

# Ethics in the Shadow of Love

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## Abstract

One of the central questions facing human beings is how we should respond to the humanity of others. Secular Western ethics has gravitated towards two kinds of answer: we should care for others' well-being, or we should respect them as autonomous agents. Largely neglected is an answer we can find in the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism: we should love all. This paper argues that an ideal of love for all can be understood apart from its more typical religious contexts and moreover provides a unified and illuminating account of the nature and grounds of morality. I defend a novel account of love for all that avoids serious worries about the incoherence or impossibility of loving everyone. I go on to argue that while it is possible for ordinary agents like us to love all, we shouldn't. Instead, we should approximate love for all. The minimal approximation of love for all is, surprisingly, respect; I derive the basic, structural features of deontological ethics (including anti-paternalism and anti-aggregation) from the ideal of loving for all.

How should we respond to the humanity of others? Ethics is in large part about that—we inhabit a world filled not only with mountains and streams, but with people, and it can be hard to know what to do about them. In secular Western ethics the responses have largely fallen into one of two camps: first, that people have interests and we should promote those interests, e.g., by making as many of them as happy as possible; and second, that people are autonomous beings whose capacity for free agency must be respected. It is surprising that what might be the most popular answer to this question dropped out of the running in contemporary ethics. Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity, whose adherents together amount to a plurality of human beings in history, exhort us to *love* others. The commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself is at the heart of the Torah (Leviticus 19:18).<sup>1</sup> Paul goes further, saying "The entire Law is fulfilled in a single decree: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Galatians 5:14).<sup>2</sup> This ideal of love for all—or *agape*—is taken to

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<sup>1</sup> See Goodman (2008) for a discussion of the love commandment in the Jewish Tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Or Matthew 22:38-40, where Jesus says all the law of the old testament can be summed up in only two commandments, to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself.

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form the basis not only of relations with friends, family and fellow Christians, but with *all*, even one's enemies (Matthew 5:35-46). Buddhist ethics take the ideal of Bodhicitta, love for all sentient life, as the central task of Enlightenment. As the Dalai Lama puts it, "the liberation of mind by love is practiced with universal pervasion by extending it to all beings, then all breathing things, all creatures, all persons, and all those with a personality" (Dalai Lama XIV and Chodron, 2014).<sup>3</sup>

To be clear, it is not as though secular ethics, historical or contemporary, has ignored love. When Stocker and Williams argued that dominant ethical views failed to make room for the phenomenon of acting out of love, the charge was taken seriously (1976; 1981). Since then, the literature on love has grown tremendously, tackling questions about what love is, what our reasons for love are, and how loving, partial relationships fit into broader ethical views. But unlike Christians and Buddhists, for whom an ideal of love for all serves as the central, organizing ethical notion, most of contemporary philosophy sees love as confined to the domain of special relationships between friends, family, romantic partners and the like; love might be important, but it plays no *foundational* role in ethics. As Setiya sums up the dominant view of love, "outside the context of close relationships, love can be ignored. It is not at the root of obligation, as such, but an aspect of our personal lives that calls for moral reflection. On this approach, one could have an adequate view of the nature and grounds of morality without having much to say about love" (2014).<sup>4</sup>

And, you might think, with good reason! Love has its home in our special relationships with the few. Ethics is concerned with much more than that, and it is hard to see how some kind of ideal of love could guide our actions toward the many, especially if we divorce the notion from the religious contexts whose metaphysics—of an infinite being or of the dissolution of the self and oneness of all things—might support it. A secular ethics of agape seems hopeless.

In the first place, the very idea of loving all presents conceptual and metaphysical worries. How could we extend the attitude that we paradigmatically bear towards *the few* with whom we are in *special* relationships towards *all*? Indeed, if love for friends and family is marked by its *partiality*, the notion of loving all seems like an oxymoron. As Orwell puts it, "To an ordinary human being, love means nothing if it does not mean loving some people more than others" (1949, p. 1353). Moreover, there are practical worries. Even if love for

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, Buddhist views differ greatly; I don't make any claim about Buddhism writ large.

<sup>4</sup> To be clear, Setiya does not endorse the dominant approach.

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all were shown to be coherent, it isn't at all clear how it could be achievable for beings like us. To love someone seems to require knowing her; and we neither do nor can know everyone, at least not in a world with more than a few thousand people. It's no accident that Buddhists think it will take *many* lives to achieve a love of all, and that many Christians likewise think agape can be achieved only in the next life or in eschaton.<sup>5</sup>

Even setting these worries aside, there remains a deeper problem: how could love serve as a *foundation* for ethics, not just an important piece but something closer to Paul's claim that the whole of the moral law can be captured by an injunction to love others? Granted that an ideal of love seems appropriate in some contexts; how could it play a foundational role in ethics as a whole, explaining the reasons we face and obligations we have in general?

Answering these questions—how is agape possible? and how can the ideal of agape serve as a foundation of ethics?—is the task of this paper. I offer a novel account of agape on which love for all is both coherent and possible for ordinary people. Doing so requires countenancing a neglected form of love. Love admits as its objects not just individual entities, like people and groups; we can also bear a love for Fs in general—for all Joneses, all Browns, or all philosophers. Here, the object of our love is irreducibly general; I'll call this phenomenon "general love." Understood as general love for all human beings, agape is coherent and possible.

Equipped with this notion of love for all, I explore what a secular ethic with agape at its foundation could look like. I argue it does not require manifesting agape, as that would preclude ever acting on the particular love we bear for family and friends. We should see agape as an *ideal* that we must approach as much as possible. Though for most, full agape is a mistake, we can and should nevertheless *approximate* it. And in this idea, *viz.* that we should approximate the ideal of agape, we can find a novel account of the foundations of ethics. Where most agapist philosophers have defended a kind of consequentialism,<sup>6</sup> I'll argue that what it is to approximate agape *just is* to manifest an attitude of respect for all. The hallmarks of an ethic of respect—universality, impartiality, an anti-aggregationist commitment to the separateness of persons, recognition of constraints against paternalistically overriding another's choices for her benefit, and some kind of distinction between perfect and imperfect duties—can all be derived from the correct account of agape. Respect just

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<sup>5</sup> "The ethical demands made by Jesus [to love all] are incapable of fulfillment in the present existence of man. They proceed from a transcendent and divine unity of essential reality, and their final fulfillment is possible only when God transmutes the present chaos of this world into its final unity" (Niebuhr, 1935, 56-57).

<sup>6</sup> See below, n. 30.

is, on this view, an approximation, a shadow, of love; and our obligation to respect all is understood as an obligation to approximate the fundamental ethical ideal: agape. Velleman argues that “respect and love [are] the required minimum and optional maximum responses to one and the same value,” that of another’s humanity (1999, p. 366). The ethic of agape claims that the maximum is explanatorily prior to the minimum: we are required to respect all exactly because it is the appropriate approximation of the maximal response of love.

The first three sections of the paper articulate a coherent and rigorous understanding of agape. I’ll begin with a discussion of love more broadly (§1), then offer a defense and account of the notion of general love (§2). Putting the ideas in the first two sections together, I’ll characterize agape as general love for all human beings and draw out what an agapic agent would be like (§3). The next section then argues that a secular ethic of agape is possible: by seeing agape as an *ideal*, we can derive a requirement that we respect all (§4). At that point the main ambitions of the paper will be complete—my goal is first and foremost to put a neglected view back on the map, not so much to argue in its defense. But I will close with brief arguments in favor of this love-first approach that sees a broadly deontological approach to ethics as grounded in an ideal of agape (§5).

## 1 Two core features of love: feeling and acting

Before offering an account of love for all, we need some rough sense of what love for another human being involves.<sup>7</sup> Without offering a full analysis or definition, we can identify two constitutive features of love: the first is a way of feeling, and the second, a way of acting.

To begin with the obvious, love involves a distinctive way of feeling. It is sometimes wrongly assumed that this feeling is a desire for the beloved—to be with him or to have some kind of connection with him.<sup>8</sup> But while many loves do involve such a desire,<sup>9</sup> others do not. For better and for worse, many of us have friends or family who drive us crazy, whose company we would avoid but that we suffer out of love. Following a divorce, a divorcée can still love her ex-spouse while never wanting to see him again; she can care about him, wish him well, hold a place for him in her heart all while never wanting him in

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<sup>7</sup> To simplify an already difficult task, I am setting aside love for inanimate objects and non-human animals, see n.24.

<sup>8</sup> As in Jeske (2008) or Sidgwick (1981, p. 244).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Abramson and Leite (2011).

her presence.<sup>10</sup> While love need not feature a desire for company, it nevertheless involves some kind of feeling—some tenderness of the heart.

That tenderness involves a *vulnerability* to the other (Velleman, 1999). To love another is to be susceptible to her happiness and pain, to the goods and ills that befall her; and it is to do so in a distinctive manner. Imagine reading a list of casualties of a terrible accident and seeing a long list of strangers' names. However saddening that might be, there would be a world of difference if you found a name of one you loved—a family member, a friend. Likewise, the successes and welfare of our loved ones move us more like our own successes than do the successes and welfare of strangers. Imagine the list again but as award recipients. The manner of feeling is akin to how we feel about the goods and ills in our own lives. We in some sense identify *with* those we love; we bring them into our hearts, and their welfare, suffering, successes, needs, wants, etc... become ours.<sup>11</sup> As Nozick puts it, “When something bad happens to one you love,... something bad also happens to you.... If a loved one is hurt or disgraced, you are hurt; if something wonderful happens to her, you feel better off” (1989, p. 58). Metaphors of love—opening or connecting the heart, bringing another into the heart—capture the sense of emotional vulnerability. And in this vulnerability lies much of the beauty and challenge of loving others.

