

Is love infinite?

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What is the main driver of all our social life and interactions? It is often seen as money, because of our need for regular income to survive. Money controls politics; it guides everyone's careers and leisure, and our decisions about where to live and what to eat or wear or own. In constant reminders from the daily news and advertising, besides countless conversations, emails and texts, it seems that many people are 'dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as their ultimate purpose'.¹

An alternative view is that the main power and energy in the world is love.² Quakers say much about how love is central to our religious life, but less about love's power in secular life and politics. Religious love can seem remote and abstract when God as love may be a wonderful but mysteriously elusive vision. Christians pray, 'Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,' as if the kingdom of God, or of love, is not yet here on earth.

Discussions about love within this essay will mainly attend to personal relationships, between people and with God, and I will consider love as the driving energy in our personal lives. I'll look at times when love seems to be missing, replaced by fear, anger or hate, and contemplate whether there are limits to love's power. I'll also briefly consider love's influence in the natural world, and in social systems such as health services, politics, and even armies. Writing about love can feel like paddling at the edges of a vast ocean, but I hope readers may find some of these ideas useful for taking heed to 'the promptings of love' in our hearts.

Personal love

Asked 'what is the greatest commandment?' Jesus gave two: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength [and] love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12:30-31). Jesus's words have been retranslated and reinterpreted over the centuries. He often spoke in jokes and irony. Did he believe love can be 'commanded' or was his reply shaped by the question? To 'command' love makes it seem unnatural and forced, as if it cannot flow easily, inevitably or powerfully. Maybe Jesus actually thought that we cannot help wanting to love.

The philosopher and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm presented personal love as an art to be taught and developed.³ He believed our most powerful longing and striving is to overcome

¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (George Allen & Unwin: 1930, p.53).

² Thanks to my colleague Rob Faure Walker who is writing a book on this theme. Although this view is widely accepted, Rob's thoughts surprised me and prompted this article, on which Rob made helpful comments. We teach courses on critical realism, a philosophy developed by Roy Bhaskar and colleagues whose ideas are used in this article.

³ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (Harper, 1956).

our separateness and alienation, and to fuse with others. Fromm's ideal love involves loving our neighbour and ourselves with true humility, courage, faith and discipline in every part of our life. He thought that true love has four main concerns: care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. Each concern is hard to define and is practised in many different ways.

Numerous authors consider the different kinds of love. Plato, for example, discussed love as a response to beauty, a cosmic force, and a spiritual path to goodness.⁴ C. S. Lewis listed:

- affection, the most basic form;
- friendship, the rarest version, based on Aristotle's intellectual friendships between men;
- eros, passionate love; and
- agape or charity, the greatest and least selfish love.⁵

This view of love was partly influenced by Immanuel Kant, who admired selfless altruism that expects no personal reward. Kant advised against 'a duty of love' towards others because this sets up obligations for some kind of return. Instead, only 'the duty of respect' preserves everyone's autonomy, our liberal freedoms, self-sufficiency and value as a human being.⁶ Kant admitted that this view could mean that helping the poor is disrespectful. Kant believed we are our autonomous true self only when we rise above emotions (such as love) and act from rational, altruistic duty.⁷ Mothers' love is then disdained as self-rewarding, instinctive, mindless affection.

C. S. Lewis, Kant and countless other leading thinkers worked in sexist, racist traditions that coloured their views of love. They feared intimacy, bodies and women, and sought refuge in calm, detached rationality,⁸ hence their low opinion of maternal love.

Centuries earlier, medieval people tended to be more at ease with their bodies, as Chaucer amply showed. The two centrally revered Christian images were of embodied love: the mother and child and the crucifixion. The mystics Richard Rolle, in *The Fire of Love*, and Julian of Norwich, in *Revelations of Divine Love*, wrote about their physical pain and passion and thrilling joy in sacred love. Quakers continued some of this spiritual tradition. 'Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness...and helping one another with a tender hand.'⁸ 'There is a spirit which I feel that delights to do no evil...its life is everlasting love unfeigned...'⁹

Yet during the 17th Century Enlightenment, René Descartes separated mind from body ('I think therefore I am'). Francis Bacon's scientific method split objective reason from subjective emotions. 'A man cannot love and be wise' wrote Bacon, though he respected private love within marriage and between friends, and spiritual people who love 'the entire universe'.¹⁰ Enlightenment philosophers' fear of love in vulnerable physical intimacy and our

⁴ Plato, *The Symposium* Trans. C. Gill (Penguin, 1999).

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Geoffrey Bles, 1960).

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue*. Trans. Mary Gregor (Harper & Row, 1964, p.448).

