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Theology Brief

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF LOVE

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1. The Love-Command as the Summary of Law

Jesus famously taught (Matthew 22: 37–40 and parallels) that the first command of the law was Deuteronomy 6:4, "You shall love Yhwh your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength" and the second Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". All obligations, moral and religious, were included in these. That was Jesus' chief (but not sole) contribution to a discussion among early rabbis, concerned to help proselytes daunted by the intricacies of Torah-commentary, about how to interpret the six hundred and thirteen distinct commands (as they were numbered) as a coherent moral law. A life joined up by law required a joined-up law; God has one will, and demands one obedience. How to describe that obedience? Jesus' answer to the question implied four things.

Love Orients all Moral Direction in Scripture

On love "the law and the prophets hang", which is to say, they derive their intelligibility from it. Not the law only, but prophecy, too, spoke with divine authority, and so must be understood consistently with Torah. Each form in which the Scriptures gave moral direction – legal prescriptions, lists of virtues, warnings of danger, description of social responsibilities, narratives of obedience and disobedience – was to be read as an elaboration of how the agent was oriented in love to its creator and its fellow-creature. Though comprised of two prescriptions, the love-command is essentially one: it directs us as creatures towards God, and as fellow-creatures towards each other. But love is not the same in either case, for God and neighbour are not equal claimants. The neighbour presents us with a reflection of God's claim, so that it is really God who claims our love in two ways, directly and indirectly, as our Father and as our neighbour's Father. As the Johannine Epistle explains it, the 'brother' is the *visible* focus of love for the *invisible* God; in loving 'one another' we 'know' God by participating in his love for us all (1 John 3:11–18; 4:7–21).

A Variety of Neighbours

The consistency of the demand for love does not iron out the variety among the commands. Neighbour-love is not uniform. As expounded in Leviticus 19, it is a relation to "the poor and the stranger" who glean the fields, to property-owners vulnerable to theft, to hired servants who depend on a daily wage, to those with impaired faculties who need a safe public space, to business-partners depending on agreements, to litigants who want impartial courts. Many different claims are comprised in the single duty of neighbour-love. If we then add Jesus' command of love for the *enemy*, the variety is even more striking. Love is sympathy, love is objectivity, love is restraint, love is energetic action. These differences must be attended to if love is to be practical.

Love Commands and Delights

Law-as-love fulfils our moral nature. It is commanded, but we "delight in" its commands (Psalm 112:1). In general law does not elicit delight, but ambivalence. It seems opaque and alien, contradicting our spontaneous desires (Romans 7:22f); as a powerless "letter" it lacks intelligibility; as an inflexible "condemnation" it lacks sympathy. But interpreted by love it promises new and more effective initiatives of action. There is a law we are free to fulfil, which the apostle calls "the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2); it is written on the heart (2 Corinthians 3:3), no longer opaque, since the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5).

Love Fulfils Moral History

Law-as-love is the fulfilment of a history of moral development. "Christ is the end of the law", we are told (Romans 10:4), and law, like a prophetic sign, looked forward to him. The command of love is both "new" and "old", rooted in the first obscure fumblings of the human race to live in keeping with the laws of the universe, but shedding new light on them, since "the darkness is passing away and the true light shines" (1 John 2:7f).

2. How Love Interprets Law

There have been many systems of law, and the Torah that Jesus interpreted by love is not identical with any law that governs us today. Can we justifiably take his summary as applicable not only to that one ancient text, but to national, institutional or professional laws and regulations that we are subject to? We can, if we see law as a living and constant presence in society, developing as historical situations change, not only the work of legislators but including customary practices, institutions, moral expectations which shape the life of any civilised community.

Law in all these aspects requires the interpretative direction of the love-command. It is not a question of love's replacing law in its many forms, but of its teaching us its true intentions. If we suppose that love and law are contradictory and mutually exclusive, we imagine that love overrides or defeats law. This idea was

given a radical turn in the "situationism" of the mid-twentieth century, which argued that since every decision must be governed by love, ordinary moral norms could do no more than generalise, with a certain heuristic value for new situations, forms that love has taken in the past, but may or may not take in any new instance. A more conservative version of the position, making the same mistake, suggests that law must govern our conduct most of the time, but in "borderline situations", where ordinary rules reach the limit of their capacity, love takes over. In both versions it is assumed that love and law point in contrary directions. But Jesus conceived that the direction given by law itself is under the direction of love.

