

[Essay]

The Meaning of Life is the Pursuit of Love

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Abstract

What is the meaning of life? In this paper, I defend the claim that love, either in part or in full, is the answer to this question. As love occupies such an overarching and central position within human existence, I believe it plays a fundamental role in our understanding of life. In this paper, I argue that humanity can roughly be divided into three groups: theists, atheists and cosmic thinkers and that while each group holds different and often conflicting views, one belief about which they can all agree is the belief in love. This consensus helps to demonstrate that the pursuit of love is the meaning of life.¹

1. Introduction

There is nothing more human than wondering whether life has meaning and, if it does, what its meaning is. For a small minority, the concept of ‘the meaning of life’ is meaningless.² While, for the vast majority, at an intuitive level at the very least, it is impossible to deny that life has meaning. As the answer to the meaning of life has the potential to transform all aspects of human life, it is certainly worth assuming that life does have meaning and then proceeding to uncover this meaning.³ Admittedly, it is far from clear what life’s meaning is, and therefore, such an important question deserves due attention and careful investigation. The question is, without doubt, of the utmost importance, as it underscores what it means to be human; its answer will shape our place in, perception of and interactions within the world. Discovering the meaning of life will help make sense of whether we have a purpose, or, as the Greek philosophers might put it, whether there is a *telos* to all of this.

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¹ As agnostics are sympathetic to both the theistic and atheistic frameworks, I have deliberately decided not to include agnosticism as a category for consideration. I have instead focused on categories/groups of people that are more sharply contrasted.

² Luc Ferry, *On Love: A Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century*, trans. by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 4.

³ I begin from the premise that life does have meaning. However, this is, of course, disputed. For more, see, Richard Hare, ‘Nothing Matters’ in *Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, ed. by David Benatar (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 43-51.

In this paper, I will assume that this question can be answered and I set out to convince my readers of my answer. The basis of my argument is that irrespective of the different beliefs each of us hold – whether we are theist, atheist, or have a more cosmic view of the world – love is the single universal belief held by all. It is the powerfulness and centrality of love that renders it so fundamental to what it means to live, that one cannot but argue that attaining love is the meaning of life. To argue for this, I will begin this paper by describing love, for, if I am to claim that it is the meaning of life, it is important first to clarify what is meant by the term. After this, I will show that love has undisputed significance for the theist, the atheist and even the more cosmic thinkers among us. Following this, I will set out the reasons behind thinking that love is the answer, highlighting its gravitas and importance.

2. Love

Love, understood in its broadest sense, to include *eros*, *agape*, *storge*, *philia*, is notoriously difficult to define. Many scholars have steered clear of devoting space to defining what one might call ‘indefinable’. The reluctance is certainly understandable. The phenomenon of love is extremely ambiguous, perplexing and confusing. We all long to experience love and freely admit that we cannot adequately describe that for which we long. Love is elusive and while this does not prevent us from pursuing it, it certainly prevents us from understanding it in its entirety. Its mysteriousness is likely part of why many have been hesitant to pay love the attention it deserves. Perhaps because we have not really been able to understand what love is, we have, in turn, been reluctant to champion it as the meaning of life. Hence, I believe that by setting aside the seemingly inexpressible nature of love and arriving at a convincing definition of it, it will then allow more of us to agree that love is the meaning of life.

In a bid to define, or perhaps describe love, I will turn to one of the most current and convincing characterisations in the literature, offered by philosopher Simon May, in his book *Love: A History*, in which he proposes his own account of love. He begins by examining how love has traditionally been portrayed in theology, philosophy and psychology, with a focus on Hebrew scripture and Christian doctrine, paying particular attention to philosophers such as, Plato, Aristotle, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. Through this trajectory, May highlights the strengths and limitations of each approach towards love and goes

on to synthesise what it is that is common to all before finally offering his own account of love.

