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Critiques and Affirmations

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## Abstract

Psychologists' contributions to our understanding of compassionate love have fallen far short of their potential. A major reason, it is argued, is psychologists' love–hate relationship with the concept of love. Psychologists raise challenging questions about love (or some *understandings* of love), based on their own deep (albeit rarely clearly articulated) ethical intuitions (e.g., telling battered women they are *obligated* to show greater love for their abusers *harms* them). In addition, many psychologists' understandings of love (e.g., a “soft” topic, and/or pertaining to what is good or obligatory, to human choices, and/or to divine action) fit poorly with psychology's natural scientific methods, which address hard facts. On the other hand, psychologists conduct research *relevant* to love and ample evidence exists that psychologists are deeply committed to love. Psychologists thus both critique love (hate it) and affirm it. When we acknowledge the critics' partial truths, routinely clarify what we mean by love, articulate how psychologists currently affirm compassionate love (often using other terms), and clarify what empirical methods can (and cannot) tell us about love, then, and only then, will psychologists' critical and affirming voices join to decidedly deepen our psychological understanding of compassionate love.

## Psychology's Love–Hate Relationship with Love:

### Critiques and Affirmations

Psychologists' modest contributions to our understanding of compassionate love may be attributed in substantial measure, I think, to psychologists' ambivalence about love. We are drawn to love, but also tend to be deeply suspicious about love, concerned about its negative effects, and unclear about what method, if any, can be employed to understand it. And our customary methods, the language we employ, our sense of our history, and our aspirations all make it very difficult to talk about—and work through—our ambivalence.

In this paper, I want to analyze some of the reasons we psychologists have contributed as little as we have to an understanding of compassionate love, notwithstanding the scattered contributions summarized in Post, Johnson, McCullough, and Schloss's (2003) recently released *Research on Altruism and Love* and the research recently funded by the Fetzer Institute and the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love. Neither that compilation of research findings nor the new research will entirely eliminate the multiply determined critiques of love and the controversies over optimal methods to study it. Unless psychologists' critiques of love are directly and effectively addressed, that emerging research is likely to be hotly contested by some psychologists, quietly snickered over by many others, and—worst of all—ignored by most.

We thus need to take seriously psychologists' critiques of love, their “hate” of it, if you will. The critics make some valid points about love, I think. And so if we pay close attention to the hate of love, we can better understand love. Furthermore, some of their criticisms need to be challenged so emerging research can gain the hearing it deserves.

Permit me to situate myself: I'm a clinical psychologist by training, and I practiced for five years before becoming a full-time academic. I would now, however, characterize myself

primarily as a theoretical psychologist, concerned about articulating and evaluating the assumptions underlying various psychological theories, findings, and practices. I am particularly interested in psychology's ethical character, in the ways in which various psychological approaches draw upon, and are shaped by, various ethical assumptions.

I am also, by history and conviction, a Christian. And so love is central to my understanding of optimal human functioning. Love is not, however, central to the thinking of most psychologists. In writing my (1999) book, *Ethics and Values in Psychotherapy*, for instance, I found little evidence that love is central to the thinking of most therapists, although there are some notable exceptions and the concept implicitly informs much that psychotherapists do. The tension between my own ethical convictions and the ethical convictions generally present in psychology—even, or especially, in those psychologists who claim their views are based solely on science—has shaped who I am and is at the heart of the intellectual passions that motivate me as a scholar.

Let me now turn to the thorny issue of specifying just what compassionate love means. It is a little strange talking about the “psychology of compassionate love,” because a search for the phrase among the millions of references in PsycINFO, the major database in psychology produces precisely four results: Two are to Lynn Underwood's (2002b) chapter in Post, Underwood, Schloss, and Hurlbut's (2002a) *Altruism and Altruistic Love*, one is to a 1994 study of romantic love among Mexican university students, and the last is to a book on the psychotherapy of Jesus—in German, published in 1928.

Let me set out an approach to defining compassionate love that makes the challenges of developing the psychology of compassionate love clear, a definition that flushes the deep differences that exist among those trying to understand some dimension of compassionate love.

Wyschogrod (2002) defines alterity-altruism as other-regarding behavior “relating to the other not as a content of one’s own consciousness—as a perception of or an emotional response to the other—but rather as an ethical datum that makes a claim on the self to engage in other-regarding acts” (p. 29). Underwood (2002b) suggests that compassionate love, which refers to a reality about which “there is something essentially ineffable” (p. 72), involves “an investment of self deeper than *altruism* suggests” (p. 72), and is a “free choice for the other” (p. 73). Jesus, according to the Fourth Gospel, stated, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13, NRSV). Post (2002) identifies a particular form of altruistic love, *agape*, which he defines as “altruistic love universalized to all humanity as informed by theistic commitments” (p. 53). And Browning (2002) notes that, in Aristotelian-Thomistic models, Christian love “finally finds itself on the sacred status of human personhood, the belief that all good (and all specific goods) comes from God, and that the ultimate meaning and direction of all finite loves is the overarching love for and enjoyment of God” (p. 343).

