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CHAPTER 3

Love in the Christian Tradition

David McPherson

C3P1

No understanding of love has had more influence on Western culture than that which emerges from the Christian tradition.[1] This essay traces some of the main contours of Christian love and examines key issues pertaining to it. The first section explores the picture of love that arises from the New Testament. The second section considers Augustine's and Aquinas's accounts of the "order of love," which address tensions inherent to the New Testament teachings on love, especially regarding (1) love for the Creator and created things and (2) universal and particular love. It will be shown that Christian ethics is above all concerned with *rightly ordered love*. The third section examines the relationship

1 See, e.g., Raimond Gaita, "Goodness beyond Virtue," in *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), esp. the conclusion; Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), esp. chs. 1, 6–7, 17.

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between two conceptions of love, *agape* and *eros*, especially in light of Anders Nygren's work, which criticizes the way of thinking about love that is exemplified in the work of Augustine and Aquinas. Against Nygren, it will be argued that Christian *agape* should be regarded as involving appraisal love that is both conditional and unconditional, in different respects, and as connected to *eros* in meeting our desire for fulfillment.

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Love in the New Testament

C3P2

A comprehensive account of love in the New Testament is of course not possible here, and so we focus on some of the most important features of the New Testament picture of love. To begin with, we should be impressed by the *centrality* of love to the Christian message, where it is regarded as having *supreme value*. When a lawyer questioned Jesus about which commandment of the law is the greatest, the Gospel of Matthew says that he replied, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37–40; cf. Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–28).[2] We might wonder here how exactly the second commandment "is like" the first. One plausible interpretation is offered by John Cottingham: "Since [we are] made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), each human being has a special dignity and worth, and is owed something of the respect and love that is due to God. So failure to love our neighbour is, in a certain way, a failure to love and respect God."[3] We later consider another way that love of God and

2 All Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version; see *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

3 John Cottingham, "Love and Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Love*, ed. Christopher Grau and Aaron Smuts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), sec. 2. I am

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neighbor are connected, but for now we should note that this twofold love commandment combines two separate passages from the Torah: Deuteronomy 6:5 ("You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might") and Leviticus 19:18 ("You shall love your neighbor as yourself").[4] We get a sense of just how important Jesus believes these two love commandments are when he says that all the teachings of the law and the prophets "hang" on them.

C3P3 It is not difficult to see how following the twofold love commandment fulfills the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–21; Deuteronomy 5:1–21). As Paul writes, "[One] who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment [pertaining to one's neighbor], are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:8–10). The commandment to love God with one's whole heart, soul, and mind can also be seen as fulfilling the commandments "You shall have no other gods before me," "You shall not make for yourself an idol," "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God," and "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy" (Exodus 20:3–11).

C3P4 The centrality of love in Christianity is expressed on several other notable occasions in the New Testament. In one of the greatest encomiums on love ever written, Paul remarks, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my

indebted to Cottingham's essay and May's *Love: A History* for how I structure this section, though my discussion differs in many respects.

4 See Lenn Goodman's essay in this volume for more on love in the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish tradition.

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possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1–3). In other words, love is what gives worth to all of our activities and abilities, and without it, they are worthless. Paul goes on to describe some features of this love: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends" (1 Corinthians 13:4–8). He concludes by saying, "Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

C3P5 In the fourth chapter of the First Letter of John we find the centrality of love expressed in a more "mystical" key:

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> Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. . . . God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. . . . We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:7–21)

C3P7 Several noteworthy things here: First, we have an identification of love as a defining feature of God ("God is love"). We have a statement that love comes to us from God, and "[We] love because he first loved us." And when we love in this way, we are said—and this especially is the "mystical" part—to participate in God's love ("those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them"). Here we also see another reason for why the second love commandment (to love our neighbor) is like the first (to love God): if we love God, we must also love our neighbor (or "brothers and sisters"), because loving God

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means participating in God's love. Since God graciously first loved us, we should extend the same love to our neighbor.

C3P8

A second important feature of the New Testament picture of love is that, as we have seen, love for God and neighbor is *commanded*. This stands in contrast to Kant, who writes, "Love as an inclination cannot be commanded: but beneficence from duty, when no inclination impels us and even when a natural and unconquerable aversion opposes such beneficence, is practical, and not pathological, love. Such love resides in the will and not in the propensities of feeling, in principles of action and not in tender sympathy; and only this practical love can be commanded."[5] But the New Testament clearly commands not only "practical love" (i.e., good deeds) but also "pathological love" or love from the "heart" (indeed, love without feeling does not seem to be love at all, so this is hardly surprising). And we saw that good deeds have worth only insofar as they are motivated by such love ("If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing"). We are called to *metanoia* (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Luke 5:32; Acts 11:18; 2 Peter 3:9; Romans 12:2), that is, to conversion or repentance, which involves not just a change of mind but also a *change of heart* (i.e., affectivity) so as to become more fully aligned with the good. Indeed, we are called to a life conversion that is so radical as to be described as "rebirth" (John 3:3–7). Such conversion is often the work of a lifetime in cooperation with God's grace.[6] What it ultimately enables is the "abundant life" for which we long (John 10:10). As Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "If you keep

