NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

**An Augustinian Christian Analysis of the Passions**

I have a theory about the emotions. This theory has always reflected my experience of myself and of others and seems to me to be, in certain respects, obviously true. Yet I have found in discussions with others that hardly anyone I know agrees with any part of it, if for no other reason than that it is extremely unflattering and, if taken seriously, quite worrisome as well. Nevertheless, I will make bold in this essay to present and defend this view.

My position begins from what I take to be the fundamental fact about human beings as we exist in the world and interact with each other: we are fallen. That is our condition – the human condition – and it influences, either directly or indirectly, every facet of our lives, so that no aspect of our humanity is wholly free from its influence. Failure to recognize (or, having recognized, to refuse to acknowledge) this fundamental fact and to turn to the only available remedy for it (the atoning grace of Christ) condemns us, from the Augustinian Christian point of view, to disordered, futile and ultimately worthless lives. If so, it is well worth considering on all our parts whether or not this might be the case.

In the first part of this essay I will present the Augustinian analysis of the human condition. In subsequent parts of this essay, I will apply this analysis to the appetites and then, by way of corollary, to the passions/emotions, arguing that our emotions, so analyzed, are neither reliable guides to the truth about the nature of reality, nor about the good for us, nor to the important choices we have to make in life. I will illustrate this claim by reference to two emotions that are often taken to be “positive” emotions – compassion and romantic love – and will conclude that our emotions, as they come to us from our fallen nature, are always negative, not just those that strike us intuitively as being so. So my title, “Negative Emotions” is, after all, something of a pleonasm.

I anticipate that many will be shocked, even offended, that anyone nowadays should so much as propogate, let alone defend, such views as those that follow here. I can only crave the reader’s indulgence and beg him or her to read what follows in a dispassionate manner, leaving one’s emotions out of it. Only in that case can a fair judgment be rendered, in this case as in any other case involving philosophical analysis. Even so, I also expect fairly intense intellectual resistance to these ideas. A good deal of work will be needed for this, so I had better get started.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Our Fallen Condition**

We begin from a general account of the nature of the good, one inspired by Plato but which many thoughtful Christians have seen worthy of adoption throughout the history of philosophical reflection. On this view, the standard for good is unabashedly metaphysical: the good is the ontic good, according to which goodness and being track each other, with the former being a sort of aspect or concomitant of the latter.[[2]](#footnote-2) This classic standard of goodness a) ranks things as having differential value in virtue of having different natures, with those having greater perfection having greater value, and b) judges each individual of each kind, as an instantiation of that kind, as better or worse in relation to the immanent ideal contained in its nature, so that individuals of a kind that more closely approximate that ideal are better than those that do so less closely.

The ontic good provides a foundation for normativity in at least two ways. First of all, as Jonathan Edwards puts it in his essay, *The Nature of True Virtue*, the principle of Benevolence toward Being, which states that things are to be loved (and thus pursued and selected by us) in accordance with their ontic value. This provides us with an objective standard against which we can compare our actual preferences and correct our erroneous judgments concerning what we ought to prefer. The second is that, since the ontic good for us as human beings is dictated by an ideal immanent in our nature as embodied, self-conscious rational beings, this dictates that, if we wish to be happy, flourishing beings, we need to pursue some goods over others and thus prefer those goods to others as objects of choice.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is how, on this view, we get “ought” from “is” at the meta-ethical level. From here, it is simply (!) a matter of specifying the relevant facts about what the human ideal is and how it is to be pursued in order to have a concrete ethical theory capable of serving as a standard for the particular moral judgments we make in everyday life.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This all seems relatively straightforward and perfectly consistent at the abstract level, despite not being to all tastes as a concrete basis for ethics. Why not? The Augustinian answer to this question makes reference to the notion that human beings are *fallen*. However we understand this in concrete historical terms, the basic notion here is that something has occurred in that history that results in our being alienated from our true natures as human, that is embodied, self-consciously rational, beings. Although both reason and the teachings of the Church inform us, if only we will consult them, that we ought to love God above all things, then our neighbor out of love of God, then ourselves, and lastly external material things, we find that, in fact, the order of our actual preferences, given our druthers, is precisely the opposite of this: we love material things in more than we love ourselves, our own happiness (understood and measured by our degree of possession of external material goods) in preference to others, others largely only insofar as we see them as part of or necessary to our own happiness (so understood), and God little or not at all. Our nature, as understood from the philosophical and religious perspective, and so the objective truth about what is both good for us and will make us happy, is directly and almost completely contrary to our natural bent, to what we spontaneously but erroneously think to be the good for us.

