Unselfing Love: An Analytical Account of Personal Love and its Compatibility with Other-Regarding Love

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Unselfing Love: An Analytical Account of Personal Love and its Compatibility with Other-Regarding Love

Submitted to Professor Adrienne Martin

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for

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Abstract

There is a wealth of philosophical literature on love. The two main camps of literature are descriptive and analytical. The former aims to best synthesize and describe how people manifest love in real life, while the latter takes the normative position of evaluating how people should be loving, which normally blends love with a hint of ethical or justice related principles.

One hidden theme that underlies many of the debates on love is the relation to the lover’s self. As this paper will gradually unfold, there are many self-interested reasons disguised behind the philosophical definition of love and the reason to fall in love and to sustain loving relationships. Beyond critiquing some of the overly self-centered descriptive definitions of love, this paper seeks to highlight the conflict between descriptive camp’s ego-leaning, and analytical camp’s ego-abstaining account of love. The conflict, at first sight, appears to render it impossible for a person to demonstrate both forms of love simultaneously. To address this challenge, this paper will explore three possible arguments supporting the compatibility of Buddhist love and personal love. Specifically, it will examine how prioritizing a select group of individuals can coexist with the commitment of practicing compassion for all.
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Introduction

Sally Haslanger, a prominent philosopher in the field of feminist philosophy, the philosophy of race, and social ontology, distinguishes between "descriptive", “conceptual” and "analytical" inquiry of any given social phenomenon in a way that is helpful in categorizing the wealth of philosophical literature on love. In “Gender and Race: What are they?”, she lays out a very clear distinction of conceptual, descriptive and analytical approach to the question of “What is gender”. While the descriptive approach focuses more on mapping out the actual social mechanisms and structures that produce and reproduce social phenomena, the conceptual approach is involved with analyzing and clarifying the precise conceptual framework and nuances pertaining to a concept. The conceptual approach is often complemented with the analytical approach which critically examines the social purposes of the concepts and redefines the concepts in ways that accomplish those social purposes.

Love, while personal, is largely a social construct. The distinct cultures, norms and expectations of love in the world makes the manifestations of love highly variable across societies. For instance, the qualities that Chinese people respond to in loving relationships are distinctively different from those of white Americans. Additionally, the popularity of different concepts of love ebbs and flows depending on the number of people that endorse these definitions in a society. The changing preferences for different bodily traits across time can serve as a simple example in point. After showing that love can indeed be interpreted as a social phenomena, this paper will now use Haslanger’s taxonomy in distilling the slightly fuzzy body of the philosophical literature on love.
The rest of the paper will be structured in three chapters. The first chapter will investigate three popular versions of the descriptive account of love. The descriptive approach aims to develop more accurate concepts of love through careful consideration of the emotional, psychological, and behavioral dimensions of love. As people generally prefer and practice one or more of the descriptive accounts of love, this paper will examine some of the key critiques, as well as the epistemologically grounded defenses posited by the philosophers. This critical examination of the descriptive account of love will naturally segue into the discussion of the ameliorative analytical approach to love, which seeks to address these issues at their core.

The second chapter will explore analytical perspectives on love, which adopt a revisionary stance by methodically dismantling the conventional understanding of love and subsequently redefining it according to one's own objectives. Analytical approaches to love often dissect the observable aspects of love into its component parts, preserving certain aspects of descriptive love while discarding others and introducing new moral or ethical dimensions to the concept. Due to the diverse ideals held by philosophers regarding love, this paper will present a wide spectrum of analytical accounts of love that encompass a distinct set of ethical or religious values.

After presenting arguments for both descriptive and analytical perspectives on love, the final chapter will delve into whether these two accounts of love can coexist. Specifically, it will thoroughly examine the conflict between the self-centered motives in descriptive love and the other-regarding motives in analytical love. This analysis will set the stage for concluding arguments that seek to reconcile the tensions between Buddhist compassion, which transcends the ego, and the selfish love for one's family and friends.
Chapter 1: Descriptive Account of Love

Quality Theory of Love

The quality theory stands as one of the most widely embraced conceptions of love. Esther Kroeger, in her work "The Reasons for Love," delineates love as a response or disposition towards to the beloved’s virtues and laudable qualities within one’s beloved, such as beauty, wit, or vivacity (Kroeker, 280). This definition resonates with the reality of romantic love. Indeed, many individuals articulate their affection for their partners by enumerating the qualities they admire. It is these qualities that draw them to their partners, eliciting a range of emotional responses such as awe, wonder, sympathy, moral approval, and pleasure—responses which, according to Kroeger, are integral to the manifestations of love (285). Therefore, within the quality theory framework, love is primarily characterized by affective emotions rather than volitional or active will, but is also partly motivated by the generation of these self-serving attitudes.

However, the quality account of love is often beset with the criticism of inconstancy and substitutability. Consider the critique of inconstancy: if attributes such as beauty, wit, or vivacity form the basis of my love for my romantic partner, does the waning of these qualities signify the dissolution of that love? Since most conceive or wish love to be more of a permanent emotional response, a person who only subscribes to the quality theory might find their love rather fickle and short-lived. In other words, the quality theory only gives people reasons for wanting, as well as seeking to cultivate, a relationship, rather than reasons to sustain the relationship once it is
cultivated. (Kolodny, 140). The inability to sustain a relationship is counter-intuitive and hence leave the quality theory in question.

The second critique is that of substitutability. This argument highlights the problem where the lover realizes all the qualities they love in person A can also be found in person B. The realization might subject the lover to accept person B as a rightful substitute object of our love (Kolodny, 141). This makes love rather fickle and unstable, if not to a degree unethical. The two critiques can also be complementarily reinforced when the lover becomes even more motivated to pursue person B when they start to notice the disappearing of desired qualities in their current partner A.

That is why the quality theories are often complemented with an epistemological argument. Love, when apprehended as an epistemic capability can help agents identify small laudable qualities and perhaps a form of deeper reason-responsive love that is absent when they first met. For instance, Jollimore argues that love is responsive to a type of reason that one only understands because one loves. (Kroeker, 285) Because of love, lovers see valuable qualities in their partners that others do not see. They see the best version of a person that is consistent with the available evidence. An interesting example of parental love is discussed in the paper. While a stranger who sees a child misbehaving in public might react by saying “what a brat”, the child’s parents might be moved by a thought like “this is what happens when she skips her nap”. (Kroeker, 285) Hence in this instance, the parents’ love for the child transforms how they view the misbehaving and allows people to discover more reasons to sustain their love in face of the same rude misbehavior.
Regarding the issue of substitutability, love can serve as a cognitive barrier, constraining its affectionate response towards strangers. In this way, the lover’s epistemology not only defines what love is but also delineates what it is not. Often, love entails the suppression of alternative reasons that could potentially evoke affection for others. For instance, according to Jollimore, love should arise in circumstances where the beloved is exempt from comparison with rivals, and any comparable qualities in rivals are disregarded (Kroeker, 283). This argument suggests that personal love requires a cognitive limitation that inhibits the extension of love to individuals who possess the qualities we value.

