

Love and religion*

JOHN COTTINGHAM

1. Introduction

Love is a phenomenon that is an ineradicable aspect of our human nature, one of the most powerful emotions to which we are subject. At the instinctual and biological level its roots are no doubt traceable to our evolutionary past, in particular to the attraction for sexual partners that is imperative for reproduction, and the protective concern for offspring without which the species could not survive. At the psychological level of the emotions and passions, it is among the strongest impulses in our lives, whether for good or ill, driving us to heights of joy and exaltation when it is fulfilled, or to depths of despair and even madness when it is thwarted. And at the ethical level, it plays a powerful role in our conception of the good life, underpinning such universally acknowledged goods as friendship and loyalty, and cementing the familial and group allegiances on which a stable social and political order arguably depends.

Given its power in our lives, one might suppose love to be something that requires no advocacy. No one, it might be thought, needs to be enjoined or urged to love, since our propensities in that direction are already so strong; and no one, one might think, needs to be told the value of love, since its power to enrich our lives is so apparent. Yet in the Judaeo-Christian tradition that has shaped so much of Western thought over the centuries, what we find is precisely an injunction to love, an insistence on love as a requirement. Both in the Hebrew Bible and in the Christian New Testament, we are commanded to love God and our fellow humans as a religious duty.

This is different in kind from anything found in pagan Graeco-Roman culture. In the latter, admittedly, love in one of its aspects is deified, as Eros or Aphrodite, but this is not because there is a religious duty to love, but rather because love is recognized as a formidable force to be reckoned with, something whose power we often cannot resist, and which we defy at our peril. In other classical contexts love is treated with great seriousness and importance, as in Plato's extolling of a certain kind of abstract love associated with the zealous and devoted pursuit of wisdom and theoretical understanding (*philosophia*), or again in Aristotle's discussion of the love of friends as a key ingredient of the fulfilled human life.¹ But what we find by contrast in the Judaeo-Christian picture is the quite different idea of love as something of unique cosmic significance, something whose activation in our lives brings us directly into contact with the creative source of our being. In what follows, we shall be examining some of the main dimensions of this distinctive religious conception of love.

Philosophy in its present-day incarnation is often hostile to religion, or at least inclined to disregard it as a problematic domain that cannot contribute to the rational understanding of the human predicament. This essay is not the place to address the question of whether the increasing marginalization or exclusion of religious ideas from mainstream philosophical debate is to be welcomed or not. But whatever one's personal attitude to religion, any serious thinker must acknowledge that it is impossible to conduct a philosophical inquiry into a concept such as love in isolation from the cultural history that has shaped our understanding of it over the centuries. And for better or worse, our Western concept of love has been heavily influenced by the religious and in particular Judaeo-Christian tradition just referred to. This alone should be sufficient justification, even for the convinced atheist and secularist, for including within a handbook on the philosophy of love an examination of its place in the religious thought of Judaism and Christianity (though we

* This is a typescript of a chapter the definitive version of which appeared in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Love*, ed. C. Grau & A. Smuts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, online version 2017, print version 2024), Ch. 30, pp. 559–574.

¹ Plato, *Symposium* [c. 385 BCE], trans. R. Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 210d5–6; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [c. 325 BCE], trans. J. Thomson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), Book 8.

shall also have occasion to refer later on to the role of love in Buddhist thought, which has had a discernible influence on the thinking of Western philosophers about religion and atheism in recent times). These points aside, it is to be hoped that an examination of the relationship between love and religion will also serve, along the way, to enrich our understanding of the ethical and psychological importance of love in human life; and if that turns out to be the case it would be an added bonus. For one does not necessarily have to subscribe to all the doctrinal presuppositions of a religious tradition in order to glean moral and philosophical insights from its teachings.

The starting point for our inquiry will be the seminal passages in the Hebrew Bible, where among the many commands and instructions God issues to the Israelites are two powerfully emphatic commands to *love*: ‘you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength’ (Deuteronomy 6:5); and ‘you shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18). These two texts inform many of the subsequent teachings of the Old Testament, and are explicitly taken up in the New Testament, when Jesus of Nazareth describes the former injunction as ‘the first and greatest commandment’, and declares that upon this and upon the latter injunction (which is ‘like the former’) hang ‘all the law and the prophets’ (Matthew 22:37–40).

There are many points of philosophical interest arising from this Scriptural emphasis on love, irrespective of whether one is a religious believer or not. In the next three sections of this chapter, we will focus in turn on three issues that are specially relevant to the role of love in the theistic worldview and its implications for moral philosophy; we shall also have occasion to reflect on how far the resulting ethical insights are capable of being preserved within the framework of a modern secularist outlook. We shall then conclude, in the final section, by looking at how various religious conceptions of love connect up with certain fundamental assumptions about the nature of the cosmos we inhabit and the meaning of human life.

