Draft copy prior to publication in:
Love, Justice, and Autonomy: *Philosophical Perspectives* edited by Rachel Fedock, Michael Kühler, and T. Raja Rosenhagen. New York: Routledge (2020).

Love, Activism, and Social Justice

Barrett Emerick

Abstract

This paper analyzes the relationship between love and social justice activism, focusing in particular on ways in which activists rely on either the union account of love (to argue that when one person is oppressed everyone is oppressed), the sentimentalist account of love (to argue that overcoming injustice is fundamentally about how we feel about one another), or love as fate (to argue that it is in love's nature to triumph over hatred and injustice). All three accounts, while understandable and attractive, are seriously problematic, as they tend either to obscure important differences in the ways that various groups are socially situated or to enable inaction by trusting that justice is inevitable. Alternative, deeper interpretations of each account (and their relationships to activism) are explored.

"I am more and more convinced that true revolutionaries must perceive the revolution, because of its creative and liberating nature, as an act of love."[i]
– *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* – Paulo Freire

It's common for those who are concerned with countering injustice to appeal to love as a remedy.[ii] My project here is to think about the relationship between love and social justice activism, focusing in particular on ways in which activists rely on popular versions of traditional theoretical accounts of love, or on claims that can be illuminated by those theoretical accounts. I will focus on three in particular – what I call the union, sentimentalist, and fate accounts of love, respectively.

I'll argue that all three, while appealing, can be seriously problematic when interpreted through too shallow a lens, as they tend either to obscure important differences in the ways that various groups are socially situated or to overlook the ways in which injustice can be structural. They also encourage inaction by suggesting that individuals' responsibility is adequately discharged simply by being differently oriented to oppressed others or by letting things unfold naturally.

None of this is to suggest that love has no place in social justice or in activists' efforts. Indeed, I follow Martin Luther King Jr. in claiming that we ought to be "extremists for love."[iii] But, that means rejecting empty platitudes that obscure structural social difference and going well beyond Pollyanna-style optimism that love is inevitably fated to secure justice in the long run. In short, though love is indeed valuable in working to achieve social justice, it crucial that we be clear about to what that value amounts. It is my aim here to try to achieve some of that clarity.

In focusing on injustice I'll not focus on the demands of interpersonal morality. I'll adopt Iris Marion Young's account of oppression – understanding it to be synonymous with injustice – specifically with regard to two important features of her view. The first is that oppression is a structural phenomenon that applies primarily to groups and only derivatively to individuals in virtue of their group membership.[iv] Indeed, as Young argues much of our identities are "thrown" onto us and we find ourselves members of social groups, often involuntarily. Moreover, structural oppression is part of what causes that thrownness; you might well come to understand that part of what it means to be gendered or raced, to be able-bodied or disabled, to be of one nationality or cultural group, is determined by your social positioning relative to others. In short, part of what it means to say that oppression is structural is to say that it non-voluntarily helps to determine who we are. Second, part of what it means to say that oppression is structural is that it does not require particular perpetrators who overtly aim to oppress others. Indeed, few people in contemporary society likely have the power to affect whole social groups. (Heads of state, religious organizations, large corporations, etc., might all be exceptions to this claim.) Young's point is that, in general, we err if we think that eliminating oppression is as simple as eliminating individual bad actors or their actions. Instead, oppression is a part of the very fabric of contemporary social arrangements and is the kind of thing that can exist in an otherwise well-meaning and liberal society.[v]

By way of terminological definitions: I'm going to use the term 'activist' very broadly to refer to those who aim to change social arrangements for the better. (Think, for instance, of those who after the 2016 U.S. election adopted the term 'resistance' – either claiming to be a member of "the resistance" or using the hashtag "#resist" on bumper stickers or social media.) Obviously, this

definition refers to a huge collection of people, many of whom might not think of themselves as activists, and some of whom might think of themselves as activists but whom we might want to exclude. My main reason for casting the net so wide is for ease of language and to be able to talk about both those who create hashtags or bumper sticker slogans, and those who protest and engage in direct action. But, I should say that this is primarily aimed at the former: at well-meaning, usually privileged folks who are concerned about social justice but who stay pretty superficial, both in act and analysis. My aim is not to attack those folks. Indeed, for reasons I'll unpack below the motivation to "resist" the global rise of fascism – literal Nazis marching in the streets – and the horror of such a display is totally understandable. But, simply labeling one's self a part of "the resistance" is of course not enough to actually oppose or counter such horrors. My aim here is not to tell people that they *ought* to engage in such efforts but is instead to help unpack what doing so amounts to for those who sincerely claim to bear such commitments. I'll argue that some uses of 'love' obscures just what making good on such commitments entails.

Finally, I want to be clear that I do not intend this accounting of love and its relationship to the achievement of social justice to be exhaustive. Indeed, love is a concept both broad and deep, with multiple meanings across cultures with deeply important personal implications, if not religious or cosmological implications, for most people. So, I want to stress that my goal here (despite its curmudgeonly undertones) really is to be constructive. Following Marilyn Friedman, philosophers rarely seem so silly as when they try to write analytically about something as central to human welfare and meaning-making as love.[vi] It's easy for such work to appear bloodless and reductionist in a way that utterly ignores the significance of love itself. I have no interest in engaging in such reductionism, or of writing about love in a way that is utterly devoid of poetry. Nevertheless, I think there is value in turning an analytical lens towards the concept precisely because there is something of real significance to the relationship between love and social justice. Indeed, as someone who strives to be an "extremist for love" it's my aim to try to achieve some clarity about that relationship – to clear away some distracting underbrush – in order to enable it to flourish.