This sad fact is concretely expressed in our *disordered motivational structure*, a common feature of all human beings everywhere, regardless of culture or socialization, by means of which our concrete desires, judgments, and the behaviors flowing from those desires and judgments, are elicited and which are cause of most of the mischief in the world.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is clear from a quick review of the components of that motivational structure: appetites, desires, and emotions. We will begin with appetites.

Appetites, which we share with lower animals, are spontaneous, non-rational sources of motivation in organisms, closely tied to basic biological functions that are directly related to the survival of the organism and the species. In conscious organisms, they take the form of urgent, spontaneously arising sensations of discomfort that motivate the organism to cast about in its environment for something that will answer to that discomfort and return the organism to a state of “zero need.” Thus, the appetite for food is accompanied by hunger, for drink with thirst, and when appropriately stimulated, the sexual appetite by an urgent need to mate for reproductive purposes. In non-human animals, these appetites are for the most part well-regulated, giving the lie to the slander on our evolutionary antecedents that traces our wickedness to our “lower” or “animal” nature. For most animals in most circumstances, the attainment of “zero need” or “homeostatic equilibrium” is enough to extinguish behavior in pursuit of the objects that answer to the demands of appetite. These objects, concerning which the apprehended feelings provide no information so that animals need to be directed by unreasoning instinct to acquire them, are apprehended by them primarily (and in most cases simply) as sources of relief from discomfort, rather than as objects of desire for the sake of the pleasure they produce.

In the case of human beings, however, the apprehension of appetitive motivation is quite different. Although human beings are subject to the same biological imperatives as other organisms, their appetites are not limited simply to well-regulated pursuit of relief from distress. Instead, in human beings, the objects answering to the biological needs of the human organism are constituted as sources of pleasure and desired for the pleasure they produce. This is so much the case that human beings will often (indeed routinely) select what to eat or drink on the basis of taste and enjoyment even when they are fully aware that the choices they are making are deleterious to the end (sustaining life and health) that these appetites, when well-regulated, subserve. In the case of the human sexual appetite, we actually find that it is quite common for both men and women to pursue artificial stimulation of the sexual appetite for the purposes of putting oneself in a physiologically appropriate state to pursue the pleasures of orgasm, something rarely, if ever, observed among non-human animals. Indeed, so strong is the attraction of sexual pleasure among human beings that they are prepared to go to considerable trouble, expense, and risk in order to enjoy it, even though what one anticipates the experience will be like in one’s fantasy rarely corresponds to the reality of the experience in fact. Despite this, that simply spurs us on to seek it further somewhere else or on another occasion in a manner that seems incapable of being extinguished by repeated failure. Further, the natural end of sexual activity, as testified to both by human physiology and by the function of sexual activity in other animal species, is so far from being the explicit end of most human sexual activity that it is viewed as an unfortunate byproduct of an act we engage in, not even to gratify our appetite, but simply for the pleasure that accompanies that gratification.

These tendencies, foundational for and the primary expression of our natural bent, appear to be dominant among human beings, despite extensive knowledge of ways in which our natural bent is dysteleological and, indeed, directly contrary to the biological end for which those appetites are intended to function in the overall economy of bodily life and health. Further, instead of regulating our appetites to bring them into line with those ends, we instead attempt to find ways to evade or mitigate the deleterious effects of following our natural bent in seeking the objects corresponding to appetite. If possible, we will have our cake and eat it, too – if not, we will eat the cake anyway, and hang the consequences – at least until we actually have to suffer them!