As law's interpreter, love has normative force. Some accounts of Jesus' words allow them only an explanatory role: love is the best description of law-governed action, the motive for it, but it does not give concrete guidance. But if love does not guide, it cannot interpret guidance, and it can guide sufficiently only when it is brought under a higher-order principle that gives it coherence. To observe law requires thoughtful understanding of its purposes, for law contains a multiplicity of demands that may generate dilemmas. The supremacy of love thus secures practical reason against the existential threat of irreconcilable moral demands.

3. The Breadth of Love

"Love" is a wide-ranging term, and that can seem alarming for the clarity of practical reason. If we place love at the head of the commands, is everything we want to do commanded? Do we have sufficiently clear criteria for action? But Jesus' twofold love-command does not command everything, not even every possible love. There are loves for intermediate objects, which may or may not serve love for God and neighbour, and there are misdirected loves, corrupted by habit, fear, resentment or ignorance. Love for God and neighbour is criterion for judging those loves. Yet it is true that it covers a wide range of possible forms of action, and we should not try to narrow that range. Simply as a working definition let us suggest that love is an *affective and directive attention to a good.* This excludes many affective states: repulsions from evil, moods that affect us without producing action, isolated spontaneous acts that give no direction to our lives. But it still allows for the variations of love as it unfolds in passive and active moments of experience: admiration, desire, practical purpose, settled commitments, identification, etc.

Types and Moments

The life of the lover contains many states of mind: agitation and calm, volition and recognition, instinct and reflection, contemplation and action, decision and habit, self-consciousness and self-abandon, enjoyment and detachment. I speak of these states as "moments" of love rather than "types" or "kinds", which could too easily suggest alternatives. Love is an extended event of human life, unfolding and developing in a sequence of its moments, which is how it gives shape to a life lived as a whole. The moralist's temptation is always to fix on *one* moment, and declare it to be the only "real" love – perhaps loyalty, or sensitive feeling, or practical helpfulness, or sacrifice. But this ignores the sheer breadth of love's range, which is why poetry and fiction have often been more successful in teaching us about love than philosophy. There

is truth, of course, in the famous claim that "love is not love which alters when it alteration finds" [1], but it was persistence, not immobility, that the poet meant to praise. Love endures, not statically, but by renewing itself from memories and habits that sustain it and enable it to find new forms and expressions. There may be good reasons to isolate distinct moments for special attention or commendation. When we are told that "greater love has no man than this, that one lay down his life for his friends", we are shown a moment of outstanding moral significance. Yet even the moment of sacrifice arises within the context of a friendship, and what kind of "friendship" would it be that was only ever sacrifice, never mutual enjoyment?

From Affection to Action

Our working definition stressed the combination of "affection" and "direction". Love gives affectionate direction to action; it fills us with something we feel and steers us to something we may do. We cannot be commanded simply to feel, but because the feeling of love is made concrete in action, we can be commanded to love. Though we recognise love first by feeling, it is already a readiness for action. But not only of the busy and energetic sort. Attentive acts, such as listening, learning and wondering, are action, too; in love these have a certain priority over the busy and energetic acts, as the story of Mary and Martha illustrates. Practical reason has both reflective and deliberative phases, attending to the good that can be admired, attending to the good that can be performed.

From Experiences to Persons

There are many types of good: experiences of sight and sound, states of existence, objective things and persons, qualities of action. We may "love" many different things: our food, playing tennis, those close to us, works of art, the horizons of our spiritual aspiration, all that shares in the created good that God has made. Aesthetic perception is shaped by love of beauty, theoretical enquiry by love of reason. More generally, there is the love of wisdom, in which we seek intelligent participation in a common life, and this is the foundation for all developed forms of work. To love, we must learn of the generic goods, of "qualities". Yet the love-command makes *God and neighbour* the supreme object of love. We may extend our definition: love for God and neighbour is an *affective and directive attention to the good of persons:* God as divine person, the neighbour as "like ourselves", possessing personal agency and self-determination.

