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Unconditional love?

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Abstract: Unconditional love gets mentioned quite often these days. The commonest context, and the one often thought to offer the best grip on the idea, is the love of parents for their children. But is there any such thing as unconditional love? I argue that an idea of such love can and does play the role of a kind of ideal in the light of which (some) people can undertake to “love better”. But I think people have also meant, or (so to speak) have wanted to mean, something more than this in speaking of their love as unconditional. I undertake to tease out what else about love such talk may be groping towards. I suggest that this “what else” reflects something infinite or boundless in love that is only misleadingly described by talk of “unconditional” love. I draw on Hegel’s “bad infinite” to help bring out the limitations of that description, and I suggest better ways of thinking about what it obscures. I also link what is misleading in the way talk of unconditional love frames an important aspect of love, to some other current thinking about love.

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Christopher Cordner is Associate Professor of Philosophy in the University of Melbourne. His main area of philosophical interest is ethics, including platonic and religious inflections of our cultural inheritance of ethical ideas and practices. More generally, he is interested in how received approaches to thinking about ethics can exclude or deflect or distort aspects of our self-understanding as human beings that have been historically and culturally important; and in exploring whether these aspects may warrant revisiting and reconnecting with, and if so, how this reconnecting might happen. The present paper instances this field of interest with respect to one aspect of our thinking about love. More widely, the paper belongs to an attempt to remind us of goodness—by contrast with “good” as something to be produced or “the good” as an object of pursuit—as a simple reality sometimes encountered, and as profoundly nourishing when it is so.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

We are creatures capable of love, but that does not mean we automatically understand ourselves as creatures who love. When parents, for example, assert that their love for their children is unconditional, it may not be very clear at all, even to them, what they are really saying. This matters for more than one reason. It matters to us that we not be ignorant, or self-deceived, about our lives. Beyond that, we don’t individually create the language we use to articulate who and what we are. We inherit it from our ancestors, and absorb and adapt it from our cultural world. But the language we currently have may not always answer to our real needs. In this paper, I explore whether and how some current ways of thinking about love perhaps distort, or alienate us from, who we are both as lovers and as creatures who are loved.

Unconditional love gets mentioned quite often these days. The commonest context, and the one often thought to offer the best grip on the idea, is the love of parents for their children. Sometimes the context is what parental love *should* be like, or would *ideally* be like. Sometimes it is parents implying that their love for their children, and also other parents' love for *their* own children, actually is unconditional. But is there any such thing as unconditional love?

It has been widely held that the idea of such love has its source in religious thinking. The Judaeo-Christian God is held to have unconditional love for us, his human creatures. This love is often labelled with the Greek word *agape*. The suggestion is then that we human beings can, by God's grace, ourselves be enabled to love others unconditionally, even if this actually happens more rarely than we might hope.¹

But many who now speak of unconditional love make no reference to a religious context, and do not suppose themselves to be relying on one to give substance or sense to their claims about loving unconditionally. That suggests that even if the idea of unconditional love did have its origins in certain religious thinking, the idea might still continue to pollinate the life and practice of non-believers, even of a society of them. For more than one reason, though, this possibility might be thought shaky. Even if the idea of unconditional love as a possibility for human beings can linger a while after the decline of religious sensibility, perhaps it will soon enough atrophy without religious backing. But even if that were not so, maybe we should still avoid all temptation to think of our loving as capable of being unconditional. In his recent book Simon May says just this:

By imputing to human love features properly reserved for divine love, such as the unconditional and the eternal, we falsify the nature of this most conditional and time-bound and earthly emotion, and force it to labour under intolerable expectations. (pp. 4–5)

May thinks that it remains a “key belief” in “the West”² that love is unconditional; and he describes the belief's content this way: “[love] is neither aroused nor diminished by the other's value or qualities; it is a spontaneous gift that seeks nothing for the giver. (paradigm case: parents' love for their children.)” (p. 2)

May does not spell out just what *he* means by saying parental love is regarded as a “paradigm case” of unconditional love. Does he mean that while love is thought to be perfectly generally unconditional, people take parental love to be the place where love's essentially unconditional character is best lived up to by the way people actually “live” their loving? Or does he think that in other-than-parental contexts of love, people take it that the “value or qualities” of a person play an acceptable role both in “arousing” and in “diminishing” another's love of her—so that love itself has a partly different structure in those contexts? I am inclined to read May as holding to the first of those options, but anyway that does not matter for my purposes. For as my opening remarks made clear, I think May is right to say that these days parental love is the love most commonly thought genuinely unconditional. If it turns out that the nature even of parental love is “falsified” by being called “unconditional”, then the *best* candidate for unconditional love, on the view May is querying, drops out. Other candidates can then be left aside.

