Love Ancient and Modern: Plato and Von Hildebrandt

Among Catholic philosophers of the 20th century, Dietrich von Hildebrandt stood out for the breadth and intensity of his reflections on the affective dimension of human nature. Under the influence of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler, he developed an objective ontology of value, a phenomenology of diverse forms of human affective response to value, and an account of how the human person is fulfilled in and through love. In his late great work *Das Wesen der Liebe (The Nature of Love)* he described love as (in its primary sense) a value-response to a beloved person as beautiful, and understood his account as overcoming some deficiencies of what he took to be the Platonic account of love in *Symposium* 199c-212c. He thought the Platonic account conceived love as a yearning for the lover’s own perfection rather as a value-response. I shall discuss the main features of Von Hildebrandt’s account of love and then, time permitting, suggest that, even if his account goes beyond Plato’s in important respects, Plato’s account is not as far removed from Von Hildebrandt’s as the latter supposed. I shall correlate a few features of *Symposium* 199-212c with features of Von Hildebrandt’s account.

**Dietrich von Hildebrandt’s *The Nature of Love***

**A. Values, Value-responses, the “merely subjectively satisfying,” and the “objective good for persons.”**

1. **Reality of value. Value Response is not an appetitus.** Value is not subjective but is something real and precious in itself, worthy of appropriate responses such as veneration, admiration and love. It must be contrasted with the “merely subjectively satisfying,” something that is important to a subject simply because it satisfies a craving. A type of value-response is not a type of appetitus like thirst, for in the latter case the value of the object exists only in its capacity to satisfy a yearning, and the yearning pre-exists the evaluation of the object, whereas a value-response is caused by the perception or intuition of value that calls the response into operation, a value that exists independently of any need on the part of any subject and whose importance does not derive from satisfying some subjective or objective need of any subject. In value-response, interest in the object is based on its value alone, and the value is thematic, whereas with an appetitus the satisfaction of a need, or perhaps the development of the subject, is thematic. (Yet sometimes something moves us by its value and at the same time satisfies an appetitus.)

2. **Value is beautiful.** All value bears beauty, even though it is not the case that all value is specifically aesthetic value. Even non-aesthetic value, such as the value of radiance of character we find in Socrates, is marked by a certain beauty. This is the reason why the deep intuitive experience of a value always confers some delight on the experiencing person, a delight only the beautiful can give. The merely subjectively satisfying does not have such beauty.
3. **The Good is God.** All values of things reflect in different ways the divine glory, which is also a value concept. Thus *value* for Von Hildebrandt is as metaphysically potent an idea as that of *being*. Value is nothing other than being in all its dignity, nobility, and beauty.

4. **Right response “owed” to value.** Everything of value is worthy of a right response in virtue of its value, and an elementary justice is fulfilled when a valuable being receives the due response. Persons *transcend themselves* when they give due value responses, not seeing things only under the aspect of satisfying their own needs, but seeing them for what they are in their own value.

5. **“Objective goods for the person.”** Certain values and good are not “merely subjectively satisfying” but rather are important for the full realization of persons—values such as health, education, and loving and being loved. These values are often (but not always) both subjectively satisfying and objectively good for the person (e.g. the satisfaction of practicing a craft well). The more-than-merely-subjective importance of such values is not only their importance as values but also their importance as being *beneficial for the subject who participates in them*, whereas the importance of values generally is independent of their being beneficial for the subject who responds to them. When a person responds to a value, however, the response is only appropriate when the thought that the responding person flourishes by so responding remains in the background and does not itself primarily motivate the response. Indeed, the response is only beneficial for the responder when it is primarily motivated by the value and not by the flourishing that supervenes upon such responding.

**B. Love as a Value-response.**

1. **Love a Value-response, not an appetitus.** Personal love is a value-response to the beloved person as beautiful. I am not drawn to the beloved under the aspect of one who can fulfill my need, even my need to flourish as a person, but rather under the aspect of one who is valuable in his or her own right, and I love the other for his or her own sake.

