



Love, Reason, & God's Story

An Introduction to Catholic Sexual Ethics

David Cloutier

ANSELM ACADEMIC

Created by the publishing team of Anselm Academic.

The scriptural quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Catholic Edition. Copyright © 1993 and 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2008 by David Cloutier. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced by any means without the written permission of the publisher, Anselm Academic, Christian Brothers Publications, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona, MN 55987-1320, www.anselmacademic.org.

Cover image royalty-free from Shutterstock.

Printed in the United States of America

7006

ISBN 978-0-88489-945-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cloutier, David.

Love, reason, and God's story : an introduction to Catholic sexual ethics / David Cloutier.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-88489-945-7 (pbk.)

1. Sex—Religious aspects—Catholic Church. 2. Sexual ethics. 3. Catholic Church—Doctrines.

I. Title.

BX1795.S48C56 2008

241'.66088282—dc22

2007044400

Contents

Part 1

Sexuality and Catholicism: Telling the Stories

1 Love and Reason	14
Your Heart or Your Head?	14
Two Descriptions of Romantic Love: Completion and Sickness.	15
Romantic Love among the Loves	16
For Discussion	22
Avoiding Ranking: Practicing the Loves in Everyday Life	23
Friendship and Romance: How Do You Decide?	24
Reason	24
Actions Have Purposes	26
Actions and Desires	27
For Discussion	29
Ordering Multiple Desires: Narratives and the Ultimate End	29
For Discussion	32
One Last Piece: Virtues and Vices	32
Conclusion	34

2	Love Stories	36
	Ingredients of a Love Story	37
	<i>For Discussion</i>	39
	Scholarly Love Stories: Biology, Psychology, Society	39
	Biology	40
	<i>For Discussion</i>	44
	Psychology	44
	<i>For Discussion</i>	46
	Society	46
	<i>For Discussion</i>	50
	Fisher, Freud, Foucault, and Our Everyday Lives	51
	Challenging Stories?	54
	Conclusion	55

3	God's Story	57
	What Is a God Story?	58
	<i>For Discussion</i>	61
	The Bible as God's Story	61
	God's Story, Plotline 1: Idolatry	62
	God's Story, Plotline 2: Jesus.	68
	God's Story, Plotline 3: Rejection and Conversion	70
	God's Story, Plotline 4: Reconciliation	76
	<i>For Discussion</i>	79
	God's Story and Love Stories:	
	Some Preliminary Observations	79
	<i>For Discussion</i>	85
	Conclusion	85

4	God's Story and Sexuality	86
	Some Initial Controversies	86
	Men and Women	87
	Men and Women: Different or Not?	87
	Gender Today	89
	Practical Consequences?	92
	For Discussion	95
	Gender and Sexual Attraction	95
	What Is Sexual Orientation?	96
	The Bible and Homosexuality	100
	Homosexuality and the Christian Tradition Today	102
	Reflection for Debate on Sexual Orientation	105
	For Discussion	107
	Conclusion and Transition	108

Part 2

Sexuality and Catholicism: Exploring the Practices

5	Practices of Sexuality:	
	The Purposes of Dating	110
	Dating in Historical Context	111
	Explaining the Contemporary Scene	115
	Getting Theological: The Christian Dating Debate	117
	For Discussion	120
	Dating and Ethics: Reason and God's Story	120
	Purposes for Dating: Only Marriage or Also Intimacy?	121
	For Discussion	125

Practicing Dating: Latitude, Anarchy, or Chastity?	125
<i>For Discussion</i>	131
Conclusion	131

6

Rules of the Practice:

Sexual Activity in Dating 132

Absolute Norms: A Primer	133
--------------------------------	-----

<i>For Discussion</i>	137
-----------------------------	-----

Evaluating Sexual Actions: Relationship Sex	137
---	-----

<i>For Discussion</i>	142
-----------------------------	-----

Evaluating Sexual Actions: Sex and Procreation	143
--	-----

Not-Quite-Sex Sexual Actions	147
------------------------------------	-----

<i>For Discussion</i>	151
-----------------------------	-----

Masturbation	151
--------------------	-----

<i>For Discussion</i>	155
-----------------------------	-----

Conclusion	155
------------------	-----

7

Practices of Sexuality:

The Purposes of Marriage 157

Marriage and Contemporary American Society	158
--	-----

<i>For Discussion</i>	162
-----------------------------	-----

The Two Purposes of Marriage	162
------------------------------------	-----

Marriage in History: The Primacy of Procreation	163
---	-----

<i>For Discussion</i>	165
-----------------------------	-----

Love (Communion) in Ancient Marriage	166
--	-----

<i>For Discussion</i>	168
-----------------------------	-----

Contemporary Reflection and Discussion on the Purposes of Marriage	169
Debating the Purposes of Marriage	171
Married Love	172
Vowed Love: Permanence and Exclusivity	173
Building Love: Mutuality, Intimacy, Companionship, and Conversion	176
Sharing Love: Moving beyond Each Other	179
For Discussion	180
Why Have and Raise Children?	180
For Discussion	184
Conclusion	185



Rules of the Practice:

Sexual Activity in Marriage	186
Marriage, Quasi-Marriage, and Cohabitation	187
The Purposes of Marriage and Moral Norms	191
Adultery	191
For Discussion	193
Contraception	193
For Discussion	204
A Brief Reflection on Temperance	204
Conclusion	208

9 Practices of Sexuality: The Purposes of Sacramental or Vocational Marriage 209

Marriage and Family in the City:

The Problem of Locating Love 211

Marriage and Family within the Horizontal God Story 214

Jesus, Israel, and the Kingdom of God 214

The Kingdom and Marriage in Scripture 216

Celibacy 219

***For Discussion* 221**

Recovering Marriage as a Vocation for the Kingdom 222

***For Discussion* 225**

The Kingdom and the Sacraments 225

***For Discussion* 227**

Sacramental Marriage in the Kingdom-Household:

New Families in the New Family 228

***For Discussion* 230**

Conclusion 230

10 Rules of the Practice: Society and Sacramental Marriage. 232

The External Transformations of Vocational Marriage 233

Definition and Description of Closed Household 235

Is There an Alternative? 236

The Interior Transformation of Vocational Marriage:

Natural Marriage Transfigured 237

Love Transformed: Indestructible and Sanctifying.	238
Sanctification.	239
Indestructibility	241
Debating Divorce.	244
<i>For Discussion</i>	252
Parenting Transformed: Children as Sacrifice.	252
The Catholic Family: Questions of Structure, Questions of Purpose	253
Work, Home, and Sacrifice as a Parent	254
The Purposes of Catholic Parenting	256
<i>For Discussion</i>	259
Special Issues: Vocation and Mixed Marriages.	259
Conclusion.	262

11 Epilogue

Forgiveness and Reconciliation:	
The Final Word of Ethics	264
Forgiveness, Guilt, and Righteousness	266
The Process of Reconciliation.	269
Sex, Confession, and Forgiveness	273
Conclusion.	274

Endnotes and Further Reading	275
---	------------

Introduction and Acknowledgments

Why is it that students today, on the one hand, universally regard issues of sexuality and marriage as central concerns for their lives, yet on the other hand, will conclude ten minutes into a discussion of such issues that everyone has different, irreconcilable “opinions,” about which we can make no judgments? Why is something so apparently important to human happiness so unclear and undiscussable?

Some people have a ready answer to this apparent contradiction. When it comes to human sexuality, they will argue, “It’s all relative, so do whatever feels right to you.” Their response ends all discussion. But others argue against such relativism, claiming to defend moral truth. Yet asserting absolute truth also ends all discussion. So on one side, we have people walking around in a fog, unable to make distinctions, and on the other are people for whom moral issues are black and white and foggy is strictly forbidden.

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has suggested that these two positions—moral relativism and moral dogmatism—are really two sides of the same coin, which he calls “moral thoughtlessness.”

We attempt in this textbook to move beyond the inadequacies of both positions, paying particular attention to navigating moral language that can send us into the rocks of either extreme. Our primary objective here is *moral thoughtfulness* about sexuality and marriage. We attempt to cultivate this moral thoughtfulness in two ways.

First, we recognize that when we are talking about sex and marriage, we are first and foremost talking about *social practices*. Historically, and especially in the Catholic tradition, discussion of sexual ethics has tended to focus on *individual acts*. Many in contemporary Catholic moral theology have rejected this act-centered approach in favor of a person-centered one, but especially in the area of sexual ethics, a person-centered approach runs us near if not directly into the rocks of moral relativism.

Rather than take the sharp turn back to act-centered moral theology, we take here a practice-centered approach. We inquire extensively into the central practice of marriage, but we do not neglect the practice of pre-

marital relationships (dating or whatever it is called these days!). Individual acts as well as the classic controversial issues such as premarital sex and divorce are then examined within these broader social practices. Moreover, we emphasize that even these individual acts are social practices—that the organization of sexuality is invariably a communal concern and remains so even in a supposedly relativistic and individualistic age. For this reason, sexual practices can be subjected to communal reason.

However public such practices may be, can we really subject them to *normative* considerations? Can we say there are *good* and *bad* forms of sexual and marital practices? It seems to me that we do this all the time. Popular, quite secular books, TV talk shows, and Internet sites give “advice” about sex and relationships—that advice is surely a form of normative guidance. Virtually no one in our society, wherever they fall on the political or religious spectrum, imagines that a system of sex and marriage centered on maintaining hereditary privilege or on the complete power of males to define and make choices is “better” than the one we have now. Try suggesting arranged marriage in a class and see how quickly students conclude that such a practice would be terrible (in their view), thus indicating how our current system of practices is indeed strongly “good.”

Here we come to the second primary aspect of cultivating thoughtfulness: it is not merely *practices*, but also the *stories* we tell about sex and marriage that are already normative. We are already engaged in making judgments about what forms of relationships are good and bad, even if we are more likely to apply the terms “healthy” and “unhealthy.” In other words, whatever slogans people might use, they are not functioning in an actual fog, but with an often under-articulated roadmap. Besides explaining that roadmap a bit (the concern of the first three chapters of this text), we must also ask if the map is any good in the first place.

To do this, we must learn how to integrate our feelings and judgments about sex and marriage within a larger (“cosmic”) whole. In our society, sex and marriage are compartmentalized, forming their own little drama, but any sense that our sexual choices and our marriages—our practices—have a meaning larger than ourselves is painfully lacking. Rejection of this “cosmic meaninglessness” is what makes this textbook “Catholic.” More than any allegiance to a set of particular rules, more even than an allegiance to certain sources of knowledge such as the Bible and tradition, Catho-

lic sexual ethics possesses the conviction that sex and marriage do exist within a larger whole, within the larger story of creation and salvation, in which God and God's creation enact a relationship. This conviction places Catholic sexual ethics in a camp that includes virtually every other great religious tradition and every so-called pagan society as well—in other words, virtually every human being ever, *except* for many born since the turn of the twentieth century in the industrialized West, has shared this view that sex and marriage are part of something very big indeed! While these cosmic stories may have important differences, they have all regarded the normative claims of sexuality to be rooted in something larger than the individual or the changing conventions of society.

But even the twentieth-century West is not exactly free of sexual mythology. Quite to the contrary, the mythology of the twentieth century offers a pretty comprehensive story—a story about sexual happiness as the ultimate form of self-expression. The larger drama of self-expression and self-fulfillment (which, we are told, should be the central preoccupation of our lives) gives a high priority to sexual choices. Whether offering the image of a “soul mate” or selling drugs that keep us sexually energized and active quite apart from any natural cycles of fertility or maturity, the story remains. It is often a story that shipwrecks on the rocks of disappointment, even of chaos, because of its bizarre promises and inattention to any sort of discipline or formation. But it is a story.

Catholicism offers quite a different “larger” story. In the first half of this textbook, we try to get at that story, often by comparing it to dominant cultural stories. Catholicism and popular culture also provide quite different frames for thinking through the social practices of sex, dating, and marriage, practices we explore in the second half of the book.

Finally, our ultimate allegiance to *either* story is rooted in the same thing: faith. Either story of life is a pilgrimage of faith. But they are decidedly different stories.

Part 1

Sexuality and Catholicism Telling the Stories



Love and Reason

Your Heart or Your Head?