With that in mind, I want to begin by directly challenging the very idea that human love could be unconditional. For now I set aside the specific terms of May's discussion (though I return to them later), and approach the question from a slightly different angle. Here is one consideration. On the face of it, any claim by a parent (for example) that s/he loves his/her children unconditionally may seem to express hubris. Why so? Well, unconditional love, surely, *cannot* fail, just because one who loves unconditionally loves, and would love, *come what may*. (Here there is a link to May's terms: a love that is “neither aroused nor diminished by the other's value or qualities”, would seem to be a love that will remain in place “come what may” in or of its object.) So, loving unconditionally—as implying loving “come what may”—involves continuing to love despite whatever does or might happen to one's beloved. But it also involves continuing to love whatever happens to *the one who loves*

(perhaps short of his or her being altogether stripped of responsive capacity by death or catastrophic injury)³. And the salient point here is that no one can ever *know*, or even be in a position to be reasonably confident, that their loving is in those ways unconditional.

There are at least two compelling reasons for saying this. First, a child can change radically. Extremely, he can become a drug addict dedicated to feeding his addiction at any cost, including deceiving his parents, stealing from them, attacking them physically, expressing apparently relentless anger and hostility towards them and others. What parent could possibly know that their love would remain steadfast in the face of such a change in their child? Secondly, even those parents who most sincerely profess their unconditional love for their children might themselves change, for all sorts of reasons including the unforeseen effects on them of serious illness or hardship, betrayal by friends, loss of reputation, being taken over by envy and resentment, and so on. Love for their children might weaken or dissolve under the corrosive pressure of these forces, even if the children themselves do not change.

Surely no one can *know* that their own loving is absolutely proof against failure in one of these ways—failure resulting from changes in the beloved which alienate the lover, or from trials and afflictions the lover may herself suffer. (I’ve spoken of parental love, but the point applies to *any* human love.) But unconditional love would not fail even under such conditions. So, if for the reasons mentioned no one can know that their love is proof against such failure, a person’s professing his or her love to be unconditional is *never* warranted; and profession of such love expresses hubris. From this it might be concluded that unconditional love lies beyond the scope of our capacity for loving. Perhaps the *idea* of such loving remains coherent. But unconditional love can never itself be a *real presence* in our human lives.

But that conclusion is a little too quick. Even if professing one’s love as unconditional does indeed always express hubris, it does not quite follow that human loving never *is* unconditional. For if unconditional love is love that will and would never fail, come what may, then someone’s love just *might* be like that, even if s/he is never in a possession to claim without hubris that it is so. Well, if that does remain in some sense a possibility, is it a realistic one? There seems good reason to say it is not. Whatever trials someone’s loving has survived, still we can never plausibly exclude the possibility that some unanticipated trial, one that may never *actually* arise, *would* see it fail. And that is not the expression of a remote, merely “Cartesian”, scepticism about the actuality of someone loving come what may. For we already know the vulnerability of people’s even deep-rooted affections to being upset, distorted and even dislodged by fearful contingencies. The more the terribleness of potential such contingencies is ratcheted up, the less implausible it is to suppose that even deep-rooted loves might be dissolved by them. Simon Weil captures the force of what is at issue here:

To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself: “I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort.” To be aware of this in the depths of one’s soul ... is ... the condition for passing over into truth. (Weil, 1986, p. 88)

In light of the above, should we then conclude that an idea of unconditional love has *no* substantial role to play in our living and loving? Well, if the playing of a substantial role by a concept or idea of unconditional love depends on unconditional love being *instantiated* in human life, this conclusion might be warranted. But one might instead moot a different role for the idea. Perhaps the concept or idea of unconditional love is best thought of as a kind of ideal, in the light of which we can measure or judge our own loving, and find it to be wanting. In these or those circumstances, our love fails or falters or finds distorted or ungenerous expression. If, when this happens we can see our failure or faltering in the light of an ideal of love as not thus failing or faltering, then the unexemplified idea

of unconditional love is still playing a significant role in our loving and our reflections upon it. So even though we fail and fail again, our very ability to see our failures as failures, along with our being moved, in the light of so seeing, to try to “love better” (or even just to continue to love), just *is* our orientation to an idea of unconditional love—in the midst, as it were, of our actual “all-too-human” loving. Even if we are not ever able *actually* to love unconditionally, we can love in a way that is responsive to the demands of *the idea* of unconditional love.⁴