Personality is singular, not generic. To love a person it is not enough to have a liking for a kind of person (wise, affectionate, glamorous, energetic etc.), nor is it enough to be in a kind of relation with somebody ("a" marriage, "a" friendship, "a" good working-relationship, etc.). Personal love involves unique historical experience of God's goodness through and in that other person: *this* encounter with *this* person is a unique opening *for me*. Personal loves are open to reciprocity and mutual communion, as other loves are not. They have their forms and types – especially marriage, uniquely mutual and enduring, treated as an image of the communion of Christ and his followers (Ephesians 5:25–30), and friendship, also a central model for that same relation (John 15:12–14). But the full meaning of any personal relation is seen only as the form is filled with a particular content; we may want to be married or to make friends, but only marriage-*to-X,* and

friendship-*with*-*Y,* will show us the goods that marriage and friendship really contain. Forms of beauty and wisdom, too, attract love, but are not where love finally comes to rest. "Wisdom is justified by all her children", we are told (Luke 7:35), which is to say, in persons who embody it. To love, we must learn to recognise personal singularity. Those who love the beauty of great drawing or fine music will learn to know *someone* whose personality appears through that art, Michelangelo, say, or Bach. Yet the singular does not leave its qualities behind. It would be nonsense to claim to love Bach not for his music but for himself. (Even Anna Magdalena Bach, who could love Bach "for himself" more than we can, must have been glad she had married a musician!) To know him, we must grasp him as the central personal subject to which his exceptional musical powers belong, in whom they inhere. Jesus himself, inviting his disciples' love, presents himself in the person of Wisdom: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me!" (Matthew 11:29) To be in love with someone is to be affected both by *who* the person is and *what.* One cannot love without admiring, and so becoming in some respect wiser. But in love the "what" becomes unsubstitutably centred upon the "who".

4. Love, Desire and Eros

Two Opposed Types of Love?

The account we have given so far has to confront the objections of a view popular in the twentieth century: that there are only two types of love, and they are radically opposed.

Anders Nygren, with whom this thesis was prominently associated, called the two loves by Greek names, *agapē* and *erōs,* the first identified as a love focussed on the other, the second as a love centred on the self. The theory was based on a philological curiosity: the word standardly used for "love" in the Greek of the New Testament was a rarity in classical and Hellenistic Greek, *agapē,* and this suggested to him that the writers of the New Testament knew that they were speaking of something so qualitatively different that the standard words for love were unserviceable to them. [2] So filling the word *agapē* with the full moral conceptuality of love in the New Testament, and *erōs* with what he imagined to be a Platonic ethic of self-realisation, he interpreted the one as self-giving and self-sacrifice, the other as self-centred, a nexus of desire, self-interest and acquisition. The two were essentially opposed, which means, though he hesitated to say so, morally opposed, as good to evil.

Nygren's idealised *agapē* is a prime instance of the mistake of canonising one moment of love and discarding the others. The love he commends to us is a love that cannot accept any kind of prior involvement of the self with the other, which would mean that its pure other-directedness would be compromised by self-love. From which it followed that it could not allow the retention of old love with settled affection. It is directed to the strange, the new and the alien, in which we find no recollection of ourselves. Dividing love into the two opposed dispositions, self-affirming and self-denying, enclosed and outgoing, exploitative and self-giving, Nygren's theory leaves no place for the extension of love through life, for a developing history of the self with the other, for the variety of moments and moods and contexts.

And because the difference between *agapē* and *erōs* is wholly a question of the orientation of the will, it has no place either for the qualification of love by knowledge. But love is, in fact, not solely a subjective disposition; it is a relation in feeling and knowledge between two subjects who are objects of love to one another. It must be judged in part by the truthfulness with which each grasps the reality of the other. Nygren imagined his idealised *agapē* as effectively creating a new world out of nothing, "conferring value" on its object, indifferent to existing goods – in fact, re-enacting the very deed of creation itself.

Erōs and Enquiry

Here Plato's ideal of *erōs* did better than Nygren gave it credit for. He described *erōs* specifically as the love of beauty, and imagined two stages by which beauty elicited it, "supply" and "want". First it presented something to wonder at, the moral importance of which lay in its revelatory power, and then it evoked a need, not simply to "possess" the object, but to be productive under its influence. *Erōs* was a moment of new beginning, a love of wisdom encountering its object for the first time, still asking questions that later stages of love might answer. It was the birth of enquiry, the moment of "fascination": the mathematician conceives a problem, the reader is swept up in a web of poetic sound and meaning, the artist envisages a play of light and shade and form. Such moments of discovery, though they are specialised, are doors opening onto the beauty of wisdom as a whole, promising a kind of universal knowledge at the end of the pursuit. Personal loves differ from intellectual loves, in that they involve personal histories lived in freedom, and yet the same pattern of fascination can be seen in their initial moments. The beloved opens to the lover a view on the universe, which may even, as Dante held, lead to a vision of its Creator.

