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Introduction

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Love is in the air. The past several years have seen a flurry of new books on love across a broad range of academic disciplines. From a historian we thus have a major new intellectual history of love, from philosophers we have important new studies of love's "vision" and love's "paradox," and from a psychologist we have a new theory of how love "affects everything we feel, think, do and become."[1] All of this might lead us to wonder: why now? Why, that is, is love presently so ascendant as a topic of popular and academic inquiry?

The reasons are surely many and complex. But at least one of them is likely political. That is, there seems to be – at least in the opinions of several of the most important recent theorists of love – something about our present political state that makes desirable, and perhaps even demands, a recovery of the primacy of love. This at any rate has been explicitly and recently suggested by several prominent political thinkers who ring changes on a common theme: namely the need to recover love to offset the egocentrism and individualism that capitalism and liberalism encourage.

This theme has been especially prominent in recent French thought. Alain Badiou has argued in his "praise of love" that while "in today's world, it is generally thought that individuals only pursue their own self-interest," love yet stands as "an antidote to that." In his view, "the re-invention of love" emerges as a "possible point of resistance against the obscenity of the market."[2] Luc Ferry has recently advanced a similar claim. Ferry and Badiou differ considerably on the questions of

whether a "politics of love" is either desirable or possible, and whether our current moment is one of decline or progress.[3] Yet such differences are perhaps less crucial than their agreement that (in Ferry's words) "our societies have become societies of hyper-consumption" which prize self-gratification, a direct consequence of the so-called "*marchandisation du monde*."[4] And so too Jean-Claude Kaufmann, whose study of love begins by announcing that "the accumulation of wealth and facile consumerism are nothing more than screens that cover up a great psychological poverty" and goes on to argue that in fact "all this could have been completely different if history had taken a different direction and if love had been able to establish itself as a political principle."[5]

Yet recent interest in love is hardly limited to France. A similar focus on love has also, perhaps surprisingly, emerged of late in the seemingly less auspicious field of Anglo-American liberal theory. In this vein, several studies, and especially those of Nicholas Wolterstorff and Martha Nussbaum, have taken aim at the long-standing assumption that liberalism is properly founded on a strict line of demarcation that separates justice from love. Wolterstorff and Nussbaum each – albeit in their own different ways – question the notion that the principal responsibility of liberalism is merely to secure the conditions for justice and negative liberty, and that as such the claims of love are best relegated to the realm of the supererogatory. To attempt to separate justice from love in this manner, they insist, would in fact serve merely to condemn both justice and love to irrelevance; what is needed, and what each seeks to provide, is rather a way by which love and justice can be reintegrated in such a way that modern liberalism might be furnished with the moral psychology that has been thus far left unarticulated.[6]

Nussbaum makes especially explicit why this task is particularly critical at the present moment. Our world, she explains, is one "in which the most intransigent obstacle to concern for others is egoistic immersion in personal and local projects." Part of her interest in recovering love thus emerges from her concern to diffuse that "narrowness, partiality, and narcissism" endemic to our world, and with which love is necessarily in "continual struggle."[7] Indeed one of her main aims is to recover the other-directedness that defines love as a means of mitigating the self-centeredness that defines our world. Noting that "most people tend toward narrowness of sympathy" and "can easily become immured in narcissistic projects and forget about the needs of those outside their narrow circle," Nussbaum praises other-directed love as the best means of "getting people to think larger thoughts and recommit themselves to a

larger common good" and thereby overcome what, following Kant, she calls "radical evil" – those "forces that lurk in all societies and, ultimately, in all of us: tendencies to protect the fragile self by denigrating and subordinating others," which incapacitate us "to see full and equal humanity in another person."[8]

