

Love

John Cowburn

Marquette University Press pb 292pp 2003

ISBN 0874626595

Reviewer: Rev Dr David Pascoe, Academic Dean, St Paul's Theological College, Brisbane

It is a simple enough word, 'love'. However, it always brings with it a complexity of image, experience and meaning. Its myriad uses include understanding or describing the relationships between people, between people and other things, and between people and God and vice versa. John Cowburn provides us with an investigation of the word 'love' and its meaning—'a worthy subject for a book', as one of my colleagues pointed out. Further, as John Cowburn himself notes, it is a subject and a term that 'invites thought' (7)! Love, then, is not a subject that can be left simply and simplistically to a false sense of mystery. Rather, it is an issue, an experience, a fundamental dimension of how it is to be human and requires intellectual analysis. That is, not an analysis that loses the height, length, breadth and depth of the mystery, but one that draws us further into the wonder of love, which at the same time, through understanding, overcomes some of the 'bewilderment' (7) elicited by the term.

Cowburn's study explicates his theory of love between people and ultimately applies this for a theological understanding. His thesis is that love between people is fundamentally of two kinds: solidarity-love and ecstatic love. Each of these kinds is characterised by two species. The first kind, solidarity-love is described as 'between unequals', and 'between equals'. The first of these species finds its primary expression in the love relationship between parent and child. The second is explained as that which exists between brothers and sisters or between 'comrades, co-workers, fellow-countrymen' (44). The dominant characteristic of this kind of love is the essential 'link' between people. For example, the parent has not 'chosen' the child, neither has the child chosen the parent; the love exists in and through the essential link with the other. The second kind, ecstatic love, has the two species 'sexual love' and 'friendship'. Both these species are primarily characterised by the free choice of each partner's love for the other. However, the two species are distinguished by the physical expression of this love, which culminates in sexual intercourse for 'sexual love' but not in 'friendship'.

It is worth noting at this point that the simplified distinctions made above are far more detailed, explained and developed in Cowburn's study. It can be said that his whole work is characterised by the making of distinctions to define kinds of love for greater and more accurate understanding.

The introduction to the above characterisation of love in its different kinds and species rests first on a discussion of self-love. The kinds of love for and with an other are dependent on both the reality and quality of one's love for self. As Cowburn notes: 'We shall see in the course of this book that most of the deviations from true love spring ultimately from self-rejection' (32).

Cowburn's work details these various kinds of love that have different essential elements in order to elicit a greater understanding of the meaning of the term and so the phenomenon that is under discussion. However, there is one essential element that undergirds all forms of love, self-love included. That is the notion of acceptance. Here

too, then, a distinction is made for greater clarification of the meaning of the term in regard to love of self and others. Acceptance here is not a weak or passive 'Oh well, it can't be helped' (22). Rather, acceptance is a strong principle of a yes to being and to life that fosters an underlying confidence and the joy of living (24). The study explicates then a discussion on the notion of acceptance. It is

the acceptance of self in self-love, the acceptance of parents of their children and by their children of their parents in parental and filial love, and I will say that essential to sexual love and friendship is the acceptance of one person by another. (24)

The notion of acceptance guides the reader through the logic of the book, from a point of departure in self-love and altruism (Part 1), through kinds of solidarity-love (Part 2), ecstatic love (Part 3), the two kinds of ecstatic love (Part 4), the synthesis of the two loves taken together (Part 5) and finally to the theological implications (Part 6). A significant strength of this work that provides both substantial content and access to Cowburn's argument is the examples of the kinds of love and their respective species that are presented. Not only is the philosophical intellectual tradition of the West mined for understanding, but examples are taken from a broad range of literature, poetry and everyday experience which reinforce and offer credibility to Cowburn's thesis. In part this too reinforces the notion of a recurrent and perpetual wisdom for a universality of understanding of love. Cowburn offers reflection on this in regard to an 'evolutionary theory' of love (235ff).

Cowburn's detailed argument for the two kinds of love could stand on its own. However, the work is taken a further step and culminates in the theological implications made at the end of this work. He notes that this is a somewhat 'artificial way' of dealing with theological considerations (8). However, it holds with the characteristic of this work in making distinctions, and in this case the one between the philosophical and theological. Cowburn applies his theory to the theological notions of Trinity and Nature and Grace and concludes with its application to the Christian love of other human beings.

The final paragraph of the Conclusion speaks of the intention of the whole work and the importance for right understanding of love. Cowburn has sought to counter mistaken notions of the meaning of love that have at times caused unhappiness for people in their relationship with God, each other and themselves. He expresses the hope that a more nuanced understanding of the nature of love might draw people into more mature relationships of love. His work presents a comprehensive and credible understanding of love that accords with the Christian tradition and challenges aspects of some developments within that tradition. This is because, 'To be on the right footing with God, we need to have sound ideas about human love' (284).