

## ***The Sine Qua Non of Love: A Pluralism Within***

**Gregory J. Kerr**

I have known many happy marriages, but never a compatible one. The whole aim of marriage is to fight through and survive the instant when incompatibility becomes unquestionable. For a man and a woman, as such, are incompatible.

—G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*

Probably never in the history of humanity has there been more emphasis on pluralism, diversity, multiculturalism, and difference. And just as assuredly, there has never been a time when we more expected generic and homogenized similarity. We are shocked at the quote above and we are shocked at the idea of other people being incompatible with us. Equally certain, on the other hand, as Allan Bloom noted so well in the *Closing of the American Mind*, people in our modern world are very wary of affecting the lives of others for fear of appearing intolerant; after all, we are all so different and unique! We fear that we will impose our personal preferences upon others and that our differences will limit them. We will inhibit their personal growth as unique human beings. Who are we, we ask, to affect their lives? Notice how Bloom puts it:

[T]oday's students ... do not, in what were once called love affairs, say "I love you," and never, "I'll always love you." [A]s to dreams about the future with a partner, they have none. That would be to impose a rigid, authoritarian pattern on the future.... A serious person today does not want to force the feelings of others.

The same goes for possessiveness. When I hear such things, all so sensible and in harmony with a liberal society, I feel that I am in the presence of robots.<sup>1</sup>

What is surprising about the contemporary liberal vision of pluralism is this: since we are “tolerant,” we wish to be pluralists but with one caveat: no one’s view of reality can really be true. No one’s view can be better than the others. This means that while you are affirmed in your right to come up with your own theory or believe your own religion, you can never claim it to be true. The result, of course, is that we never feel free to think or believe anything. It is not surprising that for Bloom, students no longer say “I love you” for they do not want to impose themselves on others. According to their view, they are all too biased and limited in their views. Only God would have the knowledge required! The popular contemporary writer on love, M. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Traveled*, believes that to tell others what is good for them is indeed like playing God. And, for Peck, if we are going to be genuinely loving, that is exactly what we have to do! We need to play God!<sup>2</sup>

Even though Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II) will say that no one can think for us and no one can will for us,<sup>3</sup> still we can show, without claiming divine inspiration, that it is meaningful to talk about loving human beings and assisting their growth in a positive way. There are truths in this area and through an analysis of the necessary elements involved in human discourse we can arrive at certain central truths about our humanity and about how to love others.

First, all human beings desire to communicate with one another. Second, as Jacques Maritain observes, this desire can only be accomplished when our words and ideas comply with the transcendental principles of the one, the true, the good, and the beautiful. He writes: “The moment one touches a transcendental, one touches being itself.... It is remarkable that men really communicate with one another only by passing through being or one of its properties.”<sup>4</sup> This is true because people cannot communicate with one another if their ideas and words are logically incoherent (lack

1. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), pp. 123.

2. M. Scott Peck, M.D., *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Touchstone, 1978). “Love compels us to play God....,” pp. 154-5.

3. Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), p. 24.

4. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph Evans (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), p. 32.

unity), intend no relationship to reality (not true), intend no value (i.e., intend no worth to the other), or do not address the beauty of the existentially unique and concrete situation that they are in. Third, if human beings are communicators who must rely upon the transcendental principles, then these principles must be fundamental aspects of human nature itself. If to be human is to know and communicate through the transcendentals, then love will be those thoughts, feelings, and actions that contribute to the growth of our or another's abilities to do this better. To love others is to help them develop their ability to learn about the true and to have a unified vision of the whole of reality, to help them to become more free to respond to what is truly good and valuable, and to help them to be able to appropriate themselves aesthetically and existentially as unique human beings.

Paul J. Wadell, C.P. says "A human being is a creature of appetites, of powerful, perduring tendencies. A human being is one whose very nature is appetite, whose whole being is a turning toward all those goods which promise fullness of life. We are hungry for completion..."<sup>5</sup> To do this, however, we must love the right things in the right way. In part, this can be translated into saying that the human being has a natural appetite for truth, goodness, and beauty, and, to truly love is to nurture one's own or another's intellectual and moral virtues that regulate these appetites towards the true, the good, and the beautiful.

