

Love Thyself: The Ethics of Self-Interest In A Loving Relationship

Sophie Fang

The Bible commands us to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” In this way, we often turn to love as a guiding virtue that motivates us to be kind and show others respect. However, we seldom consider how ethics apply to love. While there is no doubt that a loving approach to life can lead us to be virtuous, the line becomes blurry when we consider to what extent love is ethically justified and when. The ontology of love has been a topic of philosophical contention since the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. Philosophers largely agree love is intrinsically part of the human experience, although each period of philosophical history offers varying definitions of love. These characterizations range from the Pre-Socratic view of love as a conflict against strife given to us by Empedocles to the Socratic terms for love, Eros and Philia, coined by Plato and Aristotle. In postmodern times the discussion has become increasingly complex. Rather than solely defining what love is, we ought to determine the role each agent plays in a loving relationship. Thus, only once we evaluate the role of self-interest in relationships can we truly define ethical love. One might be tempted to argue that any form of self-interest in a loving relationship is unethical as they may equate selfishness with the exploitation of a partner. However, this view largely ignores that self-interest is an inherent part of the human experience. Further, it assumes a dichotomy between self-interest and morality by failing to acknowledge the critical differences between “selfish love” and “self-love”. In order for a loving relationship to be morally justified, one must be self-interested in the sense that one loves themselves. However, self-interest must not drive the agent to selfishly engage in a relationship solely for utility or pleasure. Only once the agent strikes a balance between self-love and selfish love does a loving relationship become ethical.

The ethics of self-love has been a topic of discussion since the Socratic Era. In Book IX of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, he discusses how self-love can be morally justified. To accomplish this, Aristotle begins by examining the ethics of engaging in a friendship. According to Aristotle, people who establish friendships based solely on utility or pleasure are not treating their friends well. Instead, it is ideal for one to form this relationship based on a love of their friend’s character. He asserts that “love of character [...] endures because it is self-dependent.”¹ Aristotle then applies this logic to self-love as well. If the ethics of self-love function the same as the ethics of friendship, then self-love must also be based on a love of one’s own character. In this way, Book IX establishes when self-love can be highly valuable: it is not only morally allowable but also required on the basis that it exists due to a love of one’s own character.

In modern times, the discussion has moved toward the benefits of self-love. This can be seen in William James’ *The Principles of Psychology* in which he explains self-esteem. According to James, “Self-esteem = Success / Pretensions.”² In other words, the way one feels about themselves is dictated by how well they are performing in life (their success) divided by what one expected

¹ Aristotle, “Book IX,” trans. W. D. Ross, in *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 BCE), <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.9.ix.html>.

² William James, “The Consciousness of Self,” in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/Principles/prin10.htm>.

to achieve (their pretensions). Thus, having positive self-esteem is inextricably linked to how well one performs and as one finds success, their self-esteem grows. In this way, James elucidates the way in which one should direct their selfish desires. If one truly has their best interest at heart they are not focused on bodily pleasures or wealth but are instead focused on areas in which they can achieve something meaningful. In accomplishing their goals in these areas, their self-esteem will grow. Both James' and Aristotle's theories on the morality of self-love and how it can benefit and harm an agent create the basis for determining how self-love can ethically be a part of a loving relationship.

One might argue that any form of self-interest in a loving relationship is unethical as they may equate self-interest in a relationship with exploitation. This argument is supported by the widely acknowledged notion that taking advantage of another is morally impermissible. Immanuel Kant frames this moral ordinance in his book *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant's Practical Imperative states that one should, "So act that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."³ In his article "Treating Persons as Means," Professor of Philosophy, Samuel Kerstein clarifies what it means to use another as a "means to an end." According to Kerstein, in order for an agent to use another, they must, "intend the presence or participation of some aspect of the other to contribute to the end's realization."⁴ Consistent with this notion would be if an agent uses another for their "rational, emotional, or physical capacities."⁵ Largely, Kant's Practical Imperative is accepted. An agent is not morally justified in intentionally using another for their own gain. Thus, if this logic is applied to a loving relationship, one might assert that if an agent is overtly selfish they would be driven to exploit his partner and violate Kant's imperative. Aristotle frames this viewpoint by stating, "people criticize those who love themselves most [...] using this as an epithet of disgrace, and a bad man seems to do everything for his own sake."⁶ According to Kant, it is widely believed that a good man "acts for honour's sake [...] and acts for his friend's sake, and sacrifices his own interest."⁷ If it is true that one who loves themselves or practices self-love does everything solely for their own sake, then it follows logically that if they enter a loving relationship they would be exploiting their partner and violating Kant's Practical Imperative. Thus, initially, the belief that it is unethical for an agent to love themselves if they enter a loving relationship may seem rational.

However, in asserting that it is unethical for agents to be selfish and thus practice self-love, one first ignores that humans have innate and justifiable selfish tendencies. The belief that humans are universally motivated by selfishness is presented by the thesis of Psychological Egoism. In his article "Psychological Egoism," Professor Joshua May defines Psychological Egoism as the belief that "all of our ultimate desires are egoistic."⁸ In this way, each person's ultimate goal in life is their own welfare. Given this definition, one might question how altruistic acts fit into the

³ Immanuel Kant, "Moving from Popular Moral Philosophy to the Metaphysics of Morals," in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (2017), <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/kant1785.pdf>.

