

2-2015

## The Apologetics of Love

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### Recommended Citation

Peterson, Jesse M., "The Apologetics of Love" (2015). *Faculty Publications - George Fox School of Theology*. 431.

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February 19, 2015

# The Apologetics of Love

Considering Nietzsche and Jesus of Nazareth

by Jesse Peterson

At the risk of an absurd reductionism, I'd like to propose an audacious thesis: that in Western history there have been only two distinct ethical philosophies. Every other ethic ultimately falls under the banner of one of these two. The two stances are represented by two teachers: Friedrich Nietzsche and Jesus of Nazareth. Their fundamental disagreement? What it means to be human, and what it means to love.

The Ethics of Nature

There could hardly have been a more fitting philosopher to follow on the heels of Darwin's mid-19th-century discoveries than Nietzsche. Nietzsche translated into ethical-prescriptive terms ("ought") what for Darwin had merely been biological-historical description ("is"). Darwin's "survival of the fittest" in the war of nature became Nietzsche's "will to power":

*What is good? — Whatever augments the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself, in man.*

*What is evil? — Whatever springs from weakness.*

*What is happiness? — The feeling that power increases — that resistance is overcome.*

*The weak and the botched shall perish: first principle of our charity. And one should help them to it.*

The Nietzschean "will to power" thus signifies a celebration-turned-exhortation of what is merely *natural*. It is only natural for humans to look out for themselves, to compete for precious resources, to war against potential aggressors, to seek personal power. Now whatever our opinion of Darwin or Nietzsche, it can hardly be denied that the Christian doctrine of sin fits admirably with such notions of self-preservation and egoism. If we believe we've progressed beyond this, simply observe the covetous masses blitzkrieging through your local Walmart on Black Friday at 5:01 a.m.

"For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?" (1 Cor. 3:3)

St. Paul (and most subsequent Christians) would agree with Nietzsche that such self-serving behavior is "natural." The obvious difference between the two camps lies in how these natural inclinations should be responded to—whether spurred, or spurned.

What is Altruism?

Has Nietzsche's "charity" become our own? In recent decades, the nature and origins of altruism have been hot topics, both in the popular and scholarly media.

Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson has proposed an account of the evolutionary origins of altruism as follows:

“If the reduction in survival and reproduction of *individuals* owing and to genes for altruism is more than offset by the increased probability of survival of the *group* owing to the altruism, then altruism genes will rise in frequency throughout the entire population of competing groups. To put it as concisely as possible: the individual pays, his genes and tribe gain, altruism spreads.”

Wilson is claiming that our seemingly noble, selfless acts of "altruism" are a little more selfish than they appear, thanks to those pesky "selfish genes" of ours (as Richard Dawkins has coined them). An individual may indeed be willing to act altruistically, selflessly, even self-sacrificially, but only toward a member of his own kin (or tribe, at the most), and only because the altruistic individual's genes will still live on, dispersed through their surviving kin. But is it appropriate to label such a circumscribed, cost/benefit-calculating behavior with the word *altruism*?

It has become common course to identify altruism with any action that is beyond pure and immediate egoism. But the altruistic person is by definition concerned for the welfare of the *alter*, or "other." The question then becomes (and here we echo the famous prompt of a certain young lawyer): Who exactly is my "other"? If it's only my fellow kin, wouldn't self-sacrifice become merely a slightly expanded version of self-preservation? Is not fighting for my children's survival tantamount to fighting for my own survival? Even tribalism is merely a more inclusive version of egoism. And the point is: Both are entirely natural, instinctual. Both are of an entirely different species from other-oriented love.

An Unnatural Ethic

Which brings us to Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus' radical move was to widen the circle of beneficiaries as far as it could possibly go. He would not settle for any form of instinctual egoism, whether it be commitment to one's self, one's family, or one's immediate neighbors and community.

