Love, Truth and Moral Judgement

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Abstract
A famous section of *1 Corinthians* and some influential passages in the work of Iris Murdoch seem to suppose a significant connection between the higher human love of *agape* and moral knowledge: that, perhaps, the former may provide access to the latter. Following some sceptical attention to this possibility, this paper turns to a more modest suggestion of Plato's *Symposium* that the 'lower' human love of *eros* might be a transitional stage to higher moral love or knowledge of the good. Still, while conceding that this may be so, the present paper argues that any moral transformations of such loves would need to be informed by moral wisdom or knowledge rather than vice versa. However, the paper concludes that there are ultimately deep and perhaps irreconcilable tensions between the epistemic and agapeic dimensions of moral life.

Love and knowledge

In the *New English Bible* version of *1 Corinthians* 13, *agape* – rendered as 'love' rather than the 'charity' of the King James version – is considered crucial to spiritual and moral life. Following the judgement that a person is 'nothing' without love, the chapter continues:

> 'Love is patient; love is kind and envies no-one. Love is never boastful or conceited, nor rude; never selfish, not quick to take offence. Love keeps no score of wrongs; does not gloat over other men's sins but delights in the truth. There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope and its endurance. Love will never come to an end. Are there prophets? Their work will be over. Are there tongues of ecstasy? They will cease. Is there knowledge? It will vanish away; for our knowledge and our prophecy alike are partial, and the partial vanishes when wholeness comes. When I was a child, my speech, my outlook, and my thoughts were all childish. When I grew up, I had finished with childish things. Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face. My knowledge now is partial, then it will be whole, like God's knowledge of

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> me. In a word, there are three things that last for ever: faith, hope and love; but the greatest of these is love.'[1]

Of course, this is religious scripture, not philosophy; but it is nevertheless, on the face of it, moral teaching that has continued to be widely inspiring and persuasive to many people of faith who might well claim to understand what it means. However, while the passage may seem to say something significant about the relationship of love to knowledge and truth – that, perhaps, the former may be a means of access to the latter – the precise nature of any such connection is far from obvious. The passage does seem to be clear enough in regarding love as a positive quality of character or virtue: indeed, it appears to be a sort of master virtue comprehending such other subsidiary merits as patience, kindness, unselfishness if not also – as mentioned later in the quote – faith and hope. To be sure, in the later Christian ethics focused more particularly on the love, faith and hope of the last sentence, these qualities won special favour as the three theological virtues by contrast with the more 'secular' Greek cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. In this light, on any Christian (say Thomist) ethics of virtue that might consider virtuous qualities of character to be fundamental or foundational to moral life and agency, love as the greatest of the three theological virtues would emerge as the highest virtue of all. This seems quite consistent with the overall drift of *1 Corinthians*.

Still, the *Corinthians* quote also relates love to *knowledge* and *truth* – and this seems more problematic in at least two respects. In the first place, if love is construed as a moral virtue, one might expect it to be informed or guided by the practical wisdom of *phronesis* or prudence, explicitly distinguished by Aristotle from the truth-seeking reason of theoretical knowledge and commonly understood by virtue ethicists as a matter of practical judgement between unacceptable extremes of affect or conduct[2]. However, the knowledge (*gnosis*) to which *Corinthians* refers seems to be cast more in the mould of truth-focused perception or cognition – perhaps knowledge *that* or *of* –

[1] *1 Corinthians 13*, 4–13, *New English Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) 893.

[2] Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, translated with an introduction by Sir David Ross (London: Oxford University Press, 1969; see book I for general discussion of the practical status of moral reason and deliberation and book VI, section 5, 142–143, for the distinct (non-theoretical) epistemic character of the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom.

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than in terms of such practical judgement[3]. But, secondly, there seem to be two rather different senses of knowledge at work in the *Corinthians* passage, one of which is clearly rated more highly than the other. The first deficient or unsatisfactory knowledge is variously characterised as partial or incomplete or as unclear or indistinct. On the other hand, the superior knowledge is described as clear, full or complete – and it is this form of perception or cognition to which the love of *agape* is alleged to give agents access. That said, there is now a puzzle about why we should regard a form of perception or comprehension that is inherently incomplete or unclear as any sort of *knowledge* at all. Still, to anyone at all acquainted with ancient thought, there is also a striking resemblance between the *Corinthians* passage about the partial knowledge of clouded vision and a rather older distinction between dimmer and clearer forms of perception or understanding: namely, that inherent in the image of the cave and in the epistemology of the divided line of Plato's *Republic* that underpins this. However, we may return more directly to these Platonic themes following consideration of a more modern defence of the significance of love for moral perception that itself explicitly draws upon Plato.

