



A Personal Love of the Good

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Abstract

In order to articulate an account of erotic love that does not attempt to transcend its personal features, Robert Solomon and Martha Nussbaum lean on the speeches by Aristophanes and Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium*. This leads them to downplay the sense in which love is not only for another person, but also for the good. Drawing on a distinction between relative and absolute senses of speaking about the good, I mediate between two features of love that at first may seem irreconcilable. The first is the sense in which love is deeply personal in character. The second is the sense in which we in love come to articulate ethical demands. With the help of the Diotimian ascent of love that Socrates presents in his speech, I submit that these two can come together in the realization that our personally conditioned responses in love are transformed to accommodate demands that carry an unconditional meaning.

Keywords Absolute conception · Erotic love · Goodness · Personal love

Who would you take as your guide in the mysteries of love? A playwright of comedies? An ugly philosopher, staying up until dawn discussing ideas, reiterating the words of a priestess? A scorned lover, with a hunger for power? Or would you refuse them all, turning instead to the sober words of a physician, the vanities of a young rhetorician, or to some of the other speakers in Plato's *Symposium*?

There is good reason to be skeptical of the suggestion that any one speech in the *Symposium*, even the one delivered by Socrates, gives us the truth about love, either in a general sense or as Plato understood it. The very different characters of the speeches, and the dialectic between them, the polyphony of voices speaking in praise of love, all suggest that there is no one truth about love, and contribute, rather, to an understanding of love as essentially perspectival (cf. de Sousa 2015, 35). This raises a question about what meaning there is in speaking of the truth about love in different contexts.

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Here, however, my initial interest is to survey the understanding of love offered by two philosophers who have declared they have found the truth about love in two of the speeches. The first is Robert Solomon, who supports the myth of Aristophanes in claiming that the best reasons we have for love originate in the lovers' shared identity. The second is Martha Nussbaum, who argues that the speech by Alcibiades bears testimony to the love of persons, and the importance of literature, in contrast to the love of ideas that is implicit in the standard rendition of Platonic love and reasoning. These two philosophers criticize Platonic love, or their respective versions of it, for not being able to accommodate a real love for persons. I ask whether we do indeed have to read Socrates' rendering of love in such a way that it excludes the possibility of it being deeply personal, and whether there are significant drawbacks in Aristophanes' and Alcibiades' visions of love as they are presented by Solomon and Nussbaum.

My leading question is whether our understanding of love needs to be informed by a conception of the good, and furthermore what kind of conception of the good needs to be involved in such a claim. Addressing the different senses in which we speak of what love is and what is good in love, are here central to my aims, as our understanding of these words will shape our understanding of what a good answer to my question will be. Are we, for example, to see love as an emotion, or rather as involving us in a relationship (cf. Kronqvist 2017, 32–33)? In what ways does love involve judgements as to what is a worthy object of love? What does it mean to speak of an unconditional love? Can we accept responsibility for how we love? I will not answer these questions in detail, neither do I seek to provide any one definition of love. Rather, I seek to illuminate ways in which the relation between love and the good engages us philosophically and morally, and how a one-sided occupation with some of the senses in which a word is used, contributes to how we understand the philosophical problems facing us. Nevertheless, it is helpful to add that I see erotic love as involving us in an encounter with another human being that both presupposes an embodied responsiveness to the other, and confronts us with questions of our responsibility for who we are, and who we become, in relation to each other.

This allows me to mediate between two features of love that at first appear irreconcilable. The first is its deeply personal character, the second is the sense in which we in love articulate demands that are absolute in character. *Pace* Solomon, I argue that an account of love that only sees the goodness of love as something dependent on, and thereby relative to, the psychological processes of seeking union in love, is problematic. Furthermore, I show why the good understood in an absolute sense, can be said to play a fundamental role in how we come to understand ourselves in relation to the other, and why love thus conceived, contrary to Nussbaum's concern, does not threaten the sense in which love is deeply personal.

My account of goodness in love is in many ways a Socratic, or Diotimian, answer to Solomon's Aristophanic proposal, and Nussbaum's defense of Alcibiades. The aim, however, is not to provide a defense of Socrates, or Diotima, but to explore aspects of this speech that make the relation of love to the good central to our understanding of the concept. For this reason, the purpose of reading Plato is not to give a consistent reading of his views on love. Rather, by placing some of the problems with which he struggled in the *Symposium* in relation to more contemporary discussions of love, the discussion makes available a way of conceiving what it is for love to be, as David Velleman (1999) has put it, a "moral emotion". It also provides a view into the question whether there are reasons for love (see e.g. Jollimore 2011) or in what ways love can be perceived as "a source of reasons" (Frankfurt 2004).

1 Must the Bond of Love Be Good?

Robert C. Solomon, one of the fore-figures of cognitive accounts in the philosophy of emotion, turns to the question of reasons for love in several places. One of his main claims is that the best reasons for love are Aristophanic ones; they are reasons that are constituted by the shared identity that to him is essential to love (Solomon 1990, 2001, 2005). Picking up the existential idea that our selves are neither static nor stable, but always “created” in interaction with others, he contends that “love is not a mysterious ‘union’ of two otherwise separate and isolated selves but rather a special instance of the mutually defined creation of selves” (Solomon 2001, 24). It is a dialectical process, “the movement of two dialectically opposed conceptions of ourselves—as individuals and as a fusion of two-into-one” (Solomon 2001, 26).

