

Transforming Philosophy and Religion

Love's Wisdom

Edited by Norman Wirzba & Bruce Ellis Benson

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Introduction

NORMAN WIRZBA and BRUCE ELLIS BENSON

There are many books on the morality of love. In studies of that sort, philosophers and theologians turn their analytical skills to an examination of love's nature and extent¹ as well as its inspiration and concrete expression. They consider, for instance, how a particular conception of love has practical or applied implications in domains as diverse as politics,² health care,³ gender relations,⁴ and education.⁵ In these various cases, a version of love is philosophically or theologically defined and defended, and then "tested in the field" for its transformative potential and usefulness. Such work is very important and sometimes also very good. It certainly needs to continue.

The essays gathered in this volume, however, are focused on something substantially different: *describing how various expressions of philosophical and theological reflection are transformed by the discipline of love*. Rather than turning attention immediately to how reflection on love engages and transforms our world, this book focuses on how the practice of love engages and transforms our reflection. Though it is fairly common for people to consider how love changes the way we think about "x," the "x" under consideration is rarely philosophical or theological reflection itself. So why this different and unique emphasis?

The contributors to this volume are convinced that to practice philosophy is always already to be implicated in the ways of love. It isn't simply that philosophers can choose from time to time to turn their analytical tools specifically to the various expressions of love. Rather, the matter goes much deeper, because the very attainment of wisdom (*sophia*)—as the etymology of the word "philosophy" suggests—requires that we practice love (*phileo*) in some form. In this sense, philosophers not only study love as an optional affair, but their study itself becomes the conceptual expression of a more fundamental disposi-

tion or set of practices that goes by the name “love.” The character of our purported wisdom will itself be a reflection of our ability or inability to love, *whether we know it or not*. Given that our thinking invariably colors and shapes the way we receive and engage each other, what is ultimately at issue here is not only the way we characterize wisdom but also how we characterize humanity, the world, and God.⁶

Of course, this is a curious state of affairs. For if such a thesis is correct, it would seem that philosophers—in order to be authentic and at their best—must first be lovers *before* they can truly practice their art. They must, as Plato suggested in the *Symposium*, be consumed with *eros*, that passionate movement that draws the seeker out of him- or herself so that the world outside can be embraced and understood. Insofar as philosophers are incapable of exercising love, they are rendered simply “unphilosophical.” If Socrates is right, such philosophers (and thinkers more generally) are little more than sophists who are skilled in the artful and persuasive manipulation of words. Though they may teach a lucrative skill, these “teachers for hire” or “word slayers” must not be mistaken for genuine philosophers.

Given this philosophical predicament, it is striking how little time and energy philosophers and theologians have devoted to the careful examination of love’s determinative influence in wisdom’s pursuit. How does the disposition and discipline of love alter the way we read, or change the questions we ask, or transform the methods and scope of our inquiry? Does philosophical argument take the same shape and have the same force in the face of love? Does the claim to knowledge itself change when it is preceded and permeated by the commitment to love? Do our conceptions of major ideas like justice and morality, faith and doubt, self and other undergo significant adjustment when informed by practices of love? Must not the limits of thought itself be redrawn in a context of love? These questions alert us to the fact that philosophical and theological reflections are never innocent or neutral. They occur, as phenomenologists would put it, within a horizon that can be more or less formed and colored by the dispositions of love.

Another way to put this is to say that philosophical reflection always runs the risk of being reduced to instrumental reason, a merely economic or technical skill whereby we become more adept at controlling and manipulating the world to our own ends. Instrumental thinking leaves us as thinkers unaltered and unmoved—perhaps even unquestioned—because the world is remade or refashioned to suit our tastes. Instead of allowing our thoughts (and ourselves) to be changed so that we more adequately represent and respond to the world as it is, we change (often violently) our surroundings. What is lost is the sense of the philosopher as someone who undergoes a profound personal transformation as a result of entering patiently and deeply into a conversation with reality. The sense for the wonder of existence and the world evaporates. As long as we think, using instrumental reason, there is no need for the philosopher to excel in virtues—such as love and fidelity—that make true thinking possible.

If we genuinely wish to understand others and the world, then we need the virtue of love, because love (in its most basic orientation) entails an honest and faithful engagement with others. If love is absent from the pursuit of understanding, then that understanding can become corrupt—even to the point of being dangerous—as we now produce minds capable of unleashing domination and destruction upon the world. Love is central and primary because it is the fountainhead of the practical and philosophical virtues. As Norman Wirzba puts it in his essay “The Primacy of Love,” love is the indispensable prerequisite for wisdom because it opens our hearts and minds to the wide and mysterious depths of reality. Love inspires, guides, and corrects our reflective paths so that they can be faithful and true. It also takes us to the heart of a religious life, for as Timothy Jackson has well argued, “Charity is a participation in the very life of God and, as such, the foundation of all virtues for those made in the Image of God.”⁷ To pursue the “wisdom of love” is to recover the more ancient conception of philosophical practice as a “spiritual exercise” in which personal transformation and the creation of a good life and just social order are primary. The result is a wisdom that equips us to assume a more humble and just position within the world, one that makes us more available to and responsible for the grace of life.

As Bruce Ellis Benson shows in his essay “The Economies of Knowledge and Love in Paul,” when the wisdom of love is rigorously pursued, the very character of our knowing undergoes transformation. By examining Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church, Benson shows how knowledge can be used as a way to build oneself up at another’s expense or to make claims that are injurious. The practice of love as Paul describes it, however, leads to a different “economy” of exchange. Whereas knowledge “puffs up,” love builds up; whereas knowledge claims lead to arrogance and insistence on one’s “rights,” love leads to servanthood. Moreover, Paul connects the claims of knowledge to idolatry: precisely insofar as the Corinthians think they “know,” they have given in to idolatrous practices. As a corrective, Paul shows how love is of a completely different order. Instead of putting the self first, the economy of love puts the other first. Instead of *hybris*, the economy of love is characterized by humility. One is only truly wise when love grounds knowledge.

This inextricable bond between the practice of love and the attainment of wisdom has not received nearly the sustained attention it deserves. Indeed, we do not need to go deep into the histories of philosophy, even at their key moments, to discover that love is derided and dismissed rather than given an exalted status. Of course, it is easy to see why this might be the case, particularly if the philosophical task is conceived to be the objective, impersonal knowledge of the world as it is by itself. On this view, love would deflect philosophical inquiry precisely because it introduces personal and interpersonal passions that invariably distort or dissimulate the reality that lies before us. Moreover, love is not easily controlled or ordered, since it is so attuned to personal ambition, fear, pride, and anxiety. In sum, we should be suspicious of

love—so the story goes—because it effectively renders our judgments cloudy and subjective, making us blind to the truth of the world as it really is. Indeed, such was the verdict of modernity.

Is it not possible, however, that love might be the expression of a more faithful attunement to a world of others? From this perspective, it turns out that the very desire for indifferent and impersonal knowing prevents us from seeing others in their full, mysterious depth. The distant, dispassionate stance of the knower, while it may render our judgments more precise or unclouded, may also miss the complexity and interconnectedness of the world that a charitable stance and vision—coupled perhaps with a measure of personal suffering—is able to see and understand. Love is vital because it entails the patience, attention, long-suffering, and kindness that enable care-full vision and sustained self-inspection. On this view, love becomes the means whereby the distortions caused by the anxious ego can be brought to light and corrected, both because we have now made ourselves more vulnerable to being known by others and because we see in a different way.

The distortions we live with often run deep, extending all the way to practices as (seemingly) simple as reading. As Ed Mooney puts it in his essay “Love, This Lenient Interpreter,” we cannot become good interpreters of the world if we have not first learned to “read” differently. To this end, he reflects on two recent biographies of Søren Kierkegaard, one of which is written in the mode of suspicion—with an eye to revealing character flaws—while the other is written from a viewpoint of charity—with the intention of opening new perspectives on a complex life. Mooney demonstrates how the charitable reading actually enables us to observe that a life takes shape through many twists and turns, has many forms, and is fluid and open to change as it responds to the plasticity of the world. In contrast, the reading of Kierkegaard that uses the rigid and scientific standard of “consistency” simply gets Kierkegaard “wrong.” Thus, a lack of charity in this second case leads to a lack of true understanding. By attending to the pseudonyms and masks of Kierkegaard in a *charitable* fashion, one discovers that they are actually revelatory.

The majority of the essays in this book are in conversation with European or Continental traditions. To a considerable extent, this is because these traditions, perhaps more than others, have been relentless in their questioning of philosophy itself. Thinkers as diverse as Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas, Ricoeur, Derrida, Marion, Zizek, Irigaray, and Le Doeuff have compelled us to rethink the nature of knowledge, the limits of thought, and the inspirations and contexts of reason. Often, in good phenomenological fashion, they have offered powerful descriptions of the thought process itself, exploring its narrative, symbolic, social, and sometimes subterranean dimensions. This book’s writers continue that work of philosophical description. However, they add a new, though crucial, dimension. Attuned as they are to the complexity of love and the diversity of its manifestations, each author considers how love

makes possible a more honest and faithful encounter with the world. They ask us to rethink philosophical and theological categories and methods by examining issues as diverse as social justice, the role of faith, gender, creation, political action, and bioethics.

Consider our thinking about justice. According to several accounts, it would not seem that love has much to do with justice, particularly if justice is about the equal distribution of goods or the establishment of a contract in which fairness or personal freedoms are the primary goal. The rational principles that guide our thinking about justice, we might assume, would be distorted by the priorities and manners of love. But both Mark Gedney and Chris Watkin argue that exactly the opposite is the case. In “A Love as Strong as Death,” Gedney considers Paul Ricoeur’s idea of a “third way” between love and justice. Following Ricoeur, he argues that these two can indeed exist together, and in a way that makes possible a more responsible human life. On the basis of a reading of the biblical creation story and the Song of Songs, Ricoeur understands love to be at the heart of the created world. It *opens up the space* where we can meet each other and join together in relationship. The distance between two people, in other words, makes love possible. Love is also the medium of exchange that can exist between them, so that their living together goes beyond the level of command (or law). While law is a necessary restraint against that which destroys relationships, love is a gift that goes beyond law and sustains the law. So love ultimately comes *before* justice and *makes justice possible*.

In “Paul Ricoeur and the Possibility of Just Love,” Watkin challenges Emmanuel Levinas’s suggestion that love and justice are incommensurable. Again, love turns out to be central. According to Ricoeur, love amounts to the intensification of justice, to justice in a festive mode, all based on the acknowledgment of creation as a primordial gift. Thus, both calculating and uncalculating love co-exist in a “living tension”—one that cannot be resolved through a collapse to one pole. Yet it is this tension that makes possible (as Ricoeur puts it) “a supplementary degree of compassion and generosity in all of our codes.” For Ricoeur, even the Golden Rule must be interpreted, not as calculation, but as generosity. And unlike Jacques Derrida, Ricoeur thinks that gifts truly can be given without falling back into an economy of exchange.

