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# Romantic Love and Knowledge: Refuting the Claim of Egoism

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*ABSTRACT: Romantic love and its predecessor eros have both been characterized as forms of egoistic love. Part of this claim is concerned specifically with the relation between love and knowledge. Real love, it is claimed, is prior to knowledge and is not motivated by it. Romantic love and eros according to this view are egoistic in that they are motivated by a desire for knowledge. Agapic love characterized by bestowal represents a true form of love unmotivated by selfish desires. I argue that such an emphasis on bestowal at the expense of knowledge or appraisal of the beloved is problematic. The knowledge dimension of romantic love, rather than contributing to selfishness, can be a means of freeing us from egoism when we understand identity in its relational or social form.*

*RÉSUMÉ : L'amour romantique et son prédécesseur, Éros, sont tous deux considérés comme des formes d'amour égoïste. Une partie de cette prétention concerne spécifiquement le lien entre l'amour et la connaissance : l'amour véritable précède la connaissance et n'est pas motivé par elle. Selon ce point de vue, l'amour romantique et Éros sont égoïstes parce qu'ils sont motivés par le désir de connaître. L'amour agapique d'autre part se caractérise par le don; il représente une forme d'amour véritable que ne motive aucun désir égoïste. Cet accent mis sur le don au détriment de la connaissance ou de l'appréciation de l'être aimé se révèle pourtant problématique. La connaissance, qui caractérise l'amour romantique, représente un moyen de nous libérer de l'égoïsme au lieu de l'alimenter, lorsque nous acquérons une compréhension de l'identité sous sa forme relationnelle et sociale.*

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### Introduction

Writing in the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes presents us with a simple yet highly influential account of desire and the role that it plays in human life. For Hobbes, all that we do, no matter how base or how cultured, can be explained by our desires and our aversions. We are constantly driven to fulfill these desires, so much so that we remain in a state of desire, never finding satisfaction. In fact, love itself reduces to a particular form of desire on Hobbes's account.

That which men Desire, they are also sayd to LOVE: and to HATE those things, for which they have Aversion. So that Desire, and Love, are the same thing; save that by Desire, we always signifie the Absence of the Object; by Love, most commonly the presence of the same. So also by Aversion, we signifie the Absence; and by Hate, the Presence of the Object.<sup>1</sup>

The idea that love is a form of desire is certainly not a modern notion. Long before Hobbes, Plato, in his *Symposium*, characterized love in terms of *eros*, a form of love which ultimately desires wisdom or beauty, but which in its less-developed form desires inferior representations of beauty and truth such as we see in the human body, artifacts, and common wisdom. Here, the desire that characterizes love is (ultimately) not aimed at a specific object, which can be present or absent, but at a different kind of thing. For Plato, beauty, knowledge, truth, and wisdom are not objects with which we can try to satisfy the insatiable desires of the kind of beings that Hobbes took us to be. What we get with Plato is the notion that there is an ultimate aim of love. This aim is not personal or particular in the sense of being aimed at a particular individual or object of our desire. The desire that characterizes *eros* is the desire for knowledge, the universal, the true, that which gives us true or lasting satisfaction because it frees us from a dependence on the contingent, changing nature of earthly life, a life, I might add, that is filled with particulars.

In Western thinking the concept of love characterized by *eros* has been opposed historically by the Christian notion of love understood in terms of *agapé*. The life attitude expressed by *agapé* views *eros* as a selfish or egoistic form of love, and, in its extreme expression, as a sinful, degenerate ideal. Attempts have been made to reconcile these two views of love, perhaps most notably in the Middle Ages in the Platonic-Christian philosophy of St. Augustine. Augustine used the term *caritas* to characterize love. This notion of love was neither *agapé* nor *eros* but was rather a synthesis of the two.<sup>2</sup> Irving Singer, in his three-volume work entitled *The Nature of Love*, characterizes the history of love in the West in terms of the conflicts to which these two notions give rise and attempts at their reconciliation. For Singer, the general attitude expressed by *eros* is best understood

in terms of appraisal. Agapic love, on the other hand, is characterized in terms of bestowal.<sup>3</sup> The love of God is one which is freely given or bestowed upon humankind. It is unmotivated or, perhaps, to put it in modern moral terms, disinterested. Erotic love, on the other hand, relies on some objective quality or qualities in the beloved or object of love which serve as the basis of evaluation or appraisal.

