

Filling in The Gaps: Love, Theory, Practice and the Current Situation
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Opening Remarks at the First Annual
Love in the Public Square Conference
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Welcome to Love in the Public Square! The Conference, that is – a name that is susceptible to the double entendre, which I discovered only after the call for papers went out. But that’s OK. What actually precipitated the conference wasn’t anything, well, erotic, at least in the popular sense of that word. What led to the idea of this conference was the madness and mayhem in our world, and the dearth of love-talk in our public policy discussions, our constant failures to summon-up sufficient quantities of moral imagination in our public discourse regarding the important issues of the day – war and peace, bio-engineering, responses to terrorism, genocide. Dorothy Day’s famous statement captures my thoughts and my feelings. Said Day, “The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart.” Which day did she mean? It is all too apparent, isn’t it?. She meant *each* day.

The word “love” has been replaced with imperfect surrogate words that do very useful work but, in a manner of speaking, have forgotten who sent them. *Love sent them*. We are at a loss, it seemed to me as I thought about the value of this conference, to adequately address the issues of the day without weak academic jargon or hackneyed ideological phrases, because the power of the word “love,” and the potent meanings that attend it, have been pushed aside as too simple, as philosophically or sociologically uninteresting, as lacking in sophistication, as mere sentimentalism, as effete. It seemed to me that love-talk had been relegated to religious institutions, self-help books, and poetry where such talk is expected, or at least tolerated.

A case in point. On a recent broadcast of the News Hour with Jim Lehrer, the journalist Jeffrey Brown filed a report about the poet cowboys of Elko, Nevada (it seems that the examination of the hidden lives of cowboys is all the rage of late!). After showing some of these cowboys reading their works, Brown engaged one of the cowboy poets, a Mr. Wallace McRae, in this exchange:

McRae: When you realize that your culture is threatened, you become much stronger and much more involved in being an advocate for that culture. . . .

Brown: And the poetry then becomes part of that?

McRae: Becomes part of that because it's a way of telling who we are and what our story is and that we have a culture that has worth, that has value, that is worth something.

Brown: Another reason for the poetry is to give these famously taciturn men and women a way to talk about difficult things{?}

McRae: I don't think that I would be comfortable outside the confines of poetry to talk about love [for example]. You know. I mean that's very private. That's a very private thing. . . but I think I can put that in a poem. And it's safe.

Somehow, talking about love outside of the context of poetry is for McRae actually “unsafe.” One may venture to conclude that for many others as well, talking about love outside of poetry, or the church, or the synagogue or the mosque is indeed “unsafe.” We seem, too, to be famously taciturn when it comes to

“love.”

But “love” is unsafe because love is anything but effete – rather, it is mighty. It commits us. It makes demands, sometimes uncompromising ones. It upsets our comfort, messes up our tidy little worlds. It bids us to act as though we were touched in the head, were a little insane, as did King, Gandhi, Bonhoeffer, Jesus. That is, it bids us to act against self-interest *simpliciter*, that is, in the usual sense of self-interest. We die for love, suffer for it, abandon ourselves to it. It is a powerful thing, and it must be harnessed and directed, yes, but to remove it from the lexicon of policy and politics, from the communal life of the public square is to neuter our aspirations for the attainment of a far better world.

Well, for two days, we should do all we can do to be quite “unsafe.” We will talk of love not in the context of poetry, but in the context of our public policy, our public morality, the important questions of the day – from racism and human trafficking to international development. We will remove love from its ghetto of pretty and safe institutions and genres in order to consider its place in the more mundane, dare I say secular, places – places where we set the banisters and possibilities for the quality of life itself, or where we determine who gets to live and who gets to die; places in which we consider whether we shall have more butter or more bombers; who gets incarcerated and who goes free; who eats and who starves to death; who looks in the mirror and sees a full human being, and who takes from the looking glass self-hatred; why the missing suburban teen leads on the *Today* show or on the nightly news, while a genocide in Darfur gets no mention day after day, night after night; why some children get taught with expensive calculators, laptops and other resources, while others suffer the savage inequalities, as Jonathan Kozol put it, that severely curtail their chances in life. We will be considering how, at least in part, we may get the word love to fall from the lips of policy analysts, legislators, senators and even presidents, when they assess their enemies and determine that certain people are expendable, while other are of a higher ontological worth.

