

The Virtue of Love of God: A Basis for Moral Theology

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The concept of love and its related issues have been approached within intellectual, social, psychological, mystical and legal domains. Thus, the notion of love has been theoretically and practically developed throughout history.

In this article, however, the concept of love, and principally love of God, is critically analyzed and comparatively scrutinized within the context of moral discipline. There are some theoretical gratifications and practical fulfillments for this particular examination, that promote both love and morality.

First: love moves from theory to practice, and from passion to action. It is logically possible to restrict our reflection within the realm of passion and psycho-biological features. However, when we approach it within the context of moral conduct and ethical experience, love achieves the advantage of having been practiced in a factual life. In other words, the notion of love, in the field of morality, is not merely a theoretical, romantic passion, but rather an authentic, advancing attainment.

Second: love links the human destiny, man's final end and ultimate human perfection. Moral theologians have attempted to justify and strengthen the role of love in the process of human

perfection. Now, love as the best or even the only means, enables man to shape his destination and achieve perfection. Hence, the methodology of spiritual progression is a dynamic one. That is, love speaks about a point of departure, a destination, and the stages and stations which the lover must traverse in their correct order to arrive at the final destination.

In this approach, the path before man is actual and not in the least a metaphor; and this path must be followed stage by stage and station by station. Thus, in this view, the human soul is a living organism, like a child or seedling, whose perfection lies in growth and maturation which follows a particular system and order.

Third: love directs human life in a moral, virtuous, and admirable direction. Religious philosophers have, through the history of religion, tried to illuminate that love of God, as the main, unique and fundamental virtue, makes or shapes other moral virtues. It promotes and develops man towards a moral and noble individual and collective life. Within this disciplinary framework, the virtue of love of God would structure moral duties and define the human relationship with himself, with the universe and eminently with God.

Fourth: love promotes humanity toward an aesthetic ethics. Love links art, morals, aesthetics and ethics. As has been argued by some contemporary moralists, the ethical problem is how to unite with the good without illusion or fantasy; for right action and freedom are possible on the basis of our prior attention to the Good. Hence, only love can bring about such a union with the good.¹ This aesthetic unification may find expression through certain visual and linguistic expressions.

Poetry, for example, has been traditionally and historically employed by mystics and others to exhibit the virtuous features

of moral conduct by an aesthetic technique. By mentioning some Muslim mystic poets such as 'Attar, Jalaluddin Rumi and Jami, whose works are partially accessible in English and other European languages, Nicholson confirms that "to translate these wonderful hymns is to break their melody and bring their soaring passion down to earth, but not even a prose translation can quite conceal the love of Truth and the vision of Beauty which inspired them."²

This technique, besides other aesthetic techniques, has been frequently used by both Muslim and Christian mystics, poets, Sufis (in case of Muslims), and others for the presentation of their intuitive acknowledgement of pivotal and unique role of love for God in attaining the final perfection.

Another significant consequence of studying love in the context of morality is the glorious synthesis of three primary disciplines, i.e. philosophy, mysticism, and ethics. Notably, in the process of human perfection, the major developmental steps of knowledge, love and action should be profoundly taken in order. Each of these requires its own intellectual discipline, namely philosophy, mysticism, and ethics.

The philosophical discipline will supply an appropriate knowledge for reflection. The mystical discipline helps to cultivate the love that promotes and directs man towards Good. Finally, the moral discipline will help us fulfill an efficacious action for perfection.

To elaborate an analytical exploration of the subject matter, I would like to make a presentation of my understanding of the concept of love, as well as my own anticipation of the virtue of love of God, and expound it in the following disciplinary framework. I call this recommended presentation the 'Doctrine of Love.'

Doctrine of Love

The doctrine of love is based on the division of love into physical and metaphysical love. Alternatively, we may call physical love a worldly love and metaphysical love a transcendental love. These two kinds of love are totally different and oppose one another. They are different in their nature, cause, motive and end. They are surprisingly not different in objects and language, but rather have these in common.

Physical love is a worldly, natural desire caused by physical or material aspiration. This love is naturally derived from and based on a limited predicament, requiring and seeking a temporary goal. Its ultimate end is limited to and bounded by this material and physical world. It is characterized as a non-moral temperament which is counted as an anti-virtuous (rather than non-virtuous) characteristic. Hence, this kind of love is identified as an authentic root of human sins and moral vices.

Metaphysical love, conversely, is a transcendental, supernatural desire caused by a spiritual aspiration. This love is essentially derived from and directed toward an unlimited status, which demands and seeks a permanent goal. Its ultimate goal is beyond the material and physical world, and rests with a developmental, human perfection. It is characterized as a moral attitude that is counted as virtuous in essence. Therefore, this kind of love is identified as an authentic ground for human excellence and moral virtues.

Surprisingly, the objects of both physical and metaphysical love are the same. It is remarkable to mention that the most critical part of the doctrine is this part. All kinds of love offered and discussed by moralists and theologians can be placed under the umbrella of either of the two kinds of love.