Desire and Self-Love

Nygren's *erōs* turned Plato's experience of beauty inside out, seeing it as entirely self-enclosed. The roots of this lay in the Enlightenment, which had made self-love the principle of practical motivation: "Self-love, the spring of motion, acts the soul" [3] When superimposed on the older Christian understanding of self-enclosure as radical sin, this idea of self-love as a mechanical trigger produced the general modern suspicion of desire, still evident in Nygren's idea of *erōs* as desire, self-interest and acquisition. In fact desire is no more self-concerned than any other state of feeling, for all feeling involves self-consciousness as well as the consciousness of an object. Neither is all self-consciousness acquisitive. There is a moral self-consciousness about what is good *to do and to be,* which in English we call "conscience", and this is supportive of the concern we owe our neighbour.

The Christian tradition speaks of "self-love" with deliberate paradox. On the one hand, it is a true self-interest in the love of the neighbour; on the other hand, it is a false self-interest that treats the neighbour as a competitor for goods. This paradox goes back to Jesus' own teaching, when, under the shadow of the cross, he gave the warning that to gain one's life one must lose it (Mark 8:35 and parallels). The moral care we owe ourselves must embrace conscious self-loss; effective activity involves giving the resources of our life away. Loss is not an end in itself, but a necessary means to a life of greater effect. The same pattern

applies to the more ordinary ways in which we serve one another. By giving ourselves in cooperative action, we prepare for a greater giving-away that will be required of us in death; yet death is not the horizon towards which we live, but the fuller life offered us beyond death. The paradox of self-love reflects a paradox of the self, which we can appear two quite different lights. There is a restricted self and an open self, a self we identify with our physical life, its comfort and its security, and a self we identify with a call to become something more than we are. True self-love is love of the true self, a self still to be fully realised in response to God’s call, rejoicing in realities that give new form and purpose to its presence in the world. It is a reflective responsibility for ourselves before God, an answer to his demand that we should seek his kingdom and its justice.

5. Love and Knowledge

A Challenging Question about the Love of Specialised Knowledge

We have come to an important conclusion. Love *seeks to develop itself in knowledge.* Truth, the criterion of knowledge, is also the criterion of love. Where there is truth, there may be falsehood, too, and love can fail by being false, not only by being weak. When St. Paul opposes love and knowledge (1 Corinthians 8:1) he employs a distinctive word, *gnōsis,* to represent a false knowledge, a knowledge that “puffs up”, contrasted with a love that “builds up”, a fascination with superficial and immediate phenomena that cuts us off from loving contact with the world God has given. But this windy knowledge is accompanied by an equally insubstantial love, “love of the world”, as St. John describes it, consisting in “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life” (1 John 2:15–16). Correspondingly, the stable love that ensures permanence allows a sober and affectionate grasp of reality. Those for whom specialised knowledge constitutes their sphere of work thus face a challenging question: how may they love that one aspect of the world which they know very well, while focussing their love finally upon God and their neighbours?

First Answer: Vocation

To which the first answer must be that they receive their work *as a vocation*, summoned to pay this close attention to this aspect of the world by the one who created and loves the world in all its aspects. On this we need say only that to love one’s work, whatever it may be, one must love it for an end that can truly justify it. In understanding work as a vocation from God, that end is kept in view. The satisfaction we take in doing it well is a joy in having it to offer God, and also an anticipation of the joy of more unrestricted knowledge, the knowledge of the Creator himself.

Second Answer: Order

A second answer follows: loving the good of their work for God’s sake, they seek to appreciate the *ordering* of goods that God has given. We call a special field of knowledge a “branch”, appealing to the image of an ordered relation such as we see in organisms. The special good we know must be set in relation to the

plenitude of all goods. Among these some are more fundamental, others less so, and it is always a question whether the goods we have come to love and know may restrict our view of more fundamental goods which God calls us to love and know. The idea of an “order of love” goes back to the early patristic era. Augustine developed it at length: inanimate things are loved “for the sake of animate things”; creatures are loved "for the sake of God"; God alone is loved "for his own sake". Which was not meant to be understood as a ranking of preferences, as though one might choose between God and his creatures, nor as an ordering of means to ends, as though one might value creatures solely for their utility value. It was a reflective appreciation of each in its true relation to the others, a true knowledge of “God’s world” rather than only of things *in* the world, a love of God “as” God, of neighbour “as” neighbour, with an understanding what “godhead” and “neighbourhood” imply.