2. **The individual as the object of love.** The beloved person is not just a *specimen* of some excellence or value who is lovable only on the basis of instantiating that excellence or value. I don’t love the value more than the person. The value that is thematic in my response is the unique unrepeatable individuality of the beloved person, the whole person. It is not the case that I first love, and then invest the beloved with noble qualities (as when sexual desire or parental pride can lead to value illusions). Rather, love is a response to real value incipiently known, and when it comes about and grows, it further sensitizes me to deeper knowledge of the real unrepeatable value of the beloved. The relation between love and knowledge is a mutual relation. And the knowledge is of the unrepeatable beauty of the beloved (*gesamtschönheit*), a knowledge whose content is not capable of being fully communicated linguistically.
3. **Affectivity and the role of the heart.** The imperative nature of the call of morally-relevant values is not found in the love between friends or the love between man and woman, for it is never a matter of strict moral obligation to enter into such loves. (This morally imperative moment is found in two kinds of love, namely the love of neighbor and the love for God.) Moral transcendence is not proper to them, but they do have certain perfections of transcendence not found in the moral life. For in these loves I take an *affective delight* in the other. Moral transcendence is a matter of the *will*, but the transcendence of these kinds of love is a transcendence of the *heart*. In love I am present with my whole intimate self, so that I give myself to the other in a way in which I cannot give myself when exercising my will alone.

4. **An enduring stance.** Love is an enduring stance, not a momentary episode, and it endures as long as it is not explicitly renounced. It is analogous to a promise made. It is a mental stance that is more than a mere disposition, because it continues to operate at all times at a deep level of the lover’s self, coloring and modifying all the real situations in which he lives.

5. **Intentio Unionis (as opposed to the “will to possess”).** (a) Whoever loves also desires a spiritual union with the beloved person. He desires above all else a union of hearts that only mutual love can grant. This is true not only of spousal love but to some degree of every kind of love. Love has not only an *intentio* for union but also a unitive power (*virtus unitiva*). (b) But the unfulfilled character of desire does not belong necessarily to the *intentio unionis*. Whereas in all forms of mere desire the ardor derives from the tension of unsatisfied desire, the satisfaction of which brings about a state of pure rest, this is not the case with love as a value-response. The ardor of love is the fruit of the beauty of the beloved person and does not decrease once union is achieved. Von Hilbebrandt thinks Plato made a mistake when in the *Symposium* he called love the offspring of Poros (Plenty) and Penia (Neediness) (rhetorical accommodation to Agathon). (c) If union with the other person is desired exclusively under the aspect of one’s own happiness, love is replaced by the will to possess, as can happen in spousal relations and relations between parents and children. As soon is union is desired that is not built on a return of love and is not desired equally for the happiness of both, there is no real *intentio unionis*. Personal union is distinct from *possession*, a relation that can exist only between a person and a non-person. Possession is also distinct from the union that is achieved when a person responds to the great value of a non-personal good such as a palace of great artistic value or a beautiful stone.

6. **Intentio Benevolentiae.** This consists in the desire to make the other happy; it is a real interest in the happiness, the well-being, and the salvation of the beloved. It involves a unique sharing in the beloved’s happiness and destiny. It distinguishes love from mere esteem, admiration, or veneration.

7. **Self-giving.** Love is a value-response but not only a value-response. I am made happy by loving and being loved, with a deeper happiness than that of “merely subjective satisfactions.” This means that the beloved person and the relationship is an eminent
case of something objectively good for me. I give myself to the beloved in a unique way by willing to receive from the beloved my own deepest happiness (and by willing to be the source of the beloved’s deepest happiness). (The willing is motivated by the heart but not necessitated by it, just as God’s creation was motivated by envisioning certain goods but was still a free act.) By loving I give myself and transcend myself in a way that surpasses all the other value responses, and I am more “active” here than in any other value-response, even though my love is more a matter of the heart than of the will, and even though my self-giving involves my own objective good. Love is a “super value-response” of such a kind that my own objective good is embedded in the value response to the beloved in such a way that in the response I can focus on the beloved under the aspect of satisfying my need to love and be loved and under the aspect of the beloved’s unique irreplaceable value, without this focus on my own happiness having to remain in the background of my motivations in order that my love be a true value-response. The beloved would not feel truly loved if she did not know that my loving her was a source of my deepest happiness. In friendship, spousal love, love between parents and children, and in love of God, purely disinterested and “selfless” love would be deformed. (Pieper agrees.)