And so a variety of understandings of love are extant, emphasizing or including a variety of dimensions of love. Let me mention 32 (somewhat overlapping but arguably distinguishable) dimensions relevant to understanding compassionate (altruistic) love. Definitions of “love,” “altruistic love,” or “compassionate love” generally reflect the user’s underlying philosophical and/or theological assumptions, implicit or explicit psychological understandings of human beings, ethical perspective, and preferred method(s). And so these (diverse!) dimensions of love are emphasized by different authors:

- ***Agentic***\* (“free will”)
- ***Behavioral*** (*observable*)
- ***Biological***:
  - Genetic/Evolutionary
  - Neurochemical
  - Hormonal

- **Capacities** (*human capabilities*)
- **Cognitive**
- **Cultural**
- **Developmental**
- **Distortions of human potential:**
  - Sin\*
  - Psychopathology
  - Ignorance
  - Etc.
- **Emotional**\*
- **Empathy**
- **Environmental** (situational influences, past or present)
- **Ethical**, understood from the perspective(s) of:
  - Consequentialism only
  - Deontology only\*
  - Virtue ethics only\*
  - Ethical pluralism\* (more than one ethical approach is at least partly valid)
- **God (and other entities)**\*
- **Identity**
- **Ineffability**\*
- **Intentional**
- **Meaning**\*
- **Metaphysical**\*
- **Moral sense**\*
- **Motivational**
  - Self-benefiting
  - Other-benefiting\*
  - Both self- and other-benefiting\*
- **Narratological**\* (*stories, narratives*)
- **Objective**
- **Personological**\*
- **Philosophical**\*
- **Rational**
- **Quantifiability**
- **Self-deception**
- **Social/relational/familial**
- **Spiritual**\*
- **Subjective**\*
- **Teleological**\*
- **Virtues**\*

\* = Traditional psychological science generally doesn't do well with this dimension (with a few notable exceptions)

In this paper, I will focus on twelve of those dimensions (those italicized) because I think those twelve are especially helpful in getting at psychologists' ambivalence. They thus pose significant

challenges for developing a *science* of love, and especially one that takes seriously religious understandings of love.

Let me discuss the twelve briefly as a backdrop for discussing psychologists' ambivalence about love. One need not, of course, choose only one of the twelve (or 32) in trying to understand love. Indeed, they may be combined in a dizzying variety of ways.

Much attention has been given in recent years to the biological, and especially the evolutionary, origins of altruistic behavior. The evidence is clear, I think, that evolution is part of the picture. The evidence is also clear, however, that there is much more to compassionate or altruistic love than that. Bouchard (1999) reports that about 40 percent of the variance in personality characteristics is genetically determined. Even if we ignore the possibility of allegiance effects (researchers' scientific findings tending to support their theoretical bias; Hollon, 1999; Jacobson, 1999; Lambert, 1999; Luborsky et al., 1999, 2002), a substantial proportion of the variance in personality characteristics comes from non-genetic causes. Furthermore, there is ample evidence that behavior is only partly (and some say hardly at all) influenced by personality. Social psychologists contend that *situations* are primarily responsible for moral behavior (Darley & Batson, 1973; Doris, 2002; cf. Buss, 1989); behavioral psychologists provide ample evidence and argument that much (though not all) altruism is learned behavior (through experience) and “needs no special inherited mechanism” (Rachlin, 2002, p. 239). The evidence thus suggests genes are only partly related to altruistic behavior.

Darwinian blackmail, however, occasionally curtails discussions about the causes of altruism: Advocates of any non-evolutionary explanations of altruism (even those who acknowledge genetic factors, albeit in a secondary explanatory role) are greeted with the aggressive accusation, or dark hint, that they obviously doesn't really believe in Darwin, or in

Science, and must thus be—GASP!—Fundamentalists! The price to be paid to free oneself from those accusations is to extol the primacy of genes. The evidence, of course, for those who care to attend to it, suggests a more complex reality. One need not be a devotee of evolutionary scientism<sup>1</sup> to believe in evolution. And those genuinely concerned about relevant evidence need to look to explanations of altruistic love that extend beyond the evolutionary.

Despite their differences, however, biologically-oriented psychologists, social psychologists, and behaviorists generally agree that the focus of attention in understanding love and other psychological topics should be on observable behavior, or otherwise scientifically measurable indices. As Korchin (1976) noted, “If you can’t measure it it doesn’t exist” (p. 355). They thus define compassionate love in ways that remove its subjective and emotional dimensions. That is, they depassionize love. Others, obviously, define love in ways that include emotions and subjective experience (Post, 2002; Sober, 2002; Wyschogrod, 2002).