Contrary to much of current educational theory, the growth of these abilities is not automatic. These abilities, like muscles, do not flourish but atrophy when left alone. People—parents, friends, and lovers—don't help the beloved when they only leave them alone to decide and learn for themselves all the time. To develop virtue, according to Aristotle, we must endure some degree of pain or discomfort in attempting to repeatedly hit the mean between two extremes by aiming away from the extreme that hitherto has brought us inappropriate pleasure. People love when they, through time, effort, and guidance, help themselves or others build virtues or good habits along these transcendental lines.

But there is a catch, a problem: these lines often are in tension with each other. Each appetite, each aspiration, each type of knowing has a blind spot<sup>6</sup> towards the value of the others. There can even be fighting among them. As Maritain wrote in his essay "Concerning Poetic Knowledge:"

5. Paul J. Wadell, C.P., *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. 81-2.

6. The "blind spot" idea was first suggested to me by Thomas Nagel in his work, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 126ff.

The fact is that all these [human] energies, insofar as they pertain to the transcendental universe, aspire like poetry to surpass their nature and to infinitise themselves.... Art, poetry, metaphysics, prayer, contemplation, each one is wounded, struck traitorously in the best of itself, and that is the very condition of its living. Man unites them by force."<sup>7</sup>

Theories of love face the same problems. In attempting what might be called a transcendental analysis of certain theories of love and friendship, we will explore them in the light of the different transcendental aspirations of humanity. Many of the problems concerning theories about love stem from the fact that they are themselves built on, and in turn focus upon, a particular transcendental. This causes them to have blind spots towards the value of the other transcendental approaches and perspectives. Maritain noticed a similar and analogous problem concerning philosophical theories in "Truth and Human Fellowship" where he writes:

The more deeply we look into these controversies, the more we realize that they thrive on a certain number (increasing with the progress of time) of basic themes to which each newly arriving philosopher endeavors to give some kind of place—however uncomfortable, and though acquired at the price of consistency—in his own system, while at the same time, more often than not, his overemphasis on one of the themes in question causes his system to be at odds with those of his fellow-competitor—and with the truth of the matter. The greater and truer a philosophy, the more perfect the *balance* between all the ever-recurrent basic themes with whose *discordant* [emphasis mine] claims philosophical reflection has to do.<sup>8</sup>

Maritain's notion of themes can be related to these fundamental transcendental aspirations. The word "balance" takes ever greater meaning here when one reflects upon the internal conflicts between these aspirations within each human being. A classic example of this occurs in Maritain's *Peasant of the Garonne* where he describes the radical difference in approach and vocabulary between the theologian and the saint, the speculative and the practical thinker, concerning their knowledge based upon the "true" and their knowledge based upon the "good." He writes:

The real does not appear in the same light in both cases. The theologian declares that grace perfects nature and does not destroy it; the saint declares that grace requires us to make nature die to itself. They are both telling the truth. But it would be a shame

7. Jacques and Raissa Maritain, *The Situation of Poetry* (New York: Kraus Reprint Co; Philosophical Library, 1968), p. 56.

8. Jacques Maritain, "Truth and Human Fellowship," *On the Use of Philosophy: Three Essays* (New York: Atheneum Reprint, Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 29-30.

to reverse their languages by making use in the speculative order of formulas which are true for the practical order, and vice versa.... Let us think of the 'contempt for creatures' professed by the saints.... For the philosopher and the theologian it would mean: creatures are worth nothing in themselves; for the saint: they are worth nothing for me.... The saint sees in practice that creatures are nothing in comparison with the One to whom he has given his heart and of the End he has chosen.<sup>9</sup>

As we explore theories of love, we will show how theorists tend to favor one transcendental aspiration for knowing and then become blind to the others. It will be shown that there are those like Plato, and M. Scott Peck, who focus upon the *good* and practical nature of love but are blind to the bodily *truth* about human nature and of the guidelines it provides. As will be made evident, there are those like C.S. Lewis who focus upon the truth about friendships and provide brilliant insight into genuine friendship but diminish its moral element. There are others, like Montaigne, Kierkegaard, and Marcel, who take an existential or aesthetic approach but then leave no possibilities for any natural guidelines or principles at all. All of these theorists want to preserve and value something that is truly worthwhile, but they neglect other valuable aspects of love in doing so.

