

“WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?”

Joyce Henricks

I’m going to start my talk with a reference to a dream I had the other night. In this dream, Norma appeared and told me that I had to show my credentials. Credentials? What was that about? But knowing Norma, I thought I’d better take this seriously! And the more I thought about it, it made sense. I’m going to be offering an answer to the question: Does my action have to have been motivated by love in order for it to have moral worth? And since I have a perspective that may be different from yours, it’s important that you know where I’m coming from. After all, we all have our biases. And, as Guy pointed out in his sermon last week, we should never be so sure of our own view as to ignore disagreements and constructive criticisms. (He didn’t use those words, but you get the point.)

So, there are three factors that are relevant here:

1. I’m not a religious person. I wasn’t raised with a religion. If anything, I’m a cultural Jew— although my paternal grandmother, who was Catholic, and with whom I lived for a while, would take me to church and splash some water on me. I never knew why. But I don’t think that counts as being religious or even religious by proxy.
2. I studied science in college, with the goal of becoming a modern Madam Curie. I love science, with its emphasis on evidence and testing our hypotheses, or opinions, and the need to reevaluate conclusions when new evidence is available.
3. In graduate school, however, when I realized I was not going to be a modern Madam Curie— my professors told me that I was dangerous in the lab: once I actually started a fire!—I switched my focus to philosophy and have never regretted it. Philosophers ask questions. Any question is fair game. When I was teaching moral philosophy I would often start the class with a hopefully thought-provoking question, such as: Why is incest morally wrong? Why is cannibalism morally wrong? Students looked at me as if I had sprouted horns on my head. How could I even ask that? But the point was for them to tell me why they believed it was morally wrong.

Philosophers ask questions and then propose answers, or theories. Some leave it at that. Plato, for example, believed that we lived among the “Forms” before we were born, with access to all knowledge; that we forgot that knowledge during the traumatic birth process; but would regain that knowledge when our physical body died and our soul was reunited with the Forms again. But most philosophers, including me, seek answers that can be vetted through science.

Today, I’m going to propose an answer to the question: Does my action have to be motivated by love in order for it to have moral value? Spoiler alert: I’m going to tell you my answer from the start: My answer is “no.” But before I say more, let me explain why I was interested in this question. As I’ve said, I’m not a religious person. The Bible to me is an interesting piece of literature—notice I didn’t say fiction—and therefore it doesn’t have any more influence on me than any other piece of literature. I got interested in this question when my Christian friends talked about love thy neighbor as you love yourself. They talked about loving kindness, and when I asked how that differed from kindness, I was given a variety of answers. Some of the answers were: God, or the Divine, was with you when you

acted out of love; acting out of love is the only kind of motivation that has any moral value; another answer I received was a little more promising: You have to love yourself in order to be able to love others. (Probably true, but unhelpful.)

I wasn't satisfied with these answers, so this talk is the result of my thinking about the importance of love as the motive for morality. You may agree, you may disagree. You may not know what to think, or you may scratch your head and say why is she wondering about this when the answer is obvious. Well, I just wonder about a lot of things people don't think about. For example, what is a parent's moral obligation? Do children have obligations to parents? A favorite one of philosophers is: Would you kill an innocent person in order to save humanity—or at least a lot of people? Fortunately, we're not often asked to make that choice.

For those of you who aren't familiar with Tina Turner, the title of today's talk comes from the first line of her famous song: "What's love got to do with it?" She answers the question with: "What's love but a second-hand emotion?" Now I don't know about second-hand, but love is an emotion, a feeling, albeit a complex one. What I want to focus on today is (1) the importance of seeing love as an emotion, (2) the interdependency between emotions and reason, and (3) lastly, the main point of today's talk, the relationship of the motive to the worth of the action.

Let me start by using the terms in Classical Greek:

1. Eros – sexual passion or desire
2. Philia – deep friendship
3. Agape – love for everyone, for humanity – all creatures?
(Jonathan Swift: (author of Gulliver's Travels) "I love humanity; it's people I don't like." I see a parallel today to politicians and fellow citizens who say they love children and then ignore the children that go to bed hungry, that live in poverty, that are being massacred in schools because of the reluctance of our "leaders" to do anything about gun control.)
4. Starge – between parents and children
5. Pragma – long-standing love (as in long-term happy marriages) (as contrasted to falling in love, or eros))
6. Philautia – love of self
7. Ludus – playful love (as in dancing, flirting, laughing with friends)

The Greeks most likely would have thought it odd to describe the feeling for a lover, a friend, a pet, a football team, and ice cream with the same term, but that is what we do—and we hope the context makes it clear what type of love we mean. An old Greek might say that there is a similarity between the types of love, a "family resemblance," like cousins, rather than an identity, like twins, and therefore different terms should be used to distinguish them.

(I found this list of meanings for 'love' to be thought-provoking. They have many words for love, whereas we have basically one. I find it interesting that when my children were teenagers they used the term "like-like" when asked if someone was their boyfriend? Obviously an attempt to find a middle-ground term between like and love. On the other hand, we have many words for coffee: cappuccino, espresso, latte (and skinny latte), caramel macchiato, half-caf, Americano, Black Irish,

(which I believe has some booze in it), and Red Eye—whatever that is – to list some of the more popular offers. (Not sure what to conclude from that though—We think more about what we drink than the emotion we’re experiencing?)

But I’m not going to talk about the different uses of the term love, but focus on it as an emotion of varying sorts. It’s its status as an emotion that concerns me here. Let me use a personal example to make my point.