Human beings are self-conscious rational beings. They are thus able to occurrently represent to themselves, in imagination, the various things that, from the point of view of natural bent, present themselves as sources of pleasure. Many of these are renewable, at least after an interval of time, and occurrent contemplation of them during those intervals may well create a cognitive state of *desire* – the will to repeat that experience on some further occasion. In many cases, this will is vaguely specified and amorphous, simply a kind of wish or preference. However, when taken in a context in which means and opportunity are available, desire provides psychological motivation to pursue and acquire a particular object in particular circumstances in anticipation of the pleasure that will accrue to the self by doing so. Occurrent desire will be felt in many such cases as a kind of urge or feeling that functions in a manner like that of appetitive discomfort, but which is “outward looking” – focused on the pleasure to be attained rather than on the relief of the discomfort as such. So, while the gnawing of appetite is often experienced as unpleasant, desire is accompanied by an excitement that is itself pleasurable by anticipation and in many cases, as such, a participation in the pleasure resulting from the consummation of the desire in the activity that satisfies it.

Appetite, which we share with lower animals, is not cognitive. It carries with it no knowledge or even inkling of its object, which can thus be given to an organism only by instinct or as the result of trial and error. Desire, however, is cognitive, because it makes essential reference to some external reality – thing or state-of-affairs – precisely as object answering to the subject as a source of pleasure/satisfaction. Further, it does so in circumstances in which that external reality is contemplated as something “absent” – merely as imagined, thought about, or entertained as desired and thus as not yet possessed, obtained, and enjoyed. Occurrent desire, then, requires more than mere instinct and in most cases does not involve the operation of instinct at all.[[6]](#footnote-6) More than this, desire requires our ability to contemplate that which is absent as something distinct from, but potentially present to, oneself as a necessary condition for feeling anticipatory excitement/pleasure as the motive or incentive (as Kant would call it) evoking our pursuit of that thing culminating in its possession and enjoyment. Occurrent desire, then, is something possible only for a self-conscious rational being and thus is something for which non-human animals have no capacity. The same, it turns out, holds for the emotions as well.

**Human Fallenness and the Emotions**

“Amor meus, pondus meum,” said St. Augustine – my love is my weight. What I desire, I love, and what I love I call good, or the good, or the good for me – my good, that to which the “weight” of my motivational structure carries me. But desire, whether satisfied or frustrated, concerns only that good as it as yet remains only an object to be sought. The emotions, by contrast, concern that good as something either as possessed by me or hypothetically as already in my possession.[[7]](#footnote-7) It thus concerns the good, subjectively understood, as possessed and enjoyed by myself. More than this, it concerns that state-of-affairs as something contingent, passing, and thus potentially under threat from external forces and circumstances over which one has at best limited control. Our emotional reactions, then, are of basically three basic kinds: those involving the apprehension of potential loss of my good, those constituted by my (putative) apprehension of an actual threat to my good, and those occurring in the context of the apprehension of the actual loss of my good. On this view, then, there are three “basic” emotions: fear, anger, and grief.

Although non-human animals exhibit behavior that we anthropomorphize using the descriptive language of emotion, this is only due to the fact that non-human animals share with us the primitive physiological reactions, and thus the bodily feelings, that make possible the behavioral responses by means of which we identify them as being angry, afraid, or disappointed/frustrated in some context. In human beings, emotion in the full and proper sense has further facets absent in the case of non-human animals. For human beings, emotional reactions are cognitive, both arising from occurrent beliefs and motivating certain judgments, which judgments are, in turn, both about what is going on in my world and what I should do about it. As I see it, emotional reaction in human beings – embodied, self-conscious, rational beings, have a number of distinct components.

1. One contemplates oneself, either actually or hypothetically, in relation to some good.
2. One perceives that the possession or enjoyment of that good is under threat, which threat is perceived as being either merely possible, actual, or as having been realized in fact.
3. One undergoes an involuntary physiological reaction that prepares the body for a behavioral response to what one suspects or putatively perceives to be the case.
4. This involuntary physiological reaction produces and is accompanied by a strong, unpleasant feeling that seeks expression/discharge in external behavior and which can be dissipated in no other way.
5. One is prompted to judge in accordance with one’s feelings.
6. One is prompted to act in accordance with one’s judgment.
7. Either one acts as one’s judgment prompts, or one resists doing so.