I have much sympathy for what Solomon says about the role of “sharing” in loving relationships. The notion that the relationship built by the lovers, and the life they come to share, provide the reasons we have for love, is a welcome contrast to the individualistic tendency to search for reasons for love in lovable qualities in the beloved (cf. also Kolodny 2003). In particular, the recognition that many of the needs, interests, memories and desires that shape our understanding of the life and love we share, can only be identified in relation to each other, discredits the idea that one could assess whether there are reasons for love independent of our personal relationship. There are important respects, not least ethical ones, in which I have to take the last stand on and accept responsibility for what I want. What I come to regard as my own desires and needs, however, will in many situations depend on both what you think in a matter, and the implications wanting something has for us as a couple. Indeed, one significant aspect of sharing a life in love is that, whatever I take upon me to do, I ask you what you think in the end. In these respects, Solomon’s proposal to regard love as one of the most important venues in which we are able to recreate and redefine ourselves with and through another human being is clearly appealing.

Yet, there is something deeply troubling in the suggestion that any kind of process that binds people together in an erotic relationship, and shapes how they think of their identity, their individual as well as mutual desires, must be understood as an instance of love. Falling in love can lead a couple “to break the bonds of socially acceptable and ‘rational’ behaviour and define themselves anew” (Solomon 2001, 192). It can loosen the hold of old identifications, such as to their family, and allow the lovers to identify “themselves and their obligations only with reference to one another” (Solomon 2001, 192). There are cases of acting under such a description that can certainly be considered good for the lovers, as in the happy end for Romeo and Juliet that Solomon envisages. Here the lovers take an angry farewell of their families and settle down in a modest suburb in Wisconsin. They do their best to raise a family and to support each other in their careers (Solomon 2001, 191–193). Yet, what are we to make of more sinister cases in which the couple are bound together by evil deeds,¹ or mere regular deceptions and

¹ Ondřej Beran (2018) discusses such a case in relation to Agatha Christie’s *Death on the Nile*, where a couple convene in a plot to murder a wealthy heiress with whom the man pretends to have an affair, in order to have him inherit her money. Beran suggests that what allows us to think of this as love, although not the best kind of love, is that their relationship expresses a loyalty to each other, and a sense of equality.

self-deceptions, or where their bond in other ways detracts them from doing what is good? Are we to think that these are examples of less ideal cases of the mutual creation of selves, or that they are cases where the love has gone bad? Or are we to think that there is reason for us not to consider these relationships as real cases of love?

An indication that the Socratic response would be to deny that this is a case of love, surfaces in Socrates' retelling of Diotima's speech. Here Diotima, in response to Aristophanes' account of love, says,

'And certainly there runs a story,' she continued, 'that all who go seeking their other half are in love; though by my account love is neither for half nor for whole, unless of course, my dear sir, this happens to be something good. For men are prepared to have their own feet and hands cut off if they feel these belongings to be harmful. The fact is, I suppose, that each person does not cherish his belongings except where a man calls the good his own property and the bad another's; since what men love is simply and solely the good. [...]

'Briefly then,' said she, 'love loves the good to be one's own for ever.'

'That is the very truth' (Plato 1953b, 205e, 206b)

The desire that "the good be one's own for ever" in Diotima's speech is linked to the mortal lovers' desire to become immortal, through procreating in body and soul, by giving birth in beauty, either to children or to ideas and virtues (Plato 1953b, 207a-209e). In this sense, love is accorded a very special place among the emotions. It is presented both as a mediator between us as finite and imperfect beings and something eternal and perfect, in the first place the gods, but more importantly here, the ideal forms of the Good and the Beautiful, as well as a creative power bringing ideas of the good, beautiful and virtuous into being. Thus, the speech raises a very different question about the intimate relation of love to the Good than does Solomon's account.

For Solomon, the main concern is how to conceive of a good, or the best, reason for love. Thus, he suggests that it is not only possible but unproblematic to identify a couple's relationship, or desire for union with one another, as love without at the same time considering whether their reasons for loving are good. On this view, a person may have bad reasons for loving another, e.g. loving him or her for the money (cf. Solomon 1990, 170), but the case is still one of love. In the Diotimian, Socratic account, however, the question is not what constitutes a good object of love, be it in some specific properties of the beloved, or of the relationship we build together. Rather, the Good itself is described as the primary object of love. Love is a response to, a desire for or a pursuit of the Good, to the extent that a desire for union with another, which is not at the same time a desire for the Good, is a reason for not calling that desire love, but by some other name.

This is not to say that people may not mistake what they love for something much more specific than what is truly good, and, which stands as the central example in the

speech, beautiful.² In fact, the lover's ascension, and deepened vision, described at the end of Diotima's speech, carries with it the realization that certain attachments, say, to bodily features and personal characteristics, may be false semblances of love, even if they awaken the lovers' sense of beauty and their desire to procreate. This is the case, for instance, if the lover believes he possesses beauty by possessing the loved one's body. In this way, the ladder that the lovers of wisdom need to climb in order to become educated in the rites of love, can be read as leading them to a more refined appreciation of what love is, and what they are to love. After first thinking that the beauty they love resides in the loved one's body, the lovers move on to find it in the loved one's soul, in activities and knowledge where they produce beautiful thoughts and ideas. They finally encounter it in the search for wisdom attained in gaining knowledge of what Beauty is itself, since it is only through contact with Beauty itself that the lovers reach a hold of what is true, and truly virtuous. (Plato 1953b, 210a-212a.)

The Socratic, Diotimian account, thus, ends in a reflection on the love of wisdom. For that reason, it is not only to be read as an account of personal love, but also as offering insights into the practice of philosophy, which itself is perceived as a form of love. It offers a view into the kind of contemplation on what is good, true and beautiful, as well as their interconnections, that Plato conceives as central both to moral reflection and to reflection on the whole. Yet, this does not mean that we should stop caring about love in our personal relationships for the sake of engaging in philosophy. Rather there is need to consider how these philosophical insights about the relation between love and the Good contribute to our understanding of love in the context of our personal relationships.