⁴ Samuel Kerstein, "Treating Persons as Means," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/persons-means/>

⁵ Kerstein, "Treating Persons."

⁶ Aristotle, "Book IX."

⁷ Kant, "Moving from."

⁸ Joshua May, "Psychological Egoism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/psychological-egoism/>.

theory of psychological egoism. However, psychological egoists do not reject that humans have altruistic desires. Instead, they claim that “altruistic desires ultimately depend on an egoistic desire that is more basic.”⁹ For example, take the familiar fairytale scenario in which a courageous prince drops whatever he is doing to save a princess from peril. While this noble act is seemingly altruistic as he puts his own life in danger for the sake of hers, it is pursued by egoist desires such as glory or winning over the princess. In this way even by performing a selfless act, there is an egoist desire underlying this action. Whether or not one accepts the theory of psychological egoism, it is undeniable that humans are at times motivated by their own well-being and that they gain satisfaction by helping others. Thus, a person’s tendency for selfish motivation is inevitable. The issue then becomes drawing a line between selfish love and self-love.

In order for an agent to ethically enter a loving relationship, they must practice self-love. If one does not practice self-love they cross a moral boundary into exploitation by using their partner to fulfill needs that they have not fulfilled themselves. This idea is explored in philosopher Amelie Rorty’s article “The Burdens of Love.” According to Rorty, love “requires extended reflection and work.”¹⁰ Rorty first explains the importance of critical reflection in the context of how an agent reflects on their partner. She maintains that through reflection an agent’s “interests and priorities will change” and that “[these] new interests [...] are constitutive expressions of [the agent’s] love.”¹¹ Thus, each agent changes in respect to their partner, and a well-matched couple will find that “their primary interests are compatible.”¹² Next, Rorty assigns the necessity for critical thinking to personal love. An agent’s personal loves, such as his interests and passions, “prompt the same kind of reflective examination.”¹³ Both reflections on a partner’s loves and personal loves are important in order to maintain a dynamic equilibrium in the relationship. Without reflection and thus dynamic equilibrium, the agent risks exploiting their partner as they may lose sight of their own priorities. It is easy for the agent to change themselves to be compatible with their partner’s interests because of their genuine care. However, if in doing so they cannot fulfill their own needs and acknowledge their own passions, they are exploiting their partner to fulfill their own lack of satisfaction. In these ways, an agent must be self-interested by practicing self-love through self-reflection.

However, self-interest must not drive the agent to engage in a relationship solely for utility or pleasure. As discussed previously, self-love is empathetic but selfishness is indifferent. A relationship established on utility exists solely because one or both agents provide benefits to the other. Moreover, a relationship that is maintained due to pleasure is reliant on bodily pleasures each partner can provide. Aristotle also clarifies the difference between good and bad forms of selfishness. He claims that selfishness is bad when the “wicked man” indulges in it as they will over-assign themselves objects of competition such as “wealth, honors, and bodily pleasures.”¹⁴ On the other hand, selfishness is justified when it is a good man who practices it. Even those guided by the highest levels of justice and wisdom are selfish, however, when a good man loves

⁹ May, "Psychological Egoism."

¹⁰ Amelie Rorty, "The Burdens of Love," *The Journal of Ethics* 20, no. 4 (December 2016): 341, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44077337>.

¹¹ Rorty, "The Burdens," 346.

¹² Rorty, "The Burdens," 347.

¹³ Rorty, "The Burdens," 348.

¹⁴ Aristotle, "Book IX."

himself, he will act virtuously. This will therefore cause greater good for himself and others. Aristotle summarizes his claim on selfishness by stating, “the good man should be a lover of self (for he will both himself profit by doing noble acts, and will benefit his fellows), but the wicked man should not; for he will hurt both himself and his neighbors, following as he does evil passions.”¹⁵ Following this logic, selfish love will hurt both the agent and their partner. Thus, it is undeniable that self-interest can be harmful in a loving relationship and lead to selfish love. However, this destructive form of self-interest only occurs when one overly concerns themselves with material things rather than their partner. For these reasons, the negative connotation of self-interest cannot be assigned to self-love.

The idea that love must be self-interested sounds paradoxical as we often view love as an entirely selfless act. However, selfishness is inextricably part of the human experience and thus our loving relationships. In this way, we must alter the negative connotation that self-interest typically holds. To do this, we must establish a difference between selfish love and self-love. Self-love is a positive force as each agent in a relationship is responsible for critical self-reflection in order to maintain a healthy equilibrium. Only once each agent practices these reflections on their own interests as well as their partner's can they establish an ethical relationship because without acknowledging their own passions they may exploit their partner to fulfill passions they have not yet discovered for themselves. In this way self-love is empathetic. Selfish love on the other hand is indifferent. When one loves selfishly they utilize their partner for utility or pleasure. This is morally unjustifiable as following these passions will cause very likely harm to the partner. Ultimately, in order to ethically enter a loving relationship one must “love thyself” but not love selfishly.

¹⁵ Aristotle, "Book IX."

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