One of the hallmark notions of justice is that it be impartial. Fairness seems to dictate that we not show preferential treatment. How, then, are we to think of Jesus’ commandment that we should love one another? Does love fall within the legal parameters of a command, or must it include an affective dimension that is in some sense beyond the realm of law and command? How does our idea of law itself change in the face of the command to love? Bertha Alvarez Manninen, in “Why There Is No Either/Or in *Works of Love*,” uses the ethics of Immanuel Kant to clarify Kierkegaard’s calling us to choose between unconditional love (to all people) and personal relationships. The

problem with what Kierkegaard calls “preferential love” is that at any moment it can evaporate. Unconditional love, on the other hand, is love that literally has no (even legal) “conditions.” Yet, if unconditional love is superior to preferential love (and if preferential love often *hinders* unconditional love), can there still be room—or is it even still *moral*—to have feelings of preference? Manninen concludes that, since moral actions can be “overdetermined,” one could feel an inclination yet act on the basis of duty alone. In the same way, one could act out of unconditional love yet still have feelings of preference. Here, as in the two studies of Ricoeur mentioned above, we see that the practice of love changes the way we think about justice in a profound way.

In “Living by Love,” John D. Caputo develops this tension by examining the difference—or *différance*—between love and the economy of the law. Here the concern is not so much over the legality of social institutions and practices as, more broadly (and religiously), the order that leads to our ultimate good and salvation. Caputo notes that according to Paul’s writings in scripture, and phenomenologically speaking, love needs the law, for law provides something for love to exceed. By its very nature, love is excessive. Moreover, what was needed to overcome the rule of law (which is the rule of death) was the ultimate act of love: Christ’s death. Still, whereas the law was a limiting factor in that no one could fulfill it, now the fact that not everyone has heard (and accepted) the gospel becomes the limiting factor. Paul could unite Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female—but not “those who accept the gospel” and “those who do not.” Caputo rejects a strong theology that would insist on such a distinction. This option, however, presents a different problem for Caputo, namely, the fact that Jesus does not merely *suggest* love as a nice idea but actually *commands* it. Can love still be love if it’s commanded? Does not this then mean that love is “tainted” by law? To this problem Caputo replies that law is deconstructible, while love is not. Of course, its undeconstructible status *also* means that love is impossible—not *simply* impossible but *the* impossible. Love, then, is not against the law or even beyond the law; rather, it is situated *within* the law, constantly haunting, loosening, and challenging the law. Without love, the law would not be “just.” So once again love turns out to be a possibility condition of justice.

Throughout much of its history, philosophy has been tuned to a religious impulse. In part, this is because thinking about life eventually leads us to questions about its ultimate value. But in thinking about the ultimate, we must at the same time consider the limits of thought and examine reason’s capacity to plumb the depth and extent of the sacred. As the essays by Brian Treanor, B. Keith Putt, and James H. Olthuis make clear, it is hardly enough to set up a faith/reason dichotomy and assume that we have therefore been truthful about the complexity of the human/divine relationship. Does the practice of love change the character of our relationships, and if so, how? Here questions about our naming of God, of our relationship to God, and of God’s relationship to the world come to the fore.

In “A Love that B(l)inds,” Putt investigates Shakespeare’s famous claim that “love is blind” by way of a careful consideration of Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion. Love ends up being not only a kind of unknowing but also a faith without sight. Following Caputo, he describes the act of love as one that moves from a passion *for* the impossible to a movement *by* the impossible and in terms of it. Love is what limits experience of the dark night where we become completely dependent on the other, having forsaken every gnosis, since all our attempts to know would result in the reduction of the other in terms of the mastery of self-presence. At the end, I do not *know* what I love when I love my God. Instead, I love by faith, not by sight.

This question of not knowing—of not being able to identify the other—is likewise taken up by Treanor in “Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder,” though he comes to a different conclusion. On the one hand, Treanor is sympathetic to the Levinasian and Derridian point that the other cannot be properly identified (and still remain other). Deconstructors are to be commended for their caution. On the other hand, Treanor argues that—in the name of wishing to avoid violence—deconstruction refuses to love. It *talks* about love a great deal but is afraid to *practice* love. For loving requires that I love *someone*, a neighbor who has some *identity* and who is not completely different from me. Treanor concludes that one can take the otherness of the other seriously without lapsing into a hyperbolic account of absolute otherness. Indeed, only an otherness that has some sense of similarity can ever be recognized or treated ethically. It is not a question of choosing between alterity and similitude: both are present and intermingled.

The great faith traditions of the Western world have often maintained that the ultimate value of the world is a feature of reality finding its origin and purpose in a Creator God. But what if the God who creates “is love,” as the letter of John suggests? James Olthuis argues that the traditional doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (“from nothing”) rests far too much on an understanding of God as a distant, all-powerful, controlling divinity not passionately involved in the fate of all created beings. He proposes that we revise this teaching to read creation *ex amore, cum amore, and ad amorem* (“from love,” “with love,” and “to love”), since this would more faithfully reflect what we know about God as the one who intimately and patiently enters into creation, suffers with it, and longs to redeem it. Love is the active, vivifying, and healing force that acts as the glue that holds all of reality together. Love reflects God’s omnipotence, not as a coercive or violent power over another, but as the steady, caring presence that “keeps on coming” no matter what. If love is the heart of the world as its origin and end, then the ways in which we interact with each other, the world, and God undergo a profound transformation.

For instance, how does love affect the social order? The history of politics demonstrates that love has not very often been the model for ordering our social relationships and institutions. The question then becomes: What bearing does love have for the way we order our relationships? What should the

basis for political action be? Tyler Roberts argues in “Militant Love,” following the contemporary theorist Slavoj Žižek, that the Christian legacy is important precisely because it has bequeathed love, a conception that provides a basic principle for structuring human collectivities. For Žižek, love is affirming the other on behalf of the other. What Christianity accomplishes—through Paul—is the movement from desire to love. Yet for Žižek, Christianity can only complete itself by following its own logic and sacrificing itself. Christianity thus provides a model of true commitment: one believes, not in something “real,” but in what Žižek terms “the fragile absolute.” According to Žižek, Christian love is “violent” in its rupture with its Jewish past and its insistence on sacrificing self and relationships. Yet the question is whether Christianity truly provides the “militant model” that Žižek seeks and whether he fails to pay close enough attention to Jesus’ own model of love.

Christina M. Gschwandtner continues the discussion on love’s possible militancy in “Love as a Declaration of War?” Precisely because of her recognition that love should affect our knowledge of and relationship to the other, she finds it troubling that Marion—in key passages of *Le phénomène érotique*—resorts to the metaphor of *war* to provide a phenomenological account of eros. This results in a number of seemingly strange features of erotic love. First, for Marion, the lover advances toward the beloved in a way that makes the advance of the lover virtually impossible to resist. Moreover, since the lover sets the conditions for love, the beloved is completely passive. Indeed, Marion thinks that love is complete even without the return of love from the beloved. Second, since the lover is the possibility condition for the beloved, the lover seems to have a kind of control over the beloved. Gschwandtner argues that the lover—on this account—seems almost like God. Third, Marion insists that the only appropriate way to speak of eros is in terms of mystical theology. But why, Gschwandtner asks, must eros be thematized in theological terms? Moreover, are theological terms even the appropriate ones for speaking of eros? Fourth, Marion insists that all love—whether romantic love or friendship—ends up being the same. Simply from a phenomenological point of view, such a description seems inadequate to describe the various types of relations in which some form of love plays a role. Finally, Marion makes yet another questionable move in asserting that erotic love is ultimately divine *agape*. Gschwandtner argues that, even if this move were to work theologically, it is certainly open to question phenomenologically. Note that these criticisms raised by Gschwandtner assume that the economy of love should be radically *different* from what Marion is describing.

In “Liberating Love’s Capabilities,” Pamela Sue Anderson makes surprisingly similar criticisms to those of Gschwandtner, but regarding the very Western philosophical imaginary itself. Unfortunately, that imaginary is dominated through and through by conceptions of love as a kind of bondage (and Marion is simply another example of this tendency). The history of patriarchy reveals

that women have been placed (sometimes violently) in the uncomfortable position of being unable to love in terms unique to themselves. On the one hand, women have been demonized as the originators of evil and thus not worthy of love or incapable of expressing love. On the other hand, they have simply been subsumed within the world of men and so denied the opportunity to develop patterns and symbols—what we might call a language and grammar—of love unique to their own experience.

This construal of love has been particularly damaging to women who are denied the freedom and ability to discover themselves and contribute to the world. When our notions of love are released from the bondage of patriarchal myths, not only are new conceptions of personhood opened up, *but the very sense of wisdom changes*. Liberated love makes possible new kinds of thinking that are permeated by tenderness and attention. When people, both women and men, are liberated by love to be themselves, the possibility for new attachments to each other, the world, and God emerges in such a way that members are no longer fused or subsumed into each other (as when women are alternately yoked to the demonic or the divine).

The concern with the absorption of one gender into another continues in Ruthanne Crápo's essay "The Genesis of Love." Working with Luce Irigaray, Crápo argues that our cultural and mythic past has contributed to the silencing and virtual obliteration of the female sex. The feminine has no desire or language because, and as the story of Electra makes clear, she is presumed to be but a variation on the male. Patriarchy and misogyny mean that we have a language of sameness. In other words, the feminine has been absorbed into the masculine self—and this has had a profound effect on women's ways of knowing. Through a reading of Genesis, however, Crápo constructs an alternative story, one in which male and female are not absorbed into, but rather complement, each other. She envisions a world in which we can be "two and together," a world in which the two genders do not fuse but grow, flourish, and dance with each other.

The question of love—and its relation to human ways of being—extends even into recent developments in biotechnology and genetic engineering, for such developments call into question the very nature of what it is to be human and what it means to love. Rather than women being subsumed within the world of men, humanity itself runs the risk of being absorbed into the manufactured and arbitrary world of economic efficiency and personal style. What is it to be a human being in a world where the options to change or reconstruct people and infants are multiplying? Does love have anything to say about the heart of our humanity? Amy Laura Hall, in "You'd Better Find Somebody to Love," offers a trenchant criticism of the burgeoning field of bioethics. She argues that for the most part love is absent from bioethical decision making as ethicists and scientists have succumbed to dehumanizing and thoroughly utilitarian/economic modes of reflection. What does it mean to be human in a

world of gene therapy and eugenics, where researchers and engineers now promise “No more stupid or ugly or short—or in any other way ‘deficient’—babies”? As Hall argues, it is by no means a simple thing to say what “being human” is, particularly when we remember that varying cultures at different times characterize domestic, social, and personal existence in different ways. In the face of this confusion, Hall interjects a Kierkegaardian voice on love, a voice that finds its poignant expression in the love of the suffering, vulnerable Christ. It is this divine love that makes it possible for us to welcome each other as unique gifts of grace, as ones befitting every ounce of our care, rather than as always imperfect marks in the vastly profitable web of reproductive and genetic technologies.