In one teaching, Jesus flatly turns on its head the sort of reciprocal altruism often discussed in evolutionary ethics:

"When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be *repaid*. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed *because they cannot repay you*." (Luke 14:12b-14a)

This is a call to love the unlovable devoid of any cost-benefit calculation. But the circle can be widened even more. Beyond the sphere of those who are unable to repay us with good, there are those more than able to pay us—with evil. It's with respect to this outermost concentric circle, those by whom we have been wronged and to whom our only natural inclination is hatred and

despisement, that Jesus utters his boldest ethical imperative: "Love your enemies."

These famous words are uttered in contrast to the familiar: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" (Mt. 5:43) That's a clear ethic, and a doable one. The old lines are drawn—Jew versus Gentile; friend versus enemy; us versus them. "Love your neighbor" is taken from Leviticus 19:18, while "hate your enemy" is not a wording found in the Old Testament, though the sense arguably is. What's more visceral, more human, than that? No matter where we draw the line, it seems obvious that "natural" love, or what I've called "expanded egoism," only goes so far. There will always be an "other"—which is to say, a person, a community, an ethnic group, a nation—whom our nature feels no desire whatsoever to benefit. Staring us in the face, Jesus beckons, "*Those* are precisely the ones you must love." He's bent on uprooting our deeply planted tribalism.

What we are dealing with in the teachings of Jesus, then, is the historical anomaly of a *universal* ethic of agape love. Plato had posited something like a universal love, wherein one moves beyond all particular objects of desire toward the singular transcendent object they signify, the "form" itself. But there's an obvious difference. In Plato's system, you don't have to love actual, concrete humans (let alone aggravating ones), just wonderful forms like goodness or beauty. Moreover, the ancient Greeks held nothing like our modern-day assumptions concerning equality among all people; a hierarchy of persons was assumed, and a master-slave distinction thought natural.

Jesus was therefore raising the bar, establishing a new precedent. The radical newness of Jesus' universal ethic was a bit like runner Roger Bannister breaking the four-minute mile marker in 1954—it made thinkable the previously unthought, setting a standard for all subsequent generations to deal with.

Yet, just as a competitive runner today could train for a four-minute mile while unaware of the name Roger Bannister, so too with us: the teaching has seeped into our cultural bloodstream, while floating free from its original teacher. Heirs of the Enlightenment that we are—with its talk of the "self-evident" truths of "certain unalienable rights" for every person—it hardly seems obvious to us how heavily indebted such notions remain to the peculiar rabbi from Galilee. So many influential Western philosophers have rung the bell of universal benevolence and equality—Locke, Kant, Rawls, to name a few—that a severe case of fish-in-water syndrome has set in. Contemporary cultural voices decrying racism, sexism, ethnocentrism and the like challenge our habitual tendency to divide the world into an us-versus-them polarity. But how did we learn to speak such a prophetic grammar? How did we learn to assume universal dignity and thus to condemn injustice in all its forms? To strive for "peace on earth, good will toward men"? Such practices first ripened not on American or European soil, nor even that of ancient Greece, but on the rocky terrain of Palestine.

#### Supra-natural Love

Let's sum up. For Friedrich Nietzsche, extreme individualization, or the will-to-power, is the highest good: "every man for himself." For Jesus, extreme universalization, or *agape* love, is the highest good: "every man for every other man." The former is natural (to us), the latter is unnatural, even anti-natural. If there's an apologetic to this argument, it's the inference that

perhaps the inherent *un-* and even *anti-*naturalness of Jesus' ethic was owing to its *supra-*natural (supernatural) source. Only someone coming from outside the commonplace structures of first-century "being-in-the-world" could have posited such a new way to be human: "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me" (John 7:16).

Philosophers Hubert Dreyfus (UC-Berkeley) and Sean Kelly (Harvard) concur, "As he is described in the Gospels, Jesus totally transforms people's understanding of what it is to be a human being. This is a superhuman thing to do." Note the ironic juxtaposition of terms. It's a "superhuman" thing to redefine the "human." Or put it another way: It's a "supernatural" thing to redefine the "natural." The aim of Jesus' radical *agape* teaching was to posit a new humanity, a new normal, a new nature—one exemplified precisely in Jesus' own life (and death). Paradigm in view, invitation in hand, the task is now ours to live it out as well.