. Plutarch preserves one analogy that the Stoics used to depict the immediacy of virtue: ‘Just as in the sea the man an arm’s length from the surface is drowning no less than the one who has sunk five hundred fathoms, so even those who are getting close to virtue are no less in a state of vice than those who are far from it.’²² Augustine, as we will see, knows this analogy well, and we can imagine how its austerity would strike a preacher and bishop responsible for encouraging the moral growth of his flock.

But Augustine was not the only one concerned with Stoic austerity when it came to the virtues. Other Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic schools took issue with the Stoic position. While they often kept the principle of inseparability, they also affirmed degrees of intensity or of perfection within the virtues. The most important tradition for our purposes is the Platonists represented by Alcinous, Apuleius and Plotinus.

In his *Handbook of Platonism*, Alcinous avers that

one must affirm that the virtues mutually entail one another (*ἀντακολουθεῖν*) ... No one with intemperance is able to be wise, and if someone, having been weakened by passion, does something contrary to right reason, Plato says that he does this on account of ignorance and folly. Therefore, one who is intemperate and cowardly cannot possess wisdom. So the perfect (*τελειαι*) virtues are inseparable (*ἀχώριστοι*).²³

We see here a standard illustration of inseparable virtue: a given virtue requires the other virtues in order to be what it is. Therefore, the virtues mutually entail one another. The key term in this passage, however, is *τελειαι*. The idea of ‘perfect’ virtues suggests the existence of ‘imperfect’ virtues, a category that would appear nonsensical to traditional Stoics, but which may also be read as an adaptation of Aristotle’s distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘proper’ virtues.

²¹ While this position is a key feature of ancient Stoicism, later adherents adapted the idea to make more room for moral progress. Further, much of the association of the Stoics with a hardline position on this issue comes from the Platonic polemics of Plutarch. See Geert Roskam, *On the Path to Virtue: The Stoic Doctrine of Moral Progress and its Reception in (Middle-)Platonism* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005).

²² Plutarch, *Comm. not.* 1063A (SVF 3.539 = L&S 61T). Here I maintain the English translation from L&S.

²³ Alcinous, *Didask.* 29.3–4. See Roskam, *On the Path to Virtue*, pp. 364–75.

Alcinous' rough contemporary, Apuleius, offers a similar reading in his *On Plato and his Doctrine*:

[Plato] denies that imperfect (*imperfectas*) virtues accompany one another (*comitari*); in truth, he judged that those virtues which are perfect (*perfectae*) are inseparable (*individuas*) from one another and bound together (*inter se conexas*) so that, for one with an excellent natural disposition, if industry, experience, and discipline founded upon reason (the leader of all things) are added, then there remains nothing which virtue does not administer.²⁴

Again, we see the qualified affirmation of inseparable virtue. Only the perfect virtues mutually entail one another. Apuleius' contrast between imperfect and perfect virtues also mirrors Aristotle's distinction between natural and proper virtues. Key to both Alcinous and Apuleius is the idea of moral progress, and that the term 'virtue' can in fact be used to describe states that still admit of some vice. That is to say, although the virtue of the imperfect soul must be qualified as 'imperfect', it is still nevertheless appropriately deemed 'virtue'. And yet, inseparability and mutual entailment only characterise perfected virtue. This distinction seems to be obvious: if, for instance, true justice requires prudence, an imperfect prudence would necessarily result in an imperfect justice. Further, an imperfect justice could hypothetically still exist even without any prudence at all. More important, the commonalities in Alcinous' and Apuleius' version of inseparability suggest that Platonists in the imperial period used the Aristotelian distinction between types or degrees of virtue to reconcile some of the aporiae left by the *Laches* and *Protagoras* while, at the same time, rejecting the hardline austerity of the Stoic immediacy theory.

While Alcinous represents imperial Platonism in general, the testimony from Apuleius is particularly relevant to our reading of Augustine. After all, Augustine frequently references the African literary hero from the town of Madauros, where the bishop was first sent off to school.²⁵ If recent scholarship is correct to attribute *On Plato* to Apuleius, then it is hard to imagine Augustine not reading it.²⁶ Yet the Platonism of Alcinous and Apuleius is removed from Augustine by two centuries. Fortunately, we have

²⁴ Apuleius, *De dog. Plat.* 2.6. See Roskam, *On the Path to Virtue*, pp. 375–90.

