

Love and human flourishing

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Abstract: We present arguments that the promotion of love within society has tremendous underutilized potential to enhance human flourishing. Some indication that this may be so can be found in sweeping claims sometimes made about love within philosophical, theological, psychological, sociological, and even economic, business and management literatures. We review definitional and theoretical considerations concerning love and flourishing. We summarize various streams of empirical evidence for the role of love in the promotion of human flourishing. We then argue that social policy oriented towards promoting love within families, friendships, schools, workplaces, religious communities, medicine, politics and the media could make substantial contributions to advancing societal flourishing.

Keywords: love, compassion, flourishing, wellbeing, policy

1. Introduction

In this paper, we would like to put forward empirical, theoretical, and philosophical arguments that the promotion of love within society has tremendous underutilized potential to enhance human flourishing. Love is, by and large, a neglected topic in academic discourse and in social policy. Certainly there are pockets of psychology or philosophy that address aspects of love, but no academic discipline makes the topic central, nor has love as one of its principal sub-disciplines. No modern national policy that we are aware of has made the promotion of love one of its central aims. And yet, when the topic of love is addressed, what is written about it suggests that it perhaps ought to have a greater place in academic study, and in social policy, than it does.

As examples, the contemporary philosopher Harry Frankfurt puts forward the thesis that effectively all of our reasons for action are grounded in love (Frankfurt, 2004). The claim is found in Aquinas as well (Aquinas, 1948/1274; ST I.II.28.6) who furthermore sees love as the cause of all of the various passions (Aquinas, 1948/1274; ST I.II.25.4;27.4). Within contemporary ethics, while certainly a minority view, the thesis has been put forward that love should in fact be the foundation for ethics (White, 2024), echoing religious teachings on the subject.

Love plays a central role within the Jewish tradition and law (Rothenberg, 2008; Neusner, 2010; Levenson, 2016), perhaps constituting the pinnacle or essence of the Torah (Rothenberg, 2008; Wolterstorff, 2011:82). Within the Christian tradition, Jesus taught that love of God and neighbor constituted the greatest commandment upon which hung all of the law (Matthew 22:40), and Saint Paul likewise taught, "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Romans 13:9). In the Hindu tradition, the Sanskrit word *bhakti* ("boundless, unconditional love") refers to aspects of unconditional generous love of others and the divine (Sastry, 2008:110; Lomas, 2018) that are the

basis for “moral unity” (Ranganathan, 2019:372) in Bhakti philosophy, as well as a “fundamental requirement” for “final liberation” in Bhakti spiritual practice (Ravi, 2008:382). The Tibetan word *tsewa*, rendered in English as love, is likewise posited as the “source of all goodness in the world,” the “basis of all beneficial actions” (Kongtrul, 2018:5,6, 16). In Buddhism, *metta* connotes “loving-kindness,” involving a universal and unselfish love for all beings. Such generous, self-giving love has energized world-changing religious, social, and political movements, and finds expression in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s (1967) famous proclamation that “love is ultimately the only answer to [humanity’s] problems.”

The sociologist Pitirim Sorokin similarly wrote, “Love is the supreme value around which all moral values can be integrated into one ethical system valid for the whole of humanity” (Sorokin, 1954:486). Within psychiatry, Frankl (1984:116) claimed that “Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of [their] personality. No one can become fully aware of the essence of another human being unless [one] loves [them].” Influential economist and environmentalist Schumacher (2010:102) argued that conventional economic thinking and practice had put the world on a path towards unmitigated environmental deterioration and that solutions might be found only “by bringing into the situation a force that belongs to a higher level where opposites are transcended—the power of love.” From a “womanist” perspective, the “inevitable violences” of such loveless social systems require mitigation by “love-based technologies of change” (Maparyan, 2012:xiii, xvi), or what a more broadly feminist perspective has characterized as a “creative generativity” in response to crises that is possible only by overcoming the “exclusion of love” from dominant institutions (Bologh, 1990:323-324). If love seems too impractical or idealistic to play the role that philosophers, religious leaders, feminists, and environmentalists have claimed for it, we also note that prominent business leaders have acknowledged that love is the reason their organizations have been “extraordinarily successful” (Chapman and Sisodia, 2015:82) and that love offers a “competitive advantage” because it is “the most powerful force in the universe” (Kofman, quoted in Chapman and Sisodia, 2015:82). And in the management literature as well we find the claim that “all motivations at work can be summarized by a logic of love” (Guillen, 2021:149). Each of these claims is grand and sweeping. Each suggests a fundamental role of love for human flourishing. Each suggests that in academic discourse and in social policy we have neglected the central role of love in the promotion of human flourishing.