Suppose this is right and that the idea (ideal) of unconditional love can and does play such a role in some people’s lives. That is not to say that it plays a role in *everyone’s* life, nor that it is only via their orientation to an ideal of love as unconditional that people can register normative claims upon them to “love better” when their love falters. For it seems one could be responsive to such claims without necessarily thinking of them as *unconditional*. Someone might think that in these or those circumstances he should have been less self-absorbed, or more patient, than he was, while still thinking that there are clear limits on the reach of such demands upon him—contexts in which the expression of his love reaches acceptable limits. Here, though, I am imagining someone whose hope is that, however difficult their child becomes and whatever difficulties they find themselves in, they will remain answerable to the requirement to love better. In the activity of such a person, the idea of love as unconditional does seem to be playing a role. But the role it plays is interestingly different from what is claimed by those who hold that their love (commonly their love for their children) is *itself* unconditional love. For those who recognize their answerability to the idea—to the ideal—at the same time acknowledge the frailty of their actual loving: they do not regard themselves as actually infallibly loving. Indeed it is precisely because they recognize the fallibility of their actual loving, that they think themselves always answerable to the requirement to love better, or simply to continue to love when their loving falters.

So we seem to be in the following position. No one is in a position to claim that their loving is infallibly secure—that in *that* sense their love is unconditional. Anyone who thinks they are in such a position is mistaken, and arguably guilty of hubris. But a certain ideal of love can, and does, play a role in some loving. And we might then consider charitably re-interpreting those parents who speak of their love for their children as unconditional. Perhaps they (or some of them anyway) are best regarded not as making a hubristic claim about their actual loving, but as thinking of their love for their children in the light of the requirements of that ideal of love. They regard their actually fallible loving as answerable to those requirements.

That is one way of rescuing talk of parental love as “unconditional” from vulnerability to the fact that no one can know, or justifiably claim, that his actual love for his children will remain intact come what may. The parent who speaks of his unconditional love for his children is instead to be understood as giving expression to his undertaking to remain answerable, whatever happens, to the requirement still to love them. As a matter of fact (I’ll return to this shortly), I find this reinterpretation rather implausible: at least I doubt that this is *all* that any such parents take themselves to be saying. But even so it may well capture at least something of what they are trying to get at in what they say. More strongly, I’m suggesting that this is as far as it is possible to go in accommodating what they do say with their professions of unconditional love for their children.

The picture I have sketched might then seem to be the best we can do in making sense of how “divine” unconditional love can actually be reflected in our human loving—precisely, as a recognition of our ever-continuing answerability to continuing to love when our love threatens to lapse or fail, or to loving better when our actual loving falls short of our loving well. That seems to build an intelligible kind of “infinite demand” into at least some human loving—since it is a demand that people can recognize themselves as presently committed to trying to answer to, come what may. Perhaps not everyone recognizes such a demand, but the demand makes sense, and some people do recognize it. For those who do, at least some love—typically, love for their children—is haunted by an ideal.

There are potential difficulties, to be sure, even with this ideal of loving. Some have thought, for example, that there is something either incoherent or psychologically debilitating in such an ideal. In fact that is two different thoughts, often run together, as perhaps they are by Stephen May when he writes, in a passage I quoted earlier:

By imputing to human love features properly reserved for divine love, such as the unconditional and the eternal, we falsify the nature of this most conditional and time-bound and earthly emotion, and force it to labour under intolerable expectations. (pp. 4–5)

The idea of seeing and judging oneself in the light of an ideal one cannot fully realize seems to be coherent enough. The truth of the widespread view that orienting oneself by such an ideal is psychologically debilitating—because love (in this case) is “forced to labour under intolerable expectations”—is another matter. My own view is that while some people might be psychologically debilitated by the way they conceive their relation to such an ideal, this may show more about them than it does about the ideal. In Freudian terms—though the point can also be made in other ways—such people find themselves crushed by a brutal super-ego. But the super-ego does not *have* to be brutal just because it relates one to an ideal. Others, under the *aegis* of the ideal, might instead find themselves simply re-oriented to the good of the other whom they have let down or in some other way failed.

In any case, though, I am not here concerned with this possible reason for scepticism about the value of such an ideal. I want to ask a different question: What *else* of importance in our thinking about love might be missed or overlooked by the way my reflections on unconditional love have so far been implicitly framed? Does talk of love as unconditional—or perhaps as infinite or unbounded—perhaps gesture towards something that is missed by that framing? I think the answer is yes; and I now want to try to bring out what that “something” is. Here is a way of approaching that task.

What I called “the role played by the idea of unconditional love” looks very like recognition of a demand or requirement upon us as to how we *ought* to love—a moral demand. Does this demand or requirement reflect anything in the actual lived character of our loving itself that distinguishes this from the lived character of our “conditional” loving? Or is the difference a matter only of something external to that character—the required repetition or continuance, in the face of challenge, of the loving? If the latter, unconditional loving would seem to be just the perpetual continuing of conditional love. The unconditionality of unconditional love would then be essentially a matter of its never—never ever, come what may—failing across time, rather than of anything distinctive in the quality or character or manner of *the loving itself*. Without wanting to deny the significance of this difference across time, I suggest that it misses something crucial in our thinking about love—something that talk of unconditional love may, though obscurely, be gesturing towards.