In addition to feeling, love involves a practical component, i.e., a way of acting. Imagine someone who *felt* in the manner distinctive of love but was never moved to *do* anything about it. Suppose I claim to delight in the happiness and feel the pain of another but when presented with an opportunity to make her life better, I am completely unmoved. It's not that I am more strongly moved by some countervailing consideration, e.g., that interference would be objectionable or that helping would be too personally painful. I just don't take anything about her life as a reason for *action*. I'm tempted to think that the case as described is impossible, or at least possible only for an agent with a severely fragmented psyche—our feelings and motivations are intimately connected, though the nature of that connection is complicated and contested.<sup>12</sup> In any case, such a motivationally impotent state is at best a severely defective kind of love (Abramson and Leite, 2011). Love involves a kind of motivation—to be moved by the welfare and preferences of the beloved qua reasons—what Kant called its “practical” as opposed to merely “pathological” component (1998a, AK 4:399).

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<sup>10</sup> cf. Velleman (1999)

<sup>11</sup> See Korgaard's (1996) and (2009). Johnston (2010) takes that identification quite literally.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ebels-Duggan (2009, p. 143).

While I won't argue for this here, we can best understand the practical component of love as a habit of character, a principle of practical reasoning, or a way of looking onto the world that involves noticing certain facts and according them weight in one's practical deliberation.<sup>13</sup> The generous agent notices when others are in need and her motivations are sensitive to that; compared to the non-generous, she weighs the needs of others more strongly and of herself less so. So it is with love. Insofar as we love another, we *notice* him; moreover, his interests strike us as practically significant, and we treat them as comparatively weightier reasons to act. What interests? Does one who loves respond solely to facts bearing on the beloved's well-being or do things like the beloved's choices, ends and projects matter as well? I'll argue for the latter below (§3.3). But for now, we need only the idea that loving someone involves reasoning in such a way that takes the reasons stemming from *them* as especially weighty and important. That love involves this practical component is why love for another involves a disposition to be partial towards him, e.g., to rescue a loved one over a drowning stranger when only one can be saved. And it is why we can explain someone's exhibiting partiality by citing her love.

## 2 General Love

In addition to loving particular entities like friends and family, we can also exhibit what I'll call "general love," a love for all Fs, that is irreducibly general in its structure. It is the task of this section to get the notion of general love in view. Once it is, I'll go on to argue (in §3) that *agape* should be understood as general love for all human beings.

### 2.1 Particular love and general love

Love is *for* something; love has an object. The most familiar, paradigm cases of love are those found in relationships like friendship, romance, and family, where the object of love

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<sup>13</sup> For others who take love to involve a virtue, principle of practical reasoning, or habit of character, see Pettit (1997); Kolodny (2003); Frankfurt (2004); Ebels-Duggan (2009); Abramson and Leite (2011); Jollimore (2011); Spaemann (2012); Keller (2013); Setiya (2014). We can be neutral on what in our moral psychology a habit of character or practical principle involves. One might think of them as dispositions to be moved by certain facts (Setiya, 2010), or essentially rational dispositions to be so moved (Wedgwood, 2006; Arpaly and Schroeder, 2015). They could involve the adoption of a maxim and issuance self-legislation (Kant, 1998a; Korsgaard, 2009; Schapiro, 2021), a decision to treat something as a reason (Bratman, 1999), or the setting of a relevant *end* (Bratman, 1987). Thus, it might be that to love a friend involves a disposition to respond to facts about them, or something more: seeing yourself *as a friend*, seeing your friends' needs under a distinctive normative guise (e.g., as reasons for you), deciding to take your friends' needs as reasons, or setting your friends' well-being as an end.

is a particular person. It is easy to see how our two core features of love—the practical and emotional component—take shape in love for a particular person. Love involves being emotionally vulnerable to that person and taking her interests as relatively weighty reasons to act.

We can also love a social group—a particular entity made up of many individuals. I might, for instance, love a team, my department, or my country; I'd be emotionally vulnerable to *it*, and I'd take its interests as reasons to act. I might, for instance, respond to the fact that buying Red Sox tickets supports the team by buying a few tickets, or to the fact that hitting a home run would win the game by wishing it happens; and I might *feel* success and failures of the team, exhibiting a profound emotional vulnerability to the object of my love.

Call this kind of love, love for a particular entity—a person or a group—“*particular* love.” It is often taken for granted that love just is particular love, i.e., that all love is for particular entities.<sup>14</sup> And if it were, agape would be hard to make sense of for two reasons. First the conceptual or metaphysical worry: particular love is a way of singling out some individual as special, emotionally and practically; and if everyone is special, no one is. Second the practical worry: we don't have the mental and epistemic capacity to love billions of people in particular. Particular love requires having *that particular entity* in mind, so at least in a world of more than a few thousand people, it doesn't seem possible to love each person. Getting someone in mind in a way that allows love requires some kind of *acquaintance* with him (Setiya 2022; Abramson and Leite 2011, pp. 676-77; Kraut 1986). That acquaintance might be thin—via a photograph, a letter or a perhaps fleeting glance—but it must be there to some degree. And we are not in a position to be acquainted with *everyone*. Perhaps God could love all human beings the way we love each of our friends, but we cannot.

If love is necessarily particular, then agape would have to be a love for something like the group of all humans—not a love for human beings so much as a love for *humanity* itself, for the species. (Or perhaps instead for the group of all *persons*.) As we'll see below, this is how many agapist philosophers seem to think about agape.<sup>15</sup> But such an attitude would not be a love for *all*, at least not in the first place. It would be a love for a very special *it*, of which all humans are a part. Such a love is coherent and psychologically

<sup>14</sup> e.g., “One cannot love generally; when we love, we love some particular persons rather than others” (Jollimore, 2011, p. 171).

<sup>15</sup> See n.30.

realizable; but it is normatively suspect. Love for a group need not involve a love for each, or even any, particular member. One could love the Red Sox and be indifferent or hostile to some of the players, caring about their contributions to the thing one loves but little else, even hating those one sees as holding the team back. Inasmuch as we are interested in agape as an *ideal*, a love for humanity that is compatible with indifference or even hostility towards the many seems in some way to miss the mark. Moreover, as I'll argue below (§3.2), treating love of humanity, the group, as a practical ideal would have unacceptably *aggregative* consequences.

Is there some alternative understanding of agape, one that does not understand the love as particular—neither for each human being nor for the aggregate group of all humans? I'll argue there is. To do so, we'll set agape aside for a moment and consider a more familiar case (pun intended): love for members of a family. I'll use that case to get “general love,” a love for all Fs, in view; I'll then go on to argue that general love for all Fs has a number of key features: it is less personal than a particular love for each F; it does not require knowing each F one loves; and it is impartial *among* the Fs. To foreshadow a bit, these characteristics of general love will play key roles in the argument that respect should be understood as an approximation of agape.

## 2.2 Love for all Millers

What follows is a phenomenology of a case of familial love. Having described the case, I'll argue that we cannot make sense of it in terms of particular love. I'll thereby conclude that we should countenance the existence of general love. Note that you may not love your family in the way that the protagonist of the following vignette does. All that is required for the argument to succeed is that the love described be *possible*, though I think it is moreover a love that is actual and, in varying degrees, not uncommon. Nor will the vignette make any *normative* claim about this familial love; it may or may not be rational (or good), what matters for now is just that it is possible.

Suppose Jack Miller is attending a family reunion. The timing is inconvenient and he'll have to make sacrifices to attend; furthermore, he knows time spent at the reunion could instead be used to serve more people's interests to a greater degree, e.g., by volunteering for a charity or political campaign; and he knows that the money spent on flights, lodging and toys he bought for all the young Miller children—with many of whom he is unacquainted—could have saved multiple lives that will otherwise be lost. Why, in light of



all that, would he go to the family reunion? It's no great mystery: because he loves his family; he inconveniences himself, spends significant sums of money, and allocates his time out of love for them.

In what does Jack's love consist? I'll consider three ways of understanding Jack's love as particular love and argue each fails. One response is then to give up the natural description of the case: whatever motivates Jack, it isn't love. But that's implausible; better, instead, to countenance a love that is essentially general. We can make sense of Jack if we understand his as a love for all Millers in general.

First, we could try to understand Jack's love as love for a particular multi-person entity: the Miller Family. But in the first place, Jack might not have any thoughts about the family as such. His love might only be for people, not for a family. But even supposing he loves the family, that love would be different than a love for all Millers. He might for instance love some things *about* his family, e.g., its size; but it would be confused to say he loved all the Millers for their size. And as I suggested above, it is consistent with a love for a family not to care at all about at least some members of the family. You could imagine a patriarch of an ancient family caring very much about *the family*—its reputation, its holdings, its power—while showing an utter disregard for most of the (unimportant) members of that family.<sup>16</sup> But we can easily imagine Jack's love is not like that of an uncaring patriarch—that whatever his love amounts to, it in some way involves goodwill for the Millers *themselves*, not just for the group.

One might instead think Jack's love for all Millers should be understood as a sum of particular loves for each Miller, i.e., for Carmen and for Brian and for.... But such a view could not explain how Jack's love motivates his purchase of toys for children with whom he isn't acquainted. One cannot bear particular love for those one cannot get in mind. And suppose he really can't—suppose Jack isn't even sure *how many* new Miller children there are. Nevertheless, he could lovingly buy toys for them; it is still natural to explain his purchase by citing his familial love.<sup>17</sup> This is all to say that it seems Jack *can* act out of a love that somehow includes those he cannot get in mind. One might object that this is a

<sup>16</sup> If I can be forgiven the pop culture reference: *A Song of Ice and Fire's* Tywin Lannister perfectly embodies the distinction between love for the Lannister family, which he has in spades, and love for all the Lannisters, which he clearly lacks. He sees his children as tools to be used in the advancement of the family, not as objects of love and care.