One helpful way into this question is to discuss it in parallel with the *Euthyphro*, and Socrates' question whether the gods love the good because it is good, or whether it is good because the gods love it (Plato 1953a, 10a). Here, we can reformulate the question as whether the good we perceive in love (not yet specified in what respect) is independent or dependent of us or of our love, if not of the gods.³ My quick answer to this is that it is both, and that it is a philosophical prejudice to think that when confronted with two senses of speaking of the good in relation to love, we have to opt for one as the primordial sense. It is also confusing to think that the relation between our love and what we can conceive as good in our erotic relationships, must be conceived as a temporal relation. Here, I will therefore pursue the notion that the Diotimian speech offers us a way of thinking of the concepts of love and the good as

² The speech both begins and ends with a consideration of *eros* as a desire for "beautiful things" (Plato 1953b, 201a). The good is initially introduced as a parallel to beauty since it too is beautiful (Plato 1953b, 201c). In the quoted passage, the good is also under consideration because it makes clear that the one who desires the Good, and the Beautiful, does so in the hope that they will bring happiness (Plato 1953b, 204de). The Good and the Beautiful, however, are assigned slightly different roles in the following explication of love. Whereas love is said to be of "the good to be one's own for ever" (Plato 1953b, 206b), Diotima makes clear that it is not of beauty, but of "engendering and begetting upon the beautiful" (Plato 1953b, 206e). Although I am unable to bring out all important contrasts between speaking of the good and the beautiful here, I will discuss them together where they converge.

³ Irving Singer frames this as a question about whether love involves the "appraisal" or "bestowal" of value (1984, 6).

internally related.⁴ This leaves us with the question of what conception of good is at play in our different understandings of love. In answer to this, I will consider two senses in which we may speak of the good in erotic love, and how they, as Diotima's speech suggests, are intertwined and sometimes also conflict. Inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion in the "Lecture on Ethics" (1965; cf. also Holland 1980; Gaita 2004), I call these a *relative* and an *absolute* sense of the good.

If we again think of Solomon's notion of a shared identity, it suggests that the good the lovers perceive in their relationship, is dependent on, or *relative* to their shared identity. Their reasons for doing something, longing for something or desiring something, are to be judged as good in so far as they grow out of the shared identity. In other words, a reason is judged to be good if it is in accordance with their mutual desires, ends and preferences.

For a large class of cases, this is also an appropriate picture for thinking about what is good for us in a loving relationship. When it comes to questions such as what you want for your birthday or for dinner, or where I want to go for the holiday or for the weekend, it would in many cases be absurd if we did not consider each other's wishes. It is also an expression of love that I, in such cases, respect your spontaneous desires as an expression of you, as you respect mine as an expression of me. In these cases, doing what is good for each other, or what is good for us, goes hand in hand with doing what the other wants or what we want to do together. The concepts of both "goodness" and "wanting" are here also clearly linked to that of pleasure, to our individual and mutual likes or dislikes. Something is good to the extent that it "feels good" to us.

There is also an array of cases in which we determine that something is good on the basis of it being an expression of *us*, of what we together think and feel on a matter, as well as what we, as a couple, consider important for a well-lived life. In such cases, we may have to disregard what we immediately feel like doing to be able to pursue our common ends. "We can't eat out every night, if we want to save money for a house of our own." "If you don't want us to keep arguing all the time, you have to express your desires more clearly. I can't consider what you want, if you never tell me." The goodness of our actions, and words, are here, conceived in relation to how conducive they are to the attainment of our ends. Reaching them may require both self-control and perseverance.

There is no need to deny that the goods we as lovers can ascertain in these respects, are immensely important for the life we share, giving it its form and content. Our relationship, if it is "mutually inspiring, supportive and enjoyable" (Solomon 2005, 164), can be a source of pleasure, and be a means of reaching other goods that we can perceive as higher, such as a well-functioning relationship. Our mutual love can thus make us both feel good and feel good about ourselves. Without these ways of feeling good about the goods the relationship brings, we would certainly not have the concept of love and goodness we now have. The goodness of love cannot be separated from the goodness we *feel* in being together, the goodness in sharing your joy, and rejoicing in it

⁴ This point is strengthened by considering Elizabeth Anscombe's discussion (1979) of conditions of desirability in her discussion of (intentions and) the will. There she develops the idea that there is an internal relation between what I desire and what I regard as desirable (Anscombe 1979, 76). The same thing can be said about the relation between desiring something and regarding it as good. To desire something is, in one way or other, to view it as good.

too, in being conjoined in a joint pursuit, taking share in each other's successes, and feeling bad at each other's failures.

These judgements as to what is good for us as lovers, however, are all relative to our desires, preferences and ends. They speak of what is "good for us". They do not, in that way, yet touch upon the *absolute* sense in which we may speak of the good, the sense in which, as Charles Taylor says, "there are ends or goods which are worthy or desirable in a way that cannot be measured on the same scale as our ordinary ends, goods, desirabilia" (1989, 20). How then are we to make sense of the idea of an absolute conception of the good (cf. Gaita 2004; Holland 1980), and its relation to love? This is a tricky question, since the absolute conception of the good best comes into view by using negative distinctions (cf. Holland 1980, 97). It is not a good related to pleasure, and not a means to achieving one's ends. On the whole, it is not a good among other good things (i.e. objects we judge to be good for us), it is the Good that inclines us to speak with a capital G.

This good concerns us when we raise questions as to whether what we want, for ourselves and for others, is good. This question, when it appears in connection with love, "But is it good?", is in itself a question whether what we are experiencing and doing is really love, or one of its counterfeit forms. In other words, it is the question I ask, when I ask myself whether I am acting out of love, that is a real concern for you, and your good, or whether I am just telling myself that it is love. "Am I agreeing with you just to please you?" "Am I indulging your desires, because I do not want to accept responsibility for considering if they are any good?" "Am I conflating kindness with complacency and compliance?" (See Løgstrup 1997, 21f, for a more detailed exposition of the distinctions between different attitudes we can take to each other. Cf. also Kronqvist 2012.)