Hegel can help orient us to that “something”. The framing of “unconditional love” so far considered has the hallmarks of Hegel’s bad infinite [“schlechte Unendlichkeit”]. What did Hegel mean by the bad infinite? One example he gives of it is thinking of the infinitude of the real number series as simply its “going on and on” into an infinitely receding distance; (Hegel, 1969, SL 139) and a second example is conceiving of eternal life as just “living on and on” into an infinitely receding distance, perhaps after that strange event called death. In both cases, the supposed shift from the finite to the infinite is no more than ever-continued repetition. The bad infinite is the infinite or the eternal thought of as “ever more” of the finite or transient. As his calling it the “bad” infinite implies, Hegel thought this an inadequate model (if “model” is the right word) of the infinite.

Similarly, then, to think of unconditional love simply as love that will never lapse because it will continue in time whatever changes the lover and/or the beloved undergo—and correlatively to think of loving under an ideal of such love as an aspiration to thus continue to love—arguably distorts it by treating it on the model of the “bad infinite”. So speaking of it misses something “in the loving itself”, which cannot be got into it just by its sustained continuance or repetition.

One point should be noted before we go further. Some recent translators of Hegel have rendered “schlechte” Unendlichkeit as “spurious” rather than “bad” infinite/infinity. That translation suggests that it is not any kind of infinite at all, since “spurious” suggests “a fake, a forgery a counterfeit of some sort”⁵—something which does not in fact exemplify the kind in question at all, but only seems or purports to exemplify it. A “bad” something, by contrast, exemplifies the kind in question but is for one reason or another a flawed specimen: a bad golf shot or egg or movie is still a golf shot, an egg, a movie, just not a good specimen of the kind. Well, I am happy to allow that an orientation to continuing one’s loving come what may is indeed an expression of *something* “infinite” in one’s orientation, and so to agree that this orientation is not well described as an instance of a merely “spurious” infinite. But I am also suggesting that this orientation misses something else that I think people have tried (with limited success) to put their finger on with talk of “unconditional love”—a something else that may warrant being thought of as “infinite” in a way that is free of the limitations of Hegel’s bad infinite. One of Hegel’s own examples of true infinity is the circle (Hegel, 1969). A circle has no beginning or end, and its endlessness is given in its very being as a circle. Infinity here is not always postponed because a matter of ever-continuing repetition: the circle is complete, wholly given *in* its infinity or endlessness. Let us see if that example provides an imaginative hint for our thinking about love.

Here is a way of bringing out something missed by the “bad infinite” model of unconditional love. I coached my son’s community football team when he was 10. My assistant coach, Dennis, had a boy in the team. He also had a younger son, Toby, with pronounced physical and intellectual disabilities, who used to come to the football games with Dennis. I had seen only a little of Dennis with his sons away from the football field; I was vaguely aware that Toby needed quite a bit of his time. One day, at a big moment in an important match for the team, with Dennis and I both fully focused on the play, Toby came up to ask his father for something. The loving and wholly attentive patience with which Dennis turned and immediately responded to Toby has always remained with me, as a kind of beacon for my sense of my love for my own children. But as such it has been primarily a reminder not of the need for “more of the same”, but of what real attentiveness, real loving presence to one’s child here and now, is. I had virtually no prior evidence about whether or how Dennis’ loving attention to Toby would extend into the future; and my response to what I now saw was not most fundamentally the expression of greater predictive confidence about Dennis’ future disposition towards Toby.⁶ Perhaps the continuing, into future occasions, of Dennis’ loving attention to Toby was indeed foreshadowed in the love I saw manifested on that occasion. But even so, that implication of his loving was not what most moved me in the love I witnessed. It’s worth noting, too, that what did most move me I would not myself describe as the unconditional character of that love. Earlier, we saw the natural drift of such talk into counterfactual features of the love: that unconditional love is love that would remain even were its object and/ or the lover to change radically. But if what most moved me in the love I witnessed was its unusually pure and patient character, those terms betoken the “quality” or the *spirit of the loving itself*. The “bad infinite” model of unconditional love—representing it in terms of the love’s endurance across time and change—disregards this dimension of the loving. The model in effect just assumes that “everybody” loves their children—there is no difficulty in knowing what *that* means!—and then there are those (many, it is often supposed) with a firm commitment to continuing this loving across time, perhaps undertaking to do so even “come what may”. And these are the ones who love their children “unconditionally”.