Iris Murdoch's 'loving gaze'

Despite her spirited opposition to the jaundiced Platonic view of the moral value of literature and other arts, the late philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch may be considered a leading – perhaps *the* leading – twentieth-century champion of a fairly faithful, albeit reconstructed, form of Plato's metaphysical ethics[4]. Precisely,

[3] In a recent paper on related territory, but with ultimately somewhat different concerns from those presently explored, Sophie-Grace Chappell suggests – though without developing the point – that the shortly to be examined epistemic status of love in Murdoch might be clarified by distinguishing some more relevant personally-focused conception of knowledge. While a similar strategy might be proposed in relation to the *gnosis* of *Corinthians*, I do not believe that this would accurately reflect either the *gnosis* of this passage or Murdoch's moral knowledge or be of much help with the key issue addressed in this paper. See Sophie-Grace Chappell, 'Love and knowledge in Murdoch', in Gary Browning (ed) *Murdoch on Truth and Love* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2018) 89–109.

[4] See, for example, Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (London and New York: Ark Paperbacks 1970); *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Vintage Classics, 2003); *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997) 386–463.

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Murdoch regards human moral development as a quest for a super-sensible or 'ideal' vision of the good, conceived as transcending the messy particularities of empirical human experience and association. While this quasi-Platonic vision of the good is forever destined to lie beyond the *complete* grasp of fallen human agents, some glimpse of it – however blurred – may nevertheless be a light by which some human moral improvement or transformation can occur. It may here be noted that, like more recent virtue ethicists, Murdoch takes all human moral perception, judgement and conduct to be a function or product of psychologically complex (nowadays termed 'thick') compounds of character and personality, rather than as the deliverances of some attenuated (or 'thin') rational decision procedure of the sort she vigorously resisted throughout her philosophical work. Unlike more recent neo-Aristotelian virtue theorists, however, she clearly has a more Platonic understanding of the moral change that human character and personality needs to undergo: for her, the route to virtue would seem to be a matter of *metanoia* – complete transformation of heart, soul and outlook – rather than development of the practical judgements and skills in terms of which so much recent virtue ethics has come to be characterised[5].

As already noted, however, the good whereof the psychologically complex Murdochian agent seeks perception lies 'ideally' or objectively beyond immediate human experience. Following Plato – and fairly consistent with *Corinthians* – Murdoch takes human agents to be mostly if not entirely trapped in the sunless subterranean cave of vanity, sophistry and delusion: to be, as she says – using almost identical terminology to that used by Plato in his *Laws*[6] – captives of the 'fat relentless ego'[7]. Here, of course, Plato is at odds with Paul's

[5] The recent trend towards modelling virtues on the pattern of skills, following Aristotle's own employment of this analogy in op. cit., note 2, book 2, may have been set by Julia Annas in her book *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); but this has now been taken much further by others and is arguably the default view in both modern-day philosophical and social scientific neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. See, for example, the survey of this issue in Matt Stichter, 'Virtue as a skill', in Nancy Snow (ed) The Oxford Handbook of Virtue (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 57–81. However, Aristotle himself explicitly repudiates this comparison in op. cit., note 2, book VI, section 5, 143.

[6] Plato, *Laws*, in E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds) *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961) book 5, 731d – 732a, page 1318.

[7] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (London and New York: Ark Paperbacks 1970) 52.

