

# THE POWER OF LOVE

*A serious philosophical challenge within our understanding of power*

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The acts and consequences of love have as a rule been understood as problems of individual psychology, and not as philosophical problems in their own right. Adverse effects of love are considered as results of abnormal personal qualities, subsequently not to be understood as part of love "itself". Philosophy does indeed have a lot to say *about* love and how it is a necessary part of our lives, but the concept itself has largely escaped critical attention; or it has at best been uncritically adopted from a psychoanalytical tradition that readily confuses metaphor with reality, and vice versa. If it has been treated, it has been so vicariously through discussions of friendship, sex, mothering or benevolence, and not as an isolated and concrete phenomenon. Often it is construed as some state of "being-for-others", other times it seems only to be a blanket term supposed to signal some "warm and fuzzy" feeling, either unworthy of closer study or even dangerous to study; as if it will melt away under intense scrutiny. Any serious study of power will however be lacking if love is not considered both as an expression of power and as a power in its own right.

The act of loving is inherently powerful. The power of love is not a neutral phenomenon in society or in our personal lives. It is usually directed and focused on a specific individual, on you, from someone else, either considered as "romantic" or "parental". The force of this directed power is however not *for* you, in any sense that makes it automatically "good for you". Consider for instance the loving mother that conveys to her son that he will 'break her heart' if he moves away from her. Just enduring this directed force might consequently be very costly; and active "resistance" even more so. Submission or flight are often more realistic as options than active resistance,

but each carries its own distinct and usually unattractive costs. The power of love thus intrudes and forces us to respond just as the power of violence does, and as with violence we are more at risk when we are together with those close to us. It is commonplace but still important to recognize that when someone close to you directs their love or violence upon you "with all their heart"; they are in a position to inflict great damage. This fact alone makes it at least probable that the use of any such power should be sparing and conscientious both on a personal and on a social level. Surprisingly this is not a common understanding when the power of love is considered - at least not in contemporary culture. Blatant romanticizing and idolization of love dominates our popular culture, saturating it to such an extent that any attempt to extricate from it seems nearly impossible if left only to individual action. Love is repeatedly hailed as the vehicle of access to an otherwise closed world of "meaning" and "security". Of course, we all agree that no human society where either inequalities in power, or violence, or love can be made to disappear completely is neither realistic nor wanted. Such utopian ideas are probably more dangerous than helpful in our attempts to philosophize about power. Instead, these necessary parts of humanity must be understood as such, and efforts must be made to control their appearance - to regulate their negative consequences both on personal and political levels.

Our most effective "weapon" against uncontrolled use of the specific power of love is probably just what has proved successful in controlling violence, first and foremost our ideas about morality. Random and unreflective use of love-power must be internally understood as dangerous if we are to have any hope of limiting its

widespread and negative influence in society. It is probable that any attempt to regulate its use, that is not founded on a previous understanding of the risks inherent in such acts, will have only a limited effect. Philosophers should consequently recognize the importance of this project and help develop tools to incorporate it into the moral education of future generations.

It is however not difficult to imagine the cry of outrage that might follow any public declaration of such a project. Our current ideas of the self and its development are to such an extent based on an ideal conception of love, that even the mere act of pointing to the contingent elements of its inflated importance might prove very disturbing both on the social and the personal level. The "necessity" of believing in the "redeeming" ideology of love seems fundamental to everything ranging from the ideas in object-relations or ego psychology on how to develop a self, to our belief in authentic or religious meaning in life. The *loving* God/partner/parent/world/state/mother will according to this line of thought eventually prove to be "real", and any perspective that points out that this should be understood as just the Siamese-twin of the *violent* God/partner/parent/world/state/mother is at best ignored. "More love, less violence" is hailed as the universal answer to any conflict, as if love is just another name for unproblematic goodness.

The internal thought or feeling of love might not have any more negative effects than internally imagined violence; but, just as expressed violence necessarily intrudes and elicits a response, love does as well. Saying or expressing an *honest* "I love you" necessarily affects those fortunate or unfortunate who this love is directed towards. If it is unwelcome, it is far from pleasant.

But is it possible to compare love to violence in this manner? Is not violence always bad? No, probably not. Most of our current theories about power and authority, political or moral, admit that violence-power is a necessary part of society. More often than not this has come from an understanding of traditional authority as expressive of violent power and a rejection of anarchy as a viable alternative. However we often feel a need for correction of this violence-power from a perspective of love, and we therefore idealize it privately, essentially dividing power along the current division of life into public and private spheres on a usually gendered basis, into political-violence and personal-love. It is probably time to reconsider the "naturalness" of this divide since it is limiting the perspectives we have available in our understanding of both love-power and violence-power.

What alternative perspectives might such a critique of love as unproblematic goodness make available?

**1** Independent, autonomous man is probably not free and self-sufficient; he is instead powerless, deprived, absent from any close relationship with others. This might sometimes be a positive experience.

**2** It is sometimes necessary to protect people from love-power.

**3** Any relationships based on power relations, especially those of love-power, are between inherently unequal individuals or groups.

**4** Freedom and love are incompatible ideals; love is necessarily some form of bondage; a submission to being directed by others.

**5** Being loved is not a voluntary phenomenon, it is not a matter of choice for the beloved to only experience love-power by consent. Denying the fact of someone else's love for you usually is futile.

**6** Structural inequalities exist. It is likely that love rises to the top; that "powerful" people have more, and that poor or otherwise marginal people have less. It is relevant to ask about the justice of the distribution of love and love-power in society, and any claim that this is equally distributed carries the burden of proof.

**7** The organisation of kinship or family in society is, when founded on the current ideology of love, a way of regulating the appearance of love-power on a political level.

**8** 'Love' today is as a concept devoid of reference in the social sciences or philosophy. Much of our terminology must be reconstructed to yield any meaning at all. Typical examples of this "bad" language: affective attunement, mutuality, socio-somatic interpersonal interaction, parental bonding, recognition (proper), social energy etc. are expressions that serve to hide the effects of love-power from scrutiny.

**9** Last but not least, love-power is today seriously unacknowledged in critical discourse on a social and political level when compared to violence-power. The push of love into the personal and violence into the political might have had other adverse effects not perceptible to us today, or they are only incidentally visible through our "modern" struggles between oppressive experiences in familiar relations versus loneliness and depression and other experiences of lack of power.

**L**ove is power.