Together, these essays offer multiple and varying ways of demonstrating just how central love is to true wisdom. As they aptly show, love is not just an “add-on” to wisdom but a central *feature* of being wise. Thus, these essays do something that so desperately needs to be done: they call our attention back to the fundamental role that love plays in being wise. These essays consider some of the most significant questions of philosophy: How does philosophy contribute to a good life and a just world? Does it matter what kind of philosophy we practice? How is philosophy different from sophistry or rational technique? But these questions are asked from the perspective of love’s relation to life and wisdom, rather than simply as open-ended general questions. These questions have to do with the wide range of epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical concerns that otherwise animate philosophers. And what these essays show is just how deeply love affects our thinking. One cannot read these essays without being truly challenged to pursue philosophical questions *from the standpoint of love*. And the effects of that change in standpoint are bound to be remarkable.

NOTES

1. See the three-volume philosophical (and encyclopedic) treatment by Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–87). On the theological side, see Gene Outka’s *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), and more recently, Timothy P. Jackson’s *Love Disconsolated: Meditations on Christian Charity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Oliver Davies’s *A Theology of Compassion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001).

2. See Paul Tillich’s *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analysis and Ethical Applications* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961) and more recently the work of Michel Foucault, particularly the collection *Politics, Philosophy, Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

3. See Norman Daniels’s *Just Health Care* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1985) and the essays in *Medicine and Social Justice*, ed. Rosamond Rhodes, Margaret Battin, and Anita Silvers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

4. See Eva Feder Kittay's *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and the collection of essays edited by Mary Jeanne Larrabee, *An Ethic of Care: Feminist and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

5. See the very influential work of Parker Palmer, especially *To Know as We are Known* (San Francisco: Harper, 1983, reprint 1993), and more recently Jing Lin's *Love, Peace, and Wisdom in Education: A Vision for Education in the 21st Century* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

6. For a powerful redrawing of what it is to be human in the twin contexts of personal frailty and love, see Jean Vanier's 1998 Massey Lectures, *Becoming Human* (New York: Paulist, 1998). Vanier argues that the dominant conceptions of human nature and morality are based on the Greek conception of a well-equipped, fully functioning person. But where does this leave the vulnerable, the handicapped, and the chronically ill among us? True maturity, Vanier claims, follows from a compassionate heart. Without love, we are stunted in our development, unable to fully and faithfully receive each other and the world.

7. Timothy P. Jackson, *The Priority of Love: Christian Charity and Social Justice* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 14.

1

The Primacy of Love

NORMAN WIRZBA

Philosophy is the wisdom of love at the service of love.

—Emmanuel Levinas

It is misleading, even if it is etymologically correct, to define philosophy as the “love of wisdom.” As a definition it assumes too much. Do we know what we mean when we utter the word *wisdom*, especially in a time dominated by the “end of philosophy?”¹ Do we fully appreciate the significance and the complexity of the *relation* between the work of love and the realization of wisdom? Moreover, how does the practice or character of our *love*, especially given the precarious, flexible, and fluid nature of contemporary social bonding, determine the shape of our wisdom?² If we attend to these questions, it should become clear that the pursuit of wisdom entails much more than the mere accumulation of knowledge or information. Indeed, the mass production and consumption of data that characterizes our “information age” may actually be an impediment to the realization of those forms and habits of love that promote genuine wisdom.

Put differently, the pursuit of wisdom requires that we be as attentive to the manner of our pursuit as we are to the goal of it. We need to ask about the very practical conditions—our skills and work environments, cultural assumptions and goals, personal dispositions and aspirations—that inspire and propel any and all pursuits. Are there forms of life that better ignite and fuel a genuine love of wisdom? Conversely, are there personal, social, or institutional contexts that, because of their flow and aim, work against the development of an affectionate, charitable, understanding stance in the world? When we consider these sorts of questions, the issue of primary importance is whether or not we have developed the capacity to love. Love, as this essay will argue, is the

indispensable prerequisite for wisdom. If we do not exhibit appropriate forms of love, our access to wisdom will be seriously impaired if not altogether denied.

What love itself is, of course, is not easily or simply determined. This is especially apparent when we consider how other languages, Latin for instance, employ several terms to reference love: *amor*, *caritas*, *pietas*, *dilectio*, *affectio*, and *studium*. The diversity of these terms, their meanings but also the practical contexts in which they would appear, indicate that love is a varied and complex phenomenon that should not be narrowly or quickly reduced to one thing. It may be more appropriate to cast love as being an essential ingredient in the several dimensions of human existence and practice that bind us to each other, to the world, and ultimately to God. On this view, familiar and unfamiliar human relationships, the work of devotion and attention, our response to suffering, and our handling of the material world are at their best when they are permeated by a disposition to love. Love begins in our opening to and welcome of others, and grows as we attend to them in their integrity and wholeness.

Though love flowers into many different forms, at root a loving disposition is one that acknowledges, affirms, and nurtures (human and nonhuman) others in their ability to be. Love cherishes and exults in the independence and interdependence of another. The prototype for this sort of affirmation is to be seen in God's own creative, loving act that keeps and brings the whole world into existence (remembering here the theological link between creation's affirmation as "very good" [Genesis 1:31] and the view that "God is love" [1 John 4:8]). God loves primordially and concretely by "making room" for others "to be" and to flourish.³ Creation is, in the first instance, a *given* reality and thus a reflection of the divine life as giving-ness itself.⁴ Because creation did not need to exist (it does not contain the principle of its existence within itself or hold it as an intrinsic property), the fact of its existence must be understood as a reflection of divine love.

If we are to become acquainted with this world and truly know and understand it, we must also become acquainted with—and *learn to practice*—the divine love that inspires and sustains it. Having wisdom would require us to understand the world and God *together*, since the former finds its bearing in the latter, that is, the meaning of the world is tied to its origin in the mystery of divine love. Wisdom's pursuit would also require us to proceed along the paths of love, since love is the root of our and all being. The various blossoming forms of human love—as revealed in our relationships, economies, art, work, and philosophical reflection—must tap into this primordial divine love if they are to be considered true or authentic. What this means is that wisdom does not have its origin or goal in us, for whatever finite power we possess would have the characteristic of making others dependent upon us. When our inspiration and focus is ourselves, our contact with others is rendered oblique

and distorted, since who or what they are is always mediated by our desires, fears, anxieties, and needs. This is why John insists that “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8). Only love makes it possible for us to meet another as genuinely other (and not a projection of our needs or desires).

The practical pattern for this love, John continues, is the life of God’s own son Jesus Christ: “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his Son into the world so that we might live through him” (v. 9). From a Christian point of view, if we want to truly know the world, we must approach all of it with a Christ-like disposition and perspective. Sensing how the Christian “way” leads to new patterns of relating to others and to the world, early Christians thought it entirely appropriate to speak about Jesus as the “true and complete philosopher” and to claim a “philosophy according to Christ.”⁵ We cannot have wisdom of the world if we have not first firmly committed ourselves to loving it in ways modeled for us by Christ, which means that we have put to death sinful patterns of relating that dissimulate, distort, disfigure, and destroy.

Not surprisingly, given this Creator/creation/Christic starting point, an emphasis on the primacy of love is fairly common within mystical literature. Here the anonymous fourteenth-century text *The Cloud of Unknowing* can be seen as representative: “Thought cannot comprehend God. And so, I prefer to abandon all I can know, choosing rather to love him whom I cannot know. Though we cannot know him we can love him. By love he may be touched and embraced, never by thought.”⁶ A primary problem with thought is that it seeks comprehension, whereas God is in principle incomprehensible. The capacity of thinking is simply too small for the grandeur of God. Moreover, the faculty of thought is itself constantly constrained by the power of sin: anger, envy, sloth, pride, covetousness, gluttony, and lust. The merit of love, however, is that it “heals the root of sin” and nurtures practical goodness, making us more sensitive and responsive to God’s grace at work in the world. Whereas the drive toward knowledge lends itself to personal conceit—a separation from the love of God—the work of love promotes humility, a form of self-forgetting that makes room for the truth of the world and the glory of God to appear.

But what does mysticism of this sort have to do with philosophy? Should not philosophers be dedicated to the scientific, objective, disinterested pursuit of knowledge, and thus shun such mystical talk? Clearly, it would be a mistake to advocate the mass conversion of philosophers into mystics. Nonetheless, it will be my claim that the primacy of love that mystics advocate is of crucial significance for philosophical work. We cannot have anything like an honest, detailed, clear look at reality if our sight and our sensitivity have been tainted or clouded by a knower’s ambition or desire for mastery and control. *Love is central to the philosophical task because it keeps our focus off ourselves, and directs our energy and discipline to the expansion of our sympathies and the clarification of our vision so that we can better attune our lives to the complexity*

and depth of the world. Love makes it possible for us to receive the world as it is rather than as we want or wish it to be. Love enables us to resist the (often violent) integration of others into the sameness and comfort of the thinker's world.⁷ It acknowledges in a way that no other disposition or activity can the integrity and the mystery of existence.

Philosophy, in other words, needs to be a practical discipline in which the expansion of our sympathies and the clarity of our vision assume first importance. If these disciplines are lacking, perhaps because they do not have sufficient social or cultural support or because the material conditions of our economic and practical life militate against them—consider here the speed, ephemerality, and transience of global culture—then it is safe to say that our perception and understanding will have been compromised. It isn't that we will fail to perceive altogether. More likely we will see and feel differently, with more superficiality and less insight. The irony, of course, is that a problem of perception is rarely "perceived" to be a problem. More than we care to admit, we are like Plato's prisoners, stuck in the bottom of our self-assured caves, convinced that reality is as we take or make it.

Our movement toward true enlightenment (which is not to be confused with modern Enlightenment ideas of "progress")—remembering here the long-standing affinity between love and light—has been hampered by the confusion between knowledge and genuine understanding or wisdom. In modernity this confusion reached a fevered pitch as the quest for scientific knowledge took center stage. In part, this happened because technical knowledge enabled the newly autonomous individual to better control or master the world. In this context, philosophical training lost its earlier focus on wisdom so that it could become the handmaiden and legitimating support of economic, political, and social practices that would maximize human ambition and success (often at the expense of each other and the world). The only knowledge that was prized was of the instrumental or pragmatic sort that we could easily possess or wield as an instrument with the aim of exercising possession or power.

Wisdom, however, is not a possession or a tool in the service of controlling the world. Consider here the words of Henry Bugbee:

Wisdom is not a form of knowledge which we can be strictly said to *possess*. Wisdom may better be conceived as giving us the strength and courage to be equal to our situation than as knowledge giving us command of it. To the extent that human well-being and capacity for acting well ultimately turn upon understanding (I will not say knowledge), the understanding in question is going to have to be distinguished from powers we can be said to wield, including such knowledge as we *acquire* and might employ as an acquisition.⁸

Bugbee is alerting us to a long tradition of philosophical practice that appreciates wisdom as fidelity and attunement to the world. Wisdom cannot be reduced to knowledge, nor should knowledge invariably be understood as a

sufficient condition for understanding. We can see this because at precisely the time when we have the greatest amount of data or information in the natural and social sciences, we are also witnessing human communities and natural habitats everywhere in decline or under assault. Social and personal life are beset by anxiety, worry, boredom, stress, loneliness, violence, and fear. Biological life is compromised by soil erosion and toxification, water and air pollution, unprecedented rates of species extinction, deforestation and desertification, and uncontrolled suburban sprawl. Apparently what we “know” has not translated into the sort of understanding that would enable us to affirm others in their integrity and equip us to live well or in a manner that facilitates mutual flourishing.