5 Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* [1785], trans. James W. Ellington, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), First Section, p. 12. Cottingham also discusses this passage in "Love and Religion," sec. 2. On Kant's theory of love, see also Melissa Seymour Fahmy's chapter in this volume.

6 Pope Benedict XVI writes, "The love-story between God and man consists in the very fact that this communion of will increases in a communion of thought and sentiment, and thus our will and God's will increasingly coincide: God's will is no longer for me an alien will, something imposed on me from without by the commandments, but it is now my own will, based on the realization that God is in fact more deeply present to me than I am to myself" (*God Is Love* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006], 44; cf. 8, 38).

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my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:10–11).

C3P9 The call to *metanoia* is also connected to a third important feature of the New Testament picture of love: its demanding nature. We have already seen that Christian love should be unconditional ("It bears all things, . . . endures all things"): that is, it is not undermined by what someone makes (or does not make) of his or her life. However, it is not unconditional in the sense that there is no *basis* for this love: its fundamental basis is the love-worthiness of human beings as made in the image of God. Besides being unconditional, Christian love can also require great sacrifice. As Jesus teaches (and exemplifies), "Greater love has no one than this—to lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). But it is not just our friends—in the ordinary sense of the term—that we are to love. In the Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches us to love those who are especially difficult to love:

C3P10

> Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. . . . Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:27–36; cf. Matthew 5:38–48)

C3P11 These are hard teachings: it is not clear that anyone besides God could fully live up to them. Nevertheless, we are implored to imitate God's love and mercy. As the Gospel of Matthew puts it, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48). What is operative here is something other than a Kantian conception of duty where "ought

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implies can." We are commanded to strive for an ideal that is humanly unattainable; at best it can be approximated.

C3P12 Later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is questioned about his understanding of the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. A lawyer (seemingly the same one mentioned earlier from Matthew 22:34–40), who is said to be wanting to justify himself, asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus replies with the parable of the Good Samaritan:

C3P13

> "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:30–37)

C3P14 Notably, in this parable Jesus turns the question on the lawyer, changing it from "Who is my neighbor?" to "Who was a neighbor to the man in need?" Here the concept of "neighbor" is *moralized*. Rather than identifying those who live nearby, it embodies a normative ideal: *we* ought to be a "neighbor" to everyone, including strangers, whom we come across. In other words, we should be ready to act with solidarity for any human being in need. We also see here that this moralization is the basis for the widely recognized universalization of the concept of "neighbor" in the parable: it is not to be limited

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to members of one's own political, ethnic, or religious community. As we see, it is the Samaritan, an "outsider," who responds correctly. However, the proximity or tangible nearness of the person in need—"when [the Samaritan] saw him, he was moved with pity"—also seems to matter here, as the concept of "neighbor" suggests. We return to this point later.

C3P15

The parable of the Good Samaritan also highlights (as does the preceding passage from the Gospel of Luke) that not only do we have negative duties to others (such as those specified in the Decalogue: don't murder, don't steal, don't commit adultery, etc.) but we also have positive duties, including duties of beneficence that at least in some dire need cases we are strictly obligated to fulfill (see also Matthew 25:31–46; Luke 18:18–25).[7] Thus, we have a view of love that is very demanding: it is unconditional (i.e., not based on what one makes of his or her life), it is universal in scope (extending even to enemies and strangers), and it involves positive duties of assistance. However, we are still left with some issues to be resolved: How should we understand the relationship between the love that is due to our Creator, which is supposed to be with one's *whole* heart, and love for created things? How should we balance the demands of love for all human beings with the demands of particular love for family, friends, fellow citizens, coreligionists, and so on, which the New Testament authors also affirm?[8] These questions are left to subsequent Christian thinkers to work out through seeking to clarify the proper "order of love." We now turn to consider on this front the efforts of two of the most important thinkers in the Christian tradition: Augustine and Aquinas.

7 Cf. Kant, who regards duties of beneficence as "imperfect duties," i.e., encouraged but not strictly required.

8 See Matthew 15:4; John 11:33–36, 15:12–17, 19:25–27; Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 5:21–6:4; 1 Timothy 5:8.