The Temptations of Plural Fields of Knowledge Specialised professional knowledge has a plural and fragmentary character, shaped by the variety of independent enquiries. This poses no difficulty in principle; just as there are many people in God’s world, and we can love only those whom space, time and opportunity put within our reach, so there are many things to know, and no one of us can know them all. It does, however, pose a temptation. Distinct enquiries create separate and distinct communities of enquiry, fenced in by invisible walls that distinguish those who are part of the enquiry from those who are not, held together by a solidarity of exclusive mutual esteem and sometimes bristling with defensive fortifications. Since the renaissance the work of knowledge has been known for its eristic character. The competitive spirit views specialist knowledge as a kind of property that confers power; in the present age, under pressure of cooperation with industry, the idea of intellectual property has assumed a major legal importance. There ought to be among us a deep sense that our knowledge is neither our own property nor our colleagues’. Our knowledge is subject to the question the apostle puts to all our powers: “What have you that you did not receive?” (1 Corinthians 4:7)

With these personal temptations we must notice the temptations of the institutional settings. The “university”, conceived in the faith that a plurality of studies conducted together possessed a value that none could have on its own, gives way to the “multiversity”, where forms of learning are marketed in competition with each other. Plurality is competition, and the value of any field of study is supposed to lie simply in its power to market itself. The university thus becomes a mirror of the prevailing concerns of society, rather than a resource to inform and correct them.

Established Knowledge If such moral dangers exist, arising from the tendency to entrench knowledge in doctrine and routine practices and closed professional communities, we can understand them as indicating an imbalance in love. Love, as we have said, is both old and new; there is a familiar love and an adventurous love, and the two must balance each other and build on each other. The love of knowledge is both old and new: a delight in learning what we did not know and a delight in retaining and affirming what we have learned. There is no reason to undervalue established forms of knowledge. No study can do without its basis of rationally agreed descriptions, and if we are to love people and things “as” what they are, we need to start with some prior understanding of what they are. Yet to *love* them is to be open to new communications about and with them. Within the practice of knowledge there must be a dynamic

tension between consolidation and expansion, theoretical closure and discovery. The danger lies in finalising closures that can only be provisional. The same principle holds for professional activities. To treat patients “as” patients and students “as” students, healthcare practitioners and teachers need received frames of reference and accepted norms of practice. But these cannot exhaust the demands that loving knowledge of patients and students may make upon them. Many decisions lie beyond the scope of professional guidance, and professional practice itself needs interpretation by love. The love the Samaritan brought to the wounded man on the road was something over and above the professional competences of the priest and Levite (Luke 10:25–37). Or to take a more trivial example: the teacher faced with the tedious routine of grading examination scripts can justify strictness, consistency and efficiency as professionally correct, all on the basis of a love which considers the needs of students as a class, the needs of the institution, the standards of academic life, etc. But the teacher may also detect – one time in a hundred – a small and unexpected achievement hidden by a generally unsatisfactory performance, and love may insist on taking the costly detour to recognise it.

Communication These considerations remind us that a pursuit of knowledge is open to new development in more than one way. There can be new discoveries of thought and observation that challenge old paradigms, but there can also be new openings for the communication of knowledge. A special place in the economy of knowledge is held by studies which go beyond the default scientific model of explanatory theorising to recognising communications – historical studies especially, since historical distance is by far the most radical of all obstacles in the way of communicating human experience. No contemporary voice can speak to us about our own humanity in the way that voices from the past can. These studies largely, though not exclusively, turn around the art of intelligent reading, for it is writing brings within our range communications that time has put at a distance, and that is why writing is one key to what it means to be “civilised”. But all fields of study may offer opportunities for receiving and giving new communications; and since it does not fall to many to be at the forefront of new discoveries, communication is perhaps the most important way in which our engagement with knowledge is kept pressing forward. Perhaps, it is the most important way anyway, since it brings the love of knowledge into immediate connection with the love of persons.

A Third Answer: Education

And so we add a third answer to our question. Love of knowledge must reaffirm the centrality of *education*, broadly construed, in which our knowledge is given to the service of others. Education is the transmission of knowledge in all its aspects, factual, theoretical and practical, and is usually distinguished from research, on the one hand, and from training on the other. But these distinctions are only relative. In the end there must be no pursuit of knowledge that does not aim at communication, and correspondingly no communication that does not hope to strengthen others to live well, not simply to perform certain tasks. Every “useful” field of instruction – agriculture, medicine, art, economics – trains students for tasks of one kind or another; but they may also look beyond the tasks to educate for the life in which those tasks have their place. We may find ourselves in circumstances where our training, strictly understood, cannot help

us; but we shall never be in a position where that is true of our education.

