

Love and the Pitfall of Moralism

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Abstract

In what sense does love presuppose appreciation of the other's character? First, I argue that loving appreciation is more often a source of truthful vision than of bias and idealisation. Second, using the example of Elizabeth Bennett, I show that the tendency to forfeit love for those who lose our good opinion can be an expression of undue moralism and pride. Nonjudgmental responses to the other's flaws show how virtuous love can combine both realistic vision of the other's flaws and appreciation of the other that does not stand on balancing flaws with qualities. Such love is in the end connected with a conception of goodness inspired by Kierkegaard and Weil.

In this paper, I would like to examine the relation between love and appreciation of the other. Does love presuppose that the person who loves judges her beloved as in some way good? Can love endure if the beloved does something awful? There are clashing intuitions about love regarding this question. On the one hand, love seems to require realism: we are taught to love the real person, such as she is, not an illusory or idealised one. Since flaws and failures are part of what a person is, loving a real person means loving her with her flaws and failures. On the other hand, love seems to require that we think well of the beloved, that is, it seems to require some kind of valuing or appreciation: naming a list of the other's defects is commonly taken as an expression of hostility and losing one's good opinion of the other's character seems to imply losing one's love and friendship as well. After all, there would be no temptation to idealisation and blindness to faults if love was not connected with good opinion or appreciation. I will ask in this paper whether and how the two requirements – that of realism and that of valuing – can be accommodated. Can love's good opinion somehow embrace flaws and imperfections that we are required to see realistically? Can people who don't invite the good opinion of anyone (such as father Karamazov) be loved without blindness or illusion on account of something else that is being valued and appreciated?

Whereas most theorists of love would endorse the view that love, if anything, brings epistemic bias and partiality when it comes to flaws, there is a tradition in thinking about love that claims it is the other way round: that it is only love that makes a person capable of justly appreciating and seeing the other. Love on this account preserves

good opinion against the natural tendency of human beings to be dismissive, judgmental and conceited. The injunction from Luke 6:37 'Judge not and you will not be judged' contains not only a 'warning against Pharisaism'¹ but also an invitation to acceptance, love and openness to reality, because these are (at least in their purest form) incompatible with the sense of one's superiority as a person. In this tradition, which could be called 'Platonic-Christian', good opinion is an expression of love, but it is at the same time the *true* opinion: an attitude in which one's eyes are open to the reality of the other.² This tradition thus rethinks what the reality of a human being amounts to and claims that it can only be known in the light of pure, self-less love. It is pure love only that allows knowledge since ordinary love is mixed with self-regard and self-centredness that bias the perception of the other, most importantly by implicit assertions of one's superiority.

The implicit belief in one's superiority has many forms. Its most obvious manifestation in the context of love is the belief that the other must be worthy of my love or that it would be demeaning to associate with someone undeserving, with someone who is not 'good enough'.³ The tendency to idealise loves we already have is part of this social ambition: parents want to be proud of their children because it implies (among other things) they can be proud of themselves. Moralism or what is called 'judgmentalism', on the other hand, are manifestations of superiority that concern negative judgments and criticisms. I will try to show that they corrupt people's attitude to flaws and imperfections in (at least) two aspects that correspond to the characteristics formulated by Craig Taylor in his *Moralism. A Study of a Vice*: First, it makes them pass superfluous judgments: The moralising and judgmental person criticizes and condemns as a flaw something that actually is no flaw at all or

¹ P. Winch, 'Trying' in *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge, 1972), 144.

² This tradition is mainly connected with Christian thinkers S. Kierkegaard and S. Weil, but we can find secular versions of it in I. Murdoch's and R. Gaita's conception of love. For an argument that Plato's conception of love involves just and realistic appreciation of the other see for example T. Hejduk, 'What Did Socrates Love?' in C. Maurer, T. Milligan, K. Pacovská (eds), *Love and Its Objects: What Can We Care For?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 58–9.

³ I do not believe that such an attitude is necessarily linked with one's self-respect or healthy, good pride. Quite the contrary, it is a sign of healthy self-confidence that people are not so liable to be influenced by the considerations of status. See section 2 for a more detailed discussion.

something she had no authority to judge.⁴ Second, even if her judgment is right and there is genuine wrongdoing or vice in the other, moralism and judgmentalism affect her responses to it. Together with her judgment, her responses such as indignation, repulsion or contempt express that she judged and condemned the flawed *person* as such, that she thinks her less worthy or even that she rejected her on account of the flaw.⁵ In all these judgments and responses, the judgmental person assumes a superior position, implying that she is somehow better than those she judges. In the past, such a tendency was associated with the vice of pride (a species of self-regard) and I will thus try to connect judgmentalism with pride on the one hand and pure, unconditional love with the virtue of humility on the other. In particular, I will try to show the way in which pride can prevent the lover from accepting the beloved together with her flaws and imperfections.⁶