We've all had to ask this question, particularly when we face choices about romantic relationships. What do we mean by "heart" and "head"? What exactly are we asking here?

This is a good place to begin our study of Catholic sexual ethics. In a sense, the heart/head problem helps us begin to understand the terms "sexual" and "ethics" in our subject. We'll get to "Catholic" later: it's probably the most complicated. For now we can start by simply reflecting on our experiences of the heart, the question of love.

Two Descriptions of Romantic Love: Completion and Sickness

Is this love? The fact that we ask this question points us to certain assumptions we make about falling in love. Most importantly, we take it as a fundamental, almost uncontrollable human experience. We “fall” into it. Something happens, and we are drawn to another person. Yet students of Western culture have, for some time, reminded us that our experience of romantic love is shaped by the language and cultural expectations of our time. For us, in a world where practically every movie, TV show, and song has at least a romantic subplot, it is no wonder that we “fall in love.”

So let’s look at two descriptions of romantic love that do not come from modern culture. These descriptions should help us name our own experiences with more attention to detail.

The first is drawn from the discussion of love in one of Plato’s dialogues. Aristophanes, one of the characters, suggests that romantic love happens because lovers are two parts of an original whole that has been separated. The human race was originally created as large, four-armed, four-legged creatures with faces in both directions. However, these creatures proved extremely powerful, so much so that they sought to assault the gods. Yet Zeus and the gods did not want to kill off the humans, for that would mean no one would honor and make sacrifices to the gods. So Zeus devised a plan to weaken them: cut them in half, and then turn their faces around to face the cut (an explanation of the belly button), so that they would not forget the gods’ power.

This did in fact weaken the humans considerably, but caused them a lot of trauma. They went around searching for their “other half,” and when their other half was found, they would throw their arms around each other in a tight embrace and refuse to let go. Indeed, the embrace was so total that they began to die of hunger, since they would not leave each other. What to do? Zeus devised the perfect solution: turn their genitals around. That way, when they embraced, it would lead to new generations, and the race would not die off. And so it came to pass that romantic love, which was the force that arose from their sense of being incomplete and separated from themselves, would also function for human regeneration.

Compare this story to the attitudes and practice of the Fulbe, a people who live in the northern part of Cameroun, in West Africa. Helen Regis writes, “The ability to control emotions lies at the heart of the Fulbe construction of personhood” (“The Madness of Excess,” 142). The highest value is placed on poise and on one’s general availability to fellow villagers. The people show a remarkable generosity and attentiveness. However, this spirit of solidarity is threatened by the “madness” of love. Hence the Fulbe, along with other African peoples, regard romantic love as the result of being possessed by spirits. In one example a man who refuses to find a second wife after his first wife is found to be infertile is constantly criticized: “Her charms are too much for him. He has lost his head completely!” (p. 144). Men who spend too much time at home with their wives, and not enough in public, are said to be “sick” and “under the power of a spell” (p. 145). The Fulbe tell a story in which a man falls in love while traveling, only to find that the woman is a member of a tribe who can turn into hyenas and eat humans. The story illustrates the fate of those who are unable to control their emotions, and instead give in to them. As Regis writes, “It would be difficult to construct a more frightening scenario. Her kin, as hyenas, literally tried to eat him alive” (p. 146). Only a madman would seek such a fate.

Romantic Love among the Loves

It is evident from both these stories that whatever “falling in love” is, it is understood in descriptive contrast to certain other kinds of feelings and experiences. For example, love is somehow different from lust. The love of which we are speaking is not the same as a practical relationship of usefulness. It is not a love bestowed on everyone. It coexists with friendship relationships, but is not necessarily the same. Indeed, it is potentially a threat to friendly relations in the community . . . or even with the gods! These contrasts invite us to develop our description by considering how this experience fits into the entire web of human relationships in our lives.

That phrase—*romantic* love—suggests that more is going on here than what the word “love” alone conveys. Surely we love a great many people: our parents, for example, or friends or roommates. You may love a favorite teacher or a celebrity. So what makes romantic relationships distinct? What

makes them “romantic”? And why do we feel this way toward some people but not others?

The immediate reaction to this question is predictable: sex. I would suggest that that conclusion is premature. Are romantic relationships just about sex? Are the best romantic relationships simply the ones with the best sex? Most people are likely to think that there is more involved. But what?

The best way to approach describing the distinctiveness of romantic relationships is to compare them with other sorts of relationships. To do so, I will enlist the aid of the famous writer C. S. Lewis, whose classic book, *The Four Loves*, offers us extensive descriptions of four types of loves: storge, philia, eros, and agape. These Greek words cover some of the different meanings we intend when we say we love someone. Lewis didn’t make up these distinctions—they have been around at least since ancient Greece—but by following him, we may grasp more clearly how romantic love (eros) compares and contrasts with other loves in our lives.

The first love Lewis discusses is *storge* (pronounced STORE-gay). He describes storge as “the humblest and most widely diffused” of all the loves (p. 31). Lewis uses the English word “affection” to name this love, but we might simply describe this love as neighborliness or “being nice.” The primary characteristic of this love is that “almost anyone can become an object of affection” (p. 32). There is no need to match age or interests or personality traits. You can have this sort of friendly, neighborly relationship with just about anyone, from your parents to your distant cousins, from your next-door neighbor’s grandmother to your local store clerk.

This may not sound much like love, but in fact it is immensely valuable in two ways. First, Lewis says storge is the love that leads to “the truly wide taste in humanity.” It is the sort of love that can be on good terms with anyone. Storge sets us at ease in wide gatherings and is gracious to all. The teacher who takes good care of all of his or her students might be an example, or the doctor who works with all sorts of different patients and treats them warmly. Second, these examples should help us recognize how storge is ever-present in our daily lives, and how miserable life would be without it. Imagine, by contrast, the cold and distant doctor or the rude store clerk. Imagine the driver consumed with aggression and hostility. The absence of such neighborliness makes life difficult, but its presence can transform daily life into something good. College campuses are classic examples:

some schools advertise how friendly and warm their campus communities are. This doesn't mean everyone is best friends with everyone else. Rather, it means that daily life is permeated with a general friendliness: familiar smiles, courtesies, and the like.