⁷ Victor Seidler, *Kant, Respect and Injustice* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, p.142).

⁸ *Quaker Faith & Practice*, 10.01.

⁹ *Quaker Faith & Practice*, 19.12.

¹⁰ Francis Bacon, 'Of love', *The Essays* (Penguin, 1625/1985).

'lower' embodied animal nature grew. Witch burning increased. These fears incited centuries of oppression of women and children, lower classes, non-white ethnic groups, and the natural world, with over-respect for 'rational' white men.¹¹

An example of this fear filtering into everyday and academic thinking is the 1972 Swarthmore Lecture. Professor of Philosophy of Education R. S. Peters assumed a chasm between the barbarian egotistic child and 'civilised Man'. Peters pondered how to get young children to 'overcome their passions and self-love' until they can begin to reason and respect others when aged from about 7 years. Before then, he wondered how teachers might 'sustain and cultivate a crust of civilisation over the volcanic core of atavistic emotions'.¹²

Quakers are leaders in respecting many kinds of equality rights. Yet as far as I know there has not been a Swarthmore Lecture about children's humanity and rights, although a third of people in the world are aged under 19 years. The other main Swarthmore lecture linked to children, by Michael Rutter, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology, was adult-centric advice on how parents 'bring up' children. Oddly for pacifist Quakers, Rutter approved of corporal punishment.¹³

Yet if morality and love of others are alien to the child's nature and so hard to learn, where do they come from? Who imagined them, and why would they matter? Breakthrough research by John Bowlby showed, as most parents know, how love is central to babies' lives from birth.¹⁴ Later researchers studied micro-second analysis of videos of babies' faces while they reacted to puppet shows. The videos revealed that from about 3 months babies are thinking morally about justice and kindness, long before anyone can explain anything to them in words.¹⁵

Love and morality seem to be innate within embodied human nature. Young animals' survival involves them knowing when to trust others or to fear them. Trust and love seem to have evolved in human nature through natural selection, because they increase our wellbeing, and caring families are best able to survive.¹⁶ Our bodily experiences of pleasure and pain, flourishing and suffering, develop moral empathy and compassion for others, which babies show.

From the 1980s onwards, love was introduced more widely into social research and public debate, mainly by women. They referred to love as 'care', which involves both labour and love.¹⁷ One example of these revised insights involves the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's

¹¹ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (Wildwood House, 1982).

¹² R.S. Peters, *Reason, Morality and Religion* (Friends Home Service Committee, 1972, p.87).

¹³ Michael Rutter, *A Measure of Our Values: Goals and Dilemmas in the Upbringing of Children* (Quaker Home Service, 1983).

¹⁴ John Bowlby, *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (Penguin, 1953).

¹⁵ Paul Bloom, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil* (Broadway Books, 2014).

¹⁶ Frans de Waal. *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism among the Primates* (W W Norton, 2013).

¹⁷ Janet Finch and Dulcie Groves (eds.), *A Labour of Love: Women, Work and Caring* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983).

six stages of moral development. Kohlberg researched children's understanding of rules and justice, but not love.¹⁸ Few men and even fewer women reach Kohlberg's sixth stage of applying Kantian universal moral principles. The psychologist Carol Gilligan criticised Kohlberg's one-sided ethic of justice. She developed a complementary feminist ethic of care, which she showed children can understand.¹⁹

Limits to love?

Although love may be felt as an overwhelming force, it often seems to fail. Suffering within relationships and families, and around the world, seems to prove a vast lack of love. There is widespread injustice and neglect, homelessness, hunger and untreated illness, cruelty, violence and war, with increasing human-caused floods and droughts, pollution and loss of species.

Aristotle's twelve virtues include patience, truthfulness and justice.²⁰ Love is missing, though all virtues relate to it. Aristotle saw virtue as the golden mean between two extremes of too little and too much. For example, virtuous courage lies between being cowardly or being foolhardy. Liberality is neither uncaring nor extravagant. The golden mean can show how all relationships involve love: the right amount of love, or too much, or too little. I suggest that too little love does not mean love is missing but that love is still central as the motive and measure for all actions and thoughts.

Love as our main motive magnetically draws us into making and sustaining rewarding, nurturing relationships and creative work and leisure. When things go wrong and we meet with rejection, cruelty or failure, we react with fear, anger or grief about missing love. On love as the measure, constantly and often subconsciously we gauge how thoughts and actions point nearer towards or veer further away from the compass point of love. We warm to people, relatives, friends, lovers, colleagues or strangers, who are considerate, respectful and kind. We shrink from those who are negative, casual, controlling or cruel (too little love), or are falsely extravagant or effusive (seemingly too much love). These problems tend to express reactions to earlier missing love. Lifelong distress can follow abuse and neglect in early childhood.¹⁴ The compass needle may point to desire and longing, or intense intimate passion, to faithful care, or to love's seeming absence in indifference, disrespect, dislike, hostility and then hatred.

