

Loving Idols

A story about idolatry, Christianity and love.



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Abstract

If one looks at love in popular culture one sees that the current attitude towards love is one of idolatry. This thesis explains what this popular conception of love is (largely) based on. Current love has its roots in Christianity and thus, by extension, Platonic thought. This thesis therefore examines some of the most essential characteristics of love in Christianity. These characteristics help to analyze the resemblance between love in Christianity and love in popular culture. Furthermore this thesis explores whether or not popular love could have been born out of ancient Greek philosophy or that these resemblances between popular and Christian love come from the fact that both schools are simply right about the nature of love. It is for that reason that this thesis briefly examines the potential heritage (of love) between Christianity and ancient Greece. Moreover, while it is impossible to prove that Christianity and popular culture are not right about love, this thesis provides a secular conceptualization of love which does not share the previously mentioned essential characteristics. This conceptualization 'love as bestowal and affirmation' is deeply rooted in the works of Singer, May and Nietzsche and will provide a secular view on love. This to show that it is possible to create a probably conceptualization of love completely separate from the Christian framework.

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Introduction

Whilst the philosophy of love has not been granted the academic weight of fields like the philosophy of science or political philosophy, many notable philosophers in history have, in fact, written about the topic. One specific tradition that has been most preoccupied with the conceptualization of love is the Christian. The influence of Christian love on love philosophy has been immense. This thesis explores not only the vital role love plays in Christianity but also the profound influence of the Christian notion of love on popular understanding of love.

This popular conceptualization is a form of love idolization. This thesis attempts to show that this idolization inherits its essential structure from Christianity. As such, love idolization mirrors Christianity's approach to love. The core of this thesis is: current love idolization is a secular reinterpretation of Christian love.

In order to argue this point in a structured way this thesis is divided into 5 chapters. Chapter 1 will provide context and content for the analysis of Christian love and love idolatry. Like justification of evil & suffering, and transcendence. Chapter 1 is primarily concerned with an analysis of Christian love. This analysis presents some of the most essential characteristics of Christian love. In short, it identifies what makes love, Christian love.

Chapter 2 investigates love idolatry itself. It takes the popular representation of love (as represented in Hollywood, Disney, pop music, mainstream television shows and the like) and sketches the conceptualization of love behind this representation. This chapter also relates the elements of this conceptualization back to the Christian love. In this way it attempts to show that love idolatry is indeed essentially a secularized form of Christian love.

Chapter 3 proposes two challenges. 1) Christian love and love idolatry are similar by virtue of a common ancestor and therefore love idolatry is not essentially Christian. Instead, both are a product of something else entirely. 2) Christian love and love idolatry are similar because the Christians (and consequently love idolatry also) are right about the nature of love. This means that love idolatry did not inherit Christian love as such, it is simply a slight reinterpretation of the same truth.

Chapter 4 investigates ancient Greece which, due to its ties with Christianity is the chief suspect in the common ancestry challenge. The purpose of this chapter is to show which elements in Christian love cannot be accredited to ancient Greek philosophy.

Chapter 5 partly deals with the second challenge described in Chapter 4. Bearing in mind that it is likely to be impossible to show, that Christianity and love idolatry are wrong about love, this chapter shall not attempt to do so. Instead it builds another theory of love, that does not share its essential characteristics with Christianity. This is not only to counter the challenge but also it allows for a more constructive part in the thesis.

The conclusion is meant to give a retrospective overview of the thesis as a whole and will (hopefully) allow me to conclude that I have achieved all I set out to do in this introduction.

1 The idol, Christianity and Love

This thesis aims to identify the essentially Christian aspects in the current popular conception of love, the love idolatry. The argument here is that while belief in God has been in decline in western civilization, the belief in the Christian view on love has not. Popular culture still sees love through a profoundly Christian lens.. This chapter identifies some of the most important parts of Christian love. This analysis is incomplete, because a full analysis of Christian love is too ambitious for the thesis its scope.

This chapter focuses on the central elements in Christian love. To give a more inclusive account of love idolization Plato is included, because of his influence on Christianity and for his lasting echo in the current ideas about love. This chapter offers some essential characteristics of Christian love, that give insight into the Christian-ness of Christian love.

1.1. Plato, the foundation

A thing any idol has to do, is providing some justification of evil. Nearly all great philosophers in the western world have regarded love as a benevolent force. Love and ‘goodness’ have in fact been tied together since the birth of western philosophy. We find the origin of this connection in western philosophy, in Plato’s *Symposium* which could be considered the official start of western love philosophy. The section involves a character called Diotima, who teaches Socrates about love. In ‘*Symposium*’ we find the following passage:

"Then," she said, "the simple truth is, that men love the good." "Yes," I said. "To which must be added that they love the possession of the good?" "Yes, that must be added." "And not only the possession, but the everlasting possession of the good?" "That must be added too." "Then love," she said, "may be described generally as the love of the everlasting possession of the good?" "That is most true."

Plato, Symposium (Translation by Benjamin Jowett)

This quote sets up a strong connection between love and ‘goodness’ but it doesn’t claim that love is a good thing itself. In fact, Socrates remarks that *“Love is neither fair nor good”*. His argument to deny that love is good in itself is that love desires the good. He argues that desire is only for things that are not possessed. As such love cannot be good. In a similar line of reasoning he argues that love is not a god. For love is a desire for that which is fair and since the gods are fair love cannot be a god. It must instead

be understood as the way in which gods communicate with humans and vice versa. Love retains this important role in Christianity – what is more, a substantial number of theologians have ascribed to love more divine qualities than Plato might have argued for¹.

Platonic thought also forms the basis for the idea that love is a ladder to transcendence. Plato claims that love guides us in the climb towards the beauty absolute. Here *Symposium* does get somewhat complex; in the quote above Plato mentions good while the quote below deals with beauty. To prevent confusion, an explanation of the relationship between beauty and the good is required. My interpretation of this relationship is based on another part of the *Symposium*, the speech of Eryximachus. He argues that love is about the harmonization of things that are good together. This speech combined with Irving Singer's interpretation of '*Symposium*' leads me to believe that beauty is essentially the harmony of things that are good for one another. The element of transcendence is more connected to this idea of beauty. Love is a way to reach a state in which one can perceive, know and even produce the reality of beauty, and thus one can be harmonized with the good. Ultimately, to be harmonized with it, leads to the possession of the good.

"the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is."

Plato, Symposium

This quote describes the ladder to 'beauty absolute' and its steps. Without going into detail, the vital realization here is that love guides the way to a higher reality that transcends 'normal' life. The steps slowly allow us to evolve from material beauty to more abstract and (possibly) spiritual beauty.

Another element that must be recognized is that the way one should live life also becomes connected to love. Love results in contemplation of the beauty absolute which is the way life should be lived, according to Plato:

"This [...] Socrates," said the stranger of Mantinea, "is that life above all other which man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute"

¹ Consequently love idolatry also doesn't separate love and the divine.

Plato, Symposium

This sentence shows us that love is not only a ladder to a better life but also that love becomes essential in living the right life. The connection between ‘the way to live life’ and love prepares the ground for Christians idea: love is the supreme virtue².

Another part of *Symposium* is Aristophanes’ myth³, which tells that humans were originally four legged, and four armed creatures coming in three varieties: male, female and hermaphrodites. Because these creatures angered the gods, they were split in twain. This sundering made them the humans we know today. Love, in this story, is the search for our lost half and the desire to become whole again. Even though it is different from the ideas that followed it, it forms a metaphoric foundation for the belief that love is somehow connected to overcoming separateness.

With *Symposium*, Plato both sets the stage for love as (a type of) goodness and connects love to transcendence. By cultivating the (supreme) virtue of love we might climb the ladder of love. This idea was further developed by Plato’s Christian successors. The profound influence of Plato on Christianity, which heavily influenced the prevalent ideas in our society today, makes Plato an ideological force to be reckoned with still.

1.2. Love and Christianity

This sub-chapter focuses on the central elements of Christian love which is vital in both Christianity and the current (secular) conceptualization of love. Love permeates Christianity and vice versa. As such the purpose here is to paint a picture of Christian love which enables us to analyze its most vital aspects.

1.2.1 Love and Evil

A topic has to be discussed is the topic of evil. Two main questions need an answer. 1) Why is there evil? and 2) how do we deal with evil?

God needs some justification for evil. This does not mean that God needs to have a reason that retains the goodness of God. God itself can have a character that the reason for evil simply becomes ‘evil exists because the God wills it’. However in western idolatry ‘goodness’ has become an element of God. Assuming God is benevolent and all-powerful, evil is made reasonable in three ways. 1) Punishment

² See 1.2.2.

³ Note that Plato himself rejects this account

from the idol; 2) a test from the idol, and 3); a necessity for a greater good. In these three explanations love is key.

1.2.1.1 Love, Christianity and justifying evil

God's character as represented in the Old Testament is harsher than that in the New Testament, but even in the Old Testament there are moments when God's love for humans shines through⁴. But in the New Testament the love between humanity and God truly comes to the fore. Many interpret the story of Jesus Christ as tale about love from God, like in the gospel of John:

"This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you. No one shows greater love than when he lays down his life for his friends"

John 15: 12-13

Love between God and humans is essential for Christian justification of evil. It at the very least shows us that God doesn't wish evil upon humanity (as he may have done in the Old Testament). More importantly, as the following quote shows us, human evil is human action not willed by God. Thus, human evil must be considered a side-effect of the free-will that he has created in us. What is more, this freedom allows humans to seek salvation⁵ on their own accord⁶.

"I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live [...] But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, [...] I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. [...] I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life so that you and your children may live"

Deuteronomy 30:16-19

This is certainly a less-than-loving message, it shows that humans are essentially free to either love God or not⁷. Erich Fromm analyzes the development of religion and argues that this is akin to his concept 'fatherly love':

⁴ For example the covenant between God and Noah (and through him arguably all living things) has sometimes been interpreted in a way that allows the covenant to be seen as some declaration of love from God to all of his creation.

⁵ In which love is important

⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church, part 3, section 1, chapter 1 elaborates extensively

⁷ Free to an extent at least. One could argue that the forceful tone of this quote leaves humanity little choice, but even a little choice leaves some freedom and as such the quote beckons us to make a choice

“the mother is dethroned from her supreme position, and the father becomes the Supreme Being, in religion as well as in society. The nature of fatherly love is that he makes demands, establishes principles and laws, and that his love for the son depends on the obedience of the latter to these demands.”

Erich Fromm, the Art of Loving (page 61)

This quote explains the relationship between punishment and love but also between the necessity for a greater good and love. It must be clear that in order to receive fatherly love, we must have the choice not obeying the father, or in fact rejecting his love. That choice is an essential part in receiving love. Thus human evil is (partly) the disobedience of humanity towards the principles, laws and the supreme virtue of God. As such human evil is something which God allows for the greater good of free-will (by which we can choose to love him). But also if we do not obey our father he might visit suffering upon us so that we might return to his love.

The other justification: evil is a test from God is also tied to love. Especially the idea that salvation is an ultimate victory over evil and that therefore evil is needed for salvation, has been popular. One might ask, why desire salvation if the world we live in is already perfect. Salvation is therefore in some way contingent on imperfections in the world. Suffering and sacrifice, in particular when done in an attempt to live up to the supreme virtue (love), are virtuous acts that bring us closer to God. Therefore evil is necessary as a force that needs overcoming. Consequently God acts, like Fromm describes, as a parent that loves his children but challenges them for the sake of personal growth. Using natural evil God is able to do so. The plausibility can be debated but, there is some evidence in the Bible that supports this idea:

“I [Jesus] am the true vine and my Father is the vintner. He cuts off every branch that does not produce fruit in me, and he cuts back every branch that does produce fruit, so that it might produce more fruit”

John 15:1-2

If we interpreted the cutting back as hardship and fruit production as spiritual growth and love for God, then we might say that a loving God can allow natural evil for the sake of his subjects. If we find this plausible in the light of the tremendous terror that natural evil can produce, then there is some justification for this line of reasoning.

1.2.1.2 Transcending evil

Justification of evil is important but in order to deal with evil another element becomes important: transcendence. The functional structure of such transcendence can differ greatly between idolatries but the idol paints an end-state which, if one has lived in accordance with the 'rules' of the idol, the idolater can reach. In this end-state evil is banished or does not affect the transcended individual/community.

