And the Greatest of These: an Examination of the Virtue of Love

“And now as to love, which the apostle declares to be greater than the other two graces, that is than faith and hope, the greater the measure in which it dwells in a man, the better is the man in whom it dwells.” [Augustine, *Enchiridion*, CXVII1)

Introduction

In this presentation I shall address the related topics of the role and significance that the theological virtue of Love must play with respect to other basic virtues within any plausible system of the virtues. While some may insist that Love is strictly a religious virtue, one whose virtue status depends upon a specific parochial metaphysical orientation, I attempt to demonstrate that one can make sense of Love’s being a genuine virtue without having to embrace a particular metaphysical or religious perspective. I further endeavor to establish that any ethical virtue realist, *i.e.*, anyone who is committed to ethical realism and to the importance of the virtues in ethics, needs to acknowledge both the power and role of Love with respect to any person’s being able to engage meaningfully and fully in ethical reasoning and deliberation.

My project faces two obvious objections. First, many very different things are standardly referred to as instances of love or its absence, and a goodly number of them (such as “being head over heels in love,” “being in love with love,” or “falling out of love,”) seem to have nothing to do with either a moral virtue or its absence. Given so many things which can be called ‘love’, I restrict my use of the term “Love” (that is, “Love” with a capital ‘L’) to the putative virtue I am attempting to establish, by which I understand a standing disposition or trait of character. Second, there is the objection that love is obviously a feeling and feelings cannot be virtues.
Something more than mere feelings must be required for Love to be a virtue, but what? To avoid these two objections I propose a characterization of the sort of behavioral trait connected to an appropriate feeling that could serve as the right sort of standing disposition to count as “Love”.

After a brief defense of this account of “Love” I shall then present several reasons why ethical virtue realists not only need to take “Love” seriously, and even may need to consider it the paramount virtue. The first reason I propose concerns moral motivation. What is it that causes human beings to act virtuously? Various items have been proposed: self-interest, sense-of-duty, fear of punishment, etc. But, these alternatives, while providing some motivational force, seem woefully inadequate to provide the right sort of will that is required for proper engagement in the moral enterprise. I argue that the most plausible alternative trigger for adequate moral motivation is Love. Here I follow Aquinas in general, but not in specifics.

My second reason for taking Love seriously is that Love seems to have an additional important meta- or systemic function within the system of the virtues. How does the system of virtues actually work? How does one determine which virtue is appropriate, when, and to what degree and in what manner? I suggest that Love is required for the apt application and coordination of the different virtues in specific contexts.

My third reason for taking Love seriously involves a standard conundrum faced by moral theories, namely the problem of supererogation, how to account for the extraordinary moral worth of those actions which are clearly “above and beyond” the call of duty. I propose that Love may provide us with the conceptual tools needed to make sense of the moral complexities presented by supererogation. I conclude by addressing the question of what makes love the “greatest” of the virtues.
Problems with Determining the Virtue of Love

The virtue of Love poses problems with respect to analysis. It is hard to get a clear understanding of this concept, since the notion love, unlike those associated with most of the other standard virtues, has undergone a radical transformation and multiplication of meaning. It is challenging even to get an initial answer to the question, “What might the virtue of Love be?” without having to turn to a specific text or philosophical interpretation. This is certainly one thing that makes love special, and different from other virtues.

While we should all be willing to grant that many if not most instances of small “l” love have nothing obvious to do with being virtuous, it is much more challenging to determine what might count as virtuous, capital “L” Love. While it is common to associate love with an attraction, it seems out of place to require those with the virtue of Love to be generally or potentially attracted in general to everyone. But, if Love is not a general disposition, applying somehow to everyone, then there it cannot be a virtue. If I only demonstrate love to those relatively few individuals whom I love, there seems to be nothing virtuous about my loving per se, as virtues need to be typical of my general behavior, not relatively restricted occurrences. Now there may be very special individuals, such as certain saints or even God, who are capable of demonstrating such a love to all. But, if the virtue of Love were indeed limited to such a relative handful, it is hard to see what special role Love might play in the general system of the virtues that is supposed to guide the rest of us.

Further, there seem to be things one is indeed virtuous in loving, which we, as philosophers who claim to be lovers of knowledge, should be the first to maintain, where the notion of attraction seems to take on a very different meaning. Those who love beauty or justice, or similar abstractions seem to be doing something a bit different. But what? How could an
account of the virtue of Love make sense of the virtue that we find in such positive attractions as opposed to the vice we find in negative attractions to such things as gambling or cock-fighting?