Well, of course “all parents”—alright, not all, but most!—love their children. But my example is meant to point to differences in *loving*—a difference, specifically, in depth, purity, patience of love. (This difference can show itself in other contexts than parental love too.) This difference is not to be understood in terms of continuation across time—a potential “infinity” constituted out of continuing or repeated “finite” items or moments of loving—even if we do take persistence across time to be foreshadowed in such loving. Neither is the difference one, at least in any straightforward way, of quantity or of intensity. The best single term I can think of to mark the dimension of difference in depth, purity patience of loving, is the *spirit* of the loving, though I do not wish to hang too much on that specific word.

Let me make another connection. We saw that the indefinite repetition or continuance of a series of loving moments makes for only a Hegelian “bad infinity” of love. Perhaps it does not have to be put this way, but I think we can make ready enough sense of speaking of a pure, patient love of the kind I described as “infinite” or boundless. But even if in witnessing such love we are indeed spontaneously confident of its continuance in the one who loves (Dennis, for example), that confidence—reflecting an implicitly *predictive* attitude—does not itself mark what I am now calling the infinity or endlessness of the love.⁷ For that is something inherent in this very enactment or manifestation of the loving itself, as the endlessness or infinity of the circle is ingredient in this very manifestation of its circularity. I think almost any parent could find himself or herself moved to acknowledge a kind of purity of attentiveness in someone like Dennis that they would hope might inform their love for their own child. If this is in some sense their acknowledgement of an ideal of love, it is not an ideal of temporal endurance of their loving, but of love’s becoming deeper or purer in its responsiveness to its “object”.⁸

I have tried to clarify what might be called two different “dimensions” of love-as-infinite. One, I spoke of in connection with a common contemporary way of speaking of unconditional love; the other, I spoke to with the example of Dennis. How well are these two dimensions reflected in extant philosophical thinking about love. (I ask this not for the sake of “completeness”, but to help tease out some of the implications of the difference between them.) To help answer the question, let us return to some key themes of what Simon May says about love. He describes one of the modern “key beliefs” about love this way: “Love is unconditional: it is neither aroused nor diminished by the other’s value or qualities; it is a spontaneous gift that seeks nothing for the giver. (paradigm case: parents love for their children.)” (p. 4) Against this, May says that “love is inescapably conditional” on the promise that another person (or thing or idea or discipline or landscape) can inspire in us “the feeling that I call ‘ontological rootedness’”, a feeling answering to our “need to feel at home in the world: to root our life in the here and now; to give our existence solidity and validity; to deepen the sensation of being; to enable us to experience the reality of our life as indestructible (even if we also accept that our life is temporary and will end in death)” (p. 6).

May does not tell us what in another inspires this “feeling” in us nor what might dissolve it. But he says that when another does inspire it in us, then love

will, from that point on, be unconditional. The lover will affirm and rejoice in the existence of the loved one regardless of her other qualities: her powers, her looks, her intelligence, her status, regardless, too, of complications in the lover’s feelings and commitments to her. And to such a degree that he might be willing to die for her, for without her his life would be emptied of its ultimate “meaning”: the discovery of a home that gives validity and solidity to his existence. No destructiveness, betrayal, mean-spiritedness, or decline on her part could then kill his love for her. Unless—and this is the *only* circumstance in which love can be killed—she no longer inspires in him the hope of ontological rootedness. (p. 7)

May’s view has some puzzling features. One is that, taken strictly, his words seem to imply that someone who finds he cannot commit murder or trample over others to save his beloved, *for that reason alone* can truly be said not to love her as much as one who will do those things. That is because for this person other “meanings”—what it means to commit murder, for example—prevail over his doing whatever is necessary to save her. She therefore does not constitute the “ultimate ‘meaning’” of his existence—unlike the beloved of the one who would have committed murder to save her, and whose love is for that reason alone the greater. But surely that conclusion is not warranted: someone might love his partner very deeply, while also finding it absolutely—though devastatingly—impossible to murder someone else to save her. The fact that someone would murder to save a person he loves need not show that his love is deeper, but only that he is less horrified at murdering than is the one who will not do it. (Even the latter, though, may well understand the *temptation* to murder in such circumstances.) Something is therefore awry in May’s view.

But set that feature of his view aside. The terms in which May describes the lover's orientation seem to echo the understanding of their own loving that I ascribed to those parents who speak of their unconditional love for their children: "the lover will affirm and rejoice in the existence of the loved one regardless of her ... looks, her intelligence, her status ... No destructiveness, betrayal, mean-spiritedness, or decline on her part could then kill his love for her". May's distinctive twist on the theme lies in his reference to the lover's "hope of ontological rootedness" as a grounding condition of love. "(F)rom that point on", though, he says, love will be unconditional. But a further question immediately arises: whether what May highlights in this henceforth "unconditional" love is important because it underwrites love's endurance (*that* being the key thing about unconditional love), or because it marks a distinctive mode of attentiveness-here-and-now to the beloved. These are very different emphases; for while such attentiveness may indeed foreshadow continuance or endurance of loving, its meaning and importance are not, I have suggested, primarily held in its doing that.

