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Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.5840/faithphil2012229112
Available at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol29/iss1/12

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The genius of the Romantic Age for philosophical theology was its remarkable sense of the transcendent combined with a profound awareness of history, tradition and culture. Both of these concerns coincide in a momentous attack on naturalism. Naturalism fails because it does not do justice to the contingency and cultural diversity of human experience, but also because it precludes the sense of the transcendent. Hence when Romantic-Idealistic thinkers interpreted Kant and Spinoza as the philosophers of freedom and system, respectively, they were concerned both to accord greater significance to history and language than either Kant or Spinoza could tolerate, and were quite explicit about the religious ramifications of philosophical thought. The Neoplatonic interest in the immanence of the divine facilitated the both/and of the Romantic combination of transcendence with particularity. But this does not mean that they were all panentheists (e.g., S. T. Coleridge, who was not), or that the differences between panentheists were egregious (e.g., the varied stages of Schelling’s own protean career). In his determination to highlight the prevalence and potential threat to the orthodoxy of pantheism, Cooper is too ready to iron out the differences.

My major criticism of Cooper’s thesis is quite simple: “Panentheism” is the product of Neoplatonism in a particular (but not the only possible) Romantic/Idealistic guise. It is true that Hegel was described as the “German Proclus” and Whitehead loved the poetry of Wordsworth; but we should be wary of drawing too swift conclusions from such facts.

As I have suggested, there is much to be praised in Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present. It is an impressive work of scholarship, eminently readable, and in many ways a most useful tool for students of philosophical theology. Though too schematic, this challenging and illuminating book contains a rich seam of excellent and thought-provoking material. This combination of scholarship and judgment is refreshing indeed for anyone exposed to some of the more egregious absurdities perpetrated in the recent vogue for “theological genealogies” of metaphysical nihilism. Cooper’s is a fine book that I will put on my reading lists and I will encourage students to study it. But it is also a work that I would want them to reflect carefully upon and consider critically.


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Love is a recurring theme in Dietrich von Hildebrand’s (1889–1977) writings; but he began his monumental work, The Nature of Love, only when he had almost turned 70. The German original was published in 1971. John F.
Crosby, aided by his son John Henry, produced a masterful translation, and the Dietrich von Hildebrand Legacy Project spearheaded its publication.

Von Hildebrand’s work stands in the tradition of phenomenological realism which sees the self-disclosure of reality as the foundation of philosophical knowledge. Although this corresponds very much to common sense, the history of philosophy includes many systems based on constructs of the human mind rather than on the voice of reality. In keeping with this, von Hildebrand begins (Introduction) with a critique of theories disregarding what love for others claims to be, such as explaining it in terms of “instinctive striving,” of self-love, or of what is “metaphysically inferior” to love. He points out that the nature of love discloses itself not only in one’s own loving, but also in being loved and in witnessing the love of others.

In chapter 1, he explains what he considers one of the most basic characteristics of love: its being a value-response. “Value” is a translation of the German “Wert,” meant to designate the property making an object precious in itself. Thus, love for another human is a response motivated by the other’s intrinsic preciousness, by regarding her as what she is in herself rather than viewing her from the perspective of personal gain.

Chapter 2 investigates what sets love apart from other value responses. In earlier works, von Hildebrand had distinguished value responses of the will (such as deciding to help someone because it is right rather than for an advantage for oneself) and of the heart (i.e., affective value responses). He declares love to be an affective value response. Compared to other such responses, it is most “subjective” in the sense of involving the most intense participation of the responding subject. Further, he calls love superactual, meaning that it remains a reality even when one does not explicitly focus on the beloved, in contrast, say, to being amused, which ceases to exist as soon as one no longer thinks of the amusing event. Further, love includes an intentio unionis, a desire to be with the beloved, and an intentio benevolentiae, a desire to do good to the beloved. Moreover, of all value responses, it can give the most happiness, and it involves a longing for being requited.

What he calls the “gift of love” (chapter 3) involves the following elements: First, based on the intrinsic preciousness one discovers in the beloved, she is uniquely affirmed and “declared precious.” Second, one gives a three-fold “credit” to the beloved: Concerning the beloved’s still unknown features, one assumes the best; as long as known features have not clearly been shown as negative, one sees them in the best possible light; and faults, while not ignored, are seen as not representing the beloved’s true self.

Next (chapter 4), von Hildebrand explains a feature of love he calls “transcendence,” which he understands as going beyond a concern for one’s own interest, taking something seriously in its own right. As part of a general discussion of transcendence, he mentions again doing what is right because it is right rather than for one’s own benefit. The participation
of the heart adds a second dimension: Persons doing joyfully what is right leave the confines of their immanence even more than those doing it with grumbling. With regard to this second dimension of transcendence, “love is queen.”

He begins his discussion of the relationship between love and happiness (chapter 5) with distinguishing self-regarding “happiness” from true happiness, and points at value responses as one of the sources of the latter. Disagreeing with Kant, von Hildebrand states that happiness as a consequence of value responses does not only not detract from the selfless appreciation of the value, but even increases it. This holds true also of love: That the other is a source of my happiness implies a higher appreciation than if happiness would be absent.