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epistle in refusing to allow that the deliverences of empirical sense to which human agents are held in worldly thrall may count as any sort of knowledge (as distinct from unfounded opinion) at all – though *Corinthians* might rightly claim that this is what *passes* for knowledge among earthbound humans. Still, given all this, how might any moral change or transformation of such agents occur – or even get started? How might fallen human agents hopelessly trapped in the circle of their egotistical and self-interested ideas and concerns begin to extricate themselves from this predicament? Clearly, the Socratic-Platonic key to this issue is that insofar as the progress of moral wisdom depends on a kind of *knowledge* of the good, whatever in human nature or psychology impedes such knowledge – such as vanity, avarice, injustice, intemperance, lust, cowardice – must be rooted in *ignorance*: but, in that case, it might – like any other form of ignorance – be eliminated by correction. That said, it may not – as ultimate unsullied vision of the good would require – be eliminated all in one go: in the tangled thickets of human psychology, the cleansing of the doors of moral perception can only be managed bit by bit. Such piecemeal erosion of ignorance of the good was, indeed, the evident aim of both Socratic *elenchus* and Platonic dialectic.

While Murdoch herself seems generally less confident of the power of abstract philosophical argument to remove egoistic impediments to human vision of the good, she seems nevertheless at one with Plato in this generally piecemeal or incremental ethical strategy. One may make useful progress towards vision of the good by gradual correction or elimination of the vicious, biased or prejudiced attitudes that cloud one's perceptions of others. By way of illustration, Murdoch[8] tells the much-cited story of the mother-in-law M, who feels hostility towards her daughter-in-law D, whom she regards too familiar, brusque and juvenile: she disapproves of her accent, the way she dresses and feels that her son has married beneath him and so forth. Murdoch asks us to imagine that all of this goes on in M's mind and is never communicated to D towards whom she always behaves impeccably. Given the additional supposition that these perceptions are grounded in high-handed prejudice – or possibly even oedipal jealousy – Murdoch takes M's moral progress to be a matter of 'inner' self-critical departure from or elimination of such attitudes and sentiments in favour of a revised view of D as refreshingly simple, unconventional and delightfully direct. The crucial question regarding M's re-orientation towards the good, however, is that of what might prompt or inspire it. It is this question to which Murdoch returns an answer

[8] Op. cit., note 7, 17–23.

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that also seems generally in tune with *Corinthians*: namely, it is a matter of the cultivation or exercise of love – or, more precisely, of the adoption of what Murdoch calls a 'loving gaze'. At this point, indeed, Murdoch precisely observes that 'love is knowledge of the individual', in an evident *moral* sense of knowledge[9].

On the face of it, however, there are clear problems about invoking any sort of love – which is often, after all, said to be 'blind' – as a means of access to the moral clear-sightedness required for vision of the good. At the very least, something would have to be said by way of specifying which of the many varieties of human love that philosophers and others have identified[10] is here intended. Still, it is evident from her philosophical and fictional output that Murdoch dismisses erotic love as a candidate for the loving gaze[11], since she considers this to be much too distracting, unstable and fickle a vehicle for this role: the characters in her novels who are most in thrall to erotic love are invariably those furthest from clear vision of the good. But attachments of affection or friendship may be in no better shape for this purpose: if M has by some mysterious means manoeuvred herself into a position of warmer regard or even friendship with D, it is not clear why this new climate of positive association need be any less biased than the negative one that it replaces. Precisely, having formerly entertained a false view of D as shallow and vulgar, she may now hold a false view of her as refreshingly unpretentious and direct (when she really *is* shallow and vulgar). While one might well agree that this is in some respects a change for the better – for M, for D and for their mutual association – it would not seem to bear the burden for which Murdoch invokes the 'loving gaze': precisely, that of assisting M to the clear – that is to say, *accurate* – perception of D needed for unclouded vision of the good. But perhaps what is here needed – as well as what Murdoch

[9] Op. cit., note 7, 28.

[10] For example, C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Collins, Fount Paperbacks, 1960); for more modern philosophical work, see the authors cited by Sophie-Grace Chappell in op. cit., note 3, 91.

[11] See Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Love and vision: Iris Murdoch on *eros* and the individual', in Maria Antonacchio and William Schweiker (eds) *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1996) 29–53; and '"Faint with Secret Knowledge": Love and Vision in Murdoch's *The Black Prince*', in Justin Broackes (ed) *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 135–154; also, on much this territory, Carla Bagnoli, 'Constrained by reason, transformed by love', in Gary Browning (ed) *Murdoch on Truth and Love* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2018) 63–88.

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may have in mind – is just a rather more objective, clear-sighted and accommodating conception of love along the lines of the *agape* of *Corinthians*: a love that is all-embracingly free from the gamut of negative emotions – of vanity, envy, conceit, touchiness, selfishness and *schadenfreude* – with which Paul's epistle contrasts such love.