Nussbaum's worries likely resonate with many of us. That the conditions of our political and economic life privilege self-centeredness over concern for others is a worry that has troubled political thinkers at least since the Enlightenment; indeed just as Ferry and Nussbaum and others today worry about the narcissism and the egocentrism encouraged by capitalism, many prominent eighteenth-century voices anticipated just this worry in calling prominent attention to the celebration of self-love and egocentrism that they took Hobbes and Mandeville and others to have been encouraging. And it is a worry that also seems unlikely to abate anytime soon; that individualism has supplanted community and social atomism has supplanted social connection are among the most familiar features of the debate over the benefits and challenges of our globalized capitalist world. Now, a very different book would be necessary to diagnose all the sources of this concern and indeed to assess its legitimacy. What follows simply assumes that this worry, so powerfully expressed by Nussbaum, is in fact legitimate and worthy of our attention. And if so, a new challenge demands our attention, and it is on this challenge that this book focuses. Put bluntly: even if we agree with Nussbaum that egocentrism is a problem – and perhaps even a primary ethical problem in the modern world – what reason is there to think that love is the answer? Put differently: even if egocentrism demands a response, what reason is there to think that love is capable of providing it? Can love alone pull this tall task off? And if so, what kind of love exactly do we need for the job?

The last question is easier to answer than the others. If the main problem to be combated is selfishness and egocentrism, then the love we must recover will be that capable of lifting us out of our individual selves and enabling us to establish a substantial bond with others that can trump or at least mitigate the exclusivity of self-concern.[9] Today we sometimes identify this disposition in terms that are more generically associated with other-directedness rather than with love per se; in this vein, social scientists of course often speak of "altruism" in contrast with "egoism." Yet in some deep sense, this simply won't do if altruism connotes an absence of self-preference and perhaps at best a positive but dispassionate preference for others.[10]

What today's theorists of love are instead after – and in their wake, a number of other thinkers concerned to defend additional forms of other-directed obligations variously associated with philanthropy and humanitarian action and global justice – is a considerably warmer and more affective disposition than altruism. To fill this void, they invoke the practical utility of other-directed sentiments that, like altruism, push back against the selfishness of egocentrism, but unlike altruism, do so in ways that draw on and encourage deeper affective commitment: sentiments such as compassion, pity, and sympathy.[11] The advantage of these dispositions is that they encourage us not merely to feel for others, as affect alone would have us do, but also encourage us to recognize others as beings fundamentally equal to ourselves and who demand and deserve not just our recognition and our respect but also our care and concern – beings who possess a unique dignity, and whose welfare exerts legitimate claims on us.[12] In large part, it is these notions of sentimentalized other-directedness, such as pity and compassion and sympathy, that those who today call for a resuscitation of love have in mind in their efforts to combat egocentrism.

In this sense, sentimentalized other-directedness does the work that an older tradition invoked a specific concept of love to do – namely the concept of love that in ancient Greek was called *agape* and in Latin, *caritas*. This sort of love – a love that is perhaps best rendered in English as "neighbor-love," if only to distinguish it from the many other forms of love that are perhaps more familiar to us today – shared an end common to modern sentimentalized other-directedness: namely to minimize, if not eliminate, self-preference and to encourage a substantial and indeed transformative concern with the well-being of others. This concern is perhaps best known today in the form of the Christian command to love one's neighbor, though this of course was hardly a concern exclusive to Christianity, as several studies of the theological ethics that emerge from the Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions have helpfully emphasized.[13] Yet, it is, of course, the Christian concept that is most proximate for the early modern and modern thinkers who developed the theory of other-directedness that is our focus here. And this modern theory of other-directedness of course finds much to admire in the Christian conception of *agape*. At the same time, it also finds much to which it must necessarily object. Most crucially: the traditional conception of love of one's neighbor was founded on a belief that human beings were capable of transcendence. Yet it is part and parcel of our theoretical landscape today to regard such foundations suspect as grounds for universal ethical

claims. In this sense, the shift from transcendental love to sentimentalized other-directedness is a clear step forward. At the same time, it may be that something important has been lost in this shift.

What follows is an effort to make sense of this shift by tallying both the costs and the benefits of this transformation of *agape* or *caritas* into pity, compassion, and sympathy. If it does its job well, such an enquiry may help us to gain clarity on what has been gained as well as what may have been lost in the shift from the traditional vision of love to our contemporary vision. It may also help those of us committed to advancing the political task described by Nussbaum to understand how we might best move forward and advance this vision in practice. But in order to see clearly love's present dilemmas and its possible future, we need to begin by taking a brief look at its past, and specifically at its classical origins and modern enlightenment.