<sup>17</sup> And lest one claim that the love might just be Jack's love for the kids' parents or for some other relatives he *does* know, we can imagine that he knows all the parents in the family don't want him to bring gifts, but he does so out the kind of loving regard for the children *themselves* that overrides the parent's wishes.

reason to revise a natural description of Jack's motivation—it can't be love after all! But if there is some kind of love that *can* encompass those one cannot get into mind, then we should not give up the natural description of Jack's motivation.

Moreover, claiming that Jack's love is a particular love for each Miller wouldn't capture the way in which his love for the children would naturally extend automatically to newborn members of the family. Whatever this familial love is, it automatically encompasses new Millers; that's why all these unacquainted Millers are automatically objects of his love (though not as particular individuals). He's buying toys for those he hasn't met exactly because his love automatically extends to them as well. A love for a number of individuals would not explain that automatic extension.

One last attempt on behalf to understand Jack's love for all Millers in terms of particular love: might it be the sum of particular loves for each Miller *plus* a disposition to love each new Miller Jack meets? While that would go some of the way towards solving the problem of automatic extension to new Millers, it gets the phenomenology wrong. This proposal makes Jack's purchase of toys for the Miller children an odd sort of thing. It isn't really done out of love for anyone; it was rather a kind of preparatory move—in buying the toys, Jack is readying himself for arrival of the new loves he is disposed to form. But it doesn't seem right to say Jack can only buy the toys in anticipation of future particular love; he can buy them out of love he has right now for people he has yet to meet. We could even imagine he lovingly buys the toys knowing he will never become acquainted with the children (say he's terminally ill and is mailing the gifts because he won't make it to the reunion); here the purchase could not be preparatory; if it is done out of love, it must be a love that in some way encompasses the children without having them in particular as objects.

Or consider the feelings involved in Jack's meeting new family. Imagine Jack meets Justin, with whom he was previously in no way acquainted. It would be natural on their meeting for Jack to feel that he had *already* loved Justin and for Justin himself to feel *already* loved as soon as he joined the family—that feeling can be one of the best parts about meeting family for the first time. The view under consideration, by contrast, would have it be that the love is *formed* in the meeting, not already present. Of course, a new *particular* love for Justin could be formed upon or after meeting him; a love for all Fs could even explain a disposition to get to know individual Fs and come to love them in particular. The point is that some love (i.e., the love for all Millers) can already extend to Justin.

So in addition to love for a particular individual, we should recognize love for all Fs as

another kind of love. In addition to particular entities, our love admits of general objects. Jack's love is for all the Millers, whoever in particular they may be. It may help to think of general love as an attitude in which Millers appear not by name (as Carmen, Gary, Jill, etc.) but by description (as the Millers).<sup>18</sup> It is for that reason a love that automatically extends to any new individual who fits that description. Thus we can say that Jack loves the Miller children inasmuch as he loves *all the Millers*, something that already seemed like a natural description of the case.

I'll be the first to admit this is an odd argument. We need to countenance a kind of attitude you've probably never considered because only it can explain the behavior of an imaginary person whose psychology may seem foreign! To advance the argument, then, I'll do two things: first show love is not unique among attitudes in admitting of general objects; second, characterize general love further and thereby better get it in view.

First consider other attitudes: suppose Jack has a fear of all bears. Such a fear can be essentially general, it could encompass all and only the bears (including bears Jack has never met), extending to new bears automatically. Jack could of course also have particular fears: he could fear Yogi and Booboo and Smokey; but that would be a different sort of attitude than a fear of *all* bears. He could fear bears *generically*; but generics, and so such a fear, admit of exceptions, and just suppose Jack's fear doesn't.<sup>19</sup> He could fear the group of all bears, but suppose Jack's fear is really of many individuals, not the group as such. It seems that fear—and other attitudes besides—likewise admit of these general objects that appear in the content of an attitude by description, not by name. The idea of an attitude being general, i.e., for all Fs, isn't odd; what is surprising, and often implicitly or explicitly rejected, is that *love* can be general. But the case of Jack suggests it can.

Now I'll make the notion of general love more concrete. The first thing to note is that general love is less restrictive than particular love; it allows loving people one cannot love in particular. I mean this in two ways. The first is epistemic and by now familiar: Jack cannot love unacquainted Millers particularly, but his general love for all Millers can even extend to even to those with whom he is not acquainted.

Second, general love can transcend psychological limitations. Some people are quite hard to love. Imagine Jack has an obnoxious uncle Gary Miller; Gary treats others well enough, but whenever the conversation turns to politics, he expresses deeply bigoted views.

<sup>18</sup> I avoid using the terms “de re” and “de dicto” to avoid confusion arising from competing understandings of the distinction.

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Zoe Johnson King for raising this possibility.

But while Jack finds Gary almost intolerable, Jack loves Gary's wife and children very much. We all have Garys in our lives—and perhaps many are *not* in the end worth loving;<sup>20</sup> but suppose Jack *wants* to love Gary even though he finds Gary repulsive. Gary's individual personality is not, given Jack's psychology, lovable; even if he can't bring himself to love Gary qua individual, however, he *could* love him as one among the Millers. That is, he could form a love for all Fs (all Millers) that *includes* Gary just as his love for Millers includes the children he hasn't met, without featuring him *in particular* as an object of love. Jack's love for the Millers is the same with respect to any particular Miller; it is not a love for Gary qua particular individual (in all his obnoxious particularity). So just as Jack's love for all Millers encompasses his sister, the kids, then unmet Millers, etc..., it can encompass Gary. So far as the love is concerned, he is just a Miller. And, again for better or worse, I suspect that inasmuch as any of us do love the Garys in our lives, it is just this way—by forming a love that does not respond to the beloved in his particularity but encompasses some individuals in general of which he is one.

Jack's love for all Millers is thus less restrictive than particular love because it is insensitive to the features of each Miller that make him or her unique. He need not know them, or if he does, their particularity is shielded, as it were, from the point of view of general love. This is all to say that love for all Millers is a less personal kind of love; it is more expansive and less limited (epistemically and psychologically) because it is in this way *thinner*. It is not an improvement on particular love nor an adequate substitute for it; it is something different. Imagine Jack bore no particular love for his sister Jane and loved her only as one among the Millers. She would be warranted in feeling hurt. We could imagine her complaint: "Your love for me is just the same as it is for all those cousins you've never met or for Gary! What about *me*? How could your love not be individualized to me—responsive to what makes me who I am or what has shaped our relationship?" In this way, it is not a love suited to *intimacy*, which involves responding to and loving that which makes the beloved who she is in particular. This is not, to be clear, a criticism of general love; Jack, after all, can bear a particular love for Jane alongside a general love for all Millers. I am just highlighting the less personal nature of general love.

Relatedly, general love is also by nature *impartial*. Recall that love involves a practical component—a habit of character or principle of reasoning that takes the interests of the

<sup>20</sup> As we'll see, an ethic of love should claim we have pro tanto reason to love all, *not* that we have decisive reason to love all; we can have countervailing reasons not to love.

beloved as especially weighty reasons in deciding what to do. Love for all Fs involves a principle that is impartial *among* the Fs. It is, of course, partial in one sense. Jack's love for all Millers leads him to be partial to the Millers vis-à-vis others; but among the Millers, acting out of love for Millers would lead Jack to treat Millers equally. After all, nothing in the attitude could pick out any one Miller's interests and elevate them over others. If Jack *were* partial to one Miller—if he took *her* needs and preferences as more important than that of any Miller, if he attended more to *her*—then it must be in virtue of some attitude that is apt to pick out that particular Miller, e.g., a particular love for her that he has in addition to his general love for all Millers.

(One last note: in describing general love, I have not made any claim that Jack's love is rational, nor have I discussed his *reasons* for his love. That there is general love is a separate issue from what, if any, reasons one might have to bear general love. The account of general love can adopt any of the prominent views of the reasons we have for particular love: Maybe Jack could love all Millers because of their attractive qualities (they're all funny or they're all kind),<sup>21</sup> because of the relationship he bears to them (they are his family),<sup>22</sup> or just because they are human or persons;<sup>23</sup> or maybe Jack loves them for *bad* reasons. At this stage, I only claim that as a descriptive matter, general love is possible.)

To sum up, love for all Fs is not reducible to particular love in some way. To love all Fs is to exhibit an attitude with Fs, in general, featuring as its objects. Because it is a love whose objects appear not as individuals but as some among all Fs, it is a love with key features: it is not individualized to each F, it is less personal than particular love for a given F would be, and it is thereby able to transcend the epistemic and psychological limitations of love. And while love for some Fs involves being partial to them over others, it does not discriminate among Fs and so is impartial among them.

### 3 Agape

Armed with the notion of general love, we have the necessary tools to articulate a conception of agape that avoids worries of conceptual or practical impossibility: agape is general love for all human beings.<sup>24</sup> This section's task is to say what that is. I'll do so by describ-

<sup>21</sup> As in Jollimore (2011, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> As in Kolodny (2003, 2010a,b); Scheffler (1997); Jeske (2008).

<sup>23</sup> As in Velleman (2006); Setiya (2014).