²⁵ Augustine, *Conf.* 2.3.5; *Epp.* 102.32, 137.4, 138.4; *Civ. Dei* 4.2, 8 *passim*, 9.3, 9.6–7, 10.9, 10.27, 12.10, 18.18.

²⁶ For a recent analysis and affirmation of Apuleian authorship, see Stephen Harrison, *Apuleius: A Latin Sophist* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 174–80.

another representative who is a bit closer to Augustine's time and to the Platonism he would have encountered in Milan.

Plotinus' treatise 'On Virtue', preserved as *Ennead* 1.2, describes the process whereby the soul is purified through the cultivation of virtue. In this cathartic context he says, "These virtues in the soul, too, mutually entail (*ἀντακολουθουσι*) one another ... and the purification [of the soul] must entail all the virtues by necessity, or else not one of them is perfect (*τελεία*)."²⁷ This articulation fits with what we have seen in Alcinous and Apuleius, that is, an affirmation of the necessary inseparability of the virtues inasmuch as they are to be perfect, but also an awareness that virtues can exist in the soul in an imperfect manner that may not necessarily be inseparable but may become so through moral growth.

With this understanding of the Stoic and Platonic²⁸ versions of inseparable virtue, we can identify Augustine's description in *Trin.* 6.4 as a matter of inseparability (as his vocabulary suggests) rather than identification. However, as we turn to his more extended treatment of the unity of the virtues in *Ep.* 167, we will see a turn towards the identity of the virtues that will need explanation. Luckily, I believe that one explanation will lead us back to the *De Trinitate*, inseparable operations and a Platonically influenced vision of virtue-based deification.

Epistle 167

Epistle 167 is Augustine's most focused engagement with the question of inseparable virtue. In this exegetically oriented letter to Jerome, we see Augustine articulate the classic Stoic position with great rigour only to reject it as inconsistent with both scripture and Christian experience. Instead he opts for a Platonic vision of imperfect progress toward united virtue, a goal that Augustine places outside of this life.

Augustine wrote *Ep.* 167 to Jerome in 415.²⁹ While the context of the letter is likely the intensifying Pelagian controversy, the presenting issue is exegetical. Augustine wants Jerome's advice about James 2:10, which claims that one who offends in one point of the law has become guilty of all. Should

²⁷ Plotinus 1.2.7.

²⁸ Henceforth, when I refer to a 'Platonic' version, I am referring not to Plato's own works but to what scholars used to name 'Middle' and 'Neo-' Platonism as represented by Alcinous, Apuleius and Plotinus, and which is much indebted to Aristotle's understanding of perfected virtue.

²⁹ This also happens to lie within the proposed timeframe for the initial composition of *Trin.* 6, meaning that we need not see one text as a later development of the other. They may reasonably be considered as contemporaneous with one another. For the dating of *Trin.* 6, see Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, p. 120.

one who privileges the rich over the poor really be judged a murderer?³⁰ Surely not. In fact, Augustine associates such a perspective not only with the Stoics but also with the radical Jovinian.³¹ But this consideration of the vices leads him to the subject of virtue. 'All of the philosophers', he claims, agree regarding 'the inseparability of the virtues (*inseparabilitate virtutum*).'³² He further clarifies what he takes 'all the philosophers' to mean by this assertion:

They argue that a person who has one virtue has them all and that someone who lacks one lacks them all, because prudence cannot be cowardly or unjust or intemperate. For, if it were one of these, it would not be prudence. But if it is prudence when it is courageous and just and temperate, then, when prudence exists, it has with it the other virtues. Thus also courage cannot be imprudent or intemperate or unjust. Thus temperance must be prudent, courageous, and just. Thus justice only exists if it is prudent, courageous, and temperate. And so where one of them is genuine, the others are too. But where the other virtues are lacking, the one that is there is not true (*uera*), even if it seems like a true virtue in some respect.³³