LOVE'S TRADITION

The history of love poses several challenges for us today. First and foremost, when we talk of love today, we tend to talk principally, if not exclusively, about what is often called romantic love. Yet this love, so familiar to us today, is itself largely the product of a specific revolution in the history of thinking about love, and even while scholars will continue to debate the degree to which the idea of romantic love could be said to have existed prior to Romanticism, it remains the case that the Romantic Revolution not only rendered the concept of romantic love commonplace but also served to displace the primacy of certain traditional conceptions of love.[14] Yet it is to these traditional conceptions that we must turn if we are to appreciate the nature of the Enlightenment's own revolutionary reconsideration of the forms of love that were conceptually dominant prior to the advent of Romanticism. And herein lies a second challenge for our efforts to recover the history of love today. The tradition of thinking about love prior to Romanticism in fact embraced several distinct concepts that received their most powerful articulations from a number of different thinkers. Foremost among these, three tend to be emphasized: love as longing for possession, whose conceptual roots lie in the *eros* described by Plato; love of friends and family, whose conceptual roots are perhaps best traced to the *philia* described by Aristotle; and neighbor love, the conceptual roots of which lie in the *agape* described in the New Testament.[15] Each of these connotes a substantively independent conception of love, and the question of the degree to which they can be

synthesized in a manner capable of resolving their seeming contradictions remains a matter of great concern to love's most careful modern scholars. Yet what distinguishes these three principal traditional concepts of love is less important for our inquiry than what binds them to each other and also sets them apart from the sorts of sentimental other-directedness that is the focus of what follows. This difference concerns their orientation to transcendence.

What then is transcendence? For our purposes, transcendence represents an attempt to go beyond the limits of the self, and thereby to gain access to a realm that is dedicated to or oriented around certain goods recognizably superior to the goods of basic self-interest. Within recent political theory, likely the most comprehensive and insightful treatment of the concept of transcendence and its significance is to be found in the work of Charles Taylor. Taylor structures much of his narrative of the emergence of the secular age in terms of modernity's rejection of transcendence in favor of immanence; indeed the historical conflict between "transcendent religion" and "its frontal denial" is, on his account, what makes possible a contemporary world in which for many, quite simply, "the transcendent is off their map."[16] A very similar notion has been recently expressed by Robert Spaemann. Glossing Hume's claim that however far our imagination travels, we yet "never really advance a step beyond ourselves," Spaemann interprets this to mean "that the subject remains in itself and that every notion of self-transcendence or being-outside-of-oneself is an illusion" – a position he calls "the heart of the modern worldview" and indeed "the mainstream of modern consciousness."[17] But what is important for present purposes is not only the insistence on the modern antipathy to transcendence emphasized by Spaemann and Taylor alike, but even more importantly, Taylor's articulation of the substantive tension of the commitment to or longing for transcendence with the commitment to or longing for human flourishing; indeed Taylor himself often describes aspirations to transcendence in terms of the "call to live beyond" and specifically "a beyond of human flourishing."[18] This is crucial for our study of the evolution of the traditional understanding of love, and especially for our contrast of traditional and enlightened theories of love. In short: for all of their many other undeniable differences, the old concepts of *eros* and *philia* and *agape* each depend upon a concept of transcendence from which the modern concepts of sympathy, compassion, and pity seek to declare independence.