<sup>24</sup> So far as the arguments of the paper are concerned, one can substitute "persons" for "human beings". What about non-human animals? A Buddhist would object that agape, or whatever expansive love is really

ing the love of an “agapic agent,” i.e., one who loves all human beings. In the next section, we’ll consider whether the agapic agent can also manifest particular love for individuals (I’ll say she can’t). But to get clear on agape, we’ll first consider a *purely* agapic agent, i.e., one whose only love is agape.

I’ll argue that the (purely) agapic agent’s concern for human beings is marked by four structural features; the first three follow from considering the two core features of love from §1 in light of the account of general love in §2; the fourth will require a supplemental claim that particular love is anti-paternalistic.

1. Universality: The agapic agent’s love is for *all*.
2. Impartiality: The agapic agent regards all equally.
3. Anti-aggregation: The agapic agent does not see individuals’ wellbeing as fungible. Her reasoning is committed to the separateness of persons in recognizing interpersonal constraints against justifying harms to one via benefits to another.
4. Anti-paternalism: The agapic agent is not only concerned with the welfare of others, but is also respectful of their choices. She reasons in accordance with constraints grounded in individuals’ choices and will not promote another’s well-being when doing so would override their choices.

These first two features are likely familiar; most who have explicitly considered the question think agape is universal and impartial.<sup>25</sup> The second two constitute a departure from most thinking about agape.<sup>26</sup> Most think there is some kind of tension between love and respect—one pulls us close, the other requires we keep our distance. But I think the opposite: a fully agapic agent would, *in virtue of her love*, bear an attitude of respect towards all. Love for all is a *deontic* attitude; by its nature, its full manifestation requires a recognition of deontic constraints.

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worth thinking about and regarding as an ethical ideal, is not a love for human beings but for all animals or all conscious beings or maybe even for all living things. But I’ll continue to leave non-human animals aside mainly to simplify an already difficult task and leave it open possibilities of an ethics involving more expansive conceptions of agape. Moreover, in §5, I’ll suggest that one reason to accept agape as an ideal is that the bear fact of another’s *humanity* (or personhood) gives us reason to love him. It is less clear that the fact of another’s animality or consciousness or life does. But I don’t want to settle that issue here.

<sup>25</sup> See n. 27, 28, & 30.

<sup>26</sup> But not all, see especially Wolterstorff (2011).

I'll make the case for these four structural features in order. Importantly, I am here *only* arguing for a necessary connection: that the purely agapic agent necessarily respects all; sections §4 & 5 will advance a stronger, foundational claim: that our obligation to respect all can be *derived from* an ideal of agape.

One crucial note: because the ultimate aim of this paper is to argue that the foundation for an ethic of respect, i.e., for deontology, can be found in love, I am trying to remain neutral with respect to various debates *between* deontological views, e.g., exactly what anti-aggregative or anti-welfarist constraints there are. Are these to be understood as *rights*? Are they absolute or can they be overridden? Are there constraints against harm, lying, bodily trespass, use of others' property? And what is the exact shape of those constraints? These are all questions that can be raised in terms of the agapic agent, e.g., under what, if any, circumstances would an agapic agent harm another or use another's property without permission? And I think that much progress can be made in ethics by thinking through debates within deontology in terms of agape. But given that my purpose here is ultimately to make the foundational claim that respect can be explained in terms of love for all, my sketch of agape will be just that—a sketch of the general outlines of an agapic attitude towards others but not its finer details.

### 3.1 Universal and Impartial Regard

From what we have said about love's constitutive elements and the nature of general love, what can be said about an agent who manifests agape? In the first place, her love is essentially universal. Just as Jack's love for all Millers essentially encompasses every Miller, automatically extending to new ones, so, too, would agape essentially encompass every human.<sup>27</sup> Agape is likewise essentially *impartial*. Because it is a love for all humans *in general*, there is nothing in the attitude to single out any particular person vis-à-vis any other. The attitude borne towards one is the very same attitude born towards every other, so the way in which it disposes the purely agapic agent to respond is essentially impartial, just as Jack's love for all Millers is impartial among the Millers.<sup>28</sup>

What would impartial, universal love for all look like? As with any kind of love, it should

<sup>27</sup> See Kierkegaard (1995, p. 58). Many other Christians authors agree (Outka, 1972, p. 9-24). A notable exception is Barth, who thinks God's command to love thy neighbor extends only to those within the community of Christians (Dogmatics, IV/2:802-4, as cited by Outka 1972, p. 210.)

<sup>28</sup> Again, this is a widely endorsed position by those working in the Christian tradition (ibid., 9-24; Niebuhr 1957, 108; Wolterstorff 2011, 21-40) and also by Goodman (2008, Lecture 1), who, like Niebuhr, makes much of the command to love the neighbor "as thyself."

be seen as a trait of character involving an affective and practical component. Let's take each in turn.

The agapic agent is emotionally susceptible to all (and equally so). At first pass, that might seem psychologically impossible. Velleman suggests our limited emotional bandwidth makes *universal* vulnerability impossible (1999). But consider ordinary (particular) love. Our love for our friends involves emotional susceptibility to each of them; but it is consistent with our loving a friend that on a given day, we are emotionally exhausted, perhaps by love of other friends, and so cannot feel with him. Having taken on the stress, pain, joy, etc. of some of our beloveds, we can (temporarily) run out of emotional room for that of others. We don't thereby stop loving them. The emotional susceptibility of love is a disposition or propensity to feel with and for others and like other dispositions can be masked. The agapic agent would not actually feel for all human beings; that *would* be impossible, at least for a human agent; she can nevertheless be (equally) vulnerable to all. As she moves through life, the sorrows and triumphs of others move her directly and deeply, as we are moved by only a select few. Where most of us have a(n important!) tendency to ignore most people and, when ignorance is impossible, harden our hearts to their troubles, the agapic agent does neither, letting it all in. For example, suppose you are on your way to a close friend's party and you see a car accident. You might have an only limited emotional response to the victims. And if your response were strong, you might even try to push those feelings out and harden your heart so as not to show up to your friend's party an emotional wreck who can't share in her joy because of some strangers' pain. Now suppose instead it is Jack who sees the accident and he knows the car that crashed was full of Millers; even if he were headed to a friend's party (and of course he'd likely stop! but put that aside), he'd have much more trouble pushing those feelings out—he's vulnerable to them. The agapic agent is like Jack but with respect to everyone. Such a life would be overwhelming and all consuming (more on this in §4.1) but not impossible. And we may know people who, though they may not be fully agapic, nevertheless manifest some fraction of this tendency, i.e., those whose emotional walls are thin and are very affected by those around them, even those they don't know personally.

Much the same can be said of the practical component. While the agapic agent may not be able to act out of love on behalf of every person, she can adopt a principle of reasoning that takes *each person's* interests as reasons to act. In some sense anyone who takes their moral obligations seriously sees all as equal (more on this below, §4.3), but in another we



do not. Most of the time, we don't respond fully to the needs and interests of anyone but a special few; we might allocate some (possibly large) portion of our time, money, effort and attention to the many, but when it comes to spending an evening with a friend who needs a little comforting, we do it despite, and often without any thought for, the fact that an evening spent helping those in desperate need could do far more for them than for our friend. While we always accord some minimal regard for others, we often don't take others into account any *more* than that. The agapic agent is in that respect quite different. She does not privilege any one human being; she is equally disposed to notice and act on the interests of each person. Where we don't notice, she does; where we act on behalf of the few, she acts impartially.

### 3.2 Anti-Aggregation

Does this mean that the agapic agent is consequentialist—concerned solely with promoting the welfare of all?<sup>29</sup> All of those in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who took a love-centric approach thought so—indeed, they stand at the vanguard of the Utilitarian tradition.<sup>30</sup> Some contemporary authors on (particular) love have likewise thought its practical component consists exclusively of taking the beloved's welfare as providing reasons (e.g., Frankfurt 2004). But agape is, in two crucial respects, non-consequentialist. First, the agapic agent would not think aggregatively about those she loves. Second, she would care about more than what is good for the beloved, seeing his choices, ends and projects as providing reasons, even against promoting the beloved's well-being—in short, agape is anti-paternalistic. Together, these two elements amount to a claim that a purely

<sup>29</sup> By consequentialism, I mean the old-fashioned kind, before attempts were made to “consequentialize” deontological constraints, yielding “consequentialist” views that align with deontological predictions, as in Brown (2011) and Dreier (2011).

<sup>30</sup> For an overview, see Schneewind (1998). The first was Cumberland, who is often credited with first articulating something like a greatest happiness principle (1727, §1.iv; for a list of similar passages, Schneewind 1998, p. 103 n.6) which requires us to maximize “joint” (i.e., aggregated) happiness (1727, 1.xxxiii; see also 5.xix, 5.xxxv). Cambridge Platonists like Smith and More likewise took the injunction to love as a command to promote the “happiness of all mankind” (Smith 1660, p. 154-56; More 1666, p. 15, from which the quotation is taken). Hutcheson went so far as to define even rights in terms of the “general good” (1738, Vol. II §VII.VI, p. 297-98). Butler, who thought Hutchesonian benevolence was an important principle in ethics argued it could not be the sole principle exactly because it would have unacceptably aggregationist upshots: licensing the theft of another's property and making one indifferent to whether a good was had by a stranger or a loved one (1740, ¶8-10, p.383-4). Leibniz, who thought to love was to delight in the happiness of another, was also a consequentialist (1969, §4). A quick note that Hume saw an intimate connection between love and virtue, but not in that love *was* a virtue; rather, for a trait to be virtuous is “equivalent” with “the power of producing love or pride” (2007 3.3.1.3/SB575; see Korsgaard 1999.)

agapic agent *respects* those she loves.