The second love Lewis describes is *philia*, well translated as "friendship." There are some people we say are "friends with everyone." Strictly speaking, this isn't possible. You might say it demeans friendship. Following the Greek, Lewis says that to be friends with someone is to have a relationship based on a shared task and a shared love. Affection crosses over any and all lines of interest, but friendship does not. Friends have common interests, perhaps not in everything, but certainly in something.

Writing in 1960, Lewis asserted that friendship had lost its value in his culture, but we certainly cannot say that about our culture. In many ways, friendship has come to matter more as local ties of family and affection have become weaker. Take, for example, the show *Sex and the City*: we know little to nothing about the four women's families (even their parents), and yet have a sense that we know them. From high school on through marriage (a longer and longer period of time in our culture), friendship seems to reign supreme.

But is this friendship? Lewis distinguishes between "companions" and "friends." Companions are all the people with whom you share a task or an interest. Professors, for example, are naturally companions, as are members of most professions. Members of your football team or your drama group or your choir or your video gaming circle are companions. You enjoy talking shop, sharing the interest that you all have. But not all companions are friends. It is only when you discover, says Lewis, a particular shared vision, captured in the remark "I thought I was the only one!" that friendship begins to blossom (p. 66). Companionship is the matrix in which friendship develops.

Lewis is trying to describe what we mean when we say we just "click" with some people and not with others. What matters is that "you see the same thing"—or even that you passionately differ, but you care passionately about the same thing. In this way, Lewis might be a little skeptical about *Friends* or *Sex and the City*. What holds these people together? Is it really a commitment to a shared good? For friendships to be strong, they can't simply rest on getting along. That might last for a while, but resilient friendships (he

argues) are based on a commitment to the good. For example, my closest friends from college when I graduated (in 1994) are not my closest friends now. Away from the shared context of college life, personality and support came to matter less and shared interests came to matter more. This doesn't mean I no longer enjoy seeing my old friends, but those relationships have become more like *storge*. In a way, I know who my real friends are. Not everyone whom we might call a friend actually rises to this level; many friendships are simply a deeper version of *storge*.

Helpful in this regard is the Greek philosopher Aristotle's longer description of friendship. Aristotle believed that we have three types of friendships with others. One, a friendship of virtue or character, is the kind of deep connection and shared vision that Lewis describes. The other two were "partial" types of friendships. He called these "friendships of pleasure" and "friendships of utility." These are true friendships, because they involve mutuality and well-wishing for one another, but they lack the deep ground of genuine friendship. Instead, they are based on less important goods. Friendships of pleasure revolve around simply enjoying one another's company or sharing fun leisure activities. You may have completely incompatible political or religious views, but you have a great time shooting hoops together or watching *Desperate Housewives* or hanging out at the bar. Friendships of utility revolve around some useful purpose you share—for example, a good lab partner or a co-worker with whom you collaborate on a committee. Again, your overall visions of life may be different, and yet you work well together on some specific project or task. These are friendships, Aristotle says, but they do not involve the full love of a friendship in which your friend is "another self," truly sharing what means most to both of you.

We can begin to distinguish *philia* from romantic love, however, by noting that Lewis suggests that friendship is, for the most part, between persons of the same sex, because men and women lack the shared matrix necessary for real friendship. Let the men get together in the TV room and get passionate about football, and let the women hang out elsewhere and talk about clothes, he claims. He allows that when men and women do share a sphere or task (much less common in his society than in ours) friendship may happen, but "the friendship which arises between them will very easily pass—may pass in the first half-hour—into erotic love. Indeed, unless they are physically repulsive to each other or unless one or both already loves

elsewhere, it is almost certain to do so sooner or later” (p. 67). With few exceptions, relationships between men and women simply will not be friendships. They will either become eros or remain storge.

Is this true? To answer that question, we have to describe what we mean by “erotic love.” This is what we ordinarily see as sexual or romantic love. Lewis maintains that eros, fully understood, includes sex but is not all about sex. Offering an answer to our earlier question about whether sex is the only distinguishing factor of romantic attraction, he denotes specifically sexual love as *venus* and says that it is a *part* of eros, but only a part. A man acting on venus does not “want a woman. . . . He wants pleasure for which a woman happens to be the necessary piece of apparatus” (p. 94). By contrast, someone in eros wants “not a woman, but one particular woman” (p. 94). It is a love that is not just about sex, but about the whole person: the whole person is fascinating. It is this particularity that is the hallmark of eros. Unlike friendship, where the eyes of the friends are focused on the good they share, lovers focus on each other in their entirety. This gives birth to the well-known phenomenon where those in love completely overlook the other person’s flaws, or even consider them “endearing,” precisely because they are part of the beloved.

Lewis argues that such a love is distinctive, not merely neighborly or friendly, because it seems to come upon us suddenly, from out of nowhere, and it speaks the language of irresistibility. It is almost as if we do not choose. Rather the beloved is chosen for us—quite the opposite of friendship. Moreover, it can come with alarming speed—quite the opposite of affection, which by its nature comes gradually over time as familiarity grows.

Indeed, the suddenness and totality of eros can also be its danger. As Lewis suggests, eros speaks with a voice that demands “total commitment,” yet it is not necessarily God’s voice. In another text, he quite bluntly ascribes such love to the devil. In *The Screwtape Letters*, the master tempter writes that the devil’s bureaucracy has been at work the last few centuries “closing up” lifelong monogamy as a way to deal with sexual desire: “We have done this through the poets and novelists by persuading the humans that a curious and usually short-lived experience which they call ‘being in love’ is the only respectable ground for marriage; that marriage can, and ought to, render this excitement permanent; and that a marriage which does not do so is no longer binding” (p. 81). While eros may mark a promising beginning of a

relationship, it inevitably fades. Hence, it is best seen, according to Lewis, as a beautiful beginning, aimed ultimately at something else.

Here, Lewis introduces the fourth love, *agape*. *Agape* has traditionally been translated as “charity,” but that English word has become distorted. Charity does not mean giving to the poor. Rather it is the love that arrives when, inevitably, the other loves fail. This is the love that loves even when there is no feeling left, appearing especially as forgiveness.

