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## Book Review | *The Prudence of Love: How Possessing the Virtue of Love Benefits the Lover*

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***The Prudence of Love: How Possessing the Virtue of Love Benefits the Lover*. Eric J. Silverman; Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010; 211 pages; \$68.50 hardcover; 978-0-7391-3930-4**

### 1. Overview

Eric Silverman's *The Prudence of Love* purports to offer a new philosophical account of love, one that supports the "simple claim [that] love contributes to the well-being of a loving person." (1) In defending this "simple claim," Silverman, an assistant professor of philosophy and religious studies at Christopher Newport University, places himself in the company of philosophers he refers to as *eudaimonists* about love: Aristotle and, still more importantly, Thomas Aquinas. He takes his primary philosophical opponent to be Kant, who "explicitly rejects any necessary connection between virtue and well-being." (2) "In contrast," Silverman writes, Aquinas

construes love in terms of personal fulfillment and gives a clear reason for why love benefits the lover. He views love as part of humanity's eternal destiny. The virtue of charity, which results in loving action, brings joy and peace to the charitable person. ... For Aquinas, happiness requires the proper ordering of a person's will toward her final end. (4)

Silverman's "neo-Thomistic" view is not straight Thomism: while it preserves Aquinas's view that the lover benefits from being a loving person, and that love can bring "joy and peace to the charitable person," it eschews the substantial religious and metaphysical commitments that Aquinas himself takes to support that position. What Silverman refers to as the "necessary" connection between loving and well-being is meant to be supported, instead, by philosophical and commonsense reflection, by the results of various empirical psychological studies, and by the definition of love that Silverman proposes and elaborates in the first half of the book.

Silverman argues that his account compares favorably to four competing contemporary accounts of love— those defended by Harry Frankfurt, Hugh LaFollette, Niko Kolodny, and David Velleman—in terms of the following criteria of adequacy:

- (1) An account of love must be flexible enough to apply to all types of love relationships, including those of impartial compassion or benevolence. As Silverman writes, it should identify “the essential features of love in a broad range of relationships and toward humanity in general.” (17)
- (2) An adequate account of love will “explain common psychological experiences associated with love,” including the unique nonreplaceability of the beloved, the tenacity of loving relationships, and the joy found in community with the beloved.” (17)
- (3) An account of love “should reconcile ethical concerns between partial love and impartial morality.” (18)
- (4) An account of love “must be compatible with construing love in terms of virtue” and should “distinguish between ideal love and inferior expressions of ‘love.’” (18)

All four of these criteria, it is worth saying, embody substantive and to some degree controversial claims: can we *assume* that love must be capable of being reconciled with impartial morality, that it can be construed in terms of virtue, or even that there is a single, unified phenomenon that goes by the name ‘love’ and which appears in all of these contexts, including those involving no degree of special attention or partiality at all? Some of these doubts, particularly those having to do with impartiality, will be developed at slightly greater length in what follows, but there will not be space in this review to address all of them.

## 2. Reasons and relationships

Love, Silverman claims, can be defined as “*a disposition towards relationally appropriate acts of the will consisting of disinterested desires for the good of the beloved and desires for unity with the beloved, held as final ends.*” (19) This sounds at least somewhat plausible, but is also somewhat vague: in particular the bit about “relationally appropriate acts” is rather obscure. What makes certain acts “appropriate” relative to certain relationships, and why should this matter? Moreover, precisely what *is* the role that relationships play here? At least some of the time Silverman seems to go beyond the idea stated in the definition, that relationships somehow generate normative requirements

that distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate love-related behavior, to hold that our relationships are themselves *reasons* for loving the people we love. (The clearest statement of this is on page 33: “It is more appropriate to view the relationship itself as a central reason for love.”)

Part of the reason for invoking relationships in this way seems to be to allow the theory to meet the second criterion identified above, which demands that our account of love recognize such phenomena as “the unique nonreplaceability of the beloved [and] the tenacity of loving relationships.” (In this, Silverman’s theory resembles that of Niko Kolodny, whom he acknowledges as an influence.) Theories that hold a loved person’s attractive or valuable *qualities* to be one’s reasons for loving, by contrast, are held to be unable to meet this criterion. If the attractive or valuable qualities of the people we love are our reasons for loving them, it is thought, then we are rationally required to stop loving them if they lose those properties, rationally required to transfer our love to any more attractive person who becomes available, and so forth.