Again we see the idea that the virtues are inseparable because their natures mutually entail one another, a familiar theme from Plato's *Laches*, the Stoics and Augustine's own *Trin.* 6.4. Justice (for example) requires prudence, temperance and courage in order to be true justice. Further, the idea of a true virtue is key to placing this description on the side of the Stoics. That is to say, Augustine is not describing the difference between perfect and imperfect virtues as we saw in Alcinous, Apuleius and Plotinus. Rather, as he makes clear in an examination of the supposed courage of Catiline, this position posits a binary between virtue and vice: 'it was not courage either, but hardness gave itself the name "courage" to mislead the foolish. For, if it were courage, it would not be a vice but a virtue. But if it were a virtue, it would never be abandoned by the other virtues, which are like its inseparable companions.'³⁴ In this accounting, one either has the virtues or one does not.

Augustine verifies that this is a presentation of the austere Stoic vision by also offering their analogy of the immediacy of virtue. In fact, he recites the

³⁰ Augustine, Ep. 167.1.3.

³¹ Ep. 167. 2.4.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Ep. 167. 2.5.

³⁴ Ep. 167. 2.7.

same metaphor of a sunken man – equally drowning at one hundred leagues down as within inches of the surface – that we saw preserved in Plutarch. But he presents this metaphor in order to reject it. Because of scripture's affirmation that we all have sin (1 John 1:8), Augustine cannot believe that anyone has all the virtues and (consequently) none of the vices. Yet his experience of real Christian chastity and fidelity makes it impossible for him to deny the existence of at least some virtue in otherwise unvirtuous people. 'For this reason marital chastity in devout men and women is undoubtedly a virtue – for it is neither nothing nor a vice – but it does not bring with it all the virtues. For if all virtues were present, there would be no vice; if there were no vice, there would be absolutely no sin.'³⁵ This combination of scripture and Christian experience undermines the traditional Stoic view of inseparable and immediate virtues.

Having shattered the Stoic understanding of inseparable virtue, Augustine offers his own version that includes a description of progress in virtue that replaces the drowning man analogy:

It [the journey from vice to virtue] occurs, rather, in the way in which someone going from darkness into light gradually receives light as he moves ahead. And until he has fully completed this move, we say that, like someone gradually emerging from a very deep cave, he is more influenced by the nearness of the light the more he approaches the entrance. In that way what is bright in him comes, of course, from the light toward which he is making progress, while what is still obscure in him comes from the darkness that he is leaving.³⁶

The Platonic overtones of this image are deafening, but they also lend credence to our efforts to read Augustine's account of inseparable virtue within the context of imperial Platonism. With this image Augustine depicts a morally ambiguous state in which the human soul is informed by varying degrees of both darkness and light, or vice and virtue. This account allows for degrees of virtue that may be imperfect, that is, not completely conforming to the light. Yet the light is still light no matter the shadow cast upon it by the darkness.

Augustine fleshes out this vision of progressive virtue by moving toward the 'identity' thesis of the unity of the virtues in which love is the essence of all virtue:

³⁵ Ep. 167. 3.10.

³⁶ Ep. 167. 4.13.

Why do we not say that the one who has this virtue [love] has them all, since the fullness of knowledge is love (Rom 13:10)? Or is a person endowed with more virtue to the extent that he has more love, while he has less virtue to the extent that he has less love, because love itself is virtue, and to the extent that virtue is less present, vice is more present?³⁷

Again we see that virtue can be possessed in varying degrees, but possessing more or less virtue becomes synonymous with possession of more or less love. In fact, love becomes Augustine's definition of what virtue is:

And to summarize in a general and brief statement the notion that I have of virtue, insofar as it pertains to living well, virtue is the love by which one loves what should be loved. This is greater in some, less in others, and not at all in still others, but it is not so complete (*plenissima*) in anyone that it cannot be increased in him as long as he lives.³⁸

Virtue is love, and the different virtues are that love operating in different contexts or in relation to different objects. But that love, in this life, will always be incomplete. Thus, just as different parts of the body are struck by different amounts of light based on position and clothing, so 'each person is touched by the rays of pious love ... so that he can be said to have one virtue, not to have another, and to have more or less of a third'.³⁹