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C3S2

The Order of Love: Augustine and Aquinas

C3P16

According to Augustine, "A brief and true definition of virtue is 'rightly ordered love.'"[9] Aquinas maintains something similar when he writes that "charity" (*caritas*)—which encompasses love of God and neighbor—is "the form of the virtues," that is, it orders all the virtues toward our ultimate end of friendship with God.[10] In both cases we can see how central the idea of rightly ordered love is to Christian ethics.[11]

C3P17

Augustine works out his account of rightly ordered love in book 1 of *On Christian Teaching*. He begins by distinguishing "enjoyment" (*frui*) and "use" (*uti*): "There are some things which are to be enjoyed, some which are to be used, and some whose function is both to enjoy and use."[12] The main difference between what is to be enjoyed and what is to be used is that the former "make us happy," while the latter "assist us and give us a boost . . . as we press on towards our happiness, so that we may reach and hold fast to the things which make us happy" (1.2–4). These two categories relate to love in that to "enjoy something is to hold fast to it in love for its own sake," whereas to "use something is to apply whatever it may be to the purpose of obtaining what you love" (1.2–4). In short, we can love something for its own sake and enjoy it, and we can "love" something as a means to what is loved for its own sake.

C3P18

The problem, according to Augustine, is that we often love things in a way that they ought not to be loved: namely, when we enjoy things

9 Augustine, *The City of God* [426], trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 2003), bk. 15, ch. 22.

10 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [1266–1273], II-II, q. 23, a. 8, in *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1948). Other references henceforth appear in the text with the abbreviation "ST."

11 On the continued importance of an ethic of rightly ordered love, see Stephen J. Pope, *The Evolution of Altruism & the Ordering of Love* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994); Pope, "The Order of Love and Recent Catholic Ethics: A Constructive Proposal," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 255–288.

12 Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* [397], trans. R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.2–4. Other references henceforth appear in the text.

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that instead should be used. The result is that we are "impeded" or "diverted" from advancing to our goal of true happiness (1.2–4). To illustrate this point, Augustine asks us to imagine that we are travelers who are only able to live happily in our homeland, and in order to return home we have to use certain means of transportation. However, if we become overly enthralled with the journey itself, enjoying things that ought only to be used, we might be reluctant to finish the journey promptly and thereby become "ensnared in the wrong kind of pleasure and estranged from the homeland whose pleasures could make us happy" (1.4). Augustine remarks, "So too in this mortal life we are like travelers away from our Lord . . . : if we wish to return to the homeland where we can be happy we must use this world, not enjoy it" (1.4). Here we have an account of the proper relationship between the love that is due to our Creator and love for created things. As he later puts it, "It is only the eternal and unchangeable things [namely, the persons of the Trinitarian God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit] . . . that are to be enjoyed; other things are to be used so that we attain the full enjoyment of those things" (1.18–22). For Augustine, it is only what is eternal, unchanging, and excellent in every way that can be the source of complete happiness. By placing our hopes in such a Being we can rest assured that we never have to fear losing the object of our enjoyment or happiness. As Augustine prays to God in his *Confessions*: "[You] have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."[13]

C3P19

In *On the Trinity*, Augustine writes, "Nothing but wrong use or wrong enjoyment constitutes the faultiness or blameworthiness of human life."[14] This can happen either because of ignorance or "covetousness." In contrast to "charity"—that is, love of God and love of creatures insofar as such love is directed toward love of God—"covetousness"

13 Augustine, *Confessions* [397–400], trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1.1.

14 Augustine, *On the Trinity* [ca. 400], trans. John Burnaby, *Augustine: Later Works* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 10.10. Cf. Aquinas: "[Every] sinful act proceeds from inordinate desire for some temporal good" (ST I-II, q. 77, a. 4).

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is when "the creature is loved for its own sake," which "serves not to aid our use but to corrupt our enjoyment."[15] But is it really true that all enjoyment of created things and love of them for their own sake is covetous and fails to love properly our highest good, that is, God? Augustine, it must be said, has a strange view of enjoyment in taking it to mean that which we regard as our highest good or ultimate end. This is too constricted. We can enjoy something as intrinsically good (e.g., a human being, a beautiful sunset, etc.) and love it for its own sake *without* seeing it as our highest good. Aquinas writes, "The first change wrought in the appetite by the appetible object [i.e., the perceived good] is called *love*, and is nothing else than complacency in that object; and from this complacency results a movement towards that same object, and this movement is *desire*; and lastly, there is rest which is *joy*" (ST I-II, q. 26, a. 2). This suggests that anything *not* loved for its own sake and experienced as a source of joy is in fact not loved at all. Moreover, a biblical worldview affirms that the created world is lovable for its own sake and is a source of enjoyment. We see this in the creation story in Genesis where God creates the world and declares it "very good" (Genesis 1:31) and then rests to enjoy his creation.[16] In keeping the Sabbath, we imitate God by adopting an affirmative stance of restful enjoyment of the goodness of the world. Of course, we should also see the world's goodness as having its source in God's goodness. Augustine does say that we should "derive eternal and spiritual value from corporeal and temporal things" (1.4–6), but for him this is a matter of proper *use*. No doubt there is always a possibility of idolatry in love for created things. But there is no reason why we cannot delight in created things and love them for their own sake, while also seeing them as having their source in God, who is to be loved and enjoyed above all and with our whole heart.