In their efforts to be purely objective, psychologists often leave out the *ethical* dimensions of love as well. Understood in ethical terms, love is good, an obligation (“Love your neighbor as yourself”), a virtue, or all of the above. Whether it is fully possible to remove the ethical connotations from love is, I think, most doubtful (Putnam, 2002). If, for example, as Batson (2002) and Sober (2002) suggested, altruistic love is tied to motivation and, as Koch (1969) suggested, “any phrasing of phenomena called ‘motivational’ which does not blight them demands recognition of an utter interpenetration between what philosophers have been wont to call the ‘realms’ of ‘fact’ and of ‘value’” (p. 122), then any scientific investigation of altruism—whether conducted by biologists or psychologists—may commingle ethics and science.

Another dimension of love that some contend must be taken into account to understand



compassionate love is its narrative (storied) dimension. Understanding the narrative context of love and other aspects of morality is critical (Vitz, 1990). And thus, the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, for example, has a three-fold mission. In addition to fostering scientific research and dialogue, it seeks to “disseminate the real *story* of unlimited love as it is manifested in the helping behaviors of those whose lives are devoted to giving to others”

(<http://www.unlimitedloveinstitute.org/mission/index.html>, downloaded May 28, 2003, emphasis added). By telling stories, however, and assuming (correctly, I think) that we thereby better understand love, we have moved far from traditional understandings of the philosophy of science which hold that understanding comes from natural scientific methods alone. And this conference began with stories about those who helped after September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Still others contend that understanding compassionate love requires understanding the role of agency, defined by Rychlak (1988) as “the capacity for an organism to behave in compliance with, in addition to, in opposition to, or without regard for biological or sociocultural stimulations” (p. 84). Many philosophers (e.g., Kane, 1996, 2002), some psychologists (e.g., Jenkins, 1996; Rychlak, 1988), some evolutionists<sup>2</sup> (Dennett, 2003), most ethicists, most legal systems, and most Christian ethicists (e.g., Birch & Rasmussen, 1989; Smedes, 1983) believe we are in some measure free; indeed, to be morally responsible requires freedom (Evans, 1977, 1987). Underwood (2002b) contends that “free choice for the other” (p. 73) is a central aspect of compassionate love, although Monroe’s (2002) altruistic research participants reported they didn’t feel they had a choice about the “heroic” deeds they had done. The relevance of agency to explanations of compassionate love is this: “Explanations, especially about morality, that omit this human capacity to choose are ... different in kind from those that include it” (Tjeltveit, 1991, p. 105).

To add to the complexity of the passionate love psychologists are now seeking to understand, some think spiritual and religious dimensions of love need to be addressed in any comprehensive understanding of it. And thus Post (2002) contends that “something is at work in love for all humanity that has connections with spirituality” (p. 57). To simplify the challenge the religious dimension produces, consider the Christian tradition (acknowledging that other traditions produce their own complexities). In his first letter, John makes the empirical claim that “We love because he first loved us” (v. 9; NRSV), the ethical claim that “since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another” (v. 11; NRSV), and the metaphysical claims that “God is love” (v. 16; NRSV) and “love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (v. 7; NRSV). Developing a psychology that takes seriously all of these claims is quite complex indeed. Even more complexity arises when other religions and other religious perspectives are considered.

Finally, many psychologists think that we need to take very seriously the human capacity for self-deception in understanding compassionate and altruistic love. It is that dimension which leads directly to my discussion of psychology's critiques of love.

## **Critiques**

### ***Skepticism and Suspicion***

Skepticism, contends clinical psychologist David Barlow (1996), is “one of the principal virtues of a good scientist” (p. 236). Scientific skepticism has been, and is, directed at both compassionate love itself and, especially, at the various explanations offered to account for altruistic behavior. Love and explanations of love must, scientists contend, pass through the refining fire of operationalization, quantification, and experimentation before we can accept them. As Ollendick (1999) avers, “clinical psychologists need to conduct their practice within the

confines of scientific knowledge" (p. 2). Particular targets of this refining fire are claims about agency, morality, spirituality, and God, dimensions of compassionate love (on some understandings of it) which may not be fully amenable to such reductions. But as Frank (1988, as cited in Post et al., 2002b) noted, “the flint-eyed researcher fears no greater humiliation than to have called some action altruistic, only to have a more sophisticated colleague later demonstrate that it was self-serving” (p. 5).

Science is not, however, the only source of psychologists' reluctance to accept at face claims made about love. It was Freud (along with Nietzsche and Marx) who inspired Ricoeur (1970) to coin the phrase “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which Westphal (1993) defines as “the deliberate attempt to expose the self-deceptions involved in hiding our actual operative motives from ourselves, individually or collectively, in order not to notice how and how much our behavior and our beliefs are shaped by values we profess to disown” (p. 13). And so many who are inspired by Freud and Nietzsche (which includes many neo-Nietzscheans who dub themselves postmodernists; Taylor, 1989) will want to explore the hidden unconscious conflicts or desires to gain power over others underlying acts of so-called compassionate love. Nietzsche was particularly skeptical about compassion. Indeed, Sprigge (2000) notes, for the Nietzschean, compassion has loathsome connotations.