A more modern attempt at reconciling concepts of love is expressed in the notion of romantic love. Romantic love is not a single, simple, coherent idea but rather characterizes the views of a number of philosophers and writers, particularly those from the nineteenth century. Likewise, romantic love, as opposed to *caritas*, is not a straightforward attempt at reconciling *eros* and *agapé*. Romantic love is perhaps better understood as more pluralistic both in terms of its sources and its aim. This view of love is also influenced by courtly love as well as divergent philosophical traditions broadly characterized in terms of the oppositions realist/idealist and empiricist/rationalist.<sup>4</sup> Although some conceptions of romantic love attempt to reconcile or synthesize previous forms of love, the notion of reconciliation is perhaps better used to describe the aim of romantic love. Romantic love, in its various forms, is better characterized in terms of a type of reconciliation between lovers rather than a reconciliation of loves. This reconciliation however, is greatly shaped by previous conceptions of love and the accompanying conceptions of human nature. Reconciliation between lovers involves both an element of appraisal and a sense of bestowal.

As mentioned earlier, one of the main criticisms of erotic love coming from adherents of the agapic view is that such love is selfish. This criticism often extends to romantic love, which has been significantly shaped by the erotic tradition. One form that this selfishness takes can be characterized in terms of a quest for knowledge. Romantic love and *eros* have both been characterized as attempts to gain knowledge of the other person, or of truth and beauty, rather than freely bestowing love on another person or loving them for their own sake.<sup>5</sup> In this article I want to defend romantic love against the claim that it is an inherently selfish form of love and, as such, is morally deficient. I agree that romantic love, like *eros*, aims (at least in part) at a kind of knowledge, but such an aim in itself does not render this form of love selfish in any problematic way. I believe that knowledge is and must be part of any healthy form of human love. In this sense I agree with Singer who claims that some form of appraisal (knowledge-based) must accompany the bestowal aspect of love. The importance of knowledge in love becomes apparent when we acknowledge the relational nature of romantic love and the effect that this relational aspect has on the identities of both lover and beloved.

### Romantic Love and the Problem of Egoism

Max Scheler and a number of other Christian thinkers have characterized romantic love, as well as its predecessor *eros*, as forms of egoism. One aspect of the egoistic character of these forms of love according to Scheler is their retrospective nature. *Eros* aims at recollecting or re-appropriating knowledge which we once had of truth and beauty. Romantic love aims at completing our self through a relationship with another person. In both cases love aims at some good that is a good for one's self and that makes us more whole or complete. The retrospective aspect of romantic love has to do with the idea that we are reconciling our own self with the self of someone else, and, in so doing, overcoming the alienating effects of the *principium individuationis*. It may not be our "lost half," as expressed by Aristophanes in *Symposium*, with whom we are seeking reconciliation, but it is a reconciliation with the other side of our self, as Jean-Paul Sartre has described: we are seeking to know or to experience that object side of our self which Sartre tells us is our own, but which escapes our experience of it.<sup>6</sup> We require an other in order to experience this object-self from which we have been separated because of a lapse or a fall. According to romanticism, human beings have experienced a fall through the development of consciousness, a fall which has undone a more primordial unity of experience. Since this fall, we experience the world in terms of subject and object. When we begin to reflect, we experience our "self" as being separate from the world of objects, including our own body.<sup>7</sup> In light of this a central aim of romantic love is to restore a kind of unity in our being, a wholeness which allows us once again to experience both sides of our self.

Scheler notes that the movement of this kind of love is a movement from the lower (humankind) to the higher (the divine), in contrast to *agapé*, which moves from the higher to the lower.<sup>8</sup> Anders Nygren, in his *Agapé and Eros*, likewise highlights this contrast and discusses the significance of it.<sup>9</sup> The movement from lower to higher, characteristic of *eros*, is a movement of desire. Here love desires true beauty, even though many individuals are capable of experiencing only derivative forms of beauty. With romantic love the movement is from a lower to a higher form of unity or completeness. In each case it is the self which is set on fulfilling a desire or set of desires. With *agapé*, however, the movement comes from that which is unified, perfect, ideal, and moves to the less perfect or less whole. One of the distinguishing features of this form of love, according to Nygren, lies in the claim that it is unmotivated. Unlike *eros* and romantic love, which are motivated by a desire for or toward something, *agapé* is a spontaneously creative act of God, emanating from his character and not motivated by the value of the objects of his love.

For Scheler, the selfishness or egoism of *eros* and romantic love is seen as a fault. This fault rests on a "deep metaphysical error . . . that love is no more than an intuitive knowledge of the unity of being."<sup>10</sup> Knowledge,

in this scheme, precedes love and in fact motivates love. Scheler denies that this is real love. Real love is not motivated by self-gain, whether this gain is in terms of knowledge or unity. Christian love, according to Scheler, reverses the relation between love and knowledge. Love, rather than expressing a desire for knowledge, becomes a principle which is prior to knowing. It is more important to love according to the Christian faith than it is to have correct knowledge. Action, loving one's neighbour, which is the only true way to love God, is what counts. This love cannot be motivated by a desire for gain or even by a legal requirement. It must be an expression of who one is as a Christian. We see a similar view put forward by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in his *Works of Love*. According to Kierkegaard, erotic love and friendship are forms of preferential love. They are selfish. It is only when these forms of love have been purified by Christian love—with the love of “love thy neighbour”—that they can be considered true forms of love.<sup>11</sup> Only then can one experience a repetition of such loves from a new, higher perspective on life.

