

Gandhi on Love: A Reply to Ian M. Harris

Marvin Kohl

Professor Harris¹ recognizes that Gandhi's approach to love revolves around the concept of non-violence and that the notion of *agape* is central to an understanding of both love and nonviolence. He correctly argues that, according to Gandhi, it is only nonviolence when we love those that hate us and that it is the power of unconditional love that allows human beings to feel compassion for the suffering of others. He also maintains that "Gandhi was wrong in discrediting friendship and *eros* because love in all its forms awakens moral sentiments."² Having charged Gandhi with the impoverishment of the power of love because he neglects these important kinds of caring, Harris proceeds to correct the mistake. The remedy he proposes has two major steps. The first is a conceptual or definitional change. It requires that we conceive of what he calls "loveness" as a combination of affection, friendship, *eros*, and *agape*. The second step is to embrace and promote loveness. Thus Harris writes:

By ignoring the other two types, friendship and *eros*, Gandhi did a disservice to those human beings who experience those forms of love. *Love in all its forms awakens human beings to care.* It stimulates trust within the human heart and directs individuals away from private concerns towards concern for others. . . . An enriched society will draw upon all the forms of love to nourish its members. Becoming aware of the constituent elements of loveness provides a conceptual framework for building a social order that *promotes all different aspects of love.*³

This conceptual and moral framework is problematic. There appears to be a semantic and a

logical difficulty. From a semantic perspective, we may observe that a description of the features of the four kinds of love does not necessarily amount to a univocal definition, nor does an ordering among these kinds of love mean that they are reducible to one premier sort. The so-called unity of love, what Harris calls loveness, remains thoroughly analogical (metaphorical) because the analogates or actual modes of love to which it refers are themselves different sorts of emotions and relationships.

From a logical perspective, we may say that the major weakness of Harris' implicit argument is its assumption that one can combine the four types of love, eliminate the negative or conflating elements, and yet preserve the positive diversity. On this ground one might as well argue that the solution to the diversity of theories about the good is simply to embrace all the major theories and talk about a constituent element of goodness that, in some mysterious way, captures this diversity. One can, of course, talk about loveness in the same way G. E. Moore talked about goodness, namely, that they both stand for simple indefinable qualities. But this is not the tack Harris takes. For him, loveness names a definable complex, a complex which preserves the divergent and best features of affection, friendship, *eros*, and *agape*.

The objection is not that Harris fails at an attempted synthesis. But rather that he assumes that a synthesis is possible in a context in which there is considerable evidence that the opposite is true. For example, who would wish to deny that self-love is an important kind of caring. Perhaps love of self is also a most fundamental form of caring that allows a person to love others. But, contrary to Meister Eckhardt and what Harris suggests, if you love yourself, you do not necessarily love everybody else as you do yourself. In this respect, Gandhi does

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not encourage self love because he believes that it would diminish the value of the self as a person seeking unity with universal love. Unlike Harris, Gandhi recognizes that, where self love dominates, *agape* does not.

One may wish to argue this point. But one would hope that such an argument would explain how a fusion between self-love and *agape* is possible given evidence of the contrary, and oftentimes contradictory, nature of these two different kinds of love.

It is no part of my contention to deny that understanding the relation between these two kinds of love is one of the most important problems of our time.. But it is one thing to assert that some forms of love rouse or cause human beings to care for others, another to assume that at its best love entails such caring, and still another to insist that love in all its forms awakens human beings to care for others. The last is what Harris assumes to be true. Again: Is it true that love in all its forms awaken human beings to care for others? If so, how do we explain self-love and the extreme forms of egoism? And if this is not sufficient to show the inadequacy of Harris's postulate, how does he explain away the fact that ordinary men and women often intensely like, if not enjoy, the misfortunes of others? Here again it is the belief in magic-like properties of loveness that makes the argument seem unconvincing. If love always does what Harris says it does, then how is it possible for so many people to love power or success, and to have an overriding commitment to these ends and not to caring for others?

The importance of these questions become more evident when we examine the old chestnut that it is not enough to love but also necessary to love the right things. Whether or not we can agree that human beings ought to love only what is worthy of being loved, there is an empirical problem as to whether or not humans love only the good. And if they do not, if they often only love their own things or bad things, then there is an important "is-ought" problem that should not be neglected. Few confusions in human thought are as mischievous theoretically and practically as the view that love -- to the exclusion of considerations of what ends are and are not worthy of being loved -- can serve as an adequate normative explanation.