The skepticism and suspicion found in Freud, Nietzsche, and scientists is supported by contemporary philosophers who are pointing to what Putnam (2002) identifies as “the collapse of the fact/value dichotomy” (p. 5). Whether the collapse will result in, as naturalistic ethicists claim, putting ethics at last on a firm foundation, in so-called scientists unjustifiably claiming for their own ethical views the authority of science, or in some alternative outcome remains to be seen.

In any case, psychologists are, for multiple reasons, reluctant to accept at face value claims about many dimensions of compassionate love.

***Critiques of Love Itself (or Some Understandings of Love)***

Perhaps the central critique of “love,” at least by clinical psychologists, is that love harms people. This criticism can perhaps be seen most clearly in the battered woman who stays with her abuser out of “love” or the codependent woman who stays with an irresponsible, destructive alcoholic, shielding him from the consequences of his drinking and otherwise enabling his alcoholism—because she “loves” him. In both cases, the woman is harmed by her repeated, self-destructive sacrifices, by her caretaking and martyrdom (Cermak, 1986), by her “love”; her husband is harmed because he is protected, by her “love,” from the consequences of his actions. Many psychologists, unfortunately, do not recognize that such understandings of “love” can and should be distinguished from compassionate love. Although Post (2002a) agrees with Browning that “altruistic love requires the abrogation of selfishness, but it is a mistake to confuse the valid ideal of unselfishness with selflessness, its invalid exaggeration” (p. 376), love has not always been interpreted in that way. Browning (1987) notes that some Christians have overemphasized the sacrificial nature of love. And so some are told they have, and should show, unlimited love toward others, with the result that they are depleted, are harmed.

Psychologists’ ethical critiques of love are rarely overt, in substantial measure because the aspiration to be scientific, to be objective and value-free, precludes explicit acknowledgement of the ethical basis (e.g., “it is wrong to harm people”) of such critiques. Rather than eliminating such ethical critiques, however, the aspiration to be objective has simply forced psychologists’ ethical assumptions underground, where they implicitly affect both the knowledge production and the clinical practice of psychologists (Tjeltveit, 1999). Nevertheless, some have been more

overt. Freud, for instance, a prominent critic of sacrificial love (Browning, 1987), was, in Wallace's (1986) words, "positively acerbic toward the 'golden rule'" (p. 110).

Another ethical critique of love opposes, not love itself, but love as *central* to the good life, or to human flourishing. Or, more modestly, the opposition is to love as the *sole* ethical standard, as monistic ethical ideal. Ideal human functioning has to do, on some of these accounts, with autonomy, *self*-fulfillment, or personal authenticity, not with loving others (and certainly not with the love of God). Although romantic and familial love is considered important by many (Fine, 1990), compassionate love appears on few psychologists' lists of the attributes of the healthy or self-actualized person. Since mental health, self-actualization, and healthy functioning are of utmost importance for many psychologists, they see an emphasis on compassionate love obstructing what is most important: personal growth. As Nicholson (2003) notes, the language of personality replaced that of character in American psychology in the 1920s and 30s. "In the language of character," he notes, "selfhood was achieved through surrender to a 'higher' moral standard. In the new discourse of personality, selfhood was achieved through the realization of the self's own abilities. The true self of personality was not one of duty, honor, and self-sacrifice—terms that referred to a framework outside the self" (p. 37).

The criticisms of love by both Freud and Nietzsche can perhaps both be best understood in terms of this critique of love: The problem is not so much love per se, but love that conflicts with self-fulfillment. As Taylor (1989) notes, Nietzsche "declared benevolence the ultimate obstacle to self-affirmation" (p. 343). Nietzsche's being an immoralist and his critique of compassion, then, was in the service of his particular moralist vision (Berkowitz, 1995).

The more modest version of this critique has to do with how love for others is *balanced* with other ethical ideals. Richardson (in press), drawing upon Woodruff, argues that "we simply

cannot cultivate or practice virtues like ... compassion ... apart from membership and participation in the life of a community.” Love in the absence of other ideals is problematic because, Richardson continues, “you can’t practice altruism or compassion among cruel or narrowly self-seeking individuals because to do so would simply be to portray yourself as a sucker in their eyes, and to an extent be one!” Batson and colleagues (Batson, 2002; Batson, Klein, Highberger, & Shaw, 1995) likewise note that immorality can result from altruism when compassion is not properly balanced with justice.

### ***Critiques of Efforts to Use Natural Scientific Methods to Understand Love***

Another set of critiques have to do with the appropriateness of the methods to be used to understand love. Some critics of traditional psychology—inside and outside the discipline—hate the use of natural scientific methods to understand what they take to be the ethical, agentic, spiritual, and/or religious nature of love, dimensions of love that are, at least in part, not well-suited to the reductionism and quantification of natural science methods.