A central feature of the distinctions we call up here, is that we are not considering ourselves the judges of what is good. It is better to say that we, as well as our desires and choices, are judged in the light of a certain conception of the good (cf. Taylor 1989, 20). When we speak of "goodness" in the relative sense, we describe it in *psychological* terms, relating it to both our spontaneous pleasures, and more considered desires and choices. When we speak of it in an absolute sense, however, reflection on what is good rather enters as an *ethical* question. The absolute conception of what is good, makes claims on me, in that it confronts me with the question whether I truthfully can deem that what I am doing, or feeling, is good.

These considerations give one reading of Plato's suggestion that our spontaneous desires for the beautiful and good need to be educated to encompass a conception of these which goes beyond a concern for our personal interests and preferences. They also provide some suggestions to how they can be educated in and through love. What, however, is the source of this conception, if it does not merely originate in our erotic desire? Now, in choosing to speak of an absolute sense in which we may speak about the good, I have tried to steer clear of that question. The recognition that such distinctions as outlined above do play a role in our thinking about love, and may play a role for what we can meaningfully make sense of as love, is initially enough to argue for distinguishing this use of the good from the relative senses of "good".

One should, however, notice that the *Symposium* itself is a source of this conception. Socrates' reiteration of Diotima's speech allows us to see the need to distinguish a true love of the Good from its false semblances. What is more, the portrayal of Socrates

itself provides us with a personification of the love of wisdom envisioned in the speech. The spirit in which he engages in the philosophical pursuit of what is truly good and beautiful, shows us one way of taking the demands this conception makes on us seriously. The dialogue can in this sense be read as both celebration and contemplation (cf. Gaita 2004, xxiii) of Plato's wonder at the good, embodied in the teachings and demeanour of his teacher. Through his depiction of Socrates, it becomes clear that he recognized the "power" of this absolute conception of the good to move him "without force", as Holland so aptly put it (1980, 132). In that, his description of Socrates also gives expression to a love informed by the good understood in an absolute sense. Nevertheless, this does not entail that anyone who encountered Socrates, and came in touch with this form of love of the Good, would also react to him, and what they perceived in him, with love, accepting this as one of the claims this conception of good makes on them.

This is where Alcibiades enters, for the failure to react lovingly to the goodness one's love reveals, is strikingly depicted in the portrayal of his speech. Bursting in at the end of the "drinking party", the scorned lover of Socrates⁵ delivers a passionate account of the state of love. In these settings, this is revealed to be the love of wisdom personified in the philosopher. It is a tumultuous tale, expressive of the burning desire that characterizes erotic love, and the chaotic experience of not knowing how to handle one's conflicting feelings. Alcibiades declares his intention to tell the truth about Socrates (Plato 1953b, 214e), and proceeds to tell the audience a story about how the philosopher awakens awe in him, but how this awe turns bitter when the older man resists the advances of the younger one.

The truth about love, which Martha Nussbaum finds in this speech, is the personal knowledge that the lovers gain of each other as particular individuals (Nussbaum 1986, 165–199). This knowledge is by necessity sensuous. It relies on images and imagination, and speaks to the role literature may have in furthering our knowledge of other people. Such attention to the individual, occasioned by the erotic awakening to the other, cannot, for Nussbaum, be fully represented by intellectual means. In particular, it cannot be attained by only communicating with the Forms.

For Nussbaum, the speech of Alcibiades, then, functions as a means of putting forth her own objections against the intellectualism she sees as inherent in the Socratic, Diotimian account. It also serves as a defence of the more personal features of love. Yet, leaning on Alcibiades to paint a picture of the lover's personal knowledge, leads her to downplay the features of his speech that do not only, or primarily, speak of love. Alcibiades' explicit pledge to reveal or expose who Socrates is, breathes of revenge, obsession, possessiveness and defiance. It speaks of the shame Alcibiades experiences in encountering the peculiar kind of beauty and goodness that Socrates represents. It tells us that Socrates reveals to him a goodness that was unknown to him previously, but that this goodness is something that he is unwilling to accept. Although he, to some extent, recognizes the truth Socrates is telling him about himself, such as that his aspirations in the light of the philosopher and the life he leads, are expressive of pride, vanity and a hunger for power, he does not desire to change himself according to this

⁵ Nussbaum points out the confusion in sexual roles that takes place when Alcibiades, who enters the relationship with Socrates as a passive object of desire, the beloved boy, then takes the role of the active lover, whereas Socrates seems to move from lover to beloved (Nussbaum 1986, 188).

truth. He prefers his freedom, and therefore, he also perceives the good that Socrates embodies, as something limiting, a bond from which he wants to break loose.⁶

Until his meeting with Socrates, Alcibiades had succeeded in living his life under the pretext that these were noble intentions. The confrontation with the philosopher, however, brings out a different meaning. Socrates confronts Alcibiades with the question about who he is and wants to be. This is by no means a less personal question than his previous considerations of what kind of person he was in the eyes of others. In fact, it is more so, but the ethical sense in which he is personally involved in it differs enormously from the first case. It demands of him to take himself seriously, carefully attending to the question of what he truly wants, and in what sense that is good.

Alcibiades' reluctance to accept the goodness of Socrates, then, cannot be distinguished from his unwillingness to accept what it says about his own lack of it. In that, his love for Socrates can also be described as a form of hate. It is similar to the hate which Wittgenstein addresses in the remark, "It might also be said: hate between human beings comes from our cutting ourselves off from each other. Because we don't want anyone else to see inside us, since it's not a pretty sight in there" (Wittgenstein 1998, 52e).