Part 1 – Love as Union

The first account of love I'll consider is sometimes called the union, merger, or "federation" view. Developed notably by Robert Nozick and Marilyn Friedman, the union account says that to love someone involves extending the boundaries of the self, thereby creating a new entity – a "we" – in addition to the two already existing individuals.[vii] You share in the fate of the one you love; when things go well or badly for the other there is a meaningful sense in which they also go well or badly for you.[viii] And, since love changes who you are, it affects what you perceive and how you experience the world.[ix]

Both Nozick and Friedman talk about such merger primarily in terms of romantic love, but there is nothing in principle that prevents us from understanding the same expansion of the self to include those with whom we have non-romantic relationships. In her article, "You Mixed? Racial Identity Without Biology," Sally Haslanger describes her experience (as a white woman) of adopting and parenting two black children. Over time, her perceptions and experiences of the world changed. She says, "Racism is no longer just something I find offensive and morally objectionable; I experience it as a personal harm. There is an important sense in which a harm to my kids is a harm to me; by being open to the harm, I am more fully aware of the cost of racial injustice for all of

us."[x] Since the boundaries of her identity are now broadened to include her children, when they are harmed, she is harmed as well.

If someone only loves people who occupy social locations similar to their own, it is no surprise when they fail to recognize oppressive social structures or ideologies. In this way love can be transformative; though it is not guaranteed, truly loving someone who is differently socially located can help motivate profound shifts of one's perceptual abilities.

So far I've been talking about the union view of love in terms of interpersonal relationships. Can it be applied more broadly to refer to social groups rather than individuals? Does it make sense to say that you love (are part of a "we" with) a whole group of people, many of whom you have never met and will never meet? Even if we think those challenging ontological questions can be answered adequately, there are other equally serious worries we might have.

Consider that some activists (at least those who create hashtags and bumper stickers) rely on the concept of merger or union by making use of slogans like, "We're all in this together". Others claim something like: "When one person is oppressed everyone is oppressed." Perhaps here they riff off of King who said in his famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."[xi] Environmental activists create the bumper sticker slogan that says, "We're all downstream", recognizing that pollution and climate change are global phenomena that affect everyone, and so everyone has a stake in combatting them. They might here be following Deep Ecologists like Warwick Fox who claimed that "The reason we should care about another's fate is not merely because it affects us, but because they are us."[xii] This claim is an extension of the position's ontological holism, which breaks down boundaries between objects altogether[xiii].

These are attractive sentiments; it's compelling to find solidarity and unity in thinking about oppressive social structures, since it's often the case that oppression operates by way of isolation and division. I have two concerns about such sentiments. The first is that each of these claims obscure real and significant differences in social position. We might all "be downstream" from corporate pollution, in that everyone faces some toxic elements in at least some food they eat or air they breathe, but some people are more downstream than others. Climate change is indeed a global phenomenon that will affect every living person, but of course some people will be (and already have been) vastly more affected by it than others. If you can afford to access food that is more (rather than less) free of toxic pollutants, if you can afford to live in an area that has cleaner air, then even though there might not be any food or any air that's perfectly clean, there is a world of difference between what you consume and what others who don't have that economic freedom can afford to consume.[xiv]

Furthermore, as I write this, the COVID-19 pandemic is ravaging the planet. As a great many people struggle with the economic, psychological, and physical costs of "social distancing" and having to "shelter in place" it's common to hear that "we're all in this together." As with climate change, of course the nature of a pandemic is that we *are* all affected by the virus in one way or another. However, when you contrast news reports of celebrities receiving excellent treatment for the virus with the staggering lack of adequate treatment (and even of tests) for the virus that will

result in hundreds of thousands of avoidable deaths, it makes crystal clear that in reality we are *not* all in this together in the same way.

In short, my first worry with the focus on union or merger, when taken up by well-meaning activists who aim to stress solidarity, is that in doing so they embrace sameness of social position (or at least a framework that makes it harder to recognize difference of social position) and that doing so not only fails to achieve the goals activists set for themselves (the promotion of justice) but can positively hinder it.[xv]

One common, underlying truth to each of the slogans above is that they recognize that humans are deeply vulnerable and profoundly social beings. Consider the appeal to "ubuntu" – following largely from Archbishop Desmond Tutu. One common definition says that 'ubuntu' means "I am because we are" or "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity."[xvi] Ubuntu is a rich and complicated concept that has much to recommend it. Nothing I'll say here is intended to imply that it should be rejected. However, as it stands that definition is easy to misuse.

Consider as an alternative definition of ubuntu Antjie Krog's view which she analyzes as "interconnectedness-towards-wholeness," which understands persons to be importantly interconnected so that, "one can only become who one is, or could be, through the fullness of that which is around one."[xvii] Both definitions reverse the order of the traditional Western account of the relationship between individuals and communities. Instead of focusing first on individuals and then recognizing the way that they make up communities, we instead start with the community and think about ways that they constitute individuals.