But to educate for life is to educate *in ethics*. To dramatise the point: those with whose education we are concerned are at a point of decision, a parting of the ways between a life lived fruitfully to God's glory and a life wasted in mistakes and false directions. No education can deliver them from facing that decision, but it can provide resources for making it rightly. To educate ethically is not merely a matter of encouraging students to to expand their imaginations of good waiting to be done and supplying them with factual knowledge to do it. It is to help them overcome the gap between fact and imagination, to learn how idealistic Utopias may be brought to yield practical purposes, how factual information may be probed for opportunities of freedom. In other words, it teaches them to stop thinking of the world either as putty on which they can imprint their own designs, or as a granite wall on which they can survive only by spreadeagling themselves against it. Good disciplines of reflection and deliberation are learned as one sifts the merits of goals, absolutely and in relation to existing possibilities, and reassess possibilities ambitiously, in the light of goals.

6. Love as the Form of the Virtues

The plural branches of love that follow the branches of knowledge shed useful light on how and why we speak of "virtue" and "the virtues" in Christian ethics. [4] Virtue is a Hellenistic term, a rare visitor to the New Testament, but Jewish teachers in the Hellenistic world used "virtue" (in the singular) to mark the convergence of law and wisdom in the Scriptures. Sometimes, too, they composed rhetorical lists of virtues and vices, and in this the New Testament followed them, and though it does not speak of "virtues" and "vices" in that context, commentators have usually seen no reason not to do so. The lists are exploratory and varied, each presenting its own perspective on the development or decay of moral life. [5] They bring home to us that the moral phenomena they describe are both plural and fluid. Love is the unifying factor; virtue-lists typically begin with it (Galatians 5:22f.; Philippians 1:9–11; Revelation 2:19) or end with it (2 Peter 1:5–7; Colossians 2:12–14). It is the "bond of perfection", and it is the "greatest" in that triad of virtues that "endure", faith, hope and love (1 Corinthians 13:13). The fathers insisted that love was not just one virtue among others. It was the "artificer" and "preserver" of virtue, John Chrysostom wrote, the "golden chain" that bound them together. The scholastics spoke of love as the "form" of the virtues, meaning, as St. Thomas explained, that as virtues direct acts to their end, so love directs virtues to their end.

Virtues and vices are phenomena we observe, patterns of behaviour that arouse admiration and abhorrence as we see them in others, and with less clarity see them in ourselves. Virtues and vices are not principles of deliberation, specific counsels that we are guided by in deciding what to do. Rather, they display the variety of possibilities in the moral life. In this way the plurality of the virtues corresponds to the plurality of the fields of knowledge: the variety and richness of creation allows a variety of kinds of experience, and so a variety of acquired forms of love for God and neighbour. Yet since admiration and abhorrence create a desire to imitate and avoid, the opposition of virtues and vices form a kind of

framework for our fields of deliberation, and we may derive principles of action from them, especially the more general principles that give longer-term direction to our lives.

Specificity

Virtues are dispositions specially determined by special situations: courage by the imminence of danger, humility by others’ achievements and merits, patience by undertakings that are long in coming to fruition, etc. They suggest special norms to govern those situations: humility validates teaches us not to think too highly of ourselves, courage not to value safety above greater public goods, and so on. We can acquire special virtues from acting frequently in typical situations, but precisely because there are many types of situation and many different moral requirements, no one virtue can have a final obligatory force. Each is demanded as the situation indicates a specific good that we may love: a majestic good evoking love as humility, an imperilled good evoking love as courage, a deferred good evoking love as patience, etc. This lays on us the perpetual task of interpreting the situations we face and discerning the objects of love they present. All virtues are specifications of love. What cannot be love, cannot be the exercise of a virtue. (Uriah Heep was not, as he claimed, “humble”, but merely insinuating and manipulative.)

Yet virtue can be misdirected, as love can. We can display the wrong virtue at the wrong time: humility when courage is needed, efficiency when patience is needed. Deeply habitual virtues can narrow our moral perception to see only what we are used to seeing, and the understanding which any one virtue supplies can never be all the practical wisdom we need, for the field of action is irreducibly plural. As in a social crisis no one expert can determine a course of action alone – how can an epidemiologist judge the psychological and economic implications of a lockdown? – so in the course of any human life no one virtue is all that is demanded. Scholarship has its distinctive virtues, patience high among them, but a scholar’s life needs non-scholarly virtues, too – and not least, when asked to chair a meeting, decisiveness! To discern the special wisdom needed by any situation we require a further principle of discernment, and for this we must turn to love.