For both Kierkegaard and Scheler, the difference between these types of love reveals a deficiency in *eros* and its descendent romantic love. Nygren, on the other hand, claims only to be describing two different systems of evaluation but not appraising them. He refrains from anachronistically judging *eros* according to the transvaluation brought about by the influence of *agapé* in Western culture, which in itself has coloured the meaning of terms such as “selfish,” “egocentric,” and so on. Nygren instead chooses to view these as two systems of valuation which reflect two different “general attitudes to life.”<sup>12</sup> These two attitudes are incompatible, according to Nygren, Scheler, and Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard, however, makes room for compatibility, but only once *eros* has been subordinated to Christian love.

Harry Frankfurt presents another view of love which clearly falls in the tradition of bestowal. Although Frankfurt does not characterize his notion of love in terms of *agapé*, it is clear that it shares with the agapic tradition the idea that love must be a gift or creation of the lover and not a response to or evaluation of qualities in the beloved. What motivates Frankfurt's emphasis on love as bestowal is his rejection of what Niko Kolodny calls the “quality theory” of love and the accompanying idea that there are “reasons for love.” The main problem with the quality theory is that by making love for another person dependent on non-relational features or qualities of the person, one implies that this person could be replaced by another with those same qualities.<sup>13</sup> In *The Reasons of Love*, Frankfurt characterizes love as “a *disinterested* concern for the existence of what is loved, and for what is good for it.”<sup>14</sup> This disinterested concern implies that the lover's love is not based on qualities of the beloved which will benefit her. Disinterested love is bestowed on the beloved as a kind of gift. In this sense, Frankfurt's love resembles the love of God which is

unmotivated. It does not depend on objective qualities in the beloved for its motivation.

Frankfurt does not claim that God is the source of this form of love but rather characterizes it in more naturalistic terms: “the explanation presumably lies in the evolutionary pressures of natural selection.”<sup>15</sup> For Frankfurt, the paradigm cases of such love are the love of a parent for a child or the love one has for one’s self. Self-love, according to Frankfurt, is disinterested in the sense that, like the love for one’s child, one loves the beloved (in this case one’s self) for his or her own sake and not for the sake of some other end. Just as one loves or affirms the goals of another (the goals that characterize the other’s self), so one loves or affirms one’s own goals or one’s own self. Of course this is a strange and potentially incoherent application of Frankfurt’s own concept of love since we normally distinguish interest from disinterest in terms of a relation to the self. Self-interest in this sense seems to be implied by self-love. The love which one has for one’s own self cannot be disinterested in the way that one’s love can be for someone else. By definition, an element of self-interest (as opposed to disinterest) pervades the relationship of self-love.<sup>16</sup> But this problem aside, Frankfurt’s view gives us an example of bestowal love which bases itself more on an ethical attitude than a religious-ethical one. This ethical attitude is motivated by non-egoistic concerns but does not find the source of this concern in a deity.

Frankfurt’s concern here is an ethical one, even though he suggests that the explanation probably lies in evolution. The disinterested aspect of love calls to mind Christian *agapé*, Aristotle’s highest form of friendship, and Kant’s categorical imperative where we are told to treat people as ends and never merely as means. With Frankfurt we get a conception of love which tries to avoid egoism, but does so without invoking a supernatural source. Frankfurt relies on an ethical conception of love which invokes disinterest as its central feature. Love in its purest form, according to Frankfurt, cannot be based on appraisal, but rather is an act of bestowal on the part of the lover. Appraisal for Frankfurt pulls us in the direction of loving our beloved instrumentally or for the sake of some other interest. He views the truest or most authentic form of love as one which is outside the realm of appraisal.

Emmanuel Levinas, while not discussing love specifically, characterizes the relation between self and other in ethical terms as well and in so doing introduces the issue of knowledge with which I will be concerned later in this article. For Levinas, the primary relationship between self and other cannot be one of knowledge but is rather an ethical relation. In essays such as “Is Ontology Fundamental?” and “Transcendence and Height,” Levinas argues (in a somewhat hyperbolic manner) that the act of characterizing the other in terms of knowledge is an act of violence. To experience the other as an object of knowledge is to subsume the other under

a concept or concepts. This reduces the other to a mere means of one's own understanding, thus violating the Kantian imperative, which Levinas sees as important to his own ethical philosophy. For Levinas, the primacy of knowledge in relation to the other represents a form of egoism on the part of the self. The true ethical relationship frees itself from the desire to dominate represented by knowing and allows the other the freedom to exist as a separate and unknowable being (free from the limitations of the concepts that one imposes on the other).<sup>17</sup>

What the preceding thinkers share in common is a view of love that seeks to free itself from egoism or an unhealthy form of self-interest. In order to do so, love and the ethical relationship between self and other must be seen in terms of a kind of bestowal that is unmotivated by objective qualities that reside or are perceived to reside in the other. On this view, romantic love and *eros* are disqualified as authentic or true forms of love. Both of these forms of love rely in different ways on an appraisal or evaluation of the beloved or they rely on attaining knowledge of one's self or the other through the love relationship.

