

# Caring Love and Liberty: Some Questions<sup>1</sup>



**Marvin Kohl**

**W**hat is love? To what extent, if any, does it (or a central form of it) require that we "help" a beloved by intervening in or interfering with, her or his life? In other words, is there a kind of adult relationship<sup>2</sup> where the possibility of a closer relationship is not ruled out by one of the parties and where the relationship requires or permits a form of what I shall call "moderate paternalism," i.e., a form of assertive caring, without control? I will suggest that there is an empirically manifested type of relationship, whereby if *X* loves *Y*, *X* must cherish and desire the well-being and happiness, the welfare of *Y*, and that, given the constituents of this relationship, *X* is required to help *Y* in certain circumstances if that help proves necessary. I shall call this relationship "benevolent" or "caring" love.

**I**t is tempting to begin by saying that, given a commonsense understanding of the relationship between love and liberty, if *X* loves *Y*, *X* often has the right to interfere with *Y*'s right to self-determination. As so stated it may seem obvious, since it is widely believed that there is a kind of love that requires helping those we love if that help proves to be necessary, and furthermore that this provides much of the grounds for the right to intervene in their lives.

I confess that I am unable to give an adequate analysis of this entitlement.

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Perhaps it is true that loving generates an overriding right to sometimes seriously intervene in the lives of others. Perhaps it is also true that the rights of the lover to choose between alternative courses of action or goals without being restricted by external authority must bow before the so-called rights of the beloved. But "rights" talk adds a moral dimension that is, at best, notoriously untidy. I do not wish to compound the difficulties by adding to what is already a historical intellectual mess.

Alan Soble suggests that the demanding and intelligent reader, after surveying much of the literature on love, "might conclude the area is a mess, the idea is a mess, probably love itself is a mess."<sup>3</sup> There is no quick and easy way to tidy up this mess. But we may be able to clean up part of it, albeit a small part of it, by avoiding adventitious additions, especially the question of rights. For it is one thing to argue that if *X* loves *Y*, *X* often has right to interfere with *Y*'s right to self-determination. It is another to lower our intellectual sights and be content to better understand why love often requires intervention—perhaps even coercion. It is the second question that will be the focus of my attention.

**W**hat is there about the nature of caring love that appears to justify paternalistic behavior? A simple answer is that there is a central sense of love whereby love means caring and caring means helping when help is needed. In other words, the answer seems to be that when we care about someone, we care about their happiness and well-being or what I shall call their "welfare."

If this be true of caring, it seems to be yet more evidently true of love. Of

course, this is an arguable leap. But if there is an underlying argument, one formulation may read: If *X* cares about *Y*, *X* is concerned about the welfare of *Y*. However, if *X* loves *Y*, *X* is deeply concerned about the welfare of *Y* (that is, more actively disposed, or more committed, to help *Y*) and largely—but not only—because of this *X* will intervene in *Y*'s life if that action, in the context of *Y*'s life, is necessary to protect an important good or prevent a serious harm. Thus if Barbara loves George and if, unknown to George, his life is immediately threatened by deadly force, then Barbara (given the usual caveats about the limits of reasonable action) is required to help George, especially if she is the only one in a position to do so. The rough but fundamental intuition 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.

Let us consider a more contentious example. I deliberately use it because I do not believe that the commitment of the lover to the beloved is limited to cases of protecting against threats of death or more generally to the protection of only physical welfare. Suppose George's stance on abortion is actively pro-life. Suppose that Barbara is convinced that this will destroy his political career. Now if Barbara loves George, if Barbara is deeply concerned about his well-being, as well as what makes him subjectively happy, then aside from general moral duties or the special duties she may have, Barbara seems to be obliged to intervene in George's life, say, by reminding George forcefully that his stance on abortion may undermine his important career goals. This example may be

illuminating, but it is not unproblematic. First of all, neither Barbara nor George know (in any strict sense of the term) whether his abortion stance will prove helpful or harmful. Second, what Barbara is purportedly protecting is not a basic physical need but an important career goal. Finally, it raises "the how much intervention is warranted" question. Barbara seems content with supportive confrontation. Should she be more coercive? Does love, in this and essentially similar cases, allow or require greater intervention? If so, how much?

Let us return to the main argument. It may be thought that it misses its mark. True love, we may be told, requires that if *X* loves *Y*, *X* must accept *Y* as he or she is. This essentially means accepting the values and habits that are important to *Y*. So that if George has deep convictions about the wrongness of abortion and Barbara truly loves George, Barbara must not interfere with that stance.

Is this true? Does love demand, or even suggest, complete acceptance? That is to say, does love require that we accept a loved person completely as he or she is?