In the case of non-human animals, steps 1 and 2 are replaced by instinctual reactions triggered by sense-perception and 5 through 7 by instinctive behavioral responses dictated by what kind of unpleasant feeling the organism is experiencing. Only 3 and 4 are common to both cases. The two conditions are thus radically different from one another – so much so that I am not comfortable calling these states by the same name. Emotions, then, are possible only for human beings and other embodied, self-consciously rational beings.

At the same time, while human emotions occur in a cognitive context and evoke cognitive acts concerning both the nature of the relevant facts and what, if anything, should be done about them, emotions have a physiological basis which produces strong, unpleasant, *non-rational* feelings that primarily motivate nothing more than their external expression in and through behavior that allows us to dissipate them and *feel better* as a result. While there is more to emotion than mere feeling, feeling plays an essential and ineliminable role in the constitution of emotion even in rational beings such as ourselves.[[8]](#footnote-8) As such, only a bodily being can have emotions. It is for this reason that traditional Perfect Being theology has always rejected the idea that God has emotions, for God does not have body and thus cannot possess feelings. The same tradition, however, affirms that God is love, jealous of his prerogatives, and visits his wrath upon sinners. Thus, God can be properly described using the language of emotion even though God does not and cannot literally have emotions. This will be an important point in what follows.

Emotions are *passions*. Even though they occur in a cognitive context and give rise to cognitive states, insofar as they are essentially related to involuntary, non-rational reactions mediated by non-rational physiological states and feelings, they are something that we undergo or suffer. (“*Passio*,” the root word for our English “passion,” means “to suffer” in Latin.) More than this, even though there is an important sense in which we *are* our passions – our passional reactions to things reveals our true selves – what those passions reveal about us is not always admirable, are often things we would rather keep hidden, and can be surprising, even unintelligible to us. This will especially be the case if we are fallen, because in that case, given that we estranged from our true nature as rational beings, living the lie of self-deception will be our primary strategy for dealing with the unpleasant facts about ourselves that we want to hide from others. What better way to do this than to hide them from ourselves? And we are so good at it, too!

It is to be noted that, on this account, emotions are always focused on the self, the “I,” and always only incidentally on others, viewed as either partially constitutive of the good that has been lost or is under threat, or as a threat to that good or as responsible for that loss. Emotions are always directly about me and about others only insofar as they constitute, contribute to, or impact my perceived good. Emotions, being centered on the self and its (perceived) good, are essentially egoistic. Where the emotions are concerned, it’s *always about* ***me***. This, I have found, is the part of this theory that is most resisted by those to whom I have presented it.

Some of my emotional reactions accurately track the relevant facts, and some prompt me to behavioral reactions that are appropriate to those circumstances. Others – and these, at least judging by casual observation, are by far more common – do not and are not. Even in those cases in which our emotional reactions, the judgments they evoke, and the actions to which they prompt us are accurate and appropriate, given that they are inevitably mediated by non-rational feelings, this is at best an accidental fact about this state-of-affairs. In judging about this, either with regard to one’s own emotional reactions or those of others, the relevant questions concern not the quality of my feelings or my feeling-tone, but instead whether the putative facts are really true, whether my judgments concerning those facts are sound, and whether the actions I performed in response to that judgment were appropriate. For this reason, it is never wise to trust or just “go with” my feelings, since we have no reason whatsoever for supposing that these feelings are in any way revelatory of any truth that would justify the behavior evoked by those feelings and by means of which I purge myself of those feelings. Of course, if the doctrine of original sin is true, this will be even more the case. Again, casual observation, both of my own case and those of others, seems to confirm this beyond serious doubt.

So, long story short: if the doctrine of original sin is true, then our emotional reactions to things, both in their cognitive and conative aspects, are rooted on our disordered appetites, which in turn give rise to our largely erroneous judgments about the good for us. In turn, these false judgments concerning the good lead us to form desires that lead us to seek our happiness in the apparent rather than the actual good for us. We thus invest our ultimate concern in goods that cannot possibly answer to that description or play that role. As such, our emotional reactions, judgments, and behavior expressive of those emotional reactions, are also going to be largely false and wrong, excessive and destructive. To this extent, just as our disordered motivational system is not to be trusted and will lead us into disaster if we allow it to govern us, so too do those who “follow their hearts” and live according to the dictates of their emotions do so at serious risk to themselves and others as well. It is not responsible or morally permissible, then, to live this way.