This promise of transcendence is, linked to the notion of the everlasting. The idea that through God one can, somehow survive death. Some forms of idolization promise an actual afterlife, but even when there is no afterlife there is a notion that the faithful idolater lasts⁸. The departed that have lived a worthy life, live on through the idol and become in this way connected to the surviving idol⁹. So the idolater transcends the evil of death.

The promise of transcendence is made before and after death. Despite some elements of an everlasting promise of love, the promise it makes towards a blissful life is more commonly accepted. This disconnection from the everlasting makes it more prone to disappointment yet it makes it more compatible with the secular tendencies of the western world. There is nevertheless the belief that while we may die, somehow our love survives. 'His love lives on' is something that is heard on funerals¹⁰. Christianity, on the other hand, promises transcendence mainly after death. There is a story that exemplifies this promise;

A wealthy man comes across a priest and says "father I have seen much in life, indulged in many of joys and I still don't feel happy and complete" The priest says "Join our church and you will become that". The man joins and years later he complains to the priest that he is still not happy nor complete. "The priest responds: "maybe join a monastery". The man gives away all his possessions and joins the monastery for some more years. Then he falls ill and on his deathbed the priest visits him. "Father" complains the man "I have done everything and nothing helped. I have little life left and you have tricked me into thinking that the church would make me happy and fulfilled". "Oh" exclaims the priest "you didn't specify that you wanted it in this life."¹¹

⁸ The focus of some societies (like Nazi Germany) on heroic individuals is a way to make the most loyal and dedicated idolaters survive their death and become, somehow, part of the idol

⁹ The connection between the idol, love and the everlasting is also been made by Saint Augustine; *"He who knows the truth knows that light; and he knows it knows eternity. Love knows it. Oh eternal truth, and true love and loved eternity! You are my God."* Saint Augustine, *The Confessions, Book VII - Chapter 10*

¹⁰ Elaborated in *Chapter 2*

¹¹ This story is the result of nightly thesis-work.

One might ask: what are we trying to transcend? I would argue that there are, as it pertains to this thesis, three plausible answers. 1) evil of death, 2) evil of suffering, 3) evil of human separateness.

The last answer; the transcendence of the evil of human separateness, is a vital element¹². Separateness could be considered the most serious problem for humans. Freudian thought is partially based on the frustration we experience from the realization that we are separate. To make clear where this realization comes from, I will delve deeper into Freud's ideas about love.

Freud believed that humans are born in a state of primary narcissism. The self and the outside are at this point in the infant's development one. The infant does not discriminate between its body and other parts of the world, particularly its mother's breast. Because the mother's breasts are not always available when the baby desires it, it slowly becomes apparent to the baby that he is not able to control everything in life. This revelation is reinforced by the discovery that there is another entity that lays claim to some of the mother's attention. This entity is, for Freud most pressingly, the father. These revelations cause the self of the infant to be born. Freud writes:

"originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, a shrunken residue of a more inclusive – indeed an all-embracing – feeling"

Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents (page 4)

The birth of the self means the child gains its own self and loses all that is not part of her. Erich Fromm dubs this 'original trauma' the 'problem of human existence'¹³, or the problem of separateness. According to Freud, most human desires (especially those connected to love and sexuality) attempt to deal with this problem. One way to overcome separateness is to be part of a group to which we feel so connected that our sense of self becomes one with the group itself. Erich Fromm argues that we do this either by submission to the other or by subjecting the other to ourselves. To fulfill this desire the idol must provide a way to transcend our separation and become one with others in something greater. Fromm argues that transcending separateness we try to find at-onement:

"Man-of all ages and cultures- is confronted with the solution of one and the same question: the question of how to overcome separateness, how to achieve union, how to transcend one's own individual life and find at-onement"

¹² An idea based on the works of the Christian theologian Peter Rollins

¹³ For Erich Fromm's analysis see *The Art of Loving*

Erich Fromm, The Art of loving, page 9

This quote shows the immense importance of transcendence. Therefore, the promise of transcending evil; - of either suffering or separateness, in life or death - is an element that is often very appealing to the human psyche. The conceptual origins of love's role in transcendence go back to Plato and have been strengthened by Christianity.

1.2.2 Love as supreme virtue

As previously explained; cultivating the supreme virtue of love allows us to climb the Platonic ladder. This makes love immensely important. So important that love became the supreme virtue, by which all virtues are judged. In fact, all other virtues spring from love.

"If I speak in the language of humans and angels but have no love, I have become a reverberating gong or a clashing cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can understand all secrets and every form of knowledge and if I have absolute faith so as to move mountains but have no love, I am nothing. Even if I give away everything that I have and sacrifice myself, but have no love, I gain nothing"

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Passages like this grant love the role of supreme virtue. By which I mean that it is the prime condition for any virtue. It seems clear that whatever good one does, all else is meaningless if the act isn't accompanied by love. There is a strong connection between the good and love, seemingly echoing *Symposium*. Here, however, love doesn't desire to possess but causes, the good. Saint Augustine emphasizes this;

"Love and do what you will. If you hold your peace, hold your peace out of love. If you cry out, cry out of love. [...] Let the root of love be in you: nothing can spring from it but good".

Saint Augustine, Sermon on 1 John 4:4-12

Love isn't simply a virtue in these passages, but the supreme virtue that is the necessary condition for good. As such nothing good can come without love. Note that love is also a vehicle for meaning¹⁴. Only

¹⁴ I use vehicle rather than source because one could argue that the only true source of meaning is God itself. There is an interesting similarity with Plato in this regard who also thought love was a communicative vehicle. The difference between them is on the divinity of love..

that which has love has meaning and ultimately only that which is of God can be loved¹⁵. Because our love is contingent on good and all good is of God. Therefore all that is meaningful is of God. We love others because we recognize God within them. So we love God through the other, and God loves himself through us. Through this lens the following quote can be properly understood:

“But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer him the other also[...] Whatever you want people to do for you, do the same for them”

Luke 6:27-31

From just this quote it seems that Christian love is universal and unconditional. We ought to give our utmost love to everyone, enemies included. It would therefore stand to reason that a good Christian loves all others regardless of religion or creed.

1.2.3 The limits of Christian love

Calls for helping enemies are in the Old Testament and in the gospel of Luke¹⁶. These seem to follow the principle of ‘love thy neighbor’¹⁷. Either way a plausible consequence of this would be some sort of tolerance for people who worship another idol. However the previously mentioned meaningfulness can pose questions like: can we recognize God in those who do not believe as we do? And if it is God that gives meaning to things in our lives, do non-believers have the same meaningfulness as believers? Can we love them equally? Especially if those do not share our idol, and supreme virtue¹⁸. This is also expressed by Saint Thomas Aquinas;

“Our neighbors are not all equally related to God; some are nearer to Him, by reason of their greater goodness, and those we ought, out of charity, to love more than those who are not so near to Him.”

Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Second Part of the Second Part, Question 26; The order of charity, Article 6, Reply to objection 2

¹⁵ See 1.2.3

¹⁶ See also the ‘law and the prophets: *Luke 11:12*

¹⁷ E.G. Leviticus 19:18

¹⁸ See 1.2.2

If we look at the Bible we see that Saint Aquinas does not make a strange leap here, as we find something similar.

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist [...] You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”

1John 4:1-6

So whilst one has to love enemies there might be a basis for not extending equal love to those who do not follow the same idol/supreme virtue. This attitude is still prevalent in western idolatry¹⁹. The idol gives meaning to the idolater’s whole life, in Christianity largely via the supreme virtue. If others do not share the same idol/supreme virtue their meaningfulness, in the eyes of the idol and also the idolater, diminishes. To understand this, mentioning certain Platonic ideas again, is useful. *1.1* mentions that, love in *Symposium* is a desire for everlasting possession of the good. From which follows: that which we love possesses some representation of the good. If we then assume that all goodness is of God²⁰ we must conclude that all things we love are of God. Consequently those who reject God might be seen as not good and therefore cannot be loved the same.

The supreme virtue and the idol-based limitation of love both deeply influence the role of love in Christianity: they encourage love between Christians, help in unifying Christians against outside idols²¹, and so they become a way to regulate love.

1.2.4 God, love and transcendence

Many important texts in Christianity assert that God is love:

¹⁹ An attitude one might recognize in some nationalistic idolatry but also somewhat in love idolatry (see *3.1.1.1* and *3.1.1.2*)

²⁰ and the bible seems to imply so, e.g. Mark 10:18, Matthew 19:17 and Luke 18:19.

²¹ Although if we could ask Lutherans between 1618 and 1648 we might make a more nuanced claim .

“Let us continuously love one another because love comes from God and knows God. The person who does not love does not love God, because God is love”

1John 4:7-8

This quote begs the question: If God is indeed love may we say that when we love, we become - part of - God? This leads us to the issue of transcendence. Can we become part of the divine and subsequently transcend the human struggle? The answer seems to be yes, but only in one particular way. Love, in this line of reasoning seems to be set up as a ladder to reach God²². In the Bible we find some encouragement for this reasoning:

God is love, and the person who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him

1John 4:16

This quote tempts one to return to Plato. Arguably, by climbing love’s ladder we start relationships of mutual goodness, as such we harmonize the good and therefore become part of the beautiful. In harmonizing all things we can reach *beauty absolute*. Taking it back to Christianity we might see that through love (thus abiding God) we can harmonize ourselves with representations of God (all that is good is of God) we might somehow harmonize ourselves with the divine and abide in God.

Does this harmonization mean that humans can become partially, part (of the) divine when they love? Elements in Christianity forbid human attempts to reach the divine. The tower of Babel and the original sin support this taboo. However, if humans desire to become part of the divine they need not turn to towers or apples, but to love. Love is the road to God and there are three ways humanity can conceivably walk it;

- 1) Humans have no inherent capability to love and only God can infuse it within us
- 2) Humans have an imperfect ability to love which is perfected with God’s help
- 3) Humans have the ability to love but we only truly love that which mirrors God

The second and third lines of reasoning are often blurred. God bestows his grace upon humans so they can truly love that which mirrors God. From this we arrive at the conditionality of Christian love. Or perhaps, the conditionality of a transcendental love that. A transcending love, which the Platonists

²² Note the resemblance with the Platonic ladder of love towards the absolute beauty (and the good).

might call a love ‘of a higher order’, can only be acted out and felt when the lover is infused with the grace of God which in turn allows the lover to cultivate its supreme virtue. It is important here to note that, depending on the interpretation of the Bible, one could convincingly argue that one does not need to accept God to mirror him, or to receive his grace. It is plausible that every human (or at least a group which includes more than just Christians) mirrors God, his/her creator. It is also conceivable that every human (or part of afore mentioned group) receives God’s grace by simply being born. This all means that the conditions mentioned in 1.2.3 might be strictly theoretical.

However it is apparent that if the beloved is not infused with the grace of God (even if it is a strictly theoretical possibility), love cannot flourish within the lover. Thus a transcendental love between two lovers cannot be done without God’s grace. Not only because God is itself love so without his presence and grace there is no love to be enjoyed but also because of what we love. Reminiscent of the Platonic tradition we love that which is good in the other and since God is the supreme source of goodness we love God within the other. It appears that a ‘higher level love’ may in fact be subject to a great (albeit perhaps theoretical) condition: the conditionality of God’s grace²³. After all inability to cultivate the supreme virtue cannot

climb the Platonic ladder of transcendence. Simon May argues in favor of this idea and connects love and grace to the promise of transcendence:

“the pagan idea of spiritual Eros: that immense desire, described by Plato and his followers, to rise above the transient, imperfect world into which we are born, the earthly flesh of which we are made, and, through increasing levels of spiritual attainment, to gain intimacy with the highest goodness, beauty and truth – which in Christianity, is of course God”

Simon May, Love a History, page 96

It becomes clear that transcendence becomes connected to love. Love is most necessary to gain intimacy with God is to let go of and transcend the flawed material into the perfection of the spiritual. As such the beloved is not truly the end of our love, but a means. Through the loving of our neighbor we fulfill, with God’s grace, the love for God. Through the neighbor we cultivate our supreme virtue. The beloved becomes a vehicle that allows us to come closer to God. We love the other insofar that we can love God through the other. If we imagine, the perhaps hypothetical possibility, that: God would, for

²³ Note: a possible interpretation of Christianity is that all of humanity is infused with God’s grace. If so, the limitation is only a theoretical one.

whatever reason, subside in the other, then so must our love²⁴. The main point that is stressed here is that because our love is contingent on God's grace, love between humans is essentially a way in which God loves himself. Irving Singer writes:

"He [God] is the great benefactor who always arranges for the best. And, finally none of the love he generates is ever wasted: eventually it all comes back to him. However circuitously, God always loves himself. In being love he constantly descends into his creatures; yet they too have ultimately no object but the Godhead. He is therefore [...] the beginning and end, the apotheosis of eros, the perfection of purposive self-love"

The Nature of Love part one, page 163, Irving Singer

In the other we love that which resembles God, lovability is thus connected to God bestowing his own image upon his creations. Both the ability to love and to receive love are bestowed upon humanity by God. Because to love is only possible by virtue of God's grace. Therefore human love is God loving himself through humanity. This interpretation of God's grace explains how humans can become part of God and transcend their earthly situation.