8. Desire for requital of love, for mutuality in love. The lover’s interest in what is good for himself—receiving his own deepest good from his loving and from the requital of his love in a mutual love—enhances his love and does not diminish it, as certain mistaken notions of “purely altruistic” love might imply.

9. Relation between love and freedom: the heart and the will. Love is an affective value-response and not a value-responding act of will. Love is not ‘free’ in the same sense as the will is free. We cannot posit a response of the heart like we can posit a response of the will, or command love like an action. There is an abyss between the mere will to love someone and really loving someone from the heart. The commitment of the heart is not a result of the will but a “gift.” Nevertheless, personal freedom has a role to play in love. An affective value-response only becomes a valid stance of the person when it is “sanctioned” by my free personal center. The giving of my heart requires that love arise spontaneously with a mysterious kind of inner necessity, but nevertheless self-giving remains incomplete as long as the love is not sanctioned.

10. Love of neighbor not the model of all pure and selfless love. (a) In love of neighbor the intentio unionis is overshadowed by the intentio benevolentiae. But the sublime character of love of neighbor derives from its inherently supernatural foundation in the love of God and Christ (overlooked in modern secularized moral theories), a love in which this overshadowing does not take place. What makes for supremely “selfless” love in the love of neighbor would be a deficiency of love in the setting of friendship, spousal love, or love for God. The thing that makes for the greatest self-donation in spousal love is absent in the love of neighbor and this absence constitutes a specific excellence of the different kind of self-donation in the love of neighbor. (b) Christian love of neighbor is necessarily built on the love for God, whereas the natural kinds of love—spousal, friendship, filial, parental—are not. If I am going to give the right value-
response to every person, I have to acknowledge that each is created in the divine image and called to eternal communion with God (greater mystery). But this does not mean that the sublimity of love of neighbor derives from the fact that it in it the intention unionis recedes in importance and that the happiness of the lover is not a central concern. 

For the intention unionis and the concern for happiness are fully developed in the love for God on which the love of neighbor is based.

11. Caritas or the Love Union with God. (a) The supernatural love for God is called caritas. It is the purest value response, the response to the infinite glory and holiness of God. The value-response to God bears fruit in the goodness and kindness of the lover, the full actualization of the humble, reverent, and loving center of the self and its dominion over the center of pride and concupiscence, the full participation in the kingdom of holy goodness. All of the Law and the Prophets depend upon it. (b) The “benefit” conferred upon God by the lover can only be the word of love, the return of love by the lover. The intentio benevolentiae in it has the character of burning for the glorification of God, the adoring affirmation of God, and the absolute giving of oneself to Him. (c) The intentio unionis in caritas is the yearning for love union with God and for the attendant happiness, as in spousal love. The value response to my neighbor is a manifestation of the holy goodness born of the love for God, but not identical with it.