### **Romantic Love as More than Appraisal and Bestowal**

Perhaps one of the most philosophically interesting characterizations of the problem that knowledge creates for love is to be found in the early writings of Jean-Paul Sartre. Even though Sartre suggests a more positive view of love later on in his *Notebook for an Ethics*,<sup>18</sup> he was never able to fully develop this idea in his lifetime. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre assumes the framework of romantic love that we have discussed above and, based on this model, concludes that love sets forth a contradictory ideal. Sartre believed that such love is doomed to failure because lovers engage in the impossible task of trying to capture the freedom of each other or to treat that freedom as an object while still wanting the beloved to remain free. We want somehow to capture the subjective side of another person in order to gain knowledge of our self or to experience our own objective nature. Likewise the other person wants to gain knowledge of her own object self through the experience of capturing our freedom.<sup>19</sup> In characterizing love in such a manner, Sartre agrees to a certain extent with Scheler that the notion of romantic love has an egoistic aim. But must this aim be reduced to mere egoism? Is there something else implicitly contained in this structure that suggests a quite different aim? Or, perhaps, can we understand this aim in a way that overcomes this essentially egoistic characterization?

For Scheler, Kierkegaard, and even Frankfurt, bestowal love is morally superior to appraisal love because it is freely given and not motivated by self-interest. According to Scheler, Christian love marked a radical reversal of love which freed the concept of love from the egoism of the Greek notion. Love no longer relied on qualities in the beloved that pointed to



higher forms of truth or knowledge. Scheler and others see romantic love as containing the same essential defect. Romantic love aims at knowledge which is meant to benefit the lover, making him or her more complete, or better able to understand his or her self. But I think that these criticisms miss something important in the nature of romantic love, and this is due in part to an overemphasis on the moral importance of bestowal.

The idea of love as a free bestowal is an attractive one. I suspect that part of the attraction comes from the influence of our Christian and Kantian moral heritage where the purity of ethical acts is defined in opposition to inclination, self-interest, and the instrumental reasoning required for satisfying such. A love that is given without an expectation of return is a love that seems removed from the realm of treating people as objects or treating their qualities as items of assessment and exchange. In this sense bestowal love rejects the appraisal aspect of the *eros* tradition and its romantic descendant. But there is another side to appraisal that I believe should not be reduced to objectification or some form of economic exchange and that helps to temper some of the potential excess implied in bestowal. Appraisal, at least in the context of romantic love, is a necessary feature. It is not that we simply assess the good and bad qualities of a person and then decide whether or not to love them, although part of our love will be a response to those qualities as they exist in a unique way in a particular individual. If this were not the case then our love would be indiscriminate as well as ignorant. It is perhaps reasonable that an omnipotent and omniscient god (if one exists) freely bestow love on all of creation, and it is perhaps a healthy ethical attitude for humans in some cases to aspire to bestowal love; however, when it comes to particular personal relations between human beings, romantic love may provide a better and more realistic model.

The idea that romantic love is inferior to a bestowal-based love seems to rely on presuppositions of a Christian, or perhaps even Kantian, nature. It is as if allowing qualities in the beloved to play a part in determining the experience of love somehow cheapens that love. I do not see why this needs to be the case. Certainly an element of bestowal plays a role in romantic love in order to compensate for negative appraisals, as Singer suggests,<sup>20</sup> but this does not mean that appraisal or some appeal to objective qualities in the beloved is not required. It seems to me that bestowal love divorced from appraisal gives rise to a form of love that is just as unhealthy as one based solely on appraisal. If love is based only on appraisal then it can be rightfully accused of egoism or selfishness. Love based solely on bestowal, on the other hand, can be seen as pure fantasy and as egoistic in a different way. If love depends solely on the one who bestows without regard to the object of such bestowal then there is the danger of it becoming a kind of solipsism. Bestowal love is said to create value in the beloved, but what kind of value can this be if it is ignorant of

or divorced from the object of the valuing? Should we attribute the power to create value solely to the lover? In doing so are we not making the lover into a kind of god?