In what follows, we hope to take steps to correct this. The goal of the present paper is to make a case for the role of love in the promotion of human flourishing. We acknowledge that there are very real challenges -both conceptual and empirical- in the study of interpersonal love. However, we will try to provide an outline of what has been established already and what future directions might facilitate a more adequate study of love. We will furthermore argue that even based on the limited rigorous academic study of love to date, what is present is already sufficient to indicate that the promotion of love within society has tremendous, and underutilized, potential to enhance human flourishing. We will consider various ways in which love might be promoted within families, friendships, religious communities, schools, workplaces, medicine, politics and the media so as to ultimately contribute to human flourishing, which, as described below, we take to be a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good (VanderWeele, 2017). In short, we will discuss the theoretical and empirical evidence for strategies to build a “civilization of love” (John Paul II, 1991; Catholic Church, 2004:580-583; Osewska and Simonič, 2019) and the evidence that this itself will powerfully advance human flourishing.

At present, scholarship on love remains disorganized and inconsistent, leading one observer to note that love remains a “forgotten variable” even in such as obviously relevant sub-specialties

as marriage therapy, partly because “the word ‘love’ is polysemous in the extreme” (Berscheid, 2010:6). Indeed, the construct has effectively become an “Empire uniting all sorts of feelings, behaviors, and attitudes, sometimes having little in common, under the rubric ‘love’” (Murstein, quoted in Berscheid, 2010:6). Unsurprisingly, a recent bibliometric review based on scholarly articles published between 1940 and 2022 noted “considerable confusion in the field” (Cebal-Loureda et al., 2024:4). In practice, this has meant that most studies have focused on limited aspects of love, sometimes without using the term, and often only concerning a particular relationship type; as the aforementioned review notes: “love research in the earliest years covered by our analysis tended to focus on sexuality and romantic relationships, but that more recently the field has taken a modest turn towards the ethical field” (Cebal-Loureda et al., 2024:8). Social policies are difficult to formulate based on such fragmented, inconsistent, and narrow definitions of love that only recently have considered ethical foundations. We suggest that better policies will result if they are grounded in the fullest and most broadly applicable expressions of love, with sufficient attention also to ethics. The preponderance of cross-sectional studies, moreover, also limits the policy relevance of the extant research. In our view, in order to be more useful in promoting flourishing in daily life and via social policy, research on love would do well to explore ethical and broadly applicable understandings of love *longitudinally*.

2. Definition of love and objects of love

Unquestionably some of the difficulty in the study of, and social policy concerning, love is that the word “love” is used in a variety of different ways and contexts, and its definition has been subject to considerable dispute (Martin, 2019; Grau and Smuts, 2024). The word “love” is used in a dizzying array of contexts (Hacker, 2018). Nevertheless there are commonalities and family resemblances in the way the word is used (Hacker, 2018; VanderWeele, 2023; Grau and Smuts, 2024; Hegi and Bergner, 2010; Wright, 2012; Lee, 2022; Rempel, 2013; Wolterstorff, 2011), as described below. However, to illustrate some of the complexities, the widely cited “triangular theory of love” (Sternberg, 1986) posits that romantic love is comprised of three components: passion (“drives that lead to romance [and] physical attraction”), intimacy (“feelings of closeness”), and commitment (a decision to make a “long-term commitment to a loving relationship”). As helpful as this framework might be for romantic love, it is not clear that it is applicable in non-romantic relationships. Additionally, some expressions of love do not require long-term commitment, such as, for example, selfless acts of compassion or care for one’s neighbor or even strangers. The definition of “love” thus often remains amorphous. While definitions are unlikely to be ever definitively settled, we will put forward a definition for use in this paper, and one that we believe also characterizes the ordinary language use of “love” when employed as a verb (VanderWeele, 2023).