7. Love and Justice

Justice and the Virtues

Justice may often be spoken of as a virtue, too: love operating within the special field of action that defends or establishes social order. Yet from its earliest philosophical reflections justice has seemed to stand rather apart from the other virtues. Plato, to whom we owe the idea of four “cardinal virtues”, saw justice as the organising virtue that kept prudence, courage and temperance in their place; Aristotle distinguished two kinds of justice, “general” and “special”, of which the latter governed social transactions of distribution and compensation, while general justice involved the exercise of all the other virtues in a social context. For both these thinkers justice was differentiated by a kind of universality, which put it in a position analogous to that of love in Jesus’s teaching. In the New Testament the difference of justice is

even more marked. Justice is primarily an attribute of God, designating the self-consistency of all that he wills and does in the world, his “judgments”; only secondarily is it an attribute of human acts, and that not in respect of their intentions, but of their actual conformity to God’s judgments. To be *dikaios,* as the New Testament understands it, is to be an object of a favourable judgment – primarily divine judgment and sometimes, consequently, human. Justice marks the point at which the drama of love in command, virtue and practice reaches its end and is pronounced on. If love must be the first word on our moral tasks, “justice” must be the last, the horizon on which love is proven, a universal moral goal which is the “fruit” or “crown” of a life lived in love. [6]

So as love seeks knowledge, so love seeks justice. Knowledge and justice are both modalities of the truth love seeks: on the one hand a truth joyfully affirmed, on the other a truth embodied practically in social order. In justice “your neighbour” is “as yourself”, not only in the way you feel about him, or even act towards him, but in full public recognition. Moral virtues may be exercised in secret, but justice only in public, and love’s goal is to express itself in public reality. And as we said that the love of knowledge needs to be ordered to an end in the full knowledge of God, so we must say that love of practical knowledge needs an end in the justice of God’s kingdom.

Provisional Justice and Law

With justice, as with knowledge, there is a danger of finalising the provisional. The justice we want is always more than the justice we can achieve. The parallel between knowledge and justice applies here, too: our own partial judgments stand in relation to the justice God will bring about as our fragmentary knowledge stands to the fulness of the revelation of God. The resources human judgment can call upon are limited, sufficient at best for the small scale, where we may be able to describe a case, if not completely, yet with some measure of adequacy, and do something to set it right. To describe and correct all the wrongs of history is beyond us. How, for instance, could we ever give an adequate account of, and make sufficient amends for, such a large-scale historical offence as colonial slavery? In resorting too lightly and hastily to judgment, we run the risk of adding new layers to the tale of wrongs. *Summum ius, summa iniuria*, said the classical proverb; to which Jesus added the counsel, “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matthew 7:1).

Yet while being reserved, we should not be sceptical about the judgments we may be given to do. They are limited to their time and place and relative to the immediate need. They scoop up the water of justice from a flowing river, as it were in cupped hands, to quench an urgent thirst. They are always provisional, never the last word but following the direction of love and waiting on its fulfilment. And yet they can be real and effective anticipations of God’s justice. There is a true historical record of judgments reached and performed, which witness to God’s work in the past and his purposes for the future.

Two Examples from the History of Law and Justice

Two examples in the past of how Christian hope has yielded judgments that have taught the world

something new about God's purposes may be sufficient to suggest others.

The first is *international law.* Believing that even "sovereign" governments were subject to the rule and law of God, even the earliest Christian thinkers sought to articulate the form of a "law of nations" that could reflect and correspond to God's law. The law of war, anciently understood as part of the "law of nature", they interpreted as an implication of the law of love. To understand why the conduct of war had to be subject to forms and regulations, belligerents must weigh the duties and restraints of love that even the consciousness of a just cause could not excuse them from. Contemporary international law owes many of the categories and assumptions to Christian reasoning.

The second example is *punishment.* Construed according to its ancient definition as *malum passionis pro malo actionis,* "suffering inflicted in respect of wrong done", it forms an integral part of ordered political life, as we know it, upholding the authority of law. But punishment does not have to be in any given form, and it has been a Christian political hope to shape punishment as a witness to the forgiveness of sins extended to all offenders, eliminating pointless inflictions that served no social end and especially by restraining the use of the death penalty. The claims of penal justice are important, but cannot be absolute. They have always to serve the actual needs of society and the conditions of political practicality, and an ideal of penal justice that cannot be made to do this is of no service to love.