Let’s assume that we find such objections compelling. (As I have discussed elsewhere, I find some of them pretty unpersuasive on their face, and I believe the others can be defused as long as we think about practical reasoning in the right way, but I’ll leave that mostly to the side.) Making one’s relationship the reason for one’s love is meant to avoid these problems, since unlike valuable qualities, relationships are unique: you cannot have the same relationship with A as you have with B, though A and B might share many of the attractive qualities that draws you to them.

There are many problems, though, with this move. Consider the following passage:

While the beloved’s nonrelational attributes are not reasons for love, the beloved’s attributes are still important. First, the lover appreciates the nonrelational attributes. A father loves *that* his daughter s funny, playful, beautiful, and intelligent, but he does not love her *because* she is funny, playful, beautiful, and intelligent. If his daughter had other attributes, he would still love her and appreciate her other positive attributes. He loves her simply because she is she! If he met another child that was similarly funny, playful, beautiful, and intelligent, he would not love that child in the same way he loves his own. If he discovered another child who was funnier, more playful, more beautiful, and more intelligent, this new child would not replace the daughter in her father’s affections. (80)

I am not sure quite how to understand this, and I certainly don’t find it convincing. Only on a simplistic view of what practical reasoning requires would we be tempted to think that a quality-based view would require the father to generalize or transfer his love in the ways suggested here. Moreover, I simply don’t know what it means to say that the father

“loves her simply because she is she.” (Is it meant to imply that he would have loved *anyone* who had been she? But metaphysically speaking, no one else could possibly have been she, so this is unhelpful.) Perhaps the claim is meant to be that the father would have loved his daughter, no matter who she turned out to be, i.e. no matter what she was like. But would anyone want to be loved that way, and would a love of that sort be worth anything? Suppose her father says to her, “I would have loved you even if you had had no redeeming qualities whatsoever. Indeed even if you had turned out to be deeply evil, a monstrous moral aberration, I still would have loved you just as much. Or if you had been so severely disabled that you never attained consciousness, and did not even physically resemble a human being, I still would have loved you just the same way as I do now.” It seems to me that a love of this sort would be lacking in something important. Indeed, not to put too fine a point on it, I think the daughter’s proper response, should her father voice such sentiments, would in fact be to feel somewhat insulted.

Whether or not one’s relationships with those one loves count as reasons for loving them, it does seem to be true that the nature of a given relationship is relevant to determining what counts, and what does not, as appropriate behavior. Silverman’s appeal to this connection, though, raises some questions. Once again, the purpose of the appeal is clear: some such restriction is necessary if the proposed definition is not to give highly counterintuitive results. As David Velleman and others have pointed out, there are many ways of acting for the benefit of those whom one loves, or so as to bring about a union with those people, that would be inappropriate, awkward, and at times positively immoral. But if the appeal is only there to avoid generating counterintuitive results then it risks coming across as a bit of jerry-rigging: since our intuitions are heavily shaped by the same social and cultural upbringings that shape our understandings of what relationships require, it is only to be expected that the demands of particular relationships, as culturally understood, will line up with those intuitions. In this connection it is worth mentioning Silverman’s uncritical acceptance of norms against incest, which he mentions approvingly in passing but for which he provides no rationale other than an appeal to tradition:

While there are disagreements concerning the proper relational context for passionate erotic love, virtually all thinkers and cultures agree that some relationships constitute a proper context for *eros* while others do not. For example, incestuous relationships are widely identified as vicious, improper, and destructive. (14)

We might also note his complete avoidance of the topic of homosexuality—a surprising omission, given that the understanding of marriage that has dominated modern Western culture at least until recently would hold same-sex unions to be “vicious, improper and destructive” in much the way incestuous relationships are commonly seen as being. If this shared understanding does not, on Silverman’s account, give rise to prohibitions on such

relationships, it would be helpful to be told why not. More generally, rather than simply taking the validity of such shared social understandings for granted, an account of love should be prepared to investigate, and at times evaluate, cultural norms that determine what counts as appropriate and inappropriate love-related behavior. And it should make it clear which relationships, under what conditions, generate requirements by making various failures to love, or to express love, inappropriate. Are parents *obligated* to love their parents, and vice versa? Silverman seems to think so. Is a person forced into an arranged marriage obligated to love her spouse? This seems to me highly doubtful, but how, on Silverman's view, are we to distinguish it from the previous case?

