

# ETHICS IN THE SHADOW OF LOVE

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FEB. 2020

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## I. Introduction

“The entire Law is fulfilled in a single decree: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”<sup>1</sup>

“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.”<sup>2</sup>

“We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central.” (Murdoch, 1970, p. 45)

<sup>1</sup> Galatians 5:14.

<sup>2</sup> Dalai Lama XIV and Chodron 2014

### The guiding questions

1. What, if anything, could love for all (*agape*) be?
2. How could *agape* be a *foundation* for ethics?

Is *agape* conceptually coherent? Psychologically possible?

### My answers

1. *Agape* is “general love” for all human beings.
2. So conceived, *agape* can serve as a foundation for deontological ethics.

## II. Two Core Features of Love

### Feeling

Vulnerability or emotional susceptibility to the beloved.<sup>3</sup>

“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.” (Nozick, 1989, p. 58).

<sup>3</sup> Velleman 1999.

### Acting

A practical component: love involves a way of reasoning (of noticing and weighing reasons), i.e., a habit of character, in which the reasons stemming from the beloved are given special weight.

For others who take love to involve a principle of practical reasoning or habit of character akin to a virtue, see Pettit 1997; Kolodny 2003; Frankfurt 2004; Ebels-Duggan 2009; Spaemann 2012; Keller 2013; Setiya 2014.

## III. General Love

### General vs Particular Love

“Particular love” is love for a *particular* object, e.g., love for Sally.

If *agape* were particular love for all human beings, it would be psychologically and epistemically impossible, as well as conceptually incoherent.

To love someone in particular, one must have some acquaintance with them, some way to get them *in their particularity* in mind.

### Jack's love

Jack Miller is attending a family reunion. He'll have to make sacrifices to attend and knows that the money spent on flights, lodging and the toys he bought for all the young Miller children—many of whom he has never met—could have saved lives that will otherwise be lost. Why, then, would he go to the reunion? It's no great mystery: he does it out of love for his family; he inconveniences himself, spends significant sums of money, and allocates his time out of love for them.

N.B.: While the love central to this case is not uncommon, it's only essential for my arguments that such love is *possible*.

The argument:

- P1) Jack bears a love towards members of his family.
- P2) Jack's love can't consist of particular love(s).
- C) Some love is not particular love.

*In defense of P1.* It is the natural explanation of Jack's behavior.

*In defense of P2.* Attempts to reduce Jack's love to particular love fail:

- (a) Love for each Miller.
- (b) Love for each Miller and a disposition to love each new Miller he meets.
- (c) Love for a group (a particular entity) made up of many people: the Miller Family.

*Against (a):* Jack hasn't met every Miller but still seems to act out of love for them.

*Against (b):* still the same problem as (a) (he doesn't buy the toys to prepare for some future love). Moreover, it gets the phenomenology of *being loved* wrong.

*Against (c):* Jack can love things about the family that he doesn't love about Millers, so the loves seem distinct. Moreover, one can love an entity without caring about any of its constituent parts.

### General Love: Love for all Fs

Jack's love for all Millers is general in that it enables him to love those whom he cannot love *in particular*, but it is not a love for *the group*.

Jack's love for all Millers is like a fear of all bears.

Features of general love, or love for the Fs:

- Less restrictive than particular love, epistemically and psychologically.
- Less personal than particular love.
- Impartial among all Fs.

Jack can love his obnoxious uncle Gary *as a Miller* and even if he can't bring himself to love Gary *as Gary*.

There's nothing in Jack's love for all Millers to single out any particular Miller for differential treatment.

## IV. Agape

Agape just is general love for all human beings. So understood, it is coherent and possible for ordinary people to manifest.

### Agape is universal and impartial

- Universality follows from the object of love being wholly general and so encompassing all human beings.
- Impartiality follows from the nature of *general* love.

There is room for disagreement between versions of an agapic view that see the central ideal as more or less expansive in scope: love for all humans, all persons, all conscious entities, all living entities, etc.