Finally, there is the notoriously difficult question of how to reconcile caring love with an *agape* love when the latter is conceived of as the fusion of nonviolence and the unconditional love of living things. It is this question that I shall consider for the rest of this paper.

Elswhere⁴ I have described an empirically mani-

fest type of relationship called "caring love." For X to love Y, in this sense, X must cherish and desire (in the sense of being actively concerned about) the well-being and happiness of Y. Given the constituents of this relationship, X is required to help Y in certain circumstances, even if that help involves intervention. I have called this kind of affection caring love in order to distinguish it from weaker forms of benevolent love, from other kinds of love, and from minimalistic forms of (what Robert Sternberg has called) consummate love.⁵ Perhaps the least controversial of the kinds of intervention required by this kind of love is intervention to save the life of a beloved. Thus if Hillary loves Bill and if, unknown to Bill, his life is immediately threatened by deadly force, then Hillary (given the usual caveats about the limits of reasonable action) is required to help Bill, especially if she is the only one in a position to do so. The intuition here is that death is typically a great, often the greatest loss; that the greater the threat, the greater the need to protect a beloved against it. It is a natural extension of this intuition to say that, if the use of violence is the only way to protect a beloved's life, then the tender affection we have called caring love commands that we do so. Contrary to what has sometime been suggested, we would *not* say that a person caringly loved another person if we thought he would never use force and deadly force, if necessary, to protect his beloved.

This is not the place to explore the marriage of *agape* and caring love that marks much of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What is important to note is that violence in defense of God, country, and family -- presumably things worthy of being loved -- is often permissible and that, from these religious perspectives, a major motive behind what appears to be justifiable violence is caring love.

Of course, Gandhi rejects this notion. He understands that, just as great goods can collide, so can great loves. He understands that, when love of humanity and nonviolence collides with less important (notice I did not say unimportant) loves, there is a necessary price that must be paid. For if we ought to give our life true meaning by committing to nonviolence -- and this is to have an absolute claim on our allegiance, then it follows that this commitment will over-rule the practice of caring love for an individual, family, or state. For example, if Hillary loves nonviolence more than she loves Bill or if she firmly believes that the love of humanity requires that, when there is a conflict, the commitment of nonviolence always over-rules commitments to individuals then, even if Bill's life is threatened by

deadly force and no other alternative except violence will save Bill's life, Hillary ought not resort to it.

Harris seems to miss the importance of this point. He appears to want to have it all. But how can he reconcile, say, the practice of caring love for an individual with an overriding love of humanity? How can he reconcile the obligation sometimes to do all one can to protect a beloved with an unconditional love which demands, among many other things, that we love those that hate or harm us?

Harris' dream of a "loveness" world has a certain perfectionist beauty to it. But, if the preceding analysis is correct, it is an impossible dream. Of course, impossible dreams may serve to set a direction in which we can strive. It is also true that the

process of pursuing such dreams may be enjoyed as much as, or even more than, possible ones. Nonetheless, by loving the impossible, one is doomed to failure and has expended time and energy that could have been successfully used elsewhere.

It only remains to guard my argument from being understood in a more sweeping sense than it has been intended or is properly able to bear. Nothing that I have said even tends to show that, because Gandhi's notion of love is logically superior to Harris', one should accept Gandhi's analysis.⁶ I only wish to suggest that if one has to choose between the two in terms of this one dimension, Gandhi seems the better choice.

NOTES

1. Ian M. Harris, "The Conditional Quality of Gandhi's Love," *The Acorn*, Spring-Summer, 1992, 7-18.

2. *Ibid.*, 14.

3. *Ibid.*, 16. The emphasis is my own.

4. Marvin Kohl, "Caring Love and Liberty: Some questions," *Free Inquiry* 12:2 (Spring 1992), 49-51, 54 and "Bertrand Russell's Characterization of Benevolent Love," *Russell* 12:2 (Winter 1992-93), 116-134.

5. Robert J. Sternberg, "Liking Versus Loving: A Comparative Study of Theories," *Psychological Bulletin* 102:3 (1987), 339-340 and *The Nature of Love*, New York: Basic Books, 59-60.

6. For a critical analysis of Gandhi's theory, see my "Towards Understanding the Pragmatics of Pacifism," *In the Interest of Peace: A Spectrum of Philosophical Views*, Kenneth H. Klein and Joseph C. Kunkle (eds.), Longwood Academic: Wakefield, New Hampshire, 1990, 227-239.

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