This framework of epistemic ability perfectly captures the development of personal interpersonal romantic love. It strengthens the quality conception of love and makes love more resilient to the challenge of inconstancy and substitutability by empowering lovers to find more reasons to love when in the relationship, and epistemically condition oneself to block the loving response when noticing the same set of attractive qualities in others. The functioning of such epistemic capacity can be found in both personal loving and familial loving relationships. On the flip side, the epistemology argument seems to accurately describe instances where lovers find the same attractive qualities unlovable in strangers. For example, some parents find it difficult to fall in love with children other than their own, even though they might share the same qualities, or when lovers fail to see the problems in their toxic relationships even though it’s very obvious for the bystanders.
Love as Relationship

Kolodny’s conception of love treats relationships as the main reason and the object of love. He writes that: “love is not only rendered normatively appropriate by the presence of a relationship. Love, moreover, partly consists in the belief that some relationship renders it appropriate, and the emotions and motivations of love are causally sustained by this belief” (Kolodny, 146). Similar to quality theorists’ conception of love, Kolodny’s conception of love implies a self-serving attitude where it sees love as a bundle of enjoyable psychological states engendered in the beloved. However, on top of the quality theorists, Kolodny also believes that love is the belief that involves the acts of valuing the object of love as a reason or means to sustain the belief. The act of valuing a person, Kolodny believes, in general, involves (i) being vulnerable to certain emotions regarding X, and (ii) believing that one has reasons both for this vulnerability to X and for actions regarding X. (Kolodny, 150) Love, in this view, involves both a psychological state of being emotionally vulnerable to the beloved, and an active and rational sustenance of such belief.

Kolodny’s relationship theory of love accurately depicts the development of love in the familial space. When explaining his theory to a friend, he thinks this theory aptly characterizes his relationship with his parents. While he loves them with all of his heart, they are also the type of people that he would not engage in a conversation with for more than 5 minutes in a party setting. His love is not conditioned on any qualities, but on them being his parents. The dual foci of psychological states and rational beliefs help Kolodny explain some of the mixed feelings felt when engaging in a difficult or unsatisfying friendship or relationship. For example, lovers might stop experiencing the same set of psychological states that attracted them to the beloved, but still
find reasons in maintaining the relationships they have with them. The reasons may either come from the reminiscence of shared history, or from seeing the current relationship as a valuable end worth preserving in itself. Hence the relationship view can be extended to explain some of the mixed loving feelings we have towards all interpersonal relationships, and even explain why people choose to be engaged in otherwise difficult relationships.

While love is initially causally sustained by the belief that some relationship renders it appropriate (146), the relationship also serves a key epistemic grounding that help lovers appreciate the additional appealing qualities of the beloved and hence sustain them in a loving relationship. For Kolodny, being in a relationship opens a unique epistemic lens that helps lovers appreciate “the qualities of one’s beloved specially, that is, to a greater degree than one would appreciate comparable qualities in a stranger.” (155) This is how Kolodny explains the durability of love under his framework, the epistemic empowerment helps lovers overcome the challenge of substitutability that Kolodny previously raised for the quality theory of love.

Love Incorporated

Martin’s incorporation account of love is another empirically descriptive theory of love. Martin formulates love as a combination of passivity and activity. Passivity refers to the sub-rational motives and feelings that are associated with the pleasurable feelings that arouse when being around one’s proximity and in contributing to their flourishing. Activity, on the other hand, refers to the treatment of incorporating the pleasurable feelings associated with the beloved as practical reasons to continue to love. The passivity and the activity are mutually reinforcing in the sense that the passively generated emotions are incorporated as a part of the action-oriented
maxims, that is, rational motives, to act. The feedback loop between rational and subrational motivations can also be reversely reinforced where the fulfillment of the rational maxims will sensitize one’s epistemic capacity to be more emotionally vulnerable towards the beloved, and subsequently generate more affective subrational feelings that people associate with love. Love, in this view, is structurally composed of a bundle of sub-rational affective states and rational principles of action as pertaining to the two maxims. (Martin, 691)

There are two major strengths within this incorporation concept of love: the versatility in explaining the ambiguous cases of love, and the various forms of love. There are many difficult specific examples of love within the philosophical literature. For example, the abusive husband who passionately loves his wife and the difficult relative that does not respect their family members are two case studies analyzed by Martin. While the quality theorists might be able to explain why the abused might want to maintain the toxic relationship out of her epistemic lens, they are not able to explain why the husband loves in this destructive yet passionate way. Yet, Martin’s dualist theory of motivation that can accommodate both the subrational abusive episodes, and the maxim-based rational love could better descriptively capture the contours of the husband’s twisted love. Similarly, the mixed loving feelings one has towards a rude and disrespectful relative could be condensed into the absence of sub-rational attractions that draw us to love the person, and a compelling reason to love our family members just because they are our family, as explicated by Kolodny. The bundle of emotions and volitions combine some of the strengths of both the quality and relationship theory of love explicated above and can hence be used to explicate different degrees of love in a multitude of loving relationships.
The second strength is its versatility in being applied to various forms and degrees of love. As discussed earlier, the quality theorists only define love in relation to a set of affective emotions and this limits the theory’s explanatory capacity regarding the myriad manifestations of love. For example, it is difficult to comprehend familial love using the quality theory. Similarly, it is unclear how Kolodny’s relationship theory accounts for diverging concerns in relation to a romantic or familial relationship, especially when other concerns outweigh the values one attributes to the relationship. In Martin’s characterization, love is composed of a combination of feelings, sub-rational motives, and rational motives with varying degrees of intensity. Hence, the different intensity of each category of volition, when concocted together, produces love that can cater to a wide range of loving relationships, whether it be friendship, romantic and familial love. For example, while a friendship and a romantic relationship might resemble in some ways, the degree and kind of emotional, physical and intellectual intimacy might differ distinctly in the two types of relationships. Love, when incorporated, thus becomes malleable enough to characterize the different specificities of loving relationships. (Martin, 696)

Chapter 2: Analytical Account of Love

Love as Attention

Murdoch defines love as a type of attentive observation that notices the truth of the beloved, before responding emotionally and affectively to that truth. Murdoch would partially agree with the quality theorists on love as an affective response, but only if the response is predicated on an active volition and action that carefully observes the beloved. Elisa Aaltola, in
“Love and Animals” explicates Murdoch’s theory of moral realism prior to explaining her theory of love. Moral realism is a morality that requires understanding of the “truth” of others. Only when we have access to the objective reality of another, can we know the objective “good” that is independent of human construction.

The importance of truth in a theory of morality can be best characterized by Plato’s Cave Allegory. The cave man's infatuation with the fire-lit shadows highlights how easily humans are deceived and confused by our false interpretation of reality. It is impossible for them to carry out any meaningful moral actions without a proper and accurate understanding of their given reality. A true and objective perception of reality is thus the foundation of any meaningful moral actions. And this is where Murdoch’s attentive theory of love comes in. One of the most important components or pre-conditions of love, is a state of attentive gaze. Murdoch defines the gaze as a tool of realism, with the aim to “come to see the world as it is” (Murdoch 1971:89). Murdoch believes that we can only truly love others, after we perceive them as they are, without pre-judgment, as realistically as we can” (Aaltola, 194).