Some psychologists, by way of contrast, hate the topic of love because it is a soft topic in a field valiantly struggling to be a hard science, because its complexity seems to conflict with the parsimony to which scientists strive, and because traditional scientific methods don’t very effectively get at several dimensions of love, dimensions like agency, spirituality, and what is optimal in human life, dimensions that do seem *psychological* in nature *and* that seem vital for a deep and comprehensive understanding of love.

Psychologists, contends Leahey (2000), are afflicted with “physics envy” (p. 39), the desire to be a hard science. American psychologists, notes Nicholson (2003), tended to construct scientific psychology in decidedly masculine terms. Science, like the idealized male psyche, was considered objective, detached, rigorous, and hard-nosed” (p. 83). Love, by way of contrast, is a

soft topic, tied to internal motivations, sentimentality, subjectivity, emotionality, and religion. And females. Accordingly, some psychologists avoid love as a topic for investigation (and surely think it a topic that will inhibit rather than advance psychologists' careers) because love is too bound up with emotions, is too closely linked with religion, and slips too easily into sentimentality. Love, that is, is not well-suited for a discipline that is, and should be, striving mightily to be a "hard" science. Psychologists should, rather, devote their energies to topics that will contribute to the discipline's hardness and rigor. Love doesn't qualify. Indifference to love results.

Another reason for raising questions about the appropriateness of scientific methods to understand passionate love is its ethical character, generally considered beyond the disciplinary competence of science. Although science can tell us some things about human nature (Batson, 2002) and about the consequences of alternatives—whether Intervention A produces more positive benefits than Intervention B—it has no disciplinary competence to make ethical judgments like telling us what is beneficial or good (Kendler, 2000; Tjeltveit, 1999; Waterman, 1988). Science, that is, can tell us about facts, but not about values. Emotivism, the ethical theory of logical positivism (Koch, 1969), which many consider still to be psychology's de facto philosophy of science, held that making such ethical judgments is meaningless. Others would contend that making ethical judgments is a valid human endeavor; it is simply an end beyond the competence of psychological scientists qua scientists. Love, accordingly, is either not a fit topic for scientific investigation, or can only be partly explained by traditional scientific methods.

An alternative position, the most complex but, I think, most promising, is that scientific investigations of love will always intermingle the ethical and scientific. Both scientific and ethical analysis must occur, in tandem and in dialogue, rather than only science or only ethics.

Rather than doing so implicitly, however, it may be better to do so publicly and explicitly. This means, of course, that the ethical diversity extant in the world will replicate itself to some measure in the results obtained.

Others think natural scientific methods ill-suited for investigations of love because those methods exclude the human agency thought essential to any adequate understanding of compassionate love. For those who believe in human agency, scientific methods thus make only partial contributions to our understanding of love. Very valuable contributions, to be sure, but partial. How troubling this shortcoming of science is considered to be depends on how central one thinks agency is to compassionate love. Many psychologists don't believe human beings possess the genuine free will others think integral to genuine compassionate love.

For those who don't believe in agency, scientific methods seem exemplary; their annoyance is with those who believe in agency.

Still others, however, think the scientific method can be adopted to include agency in explanations of human beings, using quantitative methods (Rychlak, 1994), qualitative methods, or a combination of both.

Still others hate that scientific methods might be applied to a “religious” topic like love, thinking religion an appropriate topic for theologians alone to investigate. Others are open in principle to the contributions empirical methods can make to religious understandings of love, but are very wary of the actual practices of those who use scientific methods to understand religious topics like agape: They think the epistemic humility among scientists for which Browning (2002) calls, the reluctance to take metaphysical stances, is—in fact—all too rare among scientists, whose methodological naturalism too often becomes a de facto dogmatic



metaphysical naturalism which rejects the religion's central claims about God or other spiritual entities.

Finally, some psychologists, who like simple problems and clearly testable hypotheses, or who consider parsimonious explanations to be of the utmost importance, don't like love because it is simply too complicated. We can, they might argue, turn to addressing that topic once we have built a sturdier foundation of basic psychological science.

For all these reasons, then, some psychologists believe it a mistake for psychologists to investigate love; they hate the waste of time and energy required by that kind of fruitless effort. And others think it a mistake to use traditional empirical methods to understand love. Still others think that those methods have significant shortcomings and that adequate understandings of love can only be developed when those methods are supplemented with ethical, theological, and/or qualitative methods.

### **Affirmations**

I have focused in this paper on the critiques of love, and of methods to investigate it because, in the context of this conference, affirmations of love and confidence about the methods available to investigate it are well-represented, indeed, far more than among the general population of psychologists. I do, however, want to discuss briefly some of the ways in which psychologists affirm (“love”) love.

