Love for One and Love for All

(2992 words)

Love is not a mistake. Of course, particular relationships can be; if only it were otherwise. But love itself is a constitutive part of an excellent human life, a virtue. A life without love is missing something essential; one who does not love, whatever else her qualities, falls short. The interesting question is not whether this is true, but what it really means. I’ll argue it means something quite surprising. Among love’s many forms are two broad categories I’ll call “selective love” and “love of humanity” (or “agape”) and each is a virtue. The first is familiar; it is broad genus of love whose species include romantic love, love between friends, etc.... By agape, I mean a love for all humanity, a love that few manifest, but with which we are familiar at least as an ideal. But if we accept that both of these loves are virtues, we are left with a puzzle: once we see what love involves, we’ll see that it is impossible to instantiate these two loves together. To love all is to recognize the fundamental equality of humanity; to love selectively is to see the beloved as special, as in some sense unequal.

I’ll here articulate a view on which there is a deep disunity to virtue; not just in the more familiar sense that one can be courageous but not just, but in the sense that perfect virtue is impossible, that some of the virtues are not just independent but mutually exclusive. It is a permissivist view on which one may permissibly love selectively or agapically, i.e., one may permissibly fall short of full virtue. Nevertheless, I’ll hold that this falling short is a genuine normative failure, albeit an inevitable one. It warrants regret and sadness. And despite—or rather because of—its impossibility, we must approximate full virtue inasmuch as we can. I’ll close by suggesting that the best approximation of agape to those who love selectively is respect,
thereby offering a novel foundation for deontological ethics in love.

1 What is love?

Love constitutively involves two things: vulnerability¹ and a way of treating the beloved as a locus of practical reasons.

Metaphorically, vulnerability is an “opening of the heart”; when those we truly love suffer or benefit, we feel that in a way that is akin to how we feel about our own suffering or benefits.² We in some sense identify with those we love; we bring them into our hearts, their welfare, suffering, successes, needs, wants, etc…become ours.³

Love also involves a way of noticing and weighing one’s practical reasons. Those we love don’t just move us emotionally, we notice and act on the basis of our beloved’s interests, needs and preferences.⁴

What does this noticing and motivational force amount to? Without yet claiming that love is a virtue, we can start by seeing that it is structurally akin to standardly recognized virtues: it is a character trait. Suppose from a crowd of horrified onlookers, Carla jumps in front of a bus to save a child; we can explain her action by saying she was courageous. That explanation doesn’t offer Carla’s reason for saving the child. That she is courageous is not what moved her; she did not save the child in order to be courageous or on the basis that she is courageous. What motivated her was the child’s

---

¹ See Velleman (1999).
² 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 on that list 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.
³ Johnston (2010) takes that identification quite literally.
⁴ Imagine a parent who is hurt by her son’s pain but is in no way motivated to do anything about it (nor even wish she were able to do anything about it) might bear an attitude like love towards her son, but it wouldn’t be love. Of course, we don’t always act lovingly towards those we do in fact love; if only we did! Our motivations of love can be overridden by other motivations, like selfishness, or temporarily masked. For instance, imagine a judge for an art competition is faced with an entry she suspects might be from a friend; she must put aside her love for her friend and act not as one who loves the author of the entry but as an impartial judge. Loss of control, in rage, drunkenness, etc…, could likewise mask one’s love.
need. And in contrast to the other onlookers, the risk to her own life, a reason not to jump, was a weaker motivating reason. To say that she is courageous is to say something about how Carla weighs her reasons: that she takes as especially weighty the needs of others and as less weighty risks to her own life.5

Suppose now we are thinking not of Carla saving some child but of her love for her partner Ari. When Ari gets a job across country, Carla decides to go with her. We can explain Carla’s action by citing her love for Ari. It would be a mistake to insist that her loving action is moved by the fact of the love itself.6 Carla’s reason is not that she loves Ari;7 rather, that she loves Ari says something about how she weighs the reasons for and against moving: supporting Ari, facilitating their partnership—these reasons strike her and outweigh the fact that she likes her job and current home, i.e., reasons to stay. To love another involves noticing facts involving the beloved’s interests, needs and preferences as reasons and being motivated by them. It is to see the object of love as of special practical significance, as a locus of reasons of which one needs to take special account.