The attentive love is not descriptive and tries to dissuade people from using the skewed epistemic lens of love, as encouraged by the quality theorists. Having the love to be grounded in moral realism gives this attentive love a normative command that requires people to look closely at the objects of love and to perceive them as they are. Murdoch’s conception of love is not only active and volitional, it also debunks understanding love as a passive response. Aaltola writes that via the loving gaze people “seek to become less affected by misleading preconceptions or stereotypes concerning them, and instead focus on how they manifest themselves, and what they are beyond pre-fixed definitions” (194). The loving gaze strives to remove any epistemic lens
that might distort how we perceive and hence react unjustly to the objects of our love. Murdoch believes that the source of our epistemic limitations and our prejudiced love lie in the “self-directedness concerning ourselves, others and the world” and how people only “define existence on the grounds of how it best serves our interests”. Since the positively valued qualities in the beloved contribute to the enjoyable states in the lovers, lovers would hence be motivated in applying a skewed epistemic lens that sees the beloved under a positive light. The epistemic fixation with our own interests make love a rather self-serving attitude and mislead people from the true realities of beloved.(194) An example of such self-serving epistemology can be found in many parental interactions. When parents witness their children crying and making a scene in public, often their most immediate reaction is not to condemn but to find excuses for them and beautify their rude public presence. “Maybe they are only acting this way because they did not get a good night of sleep”, or “aww, they are so cute when they cry so instinctively”. All these positively valenced interpretations happen partly as a result of the self-serving attitudes in the parenting psychology: parents want to see their children in a good light precisely because they are their children. Utilitarianly-speaking, it is much easier for parents to continue the decades of nurturing if they like their children. However, such epistemic lens also prevents the parents from seeing, at least temporarily, the true reality of their children’s public crying behavior. Hence, contrary to the epistemic arguments that the descriptive philosophers made earlier where love reinforces a “preferable” lens that only highlights certain laudable qualities in the loved ones, Murdoch believes that the normative and just love ought to remove such ego-fused “preferable” lens and learn to appreciate objects of love as they are.
While the realization of attentive love takes practice and training, it will nevertheless greatly benefit people involved in romantic loving relationships. This is because in the beginning phase of a romantic relationship, lovers are often very fixated on their skewed perceptions of the beloved and become greatly disappointed of their beloved when they realize their true selves. The discrepancy between who our loved ones are, and who we have thought them to be can further cascade into arguments or even eventual break-aparts. Hence, to a certain extent, the loving gaze is a normatively aspirational ideal: it directs lovers to a kind of relationship that is ultimately beneficial for their own well-being.

Kantian Love for Rational Nature

Velleman’s conception of love is unique in its connection to Kantian ethics. For him, love is the response to a universal feature of the beloved: their rational nature. When in love, lovers should treat the beloved as ends in themselves, rather than means to the ends. But before diving into all the arguments of love, this paper will first detail the Kantian ethics of treating a person as ends in themselves. Then, this section will show how Kantian love can eliminate the self-serving attitudes in the aforementioned descriptive love and be entirely other-regarding.

In outlining the precise definition of treating persons as ends, Velleman makes a clear distinction between doing what a person wants and doing for the sake of that person by using the example of attending one’s mother’s funeral. There might be multiple reasons for participating in the funeral: one can be motivated to attend for the sake of fulfilling their mother’s wishes, but it is also likely that one has a further end for which they wish to attend services for the sake of their mother herself. Only the latter attitude treats one’s mother as an end-in-itself. (359)
A naturally induced attitude after treating someone as an end is to subject them as the proper object for reverence, which for Kant, is “an attitude that stands back in appreciation of the rational creature he is, without inclining toward any particular results to be produced” (358). Or in other words, respect is the volitional awareness of a value that arrests our self-love[motivation with empirical motives and the associated prudential reasoning] for the beloved’s sake (360). In later passages, Velleman explains in more detail why ends-in-themselves deserve reverence. He quotes Kant’s analogy of price and dignity. Kant writes that: “If [something] has a price, something else can be put in its place as an equivalent; if it is exalted above all price and so admits of no equivalent, then it has a dignity.” (364). Here Kant specifies the distinction between two types of ends, ends that consist in possible results of action, or as possibilities to be brought about; and ends that are self-existent. The former end consists in a possible product of action that has a value relative to the strength of our desire for that product (Groundwork, 4:427). Hence, in plain words, this type of end necessarily implies a common measure of value comparison scheme, and appropriate comparison with other ends. An example of deciding what ends to achieve with the limited resource of time could be helpful here. The time we spend on studying is necessarily in conflict with the amount of time we use for exercising in the gym. Hence, prior to deciding the precise allocation of our time, we have to pinpoint the strength of our desire and the relative value of each end. While the values of the action-oriented ends can be compared, the self-existent ends’ values cannot be compared and hence do not have a price. One major implication of such a self-existent end is that they become “objects of motivating attitudes that regard and value them as they already are” (357). Hence, we ought to be motivated by nothing
but to treat all rational agents as ends in themselves and as the final ends that ought to be treated with dignity and respect.

Velleman’s conception of love is partially connected to the attitude of respect. Similar to how respect is understood as the volitional awareness of a value, he defines love as “an arresting awareness of value in a person” (362). Love is described as a response towards anyone who possesses rational nature. The responses are normally unleashed from the state of emotional arrest where the emotional self-protection from another person and the tendencies to draw ourselves in and close ourselves off from others are being lowered. The disarming of the emotional defenses naturally make one more vulnerable to others and more susceptible to a range of emotions associated with the beloved. Some common emotional responses are sympathy, empathy, fascination and attraction towards the beloved, which are typically the emotions people associate with love.

But unlike many descriptive philosophers who define love only in relation to affective emotions, Velleman’s proposal to love everyone who exhibits rational nature for their own sake implies the implicit ego-rejecting aspect of love. Early on in the paper he sharply critiques many philosophers’ approaches to analyze love in terms of an aim. He writes that: “their assumption implies that love is essentially a pro-attitude toward a result, to which the beloved is instrumental or in which he is involved.” (354) Such position is empirically relatable but is contrary to Velleman’s suggestion to treat love “as an attitude toward the beloved himself but not toward any result at all”. (354) The requirement for lovers to love without expecting self-serving results and treat beloved as ends in themselves demands strong volition is what distinguishes Velleman’s conception of love from that of the descriptive philosophers’.
Loving Justice

Hooks’ conception of love is inspired from that of Erich Fromm’s: “Love is as one does. Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love.” (5) This quote highlights the distinct action-oriented approach Hooks uses in defining love. In a later passage, Hooks explains the importance of understanding love as a verb, as opposed to feelings. She believes that the emphasis on action helps keep agents accountable and responsible for their actions, instead of claiming love as a feeling. In this way, people will no longer be able to use the excuse of “having no control over our feelings or emotions” as a way from holding accountability and responsibility over one’s own actions.

Hooks also builds on this volitional and active conception of love by adding the element of justice. For Hooks, justice is a pre-condition for love. Love that involves abuse or injustice is not real love, but rather a mystification of love. The normative conception of love she proposes hence makes abuse and love mutually exclusive. Love not only has to be of an active will and action, it also has to be redefined, and extolled as the primary way we end domination and oppression.” (Hooks, 76) For Hooks, a definition of love has to incorporate just actions. On page 8 of “All About Love”, She describes the experience of genuine love as a combination of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility and respect. (8) An implication of such stringent requirements of love is to ostracize all instantiations of abusive love out of the category of love. Under such justice oriented conception of love, abuse and neglect, which are the opposites of nurturance and care, would no longer be capable of existing in a loving relationship. Unlike Martin’s analytical framework, which characterizes some distorted forms of love, such as over-
jealousy, possessiveness, and controlling forms of love as bad love, Hooks is simply claiming that those relationships shall not be called love.

In chapter 3, Hooks discusses another necessary component of loving justice: truth telling. Hooks has listed numerous adverse consequences from lying: depression or the loss of self-awareness (34), or the continued control and subordination of loved ones. This ties particularly strong to the level of fake “niceness” in american culture where people lie instead of telling the truth about how they really feel. Since loving justice should maintain care, trust and respect, we ought to see ourselves and the world for what it is rather than the way we want it to be.

Loving Your Neighbors-MLK

King’s analytical account of love is very different than that of Hooks. While Hooks set strict boundaries for what love is and what love could be, King has argued for an all-encompassing account of love. He first lays out a clear normative distinction between love and like. In particular, he believes many of the aforementioned philosophers’ descriptive account of love can only qualify for the bracket of “like”. “Like”, he believes, ought to carry the sentimental and affectionate connotations that people have descriptively ascribed to love. Love on the other hand, should be “something much deeper than emotional bosh” (“A Gift of Love”48). Love, on the other hand, should take up the meaning of the Agape. The origin of the word “Agape” has come, primarily through the Christian tradition, to mean the sort of love God has for us persons, as well as our love for God and, by extension, of our love for each other—a kind of brotherly love. In the paradigm case of God’s love for us, agape is “spontaneous and unmotivated,”
revealing not that we merit that love but that God’s nature is love¹ (Nygren 1953b, 85). Hence King is commanding us to exhibit and manifest this godly love in our own life, in the form of an “understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men” (“A Gift of Love” 48). In the address titled, “Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience”, King further explicates agape as more than romantic love and friendship, and “as an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return.” (3) Hence King’s conception of love is a type of volition, but one that implies a type of ethical command that describes how we should love, rather than how we love.