Still, it would be odd to propose Love, at least in human beings, as not having an important feeling or affective component. Some virtues (such as courage, and perhaps hope) just seem to call for such an element, such as any proposed account/analysis that leaves such an element out necessarily must fall a bit flat. But, identifying this element, given the variety of potential objects of love, is another factor that makes identifying a virtue of Love challenging.

Further, it is hard to turn to a particular tradition, the Western tradition in our case, to find a common and unified account of the virtue. Aristotle, the apparent progenitor of virtue ethics does not seem explicitly to recognize love as a virtue. He does speak, in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, of the virtue of “friendliness” with respect to the sphere of the agreeable—the general business of life. But, this does not seem to be close enough to what most of us want to count as a form of Love. It is also quite different from what other philosophers who follow Aristotle, such as Augustine and Aquinas, clearly do. For both of these latter two philosophers, Love is a distinct virtue. But, it is not human love that matters so much as human connection with the Divine, or God’s Love. Augustine, for instance, says:

But whatever is done either through fear of punishment or from some other carnal motive, and has not for its principle that love which the Spirit of God sheds abroad in the heart, is not done as it ought to be done, however it may appear to men. For this love embraces both the love of God and the love of our neighbor, and “on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets,” we may add the Gospel and the apostles.³
Here, too, is Aquinas, responding to and attempting to make sense of Peter Lombard’s claims that love just is the Holy Spirit in us:

Everything that something receives, it receives in the manner appropriate to itself.

Therefore if we receive love from God, we must receive it in a finite way, in the manner appropriate to us. But every finite thing is created. Therefore charity in us is a created thing.\(^4\)

But, as already noted, if Love were a virtue largely restricted to God and to what God alone can provide, then a major role for Love in the general system of virtues for human beings would be much harder to determine.\(^5\) So, if we are to find a serious role for love as a virtue, we must set our sights on other targets. Another complicating factor is that, for many thinkers such as both Augustine and Aquinas, it is not the notion of Love that is at issue but that of Charity. But, charity brings with it its own set of issues: a sense of condescension, a certain religious specificity and an obligation which may not need any specific affective dimension.

**Towards an Account of the Virtue of Love**

Let us now consider an analysis that tries to accommodate the various worries so far mentioned. If Love is to be a virtue, then we need to think of it as the standing disposition to Love. But who should be loved? Not a single individual or a limited group (such as one’s family and friends), but somehow love in general. Again, it is too much to require the level and kind of emotional commitment attached to family and friends, but some feeling seems required. This might be well captured by specifying that the feeling involved be that of some degree of sympathy, but towards what? Towards the situation of others. But whom? Since humans cannot individually consider the situations of all other humans, perhaps we can restrict others to those whose lives our actions can and do directly affect. But what aspects of their lives should
be taken into account? Since consideration of all aspects is not practicable, perhaps the best one can do is to specify: towards all of those aspects that are morally relevant. So, let’s consider this proposal:

(L) The virtue of Love is the disposition to be sympathetically attracted to others and concerned to understand and respond appropriately to of the plight of others.

This proposal seems to have a good bit going for it. First, it makes it possible for relatively ordinary, mature human beings to have it, and also it accounts for the fact that the virtue of Love requires significant education and sensitization. Second, it explains why we sometime find ourselves criticizing others for not measuring up or being too limited with respect to their Love. For it should of course be pointed out that the virtue of Love will come in degrees, that at some points in a culture’s history it will be regarded as now morally appropriate to have regard for groups or types of individuals who were previously disregarded or ignored, such as members of other castes, ethnicities, genders, religious affiliations, nationalities, and, more recently and importantly, species. Third, using this account we can also point out the limitations of the virtue of some individuals, who are very loving to, say, their family and friends, but not to other members of their community, or to members of their community, but not to those in other communities, etc., just as we can point out limitations with respect to other virtues, such as justice or courage.