Related is transcendence of human separateness. Through love we can become part of God and in God we can overcome our separateness. Christianity lets us transcend our separateness by allowing us to become part of (the Kingdom of) God and there be one with others. This is adamantly stressed by medieval theologian Meister Eckhart:

"If therefore I am changed into God and He makes me one with Himself, then, by living God, there is no distinction between us [...] some people imagine that they are going to see God, that they are going to see God as if he were standing yonder, and they here, but this is not to be so. God and I: we are one. By knowing God I take him to myself. By loving God, I penetrate him."

*Meister Eckhart, op. cit., pp. 181-2*²⁵

This is a Christian solution to Freud's original trauma where we - with hard work, God's grace and love - are able solve the problem of human existence²⁶. Essentially this means we can overcome our human

²⁴ Our spiritual love may subside, the love of the flesh (a lower level love) could persist.

²⁵ Both the quote and the citation are from 'the Art of Loving' by Erich Fromm (page 75)

²⁶ See in 1.2.4

separateness by becoming one with God and therefore, others who are also one with God. In this way Christianity provides a way to transcend human separateness as well as the imperfect material world.

1.2.5 The regulation of love & the supreme virtue

The interpretation of Christianity in 1.2.3 might seem as an extreme reading of Christianity. After all a Christian can surely love individuals of other faiths, or indeed even the faithless. The harshness of the position is borne out of a desire to be clear about the possibility of limits within love. Which I shall now abandon for the sake of more complex accuracy.

Instead of love revolving around the representation of the idol in the beloved, it is perhaps more accurate that, instead - in 'practice'- the lover must recognize either the supreme virtue or the possibility to live by the supreme virtue in the beloved. Therefore (in some interpretations) a Christian might love someone who rejects God but still lives (or potentially lives) a life in adherence with the supreme virtue.

I am hardly saying anything revolutionary, after all if we imagine God to be love²⁷ then living in accordance with the supreme virtue, must to some extent be the same as living in accordance with God, regardless of whether we follow a Christian doctrine. However this 'supreme virtue' approach opens up a wider range of Christian interpretations. Like this one: we all have the potential²⁸ to live a life in accordance with the supreme virtue. As such we may argue that all of humanity can (or even must) be loved. The limits to Christian love therefore based on interpretation and might be strictly theoretical.

Another important structural element that must be addressed here because I seem to imply something circular. Namely: 1) God's grace is necessary in order to love 2) living a life (or having the potential to do so) in accordance with the supreme virtue (to love) is necessary to receive God's grace. While this might seem strange it solves the apparent tension between 1.2.2 and 1.2.3 as long as we assume, as Christianity seems to do somewhat, that everybody has been bestowed with some of God's grace (or in maybe at least those who are chosen by God receive this grace). So we can use our inherit capability to love to cultivate our supreme virtue in order to come closer to God. The Platonic ladder once again emerges.

²⁷ See in 1.2.4 (specifically 1John 4:7-8)

²⁸ Like by God's design

The benefit of this reading of Christianity is threefold: 1) it explains the harsh words reserved for those who turn away from God. (remembering the comment on the antichrist's spirit in *1John 4:1-6*). Those who turn away from God (which might in itself be reprehensible) also turn away from love²⁹ and from the supreme virtue. This also lends strength to the idea that God gave us free will³⁰ (allowing human evil) so we can make the choice to live in accordance with the supreme virtue. 2) It explains why Christian love might be all inclusive, as is hinted at in *Luke 6 :27-31* and 3) it allows for many different Christian interpretations.

An analysis of these different interpretations could warrant a thesis in and of itself. For this thesis suffices to say that the idol regulates love regardless of interpretation. Whether the Christian idol gives its grace to those who accept them, or gives it by design to all, the idol regulates, as in sets limits in regard to love. For some this is a strictly theoretical possibility but even so, it is a regulatory aspect. Lastly, one can argue that cultivation of the supreme virtue is necessary for 'higher level'³¹ loves, in which God uses the cultivation of the supreme virtue for further regulation.

1.3 Concluding remarks on Christian love

We can now distinguish the central elements of Christian love. This is both to give an overview and to claim, in *Chapter 2*, that love idolatry follows the same pattern as Christian love.

- 1) Love defeats and to some extent justifies/soothes evil/hardship.
- 2) Love is the way to transcend suffering/separateness by allowing us to come closer to the idol.
- 3) Love gives life meaning.
- 4) Climbing the Platonic ladder is done by cultivating the supreme virtue: love.
- 5) The idol regulates the capacity for humans to love.

These five elements are central to the idea of Christian love. *Chapter 2* argues that they are also strongly present, albeit perhaps slightly differently expressed, in the idolatry of love.

²⁹ Bearing in mind here that we must imagine God to be love see *1John 4:7-8* (quoted in sub-chapter: 1.2.4)

³⁰ See 1.2.1

³¹ Higher on the Platonic ladder

2 Love as the idol

Christianity has lost much of its overt influence in the western world since the times of St Augustine or Meister Eckhart. This does not mean that the people of the western world have abandoned Christianity's central ideas. God may have died but, in line with good Christian tradition, the idol has been resurrected Simon May writes;

“Yet other ideals, such as racial and gender equality, or protection of the environment and animal rights, have sprung up; but, no matter how noble and vital and revolutionary they are, none provides the final justification of life's aim and meaning that the Western mind still craves. The more individualistic our societies become, the more we can expect the value of love, as the ultimate source of belonging and redemption, to keep rising. In the wasteland of Western idols only love survives intact”

Simon May, Love a History page 4

The purpose of this chapter is to understand how this idolization of love works and why it is a profoundly Christian view. The idea behind this is that, even though we may have killed God, the holy spirit of God's love still lingers in the hearts of the Western world.

The style of this chapter is different from the previous one. Firstly, it is important to remember that the point of this chapter is to analyze the cultural values regarding to love. Note, that I do not claim that all the individuals in contemporary western society hold the described beliefs about love. I merely claim that in many of the most influential communication channels of popular culture these values are (implicitly and explicitly) communicated³². These cultural channels include Hollywood films, popular music and TV-shows. Not all and every communicatory vehicles communicate these beliefs but many of the mainstream ones do³³. Secondly I do not attempt quantitative research of how many Top-40 songs have lyrics that echo these beliefs about love, or any such investigations. I will however quote clichés about love and bring up a variety of books, songs, movies, etcetera. Therefore this part will read much more like a genealogy than a literature review. Lastly this chapter is not designed to critique the popular

³² While not everyone may hold the exact same beliefs as communicated in popular culture these beliefs will have profound influence (albeit often covertly) on the beliefs of many individuals.

³³ That is to say: they only really would communicate these beliefs about love insofar that they focus on a topic related to love. The book 'Swimming with Sharks: inside the world of bankers' (a book about the financial crash of 2008 by Joris Luyendijk) may have much less to do with the communication of these ideas than the song 'I am gonna be (500 miles)' (the 1988 song by the Proclaimers).

cultural view on love, which I will do in *Chapter 5*. This chapter is only designed to examine the current conception of love and its entanglement with Christianity.

2.1 Love as supreme virtue, revisited

In current love idolization love still retains the position of supreme virtue which means it fulfills several key roles. Like love did in Christianity, love can do the following: ultimately justify hardship, be the source of redemption and be the yardstick of virtue.

2.1.1 Love & Evil

To illustrate the relationship between evil and love I examine some of the most popular contemporary stories that convey deeper held cultural beliefs about love. Whilst the beginning does not strictly deal with justification of evil it does show the ability to be redeemed from evil through the power of love (and reach love's salvation). I take the position that the Christian idea that evil can be a test of the idol, is still strongly present in the modern-day idolization of love.

Additionally both bad and good deeds seem to be mitigated by love. If we for example compare two of the most iconic contemporary villains we discover a clear difference. Villain one is Darth Vader who is a major villain from the Star Wars universe and could be considered a love-based villain. His malicious career starts with the death of his beloved wife and his turn to the dark side is based on his desire to save her³⁴. Darth Vader is ultimately redeemed from his crimes by love. As soon as he realigns himself with love (due to his son Luke) he reaches, much like a deathbed conversion, some salvation. Love works here as the prime reason for his return to the good. All he did is seen as less evil because of it. Contrary we have the antagonist in the *Harry Potter* series, the villain Voldemort who has no basis of love for his evil doings. He is even defeated by love itself³⁵ and he is set up as an enemy of love. His crimes are not based on love but on ambition and he does not redeem or return to love. He simply lacks the potential to live in accordance with the supreme virtue (love). Thus he remains evil before, after and during his rise and fall. These villains have done much evil, killed without any regard for age, innocence or circumstance. Yet one, is based on love and is thus able to return to it, while the other remains devoid of love till and to his ultimate demise. This difference is remarkable. It shows us that those who share our

³⁴ Arguably his failure to save his wife Padmé reminds Darth Vader of his traumatic failure to save his mother. Both of these lead him to do evil yet are ultimately acts of frustrated love.

³⁵ I am mostly referring to his first fall after his attempt to kill Harry Potter in his infancy, where Harry is saved by (his mother's) love.

commitment to the supreme virtue might be saved but those who do not, cannot. As such it appears that the limits of love idolatry are similar to the limits of Christian love³⁶.

2.1.1.1 Suffering as a test for love

I compare the most iconic villains of *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars* to make a larger point about love and human evil. On the one hand we see that evil is less evil, or at least more relatable, if it comes from a place of love. Those who retain some form (however dormant) of the supreme virtue can return to the ways of love and might thus be redeemed. While this does not strictly justify evil it does mitigate and ultimately can redeem the evil-doer, to a significant extent. Also we can distinguish another remarkably Christian theme related to what I have pointed out in 1.2.5. The limits of love seem to resemble the limits of Christian love. We may turn the other cheek to those who have love in their heart, as Luke tries to continually forgive his father. Those who have the potential to live in accordance with the supreme virtue can ultimately be forgiven, similar to those forgiven by the Christian church if they were bestowed with God's grace.

J.K. Rowling³⁷ goes to great lengths to explain that Voldemort is incapable of love. She explains that all who are conceived under the effects of love potion (like Voldemort) have trouble feeling love. In addition to this, throughout the books she reiterates and emphasizes that Voldemort places no value on love³⁸. But Voldemort as a non-believer of love, who does not share a commitment to the supreme virtue, cannot be forgiven or loved³⁹. The lack of love in his heart makes it impossible to forgive him, he cannot be redeemed and we have no reason to love him for he is, as Saint Augustine would put it, 'an enemy of love itself'. This is why Darth Vader can be saved while Voldemort has to be destroyed. The oddity in the case of Voldemort is that to return to love is salvation but salvation can only be found in love. I would argue that this oddity is a result of removing God from Christian love (and redemption) and this oddity is neatly shown in the Harry Potter series.

³⁶ Voldemort can (and perhaps ought to be) seen as the theoretical creature from 1.2.5 that is utterly devoid of the potential to live in accordance with the supreme virtue.

³⁷ The author of the '*Harry Potter*' series

³⁸ Evidence for Voldemort's inability to love can be found throughout the Harry Potter books, but also in numerous analyses like; '*Everlasting Love; Devotion in the Harry Potter series*', S. Isaacs.; '*Pity those who live without love; The function of love in Harry Potter*', J.E. Creighton; '*CW Lewis' four loves and the Harry Potter series*', C.E. Johnson.

³⁹ Some have argued that the character Bellatrix Lestrange loves Voldemort to which I would reply two things. 1) her attitude towards love would put her outside of the idolization of love (which is in part why she is evil herself) and 2) her attitude towards Voldemort is probably more accurately described as idolizing Voldemort (ironically).