Before coming to that, I first consider the puzzling Platonic claim that love sees reality. I will start with Troy Jollimore's argument that it is love's charitable interpretation, not impartial objectivity, that is paramount to truthful interpretation of human actions and character, especially if these are somehow flawed. Jollimore claims that loving vision is true and just because it never loses sight of the positive qualities in the beloved and thus preserves the lover's good opinion. I will suggest that such a solution, though promising, takes over the exaggerated preoccupation with qualities of character present in most contemporary discussions of love. In the second section, I will question the importance and praiseworthiness of such judgments of others. Using the example of Elizabeth Bennett from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, I will show that judgment and criticism can be seen as an expression of pride and as an obstacle to love. I will consider the implication of this claim for the lover's response to the beloved's

⁴ Craig Taylor argues moralism expresses a tendency to make 'extreme or excessive' or sometimes just 'inappropriate or uncalled for' moral judgments: C. Taylor, *Moralism. A Study of a Vice* (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2012), 2.

⁵ Taylor emphasizes that moralism concerns mainly the *manner* in which the judgment is made (op. cit., 35). This manner is connected with the person's response to the flaw.

⁶ One qualification should be made at the outset: I am speaking about love for the other, not about the relationship with the other. In that sense, one can internally accept the other's fault and continue loving her, but at the same time end the relationship on account of one's protection, both mental and physical, for example. That is why my examples of wrongdoing do not involve the lover as the victim.

genuine wrongdoing in the third section. Having rejected the view that in love, it is necessary to value the other's qualities of character, I will develop a positive nonjudgmental view of valuing others in the last section. This view draws on Simone Weil's observation that in pure love, the loving person attends to the other as she attends to beautiful objects in the attitude of self-less attention and contemplation.

1. Epistemic Partiality and Charitable Interpretation

Troy Jollimore in his recent book *Love's Vision* offers an interesting defence of love's epistemic capacity. He grants that there is the danger of undue partiality in love, but retorts that the danger of uncharitable and harsh judgment performed by an impartial and detached spectator is even greater. To illustrate his point, Jollimore considers an example in which one has to judge a friend's work (a poem and a philosophy paper) and compares it with judging the work of a stranger.⁷ Jollimore claims that it is not necessarily the case that our attachment to the friend should bias the judgment. On the contrary, it makes us consider her work with closer attention than in the case of a stranger, whom we too often judge quickly and harshly. Love employs 'engaged perception', empathy and 'imaginative collaboration' that are needed for the difficult and complex task of assessing poetry. This task places significant demands on the judge and doing justice to it presupposes charitable and generous interpretation that is more readily given by love than by indifference. Jollimore concludes that the 'friendly eye' (what he calls 'epistemic partiality') is the paradigm of true judgment that we should apply to strangers, not the other way round: 'it is our practices with respect to evaluating and judging strangers that are remiss'.⁸

It seems evident that the danger of hasty negative judgment is even greater in matters of morality. Since a person as such can be blamed and judged for her flawed actions or character, their assessment is of crucial importance for her life and should be performed with utmost carefulness. At the same time, these judgments present difficulties that are not found in the judgment of someone's work: (i) Contrary to the interpretation of a work, the interpretation and judgment of action presuppose detailed knowledge (and sometimes investigation) not only of the circumstances of action, but also of the agent's inner

⁷ T. Jollimore, *Love's Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 54.

⁸ Op. cit., 61.

motives, thoughts and intentions; there is, for example, the notorious moral distinction that depends upon whether a specific action was performed for the sake of someone or for personal profit. To consider this, unprejudiced careful attention, empathy and understanding are needed that allow the judge to grasp the full story. (ii) There is also recurring lack of clarity about what was and what was not in the agent's power *vis-à-vis* the situation. Malevolent interpretation typically overestimates the agent's control, whereas charitable and generous reading takes into account mitigating circumstances such as affect, stress, peer pressure, social background and the play of coincidence and bad luck. (iii) The difficulties of interpretation and judgment of a person's character are even more intricate. Since her long-term dispositions (such as virtues and vices) only show in particular actions or responses, we only gain partial knowledge of them. At the same time, the character of people changes in time, for example in response to some particular action or experience, so the general judgment of someone's character is never definite and secure.⁹

Kierkegaard, who was acutely aware of all these difficulties and of our natural tendency to judge too harshly, urged in his deliberation 'Love hides a multitude of sins' that among all the interpretations of another person's action, the loving person should always look for the mitigating explanation and try to exonerate the beloved.¹⁰ Kierkegaard even hints at the extreme view that a perfectly loving person does not even judge because she – not looking for evil in others – does not notice the wrong.¹¹ Jollimore adds in a more moderate spirit that a friend is very hesitant to judge the other guilty and to blame her for her action. She is always an advocate for the other, never the prosecutor, since she is always ready to defend the other against accusations and devotes great energy to seek evidence for innocence.¹² She can also refuse to judge and thus suspend her judgment, for example on account of lacking information or because she does not feel she has the authority to judge.