Much philosophical thinking about love⁹ remains ambivalent or unclear on precisely this question. Some of what May says shares in that ambivalence. Later in his book, he specifically invokes the vocabulary of *attention* in what he thinks to be a development of the theme of the passage I quoted above:

Genuine human love will last only ... for as long as the lover can sustain the attentiveness towards the loved one that is love's principal virtue and the precondition for its development. Perhaps too, it will endure only if lovers develop the shared living, the dialogue of two lives that, Aristotle reminds us, is essential if love's potential is to be actualized ... But attentiveness is fragile and imperceptibly surrenders to inattentive habit. Genuine love is an achievement which can be sporadic at best. (p. 237)

And again: "But the virtues of genuine love—attentiveness to the reality of the other; submission to her lawfulness and what it is calling on us to do; devotion to her as a second self ..." (p. 238)

In these passages, the emphasis is closer to what I called a purity or perfection of attentiveness, as a condition of what May calls "genuine love".¹⁰ To be sure, what May emphasizes here is still rather under-described. Earlier I invoked patience in this context; and one might also mention reverence, respect and perhaps tenderness as elements or aspects of a loving attentiveness to the reality of another.¹¹ But even under-described, the orientation May emphasizes is clearly not the same as that highlighted by the lover's "readiness to die" for the beloved, and also by the reference to love's endurance through radical changes in the beloved. These emphases—on preserving or protecting the beloved, and on the enduring of love for her—are not inconsistent with what is involved in pure attentive response, but neither are they just elaborations of such pure attentiveness. They introduce other themes.

Noting the prominence of analyses of love in terms of some aim or aims with respect to the beloved, David Velleman rejects them all.¹² ("Caring and sharing, benefiting and being with, are the obvious candidates" for such aims (p. 87); and he might well have added May's "preserving and protecting"). Velleman endorses Iris Murdoch's view that love "is an exercise in 'really looking'"; and he says that "the various motives that are often identified with love are in fact independent responses that love merely unleashes". (p. 95) He writes: "Love does not feel (to me at least) like an urge or impulse or inclination toward anything; it feels rather like a state of attentive suspension, similar to wonder or amazement or awe". (p. 95) Perhaps the positive claim here is rather too general: Does it really apply equally well to love of one's children, romantic love and love of one's friend? But that does not matter for the present point, which is that the aim of preserving or protecting the beloved, along with express commitment to the enduring of one's "caring and sharing, benefiting and being with", belong to the aims and motives with which Velleman says love is not to be identified. As general aims they are certainly not inconsistent with love—indeed, as Velleman says they are "unleashed" by love. When "unconditional" love is in question, such aims as these are natural objects of the lover's thoughts about what he must be unswervingly committed to, and so about

what must endure or continue in his orientation. But if, as Velleman says, love is not to be analysed in terms of such aims,¹³ then what lies at the heart of the infinite and unbounded in love is also not to be understood in terms of the continuance or endurance of such aims in the lover. That turns out to be just not the right *kind* of picture of such love. What Velleman's positive terms—even if one has some reservations about them—point us towards is very much what May's invocation of “attentiveness” and my own remarks about purity of attention also point to. The “infinite” in love lies in the spirit of this attentiveness here, now, a spirit partly characterizable in terms of the purity, depth and patience of the attentiveness. Aim-oriented accounts of love will lead us to miss this dimension of love by encouraging us to render it in broadly in the terms of Hegel's bad infinite.

Let me clarify a key point in what I have been saying so far, in a slightly different way. Many parents who *never* attend to their children as Dennis did (and does) to Toby would nevertheless be ready to die for their children. I do not for a moment condescend to, let alone dismiss, that readiness. But still it is a very different thing from what is exemplified in Dennis. A parent *already* thus prepared to die for his child might still find himself newly woken to the possibility of responding to his own child more attentively, precisely by encountering the example of a Dennis. This was so with me, and it seems clear that it could be so with one of these parents I began by considering who sincerely professes that he loves his children unconditionally. The “limitlessness” of a pure attentiveness exists, so we might put it, in a different dimension from the (Hegelian “bad”) infiniteness of durability or repetition.