At a fundamental love, beneficence, something like love, is at the heart of the profession of psychology (May, 1984; Tjeltveit, 1999). Pellegrino (1989) notes that “some degree of effacement of self-interest ... is morally obligatory on health professionals” (p. 58). And Wallace (1991) contends that “By virtue of this professed vocation and the patient's suffering plea for help, a serious moral claim is made on the doctor, not merely for scientifically informed

treatment, but for caring and compassion as well” (p. 112). This is reflected in the American Psychological Association’s statement of purpose, which includes this phrase, “to advance psychology as a science and profession and as a means of promoting health, education and human welfare” (downloaded from <http://www.apa.org/governance/bylaws/art1.html> on May 30, 2003) and its current (2002) ethics code: “Psychologists are committed to ... the use of [psychological] knowledge to improve the condition of individuals, organizations, and society.” (p. 3; downloaded from <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.pdf> on May 31, 2003).

Love is also affirmed in the understanding of science which holds that its purpose is to produce knowledge to benefit humankind (Toulmin, 1975).<sup>3</sup> Psychologists have investigated a variety of specific topics related to compassionate love, usually using terms other than love. Prosocial behavior (although love—if defined to include ethical claims, emotions, intentions, and choices—is arguably broader than that term), altruism, attachment (Fricchone, 2002), caring (Noddings, 1994, 2002), the therapeutic alliance or bond (Norcross, 2002; Orlinsky, Rønnestad, & Willutzki, 2004), virtues, and other topics have all, for example, all been investigated extensively (Post et al., 2003).

In addition, humanistic psychologists like Carl Rogers (Brazier, 1993) have long addressed topics very much like love. Psychologists are also now beginning to discuss the ideas of Levinas (Beyers & Reber, 1998; Gantt, 2000; Gantt & Williams, 1998, 2002; Harrington, 1994; Kunz, 1998; Sampson, 2003; Vandenberg, 1999).

The revival of interest in questions of virtue and character (Fowers & Tjeltveit, in press; Meara, Schmidt, & Day, 1996; Puka, 1994; Tjeltveit, in press; Tjeltveit & Fowers, in press) has extended as well to the question of the virtue of love (or caring or compassion) (Barker, 2000; Cassell, 2000; Cross, 1998; Doherty, 1995; Hendrick & Hendrick, 2002; Jeffries, 1993, 1998;

Kitwood, 1990; Puka, 1994), although love as a virtue (Aquinas notwithstanding) has been less prominent than other virtues.

Finally, drawing upon my experience as a clinician and working with other mental health professionals, I have been repeatedly struck by the relentless hope, the faithfulness in caring for clients, and the steadfast love that mental health professionals exhibit in their relationship with clients. Boundaried, limited love, to be sure, taking place within particular places and within certain fixed periods of time, and taking different forms when a client doesn't pay, but love nevertheless.

### **Optimal Responses to Psychologists' Ambivalence About Compassionate Love**

Psychologists thus both critique and affirm compassionate love. The critiques have thus far been predominant, however. A very small percentage of the research conducted by psychologists addresses compassionate love. That provokes this question: How can psychologists make greater progress in understanding compassionate love?

To make greater progress and to increase the impact of current research on love, I think we need to acknowledge and, as appropriate, either incorporate or challenge psychologists' critiques and affirmations of love.

We need to begin, I think, by acknowledging the partial truths in the critiques I have discussed. There is great merit in skepticism and even suspicion. Indeed, Westphal (1993) has argued that Christians need to wrestle with the three great architects of suspicion, Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx, because much (though not all) of their criticism is apt. Christians will be more Christian (if less religious) when purging their lives of the targets of their criticisms. Doing so is good (and perhaps essential preparation) for the greater benefits that can accrue when we move from a hermeneutic of suspicion to a hermeneutic of trust (Ricoeur, 1970).

We also need to recognize that *some* understandings of love, when pushed to an extreme, clearly harm people. To help avoid this harm we need to clarify that, by love, we do not mean a selfless love (Browning, 1987, 2002; Post, 2002a, 2002b). The use of the term “unlimited love” seems particularly problematic for psychologists in this regard, as it (arguably) connotes the kind of endless sacrificial giving that most clinicians see as harmful to individuals. Another way to reduce the potential harmfulness of love (or some understandings of love) is to be explicit about studying and affirming other ethical ideals in conjunction with love. Love of others balanced with love of self, love of others balanced with justice, and so forth. Practical wisdom is perhaps of particular importance in this regard.

I think at an emotional level the greatest obstacle to psychologists addressing compassionate love is the perception (and reality) that love is a soft topic and psychologists valorize hardness. As we have seen, there *are* several “soft” dimensions to love, including (depending on one’s standpoint) its emotional, ethical, agentic, spiritual, and religious nature. As we have seen, traditional natural science methods (especially when linked to behaviorism and logical positivist philosophies) are limited in their contributions to the ethical and other soft dimensions of knowledge about love.