⁹ I examine the intricacy of the relation between a person's (general) character and her (particular) action in my paper 'Dmitri Karamazov is not a Murderer: the Significance of Action'. The conscious transition from a hostile to a loving interpretation of the other's character is very well shown in Murdoch's example of mother M ('The Idea of Perfection' in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), 17).

¹⁰ S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1964), 271–273.

¹¹ Op. cit., 268.

¹² T. Jollimore, *Love's Vision*, Op. cit., 61.

But there are situations in which such suspended judgment could rightly be called blindness or naiveté.¹³ What if the other's flaw is blatant, unquestionable? Imagine for example that she rather seriously wrongs an innocent person. What is the friendly eye's perspective? Jollimore claims that the flaw is seen, but it does not affect the general good opinion, because the beloved's flaws are charitably interpreted 'in a way that renders them insignificant or irrelevant'.¹⁴ Thus, they do not affect the 'overall judgment' of the beloved: The loving person will never think the other a bad person or condemn her as a person. According to Jollimore, it is because love prompts her never to lose sight of the other's positive qualities, to actively seek them and appreciate them. He suggests that the loving person should always judge that the 'positive, admirable qualities outnumber or outweigh her negative, regrettable ones'.¹⁵ In Jollimore's view, the loving light thus enables us properly to appreciate the real values of the beloved by making them more visible, especially when they are overshadowed by flaws and weaknesses. More, love makes us focus on them. This point was nicely illustrated by John Lippitt who claimed that the genuine lover could never think: 'OK, he's a bad-tempered, untidy borderline alcoholic with dubious standards of personal hygiene – but I love him all the same.'¹⁶ Presumably, there would have to be a 'But...' that would mention some of his positive characteristics.

While I agree that it is wrong for a person not to see and appreciate the existing qualities of the beloved, I am uncomfortable with the thought that they are the only thing that can be put on the balance or, more precisely, that there should be any balancing at all. There are people who don't have qualities to balance their flaws (father Karamazov, for example), and still they are loved realistically and this love is not only intelligible, but also admirable (Alyosha's love for his father). The idea that people are ultimately loveable only on the basis of their valuable character qualities takes an extremely narrow and moralistic view of what is valuable in a human being. It concentrates on what can be judged, compared and evaluated (character traits, actions, merits and deserts), but

¹³ And even Kierkegaard grants that there are blameworthy actions that can be objects of forgiveness.

¹⁴ Op. cit., 47.

¹⁵ Op. cit., 69.

¹⁶ The example appeared in an earlier version of his paper 'Forgiveness: a work of love?' in *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy* 28 (2017), 19–39.

leaves out important aspects of individual human beings that have to be appreciated in a different way. I will return to this thought in the last section.

2. Pride, Prejudice and Judgment

One possible reason why the quoted description of the unfortunate stinky rascal seems unloving is that it looks like the speaker is judging and condemning him *as a person*. But there still is an important gap between a list of flaws and misdeeds and the judgment (or ‘verdict’) that this person with these characteristics is a bad person not worthy of love. Rather than logical inference, such a condemnation seems to express a kind of emotional response to the flawed person, such as blame, indignation, disgust, repulsion, horror or contempt. It is these responses, not flaws as such that are incompatible with love. What is admirable in Alyosha’s love is that he doesn’t lose patience with his father’s disgusting flaws and offences. He doesn’t give way to these responses and keeps treating him with compassion.¹⁷ I will try to show that this nonjudgmental attitude is a sign of a specific exceptional virtue, whereas judgment and condemnation are connected with something dubious in human character.

Let us consider the reaction of Elizabeth Bennett to the announcement of her dear friend Charlotte’s engagement to Elizabeth’s cousin and former admirer Mr. Collins. Elizabeth is astonished that Charlotte could encourage and accept this arguably stupid and ridiculous man just for ‘worldly advantage’, and she expresses her indignation and reproach both in her conversation with Charlotte herself (Vol. I, ch. 22) and more strongly with her sister Jane (Vol. II, ch. 1). The flaws she discovers in her friend’s character, ‘selfishness’ and ‘lack of better feeling’, make her draw back and her disapproval and disappointment poison their previously unreserved and unrestrained intimacy.

Many people would find Elizabeth’s attitude justified. It seems right to be strict in one’s moral standards and honest criticism

¹⁷ See for example ch. III.1: ‘Alyosha “pierced his [father’s] heart” because he “lived there, saw everything, and condemned nothing.” Moreover, he brought something unprecedented with him: a complete lack of contempt for him, the old man, and, on the contrary, an unvarying affection and a perfectly natural, single-hearted attachment to him, little though he deserved it.’ (F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (London: Vintage, 1992), 78).

seems to be expressive of respect, contrary to patronising excuses. One could even sympathise with Elizabeth's disappointment acknowledging that it is the more bitter with closer friends. But according to Jollimore's theory, Elizabeth's would not be a loving response, and I agree with that, albeit for different reasons: Is Elizabeth really justified in being so indignant about her friend's personal decision? If Charlotte were less patient and calm, she could easily retaliate: who is Elizabeth, a 20 year-old pretty, clever and attractive woman to judge the decision of a woman seven years her senior? Both Charlotte and Jane try to explain and justify Charlotte's decision, but Elizabeth is stubborn and relentless in her passionate disapproval of Charlotte's actions and, more importantly, of Charlotte herself.

