

Regarding the Other: Altruistic Love as Religious Ideal and Scientific Project

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by *Stephen G. Post*

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All the great world religions have succeeded in part because they espouse — and ritualize — an ideal of universal, altruistic love ("love of neighbor," regard and empathy for the stranger, the Other), just as they require a stewardship over the gift of one's own life and the lives of those who are near and dear. Within Christianity, for example, finding the correct balance between love for kin, friends, "neighbors" (since in Christianity, no one is to be a stranger), the neediest, and enemies has been debated by biblical scholars and theologians in virtually every century. One opinion is consistent over time, however: the faithful must struggle to balance love (*agape*) for the near and dear with love for the neediest, and the outcome must lean *toward* the neediest and *away* from the self or the family, the near and dear. From first century Christianity, when "house churches" were open to the neighbor and the needy, to modern concerns about the insular tendencies of Christian families in a bourgeois consumer culture, the matter of the proper "order of love" has been paramount in all theological-ethical reflection.

Coined by the philosopher Auguste Comte, the word "altruism" has dominated the social sciences' discussion and measure of our behaviors toward the Other, and the motivations behind those behaviors. Altruism derives from the Latin *alter*, or "other." Evolutionary biologists and psychologists have since taken up Comte's nomenclature.

One important intellectual challenge facing us today is the attempt to build

links between the scientific, ethical, and religious traditions of discourse on altruism, beneficence, and love, respectively. To date, philosophers of science, such as Elliot Sober and Michael Ruse, have waxed eloquent on the different technical definitions of altruism within biological-genetic or social scientific paradigms, but none have adequately connected these paradigms to the humanities. Of the philosophers of love, Irving Singer has done the most to integrate classical humanistic discourse with the scientific paradigms, and theologians such as Phillip Hefner and Stephen J. Pope have made significant integrative efforts. But there is much more to be done in this dialogue, including the expansion into non-western traditions.

Altruistic Love and the Ideal of Inclusivity

By "altruistic love," I mean a warm and abiding personal affirmation of the Other that is grounded both in emotion and in the insight that this particular Other has *value*, not only in their *potentiality* (i.e., "all people have good somewhere inside them"), but in their present, non-ideal and non-sentimentalized *actuality*. As Singer puts it: "To love another person is to treat them with great regard, to confer a new and personal value upon them." Love furthers the existence, growth, and presence of the Other; love responds to need and to suffering (although it is still present in the absence of these); love is loyal and patient; love honors the Other's freedom, integrity, and individuality.

In its parental form, this love is largely instinctive and natural — but it is also driven by purposeful choices centered around the culturally-instilled value of continued existence. From a religious perspective, this participation in the continuation ("pro-creation") of human life under a natural canopy of parental and personal love is cast in the image of a parental God who is often described in motherly and/or fatherly metaphors. In this sense, then, the most *universal* form of personal love is paradoxically also the most *particular*.

Yet this form of love is never quite as natural as some suggest, and whether it is *more* natural for mothers than for fathers, as Melvin Konner contends from molecular biological and neurological evidence, must remain an open question. And however natural this form of love may be, surely mother and fathers of, say, a difficult adolescent child can find themselves loving someone who almost seems like an enemy. Thus a love grounded in procreative interests is refined, deepened, and made disinterested in the midst of struggle. That some evolutionary biologists have attached the derogatory moral word "selfish" to this form of love is, as Holmes Rolston argues, a serious "category error," at least with regard to humans, for whom parental love is terribly complex and exacting.

All great religions address the parent-child axis as meaningful and important, and even extrapolate theologies from it. But they also express as much caution about the insular tendencies of the family as they do about individual solipsism. Within Christianity, there is a radical strain of thought (exemplified by Nancey Murphy and George F.R. Ellis) that allows us to appreciate the biological evolution of the foundations for the unique human capacity for love, but then exhorts a radical reversal of moral priorities focused on love of enemies. However, while the love of enemies *is* vitally important in the Christian tradition and others, it is really foolish to ignore the moral complexity of the "order of love," with its many spheres of concern, of which love for enemies is highly important but surely not the full picture. Christian *agape* does not require a wholesale reversal of priorities, but rather the expansion of a universal love for all humanity that transcends all in-group status hierarchies and the tit-for-tat calculations associated with reciprocal altruism. This is an old theme, of course, as old as the moral transition from the insular Greek *philia* ("brotherly love") to the inclusive Jesus of Nazareth, who preached love and care for the infirm, the outcasts, and his always forgiven enemies. This was a transition well identified — and much disparaged — by Nietzsche.

In summary, parental altruistic love and other expressions of human kin-altruism emerge from the evolutionary building blocks of human life, and with the emergence of the great world religions we see the radical expansion of this altruistic love to the "neighbor" who is everyone and anyone. In this view, the purpose of true religion is to free human love from the confines of kin and in-group reciprocity to embrace, in the words of Levinas, "the other as other," while never setting aside as unworthy any of the various human spheres that define the full order of love. Obviously, even religions that teach universal inclusivity struggle against the insular grains within human nature and tribes. Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, for example, contrasted the inclusive implications of "radical monotheism" with the realities of "henotheism," the worship of nation or society. Yet the historical record does not support the cynical view that great religions contribute more to conflict than to forgiveness and reconciliation. The Nietzschean "will to power," so disdainful of inclusive love, so imbued with egoism and nationalism, gave birth to a secular 20th century of unprecedented violence and conflict. Altruistic love stands in stark contrast to intimidation, stigmatization, invalidation, objectification, mockery, disparagement and all those elements of human experience that convey to others that their existence rests on a mistake, has no worth, and can be disregarded.