2. *Can love be commanded?*

Immanuel Kant, who is famous for the maxim ‘ought implies can’, is often supposed to have held that love cannot be a duty, since one cannot love someone at will – one either feels love or one does not. But in fact in the *Groundwork* Kant distinguishes between the passion of love, or ‘pathological love’ (a feeling of liking arising from pleasure caused by the other) and ‘practical love’ (a desire to benefit them based on duty): ‘love as an inclination cannot be commanded; but kindness done out of duty, even though an ... aversion stands in our way, is practical love, not pathological love. It resides in the will, and not in the partiality of feeling.’² Kindness and beneficence to our fellow humans, which is a duty, is certainly within our power, even though liking them or being fond of them may be outside our ability to summon up at will.

To interpret the command to love one’s neighbour in this rather more down-to-earth way, as implying a duty of beneficence or kindness rather than in terms of warm or affectionate feeling, would certainly accord with some of the relevant scriptural texts. The command to love one’s neighbour in Leviticus comes in the context of a list of rules that seem more to do with avoiding harm, or, more positively, with treating others with consideration and respect, than with what we would normally call love. Don’t reap to the very edges of the field, don’t pick up every last grape from your vineyard, but leave some for the needy and the stranger. Don’t steal or deal falsely or lie; don’t defraud or rob; don’t hold back the wages of a hired hand overnight; don’t bear grudges; don’t endanger your neighbour’s life (Leviticus 19:9–18). And in the parable of the good Samaritan, narrated by Christ to explicate the command to love one’s neighbour, the focus is again on beneficence – on providing help to a stranger who is found lying by the roadside after being robbed and beaten (Luke 10: 30–36).

A duty of beneficence is recognised in many non-religious systems of ethics; it is, for example, one of the prima-facie duties listed by the influential British moral philosopher W. D.

² Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals* [*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785], Ch. I, §10 [4.399], trans. T. E. Hill and A. Zweig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 201.

Ross (along with promise-keeping, reparation, gratitude, self-improvement and non-injury).³ And clearly such a duty can be discharged in what might loosely call a ‘Kantian’ way, without any sentiment or loving feeling being present (though one should add that Kant does not deny that such feelings may be present, but simply points out that the moral worth of a doing one’s duty does not depend on them).⁴ Nevertheless, if we follow up the theme of neighbour-love as it is developed in the Bible, it becomes increasingly apparent that it takes us beyond what one might call the minimal or basic duty to treat others decently. The prophet Isaiah urges us to share our bread with the hungry, to clothe the naked, and to shelter the poor by taking them into our own homes; and this theme is taken up in the teachings of Jesus, who presents such concern for others as something in terms of which our whole lives will be judged and on which our ultimate salvation depends (Matthew 25: 34–6). Or again we find in the book of Proverbs an insistence that even our enemies should be fed and given water if they are hungry or thirsty; and this teaching is emphasised and indeed heightened in Jesus’s famous injunction in the Sermon on the Mount to ‘love your enemies’ (Matthew 5:44). Love increasingly appears in this Judaeo-Christian tradition as requiring more than the mere discharge of a duty: it seems to involve a pervasive mindset of caring and compassion towards all with whom one comes into contact, so that we are required to show ‘loving kindness’ (in Hebrew *chesed* חסד) to others, even if they are strangers or aliens (cf. Deuteronomy 19:34), or even enemies.⁵

To understand this stronger and more resonant aspect of neighbour-love in such passages, we need to look back to the first of the ‘great commandments’, the command to love God. The wording of the original passage in Deuteronomy (6:5) suggests that what is demanded of us is not just a duty of obedience but something more like fervent devotion: the injunction is to love God ‘with all your heart and soul and strength.’ This is no mere ethical precept, but is more like a call to enter into a powerful and demanding relationship that will infuse every aspect of life. The declaration of Jesus that the second commandment (to love one’s neighbour) is *like the first* (Matthew 22:39) may well be best understood in this light. Since man is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), each human being has a special dignity and worth, and is owed something of the respect and love that is due to God. So failure to love our neighbour is, in a certain way, a failure to love and respect God. Or as Simon May expresses it:

The point of loving your neighbour as yourself is ... in the final analysis, not to create a more cohesive and efficient society, or to maximise happiness and contentment. It is simply to do as God does out of love for God, in whose image we – you and I and our neighbour in equal measure – are made. Love, we see here, has ethical force as a relation to the source of our being.⁶

Seen this way, the religious context of the command to love one’s neighbour, and its linkage with our relationship to God, acts as a kind of *intensifier*, turning a mere routine duty of beneficence towards our neighbours into something of cosmic significance. Or one could put the point another way by saying that the command is transformed from a mere prescription for periodic charitable action into a structural requirement for the entire human psyche – something without which our lives would lack the meaning they were intended to have.

This brings us back to the question with which this section began, of whether love is something that can be enjoined or commanded. Without violating the maxim ‘ought implies can’,

³ W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* [1930], ed. P. Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Ch. 2, p. 21.

⁴ For a subtle discussion of Kant’s views on love as a feeling of affection versus practical love (discharging the duty of beneficence), see Allen Wood. ‘The Final Form of Kant’s Practical Philosophy’, in Mark Timmons (ed.), *Kant, Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretative Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Ch. 1, pp. 1–22.