Nancy Snow is one recent philosopher who clearly appreciates the general difficulty of formulating a conception of love that might fit the bill of the loving gaze and who labours valiantly – via an impressively rich and nuanced exploration of the moral possibilities of M's psychological predicament – to defend Murdoch's position[12]. To cut to the chase, Snow evidently agrees that in order to have some genuine access to the vision of the good, the loving gaze would need to enshrine a kind of *knowledge*: as such, it would need (in the words of *Corinthians*) to 'delight in the truth' and clearly perceive people for what they are, warts and all. Thus conceived, it would need to avoid the various delusive *cul-de-sacs* of bias or bad faith to which the wrong or lower sorts of human love are apt to lead and to be of the more or less even-handed or impartial kind that may also be (though this is not Snow's comparison) of the order of the *agape* of *Corinthians*. However, while Snow's subtle examination of the moral psychology of M's case need not be (at least for other purposes) wasted toil, it is unclear that this does much to settle the precise difficulty at issue. The basic trouble is that Snow seems to address the problem of how there might be a kind of love that is capable of accurate moral perception precisely in terms of what it might mean to have such clear moral perception. But this seems to beg the question – or, perhaps more accurately, it rather loads the case *against* the role of love in moral knowledge that Snow is trying to make. At best, the account suggests not just that we can have correct moral knowledge or perception *apart from* any loving gaze, but that such knowledge is an actual precondition of such sentiment: in short, since moral knowledge is required for the right sort of love, rather than vice versa, the 'direction of fit' between these terms is not of the right sort to secure or explain the moral role of the loving gaze. Yet worse, however, the moral role of any such sentiment may now seem simply redundant.

To be sure, for virtue ethicists of neo-Aristotelian temper – as Snow seems, from her wider work, to be – moral knowledge and perception might be localized to the practical *phronesis*-guided judgements of particular virtuous agents. However, irrespective of all

[12] Nancy Snow, 'Iris Murdoch's notion of a loving gaze', *Journal of Value Inquiry* **39** (2005) 487–498.

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other problems with this strategy, this would not seem to reflect Murdoch's own ethical perspective. On the contrary, for Murdoch – as also, on the face of it, the author of *Corinthians* – vision of the good is a matter of the (albeit gradual) grasp of Platonically transcendent moral knowledge, whereby M's perceptions may be judged true or false regardless of her best loving judgements about what is desirable or prudent. In short, M either gets things right or she gets things wrong. This is the only position consistent with Murdoch's Platonic moral epistemology according to which vision of the good depends precisely upon the eradication of false views about ourselves and others founded upon vain, egotistical or self-regarding passions. Any virtue-ethical approach that based moral perception on the essentially practical judgements of *phronesis* – for example, via the weighing of greater or smaller amounts of sentiment – would appear somewhat at odds with this enterprise. For what it is worth, the present view is that Murdoch's basic Platonic instincts are also generally sound on this matter and that without some such practice-independent touchstone of moral objectivity ultimate regress to moral subjectivism or relativism may well be unavoidable. Be that as it may, the question of what substantial contribution love or love's gaze might make to the agent's access or progress to objective moral knowledge – or vision of the good – remains unresolved.

Plato's 'erotic' alternative

The problem to date is that insofar as Murdoch takes such 'lower' human attachments as erotic love to be inimical to clear vision of the good, her more elevated loving gaze – at least on the best and most sympathetic interpretation offered by Snow – seems little more than redundant re-description of what it might mean to have objective moral perception. If such perception is indeed a kind of knowledge and/or understanding, it is not clear why this could not be had in the absence of any human sentiment or attachment such as love. Indeed, on the Socratic-Platonic view that Murdoch would otherwise seem to endorse, such perception, knowledge and understanding might seem all the better for the absence of such sentiment. In that case, the prospects of any significant role for the sentiment or attachment of love as a means of access to objective knowledge of the essentially transcendent Platonic moral good of Murdoch – or, for that matter, to the moral or spiritual *gnosis* of *Corinthians* – would seem somewhat dim. Unless, perhaps, a more modest role in the

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quest for moral knowledge or *gnosis* of a rather less elevated kind of love might be found.