### 3. Partiality, impartiality, and love for everyone

The matter is complicated by the fact that, while we are supposed to love different people in different ways (depending on the nature of the relationship), on Silverman's account we really ought to love *everybody*; this, at any rate, is what the virtue of love in its ideal form requires. "Love is not merely compatible with goodwill for all persons," Silverman writes, "but *requires* goodwill toward all." (86) And shortly thereafter: "Failure to desire union with another person is a failure to recognize that person's humanity. Thus, it is a failure of love." (88)

This seems implausibly strong. Indeed, the idea that love involves a desire for union seems to me an argument *against* the view that one ought, or for that matter could, love everyone. In a world of several billion diverse individuals with discrete and frequently conflicting wants, goals, and conceptual frameworks, the idea that one might desire union, in any genuine and meaningful sense, with every one of these several billion seems hopelessly utopian. Nor is it clear why recognizing another person's humanity requires the desire to achieve union with her: indeed, a crucial part of moral maturity seems to be developing the ability to tolerate and respect those whose goals and visions we *don't* share, those whose lives we do not desire to mix and mingle with our own.

It seems unrealistic and a bit naïve, then, to write that "Like Aquinas's *caritas*, love is impartial in that it involves the same basic desires of the good for and unity with all persons." (85) Again, since goods conflict, there doesn't seem to be any such thing as "the good for ... all persons"; and it seems doubtful that I ought to be required by love to desire the good for those people whose interests conflict with the interests of those whom I (especially) love. This would not be as troubling if we held a certain sort of objective theory of the good—one on which, for instance, the universe manifested a harmonious moral order, perhaps one overseen by a benevolent and omnipotent God, so that all apparent conflicts between distinct individuals' interests were in fact *only* apparent. But Silverman's neo-Thomistic view was supposed to eschew such metaphysical commitments; and on any subjectivist or even plausibly pluralistic objectivist view of the

good, there are enough conflicts between different individuals' goods to make deep trouble for the claim that we could, let alone ought to, desire the good for everyone.

Love and impartiality, then, cannot be reconciled as easily as Silverman seems to think. It is true that love can serve as a partial antidote to egoism by drawing an agent into a world larger than that of his own self-concern, and thus leading her, if not to put aside her own self-interest, at least to balance it against the needs of others. But love works in the other direction, too: a deep and pervasive element of love, and one that does not fit well with this part of Silverman's account, is its tendency to pull us away from the broader social world and into smaller, somewhat insular communities from which others are excluded. Loving attachments to their families, particularly their children, motivates many well-to-do citizens of Western countries to do far less than they otherwise might to help the distant but needy. Love can open one's eyes to the reality of others, thus motivating the noblest of actions (Rick's choice at the end of "Casablanca"). It is just as capable of blinding a person to the real needs of others, and thus of motivating indifferent, callous, and morally unjustifiable behavior (Almasy in "The English Patient").

Silverman emphasizes only the friendly face of love, and ignores its tragic and potentially destructive aspects; like the lover who is blind to the faults of his beloved, Silverman's love of love seems to have blinded him to its darker dimensions. As already mentioned, he writes near the beginning of his book that "an ideal account of love should reconcile ethical concerns between partial love and impartial morality," and goes on to say that "a morally attractive account of love will show how partial love toward specific others and impartial concern for all are compatible." (18) But it should now be clear that this begs an important and difficult issue. One might well *hope* that love and impartiality can be reconciled, but it is a mistake to assume that they can and to make this hope into a criterion of adequacy for theories of love.

Moreover, Silverman neglects entirely to deal with the existence of the morally wicked. Must I desire to unite myself with people who are deeply and genuinely evil? Must I love such people? I doubt that either question should be answered affirmatively; at any rate, it is not obvious that either should be, and putting forward the view that we ought to love every human being obliges one to acknowledge the issue and to attempt to deal with it in a serious way.