Given the perception that compassionate love is a soft topic, three solutions to the problem of method of inquiry in a psychology of compassionate love can be distinguished:

1. Use hard methods
2. Use correspondingly soft methods
3. Use a variety of methods (both hard and soft, including natural scientific and disciplined methods of inquiry)

The first solution is the one to which psychologists reflexly turn, given the overwhelming prestige of science in the field. And I think there is an extremely important partial truth in this approach. There are aspects of compassionate love that can be well addressed through natural scientific methods, as can be seen in the Post et al. (2003) summary of research and in the research proposals funded by the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love and the Fetzer Institute. However, the understandings produced by those approaches can only be partial (and hence profoundly misleading) if the “soft” dimensions of love are omitted. We thus run the risk of forcing love into a Procrustean bed, lopping off dimensions of it that are not well captured (or not captured at all) with the scientific method, dimensions like the ethical dimension of love.

This approach can take subtle forms. For example, one Introductory Psychology textbook acknowledges that other methods may have some validity, but the authors focus on scientific methods alone: “We focus here on science, not because we reject other ways of trying to understand human nature. We don’t. But we are scientists ...” (Mynatt & Doherty, 2002, p. 12). They represent *de facto* scientism (Tjeltveit, 1999)—only hard methods are used in developing an understanding of psychological topics, regardless of their appropriateness for the psychological topic at hand.

Because of the shortcomings of natural scientific methods, some propose the exclusive use of “softer” methods, in accord with the soft nature of love. Literary analyses, personological approaches, ethical analyses, theological interpretations, and so forth can be employed. Some would include qualitative methods here as well, although most qualitative researchers see themselves as scientists who rely on empirical evidence and use carefully delineated methods (although the nature of the empirical evidence and the methods differ from those of the natural sciences). Much diversity currently exists among qualitative methods (Barker, Pistrang, &

Elliott, 2002; Hill & Lambert, 2004), but standards are also being raised and explicitly stated (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Stiles, 1993). Advocates of these “soft” methods argue that, for example, that because quantitative scientific methods cannot get at what is good (asserting that the survival of one’s genes or one’s group is the end toward which evolution moves us does not, for example, establish that that end is good, and certainly not the best end), other analyses are necessary.

Some advocates of alternative methods are so convinced of the flaws of natural scientific methods and/or of the uniqueness of human beings (or of dimensions of human beings) that they think only soft methods should be used. That produces, I think, a Procrustean problem that is the obverse of that produced by advocates of hard methods alone: By failing to use natural scientific methods, we fail to understand the very important lessons to be learned about love in general by examining evolutionary, learning, experiential, and situational dimensions of love obtained through natural scientific methods.

The third option, methodological pluralism, draws upon both “hard” and “soft” methods, to take into account all the dimensions of compassionate love. Methodological pluralism, in other words, is the third position. Making pains to differentiate their stance from a methodological anarchism in which any method is considered as valid as any other, Barker, Pistrang, & Elliott (2002) assert that “no single approach to research is best overall, rather, what is important is that the methods be appropriate for the questions under investigation” (p. 245). And thus, some methods are best for understanding some dimensions of compassionate love; other methods are best for understanding other dimensions of compassionate love. This position is similar to that of Batson (2002), who explicitly denied that all research needs to be experimental. “Research methods need,” he asserted, “to be carefully matched to the questions

being addressed” (p. 102). Likewise, Post and Underwood (2002), who both value empirical investigations of love, discuss potential contributions of the humanities in understanding altruistic love (p. 381). And Post et al. (2002b) argue for a multidisciplinary effort: “the sciences have much to benefit from the insights of the humanities into aspects of the phenomena that are possibly beyond the reach of science and yet crucial to the overall human and cultural context” (p. 9).

In making efforts to understand altruistic love multidisciplinary, however, it seems to me that it would be good to make the discipline of ethics a more explicit partner. In the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love’s mission statement scientific research is mentioned, along with dialogue with religion and effective narratives. Ethics is not an explicit partner (although I think it is one implicitly); I think it should be an explicit, public partner in the dialogue, in part because I don’t think the dialogue between religion and science can be as effective as it can be without ethics being a full partner at the dialogue table—because the ethical dimensions of love are real, because we must understand those ethical dimensions to grasp love fully, because ethics is not reducible to either science or religion, and because ethics a concern of both scientists and people of faith.

It is one thing to argue for methodological pluralism, of course. It is quite another to specify the exact nature of the pluralism. Browning (2002), Post (2002b), and Underwood (2002a) point to several elements that seem to me essential. For methodological pluralism to work, dialogue, humility, and an awareness of common ground are all necessary. Open, honest, heartfelt dialogue across disciplinary, theoretical, ethical, and religious boundaries seems essential (Tjeltveit, 1999), like that occurring during the best moments at this conference.

Humility about the contributions of one's own perspective and openness to the insights of others also seems critical (Browning, 2002).