Knowledge without understanding unleashes destructive potential because it is knowledge without sense or purpose, knowledge without an appreciation for what our “knowing” is ultimately for. Put differently, when our knowledge is merely *about* the world or others, it becomes abstract and simplistic because it is not forged *through* a sympathetic and practical engagement with them. What is missing is an appreciation for the complex requirements and responsibilities that follow from our living with others—fertile soil, clean water, healthy organisms, vibrant farming communities, sustainable production practices, a just distribution of goods, meaningful work, face-to-face encounters/conversations, nurturing friendships, and grateful consumption. The modern disenchantment with the world reflects a failure to understand how our living is supported by others and in turn affects others, a failure that is repeated again and again in the ways we shop, work, and consume. Our cultural malpractice prevents us from living lives that are healthy and whole. In too many cases our practical living is without art and without love. It is no accident that the gradual disappearance of wisdom should go hand in hand with a gradual loss of the sense that we belong to the world and are deeply implicated in its well-being.⁹

The difference between knowledge and understanding is decisive. Though the discovery and production of knowledge can be difficult enough, the process of understanding entails a much more intimate, and thus also more complex, involvement and participation in what is understood. As we enter the domain of understanding, we move past a description of things (the surface perception of them) to their explanation, the discovery of the workings of things, their sense, direction, integrity, and purpose as well as their connectedness with others.¹⁰ At a bare minimum, understanding requires our interaction with and participation in things in a way that knowing about them simply does not. Wisdom reflects this patient, educative experience and practice informed by basic care and affection. It manifests itself in persons who understand who they are in relation to the many others that inform and intersect their living. It results in a life of propriety, a life in which the patterns of individual existing resonate and harmonize with the existence of others.

We attain a level of understanding insofar as our thinking and acting acknowledge and are informed by the many bonds that connect us to others. We should ask: Are these bonds inspired and directed by love? The character and extent of our connections to reality are crucial. The sense (direction) or purpose of our own living as well as the meaning of things around us depend on whether we can perceive the complex flows of life going on around us and then learn how to adjust our lives accordingly so that they fit or harmonize.¹¹ Without this fundamental level of perception or sympathy, something like a moral or religious sensibility risks becoming artificial or disingenuous, a feigned piety that relies more on changeable emotional states than it does on a faithful accountability to others and the world. As we engage the world around us, not with an eye to understanding it, but rather with the goal of turning it to our own advantage, we falsify and destroy it. “He who has his mind on taking, no longer has it on what he has taken.”¹²

Reflection on the distinction between knowledge and understanding, between information and wisdom, helps us appreciate how and where practices of love assume such significance in our philosophical work. Put simply, love makes possible an attentive regard for others. It creates the space in which another can appear and shine as the one it uniquely is. Jean-Luc Marion has put it this way: “Only charity . . . opens the space where the gaze of the other can shine forth. The other appears only if I gratuitously give him the space in which to appear.”¹³ Marion’s concern is that the machinations of consciousness normally reduce experience of others to what any particular consciousness allows or utilitarian intent demands. From a phenomenological point of view, even though we would think that the intentionality of consciousness would direct us beyond ourselves, the net effect of our reaching is to draw others into horizons of meaning and significance that we have predetermined. If love of another is not to devolve into self-love, a kind of self-idolatry in which I see in others always versions of myself, then there must be a transcending of intentional consciousness. For Marion, as for Emmanuel Levinas,¹⁴ this occurs in the destabilizing gaze or “face” of another person who calls into question the conclusions of our intentional aim.

Another way to put this is to say that love makes possible a responsible engagement with the world. Though it is tempting to reduce responsibility into a decidedly moral description, as when we say that it is important for people to accept responsibility for their actions, responsibility’s more fundamental meaning emerges as we demonstrate the patient, honest, non-evasive regard for and acceptance of what is before us. To be responsible is to be open to the sanctity of others and to sense the questionableness of the strategies we normally employ for comprehending them. To be irresponsible is to exhibit the basic impropriety in which the alterity and integrity of others does not register or does not count. It is to assume that we can understand ourselves and the world through and from ourselves alone.

It doesn't take much honest reflection to conclude that this assumption is false, because rather than our possessing or mastering life, life encompasses us. In its wholeness we are but one part. More fundamental to our living than our acting or planning, our choosing and deciding, is the fact that even before we are born we are receiving and appropriating the gifts of those around us. As Jean-Louis Chrétien would remind us, "Whatever we do, or do not do for that matter, wherever we are, we are always already called and requested, and our first utterance, like our first glance, is already an answer to the request wherein it emerges."¹⁵ This means that we cannot consider ourselves to be autonomous or autarchic: "Before I can ask 'what should I do?' or 'how should I live?' I have already been addressed by a voice that positions me as a respondent. Its summons makes me a 'you' before I can establish myself as an 'I.' As responsivity, morality follows an address."¹⁶ As one addressed by the world and thus called to respond to it, I am not without freedom altogether. Rather, the character or shape of our freedom develops as we move care-fully and responsively *within* the world instead of *apart* from it. Being truly within the world means that another can enter into our subjectivity and inspire us: "I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired. This inspiration is the psyche."¹⁷

We are always dependent on others for our living, so the key distinction is not between freedom or unfreedom but between responsible or irresponsible dependence, between loving or non-loving engagement. Our living, in other words, is always conditioned by the limits and possibilities at work in the particular social and natural contexts we find ourselves in. If we deny these limits or think we can escape or surpass them, we will invariably, as history clearly shows, abuse the very contexts on which we depend. But if we respect these limits and accept our partiality—consider and attend to the distance and interdependence that characterize all of life—we position ourselves to develop an understanding that will make the world healthy and whole.¹⁸

Love is an exacting discipline that is vital to philosophical reflection because it is centrally about how we position ourselves in the world. Is our stance one that enables us to possess, control, manipulate, or predict (with an eye to subsequent control or manipulation)? If it is, then it is likely that we will not meet another as genuinely other, and will thus render ourselves incapable of affirming and nurturing others in their ability to be. We will not receive or engage others in their integrity or depth, but will instead only be dealing with reduced others, with others that conform to (and thus do not unsettle) the expectations or desires of a strictly pragmatic or self-serving consciousness. We will mistake what we wish another to be for what it in reality is.

For this very reason, the earliest vocation of the philosopher was essentially tied to the work of self-purification. In this work, what happens is that the ego learns to cleanse itself of the fantasies and arrogance that so readily distort its approach to the world. To be a genuine philosopher is to practice forms of

philosophical detachment so that we can be truly open to the world and let it inform and inspire us. In significant measure, this is how we must understand the figure of Socrates, Western philosophy's prototypical philosopher. The piety of (unrelenting) questioning, but also the admission of our own ignorance, has everything to do with the destabilizing of egos determined to grasp and use others for their own wills.

Pierre Hadot has done a superb job drawing out this side of ancient philosophical practice. Referring to Socratic questioning, he observes that its purpose was not to bring an interlocutor to some conclusive result. It was rather to confront him or her with the vanity of their presumed knowledge. In exposing this vanity an important discovery becomes possible: the questionability of the knowledge seeker. "In the Socratic dialogue, the real question is less what is being talked about than who is doing the talking."¹⁹ Or more specifically, what comes into view (and is thus made available for inspection) is the manner of life of the one doing the talking. For Socrates, the focus is not on what we know but on how we practically live and who we are. Are we living in pursuit of the good? Are we open and faithful to reality in its fundamental depth and complexity? The measure of our moral excellence, but also of our rationality, is a feature of such honest openness.

What Socrates initiated was a conception of philosophy rooted in "metanoetic consciousness," a way of thinking that is confessional and self-searching to the core. In an important sense, philosophizing must have as a recurring theme the acknowledgment of failures and sin (most notably pride). It must continually go through repentance (from the Greek *metanoia*, a change in the direction of one's mind and heart), the perpetual transformation of mind, so that the philosopher might be conformed to the good that he or she so much desires.²⁰ Genuine philosophizing takes the philosopher beyond his or her own fears, predispositions, or securities so that a more faithful and true embrace of the world becomes possible. The great philosophical error and perennial temptation, however, is to think that a genuinely philosophical life could proceed without attention to these practical disciplines of detachment and self-purification.

It is the merit of Martin Heidegger to have shown that one of the long-standing devices for avoiding this self-purification is the giving of reasons. When we give a reason for something, what we are finally doing is securing the position of it, placing (grounding) it in a context where it can be meaningful within a rational paradigm. As part of a rational order, it can then be "taken up" by a rational agent and "dealt with" in a variety of ways.²¹ The reasons we give, therefore, and how we represent the world to others and ourselves are of profound moral and practical significance because it is as we represent the world according to this or that rational schema that we at the same time legitimate our practices. In other words, the philosophical work of giving reasons can become a means whereby thinkers justify or facilitate self-chosen

aims, desires, or fears. Rather than being an opening to genuine understanding of the world, an understanding that acknowledges and affirms the alterity and integrity of others, philosophical *ratio* may turn out to be little more than the technical support for an industrial or technological program.

It is significant that Heidegger came to this realization through his reading of the mystics. *Gelassenheit*, Heidegger's term for letting others be what they are, presupposes an inward transformation such that thinking does not become an imposition of the ego upon another. Practically speaking, this means that the thinker must overcome a narrow self-love, the disposition that reduces others to the fulfillment of self-chosen aims, so that the integrity and sanctity of others can be acknowledged and affirmed. Because undue care for self—the strategies we employ to secure our position or advantage over and against that of others—has been overcome, we now become freed to encounter the other on its own terms.

Meister Eckhart, but also Angelus Silesius, were foremost in Heidegger's mind when he developed this position. According to Eckhart, the soul that is genuinely attuned to God must strive for nothing for fear that some vestige of the ego will be animating it. The soul must become completely available to God, and it does this by not caring for itself, by not trying to legitimate itself through some act of reason-giving. It must become, according to Silesius, like a rose that is “without why,” a rose that simply blooms without need for an agenda or justification. It simply grows into the grace of God because it is animated by nothing but that grace. The rose has, in a sense, become a “clearing” in which God's givingness can take hold and shine. Its beauty resides in and is an unblemished display of the love of God at work within it. When the soul resembles the rose, it has stripped the ego of its controlling grip and thus made itself open and available to the grace of God. “The soul is the place of God, as God is the place of the soul. The ground of the soul is a ‘place’ among creatures into which God may come, a ‘clearing’ for God's advent into the world. An ‘event’—God's coming—can happen in the soul because the soul has ‘cleared’ a place in which it may take place.”²²

To live “without why” or without the need to give self-justifying reasons is to live in a loving manner because now one has genuinely been opened to the mystery and wonder of the world. The soul is now detached and available so that others can inform and inspire its living. What becomes possible is a repositioning of the self so that it can be in harmonious and sympathetic alignment with the ways of the world. Rather than engaging others in terms of a calculating or controlling intelligence, an intelligence we see to be wreaking havoc and destruction in our social and biophysical neighborhoods, we learn instead to welcome and embrace the world as it is.