According to May's account of love, love is an expression of, what he calls, 'ontological rootedness'. By this, he means that we love that which has the ability to ground us or make us feel at home both in ourselves and in the world. He argues that a desire for love is really a desire to feel rooted in our place in the world, feel validation and feel that we really belong. He admits that only a rare number of people, things, ideas or even landscapes can promise us such feeling. Unlike other popular thoughts about love, for May, such love is not unconditional, but is 'inescapably conditional' and lasts only as long as the objects of our love promise us this grounding for our existence.⁴ 'Love', he writes, 'is the rapture we feel for people and things that inspire in us the hope of an indestructible grounding in our life'.⁵ This description is convincing for many reasons. May's view is broad enough to encompass a vast number of things that people claim to love. He, I believe, captures an understanding of love with which most individuals resonate. His position explains why, for example, one individual may love a work of art and another individual may not – because it produces in the former individual a feeling of ontological rootedness, whereas it does not in the latter. May captures the human tendency to search for grounding, belonging, or what he calls 'home'. By nature, we humans are home seekers, we are in search of what will fill us with a sense of belonging, attachment, affirmation and a greater sense of self-identity and self-awareness. As May puts it, we essentially search for confirmation that we 'exist as [...] real, legitimate and sustainable being[s]'.⁶ Homer's Odysseus famously must travel from a place of chaos to a place of harmony, until he has returned 'home'. This love of home and love of one's own is what philosopher Roger Scruton called '*oikophilia*' from the Greek 'love of home'. Like May, Scruton felt that this love of rootedness, belonging, or homeness runs deep in human culture.⁷

Helpfully, May's portrayal of love appears to capture what is common to human culture – his phenomenological perspective appears to match our experience of love. Therefore, it strikes me that a vast majority of readers will be able to agree with May's words. This portrayal of rootedness speaks to a

⁴ Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 7.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 6.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 36.

⁷ Charles Taliaferro, 'Loving One's Home in a Philosophical Culture' in *The Religious Philosophy of Roger Scruton*, ed. by James Bryson (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016), pp. 217-236.

fundamental human need to feel connected and grounded. Through this, May implicitly shows that the pursuit of love, or the search for ontological rootedness, is what gives life its meaning. Essentially, we are forever engaged in a longing for belonging.

A turn to the thoughts of philosopher Luc Ferry will help add weight to May's perspective. In *On Love*, Ferry sets out to convince his readers that the ideals we once thought give life its meaning, such as freedom, democracy, revolution and God, are now suspect. He observes that a large proportion of contemporary society is sceptical about these ideals and, as a result, no longer hail them as the answer to life's greatest question. Ferry argues that in their place, love is the only ideal that has transformed human lives in significant and unrecognisable ways, by permeating both the private and public spheres. He holds that love has become the central value in society, the new principle of meaning and the good life. He asserts that love is 'a new principle of meaning, a principle that shapes a completely new conception of the good life: it inaugurates a new era in the history of thought and of life' and has 'changed the tenor of our lives'.⁸

To some extent, we all strive for ontological rootedness, which only love can provide. Although theists, atheists and cosmic thinkers hold conflicting views about the world, one belief that they can all agree with is love. It is the task of the second half of this paper to show how these thinkers cling to their belief in love. Owing to this, it will be shown that the pursuit of love, or ontological rootedness (as would May put it), is the meaning of life.

3. Theism

For the theist, love is essential and central to their belief in God. For those who declare faith in the Judeo-Christian God, it would not be difficult to agree with the claim that the meaning of life is love. Within the theistic framework, the purpose of life is to love: to love God and to love others in a Godly manner. God's first commandment given to His people is to, 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind', with the second being, 'love your neighbour as yourself'.⁹ The instruction to love appears in the very first two commandments from God. The commandment is that love, above all else, is pleasing to God, and hence, there being such a thing as 'Christian' love. Such

⁸ Ferry, *On Love*, p. 1.

⁹ Mark 12:30-31, *The New English Bible with Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

supreme love can be characterised as the Greek, *agape* love, which is altruistic, selfless and unconditional, making it the highest form of love.

Love is the New Testament's resounding language, as theists are to love God with their whole being: *all* of their heart, soul and mind, with a love that cannot be provided on command. In addition to loving God, theists are also to love others just as they love themselves. They are to care about the needs of others and love them unconditionally in the same way that God loves. This love is not merely a favour given out on merit, but a duty that one owes. Upon realising that everyone is a neighbour, such love is to be given to all people without discrimination. The core message is that a loving disposition is pleasing to God.

According to the Bible, this outpouring of love is the correct way to respond to God and others. There are countless examples of this loving disposition shown throughout the Bible, but the best exemplar is Jesus Christ Himself, the Son of God. Jesus is born out of God's love for humanity and He is, therefore, the human embodiment of God's love for the world, 'for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son'.¹⁰ During His time on earth, Jesus showed His disciples how to respond to situations with a loving and forgiving attitude. Even in death, Jesus modelled love by sacrificing Himself on the cross because of His love for humanity.