While I agree with Browning (2002) that for the purposes of a “general public philosophy” and “a public ethic” it is important for dialogue participants to “keep their focus on the common ground between them” (p. 344), I think there should also be times and places where participants think deeply and well about particular perspectives, within a discipline, within an ethical perspective, and within a particular religious or spiritual faith. For the integrity of individuals, for the integrity of disciplines, and for the integrity of ethical and religious traditions, this seems vital—our deepest moral, religious, and truth-seeking passions are particular, not general. Ultimately, a public ethic would benefit from an alternation between first rate *particular* reflection and more general, high quality *public* reflection.

I think there is also a valid place for the exploration of new approaches to understanding love that blur traditional disciplinary roles and methods. That is, not cross-disciplinary dialogue or even collaboration, but new approaches that blend the best of more than one approach because love itself is a blend of dimensions. Some softness needs to be brought—explicitly and carefully—into the heart of the discipline of psychology, so it can better address the soft dimensions of human existence and better develop a complete, integrated, whole understanding of love. Three examples of this admittedly sketchy suggestion: Fowers (in press) suggests a revision to psychology's traditional approach:

Flyvbjerg (2001) has argued for the importance of *phronesis* in social science. He discusses the traditional preference in social science for *episteme* over *phronesis* and questions that choice. *Episteme* corresponds to our frequently idealized version of science as pertaining to what is universal, invariable, and



independent of both the context and of the values and aims of the investigator.

Some areas of psychological science are clearly oriented to human universals such as research on sensation and the biological bases of behavior.

Flyvbjerg argues persuasively that *episteme* is an inappropriate intellectual standard for much of the content of the social sciences for two reasons. Much of what we study is variable over time and across cultures and is therefore context-dependent. In addition, the value dimension of human behavior and research appear to be unavoidable. Compelling, and thus far unrefuted, arguments have been made that human actions are largely constituted by the actor's purposes and aspirations (Gadamer, 1985; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1990; Taylor, 1985). Social science research is as much a human activity as any other and therefore also guided by the investigators' aims and values. The denial of this state of affairs has contributed to the suffusion of psychological science with unacknowledged ideologies such as individualism (Richardson et al., 1999) and patriarchy (Hare–Mustin & Marecek, 1988). Flyvbjerg suggests that *phronesis* provides a much more appropriate rationality for a subject matter that has strong context dependency and is concerned with understanding humans as beings whose choices and actions are guided by what they see as worthwhile and good.

Secondly, perhaps implicit in Browning's (2002) provocative suggestion—science “should clarify and serve” “some of the ideals of human love” that emerge from its dialogue with religion (p. 335)—is a blurring of the traditional fact–value distinction and a hint at a new and fruitful approach to love. Although advocacy of a softening of that dichotomy may be relatively new, the reality of productive results stemming from such an approach is not.

Thirdly, the very productive life of Gordon Allport may be taken as an example of someone whose spiritual and ethical convictions interacted fruitfully with his scientific endeavors in his invention of the field of personality psychology. There was in Allport's use of personality, Nicholson (2002) suggests, a “duality that lay at the center of his professional vision.” Allport wanted to “‘correlate’ psychology and social ethics” and in his approach to personality he “oscillated between the scientific and ethical meanings of the term without ever clearly stating that he was doing so” (p. 152). Perhaps even more promising is the possibility that I hinted at above that scientific investigations of love take place that are explicitly ethics-laden (rather than the traditional, implicitly ethics-laden investigations that are wreathed in the rhetoric of objectivity).

We need not, I think, determine now which approach will shed the most light on compassionate love. Better to engage in theorizing about method while simultaneously engaging in a variety of research endeavors. Empirical research, dialogue, and reflection on optimal method, when taken together, may lead to the most fruitful results.

Taking seriously the critics' hate of love may contribute to a better understanding of love and a more open reception to love among the critics. It may also be necessary at times, however, to explicitly *challenge* the critics of love when we think them wrong, challenging them with evidence, with arguments, with stories, with explicit and articulate advocacy of the importance of love (of psychologists' love of love), and with compassionate love itself.

### **Conclusion**

When love is clearly defined, when methods of inquiry are properly matched to the research questions posed (i.e., when we adopt an optimal methodological pluralism), when dialogue is taking place, when we are open to new ways of understanding love, and when

psychologists' own commitments to love are well-articulated, psychologists' critical and affirming voices about love can be joined in ways that decidedly deepen our psychological understanding of compassionate love.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Taylor, (1989) defines scientism as “the belief that the methods and procedures of natural science ... suffice to establish all the truths we need to believe” (p. 404).

<sup>2</sup> Darwin, Hurlbut (2002) notes, for example, “had a strong negative response to explanations of human behavior that eroded its central core of freedom and nobility” (p. 251).

<sup>3</sup> That morality Toulmin (1975) dubs Baconian; it exists alongside the Newtonian morality of science, which sees the purpose of science as producing truth for its own sake. He notes that scientists, when wanting support from funding agencies and the public stress the Baconian morality of science, but when talking among themselves the Newtonian.