Finally, though not specifically about ubuntu, consider King's famous claim that "In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality."[xviii]

Each of these claims is consistent with Young's analysis of social groups which recognizes that part of who we are is thrown on to us; that the social groups of which we are members help to determine our identities, often without our consent. I am very sympathetic to the claim that people are mostly socially constructed beings and that we all become who we are always via social connection with others. However, despite our profoundly social nature we should resist a conclusion that blurs the lines between individuals altogether, not only because (as I've been arguing) some people are more "downstream" than others) but also because the focus on being bound up in the same circumstances precludes from the beginning the possibility of exit from those circumstances, which is often what oppressed people want or need. Some people don't *want* to be "in this together"; indeed, very often the aim of liberatory efforts is to help oppressed people to no longer be in oppressive relation to others and to escape social positions of domination or subordination. Sometimes such escape is impossible. But, sometimes escape *is* possible; sometimes oppressed groups *can* leave those who contribute to or benefit from their oppression behind and not continue to be interconnected with them. We can agree that we are all interconnected with others, and that through that interconnectedness we might be able to become

more full and complete people, and deny that any particular relationship (in this case that of the oppressed and the privileged) ought to be maintained.

This point is seen more clearly through an interpersonal lens. Though I won't argue for it here, I believe that we all have duties not only to promote the welfare of others but also to promote our own welfare.[xix] One way to satisfy that duty might be to avoid interconnectedness with those who are harmful. In short, socially-constructed though we may be, we are capable of choosing (at least some of the time) who to be interconnected with and we satisfy our self-regarding duties by exiting those relationships of interconnectedness that do not promote our welfare. The same is true when viewing things structurally: sometimes what justice requires is for groups *not* to continue to interact or be bound up with each other, for colonizing countries to leave, for companies to stop polluting, for capitalism to stop disrupting local economies, etc. In short: we should be reluctant to embrace too deeply the claim that "we're all in this together" because sometimes the best way forward is for someone to be able to jettison harmful others from their lives.

One might object that I am being overly optimistic in thinking that exit is possible, given how thoroughly interwoven are the various systems of oppression in our profoundly unjust world. Though one might be able (some of the time) to exit harmful interpersonal relationships (and to *not* be "in this together" with particular agents of oppression), in the world as it is there might not be a place to which one could escape from white supremacy, sexism, and capitalism (and the myriad ways in which they relate, build off of, and exacerbate each other). I don't deny this. Nevertheless, it's important that we remain critical of the slogan that we're all in this together, since our goal should be not to coexist within oppressive systems but to overthrow those systems. The goal should not be to find a way for rich people and poor people to get along; instead we should aim for the abolition of poverty and wealth and the economic systems that make such disparity possible. Return to the COVID-19 pandemic. If we are to take away from the fact that the wealthy and powerful are "in this together" with everyone else, we lose some of the conceptual space that we need to overthrow a system that privileges the wealthy in such circumstances. Thinking that we are all in this together entrenches the existence of that system by encouraging us to focus on how to operate within it, rather than to challenge it.

So, the superficial account of merger is problematic because it obscures important features of the social world that need to be clear. And, the deep account of merger (relying on the ontological claim about our socially constructed nature) is problematic because it seems to obscure the possibility of severing oppressive relationships between groups or of challenging the oppressive systems themselves. Is there another way forward?

Consider U.S. presidential candidate Bernie Sanders' conclusion to a speech when he asked the crowd: "Are you willing to fight for that person who you don't even know as much as you're willing to fight for yourself?" he asked. "Are you willing to fight for young people drowning in student debt even if you are not? Are you willing to fight to ensure that every American has health care as a human right even if you have good health care? Are you willing to fight for frightened immigrant neighbors even if you are native born?"[xx] Sanders is here calling people to be willing to fight on behalf of strangers – those they do not know and will never know. He therefore cannot be endorsing the type of union account of love that relies on intimacy and close connection. He also doesn't suggest that people ought to fight on behalf of others who are similarly socially

situated; indeed, in each example he asks if the crowd would fight for others who are oppressed even if they themselves are privileged. This, it seems to me, is calling for real and meaningful political solidarity that does not erase difference but recognizes that social structures position some people hierarchically relative to others.[xxi]

To be clear, I am not suggesting (nor, I take it, was Sanders suggesting) that privileged folks ought to jump in to organizing work without understanding the implications of their efforts, nor should they do so in a way that centers attention on them or refocuses the larger narrative around their efforts or agency. Following Linda Alcoff, I'm arguing that privileged folks ought to "wherever possible aim to speak with rather than for"[xxii] others – to not make the conversation about them, but to ensure that those who might otherwise be easy to ignore, and with whom they are in deep solidarity, are able to speak and be heard.[xxiii]