Absolute justice there is none in this world – or the next, for when "mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 3:10), that is a truth not only about our own acts of judgment but about history as a whole. The last word in history, as the prophetic vision of John of Patmos saw it, is the "city of peace", where God dwells in communion with mankind for "the healing of the nations". There is justice, an order governed by love. The next-to-last word of judgment must have its place until then, yet always looking forward to the last word, overcoming of the bitterness of war and the shame of guilt.

8. Conclusion

We began from love as the interpretation of the law: on the one hand specific patterns of practical knowledge in need of the purpose of love to make them morally intelligible, on the other, love as the primary obligation, demanding expression in specific patterns of practical knowledge. From this, in conclusion, we may draw two warnings.

It is a warning, in the first place, against *abstract norms of knowledge and action*. Those whose business it is to find and share knowledge must recognise that merely to know is not to know. To know what we know, we must know it in the service of love. Which does mean that knowledge is squeezed into a utilitarian straitjacket, or its value for its own sake denied. For to love knowledge as a blessing to mankind is to love it for what it is: a dimension of life itself, a ground of common enjoyment, a purchase on reality which permits action, fellowship and the praise of God. Merely t*o* know how to act, similarly, is not to know how to act. For effective agency needs more than norms; it needs an appreciable and worthwhile end given to it to pursue.

It is a warning, secondly, against an *impractical idea of love* that is confined to attitude and feelings, and does not form a practical direction for action. Love is more than a general benevolent will, resigning the questions of how to act to a practical reason that can function independently of it. A love that is alive and shapes life seeks to discern goods that are given us to do. If we say that love is a “motive” for all knowledge and all action, we shall not be wrong; but we must not understand “motive” too restrictively, simply as an impulse that initiates. Love is to be the end of our knowing and acting, not only the beginning of it. The proximate end of our knowledge is to know in love, and the proximate end of our action is to establish justice in love, in each case re-shaping and renewing the knowledge and action that we had before. But their final end is to know as we have been known, in God’s compassionate understanding, and to act as we have been acted upon, in God’s persistent grace.

That is why love is not simply a virtue we may learn to practice for ourselves. The love of God must be “poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that is given us” (Romans 5:5).

End Notes

[1] William Shakespeare, *Sonnet* 116.

[2] The true reason for the use of *agapē* in the New Testament was probably not philosophical, but simply an idiom of Hellenistic Jewish Greek. In the Septuagint, which influenced them, *agapān* translated the Hebrew *āhab,* the most general verb for "love". There were other common words for love in ancient Greek as well as these two. As well as *eros,* Plato and Aristotle made much of *philia* – "friendship", though the English word fails to convey its breadth. C.S. Lewis 1963, whose *The Four Loves,* written in conscious reaction against the dualist thesis, did a service to the debate by widening the range further by recalling *storgē,* commonly used of close familial and social bonds. Yet the discussion of love does not, in the end, depend on how many ancient Greek words for love there were. Preachers who would never otherwise comment on the Greek text of the New Testament still like to pull out what they were once taught about the "special significance" of *agapē* – which perhaps is the greatest disservice Nygren rendered to theology!

[3] Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man* 2.59.

[4] This topic, extensively discussed in an earlier GFI Brief by Jennifer Herdt (https://globalfacultyinitiative.net/content_item/389), is merely touched on here, to highlight the implications of the sovereignty of love-command and to raise the question of justice.

[5] If three or more items constitute a list, we can count eight lists of vices and perhaps twenty-five lists of virtues in the New Testament. But such observations are subject to the general rule that the more something is counted, the less it is understood.

[6] To give some honesty to this over-compressed summary of how justice is spoken of in the New Testament two philological warnings are needed: (i) Modern English makes a distinction where New Testament Greek does not, between "justice" and "righteousness" – both translating *dikaiosynē*. Roughly, English "justice" corresponds to Aristotle's "special justice", while "righteousness" corresponds to his "general justice". (An older English usage favoured "equity" for general justice.) Translators import this distinction back into English translations of the Bible, and may have persuasive reasons for doing so, but in asking how the New Testament speaks of *dikaiosynē* and its cognates, we should not prejudge the matter. (ii) Greek makes a distinction where English does not, using a different root for the act of "judgment", which is *krisis.* But the two terms remain closely connected, because Greek translators of the Hebrew Scriptures employed both roots to translate the Hebrew, *špt,* which is both "justice" and "judgment".

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