15 *On the Trinity* 9.7.

16 The inherent goodness of the created world is also affirmed in Aquinas's claim that being and goodness are "convertible" (see ST I, q. 5, a. 1).

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C3P20 Augustine's view that we should use rather than enjoy created things is especially problematic when it comes to our fellow human beings. He realizes that he is confronted with a dilemma: we as human beings, who enjoy and use things, are ourselves a "major kind of thing, being made 'in the image and likeness of God' . . . by virtue of having a rational soul" (1.22). The question then is "whether humans should enjoy one another or use one another, or both." Since we are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves, Augustine also frames the question as whether human beings should be loved on their "own account or for some other reason." He answers, "If something is loved on its own account, it is made to constitute the happy life," therefore human beings "should be loved for another reason," namely, that they come to love God with all their hearts. In other words, we love them *for God's sake*, who does constitute the happy life: "So a person who loves his neighbor properly should, in concert with him, aim to love God with all his heart, all his soul, and all his mind. In this way, loving him as he would himself, he relates his love of himself and his neighbor entirely to the love of God, which allows not the slightest trickle to flow away from it and thereby diminish it" (1.22). Augustine concludes, "The person who lives a just and holy life is . . . a person who has ordered his love, so that he does not love what it is wrong to love, or fail to love what should be loved, or love too much what should be loved less (or love too little what should be loved more)" (1.26–27).

C3P21 For Augustine, rightly ordered love is where God is regarded as the highest good and "loved for himself" and where all other things are loved for God's sake, since he is the proper object of enjoyment. Human beings are to be loved more than other created things, since we are made in the image of God and can share in fellowship with God; however, human beings (including ourselves) are to be loved on account of God and not for their own sake. Augustine does acknowledge that there is a sense in which we can enjoy other human beings "in God," but in such cases he thinks you are still really "enjoying God rather than that human being," since you refer this love for others to

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the love of God, who is the source of complete happiness. Moreover, Augustine says that the notion of enjoying others in God is still very similar to the idea of "using someone or something together in love," since you go beyond the enjoyment of a human relationship and "relate it to your permanent goal," and thus are using it, or enjoying it "not in a literal sense, but in a transferred sense" (1.33). Genuine enjoyment, for Augustine, is thus still only possible in relation to God. But again there is no need for such a constricted sense of enjoyment, as we see with Aquinas's position: we can and should love human beings for their own sake and find joy in doing so while still affirming that the order of love requires that God be loved above all and that loving our neighbor means willing his or her greatest good, which is sharing in friendship with God (see ST I-II, qq. 26–28; ST II-II, qq. 25–26). Indeed, regarding charity, Aquinas says, "The aspect under which our neighbor is to be loved, is God, since what we ought to love in our neighbor is that he may be in God" (II-II, q. 25, a. 1).

C3P22 However, in addition to what we might call the *forward-looking* accounts of Augustine and Aquinas of how we should order our love of neighbor toward the love of God through willing that our neighbor come to share in the fullness of friendship with God, we should also recognize a *backward-looking* account. This applies not just to our fellow human beings but to all creatures, since all creatures have their ultimate creative source in God and can be seen as gifts from God. On this account when we love creatures properly we also love God as the ultimate source of the given good of each creature. In this way we can and should love our neighbor and other creatures "in God," that is, *as creations of God*. In both ways we can love God above all and with our whole hearts and our neighbor as ourselves.