These strike many as odd claims to make. Love and respect for a person have struck many as pulling us in opposite directions. Early Modern ethics is characterized in part by a debate between the agapist forefathers of consequentialism were *opposed* and those of a more deontological bent, concerned with the *rights*.<sup>31</sup> Kant sees love and respect as the two “laws for human beings’ external relations with one another,” forces that must be kept in a balance of “*attraction* and *repulsion*”:

The principle of **mutual love** admonishes them constantly to *come closer* to one another; that of **respect** they owe another, to keep themselves *at a distance* from another; and should one of these great moral forces fail, “then nothingness (immorality), with gaping throat would drink up the whole kingdom of (moral) beings like a drop of water.” (2017, AK 6:449, *emph. original*, quoting the poet Haller)

Kierkegaard claims that “there are no *mine* and *yours* in love” (Kierkegaard, 1995, p. 265, *emph original*); love is in some sense about eliding that distinction—your pain is my pain, what matters to you matters to me; but respecting another’s autonomy seems to be largely about *abiding* by the distinction between mine and yours—recognizing your life is *not* mine.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, if ever paternalism is appropriate, it seems to be exactly in the context of close *loving* relationships. Parents often should act in their child’s interests whatever the child’s preferences. We sometimes intervene in our friends’ lives—we get in their business, trying to direct and effect their choices—in a way we do not and should not with others. So doesn’t *love* involve a very different attitude than *respect*?

My task in this and the next subsection is twofold: to advance the positive case that love for all involves a recognition of deontic constraints against paternalism and aggregation and to defuse the felt tension between love and respect. To do so, I’ll make claims about what is more or less loving or what meets the standards of love. I don’t mean to suggest that being insufficiently loving or failing to meet such standards means one’s attitude isn’t love; I am making a claim about what it is to love well (or as I also put it, to love “fully”), i.e., what

<sup>31</sup> Like Suarez, Grotius and Hobbes. See Schneewind (1998).

<sup>32</sup> Nygren and Niebuhr likewise see a conflict between love and justice, and we can see how their remarks would extend to respect. Nygren takes forgiveness to be the paradigm expression of love, and understands forgiveness as something like the willful neglect of what is owed (1953, p. 88-90). See Wolterstorff (2011, p. 51-55) for a decisive response. For Niebuhr, consideration of rights or what is owed only makes sense in a context of conflict and competing interests whereas love exists in a space of harmony (1957, p. 28)—hence his thought that agape must wait till the end of days when competition is eliminated (1935, p. 56-57).

it is to respond fully to the reasons of love, in the same way we might talk about what it is to be fully courageous or generous.)<sup>33</sup>

First against aggregation. By aggregation, I mean a form of reasoning that indulges in the kind of impersonal comparisons that, roughly, consequentialists endorse and deontologists reject. While deontologists, of course, disagree on its exact shape, a constraint against aggregative reasoning involves something like a refusal to see harms to one person as compensated by benefits to another. To reason anti-aggregatively is to reason in such a way that respects that constraint, that sees people's interests as non-fungible.

Particular love for humans is clearly anti-aggregative—to love someone in particular is to see her interests as non-fungible. If an agent bears particular love for two people, her love is poor insofar as she thinks harms to one are compensated by benefits to another, i.e., her attitudes towards the two seem positively *unloving*. Imagine Sophie has two friends, Jan and Eva, whom she purports to love. Sophie, however, constantly lies to and harms Jan for the sake of Eva. When Jan has medicine and Sophie (correctly) believes that Eva would be made moderately better off by it than Jan would be harmed by its loss, she secretly steals and delivers it to Eva. Or she lies to Jan so as to trick him into giving it to Eva. Granted there *might* be times where the difference in need is so great that such actions are justified; suppose these are not those times. What Sophie does is wrong. It also seems *unloving*. If Sophie is caught, Jan would not only be warranted in feeling wronged but unloved (or insufficiently loved). Suppose Sophie explained “I was just doing what was best overall for my friends—had Jan needed it more and Eva had the medicine, I would have done the opposite.” If anything, that would seem to give Eva, the beneficiary, reason to feel unloved as well! That Sophie thinks of their interests as fungible in this way evinces a lack of love for them as individuals, or at least a profound deficiency in Sophie's love. Note the shape of the claim here: it is not just that loving well involves loving plus doing something else, namely not aggregating. It is rather that in reasoning aggregatively, Sophie seems to violate some standard of love itself—her attitude is *deficient qua love*.

If aggregative reasoning runs afoul of the “separateness of persons,” particular love seems like the sort of attitude that quintessentially recognizes the separateness of its objects. Each beloved is special, and to see them or their interests as interchangeable in some way is to fail to love each adequately.

<sup>33</sup> Like Ebels-Duggan (2009), I make no claims about the grounds of those standards—they could be constitutive norms derived from the nature of love, explained via a naturalistic reduction, or fundamental normative truths about what reasons a loving agent should respond to.

So much for ordinary, particular love. What about agape? Whether agape is aggregative depends on how one understands the attitude itself. Early Modern agapists thought that love for all required promotion of aggregate good. Maybe that is because they saw agape as something like love for a group. If one's object of concern was not each person but a multi-person entity—the group with people as parts—aggregation would be natural. The focal point of practical attention would be the aggregate, with each person relevant inasmuch and because they are a part of the whole.<sup>34</sup> Just as my love of the Red Sox might lead me to desire we sacrifice one player for the good of the whole, an agapist who thought the ideal of practical reasoning was love of the *group* of all humans would think harms to one could be justified by greater benefits to the whole. Such a love would see each human as a *part* of the object of love, and so the well-being of each as fungible.

On exactly these grounds, I think we should reject a conception of agape as love for a group. The Early Modern agapists' *modus ponens* “we should love all; if we should love of all, then we should promote the welfare of the aggregate of all human beings; therefore we should promote the welfare of the aggregate” is my *modus tolens*. But armed with the alternative of general love, we can reject the *second* premise instead of the first—agape properly understood need not be aggregative! On the contrary, if we adopt §2's notion of general love, we can see it is anti-aggregative in its very nature.

Agape understood as general love for all human beings does not have some aggregate as its object; general love for human beings is an attitude towards the humans, plural, not towards *one* object with each human as a part. It is a love of *them*, not of some aggregate *it*. The separateness of its objects is reflected in its very structure—that was how we distinguished Jack's love for all the Millers from love for a group.

Because *particular* love for multiple people is anti-aggregative, we should conclude *general* love is anti-aggregative. The various loves I've considered—particular love for many individuals, particular love for a group, and general love—differ in virtue of their *objects*. Subsequent differences between these loves stem from a difference in what they are for. Particular love for a group is aggregative while particular love for many individuals is not because the former love is for an aggregate, the latter for individuals. But in this respect, general love is more like particular love for many individuals than it is like particular love

<sup>34</sup> cf. Rawls's claim that “the most natural way...of arriving at utilitarianism...is to adopt for society as a whole the principle of rational choice for one man.” (1999, §5, pp. 26–27). I am suggesting that agapist consequentialists extend an attitude held towards one person (particular love) and adopt it towards society as a whole, an aggregate.

for a group; its object, though less personal and essentially general, is still for individuals, not a group. There is nothing aggregative about it. There are other differences, of course, that stem from the difference in object: general love is less personal, impartial, etc. But there is nothing in the contrast between having as an object of love humans in general and some particular humans that could ground a difference with respect to aggregation.

Another route to the same conclusion is to consider Jack. Suppose he reasoned aggregatively: seeing theft of a toy from one child as justified by the greater benefits its redistribution would bring to another—that would be *unloving*. Or else it would suggest that Jack’s love is like love for a team or a patriarch’s love for *the family*—love for an aggregate with each person as a part.

That is not to say that agape admits of no comparative judgements among its objects or that numbers don’t count at all for the agapic agent. I am leaving open the exact shape of an anti-aggregative constraint. I claim only that agape involves a recognition of some interpersonal constraint against seeing harms to one as simply compensated by benefits to another, and that a failure to do so falls short of the standards of general love. It is *unloving* with respect to general love for all human beings, just as it is unloving with respect to particular love for human beings.

### 3.3 Well-being *and* Autonomy

The last subsection alone does not yet get us the claim that the agapic agent respects all. Respect not only involves a recognition of interpersonal constraints but also of anti-paternalistic constraints, i.e., constraints against overriding the choices or ends of another for the sake of her well-being. Granted on some views of well-being, there will be no such conflict; but so long as one thinks that some choices are genuinely self-sacrificial, e.g., dying for a cause, the possibility of a conflict between one’s well-being and one’s choices, preferences, or aims arises. My claim in this subsection is that love—both particular and general—for human beings involves taking the choices, preference or aims of the beloved as reasons to act and as constraints against promoting the beloved’s well-being. As in the last section, the nature of my claim is that inasmuch as one *does* violate paternalistic constraints, one is *unloving*. This is, perhaps more than the claim about anti-aggregation, quite surprising; if ever paternalism seems right, it is in the context of love. So my argument will proceed in three steps: first, that particular love is anti-paternalistic, second, that the felt tension between love and anti-paternalism can be defused, and third that general love is

likewise anti-paternalistic.