The solution to this difficulty involves a kind of pluralism ... not a pluralism concerning truth, but a pluralism within. It involves affirming that while there is indeed one reality, there are different and incommensurable ways of accessing it. To love ourselves and others means to affirm these important but conflicting aspirations within all human beings. It means to affirm the unity of reality with the plurality of the ways of knowing it. To love, then, is at least this: to nurture the growth of these natural but conflicting, and yet interdependent, aspirations and appetites within us all.

Notwithstanding certain interpretations of Plato, no one can be at ease with the speed with which he guides our minds to love that which is invisible, eternal, form-like, and divine. Even in the earthy *Symposium*, where there is much talk of bodily love, Socrates' major contribution is to provide us with a ladder out of that. He goads us on to ascend to the form of beauty! Thus, the ultimate love is not that of other persons but that of a reality that is out of this world and impersonal. For Plato, the true is fused into the good and, as with Augustine, there is an impatience with the material aspects of truth in reality. The great insight of this Platonic view lies in the highlighting of the special nature and dignity of the human soul as it rises in its partial freedom from matter. The error is the identification of the

9. Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself About the Present Time* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 44.

soul with the real self and the forgetting our bodies and the spirit-incarnate whole that we really are.

Perhaps no contemporary writer has had more of an effect upon contemporary society than M. Scott Peck. Through years of providing therapy, Dr. Peck has come to define love as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.”<sup>10</sup> Peck tells us that this implies choice and effort. Having given us a necessary condition of love, Peck, in subsequent pages, tells us that feeling, romantic love, and affection are not genuine forms of love. In doing so, he clearly wants to steer his patients away from unhealthy, delusional, codependent, and abusive relationships. He, like life management theorist Stephen R. Covey, wants to assert the importance of the idea that “love is a verb.” Perhaps Dr. Covey illustrates the logic of this position best in his *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by retelling a conversation with a seminar participant:

“Stephen, I like what you’re saying. But every situation is so different. Look at my marriage. I’m really worried. My wife and I just don’t have the same feelings for each other we used to have. I guess I just don’t love her anymore and she doesn’t love me. What can I do?”

“The feeling isn’t there anymore?” I asked.

“That’s right,” he reaffirmed. “And we have three children we’re really concerned about. What do you suggest?”

“Love her,” I replied.

“I told you, the feeling just isn’t there anymore.”

“Love her.”

“You don’t understand. The feeling of love just isn’t there.”

“Then love her. If the feeling isn’t there, that’s a good reason to love her.”

“But how do you love when you don’t love?”

“My friend, love is a verb. Love—the feeling—is a fruit of love, the verb. So love her. Serve her. Sacrifice. Listen to her. Empathize. Appreciate. Affirm her. Are you willing to do that?”<sup>11</sup>

Both Covey and Peck make excellent cases for why love should be considered a verb. This is love considered from the point of view of the good, of what ought to be the case, rather than the true, what is already the case. There are great advantages to this, of course, the primary one being that if we conceive of love in this fashion we can be responsible and proactive in loving others rather than being at the mercy of other people’s agendas, circumstances, and physical and/or psychological environments.

10. Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, p. 81.

11. Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (New York: Fireside, 1989), pp. 79-80.