The case of Darth Vader also shows how justification of evil ultimately works. Both Anakin⁴⁰ in the prequels and Anakin's son, Luke in the sequels are tested. Anakin's rejection of love is a failure and Luke's ability to save him (and indeed convert Vader back using the power of love) is the ultimate success. The justification of evil here is similar to the justification that Jesus gives in the 'true vine'⁴¹. In addition we see the free will argument of idolatry, mentioned in 1.2.1, reemerges here. These tests (and related evils) are justified by the idea that it allows for salvation and as such that it allows us to come closer to a more pure form of love.

A comparable though more lighthearted theme we see in the wildly popular sitcom *How I met your mother*. In this show the viewer is invited to enjoy the main character's (Ted Mosby) journey in search for romantic love. On this journey to love he endures much hardship that he is doomed to endure. Much of the story revolves around Ted keeping faith in love, despite its tests. The reward of these tests of love is: he will in the end overcome the hardships and reaches his idolized form of love (or at least comes closer to it). Few are so clear and obvious as *How I met your mother* but many more examples of main characters that are tested for the sake of reaching ultimate love can be given. *Shrek*⁴², *Chuck*⁴³ and *About a Boy*⁴⁴, to name a few, all seem to follow a similar pattern.

All these stories are very different but convey ultimately the same justification for evil or, perhaps more accurately put, hardship. Like in Christianity there are challenges, by which, if we overcome them, we cultivate the supreme virtue within ourselves and thus come closer to our idol. The belief is that by suffering from the evils/hardships of life we can grow, (possibly), into a better 'higher level' form of love. This idea strikes one as very similar to the Christian idea of salvation and the road to it.

2.1.1.2 Love defeats evil

Another strong belief is that love, in the end, conquers all evil. Represented in Darth Vader's victory over evil as his love for Luke proves more powerful than the dark powers of the evil emperor. Yet this power discrepancy (with the side of evil being stronger on a pure skill-level) is even more prevalent in the fight between Voldemort and Harry Potter. Throughout the *Harry Potter* series Voldemort is depicted as the more competent and powerful wizard than Harry. As a consequence, Harry is never able to beat him in a

⁴⁰ Darth Vader's name before his turn to evil

⁴¹ See: *John 15:1-2*

⁴² In particular part one and part two of the animated Shrek series

⁴³ A sitcom about Chuck Bartowski, a Buy More employee turned spy.

⁴⁴ Novel in which protagonist Will struggles with self-love and his love/developing mentorship for a little boy named Marcus

duel based on skill alone. The only thing that makes Harry defeat Voldemort is crucially the power of love⁴⁵.

In this story we are led to believe that love is not only a force that may redeem evil and suffering. Although love might test us, ultimately we must realize that it 'conquers all', overcoming and even defeating the evils of life. Those who cannot feel love or have lost the connection to the supreme virtue are deemed (almost automatically) bad and need to be either destroyed or saved. Those who remain true to the supreme virtue will overcome suffering and are in the end good⁴⁶. We are also reminded of an earlier quote from: *Deuteronomy 30:16-19*,⁴⁷ in which those who do not share the idol (in the quote God but in this case love) must be destroyed. A similar notion is described by Saint Augustine

"Love should be ferment to correct. Take delight in good behavior, but amend what is bad. Love the person but not the error in the person"

Saint Augustine, Sermon on 1 John 4:4-12

We notice that: 1) One must love the person and not his error and 2) that correction of errors is a part of love. From the *Letter 185* that Saint Augustine wrote largely about the heretical Donatists we learn that he does believe that these corrections can include severe force. In section 6:21 he quotes an unnamed poet: *"Unless by pain and suffering you are taught. You cannot guide yourself aright in anything"*⁴⁸. Yet this is not the only instance where he takes this line. The entire sixth chapter of this text seems to be dedicated to this topic: love can mean punishment as long as its goal is (in this particular letter) the return of Christ to the sinner. If it is possible that one can be saved we can love the person whilst strongly trying to amend the error.

The Deuteronomy approach applies to Voldemort who did not share love as the supreme virtue. The latter approach, St Augustine's approach, is what happens to Darth Vader who, because love still resided in him, could be saved⁴⁹ and thus had the potential to still be turned to share the supreme virtue. The

⁴⁵ Note that during the first attempt on Harry's life by Voldemort, Harry is able to even survive certain death due to his mother's love. Love is set up as something that allows Harry to survive death.

⁴⁶ As such it becomes rather obvious that the connection between being good and loving which began in Plato, was continued by Christianity, and still survives today

⁴⁷ In particular the passage *"if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, [...] I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed"*.

⁴⁸ *Saint Augustine, letter 185, 6:21*

⁴⁹ Luke's belief that Darth Vader can still be saved is a great point of contention between Luke and his two mentors (Obi Wan and Yoda) which makes Luke even a greater champion of love. He is not only able to save Darth Vader but is also alone in his

moral of this is: love is greater than evil and will in the end defeat it. We do not only see this in contemporary stories but also in speeches of leaders in society. Former US attorney general Loretta Lynch said in response to the Orlando terrorist attack of 2017: *“We stand with you to say that the good in this world far outweighs the evil, that our common humanity transcends our differences, and that our most effective response to terror and to hatred is compassion, it's unity, and it's love”*⁵⁰. This quote reinforces the idea love puts a heavy weight on the balance between good and evil. She is not alone in believing this, and this speech nicely shows that love as the ultimate victor is not only present in the creative field but also in wider society.

2.1.2 Love as yardstick of the good

One of the ways that love retains the functions that it has had in Christianity is that it is still a yardstick for the good and the ultimate source of virtue. This belief come to the forefront during key moments of our lives.. In funerals we can for example see the an echo of Saint Agustine’s call to ‘love and do what you will’⁵¹. Those who have lived a life of love are often remembered as having had a worthwhile and (to some extent at least) virtuous life. Even if these lives were not particularly experienced as such at the time. Yet the mediocre and inconsequential lives are redeemed and made meaningful by love in them. Clearly echoing the mentioned quote from Corinthians in 2.2.2.2⁵² that only that which is done with love is ultimately worthwhile and virtuous. One could of course argue that this might not be a Christian idea. However love as a supreme virtue is very prevalent in Christian love while this isn’t the case in Hellenic⁵³ or Roman⁵⁴ love. Which means that if this love as supreme virtue is inherited from somewhere the prime suspect must be Christianity.

In love during life we see a similar pattern. Any relationship (obviously romantic ones but not untrue for friendship, family bonds etcetera) is made ‘good’ by the presence of love within it. A relationship can have many benefits to the ones involved, like arranged marriages that benefit the community in economic terms, social capital and even personal lives. They are, however, regarded as inferior to even

believe that he can. He as such does not only prove that love can defeat evil but also that he has the greatest faith in the power of love and he is rewarded and even more of a hero for it.

⁵⁰ Quote taken from *‘Orlando shooter’s alleged love: it was revenge not terrorism’* by Louis Nelson. *Politico*, 2016.

⁵¹ See: *‘Augustine Sermon on 1 John 4:4-12’* as quoted in 1.2.2

⁵² See 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

⁵³ See *Chapter 4*

⁵⁴ See *The Nature of Love part 1* by Irving Singer Chapter 7(Sex in Ovid and Lucretius) and *Love a History* by Simon May chapter 5(Love as sexual desire)

more dysfunctional marriages based on love⁵⁵. The point is that it is love that gives ultimate value to (human) relationships and these relationships are rendered good by aforementioned love more than anything else. Love's supreme role is however not a given. An example is the ancient Hellenic tradition which had a different view on the supreme virtue, as I will explain in *Chapter 5*. Seeing love as the supreme virtue is an idea that love idolatry has likely inherited from Christianity.

To make the point more concisely: love still plays the role of supreme virtue. Lives are ultimately judged by the love within (or between) them. That which has plenty of love has much value and that which has little love is deemed of little value. Love gives meaning to the elements in life and consequently even life itself. In Christianity, God gave meaning to life through love, but it was not love itself that gave meaning to life. That role was reserved for God alone. Now in the dusk of Christianity⁵⁶ love still retains its role. As the old source of meaning (God) slowly dies, love comes to fulfill the role itself: the good life as a life in the service of God therefore seems to have become a life in service of love.

2.2 Love & Transcendence

Bearing in mind love's role in both Platonic and Christian thought it would come as no surprise that love takes up the position of a guide to transcendence once more. As seen in *Chapter 1* love does not only deal with the transcendence of evil and suffering, but also the transcendence of separateness. Both seem naturally fitting to love and in this chapter I lay out how love (as a proper idol) fulfills these roles.

2.2.1 Transcending suffering

As mentioned above love plays an important role in dealing with suffering. Either by outright vanquishing its sources or through transforming suffering into a test. Since vanquishing evil is, arguably, somewhat different from transcendence, we switch our focus to, testing and transcendence.

The main line of reasoning is the following: through hardships we can come to a place that is most easily explained as the 'happily-ever-after-state'. While 'happily ever after' most often refers to a notion of romantic love it can be used to refer to other types of love too. We could for example imagine an unhappy couple that has a baby to get to the 'happily-ever-after-state' or a situation where someone is convinced that only if he could be friends with a certain person he can become truly happy.

⁵⁵ In Western popular culture

⁵⁶ In the Western world

The general idea of the *'happily-ever-after-state'* is most pressingly reinforced in popular culture by the simple fact that almost all Disney-fairy tales end in this way. In these stories the premise is rather obvious; as soon as the prince(ss) arrives and saves the day the protagonist of the story can live free from the ills that made her/him suffer⁵⁷. What exactly happens in this state remains uncertain. But one thing is certain; the life of those in such a state is a blissful happy state that lasts forever. It is the banishment of evil and pain as it leaves only place for happiness. It resembles heaven itself⁵⁸ and in a way (even though less strongly and more nuanced) also the final step on the Platonic ladder in which the lover will only recognize and consider that which is beautiful⁵⁹. After all it is happily ever after and not reasonably happy for the most part. It is important to note that it is primarily love in these tales that brings us to this place. Admittedly, elements like bravery and endurance play their part, but these always spring, as Saint Augustine would put it: 'from the root of love'. In the (fairy)tale's end, it is love that gets us to the *'happily-ever-after-state'*⁶⁰.

It is easy to see how this relates to the issue of love tests. On the road to 'happily ever after' and thus salvation, tests need to be passed (like in Christianity). Such tests make us cultivate our supreme virtue. They may come in many different forms but they serve the same purpose: to communicate the message that we can, through hard work and unwavering commitment to the supreme virtue, come to the *'happily-ever-after-state'*.

There are three basic premises to this argument: 1) happiness can be reached; 2) happiness can be pursued; and 3) love is the most essential element in this pursuit. The current beliefs about love seem to be somewhat different than those discussed for Christianity. This difference has everything to do with the downfall of God. If we amend these premises to a Christian context we get: A) closeness to God can be reached; B) closeness to God can be pursued; and C) love is the one essential element in this pursuit. It might be argued that closeness to God can only be a pursuit insofar that God bestows grace upon us⁶¹. If so, we could exclude the second premise, in which case the original line of reasoning would hold.

⁵⁷ *Cinderella, Frozen, Tangled, Aladdin*: all of these – and similar – stories support the same idea

⁵⁸ An idea immortalized in the Belinda Carlisle song *Heaven is a place on earth*: "They say in heaven love comes first. We make heaven a place on earth", brought to my attention by the brilliant song collecting work (*The Power Tunes*, 2016) of Uwe Steffen

⁵⁹ That which is beautiful also (at least as far as I am concerned here) is the absolute good,

⁶⁰ It is also noteworthy that the 'evil' in most such stories shares some good characteristics like boldness and strong work ethic yet since they do not spring from love, they are not considered part of the good

⁶¹ See 1.2.3

Closeness to God is replaced by happiness(-ever-after)⁶² but the role of love remains similar, with two noteworthy differences: 1) in Christianity love leads to happiness and in love idolatry the difference between the concepts is blurred and 2) the exclusion of God's grace. The second one makes the role of love wildly important: it is now the sole ingredient for our transcendental state. What is more it allows humans to reach transcendence without the old external condition of God's grace. In our pursuit to reach a happy place free from suffering, only the supreme virtue (love) has meaning. As such it seems that the Christian mechanics of what might be called, salvation reappear in the idolization of love, maintaining an eerie resemblance to what it used to be in Christianity.