In other words, love of God can be motivated and experienced as physical love or as metaphysical love. In the case of physical love, the subject naturally desires a limited, worldly and immoral inclination. Here, man loves God, not for God's sake, but for the sake of his own material, worldly and vicious egocentrism. Therefore, love of God here is not a Divine moral virtue; rather it is a means to procure a worldly, amoral accomplishment.

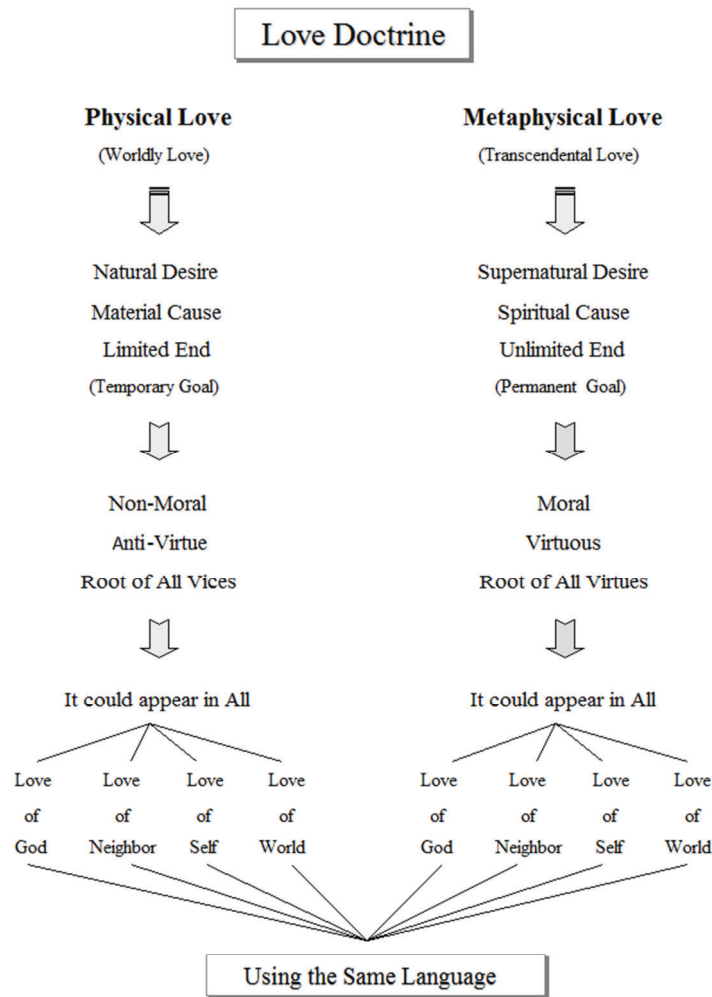
In the case of metaphysical love, in the example of love of God, the subject's supernatural desire is toward an unlimited, heavenly, spiritual inclination. Man loves God for God's sake, not for an egotistic, worldly aspiration. Hence, love of God, in this case, is an admired, moral virtue, which functions as a fundamental ground for all human righteousness and moral virtues, and directs him towards his ultimate perfection.

With respect to the linguistic phenomena of the doctrine of love, there would be another critical surprise. The fact is that there is no difference between the terminology used for the physical and metaphysical loves. There is no need, to my knowledge, to apply a metaphorical, symbolic, supernatural language for one, and a literal, experimental, and tangible language for the other.

The same terminology of love, including classical and modern with respect to the words, phrases, discourses, and expressions, could be applied for both loves. The only difference is the meaning, which has been inspired and conceived behind the applied linguistic utterances. The nature of this meaning and the way we convey it through the same language determine the type of love we anticipate in our examination.

Hence, I do not see any room for certain critical linguistic approaches to the issue of love, which has been taken seriously by recent moralists and theologians in their recognition of the religious terminological application.

The following diagram is helpful for a general comparison between the two kinds of love, with regard to the certain features we observe in the doctrine of love:



In this doctrine, the unity and conflict between the certain kinds of love deserve a special meaning and application. First of all, there is a unity among, and no conflict between, all kinds of love classified under either the physical or metaphysical love. Secondly, there is a deep conflict between each form of love from the physical-love category with every form of love from the metaphysical-love category.

For instance, there is no conflict between love of God and love of self when they are classified under one category. However, there would be a very serious conflict when we compare love of God from the metaphysical-love category, which is Divine, virtuous, and moral, with love of self from the physical-love category, which is selfishness, anti-virtue and amoral. The best statement that I found from a Western thinker, which somehow harmonizes with the above mentioned doctrine of love, quotes the Italian philosopher, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), who says:

The human will can be disposed toward God chiefly in two ways. It desires either to receive from him or to give. The first instinct is common and natural to all, for we all desire many things from God, but we do not love God or man on this account... It is only the man who gives himself back to God, that is to say who turns every thought and action to Him, who truly loves God for God's sake alone and other things because of God.... Such spirits are moved with an ineffable love to God and to each other. To Him they give themselves spontaneously as to their Father; to others most gladly as to their brothers. Whatever else goes by the name of friendship among men is nothing but robbery. True charity, as Paul the Apostle says, seeks not its own good but that of the other.³

According to this doctrine, the difference between heavenly and earthly love, as well as their relationship, has been subjectively and objectively justified. Both loves take place in this world, but the inclined motivation and the ultimate objective differs in each one. In heavenly love, man's motivation is a supernatural enthusiasm which leads him towards a transcendent object that is superior to this world. In earthly love, on the other hand, the main motivation is a material, temporal passion, which ultimately vanishes in this worldly life.