This is, of course, the love God has for us in the Christian story, as well as the love we are supposed to have for God. This is what Jesus means when he calls us to love God “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). It is absolute and unconditional love. The dominant characteristic of this love is disinterestedness. To be disinterested is not, of course, to show no interest, but to ignore any sense of one’s own interests being at stake in love. For all the other loves, some degree of mutuality is necessary for love to be realized. Friendship is not one-sided, and unreciprocated eros is sad, even tragic. But *agape* is specifically about ignoring this mutuality, transcending it, and loving those who are not lovable or who do not love back.

This lack of mutuality raises the question of whether such a love is compatible with all the other “natural” loves. After all, if they are all marked by mutuality, *agape* would seem to be opposed to them. Lewis argues that *agape* and the other loves are compatible: that the other natural loves need *agape* to complete them. Ultimately the problem is that all human relationships end up being asymmetrical: the giving and receiving do not work out neatly. In some relationships, we may have to give a lot more than we receive. In other relationships we may need a lot more than we can give. It would be nice to think that overall, over the course of our lives, this would resolve into a happy equilibrium, but that’s just not the way it works. Some people may find themselves called to give much more than they receive from others. Some may have to suffer as recipients, never able to give worthy gifts to others. In our culture, which so highly values equality and so carefully calculates the cost-benefit ratio of every transaction, this asymmetry is disturbing. Shall we abandon all relationships from which we do not profit? Some might say yes, but *agape* says no. God is presented in the Jewish and Christian stories as preeminently faithful and steadfast. God’s love is often severe, disturbing, unexpected. It is not always tender and kindly. But

it is always faithful; when we fail, as people do constantly, God's love does not fail. God's love never takes the path of abandonment. That steadfast faithfulness is the essence of agape.

While agape is a completion of the natural loves, we should not forget that it can also be a challenge to them. Quoting the nineteenth-century thinker Soren Kierkegaard, theologian Amy Laura Hall notes that "although 'we human beings speak about finding the perfect person in order to love him,' Christ speaks to us of 'being the perfect person who boundlessly loves the person he sees'" (Hall, 42). Read that again carefully. It reminds us that most often, when we humans "love," what we are doing is finding a person who seems perfect to us. That means that what we love in our best friends and our families is ourselves, which is not love at all. As Hall writes, "Even when I proclaim that I love another dearly, what I am likely cherishing is some aspect of the other that relates to my own self-centered hopes and dreams" (Hall, 44). God's love, seen in Christ, challenges the preference for self inherent in our human loves. From God's point of view, God loves us not because of what we do (or fail to do) for God, but simply because we are persons. God is not self-interested. And so agape challenges us to consider whether our "falling in love" is really directed at the beauty and wonder of the other person, or whether it is a matter of using the other person—or the parts of the other person we deem acceptable and lovable—for our own fulfillment.

For Discussion

1. Why might the experience of falling in love be thought of as seeking completion? Why might it be thought of as being sick?
2. Compare Lewis's loves to the relationships in your life. Do they fit these categories?
3. Is eros = friendship + sex? If not, what are the additional qualities? Or do you not see friendship as essential to eros?
4. Do you feel that you truly love others selflessly? Is such selfless love possible? Explain how you understand the relationship of self and other in your loving relationships.

Avoiding Ranking: Practicing the Loves in Everyday Life

As you read through the loves and thought about different relationships in your own life, were you tempted to rank them? Even if they are all “love,” can’t we say that our lovers are more important than our friends, and our friends more important than those for whom we only have affection? This tendency is reflected in our language. Think of the term “significant other,” which implies the existence of people that are not significant.

But reality is more complicated than a simple ranking. Imagine that your best friend is on a ski trip over Christmas break, while you are celebrating Christmas with your significant other’s family. Suddenly your cell rings, and it’s your best friend’s sister, weeping and telling you that your friend has had a terrible accident and is in the hospital awaiting potentially dangerous emergency surgery. The friend wants you there. What should you do? Do you say, “My significant other comes first in my life, and I’m committed to Christmas with his/her family, so I guess I can’t go.” Sounds rather heartless, doesn’t it? But when you decide to go your significant other objects, saying, “Don’t you love me? Am I not your highest priority?” What do you do then?

So a simple ranking cannot account for the differences between eros and friendship. But surely friendship and eros trump affection? Again, the problem is not that simple. Consider the cry of the man lying beaten by the side of the road in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). The whole point of that story is that priority should be given to those in immediate need, even if that relationship happens to be one of affection. For many of us, professional connections related to our jobs may at some times be genuinely central in our lives. Affection may not have the flashiness and depth of friendship or eros, but its wide coverage means that it may play just as important a role in our lives.

We ought to avoid ranking the loves. For a happy, fulfilled life, all of them are important, but in different ways. Our tendency to rank them may be most pronounced in the priority we give to relationships of eros. The immediate meaning of the term “love” in our culture is often erotic love. It is the flashiest of the loves, and besides it gets all the media hype. But perhaps we might reconsider. For example, the great theologian St. Thomas

Aquinas suggests that friendship is the love that is most like our relationship with God, and that friendship is the central category of relating to others. This is not a ranking; it simply calls us to recognize the role of all the loves in our lives.

Friendship and Romance: How Do You Decide?

In describing the different types of love, perhaps the most interesting question is how we differentiate eros from friendship. Lewis, as we saw, felt that nearly any true friendship between members of the opposite sex will eventually turn into eros, at least if both parties are available. We, however, may have quite a different perspective. Most of us grew up in a world where we took for granted that we would be friends with men and women equally. Men and women work together today in nearly every field. Just as importantly, many people expect that their romantic partner will also be their best and closest friend. This is a relatively new phenomenon. In former times the sexes were more separated in everyday life. You might have great love for your spouse, but your friends were drawn from a whole different group.

Another way to put this is to note the common observation that people are immediately attracted to those who are wrong for them, who are bad for them. Sometimes a relationship that starts more slowly, with less romantic attraction and more friendship, ends up being a better relationship in the long run. Should we just abandon our search for eros and go out with the friends with whom we feel most comfortable? Should you marry your best friend, even if you don't have that "falling in love" feeling?

