

Love and morality: a necessary conflict?

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Introduction

Many theorists hold that morality is essentially impartial. Yet, in our everyday discourse we use the word 'love' as a way of noting both that we favour someone 'above all others' and in a way that imbues 'love' with a sense of moral goodness. This generates a puzzle for theorists. Is love moral and partial? Or are we going wrong in our everyday discourse? In this essay, I will argue that while we assumptively use 'love' to denote a kind of moral goodness, the theorist is correct to say it does not have thick moral content. However, this does not mean we have to give up on the goodness of love; I will also argue that love has a special status in human nature, impacting our moral decisions. Moreover, I consider this debate to be valuable for the innovation and implementation of artificial moral agents. This shines light on whether the emotion of love should play a role in the ethics of Artificial Intelligence; or if it could represent a differentiating characteristic of human moral agents.

This essay is thus going to address the following two questions: i) Why have philosophers thought that morality must be impartial, and ii) Can the emotion of love comprise both partiality and morality? I will begin by defining morality along the widely accepted lines of James and Stuart Rachels who insist on the importance of

impartiality in morality. I will then give a general definition of love as a partial emotion. Answering the two questions of this essay ideally requires an ethical theory that is applied to love, enabling us to assess the viability of the project. I use Kant's ethical framework to articulate the notions of 'universality' and 'respect', and then outline two applications of Kant's theory. The first is David Velleman's 'love as a moral emotion' argument and the second is Barbara Herman's argument that love and morality coexist. Following a preliminary evaluation, these are applied to a thought experiment from Charles Fried. The exercise affords a better-informed adjudication of the three suggested approaches. I conclude that love cannot be impartial, but it should nevertheless play a role in how we make moral decisions.

Morality is impartial, love is not

To start with, the Rachels define morality as something that is based on reason. This enables us to examine potential actions, their implications, and to choose the best options accordingly. They emphasise that we should consider the interests of each individual who will be affected by our actions. Moreover, the effects of our actions should be the same to both the moral agent and those the action affects (Rachels 2012, p. 13). This fairness lies behind the notion of impartiality—our ability to act independently from our own personal interests and in the equal interest of others. For example, there is a nuance between saying 'it is immoral to kill anyone' instead of 'it is immoral to kill someone'. The key difference is that the first formulation does not allow for exceptions that would be partial in suiting the agent, fulfilling her specific interest, when the second one does. Let us use the following working definition of a morally good action.

An action X is morally good if:

- i) It is based on pure reason (not on instincts, reflexes, or emotions); and ii) It is impartial, it considers outcomes irrespective of the interests of all parties.

A question arises when we consider the motivations for an action X. Is X still morally good when one of its motivations is love? We can loosely describe love as at least a positive attitude towards its object (say, another person) and as non-instrumental. We have a non-instrumental attitude towards a person when we appreciate them for their own sake, not merely for the benefit they represent to us (e.g., making us hot chocolate when we are sad). Moreover, love is deep in the way that we identify with the persons we love and feel like a part of us is missing if such a person is removed from our life. I am herewith including any love-based relationship between two individuals such as a romantic relationship, a friendship, or a familial relationship. The involved individuals' gender does not matter. Lastly, if one loves a person, that does not entail that others will (e.g., if I love my little brother, others will not automatically love him too). This gives us the following definition of love.

A loves B iff:

- i) A has a positive (non-rational) attitude towards B,
- ii) so strong that A does not feel the same without B in his/her life
- iii) A associates intrinsic value to B such that A's attitude towards B is non-instrumental

iv) A's attitude to B is exclusive in that others are not said to love B by virtue of A loving B.

The question is whether this definition of love allows for the impartiality required in the definition of morality. Love is usually perceived as partial, due to its condition (i). Consider a case of nepotism. A lawyer named Chris, with a position of influence (e.g., partner), gives a job to his daughter Emma because he loves her and wants her to have this professional opportunity. Chris loves Emma in a way that he fulfils all three conditions of the definition of love. Assuming Chris has a rational justification for acting that way (Emma is a successful law graduate), this action is nonetheless not impartial, as Chris would not consider other applicants' suitability for the position. According to the condition (ii) of a moral act, this would be considered as immoral. When moral considerations are motivated by love, it appears that love can detriment our decision-making abilities.