In some insightful commentary on Murdoch's ethics, particularly as it figures in her literary fiction, Martha Nussbaum also makes much of the novelist's dismissal of any moral place for human erotic love, something that Murdoch clearly regards as too self-absorbed, inconstant and delusional for the role of loving gaze[13]. In this regard, Nussbaum sharply contrasts Murdoch the novelist with the poet Dante whom she contends does find a significant moral place for such love in the *Divine Comedy*. On more philosophical ground, however, this negative Murdochian view of erotic love seems apt for sharp contrast with that of her own inspiration, Plato. Precisely, the key concern of Plato's famous *Symposium*[14] lies with the moral potential or implications of human love or desire in its more natural and basic forms. In this most engaging of Platonic dialogues, Socrates offers – on the basis of an alleged conversation with the mysterious Diotima – an account of human love and/or desire that aims to move gradually from more to less mundane sources of attraction. Plato's *Symposium* is evidently no less concerned with beauty than moral goodness on a reasonable understanding of alluring appearance as the prime object of more natural human love and desire. That said, the dialogue is ultimately concerned with relations between beauty and goodness, as well as of these with truth, according to the basic Platonic position that the three supreme 'forms' of beauty, goodness and truth – those ideals to which right reason should aspire – are in harmony with one another if not ultimately one and the same thing. In this light, the dialogue's conception of beauty is at some odds with more modern aesthetics, whereby not all that is sensibly beautiful may be true or good, or vice versa. Nevertheless, the dialogue may well reflect a compelling intuition regarding human development: precisely, that the growth of human mind or soul might be a matter of progress (perhaps of Platonic emancipation) from the more basic pleasures or attractions of empirical or 'sensible' appearance towards more mature, advanced or 'intelligible' passions or interests.

At all events, Plato's *Symposium* starts from the assumption evidently shared by other parties to this dialogue that the basic form of human desire is a kind of erotically charged attraction to what is sensibly or sensually perceived as beautiful. In Socrates' account,

[13] Op. cit., note 11.

[14] Plato, *Symposium*, in E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds) *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961) 516–574.

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however, the objects of such attraction cannot be regarded as truly or ultimately beautiful in the absence of other less sensible qualities – or, perhaps more, if they are at odds with other less immediately sensible qualities. To be sure, the beauty of such purely sensual attraction is commonly said to be only 'skin deep' and it is no doubt the main point of Oscar Wilde's parable of Dorian Gray[15] that we cannot continue to regard the eponymous anti-hero as handsome the more that his portrait in the attic, which represents his soul or moral condition, grows uglier in the shade of his inner depravity. Indeed, it seems much to Socrates' point in *Symposium* that erotic love – not least in the ancient Greek contexts of homoerotic association between younger and older men with which the dialogue is much concerned – is precisely liable to such degradation by exploitation or abuse. Still, while Socrates shows little sign of enthusiasm for the suspect erotic customs of his day, he argues (no doubt strategically) for the higher potential of even such relationships if they allow for the deeper moral regard or respect of one soul or character for another. Indeed, Socrates seems precisely concerned to explore the potential of more basic and superficial human attractions and relations for the kind of moral association that he himself aspired to engender between himself and his philosophical admirers. The point is evidently that less elevated relationships of physical attractions to handsome youth, or even to the charm or charisma of an older Socrates, may yet be raised to another level at which what is venerated is virtuous character more than prettiness or wit.

In the name of the true beauty that is also goodness, however, the souls or characters between which the better sorts of love or attraction should obtain would also need to be honest and true if they are to be of the morally right sort: those in thrall to lies or falsehood, with little regard for the difference between truth and illusion or concern for genuine knowledge could hardly qualify for the goodness required of genuine beauty. In short, in the more general spirit of Platonic metaphysics, the beauty defended by Socrates in *Symposium* is not a 'natural' deliverance of empirical or 'sensible' experience, but an ideal or 'intelligible' construct only available to minds or souls capable of rational appreciation of goodness and truth: hence, insofar as unreasoning brutes can have no access to truth or knowledge of moral good, they cannot have any conception of beauty – even though they are clearly drawn to sources of animal attraction and pleasure. By the same token, however, the forms of human

[15] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2012).