But is it possible, practically speaking, for us to live like a rose? After all, is it not naïve or rash to suppose that we can do away with reasons altogether? My point has not been to demolish all kinds of reasoning, since we can readily

observe forms of reasoning that would highlight or amplify the integrity of others or that would draw out the complexity and depth of relationships that bind us together. Our goal should be to guard against the forms of reasoning that dissimulate or violently assimilate and that cloud the extent of our interdependence or the distance between ourselves and others. What we need to develop are practices of philosophical reflection that open us to the wonder and the sanctity of the world, practices that more humbly and responsibly position us in the world.

For this, we have models to help us. Consider here the ancient estimation that philosophical skill is analogous to the skill of a craftsperson. The successful execution of a craft depends on a craftsperson's first having undergone an apprenticeship to reality. What I mean by this "apprenticeship" is that the craftsperson never simply imposes his or her will on the world. Rather, what happens is that the apprentice learns to see cues that inspire and guide the design and work, cues that have their origin in the world itself. What makes a craftsperson excellent is that he or she has learned to be attentive to the needs, limits, possibilities, and desires of the social and natural world in which he or she moves, and has developed the skill to turn possibilities into realities that are pleasing, useful, enduring, and beautiful.²³

On this view, true skill is a measure of how faithfully, honestly, and creatively one can respond to the potential that is the world. Such skill takes considerable time and discipline. It also requires repentance or *metanoia* as we learn to see our mistakes and correct them. The overall goal, however, is for the craftsperson to come into clearer alignment with the world. This aligning process is something like a conversation in which we offer our thoughts and plans to be tested in experience, knowing that we will be spoken to through the effects of our work (a failed or destructive result "calls" for a reevaluation of our entire plan and thought process). The master craftsperson is thus someone who puts him- or herself at the disposal of the craft. Building on the hermeneutical theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Joseph Dunne has put it this way: "A conversation really has a life of its own, and is most fruitful when the partners surrender to this life—a surrender that is accomplished, of course, only through the intense 'activity' of remaining open and responsive to the to and fro movement of the questioning."²⁴ Surrendering is a form of detachment in which the craftsperson submits to the demands of an art or skill. He or she becomes a "master" of a discipline insofar as his or her personal will is held in check. Of people such as these it is possible to say they are lovers of, rather than rulers over, their art.

The history of Western culture demonstrates that philosophers have wanted to be rulers far more than they have wanted to be lovers. Rather than offering ourselves up in a loving response to the world—in ways that would promote mutual flourishing—we have instead sought to bring others within our control. The result has been the world's and our own destruction or

disfigurement. More than ever before, what we need is a transformation of philosophical practice so that an affirmation of others in their integrity can take place. But we cannot do this until we learn to encourage and practice those forms of love—affection, kindness, charity, mercy, delight, self-forgetting, and humility—that promote the expansion of our sympathies and the clarity of our vision. As we do this, we participate in the divine creative love that first brought and affirmed the world into being.

NOTES

1. Consider here Martin Heidegger's influential 1964 essay, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *On Time and Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), where the "end" refers to the realization of philosophy's "most extreme possibility." That possibility is modern technological culture, the scientific ordering of the world in terms of a utilitarian calculus. In our drive to manipulate the world for our own benefit, the "opening" or "unconcealing" (*aletheia*) of the world itself, what we might call its sacred dimension and its capacity to inspire wonder in us, is lost.

2. For a wide-ranging sociological analysis of our current situation, see Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003). The advent of "virtual proximity" and the dominance of free-market global economics have rendered all forms of social bonding more ambivalent and tenuous. In Bauman's view, the "skills of sociality" as well as care and affection are simply crumbling away.

3. In his *Journals and Papers* (ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970], entry #1251) Søren Kierkegaard casts God's goodness and omnipotence in the following way: "All finite power makes [a being] dependent; only omnipotence can make [a being] independent, can form from nothing something which has its continuity in itself through the continual withdrawing of omnipotence" (2:62). My thanks to Merold Westphal for alerting me to this passage.

4. Jean-Luc Marion argues that we should understand God as "being-as-given" without restriction, reservation, or restraint. As such, God does not simply stand behind creation as its efficient cause. God ecstatically, lovingly "disseminates" Godself in creating a world that is not itself divine. This divine dissemination gives to creatures their character as saturated beings, beings that witness to "donation without reserve." See his essay "Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Summary for Theologians," in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 279–96.

5. See Pierre Hadot's essay "Ancient Spiritual Exercises and 'Christian Philosophy,'" in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 126–44.

6. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. William Johnston (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 54.

7. Simone Weil writes: "To love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love" (*Gravity and Grace* [London: Routledge, 1963], 58). This is why she also notes that love is the only real organ for genuine contact with existence (57).

8. Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning: A Philosophical Exploration in Journal Form* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 65.

9. I am thinking here of the general homelessness and disembeddedness that characterize modern life. See the sociologist Anthony Giddens's work for an elabora-

tion of these themes, especially *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990) and *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), and Erazim Kohák's *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) for a particularly insightful account of the loss of wisdom in the context of homelessness. Kohák writes: "The bond of belonging that grows up over years of life, love, and labor is the most basic truth of being human in a world. . . . The distinction between possessing and belonging is crucial. Though humans may need to formalize having as possessing, the living truth of having is belonging, the bond of love and respect which grows between one being and another in the course of the seasons. The claim to having is as strong as all the love and care a person gives, and only that strong. It is crucial to have no more than we can love, for without love the claim to having becomes void. Loveless having, possessing in the purest sense, remains illegitimate, a theft" (107–108).

10. As Aristotle says (*Metaphysics* 981b10–13), sensory experience by itself is not wisdom because it does not tell us the "why" of things. Though the senses may be able to tell us that a particular thing is hot or of this or that composition or shape, they do not tell us why a thing is the way that it is, how it came to be this way, or what purpose its being serves. The analyses of the four causes (material, formal, efficient, and final) move us beyond the level of description to the deeper appreciation called understanding.

11. "It seems that there is a stream of limitless meaning flowing into the life of a man if he can but patiently entrust himself to it. There is no hurry, only the need to be true to what comes to mind, and to explore the current carefully in which one moves" (Bugbee, *Inward Morning*, 83). In a time of hyper-reality, of course, we are all hurried all of the time and thus do not have the time or patience to explore currents.

12. Michel de Montaigne, "Of Coaches," III:6 in *Essays*, trans. Donald Frame (Everyman Edition, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 837.

13. Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 166. Marion further compares our "making room" for another with God's original creative hospitality that makes room for creatures to be (167). In this respect, authentic human love is patterned upon God's love.

14. "The presence of the Other is equivalent to this calling into question of my joyous possession of the world" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969], 75–76). For a description of the significance of the "face-to-face" encounter for philosophical work, see my essay "From Maieutics to Metanoia: Levinas's Understanding of the Philosophical Task" (*Man and World* 28 [1995]: 129–44).

15. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 14–15. In the face of our continually being called, Chrétien suggests, much like Bugbee, that "our task is not to give an answer that would in some sense erase the initial provocation by corresponding to it, but to offer ourselves up as such in response, without assigning in advance any limit to the gift" (13).

16. Adriaan Peperzak, *Elements of Ethics* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), 54–55.

17. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), 114.

18. For a careful description of the relation between wholeness and the acceptance of limits, see Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*,

3rd ed. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996), esp. chaps. 6 and 7. “A healthy culture is a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration. It reveals the human necessities and the human limits. It clarifies our inescapable bonds to the earth and to each other. It assures that the necessary restraints are observed, that the necessary work is done, and that it is done well” (43). We simply cannot thrive for long at the expense of those on whom we depend. Our current environmental crises make this point very well; it is a fundamental error to think we can ignore or override biological limits and possibilities.

19. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 28.

20. For a wide-ranging discussion of “metanoetic consciousness” in ethical and spiritual development, see Michael McGhee’s *Transformations of Mind: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and the extensive study by Tanabe Hajime, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, trans. Takeuchi Yoshinori (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). For Hajime, philosophical reflection reaches its most authentic pitch as the self moves beyond itself (as a self-standing being) and identifies with the being of the world: “‘Meta-noetics’ means transcending the contemplative or speculative philosophy of intellectual intuition as it is usually found in the realms of thought based on reason . . . it is not a philosophy founded on the intuitive reason of *jiriki* (self-power), but rather a philosophy founded on action-faith-witness (*gyō-shin-shō*) mediated by the transformative power of *tariki* (Other-power)” (2–3). What Hajime is describing is a submission to the world and the testing and correcting of one’s thought and speech made possible by that submission.

21. Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

22. John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978), 113. In this excellent study, Caputo demonstrates convincingly the theological parallels in Heidegger’s philosophical work. Of course, this is not to turn Heidegger into a theologian. Caputo summarizes: “Eckhart’s life without why is a life of perfect love and perfect unity with God, which allows God to enter the soul and become the principle of life. Heidegger’s life without why is the renunciation of concepts and representations, of propositions and ratiocinations about Being; it lets Being be Being” (191).

23. The forms of attention that are here essential have become much harder to realize in the context of global economic life. Promising alternatives, alternatives that can help restore social and natural health and wholeness, are to be found in emerging “local economies” and the encouragement of “focal practices.” For accounts of the former, see *The Case Against the Global Economy: And a Turn Toward the Local*, ed. Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996) and Bill McKibben’s *Deep Economy* (New York: Times Books, 2007), and for the latter, Albert Borgmann’s *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

24. Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: ‘Phronesis’ and ‘Techne’ in Modern Philosophy and in Aristotle* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 136.

2

The Economies of Knowledge and Love in Paul

BRUCE ELLIS BENSON

The entire pericope of 1 Corinthians 8–10 can be situated between the strange juxtaposition of two phrases that we find at the beginning of chapter 8: “*Peri de tôn eidôlothutôn*” [now concerning food sacrificed to idols] and “*oidamen hoti pantes gnôsin exomen*” [we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge’].¹ While it might seem as if Paul turns to idolatry only to be immediately distracted by one of the chief claims of the Corinthians—that they “know”—the linking of idolatry and knowledge is crucial to Paul’s argument.² Since knowledge claims and idolatry often go together, Paul actually addresses what turn out to be variants of a well-established pattern.