⁵ See further Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011), Ch. 2.

⁶ May, *Love*, p. 18.

someone can clearly be commanded to render assistance to others, or to treat them with basic respect, since such behaviour is evidently within our power. But to act with genuine heartfelt care and loving kindness, even towards those to whom one has no special relationship or personal affection, might seem to many to be psychologically very hard or even impossible. From the Judaeo-Christian religious perspective however, things start to look rather different, as we have seen. If loving service to others, to our fellow human beings, is intimately linked to the wholehearted love and devotion each of us owes to our creator, then what we are asked to do will be something bound up with our very identity as human creatures, and with the ultimate meaning of our lives. This does not of course imply that it is a straightforward task to acquire a character and outlook which enables us to think and act this way, nor does it imply that someone can obey the love commandment ‘just like that’. But obeying a precept can nevertheless be in our power, not in sense that we can immediately do it at will, but in the sense that we can take steps to develop our character so that it does become possible in the future. For as Aristotle argued in the case of many of the ethical virtues, although their proper formation may take years of training and habituation, such virtues are still ‘up to us’, since we can voluntarily set about acquiring the appropriate dispositions.⁷

There is however a significant difference between Aristotelian ethics, which builds its conception of human fulfilment on what may be thought of as ‘normal and natural’ human dispositions and feelings (albeit requiring to be shaped by training and habituation), and on the other hand the kind of disposition envisaged in the religious conception of love we have been examining, which may seem to require more than ordinary human resources. Christian moral philosophers have recognized this by making a distinction between on the one hand the natural or purely human virtues, such as wisdom, justice, temperance and courage (the four ‘cardinal’ virtues discussed by Plato),⁸ and on the other hand the ‘theological’ virtues, comprising the famous trio of faith, hope and love discussed by St Paul, of which love is said to be the most important. The seminal text here is Paul’s famous encomium to love in his first letter to the Corinthians – the love which ‘does not act unbecomingly, does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices in the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things ...’ (I Corinthians 13: 5–7). The kind of love envisaged here, evidently modelled on the life of Christ, seems outside the boundaries of what most ordinary mortals might hope to achieve unaided.

It is in recognition of this point that Thomas Aquinas maintains that love and the other theological virtues have to be ‘infused’ – that is, they require grace in the form of divine action which infuses them into the will of each person (though, according to Thomas, without compromising the freedom of the will).⁹ The effects of such infusion will be manifest in pervasive and manifold ways, as the American philosopher of religion Eleonore Stump has argued in expounding the implications of Aquinas’ theory. These include, for example, the nine ‘fruits’ of the Spirit spelt out by St Paul in his letter to the Galatians (5: 22–3), namely ‘love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance’.¹⁰

In respect both of its origins and of its structure, then, the framework for living, in this Christian theory of human flourishing, starts to look very different from anything found in the Pagan world.¹¹ It is a framework in which Christlike love clearly plays a pivotal role. It can be seen, according to Stump, as superseding the Aristotelian account of virtuous living, subsuming and augmenting the list of virtues and transforming the character of what is subsumed, so that even the

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk III, Ch. 5.

⁸ Plato, *Republic* [375 BCE], Book IV.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266–73], IaIIae (First Part of the Second Part), Qu. 68, art. 1.

¹⁰ Eleonore Stump, ‘The Non-Aristotelian Character of Aquinas’s Ethics: Aquinas on the Passions’, *Faith and Philosophy* 28 (2011), pp. 29–43.

¹¹ For more on the contrast between Aristotelian and Christian virtues see J. Cottingham, ‘Partiality and the Virtues’, in R. Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live? Essays on the Philosophy of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 57–76.

virtues that appear on both the pagan and the Christian lists (such as courage or temperance) hardly count as the same, except nominally.¹² However that may be, and whether or not one is able to accept the metaphysical implications of Aquinas's account (with its notion of the divine 'infusing' of certain virtues), what emerges from our brief excursus into the moral theology of one Christianity's most influential thinkers is the central importance of love in Christian moral thinking, and how far the resulting blueprint for a virtuous life diverges from the kind of secular ethics represented by Aristotle.

3. *Is the Christian love commandment too demanding?*

Given the very special character of love as it emerges in the Christian philosophical and theological tradition, it is natural to ask if the resulting ideal does not turn out to be altogether too idealistic and too demanding to serve as the basis for a viable morality for ordinary human beings. The mindset of love, gentleness, longsuffering, and so on, described in the list of the 'fruits of the spirit' quoted at the end of the previous section, seems to take us into a realm of complete self-giving and self-sacrifice – an ethics of selfless love that might be thought suitable only for saints. And this has led to a pointed criticism raised by the Oxford philosopher John Mackie, that the injunction to love one's neighbour as oneself, if it is taken to require a 'universal and equal concern for all men', amounts to an 'ethics of fantasy'. 'People simply are not going to put the interests of all their "neighbours" on an equal footing with their own interests and specific purposes and with the interests of those who are literally near to them. Such universal concern will not be the actual motive of their choices, nor will they act as if it were.'¹³