The truth Alcibiades tells us about personal love, therefore, is also the truth about the vulnerability of erotic desire, and the lover's susceptibility to failure. Particularly, it is the truth about our weakness for deceptive appearances, a fallibility that, to Plato, was connected with our being bodily beings, and the specific traps this sets for us in our search for the good. Bringing in a theme from the other Socratic dialogues, we could say, that the ways in which Alcibiades is torn between motives reveals a division between the needs of the body on the one hand, and the needs of the soul on the other. This distinction between body and soul, as Ilham Dilman makes clear in a discussion of the *Phaedo*, is not to be seen in analogue with the Cartesian dualism of mind and body. It is not a rejection of the fact that we are embodied beings, nor expressive of the kind of skepticism that comprises Cartesianism. "For Socrates, from the start, human beings are flesh and blood beings interacting with one another in a public life. It is within such a life that the possibilities of good and evil are to be found" (Dilman 1992, 74). For Plato, the body rather comes to represent our moral weaknesses:

the body is the seat of various forms of pleasure and pain and appetites, the focus of powerful fears, desires and attitudes. These contrast with many of our moral ideals and handicap us in our aspirations to live in their light. (Dilman 1992, 74)

The example of Alcibiades thus provides us with a different way of presenting the personal character of love than the one suggested by Nussbaum. The experience and emotions of falling in love may come to us all, awakening us to the beauty of the one we love, and inclining us to think of the loved one as good. What we make of these experiences, what they bring out in us, and whether they do indeed put us in contact with the Good, however, will depend on who we are and the relationship to the other that we are capable of forming. Significantly, it will depend on the extent to which we are willing to be transformed by it. Our own ability, or inability, to open up to claims

⁶ Alcibiades' ways of speaking about being bound and limited in his love for Socrates interestingly resonates with Solomon's description of the shared identity in love as a psychological bond.

our encounter with the other makes on us in the light of the good, our insecurities and failures, our pride or humility, will therefore affect what we come to see as characteristic of love and as possibilities in it.

In these respects, Alcibiades' understanding of Socrates is an expression of who he is, the love he has to give, or better yet, his failure to love in an absolute sense. His inability to see and accept the goodness of Socrates as good, reveals his resistance to being transformed by what, to Plato, was an absolute good. This absolute sense in which we in love can be bound, not only to each other, but also by a conception of the good, is an aspect of the personal knowledge that love may make available to us that Nussbaum's account does not help us see. It is also a feature that Solomon's description of love as a psychological bond fails to elucidate.

2 The Good as the Formal Object of Love

For Solomon and Nussbaum, one of the main stumbling stones in Socrates', Diotima's or Plato's view of love is that, in their view, it fails to teach us something significant about the personal character of love. In particular, the sensuous nature of people as historical and finite beings appears, to them, to be left out of the picture. In the rest of the discussion, I respond to this objection. I argue that an account of love that characterizes it as embodying an absolute, or unconditional, perspective on our relationships with other people, must not fail to acknowledge the ways in which love is deeply personal. This also holds for an account of an absolute conception of the good that regards it as the object of love.

In a manner similar to that of Nussbaum and Solomon, Gregory Vlastos articulates the following criticism of Plato.

As a theory of the love of persons, this is its crux: What we are to love in persons is the “image” of the Idea in them. We are to love the persons so far, and only insofar, as they are good and beautiful. Now since all too few human beings are masterworks of excellence, and not even the best of those we have the chance to love are wholly free of streaks of the ugly, the mean, the commonplace, the ridiculous, if our love for them is to be only for their virtue and beauty, the individual, in the uniqueness and integrity of his or her individuality will never be the object of our love. (Vlastos 1981, 31.)

The criticism Vlastos voices is twofold. First, he suggests that by making the good the object of love, the Socratic, Diotimian account disregards that it is another person, and not the good, that is the true object of love. Second, he claims that by construing the good as the object of love, the Socratic, Diotimian account fails to do justice to the fact that actual persons are never perfectly good. One is, Vlastos claims, not only to love people for their perfections: they are “worthy of love for their own sake” (Vlastos 1981, 31). This concern is echoed in Nussbaum's account, in which acknowledging Alcibiades' imperfections is central to recognizing his love as a very personal form of love.

These criticisms capture something significant in the philosophical reflection of love. Saying “I love your goodness” is clearly saying something less than saying “I love you”. Not least since we cannot deduce the latter from the first. I may “love your

goodness”, without “loving you”. This, however, does not only apply to “goodness” as a quality of a person, but to any quality with which we replace “you”, be it “your intelligence”, “your wit”, or “beauty”. Thinking that my love is for certain qualities, and not simply for you, inevitably leads us to the problem of replaceability (cf. Jollimore 2011, 16). If it is the “goodness”, “intelligence” or “wit” I love, it is not you as another individual that is at the center of my love. It is for this reason that qualifications such as loving the other “for their own sake” so easily enter the picture. Aristotle’s discussion of friendship is often referenced here, where loving our friends for what they are, is regarded as the highest form of friendship, by contrast to the love we have for their utility or the pleasure they offer. Expressions such as “loving someone for their own sake” also seem to be the greatest length to which many philosophers go to assign to love an unconditional character.