We may look at this from the perspective of the beloved. On one hand, if a person feels that she is loved only for her qualities (beauty, intelligence, etc.) then she may feel that she is not loved for her own sake—that unique configuration of qualities that produces a particular experience of beauty in the lover and provides a terminus for love's aim. On the other hand, if love is only a bestowal which does not take into account the beloved's objective qualities, talents, beauty, efforts, and so forth, then she may feel as if these various aspects of her identity have not been valued or recognized. The love bestowed by the lover may seem indiscriminate to her and she may feel that she could easily be replaced by someone else with very different qualities. This would seem to point to a certain limitation in agapic or pure bestowal love, at least when applied to certain types of personal relationships—what we call romantic relations and friendships, for instance). Bestowal love without appraisal is too indiscriminate to be a model for these types of personal loves.

I believe that the term appraisal itself is insufficient to capture the full sense of what I want to oppose to a one-sided bestowal notion of love. When used in the context of love, appraisal often seems to suggest that love is a response only to someone who possesses loveable qualities. In other words, the qualities of the beloved determine the love. But there is another dimension when it comes to taking into account the objective qualities of the beloved in love. To say that love depends in part on qualities possessed by the lover can be understood to mean that love is something more than bestowal or appraisal alone. What I mean here is that love (romantic love) is relational and, as such, relies on a dynamic of giving, receiving, and responding. One of the limitations of the bestowal-appraisal opposition is that it focuses primarily on the position of the lover in terms of a kind of ontological isolation. The lover is seen either to bestow love on the beloved or to love the beloved in terms of an appraisal of his objective qualities. Romantic love, on the other hand, is not adequately understood in terms of either bestowal or appraisal, nor is it to be simply understood as involving both if we limit our understanding of these terms solely to an act of the lover. Love, in the romantic sense, involves a two-way dynamic and a two-way aim.<sup>21</sup> Romantic love aims at reciprocity even if this is not always achieved. According to the bestowal and appraisal models of love, the failure to achieve reciprocity does not present a major obstacle to love. In the context of romantic love, however, such a failure makes love seriously incomplete.

Robert C. Solomon, in his book *About Love: Reinventing Romance for Our Times*, discusses the social dimension of romantic love by viewing love in terms of an identity thesis. For Solomon, romantic love is neither

a form of egoism nor a disinterested love. Love according to Solomon exists in a dialectical tension between self-identity and mutual identity.<sup>22</sup> It is in or through love that we gain an enriched sense of our own identity through the affirmation or approval of our character and virtues provided by the one who loves us. Not only is our self enriched but it is enlarged as we come to understand the world and our self differently through coming to understand the perspective, the language, and the metaphors of another person in the context of an intimate relationship. Romantic love ideally aims at equality, although actual romantic relationships often reflect the asymmetry that Sartre describes in his account of love. The dual emphasis on equality and identity or selfhood is crucial to Solomon's conception of love and the notion of romantic love in general, as are the notions of choice and creativity. Romantic love as we know it emerged in a modern context, influenced specifically by romantic philosophy and the political philosophy of liberalism. Romanticism emphasized creativity as well as finding or creating one's self or identity, while liberalism promoted freedom, equality, and individual rights. The emphasis on choice, individuality, and freedom has often led to the assumption (and often the reality) that romantic love is self-centred, selfish, or a form of egoism. But Solomon argues convincingly that there is nothing inherent in this concept to warrant such a conclusion. Romantic love, like other forms of love, is a cultural creation. It may have its basis or its motivation in other natural or biological realities such as desire, survival (understood in evolutionary terms), and so on, but our understanding and construal of this concept is the result of human creation or construction. This is no less true of the Christian notion of *agapé* or Frankfurt's concept of a disinterested love. Although Frankfurt suggests that such love is natural, I believe that only the desire that motivates such love is natural, and love conceived of as disinterested is a created notion.

What is appealing about Solomon's conception of romantic love is the fact that he leaves intact the tension that love creates. This tension is somewhat diffused by a conception of love that sees love as either motivated by an appraisal of the beloved or by a bestowal on the part of the lover. The one-sidedness of these conceptions removes a certain tension that remains in romantic love. Romantic love, like other forms of love, sets up an ideal paradigm of what love should be. It has often been thought that the ideal implied in romantic love is an impossible one, as Sartre so forcefully argues. Taken in its strictest logical sense, this is probably true, but it is in the nature of ideals that they are rarely if ever fully realizable. In the case of romantic love as Sartre sees it, however, it is not merely the case that the ideal is unreachable in practice, but that the ideal presents a logical impossibility. The problem is that two human beings are trying to capture each other's freedom as if this freedom were an object while at the same time allowing each other to be free as subjects. The problem with Sartre's

claim in this case is that he mistakes what should rightly be considered a practical problem or a problem of practical knowledge for an ontological problem (or a quasi-epistemological problem). The sense of possession or understanding of another in a romantic relationship between two conscious subjects is not the same as the one-way relation between a person and a thing, a subject, or an object. Even though we may at times treat another person like an object, this does not preclude the possibility that, at a practical level, we can communicate, relate, and even share an identity with another person to some extent. Sharing an identity, coming to understand oneself through a relationship with another, and coming to understand another through a sharing of oneself provide a practical, realizable aim of love. Solomon's account acknowledges this and presents several positive possibilities for achieving this goal.