Marriages fade into divorce through many tiny steps away from warm loving relations and towards cool and then hostile ones. Each partner tries attack or self-defence against the sadness of seeming to lose love. Partnerships that endure settle into Aristotle's realistic golden mean, coping with minor painful differences and stressors within the major power of their loving relations. 'Hatred is appeased by love alone. This is the eternal law.'²¹

¹⁸ Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (Harper & Row, 1981).

¹⁹ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Harvard University Press, 1982).

²⁰ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* (Trans. R. Crisp, Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²¹ The Mother, *Commentaries on the Dhammapada* (Lotus Press, 2004).

Dialectic is the method of searching for truth through discussion. It also involves creative overlapping interactions between opposites, such as love and hate. Dialectic may progress from negative destructive power into creative nurturing power, through overcoming differences.²² This can help us to see latent love in its seeming opposites of rage and hate: first, love as the motive and cause behind hate in grief and bewilderment over missing love; second, love as the potential resolution into peace and harmony.

Love is often a taboo word, too serious or intense or intimate to seem appropriate to many relationships. Yet we may often mistakenly deny love or hide it in other words, such as ‘care’ noted earlier. The Socialist call for ‘solidarity’ replaces the earlier gendered ‘fraternity’ or brotherly love. The alternative to addiction is termed ‘connection’.²³ Addiction relates to parts of our brains concerned with basic needs and functions: incentives, motives, relief of pain and stress, and feeling love. Addicts are more likely to recover if they have several strong connections that reward and calm them, which their addiction had weakened or removed from their life. These connections involve love of family and friends and enjoyable activities.

Also vital for addicts’ recovery is love (or at least liking) from other people, experienced through enjoying time together. This helps addictive people to restore their self-worth, the basis of being able to love anyone else and ‘love your neighbour as yourself’. My daughter Juliet is in charge of a beautiful five-place home for women seeking refuge from abuse, who tend to be addicts. She finds that after weeks of connecting with them, and their coming to feel that she is on their side, one woman gained the confidence to go to a church coffee morning, another to attend a course on ‘finding yourself’, which Juliet attends with her, and a third met her children again after three years apart. Love as inter-personal care seems crucial to help them to accept themselves. George Herbert’s poem ‘Love bade me welcome’ emphasises how hard it can be to feel worthy of being loved.

Perhaps long-term, intimate aspects of love are over-emphasised when love is defined narrowly, as if only families and partners really love one another. As a researcher, I felt strong affection towards the children who allowed me to observe and interview them. Yet I was slightly shocked when a colleague said she ‘loved’ her young participants. Was she being unprofessional? Teachers may be discouraged from showing they love their students for fear of favouritism. Yet when loving means mutual respect and liking and developing children’s innate love of learning, surely this is the relationship to encourage. As a former teacher I saw that this especially matters with primary school teachers who spend all their time with their class, and with special needs students of all ages. The questions then become: if mutual affection is missing, what is going wrong and what is the remedy? The aim here is not to demand a standard of love required by Ofsted or measured by psychologists. Instead, it is subtly to use the insights of love as a guide to creating happier relationships and schools.²⁴ ‘Eros is an overflowing of acting into new realities and new beauties, a world in which human beings extend their powers and senses’ a part of nature.²⁵ Love can always be recognised in new contexts and defined more broadly.

²² Roy Bhaskar. *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (Routledge, 2008).

²³ Gabor Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction* (Vermilion, 2018).

²⁴ Priscilla Alderson, *Learning and Inclusion: The Cleves School Experience* (Routledge, 2013/1999).

²⁵ Jeffery Nicholas, *Love and Politics* (Routledge, 2021).

Beyond personal love

Love exists beyond personal levels in two larger main ways. George Fox's 'infinite ocean of light and love' is shown in nature and the created universe(s), in the overpowering infinite variety and beauty of all species, and their interactions. There is support between trees,²⁶ and between plants, bacteria and fungi.²⁷ Scientists tend to reduce birdsong to sex or war, birds' only supposed intentions being to attract a mate or warn off a rival. Yet how can blackbirds' song not be rejoicing in being alive, their inventive echoing duets not be neighbourly ones, and how can birds not love flying? People who find 'God' is too personal a term, but who accept there is some indefinable, unimaginable, infinite, creative energy, may prefer 'love'.