The criticism that Christian love requires us, unreasonably, to have an 'equal and universal' concern for all mankind runs closely parallel to criticisms often levelled against act utilitarianism (the view that each act should be judged by its effects on the wellbeing of all), namely that it is an impossibly difficult principle to adopt, given certain deeply ingrained human impulses towards self-referential concerns, as well as being incompatible with an enormous range of ordinary, intuitively quite legitimate, human pursuits (such as assigning preferential time to oneself and one's immediate family). Thus Bernard Williams famously argued, against the utilitarian ethic, that I could scarcely function as a human being at all unless my own individual pursuits and preferences were allowed some special weighting in my deliberations. I would simply be, in Williams's phrase, a cog in a 'satisfaction system' which 'happened to be near certain causal levers at a certain time'.¹⁴ Taking a similar line with respect to the ethic of self-sacrificial love, Susan Wolf has urged that that in our ordinary human lives we take ourselves to have 'sound and compelling reasons' to devote considerable portions of our time to pursuing our own interests and developing our own talents (learning a musical instrument, for example); and if this is right it makes the ideal of complete saintly self-sacrifice one that is 'unattractive or otherwise unacceptable'.¹⁵ One might conclude from this that the perfectionist ethic of total self-giving love implied by the saintly ideal, for example in Christ's injunctions to 'be perfect', or to 'sell all you have and give to the poor' (Matthew 5:48 and 19:21; Luke 18:22; Mark 10: 21), is in serious tension with what most of us plausibly suppose to be essential to what makes a human life fruitful and fulfilling.

It is certainly true that the Christian ideal of love is a demanding one, apparently urging us to us to reach beyond the particularities of tribal and national allegiance, towards universal love for all humanity (an idea connected with the conception of God as the Father of all mankind). It should be added, however, that the commonly found view that the ethics of Judaism is tribalist and partialistic, while Christianity breaks new ground by introducing a wider and more universalist dimension, cannot survive scrutiny of the scriptural sources: there is a clear strand of universalism in the Hebrew Bible (see for example Genesis 22:18), and conversely there are New Testament

¹² Stump, *op. cit.*

¹³ John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 130–1.

¹⁴ Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 4.

¹⁵ Susan Wolf, 'Moral Saints', *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982), pp. 419–439, at pp. 435, 427.

texts which depict the teachings of Jesus in a partialistic light (Matthew 15:24-26). We certainly find a strongly universalist flavour in the Good Samaritan parable, which invites us to regard as a 'neighbour' *anyone* in distress – an idea, as Nicholas Wolterstorff has emphasised, that has deep roots in the Hebrew Bible, for example in the injunctions found in the Prophets and the Psalms to care for the 'quartet of the vulnerable', orphans, widows, the impoverished, and resident aliens (Zechariah 7: 9-19; Isaiah 1:17; Psalm 147:6).¹⁶ But it is by no means clear that the Christian (or Judaeo-Christian) ethic of loving kindness outlaws all partialities or special relationships; on the contrary, the duty of loyalty to family is enshrined in the ten commandments (Exodus 20:12), and Christ is depicted in the Gospels as having close personal ties (for example, to his mother, to the 'beloved disciple' who was special to him, and to the family of Lazarus (see John 19: 25-7; John 11:35). If we take these examples into account, it seems a distortion to see the Christian saint as required to forswear all partialistic concerns and commitments in favour of complete universalism and impersonal detachment. That said, it remains a vexed question how we are to balance the requirements of universal love against the love we are rightly expected to show to those close to us.¹⁷

A slightly different issue from that of universality is whether the kind of love that the Christian ethic demands is *unconditional*. Although this latter term is often used in discussions of the ethics of Christianity, this can be misleading. Christ's teaching on love and forgiveness, for example, makes it clear that even divine love is not unconditional: being forgiven by God is conditional on one's own willingness to forgive (Mark 11:26; Matthew 6:15; 18:35).¹⁸ That said, it cannot be denied that the love commandment, as developed in some of the Christian scriptures and in subsequent tradition, seems to require us to take loving self-sacrifice to the very limits. In the fourth Gospel, in commanding his disciples to 'love one another as I have loved you', Jesus immediately adds: 'Greater love has no one than this – to lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you' (John 15:13–14).