There are two direct implications of such love that departs from most people’s expectation of love. Firstly, this is a type of love that is not reason, nor quality responsive. People do not manifest love only to the selective group of people whose qualities they appreciate. Velleman’s valuing of people’s rational nature comes close. But for King, no subjective personal prerequisite is necessary to command this unconditional love. We should learn to love everyone for who they are, without questioning or forever begging to find the love-worthy qualities. Secondly, loving everyone hence involves loving also one’s enemies, which is conceptually impossible for many. However, King here resorts to the earlier distinction between like and love to come up with a theory that explains how love and dislike for the enemy can coexist. As King ascribed emotions and sentiments to like earlier, it will be difficult to to have preferential emotions towards those that bomb your home, threaten your children, or politicians that defeat civil rights. However, love is not a sentiment, love should manifest as a compassionate and good will for all men. It asks us to disregard how we personally and

subjectively feel about the objects of love, and instead require us to extend good will to them, unconditionally. The two implications of no selectivity of love and loving enemies make King’s proposal one of the most audacious and anti-descriptive accounts of love surveyed thus far.

Subjecting the discussion of love in the context of nonviolent protests also highlights the ethical command of the agape love. King’s nonviolent protests were largely inspired by Gandhi. He writes that: “the whole Gandhian concept of satyagraha [nonviolent protest], where satya is truth which equals love and graha is force; satyagraha thus means truth-force or love-force, was profoundly significant to me.” As King intellectualizes and does more field work, he comes to realize that at the center of nonviolence stands the principle of Agape love. (A Gift of Love, 155), which is one of the most potent weapons available to an oppressed people in their struggle for freedom. This is because the exercise and the manifestation of love is a powerful transformative force that gives the hearts and souls of those committed a new self-respect. It calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. And lastly, their exuberating love becomes so powerful that it stirs the conscience of the opponent that reconciliation becomes a reality. (A Gift of Love, 157). And that is precisely why King has committed to this agape love as a tool to the eradication of even these most economically, politically, and socially entrenched evils is the moral imperative of love.

Loving Your Neighbors-Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard’s analytical approach to love presents a clear distinction between preferential-love, which encompasses erotic love and friendship; and Christian love, which is expressed in in the commandment "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:39),
and this "shall," this duty, is "the very mark of Christian love" (Kierkegaard 1995, 24). (Krishek, 596)

In order to understand the moral specificities involved in this command, one has to first decipher how people have been covertly loving themselves in their current relationships. Unlike self-love, which exclusively centers the attention on one’s self, erotic love and friendships do involve some self-denial and self-sacrifice, whether it is in terms of time, attention and money spent on the beloved that could have otherwise been spent on oneself. However, Kierkegaard is still unsatisfied with the self-regarding intention of much personal love. He writes that: “Is not this plainly self-love’s danger – to have one single object for its admiration when this one and only admired person in turn makes one oneself the sole object of his erotic love or his friendship?” (67, Works of Love). Here Kierkegaard underscores the true motive behind the partial self-sacrifice: we want the objects of our love to return the same, if not more of the same love, back to ourselves. The actions of love are no more than a boomerang that eventually returns to oneself.

This is how Kierkegaard formulates the critique for selfishness. The innately covert selfishness in all loving relationships suggests that lovers will only care so that themselves can be loved. Such instrumentalization of the beloved will necessitate the ignorance and disregard of the beloved when the needs of the beloved become in conflict with the lovers’ own personal ends. For instance, some romantic couples might have different expectations regarding the level of attachment their partner has to manifest in the relationship. They only love their partner in so far as their expected need for intimacy is met; and hence stop loving their partners, or even intentionally get back at their partners when they notice the intimacy that they projected to their
partners are not reciprocated. There are many more empirical examples like this where the beloved is treated as a means to the end and hence defies Kierkegaard’s earlier moral demand of treating all humans as equals (Krishnek, Routledge, 253). If Kierkegaard is right about this aspect of human psychology, it would imply that Velleman’s account of love would also be subject to the same challenge of instrumentalizing the beloved. The Kantian lover might only love and respect others’ human nature insofar as their own human nature can receive an equal amount of recognition.

However, in exceptional circumstances, Kierkegaard does believe some romantic partners can overcome the conflicts and transcend the boomerang-love into an even more interdependent and interconnected form of personal relationship. He writes that “the more securely the two I’s come together to become one I, the more this united I selfishly cuts itself off from all others.” (“Works of Love”, 68) Here, the peak of self-regarding love and friendship are epitomized by the merging of two I into one self, one I. It is the expectation for merging into a perfect reciprocity of recognition and love that leads the lovers to treat the objects of love as the “other-self” or “other-I”, rather than independent beings in themselves. Many have idealized the process where the two merge into one and have enjoyed such extreme interdependence. Such union is a further progression of boomerang-like love: we not only want love to be passed back after a period of time, we want the experience of loving others to feel like loving ourselves.

The neighbour love is the natural solution to the moral challenges of personal preferential love. Kierkegaard believes that contrary to that of the selfish love, “love of one’s neighbour, is self-renouncing love” (“Works of Love”, 68). Similar to the Buddhist concept of no-self in some ways, this love requires the eradication of selfish desires in order to better attend to the interests
of the beloved. The empirical manifestation of such love is hence a type of love that loves without distinction nor preferences (“Works of Love”, 67). Since we have no self-oriented desires and ambitions in our loving actions, love will hence transcend into a new unconditional form that recognizes the personhood and values that everyone shares. The object of our love hence turns from “other-I” in the preferential love, to “first-thou” in the neighborly love. Hence, to sum up, the Kierkegaardian neighborly love is an impartial attitude of caring towards all. (Krishnek, Routledge, 254) However, it is a volition that requires an extraordinary amount of will. A difficult implication of such commandment is to see one’s enemies as neighbours and objects worthy of love. (Stern, 211, “Understanding moral Obligations_Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard”) Another is to give neighbour love priority over the preferential love. Kierkegaard notes that “your wife must first and foremost be to you your neighbour; that she is your wife is then a more precise specification of your particular relationship to each other”. (Stern, 212, “Understanding moral Obligations_Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard”) The unnaturalness of this command highlights a moral gap in people’s successful execution of the commandment.

Kierkegaard argues that only if we see it as a divine command, can we begin the God-relationship and receive divine assistance and forgiveness in executing the command. Only when we understand the divineness within the command can we make sense of what it is demanded of us, and strive towards the fulfilling of the requirement, even though we cannot really expect to abide by it. (Stern, 214-216)
Love as Compassion

In Buddhist canon, secular love is often fraught with the problems of attachment, grasping and over-indulgence of desires, which are some of the primary underlying causes for suffering. However, Buddhism does advocate for an analytical concept of love: compassion, that is a form of universal caring and valuing of all beings without attachments. This concept of loving kindness and compassion is strikingly similar to MLK and Kierkegaard’s normative conception of love. The brahma-viharas, or “sublime attitudes”, for example, is a prime Buddhist discourse on the empirical benefits of compassion and love.