One of Jane's explanations, in particular, is very insightful. Jane tells Elizabeth that she does not 'make allowance enough for difference of situation and temper'.¹⁸ Indeed, as is made clear in the novel, Charlotte's decision is not a bad one, if Charlotte's situation is justly represented. Charlotte is not very attractive, she is of age and she is beginning to feel that she is a burden to her parents. More, contrary to Elizabeth, she has 'never been romantic' and probably never sought love, or, at least, love of the sort that Elizabeth seeks. She thinks realistically and makes a prudent, lucid decision that Elizabeth should respect. Or at least, as Charlotte's closest friend, she should try to exert empathy and make a charitable and generous judgment that wouldn't hastily and arrogantly condemn her friend's character; or even better, she should not pass any judgment at all. Instead, as happens in the novel several times, we find this attitude in Jane who tries to present a balanced view of the situation and emphasises the advantages of the match. Jane's loving and just attitude tells us that there was actually no place for judgment at all and even less place for passionate indignation and rejection.¹⁹

The key to Elizabeth's character is the title of the book, *Pride and Prejudice*. Even though the usual reading attributes pride to Mr. Darcy and prejudice to Elizabeth, I will claim that the source of Elizabeth's distorted judgment is her pride.²⁰ Arguably though,

¹⁸ J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 91.

¹⁹ I disagree here with Zimmerman who claims Jane 'refuses to see evil in the world' because it is too painful for her and thus her judgment is just distorted by her desire (E. Zimmerman, 'Pride and Prejudice in *Pride and Prejudice*', *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 23/1 (1968), 66).

²⁰ For the same point see D. J. Dooley 'Pride, Prejudice, and Vanity in Elizabeth Bennet', *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 20/2 (1965), 185–188 and E. Zimmerman, 'Pride and Prejudice in *Pride and Prejudice*', op. cit..

she is not proud in the more obvious sense in which the inhabitants of Hertfordshire speak of Mr. Darcy's pride. Elizabeth's youthful and rather natural pride seems justified by her many qualities, especially by those of understanding and judgment. But her self-complacency goes too far (as she herself realises later): she overestimates her excellent discernment, relies too uncritically on her own judgment and is blind to that of others.²¹ More importantly, she makes it a sport to use her judgment and wit to find fault in others – but never in herself. We might say that all her amusing witticisms in which she laughs at the folly of others and teases them for their imperfections are just a playful expression of superiority and conceit. Her indignation and her condemnation of Charlotte can thus be interpreted as contempt based on an implicit belief that she herself is *better* than Charlotte. But those who exalt themselves will be humbled and so is Elizabeth. Thanks to Mr. Darcy's letter, she finds that she is not without fault, neither in judgment, nor in character and she becomes meeker and more forgiving. (It is a sign of her great integrity that she does not refuse to learn her lesson.)

I would like to claim that this judgmentalism that we find in Elizabeth comes from what Robert C. Roberts calls 'competitive pride'. According to Roberts, a proud person derives her worth from her social status that again derives from comparisons with others.²² Such a person needs to think well of herself but misunderstands this 'well' for 'better than others' or 'eminent'. Humility, accordingly, is on Roberts' account a psychological independence from comparison with others. As such, a humble person is genuinely not able 'to feel the emotions associated with caring a lot about one's status',²³ such as 'envy, superciliousness, putdowns, condescension, scorn'²⁴ or we might add, indignation. Humility, Roberts continues, is characterised by the deeply ingrained belief that all people are 'ultimately and basically equal' irrespective of their qualities.²⁵ So the humble person does not derive the value of people including herself from the balance of qualities and perfections, from whether they are 'good enough' or 'worthy', but she sees them all equally

²¹ This is what she cries in ch. 36 when she discovers her delusion: 'I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities!'

²² R. C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 88.

²³ Op. cit.

²⁴ Op. cit., 85.

²⁵ Op. cit., 83.

valuable *as human beings*.²⁶ Excessive need to judge and compare human beings including oneself is thus an expression of pride not only because it assumes the superior position of the judge, but also because it is a projection of one's social ambition.