C3P23 Let us now consider the second issue identified at the end of the previous section: how should we balance the demands of love for all human beings with the demands of particular love for family, friends, fellow citizens, coreligionists, and so on? In *On Christian Teaching* Augustine writes, "[You] cannot do good to all people equally, so you

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should take particular thought for those who, as if by lot, happen to be particularly close to you in terms of place, time, or any other circumstances" (1.16–29). In addressing this issue, Aquinas cites this passage from Augustine and goes on to remark,

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> Grace and virtue imitate the order of nature, which is established by Divine wisdom. Now the order of nature is such that every natural agent pours forth its activity first and most of all on the things which are nearest to it. . . . Therefore we ought to be most beneficent towards those who are most closely connected with us. Now one man's connection with another may be measured in reference to the various matters in which men are engaged; (thus the intercourse of kinsmen is in natural matters, that of fellow-citizens is in civil matters, that of the faithful in spiritual matters, and so forth): and various benefits should be conferred in various ways according to these various connections, because we ought in preference to bestow on each one such benefits as pertain to the matter in which, speaking simply, he is most clearly connected with us. And yet this may vary according to the various requirements of time, place, or matter in hand because in certain cases one ought, for instance, to succor a stranger, in extreme necessity, rather than one's own father, if he is not in such urgent need. (ST II-II, q. 31, a. 3; cf. q. 26, aa. 6–8)

C3P25

For Aquinas, then, in our beneficence we should generally give preference to family, friends, fellow citizens, and coreligionists over strangers, given the greater connectedness. Yet in some cases—namely, encounters with human beings in dire need—we can be strictly obligated to help a stranger, to be a "neighbor" to him or her.

C3P26

However, as suggested earlier, proximity seems to matter here: while we can be strictly obligated to help in Good Samaritan–type cases where we confront dire need face-to-face, we do not seem to be similarly obligated to help everyone in dire need around the world. That would be impossibly demanding, and attempting to help everyone

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would also be self-alienating (or self-mutilating) because of undermining the particular relationships and projects that give meaning to our lives.[17] Aquinas writes, "Absolutely speaking it is impossible to do good to every single one: yet it is true of each individual that one may be bound to do good to him in some particular case. Hence charity binds us, though not actually doing to some, to be prepared in mind to do good to anyone if we have time to spare" (ST II-II, q. 31, a. 2, ad. 1).[18] This suggests that though there are cases of strict obligation, other cases will be matters of discretion, where it is good to help if we can, but we need to weigh this against other considerations (see ST II-II, q. 31, a. 3, ad 1).

C3P27

But does "discretion" mean that in regard to dire need around the world one can do nothing, where he or she can do *something*, and be blameless? Not necessarily according to a Christian viewpoint: we will be judged on what we have done with what we have (see Matthew 25:14–46; cf. 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9). So discretion should be understood in terms of figuring out what is *required* of us in the course of our lives, given our circumstances and all the different considerations that need to be weighed against each other. But there are cases where having the virtue of neighbor-love will mean that we recognize a kind of *moral necessity* to render aid when we encounter someone in dire need. In his reflections on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Peter Winch remarks that the Samaritan responds compassionately to "what he sees as a *necessity* generated by the presence of the injured man." In other words, he experiences—in a way that the priest and Levite who passed by on the other side evidently do not—a kind of impossibility that is

17 See Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism: For and Against,* coauthored with J. J. C. Smart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), esp. at 95–118; Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–19; John Cottingham, "Impartiality and Ethical Formation," in *Partiality and Impartiality: Morality, Special Relationships and the Wider World*, ed. Brian Feltham and John Cottingham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 65–83.

18 Aquinas continues the passage, "There is however a good that we can do to all, if not to each individual, at least to all in general, as when we pray for all, for unbelievers as well as for the faithful."

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expressed in the thought "I can't just leave him here to die."[19] It is of course possible that one might also properly recognize a kind of moral necessity with regard to some cases of more distant need, but face-to-face encounters with dire need are the most obvious cases where such moral necessity properly arises. In any case, it is clear that Christian love at least requires that we be disposed to be a "neighbor" to everyone, seeing every human being as made in the image of God and so as being worthy of our concern.[20]

C3S3

Agape and *Eros*

C3P28

Let us turn now to consider an influential critique of the way of thinking about love that is exemplified in the work of Augustine and Aquinas, namely, the critique by the twentieth-century Swedish Protestant theologian Anders Nygren of what he calls the "caritas synthesis," which he claims brings together two incongruous conceptions of love: Platonic *eros* and Christian *agape*.[21] In making this turn we are regrettably skipping over centuries of valuable reflections on Christian love after Aquinas (e.g., in the writings of Julian of Norwich, Luther, Calvin, Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, De Sales, etc.); likewise, by focusing on Augustine and Aquinas we also regrettably skipped over many valuable reflections on Christian love during Late Antiquity and

19 Peter Winch, "Who Is My Neighbour?," in *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 157.

20 For a similar account, see David Oderberg, "Self-Love, Love of Neighbour, and Impartiality," in *The Moral Life*, ed. Nafsika Athanassoulis and Samantha Vice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 58–84, esp. at 63–66. Oderberg writes, "It is simply in virtue of sharing a common human nature that everyone one of us is bound to love every other; in theological terms, we are all made in the image of God. Yet this is only the starting point for moral reflection, not the terminus" (63). He sums up his view as follows: "The closer the relationship and the more severe the need, the greater the obligation of charity" (64). I have explored these issues further in David McPherson, *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 104–114, and McPherson, *The Virtues of Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 71–83.