We may, I suggest, read Augustine's description of the virtues in this life as never *plenissima* as related to the Platonic idea of perfect and imperfect virtue. Yet several important differences and questions arise. For Augustine, perfect virtue is not possible in this life. The Platonists we examined offer no such qualification. Further, while Alcinous, Apuleius and Plotinus affirm that only the perfect virtues are inseparable, Augustine in Ep. 167 leaves us unsure of the virtues' inseparability. He clearly rejects the Stoic version of the idea. And he moves towards the identity version of unity by making love the essence of the virtues such that possession of love entails the possession of all the virtues. But does he see the imperfect virtues that exist as expressions of imperfect love to be inseparable or not? Ep. 167 does not answer these question. I turn again, now, to *Trin.* 6.4 and to the larger project of *De Trinitate*.

Two theories or one?

Several problems present themselves when we attempt to read *Trin.* 6.4 and Ep. 167 as parts of a single theory of inseparable virtue. Most important,

³⁷ Ep. 167. 3.11.

³⁸ Ep. 167. 4.15.

³⁹ Ep. 167. 4.14.

it is unclear whether Ep. 167 even maintains the principle of inseparable virtue. After rejecting the austere Stoic version, Augustine never refers to the virtues as inseparable except insofar as they are forms of love. Because of this, we might suppose that Ep. 167 represents a rejection of inseparability in favor of the identity version of virtue unity, putting that text in clear opposition to Trin. 6.4, where Augustine affirms that the distinct virtues are inseparable. This tension is enhanced by the fact that Trin. 6.4 never mentions love as the essence of the virtues. But the most threatening blow comes in Ep. 167, as Augustine develops his metaphor of the light of virtue shining on a soul still covered in some shadows and summarises the significance of the image in a way that seems to deny outright the inseparability of the virtues, at least in this life: 'each person is touched by the rays of pious love ... so that he can be said to have one virtue, not to have another, and to have more or less of a third'. Such a statement is a definitive denial of inseparability as we have come to understand it. If it is possible for someone to have one virtue but not another, then by definition the virtues are not inseparable.

Because of these seeming inconsistencies, we may be tempted to see Ep. 167 as a slightly more developed or mature version of what Augustine only engages *en passant* in Trin. 6.4. Such is the essence of Bowlin's cursory treatment of Trin. 6.4, and perhaps the reason why Langan never even mentions that passage. There are, however, some important features that suggest that such strict opposition between the texts is not a necessary or even the best reading of their relationship. Further, by following these suggestive features, we may come to see Trin. 6.4 and Ep. 167, together, as representing an adapted version of the Platonic understanding of inseparable virtues made to conform to the Christian life.

First, returning to the problematic statement in Ep. 167, we need not read the affirmation of someone possessing one virtue but not another as an outright denial of inseparability. Rather, given Augustine's accompanying affirmation that virtue/love is never perfected in this life, we may read this description of virtue's presence and absence within a single soul as consistent with the Platonic belief that only the perfected virtues are inseparable.

Second, Augustine's description of inseparable virtue in Trin. 6.4 is not the traditional Stoic position because his entire argument turns on the possibility of degrees of virtue, of 'more' or 'less' justice, prudence, etc. On the one hand, this fits well with the Platonic position that allows for imperfect virtue that is, nonetheless, true virtue in the process of moral progress. On the other hand, in affirming that the virtues are inseparable even in their imperfect state, Augustine bucks the Platonic limitation of inseparability only to perfect virtues.

Third, if we accept the idea that in *Trin.* 6.4 Augustine presents an amended version of the Platonic position such that even imperfect virtues can be understood as inseparable, then we may be able to read *Ep.* 167 as consistent with that vision. The key question is whether the affirmation in *Ep.* 167 that someone can have one virtue but not another fits with an understanding of the inseparability of imperfect virtues in *Trin.* 6.4. The answer is 'yes' and 'no'.