I think there is an analogue here with the moral attitude of respect, even in its Kantian form. By the “moral” attitude of respect, I mean to distinguish it from respect that is earned by the qualities or deeds of those respected, and that is properly regarded as forfeited by absence or failure of those things: “He lost his pupils' respect because of the nasty sarcasm he began to resort to in class”. The respect I'm instead speaking of is indeed often called unconditional. In Kant's view, all people are always owed such respect. But—even if Kant himself may not always keep this clearly in view—such respect must involve a form of due attentiveness to *him* or *her*. There may be a sense in which I can be motivated to respectfully attend to this person on the basis of a “universal” thought about the respect I owe to all persons always. But my actually so attending to this person is not guaranteed by my having of such a thought, however sincerely I entertain it. Nor is it guaranteed even by my successful determination never to fail in any duties towards this person (whoever it be). My attitude has to actually *be* one of respectful—Kant also says “reverential”—attentiveness towards *this person*, here and now, and its actually being so exists in a different dimension from anything directly derivable from a “universal” thought about everyone's respect worthiness, and also in a different dimension from the successful prosecution of any aims with respect to him or her, even the noble aim of leaving no duties to the other unperformed. That last thought is carried in Kant's insistence that I can never *know* that I have acted from a morally good will because however sincerely I have set myself to do so it remains possible that some “hidden principle of self-love” has actually motivated me. (While I think this analogue of Kantian respect with what I have said about love does indeed hold, my argument does not depend on it).

Let me repeat that I'm not dismissing the importance of parents, or others, being committed to continuing to love those they love. In May's terms, that future-directed orientation may even seem to be a condition of one's here and now recognizing one's love as involving a “submission to the beloved's *lawfulness*” [my italics]. In related terms, we can speak of a person recognizing herself as claimed in response by the other: there is a kind of necessity here, and that betokens the lover's answerability, in circumstances other than those presently obtaining, to what she is “called on ... to do” (p. 238) by her love. But at the same time, a key point is that there is a kind of limitlessness, a kind of “infinity”, in a genuinely loving orientation, that resists full capture in terms either of “continuance” itself or of the lover's commitment to it, and that instead dwells in what I called the spirit or manner of the loving. The parent, who is moved by and awoken anew to something in the “attentiveness” of a Dennis to Toby, is not awoken to the need for “continuance” of his loving. He may *already* have been committed to that—that is the theme of those passages from May focusing on

being “willing to die” for the beloved, and on his love being such that nothing will “kill” it. What he might be awoken to by an example like that of Dennis belongs to a register—which May calls “attentiveness to the reality” of the other, and “submission to her lawfulness”, and which I spoke of in terms of the purity and lucidity of attention to her—that escapes full capture in terms of the continuing or enduring of love.

I am suggesting that May does indeed speak in both these ways but without, it seems, being wholly clear sighted about the difference between them. He oscillates between them and seems to take his second way of speaking—thematizing “attentiveness”—to be effectively an elaboration on the first. The significance of that mistake can then be described in the terms of Hegel’s two conceptions of infinity. May’s first way of speaking, carrying suggestions of an aim-oriented account of loving, gives expression to Hegel’s “bad infinite”—remembering that its “badness” does not mean it should be eschewed, only that it falls short of or misses an “infinite” that matters more. Even if it is less than fully developed, May’s second way of speaking—in terms of “attentiveness to the reality” of the other and “submission to her lawfulness”—registers the loving response whose “infinity”, like that of the circle, is enacted in the very mode or manner of its present being.

The ambivalence, or oscillation, I find here in May’s reflections is manifested more widely in philosophical thinking about love. Even a thinker as subtle as Talbot Brewer, in his recent penetrating critique of “production” models of action and desire, shows symptoms of it:

To love another is to be drawn to another by a generous straining to bring into focus the goodness, hence desirability, of an as-yet-obscure object of desire. The lover stands ready to interpret the beloved’s words and actions as signposts towards further discoveries about what it is good to be or to do, and this interpretive posture sustains and is sustained by attention-riveting appreciation of the other. At its best, this is a mutual and continuously reiterated process. It involves a readiness on the part of each to be guided by the example of the other in articulating an evolving understanding of the human good. (Brewer, 2009, p. 64)

This passage affirms an aim-oriented conception of love—to progressively “bring (the other) into focus”, to realize “further discoveries”—while holding that this “interpretive posture” is “sustained by attention-riveting appreciation of the other”. (For Velleman, by contrast, love is “attentive suspension” and love then “unleashes” various aims in the lover). So far as the role of the attention is to sustain the future-directed orientation, this still amounts to a “bad infinite” reading of love even at love’s best. Brewer’s version of such a reading is subtler than many, precisely because of his acute critique of a model of action as aiming at the production of already fully-determinately conceived outcomes. But still the teleological theme of Brewer’s own picture preserves the view I have been querying. It is important that love can indeed deepen through a life shared, as Brewer here suggests. But to say that to love *is* “to be drawn to another by a generous straining to bring into focus the goodness, hence desirability, of an as-yet-obscure object of desire”? Or that the lover “stands ready to interpret the beloved’s words and actions as signposts towards further discoveries about what it is good to be or to do” as if this is the defining “stand” of the lover? Love opens the lover to becoming present to the beloved—even if we know all too well that, fearful of their own self-exposure, human beings often resist the letting-themselves be present to the other that their love presses on them. Such presence-to cannot be adequately understood in terms of its contribution to the deferral to the future suggested by “signposts towards further discoveries” about what it is good to be or do. Brewer’s teleological emphasis eloquently resists a conception of abiding love as just a matter of repetition or continuance, and so it is not implicated in any simple version of Hegel’s “bad infinite”. But even so, the teleological emphasis still deflects full appreciation of what can be carried in *this* loving presence to another. (Although I can’t establish this here, my further suggestion is that a kindred limitation will attend *any* teleologically accented account of love).