Roughly following Aquinas (1274/1948) and Stump (2006), we have argued elsewhere that all uses of the verb “love” involve either a unitive component or a contributory component or both (VanderWeele, 2023), i.e. either a desire to be united with the beloved, or to contribute to the good of the beloved, or both. More precisely, whenever the expression “He/she loves . . .” is employed, then “love” is used to indicate either: (i) “a disposition toward desiring a perceived good or desiring union with it, either as an end itself or with it being a source of delight in itself” (i.e., unitive love) or (ii) “a disposition towards desiring good for a particular object for its own sake” (i.e., contributory love), or both (VanderWeele, 2023). Part of the difficulty in analyzing love is that unitive love and contributory love have distinct characteristics (Stump 2006; VanderWeele, 2023) and what applies to one does not necessarily apply to the other. Part of the difficulty is also that the word “love” is often used when either unitive or contributory aspects

are present, but also often used when both are present; and, with interpersonal relationships especially, it is often assumed that the two will, or ought to, go hand and hand. The use of “love” for one of the two phenomena, versus both, helps explain some of the disputes over love. Some of the puzzles and paradoxes concerning love can arguably be addressed by recognizing there are two distinct aspects of love and that the word is used when either, or both, are present and then proceeding with analysis with each of the two aspects in mind (VanderWeele, 2023). Consensus on definitions is unlikely to ever be entirely resolved, but recognizing both of these distinct aspects can again help clarify analysis.

Some of the complexity of love also concerns the potential diversity of its objects (Hacker, 2018; Stump, 2006). We can love friends, family, our country, food, or justice. We can love people, pets, things, places, communities, activities, ideals, the divine, etc. Different objects admit unitive or contributory love, or both. While perhaps all of our various loves have a place in the attaining of human flourishing, the focus of the present essay will be on interpersonal love, when the object of love is a person, and the place of such interpersonal love in the promotion of human flourishing. However, even with interpersonal love, the objects of love are diverse and might include one’s children, one’s friends, one’s romantic partners, or even one’s neighbor, or strangers, or one’s enemy, or God. What constitutes, and what is proper to, unitive and contributory love in each of these types of relationships varies (Stump, 2006; Hacker, 2018; VanderWeele, 2023). However, all of these various relationships and objects of interpersonal love do, as will be argued below, play an important role in human flourishing.

3. Theoretical considerations

The goal of the present paper is to make a case for the role of love in the promotion of human flourishing. A variety of further theoretical and conceptual considerations are relevant in understanding these relationships. Although a comprehensive treatment of theoretical considerations concerning love, or concerning flourishing, is well beyond the scope of this essay, we instead provide an admittedly abbreviated overview of some of the theoretical and conceptual considerations relevant to the *intersection* of love and human flourishing. We indicate why, on theoretical grounds, one might expect the promotion of love to contribute to human flourishing, and in the following section we review some of the more rigorous empirical evidence that this is indeed the case. Both the theoretical and the empirical sections then lay the groundwork for the subsequent section on how we might incorporate the promotion of love into social policy to enhance human flourishing.

As noted above, love is a contested concept, manifesting a range of definitions and conceptualizations. The same is true of flourishing. The working definition of flourishing that we have employed in our past work is “the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good, including the contexts in which that person lives” (VanderWeele, 2017; VanderWeele and Lomas, 2023). Understood thus, flourishing is multidimensional: one may be flourishing in certain ways, but not others. Flourishing might be understood to include happiness, health, meaning, character, relationships, and financial stability (VanderWeele, 2017), but such things do not exhaust flourishing since flourishing pertains to “all aspects of a person’s life.” Flourishing is also an ideal; it concerns the “relative attainment” of that ideal; we never perfectly attain it, and there is always room for improvement. Flourishing also includes the “contexts in which a person lives”, including one’s communities and environment. The community’s wellbeing is a part of one’s own flourishing, both because the community and environment can facilitate (or impede) one’s own wellbeing, but also because a person participates in the common good of the community itself.

We will not here be providing a full defense of our definitions and conceptualization of love and of flourishing, nor a comparison with competing definitions and conceptualizations. We have done some of that work elsewhere (VanderWeele, 2017, 2023, 2024; Lee, 2022; VanderWeele and Lomas, 2023; VanderWeele et al., 2023; Lomas et al., 2023, 2024). Rather we will take as a starting point the understanding of love and of flourishing given above, and will summarize some of the relevant theoretical considerations concerning the relations between love and flourishing thus understood, acknowledging that other definitions and understandings are present in the literature. However, much of what we describe below, both with regard to theory, and later with regard to empirical evidence, would be relevant under many alternative conceptualizations of love and flourishing as well.