What is involved in this specialness? We are always required to respect other human beings; but for those we love we do much more. We don’t just respect their rights and offer whatever minimal level of concern is required. We make them focal points of our practical life. We notice their needs, interests and preferences, which become reasons for us that take on an insistence lacked by the needs, interests and preferences of others. As reasons, they can be overridden, but they cannot be ignored.8

In sum, love is a character trait akin to what are standardly thought of as the virtues: it is a way of taking account of one’s practical reasons. The courageous see the needs of others and risks to themselves in a certain practical light; to love Ari likewise involves seeing facts in a certain practical

---

5 See McDowell (1998); Quinn (1992); Foot (2001); Setiya (2010).
6 See Pettit (1997); Setiya (2014) and my (XXXX).
7 Pettit says the fact of love can never be a reason for loving action (1997). I follow Setiya (2014) in thinking that it can be, but is not among the primary reasons for loving action (see my XXXX).
8 By “cannot,” I mean both motivationally and normatively.
light.\footnote{What, precisely, in one’s moral psychology is a character trait? You might think that in general, virtues like courage and generosity are mere causal dispositions; it is to have a disposition to notice certain facts and to act in such and such a way when one has the relevant beliefs (to notice imminent danger to others; to ignore the risk to oneself; to jump in front of the bus when one believes it could save a life) (as in Setiya 2010, 2011). Or perhaps they are not \textit{mere} dispositions, but rather dispositions that are essentially rational (as in Wedgwood 2006 or Arpaly and Schroeder 2015, 2013, 2012). Or perhaps this causal approach is off on the wrong foot and we should instead look to Kantian theories of motivation, where virtues are practical principles of self-legislation (as in Kant 2012 and the work of Kantians like Korsgaard 2009). Or perhaps they are \textit{decisions} to treat something as a reason (as in Bratman 1999), or decisions regarding some relevant \textit{end} (as in Bratman 1999). Thus, it might be that to love a friend involves identifying yourself as a \textit{friend} (as in Korsgaard 1996), of 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’ wellbeing as an end. But we needn’t settle this question here. Whatever the details, love involves some disposition or principles according to which the object of love matters especially—that her needs, interests and preferences are especially weighty. For more on this, see my XXXX.)}

None of this is yet to say that love (or courage, for that matter) actually is a virtue; that argument comes in the following two sections.

## 2 Selective love

If love involves taking the needs, interests and preferences of the beloved as special, selective love is the extension of that specialness to a (relatively) small few, i.e., selective love constitutively involves \textit{partiality}. Those we love selectively are given \textit{greater} weight in our practical reasoning. We treat a friend to dinner despite the fact that the money spent could have contributed to the fight against malaria; we pay for our children’s music lessons or sports practices even though that money could have paid for the deworming of hundreds of children in grave need.\footnote{Of course there is a limit to this. See my XXXX and §4.1.} \footnote{Moreover, selective love is essentially be directed at \textit{that particular person} as a non-fungible entity. Contrast, for instance, an attitude directed at “my wife, whoever she may be” and one directed at “my wife, Patricia” or just “Patricia.” Only the latter two could be attitudes of selective love. What would it be to have an attitude essentially feature a particular person? Suppose you have a dispositionalist view of principles (see n.9); then it would be to have a disposition whose triggering condition essentially features a particular person (as opposed to a description like, “my wife”). For a Kantian, it might be to have the self-issued legislation feature the individual or to self-identify as a lover of \textit{Patricia} and not merely as a lover of \textit{my wife}. It is further, difficult task to spell this out precisely. See Pettit (1997) for one careful accounting of this issue.}
Is selective love a virtue? By “virtue” I mean two things: first, that manifesting the character trait is rational (i.e., permissible, not a mistake); and second, that not manifesting the character trait constitutes some kind of practical failure. The idea that selective love is mistake is just implausible. As Keller puts it:

The times when we act well towards those with whom we share special relationships—when we respond immediately to the needs of our parents, make a sacrifice for the sake of a friend, or do something that brings joy to our children—are some of the times when we seem to see most clearly what matters, when we seem to be in closest contact with the really important things in life. It would be both implausible and depressing to suggest that when we act well within special relationships we systematically misperceive our reasons. (2013, p. 27)

That takes us half way to establishing that love is a virtue. What of the idea that not manifesting selective love would be a failing? Just imagine a person who truly sees his child or his “friend” as merely one among equals, i.e., one who, if the needs arose (and don’t they always?) would allocate her time, energy, emotional attention and resources on whoever needed it most, be they friend, child or stranger. Whatever its virtues, such a life is obviously missing something essential.

3 Love of humanity

If love is a virtue, then we should love as much as we can! Hackneyed though it may sound, we should bring more love into our lives.