Such expressions do some work. They are reminders that I am to love you despite your imperfections: I should not disregard or be uncritical of your faults. However, it is questionable whether the addition of “for their own sake” adds something substantial to our understanding of love above such explications. Roger Scruton suggests that the phrase “for its own sake” is “a device which serves to block the passage to purpose, and to focus all reasoning upon the thing itself” (1986, 81). Here, however, I agree with Peter Winch that the problem with putting the emphasis on doing something “for its own sake” is that it makes one’s actions and love “*too like*” what we do “for the sake of something else” (1972, 183).⁷ By modeling one’s thinking on a “love for something”, one suggests that loving someone for their own sake is the outcome of the same kind of reasoning that informs loving someone for fame, money or fortune, that is, as means to an end. It is only that loving someone *for* their own sake is preferable. Solomon also gives in to this thought, when he, on the contrary, argues against accounts of unconditional love, on the basis that it never is true that we love all the qualities of a person (1990 133, 165). This assumes that speaking about unconditional love can only be explicated as a conditional love of everything. It does not recognize that speaking about an unconditional love can serve as a rejection of speaking of conditions in the first place, as well as it can be expressive of a desire to speak, as it were, in a different mode.⁸

An alternative strategy is to recollect that the words “I love you” are not primarily used to convey the end of one’s reasoning. With the words, I turn to you with my love, opening up to what the words can mean in different circumstances. They are words longing for a response, not for justification. Alcibiades in his speech is not merely out to tell the truth about Socrates, for the virtue of truth telling. He aims at eliciting a response in the philosopher. His speech, in that way, shares significant features with the moving story he tells of himself attempting to win Socrates’ heart by spending the night with him (Plato 1953b, 217a–219d). On such a note, the significant point in love is not that my love be *for your sake*. Rather it is *for you*. It is an offering, not an achievement. Uttering those words is an expression of my love, as an embodied response for which I also accept responsibility.

⁷ Cf. also Pacovská (2017) who suggests that the evaluations made in the “best kind” of love are of a different kind than the judgements that are usually the focus of philosophers, and that the judgements philosophers are inclined to make on what is lovable rather express a form of moralism.

⁸ In a similar manner, as one assumes that speaking about the good in an absolute sense can be explicated by means of the goods we speak of in a relative sense.

Such assertions demand elaboration, to be more than rhetorical gestures. A key here is to consider the sense in which we can speak of objects of love in the first place, or more generally of emotions. The object of emotion is usually defined as that *something* or *someone* the emotion is about (cf. Taylor 1979, 165; de Sousa 2015, 59, 61). The free running bear in the case of fear, the offence in the case of justified anger. Much consideration is not usually given to the distinction between a “something” and a “someone”. “I love your *goodness*” is placed on a par with “I love *you*”. The only difference there seems to be is the one between the part and the whole, the piece and the puzzle. Where “goodness” is seen as denoting a quality of you, “you” denote the sum of these qualities.

This view makes intelligible Solomon’s claim that we never love everything about a person. It also speaks to his conclusion that the suggestion that I should love all of you lacks sense (1990 133, 165). It does not, however, account for the radical difference between “loving something you did” and “loving you”. In the first case, I can specify specific behavior. In the second case, there is nothing for me to specify, because I am not in the business of specifying anything in the first place. Certainly, loving you entails finding much in you to love, just as being angry at you occasions me to find most of the things you do offensive. The words love and anger, here, gesture at emotional attitudes that seek out their objects, such as, in the case of love, your readiness for laughter, the kindness in your eyes, your attentive eye for detail. These are all aspects of you that I may come to regard as good.

Yet, speaking of standing in relation to you, as another human being to love, and who may or may not love me back, signals that love also involves us in much more than, and something very much different from, an emotional response to something you did. It involves us in a relationship, in a history, in an understanding of the occasions on which I do feel love for you, but also of the occasions on which I rather feel frustrated and irritated with you. It carries with it the realization that acknowledging all these features does not in the least detract from my loving you dearly. What is more, our love involves us in the recognition that you stand in a similar relation to me, and that I am not the sole judge of what aspects of me, and you, can be regarded as infuriating and endearing within our relationship. Such considerations may make us feel uncomfortable with the suggestion that “you”, as a person or individual, are to be considered the object of my love. Should one not rather say that love is a relationship between, and even more a meeting of, two subjects? (If one, as it were, still feels obliged to hold on to the distinction between subject and object.)

A first step out of the picture that “you” be conceived as the object of love, is to single out the formal object of an emotion, in distinction from its material object (cf. Kenny (2003, 312) in relation to the scholastic distinction), or its focus or target (cf. de Sousa 2015, 59–62). “The formal object of ϕ ing is the object under that description which must apply to it if it is to be possible to ϕ it.” (Kenny 2003, 132). (The formal object of fear can thus be formed as danger, whereas the material object of my fear, is the rabid dog. Similarly, the formal object of anger is injustice, whereas the material object is you not having done the dishes as promised.) The formal object then plays a significant role in our being able to identify certain feelings as a particular emotion. What I fear is not danger itself, but the rabid dog. That I see it as dangerous,⁹ however,

⁹ In any one sense that can be spelled out, such as that I want the situation to end, worry about my safety, take measures to avoid the danger, and so on (cf. Taylor 1979, 166–167).

identifies my feelings and behavior as fear. In these respects, considerations about the formal object of an emotion also qualifies what is a meaningful attribution of an emotion to someone. In situations where I am prone to question the real danger, I am also more hesitant to find “fear” the most meaningful description of a person’s feelings. Rather, I may think of their fearful reactions as an expression of a phobia.¹⁰

In a similar manner, it is possible to consider “good” as the formal object of love, whereas its material object, or perhaps better yet its focus, is the individual towards whom it is directed. Here again, it is not the good I love, but you. That I see you as good,¹¹ however, helps us to identify my feelings as love. Where I do not recognize in what ways a lover is able to recognize the one they love as good, I may also be more hesitant to think of it as love. Rather, I may think of it as a form of destructive dependence.

This way of thinking secures the sense in which love both involves me in a relation to the good, and to another individual. It also shows the limits of considering love as one of the emotions. Perceived as a form of response, attitude, or more generally, a form of responsiveness, love shares this logical structure with the other emotions. As soon as we think of the ways in which love places us within a relationship with another human being, however, we also have to consider ethical questions about our responsibility. A better way of expressing the formal role of the good in love, then, is that we, as lovers, regard each other as well as our relationship with each other under the description of good, or in the light of good. Here, part of our responsibility for each other involves our responding to the question about how truthful our vision about this good is.¹²

Despite their criticism of the Socratic, Diotimian account for failing to account for a love of individuals, Solomon’s and Vlastos’ focus on how to delimit the object of love, the person as such, or some other features that provide a good reason for love, ironically renders the personal love of the other too impersonal. Their preoccupation with *what* we are to love easily leads to theoretical speculation about the kinds of object that are fitting to love, as well as the possible differences in goods we identify in our relationship or in the other person. Thus, it seems that the problem with loving an image of you that Vlastos identifies, is that I then love only a limited part of a whole, whereas I should really love the whole.