### **Love and Knowledge**

I want to take a look now specifically at the problem of knowledge in relation to love. I want to oppose the idea that the knowledge-seeking aspect of romantic love implies that such love is egoistic. Solomon suggests that love need not be egoistic when we view love in relational terms as a form of identity created by two lovers. The mutual identity created in romantic love prevents both the lover and the beloved from succumbing to egoism as a correct view of personal identity on this account will never fully exist in egoistic isolation but will be formed by the relationship. Singer, on the other hand, seems to avoid egoism by claiming that love is both appraisal and bestowal. One must look outside of one's self in order to find qualities in the lover which are the basis of appraisal. Bestowal allows us to go beyond mere appraisal by creating value which exceeds these appraisals. Bestowal in this sense can be seen as a response to the lover's self—a self which includes beauty, intelligence, goals, creativity, and so on—but it is also a response that is personal and departs from public forms of appraisal. This is what makes the beloved seem more intelligent or beautiful to the lover than he or she may seem to others.

A third aspect of overcoming the problem of egoism in romantic love, which I have already hinted at and which is distinct from the attempts made by Solomon and Singer, can be understood upon explicit examination of the relationship between love and knowledge. Indeed, I believe that knowledge plays a crucial role in helping us overcome egoism in the context of love. Romantic love or personal love, I would argue, requires some knowledge of the beloved in order for love to be authentic. The man who falls madly in love with a woman whom he never gets to know is rightly thought of as experiencing infatuation rather than genuine love for another person. In the same way, a one-sided love that does not possess knowledge of the beloved seems illusory. Knowledge of the other is of fundamental importance to romantic love (and friendship). The reciproc-

ity demanded by such love makes knowledge of the other possible. This runs contrary to claims such as we find in Scheler and Levinas. For both of these thinkers knowledge gets in the way of an authentic love (or, in Levinas's case, an authentic ethical relation) for another person. When love is concerned with knowledge of another, one does not allow the other to be just who they are but one attempts to reduce them to sameness, to use Levinas's term,<sup>23</sup> or to make them part of the whole, in Scheler's language.<sup>24</sup> That is, rather than allowing the other to be a free subject, we are turning them into an object of our knowledge, thus violating the spirit of the Kantian imperative. As much as I sympathize with the Kantian idea implicit here, I think that once again, as in the case of Sartre, theoretical consistency sometimes breeds folly in the practical field. I want to claim that in love we cannot help but try to understand the other as an object of knowledge and through the concepts of language. No matter how much we respect the freedom of another and no matter how purely we try to relate to them *qua* human beings, we relate through the medium of language. I would even go further and say that as human beings we love partly through language. Love is never pure in the sense of being free from knowledge, and when it is free from knowledge, it runs into the previously stated problem of becoming illusory.

Through language, through concepts, through a reciprocal relation, we come to learn that another person is a subject possessing freedom as opposed to an object which can be possessed in an unambiguous manner. Likewise, we learn that we possess an objective side which others see and experience. Romantic love and friendship help us to see this other side of our self and allow us to get beyond our egoistic isolation. Lovers and friends give us glimpses of our public self. We also learn what it means to love, not only through action—in other words, loving—but through an understanding of the idea of love. There may be much in the idea of love that is natural and the impulse that gives rise to desire and fellow feeling, but, as I have discussed early on, love is a created notion. According to the life-attitude recommended by *agapé*, one's concern should be selfless, unmotivated, and pure; but romantic love recommends something quite different. The reciprocal aim of this latter life-attitude may never be fully realized in any pure form, but I believe that the aim itself is both realistic and authentic. Such a love should not try to reduce the other to a mere means or an object or concept of our language; indeed, the very authenticity in this form of love lies precisely in the struggle to come to know another person without reducing them in this manner. Romantic love is a mixed love, an "entangled love" (to use a variation of the Kierkegaardian concept). It involves both knowledge and freedom. We must come to know another person in order to be aware of her interests, but we should never let this knowledge become frozen so that we maintain a fixed concept of the other. We must constantly allow our conception of the other to be

transformed by her freedom as it is expressed in dialogue, communication, through living together, and experiencing each other. This communication can only achieve an authentic sense of the other if it is a two-way communication, a two-way love. There is no denying the difficulty involved in such an enterprise, but to remove the difficulty and to make love a one-way affair is itself to engage in an inauthentic form of love. Romantic love demands reciprocity in a similar manner to friendship.