Theists are to mimic the ways of Jesus and reciprocate this love back to God and others. The underlying message is that love of God and love of neighbour are dependent on one another. To correctly love God, one must love their neighbour and vice versa. Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's gloss on this is that, 'in loving towards the neighbour, God is the middle term, so that only by loving God above all else can you love your neighbour in the other man'.¹¹ However, it is not only theists that accept the gravitas of love.

4. Atheism

For the atheist, unlike the theist, there is no belief in God, but, like the theist, there is the belief in love. For the atheist, love does what God does for the theist: it provides the ultimate source of meaning and happiness and helps cope with moments of pain and turmoil. As May observes, with the rapid decline in religion,

¹⁰ John 3:16, *The New English Bible with Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. David Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 48.

there has been a synonymous increase in the pursuit of human love. The reason is that human love fills the gap that religion would otherwise fill as it has the double job of providing atheists with happiness in times of celebration and also helps them make sense of devastating situations. Owing to this, where the theist declares ‘God is love’ the atheist reverses the adage to ‘love is God’; whereby love has become ‘the West’s undeclared religion – and perhaps its only generally accepted religion’.¹² The reason is that it allows them to believe in an eternal, unchanging and powerful force, something greater than themselves, without having to accept the existence of God.

Within the atheistic framework, love occupies an exalted position, as it speaks to humanity’s deepest need for security, togetherness and belonging. Love is called upon in all situations. In times of celebrations – births, birthdays and bar mitzvahs – love is present because one feels love for the happy individual and the occasion. Similarly, in times of disappointment – death, illness and unemployment – it is to love and to loved ones that one clings. The love they feel for one another is what they hold onto as it helps them overcome the hardship. Even the current romanticised climate testifies to the extent to which society pursues love. Reality shows, films, music lyrics, literature, artwork, dating apps, academic books and newspaper columns are largely premised on love: the search for love, finding love, sustaining love and expressing love.

5. Cosmic

Similarly, for those who do not wish to adopt a spiritual view of life, either directly (as a theist) or indirectly (as an atheist), love can still be shown to be the answer to the question of the meaning of life. For those who subscribe to a more cosmic view of the world, love, they hold, is a fundamental force or principle of nature that puts everything into motion. In Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, he famously describes how love is the underlying force of life when he says, ‘love, that moves the Sun and the other stars’.¹³ The transcendence, grandeur and beatific vision stemming from love is clear for Dante. Though love transcends the world, it also sustains it, supporting the common cliché that ‘love makes the world go round’.

In the same vein, philosopher Troy Jollimore agrees that love has a cosmic

¹² May, *Love*, p. 1.

¹³ Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy Poem*, Paradiso, Canto XXXIII, lines 142-145, trans. by C. H. Sisson (Oxford University, 1998).

significance. In his book *Love's Vision*, he argues that love is guided by reason even though it often eludes rationality. For our purposes, the most relevant part of his argument is his observation that popular solar metaphors often portray love as a catalyst for the cosmos' function. He notes that songs such as, 'You Are My Sunshine' and 'Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone' suggest that love is akin to the sun. These solar metaphors are significant because they suggest that love, like the sun, is necessary for life on earth, such that without it, life would be futile. The further suggestion is that love, like the sun, is visionary. It affords individuals clear vision that allows humanity to see the world and others as they really exist, as opposed to how they think they exist. This approach Jollimore champions as his 'Vision View'.¹⁴

Also, human connections are created and sustained by love. Connections are strongest with those we love; 'we are all always connected, but you can also strengthen the power of this connection – when you love. So please, do not ask the Cosmos for strength but live the love inside you. It is there and it wants to live.'¹⁵ Love enhances the human network and acts as the energy that undergirds conversations and creations – a turn to Plato's *Symposium*, for example, shows that one of Diotima's well-known assertions is that creative ideas are born out of love.¹⁶

6. The motivation for thinking that love is the answer

As has been argued, love serves as the driving force for the theist, atheist, and the more cosmic thinker. Love is hailed as the meaning of life because, as the crux of this paper has shown, it serves as a hallmark to what it means to live. Love is the answer because, without love, life is futile. Plato, in one of the greatest works on love, his *Symposium*, revealed that love alone has the power to fix our brokenness, incompleteness and inevitable longing to be whole. Using his protagonist Aristophanes, Plato writes, 'love is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete'.¹⁷ All in all, these points illustrate that love has the power to make us feel connected to something greater than ourselves and in so doing can give us a sense of purpose.