21 *Eros* and *agape*, along with *philia*, are transliterated Greek words for love. *Agape* is one of the common words used for love in the original Greek of the New Testament, and it is used by those who translated the Torah into Greek in what is known as the "Septuagint" (see May, *Love: History*, 21–22).

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the Middle Ages (e.g., in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, Basil the Great, Maximus the Confessor, Bernard of Clairvaux, and others). Since it is not possible to cover every significant reflection on Christian love in this essay, some selectivity is required. The justification for focusing on Augustine and Aquinas is obvious enough, but why focus on Nygren? First, because, as mentioned, he provides an influential critique of the way of thinking about love that is exemplified in the work of Augustine and Aquinas. Second, no one else has provoked more discussion about the nature of Christian love in the last hundred years. Third, Nygren's work raises a key issue that should be addressed in an essay exploring love in the Christian tradition: namely, the relationship between *agape* and *eros*.

C3P29

In his book *Agape and Eros*, Nygren contends that these two conceptions of love are fundamentally opposed and originally had nothing to do with one another.[22] The essential difference between them, according to Nygren, is that Platonic *eros* starts from an *egocentric* perspective, where one desires to become happy and seeks to discover and obtain whatever will make him or her happy; Christian *agape* is *theocentric* in that it concerns God's absolute goodness, particularly as expressed in God's offer of fellowship with us (44–45). As he later puts it, "Eros-love ascends and seeks the satisfaction of its needs; Agape-love descends in order to help and to give" (469).[23] Nygren sees Augustine (and others who endorse a similar way of thinking about love, such as Aquinas) as making all love "acquisitive love" (476). The "caritas synthesis" accepts the aim of classical Greek and Roman ethics of pursuing happiness, but, unlike them, it maintains that accepting and participating in God's *agape* is necessary for attaining this happiness (470–475).

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22 Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953 [1930/1936]), 30–31. Other references are henceforth provided in text.

23 Cf. C. S. Lewis's distinction between "gift-love" and "need-love" in *The Four Loves* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1960). Lewis also has the category of "appreciative love," and he writes, "In actual life, thank God, the three elements of love mix and succeed one another, moment by moment" (17). I suggest that it is in fact appreciative love that is fundamental in the discussion below.

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In this synthesis of *agape* and *eros*, Nygren thinks that *agape* loses out because it serves as a means for attaining the aim of *eros*, and thus it is not really *agape* at all (55–56, 503). So how then should Christian *agape* be understood?

C3P30

Nygren identifies four main features. First, *agape* is "unmotivated" (75). There are no "extrinsic grounds" for God's love, but rather such love is spontaneous and receives its "motivation" from God's very nature, since "God is *Agape*," and through first loving us he summons us to respond in kind in love for one another and so become a "channel" of God's love (see 91–102, 733–737). Second, *agape* is "indifferent to value" (77). This is a further specification on the first point. In contrast to *eros*, where a person must first be motivated to love by the perceived value of some object, with *agape* the initiating Divine love is not motivated by the value or lack of value of the object: "*any thought of valuation whatsoever* is out of place" (77). Nygren sees evidence for this claim in God's love for sinners. Third, *agape* is creative (78). This can also be seen as further specifying the previous points: "Agape has nothing to do with the kind of love that depends on the recognition of a valuable quality in its object; Agape does not recognize value, but creates it. Agape loves, and imparts value in loving" (78). In other words, *agape* is a form of "bestowal love" rather than "appraisal love."[24] Finally, God's *agape* is "the initiator of fellowship with God" (81), or as 1 John 4 puts it, "We love because he first loved us." Nygren presents this overall picture of *agape* as a revolutionary understanding of love, and thus it is unsurprising that he thinks *agape* loses its character when combined with *eros*.