As noted above, interpersonal love involves both a unitive dimension and a contributory dimension. Love's unitive dimension seeks to be with, and in some sense, be one with the other person. Love's contributory dimension seeks to provide what is good for the beloved. We might say that love involves both seeking the good which is constituted by the other, and seeking the good for the other. Love for another person, both in its unitive and contributory aspects, thus has at least some potential to bring wholeness and healing to the beloved.

One way in which love contributes to the flourishing or wholeness of the beloved is by the affirmation of the goodness of their being, of who they are as persons. An historical review of love suggests that this sense of wholeness is sometimes constituted by a powerful experience of being "at home in the world" and of "the hope of an indestructible grounding for our life" (May, 2011:6). Both in promoting the other's good, and in being with the other person, the beloved's experience of that love can make the person feel fulfilled. In being loved, one knows that one is valued and cared for. The goodness of one's very being is affirmed (Pieper, 1974). Such affirmation may contribute to a person's happiness, their sense of meaning, and potentially their character. The unitive aspect of love involves a recognition of, and a delighting in, the goodness of the other person. Contributory love involves the recognition of some good that might be contributed, sometimes grounded in the acknowledgement that the person is in some sense worthy of that contribution. Both unitive and contributory love concern goodness, and both in general affirm the goodness of the other's being.

In addition to fostering psychologically positive feelings, interpersonal love has profound neurophysiological consequences that can affect the body and can affect health, and that further help explain the prominent place of love in human experience. Love literally "gets under our skin." This is true for experience commonly labeled *falling in love*, as well as forms of loving associated with deep relatedness and mutual beneficence, though they are neurologically separate: "*loving* is limbically distinct from *in love*" (Lewis et al., 2001:207). In expressions of interpersonal love that involve repeated physical proximity and mutual benefit over time (e.g., committed relationships), the limbic system which regulates emotional experiences is especially implicated: "Limbic regulation affords lovers the ability to modulate each other's emotions, neurophysiology, hormonal status, immune function, sleep rhythms, and stability" (Lewis et al., 2001:207-8). As a result, when one person leaves for several days or longer, the other may experience a variety of physiological consequences, including a suppressed immune system, sleep disturbances, a delayed menstrual cycle, and even changes in markers of inflammation associated with mortality (Jolink, 2023). The social-physiological reciprocity encourages an embodied "calm and connect" response, rather than the stressful and mortality inducing "fight, flight, or freeze" response, that is beneficial to long-term physical health and psychological wellbeing (Fredrickson, 2016, 2018).

Love of course also fosters relationships. Desiring to be with the other person, and spending time with the other person, is effectively what allows relationships themselves to form, develop, and deepen. The feeling of being loved encourages an unconditional affection for the source, regardless of whether this source is flawed or even harmful to us in other ways (May, 2011). There is a joy that comes in loving, and a joy that comes in loving relationships; there is a sharing of life, a delighting in, and a deepening understanding of the other person and an enjoying of their presence (Simpson and Campbell, 2013; Maddux, 2024). Such relationships are of intrinsic value in and of themselves, but also provide social support which can contribute to the material and psychological wellbeing, both in general and perhaps especially in times of need. However, the origin of such relationships begins with various forms of love.

As social creatures, love itself is arguably simply a basic need. Attachment theory points to the importance of and need for love (Cassidy et al., 2013; Holmes, 2014). We are born with needs to form bonds and attachments that shape us throughout our lives. Such needs arguably constitute needs for love. The importance of love is also prominent in Winnicott's classic observations of infants and his conclusion that those who feel "sufficiently loved and secure" to explore the environment experience greater wellbeing than those who do not, a phenomenon which has been observed with university students as well (Lee et al., 2021:204). Indeed, well-known findings from the 1940s reported by psychoanalyst Spitz demonstrated that the experience of care and affection was literally a matter of life and death for orphaned infants. In order to prevent exposure to hazardous diseases, a group of institutionalized infants were "fed and clothed, and kept warm and clean, but they were not played with, handled, or held... a great many died" (Lewis et al, 2000:69). Minimal standards of care do not qualify as love (Hooks, 2001). Love extends beyond beneficent or prosocial acts. Love is the consistent desire to both be with and contribute to the good of the other. Love recognizes and is drawn by the goodness of the other. Love persists in good action even amidst challenges and difficulties.