Reason

This, of course, brings us back to the initial question: your heart or your head? We've thought a bit about what we mean by heart; now we have to figure out exactly what we mean by using our heads, our reason. Again, we can all recognize the experience of wanting something (or someone), but then wondering, "Is this really a good idea?" What exactly are we asking?

It is characteristic of human beings to think before acting. That is where the study of ethics begins. Perhaps there are times when you've looked at a dog or a cat or a tree and wished you could live as it does. Dogs and cats and trees are alive, but they are alive in a different way. In one sense, they are the same as us: a tree that's alive is a tree that is still growing and developing. The same holds true for us. To be human is to be growing into our potential, like moving from seed to sapling to tree. But where do these various potentials lead? An oak cannot become a walnut tree, nor can it become an animal. It's an oak tree; we pretty much know what it will be. It is alive, but it does not have a hand in its own completion.

You, on the other hand, are different. Sure, you can't make yourself into a cat. But you have a hand in determining what you become. What you do—and what the tree doesn't do—is *act*. To act is peculiar to humans, and it is the way we become who we will be. The tree moves, but the tree doesn't act. When the wind blows, the tree bends and sways; we move in the wind, too, but we also push back, keep our balance. That's more than moving: that's acting.

Ethics is the study of human actions. Chemists study atoms and molecules; ethicists study actions. So to start off, we might want to put an action under the microscope and examine it closely to understand how it works. Think of an action, any action, you have performed—say, reading an assignment. The first question to be asked about such an action is, what are you doing? But any answer to that question will really be an answer to the question, why are you doing it? For example, say I ask you what you plan to do this afternoon at 4 o'clock and you say, "I will be driving my car." This is an answer to the question, but not a complete one. A more complete answer might be, "I will be driving to the mall to buy new clothes."

Why is the latter answer more complete? In the first answer, "driving a car" is certainly a physical movement—or more precisely, a set of physical movements—but physical movements are not all we mean when we say human beings act. Remember, trees move, but they don't act. Moreover, if you answered my question by saying, "I will be fantasizing about my girlfriend," we might not be able to identify any actual physical movement, but we clearly have an action—you are clearly doing something.

Actions Have Purposes

If an action is not simply physical movement, what is it? An action has a purpose, an aim. That aim is what we are really looking for when we ask the question, “What are you doing?” Say I am walking across the campus with a friend, and suddenly, while passing the flagpole, she drops to the ground, does ten quick sit-ups, gets back up, and continues our conversation. Perhaps owing to my reserve, I will refrain from inquiring into her mysterious behavior, but then, the next day, in the exact same spot, she does exactly the same thing. I ask, “What were you just doing?” If she answers, “Ten sit-ups, didn’t you notice?” I will not be satisfied with that answer, will I? What is missing? She has not told me why—for what purpose, to what end—she is doing this. Now, if it were a campus ritual to do this on certain days of the year, I would not have to ask the question. But since it is not, and since she has now done it twice at exactly the same spot, I assume that there is some reason, some purpose, some order to the action. If there is not, I will have to question her sanity.

This example should show us that most of the time we know the purposes behind our own actions and the actions of others. We naturally assume that everyone acts with purposes in mind, even if the purpose is “just for the fun of it.” Every human action has a purpose, and we can only understand the action if we know what the purpose is.

Where do these purposes come from? In the above example, why are you driving to the mall to buy new clothes? You could answer, “Because I am a stylish person, unlike you and your colleagues, Professor.” But suppose I reply, “Because you are a slave to fashion and to the advertising of a consumer society.” Now things are getting interesting! Ethics is interested in an accurate description in response to the question, what are you doing? In other words, what you are *really* doing. Let’s say you’re going to the mall to buy new clothes, but you feel a tad guilty about that, so you say, “I’m going to buy a gift for my grandmother.” Now if that’s an out-and-out lie, obviously you’ve offered an inadequate description. But in fact, you do buy a little bottle of perfume for your grandmother. You also buy a couple hundred dollars worth of clothes for yourself, however, and you probably wouldn’t have made a trip to the mall just for grandma’s present. In that case, “I’m going to buy a gift for my grandmother” cannot be said to be accurate.

So we have competing descriptions. This is a problem because the only way we understand our actions is by describing them. In matters of ethics we are sometimes quick to identify an action as “right” or “wrong,” but we should be patient: first, we need an accurate description.

Actions and Desires

So, what is behind your trip to the mall, your stylishness or the advertiser’s sales pitch? Where does your purpose come from? We are interested in purposes because, behind them, we have desires. Desire gives rise to purpose. I am doing an action for a purpose because I want something. Properly speaking, ethics is a study of desires before it is a study of actions. The question, what are you doing? is then superseded by the prior question, what do you want?

What do I really want? And why do I want it? Where do desires come from? This is a complicated question. Let’s start with an example: where does my desire for my morning cup of coffee come from? Obviously, it comes from inside of me, but I can say with certainty that the desire is not “natural,” which is to say, I was not born with it. Rather, I have acquired this desire by becoming acquainted with coffee (and caffeine). In this example, Catholic moral theology would call the coffee an *object*. The desires that arise inside of us are elicited by objects outside of us. (Notice here that the object strictly speaking is not the coffee itself, but drinking the coffee.) But of course many people do not drink coffee—for some time I could not stand it. So how did I ever get started drinking it? My girlfriend in college drank it and urged me to try it. What did I desire? My heart was burning for my girlfriend, not for the coffee. Of course, then I figured out about caffeine, and went to grad school, and that was that.

At this point we need to head off a fallacious way of understanding action: I call it the mechanical model. Actions are not caused mechanically—movement is. What causes the 8-ball to go into the pocket? The cue ball. What caused the cue ball to go? The pool cue. What caused the pool cue to move? My arms. But what caused me to move my arms in that particular direction at that particular time? The “cause” is the purpose: to win the game, which I desire. This is not mechanical causation. Philosophers call it “final causation.” That is, actions are caused by things that *pull* us, rather

than things that *push* us. Now if someone is holding a gun to my head, that's a *pushing* cause, but we know that's a poor example of action, since action is ideally voluntary. It comes from within us.