This claim is central to much of what follows, and as such it is important to be as clear as possible about what does and does not follow from

it. In the first place, to say that *eros* and *philia* and *agape* all depend upon a concept of transcendence is not to say that they ought to be *reduced* to concepts of transcendence; clearly central to our experiences of all three concepts (and most especially and obviously to *eros*) are the ways in which our experiences are shaped by the conditions of our embodiment. Further, to say that *eros* and *philia* and *agape* are united in depending on a concept of transcendence is not to say anything about the possible differences in the ways each of these seeks to realize transcendence; indeed, as will be argued subsequently, one of the key differences that separates *eros* and *philia* on the one hand from *agape* on the other is that where the former take the realization of transcendence as their end, the latter takes the condition of transcendence as its point of departure. This inversion of causal direction represents an extremely significant difference among these ideas – a difference I think is at least, if not more, foundational than those clear and obvious differences in the ways in which they are felt, and by whom and toward whom they are felt. But for all these differences, it remains the case that – and this is the claim for which I want to argue here – *eros* and *philia* and *agape* are all inconceivable and indeed nonsensical if the very concept of transcendence is precluded. This fact not only unites these concepts of love together but also suggests why they cannot be at home in an age skeptical of transcendence – and in turn suggests why a search for a substitute might have been seen as so pressing at the advent of this age.[19]

To begin with the two ancient Greek philosophical concepts: *eros* and *philia*, while directed to different ends, each share a common ambition of transcendence of the limitations of the self culminating in access to a higher and more perfect realm. The key text for the Platonic conception of *eros* on this front is Diotima's speech on the ascent or ladder of love in *Symposium*. Diotima's famous speech in many ways represents the high-water mark of *eros*, for it is in her speech that the dialogue's interlocutors come to see the ways in which erotic longings – which to that point in the discussion had been associated largely with the sexual desires of one person for one specific other – can lead their possessor to seek something infinitely greater and more beautiful than physical gratification or possession of another individual. *Eros* properly understood, she explains, has the potential to encourage in its possessor "a permanent turn to the vast open sea of the beautiful," culminating in the knowledge of "what is beauty itself."[20] Here and elsewhere, Diotima makes clear that this turn itself depends on a specifically upward movement toward the transcendent sphere – hence her claim that "erotics" begins with apprehension of

beautiful things before us, but then seeks "always to proceed on up for the sake of that beauty, using these beautiful things here as steps: from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; and from beautiful bodies to beautiful pursuits; and from pursuits to beautiful lessons; and from lessons to end at that lesson, which is the lesson of nothing else than the beautiful itself."[21] The significance of *eros* thus lies in its capacity to lead us up from a lower realm of selfish desires for the possession of particular beauties to the transcendent realm of absolute beauty culminating in an acquisition and eternal possession of the beautiful, and "the good's being one's own always."[22]

Diotima's conspicuous emphasis on the ways in which *eros* encourages our desires for possessing the good and making it our own has often led commentators to speculate about the degree to which *eros* should be fundamentally understood as selfish.[23] Yet this association of possession with selfishness, however familiar it may be to us in our age of acquisitiveness, maps uneasily onto Plato's characterization of *eros* in the speech given by Diotima. Clearly Plato is invested in the claim that *eros* is born in need and longs to possess the beautiful. But his focus here seems to be less to denigrate *eros* as an exacerbation of self-love than to show how it might serve to bind the self to the transcendent, and indeed elevate the self above the self. Indeed part of what makes Plato's vision of *eros* so powerful is the promise that it extends to us that we need not be imprisoned by our self-love, and that the longing born in self-love can lead us outside of ourselves to others, and ultimately beyond others to transcendent beauty. In this way, Plato's vision of *eros* points to a way in which self-love, the love of others, and the love of what is best and most beautiful can be seen as connected.[24]

Aristotle's concept of *philia* of course deals with a different sort of disposition altogether. His aim is to define the sort of disposition that binds friends rather than sexual partners together, and on such grounds the differences between his theory of love and Plato's have been often emphasized. Yet emphasizing these differences can run the risk of blinding us to the similarities that tie his concept of love to Plato's as well as to the Christian conception of love, and distance it from modern conceptions of sentimental other-directedness. Two similarities are especially important: the orientation of *philia* to the self and the orientation of *philia* to the transcendent.