¹⁴ Troy Jollimore, *Love's Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 4.

¹⁵ Sylvia Leifheit, *Initiation to the Secrets of Cosmos* (Germany: Silverline Publishing, 2015) p. 105.

¹⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 48-50 (206a-207e).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 29 (193a).

Love is the appropriate candidate as the answer to life's toughest question because it satisfies the human desire for freedom. Love allows us to realise that we are free and autonomous beings. Love reminds us that we have the capabilities to make sense of ourselves, others and the cosmos. As theologian Norman Wirzba sees it, love is 'the indispensable prerequisite for wisdom because it opens our hearts and minds to the wide and mysterious depths of reality'.¹⁸ As previously mentioned, the thought is that love allows us to refocus our attention away from ourselves and our preferences. Love retunes our attention by allowing us to see others and the world as they really are and not as we want them to be. Hence, love remains one of the most powerful forces in society. To rephrase Karl Marx, it is *love* that is the opium of the people.

Given the importance of love, it is unfortunate just how little we acknowledge love as the answer to the meaning of life. Etymology tells us that 'philosophy' translates as 'the love (*philo*) of wisdom (*sophia*)'. Therefore, by virtue of being a philosopher, one is already, by default, concerned with matters of love. It is not as if philosophers can choose when and when not to engage in love matters, as if love is an optional affair. Instead, philosophers always have a fundamental disposition to love: 'to practice philosophy is always already to be implicated in the ways of love'.¹⁹ As philosophers, our wisdom reflects our ability to love or not to love, as our ways of thinking impact the way we interact and engage with others and the world.

As Plato stresses, we must be consumed with *eros* if we are to be authentic philosophers. Love must guide our rationale because it is love that allows us to see ourselves, others and the world objectively, honestly and faithfully. Love attunes our focus; it allows us to be reflective – love is 'the indispensable prerequisite for wisdom because it opens our hearts and minds to the wide and mysterious depths of reality'.²⁰ The giants of philosophy, such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, understood this well, as love was central to their philosophy. For these thinkers, love was not an add-on to their enquiry, but as an essential feature of their wisdom.

¹⁸ Norman Wirzba, 'The Primacy of Love' in *Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love's Wisdom*, ed. by Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 15-27 (pp. 17-18).

¹⁹ Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson, 'Introduction' in *Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love's Wisdom*, ed. by Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 1-10 (p. 1).

²⁰ Wirzba, 'The Primacy of Love', (pp. 17-18).

Plato, in particular, was certainly an advocate for love as his *Symposium* attests. The *locus classicus* of the text is love. On the surface, the subject matter may appear to be a frivolous and sentimental choice for serious philosophical reflection, but, on closer inspection, Plato shows his artistry in his ability to weave together love and philosophy. He takes matters of the heart and exploits them for philosophical purposes, showing throughout each speech how and why love is central to his larger philosophical project. For him, the concept of love is central to our humanity and, therefore, central to our philosophy – the interface between philosophy and love is a given.

There is no greater human need than to feel affirmation, security and a sense of belonging; and it is love that plays this role in humanity. I believe love is to be championed as the ultimate source of happiness because it aids us in making sense of some of the most difficult questions about nature and life itself. In agreement, philosopher David Naugle holds that love is ‘an ultimate, if not the ultimate, human concern, it is the object of all human striving and the universal principle undergirding all human activity’.²¹ In making this point, Naugle captures society’s fascination with love - we are constantly told, ‘all you need is love’, and, if this is correct, then it makes sense to suppose that the meaning of life is the pursuit of love.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has argued that love is the answer to the meaning of life. Love occupies a fundamental role in human society. That which we love allows us to feel at home and rooted in the world. It affords us a sense of ontological rootedness. As has been argued, despite the many beliefs that divide human society, it is the pursuit of love, or ontological rootedness, that unites us. The paper showed that this position is true for the theist, the atheist and the cosmic thinker. Love plays an important role for all groups of people as it helps them make sense of the world and their place in it. As opposed to any other ideal, it is love that deserves the title of the meaning of life because it is love that unites, enlightens and heals humanity. In this way, I hope that this paper has gone some way to defend Mahatma Gandhi’s assertion that ‘life without love is death’.²²

²¹ David Naugle, ‘The Platonic Concept of Love: The Symposium’ in *David Naugle: Academic Papers* <<http://www3.dbu.edu/naugle/papers.htm>> [accessed 8th October 2020].

²² Mahatma Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. by Krishna Kripalani

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