

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

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UNCONDITIONAL love is impossible, and this fact has important consequences in a variety of domains. Social policies have been derided on the grounds that they undermine unconditional love,¹ such love has been considered the best and noblest form of love,² and it has been called 'possibly the most valuable aspect of the Christian tradition'.³ *Prima facie*, 'unconditional love' could only refer to love that is not conditioned upon (dependent on, in virtue of) *any* properties of the beloved. Anything short of this would be love that is conditional upon some properties of the object of love, and hardly an honest candidate for unconditionality. Unfortunately, all love is due to some properties being exemplified by the beloved. Juanita loves José, e.g., and not other men because he has certain properties that other men of her acquaintance lack. He shares interests with her, has similar political and religious views, has a physical appearance Juanita finds appealing, has a personality type she prefers, has a certain financial wherewithal. She fell in love with him because of these properties, and did not fall in love with other men because they lack them. José's relational or 'Cambridge' properties may have a role as well as his intrinsic properties. For example, José was such that Juanita was not in a competing relationship when she met José, he was such that Juanita was psychologically ready to fall in love when she met José, and so on. In short, José had the properties of being in the right place at the right time. Should he lose some of the properties that ground Juanita's love—by becoming destitute, drunken, abusive, philandering, and switching political allegiances—it is hardly unexpected that she would stop loving him.

Robert Nozick has argued that while love is initially conditional upon the properties of the beloved, 'eventually you must love the person himself, and not *for* the characteristics'.⁴ Thus mature love is unconditional. He acknowledges that love can die, offering this explanation: 'though no longer dependent upon the particular characteristics that set it off, [love] can be overcome over time by new and sufficiently negative other characteristics'.⁵ Nozick thinks that if Juanita stops loving José because José has

become a drunken philanderer, it is not that José no longer exemplifies the properties upon which Juanita's love is conditioned, but rather that José has acquired sufficiently unpleasant new properties that overcome Juanita's love for him. However, Nozick misconstrues the metaphysics of the matter. Unless he subscribes to the implausible Sartrean view of positive properties being the only ontologically legitimate ones, José's acquisition of the property *being a drunken philanderer* is necessarily coextensive with his loss of the property *not being a drunken philanderer*. We may reasonably conclude that it is the loss of this latter property that causes Juanita to stop loving José. Love is conditional, only upon negative as well as positive properties.

This result should be unsurprising. First, the recognition of negative properties in this context is not all that uncommon. We often think it an important property of the beloved that she not remind us of a previous unhappy love, or crucial that she not be a selfish lover, or vital that he is not a drunken philanderer. The presence of these negative properties are requirements of our love. Second, even if we fail to acknowledge the negative properties that ground our love more often than we fail to recognize the positive properties that do so, this is only due to the psychological fact that we tend to become aware of negative properties (and negative events—e.g., Pierre's not being in the café) when our expectations are not met. This epistemic fact shows nothing about the actual metaphysics of love.

One might argue that the love parents have for their children is a paradigm example of unconditional love. Such a view is endorsed by Elizabeth S. Anderson, who worries that surrogate motherhood will serve to undermine unconditional parental love, and replace it with love conditioned upon "market" properties of the child, such as intelligence, beauty, and so forth.⁶ Presumably the presence of the sort of parental love Anderson promotes means that no matter what the eventual behavior or beliefs of a child, his parents would continue to love him. Thus whatever properties little Johnny might gain or shed, his parents' love would abide undiminished, and so their love is unconditional. Yet even here the love of Johnny's parents is conditional upon at least one of Johnny's properties, namely the property of *being their child*. That he has this property explains why they would continue to love Johnny should he become an ax murderer even though they do not love other ax murderers. The others lack the property of being their child.

One might argue here that even if, strictly speaking, unconditional love isn't possible, this doesn't get at what people care about when they speak of unconditional love. What they care about is love that won't vanish no matter what happens, or no matter what the actions of—or changes in—the beloved. This sort of love is clearly possible. This kind of love is love

conditional upon essential properties of the beloved. Johnny's parents love him because he is their child. *Being their child* is not a property that Johnny can ever lose. So no matter what Johnny does, or how he changes, his parents' love for him will abide. Weaker sorts of love will be those that are conditional upon contingent properties. Juanita does not love José because of his essential properties, but because of his contingent ones. This is why his drunken philandering could cause her to stop loving him. The weakest kinds of love are those conditional on properties that might easily be lost, such as physical beauty. Stronger sorts will be conditional upon properties or clusters of properties that will be hard to lose. The strongest possible love will be love based upon essential properties.

Should we aspire to love on the basis of essential properties, or admire such love in others? Richard Taylor thinks that love based on essential properties is the best kind of love, in fact he calls it 'the greatest good'.⁷ It is certainly the best in terms of strength, but it is not quite clear that such love is best by other measures. In fact, love for others based on essential properties may be (in a normative, as opposed to decision theory, sense) irrational. Consider by analogy other emotional attitudes. Suppose that Bob is a racist, and hates Vashaunda because she is black. We typically regard racial hatred as irrational. There are probably many things that make this irrational, but a sufficient condition for its irrationality is that race membership cannot be changed, and it is outside of a person's control. There is nothing Vashaunda could do, say, or change to ameliorate Bob's hatred. This is much like the assignment of moral blame—such blame does not properly accrue to an agent whose behavior was genuinely beyond her control.

Or consider someone who respects a rich person born into wealth. This too seems irrational, in a way that respecting a rich person who became rich through dint of hard work and ingenuity is not. Moreover, part of the reason that the former seems irrational is because it is grounded on a property that the object of respect had no control over. Likewise for admiring someone for their height, distrusting them because they have a big nose or respecting them because they are old. These emotions are all improperly grounded in properties over which the object had basically no choice. All essential properties are properties like this, so we have some reason to think that love conditioned on *being one's child* is not a sort of love that is rational or worthy of cultivation.⁸

It is curious that emotional attitudes towards non-human objects seem different. We would not regard it as irrational for me to love a Seurat painting because it has the property *having paint daubed upon canvas in a certain way*. Yet this is surely an essential property of the painting. Nor is it clear that hating slugs because they are slimy, squishy plant-eaters is

irrational or improperly grounded, even though these are properties over which slugs have no control. Perhaps it is the free will of the object of love that is a crucial element. This is certainly a matter that merits further investigation.

Yet understood in its most natural way, viz. as not conditioned on any properties, unconditional love is impossible. Understood as not conditioned on any contingent properties, unconditional love for persons may well be irrational and not worthy of promotion. If the best sort of love for other persons is based upon their contingent properties, as I have suggested, we need not worry about social policies that promote this. Indeed, such policies further the good.⁹

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NOTES

1. See Elizabeth S. Anderson, "Is Women's Labor a Commodity?" *Contemporary Issues in Bioethics*, T. L. Beauchamp and L. Walters, eds. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1994, 4th ed.) pp. 233-43.

2. See Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1970).

3. Stephen G. Post, "Conditional and Unconditional Love," *Modern Theology*, vol. 7 (1991), pp. 435-46. The quotation is on p. 444.

4. Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989). The quotation is on p. 75.

5. Nozick, *The Examined Life*, p. 76.

6. Anderson, "Is Women's Labor a Commodity?" esp. p. 235.

7. Taylor, *Good and Evil*, pp. 243-44, 250.

8. Interestingly, Freud gives somewhat similar arguments to show that the love of humanity is contrary to reason. However, he fails to generalize to all essential properties. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: The Hogarth Press, 1930). §V. 4.

9. Thanks to Richard Brook and George Rainbolt for helpful discussions of this topic.