On the former front, Aristotle introduces a key element of his treatment of *philia* in his effort to resolve an impasse over whether it is good for a friend to love himself more than he loves others. Aristotle's answer

rests on a distinction between two types of self-love. He admits that the former, familiar type of self-love is hardly admirable – the sort exhibited by those who "crave" and "zealously chase after" and fight over such goods as "money, honors, and bodily pleasures."[25] But against this he sets another self-love, that of the one who "takes for himself the things that are most beautiful and most good" and claims for himself "the greater share of the beautiful" – a view that suggests that what the self-lover loves is not only, or not simply, what is best within him (in Aristotelian terms, *nous* or intellect), but also the beautiful and noble that is best absolutely.[26] In this sense Aristotle's self-loving friend seeking always to claim the beautiful shares much in common with Diotima's lover who also aims to possess beauty for himself and "come close to touching the perfect end."[27]

The self-love that animates *philia* is then guided by a specific orientation to the transcendent category of the beautiful and noble, and particularly by the desire to possess it. But Aristotle also goes a further step, and in so doing he makes clear that the self-love of *philia* not only orients its possessor to the transcendent, but also encourages a reorientation of his relations with others:

> Hence such a person would be a lover of self most of all, though in a different form from the one that is reproached, differing as much as living by reason does from living by passion, and as much as desiring either the beautiful or what seems advantageous. Everyone, then, approves of and praises those who are exceptionally zealous about beautiful actions, and if they all competed for the beautiful, and strained to the utmost to perform the most beautiful actions, then for all in common there would be what is needful, and for each in particular there would be the greatest of goods, if indeed virtue is that. Therefore, a good person ought to be a lover of self, since he will both profit himself and benefit the others by performing beautiful actions.[28]

Philia properly understood is thus transformative on multiple levels. In the first place it represents a new orientation to the self and specifically a willing and even conscious preference for the transcendent goods of beauty and nobility over those more common external goods desired by the vulgarly selfish. In the second place, and perhaps more importantly, it is precisely this longing for transcendent nobility that leads one animated by it to perform the "beautiful actions" that Aristotle says are of such explicit benefit to others.[29] It is precisely this concern with the beautiful and noble in its transcendent sense that Aristotle thinks distinguishes the best and highest forms of *philia* from other, lesser forms of friendship based on pleasure or convenience or utility, and distinguishes

the philanthropy that is the product of this peak *philia* from the comparatively weak "goodwill" that we feel for strangers.[30]

For all their differences, *eros* and *philia* thus share a concern to elevate their possessors from conventional self-concern to a concern with the transcendent. And at least in the case of *philia* (though perhaps also in the case of *eros*) the experience of the transcendent itself leads to a new, more beneficent relationship with others.[31] In any case, what seems clear is that *eros* and *philia* are both concerned with establishing a proper ordering of three categories: self-love, other-love, and love of the beautiful. And this, in turn, brings us to *agape*. The question of the compatibility of *agape* and *eros* has long exercised scholars, and we would be remiss were we to fail to note at the outset the extensive debate on this front; where many of the most respected and careful students of *eros* and *agape* have judged them incompatible on the grounds of their differing views on the self, a diverse set of prominent voices has been equally insistent that separating *eros* from *agape* only reduces each to "caricature."[32] Yet when examined from the perspective of the ways in which the original concept of *agape* evolved into the sentimentalized form that is our main focus in what follows, we may in fact be more inclined to emphasize its similarities to the two classical conceptions of love, as well as its distance from modern sentimental conceptions. The fault lines for both comparisons concern the way in which *agape* conceives its relationship to self-love on the one hand, and to the transcendent on the other.

A comprehensive review of the sources of *agape* as a concept would require a wide-ranging study of Biblical texts, Hellenistic Neoplatonic philosophical sources, and the extensive commentaries of the Church Fathers, especially Augustine.[33] Yet clearly the fundamental text, all agree, is Jesus's response to the lawyer who wants to hear him explain "which is the great commandment in the law." Jesus replies:

> Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.[34]

Of all that could be said about these words, two points seem relevant in the present context. The first concerns the first commandment. In commanding his audience to love God first, Jesus makes clear that *agape* is founded on love of the transcendent. And indeed when we say today, as does Badiou, that "Christianity itself is the finest example of love's intensity towards a transcendental conception of the universal," it is this