We will never get a first-person perspective of the subjectivity of another person, but this fact does not negate the possibility of gaining an understanding of the other person that fulfills the demands of love. Such demands require practical knowledge, and this will often represent an advance in our understanding of the way that the other person sees the world. When faced with the abstract philosophical problem of other minds, we may be sceptical about the possibility of understanding another person's perspective, but when we examine the actual development of close relationships, we see that advancement is often made towards such understanding. The way we understand someone at the beginning of a romantic relationship or friendship is quite different from the way we understand someone after years of living together, learning from one another, discussing important matters, and thinking together. In romance especially, the early period of infatuation often creates or allows for an idealized and often distorted picture of the other person, for the tendency is to create a picture of the other person as we want them to be. Over time (at least in healthy relationships), however, that picture changes in a way that is not merely the result of the excitement or infatuation having faded: we gain a greater understanding of what the other person means by the words they use or the body language they employ. Sometimes the expressions and concepts used by the other become our own and allow us to articulate our own experience of selfhood in a new way. It is not a distortion of language to say that we come to "know" another person in this way; the sense of knowing here is not the strict epistemological sense of having true belief. Although true belief will inevitably be part of such knowing (e.g., it is important that we have the correct belief about the other person's dislike of sarcasm), it is more than this. Knowing another person also involves developing sensitivity towards her affective states as well. The notion of empathetic understanding comes to mind. It is a mixed concept of knowing, one similar to Ilham Dilman's term "contact." Contact, for Dilman, is neither a "knowing that" or a "knowing how," to use Ryle's distinction. It does not mean that we simply know certain facts about another person, nor does it imply that we know how to employ a set of techniques when interacting with that person. It is, rather, that we have established a kind of relationship with another person such that we respond appropriately to them (at least most of the time) on an emotive and practical level. The kind of knowing involved in contact, according

to Dilman, requires a two-way understanding or acquaintance and cannot simply be something that only one of the parties possesses.<sup>25</sup> The distinction made in the German language between the verbs *wissen* and *kennen* (both translated in English as “to know”) is instructive here. *Wissen* characterizes our knowledge of facts and concepts, whereas *kennen* characterizes our knowledge of people. To know a person or a subject who possesses intentions, thoughts, feelings, character, as well as a self-concept, is very different from knowing that one plus one makes two. Such knowledge involves a form of reciprocity, if you will, due to the fact that it is a mutual relating of self-conscious beings.

To suggest, as Scheler does, that Christian love is superior due to the fact that it prioritizes action over knowledge is a bit misleading when applied to love between individuals due to the dichotomy that is created between acting and knowing. In the context of personal love between human beings, true loving requires some degree of knowing. Bestowal will be a part of this, of course, since even if we possess knowledge of the other person that knowledge will be incomplete. Bestowal becomes a way of dealing with that incompleteness. To bestow love on another is a creative act which goes beyond a person’s objective qualities or the lover’s knowledge of those qualities. Bestowal is an imaginative act on the part of the lover which completes his picture of the beloved. It is possible that this imaginative act may involve illusory elements, but the illusory aspect is less than it would be if love were only bestowal.

This picture of love can be compared to certain accounts of self-identity. The picture that one has of one’s own self is always incomplete and rarely only factual. To compensate for this, we create a narrative or imaginative account of our own self, which can lead to an unhealthy delusional sense of one’s own self. However, one could argue that viewing one’s self in existentialist fashion as a discrete series of facts or moments can be even more unhealthy as a psychological strategy for dealing with life. Sartrean characters such as Roquetin in *Nausea* do not present us with a picture of a person ideally suited to dealing with the practical necessities of life even if such characters maintain a certain authenticity with their lucid view of both self and world. Sometimes certain illusions, or certain creative ways of understanding our self and the world, provide us with a filter or a way of dealing with the innumerable facts that confront us so that we are not overwhelmed by that world.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, our experience of another person whom we love will involve both knowledge of that person and a value or image bestowed upon her that will, in an important way, transcend the naked facts that constitute our knowledge of her. Love is not merely a response to facts or qualities of the beloved. It is partly constituted by this and relies on the knowledge one can attain regarding the beloved, but it also relies on an attitude of bestowal that elevates the value of the beloved above or outside the system of public values. The valuing expressed in

bestowal need not be considered entirely mysterious or illusory but should be understood in terms of a personal relation between lover and beloved. What makes love more than knowledge is a bestowal inspired by feelings, imagination, and creativity. What makes this bestowal more than a fantasy are the qualities belonging to the other that affect our senses, our imagination, and intelligence, in other words, our knowledge of her.