In what follows, I will argue that Paul in effect lays out two economies, that of a particular sort of knowledge (rather than simply knowledge per se) and that of love. These economies are in turn defined by a series of dichotomies—puffing up and building up, the strong and the weak, and exercising one’s freedom versus being a servant and a steward. All of these categories have a connection to idolatry. As we will see, for Paul idolatry is very closely connected to knowledge claims that Paul thinks one simply isn’t entitled to make. And making those claims means that one is part of the economy of knowledge, not love.

The Economy of Knowledge

That Paul thinks knowledge and love are dichotomous is clear from the way he contrasts them already in the first verse. “Knowledge puffs up,” he says, “but love builds up” (8:1). *Gnôsis phusioi, agapê oikodomei*. This puffing up versus

building up is not merely a feature of English translation. Each verb carries the idea of “constructing,” though the two constructions are remarkably different in nature. *Phusioō* literally means “to inflate” (from the term for bellows, *phusa*). Yet Paul always uses the term metaphorically (and negatively) for the pride that inflates one’s ego. *Oikodomeō* is literally “the building of a house,” an *oikos*. For instance, Matthew uses the term in that well-known parable of two persons who build houses, one on the rock and the other on the sand (Matt 7:24). Yet the term is used both literally and metaphorically for building in general.

Although Paul doesn’t explicitly “build” his argument on the root of *oikodomeō*, I read him as setting out—both in this verse and throughout the letter—two conflicting economies. The economy of love is an *oikonomia* that is focused on an *oikos*, not a house in this case, but the household of faith. But as we will see, it is also a “stewardship” of that with which one has been entrusted—the right use of something that comes as a gift. Paul clearly would have been aware of the etymological connections between *oikodomeō* and *oikonomia*, though whether he is thinking in terms of two economies per se would be hard to argue. Thus, my argument is merely that this is effectively what he does, rather than that this is what he had (so to speak) “in mind.”

Given that Paul begins chapter 7 by saying “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote,” commentators generally agree that Paul is responding to a letter or series of letters from the Corinthians.³ His use of the locution *peride* here and elsewhere in this text indicates that he is responding to a concern raised by the Corinthians. Moreover, Paul appears to be quoting from the Corinthians’ letter(s) and responding to each point. What makes Paul’s use of quotations complicated is that the degree to which he agrees with what the Corinthians write is not always clear (nor is it clear what is part of the quotation and what is Paul’s addition). As will become evident, my own view is that Paul’s use of quotation in the text is often both ironic and critical.

Certainly the first quotation of chapter 8 fits that description. Paul quotes back to the Corinthians something that seems to have been a kind of motto of theirs: “We all know” [*pantes gnōsin exomen*]. But more than that, he prefaces that motto with the phrase “*oidamen hoti*.” Taken together, the entire phrase “*oidamen hoti pantes gnōsin exomen*” is a meta-epistemological claim: “We know that we know.”⁴ Although we could explore exactly how *gnōsis* functions here (for instance, does it denote some esoteric knowledge regarding the true nature of the physical and spiritual realms?), I’ll leave that question aside. Whatever this *gnōsis* may be, the Corinthians clearly think it empowers them—and that is what disturbs Paul.⁵ Rather than reading Paul as including himself in the “we know that,”⁶ I read Paul as describing the attitude of the Corinthians.

That the problem here is not simply “knowing” but a kind of “knowing that one knows” becomes clear in verse 2. Paul says: “Anyone who claims to

know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge.” The key word here is *dokeō*, which means “to suppose or think something.” In effect, Paul says that, at the very moment you think you “know,” you don’t actually know as you ought to know—which is to say, you don’t really “know.” Here we have Paul at his enigmatic best. But he is certainly not without precedent in making such a puzzling claim. One cannot help but think of the similarly enigmatic remark Jesus makes to the Pharisees. They say to him: “Surely we are not blind, are we?” He responds: “If you were blind, you would have no sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains” (John 9:40–41).⁷ It is not the moment of knowing (or seeing) but the moment of claiming knowledge that is problematic. Not only is the claim disproportional to the actual knowledge they possess, but also *how* they make the claim troubles Paul.

Let us first turn to the “disproportionality” of the claim. At issue here is the status of their knowledge claims—or, put more pointedly, the status they *claim* for those claims. If one says “*oidamen hoti pantes gnōsin exomen*,” then one is making a very strong claim indeed. The verb *oida* (to know) comes from the root **eidō* (to see). In Plato’s philosophy, for instance, knowing the *eidos* (usually translated as ‘form’ or ‘idea’) of something means that one has grasped it perfectly. To know the *eidos* is not merely to know the “outward form” of something but to know its “true reality.” When comparing his knowledge of the Father to that of the Pharisees, Jesus claims, “You have never heard his voice or seen his form [*eidos*]” (John 5:37). In other words, they don’t really “know” the Father. The kind of knowledge that *oida* provides is “comprehension,” as opposed to “apprehension.” Whereas comprehension is to “conceive fully or adequately,”⁸ apprehension suggests incompleteness. “Adequately” here does not mean “good enough” but “adequation” in the sense of the medieval phrase *adaequatio intellectus et rei*—a perfect one-to-one correspondence between the mind and the object of thought. *Oida* is often used in this sense of knowing perfectly or fully in the New Testament. Again, in rebuking the Pharisees, Jesus contrasts his knowledge of the Father with theirs by claiming that his is on the order of *oida* (John 8:55). That Paul uses the term *dokeō* in the phrase “anyone who claims to know” [*dokei egnōkenai*] shows that he thinks their knowledge claim is no more than an opinion—and a bad one at that.

But there is a second, even if closely related aspect at stake: *how* those claims are made. It is a common interpretation to suggest that Paul contrasts knowledge and love in verse 1 with the intention of saying that love needs to temper or inform knowledge. For instance, Augustine says:

Now the Apostle, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says, “Knowledge inflates; but love edifies.” The only correct interpretation of this saying is that knowledge is valuable when charity informs it. Without charity, knowledge inflates; that is, it exalts man to arrogance which is nothing but a kind of windy emptiness.⁹

At the risk of going against “the only correct interpretation,” I want to argue for a distinction between the economy of knowledge and the economy of love. The difference between the two is where each begins, which is to say their respective *grounds*. Whereas the economy of knowledge begins with me, the economy of love begins with the other. Or to put it another way, while knowledge is something that *I* ground, love is that which the *other* grounds. In the economy of knowledge, I maintain that *I* am able to give sufficient reasons for whatever it is I take to be true.

Precisely that difference explains another strange transition, the one that occurs between verses 2 and 3. In verse 2, Paul speaks from the active perspective of the knower. Yet in verse 3, he suddenly reverses perspectives: he now talks (passively) about *being known* by God: “But anyone who loves God is known by him.” Furthermore, it is here that knowledge and love are connected, not in the sense that love “informs” knowledge (*pace* Augustine), but in the sense that love proves to be the possibility condition for knowledge. So there is still knowledge, but two significant changes have taken place: first, one only obtains knowledge by way of love; and second, knowledge is fundamentally not about *what I do* but about *what God does*. Love is put in first place, with knowledge taking second place. Moreover, God is put in first place, with me taking second place.

That Paul thinks there is a distinct difference between the economy of knowledge and the economy of love is already clear from the first chapter of his letter, where he asks (rhetorically): “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1:20). Although Paul does distinguish between “wisdom” and “knowledge” (most notably in 1 Corinthians 12:8, in which they are listed as separate gifts of the Spirit), that distinction is irrelevant for the point I am making here. For both the “wisdom” and the “knowledge” that Paul criticizes in 1 Corinthians have a *human* basis, meaning that they are grounded on the self. But this is precisely what Paul takes to be impossible. Moreover, such “justification” likewise provides license for sinful practices.¹⁰ For Paul, the “wisdom of the world” [*sophia tou kosmou*] includes both the Jewish demand for signs [*sêmeia*] and the Greek search for wisdom [*sophia*] (1:22). In their place is put a new *logos*, “*ho logos ho tou staurou*” [the *logos* of the cross] (1:18).¹¹ As Stanislas Breton notes, with the adoption of this new *logos* “we have left the home of Israel just as we have left the home of Greece,” the result being that “the Western thinker is divided from *within*.”¹² Leaving Jerusalem means that we can no longer demand a sign as the requirement of our belief. Leaving Athens means that we give up the demand of *logon didonai*—giving reasons. From the standpoint of the economy of knowledge, then, the *logos* of the cross is truly foolishness. Indeed, the very connection of *logos* with *stauros* [cross] can only be reckoned as folly [*môria*]. Yet that folly, which has at its heart the kenotic self-emptying of Godself, demonstrates its own sort of strength in that it “shatters the idol of power.”¹³ In place of the wisdom of the

world is put God's wisdom, which is "secret and hidden" and "decreed before the ages" (2:7). Such wisdom cannot be "owned" or "mastered." It is beyond our comprehension.

A Taste for Idolatry

The strange series of reversals that we noted in verses 1–3 of chapter 8 takes place within the context of idolatry—more specifically, food sacrificed to idols. And that is not purely coincidental, for there is an important connection between Paul's claims regarding knowledge and the topic of idolatry. Earlier we noted the connection between *oida* and **eidō*, in which seeing for the Greeks is equated with knowing. The word for *idol* in Greek—*eidōlon*—is linked to both of those terms. Unlike God, the idol is something we both see and are truly able to grasp (to *comprehend*), for the simple reason that we are its creators. As Jean-Luc Marion puts it, "The idol presents itself to man's gaze in order that representation, and hence knowledge, can seize hold of it."¹⁴ Yet, claiming that the idol is in reality "nothing," the Corinthians feel confident enough to write, "We know that 'no idol in the world really exists'" and "'There is no God but one'" (8:4). In one sense, the Corinthians are correct. But it is in both the Corinthians' actual claim and the way it is made that Paul detects the threat of two sorts of idolatry. The first sort is the obvious one of partaking (either directly or indirectly) in pagan rites. We'll turn to that momentarily. But it is the other sort of idolatry—what we might call the idolatry of knowledge or "conceptual idolatry"—that we turn to first. In such idolatry, not only are human claims made too strongly, but those claims foster an arrogance that can lead one to idolatry. *This* sort of idolatry—rather than that of creating or bowing down to graven images—is actually the first recorded in Scripture.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out that in Genesis 3 we have "the first conversation *about* God, the first religious, theological conversation."¹⁵ Like all theological conversations, this one depends upon a particular *conception* of God, for there can be no theology without a "*logy*" or a *logos*. It is here that we find the first *misconceptions* of God. But it is also here that human beings develop a *taste* for idolatry—and this taste is closely connected to knowledge.