But I doubt we will fall off into mere sentimentalism here. Policy is tough stuff, after all. There will be philosophers here probing the very meaning and utility of love in such places and by such people, even whether using the word love and all that it means really adds anything substantive to the construction of and debates surrounding public policy. This philosophical push back is neither new as it pertains to love, nor should it be taken as antipathy toward love’s possibility in the public square. Such push back, or critique, is a useful therapy that can help us make sure that the love we speak of is not some mere, uninformed, sentiment which can merely pave the road to hell with syrupy-sweet good intentions. Let us remember, some of the blackest episodes of the 20th Century were set on roads that were paved with good intentions. Love feels, yes. But also, love must think. It *must* think.

Theories and Their Gaps

We analyze our public morality with reference to and against the backdrop of the economic, political, moral and legal theories which inform and frame our activity, construct our “knowledge.” We do not merely act, whether as individuals or as communities, with reference to no landmarks or patterns. Our actions are informed by models for action and presuppositions – theories, ideologies, conceptual frameworks. But while we may hold that such models work for the most part – or more or less work – we seem reticent to do better at times. Theories are by their nature conservative, in a manner of speaking. They put in place a more or less predictable framework within which we construct our plans of life. Even in the face of glaring absurdities that fly in the face of our deepest aspirations and convictions, we turn to our theories for solace and justification, and dismiss the gaps into which fall children, the poor, the sick, the jobless, the homeless, the mentally ill, people for whom the model or conceptual scheme does not

concern itself, not really. Our theories, which we must have, of course, perhaps give us a little too much cover, a little too much succor, might excuse us a little too much as we throw our hands up in the air and exclaim “We have the best economic, market, political, democratic practices in the world - what more can anyone ask?” One can imagine the inquisitive retort, “Well, whatdaya got?”

We confuse the relative best for the actual best; ground covered for the destination; what we have accomplished with what we are capable of accomplishing; a high plateau for the summit; a more fair distribution of welfare for the better justice which awaits and which is grounded in our aspirations that we have warrant to possess given that the heights which we have attained provide a far better vantage point from which to see what we can become if we but push on. We confuse the relatively better for the absolute best, toward which we might strive but for our comfort with our pet theories and our pet practices which habitually attend them. And when I say we, I do mean we, and I indict myself as well.

But we can do better if we are willing to sacrifice and sweat toward the goal. As philosopher Martha Nussbaum points out in her essay *Love's Knowledge*, our habits are at times but mechanisms to shield us from our discomforts and our suffering, and mute our pathos and empathy and longing. In the language of John Dewey, our current habits can become the excuse for not exercising ourselves toward newer and better ones. The habit of keeping slaves desensitized many to the cruelties of servitude. The habit of pouring toxins into our rivers and streams was only shaken when Rachel Carson grabbed us by our lapels and demanded that we think differently about what our planet, and what we, can take and what it, and what we, cannot abide.

We have 45 plus million people with no health insurance (translated into more human terms, there are 45 plus million people who may suffer and die because they cannot afford medical treatment if diagnosed with a disease - imagine that one of them is your child or grandchild), a situation that is not even a relative best when measured against our peers in the developed world. We continue to tolerate horrendous social distance between communities based upon race and the size of their members' bank accounts. In international affairs, we send our mighty military to engage in belligerence to save thousands, we think, here at home, by killing tens of thousands abroad, and, at the same time, we watch hundreds of thousands get slaughtered in mass killings or genocides with but meek protests, and millions more get displaced in failed states ruled through butchery and thuggery, some of which we in the West helped to put in power. As we do so we take solace in our theories - our theories of just war, riddled with lacunae that naively - *naively!* - ignore human psychology and gullibility and knavery; our theory of political realism in international affairs, that says the default position between nation-states is hostile competition and not cooperation; theories of sovereignty which rest upon theories of the impenetrability of nation-states even when they perform atrocities on their own people. We forget that behind all of these, are flesh and blood human beings - men, women and children who want to live decent lives rather than live on \$1 or \$2 per day, as so many hundreds of millions of people do. Our theories can exonerate us for our forgetfulness of that fact.