Few write so beautifully about love and its relationship to activism as Paulo Freire in his classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* In it he argues that what he calls dialogue or revolutionary and liberatory remaking of the world "Cannot exist in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself… Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause – the cause of liberation.[xxiv] Later, he argues that "Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture… [T]rue solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the oppressive reality which has made them these 'beings for another'."[xxv] But, being in true solidarity is not mere endorsement of a political position or concern for/caring about the situation of others. Instead, what Freire calls for, and what true solidarity involves, is that privileged people should be "Accomplices, not allies."[xxvi] I take this at least to mean that privileged people ought not be a bystander or superficial support from the sidelines for those who are doing the actual liberatory work, but should instead be deeply invested in that work in a way that both implicates them and leaves them exposed to penalty or sanction. It does not imply hierarchy or separateness, where one person fights for (and is the hero of) another, but instead means working side by side in a horizontal relationship that avoids maintaining a relationship where one party is subordinate (because one party needs saving).[xxvii]

In short: the deep rather than shallow union account of love enables genuine collaboration between parties rather than mere support from the sidelines. But, even then it should always do so self-critically in a way that aims to avoid reinscribing power relations that center already privileged voices and perspectives while continuing to marginalize others. One way to do this is for privileged activists to make their aim to promote the autonomy of those who have less power. Marilyn Friedman defines autonomy as "reflecting on one's deeper wants, values, and commitments, reaffirming them, and behaving and living in accordance with them even in the face of at least minimal resistance from others."[xxviii] This conclusion goes beyond simply asking how to achieve the goals that oppressed others would autonomously pursue, but to help create the conditions where oppressed others are able to act autonomously in the first place.[xxix] Indeed, when we recognize (following Young) that oppression is structural, our aim should be to transform social circumstances to enable autonomous action.[xxx]

Part 2 – Love and Sentiment

The second type of love that is sometimes employed by activists regards the attitudes we take up towards others – most notably towards our adversaries. I call this account the "sentimental" account of love, and I take it to have at least two features.

The first is that love is fundamentally affective or attitudinal; it's about how we feel or are oriented towards one another, and the fundamental problem with politics or social arrangements more generally is that we aren't oriented towards each other in the rights ways. The second feature, born from the first, is that it calls us to harken back to an earlier time when people were simply kinder, more patient, more willing to work with and understand those who hold different perspectives, and more concerned with decency, civility, and respectful citizenship than they were within the divisive tribalism we now face.

As an example of the sentimental account of love, consider Gandhi's famous claim that one should "be the change you want to see in the world." There are at least two ways to interpret what that means, one shallow, and one deep. I'll turn to the deep meaning shortly, but for now I take it that, when adopted superficially, what this claim amounts to is simply that everyone needs to be nicer to each other, that small acts of kindness when added together can be revolutionary, and that we all ought to find something to like or value about those with whom we disagree.

Sometimes those who employ the sentimentalist account of love and who make this kind of argument do so by appealing to King's repeated calls for us to love our enemy. And, of course he did – but the kind of love he called for was not reducible to mere sentiment.[xxxi] King drew the traditional distinction between three types of love and then argued repeatedly and across many sermons and speeches for the last: agape, which he defined as creative, redemptive goodwill toward everyone. Agape requires that we recognize the spark of divinity in all people, believe in their capacity in every moment to go in a new direction, and always to hope that they will do so.

This forward-looking pursuit of positive change in your enemy is not the same thing as finding something to like about the other, nor does recognizing the spark of divinity require that you feel positively about them. Indeed, King notes in multiple texts that it's possible to love without liking the other person at all. Instead, it is precisely because agape is forward-looking that it sets demands for the other, not to take them as they are and find something to appreciate or value about them, despite their terrible politics or past actions, but to expect them to transcend their old ways and become better.

Note also that this does not imply that the loving activist ought to be willing to work together with their adversary to find common ground. Indeed, when dealing with fascists or Nazis there may be no common ground to find, nothing with which to be patient. This is perhaps in tension with the Gandhian tradition of nonviolence which starts from the fallibilist assumption that no knowledge is perfect and that everyone has something to say so we ought to be open to engaging in dialogue or argumentation with those whom we oppose.[xxxii] Indeed, I think we've all heard quite enough from the Nazis and members of the Klan and there's nothing more to learn from them (at least regarding things like race).

Much ink has been spilled in the last few years debating not only whether it's ok to "punch Nazis" but whether we ought to engage in dialogue with "the other side," and whether we ought to "reach across the aisle" to find common ground with interlocutors with whom we disagree. I won't explore the first question (when physical violence is justified) and I won't settle any debate about the limits and requirements of civil discourse here (though I have written about it elsewhere[xxxiii]). However, I do want to spend some time exploring the claim that activists ought to be motivated by love, or that love ought to guide their actions, and that both suggest that we ought to be nice or kind to our enemies. In other words, even if you agree that we don't need to "hear out" the other side, you might still think we need to "work with" the other side, or to be willing to compromise. And, in particular, you might take the sentimental account of love to mean that, at the end of the day, we simply need to be loving towards each other, and that means being civil or nice to each other.