But why do I desire to win the game? At some point, you have to answer this question by saying simply, "Because it is *good*." This is really the way actions get started: we come to desire an object because we perceive it as good. According to Thomas Aquinas, that is how we're made. We're drawn toward good, and we're driven away from what is evil. Now we have not yet considered what makes something good or bad, but we can say simply that we are drawn to those things that our reason presents to us as good.

Notice the crucial difference between this and mechanical causation. For example, we can imagine that our sexual actions are the result of a "sex drive," quite a mechanical phrase that suggests that our actions stem from some internal engine. But no well-adjusted human being feels a continuous, burning desire to have sex all the time. What we call "sexual desire" is aroused by encountering the good. Our desire for sex, like our desire for everything else, is forward-looking. Desire is the thing *inside* us that perceives that something *outside* us will fulfill us.

Thinking of actions as mechanical can get us into trouble as we interact with other human beings. Let's say you are thinking, "I want to have sex with my girlfriend." If you're thinking mechanically, you will think just like you thought when you were trying to sink the 8-ball: I'll make this move, then that one, and the act is successfully performed. Admittedly, this works in a sense; you can treat other people like pool balls. But then what exactly is your girlfriend doing when she's having sex with you, if you've "succeeded"? She's not really acting at all; you've simply manipulated her mechanically. When the partner is not choosing to participate from her own desire, the term for such sex is not "making love" or "hooking up"; it's "rape."

Another problem with viewing acts mechanically is that actions are not primarily about achieving certain results, but about what purposes you have in mind. Think of the common phrase, "She didn't do it on purpose." It refers to some action that caused an unfortunate result, but it assumes that what matters most is not the result, but the fact that no harm was intended: the purpose of the action was not to cause harm. Conversely, we might imagine a terrorist who plants a bomb that fails to detonate. Can he say, "I'm no terrorist—where are the dead bodies?" A prosecuting attorney will urge his

conviction not on the basis of the results, but on his purpose in planting the bomb.

Returning to our original head versus heart problem, we see that we've shed some light on what we mean. To use your head is to think about what you should do, to think about what is really "the good," to consider the purpose of this or that action. Your heart is telling you that the object is good and pulling you toward it. But your head asks, "What is truly good? What is this really pulling me toward?"

For Discussion

1. Think about a recent situation in your life where you didn't quite know what to do. How did you analyze the possibilities? What did you do? Can you explain your decision-making process in terms of your desires and purposes?
2. Using actions from your life (e.g., which courses to take, how to treat a friend, what to do with money, which career to choose), explain the "final cause" that determined your actions. What truly "caused" your choice?

Ordering Multiple Desires: Narratives and the Ultimate End

When we think through actions, it's inevitable that we start to debate not just one action, but a set of actions and their purposes. If human actions were in fact isolated, atom-like units, they could be fairly complex but not particularly confusing. But things are not that simple. Going to college might be considered a complex action, which really means that it is a whole set of actions. Most importantly going to college is not usually an action with a single purpose. The complexity of our actions indicates that the desires behind them are also complicated. We want a lot of different things.

This is a second crucial role for the head. How we go about organizing or ordering our actions and desires is as fundamental to understanding them

as knowing that each action has a purpose. So how do we order our actions and desires? Do we make massive to-do lists and try to schedule everything in? In a word, no. If this is the way one has to go about ordering one's actions, something has already gone wrong. Rather, we use stories (narratives) in order to make sense of actions in bunches.

A story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The story moves because the characters act in certain ways and not in others, in order to bring the story to its destination. As children our moral development begins not with philosophy but with the stories that we hear. The stories begin to allow us to learn what it means to strive for a goal, what sorts of actions work (and don't work) in moving us toward the goal, how to deal with others who have different goals, and (perhaps most importantly) what counts as a good goal. But the story does not simply hand us these things in a list. Rather, it places them within settings and within the sequential development or failure of characters' lives.

From these stories and from the stories of the others we see around us, we learn how to shape our own life stories. Of course there are a lot of different stories we hear, too, especially in our culture. This is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, hearing many stories allows for a certain creativity and makes it less likely that we will blindly follow a bad story. On the other hand, we can live many different, incompatible stories and end up a mess. In C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, two devils are discussing a person they intend to capture for their "father" when one observes, "Your man has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to having a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together in his head. So he doesn't think of doctrines as primarily 'true' or 'false,' but as 'academic' or 'practical,' 'outworn' or 'contemporary,' 'conventional' or 'ruthless'" (p. 8). Lewis's point is that by placing at our disposal many different stories, we come to think that there is no such thing as a good or bad story. And this, of course, is fatal to ethics, for it means that Hitler and Gandhi, Ron Artest and Martin Luther King, Jessica Simpson and Dorothy Day are all equally valid stories for our lives. In the end we may submit to a bad story. Or we may give up trying to find a true story and just go with the flow, allowing multiple stories their domination over our lives.

Why do we need a single story? Without a settled story, there can be no sense of a final ending. And without a final ending, our entire chain of

desires goes on without any direction or purpose. Without a final purpose or a deepest desire, we cannot end up organizing all our other desires. It would be like trying to organize the scenes of a movie without knowing what the ending is: it would be an impossible task. The only way to determine the order of the scenes is by looking at all the pieces and figuring out where they are going. As Aristotle and Aquinas put it, if there were no ultimate purpose, desire would go on without end.

In order to reason well about our actions, the final piece of description we need is an ending, a point to the overall story of one's life, what ancient philosophers called the "ultimate end." This ultimate end provides the basis for ordering everything else, for all other actions must somehow coordinate to reach this end. For example, while we may pursue many purposes in our college career, for nearly everyone the goal is to graduate. Consequently at some point all the other purposes and desires must get organized so that the ultimate end, the ultimate purpose, is attained. Here you may object, and rightly so. Sure, graduation is a goal, but is it the ultimate one? We faculty labor under the grand narrative that the purpose of going to college is simply to learn and to learn to love learning. A graduation is not simply supposed to indicate you met certain requirements, but that you have become "liberally educated" (watch the movie *Mona Lisa Smile* if this mystifies you). We may be happier with the peace studies major who never graduated but left college to devote her life to working in Africa than the career-motivated professional major who jumped through all the right hoops but will never read another book in her life, if she can avoid it.