The four sublime states: loving-kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), sympathetic joy (mudita) and equanimity (upekkha) are conceived as the right or appropriate way to conduct towards living beings. Different from some of the Western philosophers’ conception of love, Buddhists believe the four gradual developments of the sublime states are the right way of life and are also the ways to successfully counteract the three sources of suffering. For example, loving kindness refers to the wish for true happiness for oneself and others, and the meditative cultivation of such a state is particularly effective at counteracting anger. brahma-viharas, or “sublime attitudes”, for example, is a prime Buddhist discourse on the empirical benefits of compassion and love.

The cultivation of loving kindness is ensued by compassion which describes the feeling of unbearableness at the sight of other people’s suffering, and the resolution to remove others’ suffering and misfortunes. The cultivation of compassion hence counteracts the harmfulness one might direct towards others. Sympathetic joy builds onto the first two and is the state of desiring the continuity of others’ happiness and welfare. The development of this third stage hence helps
one become non-envious and counteract the displeasure associated with jealousy and envy.
Lastly, equanimity is the state of observing one’s suffering or happiness equally and is said to be effective at counteracting lust. (Pa.ii.128, The Ultimate Light)

In addition to the discourse on how Buddhist compassion and love can alleviate the conditions of one’s own suffering, the Dalai Lama has also written extensively on the path to cultivate compassion and the philosophical arguments for extending such compassion towards all. In “A Commentary on the Way of Bodhisattva”, Dalai Lama writes that: “to summarize, we start by getting rid of our attachment to nonspiritual goals, first in this life and then in future lives. Having seen the suffering inherent in saṃsāra, we resolve to free ourselves, and as we extend this attitude to other beings, we develop compassion and generate bodhicitta.” (106)

The reasons for absolving ourselves of the causes of suffering are strong in this paragraph, yet it is not particularly clear why we ought to extend such good will towards all beings. In a later passage, Dalai Lama elaborates on the two reasons for caring about the wellbeing and suffering of others. The first reason is that if one believes in samsara and reincarnation, one will soon realize that all beings have had at some time been our parents, or at least close friends. The potential personal connections with all beings in all of our past lives naturally make us feel grateful towards them and wish to alleviate their suffering. It is the voluntary feeling to take on others’ sufferings that help Buddhist practitioners develop the sense of compassion. The second method asks people to understand that the source of suffering is the same. Everyone suffers from the three poisons of greed, ignorance and aversion. Hence, if we are compassionate and empathetic towards ourselves for being trapped in the sufferings, so should we towards all other sentient beings. Hence similar to MLK and Kierkegaard’s universal orientation of love, the
Buddhist love is also universally directed. However, what makes Buddhist love unique is that it is empirically grounded in the alleviation of sufferings for oneself and others.

Chapter 3: Are Universal and Partial Love Compatible?

The first two chapters present a survey of the two major positions on love: the descriptive and the analytical. The former primarily focuses on the observing and categorizing of the various experiences of love, while the latter prescribes how love should be ideally experienced and expressed with the goals of promoting justice and wellbeing. Admittedly, in some ways, the narrative of this thesis leans towards the analytical accounts of love, especially the appreciation for the orientation for justice. However, it does not wish to invalidate the values people can receive from the descriptive loving relationships. For instance, Obdrzalek has defended quality theorists despite the problems of transience and substitutability. Her refusal to reject quality theorists come from two primary reasons. Firstly, from the lover’s perspective, the quality theorists characterize the beloved’s personal qualities as reasons for love. The failure to appeal love to those personally distinct qualities would subject the loving relationships as either indiscriminate or irrational, at least as per the norms within current culture. Secondly, from the beloved’s perspective, to be loved independent of their qualities seems dehumanizing. Suppose the beloved takes pride in being witty, and desires their lovers to at least appreciate their humor to a certain extent. The failure of the lover to recognize and love the humor would hence make the beloved at least disappointed or disheartened. (Obdrzalek, 33)

Given the undeniable virtues present in both accounts of love, the immediate inquiry arises: are these two types of love compatible? Can a lover encompass both types
simultaneously, or must they opt for one over the other? To address these questions, this paper will first synthesize and delineate the primary disparities between the descriptive and analytical accounts of love, along with the specific rationales that render the two accounts incompatible.

The foremost disparity between descriptive love and analytical love lies in the scope of one's affection. Descriptive love typically concentrates on a select group of individuals as the recipients of one's love, whether they be family members or individuals whose qualities one admires. In contrast, the analytical accounts of love broaden the range to encompass a wider and more universal array. For instance, Kantian love defines love as a response to rational nature, a trait inherent in all human beings. Similarly, figures like MLK and Kierkegaard advocate for love towards one's neighbor, inclusive of even one's adversaries. This expansion and universalization of the objects of affection render analytical love less intuitive and simultaneously heighten the challenge of coexisting with descriptive love. The dual task of maintaining the commitment of universal love towards all while prioritizing one’s love for our family and friends sounds like an impossible task.

Additionally, the conflict worsens when examining the conflict on a deeper psychological level. It seems that the two types of love are sustained by two distinct types of human motivations: one selfish and the other self-less. As Kierkegaard has alluded to in his earlier critique of interpersonal relationships, the true motive in going into a descriptive loving relationship is for the objects of our love to return the same amount of love back to ourselves, whereas the ambitions behind loving one’s neighbors and loving all sentient beings ought to be purely other regarding. However, before discussing the distinctions and potential compatibilities between the partial and the universal, or the selfish and the self-less love, this paper will first
clearly define what do selfish and egoistic love really mean before teasing out all the selfish and selfless intentions within all of the aforementioned descriptive and analytical definitions of love.

In “Socrates on Love”, Obdrzalek carefully delineates the three versions of utility-based love: egoism proper, instrumentalization and objectification. There is firstly the worry of egoism proper, which is a theory where the lover is egoistic but not selfish with regards to the beloved. When behaving egoistically, the wellbeing of the beloved is a constituent of the lover’s good, independent of their contribution to the lover’s psychological state.(Obdrzalek,21) There is a temporary illusion of other-directed concern for the beloved in this form of love, where the lover cares for the beloved’s own good. However, such other-regarded will cease the moment when the beloved stops contributing to the lover’s own good. For example, if the beloved’s final goal is wisdom, the lover will cease to care for the beloved whenever they fail to be an optimal means to wisdom, no matter how happy or exhilarated the beloved makes the lover feel. (Obdrzalek, 30) On a worse note, there is also the worry of instrumentalism where the lover is selfish, in addition to being egoistic. In this case, the good that love aims for is necessarily a state of the lover, such as pleasure, without any regard for the valuing of the beloved for their own sake. In Obdrzalek’s analysis, psychological states and the good of the lover are separated as two different types of ends that lovers pursue. This is perhaps because in Plato’s other dialogues, he typically exalts the final good, happiness, over other nonfinal ends, which would include different affective emotions and psychological states. While some readers might argue that positive valenced psychological states are a type of good, I tend to agree with Plato that the goods in life are more “final” than psychological feelings. Hence a clear separation between psychological states and one’s formulation of their good in life will be more analytically fruitful in understanding
people’s motivation for entering loving relationships. For instance, imagine a person who treats professional accomplishments as a primary component of their good. While it is likely that they derive pleasure from the achievement of certain career milestones, and even in the process of achieving the milestones, they are primarily motivated by their professional end. Hence, when translating that into a loving relationship, it is more likely for them to face the problem of egoism proper, rather than instrumentalization. It is more likely for them to love the beloved only insofar as they advance their own career pursuits, rather than for their psychological well beings. On the flip side, it can be speculated that younger lovers have their love motivated by a set of positive valenced psychological states, and hence be more likely to instrumentalize their beloved in relationships.

The last worry spurns out of the failure to understand the good of the beloved. Obdrzalek has pointed out that the valuing of one’s good presupposes the understanding and appreciation of the values that constitute that person’s essence. Hence, in addition to valuing the portion of beloved’s good that are constituent of that of the lover’s, the lover could also fail to respond to the beloved’s true self, and hence fail to love the qualities that are constitutionally significant. Obdrzalek names this last worry objectification.