It is obviously true that there are times, strategically, where compromise is called for, in which you make concessions on some points or in negotiating certain outcomes but judge those concessions to be worthwhile, since making them serves some larger end. I cannot here specify when such compromise is called for, since doing so would require real-world knowledge of particular political gains that activists anticipate they would secure by making such concessions. Instead, my point here is to note that when people invoke King (or Christianity, or vaguely Christian norms more broadly) when calling for us all simply to be nicer to and more civil towards one's adversary, they fail to remember what I noted at the outset, which is that King calls not for moderation, but for extremism, not for compromise, but for the defeat of injustice wherever it lives. There is no reason whatsoever for thinking that the kind of love King was after – agape – means being either merely nice or civil.

Consider two recent cases of this kind of niceness and civility, both of which might (when pressed) get bound up with a more foundational commitment to being loving. In 2019, comedian and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres was roundly criticized for being friends with former U.S. President George W. Bush. The next day DeGeneres addressed the controversy on her show saying, "I'm friends with George Bush. In fact, I'm friends with a lot of people who don't share the same beliefs that I have. Just because I don't agree with someone on everything doesn't mean that I'm not going to be friends with them," Ellen concluded. "When I say, 'Be kind to one another,' I don't mean only the people that think the same way that you do. I mean, 'Be kind to everyone, it doesn't matter.'"[xxxiv] What could be wrong with universal kindness? And don't we, after all, "Defeat our enemies when we make them our friends"[xxxv]? Isn't the way to bring about a world devoid of violence and conflict to regard everyone else *not* as an adversary to be opposed but as someone with whom you can watch a football game?

Poor George W. Bush; just a few weeks later his friendship with former First Lady Michelle Obama also caused public scrutiny. In an interview on The Today Show Obama said of Bush: "Our values are the same. We disagree on policy but we don't disagree on humanity. We don't disagree about love and compassion. I think that's true for all of us."[xxxvi] What Obama meant is unclear, and to be fair, she made that statement in an interview (and not as a prepared statement) so it might not have been as carefully worded as it otherwise would have been. But, to try to achieve some of that clarity now, and with an eye towards charity, it seems like the best interpretation we can offer is that both Bush and Obama are committed to being loving in two capacities: the first is to do so

within interpersonal relationships; the second is to do so more broadly and impersonally. We can grant that the first is true of Bush, that he loves his family, friends, and the members of his church, for instance. But, Bush is a former two-term president of the United States of America whose actions in that office caused innumerable, hugely significant, and enormously horrific global effects. To think of Bush as manifesting the shared value of love only in an interpersonal sense is at best to fail to say anything interesting about love itself and at worst to dramatically distort our understanding of the issue at hand.

Consider an analogue: it is common in the U.S. for politicians to claim that we ought to apply the same principles to the U.S. economy that families do to their own budgets; in short, they claim that we ought to have "kitchen table" conversations about how to not overspend as a country. This is, on but a moment's reflection, an utterly ridiculous comparison to make, since the two budgets are many orders of magnitude different both in size and complexity (not to mention that the economy is what sets the terms for personal financial decisions to be possible in the first place). Obama makes the same error when thinking about the ways in which she and Bush share the same values: his commitment to the value of love clearly did not extend to the brown bodies that he bombed in Iraq and Afghanistan, nor to the LGBTQ bodies whose rights he undermined and violated, nor to those bodies who have been and will be destroyed by climate change, and on, and on. Those are not just disagreements about "policy"; if someone can do the things that Bush did and still be someone who should be viewed as committed to the value of love, then we should abandon that commitment.

What about DeGeneres' claim that what we all ought to do is be kind to one another (and in this case, to be kind to Bush and to be his friend, despite their policy disagreements)? DeGeneres does 'kindness' a disservice here, for she interprets it to be far more vapid and empty than she should. I'm not saying that DeGeneres should have made a scene on national TV and I recognize that moments like that often sail by before we realize we have an opportunity to act. But, in DeGeneres' case she went on to defend not just sitting next to Bush and having a pleasant time at the game with him, but to claim friendship with him, along with a fundamental commitment to being kind to everyone. Kindness is not niceness, nor is it civility. Real kindness that moves beyond exchanging simple pleasantries or maintaining a pleasant disposition involves caring about others as complete people, including as moral agents. That means holding them to account for what they have done and expecting them to be better than their past selves.[xxxvii] If DeGeneres really cares about Bush and really wants to be kind to him as his friend, she should hold him to account for his past and press him to do all that he can for the rest of his life to try to make up for it.[xxxviii]

One might object that all this holds DeGeneres and Obama (and all of us) to too high a standard; we can only control our own actions (and cannot control what others do) and so we ought to set for ourselves the commitment to being kind and loving and leave it at that. Not only does this account of responsibility encourage inaction (a point to which I'll return in the next section), it also encourages an account of friendship, love, and indeed of what it means to be a person (as deeply social beings) that are unworthy of those terms. What a lonely world it would be if everyone truly only was concerned for their own actions and didn't participate in the identity formation and moral development of others. To the contrary, we should adopt a deep understanding of Gandhi's claim that we should be the change we want to see in the world. Instead of letting ourselves off the hook for bringing about real structural change by focusing exclusively on our own emotional

dispositions – on not having hatred in our hearts or on being nice to others – we should aim to prefigure the future we want to bring about by focusing hard on the redemptive aspect of agape. Love, for King, is an *expectation*, a *demand*, that all of us exercise agency responsibly, that we dedicate ourselves to promoting justice, and that in truly loving our neighbors we see them as whole people who are flawed but could be better. And, it means doing the same thing for ourselves; it means that we all must strive to recognize the ways in which everyone who operates within oppressive social structures can be complicit in their maintenance or caught up in their enforcing ideologies and then doing the hard work of expressing through our actions a claim to the dignity and equality of everyone. In short, we can't achieve the redemptive aspect of agape without an honest accounting of the wrongs for which agents must be redeemed, and niceness and civility do not achieve such an accounting.