2.2.2 Transcending separateness

It must not come as a surprise that in thinking about the act of transcending our separateness, our beliefs and hopes about love come to the forefront. Similar to the Christian idea that through love we can become part of God and through that become part of one-another, current ideas about love also bestow upon love the ability to help us solve the problem of human separateness. I started this particular topic by turning to Freud. He does not see love necessarily as the solution but as a desire that originates in the problem⁶³. The nature of love, if one was to believe (early) Freud, is tragic as it is ultimately unable to overcome human separateness. Some of his followers however, have argued that love is not only the desire to overcome the problem but also its solution.

Erich Fromm takes such an approach in his book *The Art of Loving*, arguing that through love we don't only become one with merely one other but with all. Meaning: we may become part of what he calls 'the One'. In fact becoming one with just one other is undesirable: even if we succeed in that quest the couple is still separated from the rest. The problem is thus not solved but it has only moved from an individual problem to a shared one. But through the other we may transcend the separation and become part of the One⁶⁴. He writes:

⁶² I must point out here that technically replacing God with happiness isn't the only option. One could replace it with something else or create a hybrid of happiness and closeness with god. The proposed switch here is for argumentation sake. The other options are not considered because this argument is only to show that the mechanics can to some degree still work (or perhaps more importantly where they seem to falter) in a secularized context.

⁶³ This is a similar approach to the myth of Aristophanes mentioned in 1.1 where love is the reaction to human separation but not necessarily a phenomenon that solves the problem from which it arises.

⁶⁴ Note the striking resemblance to the Meister Eckhart quote in 1.2.4

"I love from the essence of my being – and experience the other person in the essence of his or her being. In essence, all human beings are identical. We are all part of the One; we are One. This being so it should not make any difference whom we love"

Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving (page 52)

I must point out that Fromm does argue that erotic love is a love for a specific other and that as such in erotic love it does matter whom we love. Yet through this erotic love we find, maybe paradoxically, the idea of oneness that is present in the quote and which is related to what he calls brotherly love. In his *The Seducer's Diary*, Kierkegaard writes about a larger yet related notion when he writes *"I do not see you; you are continually moving in a wave of perception, and yet I am already happy over any resemblance to you [...] To love you, is it not to love the world?" (page 136)⁶⁵.*

The cultural belief that is related to these quotes ideas is not a copy of them but does bear a resemblance. As the cultural idea emphasizes 'the One' less (though there are those who do believe in such a vision). The central idea that love can make us transcend our separation is a powerful one. Concepts like 'soul mates' and 'other halves'⁶⁶ are testaments of this.

While this idea is certainly not unheard of in close friendships it seems that it is most commonly applied in the context of romantic love. In good Freudian fashion it seems that sex plays a central role. Sex, some have argued a momentary union of two people⁶⁷. Regardless of whether we believe that such a union is possible it seems hard to deny that in the current cultural conceptualization of love, love is seen as a way to, in various degrees, become one with others and thus solve the Freudian original trauma.

2.3 Love is God

Based on the previous sub-chapters, I argue that in current cultural communication love has come to fill the idolatry void. While love itself has remained profoundly Christian and love idolatry is in large part a new (seemingly secular) interpretation of Christian thought. Why and how love became such a powerful force is complex and certain periods in the history of philosophy, like the enlightenment and romanticism, have had a significant influence. These developments fall outside the scope of this

⁶⁵ Note that it is not clear of which type of love Kierkegaard speaks. The obvious interpretation is romantic love towards Cordelia but one could make the claim that he is only influenced by the passions related to the love or (the interpretation I am most fond of) that his love is not for Cordelia in particular but an aesthetic ideology on which the book is based.

⁶⁶ Again these concepts seem to be inspired by the myth of Aristophanes explained in 1.1

⁶⁷ Read for example the first chapter of *'Woman's Anatomy of Arousal'* by Sheri Winston

particular thesis but books like *Love a History* by Simon May and the three-part standard work *The Nature of Love* by Irving Singer give detailed accounts. This sub-chapter merely gives a conclusion to the developments described in 2.1 and 2.2 . The conclusion is in part, that love has become a new idol but also that love itself has not been set free from Christianity.

2.3.1 Love, the ultimate good

Love is, like the Christian God, a benevolent idol. Both the Platonic and the Christian tradition lead us to believe that love is inseparable from the good. Both love as supreme virtue and love as victor over evil, assert this relationship. As mentioned before about the Christian God, love is able to at least to some extent redeem evil-doers. Additionally love idolatry promises that to transcend suffering - both by overcoming hardships that cause suffering and by solving the problem of human existence - is possible.

Love was able to retain what it had done in Christianity as the supreme virtue. The difference is that love under God was tied to - some form of - God's grace. As such one could only love (and thus be good) with some involvement from God, even if just by making use of his design. Therefore those who desired to be good and to love, had to (somehow) serve God. Without (such an Omni-powerful) God this still applied to a lesser extent. This is not to say that faith was completely out of the picture as it still might be held that for transcendental love (and salvation), one is required to have a certain type of faith. A faith in one's own capability to love or a faith in the potential of the supreme virtue. However these types of faith are quite compatible with the individualistic and secularized societies of the west.

That is not to say that love does not test her idolaters but this is precisely where faith gets tested and solidified. There is no greater achievement in the idolatry of love than to be able to love in the most dire of circumstances. Much like the tests of faith that Abraham and Job, we are tested to strengthen our devotion to the supreme virtue. Retaining ones faith in love's salvation (like Luke Skywalker) are considered good, those who don't (like the *Batman* villain Two-Face⁶⁸) are bad. Faith in love, and thus the commitment to cultivate the supreme virtue, allows our salvation. Conversely, the lack of such a commitment makes us bad. So it is with the individual and so it is with his life. A life guided by love is worthy and good; a life without it (however noble otherwise) will always be lacking.

A notable part of this comes from the ability of love to withstand evil. No other value can rally so many to its cause as love and none but love can stand up against evil with such vigor. Freedom and solidarity

⁶⁸ Using the Two-Face origin story in the movie *Batman the Dark Knight* (2008).

both potentially could but due to their politicized nature, they ultimately lead to divisions⁶⁹. Due to her divine tradition love does not suffer so much from that divisionary problem. In fact those who cannot rally to love's banner are, as explained earlier, de facto part of the problem. As such only love remains a true unifier of the good and the only power that can ultimately overcome all that is evil⁷⁰.

Through these awesome powers, love has become nothing less than a divine power and, as Simon May indicates, the strongest remaining idol in the western world.

2.3.2 Love and Meaning

As was briefly touched upon before, life gets meaning by virtue of love giving it meaning. It becomes the ultimate source of all meaning in the life of the idolater. This not only due the processes that I described in 2.3.1 but also through the occurrence of transcendence.

Love is the way to transcend some of the most profound problems of our existence. Firstly our strife to reach the *'happily-ever-after-state'*. A state mimicking Christian redemption. Additionally, love is the most potent answer to transcending separateness. All actions in life are meaningful insofar that they help us transcend the material world (or our constraints that make us separate) and all in life is made meaningful by the virtue of love⁷¹.

How could it be different? Love's monumental promises must lead us to believe that pursuing our transcendental opportunities is a worthwhile endeavor. In fact, if we follow the Platonic line of reasoning it is the life that all should aspire to lead⁷². Therefore life must find meaning in the ascendancy towards the idol and only that which helps on this endeavor truly has meaning in our lives. Love has been, ever since Plato, a guide in this ascendancy and in the idolatry of love her role is, unsurprisingly, much the same. So love becomes the ultimate source of meaning in life. As with God before, in this neo-Christian tradition, the source of meaning is ultimately centralized and outside of mere mortals.

2.4 Christianity & The idolization of love

⁶⁹ The origins of this idea come from *Love a History*, by Simon May. He hints at this in his short analysis of freedom as a potential idol on page 4 of the book.

⁷⁰ This is not to say that love cannot lead to divisions but these are not disagreements over the goodness of love but rather disagreements over what the objects of our love should be.

⁷¹ In the reality of the individual this might be slightly more nuanced but I am merely discussing the cultural conceptions here and the slight overstatement makes the point more clear.

⁷² *"This my dear Socrates," said the stranger of Mantinea, "is that life above all other which man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute"* Plato, *Symposium*

In concluding *Chapter 2* it is pertinent to look back at the essential elements of Christianity as laid out in *1.3*, to make sure that what has been described in *Chapter 2* mirrors the conclusion of *Chapter 1*:

1. Love defeats and to some extent justifies/soothes evil/hardship.
2. Love is the way to transcend suffering/separateness by allowing us to come closer to the idol.
3. Love gives life (and acts within it) meaning.
4. Climbing the Platonic ladder is done by cultivating the supreme virtue: love.
5. The idol regulates the capacity for humans to love.

Firstly we indeed see that, while love may not strictly justify evil (as perhaps God would have⁷³), it can redeem and/or vanquish it. What is perhaps more important is that love, in love idolatry, does soothe hardship⁷⁴. It does this in part by attaching meaning to hardships endured whilst cultivating the supreme virtue. The hardships endured on the way to the end of the Platonic ladder are (by virtue of being on that ladder) meaningful forms of suffering. Giving a purpose and meaning to suffering has a soothing effect and hardships of this type are justified as a way to cultivate one's supreme virtue (love).

Related to this, love may also soothe hardship by promising transcendence, this is in part covered by the Platonic ladder, but I do want to give it a specific mention. Mainly because soothing through meaning is distinct from (albeit ultimately entangled with) soothing by promise. The promise of future 'happiness ever after' gives a certain hope that can soothe hardship. This leads us into the second element: we can transcend our material problems by coming closer to the idol. Indeed love idolization promises this, if we live in accordance with the supreme virtue, we might climb the platonic ladder and live 'happily ever after'. A state that is practically always tied directly to love. It is a state of perpetual love and bliss, a state in which we have become much closer to our idol than during our struggle towards that state. It comes as no surprise that love is also seen as something that can overcome separateness. However in this case transcending separateness is not done by becoming one with God but either by becoming one with the object of our love⁷⁵ or by becoming one with a loving whole, that which Fromm calls the *One*⁷⁶. But perhaps the most useful part that Fromm puts our attention to is: the awareness that humanity has

⁷³ Even though God may justify evil somewhat, this has also been a persistent problem in Christianity.

⁷⁴ I am ignoring the natural ability of love to soothe, loving acts of others that may soothe our hardships

⁷⁵ Reminiscent of the myth of Aristophanes

⁷⁶ See the quote from *The Art of Loving* in 1.2.1.2

always tried to find answers to the question of human separateness⁷⁷ and that love seems to, in love idolatry once more, be our most promising answer in trying to do so.

That the third element is present in love idolatry must come as no surprise. It does so, perhaps even more than in Christianity, for love in the context of love idolatry is the supreme source of meaning. Everything we do in accordance with that which is idolized must be extremely meaningful.

This sub-chapter has already, in part, dealt with the Platonic ladder. So let me just touch upon one more element: love is, like it was in Christianity, our guide on the Platonic ladder. Because of love's role in meaning, the Platonic ladder, redemption, soothing, hardship and evil, love strongly positions itself as the supreme virtue once more.

Lastly, it must be evident through the analysis of Voldemort and Darth Vader that the limits of love in the idolatry of love are similar to those of Christian love. Those who have the potential, or accept the supreme virtue are worthy of our love and praise. Those who do not are not. God's grace has, understandably, lost its power in the idolatry of love. But when we take only the supreme virtue approach we can see that the system remains intact.

Because of this one is drawn to conclude that the essential elements of Christianity are all, albeit perhaps in somewhat amended forms, still intact in the idolatry of love.

⁷⁷ "Man-of all ages and cultures- is confronted with the solution of one and the same question: the question of how to overcome separateness, how to achieve union, how to transcend one's own individual life and find at-onement" Erich Fromm, *The Art of loving*, page 9

3 Heritage of Christian love

The previous chapters have aimed to show the similarities between Christian love and love in current culture. The question remains whether popular love has truly inherited its core elements from Christianity or that these similarities have another cause. It must be noted that a true causal connection is impossible to prove. Nonetheless, a plausible rejection of the other most probable causes, might make us accept the position: current love as portrayed in popular culture is an heir to Christian love. Below I briefly outline two of the challenges that I find most interesting.