We have an economic theory rooted in supply and demand and market rationality and pareto optimality that has become divorced from any *conscious* other-regarding interests, including value and culture interests, an economic theory that a group of professors and students, beginning at the Sorbonne in 2000, labeled autistic economics - an economics ignorant of its own presuppositions and self-absorbed with its quantitative approach to real human needs. Of autistic economics, or neo-classical economics, one scholar has written that “the close to monopoly position of neoclassical economics is not compatible with normal ideas about democracy. Economics is science in some senses, but is at the same time ideology. Limiting economics to the neoclassical paradigm means imposing a serious ideological limitation. Departments of economics become political propaganda centers” (Peter Soederbaum). (And what of those who are taught by them?) So a new movement has emerged, “Post-Autistic Economics,” a movement that views economics not as the science that many neo-classical thinkers would prefer, but as a discipline that must

maintain a dialogue with the values of the communities it purports to serve. It alleges that “like sufferers of autism, the field of economics was intelligent but obsessive, narrowly focused, and cut off from the outside world. . . . [It had become] enthralled with complex mathematical models that only operate in conditions that don’t exist” (Deborah Campbell) and which have little regard for actual human lives. It can be illustrated by the infamous statement of Larry Summers, Harvard’s former president, who was also chief economist at the World Bank in the 1990s. Wrote Summers in an internal memo:

“Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging MORE migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs [Less Developed Countries]?” the memo inquired. “I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that . . . I’ve always thought that under-populated countries in Africa are vastly UNDER-polluted . . . ”

Summers protested that this memo, written by an associate for his signature, was meant tongue in cheek. Either way, it unmasks the worst elements in neo-classical economics. This is the impeccable logic of neoclassical economics – the economic costs of dumping toxic waste in LDCs are less than having them dumped in the developed West. To Summer’s memo, in fact, Brazil’s then-Secretary of the Environment, Jose Lutzenburger, replied: “Your reasoning is perfectly logical but totally insane . . . Your thoughts [provide] a concrete example of the unbelievable alienation, reductionist thinking, social ruthlessness and the arrogant ignorance of many conventional ‘economists’ concerning the nature of the world we live in.”

The important observation, lurking behind these criticisms, is that our neo-classical economic theory, though having done much good, has also been and is dangerous. We are not the “rationally self-interested” creatures that neo-classical economic theory takes us to be and, through circularity of belief in it, indoctrinates us to be. “Why,” present economic theory asks us, “you wouldn’t want to be ‘irrational’ would you?” (Autistic economics has its analogues in academic philosophy; in the social sciences; in religion; in theology; in business management.)

Our legal theories confer to corporations personality and thus, under the 14th amendment (an amendment designed to protect the rights of African-Americans, it may be said with some relevance),¹ the protections normally afforded to natural persons, to people. I say this *als ob* creative reading of the meaning of personhood has done much good in smoothing the way for market institutions to operate in the world, regardless of some of the objections I hear from time to time. However, when taken too far corporate personality pinches-off corporations, large and small, from the ideals of the commonwealths from which they spring, leaving them to operate as autistic economic theory both sanctions and demands. This of course is rooted in theories of the person in modernity, theories which have created societies of instrumentalists, rather than societies of care-givers, in which the meaning of “commonwealth” is reduced to mere quotidian concerns.

We need far more than democracy to fill in the gaps of care which we are certainly capable of filling in, just as we are of creating more gaps, and this is because a view of the demos as in any way naturally and wholly loving, as naturally and wholly selfless rather than selfish, is misguided. We need a social order

¹ “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any *person* of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

permeated with an attendant ethos of other regarding love, rather than mere and perhaps grudging recognition of the other – a love that does not allow a retreat to a saving theory or entrenched set of practices, but one that requires that we look to fill in the gaps even as we look for feasible ways to amend or replace our working theories.

Finally, we must remember that theories and background assumptions and presuppositions have their place. We would hardly be able to operate in the world without them. Nor do I wish to suggest that markets and corporations and businesses are *per se* problematic. I do not believe that they are. Nor that wealth is necessarily evil. Nor that self-regard is unhealthy (I do not equate self-regard and vice). But I do insist that all of these must be tempered with a constant concern for the welfare of others, our commerce and political and international relations tempered by a deep concern for more than one's own kith and kin. This other-regarding love does not so regard the other only in the aggregate, but regards each individual. We can do better. I do not know that we will do better. But conferences like this one will, perhaps, help, by extending the analysis and rhetoric and passions of love into all our public spaces, so that we are willing to live the unsafe lives that we must if the anguish of the world, and our own anguish as its relatively comfortable witnesses, might be abated.

Welcome to "Love in the Public Square." I am pleased to introduce our first panel.