Part 3 - Love and Fate

The final type of love is what I'll call "love as fate". Activists have at times relied on the idea that a loving orientation to or regard for oppressed others (or for those privileged groups who maintain oppressive relations) inevitably achieves social justice. For instance, consider popular slogans like "In This House, Love Wins," or "Love Trumps Hate" along with hopeful sentiments like the claim that it is in love's nature to triumph over hatred and injustice or the claim that "love is all you need."

One reason to be concerned about using such slogans is that they send the message that love is a force that exists independent of human agency. All we have to do is open our hearts and let love take over. Just as gravity causes a book to fall to the ground when bumped off a table, love causes things to get better, causes the "moral arc of the universe to bend towards justice," causes the inevitable downfall of those wicked people who are in power and the inevitable victory of those who oppose them.[xxxix]

But of course love is not a force like gravity and acting like it is enables inaction. As the recent global resurgence of fascism has made enormously clear, to believe that states of affairs in the social world inevitably move toward any outcome – including progress – is folly. Instead, *social movement happens because there are social movers* – those who work to change social arrangements, either for the better or worse.

Indeed, Kathryn Norlock argues convincingly that it's a mistake not only to think that our moral trajectory is towards something better, but that it's a mistake to think that there is a moral trajectory at all. She says, countering the claim that social justice advocacy is a Sisyphean task, "There is no hill. There is no upwards and no backwards. Our attraction to directional metaphors betrays a wishful thinking that moral progress and ambitious policies are achievements with endpoints that we can reach if we just get closer to them."[xl] Instead, there is only the diligent work of imperfect human agents who have chosen to strive towards particular outcomes. Though it is tempting to take the long view of history and draw some common thread from a series of events, ideological developments, or changes in the social imaginary, we should be careful not to attribute any causal origin to those things other than that diligent work.

One reason why this point is worth making is that to view love as a force that brings about goodness in the world – to believe not only in fate but in fate that spirals progressively upwards towards justice – is that it encourages inaction or quietism. If love really does win, if it is the destiny of love to vanquish hate, then I don't have to work to bring that about. This concern becomes more pronounced when coupled with the sentimental account of love developed in the previous section: if love really is *all* that others need, if it is the most powerful tool or weapon at our disposal, and if love is an emotion or an attitude internal to me, then by simply having love in my heart or being lovingly oriented towards the world, I have done what morality requires of me and am in that way a conduit for that force to do its work, a place for fate to unfold. In short, understanding love as fate helps to justify my inaction.

Such inaction is totally understandable: there is so much injustice in the world that having to take on the task of working to make it better is terribly overwhelming. It is therefore very tempting to adopt a worldview that relieves you of that responsibility. Moreover, it's not just tempting but often positively needed. Research in social psychology supports the claim that we need to believe in the just world hypothesis: that the world is basically just, that social arrangements are fundamentally stable and dependable, and that I as an individual actor am essentially good, even if I sometimes do bad things.[xli] To fail to take up this perspective is to open oneself to the threat of being crushed not just by the weight of how much work there is to be done, and not only to my own near constant moral failure, by the utter horror that pervades the world and of which people are capable.

Indeed, this is perhaps part of why King wrote things like, "Love is the most durable power in the world. It is the most potent instrument available in mankind's quest for peace and security,"[xlii] and "Evil is doomed; good is inexorably the victor."[xliii] Those kinds of claims can be read to imply the kind of fated, guaranteed outcome that could enable quietism. And, when reduced to a slogan or put on a bumper sticker they might have that effect. However, to reiterate, King's view was considerably more complex than it is often taken to be and he called many ways of talking about love "sentimental bosh".[xliv] My point here is that we can acknowledge, on one hand, the need to believe that the fight not only can but will be won while remaining committed to the fight itself and remembering, on the other hand, that there being a fight implies there are fighters who actively work to bring about that victory.

In other words, the shallow version of love as fate enables inaction while the deep version recognizes both the magnitude of the fight and the frailty of human motivation. I have much more patience for this latter implication than the former – much more patience for needing to believe that "love wins" because the alternative is too horrible rather than wanting to believe that love wins because doing so let's you off the hook. But, it is worth noting that despite the need to believe in the inevitable and fated progress love ensures we will achieve as a society, that belief is not true and if we want to take seriously the psychological need to believe it, we tell ourselves a noble lie in order to continue going about our days and getting out of bed in the morning. All that said, the second sense of this thesis – that we need to believe that love wins – serves to avoid the pitfalls of the first – that love's fated victory lets us off the hook. If we don't believe and bet on the outcome that love wins, it would indeed be very difficult – perhaps impossible – to go about trying to achieve that outcome. So, instead of a noble lie perhaps we should understand it as a version of

Pascal's wager: it's better to bet on love winning than not, because even though we might lose, if we don't make that bet we are sure to do so.