- Feelings: The agapic agent is equally vulnerable to all human beings (and so often emotionally at the limit).
- Action: She reasons impartially, i.e., with equal concern for all human beings.

### The agapic agent *respects* all

The idea that love and respect in some way go *together* is an unpopular one. Most philosophers see the two in tension with one another:

“There are no *mine* and *yours* in love.” (Kierkegaard, 1995, p. 265)

But a loving agent sees the beloved’s choices, projects—her will—as a source of reasons.

To justify a violation of someone’s autonomy by appeal to his wellbeing is *unloving*. The loving agent recognizes *anti-paternalistic* constraints.

What seem like obvious counter-examples—lovingly intervening in the life of a child or friend—are not. The existence of a loving *relationship* changes what constitutes a violation of autonomy.

To justify harms to one via benefits to another is *unloving*. The agapic agent recognizes *anti-aggregative* constraints.

- Early consequentialists saw love of all (beneficence) as aggregative.
- But to love another is to see her as non-fungible. And general love is a love for individuals, not a group; the separateness of its objects is reflected in the structure of general love.

### V. Agape as a foundation for ethics

Agape dominates a life, leaving no room for one to feel or act on the particular love for friends and family. It is, therefore, not required.

This tension between particular love and agape is a familiar one, reflected in St. Benedict’s code (forbidding friendships among monks), Buddha’s leaving his family, the autobiographical reflections of agapic agents like Gandhi and Mandela, and philosophical works like that of Wolf and Cottingham.<sup>4</sup>

#### Agape as an ideal

A life of pure agape is a mistake for most; agape nevertheless has some *pull*.

*The main proposal:* Agape is a practical *ideal*, i.e. that which we aren’t required to manifest fully but should nevertheless approximate.

“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, Kant AK 6:449, emph original, quoting Haller).

See Ebels-Duggan 2009; Wolterstorff 2011.

See Smith 1660; More 1666; Cumberland 1727; Hutcheson 1738; Leibniz 1969. Butler criticizes Hutchesonian benevolence exactly because he thought it would have unacceptably aggregative upshots (1740, ¶8-10).

“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)

<sup>4</sup> Spaemann 2012; Mandela 2018; Wolf 1982; Cottingham 1983.

### Respect as an approximation of agape

*Question:* what does it look like to approximate agape without compromising one's love for particular friends and family?

*My answer:* it is, at the very least, to respect all. In other words, an ethic of approximating agape *just is* deontology.

Deontological views are marked by the following structural features:

1. *Universality.* Everyone must be respected.
2. *Impartiality.* Everyone is equal, and absent special circumstances should be treated equally.
3. *Anti-Paternalism.* Respect requires honoring constraints against promoting another's well-being when doing so infringes on autonomy.
4. *Anti-aggregation.* Respect requires that we honor inter-personal constraints, treating individuals as non-fungible.
5. *Perfect-imperfect duties distinction* An ethic of respect typically distinguishes constraints that are always in place (e.g. against lying) and requirements that must be met *enough* (e.g. obligation to charity).
6. *Supererogation.* Some actions are in some way more ideal without being required.

A special relationship with someone is a special circumstance.

Or a positive-negative rights distinction, or something of the sort.

Each feature can be derived from the idea that one must approximate agape inasmuch as it is consistent with one's particular love.

One element of agape that is *not* required is the emotional element of agape.

## VI. Love First

Why accept this love first view? Two and half arguments:

1. Unifying love and respect: why would love and respect be a response to the *same thing*?
- 1.5. If the humanity of another is a reason to (particularly) love her, then we have reason to love all.
2. The phenomenology of living as well as one can and inevitably falling short.

“[R]espect and love [are] the required minimum and optional maximum responses to one and the same value,” that of another's humanity (Velleman, 1999, p. 366).

Particular love has a kind of “outward pressure”—a proper argument is on offer in the Q&A.

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