Raimond Gaita goes further than Roberts and argues that to consider another human being as equally valuable ('precious') and real as oneself is only possible in the attitude of love. Most people are able to love, that is, to treat as equally valuable, only a limited number of those who are not too distant from them in view of their status. It is only the perfectly humble 'saints', according to Gaita, who are able really to love *all* human beings, including those who have sunk to the very bottom of society, the most afflicted and the most villainous.²⁷ These moral saints lack any sense of superiority or social ambition and this enables them to accept and love even the most wretched human beings without any contempt or condescension and to see them without prejudice or judgment. Only they can thus see them clearly (such as they are) and respond to them as such. As Taylor shows following Gaita, moralistic judgment prevents exactly these responses. He claims such judgment is incompatible with the perception of the other's humanity, that is, among other things, of her feelings. When a person condemns the other, she is no more able to recognise her suffering and to respond to it with pity and compassion.²⁸ Indeed, we noticed that at the moment Elizabeth passed her judgment, she stopped being able really to see Charlotte. She was no more interested in understanding Charlotte's

²⁶ Cf. S. Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits, Kierkegaard's writings XV* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 170f. and S. Weil, 'The *Iliad*, Poem of Might', in *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), 24–55. Weil contrasts the attitudes of admiration and scorn that are based on strengths and weaknesses to that of love.

²⁷ See especially the chapter 'Goodness beyond virtue' from R. Gaita, *Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice* (London – New York: Routledge, 2002) and the Preface from R. Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London – New York: Routledge, 2006). This point is connected with another of Gaita's claims that even the worst villain does not deserve to be treated like vermin. Murphy attributes such an attitude to 'moral humility' in 'The Case of Dostoyevsky's General' and 'The Elusive Nature of Human Dignity' in J. Murphy, *Punishment and the Moral Emotions. Essays in Law, Morality, and Religion* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁸ C. Taylor, *Moralism. A Study of a Vice* (op. cit.), ch. 2.

situation, motives, feelings or hopes. Pride and judgmentalism obstruct love in this way.

But Elizabeth didn't have a truthful image of Charlotte even before the engagement. She couldn't have been so surprised if she took seriously Charlotte's opinions of matrimony and saw her situation more clearly. But Elizabeth tended to idealise Charlotte, concentrated on what they shared and didn't pay enough attention to their difference. Elizabeth is thus a good illustration of how pride (and the 'mentality of comparison') distorts vision in both directions: she is too partial to those she finds worthy and too prejudiced against those she doesn't.²⁹ We thus showed that in love generally, excessive emphasis on judgment of character qualities signals this love is not of the best kind, because it is corrupted by pride and superiority. In love of the best kind (or pure love), the lover does not judge and assess the other; in particular, she does not condemn the other for her flaws and failures.³⁰

3. Nonjudgmental Response to a Flaw

I have been arguing that it is a sign of pride to judge and condemn others for their flaws and failures. Elizabeth was conceited and judgmental when she judged Charlotte and condemned her on account of

²⁹ This can explain the 'inconstancy' Tony Milligan charges her of, even though I believe that her feelings for Wickham cannot be called love, but infatuation. See T. Milligan, 'Abandonment and the Constancy of Love', https://www.academia.edu/13791951/Abandonment_and_the_Constancy_of_Love, accessed 14th November 2017, 10.

³⁰ Milligan raised the worry whether Gaita's idea of unconditional or agapic love can be considered as an ideal (or the 'best kind') even for deeply personal love such as romantic (or intimate) love the cases of which I discussed in my 'Loving Villains. Virtue in Response to Wrongdoing' (in C. Maurer, T. Milligan, K. Pacovská (eds), *Love and Its Objects* (op. cit.), 125–139) – see T. Milligan, 'Love and Acceptance', *The Philosopher's Magazine* 70 (2015), 86–92 and 'Abandonment and the Constancy of Love', op. cit.). I chose the example of friendship here to show that even in the most rational type of personal (and selective) love there is room for discussion whether the conditions and standards one applies are adequate and whether one is a good friend to another. Leaving aside the problem of serious crime, I believe it is possible to argue (as I did) that in more ordinary failures and flaws, the tendency to condemn and withdraw can be considered as improper judgmentalism and disloyalty both in friendship and in intimate relationships.

something she saw as immoral. But someone could object rightly that where there is real wrongdoing or even crime, not to judge would mean not to see that something wicked was done. Imagine for example that Charlotte wouldn't only encourage Mr. Collins to marry her, but that she would steal him from someone who truly loved him and was even poorer than her. The urge of humility and love warns first – as we saw in section 1 – that one should not give way to the temptation and pass judgment where it is not called for or pass it hastily with passion and prejudice. Careful consideration of facts should be made, investigation of circumstances and motives, possible 'misunderstandings' (maybe Charlotte didn't know that...). Love then interprets and judges in the best possible light, with charity and generosity and with the knowledge that it is always possible to suspend judgment.