Heroic self-sacrifice, for example laying down one's life for a comrade on the battlefield, is something that clearly occurs, and moreover is generally regarded, even in the increasingly secularized outlook of today, as something ethically valuable; so it would be inaccurate to suggest, as Mackie comes near to doing, that the ideal of Christian love and self-sacrifice is nothing more than a 'fantasy'. It is true that it takes us beyond the realm of ordinary ethical requirements to the category of the 'supererogatory' (what is above and beyond the call of duty), and indeed to a special sub-category of the supererogatory, namely the heroic. Our response to this will no doubt depend on what we expect of an ethics. Much contemporary moral philosophy expects an ethical theory to fit in with our ordinary 'common-sense' expectations of what can reasonably be expected of us. But it is clear from even a cursory reading of the relevant scriptural texts on love that the ideals proposed are not intended to be tested against our 'ordinary intuitions'. On the contrary, the Christian love-ethic, together with many of the moral teachings in the Bible (for example the calls to righteousness and repentance found in the Old Testament prophets), seems to fall into the category of what one might call a *transformative* ethic. Such ethical systems do not attempt to systematize or reflect our existing intuitions about how life should be lived, but are radically revisionary, representing a *call to change*. This kind of revisionary strand is a hallmark of much religious ethical thinking; as the philosopher Charles Taylor has put it, we are characteristically presented with a 'call to transformation, starting to be educated by God' (though one might add that revisionary ethical thinking can also be found in secular manifestations, as for example in Peter Singer's call to widen our ethical concerns beyond the human species to all sentient creatures).¹⁹

¹⁶ Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 76.

¹⁷ See Brian Feltham and John Cottingham (ed.), *Partiality and Impartiality: Morality, Special Relationships, and the Wider World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁸ See further May, *Love*, Ch. 7.

¹⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 668. Cf. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* [first pub. 1975] (London: Random House, 1995).

4. *The obligation to love*

In the previous section we touched on the common distinction between that which is obligatory or required, and what is ‘supererogatory’, beyond the call of duty. A distinctive feature of the Judaeo-Christian approach to love, as we have seen, is that loving God and one’s neighbour is commanded as a requirement or duty. This aspect is especially emphasised in the Fourth Gospel, where in one of the discourses attributed to Christ we find the famous pronouncement: ‘A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: as I have loved you, that you also love one another’ (John 13:34). Whether commands, even stemming from a divine source, can of themselves generate obligations is a vexed question in religious ethics.²⁰ But a closer look at the text in John suggests that there is more than a mere command at work here. Having commanded his disciples to love one another, Christ immediately adds ‘as I have loved you, that you also love one another’. And later in the same discourse, when he recapitulates the command, there is the same closely associated reciprocal clause: ‘this is my commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you’ (John 15:12). The passage follows the episode of Christ’s washing of his disciples’ feet, where again we have exactly the same stress on reciprocity: ‘If I your master and teacher have washed your feet, so too you ought to wash one another’s feet’ (13:14).

Such passages invite us to see a *reason* for the love commandment: we ought to love others because we are already involved with them in reciprocal relations of giving and taking – this is the essence of what it is to be human. In other words, if I recognize my own urgent need to be loved and cared for, I cannot but recognize that there is a reason for me similarly to love and care for others in need. In short, the obligation of love can be seen as grounded in the facts of mutual dependency that are inseparable from our humanity.

Yet this in turn raises the interesting question of whether the love ethic might not be articulated in a way which dispenses with the religious framework altogether. Does it not begin to look as if our obligation to love and care for others, so far from depending on a specifically religious outlook, is simply a rational requirement that we cannot in logic deny, once we allow our own need for love as a reason why others should love and care for us? This points to the possibility of a purely secularized interpretation of the Christian ethic, along broadly Kantian lines. Immanuel Kant proposed that to assess the permissibility of my conduct I should ask if it accords with a maxim that could be willed as a universal law.²¹ So I cannot rationally will that I should myself be loved and cared for when in need unless I am prepared to assent to the maxim that everyone (including, of course, myself) should love and care for those in need. If one accepts the implications of this kind of Kantian framework, there might not seem to be any need for bringing in God, or Christ, or divine commands, in order to bolster the ethical status of love as a moral imperative; one would simply rely on facts about the human condition, such as human need and dependency, and on the principle that I cannot rationally will a course of action unless I am prepared to see it adopted as a general principle of conduct.

There is, however, a problem with this approach, namely that there seems no logical contradiction in someone’s refusing to allow that the need or suffering of others is a reason to reach out to them in love and compassion. There is no contradiction in the attitude of the egoist who simply rates his own plans and projects as of supreme importance, ignores the needs of others, and is quite prepared to accept the consequences were everyone to act likewise. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche famously rejected the entire Christian ethic of love and compassion, proposing instead that a new breed of free spirits, pursuing their own creative projects, ought to disregard the sufferings of the weak as of no importance in comparison with their own great endeavours. For

²⁰ See for example Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. Chs 10 and 11, and C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also John Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Ch. 4.

²¹ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ch. 2, §25.

such ‘supermen’, he argues, there might be conclusive reasons to steel themselves *against* impulses of love and mercy, to harden their hearts against compassion and forgiveness, since such sentiments might get in the way of the will to power, or their passion for self-realisation as a new and stronger kind of being.²² It may be that Nietzsche’s advocacy of a willingness to ‘let people suffer’, as he put it,²³ displays a curious kind of moral myopia; but it does not appear to violate any principles of rationality.