Part 4 – Conclusion

It's attractive for activists to employ love (or related concepts) in their work for a variety of reasons – motivational, epistemic, perceptual, prefigurative, and to break down oppressive group boundaries by merging groups altogether. But, it's also perilous to do so, since it can entrench oppressive relations between privileged and subordinated groups, inspire quietism, justify a retreat to the interpersonal and away from the structural, and cause a failure to recognize the ways in which social location leaves some groups more exposed to oppressive harm than others. It's vital, then, for activists to retain a clear understanding not only of what they mean when employing the language of love, but what outcomes such theoretical commitments imply.

At the same time, I am persuaded by King and Freire's repeated claims that we must remain hopeful about both the achievement of justice and about the lives and potential of those privileged people who benefit from or maintain oppressive social structures. What King called agape we might tie with Freire's account of hope. He says, "Hope is rooted in men's incompletion, from which they move out in constant search – a search which can be carried out only in communion with others."[xlv] We should start from the open-endedness of human agency that Norlock describes; though there is no guarantee that people will act rightly or be better in the future than they have in the past, we can work actively to encourage each other to do so.

Though I said at the outset that I join King in thinking that we all should be extremists for love I admit that at times I struggle to understand what that entails. Such struggle is both necessary and always ongoing; being an extremist for love is the kind of identity it takes a lifetime to explore and cultivate. That said, I also feel certain that part of what being an extremist for love means is that we can use love not only to inspire our efforts but to help set our agendas in the first place, to help determine the aims of the political struggles we take up. At the end of the introduction to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire says, "From these pages I hope at least the following will endure: my trust in the people, and my faith in men and women, and in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love."[xlvi] What if we set that as our goal: *to create a world in which it will be easier to love?* Surely such a world would be worth fighting to achieve.

Works Cited

Alcoff, Linda. 1992. "The Problem of Speaking for Others." *Cultural Critique,* No. 20 (Winter): 5-32.

Ember, Sydney. October 19, 2019. "Proclaiming 'I Am Back,' Bernie Sanders Accepts Ocasio-Cortez Endorsement." The New York Times:

https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/19/us/politics/bernie-sanders-aoc-queensbridge-park.html

Emerick, Barrett. 2016. "Love and Resistance: Moral Solidarity in the Face of Perceptual Failure," *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly,* 2 (2): 1-21 URL: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/fpq/vol2/iss2/1 DOI: 10.5206/fpq/2016.2.1

-----. Forthcoming, "The Limits of the Rights to Free Thought and Expression," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal,* Johns Hopkins University Press.

Fox, Warwick. 1984. "Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy of Our Time?" The Ecologist 14 (5, 6): 194-200.

Freire, Paulo. 2012. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.

Friedman, Marilyn. 2003. *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grady, Constance. Oct. 9, 2019. "Ellen Built Her Brand on Being Nice to Anyone, Even George W. Bush. That Brand Might Not Be Viable Now." Vox.com:

https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/10/9/20906371/ellen-degeneres-george-w-bush-controversy

Haslanger, Sally. 2005. "You Mixed? Racial Identity without Racial Biology." In *Adoption Matters: Philosophical And Feminist Essays,* edited by Sally Haslanger and Charlotte Witt. Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press: 265-289.

Henderson, Cydney. Dec. 11, 2019. "Michelle Obama Defends Friendship with George W. Bush." USA Today: https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/celebrities/2019/12/11/michelle-obama-defends-friendship-george-w-bush/4402339002/

Indigenous Action. 2014. "Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex.": http://www.indigenousaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex/

Jost, John, and Orsolya Hunyady. 2002. "The Psychology of System Justification and the Palliative Function of Ideology." *European Review of Social Psychology* 13: 111-53.

Khader, Serene. 2019. *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic.* New York: Oxford University Press.

King Jr., Martin Luther. 2010. *Strength to Love*. Minneapolis, MD: Augsburg Fortress Press.

King, Jr., Martin Luther. 1986. "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., edited by James M. Washington, New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers: 289-302.

Krishnamurthy, Meena. 2013. "Political Solidarity, Justice and Public Health," *Public Health Ethics*, Vol. 6, No. 2: 129-141.

Krog, Antjie. 2008. "'This Thing Called Reconciliation…' Forgiveness as Part of an Interconnectedness-Towards-Wholeness." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27: 353-366.

Lance, Mark. Manuscript. "Speaking For, Speaking With, and Shutting Up: Models of Solidarity and the Pragmatics of Truth Telling."

May, Todd. 2015. *Nonviolent Resistance: A Philosophical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Metz, Thaddeus. 2007. "Toward an African Moral Theory." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15: 321-341.

Norlock, Kathryn J. 2019. "Perpetual Struggle," *Hypatia,* Vol. 34, No. 1 (Winter 2019): 6-19.

Nozick, Robert. 1989. "Love." In *The Examined Life*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster: 68-86.

Soble, Alan. 1997. "Union, Autonomy, and Concern." In *Love Analyzed*, edited by Roger E. Lamb, Boulder: Westview Press: 65–92.