In her (2009), Kyla Ebels-Duggan persuasively argues against what she calls “benefactor” views of love, on which the attitude a lover has is that of a benefactor—one concerned only with the well-being of the beloved. Such an attitude treats the beloved in an unacceptably passive way, failing to engage with him as a person. To care only for the well-being of the beloved and to be willing to override, ignore or bypass her aims is to infantilize her. Granted there are times when such paternalism might be appropriate: one should override the choices of a child or a profoundly depressed person with no regard for his own well-being. But it is a mistake to take such love as *the paradigm* for love in general! If anything, love for a child or a profoundly depressed person should be seen as a special case; it is the fact that the beloved is incapable of full rational decision-making that necessitates what would otherwise be unloving. To love an *adult* requires taking her choices and ends as providing reasons.<sup>35</sup>

To bring this out, consider a case in which the well-being and choices of the beloved come apart; it seems that not only is overriding another’s choices disrespectful, it is also *unloving* (Ebels-Duggan, 2009).<sup>36</sup> Suppose you know your friend is dating someone (or pursuing a career, or making some other life choice) that is bad for them; that is, you *correctly* believe that what he is doing will make him worse off, but even when you outline the consequences, your friend is firm in his choice. Suppose further that you correctly believe that with just the right threat (“It’s him or me; if you don’t stop seeing this guy, I’ll stop speaking with you”) or just the right lie (“I saw your new boyfriend with another man”) you could *in fact* make his life better off. Such actions would be unloving. Involving oneself in a beloved’s life by trying to *persuade* him to see things as you do is one thing; sabotage, coercion, and deception—overriding his choices—another.

Moreover, it seems that one of the most loving things we can do for those we love is *support* their choices and ability to author their lives as they see fit.<sup>37</sup> To support another isn’t just to make them better off, it is to enable them to pursue their own ends. For a parent to help pay off student loans and thereby enable her child to pursue what he would

<sup>35</sup> Ebels-Duggan goes further in claiming that love involves *not* seeing her well-being as providing any reasons at all; while that is compatible with the agapist view I’m articulating, it is not necessary for it, and for the sake of neutrality among deontological views, I’ll leave open the question of whether love involves taking at least some account of the wellbeing of the beloved.

<sup>36</sup> cf. Jollimore: “Recognizing and valuing a person as an autonomous subject is not sufficient for love, but it is certainly a necessary element of it” (2011, p. 129).

<sup>37</sup> What Darwall calls love’s “upholding” of the beloved (2018, pp. 105-6).

is a paradigmatically loving thing to do; for her to force him into the career she thinks best seems unloving—even if her beliefs about which career is best is correct!

And that makes sense. To love someone requires seeing and responding to the other as what he is. And humans are not merely receptacles of well-being; they are beings with a capacity for choice. To treat someone in a way that disrespects their autonomy, even for the sake of their well-being, is to see and respond to only a part of him, and in that way is deficient *as* love.

I take these considerations to give us defeasible reason to accept that loving another involves respecting him. But we must still defuse the felt tension between loving someone and respecting him. Respect involves letting another person live *his own* life; but it is with those we love that we seem to have the most license to interfere. Perhaps we cannot *lie to* or *coerce* our friend out of a bad relationship or career, but we can certainly interfere in other ways—trying to help them see they are making their lives worse. If respect involves honoring the distinction between mine and yours—my life and your life—isn't Kierkegaard right to say that love *is* the elimination of that boundary?

He is right! But once we appreciate *why*, we can see that Kierkegaard's insight, and even the truism that we *can* and sometimes *must* override the wishes of those we love for their own good, is entirely consistent with the idea that love requires respect for another.

While interfering in the life of a friend or family member is one thing, interfering in the life of one who does not reciprocate one's love or with whom one has no *relationship* is another thing entirely. Suppose that after a divorce, one member of the former couple continued in his love for his ex while the other's love died; suppose moreover that the divorce was difficult and the two have no ongoing, special relationship, i.e., they aren't friends. If the one whose love survived continued to interfere in her ex-wife's life despite the latter's wanting nothing to do with her, she would be acting both wrongly and *unlovingly*. ("If you really loved me, you'd leave me be!") But the difference between such a case and one where an agent may or even should interfere isn't *the love* the agent bears. A spouse can interfere in her wife's life where a divorcée cannot because of the attendant circumstances, i.e., because of the relationship that they are, or are not, in (Baron, 1991).

Loving another and being in a loving relationship with her are two different things. One can love unrequitedly; one cannot be married, or be friends with, or date unrequitedly. Indeed, it can even be that two people bear love for another without being in a relationship together, as in a case of two people loving each other while believing the love is

unrequited. A relationship involves more. And part of what is involved in coming to form loving relationships is the invitation of the other into one's life. We let our friends and partners in because we love them. Becoming friends *makes* it the case that our otherwise private life is now our friend's business, our property is free for them to use, our secrets are their secrets—at least up to a point. Much the same is true in familial relationships, although there the permissions are not always generated by invitation. Mothers, fathers and guardians are permitted to override their child's choices not because they love their child or because the child loves them back but because of their relationship; an estranged parent with *no* practical relationship to her child lacks those privileges.<sup>38</sup> Relationships have their own rational significance, generating permissions and obligations that merely loving another does not.

When we intervene in a beloved's life *permissibly* for the sake of their well-being, it is not a violation of their autonomy; our relationship permits us to so intervene. And if our interference strays into areas of their life not ours to participate in, it then becomes disrespectful *and* unloving. Kierkegaard is right that love eliminates (some of) the distinction between mine and yours in that love for another often engenders relationships in which we waive constraints that apply to others. But love for another *per se* does not eliminate the distinction between mine and yours or pull us in the opposite direction as respect. Love for another typically leads us to form relationships that change what is involved in respecting the other. Put another way, what it is to respect another's autonomy depends in large part on the kinds of relationships one is in with the other, with some relationships allowing more intimacy and interference—if it can even be called that—without thereby affronting the other's autonomy.<sup>39</sup> But that shows no conflict between love and respect. Instead of ignoring what respect requires, love often leads us to form relationships which change that which respect requires and permits, making what was mine or yours instead that which is *ours*.

Thus, particular love involves taking as reasons not just the well-being of the beloved but also her choices, ends and preferences—in short it involves respecting her autonomy.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Velleman (1999), who likewise emphasizes the role of relationships, not love itself, in generating special obligations and permissions. (He goes much further in saying loving someone involves no element of partiality at all; I claim only that love, on its own, doesn't generate special permission to interfere with another's life.) There may, of course, be other considerations that bear on the permissibility of interference in children's lives, e.g., their still-developing agency (Schapiro, 1999). But that alone isn't the whole story as a case of an estranged parent or unrelated adult illustrates.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Ripstein (2009); Pallikkathayil (2010). See my "Honesty and Discretion."



To be a fully loving agent requires recognizing constraints stemming from her autonomy.

What about general love? Just as above, I think we can reason that because particular love is anti-paternalistic, general love is as well. After all, the two attitudes differ only with respect to their object. So some difference between them would have to stem from a relevant difference in their objects. But there is no relevant difference between *a particular human* and *all the humans (generally)* that would explain some change with respect to anti-paternalism. Both loves feature *human beings* as objects, and the differences between them—that general love is less personal, transcends particular love’s psychological limits, is essentially impartial among its objects—do not affect whether paternalism is fitting. By contrast, love for some objects may well admit of or even essentially be paternalistic, e.g., love of a dog or of all the cats in the shelter. Maybe love for an aggregate *group* of humans admits of paternalism; after all, if the object of love is an aggregate, it isn’t clear why that would yield some restriction on a way of reasoning about the aggregate’s parts. But if love of a particular human being is anti-paternalistic, love of all human beings is.

### 3.4 Summing Up

I’ve argued for a necessary connection: the fully agapic agent respects all. Inasmuch as she falls short of a standard of respect, she is unloving. Therefore, the agapic agent takes not just the welfare but the choices, projects and ends of others as providing reasons for actions. She sees constraints against promoting an individual’s welfare against his will and reasons in a such a way that honors the separateness of persons. Moreover, her love is universal and impartial. But to love all far outstrips merely respecting all. The agapic agent takes the interests of all as equal reasons for action. Where it is not a failure of respect to, say, allocate some sizable portion of one’s life to the needs of strangers but live the rest of one’s life without giving much thought to the distant needy, the agapic agent does just that; she is moreover emotionally susceptible to all, even those to whom the rest of us (appropriately) harden our hearts.

## 4 Agape as a foundation for ethics

So much for what agape is. By appealing to general love, we have shown it is both coherent and not made impossible by the fact that we do not know all human beings. I’ll here argue that although agape is possible, it is, for most of us, a mistake. To love all would crowd

out our particular love for family and friends. In §4.1, I'll get clear on the nature of this conflict. But I'll go on to claim that agape is not therefore practically irrelevant. In §4.2–4.3, I'll argue that we can see agape as a practical ideal, that which we should not manifest, but should *approximate* (consistent with our other loves). A view that holds agape is to be approximated will, surprisingly, turn out to look just like familiar deontology.

#### 4.1 Agape dominates a life

Loving another is a serious business. To act on the interests of some leaves less room to do so for others; to feel for some can make it harder to *actually* feel for others. Our emotional capacities, time, attention, and effort are finite, limiting our capacity to actually manifest our love. Agape dominates those resources, making it impossible to act out our particular love for friends, family and the like.