The answer is 'no' if we want to affirm inseparability as we have been using it, that is, as saying that the virtues are mutually entailing such that if someone has one they have them all or if one lacks one they lack them all. But Augustine has already thrown a wrench into that 'strong' version of inseparability when he described as inseparable even those virtues that are still increasing or decreasing within a soul. There is a reason that the Platonists reserved inseparability for the perfect virtues: imperfect virtues problematise the logic of inseparability. It makes sense to say that in their perfected forms justice, prudence, temperance and courage all entail one another inseparably. But if the logic depends upon the assertion that each requires the others in order to be what it is, what happens when one of those virtues admits of degrees or of imperfection? It becomes unclear to what extent the other virtues are necessarily present for an imperfect virtue since, as imperfect, the logic of mutual entailment need not fully apply.

Yet Augustine does maintain exactly this tricky position, namely, that even imperfect virtues are somehow inseparable. And so, as we see Augustine rejecting the Stoic position and adapting the Platonic, I believe we also see him presenting what we might call 'soft' or 'imperfect' inseparability of imperfect virtues. In other words, Augustine realises that the traditional logic of mutual entailment, whereby the virtues are what they are in part due to the presence of each other, can and indeed must still hold for imperfect virtues. Thus, the imperfect virtues are still inseparable conceptually from one another because the very thing that would make justice imperfect would be the limited presence or even absence of the other virtues. Within the soul itself, therefore, it is possible to possess one virtue and not the others. But the one possessed would necessarily be imperfect without the others. In the strong sense of inseparability, then, this is exactly the Platonic position: inseparability obtains only for the perfect virtues because only the perfect ones will perfectly accompany each other. But in the soft sense of inseparability, we can affirm with Augustine that, as the virtues are possessed to greater or lesser degrees, they will necessarily enjoy the presence of their companions to greater or lesser degrees because the latter variation helps account for the former.

Considering the nature of Augustine's argument for equality between two souls in *Trin.* 6.4, we may conceive of this soft inseparability in the following manner. Imagine that the degree of intensity or perfection of a given virtue can be rated on a scaled of zero to ten. In *Trin.* 6.4 Augustine argues that two souls, Bob and Jill, who have an equal rating in one virtue, will by necessity share an equal rating in the others. Note, however, that Augustine does not say that the ratings would be the same between the different virtues. So, imagine that Bob and Jill are equal in justice because they both have a justice rating of seven. Now it follows, Augustine claims, that they must also be equal to each other in prudence. So, they would both have, for instance, a prudence rating of five. But what happens if Bob slips in his prudence down to a three? Would this prove Augustine wrong? Not at all, because less prudence would necessarily mean a lessening of Bob's justice, perhaps down to a six and a half. As stilted as this example is, it shows that Augustine is not working out how imperfect virtues are inseparable, but simply that they still are inseparable because of what the virtues are. One can even imagine, in order to conform to *Ep.* 167, Bob dropping to a zero for prudence, representing its complete lack, while still preserving some level of justice, albeit a sharply diminished form. Indeed, it would be the very absence of prudence that would account for this diminishment of justice, demonstrating the virtues' continued inseparability.

In this way, we can read Augustine's accounts of inseparable virtue in *Trin.* 6.4 and *Ep.* 167 as consistent. Moreover, the understanding of inseparable virtue that unites these two texts represents both a rejection of the austere Stoic position and an adaptation of the Platonic position. I have described this adaptation as a 'soft' or 'imperfect' inseparability that represents the way in which even imperfect virtues conceptually entail one another in their very imperfection – and even in their absence. Further, this vision of the imperfect inseparability of imperfect virtues fits with the practical and exegetical concerns that led Augustine to reject the Stoic version in *Ep.* 167. The Christian life will never reach the perfection of virtue in this life, but ascetic practice can still cultivate true, even if imperfect, virtue. And if, as Augustine insists in *Ep.* 167, the different virtues are types of love, then our growth in love, be it ever so uneven, will entail growth in all the virtues.