Tessman, Lisa. 2005. *Burdened Virtues*: *Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Young, Iris Marion. 1988. "Five Faces of Oppression." *The Philosophical Forum* 16, no. 4: 270-90.

End Notes

---

[i] Freire 2012, 89.
[ii] Many thanks to Rachel Fedock, Jennifer Kling, Michael Kühler, Mark Lance, and Audrey Yap, for their invaluable insight and critique.
[iii] King 1986, 297.
[iv] Young 1998, 273-276.
[v] Young 1998, 271.
[vi] Friedman 2003, 116.
[vii] Nozick 1989, 71.
[viii] Friedman 2003, 122.
[ix] Friedman 2003, 122.
[x] Haslanger 2005, 282.
[xi] King 1986, 290
[xii] Fox 1984, 200.
[xiii] Fox 1984, 199.
[xiv] See Tessman 2005, p. 98-106 for a helpful discussion of this point.

[xv] I recognize that many activists might call for solidarity or union without appealing (or intending to appeal) to love. I'm not suggesting that whenever one does the former one necessarily does the latter. But, I think it's not unusual to hear well-meaning folks refer to how we should "love the world" or "love humanity" while also talking about being in solidarity with them in a way that suggests the two sometimes go together in people's minds. In short, these kinds of claims, though not explicitly invoking love (the word doesn't appear in the slogan that "We're All Downstream") are at least love-adjacent appeals.
[xvi] As with many of the slogans I'll consider, these definitions are commonly said and it's hard to pinpoint an originating source. As evidence that these rich concepts can be watered down (and commodified), consider that you can learn about "the essence of ubuntu" by staying at a resort named Ubuntu Luxury Villa that employs both of these quotes: https://www.ubuntuvilla.com/the-essence-of-ubuntu/
[xvii] Krog 2008, 355. Krog is here relying on and further unpacking the moral concept of "ubuntu." For very helpful additional analysis of the concept, see Metz 2007.
[xviii] King 2010, 69.
[xix] The claim that we have self-regarding duties is controversial in contemporary Western normative ethics; many think that we have merely prudential (but not moral) reasons to commit self-regarding actions. I cannot argue for the stronger position here but just note that traditional normative theories (like Kantian and Rossian deontology) both make clear that it is not only rational to act in ways that demonstrate self-respect or promote our own welfare but are morally obligatory as well. For instance, according to the Kantian it would be wrong (and not merely imprudent) to treat myself as a mere means to an end. For the Rossian it would be wrong (and not merely imprudent) for me to fail to cultivate my own wisdom and virtue.
[xx] Ember 2019.
[xxi] See Krishnamurthy 2013 for a very helpful analysis of political solidarity and survey of views in the literature.
[xxii] Alcoff 1992, 23.
[xxiii] Also very helpful is Mark Lance's discussion in his manuscript, "Speaking For, Speaking With, and Shutting Up: Models of Solidarity and the Pragmatics of Truth Telling."
[xxiv] Freire 2012, 89.
[xxv] Freire 2012, 49.
[xxvi] Indigenous Action, 2014.
[xxvii] Freire says, "No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption." Freire 2012, 54.
[xxviii] Friedman 2003, 99.
[xxix] One might worry that union views threaten to erase distinctions between individuals which would render such autonomy promotion impossible (see Soble 1997). One reason why I adopt Friedman's account is that she aims to preserve the separateness of individuals who make up a particular union and thereby enable such autonomy promotion, while reframing autonomy (and autonomy competence) as being grounded in our relational nature. In short, because we are profoundly social beings we are able to develop (or are prevented from developing) the capacity to act autonomously always via social interaction with others. So, on Friedman's account the following three things are true: 1. We are relational beings; 2. Loving relationships entail union among their members; 3. We are discrete beings who can (in principle if not always in practice) disrupt or leave those relationships.
[xxx] Serene Khader raises important concerns about the ways in which Westerners might try to promote the autonomy of non-Westerners but end up reinforcing oppressive structures, especially capitalism. Truly promoting the autonomy of others is tricky, to say the least. See Khader 2019, 76-98.
[xxxi] King 2010, 46.
[xxxii] May 2015, 75.
[xxxiii] Emerick Forthcoming.
[xxxiv] Grady 2019.
[xxxv] This quote has been attributed to a variety of people including Abraham Lincoln. King says something similar when he tells us that "Love transforms enemies into friends." King 2010, 48.
[xxxvi] Henderson 2019
[xxxvii] Emerick 2016.
[xxxviii] One might object that challenging Bush publicly would humiliate him and not only undermine the obligation to be kind but would undermine the goal of pressing him to be better (since he might then become more defensive and less willing to take responsibility for his past wrongs). I am not calling for DeGeneres to humiliate Bush. However, in portraying him as someone with whom she merely disagrees politically, she surely swings much too far in the other direction and lets him off the hook entirely.

[xxxix] King 1986, 252. With this famous quote King was paraphrasing 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker.
[xl] Norlock 2019, 16.
[xli] Jost 2002.
[xlii] King 2010, 51.
[xliii] King 2010, 76.
[xliv] King 2010, 46.
[xlv] Freire 2012, 91-92.
[xlvi] Freire 2012, 40.