There are at least a couple of emotions that seem, and that many people would insist, constitute obvious counterexamples to the analysis of emotion I have presented here, namely, compassion and Romantic Love. In fact, however, they do not and only appear to do so due to a certain unclarity about the nature of these emotions, an unclarity that, I think, is itself a product and a symptom of our fallenness. As such, I need to address these specific examples as a way of both illustrating and defending the account of emotions presented here.

**“Compassion”**

In discussion of the passions/emotions, what goes by the name of compassion is typically an illustration of Humian “sympathy.” Essentially, compassion is evoked by the contemplation of the sufferings of others in company with an “empathetic” reaction – we place ourselves in the position of others and realize that, if we were suffering as they do, we would desperately desire that others help us. This, in turn, evokes a strong desire to help them that is naturally connected to acts of generosity intended to relieve their suffering. When we engage in such acts, we act compassionately and thereby produce positive good in the world. This, in turn, produces a sense of self-satisfaction on account of our generosity.

Very little is needed to accommodate “compassion,” so understood, to the model of the emotions presented above. The fact that compassion so understood involves sympathetic identification with others through empathetic projection seems to give the lie to the claim that all emotions are centered on the self. Here, it seems we have a “positive” emotion, one centered on others rather than oneself. This, however, proves to be a merely superficial difference, one that we tend to distort both in important and in its positive effects. In fact, sympathetic identification is still an act of the self, and still has the self, hypothetically projected into circumstances in which it is imaginatively conceived as being under imminent threat of loss, as its primary object. “This could be me,” we think, “That starving waif could be my grandson! That abused and neglected dog could be my own!” It is only by contemplation of suffering in hypothetical relation to myself that the uncomfortable feeling arises that motivates our passional “desire” to help. This desire, in turn, reflects primarily our need to discharge the unpleasant feeling that results from identifying another’s imminent actual loss with one that I might hypothetically face or have faced on some occasion. That is precisely what our “good works” primarily accomplish, and do so for ourselves directly and for others only incidentally. At the same time, satisfying this desire to help (most often through some monetary contribution) produces accompanying feelings of self-satisfaction and self-gratulation that are generally disproportional to the likely effect of our helpful acts.

In addition, we may note that this emotionally grounded “compassion” is, in general, an extremely feeble and largely ineffective platform for engaging the suffering of the world. Out of sight, out of mind. The compassionate feelings that arise in this way are occasional, intermittent, generally of short duration. Further, although we sometimes act as these feelings prompt, we also find it quite easy to make them cease in other ways. I could adopt an orphan through Christian Children’s Fund or send nineteen dollars a month to the Humane Society – yes, I *could* do that. I could also just change the channel and watch football instead. Guess which I do – and I’ll bet you do the same. We are also adept at special pleading in our own cases, easily manufacturing excuses as to why we are individually exempted from the general principle to which we all subscribe, i.e. that we ought to help those in need. We plead poverty, our inability to help in a substantial way, and express our regret at being unable to help, in this way assuaging our consciences. I once remember one of my teachers in graduate school who told me, quite seriously, in response to some questions I had about Singer’s famous paper “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” that he never contributed to charity as a matter of principle. That, he said, was a “Christian thing,” and amounted to little more than a Band-Aid on the problem of world hunger. However, he said, he did support “political initiatives” that would deal in a systemic way with the problem of world poverty and the causes of hunger. Although I admired and respected this man, I never felt less of him than I did on that occasion. At any rate, I’m inclined to conclude that this vaunted “compassion” we put so much stock in is a pretty paltry thing, and like the so-called negative emotions, only accidentally related to any substantive good that it might evoke or lead us to accomplish.