C3P31

There is reason, however, to take issue with Nygren's first three points (which, as indicated, are all related): that is that *agape* is "unmotivated," "indifferent to value," and "does not recognize value, but creates it." Part of why it is desirable to be loved is that we believe that

24 Irving Singer makes this distinction in *The Nature of Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

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love is responsive to and affirmative of some perceived lovableness or love-worthiness in ourselves. A love that is not responsive to who we are seems depersonalizing and therefore repugnant. Moreover, to say that *agape* is completely indifferent to value seems to make such love arbitrary: the lover could just as well have loved a rock as a human being in this way. The idea that love can create value in someone is also unconvincing: while we can create things (e.g., works of art, relationships) that *have* value, value itself is not something that can be created or "bestowed." It is either something objective or else it is merely subjective (i.e., value refers not to anything about the object but only to the subject's caring about something).[25] If the latter account of value were the case, its acknowledgment would have a deflationary effect since it denies the ordinary human experience of love as responsive to something about the loved one being love-worthy. In fact, it is not clear that it even makes sense to say that love is not responsive to some perceived value. A love that is not responsive to perceived value seems *unintelligible*. All love, it would appear, has to be appraisal love rather than bestowal love.

C3P32

One concern with appraisal love is that if love is based on perceived valuable features, then this could make the loved one replaceable by someone who had similar features, and perhaps in greater quantity or with other valuable features. Additionally, there is a concern that appraisal love makes it too easy for love to cease when the beloved loses valuable qualities.[26] This can connect up with a concern to affirm an "unconditional" form of love. Indeed, one might think that something like Nygren's account of *agape* as "indifferent to value" is what is needed for love to be "unconditional." Nygren seems to have this in mind when he appeals to God's love of sinners. But this overlooks

25 For the latter view, see Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

26 See Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 85–90.

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the different ways that someone or something can have value, and therefore the different ways that love can be "conditional" or "unconditional." As suggested earlier, a view of *agape* involving appraisal love can be regarded as "unconditional" in that it does not depend upon what the beloved makes (or does not make) of his or her life. In this way we can certainly love the sinner. But this does not mean that such love is completely unconditional: while it does not depend on what we *do* (or fail to do), it is based on what we fundamentally *are*, namely, beings made in the image of God who thus have intrinsic dignity and are love-worthy. In this regard, the saint and the sinner are both equally loved through *agape*. In short, there is a fundamental conditionality (our intrinsic love-worthiness as human beings) at the heart of the unconditionality of *agape* (it is not based on what we do).[27]

C3P33 Therefore, *agape*, so understood, entails that we won't stop loving other human beings (our "neighbors") if they lose some of their valuable qualities, since it involves the appraisal that there is a valuable quality that they cannot lose (it is "inalienable"): namely, their intrinsic love-worthiness as beings made in the image of God. Moreover, each human being is *uniquely* made in the image of God and is someone with whom we can form a distinct relationship, and thus they cannot be regarded as replaceable.

C3P34 There is, however, a final concern regarding appraisal love as the basis of *agape* to which we need to respond: Nygren's claim that appraisal love is connected to *eros* and so is *egocentric* by virtue of seeking after one's fulfillment. A proper response should affirm this connection with *eros*, but deny that it must be egocentric. It is helpful here to consider Josef Pieper's defense of the Augustinian-Thomistic tradition against Nygren.[28] Pieper—who is a Catholic philosopher—endorses

27 Cf. May, *Love: A History*, 236–237, which critiques unconditionality but assumes a Nygren-like view of it.

28 Two other well-known responses are John Burnaby, *Amor Dei* (London: Canterbury Press, 1938), and Martin C. D'Arcy, SJ, *The Mind and Heart of Love* (New York: Meridian Books, 1947).

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an appraisal account of love and regards the basic act of love to be the affirmation of the goodness of the beloved's existence (this is what C. S. Lewis calls "appreciative love"), which seems the opposite of egocentric. Pieper writes,

C3P35

> In every conceivable case love signifies much the same as approval. . . . It is a way of turning to [someone or something] and saying: "It's good that you exist; it's good that you are in this world!" . . . The approval I am speaking of is . . . an expression of the *will*. . . . It testifies to being in agreement, assenting, consenting, applauding, affirming, praising, glorifying and hailing. . . . We have been taught to restrict the concept of willing to the idea of willing to do. . . . [But] there is a form of willing that does not aim at doing something still undone and thus acting in the future to change the present state of affairs. Rather, in addition to willing-to-do, there is also a purely affirmative assent to what already is. . . . To confirm and affirm something already accomplished—that is precisely what is meant by "to love." . . . [Love] is the primal act of willing that permeates all willing-to-do from its very source. . . . Whether for good or evil, each man lives by his love. It is love and it alone that must be "in order" for the person as a whole to be "right" and good. . . . "Virtus est ordo amoris [Virtue is rightly ordered love]."[29]

C3P36

Pieper goes on to say, "It is God who in the act of creation anticipated all conceivable human love and said: I will you to be; it is good, 'very good' (Gen. 1:31), that you exist" (171).