Mere Kantian rationality, if this argument is right, cannot support a Christian-type ethics of love and compassion. There are, to be sure, alternative ways of attempting to ground an ethical system, the most celebrated alternative to the Kantian approach being David Hume’s appeal to feeling or sentiment as the basis for morality.²⁴ But it seems doubtful that an appeal to feeling can generate the right kind of normative power, that is to say, whether it can imbue the value of love with the requisite moral authority to serve as an overriding principle of action. It is certainly true, as Hume pointed out, that feelings of benevolence and compassion are a natural part of our human makeup, but it is unfortunately also true that selfish and aggressive feelings are equally prevalent: as Hume himself acknowledged, ‘a particle of the dove is kneaded into our frame along with elements of the wolf and serpent.’²⁵ And that being so, there seems no compelling reason why one particular affectionate strand in our complex and diverse array of natural inclinations should have supreme normative force in our lives. As Bernard Williams graphically put it, our human nature is a ‘rather ill-sorted *bricolage* of powers and instincts’;²⁶ and in this contingently evolved aggregate of traits and characteristics there seems nothing to entitle one particular set of instincts or desires to take normative precedence over the others.

The above considerations raise complex issues about the foundations of ethics which cannot be settled here. But they are perhaps enough to indicate that it is not as easy as might at first appear to preserve, in purely secular terms, the special authority and resonance of the love commandment as it has come down to us in the religious tradition. What the religious tradition seems to supply is something not obviously catered for in secular accounts: the notion of love as possessing a special kind of authoritative significance. One might call this a ‘cosmic’ significance – significance which connects love with the ground of our being, and which enables it to play a primary role in our sense of our lives as having ultimate meaning and purpose. To this special dimension of love as it appears in religious ways of thinking we shall now turn in the concluding section of this chapter.

5. *The cosmic significance of love*

In a remarkable passage in the first letter of John, love is identified with God: ‘whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love’ (I John 4:8). And a few verses later: ‘God is love, and whoever lives in love lives in God and God in them’ (4:16). This is not, of course, the whole story. The theistic worldview ascribes many other characteristics to God, such as justice and righteousness, and at the start of the fourth Gospel, what is especially prominent is *logos* – word, intelligence, rationality. So the cosmos we inhabit, on this conception, is ultimately a rational and a moral cosmos, one in which human beings, provided they live their lives in conformity with reason and morality, can feel fundamentally at home. Yet in the resulting blueprint for a good human life the primacy of love remains inescapable. We are called not just to live ‘in accordance with nature’,

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886], transl. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), §37. See also J. Cottingham, ‘The Good Life and the “Radical Contingency of the Ethical”’, in D. Callcut (ed.), *Reading Bernard Williams* (London: Routledge, 2008), ch. 2, pp. 25–43.

²³ Cf. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §202.

²⁴ David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* [1751], ed. T. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Section V, parts 1 and 2; Section IX, parts 1 and 2.

²⁵ Hume, *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, section IX, Part 1.

²⁶ Bernard Williams, ‘Replies,’ in J. Altham and R. Harrison (ed.), *World, Mind, and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 199.

or ‘in accordance with reason’, as the Stoic philosophers advocated,²⁷ but to ‘abide in love’ (I John 15:9). In the theistic picture, espoused by Judaism, Christianity and Islam, our very existence is a free gift given by the creator, a creator of loving kindness and compassion. The required life of love reflects our utter dependence on God as the loving creator who created and redeemed us, as is again emphasised in the first letter of John: ‘this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us’ (I John 4:10); or later, ‘we love, because he first loved us’ (4:19).

The scientific revolution of the past two or three hundred years has seemed to many people to have made the worldview in which love plays such a central role increasingly problematic. In the fourteenth century, Dante was able to speak very straightforwardly of ‘the love that moves the sun and the other stars’,²⁸ taking it for granted that the force that powers the universe is identical with love as conceived of in Christian theism. But not only does modern physics conceive of the workings of the universe in abstract and impersonal terms (through mathematics and mechanics), but modern biology appears to present an account of how that universe has developed which depends more on chance mutation and a blind and brutal struggle for survival than on cosmic benevolence. It was the struggle to come to terms with the nature of the cosmos as disclosed by scientific inquiry that made the poet Alfred Tennyson speak of the difficulty of trusting that

God was love indeed
And love creation’s final law,
Though Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shrieked against his creed.²⁹

Of the two threats to traditional theism mentioned in the previous paragraph, the impersonal and abstract nature of modern physics, and the seemingly pitiless implications of modern biology, the former seems less of a problem for the theist. For the fact that the cosmos operates in terms of universal mathematically describable principles may be thought of as quite consistent with the idea of a rational and benevolent creator. Thus in the mid seventeenth century, René Descartes, for example, was able to champion the idea of a comprehensive mathematical physics while remaining a devout believer. God for him was the author of the immutable laws of motion that governed the universe, and the workings of our bodies and nervous systems, where, he argued, there is nothing that does not testify to the ‘power’ and ‘immeasurable goodness’ of God.³⁰ It is in the light of the subsequent Darwinian revolution that this latter kind of claim seems harder to sustain. For modern evolutionary biology has brought home to us the sheer contingency of how our human physiological structures were cobbled together, emerging from millions of years of random mutation and competition for survival, with much wastage and many dead-ends along the way; and all this has seemed to many people to put serious pressure on the idea of a loving and benevolent intelligence at the heart of things.