What this *theoretical* commitment deflects from is the *ethical* significance of saying, for instance, that if I were to love only “‘the image’ of the Idea” (Vlastos 1981, 31) in you, I would not be loving *you*. This saying is reminiscent of Iris Murdoch’s idea that love is “the perception of individuals, and the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real” (1997, 215). In Murdoch’s writings, this saying invites us to inquire into how we gain an understanding of *who* we love, and how our

¹⁰ Identifying the formal object of the emotion is not the only identifier of emotions. With emotions go characteristic behavior, facial expressions, tone of voice and ways of speaking, that also guide us in our attributions of emotion to others.

¹¹ Again, in any one sense that can be spelled out, such as that I desire your company, want to promote your well-being, wonder at your existence, and so on.

¹² This is one way to read Murdoch’s remark that “when we try perfectly to love what is imperfect our love goes to its object via the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just” (1970, 103). In the senses of ‘object’ discussed here, “love’s” object would be its material object, or focus. An imperfect or “false” love, on this reading, is a love that regards the material object of love as good without further consideration as to whether this is a “false good” (Murdoch 1970, 102).

love may both meliorate and distort such understanding. It urges us to explore how our reliance on varying conceptions of the good reveal our difficulty with, not only gaining sufficient knowledge of the ones we love, but seeing them justly.¹³ On this account, the centrality of the claim that I should not love an image of you, resides in the realization that this would not be a whole-hearted love of you. If what I think of as you were only a product of my own imagination, it would constitute a betrayal of you and your love, as well as the sense in which you, in Murdoch's sense, inhabit a reality that should be perceived as a limit to my will. (Cf. Weil 2002, 64–65; Murdoch 1970; Gaita 2004, 5, 171, 278; Kronqvist 2009).

This way of thinking about the love of an individual raises questions that are significantly ethical. They are ways of relating to experiences of human encounters that invite wonder and contemplation rather than call for judgement and justification (cf. Wittgenstein 1965 and Holland 1980). Thus, they constitutively engage us in self-reflection. Rather than raising questions about what we in any particular case, such as in Alcibiades', would be prepared to call love, they urge us to take to heart that such questions do not call for a philosopher's, or a choir of philosophers' assessment. They are personal, in the deep sense that they confront us as all as individuals, calling upon our own responsibility to answer such questions, when they face us in person, as truthfully as we can.¹⁴

So far, I have dwelled upon the conceptual connections between love and the good, and the sense in which they, on one conception, mutually define each other. I have also given a first indication of how such conceptual elucidations as Murdoch's can both express and guide our ethical thought. Remarking on such conceptual connections, however, does not yet stand in opposition to thinking of love as a personal relationship. Why then, is Vlastos so inclined to think that the Platonic account tells us to only love "the 'image' of the Idea" in other persons, or only love them "insofar, as they are good and beautiful" (Vlastos 1981, 31). This question is particularly pressing in the light of his claim that we cannot read the *Symposium* correctly without acknowledging in which ways it is a continuation of Plato's teachings about the Forms (Vlastos 1981, 19f). Why would a consideration of these necessarily require us to transcend the love of our personal relationships?

This faces us with the question of how we should understand Plato's conception of the Forms, and how it is treated in the *Symposium*. In particular, we are asked what significance we should give to the notion that we come to know the Good and the Beautiful *through* our personal relations to others? The standard reading of the *Symposium* certainly presents the aim of love as something to be found over and above

¹³ Cf. Murdoch's discussion of M (1970, 17–23) as an example of someone trying to extend a just and loving gaze on the reality of the other.

¹⁴ But did he love Socrates? That depends on what aspects of love one wants to bring to the forefront. He was certainly in love with him. The fact that he failed in many ways in his love, also does not prevent us from saying that he loved. What we go on to say, however, depends on terminology and partly temperament. It is possible to say that he loved, in the sense that he desired him, was awakened to aspects of him as good and so on, but that he did not love well, in the sense that his love was still too selfish and possessive. In that sense, we open up the space for the possibility that love is not always to be conceived as a good itself. This is important, for clearly falling in love can lead to a person's destruction. It needs, however, to be noted that we sometimes make the judgement not that someone loved badly, but that it was not love in the first place. Such a possibility also needs to be open to us in language, and I have brought out how that is connected with questions of what we perceive as good in an absolute sense.

our personal relationships with each other. The highest form of love does not appear aimed at finding unity with the other, but at meditation and reflection of eternal objects, the Forms. These are portrayed as residing in a realm beyond the finite nature of our time and place. On this reading, the Diotimian ladder is taken as a *temporal* account of how we come to acquire knowledge of the Form of Beauty as an idea, or better yet, as an ideal, that exists in a world beyond our own.

It is, however, also possible to read Plato's reflection on the Forms as struggling to come to terms with the place concepts, and relations between concepts, hold in the concrete contexts of our life. On such a reading, the Diotimian ladder does not tell us anything about the relation between the personal, particular, and finite objects of our world that we misleadingly identify as beautiful, and the ideal, universal, and eternal object that the word really signifies. Rather, it tells us something about how we come to be acquainted with the *concept* of beauty in our own world. In these ways, reflection on the Forms of the Beautiful and the Good for Plato, is not primarily to be seen as a form of metaphysical speculation about abstract notions or entities. It involves us in reflection about what it means to speak about what is beautiful and good, what dimensions and truths such concepts, and our life with them, allow us to see in our life. It contributes to our knowledge of ourselves as beings whose lives are certainly marked by finitude, but whose understanding of these lives transcends those features of our existence. This form of reflection, as Dilman insisted in relation to the *Phaedo*, should be seen as inherently ethical (1992, 74, see also Weil 1998, 134).