12. Eros is not Antithetical to Agape. (a) All the natural categories of love can and should be penetrated and “baptized” by caritas. It is wrong to identify caritas with love of neighbor exclusively, and wrong to make the mistake of contrasting eros with agape in such a way as to think that any love with a happiness-inducing intention unionis is mere eros, and any benevolent love like love of neighbor, in which the intention unionis is reduced, is agape. Agape is caritas, and caritas is the love for God with its full happiness-inducing intention unionis. It is entirely false to identify spousal love with eros and thus to oppose it to agape. Caritas protects natural loves from “egoism of the beloved person”—in which love can betray a lover into harming some third person for the sake of securing a benefit for the beloved person, into setting aside the moral law for the sake of the happiness that comes from union with the beloved person. It protects those engaged in noble projects of art, social reform, and statesmanship from the “egoism of the idealist,” from being inconsiderate to all that falls outside the boundaries of their projects. The real datum one is aiming at with the distinction between eros and agape is to be found in the distinction between the quality of any natural love (including universal benevolence detached from the love for God) cut off from the transforming influence of the love for God, on the one hand, and the quality of any natural love that is transformed by its conjunction with love for God, on the other (Christian love of neighbor by definition is a fruit of the love for God). But this difference in quality does not entail any antithesis between eros and agape. Agape fulfills, transfigures, and perfects eros. In every natural love, even the most imperfect, there is, insofar as it is love, a reflection and image of caritas. This is why it is entirely false to deny any moral value to this purely natural but still “unbaptized” love and to treat it like a morally neutral instinct. For an essential core of love qua love remains common to eros and agape, despite their differences.
Spiritual Pregnancy and Socrates’ Refutation of Agathon in the Symposium 199c-213c

I have no space or time for careful exegesis of this dense text. So I shall simply list a few ways in which Plato’s account dovetails with Von Hildebrandt’s later account.

1. Reality of value. Value Response is not an appetitus. Socrates shows Agathon that the ultimate meaning and purpose of eros is to lead to an encounter with a divine eternal goodness from which all other goods, and the beauty of these goods, come. Socrates characterizes eros as a desire and a need, but Von H. admits that objects of eros can move us both by their value and by satisfying a need. Von Hildebrandt thinks Plato made a mistake when in the Symposium he has Socrates call love the offspring of Poros (Plenty) and Penia (Neediness). But Plato has Socrates use this myth as a rhetorical means for helping Agathon to overcome his false understanding of eros as only a need for physical union. Plato is not committed to a general abstract thesis that Eros is a need in Von H.’s sense.

2. Value is beautiful. In Socrates account, erotic attraction to beauty is attraction to things that participate in a God who is at once eternal beauty and eternal goodness.

3. The Good is God. Socrates’ God is the Good and the Beautiful.

4. Love has an Intentio Unionis (as opposed to a “will to possess”). Von H. takes pains to distinguish real love’s desire for union from the will to “possess” another like a thing. Plato has Socrates take great pains to show Agathon that the “possessing” that love strives for is not this kind of possessing.

5. Desire for requital of love, for mutuality in love. Plato takes great pains in the Symposium to show that the prevalent conception of the lover-beloved relationship as an asymmetrical relationship is a flawed conception.

6. Caritas or the Love Union with God. Socrates’ lesson for Agathon, a lesson he says he received from a wise woman Diotima of Mantinea, centers around the notion of “pregnancy of soul.” Diotima’s teaching aims to show that at the top of the ascent of eros, when they have the experience which discloses the ultimate meaning and purpose of eros, men, and not only women, spiritually inhabit the feminine role in conceiving and giving birth to true virtue.

7. The full flourishing of all the loves—love of neighbor, spousal love, friendship, parental love, and filial love—is based upon the love union with God with its intentio unionis and its concern for happiness. The “sexual encounter” with the divine at the summit of the ascent is such that the soul of the erotic lover must become actively receptive to the divine reality in order to give birth to true virtue—necessary to true love—in him. This is Plato’s way of showing that the proper operation of all the loves is rooted in the love union with God. Diotima’s teaching concerning the highest mysteries (210a-
212a)—the ascent of *eros* and bridal mysticism— attempts to show Agathon the meaning and purpose of the lesser loves.

8. **Eros is not Antithetical to Agape.** Von H. holds that it is entirely false to identify spousal love with *eros* and thus to oppose it to *agape*. Plato does not make this mistake. The *Symposium*, does not explicitly distinguish between *eros* and *agape*. But its teaching is quite in line with Von H.’s view that the distinction (made after Plato) between *eros* and *agape* is a distinction between the quality of any natural love cut off from the transforming influence of the love for God, on the one hand, and the quality of any natural love that is transformed by its conjunction with love for God, on the other.