These modern understandings of our origins have generated a kind of existential vertigo that is apparent in many modern writers. One might contrast Dante’s confidence in the ‘love that moves the sun and other stars’ with the poet A. E. Housman’s feeling of being ‘a stranger and afraid/ In a world I never made’.³¹ A belief in love at the heart of reality supports a sense of being ‘at home’ in the world, the sense Wittgenstein described he characterised the religious outlook as involving a

²⁷ For these Stoic formulations, see A. Long and D. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), §§63 A and B.

²⁸ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradise* [*La Divina Comedia: Paradiso* c. 1310], final line.

²⁹ Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam* [1850], Canto LVI.

³⁰ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* [*Meditationes de prima philosophia*, 1641], Sixth Meditation, last three paragraphs. See further J. Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Ch. 13.

³¹ A. E. Housman, ‘The laws of God, the laws of Man’, in *Last Poems* [1922], repr. in *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956).

feeling of ‘absolute safety’.³² In short, the sense of a loving power at the centre of things provides a sense of what Simon May has aptly called ‘ontological rootedness’;³³ and for those for whom love can no longer be seen as the ground of our being, the ontological source of our existence and that of the very universe, such rootedness is radically undermined.

It is interesting that love is often presented in our contemporary culture in a way that apparently aims at filling the resulting void. Countless films and popular love songs feature phrases such as ‘you’re all I’ll ever want’, ‘you’re my reason for living’, as if a certain kind of romantic love could somehow give us complete security and validate the meaning and purpose of our lives. Yet while genuine love (as opposed to its debased Hollywood fantasy of ‘love at first sight’) can clearly be a powerful long-term generator of meaning and value in peoples’ lives, the slogan found in the Beatles’ song, ‘All you need is love’, if intended to refer to romantic attachments, is evidently absurd. Not only is the continued flourishing of a loving relationship necessarily subject to the contingencies and fragilities that beset all human life from birth to death, but there is something fundamentally unfair, and perhaps infantile, about loading onto another human being, however noble and worthy of affection, the entire weight of being the sole source of life’s meaning and value.

Our human longing for the feeling of security that can arise from loving and being loved by another nevertheless remains a powerful psychological force in our lives. Sigmund Freud took note of this when he famously compared the religious impulse to an infantile desire for the loving protection of a parent: ‘the derivation of religious needs from the infant’s helplessness and the longing for the father aroused by it seems to me incontrovertible ... I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father’s protection.’³⁴ Freud himself attacked religious belief as an illusion we need to grow out of; but tracing a belief back to certain causes in the human psyche does not of itself show it to be false (to suppose otherwise would be to commit the so-called ‘Genetic Fallacy’). And Freud himself, to his credit, is prepared to allow that an illusion, born of longing, might actually turn out to correspond to reality. Once that is recognised, however, the religious believer might well be happy to agree with Freud that human beings do indeed have a longing for security and protection, a powerful wish for an authoritative source of meaning and purpose in whom they can put their love and trust, but then go on to affirm that ultimate reality is indeed such as to provide a home for that love and trust. It was acknowledging just such a longing for love and security that led to St Augustine’s famous address to his creator, ‘You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds repose in You.’³⁵

Theism on the one hand, and Freudian psychological reductionism on the other, are of course far from being the only possible answers to the questions we have been raising about the human predicament and our need for love and security. A quite different take on these matters is provided by some of the Eastern religious traditions, of which Buddhism has been the most influential in recent times among Western philosophers who are drawn to the values associated with the religious and spiritual quest, but who cannot accept the theistic premise of a loving personal creator. For the Buddhist, ultimate reality is not personal at all: There is no God, and indeed even for the ordinary human being the very notion that he or she has an enduring ‘self’ is an illusion. There are simply conditions that arise and pass away, and enlightenment consists in freeing oneself from the desires and attachments that lead us to try in vain to cling on to what is ephemeral.

While exploring the implications of this vision in any detail would take us too far outside the scope of this chapter, a strikingly relevant feature about such an outlook for present purposes is that love does continue to play a central role in the resulting conception of the spiritually

³² Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘A Lecture on Ethics’ [1929], in *Philosophical Review* (1965), p. 8.

³³ May, *Love*, pp. 6–7.

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, *Civilization and its Discontents* [*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1929], *The Penguin Freud Library* (London: Penguin, 1991), Vol. 12, p. 260.