The first of these challenges is this: it may seem like current love draws on Christianity but it only does so because they are both essentially reinterpretations of Hellenic love. This argument and why it is a problem for this thesis is laid out in 3.1 and overcome in *Chapter 4*. The second challenge is relatively straightforward; popular culture has the same elements as Christian love because the Christians were simply right about the nature of love. This challenge is set up in 3.2 and dealt with in *Chapter 5*.

One might of course be able to come up with other theories to explain the similarities between love idolatry and Christian love. In this thesis special attention is paid to the Hellenic challenge and the 'Christians are right' claim, because they are the most interesting ones - giving opportunity for the most interesting responses. These two are included and other theories - like 'These views on love are an obvious consequence of the evolution of the human brain' or 'These views are similar because they are based on similar economic struggles' - are not. The other hypotheses are excluded because the scope of this thesis is limited, but also because the additional theories, while not without merit, are not as relevant as the challenges that are dealt with below.

3.1 The Hellenic challenge

There is no denying that Platonic philosophy has profoundly impacted Christianity. That is exemplified by the fact that this thesis includes a specific sub-chapter about Platonic love. Christian theologians have referred to Plato throughout the history of Christianity. The influence of Plato (and in some areas Aristotle) is in fact so strong that it proved somewhat of a problem: if Christianity was revealed to humanity through Christ, how then, can someone who lived more than three centuries before Christ's coming, already be essentially a Christian? Whilst it has been proposed by some that Plato had seen Christ as a divine revelation, the more convincing argument perhaps is that Platonic philosophy prepared the world for Christianity.

“I mentioned that I had read certain books of the Platonists, which Victorinus [...], had translated into Latin, he testified his joy that I had not fallen upon the writings of other philosophers, full of fallacies and deceits, after the rudiments of this world, whereas the Platonists many ways led to the belief in God and His Word.”

*Saint Augustine, Confessions, Book 8, Translated by E.B. Pusey*⁷⁸

One must take into account that Saint Augustine does not argue that Christianity is a consequence of Platonism but the opposite. God gave the Platonists knowledge in philosophy that was perfected in the teachings of Christ.

The problem of such reasoning for this particular thesis is that I have been keen to point out how the current cultural belief about love inherits its most important aspects directly from Christianity. Consequently, that popular love is at its core Christian. The argument one could make however is that, as it pertains to love, popular culture is not a reinterpretation of Christian love but rather of Hellenic⁷⁹ love. To counter the challenge this thesis needs to show one thing, that there is an essential element of popular love that is present in Christianity while it is not shared with Hellenic love. Because of the undeniable influence of Plato and Aristotle and the claims of theologians in regards to their role in Christianity, these two philosophers have become to some extent unusable in countering the challenge.

3.2 The righteous Christian challenge

A simpler and perhaps less enticing challenge to this thesis, is that popular love idolatry and Christianity are quite similar because Christianity has been right about the nature of love to begin with/all along. This means that while love idolatry may be an adapted version of Christian love they both touch upon same ultimate truth about the nature of love.

The tragic elegance of this critique is that it cannot be disproven. At least not beyond doubt. What this thesis does however in *Chapter 5*, is gesture toward a new (acceptable) narrative on love that doesn't share the central elements of Christian love⁸⁰. It is an attempt to show that it is possible to conceptualize

⁷⁸ Text used is found on: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3296/3296-h/3296-h.htm#link2H_4_0008

⁷⁹ I am using the word Hellenic on purpose here. My dear friend Eva Vasiliou, whose knowledge of the Greek language and culture has been indispensable in writing this thesis, has convinced me that it is better to refer to Greece by its official name 'the Hellenic republic'. The word 'Greek' is avoided in favor of the word Hellenic, with the exception of this footnote.

⁸⁰ Like love idolatry does

love in a way that is not a continuation of the Christian tradition. In addition *Chapter 6* gives me the opportunity to include a constructive bit of philosophy in this thesis.

4. Arête, love & the supreme virtue

As laid out in chapter 3 this chapter has as its purpose to rise to the Hellenic challenge and show that love idolatry has inherited its central ideas from Christianity and not the Hellenic tradition. We do not have to indulge into an extremely comprehensive study of Hellenic philosophy to do so. The only thing that is necessary, is to show that the Christian and popular cultural view on love are in some way vitally different to the Hellenic view.

This chapter starts by analyzing the difference in the supreme virtues of both schools of thought and from there we will build the case that love idolatry is tied to Christian and not Hellenic love.

4.1 Different virtues

One of the main differences between Hellenic culture and love idolatry is the role and content of the supreme virtue. I briefly explain some of its influence here.

In Christianity and love idolatry, love plays a role in transcendence. It is the guide to heaven and the ‘happy-ever-after state’. This leads our attention to what Plato would call ‘that life above all others which man should live’⁸¹. Generally we can say that a supreme virtue guides people towards the best (after)life⁸². As such the supreme virtue gives meaning to life. If the life that we should live is guided by a certain virtue, then all acts in accordance with that virtue are meaningful. Thus, the supreme virtue is closely tied to meaning in life⁸³.

In Christianity and popular culture, the supreme virtue also plays a role in the regulation of the limits of love. Those who succeed in cultivating their supreme virtue are worthy of love. Those who have the potential to cultivate their supreme virtue, might be loved for their potential and should be encouraged to cultivate that virtue. The (perhaps hypothetical) beings that do not have the potential to cultivate their supreme virtue cannot truly be admired and loved⁸⁴.

⁸¹ Full quote can be found in 1.1

⁸² ‘Best’ in this case should be taken as that which brings one closest to the idol, the reasons for the desirability of this are numerous and scattered among almost all the previous chapters and sub-chapters.

⁸³ See 2.3.2

⁸⁴ See 1.2.3

Lastly the supreme virtue is the yardstick by which all other virtues are judged. If the other virtue has a harmonious relationship (which can be entirely situational) with the supreme virtue, the other virtue is good. If the other virtue does not it will be deemed a less important virtue or even a vice. As such acts in life are primarily judged by the supreme virtue, other virtues are less important.

Consequently the supreme virtue plays a major role in cultural systems and a difference in supreme virtue has a profound effect on the central characteristics of different cultural systems. Which is why I have included it in the list of essential characteristics of Christian love in 1.3.

4.2 Arête

Although Plato's symposium sets love up for the role of supreme virtue, the Hellenic supreme virtue probably revolved around the concept of Arête instead. The translation of this word has been disputed, yet it is commonly seen as a mistake to translate simply as virtue. H.D.F. Kitto argues that the problem with this translation is that virtue is strongly normative whilst arête, in his mind, translates to something more neutral: excellence. Similarly Terence Ball also called for a translation different than virtue:

"A better, if rather more awkward, translation of arête would be 'role-related specific excellence.' Arête is that quality or set of qualities which enables one to fill a particular role and to discharge its duties"

Terence Ball, Reappraising political theory, page 74

It must be pointed out that he is not writing about excellence-differences measured between individuals. This excellence instead depends on the role of the individual. In other words, the arête of a silversmith consists of different elements than that of an admiral.

The reason why the concept of arête is so important has everything to do with the concept of the polis. In the Hellenic mind, that which sets civilized humans apart from barbarians (and gods) was the fact that they lived in societies⁸⁵. As such it becomes very important that all the inhabitants⁸⁶ of a polis contribute to its general welfare. Therefore excellence in the respective role of every individual becomes a central element of the supreme virtue.

⁸⁵ Directly related to the Aristotelian concept of the political animal

⁸⁶ I use the word inhabitant rather than citizen because arguably there can be something like a slave's or woman's arête. Neither could generally claim citizenship yet all might develop arête.

In this respect it is vital to point out two things; 1) *arête* can fulfill the role of a virtue without being translated, literally, to the word 'virtue'. 2) *arête* can consist of different virtues. It can even, in part, be love. The *arête* of a mother is perhaps tied up with the love for her children while for a stoneworker, love might be far less relevant. Love then, is not the supreme virtue. The supreme virtue is *arête*, constituted in whichever specific qualities are necessary for the role of the specific (civilized) human.

A rather clear example of the importance of *arête* is a story that Margalit Finkelberg uses in *Virtue and Circumstances: on the city-state concept of arête*. It tells of an army of Hellenic mercenaries that found themselves in a precarious military situation deep in Persian territory (around 400 BC). The Persian negotiator Phalinus asked the army to surrender:

After him Theopompus the Athenian spoke. "Phalinus," he said, "at this instant, as you yourself can see, the only good things left to us are our arms and our arête. If we keep our arms, we suppose we can make use of our arête; but if we deliver up the arms, we shall presently be robbed of our lives. Do not suppose then that we are going to give up to you the only good things that we possess. We prefer to keep them; and by their help we will do battle with you for the good things that are yours." Phalinus laughed when he heard those words, and said, "Spoken like a philosopher, my fine young man, and very pretty reasoning too; yet, let me tell you, your wits are somewhat scattered if you imagine that your arête will get the better of the king's power."

Margalit Finkelberg, *Virtue and Circumstances: on the city-state concept of arête*, page 38⁸⁷

This quote shows that *arête* was considered a supremely important element of being a civilized human. Theopompus chooses a likely death over losing his *arête* (as a soldier).

We also see the importance of *arête* in Hellenic myths, as mentioned by Donald Kagan in a lecture about the *arête* of Achilles and Odysseus in the context of the ancient polis:

"The recognition of those qualities, the recognition of the arête that these heroes have, is what their lives are all about. First of all they had to have these qualities but it is not enough. They must be recognized [...] by the communities in which they lived and the highest rewards that individuals can have is the recognition of their fellow men of their very, very high qualities."

Donald Kagan, *Lecture at Yale University: Rise of the Polis (pt1)*, 4:20-5:00⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Finkelberg uses this story as a quote in the attached footnote she writes: "*Xen. Anab. 2.1.11-13, trans. Henry G. Dakyns, with slight changes*". I couldn't find out the exact nature of these changes so I refer to her article.

Arête is largely dealt with in the same way as this thesis deals with the concept of supreme virtue. It is the virtue that ultimately gives one's life meaning. Irving Singer writes about arête:

"The term was used by the Greeks to signify a condition of a man's soul or character without which life was not worth living. The man without arête was better off dead; but the man who died in the quest for this inner excellence had nothing to fear from death"

Irving Singer, The Nature of Love part 1, page 70

These quotes might lead us to believe that its role is that of a supreme virtue. As in fact it was arête that elevated us from barbarism⁸⁹ and gave our lives meaning.

It is clear that not love (necessarily) but rather arête was the supreme virtue in the Hellenic belief-system. This automatically gives love a less important place in their philosophy which, in turn, makes Christian love different than the heir of the Hellenic heritage.

4.3 A supreme difference

In his lecture, Donald Kagan sketches a wide range of differences between the Hellenic world of polis and arête and Judeo-Christian societies. Although his analysis does not deal with the role of love in Christianity specifically, he does outline several attitudes which relate very strongly to the role of love in Christianity and current culture. Perhaps the main difference he points out (as shown in the quote above) is that the supreme virtue is not regulated by an idol but the community. The highest reward for living up to the supreme virtue is recognition of the community not the idol. This has a consequence: living up to the supreme virtue does not bring one to a place without suffering because one who has arête does not transcend into a different world. Instead one fulfills, to the fullest extent and excellence, that which one was born to do in *this* world. Love therefore is not tied to the meaning of life. It can, nonetheless, still give certain parts of life meaning but it is not guide to 'that life above all others which man should live'. Meaning in life is dependent on situational excellence of the individual and their role in the community.

⁸⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6uBJq4VQ5E>

⁸⁹ Transcendence in this regard could be seen as transcendence (with the help of arête) into a civilized human.

Plato has written about *arête* but because of the retroactive Christianization of Plato I have been inclined to ignore it. However even if he would be included love would not be the supreme virtue. There are two central elements to the *arête*; 1) virtue is the power to obtain good things and 2) this power is wielded justly. Love is the desire to possess the good and the essence of virtue would be the power to do so. These things are different and love cannot be both the power and the desire because one has the power and desire is for that which one does not have. They must be different⁹⁰.

This is important because if the Hellenic tradition does not make love its supreme virtue than love cannot have the profound importance that it has in Christianity and popular culture. We must conclude that love as it is seen in popular culture is not inherited from the Hellenic belief system. So it seems ever more likely that Christianity is the father of popular love.

⁹⁰ I personally believe that it Plato's response is an objection to the common Hellenic view as expressed by Meno.