In the next section, I consider three approaches to answering this question. I reject the Kantian solution because it does not fully represent the emotion of love, and Velleman's solution due to it encountering challenges that require a reply, but I ultimately accept Harman's solution because it successfully provides a theory for accommodating both love and morality.

Should morality, love, or both justify our acts? Can we reconcile the opposition between partiality and impartiality? Three potential solutions:

In Kant's Groundwork, he introduces the Categorical Imperative as a command one must follow. It is our moral obligation to base our actions on pure reason, regardless of our desires. We should thus act upon what he calls in his first formulation of the Categorical Imperative 'universal' and 'impartial' principles which will apply to all rational beings at all places and times. Kant rejects exceptions or particularities that are associated with every person, their cultural background, especially their preferences. This is where it is argued his theory would inevitably conflict with acting out of love. In order to establish a universal maxim, you must first express a maxim based on your intention, then reshape it as a universal law of nature governing all rational agents (as if every person would act in the exact same way you would) and lastly verify if this situation would be possible in our world and not bring about any contradiction with what we intended in the first place.

Consider a case that is based on love and represents a clear conflict with Kantian ethics, where we would prioritise the good of the ones we love by hurting others. Imagine I turned over an innocent person to a terrorist as a ransom in order to free my little brother who was held hostage by them. This situation could not rationally be universalized since we would live in constant fear of being kidnapped and used as ransom for someone else to save their loved one. When we are said to 'act out of love', the moral criticism that arises here would be focused on the impartiality and the rational justification of the act, which should in this case not be necessary. 'I needed or desired' to save my brother; no justification should be required as it is self-explanatory. It is relating to a particular and specific personal case where universality is not the criterion for me to act upon.

As purely rational as Kant's moral theory may be, it can also be interpreted as associated with love since he claims one should respect every human being (partially fulfilling condition (i) of love), by virtue of their rational capacity, making them autonomous beings. Humans therefore have non instrumental value and should never be used as a mere means to an end (fulfils condition (ii) of love), thereby qualifying my act as immoral when I used the group of innocent people for my personal goal. Nevertheless, I will not consider the notion of respect as sufficient to define love, or close enough to the established definition of the essay, as it does not meet condition (i.i) and (iii).

What I wish to ask is whether some moral actions are initiated by the emotion of love. I want to save my brother because I love him. Intuition supports the view that I have also done something right because saving a life by appeasing terrorists is morally preferable to letting my brother potentially be killed. I would have to do this morally good action because I love my brother. Here, the conflict with Kant's impartiality is sown. I will need to argue that the moral theory guiding our actions should not go against our human nature, with love having a central place in it.

Velleman, however, shows how a Kantian theory can accommodate the partiality of love-caused moral actions. He joins Kant on the idea of respect but takes the point further by including the phenomenon of selectivity in love, thereby meeting condition (iii) of the definition of love. He poses the question of why we would love one person instead of another. Velleman thus insists on the depth of love (meeting condition (i.i)),

allowing him to distinguish it from mere respect that we have for persons, and bases his theory on two crucial points: value and universality.

In Velleman's definition of love, he refers to our perception or realisation of a person and how it affects our judgement of their corresponding value without making this value anything else than universal. He therefore distinguishes the quality of being 'lovable' from the fact of being 'lovable to someone'. The notion of directionality is crucial. Their persona is reflected in our perception of their value. Unlike Kant, who argues that people have value by virtue of their mere existence, Velleman argues that we value people for who they are individually, that and based on that, we love them. For instance, Lily's friend Charlie has the capacity to laugh in annoying situations. Lily values her friend's personality, and this then plays a role in why she loves him. In other words, I would picture this distinction as other people's value being subjectively mirrored or interpreted in us, but not us projecting value on them (Velleman 1999, p. 372). We are able to love people by valuing them to different degrees of intensity. However, Velleman insists we should not compare different people based on their value¹.