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love, desire and/or attraction that take various modes or levels of beauty as their objects are themselves of diverse kinds and are accordingly subject to continual refinement and transformation in the course of human rational development. Since philosophers, psychologists and theologians have over the centuries distinguished between various narrower and broader, shallower and deeper, forms of human love – and of such related motives as affection, care, compassion, concern, empathy, sympathy, commitment and interest – in terms of their often different 'intentional objects', one may be tempted to regard such states as essentially separate and distinct. But, as Plato's *Symposium* indicates, these are liable to significant conceptual and causal interconnection, concatenation and progression in the complex course of human maturation: erotic love may transform into affection and care; camaraderie may become friendship; crushes on teachers may give rise to academic interests and passions; and so forth.

In this regard, the account of the moral evolution of human love or desire that Socrates presents in Plato's *Symposium* offers a promising picture of human education in general and of moral education in particular. On this view, such education is not a simple matter of filling empty vessels with inert facts – as on classic empiricist accounts of education (as famously lampooned by Charles Dickens in *Hard Times*[16]) – but of dynamic re-direction or transformation of more superficial or less humanly elevated desires and attachments into the deeper and more considered judgements and evaluations of rationally mature conduct and sensibility. While human love and desire may well have origins in the sensual attractions of human nature, there is never a moment – at least in the development of human children beyond first language acquisition – when it is *entirely* sensual and devoid of the powers of critical reflection and evaluation that define any and all serious human growth and progress. On the *Symposium* account, the human child or youth is not forever stuck with the initial attractions of childhood and youth but may with further reflection and the good influence of elders or peers move on from these. Indeed, *1 Corinthians* might well have presented its case by saying that while my childhood *loves*, passions and interests were all childish, it is these attachments that I left behind when grown. At all events, via the labyrinthine and perhaps unfathomable routes of human psychology – and with critical re-evaluation in the light of the knowledge and understanding available through the

[16] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2003).

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educational provision of most human cultures – even the most basic and sensual of human attachments and passions may well be first stages on a long road that leads eventually to some Platonic or Murdochian grasp of knowledge of the good.

Love and moral judgement

Hence, in line with Plato's *Symposium*, it would appear that various forms of more and less elevated human love – as well as such related motives or attachments as care, compassion, concern, loyalty, empathy or sympathy – may have a moral role or constitute actual stages on the long road to Platonic knowledge of the good. Some of such forms – variously distinguished by philosophers down the years as erotic attraction, affection, friendship and so on – may fall short of the *agape* or *caritas* of *Corinthians,* or of early Christian theology, but might nevertheless be eventually transformed into higher or more universal loves or facilitate the clearer, if still limited, perception of the world, self and others of objective moral wisdom or knowledge. Agents may well be drawn, in the *Symposium* manner, from more superficial attraction to friend or teacher, to love the interests or commitments of such mentors, which may be selfless service to others or even pursuit of the more abstract reflection of Socratic enquiry. Moreover, another good reason for taking almost all forms of love or other human attachment – such as affection, compassion, friendship, loyalty, care and sympathy – to be morally significant is that these may all be regarded, subject to the right sort of restraint or discipline, as human *virtues*. Indeed, if virtues are understood, according to the perspective of past and present-day virtue ethics, as affect-based qualities of character broadly conducive to individual and social flourishing, then almost all the above-mentioned human motives of attachment and other-regard may contribute to human good if not to some more explicit (Platonic) appreciation or knowledge of this. In this light, even basic erotic attraction – so long as it does not take the form condemned by the Sermon on the Mount as lust – may be the source of a variety of fairly obvious pleasures, inspirations and benefits in human life and association.

Still, notwithstanding all such considerations and connections, one should not fail to recognise the fundamental logical disjunct or gulf between any or all kinds of love – or other human attachment – and the moral knowledge or vision of the good of basic Platonic, Murdochian or any truly 'objectivist' conception. Despite any and