It is similar with the *intentio unionis* (chapter 6). That I desire to be with the beloved shows a greater appreciation of her worth than if that desire would be missing. At this point, he includes a detailed critique of Fenelon’s idea of “disinterested love.”

Chapter 7 deals with the *intentio benevolentiae*. It is closely connected with the fact that loving persons experience as being in their own best interest what is in the best interest of the beloved.

Further (chapter 8), he points at a special sense in which the person loving calls the beloved “mine.” He takes up several meanings of “mine,” such as that of a property relation, that of being a part of something, and that resulting from “feeling at home.” He specifies the “mine” connected with love as stemming from the beloved’s entering deeply into the world of the loving person’s subjectivity.

This point is amplified in chapter 9, the book’s most problematic segment; I at least consider it unclear. He states that, except for love of neighbor, the beloved becomes in a special way a part of these things which are of particular significance to the person loving, and/or which belong to him/her as this particular person. This formulation is an attempt to get at what von Hildebrand calls in the German original “Eigenleben.” Sometimes, the translator leaves the word untranslated; at times, he translates it as “subjectivity.” The literal translation is “one’s own life” or “a life of one’s own.” The expression, never explained with sufficient clarity, denotes a group of things constituted by conscious experiences significant to the subject and some objects which are especially dear to the subject.

Subsequently (chapter 10), von Hildebrand takes up the relationship between love and happiness. He emphasizes that true happiness is not the motive of the experiences making us happy—if it is directly aimed at, the result is “pseudo-happiness”; rather, happiness is a superabundant gift. Not only is the act of loving a source of happiness (except, of course, if love is unrequited), but so is the requital of love.

In chapter 11, entitled “Caritas,” he considers love of God and Christian love of neighbor. Caritas is said to constitute itself in love of God and be actualized in love of neighbor. Von Hildebrand claims to limit himself to what is accessible to the natural light of reason: Even an atheist might
be able to understand, after all, how someone believing in the Christian God will relate to Him and to others. At times, though, von Hildebrand clearly goes beyond what reason unaided by faith can know, especially when speaking about Christ’s love for us. Even for the person of faith, the nature and intensity of this love remains surprising (one look at a crucifix will bear this out).

Christian love of neighbor is based on love of God: One sees the other as created by God and loved by Him, and this motivates one’s love for the other. While the intentio benevolentiae is included in this type of love, the intentio unionis is secondary.

Christian love of neighbor can (and should) shape all other categories of love without changing them into different types; in fact, only when formed that way can they truly become what they are meant to be. For example, an “illegitimate egoism for the beloved”—a danger of all natural types of love—can be overcome if love of neighbor forms them. Concerning a non-Christian’s positive relations to strangers, von Hildebrand mentions the kindhearted person and the person helping others out of a moral striving; surprisingly, though, he omits a discussion of a genuine love for strangers, which surely also exists among non-Christians and non-religious persons.

In chapter 12, on love and morality, he takes up moral dangers connected with love, and examines ways in which love can improve a person’s moral standing.

Among the moral dangers are doing wrong out of love (acceding to inappropriate wishes of the beloved), being inappropriately influenced by the beloved, jealousy, and unfaithfulness motivated by love. None of these dangers are due to love itself, though; they spring from other moral defects.

Concerning love and moral goodness, while love is a great good, it is, except for love of neighbor, not itself morally good. It can, however, be related in several ways to a person’s moral goodness: Someone’s morally good basic attitudes may shape his or her love; or someone’s love may make the person more aware of the moral dimensions of life, contribute to one’s humility, reverence, or gratitude. Further, being formed by caritas gives moral goodness to all forms of love.

One of the moral qualities love can bestow upon the loving person results from faithfulness, to which von Hildebrand devotes a chapter of its own (chapter 13). Faithfulness presupposes continuity, which is “holding on” to what we understand to be commanded. In many cases of love, there is no strict obligation to enter into the relationship; but once one has entered it, there is a duty to hold on to it. Doing so is faithfulness. Von Hildebrand devotes special segments to faithfulness in love between spouses and friends.

Chapter 14 considers the “ordo amoris,” the correct ordering of the attachments of one’s heart and of various love relationships in one’s life.

In the broader sense of the term, “ordo amoris” refers to the question, “What should my heart be attached to more?” Outside of love, this
depends chiefly on the value of the object; the object with the greater value deserves the greater attachment of my heart.

In the case of love, though, the extent to which the other merits love objectively is only one factor influencing the degree of attachment deserved. There also is a “being ordered to someone.” This can be pre-given by the situation, such as in a parent-child relationship—obviously, parents are to be attached to their own children more than to those of strangers. In other cases, such as with friendship or spousal love, that “being ordered” may be due to a special affinity, an ability to “understand” the friend or the person one is in love with better than others: one does have unique “access” to the interiority of the other’s personality. This affinity can and ought to lead to a stronger attachment of one’s heart to the person to whom one is ordered in this manner.

Von Hildebrand concludes with emphasizing that love involves a unique self-donation, a “giving oneself” to the person whom one loves.

It is hardly worth mentioning that a 1,800-word review cannot do justice to von Hildebrand’s great work. Reading the book might help you grow more into the loving person you are meant to be.