Disentangling the Self and Other-regarding Intentions in Descriptive Love

All of the descriptive accounts of love face one or more of the utility-based critiques mentioned above. Many versions of the quality view, for instance, run the risk of including psychological states that will instrumentalize the beloved. The quality theorists define love as a response to a set of pleasurable qualities or virtues they would like to see in their partners, such
as beauty, wit or kindness. According to Kroeker, some of these typical responses and attitudes that could be understood as revelations of love are: awe, wonder, sympathy, moral approval, and pleasure. (Kroeker, 285). A stereotypical example of the quality view is a person who seeks to maximize their own pleasures in relationships and amongst many things find the presence of physically attractive partners particularly pleasurable. Let’s call them the beauty-seeking hedonists. Their love towards the beloved is almost entirely selfish. They have no concern for the beloved beyond enhancing their own pleasurable psychological states. However, the quality view is not by itself subject to the problem of selfishness and instrumentalization. Those problems only pertain to certain kinds of states involved in love, and certain kinds of qualities that tend to elicit those states. For instance, the state of enjoyment and satisfaction and the quality of beauty, power and money are some examples that are more likely to result in the problem of instrumentalization. Two great examples of the quality view of love that are not selfish are Velleman’s Kantian love and the Buddhist’s compassion. Both philosophies describe love as a response to some universal qualities of the beloved. The quality Velleman believes lovers should respond to is the person’s rational nature, whereas for Buddhists, the quality becomes extended to the ability to suffer, which expands the subject of love to the scope of all sentient beings. While these analytical versions of the quality theory are superior to the descriptive versions for the lack of selfishness, these views would appear dehumanizing given Obdrzalek’s arguments, because they do not involve loving a person in their particularity.

A similar trace of selfishness can also be found in Martin’s incorporation account of love, albeit the self-leaning pleasurable feelings is only one of the motivators of love. For example, in Martin’s incorporation account of love, she accurately describes a phenomenological account of
love where “when we love a person, we (pragmatically) find both her proximity and her flourishing pleasurable; her absence and her suffering painful”(693). Here, Martin seems to suggest that, at least initially, the relationship between love and pleasurable emotions are causal only unidirectionally. The pleasurable feelings are the manifestation of love, but not the reasons for loving that person in the first place. However, in her descriptive account of love, “the pleasurable feelings associated with the beloved” then become practical reasons to love. Martin admits the self-centered motives in such an account of love. We love to an extent to prolong and extend our pleasurable feelings when surrounded by our beloved. However, love is not exclusively self-centered, we also treat the features of the beloved that produce these feelings and attractions as reasons for love, and hence love and care for the beloved as an end in themselves.

To connect to Kolodny’s previous critiques of quality theory of love, selfishness and egoism would further worsen the problems of substitutability and transience. For instance, in the case of transience, insofar as the lover loves for certain qualities their partner exemplifies, either because it contribute to their own good, or necessitate in certain pleasurable states, they also have rational reason to love her than someone else who exemplifies these qualities equally, and he ought, rationally, to abandon her should a more attractive woman come along. (Obdrzalek, 22) Secondly, the selfish utilitarian lover would also worsen the challenge of the transience of love. If the lover is only instrumentally concerned about the beloved in relation to their own psychological states, then they would immediately cease to love the beloved should they stop possessing the qualities that made them initially lovable. The lack of permanence and sustainability in those loving relationships stem from the lack of valuing the beloved for their
own sake, or in Velleman’s words, the failure to treat the objects of love as respectful ends in
themselves.

On the other hand, the egoism proper critique applies more to the relationship view.
According to Kolodny, Love involves both a psychological state of being emotionally vulnerable
to the beloved, which is rendered appropriate by one’s relationship with them, and an active
sustenance of such belief. The relationship itself is one’s reason to sustain a relationship.
(Kolodny, 147) Kolodny believes that A’s loving of B consists (at least) in 6 conditions
pertaining to A. In particular, the fifth and the sixth conditions lay out a firm groundwork for the
analysis of covert self-regarding nature of the relationship view.

(v) believing that r is a noninstrumental reason for A to act in r’s interest (in ways
that are appropriate to R), and having, on that basis, a standing intention to do
so; and

(vi) believing that any instance, r*, of type R provides (a) anyone who has r* to
some B* with similar reasons for emotion and action toward B* and r*, and (b)
anyone who is not a participant in r* with different reasons for action (and
emotion?) regarding r*.

In the fifth condition, the lover A is required to act in the interest of B, with whom they
are in a relationship with. By acting in the interest of B, Kolodny believes it should include the
promotion of B’s well-being, the protecting and promoting of what matters to B, where this may
be something other than B’s wellbeing. The latter might include expressing one’s attitudes towards B, or acquainting oneself with B’s favorable qualities. (153)

While the fifth condition highlights the other-regarding nature of this love, the sixth condition reveals how such love is underlied by a boomerang-like return of love. The sixth condition discusses how the reason for loving the relationship and the object of the relationship should be universalizable. “We expect our justifications of our actions for our relatives to be understood and appreciated, in particular, by those who value relationships of the same type”. (153) Kolodny discusses such expectations with the example of familial love, where loving parents would also understand why other parents would project the same level of care and affection to their own. However, when understanding this descriptive constituent of love in other forms of more equally requited relationships, such as familial relationships between cousins and relatives, romantic relationships or friendships, the universalization would also make the lover A to realize that the object of their love, B, ought to return a similar extent of love to oneself. Take my family for example, back home in China, there is the tradition of giving kids under the age of 18 red packets-red envelopes filled with money of various amounts-during the first week of Lunar New Year. It is a century-old tradition where the elders express love and care towards the younger generation. However, it is also one where people have universalizable expectations about giving out the same amount of red packet one receives. This is especially the case for my parents, who have done careful accounting of many years’ red packet giving and receiving between our family and the closed relatives and friends’. My parents know precisely how much red packet I will receive from every relative and family friend. While they appreciate the love
symbolized by the red packets, they also return red packets of roughly the same values to all the givers.

But the degree of selfi-regardingness and self-orientation in the expectation for reciprocation might not be that bad afterall. This paper, in fact, wishes to argue that selfish intentions are indeed necessary in solving the challenge of the collective action problem of love.

Before elucidating the collective action problem of love, a one-time prisoner’s dilemma in the context of love between two strangers will first be explained. Imagine two strangers A and B who have never met before and who will never meet again facing decisions about their loving actions and behaviors towards each other. Each person has the choice to either cooperate (act in the best interest of the beloved and the relationship) or defect (act selfishly for personal gain) in their interactions. Following the game theory assumptions, let us also assume that A is selfish and desires to be loved but at the same time does not want to devote too much time and energy in loving B. This assumption can in fact be validated by the recognition theory of love and many empirical psychological studies that claim that everyone desires to be seen, acknowledged, loved and cared from their closed ones. In this particular case, it is foreseeable for A to act in their best interest and against the interest of the B or the relationship itself: defect when the other cooperates. The one-time occurrence of the loving relationship makes it particularly subject to exploitation, and hence disincentivize the two to love.

The collective action problem builds onto the prisoner dilemma by expanding the subjects of love. While this is not the case in most societies, love can be a common pool resource if people willingly project love towards everyone even though they might only have one-time interaction, regardless of their personal relationships and connections with them. Yet, due to the
lack of trust and familiarity between people, the individual interest of receiving a net positive amount of love (receiving more than one gives) trumps the group interest where everyone receives a net neutral amount of love. Love never can exist as a common pool resource and there are very few people who are willing to send free love to strangers because they cannot ensure cooperation or equal reciprocation.