Love and Care

Altruistic love precedes care but is very closely linked to it. Care is the

form altruistic love takes when attending to the other in need. There is no credibility to the moral agent who says the he or she "loves" the other but refuses to respond to the other in time of need. Love and care are thus distinct but inextricably bound. Love as expressed in care is manifest in expressions of solicitude (anxious concern) for the welfare of the other, while love in the absence of need is manifest in expressions of joyful delight in the other's presence.

Love is an abrogation of the self-centered tendency — although not of *all* concern for the self — and a transfer of interests to the other for his or her own sake. Love is the foundation of all moral idealism, i.e., of acts that surpass the merely minimal requirement of "do no harm."

While love requires the abrogation of selfishness, it is a mistake to confuse the valid ideal of unselfishness with *selflessness*, its invalid exaggeration. Selflessness obscures the extent to which self-concern or care of the self is *necessary*, if we are to sustain our commitment to love and care for the other. Thomas Aquinas thought that people who truly love others have a special obligation to take reasonable care of themselves — valid and necessary acts of risk notwithstanding — so they can continue to function and benefit the world. Mother Theresa and Mahatma Gandhi took good care of themselves. Saints never *seek* the cross, although the cross may find them. Moreover, the complete abnegation of self-regard is morally questionable, because it invites exploitation on the part of other, and fails to correct the other's harmful behavior. Feminism, psychology, philosophy and theology increasingly converge on this point.

There are spheres of love, just as there are spheres of justice. One sphere is characterized by special relations. Partiality, special obligations, and proximity over extended periods of time roughly define the moral texture of this sphere, in which we *know* one another, often deeply. Marriage, parental love, filial love, and friendship lie here. Another sphere is that of love for those at greater distance, those whom we often do not know in the least, and who are not especially needful, but about whom we must be concerned. Here, Christianity speaks of the virtue of "hospitality." A third sphere includes the most needy, such as people who are severely ill or famished. A fourth sphere looks toward the criminal or the enemy who poses a threat to self or others but for whom an inner resurrection is always a vivid possibility, as Dostoyevsky eloquently described. The first and second of these spheres are appropriately haunted by the requirement of attentive love in the third and fourth spheres. However, love in these last two spheres should never eclipse the first two.

These various spheres compete for our moral attention, and well they should, for they are all proper areas for love's compass. The spheres are related, and no truly integrated moral agent can live a bifurcated existence

loving those in one sphere while detesting those in another.

The Scientific Future

Certainly altruistic love can and should be scientifically studied — and to a significant degree, it already has been. Social scientists have addressed altruistic love in a variety of contexts, both with regard to underlying motivations and helping actions. There is, however, deep disagreement in social science over the authenticity of other-regarding motivation. The social scientific approaches sometimes focus on rescue behavior that may place the agent at risk, and sometimes on daily acts of love, care, and kindness, which value the other and seem motivated primarily by desire for the good of the other.

There are ongoing debates within evolutionary biology and evolutionary psychology regarding altruism. To what extent are all forms of human altruistic love determined and limited in scope by "selfish genes"? Does genuinely altruistic love for non-kin truly exist, or is it based on mere human self-deception? If such love is possible, can it ever extend beyond in-groups to out-groups, and even to the religious and philosophical moral ideal of all humanity? What scientific explanations are there for genuinely counter-reproductive altruistic behavior in various nonhuman species, and what do these explanations imply for human beings? How have evolutionary biologists and evolutionary psychologists interpreted altruism across species, and what do they think the implications of these interpretations are for the human condition? Are human acts of radical self-sacrifice for the good of others contrary or consistent with nature and human nature as understood by evolutionary paradigms? How do data from the biological sciences compare with those from the social sciences regarding the existence of altruistic love at various levels of inclusivity?

The lines of inquiry extend in several directions. How can we better understand the emotional aspects of altruistic love, focusing on the role of empathy in both humans and nonhumans? Here the work of zoologist Frans de Waal on the social interactions in primates is highly significant. A dualist view of the moral agent has historically focused entirely on properties of disembodied mind or soul, dismissing the biology and evolution of empathy and other affective states that contribute to love. How does variation in neurobiological capacity for empathy affect cognitive functioning and the ability to act in a loving manner? Why are some persons more or less empathic than others? What are the biological forces that encourage or inhibit the expression of altruistic love? How strong a force is empathy? Is it always used for loving purposes, and is it a necessary feature of love in humans? What are the biological processes of attachment and bonding that pertain to empathy? Here, the work of neuroscientist Thomas Insel on the molecular basis of monogamy

is especially interesting [see related story on page XX]. What are the discontinuities between human and nonhuman capacities that allow for the emergence of a regard for the other? Where do culture and symbol enter into the distinctly human capacity for universal altruistic love, if this capacity is real?

Working with social scientist Lynn G. Underwood, biologist Jeffrey P. Schloss, and William B. Hurlbut, M.D., we articulated these research questions for the future:

- What are the evolutionary origins and neurologic substrates for altruistic behavior?
- What developmental processes foster or hinder altruistic attitudes and behavior in various stages of life from early childhood onwards?
- To what extent do human individuals and societies manifest behavior that are either motivated by altruism or have altruistic consequences? What psychological, social, and cultural factors influence altruism and caring?
- Do spiritual and religious experiences, beliefs, and practices influence altruism?
- How does the giving and receiving of altruistic love interact with personal well-being and health?
- How can researchers from various disciplines collaborate to enhance this field of study?
- Overall, is it possible to gain new insights which can be used to help people and their communities to better appreciate the significance and importance of love, and benefit from its expression as a lived reality?

But the definition of terms and of research programs at the interface of altruism, love, religion, science, and philosophy requires much more thought than these preliminary comments contain. Before the power of love — which, like the Nazarean, compels no one by force — we must be humble about our powers of scientific understanding. And yet it is imperative to proceed.

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