The second larger expression of love is through our social systems, such as law courts or hospitals. These are powerless buildings until people turn them into spaces to promote justice and healing. Yet the activity of many individuals adds up to more than the sum of the parts. Institutions gain their history, reputation, routines, knowledge and authority to benefit present generations and pass on to future generations, potentially as a loving gift.

Can armies be loving? Nations usually live in peace, but when they start wars politicians appeal to soldiers' love of their country, their local land after which regiments were named, and their desire to defend their families. These appeals, like 'sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal', involve only the appearance of love.²⁸ Yet, with intense loyalty, soldiers die for their loved ones and comrades. Armies are highly organised and so rely on such aspects of love as trust, reliable cooperative commitment and dedicated service. Soldiers who suffer PTSD are reacting to this misdirection of love into organised hatred, which only coheres by relying on loving methods.

Love is also central to politics: love of doing good, or of power, money or approval. Passion in politics challenges Quakers' pacifism. Calm dignity assists powerful advocacy as Ada Salter showed.²⁹ This can involve challenging and critical debate. Yet decades of peaceful protests by millions of people against war and climate chaos are ignored by politicians and journalists, who do, in contrast, react to disruptive protests. Should Quakers' campaigns involve violence against things, though never against living beings? Or does this discourage the 'moderate majority' who could be the main agents for change?³⁰ Jesus overturned the money tables in the temple. A Quaker tried to damage a fighter jet.³¹ The soup thrown harmlessly onto van Gogh's glass-covered sunflowers provoked national debate. It usefully highlighted how powerful groups treasure costly painted sunflowers more than working to

²⁶ Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree* (Penguin, 2021).

²⁷ George Monbiot, *Regenesis* (Allen Lane, 2022).

²⁸ 1 Corinthians, 13:1.

²⁹ Graham Taylor, *Ada Salter: Pioneer of Ethical Socialism* (Lawrence & Wishart, 2016).

³⁰ <https://systems-souls-society.com/what-next-on-climate-the-need-for-a-moderate-flank/>

³¹ <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/christians-accused-trying-disarm-bae-made-eurofighter-typhoon-sold-saudi-arabia-amid-yemen-war-1644324>

sustain real sunflowers destroyed by climate chaos and in Ukraine. ‘For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.’³²

Amitav Ghosh believes real debate about the climate crisis is angry because it involves unlearning and painfully letting go of loved old beliefs and identities: pride in our technology, consumer lifestyles, neoliberal politics and victorious British history.³³ These have a ‘death grip on the world’ and are harder for older people to give up. Younger generations with more to gain and less to lose are far more active about change. Loving action may be defined less by manners than by motives: to sincerely promote valued, beloved people, beliefs and causes; to prevent hurt and harm; to try to right wrongs.

We can all shift our love more from narrow self-interest towards international compassion, so that floods in Pakistan and droughts in Somalia matter as much as our local concerns. This would hasten transitions to green energy and payment of reparations to poorer countries, which have emitted the least CO₂ but suffer most from the effects.

The Care Collective calls for care (love) to be the organising principle on every scale of life from families to ‘the world, all the people and all other species, to promote international peace, health and shared prosperity’.³⁴ Democrat Senator Cory Booker wants love to be the foundational American value. ‘Love knows that every American has worth and value.’³⁵ Mahatma Gandhi said, ‘Whatever I do is out of love’ and ‘Peace between countries must rest on the solid foundation of love between individuals... Conquer the heart of the enemy with truth and love, not by violence’.

Like gravity and truth,³⁶ love may be seen as an all pervasive, organising power. These powers are far beyond our vision and comprehension, but are also central to how we understand and live in the world. They exist at three levels.³⁷ First, we think, imagine, talk and sing about love, and experience it such as in gathered Meeting. Second, love actually works in kind, caring, creative actions. Third, love is the unseen micro-level power that motivates and guides our lives and intentions, forms our bodies and brains, impels our plans and relationships. And at macro-levels, love creates and sustains communities, social institutions, nations and ecosystems.

Love is more than reasoning or morality, wisdom, emotion or practical action. It combines them all. To follow love as the guiding compass point can reveal and help us to question our conscious and subconscious relationships and beliefs and, if necessary, change our direction.

³² Matthew 6:21.

³³ Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (John Murray, 2022).

³⁴ The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto* (Verso, 2020).

³⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cory_Booker

³⁶ Priscilla Alderson, ‘Three levels of reality, truth and faith’, *The Friend* (26 April 2018).

³⁷ Roy Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense: The Philosophy of Critical Realism* (Routledge, 2016, p.7).