However, again, there are problems. We may tend to overlook real psychological and cultural forces as well as miss the value of the natural forms and structures that these loves take. Peck, for instance, thinks that feelings, romance, and affection are not forms of love at all. For him, all of these have suspicious ties to biology. He says about falling in love that it is "a genetically determined instinctual component of mating behavior," "a trick that our genes pull on our otherwise perceptive mind to hoodwink or trap us into marriage," and a "regression to infantile merging and omnipotence."<sup>12</sup>

Another grave problem is the neglect of the body. For Peck, love is the fuel for spiritual growth and since the aim of life is spiritual growth and since spiritual growth is, for Peck, the same as mental growth, there turns out to be absolutely no real role for the body. This results in a view that allows, for Peck, open marriages and, although rare, therapeutic sex with clients.<sup>13</sup> The bottom line is, if it has to do with the body, it has very little to do with love.

Some authors consider certain forms of love from the vantage point of the true. Take C.S. Lewis's classic, *The Four Loves*, for example. The reader relishes in Lewis's description of the natural gifts of affection, friendship, and romantic love, all given freely to be enjoyed for what they are. We can enjoy all of them without worrying if they are bringing us spiritual growth or making us better. Friendship, like philosophy or art, is for itself and not for some other purpose.<sup>14</sup>

While we might expect some place for the "good" or for ethics within the natural structure of friendship from this Christian Neo-Platonist, we find none. "Friendship," according to Lewis, "is an affair of disentangled, or stripped, minds." "*Eros*," Lewis continues, "will have naked bodies; friendship naked personalities. Hence (if you will not misunderstand me) the exquisite arbitrariness and irresponsibility of this love."<sup>15</sup> Lewis goes on to say that friendship has no duties. He talks about how it is neutral in the school of virtue: "Friendship (as the ancients saw) can be a school of virtue; but also (as they did not see) a school of vice. It is ambivalent. It makes good men better and bad men worse."<sup>16</sup>

Although Lewis does claim that friendship, like affection and romantic love, do need the "good" of charity in order to survive and not go bad on us,

12. Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, p. 90.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 93, 175-76.

14. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960, 1988), p. 71.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

still, it is remarkable that he sides with Montaigne rather than Aristotle and Plato both of whom argue that morality is constitutive of genuine friendship.

Finally, there are those who stress the existential/aesthetic dimension of love. This is the realm of beauty. Michel de Montaigne in his essay, "Of Friendship," begins with a reference to painting. He quotes Cicero that "Love is the attempt to form a friendship inspired by beauty." He continues, "If you press me to tell why I love him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, for Montaigne, there is no explanation of, and no moral elements in, a friendship. The "union of such friends, being truly perfect, makes them lose the sense of such duties, and hate and banish from between them these words of separation and distinction: benefit, obligation, gratitude, request, thanks, and the like."<sup>18</sup>

Kierkegaard, in his *Works of Love*, also stressed the existential nature of love. In particular, he highlights the existential nature of the Christian's obedience to Christ's command to "love your neighbor." According to Kierkegaard, Christ's command excludes consideration of any formal structures of the natural loves as well as any form of love being good for, or suitable to, the human "form" or nature. For Kierkegaard, we are simply to follow the command of Christ. There are no truths or conditions that must be in place. There is nothing good or fulfilling to be sought. We are simply to do it! To love otherwise is "poetic" love and that is based upon personal preferences and inclinations and, because there is no truth about humanity, no human nature, all choices based upon the self must be understood as "selfish." There is no time here to make distinctions or to define love. He writes:

Just because Christianity is the true ethic, it knows how to shorten deliberations and cut short prolix introductions, to remove provisional waiting and preclude all waste of time.... Love to one's neighbor is therefore eternal equality in loving, but this eternal quality is the opposite of exclusive love or preference.... Equality is just this, not to make distinctions.... Exclusive love or preference, on the other hand, means to make distinctions.... Christianity is in itself too profound, in its movements too serious, for dancing and skipping in such free-wheeling frivolity of talk about the higher, highest, the supremely highest.... [And] If you think to come closer to this highest by the help of education, you make a great mistake.<sup>19</sup>

17. Excerpts from Montaigne: *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University, 1958) in *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, ed. Michael Pakaluk (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1991), pp. 192ff.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

19. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) in Pakaluk's *Other Selves*, pp. 239, 245-46.