Consider the opening salvo of the serpent's seduction of the woman. "Did God [*elōhim*] say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Gen 3:1). The serpent's subtle rhetorical twist turns the focus from God's gracious permission ("You may freely eat of every tree of the garden," 2:16) to the one and only prohibition placed on Adam and Eve's liberty ("but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat," 2:18).¹⁶ Given the serpent's characterization, God's nature has already been distorted—a false image of God, as one who prohibits rather than enables, has been put in God's place. To this distortion, the woman responds: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said: 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the

middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die'” (3:2). The woman rightly rejects the image of God presented by the serpent, even if she also slightly distorts what God has said by adding “touching” to God’s more simple command of “eating” (2:17).¹⁷ In response to the woman’s correction, the serpent simply provides a *different* distorted image of God. For the serpent now says: “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:4–5). Here we have not merely an image of God as liar but also one that actually reflects the serpent’s deceitfulness. Yet this should come as no surprise, for Marion reminds us that the idol always serves “as a mirror, not as a portrait; a mirror that reflects the gaze’s image.”¹⁸ That is exactly what we get from the serpent: a “portrait” of God that is a mirror image of the serpent. Such is the nature of all idolatry, according to Marion:

The idol reflects back to us, in the face of a god, our own experience of the divine. The idol does not resemble us, but it resembles the divinity that we experience, and it gathers it in a god in order that we might see it.¹⁹

Thus, the nature of the conceptual idol is always based on the nature of the viewer. What we get in idolatry is a “picture” of God that reflects our distorted experience of God. Yet the idolatry does not stop there, for the serpent in effect claims to be able to get into the mind of God and postulate *why* God has made this command. Not only does this theory regarding God’s motives presume knowledge the serpent cannot have (resulting in its being *ungrounded*), it also makes God out to be both petty and envious.

Up until this point, only the serpent is engaged in idolatry. But the hook that draws the woman in is the claim that she “will be like God.” It is here that the taste for idolatry—perhaps already latent—is cultivated. Jacques Derrida speaks of his “taste” for the secret, for whatever can “never be broached/breached.”²⁰ We have a taste for that which is secret precisely because it stands at the edge of our limits. It is the “absolute,” that which language cannot express or human reason fathom.²¹ We want to invert the order of things, taking ourselves beyond our natural limits. It is *this* taste that the woman has. At the moment that she lusts after the fruit, she has developed a taste for idolatry. She seeks the transcendence of human limitations, enabling her to become like God. Gerhard von Rad describes that desire as follows:

What the serpent’s insinuation means is the possibility of an extension of human existence beyond the limits set for it by God at creation, an increase in life not only in the sense of pure intellectual enrichment but also familiarity with, and power over, mysteries that lie beyond man.²²

Exactly what this God-like “knowing” [*yd'*] involves is certainly open to debate,²³ but it is instructive that the woman sees the tree as (1) “good for food,” (2) “a delight to the eyes,” and (3) “desired to make one wise.” Here we have the combination of taste, sight, and knowledge. Eve clearly has a taste for

that knowledge (whether *yd'* or *oida*) that constitutes idolatry. For the delight that Eve experiences is primarily the delight of inverting the proper order of creator and creature and usurping God's place. She lusts after the knowledge that puffs up. The eating of the fruit is merely the satisfaction of that desire. Yet the result of that "puffing up" is a broken fellowship. What had been a perfect relationship between human and divine being is broken at the very moment that the human wants to become divine. So idolatry begins with a distorted image of God and ends with wanting to *be* God.

The Corinthians likewise have a taste for idolatry, in at least two different (though not unrelated) senses. The most obvious aspect of that taste is the literal taste that appears not to be "idolatrous" at all. Although commentators have often taken the issue in these chapters to be simply about buying idol meat in the market or the possibility of being served it while dining with friends, the situation faced by the Corinthians was far more complicated than that. For the Corinthians were literally *surrounded* by pagan practices. Imagine an atheist living in the Bible Belt in the 1950s, and you begin to get a kind of reverse perspective. There were all sorts of social occasions—weddings, birthdays, thanksgiving dinners, funerals, holidays—that would have included sacrificial rites or at least prayers as part of the celebration. Moreover, meals were served both in temples as part of pagan ritual and likely also just as "regular" meals.²⁴ Given that environment, if one wanted to take part in Corinthian social life, one had to make some concessions to pagan practices. And how could one turn down all of those invitations to lavish parties and dinners given by one's pagan friends who served such tasty fare, especially if one wanted to get ahead in life? Just as in our society, in the Greco-Roman world one's status was measured by the company one kept and the people with whom one dined. The Romans actually had a word for a "social climber" who advanced by getting dinner invitations from important persons—*parasitus*.²⁵ But the Corinthians rationalize that they can continue social life as usual just by thinking "no idol in the world really exists." Going back to my earlier comparison, it would be like an atheist attending a Thanksgiving dinner at the home of Christian friends who begin the meal with a prayer in which they asked God's blessing on the food. The atheist thinks: "There's no god, so the prayer is just meaningless." Likewise, the Corinthians insist that, since idols don't really exist, eating idol food shouldn't be a problem.

While it might appear (from chapter 8) that Paul agrees with them, his argument in chapter 10 makes it clear that he has been parroting back their own beliefs, not necessarily agreeing with them.²⁶ For in chapter 10, he claims that "what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons [*daimoniôn*] and not to God" (10:20). In other words, it is too simple to say that idols are just "nothing." Although an idol does not truly "exist," Paul thinks that taking part in pagan rites (including meals associated with them) means partaking in "the table of demons" (10:21). That Paul thinks they are in danger of idolatry is

clear from his warnings in the first part of chapter 10, where he draws a parallel between the ways the Israelites continually “tested” God and the ways the Corinthians are testing God by their behavior. “We must not put Christ to the test,” warns Paul in 10:9, and he asks, “Are we provoking the Lord to jealousy?” (10:22). Paul thinks the Corinthians’ arrogance has caused them to be so bold as to put God to the test, which is itself idolatrous.

Yet the Corinthians test God in another sense. Their arrogance does not merely lead to this literal sort of idolatry. It likewise leads to one of a much subtler sort, one that might not even seem to be idolatry at first glance. For the Corinthians have a taste for pushing things to the limits, for seeing just how far they can really go. Again, the taste is for a kind of transcendence. In the same way that “We all know” was one motto for the Corinthians, “All things are lawful” (6:12 and 10:23) was another. Literally, this could be rendered “I am free to do anything” [*panta moi exestiv*], but we might better capture the *force* of the claim if we translated it—in keeping with current usage—as “We have our rights!” What is at stake here is not merely the Corinthians’ *exousia* (right) and *eleutheria* (freedom) but also their absolute *insistence* on being able to exercise those rights without hindrance. That haughty insistence stands behind Paul’s entire discourse in chapters 6 through 10.

While Paul himself preached a message of freedom from the law when he had been in their midst, he clearly thinks they are abusing it in selfish—and even idolatrous—ways. Once again, Paul takes on an ironic posture, much like that which he exhibits in 4:10 where he says, “We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.” That passage almost drips with sarcasm. Paul’s move is first and foremost deflationary. When he writes, “It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge” (8:7), it is an inversion of what he had said only a few verses before—*oidamen hoti pantes gnôsin exomen*. As it turns out, we *don’t* all possess knowledge—and that “we” can easily be taken to include the seemingly “strong.” In other words, Paul can be read as suggesting that the Corinthians are not necessarily so strong after all. With that in mind, Paul’s famous warning in chapter 10—“So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall” (10:12)—should be taken as a rebuke to those who *think* they are strong. The message is clear: your pretensions to strength may well prove your undoing.

But Paul does not stop with merely undercutting their arrogant claims to “knowledge,” to “knowing the secret.” To correct the abuse of their *exousia* and *eleutheria*, Paul articulates a guideline by invoking a fictitious entity—the so-called “weak.” There is no textual evidence to suggest the existence of any “party” of weaker believers in Corinth, so it is hard to maintain the usual view of this passage: that there were “weak” and “strong” factions in the church at Corinth.²⁷ If anything, it seems that the Corinthians uniformly consider themselves “strong.” So the example of the weak is not an *actual* case but a *test* case

invoked as a kind of guiding principle designed not only to call the Corinthians up short but also to demonstrate what the proper exercise of Christian liberty looks like in practice. By turning to the weak, Paul shows that one's freedom is not curbed by some law but rather by other members of the body.

Here one cannot help but think of the way Emmanuel Levinas argues that it is the *other* who curbs my freedom. "Autonomy or heteronomy?" asks Levinas. "The choice of Western philosophy has most often been on the side of freedom."²⁸ Such has certainly been the choice of the Corinthians, who are insisting on their autonomy. To act with autonomy is literally to be one's own [*auto*] law [*nomos*]. Yet Levinas calls us to "heteronomous" acting, in which concern for the other curbs our freedom. There is a good reason why Levinas speaks of being "traumatized" by the other in *Otherwise than Being*, for the other's appearance radically disturbs my egoism and calls my vaunted autonomy into question.²⁹ In effect, Levinas distinguishes between a natural self, one defined by its egoism of enjoyment, and an ethical self that takes the other into account.³⁰ In order to become an ethical self, I must become a self that is directed toward the other, and this requires a radical rethinking of who I am. Levinas says: "The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and everyone."³¹ Thus, the subject for Levinas is truly a "subject" in the sense of *being subject* to another.³² And the paradigmatic figures to whom the subject is "subject" are precisely the lowest in terms of strength. "The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated."³³ In this, as in so many other ways, the economy of love demands that the "first will be last" (Mark 10:31). The result is that "*I am no longer able to have power*: the structure of my freedom is . . . completely reversed."³⁴ "Before the Other, the I is infinitely responsible."³⁵ What Levinas means by this "infinity" of responsibility is (among other things) that there is no point at which I can draw the line and say: "I'm no longer responsible for you. I've done enough." Instead, my responsibility extends indefinitely, in the same way that Jesus makes clear in the parable of the so-called good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37) that our responsibility to the neighbor has no clear boundaries or limits. I say "so-called good," because Jesus makes it clear that the Samaritan, while "good," does nothing extraordinary or even particularly commendable. Rather, he simply does what any good neighbor would do.

In invoking the weak, Paul is telling a story of what true neighborliness looks like—which is to say, a proper exercise of *exousia* and *eleutheria*. And evidently Paul had read his Levinas. For he makes it clear that, given the choice of autonomy or heteronomy, I am compelled to choose heteronomy. My responsibility is fundamentally to my neighbor. It is not that I am not free or that I do not have any rights; rather, it is that the boundaries of my freedom and rights are drawn by the mere existence of my neighbor. Moreover, not just *any* members of the body have this effect on us: the *weakest* ones turn out to have the *strongest* claim on us. No doubt the Corinthians—if they took Paul's

letter seriously, which is certainly open to question—would have found his claim traumatizing. “I have to turn down those important social invitations *just because* my eating affects someone else?” Paul’s answer to any such objections takes up all of chapter 9. There Paul details his reasons why he could—if he so chose—exercise his rights, not just as a Christian but as an apostle who has seen the risen Lord (9:1). Paul’s argument is that it is not his *rights* that compel him to act as he does, but his responsibility. He says: “An obligation is laid on me” and “I am entrusted with a commission” (9:16–17). It is in light of that responsibility that Paul talks about becoming all things to all people. But, of course, such is the truly neighborly thing to do.³⁶

What, though, does all of this have to do with idolatry? Paul makes it clear that, in improperly exercising one’s liberty, one sins not merely against one’s neighbor but also “against Christ” (8:12). To say that such believers sin against Christ is really to say that they are guilty of idolatry, because they have allowed themselves a freedom that they simply are not allowed to have. In effect, such persons make themselves out to be “God” by elevating themselves above others. It is the same desire for transcendence found already in Genesis 3.