This reading casts serious doubts on the suggestion that the search for beauty presented in the Diotimian ladder, should be read as a way of *transcending* our personal relations. A more helpful alternative is to think of it as a *transformation* in how we regard our personal relationships in the light of the beautiful and good.¹⁵ Here, the Diotimian ladder does not involve us in a literal ascent, but in a deepening of our concepts of the beautiful and the good. We come to see these as not being connected with either any specific feature of a person, or one single person, but as having a more fundamental role in how we understand each other, and how we make sense of love. Such a transformation of our concepts, I want to argue, is only available to us as finite beings, and in virtue of the kinds of personal encounters we may have with each other.

I have continuously spoken about the absolute sense in which we may speak of what is good, to avoid speaking about an absolute good. Whereas such an expression invites considerations about what kind of good this is, I wanted to bring out the character of my relation to those who reveal to me the significance of speaking about the good in that spirit. In particular, I wanted to focus on the ethical requirements involved in thinking truthfully about the meaning of these relationships in the light of such a good, and the sense in which this makes demands on me that are independent of how I choose to think. Both with respect to the descriptions I find suitable to make sense of these relationships, as well as the personal significance they have for me, I can neither neglect these demands nor release myself from responsibility or criticism by denying their absolute character. I can certainly try to close myself to what these meetings reveal, but if I do, it is central that I would think of this as a form of closing myself off from what I, in other respects, recognize as good. The sense in which love is both an emotion

¹⁵ See Diamond (2005, 125) for a rendering of how our concept of beauty can be transformed in the light of a personal encounter.

(something I feel) and an ethical demand (something I can be required to do better), then, speaks to the recognition that certain experiences of what I come to regard as good, command my attention and raise a question as to what it means for me to live in their light.

I cannot emphasize enough the personal character of such experiences of the good, also when we speak of it in this absolute and commanding sense. Wittgenstein warned us against locating the meaning of words in anything other than our use of language, and by the same token I would warn against thinking that goodness exists somewhere apart from our lives and the good and evil we do to each other within these. I can only speak of such experiences of the good embodied in personal love, and the demands that issue out of them, in the first person. Similarly, the experiences of which I speak emerge out of encounters with others, who stand to me in a second person relation.

In other words, it is essential to the goodness that is revealed to me in love that it is revealed in the individual encounters of human beings. The goodness of your love is not anything apart from your smiles, your care and concerns, the look in your eyes (cf. Rhee 2000). To paraphrase Wittgenstein, it is there alive in your features, in your actions, in your words (1997, §537): the goodness that I see in you cannot be separated from seeing *you*. Neither can the goodness I see in you and our relationship be separated from the remorse I feel at realizing that I, by my words, have caused you pain, or the joy that is awakened in me by a loving glance, or by you taking the time to listen or recognizing me in my affliction. The sense in which I experience love as unconditional or as a grace cannot be separated from you welcoming me with open arms, although I stand in front of you as a sinner, perhaps having done something “unforgivable”. This sense in which I may, and repeatedly do, fail you in my love, without the need to doubt whether I or you still love, is indeed one source of wonder at the goodness of love.

Thus, although I can speak of love as making absolute demands on me that are independent of my will, my understanding of goodness is nevertheless dependent on my seeing it embodied in my life in ways that are not of my own making. This sense of goodness is, for that reason, also vulnerable to evil and misfortune, to the extent that someone who has only been met with distrust, nonchalance or neglect may have great difficulty seeing, say, the generosity and trust in another, and responding to it with love.

3 Conclusion

I began by considering Solomon’s Aristophanic reasons. I agreed with him that our interests and aspirations in love need to be seen in the light of the relationship we have to each other. The reasons love provides us with is in that respect not contained within the individuals, but something constructed within their relationship. Yet, I have suggested that this account is limited in so far as it does not encompass a view of what is good that goes beyond the mutual preferences and interests of the lovers. Here, I leaned on two different ways of conceiving what we desire and what we perceive as good. The first involved the relative sense in which what I regard as good is an expression of my desire, with the caveat that it does not necessarily have to be good in any deeper sense. Rather it is my desire that makes me present it as good. The second was the absolute

sense in which the good appears as a limit to my will (cf. Gaita 2004). Here, appealing to what is good gives us reason to desire, love and wonder at it.

With the help of the Diotimian ascent of love and the transformed vision of beauty it describes, I have suggested that these two senses of good can similarly come together in the realization that our personally conditioned responses to each other in erotic love need to be transformed to accommodate ethical demands that carry an unconditional meaning. Here, I described a dialectic of response and responsibility, in which loving someone involves spontaneously responding to him or her in the light of goodness and beauty, but also a responsiveness to and responsibility for the demands that love makes on us within our personal relationships. What we come to regard as good in our love does, in these respects, not only issue out of our spontaneously felt emotion. It also constrains what we can meaningfully perceive as love in our relationship.

Such a personal and conceptual transformation, however, is no necessary outcome of erotic love, but rather a possibility within it. Alcibiades' speech at the end of the *Symposium*, although it, as Nussbaum insists, reveals one personal response to love, illustrates the failure to be thus transformed. It reveals a failure to respond to love shown lovingly, rejecting the goodness he perceived in Socrates out of pride and vanity. The lesson we might glean out of this discussion, is that although love depends on personal responses to beauty, joy and wonder, we are personally responsible for how we go on living in the light of these glimpses of an absolute good.

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