Contributory love essentially directly aims at the flourishing of the beloved. Seeking of the good for others may of course be constituted by providing for their material needs. But it may extend beyond this so as to include seeking the flourishing of the beloved more broadly, seeking to enable some measure of happiness, meaning, or a sense of relational connectedness. Love can be a powerful motivational force that can encourage additional acts of love and inspire positive changes (Rempel, 2013), possibly including reproach of loved ones when they do wrong, in the spirit of "loving forth the good" in them (Kierkegaard, 2015:61) and encouraging their development in character (Wolterstorff, 2011). When seeking the good of the other takes place in the context of seeing the other's suffering, it is sometimes referred to as compassion (Strauss et al., 2016) or compassionate love (Sprecher and Fehr, 2005; Fehr et al., 2009; Oman, 2011); but contributory love –seeking the good of the other– can arise in other contexts as well, when someone's suffering is not in view. Seeking to help others flourish, especially if this is framed in terms of seeking their deepest and most profound wellbeing, requires intimate knowledge of the other (Frankl, 1984; Hooks, 2001). Such contributory love will, in most cases, make it more likely for the other person's wellbeing to be enhanced.

Unitive love may sometimes be present without contributory love, if for example passion is expressed as jealous infatuation, without concern for the wellbeing or wishes of the beloved. In order to avoid confusion, some scholars prefer terms such as compassionate love, loving-kindness, mature love, *shalom*, *caritas*, *agape*, charity, loving care, self-giving love, and the like (e.g., Post 2022; Lee 2022). At times, *eros* (self-seeking love) and *agape* (self-giving love, spiritual love) are framed as in opposition (Nygren, 1982), although a cross-cultural review suggests that synthesis is the norm, with some cultural systems placing greater emphasis on one aspect or the

other while still viewing them as complimentary (Sorokin, 1954). In most contexts, love often but not always involves both giving and receiving in relationships characterized by some degree of mutuality. The question of whether “unitive love” without a contributory aspect truly constitutes “love” is arguably itself an important feature of our ordinary language concerning love (VanderWeele, 2023), pointing towards the expectation and hope that in interpersonal relationships, both unitive and contributory love will be present.

The forms of unitive and contributory love that are appropriate will inevitably vary by the nature of the relationship (Stump, 2006; Hacker, 2018; VanderWeele, 2023). What is appropriate and what can be contributed in a parent-child relationship is very different than in a spousal or romantic relationship. What is appropriate in a deep friendship is very different than what is appropriate with a neighbor, or stranger. While the concept of love of neighbor in principle suggests that love, and contribution to another’s flourishing can be extended to all people, deeper forms of love are realized in closer and longer-term relationships with friends and family. However, these more preferential forms of love may themselves provide insight into a more expansive universal love of neighbor (Hanson, 2022). Moreover, the respect and recognition of the other’s humanity of such universal love of neighbor should also be present even in closer more intimate relationships as well, and preferential intimate loves might in fact be conceived of as what arises from full recognition of the humanity of the intimate other in the context of that particular relationship, so that, when properly ordered, there is in fact a unity to our interpersonal loves and the variation arises simply from the nature of the relationship (Hanson, 2023).

In considering the nature and extent of love, Sorokin (1954) distinguishes five dimensions: intensity, extensity, purity, duration, adequacy. Intensity refers to the strength of love; extensity concern the range of objects and people to which one’s love extends; duration concerns the time span for which that love is present; purity concerns the extent to which the love truly is seeking the good of the other for the other’s sake, rather than for some other motive; and adequacy concerns the relative attainment of the objective consequences of seeking to contribute to the other’s good. An intense pure adequate love of long duration that extends to all persons – a perfect love of neighbor – is bound to contribute substantially to greater flourishing within the world.