But there’s an obvious problem. It goes without saying that this reasoning does not apply to all kinds of love. Adding a second purportedly monogamous partnership is certainly not an improvement, and at some point, another intimate friendship may be impossible in light of constraints on our time and emotional energy. We simply cannot love too many people in particular without threatening the character of the love. Because selective love is a singling out of the beloved as practically special, i.e., having the beloved’s interests and preferences count as especially weighty reasons,
it is essentially comparative. What it is for those reasons to be especially weighty is for them to be stronger than the reasons involving others; the more people who are special in that way, the less special any one can be. While our capacity to expand the limits of our time, attention, and emotional capacity is significant, it is not boundless. At a certain point, deciding to spend time with one means not spending it with another; holding one person close in one’s heart means having to let another fall away.

This inherent limit to selective love is borne out in our feelings about intimate relationships. Imagine finding out that unbeknownst to you, your closest friend in the world has dozens of friends with whom her relationship is just as intimate; the vulnerability that you had with her alone was reciprocated, but so, too, was it offered to so many others. It would be hard not to feel betrayed, and not just by her failure to tell you about other close friends (we can suppose you knew of them, just not how close they were); the real pain would come from discovering that you are not all that special to her, but just one among many. These limits may be well beyond what most of us achieve; our capacity for expansive, selective love may seldom be reached. But selective love of all is impossible.

All that being said, there is obviously some kind of love that can be expanded to encompass many people, just not selective love. We’ve all had the experience of being in the presence of someone who relates lovingly towards those with whom he has no special relationship. Much of what is constitutive of love can in principle be extended to many without running into some kind of problem. Though unimaginably emotionally exhausting, there is nothing impossible about opening one’s heart to many people or even humanity as such. How could one do it? By coming to love all on a

---

12 At the risk of spoiling one of the best films about love, this dynamic is wonderfully illustrated in Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013). The story is of a romance between a human being and an artificial intelligence; in the climax of the film, the AI reveals that she has been sustaining an intimate, loving relationship not just with the protagonist but with thousands of other people. While she insists that in no way cheapens or impugns their relationship the human being cannot help but feel betrayed. In part that is because of the AI’s having kept this part of her life secret from him, but a further betrayal is of the love itself. Finding out that he is not special in the eyes of his beloved, or rather is just as special as thousands of others, is devastating.
universal basis: humanity itself. To borrow from Velleman, we can think of love and respect as responses to the same value: one is the maximal, the other the minimal response to another’s humanity (1999, 366). That is to say that we have sufficient reason to love humanity wherever it is instantiated, to love any human being as such. And if we can love any human being, we can love all human beings.

But what of the element of specialness that is constitutive of love? If selective love is the extension of that specialness to a few, *agape* is the extension of it to all. Where one treats the beloved partially, the other cannot—for all to be “special” is for all to be treated equally. Does that make this kind of love impossible? No, just essentially different from selective love. It is a love that is a response to and reflects the fundamental equality of all human beings and treats them equally.

This love of humanity is rare; but it is an ideal in which we can and often do participate to some degree. When we open our hearts to those with whom we have no special relationships, when we orient some part of our lives around the fundamentally equal needs of strangers, we at least approximate *agape*.

Is love of humanity a virtue? Let’s again consider the claim in two parts: first, is it a mistake to love agapically? Second, is it a failing not to do so? While few of us have ever fully manifested love of humanity, we are able to approximate it more or less, to open our hearts to some extent and to love of at least some on the basis of their humanity. And when we so open our hearts, it again seems like we are in touch with real value in the world. That, along with humanity’s being a sufficient basis for love, shows love of humanity is not a mistake.

The more contentious claim is that *agape* is not merely permissible but necessary for one to be fully virtuous, i.e., that’s its absence from a life con-

---

13 Is this the only such basis? I suspect not. I would think that something’s being conscious or even just alive might suffice to justify love, as Buddhists believe.
14 Velleman thinks of them as responses to the rational will of another; following Setiya, we can instead think of humanity (2014).
15 Note that already we have a tension with the claims of §2. If selective love is required and incompatible with love of humanity, how can the latter not be a mistake?
stitutes a failure of some kind. Set aside for the moment the claims of §2 and consider *agape* on its own. It seems like the sort of attitude the absence of which really is impoverishing. Never to extend one’s love beyond one’s innermost circle of family and friends seems limiting, parochial and, if not self-centered, nevertheless centered a little too closely on the self.