But what if there is no doubt about the friend's fault? What if the imaginary Charlotte professes resentfully she does not care about the other girl? In that case, a judgment that her act was mean and heartless is unavoidable and a response is called for otherwise there is the charge of blindness and of injustice in view of the victim.³¹ But is there a serious loving response that is not judgmental and preserves equality, realistic vision and empathy? Following Peter Winch, Gaita argued in his *Good and Evil* that the loving response of a humble person is pity.³² If the loving person sorrows over what the other has done and pities her for what she has become by doing it, she sees her wrongdoing clearly, judges it wrong and yet she is not judgmental as she would be if she responded for example with indignation, contempt or repulsion. Her response does not condemn the wrongdoer as a person and thus does not involve superiority. It is a loving response, because it does not block attention and concern for the other.³³

³¹ It is part of Elizabeth's moralism that she judges a decision that does not concern her and that does no obvious harm to anyone.

³² R. Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, op. cit., 45; see also my 'Loving Villains', op. cit., in which I examine loving reactions to wrongdoing in more detail.

³³ See also B. Browne, 'A Solution to the Problem of Moral Luck', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (1992), 350. In addition, Browne claims that even anger is compatible with love and loving concern and does not imply the desire for retribution or payback. The same point is argued by M. Nussbaum in her book *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2016) who advocates what she calls Transition-anger. Anger should focus on wrongdoing and should not condemn the wrongdoer as a person, in so far as it does not contain hatred

Kierkegaard made an even more extreme claim: weakness in the beloved not only should not affect love, intimacy and empathetic understanding. It should make the relationship even more inward. His 'earnest' person, contrary to the 'fastidious' one, doesn't turn one's back, but accepts the fact of the other's weakness and fault and helps her to conquer it.³⁴ Standing by the other in times of misfortune and weakness is considered as integral to love even if (or maybe rather 'because') it involves sharing shame and humiliation and a considerable personal sacrifice (compare the lovely response of Mrs. Bulstrode from Eliot's *Middlemarch*³⁵). Loyalty, solidarity or faithfulness are virtues of love that honour the past relationship and do not derive from desert in the beloved. But Kierkegaard emphasises also faith and hope that the other will repent as characteristic of loving relationship.³⁶

Now that we have identified loving responses to a genuine flaw, we can return to our original question: how should the loving, yet realistic person *see* the beloved's flaw (and the flawed beloved) if there is no way of interpreting it positively, such as in the case of father Karamazov? I tried to show in the previous section that the acknowledgment of the fault in the other does not have to be counterbalanced with her qualities in order to preserve what Jollimore called 'the overall judgment' (that is, judgment of the person as such) or, more precisely, in order to prevent the overall condemnation of the person. I claimed that such judgment is part of the lover's response. It is thus determined by her own character and responsivity in the same measure as it is determined by the character of the other. It follows that what makes a description of the other person a loving one is in the same degree the tone in which it is said and that reflects

or contempt (see *op. cit.*, 50). The response of anger, however important, is primarily felt by the victim of the wrongdoing, so I will leave its discussion aside.

³⁴ S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, *op. cit.*, 164. This observation shows that honest severity can be compatible with love, but not the righteous kind of it (such as Mr. Bulstrode from Eliot's *Middlemarch* or Kostelnička from Janáček's *Jenůfa*).

³⁵ See my 'Loving Villains', *op. cit.*, section 4 and also M. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness. Resentment, Generosity, Justice*, *op. cit.*, 119f.

³⁶ See J. Lippitt, 'Forgiveness: a work of love?', *op. cit.*, part IV, and S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, *op. cit.*, Deliberation 'Love hopes all things'. For a defense of non-judgmental loyalty as crucial to love see O. Beran, 'In the Absence of Judgment', to appear in *Philosophy and Literature*.

the lover's response, as its actual content.³⁷ If the lover responds with sorrow and pity, the description 'he's a bad-tempered, untidy borderline alcoholic with dubious standards of personal hygiene', when pronounced in a particular tone, can be both a realistic acknowledgment *and* an expression of these loving feelings.³⁸ Similarly, 'she was mean and heartless' can be uttered in a way that expresses rather grief than indignation and contempt.³⁹

Sometimes the tone or accent of the voice is enough, but there are devices in our languages that help to suggest the spirit in which a description is said and felt and thus to convey the complex vision of the other. Some expressions and appellations cannot but be derogatory: downright slurs, names like 'beast', 'bastard', 'monster' or more relevant for our examples, 'boozer' and 'heartless swine'.⁴⁰ Expressions like 'I'm afraid that...', 'regrettably', 'rather', on the other hand, suggest patience and pity as well as appellations like Falstaff's 'pitiful rascal',⁴¹ 'poor wretch', etc. If the wrongdoer is to be loved, accepted and pitied ('poor wretch') without irony, the tone of the description must express a sense that something valuable or precious is being damaged. We will turn to consider the nature of this value now.

4. Appreciation without Judgment

One may ask now whether it is not enough, in the effort of being less judgmental and moralising about the other's flaws, to adopt the loving and non-condemning responses we spoke about just now

³⁷ This, again, concerns only the cases when the flaw or wrongdoing is beyond doubt.