Further, fourth, the proposal seems to have the advantage of explaining the historical connection of love with caritas or Charity, in that one is often motivated to be charitable to those whose situations seem to be the most deserving of special attention. The powerful injunction, “Love Thy Neighbor,” is often taken, at a minimum, to be encouraging us to engage in acts of charity towards others.
So, it seems that this proposal may have a number of attractive features to recommend it. Still, some might object that (L) while is an account of sympathy, or perhaps, deep care, it is not an account of Love. My initial reply would be to ask what is missing from the proposed account. If Love is supposed to be Care-Plus, then just what is the plus supposed to be that is available to all perspectives? If the reply is that a very special sort of Love-related feeling is required, I would challenge the objector to demonstrate that the sort of feeling required for true sympathy and deep care is somehow different from that required by the account of Love given above in (L). It is just not clear that one could really be sympathetic to the plight of another without having an appropriate feeling regarding that person’s situation. It may be that the objector is confusing what I want to analyze as the virtue of Love with another kind of love, perhaps on the model of romantic love, a form of love that is standardly taken to involve a very special intense feeling. While it seems reasonable to suppose that all forms of love do involve some variety of feeling or other, it need not be that case that all forms of love involve exactly the same kind of feeling. Indeed, it is important to emphasize that one can have different feelings of love related to different human beings, depending on exactly what sort of love is involved. Clearly the feelings required for Love understood as (L) are different from those of other forms of love. I now want to turn to my claim that Love, understand as (L) above, is indeed a most important virtue, perhaps the most important virtue, by looking at three different aspects of morality and showing how Love plays a key role in each.

**Love and Moral Motivation**

It is hard to deny the importance of the virtues. But, merely to say that one should act virtuously is not enough. How does virtuous behavior occur? It is natural to adopt what we might call an internalist perspective: one has to perceive the need for acting virtuously in
different contexts, for if one does not accurately perceive the need for virtue, then one cannot be faulted for not acting virtuously. According to the moral internalist, moral thinking requires a special awareness of the need for moral consideration which then motivates moral action. But, how does moral insight occur? Is there a special moral sense that senses the morally relevant features of a situation and helps propel the individual sensor towards action? Some special metaphysical features or abilities have been proposed, but it seems dangerous to limit a very important aspect of ethics, namely, virtue, to a specific metaphysical orientation. Similarly sometimes special epistemic powers are postulated, but the same worry about narrow parochialism can be raised. What might plausibly be a non-controversial source of moral motivation, based on features of humans that we can all grant? Humans are sympathetic, they are empathetic, and they can be made to appreciate others’ plights, especially through moral education and experience. So, it seems reasonable, parsimonious and relatively uncontroversial to say that it is the virtue of Love as described above that provides a significant part, perhaps the bulk of the moral motivation needed to apply the other virtues appropriately in different particular circumstances. Thus, Love seems to play the role of the trait that is required to get one to think morally.

It might be objected that one does not need the virtue of Love to compel one to engage in moral evaluation, since all one needs is either a set of moral rules, or perhaps one big rule, such as the Golden Rule, or even a particular moral principle or theory. While it is surely worth worrying about whether moral rules or principles might be accurate, it seems, contrary to Socrates, simply false that knowledge of a rule or principle is sufficient for motivating one’s behavior. Further, and more importantly, since there are a variety of moral considerations that appear to matter, it should be emphasized that not only does one need to be motivated to engage
in moral consideration of a particular individual or context, but one also needs to be motivated to bring the relevant moral factors for consideration to bear. In order to do this, one requires exactly the sort of empathetic understanding specified above in (L). Again, there are many moral rules and many moral considerations, and not all of them are relevant in a particular case. Determining just what is relevant requires what I have been calling Love.

But, the objector may persist: what about the Golden Rule? Isn’t that enough? My reply is that even to apply the Golden Rule sensitively requires that one be able to understand and sympathize with the plights of those concerned by different actions, and that without sensitive application, the Golden Rule, like all moral rules, winds up sanctioning bizarre and unacceptable results. Thus, to be a genuinely moral evaluator/reflector, one needs Love, for without Love the appropriate connection between the affected individuals and the appropriate complexities of the situation being considered cannot exist.

**Love and the Coordination of the Virtues**

This leads us naturally to the next important role for the virtue of Love, namely virtue consideration and coordination. Since there are clearly many different virtues, one obvious concern for those who worry about the workings of the system of virtues is how these different virtues are to be coordinated. While it seems that wisdom is always a valuable trait, perhaps temperance, on the other hand, is not always appropriate. The same seems to hold for courage. Again, there also seem to be situations in which justice may need to be appropriately tempered by other considerations. But which situations call for the application of which virtues, to what degree, and in what manner? Aristotle notoriously reminds us of the necessarily vague nature of the application of the virtues, as doing the right thing in the right way at the right time, etc. But, how are we to determine what is right? Aristotle’s answer always seems to be: experience and
education. But, mere experience and education all by themselves seem insufficient. There are many who have large amounts of experience and education that seem to lack the moral sensitivity to determine what is appropriate and how to combine what is appropriate. While they can cite moral factors for consideration they are unable to relate them appropriately to the individuals as individuals in specific situations, often relying instead on a particular role or rules that they have adopted as absolute. Their moral application of the virtues appears ‘mechanical’, or, to pick another metaphor, ‘tone-deaf’ to important specific differences between the exact situations that they have experienced in the past and those in which they currently find themselves. So, it seems reasonable to consider whether it Love is what would help to explain the difference here. Those who are better tuned into the needs of other individuals would also seem to be those who are expressing requisite empathetic understanding, or Love as I have called it. So, to explain how a system of virtues can function as a unified system in the many different sorts of circumstances in which we find ourselves it would seem important to refer to the meta-virtue role played by Love in the system of virtues.