#### 4. The eudaimonistic thesis

According to Silverman, there are five main types of benefit that love confers onto the lover. Loving, by his definition (and, I would add, by any plausible definition) gives the lover final ends, which are necessary in order that we live purposeful lives. (Here Silverman draws on Harry Frankfurt's excellent work regarding the usefulness and value

of final ends.) Loving also requires that the agent integrate her psyche, provides motivation for self-improvement, and improves the quality of the lover's relationships. (Interestingly, Silverman claims that it is possible for unloving agents to have friends, while allowing that love "fundamentally changes the nature of" one's friendships. (121) I would have thought that friendship impossible, and not merely less fulfilling, without love.) Finally, love provides access to certain epistemic goods including "self-knowledge, knowledge gained through empathy, and knowledge concerning what benefits humans." (128) Silverman also considers Neera Badhwar's suggestion that love is inherently pleasurable, though in the end he takes a fairly skeptical stance toward it, largely on the basis that love can sometimes cause pain and thus is not "unqualified in its pleasantness." (133)

One might take issue with this particular list of benefits, arguing for the exclusion of some or the inclusion of neglected others. It is harder, perhaps, to imagine taking issue with the general claim that loving tends to lead to good things for the lover, at least in many cases. Silverman might say that he is insisting on something stronger: not just that love *often* leads to or even *tends to* lead to benefits for the lover, but rather, as he puts it, that there is a "necessary" connection between loving and well-being. But much depends on how we interpret this "necessary." One might be tempted to read the eudaimonistic thesis as asserting that loving is *guaranteed* to make a person's life better, or that the goods afforded to lovers in virtue of loving were of a higher order, in some deep sense, than those goods that are available to unloving agents. But neither of these seems to be Silverman's view, and indeed he explicitly rejects the former: "Just as love in unusual circumstances can result in an overall loss to well-being," he writes, "unloving dispositions can sometimes result in an overall increase in well-being." (191)

This is a sensible observation, but it leaves one wondering just what the "necessary" connection between love and well-being is supposed to be. In the final analysis it seems to amount to little more than the claim that there are certain good things that loving provides even when loving is, on the whole, bad. This is probably true, but the same could be said for eating chocolate or shooting heroin, neither of which are *wholly* negative (if they were, people would not seek them out and become addicted to them) even when they are on the whole negative. Given this, it is natural to wonder whether Silverman's view really can be considered a version, or even a close relative, of Thomas Aquinas's far more robust account, which really does assert a kind of *necessary* connection (but only at the cost of leaning fairly heavily on some deeply dubious metaphysics). At the same time it is somewhat hard to avoid feeling that the eudaimonistic thesis, as Silverman asserts it, is obviously true, which leads naturally to the question why it is necessary to devote an entire book to proving it true.

Unfortunately, Silverman's attempts to put an actual face on the anti-eudaimonistic position are not especially persuasive. His most frequently mentioned opponent is Kant,

but the passages he cites do not really establish that Kant would reject the kind of eudaimonistic thesis Silverman is putting forward. Rather, Kant (plausibly and sensibly) seems to deny the existence of a much stronger sort of alleged necessary connection between well-being and virtue, one that would guarantee that the world reliably and indeed unfailingly rewarded agents for their virtuous behavior. Silverman attributes to Kant the position that love “may cause the lover to risk his own happiness and well-being for the sake of the beloved,” (2) but *any* reasonable view of love ought to allow that such actions are at least possible. (It is an interesting and potentially significant question whether Silverman takes it that his own view would rule out such risk-takings. We saw above that he acknowledges that at least in “unusual situations” love can lead to diminished well-being; perhaps, though he would want to deny that love could lead an agent knowingly to take such a risk.)

Other putative antagonists are brought in largely via association or speculation:

David Velleman does not say whether love benefits the lover, but since his conception of love is modeled upon Kantian respect he likely shares Kant’s belief that virtue and love make no necessary contribution to the virtuous person’s well-being. Niko Kolodny also does not explore the role of love in the agent’s well-being. (93)

This is hardly compelling evidence for counting Velleman and Kolodny among the anti-eudaimonists. If they, and others, have neglected to mention the ways in which loving typically benefits the lover, it might well be because the claim that it does is sufficiently obvious and widely agreed upon to be taken for granted. It is just common sense, that is, that loving, even when it is not on the whole beneficial, does enrich and expand people’s lives, gives them a sense of meaning, teaches them things they would not otherwise learn, and provides various other benefits to those who engage in it. Love is desired, pursued, and obsessed over to a greater degree than nearly any other object one can think of (material wealth being the obvious exception in this society). The claim that “love is the only prudent way to live despite its risks” (135) might be a slightly odd way of putting the point—indeed, the language of *prudence* feels inappropriate here, and despite his having chosen to include it in the title of the book, nothing in Silverman’s argument makes it seem less so—but the idea it expresses is one that would find a good deal of acceptance among most audiences in our society, even if it were put forward unsupported by any argument at all.