A positive answer to this question may involve a confusion between agapic (or unconditional) love and nonagapic (or conditional) love. I say "may involve a confusion" because I do not wish to deny that there are special circumstances in which the preferred thing is to love unconditionally. Nor do I wish to deny that conditional love requires commitment to the welfare of the loved object.

To love someone, in a most central sense of nonagapic love, is to be emotionally attached to and generally take delight in the contemplation of that person and want his or her good. Accordingly, if *X* loves *Y*, *X* must cherish and desire the well-being and happiness of *Y*. I have called this kind of caring benevolent or caring love in order to distinguish it not only from other kinds of love but also from even minimalistic forms of (what Robert Sternberg has called) consummate love.<sup>4</sup>

Here, however, it seems that even fair-minded opponents may be upset. They may suggest that benevolent love is a matter of degree and that at its most

fundamental level only concern and well-wishing are required. If *X* benevolently loves *Y*, *X* must cherish and desire the well-being and happiness of *Y*, but *X* need do no more than wish *Y* well. Evidently, some thinkers would approve of the cultivation of this kind of affection, but would not recommend the cultivation of a more caring love. They may urge that benevolence in terms of well-wishing is enough. Now it may be admitted that, while all caring love is a form of benevolent love, not all benevolent love is caring love. What appears to be common to both is that they involve a direct concern for the good—that is, the happiness and well-being of another person. However, the rough but essential difference between benevolent and caring love is that the former is often limited to inert concern while the latter involves, by its very nature, active concern. Someone who wants a relationship of reciprocal caring love will generally be frustrated by, or dissatisfied with, a relationship where the other is content with well-wishing and inert concern. Imagine, for example, Barbara loving George caringly and George only loving Barbara in the more limited sense in which I use *benevolence*.

What the latter means is that there is often a conflict between what is in a person's best interest and what they want. Someone, for example, may want to overeat because gluttony has become an essential condition for their happiness. But it does not follow that gluttony is a condition of well-being. Similarly, someone may want to smoke cigarettes because this habit has become a compulsion and they feel happier smoking than not smoking. But few would argue that this behavior is conducive to their physical well-being. Similarly, if George's stance on abortion is self-destructive in some important way, it is difficult to understand (*ceteris paribus*) why, if Barbara knows this and loves George, she does not act accordingly.

Exactly how Barbara should go about interceding is difficult to say. There is an interesting body of evidence to indicate that attempts to change one's partner significantly in a loving relationship often signals the breakdown of that relationship. Diane Vaughan suggests that uncoupling begins when one of the

partners starts to feel uncomfortable in the relationship and that it ends when that unhappiness is both explored and acted on.<sup>5</sup> The line between beginning to end a relationship and attempting to improve it may be a thin one. But there seems to be a vital difference between the attempt to change the behavior or values of a loved person because it primarily serves one's own perceived good and the attempt to change that person because one is primarily committed to their welfare. Caring love, if I understand it correctly, requires that when we interfere with the values or lifestyle of a beloved, we do so only because we intend and foresee their welfare, not because we solely or predominantly are aiming at our own. Indeed, it is true that relationships typically involve a complex mix of these feelings and motivations. Nonetheless it seems odd, if not counterintuitive, to say that *X* loves *Y* in this sense, yet *X* completely accepts *Y*'s self-destructive behavior.

This position may seem to some offensively paradoxical; consequently they may think it desirable to abandon it and substitute an *agape* notion of love. Here we may observe, first, that it is quite consistent with agapic love to say that *X* loves *Y* only if *X* unconditionally accepts the qualities or features of *Y* or accepts *Y* regardless of her or his qualities, if by *acceptance* we mean to view or deal with the other with affection, without any criticisms or conditions. That is to say, there is one kind of agapic love where all that seems to be required is that we bond and be committed to the other without any conditions (or, perhaps, significant conditions).

Biblical scholars suggest that this kind of commitment has its prototype in the love "manifested by God, and therefore it must be spontaneous and unmotivated, uncalculating, unlimited, and unconditional."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Irving Singer regards *agape* as being wholly non-appraisive love, where we are to love more or less as God loves, remembering that "God loves all creatures regardless of how worthless they may be in an appraisive sense. . . ." <sup>7</sup> If, then, we seek *agape* love, we must accept the beloved exactly as he or she is. If George is a glutton and smokes and if Barbara loves

George in this agapic sense, then Barbara must accept the gluttony and the smoking. If George's stance on abortion is self-destructive and the nature of Barbara's affection is commitment without any conditions, then she may be bound by her love not only to accept but to support George's stance on abortion.