**Love and Supererogation**

We now turn to a further point, an intriguing puzzle, one which bedevils many if not all leading contenders among the major theories of normative ethics, namely the puzzle of supererogation. How can one account for the goodness of actions which are clearly “above and beyond the call of duty”? Such are the actions of saints and heroes, to recall the title of J.O. Urmson’s classic discussion, actions that involve an extraordinary, often ultimate, self sacrifice. The problem for standard theories of normative ethics is to explain how an action can both be morally praiseworthy yet not one’s duty. The utilitarian, the Kantian, the Divine Command Theorist, and the simple Aristotelian virtue theorist all seem unable to account adequately for
this moral category. So, how can the traditional virtue theorist (the one who accepts the four cardinal and three theological virtues) do any better with respect to supererogation? Love seems to provide the beginning of a solution. One might say that a supererogatory act is one that demonstrates an excessive degree of Love while, at the same time, contradicting or overriding other virtues, such as those of temperance, or wisdom or justice. In sacrificing oneself for others, by, for example, throwing oneself on a live grenade, one overrides the virtue of temperance. What makes the act a remarkably good one from the perspective of virtue consideration can only be accounted for in terms of Love, which unlike many other virtues, the excess of which, since it involves Love cannot be regarded as a fault, as Augustine’s beginning comment emphasizes. Admitting that there cannot be a limit on love seems to help account for the supererogation puzzle. Only by appealing to love can one make sense of great self-sacrifice’s being supremely good. Perhaps one can say that duty to self is governed by temperance, but sacrifice for others is encouraged by Love. Exact details of the explanation of supererogation require a more fully worked-out account than what I can now provide. Still, it seems clear that there is something important here worthy of further investigation. And, if the line of explanation outlined above is correct, then those who attempt to construct an adequate normative moral theory need to take cognizance of the important role the virtue of Love can and does play with respect to the creation of the supererogatory.

**Love and Greatness**

Finally, let us turn briefly to the question of Love’s greatness. What makes Love the “greatest” virtue, as Augustine calls it? While some may be tempted to claim that greatness involves goodness, it does not. There are, unfortunately, numerous historical individuals who have earned the title of “the Great” without being especially good, and often by being especially bad. If we
examine instances of greatness carefully we will see that greatness instead involves power. And here I find support from Aquinas who says that “Charity [Love] is the most powerful of the virtues”. If Love is the greatest of the virtues, then its greatness has to involve its power.

But, what power does Love have? One obvious answer is to consider the claims already discussed involving moral motivation and the consideration and coordination of the virtues, as well as the power exhibited in supererogation to override other virtues. Love not only seems to have the greatest influence among the virtues, but is crucially involved in plausibly accounting for how the relevant virtues get identified, and how some virtues take precedence over others in particular situations. Given these powerful reasons, the claim of the supreme greatness of Love among the virtues makes great sense.

Notes


2 Of the standard virtues, perhaps only justice has undergone a similarly radical transformation.

3 Ibid, CXXI, p. 139.


5 It would be comparable to Aristotle’s notion of the “great-souled” or magnanimous person, which only a very few manage to achieve.

6 We might distinguish this approach from that of the moral externalist who thinks that what is required for moral behavior is not an elaborate mental reflection and evaluation of one’s options but rather the right sort of connection to certain external objects or situations that brings about moral behavior as a response. Thus, for the moral externalist one responds quasi-automatically to certain conditions perceived in others. Still, while there may some individuals who appear always to react automatically and morally correctly to the plight of others, it is hard to for many of us, namely those who struggle with moral decisions, to take moral externalism as an accurate account of our own moral phenomenology.


8 Alexander the Great, Catherine the Great, Tamerlane the Great, and the Great Satan are relevant examples!

9 Ibid, p. 119.