Inseparable virtue, inseparable operations and the *imago Dei*

And so I return to my original question: what is the significance of inseparable virtues in *Trin.* 6.4? Given the reading of Augustine's understanding of inseparable virtue that I have provided against the backdrop of Graeco-Roman philosophy and his own *Ep.* 167, we are justified in suspecting that it is not a mere analogy, at least not merely a conceptual

analogy. Its meaning lies in *De Trinitate's* larger project: seeking a glimpse of an image of the triune God within creation.⁴⁰

In *Trin.* 9, Augustine moves to the psychological trio of the mind, its self-knowing and its self-loving (*mens, notitia* and *amor*). These he believes have the potential for representing the image of God as Trinity:

Therefore the mind itself, its love, and its knowledge are a kind of tria; these three are one, and when they are perfect they are equal. For if anyone loves himself less than he is – e.g., if the mind of man loves itself as much as the body of man is to be loved, whereas the mind is more than the body – he is guilty of sin and his love is not perfect. Similarly, if he loves himself more than he is, if he loves himself as much as God is to be loved, whereas he is incomparably less than God – he also sins greatly and does not have a perfect love of himself. But he sins with greater perversity and iniquity when he loves the body as much as God is to be loved.⁴¹

Augustine goes on to say the same thing about the mind's self-knowing. In sum, the *imago Dei* exists within the mind, but it is not realised as a true likeness of the Trinity until it is perfected. The discussion of self-love here places that perfection in terms of properly ordered love, a theme not only ubiquitous in Augustine but also the exact way he defined virtue in *Ep.* 167.

Moreover, Augustine's use of the psychological trios throughout the latter half of *de Trinitate* is not an attempt to find the perfect analogy for the triune life; rather, it is an exercise training the mind to seek and contemplate God in ways that draw the mind more and more into conformity with the one in whose image it was created. This includes the cultivation of right love and right knowing. In the above paragraph it is sin, disordered love, that distorts our minds. Thus the mind is the image of the triune God potentially and requires purification to live into that potential.

Sin is not the only thing that prevents our minds from truly manifesting the image of God. Our createdness presents a challenge as well: 'But when the human mind knows itself and loves itself, it does not know and love something immutable.'⁴² The changeableness of created existence means that we cannot sufficiently, on our own, know and love our own minds with the necessary stability and perfection to be truly the image of God. We must

⁴⁰ On this aspect of *Trin.*, see Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, pp. 273–81; Luigi Gioia, *The Theological Epistemology of De Trinitate* (Oxford: OUP, 2008); Rowan Williams, 'The Paradox of Self-Knowledge in Augustine's Trinitarian Thought', in *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 141–54; and Williams, 'Sapientia: Wisdom and the Trinitarian Relations', in *On Augustine*, pp. 155–70.

⁴¹ Augustine, *Trin.* 9.4.4.

⁴² *Trin.* 9.6.9.

come to know and love God within the Truth and through the Love that God is, and only then will we properly know and love ourselves – and our neighbour – in God.

Augustine's talk of the mind's knowing and loving as the potential location of the divine image alongside the distorting effects of sin and creatureliness allows us, I suggest, to see how he maintains the inseparability of the virtues, even as he seems to deny it, through what I have named 'soft' or 'imperfect' inseparability. His emphasis on love as the heart of virtue itself brings us towards his trinitarian discourse. After all, this love that is virtue is also God. And it is this divine love that must be perfected in us in order for our minds to live into the image of God. Our full eschatological participation in the love that is God will allow our loving to be perfected such that we possess the virtues inseparably in beatitude. Similarly, Augustine's denial of perfect inseparable virtues in this life reflects in part an awareness of the human condition, of our fallen and mutable nature within creation. Sin and creatureliness are what prevent our minds from fully imaging the triune God, such that it is only through God's own love that we can be transformed, purified and perfected.

Turning back to *Trin.* 6.4 one last time, therefore, we see Augustine comparing inseparable virtue within human souls to the inseparability of divine attributes within the essential simplicity of the Trinity. We may now read this within the context of the Christian life and Augustine's understanding of imperfect inseparability that allows for progress in the virtues even as they somehow still mutually entail each other in their necessarily imperfect state this side of glory. And we may also read it within the context of the rest of *De Trinitate* and Augustine's affirmation that the human mind comes to bear the image of God only as it comes to love itself in God more perfectly. Since love is, for Augustine, virtue itself, we can see that the progress made in imaging God through the mind's cultivation of proper love is also progress towards a more perfect type of inseparability in our virtue.