³⁵ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* [*Confessiones*, c. 398], Book I, Ch. 1.

enlightened life. But it is not the love of personal commitment and attachment, or of devotion to a personal creator, but rather a boundless feeling of compassion stemming from pity for the suffering of those in the grip of desire and illusion. Thus the atheist philosopher Sam Harris, speaks of the spiritual exercises of meditation in this tradition as leading to ‘boundless love’, ‘selfless wellbeing’, and ‘self-transcendence’.³⁶ Or again, the French atheist philosopher André Comte-Sponville, similarly attracted by ‘oceanic’ feelings of self-transcendence,³⁷ speaks of ideal love or charity as a kind of *letting be*. The one who ‘forbears’ is the very opposite of the self-obsessed egoist who tries to fill all the available space:

This kind of love is the rarest of loves, the most precious and miraculous. You take a step back? He takes two steps back. Why? Simply to give you more room, to avoid crowding you, invading you, or crushing you, to give you more space and freedom and to let you breathe . . . He steps back so as not to impose on you his power, or even his joy or love, so as not to take up all available space, all available being, or all available power.³⁸

The metaphysical and ethical implications of the kind of outlook advocated here are clearly very different from those in the theistic traditions we have been looking at earlier on. There is a significant place for love, but it is not a love that is supposed to ‘ground’ us, or bring us into union with the creative source of our being and selfhood, but rather a love that arises from the dissolving of personal craving, where reality is conceived of as a constant flow of impersonal conditions that come into being and pass away. It would be inappropriate, as we come to the end of our discussion of the relationship between love and religion, to try to adjudicate between these conceptions, each of which seems to resonate with certain aspects of the human condition, and with the perennial struggle to live well in the short time allotted to us. If there is a general conclusion to be drawn, it must be that among the many forms the religious quest has taken, it is striking how often the concept of love emerges as occupying a centrally important role.

Reference list

- Adams, Robert M., *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
 Aquinas, Thomas *Summa theologiae* [1266-73], trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1911).
 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [c. 325 BCE], trans. J. Thomson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).
 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* [*Confessiones*, c. 398], trans. W. Watts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912).
 Comte-Sponville, André, *A Short Treatise of the Great Virtues* [*Petit Traité des Grandes Vertus*, 1996] (London: Heinemann, 2002).
 Comte-Sponville, André, *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* [originally published as *L’esprit de l’athéisme*, 2006] (London: Bantam, 2008).
 Cottingham, John, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014)
 Cottingham, John, ‘Partiality and the Virtues’, in R. Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live? Essays on the Philosophy of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 57-76.

³⁶ Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion* (London: Bantam Press, 2014), pp. 14, 17, 18.

³⁷ André Comte-Sponville, *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* [originally published as *L’esprit de l’athéisme*, 2006] (London: Bantam, 2008), pp. 150ff.

³⁸ André Comte-Sponville, *A Short Treatise of the Great Virtues* [*Petit Traité des Grandes Vertus*, 1996] (London: Heinemann, 2002), p. 276.

- Cottingham, John, 'The Good Life and the "Radical Contingency of the Ethical"', in D. Callcut (ed.), *Reading Bernard Williams* (London: Routledge, 2008), ch. 2, pp. 25–43.
- Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* [*La Divina Comedia*, c. 1300-1310], ed. and transl. G. Bickersteth (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).
- Descartes, René, *Meditations on First Philosophy* [*Meditationes de prima philosophia*, 1641], trans. J. Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- Evans, C. Stephen, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)
- Feltham, Brian and Cottingham, John (eds), *Partiality and Impartiality: Morality, Special Relationships, and the Wider World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents* [*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1929], *The Penguin Freud Library* (London: Penguin, 1991), Vol. 12.
- Harris, Sam, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion* (London: Bantam Press, 2014).
- Housman, A. E., *Last Poems* [1922], repr. in *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956).
- Hume, David, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* [1751], ed. T. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* [*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785], trans. T. E. Hill and A. Zweig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- Long, A. A. and Sedley, D. N. (eds), *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- Mackie, John, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).
- May, Simon, *Love: A History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886] transl. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966).
- Plato, *Republic* [375 BCE], trans. D. Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).
- Plato, *Symposium* [c. 385 BCE], trans. R. Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- Ross, David, *The Right and the Good* [1930], ed. P. Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- Singer, Peter, *Animal Liberation* [first pub. 1975] (London: Random House, 1995).
- Stump, Eleonore, 'The Non-Aristotelian Character of Aquinas's Ethics: Aquinas on the Passions', *Faith and Philosophy* 28 (2011), pp. 29-43.
- Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- Tennyson, *In Memoriam* [1849] in Alfred, in C. Ricks (ed.), *Tennyson, A Selected Edition* (London: Longman, 1989).
- Williams, Bernard, 'Replies,' in J. Altham and R. Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind, and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- Williams, Bernard, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 'A Lecture on Ethics' [1929], in *Philosophical Review* (1965), published in *Wiley Online Library*, 2014, DOI: 10.1002/9781118887103.
- Wolf, Susan, 'Moral Saints', *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982), pp. 419-439.
- Wolterstorff, Nicolas, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- Wood, Allen 'The Final Form of Kant's Practical Philosophy', in Mark Timmons (ed.), *Kant, Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretative Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).