Buddhism and Christianity exhort us to love agapically. The Dalai Lama writes that “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). Jesus commands his followers to love (*agapē*) all, even their enemies (Matthew 5:35-46); and agape is said to the kind of love God has for human beings and what we must aspire to show one another (Lewis, 1960).

Consider the otherwise perfect altruist who (through charity or politics or whatever you think is appropriate) dedicates herself to the service of others, not on the basis of their humanity, but because it makes her feel good or because she believes it will send her to heaven or because she has been convinced by the arguments of Singer, Unger and the rest (1972; 1996, respectively). Moreover, imagine she closes her heart to those she is helping; it’s exhausting, after all, and she can do more good if she focuses less on the humanity of others and more on the concrete steps she can take to help. Whatever is praiseworthy about such a person (and there is much!), she nevertheless still seems to be *missing* something. She fails to meet those she is helping as human beings and to extend her heart to them. I’m not suggesting she should be blamed or even that she *should* open her heart (more on that in a moment), but she does exhibit a kind of failing or lack.

Much more needs to be said, but let’s see what might follow from these arguments.

### 4 A conflict of loves

If anything is a good argument against *agape*’s being a virtue, it is its conflict with selective love. While both involve making oneself vulnerable, one is a
singling out of a select few as practically special, the other an embrace of all as equal; we cannot do both at once. So what are we to do? Maybe we have obligations to respect all, but not to love them, the latter being a mistake. I’m open to that being the case, but let’s explore an alternative.

4.1 Approximating Perfection

I will assume without argument that some version of ought implies can is true. We are required to be as virtuous as possible; so we are not required to fully exemplify both selective love and love for humanity. At the core of my proposal is permissivism: there is more than one way of reasoning rationally. When faced with a decision about how to spend our money, our time, our emotional attention—a decision about who we want to be—there is not a uniquely rational response. But in claiming that both loves are conflicting virtues, I am claiming something further: that full virtue is impossible and failure inevitable. For me, at least, this thought is simultaneously saddening and liberating, and it rings true to the experience of trying to live a moral life.

Consider the arguments of Singer, Unger and the like. Of course we should care about and help the distant needy, especially when small reallocations of our time, money and attention from ourselves and those we love to strangers can make such a big difference. But at the same time, that kind of reorientation around the needs of all seems not just hard but impossible to fit into a life that even remotely resembles our own. We cannot possibly be good friends, parents or partners if we treated everyone as equal (or something close to it)? And that is liberating—the impossibility of virtue is no personal failure but a byproduct of the disunified nature of virtue itself. At

---

16 I’m also assuming that ought claims agglomerate; that is, if I ought to φ and I ought to ψ, then I ought to φ & ψ. So I am rejecting an approach that says that even though we cannot love agapically and selectively, we still ought to love agapically and we ought to love selectively. For more on this, see n.??.

17 See Singer (1972); Unger (1996)
the same time, it is nevertheless deeply saddening—inevitable or not, we are failing.\textsuperscript{18}

But while one who loves selectively cannot fully embody love for humanity, she \textit{can} approximate it.\textsuperscript{19} Without fully loving all of humanity, we can act in a way that approaches equal love of all. Our love for the special few\textsuperscript{20} requires that we act in a way that treats them as special, but they need not be our whole world. Donating \textit{some} sizable portion of one’s income to charity, spending \textit{some} of one’s time engaged in political advocacy, choosing a career that is in \textit{some} way of service to others—these need not threaten our ability to love selectively. We must be as virtuous as possible; with \textit{agape} closed to selectively loving agents, we must instead approximate it as best we can, doing some of what the agapic agent would do but to a lesser degree, perhaps motivated by \textit{agape}.

Recall Velleman’s claim that love is the maximal and respect the minimal response to the humanity of another. Perhaps it is the maximal response that is explanatorily prior: our obligations to others can be explained as the requisite approximations of \textit{agape}. Why? Because respect is the greatest approximation of \textit{agape} fully compatible with any selective love. This is a novel account of the foundations of deontological ethics, one on which key notions like the non-fungibility of persons, the need for rights, and the requirements of respect can be derived from their status as approximations of love for all.

References


\textsuperscript{18} Anecdotally, I’ve heard some Christian friends and acquaintances describe their reaction to their belief in original sin in something of the same way.

\textsuperscript{19} There is an asymmetry here. I don’t see any way that the true lover of humanity could approximate selective love.

\textsuperscript{20} Including our love for ourselves, see Setiya (2015).


Kant, I. (2012). *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*.