As a compromising solution to the collective action dilemma, people will only love those with whom they will have repeated interactions, since the rate of reciprocation will be higher for those relationships. Additionally, as suggested by Kolodny’s universalizable principle and the red packet example, the expectation in the family, and the different norms and cultural practices that reinforce those expectations will ensure an even higher rate of cooperation. Love, or the physical marker of love, red packets, will be most likely reciprocated in the family, yet not in the public. The lovers would be instrumentalizing the beloved if they sustain the loving relationships only because they want something in return. However, even if one is not entirely motivated by the reciprocation, partly being incentivized by the reciprocation makes their love partly instrumentalizing. In general, the descriptive accounts of love leave a lot of space for different versions of selfish and ego-centric love.

Disentangling Self and Other-regarding Intentions in Analytical Love

For Velleman, love, apart from the disarming of one’s emotional defense, is underlied by a sense of other-regarding attitudes towards the beloved. Velleman writes that Kantian love is characterized particularly with the suspension of “our emotional self-protection from the person rather than our self-interested designs on them” (362) Love is stripped of its selfish and egoistic
ambitions. The beloved is no longer being compared to other things that are only instrumentally in relation to the lovers’ utility. The Kantian analytical conception of love becomes primarily a volitional state that focuses on the beloved’s wellbeing and treating the beloved as ends in themselves.

Murdoch’s conception of attentive love requires the active and volitional reconditioning of our epistemic framework that stops reinforcing an ego-fused “preferable” lens and truly learns to appreciate objects of love as they are. Hence, one of the biggest challenges to achieving Murdoch’s conception of love is our own self and ego. The bigger the ego, the more likely one is to focus only on their own self-directed needs and define and perceive the beloved only insofar as they are instrumentally useful to lovers. The ego is very good at bending and interpreting things in ways that suit its purposes, and hence makes it increasingly difficult to perceive the unfiltered reality. Murdoch is effectively demanding a version of selfless love because only the dissolution of ego can eliminate the biases and prejudices in perceiving the true reality of the beloved.

Out of all the normative conceptions of love, King and Kierkegaard are the two philosophers who are the most explicit about the element of selflessness in love. Specifically, King defines love in relation to the Christian concept of agape, which is the paradigm case of God’s love for us. He believes that such love should be “spontaneous and unmotivated”. We should resemble God, in a sense where we possess no preferential loving feelings or any particular motivations in prioritizing the wellbeing for any selective group of men. Similarly, Kiekegaard borrows the neighbourly love command from Christianity, which is in nature self-renouncing. The love for neighbors is without distinction nor preferences (“Works of Love”, 67),
which are two of the most important markers for self. Under such light, both philosophers’
universalization of the objects of love is predicated on the eradication of one’s selfishness.

Buddhist Compassion:

Buddhist teachings emphasize a definition of love that diverges the conventional
association with attachment and desire. Instead, Buddhism advocates for an entirely other-
regarding love rooted in compassion, transcending personal attachment and encompassing all
beings. The concept of loving-kindness and compassion, akin to the normative conceptions
articulated by figures like MLK and Kierkegaard, is central to Buddhist philosophy. Within this
framework, the four sublime states—loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and
equanimity—serve as guiding principles for ethical conduct and spiritual growth for oneself and
others. Each state, cultivated through meditation and practice, serves as a remedy for specific
sources of suffering: anger, envy, and lust towards others. It is true that many embark on the
Buddhist path with the selfish intention of alleviating suffering for oneself. However, they will
soon realize that the true alleviation from suffering comes from detaching the concept of self.
Hence, the eventual attainment of Buddhist love and compassion is predicated upon a state of
complete concern for others.

Arguments for the Coexistence of Sublime Love and Personal Love

As illustrated in the sections above, the apparent conflict between universal and partial
love; and selfish and and other-regarding motivations for love appear to make the juxtaposition
of two types of love impossible. Kierkegaard, for instance, does not seem to have left much room
for the concurrence of selfish personal love and neighborly love in the “Works of Love”.

However, instead of making compatible arguments for all analytical accounts of love, the last section of the paper will zoom in onto Buddhist love and highlight two arguments that potentially make Buddhist compassion and personal love compatible.

The first argument discusses how personal love can transform into the Buddhist impartial and other-regarding love. The conflict of the two is resolved by the merging of the two into one. Zhiru in “From Family love to Universal Compassion”, quoted the story of Dizang bodhisattva, or Kṣitigarbha, who is famous for his vow to not achieve buddhahood before all hell is emptied. (Zhiru, 2) Zhiru discusses one of the canonical literature of Kṣitigarbha’s past life to illustrate that the prioritization of one’s family is not contradictory with bodhisattva’s compassionate practices. In that past life, Dizang Bodhisattva who was reincarnated as a filial daughter who tried to locate her deceased mother with help from an arhat. And she uttered the following aspiration when identifying her mother:

May all the buddhas in the ten directions, please compassionately commiserate with me, and listen to the great vow I make for the sake of my mother. If my mother obtains eternal release from the three evil paths, from inferior status, and also from a female body, and never have to undergo them for endless kalpas, then I aspire, before the image of Pure Lotus Eyes Tathagata, from now until thereafter for hundreds of thousands of tens-of-thousands of millions of kalpas, should there be living beings suffering for their wrongdoings in the hells and evil paths of various worlds, I aspire to rescue and free them from the hells and evil realms of animal or hungry ghosts. Only after such beings who are undergoing retributive
punishments have all attained buddhahood, then will I attain complete awakening.

(Dizang pusa benyuan jing, Taisho vol.13, p.781a.)

It is clear that there is a mixture of both other-regarding and self-regarding volitions in her vow. On one hand, Dizang Bodhisattva projects loving kindness and compassion towards all beings who are suffering. But on the other hand, the compassionate love was initially inspired by the desire to bring her mother out of suffering. Yet, the two divergent volitions do not appear to be in conflict but are in fact in causal relationship. Zhiru phrases such causal relationship very nicely: the “emotional intensity of the loss of a blood relation that cathartically transmutes a child’s deep affection for the parent into the universal compassion of the bodhisattva that regards living being equally and seeks to free them from suffering” (Zhiru, 2). Compassion, in this case, does not have to be cultivated by the renunciation of family ties, instead, it can be cultivated via the deep bonds to one’s mother.

While convincing, the above compatible argument only justifies how personal love can be transcended into impersonal love, with the former slowly dissipating as the latter grows. It does not tell us if Buddhist love can also permit the existence of secular love, which is a rather intuitive form of love for many. For that, we have to turn to another formulation of the compatibilism argument made between Buddhist monks’ patriotic love and compassion.

In Buddhism, War and Nationalism, Xue Yu discussed many of the intriguing accounts of Buddhist involvement in the Anti-Japanese War. Many young Chinese monks in that period were inspired by the nationalism and patriotism prevailing in China and temporarily abandoned their spiritual practice to join the army. The enlistment was rather shocking to the monastic and
the secular community since Buddhism is a religion that condemns violence and promotes compassion towards all. (46) In order to make sense of the conflict between monks’ patriotic love towards the nation and the commitment for compassion towards all, the author selected three commentaries during the time that attempt to justify their “unconventional activities”. The examination of those arguments are helpful for this paper in terms of providing similar justifications for the conflict between Buddhist compassion and personal love.

The first commentary accounts for patriotism via a causal relationship. There are several monks who wrote that patriotism is the best way for monks to love Buddhism and continue their Buddhist practices. The text urges the monks to protect the nation in order to safeguard Buddhism in China. (54) This line of justification emphasizes the ontological relationship between Buddhism and the nation where Buddhism takes root. The practice of universal compassion has to be predicated upon a peaceful nation or physical space. Hence in extreme times of conflict, Buddhist practitioners should temporarily adjust their priorities and abandon their practice in order to defend the space that ensures their Buddhist practice in the long term.