To be clear, then, we must particularize the kind of love we are talking about and at least distinguish between agapic (unconditional) and nonagapic (conditional) love. Even so we have not got rid of the problem, for we are still faced with the stark choice of being an agapic or nonagapic lover. Nor, for that matter, is the nonagapic view free of the problem of paternalism.

I may illustrate this by returning to George's life and the notion whereby if Barbara loves George, Barbara must cherish and desire the well-being and happiness of George and, although committed to George, it is not an unconditional one. Now the nature of commitment and the role it may play in the various kinds of love is not an easy one to understand. According to Sternberg:

The decision/commitment component of love consists of two aspects—one short-term and one long-term. The short term aspect is the decision to love a certain other, whereas the long-term one is the commitment to maintain that love. The decision to love does not necessarily imply a commitment to that love. Oddly enough, the reverse is also possible, where there is a commitment to a relationship in which you do not make the decision, as in arranged marriages.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, a decision to love another is not a necessary commitment to love them throughout life. This is easy enough to understand. But it does not help us with the more difficult question.

What exactly does having a commitment mean? For Sternberg it seems minimally to mean making a decision to love a certain other but not necessarily making a commitment to maintain that love. Yet it is not at all clear what "making a decision to love" signifies. It does not seem to mean the state of

arousal Sternberg calls passion, since it is unusual, if not odd, to say that a person decides and, thereupon, has a feeling of attachment toward another. Unlike Singer, Sternberg does not distinguish between the appraisal and the bestowal elements of love. What Sternberg perhaps should say is that loving a person minimally means according that person a preferential status that is unearned in any appraisive sense<sup>9</sup>; that it is having a profound primitive affinity, an affinity richer than mere liking for that person; and that it implies a decision to maintain or nurture that feeling but not necessarily the intimacy or the relationship.

The last-named notion, is, however, perplexing. After all, if *X* has a profound primitive affinity for *Y*, an affinity richer than mere liking, then why would *X* not want intimacy or a relationship with *Y*? Sternberg, by way of a partial answer, suggests that not all love is acquisitive. Contrary to a venerable philosophical and literary tradition, it is possible for people to love without necessarily directing their longing and desire to the possession of that human object by whom one expects to be made happy. In other words, having the passion in itself does not necessarily *cause* the wanting of intimacy or possession of the love-object in question. Nor does the having of passion in and of itself illuminate the nature and limits of a commitment to care for a beloved. Sternberg tells us that one can be smothered by love, that a lover, among other things, can care too passionately or possessively. But he does not suggest the rules of a reasonably caring relationship, which is not exactly the same as providing rules for successful relationships.

Jan Narveson's argument<sup>10</sup> for relationships based primarily on self-interest, even in outline, is a complex one. I will not pretend to do it full justice here. He agrees that there is a contrast between the idea of what is in one's interest and what one wants. But he suggests that this cuts across another contrast: the contrast between what *X* thinks *Y*'s interests are and what *Y* thinks they are. Imagine Barbara *thinking* George is interested in having a caring love relationship, where George thinks

he is not. Or imagine George *thinking* Barbara would be a better person, in the sense of caring about her own well-being, if she retreats from having a caring relationship with George. Narveson asks whether the attempt to change these interests are motivated by love or really by self-interest. The answer, I believe, is that in some cases it is motivated by love, in some cases by self-interest, and in some cases by a combination of love and self-interest. Here I would follow Carol Gilligan and say that love and self-interest are not necessarily incompatible and what is required is a kind of education that stresses different ways of imagining the self in relationship, a kind of education which encourages inclusive problem-solving.<sup>11</sup> However, this is probably a feeble reply to those who have plausible theories of the self and self-interest, or to those who have selves that, given their present nature, cannot become caregivers in relationships.

One might argue that these distinctions and facts merely illustrate the relationship between one kind of love and what I have called moderate paternalistic behavior. Men and women do not have to love in a caring way. Yet surely it does not follow from this alone—from the diversity of the kinds of love or even from the fact that a person can love another merely by having a profound emotional affinity for that person—that human beings are justified in having life plans devoid of caring love. To discuss this fully would carry us too far beyond the range of this article. But we may perhaps note that a libertarian may plausibly argue that, if the price of full autonomy is to have a life plan devoid of caring love, then that is the price one must pay. However, this has to be argued, since caring love is a source of the fullest satisfaction known to human beings and typically is considered the primary emotional good.

To sum up, there is a kind of love that requires a form of paternalism. It is a kind of conditional affection I have 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

(Caring Love, continued on p. 54)

in church services with the team chaplain "exalting the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord," according to press reports.