What matters for Kierkegaard is one's relationship and obedience to God. He will not listen to the Socratic demand in the *Euthyphro* for a form. He is beyond Plato's forms. And if we don't notice it here, we can always remember his view of Abraham and of his famous teleological suspension of the ethical.<sup>20</sup>

Another philosophy of love that is built on existence but perhaps in a more positive manner is that of Gabriel Marcel. Marcel talks about the mystery of love, and as a mystery, it is one of those philosophical problems where the one who investigates it is a part of the problem, and so cannot be objective about it. Human love cannot be separated out for an objective analysis.<sup>21</sup> Love is not, as the derivation of the word "objective" suggests, "thrown in front of me." Love is a force that creates us, develops us, and is not simply a tie between already constituted human beings. It is beyond the problematical, beyond criteria, and exists among unique people and relationships and thus cannot be universalized. It is, in a sense, more than I am. It is creative. Marcel's notion of creative fidelity is unlike anything else we have discussed here. Now the emphasis is not upon activity or effort in doing something, but on one's being available, being permeable and open to others, a kind of active passivity, an attention to the other as an unique human being. Marcel writes, "Creative fidelity consists in maintaining ourselves actively in a permeable state; and there is a mysterious interchange between this free act and the gift granted in response to it."<sup>22</sup> Rather than considering two autonomous human beings making a connection to one another, Marcel insists on a notion of *co-esse* or a "being with." We exist with others, and this is an important part of reality.

But then, if love remains a mystery, we might ask Marcel the following questions: first, must we say that there are no rules, principles, or universals? Second, are there no already constituted human natures required for such *co-esse*? While Marcel gives us brilliant insights, he does so at a cost. Perhaps, this is a necessary cost, but it is a cost. Perhaps this is similar to the deformation, the transformation, and the indifference to the "true" and the "good" that Maritain claims for the artist *qua* artist.

What is it then that provokes us to enlist in one of these camps—either of the true, of the good, or of the existential/aesthetic—and to take

20. See Soren Kierkegaard's "Problem 1," in his masterpiece *Fear and Trembling*.

21. Gabriel Marcel, "On the Ontological Mystery," *The Philosophy of Existentialism* (Secaucus, New Jersey: The Citadel Press, 1956, Philosophical Library), p. 19.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

sides? These views are all valuable but they are incommensurable. Are they contradictory? I would argue no, no more than the statements of the Theologian and the Saint mentioned above. They belong to different paradigms; paradigms of the good, the true, and the beautiful. As Karol Wojtyla has said, "Inner life means spiritual life. It revolves around truth and goodness."<sup>23</sup> For Wojtyla, these are two foci for humanity, but are those two alone sufficient? Might we add others, beauty or existence perhaps, as well?

Like Chesterton's idea that "The whole aim of marriage is to fight through and survive the instant when incompatibility becomes unquestionable," this dilemma of the incompatibility of the different kinds of knowledge cannot be resolved in thought but only in actual human existence, for each kind of knowledge will wish to reign over the others and reduce them to a kind of slavery. It is in living that we know that we must see not with one eye but two (or more). The reality of love demands all our ways of knowing. Ultimately, these ways can be shown to be interdependent, but that is only after they have been distinguished and appreciated as independent. We are told to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and that Jesus calls himself, "the way, the truth, and the life." St. Paul tells us how to accomplish this through faith, hope, and love. Indeed, the different loves do not see eye to eye, that's why we distinguish them! There is a pluralism of loves, really different ways to know and love the world. It is in our actual living and loving that we unite them. Perhaps we can reflect upon what Kierkegaard said,

The true is no higher than the good and the beautiful, but the true and the good and the beautiful belong essentially to every human existence, and are unified for an existing individual not in thought but in existence.<sup>24</sup>

And to repeat what Maritain has said,

Art, poetry, metaphysics, prayer, contemplation, each one is wounded, struck traitorously in the best of itself, and that is the very condition of its living. Man unites them by force."<sup>25</sup>

23. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, pp. 22-23.

24. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David Swenson, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 311.

25. Jacques and Raissa Maritain, *The Situation of Poetry*, p. 56.