³⁸ I believe Murdoch was thinking of this tone when she said that the realism of an artist 'is essentially both pity and justice' ('The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts' in I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, op. cit., 87).

³⁹ In Murdoch's example, the description of daughter in law D would not have to be unloving if she really were 'pert and familiar', 'brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile' ('The Idea of Perfection', op. cit., 17) – there are people like that and they are loved and accepted as such.

⁴⁰ The judgment often labels the individual person, subsumes her under a group enemy description or type. Cf. C. Taylor, *Moralism: A Study of a Vice*, op. cit., 22.

⁴¹ Gaita discusses this expression and its connection with Falstaff's sense of equality with all fellow mortals in ch. 3 of his *Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice*, op. cit.

and leave out the content of judgment altogether. Could we not call Elizabeth (in the original scenario from section 2) perfectly loving if she responded to her friend's engagement with sorrow and not with indignation? I believe not, since there is still the fact that she judges where judgment is not called for. Sorrow and pity are possible loving responses only to undeniable genuine wrongdoing. But it is not a sign of humility to have acute and fine-grained sensibility to other's faults and sorrow over them all the time. Love is a powerful and important constituent of a good human life. It is a source of energy, satisfaction and joy, because it connects the human being with something valuable. As I showed in section 2, a humble person, because she does not lay so much emphasis on comparing people's qualities and flaws, is able to see their inherent value as something incomparably more important. Pure and unconditional love is what attaches her to this value. In the remaining section of my paper, I want to consider what appreciating this value can amount to in order to outline the kind of ideal, saintly love that can nevertheless become an inspiration for more ordinary love, such as Elizabeth's.

Just at the beginning of his discourse 'Duty to love those we see', Kierkegaard criticises 'fastidious' people who are picky and who keep looking for the perfect object of love without ever being satisfied. Such proud self-satisfaction, Kierkegaard says, leads only to unhappiness.⁴² To depict the absurdity of such an attitude, he invites the reader to consider two artists. The first one travels in vain throughout the world to find a person with such perfection of beauty as to be worth painting. The second one who never left his home town claims from the outset that 'he doesn't pretend to be a real artist'. But, he goes on, 'I have not found a face so insignificant or so full of faults that I still couldn't discern in it the most beautiful side and discover something glorious.'⁴³ He then professes his great satisfaction and happiness in being an artist. It is no wonder that, according to Kierkegaard, this one is the real artist and not the fastidious one. What Kierkegaard emphasises about this man is his modesty and love that helps him to see the inherent beauty of human beings. In each face, he sees something beautiful behind all its imperfections and he reveals it to others who see his painting.⁴⁴ Such quality of

⁴² Op. cit., 155f.

⁴³ Op. cit., 156.

⁴⁴ This aspect of Kierkegaard's view is very well depicted in Veresaev's story 'The Contest' (I thank Ondřej Beran for this suggestion).

attention requires an artist's eye and we will see that there is something of an artist in the humble lover.

Kierkegaard's humble artist is not a great artist only because he paints beautiful pieces of art. He is a great artist because he can see his loved ones as something beautiful and precious, as great pieces of art. In a strikingly similar tone, Simone Weil says that we should rejoice over the people we love in the way we rejoice over the objects of beauty: we should learn to forget and eventually to renounce our selves in joyful contemplation of them.⁴⁵ But whereas the beautiful object (be it nature or art) captures attention and thus invites self-forgetful contemplation immediately, to reach this attitude with beloved people needs effort or a special gift because their beauty is not visible at first sight. Among other things, it is overshadowed by their flaws and weaknesses or more precisely by the condemning responses that they inspire.⁴⁶ But as we saw in the previous sections, it is part of humility not to indulge in such responses and to appreciate the beloved as she is. Weil compares the nature of such appreciation to the appreciation of a beautiful object and suggests that its ground is no particular quality of the object or any pleasure or comfort it brings, but simply 'the fact that it exists'.⁴⁷ The existence of another soul that we acknowledge in love is in Weil's view a miracle to wonder at and rejoice over just as we wonder at and rejoice over the existence of an exquisite piece of art. The differences of merits or flaws that can be judged and compared seem negligible compared to the fact that this particular and unique thing or person *is* (and might not be).

Weil suggests another aspect in the value of art or nature that is similar to that of human beings. In contemplating a beautiful piece of art, the observer has a sense of respect or reverence in view of something that is above her. It is respect for something excellent she could never have accomplished and of something she will probably never fully grasp. The thought of wishing to change the object is impossible, because it is excellent as it is.⁴⁸ There is a sense in which other human beings as well are 'above us' that has a bearing on the

⁴⁵ S. Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), ch. 'Love'.

⁴⁶ In *Gravity and Grace*, Weil contrasts self-less contemplation with the attitude of desire (to own, to control, to change) that affects the lover's vision and imagination. I believe that similar disruption of vision can be caused by the attitude of superiority. Weil suggests that in her later essays such as 'The *Iliad*, Poem of Might'.