In response to their supercilious claims of “knowledge” and insistence on their *exousia* and *eleutheria*, Paul provides an account of the economy of love, which overcomes knowledge and has its own kind of “wisdom.”

The Wisdom of Love

Inverting the literal meaning of “philosophy” [the love of wisdom], Levinas speaks of “the wisdom of love.” What distinguishes this “wisdom” is that it is “at the service of love.”³⁷ Here Levinas follows the same kind of inversion that we saw earlier in Paul: love takes the place of knowledge in the sense that it both *founds* knowledge (and *founds us*) and *transcends* knowledge. “Knowledge puffs up,” says Paul, maybe not always but often. In contrast, love edifies, for love partakes of an entirely different economy than that of knowledge.

The economy of love is the economy of the gift, which is to say an economy that does not begin with us and is in reality no economy at all (in the sense that it does not operate by the usual structure of reciprocity).³⁸ Earlier we noted the strange reversal between verses 2 and 3 of chapter 8, in which Paul suddenly shifts from our knowing to our being known. That formula of being known by God as preceding our knowledge of God is common in Paul. For instance, in Galatians 4:9 Paul begins by saying, “Now, however, that you have come to know God,” but then he quickly corrects himself by adding “or rather to be known by God.” We think in terms of our “knowing God,” but that—to use Heideggerian language—is a “founded” mode of knowing. Properly speaking, the ground of our knowing is our *being known* by God. In speaking of one day knowing “fully” (whatever that means exactly), Paul describes this state with the phrase “even as I have been fully known” (13:12).³⁹ But this shift of

standpoint from us to God is not just found in Paul's comments about knowing: it applies universally. Paul says to the Corinthians, "All things are yours," but immediately qualifies that claim by saying "and you belong to Christ" (3:23). In short, both our knowing and our having begin with God's knowing and having. That we have anything at all is purely a gift.

Much like Levinas, Marion speaks of the other's claim on me. Yet this "other" turns out to be the ultimate "Other." In language clearly reminiscent of that of Levinas, Marion says that we are held in *God's gaze*, which means that we are "deposed from any autarchy and taken by surprise."⁴⁰ In effect, God's call displaces me from being the center of my world. Since the call (vocative) is to *me* (dative), there is no longer an *I* but a *me*. The "I" is no longer the source of reason or even my identity, which "can be proclaimed only when called—by the call of the other."⁴¹ In *Reduction and Givenness*, Marion refers to the one called as the "*interloqué*." But, in *Being Given*, he speaks of the *adonné*, "the gifted." There he says that the "gift happens to *me* because it precedes *me* originally in such a way that I must recognize that I proceed from it."⁴² In keeping with what Paul says about knowledge (i.e., that it is a gift, 12:8), Marion says that "the gifted [*adonné*] does not have language or *logos* as its property, but it finds itself endowed with them."⁴³

The logic of love is that we are first loved. And the love bestowed on us is the possibility condition of our showing love to others. Thus far, the logic of love makes sense. But at its very core, it is inscrutable. For the logic of love is the logic of a gamble, of a loss without any assurances of a possible gain, a kenosis. As Marion puts it, "The logic of love . . . does not rely upon an assurance."⁴⁴ And yet love persists. The *oikonomia* that constitutes the *oikodomê* of love that Paul describes is remarkable in its tenacity. In what is clearly a stinging rebuke of the Corinthians, Paul describes precisely how they have *not* been acting:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (13:4–7).

That love "bears," "believes," "hopes," and "endures" *all things* is precisely why Marion calls it an "unconditional surrender," a surrender that certainly also requires *faith*.⁴⁵ No better illustration of the sheer inexplicability of love is that Christ gave himself despite the fact that "his own received him not" (John 1:11, KJV). Yet such is the nature of *agapê* that "surpasses all knowledge, with a hyperbole that defines it and, indissolubly, prohibits access to it."⁴⁶ How could one make sense of that which bears and believes and hopes and endures all things? Love utterly confounds the wisdom of the world. It is no wonder, then, that Heidegger asks: "Will Christian theology one day resolve to take seriously the word of the apostle and thus also the conception of philosophy as foolishness?"⁴⁷

The Economies of Knowledge and Love in Paul

What could be more at odds with the Corinthians' pretensions to "knowledge" and their insistence upon their *exousia* and *eleutheria* than love? Precisely in *not* being "envious or boastful or arrogant or rude" and in refusing to "insist on its own way," love does not puff up but edifies. Yet it also escapes idolatry. Whereas the economy of knowledge, with its certainty and insistence upon its *exousia* and *eleutheria*, naturally leads to idolatry, the economy of love leads in the other direction. For the one who loves neither makes boastful claims about his "knowledge" nor seeks to be elevated to a higher station. The one who loves is instead content to be held in God's loving gaze, not clinging tightly to a knowledge that "will come to an end" but instead basking in the gaze of a love that "never ends" (13:8). And that love that comes from God naturally and spontaneously overflows to one's neighbor, without measure or thought of repayment.

NOTES

1. All biblical citations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise indicated.

2. Gordon Fee claims that the entire passage seems to be a non sequitur. But the non sequitur actually occurs between the first and second part of verse 1. Verses 2 and 3 follow Paul's switch to the theme of knowledge, while verses 4 through 6 return us to the original theme of food sacrificed to idols. See Gordon D. Fee, "Eidolothuta Once Again: An Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 8–10," *Biblica* 16 (1980): 172.

3. For some possible hypotheses on the exact sequence of exchange of letters, see Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 3–4. For an attempt to reconstruct the exchanges, see John C. Hurd Jr., *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (New York: Seabury, 1965), 290–93.

4. It is quite possible that the entire phrase—"oidamen hoti pantes gnôsin exomen" [we know that we know]—is from the Corinthians. If so, that would further strengthen my case. But in order to make my point I only need to claim that it represents what the Corinthians think about themselves.

5. While Paul often uses *gnôsis* positively (e.g., in 1 Cor 1:5), here he thinks that it is problematic.

6. Such is Conzelmann's reading, for example.

7. This strange saying is preceded by yet another. Right before the Pharisees ask their question, Jesus says, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind" (John 9:39). It is in response to *that* statement that the Pharisees pose their question.

8. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), s.v. "comprehend."

9. Saint Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1972), 9.20.

10. Wisdom and knowledge are woven together in Paul's discussion in 2:6–16. For more on the relation of wisdom and knowledge in 1 Corinthians, see Michael D. Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001), 92–103.

11. Louis Martyn notes that “the cross is and remains *the* epistemological crisis.” See his chapter titled “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages: 2 Cor. 5:16,” in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, and R. R. Niebuhr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 285.
12. Stanislas Breton, *The Word and the Cross*, trans. Jacquelyn Porter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 132.
13. *Ibid.*, 98
14. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 9–10.
15. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, trans. and ed. Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 111.
16. Walter Brueggemann points out that the story of the garden is one in which God gives human beings a vocation, permission, and a prohibition. By deliberately focusing on the prohibition, the serpent distorts what God has said (and thus—I would add—who God is). See Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 46.
17. Of course, some commentators assume that “touching” is implied by “eating.”
18. Marion, *God without Being*, 12.
19. Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 6.
20. Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 57.
21. It is not accidental that the Latin term *sapiential* also connotes “taste.”
22. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed., trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 89.
23. See E. A. Speiser’s discussion in his *Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 26. He claims that *yd*’ means not merely “know” but the entire process of coming to know. Lyn M. Bechtel, no doubt influenced by structuralism, claims that this knowing is “the capacity to discern the binary oppositions of life.” See her “Rethinking the Interpretation of Genesis 2.4b–3.24,” in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 88.
24. Here I am particularly indebted to Peter D. Gooch, *Dangerous Food: 1 Corinthians 8–10 in Its Context* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993). Gooch argues that Paul is not primarily addressing sacrificial meat sold in the market. Instead, Paul is concerned with partaking in meals connected to pagan rites. Note that the question is not just one of “meat” (*krea*), since Paul also uses the generic term for food (*brôma*) in 8:13.
25. See the discussion in Gooch, *Dangerous Food*, 40–45.
26. In 8:4, Paul repeats the Corinthian claim that “no idol in the world really exists,” but he does not necessarily *affirm* it.
27. Both Hurd and Fee (following Hurd) take this view, and I find their arguments convincing. See Hurd, *The Origin of 1 Corinthians*, 124–25, and Fee, “*Eidolothuta* Once Again,” 176.
28. Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1987), 48.
29. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), 111.
30. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1979), 175.

31. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 114.
32. Simon Critchley makes this point in *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity* (New York: Verso, 1999), 51.
33. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 215.
34. Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," 55.
35. Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 18.
36. I should note that there *is* one thing Paul says that *might* be taken to support the Corinthians' free exercise of their *exousia* and *eleutheria*. In 10:29 he writes: "For why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else's conscience?" Yet if that question is set in context, it becomes clear that Paul merely means that our own respective consciences should normally be our guide—*except* when following my conscience does another harm.
37. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 162.
38. Whether a gift can truly be "given" has been the subject of heated controversy. Derrida insists that the gift is "the very figure of the impossible," which is why we want it all the more. See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 7. Marion responds by refiguring the gift in *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Koskey (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002) and *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), particularly chapter 6. John Milbank has attempted to argue for the possibility of gift giving *with* reciprocity as a component by refiguring the notion of reciprocity. See his "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Trinitarian Metaphysic," *Modern Theology* 11 (1995): 119–61; "The Soul of Reciprocity Part One: Reciprocity Refused," *Modern Theology* 17 (2001): 335–91; and "The Soul of Reciprocity Part Two: Reciprocity Granted," *Modern Theology* 17 (2001): 485–507. Here I will assume that, while gift giving is a rather complicated enterprise, gifts truly can be given. But it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an argument for that stance.
39. For an interesting attempt to make sense of Paul's claim "For we only know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end" (13:9–10), see Paul W. Gooch, *Partial Knowledge: Philosophical Studies in Paul* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), particularly chapter 7.
40. Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 201.
41. *Ibid.* Whereas one of Marion's strategies for making sure the gift remains truly a gift is by making sure the call remains unidentified (particularly in chapter 6 of *In Excess*), Scripture identifies God—though on God's own terms.
42. Marion, *Being Given*, 270.
43. *Ibid.*, 288.
44. Marion, *God without Being*, 194.
45. Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 101.
46. Marion, *God without Being*, 108.
47. Martin Heidegger, "Introduction to 'What is Metaphysics?'," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 288.