Notwithstanding the fact that Velleman's theory points towards recognising the quality of being individual or unique, he seems to want to simultaneously combine it with universality. Velleman explains in his example that his immeasurable love for his children teaches him to love all children, resulting in a universal kind of love. He

¹ I will specify that 'value' is used in the 'love' context, and not in the 'intrinsic value' context.

portrays a progression from having a partial love for particular beings to having an impartial, universal love for all other beings. I believe Velleman's concept of universality is disputable. In my understanding, the love one will have for particular people cannot be one and the same as love for beings overall. I will thus rename the second instance of love as 'sympathy', since people could care and feel for others, no matter their relationship to them. However, I would qualify sympathy as very similar to respect, both being directed towards an individual, in a positive, non-instrumental way; but not in such a deep and unique way as love does. In claiming that our emotion could 'awaken us' and thereby make that love universal, Velleman goes a step too far. Further clarification and support are needed here to make this universal love coincide with conditions (i.i) and (iii) of the definition of love.

In a different vein, Herman presents love as going hand in hand with morality. She argues, firstly, that love and morality are not equal, and secondly, that both fit into life, helping complete a person's aim of making it 'good' (Herman 2018, p. 12). She further declares: 'if part of the route to morality goes through our experience of love - of loving and being loved—and since morality is one of the ways we come to articulate the otherness of persons, wouldn't it make most sense to regard morality and love as vehicles for each other's normal expression?' (Herman 2018, p. 14). This statement is largely vague. It is not perfectly clear what 'normal expressions' are meant to be (of love and morality?), and if these 'vehicles' (of motivation, emotion?) are the same for both. Nevertheless, it is easy to understand the gist of what she is saying—that love and morality are rather like two parts of a process of action and human deliberation that come into play at different stages, but not against each other.

She presents her idea using the notion of spheres, saying that the possibility of conflict between love and morality does not stem from an 'inherent tension between two spheres of concern or command' (Herman 2018, p. 14). In her view, there is a constant and mutual fluctuation of the spheres, as a person goes through life and matures. Our tests and justifications for acting in one way or the other thus create these conflicts, which are entirely natural and should not lead to rejecting either love or morality.

I believe this explanation is more suitable to explain any inner conflicts that might arise. If we define conflicts as cases of incompatibility, such as one sphere endorsing one way of acting and the other a different way, with no way of reconciling both ways of acting, it will necessarily lead to issues. Usually, ethics provides us with the tools to define which action is right or wrong. The probability of making the wrong action, if the spheres do not provide us with a clear answer, will therefore be quite worrisome. Nevertheless, this issue is not insurmountable. There are cases in which two genuine sources of value compete for an agent's attention, and which the agent favours will depend on the agent's own value structure. For instance, one might have two options: (A) spending time volunteering at a pet shelter or (B) spending quality time with family. How ought one choose the right action? Harman would argue that both are permissible, and one ought to choose (A) or (B) according to one's personal priorities. For some that might be doing something for a good cause and for others that might be bonding with their loved ones.

In my view, Herman's approach is admirable because she does not try to accommodate love and morality in a perfect, theoretical way that should not fail, but instead appreciates the concept and significance of both. Love and emotions have predominantly been categorised as distracting and blinding to our true moral commitments. Herman, however, advocates for a view where morality stands on an equal level to love, not the former restricting the latter.