The second line of argument follows the justificatory pathway of owed kindness which is more closely connected to the Buddhist concept of karma. There were monks who wrote about the idea that all Buddhists and Buddhist institutions should repay the kindness that they owe to the nation. This argument becomes particularly salient since the sustenance of the monastic life is entirely dependent on external donations. All the clothing, food and even the physical temples were given by people or provided by the state. Hence while the monks should direct their kindness towards all, they should first and foremost be grateful towards their donors. In fact, prioritizing services for big donors in Buddhist temples is not uncommon. Almost all temples
offer monks-led scripture chanting or other spiritual services for a set price. The time and energy monks put into chanting the scriptures and leading the ceremonies is in essence the prioritization for a selective group of individuals who pay an exorbitant amount of money to support the livelihood of the temples.

Additionally, Xue Yu also cites Buddhist canon that details why we should prioritize repaying kindness to a selectively group of people. According to The Sutra on Insight of Mind-State of Mahayana Jataka, one is obligated to repay 4 types of kindness: the kindness of parents, fellow-human beings, king, and the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha). While the category of fellow-human beings include the rest of the 3 categories, the mentioning of the categories parents, nation and the Three Jewels highlight the special attention that they deserve. Hence, all the monetary, kinship and national karmic relationships claim that the Buddhist institutions can to an extent prioritize the wellbeing of the nations and societies that patronize their existence.

The last argument even takes a step beyond self-defense and justifies warfare and “compassionate killing” from the standpoint of intentionality. Even though the abstinence from taking lives is the first of the 7 Buddhist precepts, killing may not be considered a violation if it was done for the good of others, or if it can be proved meritorious and beneficial. (66) The killing of foreign invaders can hence be justified if the killings are meritorious and beneficial for the citizens of one’s country. The argument of intentionality also condemns monks’ inaction during warfare. If the Buddhist practitioners have embarked on the compassionate path of Bodhisattva, their nonintervention cannot be called compassionate when murders are happening all around them and are going to kill thousands of people. (67)
It is possible to extend the above 3 arguments to the dilemma between the prioritization of personal loving relationships while maintaining universal compassion towards all. For example, the first and the second argument tells us that prioritizing one’s love for parents and partners is valid especially because of our owed kindness to them. It is the physical and spiritual nurturing received while growing up that obligates people to first repay their kindness in the form of a prioritizing love towards them. Such preferential love can come both in the form of loving them a little extra, or choosing to love them instead of all the other sentient beings when given limited resources. At first sight, such argument seems contradictory to Dalai Lama’s earlier arguments for detaching from any secular goals, and his critique for attachment in general. Logically, it is simply impossible for anyone to simultaneously pursue non-attachment while attaching to some loving relationships. In Buddhist metaphysics, worldly attachment is generally discouraged as it worsens the three sources of suffering: ignorance, anger and desires. One’s prioritization of a selection of loving relationships suggests one’s attachment, or at least the growing attachment, to those relationships.

But is it really impossible for people manifest preferential love without attachment? Dalai Lama himself, certainly embodies some forms of preferential love. For example, though he is committed to alleviating suffering for all, he is particularly concerned with the suffering of the Tibetans to whom he devotes the majority of his time and energy. The example of the Dalai Lama is to claim that either he has transcended attachment, or that he certainly possesses it. Instead, the example serves to highlight a previously ignored grey area between attachment and possessing preferential loving attitudes. It might be possible for the Dalai Lama, and perhaps other practitioners, to exercise personal love without indulging in attachment. While the scope of
this paper cannot further discourse on the nature or limits of attachment, it is deducing from
many of the real life examples of Buddhist practitioners’ preferential loving behaviors that a
form of non-attaching preferential love can exist. And if such love can exist, then the repaying of
the kindness of the closed ones in the form of preferential love can hence be legitimized. Hence,
the conflict between an attachment-heavy, and attachment-free love disappears.

The third intentionality argument can also help make the case for the coexistence of
personal and universal love. Xue, the author of *Buddhism, War and Nationalism*, would probably
argue that the preferential love can be justified as long as the lovers avoid hiding any selfish or
egoistic intentions behind the prioritization of their beloved. The preferential attitude is
legitimate insofar as it serves for the good and benefits of others, rather than the good of oneself.
This argument connects well to the previous discussion on attachment. People are typically
attached to things in relation to themselves. For instance, it is far more common for people to be
attached to their own physical appearance, wealth and power rather than that of others. Hence,
requiring the practitioners to only love for the sake of others prevents a large portion of the ego-
fueled attachment in the prioritization of the personal relationship. However, even though people
are precluded from attaching to selfish intentions, they can still be attached to prospering the
good of others. Parents, for instance, can very easily become attached to their children’s success
and accomplishment. Many devote a significant amount of their time and energy to their
offspring’s education, and hence become rather attached to their younger generations’ future
success. Hence, Dalai Lama would likely critique the intentionality argument by highlighting the
different instantiations of attachment within other-regarding intentions. Even though the
argument prevents people from attaching to themselves, it does not prevent one from attaching
the self to other objects. To make this intentionality argument work, this paper will hence supplement an additional non-attachment provision and claim that the coexistence between personal love and universal compassion can only be made possible if the lover is withheld from both selfish intentions and any possible forms of attachment in their preferential love.

Further Considerations

After surveying close to a dozen descriptive and analytical accounts of love, this paper zoomed in on the sub-topics: descriptive and analytical accounts’ divergence on self and other-regarding intentions and the two ways the Buddhist self-abstaining love can be compatible with the self-leaning personal love. However, due to the limited scope of this paper, there are plenty compatibility related arguments that have unfortunately been omitted in the discussion but would certainly contribute to a more interesting paper. A particular promising argument could be extended from the concept of absolute truth and conventional truth in Buddhism, and its implications for the practice of sublime love and secular love. In this last section, this paper will quickly delineate how the two types of truth can inspire a different path of compatibility argument for future research on love.

Emptiness, or interdependence is typically referred to as the absolute truth in Buddhism. It is the reality beyond any kind of conventional dualism. Whereas the relative truth includes all the dualistic phenomena - ourselves, other beings, material objects, thoughts, emotions, concepts - that make up our lives in this world. Even though Buddhist teachings urge people to strive towards absolute truth, it does not negate the importance of engaging with the dualistic phenomena of the conventional truth. For example, monastic monks and nuns are typically not
prohibited from engaging with the secular life that could in some ways violate the doctrinal requirements. For example, even not taking life is one of the Buddhist precepts, some Tibetan monks are even not prohibited from consuming meat when residing on the Tibetan Plateau to prevent malnutrition. They temporarily prioritize the conventional truth of material well-being over their spiritual practice so as to better fit the context where they are living.

In the Buddhist metaphysics, compassion can be interpreted as an example of absolute truth and selfish love conventional truth. This is because the complete realization of compassion has to be predicated upon the full recognition of the principles of emptiness and non-dualism, which are the core elements of the absolute truth. Hence, to an extent, the relationship between absolute truth and relative truth can be perfectly paralleled to that of compassion and selfish love. The practice of compassion does not have to be predicated on the denial of personal love. Sometimes, as can be implied from the example of Tibetan monks’ meat diet, the occasional prioritization of personal love over universal compassion can even be allowed given extenuating circumstances. However, similar to the Dalai Lama’s arguments above, the coexistence of sublime and personal love has to be predicated on a state of non-attachment. The Tibetan monks certainly cannot be allowed to consume meat if they are attached to it; similarly the personal love cannot be prioritized over compassion if one clings to the former. It is only through the cultivation of emotional detachment within loving relationships that individuals can achieve the harmonious duality of personal and universal love.
Bibliography


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