Even at the comparatively simple level of reasons for going to college we can see the complications involved in identifying an "ultimate end," the purpose for which everything else is done. What about one's life as a whole? What is our overall purpose? Or, stated in terms of desire, what will completely and totally satisfy us? If your instinct is to answer "nothing," then you basically have two alternatives. You can turn to the Buddhists, who conclude that since our desires come to nothing, we ought to unlearn them to find peace. Or you can side with the hedonists, who conclude that because there is no point to anything, we basically need to enjoy each day as much as possible. Christians (and many others) believe these views to be false. Humans desire satisfaction because, ultimately, humans can be satisfied. We work toward an end because we can in fact arrive at a happy ending. Christians

sometimes have silly ways of articulating what that happy ending looks like (e.g., a long escalator into the clouds), but that's beside the point. When we really look at what we are doing or what others are doing, we will be driven to ask, "What's the point of it all? What's the ultimate purpose? What do I really want?" The ultimate purpose is that which we most desire, that which is deepest in us, that for which we were made.



For Discussion

1. Consider a character from a story (book, movie, etc.) who is portrayed as evil or a failure. What makes him or her that way? What is the ultimate end of this character?
2. Name some stories that have helped you figure out which desires are more important than others in life. What are the morals of these stories?
3. What is the purpose of your life? Have you considered this recently?

One Last Piece: Virtues and Vices

At this point, we really have all we need to start doing ethics. We know we have to describe actions, that we have to make sense of them in terms of their purpose, and finally that we need to place them within some larger story that leads to an end. Before we leave this topic, I must note one other term used to understand action: virtue. Unless you are afflicted with an addiction to philosophy and theology, you don't ask yourself the questions we have been asking about your actions. Yet hopefully, when you read this chapter, you could see how you have been "doing ethics" all along. How are we able to act ethically without consciously thinking about ethics?

Ancient thinkers, both Christian and non-Christian, agreed that as people grow into adults, they develop what they called virtues. Roughly speaking, a virtue is a habitual way of acting that "automatically" channels desires in certain ways when presented with certain objects and leads to certain

characteristics and regular ways of acting. They explained this as our developing a “second nature” that builds on and completes (or wrecks!) our human nature. If this second nature leads to actions in accord with goodness and truth and reality, the characteristics are called virtues; if the opposite occurs, they are called vices. So, for example, we all develop habitual ways of dealing with strangers we meet. Do we blow them off? Do we judge them by their appearance? Do we respond warmly and hospitably? The point is, over time, we stop thinking about it. We develop a stable way of responding to the presence of a new person. The fact that we don’t have to think about them doesn’t mean that the actions are not *ours*. Indeed, habitual actions, actions that we don’t even have to think about, are the deepest indicators of who we are.

We need the language of virtue to explain why we may be good at analyzing choices, but not actually good at acting. Acting well and thinking well are not identical: compare a sports commentator to those actually playing the sport. The commentator (or manager or coach) may be able to explain the actions of the players in more detail than the players themselves. But that ability to explain, analyze, and even evaluate does not mean that the commentator can in fact do the things that the players are doing. Nor is it necessary for players to be able to articulate all the details of their actions, particularly when they are actually playing. They are not thinking. They are acting out of the second nature they have developed for the game. They are acting out of virtue.

A virtue, then, is a sort of skill, but it is more than that. Skills generally have specific application (think sports again) and can be learned by almost anyone if he or she just does the action enough. A virtue has a much more universal application—it applies to many different areas of life. Training a basketball player to win a game and training him to treat other players and fans with real respect are two very different things, but both involve training. We learn to act in certain ways and not others by acting habitually in these ways. In both cases, the more we act in correct or incorrect ways, the more we develop our abilities or destroy them. In both cases we make a choice to develop or not develop a certain skill or virtue. And in both cases, the process begins when we are young, so that a key beginning to our learning comes from having a good coach (or “role model”)—or we suffer because our earliest coaches and role models trained us poorly.

Of course, being trained well or trained poorly only makes sense if we know what the object of the game is, the ultimate end, and the sort of role we need to play in order to reach it. Good and bad coaches inevitably rely on stories. Indeed, we tell stories of good and bad coaches, indicating the virtues and vices of a given role. Actually, all stories develop “characters,” that is, they indicate what it means to develop a life well or poorly. They ultimately indicate what a good person and a bad person look like. If we watch movies that treat women as sexual conquests and then go to the bar every Friday with that sort of action in mind, then guess what: we will become that sort of person. Does that make us an admired and popular hero or a predatory and immature jerk? Or we may in fact watch conflicting sorts of movies and have mixed motives when we go out to the bar on Friday night, and then we are what Aristotle called *akratic*, somewhere between virtue and vice, having some idea of virtue but not yet doing it freely and happily, not taking pleasure in it. Indeed, we may be divided within ourselves: part of us may idolize the confident “alpha male” while another part is repelled by him. We wonder who exactly we are and want to be. Notice that we have now returned to our first observation: by our actions we become human, become one sort of person or another.

Conclusion

So, is it your heart or your head? You can’t really choose between them. Reason needs love in order to do anything at all, but love needs reason in order to organize and direct our action toward what is good, toward what will ultimately fulfill us. You might say that reason needs love in order to get out of bed in the morning, and love needs reason in order to know what to do once you’re out of bed. It is not a matter of balancing the two, but harmonizing them.

And the way we do that is through understanding our actions and lives in terms of a story. We organize our various actions and purposes and desires in terms of some sort of ultimate ending, some ultimate purpose in life. In light of our purposes and stories, we shape our behavior by developing habitual ways of acting called virtues and vices. And so we become a certain

sort of person, more and more determined toward a particular story and end.

But which story? The pick-up artist or the nice guy? Which story is *true*? Do we tell the story of the pick-up artist as someone who is happy, or do we tell it in terms of someone who needs to grow up? As should be clear, the key question is which story or stories are we going to believe? Because to believe these stories is to believe *in* these stories, to trust them, to hope that they will guide us to happiness and goodness. And so it makes sense to turn now and ask: what love stories do you believe in? And which ones are just fictional, just fantasies? That's the next chapter.