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all looser conceptual connections, the key point is that no variety of human love – neither the *agape* or *caritas* of Christian theology nor Murdoch's 'loving gaze' – could be regarded as either sufficient or necessary for the clear vision of moral knowledge. The basic reason for this is that the sentimental attachment by which any and all forms of love are primarily defined is simply not epistemically equipped to disclose the truths of correct moral judgement. True, as latter-day philosophers of mind have tirelessly insisted, those human affections commonly called 'emotions' – amongst which diverse forms of love would have to be counted – may also be considered 'reasonable' or reason-responsive insofar as they have 'intentional objects' or a 'cognitive core'. But it is also true that such affective states are weighed in the balance – and often found wanting – by appeal to evidential and other considerations that are quite affect-independent. If Othello is jealous because he believes Desdemona to be unfaithful, but it is clearly demonstrated to him that she is not unfaithful, he must either forfeit the jealousy or continue to be *unreasonably* jealous. This is the overall drift of human sentiment: we aim to value, admire or love what may otherwise be (as far as possible) rationally determined as valuable, admirable or worthy, rather than considering these objects – at the risk of sentimentalism – to be so because we value, admire or love them. Moreover, the transformations of love and other sentiment lately noted in light of Plato's *Symposium* are also clearly dependent on correct views of their objects: the initially star-struck admirer of Socrates worships him wrongly so long as he fails to appreciate his master's single-minded quest for knowledge of the good – which is also a *dispassionately* intellectual search for objective truth. In short, there is a point in the Socratic passage from love or admiration to appreciation or knowledge of the good at which the personal and partial attachment of the former has to give way entirely to the impersonal and impartial concern of the latter. The Platonic knowledge of the good is the full face-to-face epistemic encounter of *Corinthians* whereby we come to appreciate the world, our relations with others and ourselves – without favour and no little fear – for what they and we really are: as such, it is a site of moral judgement requiring the forensic self-analytical wisdom of (for example) Socratic *elenchus* or Platonic dialectic, more than the potential turmoil and distractions of sentimental attachment.

But what, then, of the previous suggestion that love – as well as other forms of human attachment – may be considered humanly valuable *virtues*? Here, of course, one needs to be aware that there are different conceptions of not just virtue but the moral status of virtues. For Socrates, the morally flourishing human life was certainly one

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of proper cultivation of virtue which he firmly grounded in wisdom defined as clear moral perception. For Plato, such perception needed to be aided and abetted by the passions of (something like) spirit and commitment, on the grounds that moral agents needed not only to see what is right but to act accordingly. To be sure, on both these conceptions it is reasonable to suppose that those with clear vision and knowledge of the good would be generally concerned that the world, others and they themselves conform to it. Still, as previously observed, whether or not this might be regarded as itself a form of love, it is also clear that it would be a *consequence* of moral vision, not (as suggested by Murdoch and *Corinthians*) a means of access to it. But what, then, of the more currently fashionable Aristotelian conception of virtues – also influential on later Christian theological interpretations of *Corinthians* – as complex cognitive-affective qualities of character and agency conducive to human benefit or flourishing? On the face of it, this seems more problematic for present concerns. Apart from the fact that such genuinely virtuous character traits as self-control and courage may be devoted to highly suspect ends and causes, sound moral judgement seems hardly reducible to the characteristic deliberation of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, since it is clear that agents might count as largely virtuous in the light of their best practical judgement, yet fall morally short on account of their epistemic shortcomings or limitations. Given Aristotle's separation of virtuous deliberation from truth-focused reason[17], agents of virtue might well have *phronesis*-shaped characters but nevertheless be mistaken at least about the precise faults or merits of others. Moreover, this would seem to apply with even greater force to any notion of love as a virtue: indeed, aside from the fact that love may be all too 'blind' to the moral status of its objects, while still counting as love, it may also persist – even virtuously – in spite of some clash with *accurate* moral judgement.

Perhaps the notion of forgiveness affords the best example of shortfall or tension between a form of sentimental attachment that is a very close relative of the love of *agape* or *caritas* and the judgement or verdicts of moral knowledge and truth. Clearly forgiveness actually *presupposes* moral knowledge and the judgement implied by such knowledge, since there can be no true forgiveness failing clear recognition of the offences that any candidate for such beneficence has committed: simply turning a blind eye to the offense committed or to the guilt of the offender could not be genuine – or, at any rate, only very superficial – forgiveness. On the one hand, then,

[17] Op. Cit., note 2.