⁴⁷ S. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, op. cit., 67.

⁴⁸ 'The beautiful is that which we cannot wish to change.' Op. cit., 65. Cf. also 149f.

tendency to judge. Part of the lover's renunciation is the acceptance that other people are essentially different and that they live a life independent and separate of hers. It is in principle impossible fully to understand and encompass the life of another person and to accept that is to respect the reality of another human being. 'Love', says Murdoch, 'is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness'.⁴⁹ If the lover approaches the other with full knowledge of her utter mysteriousness, attention that she pays her gives a joy similar to that of an explorer. A devoted explorer is not continually disappointed that she didn't find what she wanted to find. She is delighted in every new piece of nature she found and in the boundless variety that exists in nature. Similarly, a humble lover's attention is absorbed by the beloved because she delights in watching what is so different and surprising. Such joy is only possible if she approaches the beloved with an open mind and without prejudice: she hears *what* the other says, she doesn't judge *how* it is said.⁵⁰

What she sees or hears can, arguably, be grievous: the beloved person may be suffering or she might have done something very regrettable. But as I tried to show, there is a certain spirit in which the loving and humble person responds to such situations, the spirit of compassion that guards her from the temptation to contempt. Even if most of what the beloved does or undergoes is grievous, there is a special way in which the loving person would still see her and her existence as something precious. Her grief is then connected with the sense that this value is being jeopardised. Weil shows this nicely when she analyses the way Homer depicts the atrocities done and suffered by the characters of his *Iliad*. She claims his special loving vision of the events is reflected mainly in the tender tone in which they are told. This tone that Weil calls bitterness 'extends, as the light of the sun, equally over all men' in the *Iliad*.⁵¹ Indeed, when we read the *Iliad*, its author strikes us as exceptionally nonjudgmental and accepting, endowed with a certain child-like simplicity. This is because Homer is humble according to the account given above: as Weil shows, there is no competition mentality in

⁴⁹ I. Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (ed. P. Conradi, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997)), 216; cf. also op. cit., 417 and I. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 17.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard compares the judging lover to that which has two pairs of ears – one that hears and one that judges (S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, op. cit., 110).

⁵¹ S. Weil, 'The *Iliad*, Poem of Might', op. cit., 48.

him, no tendency to admire, scorn or hate. All his characters are precious to him, no matter what they do and where they stand. According to Weil, 'the victors and the vanquished are shown equally near to us, in an equal perspective, and seem, by that token, to be the fellows of the poet as of the auditors'.⁵² The ability of the best of artists (Homer) to see value in something that is dreadful and depict it in a way that is both beautiful and realistic is similar to the lover's power to see value in an afflicted or wicked beloved.

Conclusion

Just before relating her complaints about Charlotte to Jane, Elizabeth proclaims: 'The more I see of the world, the more I am dissatisfied with it.' With unusual gravity, Jane checks her not to give way to such feelings, since, as she says 'they will ruin your happiness'.⁵³ Elizabeth voices a certain view of the world and of human beings that is tempting, but dangerous because it leads to a trap of notorious conceited dissatisfaction and consequent absence of love. Jane sees clearly that a life lived without love or with a poor form of love will lack reality and joy and therefore will not be a happy one. A reply to Elizabeth might be: 'The more you see the world, the more you should love it.' And this is a moral requirement, a requirement to exert an effort to love and accept the world such as it is, despite its imperfections.⁵⁴ In the previous text, I tried to show that such attitude of unconditional acceptance and love is connected with a certain virtue, that of humility, and that what Elizabeth expresses in her proclamation is thus a certain kind of pride.

Elizabeth's view is tempting because being critical is sometimes praised as being truthful. I tried to argue that when it comes to human affairs and their assessment, it is not always so. It is very often the case that criticism and condemnation are spurred by self-regard and superiority. Love, on the other hand, directs attention from the self and its prejudices. It enables the loving person to see reality in a just and truthful way and to rejoice over it. The more this reality is flawed, the purer love is needed to overcome the natural repulsion and contempt. It is therefore only the most

⁵² Op. cit., 49.

⁵³ J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, op. cit., 90.

⁵⁴ A fine example of such love of the world can be found in Roy Holland' quote from P. Casals in his *Against Empiricism: On Education, Epistemology and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 59.

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humble and good characters ('moral saints') that have the ability to love purely that which is utterly unlovable.⁵⁵

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⁵⁵ I would like to thank the participants of the 5th Colloquium on the Modalities of the Good and the participants of the workshop Love, Forgiveness and Reconciliation for the inspiring discussion of the earlier drafts of the paper. Special thanks to Alison McIntyre for her thoughtful and close comments. The paper was supported within the project of Operational Programme Research, Development and Education (OP VVV/OP RDE), 'Centre for Ethics as Study in Human Value', registration No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/15_003/0000425, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund and the state budget of the Czech Republic.