When I was told that I would have to promise to “love, honor, and obey” at my marriage ceremony, I almost canceled the wedding. Certainly “obey” was out of the picture, but so was “love,” although for a different reason. I could promise to obey; I just didn’t want to. But, in contrast, I couldn’t promise to love. How can one promise to have a certain emotion, a certain feeling, towards someone in the future. I certainly did love my future husband, but could I be sure I always would “until death do us part.” I hoped so, but I couldn’t promise that. Now, you must be thinking, this was a bad start to a marriage; that I was being too much of a philosopher even at that point in my life; or even that words really don’t matter. But they matter! And promises mean something. Fortunately, my future husband knew me well enough to at least tolerate my misgivings, and we ended up convincing the priest to accept the vows that we provided. Yes, this Jewish girl got married in a Catholic service. Don’t ask!

The point of this example is that it’s not easy, or even possible for most of us, to simply call up emotions. I’ve heard that some actors can get themselves to call up the emotion of the character they’re portraying, but that takes more training than most of us have. On the other hand, though, emotions can be manipulated. Think of all those ads on TV asking for money using pictures of either adorable children and animals or distressed children and animals. How many times do we send money out of sympathy (an emotion), pity (an emotion), guilt (an emotion) or love (again, an emotion)? Do we ever check to see if the money goes to help the children and animals? Do we check to see how much of our contribution goes to the agency for its administration and publicity? Would you still contribute if you knew that less than 30% goes to the children and animals? I hope not.

But, to my second point, emotions won’t tell you that. You need its counterpart: reason. There seems always a view that reason and emotion are rivals, an either/or choice. Either follow your head or your heart. The truth is that they complement each other. As Aristotle says—you knew I’d bring that old Greek into this, didn’t you?—“*Reasoning helps us to refine our emotions and emotions help us to evaluate and validate our reasoning. In order to see this more clearly we need to see how both our reasoning and our emotions are means to understand the world around us, but either one by itself is incomplete.* (Aristotle, paraphrased)

Emotions tell us what we desire, what we want. If I desire a chocolate fudge sundae, I need to know where and how to get it. My emotions won’t answer that. I need reason, facts.

A more significant example would be as a parent. I love my child and want the best for her. How do I do that? All the love in the world won’t give me that answer. Parental love may lead to being a helicopter parent, hovering over the child, solving all her problems, never letting her develop her independence. It may also lead to too much freedom for a child, so that she never learns boundaries

and becomes an annoying person. We need the best available evidence to know how to show our love for the child. And emotions won't do that; we need facts, we need to use our reason in order to satisfy our desires. Emotions without reason are like a boat without a rudder, going off in all directions as the winds take it – or in the case of emotions, as the whims take it. On the other hand, reason without emotions is like our new AI chat boxes, cold and mechanical.

So, let's get back to our main question. What's the difference between acting out of loving kindness and simply doing something kind? I think it doesn't matter to the recipient! If I give \$20 to a person pan-handling (begging) on the street, do they really care if I do so out of love, or compassion, or pity, or out of a moral principle that one ought to help others in need, or simply because that's what I do? Those are my values.

Another example: (hypothetical!): I know my next door neighbor is a Neo-Nazi and hates Jews, among other people. I see him fall on the ice in his driveway and can tell that he is hurt and can't get up. What do I do? I can't act out of loving kindness—I don't like the guy, no less love him—but I can help him, and do. Do you think he cares why I'm helping him? Whether I'm acting out of love, or just doing what I think is the right thing to do? In other words, I just try to help people if I can; that's who I am; that's how I was raised; those are now my values.

Now, the question: Does my action have to have been motivated by love in order for it to have moral worth? And my answer is “no”. My helping my Neo-Nazi neighbor was kind, but it wasn't done with loving kindness. I believe it was the right thing to do – even if it had been motivated by a lesser motive: “Ha, now he knows what it feels like for his life to be dependent on a Jew!” Petty? Perhaps. But does acting from that motive mean my act has no moral value? I don't think so. I believe the motive for an action is not relevant to the recipient of the action. However, I believe it is relevant for the agent. When we act with love there's an emotion we feel, one that makes us feel good, even, perhaps, makes us a better person. And, perhaps, a by-product of that feeling is that as we become better we act better!

The new UUA proposal to replace the seven UU principles with circles, showing love at the center and things like justice, generosity, pluralism, equity, transformation, and interdependence on the periphery is interesting. (The diagram is on the back of your Order of Service.) However, when explaining the connections it talks of actions and covenants. But I find myself asking the Tina Turner question: What's love got to do with it? Somehow it is assumed that love will be the foundation or motivation of these actions and covenants.

Our UUFCM mission statement is similar. “We are a religious community guided by love, transforming ourselves and our world.”

It's always good to be guided by love. Love is one of the good, warm, fuzzy emotions. But that's not enough. We need reason to best decide how to make those transformations, how to work for justice, how to respect and protect the earth, how to provide dignity for every person, how to build inclusive communities, how to support democratic processes. In other words, how to transform ourselves and the world.

Doing those things that we covenant for is what's important. The motive isn't relevant. I agree with Spike Lee: "Do the Right Thing!" I don't care whether it's out of love, practicality, or guilt. Just do it!

A last point: Are we so sure about the motive of another person's actions? Was their act one of loving kindness? We can tell if it was kind, but how would we know if it was motivated by love? (Except by their telling us!) Are we really so sure about the motivation of others?

What about our own motivation? Are we even sure about that? Do I help at the local homeless shelter because I care about the people? Because I want to be seen as a caring person by others? Because it looks good on my resumé? Because I fear God's judgment if I don't help others when I can?

I know many people, especially Christians, will disagree with me. For another example, I think that lusting in my heart is not the same as acting on my feelings. I'm referring to former President Jimmy Carter's remark that he had lusted in his heart, which turned many people against him, likely leading to his losing re-election.)

I leave you with these questions and my answers. As a good philosopher says: Let's talk. And as a good scientist says: Prove me wrong!