To see why, consider first what it is like to bear particular love for someone in dire straights. Imagine Keerthi is a mother whose son, Adnan, is fighting a painful, and thus far losing, battle with leukemia. She shares his pain and helps him however she can, day and night. Supposing the (significant) needs of her son exhaust her attention, time, energy, etc..., Keerthi will be unable to act out of love for others, i.e., she won't be as able to manifest her love for them. Emotionally things are much the same: it would be hard if not (psychologically) impossible for her to feel with others if the enormity of her son's struggle exhausts her emotional capacity. Does it follow that Keerthi cannot, therefore, love others while loving her dying son? If love were a matter of *actually* doing for or feeling with others, the answer threatens to be "yes." But vulnerabilities can be masked; there is a distinction between loving another and manifesting that love. Keerthi could still be emotionally susceptible to others and take their interests as reasons while her ability to *manifest* her love is impaired, both practically and emotionally. Given Adnan's suffering, Keerthi's love for him *crowds out* other loves from her life, not in extinguishing them, but leaving no room for them to play an active role in guiding Keerthi's life or heart.

Of course, ordinary love doesn't always or even typically consume a life like that. It depends on the circumstances of the beloved and the depth of the love. Agape is, by contrast, almost inevitably so consuming;<sup>40</sup> there are just so many people in situations like Adnan's whom the agapic agent loves. Given the contingent but firmly entrenched reali-

<sup>40</sup> cf. Nygren, whom Wolsterhoff describes as claiming (without argument and never explicitly) that agape is "jealous; it tolerates no other forms" of love (Wolterstorff, 2011, p. 30).

ties of our world, the agapic agent is always in a position to save lives that will otherwise be lost, comfort those who will otherwise be alone, open her heart to those whose suffering is unbearable, etc.... She will always be emotionally consumed by others since there are so many people she loves in dire straights. To love all is, practically speaking, to guarantee that one's resources—time, effort emotional capacities, effort, etc.—will always be at their limit. In the same way that Keerthi, consumed with thoughts of her dying son, would have little left to give to other friends, an agapic agent would have little to no space for those who are not in desperate need. After all, if one you *love* is dying or suffering greatly and you can do something about it, you'd be far more moved to help them than to spend time with friends who are doing fine.

The agapic agent is virtually guaranteed to neglect much of what makes life valuable in acting out of her love for all (Wolf, 1982). As Cottingham puts it,

A world in which I accorded everyone at large the same sort of consideration which I accord to myself, my children and my friends would not be 'one big happy family'; it would... be a world where much of what gives human life preciousness and significance had disappeared. (1983, p. 90).

And notwithstanding my arguments that the agapic agent can, like Keerthi, still bear particular love for individuals, those individuals won't ever find themselves on the receiving end of that love. The love would have neither time nor place to express itself. The special relationships grounded on that love, that are sustained by individuals' partiality towards each other, would be impossible for an agapic agent.

It's no accident that those who devote themselves to the religious traditions that take love for all as an organizing ideal often forsake particular love—Siddhartha Gautama's left his family, St. Benedict's code forbids friendships (Spaemann, 2012). Agape's domineering nature might not be the only explanation of this, but the tension between devoting oneself wholly to love of all and loving a child or partner is reflected in these traditions. Likewise is it reflected in the lives of those who seem to live out something like agape. Mandela wrestled with this tension: "Is one justified in neglecting his family on the ground of involvement in larger issues? Is it right for one to condemn one's young children and aging partners to poverty and starvation in the hope of saving the wretched multitudes of this world?" (Mandela, 2018, p. 237). Gandhi wrote: "I am of the opinion that all exclusive intimacies are to be avoided.... [H]e who would be friends with God must remain alone, or make the whole world his friend. I may be wrong, but my effort to cultivate an intimate

friendship proved a failure” (Gandhi, 1957, p. 19). Agape *crowds out* other loves from a life; it is domineering.

One might object: can’t the agapic agent love all very weakly? If her love for all were faint, maybe she could carve out some space for friends and other particular loves. I think this objection approaches the truth; I’ll go on to say that because a weak approximation of love is *exactly* what we can manifest along side our particular loves, we should do just that.

But the weak approximation is not love; it is something less. Consider how we in fact get by in our daily lives despite our knowledge of the dire needs of the many: we largely *ignore* them. To avoid being overwhelmed by the suffering of others, we spare the many in need little thought, at least most of the time. We restrict our emotional vulnerability—hardening our hearts to most. We might allocate portions of our lives—even large ones like entire careers—to acting on behalf of and maybe feeling with strangers in need, but when it comes time to be present with family or friends, we largely “turn it off,” setting the problems and needs of others aside for a while. That is, it takes a positively *unloving* stance towards strangers to maintain the emotional space in our lives for ourselves and loved ones. Whatever relatively minimal, highly regulated emotional susceptibility is compatible with a life of particular love falls well below the kind of emotional vulnerability constitutive of love. Something *less* than love for all, however, *is* compatible with love for a few.

## 4.2 Agape as an Ideal

What should we make of this crowding out? Does it mean we should give up on the idea that agape has any practical relevance?

It at least means that we have strong reasons not to love all: that loving all would prevent us from adequately manifesting the particular loves in our lives, leaving room for little else. I take for granted that when we act out of particular love for family, friends and the like, we are often acting well—not making some practical error (Keller, 2013). So if manifesting agape rules out our ability to manifest such (permissible) love, it cannot be required. Indeed, for most of us, agape would be a mistake, as it would constitute an unacceptable neglect of our loved ones and that which gives our life meaning.

In the passage quoted above, Cottingham goes further, holding that impartial concern for all as an ideal “make[s] nonsense of ethics” as it “sever[s] the link between ethics and *eudaimonia*, the good for man or human fulfillment” (1983, p. 90). But that is too strong. For those like St. Benedict’s monks who eschewed personal relationships, agape would

not be a mistake. (Though neither is it required.) While those who love all foreclose one source of human fulfillment (i.e., particular love), they gain access to another (i.e., general love of all). All else being equal, we have reason to pursue either a life of particular or agapic love.

But is Cottingham at least right about those for whom all else is not equal? Given that agape would do such violence to our lives and our ordinary loves for friends and family, is it irrelevant? No. We can still see love of all as a practical *ideal*. By an ideal, I mean a trait of character that serves as a standard of evaluation for our actions and attitudes without it being the case that one should *fully* manifest it.<sup>41</sup>

More concretely, the proposal is this: we all have pro tanto reason to love all. Each person's humanity gives us a defeasible reason to love her, and so agape is the *maximal* response to the humanity of others. To manifest that maximal response is to respond fully to the fact of others' humanity; but we have reason not to respond fully: that agape crowds out other (particular) loves. There is normative pressure towards agape, but it is not without opposition. So we should instead settle for second best, responding not fully but only partway to the fact of others' humanity by manifesting not the whole of agape but some part of it that would not crowd out other loves. Taking for granted that requirements have a constitutive link with what can be legitimately demanded,<sup>42</sup> the proposed agapist view hold that we are required to be as agape-like as can be demanded. That which goes beyond that minimal required approximation of agape is supererogatory. Put another way, we are required to manifest some approximation of the ideal to response to the humanity of others.<sup>43</sup>

What is this minimum approximation demanded? What would it be to exceed that minimum? How agape-like can one be without crowding out room for particular love? A full answer to these questions is, on the view I'm defending, more or less a full theory of morality. But I can give an illuminating sketch: the minimal required approximation of

<sup>41</sup> There are many ways of understanding the relation of an ideal to some object of normative evaluation, cf. Buss (2018). I offer one account, but different agapist views can differ in their understanding of what an ideal is and how it bears on reasons for action.

<sup>42</sup> See Darwall (2006, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Jollimore who writes, "The idea is that relations with strangers, from the point of view of love, are at best rough simulacra of the *ideal* ethical relationships we find obtaining between those who genuinely love one another" (2011, p. 151) While he would not endorse the explanatory claim I am proposing, he seems to at least make space for the possibility that it is loving relationships which, as an ethical ideal, can explain how we should relate to strangers: in a manner that (very) roughly approximates love. Cf. also debates in the Christian tradition about the love commandment somehow explaining the rest of God's commands or agape being at the root of all virtue (Outka, 1972, p. 133-37).

agape just is respect. That is, an ethical view that treats agape (properly understood) as the practical ideal will derivatively yield that we must respect all. I'll now give that derivation; an important note: in doing so, I am not yet arguing that we should accept this picture over one that sees the requirement of respect as fundamental. What follows is just a proof of concept; §5 will offer some considerations in favor of the view.

### 4.3 Respect as an Approximation of Agape

There is of course much debate among deontologists. But ethical views centered around respect generally have something like the following structural features:

1. **Universality:** Everyone must be respected.
2. **Impartiality:** Everyone is equal, and absent special circumstances (e.g., having a special relationship with someone) should be regarded equally.
3. **Anti-aggregation:** To respect the autonomy of all is to see and treat individuals' well-being as non-fungible. Respect other involves a recognition of the the separateness of persons, i.e., of interpersonal constraints against justifying harms to one via benefits to another.
4. **Anti-paternalism:** Respect for others requires taking some heed not just of their welfare but of their choices. Respect requires that we honor constraints against promoting another's well-being when doing so would override their choices.
5. **A distinction between perfect and imperfect duties (or positive and negative rights or something of the sort):** An ethic of respect typically involves a distinction between constraints that are always in place, e.g., against harming or lying, and requirements that must be satisfied *enough*, e.g., an obligation of charity or development of one's talents.
6. **Supererogation:** Some actions are such that they are in some way more ideal (or are better or we have more reason to do them) without their being *required*.

I'll now argue that an ethical view centered on the approximation of agape has just these features, although as the familiar-looking list suggests, much of the argument has already been made.