There is a genuine form of compassion, but it is not an emotion, but rather the product of principled commitment. Suppose that a bitter, unrepentant, drug-addicted prostitute is saved from a well-earned death in the gutter and taken to one of Mother Teresa’s hospices to die instead. The young nursing sister assigned to her case may find caring for her quite a trial. However, if she resolves to care for this person, respond to her in a loving way, honoring the intrinsic value and dignity she possesses due to her being made in the image and likeness of God, and treats her accordingly then she acts compassionately toward that dying prostitute, despite the fact that this person has done everything in her power to deface that image and present herself as a living blasphemy in the eyes of her Creator. No mere sentimental feeling can steel someone to undertake such a task – but it can be, and is sometimes done so, and done so successfully, without the support of any sentimental feeling whatsoever.[[9]](#footnote-9) Indeed, one can even do so in the face of feelings of regret or disapproval toward the object of our loving care. Needless to say, one is more likely to feel relief rather than satisfaction at end of such a trial, but this in no way detracts from its beauty and moral worth.

The etymological root of compassion is the Latin *com passio*, which means “to suffer with.” True compassion is content to wait with the sick and the dying, to hold their hands, to simply be present with them when all hope is gone and there is nothing more we can do – something that it is extremely difficult to do and quite beyond the power of any merely sentimental feeling to sustain. It is a sharing in the suffering of others which, of course, involves our suffering along with them, something that most of us are not willing to do. As such, it is not surprising that the sentimental compassion I have spoken of above is often invoked as a ground for doing exactly the opposite of what true compassion dictates – as a pretext for “relieving the suffering” of the ill, the unfit, those dying in pain, and those whom we judge to possess an inadequate “quality of life” – by putting them to death, for which we have coined the felicific euphemism “euthanasia.” Although relieving the pain of the euthanized is our given pretext, what we are more likely directly focused on is our own suffering, which only the death of its cause can relieve us and which we value more, at that point, than the life of person to be put to death, at least in part because our emotional resources creating a sentimental attachment to that person have been exhausted. In many cases, the appeal to the good of relieving suffering covers even less savory motives. The very fact that we feel the need to make such a feeble pretext to disguise our real motives is proof of our bad faith and the paucity of feeling-based compassion. True compassion involves suffering, freely accepted and endured for the sake of the other as an expression of genuine love of that other, and most of us are not up to it. Only the grace of Christ can make us capable of it.

**Romantic Love**

The only true thing that I ever heard Ayn Rand say was that romantic love is a selfish emotion.[[10]](#footnote-10) For most us, “romantic love” and “love” mean pretty much the same thing. Although when pressed we recognize other forms of love, such as the love between parents and children, between friends, and even in some sense love for all humankind, as genuine forms of human love, we still tend to think that romantic love is the epitome of human love. Certainly, the bond between those who are in love with each other and are thus lovers being the most intimate, intense, exciting and so most desirable. All of us want it and most of us, especially those of us who have experienced it, would not want to live without it. Nearly every song and poem extols it, promotes its value, and almost every story and novel glorifies the sufferings and even the tragedies associated with this emotion. Given all of this, surely I can’t be seriously proposing to deny that romantic love is a positive, and indeed, intrinscially life-enhancing emotion essential to a complete life!

Sorry, that’s precisely what I intend to suggest, without denying that romantic love has its own proper value and role in human life, though one much less central than poets, novelists, and songwriters have tended to assign it.

Although romantic love often has its origin in sexual attraction – indeed, it is quite rare for one to fall in love with someone that one finds repugnant or contemptible when contemplated as a sexual partner – it is more than this. In romantic love, what one most desires is not the other person’s body, but instead his or her soul. One desires the same interest, affection, and desire for personal intimacy on the part of the other that one feels for and wishes to confer on that other. Typically, feelings of romantic love arise from mere proximity, quite independently of any deep acquaintance with the object that evokes them or any suggestion of similar interest on the part of that other. For this reason, romantic feelings of this kind, though powerfully motivating, are also accompanied by other emotions – fear (of rejection), jealousy, incipient despair, and so on – as well as general confusion concerning what, if anything, to do about them. Such feelings can also raise moral issues, which increases the “agony” associated with “being in love,” especially with an inappropriate object (e.g. another person’s spouse.) Despite the suffering involved in being in love, however, people not only easily fall under its spell, but even fantasize about it. As depicted in literature, movies, and so on, the greater the drama associated with romantic love, the better able it is to get the endorphins, and the tears, flowing.