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forgiveness requires clear recognition of guilt or sins that may cry out to heaven and for which any divine or human court would hold the sinner accountable in the name of justice. Indeed, this is quite clearly Socrates' own view in Plato's *Gorgias*[18] where he argues that the sinner or criminal deserves nothing less than punishment in the interests of the well-being of his own soul: on Socrates' view (stoutly resisted by his associates), wrongdoers are actually more miserable or unfortunate if they are allowed to get away with their crimes than if they are made to pay from them. But, on the other hand, forgiveness is popularly (as well as philosophically and theologically) regarded as a highly significant – perhaps the more so for its difficult and demanding nature – *virtue*. While courts of law may, in the light of clear knowledge and evidence of the sinner's guilt, demand punishment in the name of justice, forgiveness requires the virtuous to let bygones be bygones in the name of reconciliation. In this regard, there seems to be some tension between the overall aim of forgiveness and full knowledge or appreciation of the good that would call for justice and retribution.

But much the same tension is observable between the more universal love of *agape* or (Christian) *caritas* (close kin if not often much the same thing as forgiveness), which enjoins sympathy and forbearance, and the full moral knowledge of ourselves or others, warts and all, that might call for harsher treatment if justice is to be done. Indeed, even in the case of the more humanly biased love of a mother whose son or daughter has committed some dreadful crime that she knows in all conscience to deserve the heaviest of penalties, we are likely to regard her forgiveness and continued love of her offspring as a genuine virtue – indeed, to consider any lapse of such maternal love (except in the most extreme circumstances) to be something of a human defect or vice. So, at some odds with Murdoch's view and that of *Corinthians* that such higher forms of love as *agape* may be modes of access to transcendent knowledge of the good – at least according to a broadly Socratic or Platonic conception (of the kind, indeed, by which we may also expect Greek New Testament literature to have been influenced) – these notions are not obviously in complete accord: in any case, as previously noted, moral knowledge would seem presupposed to love – rather than vice versa. At all events, the fundamental conflict between moral knowledge as

[18] Plato, *Gorgias*, in E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds.) *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961) 229–307. This claim is pressed throughout the dialogue in converations with both Polus and Callicles.

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Socratic or Platonic understanding, warts and all, of ourselves and others – with the potentially negative judgement that this may imply – and the general drift of love and/or forgiveness is writ large throughout the New Testament from *Matthew* to *Revelations*. On the one hand, there is the God and/or Christ of love and forgiveness whom we may expect (at least if we repent) to overlook our worst excesses; on the other hand, there is the God of justice and retribution whom we might equally expect – indeed, in the name of justice and honesty, actually *require* – to condemn us (either to Hell or Purgatory) for the very same offences.

In the last analysis, then, the basic terms of this tension – love and moral knowledge – are far from easy to reconcile, at least in any terms clearly discernible in Iris Murdoch, her sympathisers or in *1 Corinthians*. At the same time, however, we may yet be strongly drawn to regard both of these as key features or constituents of any complete conception of moral life and agency – and, to be sure, we have frequently noticed that the higher forms of love and related other-regarding virtues make little sense apart from more judgemental notions of moral knowledge or perception. Given that the latter is an evident precondition of the former, however, what might be said is not so much that one is a means to the other, but that one is humanly required to compensate for the negative fallout of the other. Simply put, whereas moral knowledge and perception – at least on the Platonic understanding that Murdoch largely endorses – seems significantly backward-looking, love and forgiveness are essentially forward-looking. Like the picture of Dorian Gray, the truths of Plato's moral vision are liable to present most if not all of us with a fairly dismal picture of how we are or have been in our previous history: precisely, as sinners in need of Christian or other redemption. Indeed, this may give a poignant moral twist to the *Ecclesiastes* observation that knowledge increases sorrow[19]. On the other hand, the virtue-sustaining power of the love of *agape* and/or forgiveness holds out some moral hope of healing and absolution – of others, ourselves or perhaps of the latter through the former – that is a potential antidote to the despair that full self-knowledge might well induce. Socratic or Platonic self-knowledge is the standard by which mere mortals in the sorrowful vale (or Platonic cave) are condemned to be judged and found wanting. Love and forgiveness, of others if not also of ourselves, offer some prospect of hope, renewal and/or redemption without which – in light of true self-

[19] *Ecclesiastes* 1, 18, *New English Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) 493.

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knowledge – we might well abandon the unequal moral struggle. But such love is also the dove that often flies against the powerful winds of moral truth with no firm assurance that its flight is fully just.

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