29 Josef Pieper, "On Love" [1972], in *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 163–167. Other references are henceforth provided in the text. The following is the clearest indication of Pieper's endorsement of an appraisal account of love: "[Our] love . . . never creates 'values' or makes anything or anyone lovable. . . . What comes first is the actual existence of lovability, independently presented to us. Then this existence must enter into our experience. And only then, hence anything but 'unmotivatedly' and 'without reason', do we say in confirming love, 'It's good that this exists!' " (220–221).

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C3P37 In light of this affirmation of the goodness of the beloved's existence, there follows, according to Pieper (and Aquinas), two desires: (1) good for the beloved and (2) union with the beloved (194–197).[30] In fact, these are related, as Aquinas writes: "When a man loves another with the love of friendship, he wills good to him, just as he wills good to himself: whereof he apprehends him as his other self, in so far, to wit, as he wills good to him as to himself" (ST I-II, q. 28, a. 1). There is a "union of affection" here in which we affectively identify with the beloved and regard the beloved's good as our own such that we desire good for the beloved for his or her own sake and for our own.[31] When such love is reciprocated there is then a "mutual indwelling" where each person desires good for the other and regards it as his or her own good (ST I-II, q. 28, a. 2). But the fact that we regard the beloved's good as our own is by no means egocentric. Rather, it precisely involves self-transcendence to affirm the goodness of the beloved's existence and to identify with the beloved and his or her good. As Aquinas says, love involves "ecstasy": "a man's affection goes out from itself . . . ; because he wishes and does good to his friend . . . for his sake" (ST I-II, q. 28, a. 3).

C3P38 We can see then two ways that love for another is connected to our own happiness or fulfillment. First, affirming the goodness of the beloved's existence involves a rejoicing or delighting in the beloved. Second, through the union of affections we regard the beloved's happiness as our own. Is it problematic that love should be connected to our desire for our own happiness or fulfillment? The fundamental disagreement that Pieper has with Nygren here is over the relationship between nature and grace, and in particular over whether grace

30 Cf. Eleonore Stump's discussion of Aquinas's account of love in *Wandering in Darkness*, ch. 5, where she mentions these two features of love. My language here is closer to Stump's than Pieper's, but they put forward the same idea, which is unsurprising given that both are indebted to Aquinas. See ST, I-II, qq. 27–28; II-II, q. 27. a. 2.

31 On affective identification, see Jules Toner, SJ, "The Experience of Love" [1968], in *Love and Friendship* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003), 117–124.

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in the form of God's *agape* and our sharing in it is something opposed to natural desire (as Nygren suggests), which would seem to eliminate human agency in cooperating with grace (we become a mere "channel"), or whether it perfects our nature (as Pieper, following Aquinas, maintains) and is something with which we actively cooperate.

C3P39 If *eros* is understood as "the quintessence of all desire for fullness of being, for quenching of the thirst for happiness, for satiation by the good things of life, which include not only closeness and community with our fellowmen but also participation in the life of God himself," then, Pieper contends, it "must be regarded as an impulse inherent in our natures, arising directly out of finite man's existence as a created being, out of his creatureliness" (222–223). It is not a "persisting human weakness," but rather "the indispensable beginning of all perfection in love": "[All] love has joy as its natural fruit. What is more, all human happiness . . . is fundamentally *the happiness of love*, whether its name is eros or *caritas* or agape and whether it is directed toward a friend, a sweetheart, a son, a neighbor or God himself" (223–224). "Our whole being," Pieper further maintains, "is so set that it wants to be able to say with reason, 'How good that this exists; how wonderful that you are here!' " (226). We are primarily focused here on the goodness of the beloved's existence, and yet "our desire for happiness can be satisfied precisely by such affirmation directed toward another, that is, by 'unselfish' love," as we delight in the beloved (241). In light of this, Pieper draws the following lesson:

C3P40

> The indispensable goods of life can be acquired only by their being "given" to us; they are not accorded to us when we directly aim for them. . . . That love, insofar as it is real love, does not seek its own remains an inviolable truth. But the lover, assuming that he is . . . not calculating, does after all attain his own, the reward of love. And this

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> reward, in its turn and in view of human nature, cannot be a matter of indifference to him. (244–245)

C3P41 Here we see the meeting ground for *eros* and *agape*: God's *agape* comes to us as a gift that meets our deepest human longings for fulfillment, or "abundant life," that our "joy may be complete." In short, grace perfects nature.[32]

32 I would like to acknowledge with gratitude my debt to my spouse, Kirstin (a fellow philosopher), for numerous conversations that helped to shape my thinking in this essay. I would also like to thank Ryan Patrick Hanley for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my former teacher Roland J. Teske, SJ. It was in his course on Augustine (fall 2005) that I began thinking extensively about the order of love.

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