Even so, feelings of romantic love motivate us to seek their consummation in an actual romantic relationship with the other. Romantic love without a requiting response on the part of the other is felt as an urgent need or lack that only such a response can fill and (at least at that moment) without which one’s future happiness is impossible. As such, one is driven to “declare oneself,” to make protestations of love, to associate with and cultivate the friendship of the other, invite the other on dates, and so on, as a prelude and means to winning the affection of the beloved. Once again, then, the self and its “needs” (i.e. keenly felt wants) are at the focus. The other is viewed primarily as an object, as something that complements, completes, or answers to my wants and desires precisely in my possession and enjoyment of their similar affections toward us. Thus, in mutually shared, requited romantic love there is the mutual experience of “completion” in another. Yet this is and remains egoistic on the part of both of the lovers, now in love with each other. To use a crude metaphor, romantic love is the emotional equivalent of mutual masturbation.

Romantic love, then, fits quite comfortably into the general account of the emotions presented above. It is especially to be noted that romantic love is accompanied by strong, visceral reactions apprehended by us as strong, physiologically based feelings associated with the production of adrenalin and the flow of endorphins in the brain. So much is this the case that many people associate romantic love with “being in love,” i.e. being subject to these, strong, invasive feelings capable in many cases of affecting our appetite for food, disturbing our sleep, producing loss of focus and the ability to concentrate, and so on. These feelings are difficult to subdue or ignore; in most cases, they cannot simply be dismissed by an act of will. For those who identify love with being in love, and being in love with having these physiologically-based feelings, the inevitable, because physiologically-based, loss of these feelings is apprehended by many as proof that one is no longer in love with the person whose presence previously invoked those feelings, and thus as a reason to terminate one’s “relationship” with the other.

Both sexual attraction and romantic love have a role to play in bringing us outside of ourselves. First, they are an assault on the illusion of self-sufficiency that many fledgling (and in our time, eternally juvenile) adults regard as somehow ideal. Both powerfully motivate even the most selfish and self-centered among us to seek and to value others as necessary for our own happiness and to find interaction with them a major source of that happiness. In so doing, we thus both integrate them into our lives and become integrated into theirs as well, making us mutually indispensable to one another, at least for a period of time, and when that time is up, to seek to renew that same intimacy with someone else. The difficulty, however, is that relationships that are arrested either in the gratification of the sexual appetite or in the continued enjoyment of physiologically-based feelings of “being in love” fail to attain the end that they promise and portend, and should motivate us to further pursue, thus defeating the pursuit of the end from which they draw their positive value for human life and happiness. Worse than this many people, especially nowadays, choose to arrest their interaction with others at the first or second of these levels of ingression into full and complete relationship with others, whether out of fear of further intimacy or by deliberately choosing relationships that cannot, by their nature, transcend the limitations of either one or both of these incomplete expressions. When done deliberately, intentionally, and with full recognition/acceptance of these consequences, one acts culpably as well.

There is, of course, a genuine form of love between persons, which transcends feeling and actualizes the end to which both sexual attraction and romantic love tend but are incapable of achieving on their own. This is genuine other-love, in which the beloved person is not an object, but instead is loved for his or her own sake and in which one’s earthly happiness is centrally constituted by awareness of the happiness of the other. In turn, the happiness that makes me happy is no mere awareness that the other person is getting what he or she wants out of life, which after all is still an egoistic standard for personal happiness, but instead awareness of a shared, mutual happiness resulting from the subordination of one’s personal desires and goals to something greater than either of the persons taken individually. In such a relationship, the energy of both persons is focused on a mutually shared project jointly constituted by the deliberate choice and intentional action of such persons taken as full partners in this enterprise, even if a natural division of labor requires that each contributes in a different way or through executing a different role in the partnership. Anything less, of course, deviates from the ideal and to that extent, misses the mark, stopping short of the perfect happiness possible through relationship with another person.

In such a relationship friendship, affection, mutual support, security, and a sense of being valued by the other in many ways and aspects of our being will typically be present. However, none of these is essential to genuine other-love, even if they are typical expressions and concomitants of it. At the same time, each and all of the above can be present in relationships that are completely toxic and productive of unspeakable evils, both to others and the lovers themselves. Such relationships, then, need not be characterized by any merely physiologically-based feelings between those so related, nor any merely sentimental attachments they may have to one another.