Of course, the Trinity's attributes are more than just inseparable; they are identical within divine simplicity. For all Augustine's talk of inseparability, then, we may suspect that virtue is unable to serve as a true image within the human mind of the simplicity of divine attributes. Three considerations help bridge this gap. First, we must remember that all analogies, even the perfected human ones, will retain a certain distance from the divine archetype due to the Creator/created divide that is never completely overcome. Second, we must recall that in *Ep.* 167, Augustine points towards an identity version of the unity of the virtues that was rooted in love. Given the reading I have provided of virtuous progress in Augustine, we may view

such progress as a move from ‘imperfect’ inseparability towards a perfect identity of the virtues as love. While the Creator/created gap still remains, the soul would image an identity of the virtues closer to the simplicity of the divine attributes. Finally, the answer may lie in the term ‘inseparable’ as Augustine uses it elsewhere throughout *Trin.*, especially in his pro-Nicene emphasis on inseparable operations.⁴³

The principle of inseparable operations sets much of the agenda for the first few books of *De Trinitate*. While discussing the baptism of Christ in *Trin.* 1, Augustine affirms the principle that ‘just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so they operate inseparably’.⁴⁴ But this claim establishes an exegetical problem: what of all the scripture passages where the Son or the Spirit seem to operate independently and individually? *Trin.* 2–4, therefore, take up the missions of Son and Spirit in order to explain how the Trinity operates inseparably even in the incarnation, at Pentecost or in Old Testament theophanies.⁴⁵ At the heart of this concern lies Augustine’s theological epistemology and the inability for the creation perfectly to manifest the Creator:

But I do assert with absolute confidence that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, being of one and the same substance, God the Creator, the omnipotent Trinity, operate inseparably. But this cannot be represented inseparably by a creature that is exceedingly dissimilar, and especially one that is corporeal.⁴⁶

Augustine continues to elucidate this point by comparisons with human words and their inability to name the inseparable Trinity inseparably. Thus we see how the inseparability of the Trinity’s operations, itself a manifestation of divine simplicity, manifests as fragmented within a creaturely world. How much more so must the image of divine simplicity, inseparable virtue, experience a lack of truly simple identity, except inasmuch as the soul’s virtues are perfected in and as divine love. Perhaps then, it is not the divine attributes themselves that inseparable virtue images

⁴³ On inseparable operations in Augustine and prior Latin authors, see Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, pp. 42–71; for inseparable operations as a unifying theme in both Latin and Greek pro-Nicenes, see Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, pp. 296–300.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Trin.* 1.4.7.

⁴⁵ As summarised by Augustine at *Trin.* 15.3.4: *in secundo et tertio et quarto eadem, sed de filii missione et spiritus sancti diligenter quaestio pertractata tres libros fecit, demonstratum quae est non ideo minorem mittente qui missus est quia ille misit, hic missus est cum trinitas quae per omnia aequalis est pariter quoque in sua natura immutabilis et inuisibilis et ubique praesens inseparabiliter operetur.*

⁴⁶ *Trin.* 4.2.1.30.

but the inseparable operations by which the Trinity acts *ad extra* as an expression of divine simplicity.

Conclusion

I have argued that inseparable virtue is not a random analogy for attributes within divine simplicity. Rather, inseparable virtue, as it is perfected, may be understood to be that by which we most image divine simplicity, perhaps even imaging the inseparability of divine operations, to the extent that such is possible for created beings. While I do not think this argument is provable as what Augustine had in mind, I do believe it represents a theologically responsible reading of Augustine. Moreover, such a reading may bear fruit in our own reflection on the *imago Dei* as not only something we are created in but something into which we grow. Thus the Christian life, inasmuch as it entails the cultivation of the virtues, especially the ultimate virtue of love, conforms us to the image and makes us, little by little, living (if distant) analogies of the Trinity's divine simplicity.