The love of others clearly has the capacity to contribute to the wellbeing of others. But it is well-known that loving others can also contribute to a person’s own wellbeing: “In the giving of self lies the unsought discovery of [a better] self” (Post, 2003:3; Post, 2017; Nakamura et al., 2022). Our love for others is part of who we are as persons; loving others is a part of our own flourishing. Loving others, contributing to their good, spending time with them, coming to know them all builds relationships. Such relationships and communities are an important constitutive part of our own wellbeing and can further contribute in various ways to other aspects of our wellbeing (Maddux, 2024; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Hong et al., 2023). As one contributes to the good of others, this may itself be accompanied by a sense of purpose, or satisfaction, or alternatively a sense of growth or goodness in the exercise of one’s capacities to contribute to the wellbeing of another. We are social creatures, and love is in some sense part of the fulfillment of our very being.

Loving others, and seeking the good of others, not only contributes to their own good, but can also prompt and promote similar acts of kindness and love in others as well (Fowler and Christakis, 2010; Jordan et al., 2013; Chancellor et al., 2018). There can be a powerful reciprocity and contagion of love and of loving action that, when operative, can extend not just between two individuals but in fact through an entire community and beyond. Love can bring wholeness and

healing to individuals, and can have the capacity to spread, bringing love and spreading wellbeing yet further.

Love thus affects not only individuals, but also the wellbeing of communities. Love of others contributes to the good of others, allows for the enjoyment of the good of others, and affirms to the other their own goodness. When this takes place, not just between two people, but between many, community life is allowed to emerge in a fuller richness, thereby potentially creating trust, belonging, welcome, mutual support and care – a flourishing community. Such characteristics may be thought of as hallmarks of “beloved community,” where “redemption” and “reconciliation” are practiced in a manner that extends solidarity to all people without exception (Marsh, 2005:5; see also Post, 2003). Given the centrality of love to relationships, and of relationships to community, the relevance of love arguably extends to many forms of community life, from families to schools to workplaces to religious communities, neighborhoods and nations. Love of one another is fundamentally what will allow relationships to develop and for community life to flourish.

Love can be promoted. Love may of course arise naturally in seeing the value of others and coming to desire good for them and to be with them. But love can also be fostered. Work can be done to ensure that there is an understanding of the value of each and every person. Efforts can be made to facilitate such an understanding. Each person can come to view every other person as of fundamental value and dignity, as someone for whom it is worthwhile to contribute to, as someone with whom it is good to be with. Love arising from the recognition of the goodness, dignity and worth of the other allows us to contribute to the needs of the other while preserving their dignity and respect (Velleman, 1999) since recognizing the inherent worth of the other, and thereby desiring to be present or united with the other, affirms to the other their value and worth. A return – again and again – to the fundamental value and dignity of each human person, and of the importance of love, can facilitate love within communities. If love is grounded in human dignity and if such a grounding enhances flourishing (Hitlin and Andersson, 2023), then this arguably provides grounds not only for love of friends and family, but also for love of neighbor, love of stranger, and even love of enemy.

For love to persist within society, in relationships or within community, there need to be mechanisms to restore love in the face of harm or wrongdoing. If one is harmed by another, it can be difficult to love. When such harmful actions are persistent, reference is sometimes made to one’s “enemy” – someone who consistently desires harm for oneself. Nevertheless, if all people are of value and worth, and these are ultimately the grounds for love, then love could include also love of enemy. Such love of enemy does not ignore or neglect the harm or wrongdoing, but it persists in goodwill even in the face of such wrongdoing. When we are harmed, we are often rightly angry, but that anger, when directed properly, is to address the harm and to right the wrong or injustice that has been done. Doing so may involve rebuke or punishment of the wrongdoer, but not hatred, not desiring to harm them simply so that the perpetrator might suffer, but rather so as to correct or prevent further wrongdoing, or to restore justice within the community (Koritansky, 2012; Potts, 2023; VanderWeele, 2024). Love of enemy sees the wrongdoing as itself an indication of the need of the offender for healing and restoration – a need for a re-orientation from ill-will towards goodwill. Such love of enemy will thus include forgiveness. Forgiveness itself might be understood as the replacing of ill-will towards an offender with goodwill; forgiveness is in some sense a restoration of contributory love following an offense.