It is because agape crowds out room for other parts of a life—especially particular love—that we should not manifest it. What justifies deviation from the ideal is the need for space in our lives that agape would fill. But many elements of agape do not contribute to this crowding out. In particular, one could recognize constraints against promoting an individual’s welfare against her will and refuse to reason aggregatively. An attitude towards others that had those two elements of agape would be agape-like without yet causing any problems for particular love. Likewise, you could extend those two elements to all individuals, thereby seeing these constraints as universal. These three elements of agape—universality of anti-welfarism and anti-aggregation—do not pose any obstacle to manifesting particular love. So the justification for deviation from agape, i.e., that agape crowds out particular love, does not justify deviating so far from agape that one does not at least manifest those three features. So, too, with *impartiality*. While reasoning wholly impartially in the manner of the agapic agent *would* crowd out particular love, treating all as equal *unless* there are some special circumstances would not. So one can approximate agape by treating impartiality as the default, from which one can deviate with good reason (e.g., that this person is my friend). Since one *can*, without dominating a life, reason in such a way that treats all impartially by default and is subject to constraints against harming, lying, etc... and against seeing the harms to one as compensated by benefits to another, that extent of approximation of agape is required.<sup>44</sup>

What about the agapic agent’s acting on behalf of all? To do all the agapic agent does is untenable; but doing only *some* is not. Allocating some fraction of one’s time, effort, resources, and affection to serving the many can still leave plenty of room for particular love and other meaningful pursuits. So the approximator of agape is required to do just that. This is all to say that one who acts as required will be following some division between constraints that must *always* be obeyed (e.g., not to harm) and obligations that must be obeyed *enough* (e.g., to aid those in need); and here is the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties (or something of that ilk). Exactly how much time, effort, etc..., is enough? This is, of course, a famously difficult question to answer, and I won’t do so here. But on this agape-based view, the question will be posed as “how much of an approximation of agape is required?”

One element of agape, though, will *not* be required: the affective component. Again,

<sup>44</sup> Niebuhr thinks justice is an “approximation” of agape exactly because of its commitment to equality, reflected in the commandment not just to love thy neighbor but to do so “AS THYSELF” (1957, p. 111, 108, his capitalization).

I'll help myself to an assumption: that feelings cannot be demanded (because they are not subject to the control of the will). While they are subject to standards of evaluation, we cannot demand that others feel a certain way, and so (given the constitutive connection between demand and requirement) feelings are not required. That which is required is then an entirely *practical* approximation of agape.<sup>45</sup> We are not required to feel as the agapic agent does. We are not required to be emotionally susceptible to all. Feeling for others and going beyond whatever minimum standard of aid is required are both more like agape and so more ideal. That is, they are *supererogatory*.

An ethic of agape, then, has all six of the features identified above. An ethical view that takes agape as an ideal to be approximated just is deontology. But instead of taking respect for all as a first principle or respect as, in the first place, called for by the humanity of others, it sees the requirement of respect as derivative. To be sure, the derivation is *not* one that tries to define, reduce or analyze deontic notions like that of a right or a duty or constraint in terms of love. Nor was the derivation motivated only by intuitions about what is loving; I rejected a conception of agape as group love in part (but not wholly) because I believe there are aggregative constraints in general, and a consequentialist could object at just that point (perhaps even accepting other elements of the picture). The derivation is of the *content* of our obligation—it defines what it is we are required to do in terms of love. It is in this sense a “love first” view. Following Velleman, it holds that “respect and love [are] the required minimum and optional maximum responses to one and the same value,” that of another’s humanity (1999, p. 366). It goes further in claiming that the maximum is explanatorily prior to the minimum.

## 5 Love First?

Up to this point, I have not done much to argue for the view or for its most important claim: that agape is an ideal we have pro tanto reason to manifest. Instead, I have been concerned with making the notion of agape coherent and showing that we can offer a novel foundation for deontological ethics if we accept it as an ideal; I did that first by building

<sup>45</sup> “[L]ove as an inclination cannot be commanded, but beneficence from duty...is *practical* and not *pathological* love, which lies in the will and not in the propensity of feeling, in principles of action and not in melting sympathy; and it alone can be commanded” (1998a, AK 4:440, *emph. original*). Thus, for Kant, a duty to love is “an absurdity” (2017, AK 6:401). But following God’s command to love (practically) just is, for Kant, a command to follow the moral law (1998b, AK 6:124). The structure of his view, then, is the reverse of mine: for Kant, we begin with the moral law (of respect), which then explains the content of the injunction of practical love.



towards an account of agape as general love for all human beings (§1–3), then by deriving respect as the minimum required approximation of agape (§4).

But should we actually accept this view? Maybe. In this final section, I'll offer two and half brief arguments in its favor; I don't take their treatment here to be decisive—there's more to be said. But my hope is that they will show an agapist approach is at least worth taking seriously.

First, the half argument. What justifies particular love? Velleman and Setiya argue the bare fact of the beloved's humanity (1999; 2014).<sup>46</sup> What is "humanity"? For Velleman, it is rational nature; Setiya leaves things open-ended. They agree that what justifies love is the same thing—humanity, personhood, rationality—that necessitates respect. Among other reasons to accept this surprising claim is that no other account can make sense of the rationality of *unconditional* love. But they fear the natural consequence of their view that I accept: that we have reason to love all. If each human is such that we have reason to love him, we have (defeasible) reason to love all. Velleman avoids this conclusion because he thinks love for all is impossible given human limitations (1999); but it isn't. Setiya worries because love requires acquaintance with the beloved (Setiya, 2022); but while particular love does, general love does not. To avoid the conclusion that we have reason to love all, they invoke talk of "noninsistent" reasons, or of reasons that make objects "eligible" but not "mandatory" for choice, thereby blocking the inference to the claim that we have pro tanto reason to love all.<sup>47</sup> But if the arguments of §§2–3 succeeded, their worries are misplaced. So the half argument is this: if one antecedently accepts the view that the humanity of others is a reason to love them, one can accept the natural consequence that one has pro tanto reason to love all.

We might even be able to say something stronger. It is natural to think that particular love is at its *best* when it is unconditional. Unconditional love is not always appropriate, but it is in some sense the most loving love, a love that is ideal by the lights of love itself. Suppose that's right. We can then find in our ordinary particular love a kind of outward pressure. My (conditional) love of my friend would be better qua love if it were unconditional; and that would involve seeing my friend's humanity as a reason to love him; and *that* in turn has a rational upshot regarding all those other humans—there is reason to love

<sup>46</sup> See also Kierkegaard (1995, p. 86–89).

<sup>47</sup> See Jollimore (2011), who takes of reasons that make objects "eligible" but not "mandatory" for choice. Kolodny (2003) and Setiya (2014) both speak of insistent and noninsistent reasons, notions taken from Kagan (1991, p. 378–81)—who after characterizing such reasons, goes on to say "I do not know what reasons of this kind would be like.... [I]t is hard to imagine how reasons for acting *could* be of this kind" (ibid., p. 379–80).

them, too. Love has a kind of outward pressure: its better qua love just when it is based on a reason that applies equally to all. That's the half argument, relying as it does on the surprising and here undefended claim that the bare fact of another's humanity justifies love.

The second argument: a love-first view offers an explanatory unity that is otherwise elusive. Setting aside Velleman's controversial claim about reasons for love, love and respect still seem like optional maximum and required minimum responses to same thing: another human being. Even more importantly, §3 established a necessary connection between love and respect, and necessary connections call out for explanation. Why are love and respect so intertwined? What does love have to do with respect? The love-first view has an answer: respect just is love's approximation. It defines one attitude in terms of the other; the requirement is understood in terms of the ideal.

A view that takes respect as underived cannot make similar moves. In general, it is hard to see how one could derive an optional maximum from a required minimum—that would be like trying to understand beauty in terms of mediocrity. More specifically, it is hard to see how we could derive or analyze love in terms of respect. If analyzing knowledge as true belief plus some elusive  $x$  is hard, the prospect of defining love as respect plus some elusive  $y$  looks even worse. Nor will it do to say love and respect are totally independent of one another; we've already seen that fully loving another (or some Fs in general) requires respecting her (or them), and that calls out for some unifying explanation.

And the last argument: accepting agape as a fundamental ideal towards which we are called better captures the phenomenology of living a moral life. Even if we act our best, we still, in some hard-to-identify sense, seem to fail. However much we do for others, we *could* do more. And though we may be confident that we have done enough—even that if we were to do more we'd sacrifice that which should not be sacrificed, like our ability to manifest love for friends and family—there remains a feeling of our failing to live up to something. Acting as well as we can is still acting non-ideally. If only we could respond more fully to the humanity of others..., but we *can't*, at least not without thereby making some other mistake. Failure, then, seems unavoidable. The nature of the question posed by the existence of other people—how should we respond to the humanity of others?—does not have a wholly satisfying answer, at least not in a profoundly imperfect world like ours.

Seeing agape as an ideal captures this hard-to-identify sense of inevitable failure. It is

not a case of doing what we should not do or reasoning incorrectly. But it is nevertheless a deviation from the ideal we are called to by the humanity of others. At the same time, it is an ideal out of reach for most of us, one we cannot *but* fall short of absent a total abandonment of particular love—which would leave our life deficient in another respect, not to mention constitute an abandonment of those to whom we bear love’s commitments. Living virtuously is a matter of living in this shadow of agape, doing the best we can to reach towards it and always falling short. And this is at once depressing and liberating. Responding well to the humanity of others is a matter of living up, as best we can, to the almost unreachable standard of perfect love for all. But though impossible, it is a standard whose intelligibility and normativity we see reflected in the very part of our lives we value most: in the love we bear for others and they bear for us.<sup>48</sup>

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