Finally, my main point here about two different models for an “infinite” love is further confirmed by reflecting on the experience of *being* loved. If the really important thing about parental love for

children was its unconditionality, and that was to be explicated in terms of its enduringness, its continuance, then what was affirming or nourishing in that experience would seem best reflected in the beloved's warranted confidence in that love's continuance in the future. As I have emphasized, there certainly is a place, even an important place, for such a future-directed orientation, but it does not by itself fully capture the sense of *being held securely here and now*, in the pure attentiveness of this loving. If a pure love is a love wholly responsive to the reality of its object, then the experience of such a love can be the experience of one's "reality"—we could also say, the experience of *oneself*—being affirmed absolutely and without qualification. What is then at issue here—this time from the perspective not of the lover but of the beloved's reception of the love—is the experienced spirit or manner of the *loving itself*, rather than any conviction about its repetition or continuance.

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Notes

1. Nygren (1969) has a very influential exposition this view, of which there have also been many variants.
2. May doesn't explicitly confine the belief to "the West", but also doesn't commit himself to a wider claim.
3. The parenthesis in the text raises the question of what events fall outside the scope of the parents' profession of unconditional love. Obviously, for example, those parents don't think they will continue to love their children when they (the parents) are dead. The (vague) thought in play here, I suggest, is something like this: "Only something like the cancelling of all capacity in me for attentive response to another could end my loving of my children". That implies, I think, that their love will withstand the sorts of corrosive pressures mentioned in the text, but leaves unspecified just where, this side of death, the boundary between such "corrosive pressures" and what I called "the cancelling of all capacity for attentive response", is to be drawn. Let it be agreed that the unconditionality of love is not undermined by its cessation under such cancelling. My point in the text is that no one can *know* that his love will be sustained even under corrosive pressures falling well short of such cancelling.
4. Of course the one who suffers the affliction Weil describes in the passage I quoted will no longer be able even to orient himself to that ideal of love. But that is compatible with this ideal still playing an actual role in a person's life short of his undergoing such affliction.
5. See Wayne Martin "In Defense of Bad Infinity", online at <http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/wmartin/BadInfinity.pdf>, p. 3.
6. I would certainly have been very surprised, indeed amazed, had it turned out that Dennis later came to neglect Toby, or to respond dismissively or even casually to him. But as we noted earlier, such changes can in fact happen: Dennis might go mad, or suffer a breakdown or some other unexpected disaster that disables

him from attending to Toby in the way I witnessed. If any of that were to happen, that would be a devastating (to Dennis) dislocation of his love for Toby.

7. Does love necessarily take up a significant stretch of time—even if what counts as a significant stretch can't be determined at all precisely—so that it is not possible to love "for just a few moments"? I'm inclined—though hardly more than inclined—to think so. But nothing in my argument depends on the view one takes about this.
8. In my "Attention and Moral Reality in Iris Murdoch" (unpublished), I resist another mistaken way—in terms of grasping more properties of, or coming into possession of more truths about, another—in which philosophers have tried to spell out love's deepening.
9. About love in general, but also specifically about "unconditional" love, which is my main concern here.
10. May's emphasis on attention recalls Iris Murdoch. Another who has similarly followed Iris Murdoch is Velleman (2006, pp. 70–109). While Velleman avoids a "bad infinite" reading of love's infinity or boundlessness, it needs saying that drawing on the idea of attentiveness does not itself guarantee such avoidance—that depends on how the idea is elaborated.
11. On this, and the theme of note 13, again see my "Attention and Moral Reality in Iris Murdoch".
12. In addition to Sigmund Freud, Velleman cites Henry Sidgwick, Laurence Thomas, Harry Frankfurt, Gabriele Taylor, William Lyons, Patricia Greenspan, Robert Nozick, John Rawls and Alan Soble as defending analyses of love in terms of love's supposed aims. See "Love as a Moral Emotion", pp. 82–86 for quotations and references.
13. I am not offering independent justification for Velleman's view here; just drawing on it as both dovetailing with, and illuminating, the view I have myself developed.

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