It is noteworthy that, according to this doctrine, there is a considerable difference between self-love and selfish-love; the former is positive and the latter is negative. The former is categorized under transcendental love, which is identified as the basis of all loves; whereas the latter is classified under the worldly love that is ultimately tends to egoism and the eradication of everything else, including one's self.

Ultimately, we may, as a gracious conclusion or delightful fruit of the discussion, demonstrate that the outlook of the research renders God exceedingly loveable to the extent that it amends the misinterpretation of the fearful God presented by certain theological elaboration.⁴ It is declared that, in modern times, the presentation of a terrifying God leads people either to turn away from God and deny or ignore His existence, or to continue to worship a terrifying God and avoid His condemnation and punishment.⁵ However, if we delineate an authentic illustration of divinity, like what we have partially done here in this research, it will obviously promote people not only to improve their understanding of God, His attributes, and particularly His approach towards humanity, but also to acknowledge His Compassion and Love to the extent that they will be prepared to lovingly and willingly obey and worship Him.

Furthermore, we may expound the final consideration in another way. Perhaps, as Tinder anticipates, the heart of the modern crisis is that love has lost its real object.⁶ Although love bears complexities, it has only one adequate object that is God.

In modern and postmodern times, we are frequently challenged by the crisis everywhere; particularly in moral and political dimensions of social and cultural encounters. The convincing solution that this doctrine proposed is called the 'love message' which cautions man not to love something or someone, but to change the object of love. This doctrine indicates that humanity should change the object of its love and find the real object to love.

As a matter of historical fact, this is the summons of all world religions that we hear from theologians, as well as the mystics, that if we love God appropriately, we would be able to instruct and determine our virtuous conducts not only to achieve our ultimate end and happiness, but also to settle our daily life and worldly affairs.

This commonality and sameness we hear and see here from the two lines of religion-oriented thinkers reveals one of the best and most important results of our cross-religious and cross-cultural inquiry in this research. This study has potential to shed light not only on the philosophical concept of virtue but also to foster on a better understanding of the faiths in the field of ethics. This study also illuminates a new avenue of inquiry into virtue theory and interreligious dialogue in the field of ethics, moral excellence and human perfection.

We may approach the result of this doctrine in the context of the recent critical examination of the theory of virtue. At the outset of the second section of their book, Hauerwas and Pinches

remind us that they have "no stake in defending virtue as a thing in itself."

Indeed, for the Christian, to defend virtue in that way may result in defending what is vicious. Examining the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, the authors echo one of MacIntyre's famous titles and insist:

If someone asserts that striving after virtue will bring one closer to God, Christians are obliged to ask: What virtues? And which God?⁷

As a result of this study, I would say that the unanimous response from the thinkers of both theological and mystical realms would clearly be that 'the virtue of love of God, and the God who loves and is beloved.'

Finally, I would like to close with a *hadīth* (tradition) of Imam Ali, may peace be upon him, wherein he states:

Most certainly the best and most delightful of things in Paradise is the love of God and love for the sake of God and the glorification of God. God, the Almighty and the Glorious, says "And the last of their cry shall be: 'Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.'"⁸

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1 See Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 38-39.

2 See Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: 1914) p. 106.

3 I am quoting this passage from James A. Devereux, "The Object of Love in Ficino's Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 30, Issue 2 (April-June, 1969), p. 168. Charles Nelson believes that "for all Ficino's desire to reconcile Platonism with Christianity, his concept of love is basically platonic." See Nelson, *Renaissance Theory of Love* (New York: 1958), p. 83.

4 As Anders Nygren explains, some Christian theologians have rejected both the Platonic eros or longing, and egocentric love, in which Christian gnostics saw the path to salvation. For them it is neither eros nor the agape motif can effectively bind man to God, but only the fear of punishment and the hope of reward can do that. See Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, English trans. by Philip S. Watson (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 252, 317-334, 343-348.

5 For instance, Glen Tinder has explained the problem of misunderstanding of the theological issue of fear of God and its consequences in the modern time. See Glenn Tinder, "Augustine's World and Ours," *First Things*, no. 78 (December 1997), pp. 40-41.

6 Glenn Tinder, "Augustine's World and Ours," *First Things*, no. 78 (December 1997), p. 42.

7 See Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998.

8 The hadith is in Majlisi, *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. LXVI, p. 251; the verse is in the Noble Qurān 10:10.