5 Love anew

The aim of this chapter is to construct a viable and non-Christian⁹¹ view on love. The purpose of this is three-fold. Firstly, it will demonstrate that in the attempt of de-Christianizing contemporary love we didn't lose the concept of love itself. Secondly, it works as an argument against the righteous Christian challenge. If we can construct a viable alternative view, then we show that (even though we can never completely prove that the Christians weren't a hundred percent right about love) a secular alternative might equally well be preferred over a Christian one. Lastly, and on a more personal note, it gives something constructive to this thesis.

In this chapter I will draw heavily from the works of Simon May, Irving Singer and Friedrich Nietzsche. The first half of this chapter deals with these philosophers and the conclusion I draw from their works on the nature of love. The second half deals with the tensions between this view on love and the contemporary approach.

5.1 The nature of love

The lion's share of this sub-chapter deals with Irving Singer's idea of 'love as bestowal/appraisal' and 'love as affirmation', an idea inspired by Nietzsche. Strongly related to Nietzsche is the concept of 'ontological rootedness' developed by Simon May. These ideas will be used to build a new conceptualization of love that is separate from Christian love

5.1.1 Love as bestowal and appraisal

Love as bestowal and appraisal is a theory developed by Irving Singer in his three-part investigation of love philosophy, *The Nature of Love*. He argues that love comes from appraising and bestowing value by the lover.

Appraisal is the assessment of value. When one wants to buy a motorcycle one looks at the functionalities the motorbike has. If we would ask experts they would all come to a similar objective value for the motorcycle. Similarly we can appraise a person, we could (albeit theoretically) identify desirable and undesirable traits in people and get a more or less objective value. But individual appraisal complicates this. We might have a preference for a fast(er) motorcycle and therefore we might be

⁹¹ Non-Christian here means that this view does not inherit its core elements from 1.3.

willing to pay more for a particular model than its objective appraisal would suggest. A similar situation arises with the appraisal of people. We might prefer wittiness or curly hair and therefore appraise some people higher than the (purely theoretical) 'objective' appraisal would suggest.

Individual appraisal is not love, no matter how positive. There is another crucial element: *bestowal*. If a person has had her motorcycle for a while she might think it has more value to her than she would appraise it to have, based on its objective specifications. This person can bestow value unto the motorcycle. This value has less to do with the vehicle but her attitude towards it. Singer writes:

"It [value] is created by the affirmative relationship itself, by the very act of responding favorably, giving an object emotional and pervasive importance regardless of its capacity to satisfy interests."

Irving Singer, The Nature of Love part 1, Page 5

In human relationships this can happen also. The lover does not only see the beloved as something to satisfy his interest. The beloved may do that, but the real value of the beloved comes from the value the lover bestows on her. In the act of bestowal the lover is thus creating extra value that the beloved would not otherwise have. The lover cares for the beloved for the sake of the beloved, he takes interest in her desires and needs. Then, fulfilling these desires becomes important for the lover not because of the potential benefit to the lover but for the benefit of the beloved.

Through this mechanism, appraisal becomes very important. How can we serve the interest of the other without properly appraising who she is? Singer writes: *"In love we **attend** to the beloved, in the sense that we respond to what **she** is."*⁹² Bestowal and appraisal thus go together in the act of loving.

5.1.2 Love as affirmation

If we accept Singer's interpretation of love we are still confronted with the following question: what inspires love? Or what makes us bestow value upon some people? May argues that love is inspired by the promise of *ontological rootedness*:

"If we all need to love, it is because we all need to feel at home in the world: to root our life in the here and now; to give our existence solidity and validity; to deepen the sensation of being; to enable us to experience the reality of our life as indestructible"

⁹² Irving Singer, The Nature of Love part 1, page 9

Simon May, Love a History, page 6

This desire for home and rootedness is the primary characteristic that inspires love within people. May argues that we are willing to ignore the beloved's negative characteristics - indeed that we are willing to suffer tremendously -, if the beloved makes us feel like we truly exist in this world. However when the object of our love ceases to affirm our life, our love for the object discontinues.

For further elaboration we may look at Friedrich Nietzsche⁹³. Affirmation of life is central to May's interpretation of Nietzsche's ideas about love. Nietzsche invents a term called: *amor fati*, which might be translated into the 'love of fate' even though a more accurate depiction might be the 'love for necessity'. Nietzsche writes:

"My formula for greatness in man is amor fati: the fact that a man wishes nothing to be different, either in front of him or behind him, or for all eternity. Not only must the necessary be borne, and on no account concealed – all idealism is falsehood in the face of necessity – but it must also be loved. . ."

Twilight of the Idols with The Antichrist and Ecce Homo, Friedrich Nietzsche, page 203

Where Singer describes what happens in the act of loving and May examines what inspires love, Nietzsche concerns himself with a more love-based attitude to existence. The Nietzschean attitude in this interpretation is to let the world as a whole affirm your existence (and vice versa). A love for the world as a whole however, does not mean a love for all the specifics within that world. It does mean that even the things we despise are a necessary part of the whole. We can claim that we love *de Nachtwacht* by Rembrandt but simultaneously hold that we aesthetically despise the man holding the drum on the far right. Yet we can still love him as part of the whole and the necessary part he plays in the painting. Similarly I may find the role of my roommate a negative one within the whole but still affirm the part he plays in the shaping of my life. He becomes part of my love of the general even though I may not love him as a specific part.

We can see that this is holistic attitude, of loving life as a whole, might inspire a sense of *ontological rootedness* towards the whole world. This idea resonates very strongly with the quote above and we can see May's with Nietzsche. If we take the quote above serious we also see that to love one thing is to love her necessity and all the necessity of things that were and are necessary to make her exist.

⁹³ *May calls Nietzsche one of his philosophical parents in an interview with philosophy bites.*
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52ixmpRO7vU&t=2s>)

Love as affirmation becomes a radical attachment to existence. A guiding idea not to wish the world to be different or to be in a different world but to 'say yes' and indeed love life as a whole. Consequently allowing the world to affirm our life. Or if we take a less extreme approach we might say that all that specific parts that we love make us rooted in the world and strongly attached to our existence itself. As such love becomes affirmation of our necessity as part of the whole. A necessity about which Nietzsche writes:

"in reality purpose is altogether lacking. One is necessary, one is a piece of fate, one belongs to the whole, one is the whole"

Twilight of the Idols with The Antichrist and Ecce Homo, Friedrich Nietzsche, page 36

It becomes clear that because one is necessary and because one is the whole, love becomes affirmation of our existence. He exclaims later in the same paragraph *"But there is nothing outside the whole!"*. Which means that if we combine the *amor fati* quote from *Ecce Homo* with the quote from *Twilight of the Idols* we can conclude that *amor fati* means to love necessity is to love one's own existence as part of the whole. Affirmation of life is thus connected to the idea of *amor fati*.

This brings us to a borderline ironic situation; while attempting to rid ourselves of the old Platonic-Christian ideas of love we construct a new type of Platonic ladder. In love for existence as a whole, one hears the distant Platonic echo of *'a life in contemplation of beauty absolute'*⁹⁴. If love is the desire to possess beauty, then would a life in contemplation of beauty absolute not be very similar to living life loving existence as a whole? One could argue such a position but it builds upon another interpretation of Plato's ladder. I have so far hinted at the interpretation that the Platonic ladder is a way to transcend life. This might have been unfair to Plato, but not to the Christian interpretation of Plato. Another way to interpret Plato is that his prescribed way of life is a way to live it fully emerged in existence. The ultimate state at the end of the Platonic ladder is arguably not above life but truly the middle of it. The Christian influenced perspective is less so, at least before the radical direction Spinoza⁹⁵. This is Christian interpretation what Nietzsche rails against. In *the Antichrist* he writes:

"Parasitism as the only method of the Church; sucking all the blood, all the love, all the hope of life out of mankind with anemic and sacred ideals. A 'Beyond' as the will to deny all reality; a cross as the

⁹⁴ As quoted and explained in 1.1

⁹⁵ 'Spinoza' by Stuart Hampshire explains how Spinoza reinterprets Christianity

trademark of the most subterranean conspiracy that has ever existed – against health, beauty, well-constitutedness, bravery, intellect, kindness of soul, against life itself”

Twilight of the Idols with The Antichrist and Ecce Homo, Friedrich Nietzsche, page 163

Nietzsche objected against the Christian interpretation of the Platonic ladder, which tries to convince us that the ladder leads to something that is more than life. A Platonic ladder which, in order to be climbed, requires one to deny life and rise above it. *Love as affirmation of the whole* does the opposite: it requires us to fully experience life, in all of its ugliness and beauty. To love even the parts we dread and despise. The potential Platonic ladder of *amor fati* leads not to a higher existence but to full emergence in existence.

5.1.3 Bestowal & Affirmation

This has repercussions for Singer’s ideas. At first glance, appraisal loses significant importance because the only thing we have to appraise is the ability of the other to affirm our existence⁹⁶. Nonetheless there are two important elements of appraisal that would help us in uniting the theories.

First of all appraisal gives us a way to respond to the beloved. Singer explains that we care for the beloved not for our own interest but for the sake of the beloved. For this we need to know who it is we love exactly. The information we need for this is relayed to us through appraisal. At the very least we need to appraise if the prospective beloved offers ontological rootedness. One therefore does not have to forsake the importance appraisal in order to combine these theories. Ontological rootedness sheds an enriching light on Singer’s theory. The reason why the bestowal occurs is not the arrows of Cupid but a logical consequence of human desire. Singer’s mechanical approach can thus fit May’s and vice versa.

As I mentioned, the three philosophers describe different aspects of love. When harmonized these theories can explain both the cause and inner workings of love. After all, that which affirms our existence must, if we are willing to follow May, be of extreme importance to us and thus of great value. Love can thus be summarized as: the bestowal of value on that which affirms the existence of the lover (and her necessity in the whole).

⁹⁶ This affirmation refers more to May than Nietzsche

It must be clearly stated however that the bestowal must come from the person itself. This point will be further examined below but it must be noted that it is the lover that bestows value upon the beloved and not another entity⁹⁷. A related point is that it is the affirmation of the lover's own life that inspires it.

5.2 Specific problems of love

We may ask ourselves if the idea of love that I sketched out above is compatible with the current cultural conception of love. In this sub-chapter I argue that it is not. Although the Christian conceptualization of love works well enough in its original context, without a societal devotion to God the idolatrous attitude to love becomes unsustainable.

The problems outlined in this sub-chapter come from three sides. The expectations of love, the tension between transcendence and affirmation and the sources of meaning.

5.2.1 Unreasonable expectations of love

Can we, without tying love to any divine or idol-like character, make any claim about love being good? In Christian narrative we can argue that a crime⁹⁸ for the sake of love cannot be truly for the sake of love. Love is after all (at least) part of God and that which is against God is almost per definition a crime against love⁹⁹. A crime in the name of love would thus be crime inspired by a false prophet¹⁰⁰. If one stays true to the argument that God is the one and only authority on love then one can make this claim, yet in a humanistic world, who can distinguish between the true and the false spirit of love?

Bestowal and affirmation does not claim that love is inherently a virtue. There is no ethical super-structure to grant love that position. Consequently love loses its standing as the supreme virtue. The belief that love is a virtue is based on a Christian interpretation of love where love must be good (for God is love and God is good). Which works when one is willing to include a supreme being, without it, it does not.

Another promise made by the love idol is closely connected to transcendence but I feel that it makes most sense to discuss it in this section. It is the promise of the reachable *'happily-ever-after-state'*. The

⁹⁷ As within Christian love, where God bestows his grace as a necessary part of love.

⁹⁸ A crime in the eyes of God.

⁹⁹ Bear in mind Augustine's Sermon on 1 John 4:4-12: "Let the root of love be in you: nothing can spring from it but good".

¹⁰⁰ 1 John 4:1 "Dear friends, stop believing every spirit. Instead, test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

idea that love can guide us to a blissful state is not totally without foundation. The beginning of a (especially romantic) love affair is certainly frequently described as a state of bliss yet the promise implicit in the fairytales is the continuation of such a state forever. Which is not often, or perhaps never, the case. Even a life of love remains a life with all its inherent pleasures and pains so while the Christian priest can promise a state of bliss after life, such a promise cannot be fulfilled in actual life, at least not forever.

The bestowal and affirmation idea of love does not promise any such things. Love might be able to help one through struggles in life and it may help in providing meaning (not as a source but as the act of bestowing) but it does not let one escape the bad times (completely).