So, then, where *does* the foundation for this sort of mature love come from? Since I have already played my hand in my introduction, one might well suppose that my response will be that it comes from outside the persons themselves, and that its source is ultimately supernatural. If you do suppose that, then you suppose correctly. It is the love of God, given as a gracious gift of God and mutually shared by the lovers, that makes true, deep, lasting, and genuine love possible between persons. That’s the secret to true love and a happy life.

Disappointed? Sorry. Disgusted? Too bad. Angry? Tough! In response, I have nothing further to add, except to humbly and sincerely suggest that it might be a good idea for you to ask yourself “Why do I feel this way?” and to consider whether these negative emotional reactions to this idea could possibly be justified. The rest is up to you.

1. It is to be noted that I have already done a good bit of this work elsewhere, in other essays, so I will indulge the fault of referring the reader to my other essays for analysis and defense of views that here, for limitations of space and time, I will be taking for granted, despite their debatable character. I apologize in advance for any irritation and inconvenience this may cause on the reader’s part. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Here we go! I have explored and defended this idea in my paper “Happiness: A Preliminary Inquiry,” also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Again, see my essay, “Desire, Love, and Happiness,” also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I explain and defend this, as well as advocate a particular account of the concrete human good, and in a way that does not depend on the metaphysics of the ontic good that I am here advocating, in my *Primer of Modern Virtue Ethics*, Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 1995. That the approach taken there converges on the same concrete account as the one briefly adumbrated here I regard to be a strength rather than a weakness in that work. At the same time, however, my older self now regards this work of my youth with a gimlet eye, and if I were, like Augustine, to issue a *Retractiones*, I would have to condemn this book as insufficiently imbued with an awareness of original sin and our consequent inability to successfully acquire virtue in the Aristotelian fashion, simply by embracing the human ideal and acquiring virtue through assiduous practice. We possess too much weakness of will to succeed in doing this. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *En passant*, it will not do to blame our disordered appetites and unruly emotions solely on socialization. The idea that we are innately good and only go bad due to bad socialization leaves unexplained how bad socialization is possible in the first place, given that we are “naturally good.” It is far more reasonable to suppose that our practices of socialization reflect, and are the product of, our disordered motivational system, not the other way round. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There are mixed cases. For example, the sexual appetite in human beings on its part operates to periodically motivate the pursuit of and participation in sexual activity. However, there is in addition an independently constituted sexual desire which motivates the pursuit of sexual activity, even in cases where, so to speak, the flesh is weak and needs artificial stimulation in order to attain physical arousal. It is often enough, in such cases, simply to fantasize about sex in order to become aroused, in which case, the motivation to seek and participate in sexual activity is already a participation by anticipation in the pleasure attending desire satisfaction. By contrast, the quite independent promptings of the sexual appetite are generally felt as a feeling of discomfort or unrequited need only on occasions on which we refuse its blandishments or after a prolonged period of sexual deprivation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Envy, for example, is more than simply a strong desire to possess what others have. It is instead a desire to possess it in preference to the others who actually possess it now, on the ground that they are somehow undeserving, unappreciative, or wasteful of those good things, which would be so much better appreciated and managed by ourselves. It involves the comparison of two states-of-affairs and embodies the judgment that the actual state of things is unjust or suboptimal. Envy, then, always involves resentment of other persons, whom we see as impacting our own happiness in some negative way – one quite compatible with our lacking any sort of deprivation or privilege that we might think should accrue to us and quite independently of any intent on their parts to do so. It doesn’t matter how much we have – we want theirs. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. But see below – not all rational beings are subject to emotion. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is not a case of “acting from duty,” as would be the case if a nursing sister were to undertake to care for the dying prostitute on the pretext that she was just doing her job or obeying the will of her superiors. There is virtue in this, but to do this is not to act from love. This is what the other nursing sister does, so that only she truly acts in accordance with our Savior’s injunction to love our neighbor. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In an interview with Phil Donahue aired many years ago on television. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)