No wonder they've had such a good season. They emerge with souls so purified that they can deal out wholesale mayhem, smashing quarterbacks to the ground and reducing opposing linemen to a bloody mess.

Football fans know that, even in regular-season games, if a linebacker makes a sack, a quarterback throws for 300 yards, or a fullback keeps finding holes up the middle, we will be told that God had a hand in it all answering players' heartfelt pleas for a "W."

It would put the Lord in an awful quandary if two equally devout teams

were to meet for the Super Bowl, but today He is presented with a clear choice.

Gibbs in his book wrote that he blamed himself for all his failures and credited God for all his successes, which bespeaks a world-champion humility. 'Skins by two Ave Marias.

Theologians are unable to decide precisely when God became a sports fan or to explain why He is interested only in American sports. You never hear a soccer player, for instance, thanking God for allowing him to score a goal, and we can only assume that European games are less of a spiritual experience than the NFL.

Other gods, moreover, seem content

to leave sportsmen to their own devices. The Indian cricket team's record, for instance, appears to be a matter of total indifference to Buddha.

Yet if, say, Mark Rypien hits Art Monk on a crossing pattern, God apparently looks on with approval. Well, it must make a pleasant change after all those overwrought conversations with Jimmy Swaggart or Oral Roberts.

Still, the Lord is surrounded by mysteries that mere mortals can not penetrate. Try as we might, we will never figure out what He does during commercials. •

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(Caring Love, continued from p. 51)  
and happiness of *Y*. Given the constituents of this relationship, *X* is required to help *Y* in certain circumstances (given the usual caveats about the limits of reasonable action) if that help proves necessary even if that help involves intervention. Remaining issues include a fuller analysis of how liking, intimacy, and commitment are related to caring; more carefully distinguishing between caring as a constitutive element and caring as an obligation; having a clearer understanding of how conflicts between the subjective happiness and well-being affect how a lover should care about the welfare of the beloved; and the extent to which agapic love can be successfully mixed with, or serve as an ideal for, its nonagapic counterparts. These issues deserve a detailed examination, one that must be reserved for a future date.

## Notes

1. This is a revised version of "Love and Liberty," a paper presented at the FREE INQUIRY conference on "Humanism and Liberty," Boston,

November 4, 1990. Although I do not share Jan Narveson's self-interest theory of relationships, I am indebted to him for several valuable suggestions.

2. By limiting my analysis to adult love, I hope to reduce the need of addressing the question of caring for others, especially children, by helping them grow and actualize themselves. Contrary to a venerable tradition, children seem more vulnerable to paternalism, especially its more subtle or suffocating forms, because they are in the process of self-determination, of forming their own values and ideals. I am not suggesting that in adulthood or even in late adulthood this process is necessarily complete. I only wish to suggest that many adults seem less vulnerable to control and more capable of protecting their own values and life plans.

3. Alan Soble, "Analyzing Love," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 19 (1989):493.

4. My characterization of caring love largely follows Bertrand Russell (*What I Believe*, London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Truber, 1925, pp. 28-42). Robert Sternberg, on the other hand, maintains that there is a cluster of human relationships that can be measured and better understood by using (but not only using) scales of liking and love. Sternberg suggests that love can be understood best in terms of three components: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. Using these components, he distinguishes eight kinds of love, including consummate love. Consummate love (i.e. the combination of all three components) seems to be akin to what I have been calling caring love. The difficulty is that what is purported to be consummate love is a matter of degree and is,

therefore, not necessarily consummate. The reason seems to be that intimacy and commitment, in themselves or when they are only minimally present, are not synonymous with caring and being strongly disposed to help actively. See Robert J. Sternberg, "The Nature of Love," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 47, 2 (1984): 312-329; "Liking Versus Loving: A Comparative Evaluation of Theories," *Psychological Bulletin* 102, 3 (1987): 331-345; *The Triangle of Love* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

5. Diane Vaughan, *Uncoupling: Turning Points in Intimate Relationships* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 13.

6. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 91.

7. Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: Vol. 3. The Modern World* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 391. The fact that Singer correctly recognizes there is a central type of agape love that is unconditional and wholly non-appraisive is not to suggest that he is in sympathy with the concept of agape. "I myself," he writes, "have never held this belief. I am convinced that wholly unappraisive love is foreign to human nature."

8. Sternberg, *Triangle of Love*, p. 46.

9. Singer, *Nature of Love*, p. 393.

10. Personal correspondence, November 29, 1990.

11. Carol Gilligan, "Remapping the Moral Domain: New Images of the Self in Relationship," in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. by Thomas C. Heller, et al. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986) pp. 237-252. •