5.2.2 Affirmation & Transcendence

To transcend suffering is to triumph over, or rise above the material world. To affirm it, is to be dedicated to it and not to rise above, or beyond it, but to go through it. It is for this reason that we may find a lot of tension between a view of love based on affirmation and love based on transcendence. Due to the Platonic foundations of the western philosophy of love, transcendence has played a large role in Christian thought about love¹⁰¹. Through transcendence, love became a guide to dull the sensuality of suffering. It did, in thought at least, not bolster our ability to sense the world as a whole and the beloved as particular within it. But it guided us to an extreme focus on the particular. Whether this focus is on God, other people or material entities the result is the same: a misunderstanding of the actual functionality of love and therefore a disillusionment of love¹⁰² and its ability to make us transcend.

Nietzschean ideas about affirmation of life relate to this as they are part of his attack on transcendence. He argues against the idea that there is another world than this one and thus he takes the position that we ought to be connected to this world unreservedly;

“To divide the world into a ‘true’ and an ‘apparent’ world, whether after the manner of Christianity or of Kant (after all a Christian in disguise), is only a sign of decadence – a symptom of degenerating life. The fact that the artist esteems the appearance of a thing higher than reality, is no objection to this statement. For appearance signifies once more reality here, but in a selected, strengthened and

¹⁰¹ Even though it depends highly on how one is to interpret Plato, this sentence refers to the mainstream Christian interpretation.

¹⁰² If we believe that this transcendence comes after death (like in Christianity but not love idolatry) then we may not be disillusioned by love in this context.

corrected form. The tragic artist is no pessimist – he says Yea to everything questionable and terrible, he is Dionysian.”

Twilight of the Idols with The Antichrist and Ecce Homo, Friedrich Nietzsche, page 21

Instead of trying to transcend this life, we ought to say *yea* to it including ‘*everything questionable and terrible*’. Instead of rising above it, we ought to fully partake in all elements of this life as we sense it. Love tied to Christianity showed us the way to the ladder that allows this transcendence, in Nietzschean thought, love allows us to fully attach ourselves to this world.

“The spiritualization of sensuality is called love: it is a great triumph over Christianity.”

Twilight of the Idols with The Antichrist and Ecce Homo, Friedrich Nietzsche, page 25

Love thus does not guide us to a higher world but connects us strongly to what we sense in this world. Since Christianity invites us to seek a higher world, love becomes a somewhat of an antagonist to Christianity for the reasons I have described. It attaches us to this world and it is not ladder by which we transcend this world.

It must therefore become obvious that our desire for love is a desire to be affirmed in our existence, if we dull our sensuality two problems arise. 1) We can only sing our senses to sleep but ‘*happily-ever-after*’ is, if not impossible, absurdly difficult to reach, especially if one desires to sustain it forever. 2) We set ourselves up for a love-affair that cannot satisfy our initial desire for love. Love based on transcending suffering is bound to not affirm our existence and thus cannot satisfy us.

Transcendence has been a large influence in the philosophy of love ever since Plato. However let’s take a second look at Platonic transcendence. His transcending steps of love led to the ‘*contemplation of beauty absolute*’. It could be argued that Plato was much more concerned with finding and recognizing beauty everywhere than transcending this world. In this interpretation Nietzsche and Plato find themselves, to their own dismay perhaps, in a similar conceptual corner. If love leads to a life of recognizing beauty everywhere and if love is the desire for beauty then one could argue that the Platonic ladder leads to a place where one can see beauty in all things. Not completely unlike Nietzsche’s call for a love for the whole. There is even a deeper connection here; Plato’s idea of beauty relates to the harmonization of all that is good. Arguably, the connection of necessity of all things is a possible description of this harmonization. The beauty absolute might be interpreted as the realization

of the necessity of all connected things. Harmony through necessity. This argument might be scrutinized but it is a thought which might be joyously entertained.

Nevertheless, the obvious differences between Plato and Nietzsche might not be as irreconcilable as previously sketched in this thesis. Additionally it might not be utterly impossible to reconcile affirmation with transcendence. Regardless, the current cultural paradigm still holds on to a form of Christian transcendence that has (at best) a problematic relationship with affirmation.

5.2.3 Meaningfulness & Bestowal

Perhaps the most important part of the idol is that all things only obtain meaning by virtue of the Idol giving it meaning. Additionally acts done in accordance with the supreme virtue have meaning. Let's turn to the relationship between love and meaning. That which we do with love (supreme virtue) immediately becomes meaningful, this is true in a Christian context, but also in current culture. In an *affirmation and bestowal* conceptualization of love it is different but also present. However, the fact that *affirmation and bestowal* connects love and meaning does not necessarily make the conceptualization Christian. Because love as affirmation and bestowal changes the nature of said connection.

While love and meaning are often connected, there is a considerable problem with meaning in love idolatry. Modeled after a Christian love the idol gives meaning to everything and the idol (plus its connected supreme virtue¹⁰³) is de facto the only entity that has itself intrinsic meaning. We give meaning to that which we love but since the source of meaning is the idol we can only love that which is deemed, often via the supreme virtue, meaningful by the idol. When love becomes the idol something odd happens, we can only love that which is made meaningful by love. What we are essentially loving is the grace of love within the other. We are, to put it differently, loving love itself. This might not sound problematic but it complicates our ability to love the actual objects of our love. Love is, in part, the bestowal of meaning and when the lover is not the source of meaning the lover is merely a vehicle for love, loving itself. Much like how in the Christian tradition it was arguably God loving God.

Contrasting this with the *appraisal and bestowal* theory of Singer; the lover becomes the source of meaning and breaks away from this circular reasoning. A situation where the idol doesn't love itself

¹⁰³ But even the supreme virtue is given its status by the idol in the Christian and subsequent love idolatry context

through particular love-affairs but where individuals have the power to actually love and give meaning themselves.

This closely relates to Nietzsche's account of the death of God and his subsequent answer to nihilism:

Where is God gone?" he called out. "I mean to tell you! We have killed him, - you and I! We are all his murderers! [...]Do we not dash on unceasingly? Backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us? Has it not become colder? Does not night come on continually, darker and darker? Shall we not have to light lanterns in the morning? Do we not hear the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we not smell the divine putrefaction? - for even Gods putrefy! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers? The holiest and the mightiest that the world has hitherto possessed, has bled to death under our knife [...] Is not the magnitude of this deed too great for us? Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it? There never was a greater event, - and on account of it, all who are born after us belong to a higher history than any history hitherto!"

Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, Book III, page 181

The death of God, and with it the death of the ultimate source of meaning may, at first glance, seem like a daunting situation. Yet instead of giving up on meaning altogether Nietzsche does something different. The end of this passage seems a call to humanity to become the source of meaning in our own universe. Based on this I would argue that love and meaning are based within ourselves instead of an external idol, which means that no idol dictates a supreme virtue.

5.2.4 Human separateness

If we want to endow love with the power to overcome separateness we have to argue two points 1) that it is possible to overcome human separateness and 2) that love has the power to do so. Since arguing these points would fall well outside the scope of this thesis, I have decided that the alternative position this thesis takes must allow for any of the positions available with regard to human separateness. Affirmation of life is possible as both a way of transcending separateness and as becoming one with all and as a way to see find a home as (separate) part of the whole. In this way love does not promise something that might never be achieved without completely barring the possibility of bridging separateness all together. It's important to point out that in *love as bestowal and affirmation*

transcending human separateness is not achieved through an idol. If it can be done at all, it must be possible for a mere mortal without any idol-like help.

5.3 Love beyond Christianity

Let's return to the previously mentioned central elements of Christian love;

- 1) Love defeats and to some extent justifies/soothes evil/hardship.
- 2) Love is the way to transcend suffering/separateness by allowing us to come closer to the idol
- 3) Love gives life meaning
- 4) Climbing the platonic ladder is done by cultivating the supreme virtue: love
- 5) The idol regulates the capacity for humans to love

If we go through these points we see that love as affirmation and bestowal is an attempt to break away from the afore mentioned elements

Firstly love does not justify or soothe anything. Love is freed from morality. One can be affirmed in life by terrible things or one can bestow meaning in a dreadful way. 'Love as bestowal and affirmation' does not refuse to call non-virtues love (as would have happened in Christianity because if love is God, how can it be bad?)love. Love itself is neither virtue or vice, thus love loses its position as supreme virtue.

Secondly love is not a way of transcending suffering but rather of affirming it as part of one's life¹⁰⁴. Love is not a way to escape the difficult parts of life. Rather to love is to love one's own necessity and let one's life be affirmed by the necessity of the whole. With the possible consequence that one might find a love for existence as a whole.

This thesis has neither promised that love can let us transcend human separateness nor outright denied the possibility. Partially because love's potential for transcending separateness is not necessarily solely a Christian notion but mainly because placing the potential outside of the hands of the idol is a sufficient break with essential elements of Christianity.

Thirdly, love in 'love as bestowal and affirmation' is not the source of meaning. Love is a result of meaning bestowal of the lover. Everyone is the supreme source of meaning in their own lives. While love is undoubtedly still connected to meaning, the connection is different. This thesis does not sever the connection between love and meaning but rather re-attaches it. A way that strips love from the role

¹⁰⁴ Observable in the concept of Amor fati

in which it gives meaning to all of life. Either through straight idolatry or through love's role as supreme virtue.

Fourthly, the idea of cultivating love as a supreme virtue and through it leading a meaningful life is not (necessarily) present in 'love as bestowal and affirmation'. Because this conceptualization does not imply any supreme virtue. As such love, in 'love as bestowal and affirmation', does not need anyone to share (or indeed have) a supreme virtue¹⁰⁵. Hence in 'love as bestowal and affirmation' love can function independently from any supreme virtue.

Lastly there is no room for the idol to regulate love between humans. The lover can love regardless of any outside influence (save for the necessary object of the bestowal of meaning). Love, then, becomes contingent on the ability to appraise value and bestow meaning. Even if the regulatory aspect of the idol was theoretical before (bearing in mind that in some interpretations all humans have been granted love's potential) it is not even that in 'love as bestowal and affirmation'. The lack of an idol connected to love, means the end of idol-based regulatory influence.

¹⁰⁵ In fact there is (albeit in theory) no sharing of anything necessary between the lover and the beloved. The beloved only need to have an appraisable element that affirms the existence of the lover.

Conclusion

So we arrive at the conclusion of this thesis. In the introduction of this thesis I outlined what I set out to do: to show that the current conceptualization of love is one of idolatry and that this love idolatry is an essential Christian conceptualization of love. *Chapter 2* therefore gave both some context on idolatry itself and created a convincing account of the role of love in Christianity. This endeavor accumulated in a list of 5 essential characteristics of Christian love:

- 1) Love defeats and to some extent justifies/soothes evil/hardship.
- 2) Love is the way to transcend suffering/separateness by allowing us to come closer to the idol
- 3) Love gives life meaning
- 4) Climbing the platonic ladder is done by cultivating the supreme virtue: love
- 5) The idol regulates the capacity for humans to love

These five elements were used in *Chapter 2*, where I tried to show: 1) that the current popular conceptualization of love is one of idolatry and 2) that this encompasses the same five elements.

Even if we accept all that has been claimed in these chapters unreservedly, the aim of the thesis leaves wanting. In *Chapter 3* I proposed two distinct challenges that needed to be addressed for this thesis to succeed. 1) the Hellenic challenge and 2) the righteous Christian challenge. Subsequently *Chapter 4* dealt with the Hellenic challenge that love idolatry and Christian love are essentially similar, inheriting their essential elements from Hellenic philosophy. By focusing on the role of the Hellenic supreme virtue I have shown that the differences between the Hellenic supreme virtue, *arête*, and the Christian/love idolatry supreme virtue are such that this claim is faulty.

The righteous Christian challenge argues that Christian love and love idolatry are so similar because they are both accurate reflections of the true nature of love. While it is beyond my power to categorically prove them wrong, in *Chapter 5* I showed that an acceptable theory of love can be constructed without the 5 essential elements. The purpose there was threefold: 1) It shows that there is no real reason to suspect that the Christian/love idolatry conceptualization is more likely to be true than the one I used ('love as affirmation and bestowal'). 2) By contrasting 'love as bestowal and affirmation' with love idolatry it became all the more clear that without the Christian framework the usage of Christian love, as it is done by love idolatry, does not really work. 3) It gave me the opportunity to include a constructive part in this thesis, thereby making the work itself more satisfying.

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