The rescue case: testing the solutions

The different views become very intelligible once we consider Fried's rescue case (Williams 1973, p. 17) where a person P has, without enduring any pain, the choice of saving a stranger S or a loved one L, who are both in the same circumstances of danger. Assume P has no duties such as those of a captain of a ship, a public health official, etc. Taking the Kantian position, one should respect both our loved one and the stranger equally because of their rational capacity, therefore allowing us to save either one. Nonetheless, even if the consequence of saving the loved one would be the same as the one from acting out of love, this view seems contrary to our gut feeling of not having to justify our choice to save our loved ones. The problem lies in the fact that the Kantian position does not make love and morality compatible or equal but only convergent, as the justification always seems to be rational, and not fully conceiving the vibrancy and magnitude of emotions. Merely allowing us to pick our loved ones does not represent the value of our human relationships.

Furthermore, love not only can produce a contradiction in the universalizability of certain maxims of the Categorical Imperative, but necessarily does. If we were to

translate the action of choosing the stranger into a universal law, a contradiction would arise on the emotional level of all human beings. The nuance between it being not just sufficient but also necessary lies in the difficulty of rationalising the capacity of all human beings to feel that same kind of love (exceptions arise where some humans are, for instance, sociopaths and are not able to feel love), but this should not cause a problem if we can agree on the fact that it is at least sufficient as the majority of humans naturally are able to love. In essence, universalising the act of choosing the one we love in such a rescue case scenario is only natural, whereas choosing the stranger would result in a contradiction if, according to human nature, all beings would reject that option. If the Categorical Imperative is based on creating a structure of universal laws, acting as laws of nature, why should it go against the nature of human beings?

Now, considering the slightly different view of Velleman, who acknowledges particularity, one could choose to favour someone in particular, as saving our loved one instead of the stranger. According to Velleman, love shows us that persons are priceless and should therefore never be compared or weighted, not even on the basis of their value. He refers to our economic system, where we typically value things by giving them a price, permitting us to exchange it for something with the same price, without losing or gaining any value. Velleman concludes by saying that love is also a moral education (Velleman 1999 p. 374) since it makes the absurdity visible to us. I agree with the way Velleman conceptualises price and captures the absurdity of being confronted with such choices, as in Fried's example.

Nonetheless, I would like to point out our natural inclination to compare not just objects or situations but also the value associated with different human beings. In Fried's case, I would hardly picture someone saving their loved one purely based on the value they represent to us, without comparing them to the stranger that could be saved instead. We might not hesitate to save our loved one, but our conscience might later raise the issue of fairness. When acting immediately, we would just say: 'I will save the person that has the most value to me'. We are in a situation of comparison of value, even if these are subjective, or immoral according to Velleman.

Lastly, Herman's response to the case would be based on her position that we have a moral commitment to the maxim of, for instance, 'saving someone if it is to no cost to you'. However, according to her, we should also pursue our interests, such as beauty, love, work, and play. Therefore, one might hesitate between whom to save, but once the decision is made, one should need no further justification for the choice.

I believe that Herman conforms to Bernard Williams' claim that we cannot be 'treating persons in abstraction from character' (Herman, 1973, p. 19). A person's character contributes to our interpretation of the outside world and thereby has its importance in how both love and morality influence our choice of actions.

If love is partial and morality is not, what then?

In conclusion, I suggest that morality and love remain separate motives, in line with Harman's view. On the one hand, I summarise morality as universality and impartiality because it relies on the crucial notion of fairness, needed in society for human beings to

live together constructively. On the other hand, I summarise love as partial and selective. The partiality thereby qualifies love as more than mere respect, and the selectivity rejects the universality of our emotions.

Consequently, does this mean that there is room for partiality in our ethical theories? Ethical theories have often assumed impartiality, and that is what gives them strength. However, do they really reflect the phenomena of both morality and love? I have argued that partiality is the actual phenomenon we experience in life and that ethical theories, to some extent, fail to capture the reality of love.

Rescue cases such as Fried's push our human nature towards defining love as moral, to justify our act. I believe this is a misjudgement. Love, as an emotion, does not comprise both partiality and morality. I will adopt Herman's view, of our aim towards a 'good life', constituted by our coexisting moral requirements and pursuit of interests through love because of the realistic and practical approach it offers.

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