To claim that a love based in knowledge is egoistic is problematic for a number of reasons. Knowledge in some sense takes us out of egoism because it is primarily not a private phenomenon. Knowledge, like language itself, is public. Language may work as a means of freeing us from egoism. It is only when we allow language to become static or inflexible that we are in danger of losing the sense of otherness that another person embodies. This is why language and knowledge (in relation to the other) must be understood in dialogic rather than absolute terms. Our knowledge of the other that we inevitably formulate into concepts must be constantly called into question by our hearing what the other has to say. Scheler, by separating knowledge from love, presents an idealistic picture that is hard to make sense of. A relationship without knowledge, concepts, or language is not a human relationship.

Pure bestowal love, such as we see in the Christian notion of *agapé*, as well as in Harry Frankfurt's more naturalized version, seems inadequate at least as a characterization of personal love between two conscious or mature individuals. Bestowal may best characterize the relationship between a parent and her young child where there is not the same possibility for reciprocation, but romantic love (or friendship in certain contexts) seems better suited for adult relations. Bestowal love avoids a certain difficulty in personal relations by its one-sided nature. One could say that a pure appraisal love (such as *eros*) does so as well. Bestowal avoids the problem of knowledge of the other person. Bestowal love does not require knowledge of the other person or his qualities. A strict appraisal love is a response to those qualities and is indeed conditioned by them but it does not require a two-way relation between people. Both approaches to love seem to escape the difficulty in mature human relations that romantic love is willing to face head-on. Romantic love requires both initiative on the part of lovers (often taking the form of bestowal) and a response to each other's qualities or actions. Romantic love recognizes the incomplete nature of human beings as well as our incomplete understanding of one another. Reconciliation suggests a theme whose aim is to overcome our separation, estrangement, and incomplete knowledge of the other. This reconciliation will never be complete. There will always be something unknown about the other and perhaps this is a good thing, but the aim of knowing the other and knowing oneself through the other is a healthy part of love. The so-called unselfish love characterized by the



agapic tradition presupposes a completeness possessed by God. This is not a completeness that humans possess.

### Conclusion

What I have tried to show in this article is that romantic love is a form of love that cannot be reduced to egoism. That this is so is evident when we look at the nature of interpersonal identity implied by the romantic relationship as well as the relation between love and knowledge. Romantic love escapes egoism because on this model identity is social, formed by others and specifically by the other whom one loves. Further, romantic love aims at knowledge of the other and does so in a reciprocal way. Lovers escape the egoistic predicament as they come to know one another. Knowledge of the other brings one out of their isolated egoism. Romantic love relies on both a response to the other and one's knowledge of him as well as a creative giving or bestowing which in part makes up for what is lacking in that knowledge.

### Notes

- 1 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 119.
- 2 Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), Vol. 1, p. 315.
- 3 *Ibid.*, Vols. 1-3.
- 4 *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 283-302.
- 5 Max Scheler, *On Feeling, Knowing, and Valuing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 152-55.
- 6 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), p. 380.
- 7 For a discussion of the Romantic version of the "Fall," see, for instance, M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971).
- 8 Scheler, *On Feeling, Knowing, and Valuing*, p. 156.
- 9 Anders Nygren, *Agapé and Eros* (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), pp. 80-81, 176-77.
- 10 Scheler, *On Feeling, Knowing, and Valuing*, p. 155.
- 11 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 44.
- 12 Nygren, *Agapé and Eros*, pp. 209-10.
- 13 Niko Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship," *The Philosophical Review*, 112, 2 (April 2003): 135-89, esp. p. 135.
- 14 Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 42.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 16 Jan Bransen presents us with the notion of an "alternative of oneself" that potentially saves Frankfurt's notion of self-love from internal incoherence. See Jan Bransen, "Selfless Self-Love," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 9 (2006): 3-25.

- 17 See Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" and "Transcendence and Height," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited by A. T. Peperzak, S. Critchley, and R. Bernasconi (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 1-10 and 11-31, respectively.
- 18 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebook for an Ethics*, translated by David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- 19 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 474-93.
- 20 Singer, *The Nature of Love*, p. 10.
- 21 The reciprocal aim of romantic love is best represented by an image in which neither the position of the lover nor the beloved is privileged. Both participants occupy the position of lover and beloved in a reciprocal manner similar to the agent-patient relationship of ethical philosophy.
- 22 Robert C. Solomon, *About Love: Reinventing Romance for Our Time* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), pp. 23-26.
- 23 Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," pp. 11-12.
- 24 Scheler, *On Feeling, Knowing, and Valuing*, p. 155.
- 25 Ilham Dilman, *Love and Human Separateness* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 121-28.
- 26 Colin Wilson, "From *Anti-Sartre*," in *Existentialism*, edited by Robert C. Solomon, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 343-52, esp. pp. 344-48.