Love of enemy has the potential to free the one loving from hatred, to end cycles of hatred, and can sometimes help bring about transformation of the wrongdoer or change, reconciliation, or peace (King, 1957; Brooks, 2019). It is not guaranteed to do so because the other person is free,

but it might invite such change. Responding to harm with love is counter-intuitive, paradoxical, and may confuse and confound those who wish one harm (Wink, 2003). That response of love may even infuriate and provoke an offender yet further, but that response of love may also alternatively bring peace and repentance. It may overcome evil with good. Love for one's enemies is a pathway towards the end of enmities, towards reconciliation, towards peace and wholeness of all people, towards the healing of communities. Just as acts of love can prompt similar actions in others, so also acts of hatred can prompt hatred in others in return (Huesmann, 2018). Something must break the cycle of hatred and acts of hatred, and love has the capacity to do this. Love of enemy is a radical approach to break such cycles of hatred at its root. If practiced universally, enmities would cease.

4. Empirical evidence

We will now consider empirical evidence relating love and human flourishing. As with our overview of the theoretical considerations, we will not consider all research on love, but will restrict attention to that principally focused on the relation of love to flourishing. The empirical study of love at present faces a number of challenges. Part of the challenge is the dizzying array of definitions that have been put forward (Martin, 2019; Grau and Smuts, 2024). This has in turn led to a host of different and disparate measures or assessments concerning love (Hatfield et al., 2012; Hendrick and Hendrick, 2019; Sternberg and Sternberg, 2019; Levin, 2023), some of which have been influential in research on some forms of love. For example, Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love has been widely cited in psychology and related fields. But no measure has received particular traction across relationship types within the empirical research literature. As with definitions, complete consensus concerning measurement is unlikely ever to be attained, and, with measurement, complete uniformity may not be entirely desirable. Nevertheless, somewhat greater conceptual and empirical commonalities might facilitate empirical research on love. Larger groups of researchers using the same or similar sets of theoretically and psychometrically grounded measures could go some way in advancing the field, even if there remain multiple such groups and multiple measures.

Another challenge that faces the empirical study of love is the fact that much of the empirical research that does exist makes use of cross-sectional data, with data on the assessments of love collected at the same time as possible outcomes. These possible outcome may be influenced by love, or alternatively, may be possible causes of love itself. This is problematic because one cannot in general provide any sort of evidence for causation from such cross-sectional studies (VanderWeele, 2021). For example, it is impossible to discern from cross-sectional data whether an association between love and happiness is because love contributes to happiness, or happiness to love, or both. There has been a great deal of research on the triangular theory of love using the Triangle Love Scale (TLS) and this has indicated that, for example, the passionate aspect of love tends to decline over time. However, such data also needs to be linked to possible outcomes and antecedents, and researchers continue to call for longitudinal studies to "test the possibility that changes in perceptions of alternatives precede changes in satisfaction and love across time, rather than the other way around" (Sorokowski et al., 2021:50-51; see also Cassep-Borges, 2023; Tang, 2007). Longitudinal or experimental designs capable of addressing such issues remain in short supply (see Sprecher and Felmlee (1992) for an exception based on measures other than the TLS). Empirical research on love and flourishing with longitudinal data thus remains in a relatively rudimentary state.

Nevertheless, in spite of these challenges, there is a small body of more rigorous longitudinal studies and randomized trials that supports, directly or indirectly, the notion that love is

conducive to health and human flourishing. More rigorous research in at least five domains is relevant: (i) parental love, (ii) marital love, (iii) forgiveness, (iv) interventions promoting compassion, and (v) interventions promoting beneficent action. We will review each of these in turn. In several cases, the empirical research does not concern love *per se*, but rather indirectly or tangentially provides evidence for the thesis that love promotes human flourishing (cf. Long and VanderWeele, 2023). Other reviews also discuss relationships between love and wellbeing, though often drawing upon cross-sectional data (Levin, 2023; Maddux, 2024). Better measures, more rigorous longitudinal designs, and a clearer focus on love, however, would be important to more definitively establish the salience of love itself, beyond various other aspects of parenting or marriage, etc. There is likely mutual reinforcement between love and other aspects of relationships and understanding this better also would be valuable. In any case, we will consider each of the five domains above in turn, discussing studies that employ longitudinal data or randomized trials.

First, there is a moderate body of more rigorous longitudinal evidence concerning parental love or warmth and subsequent health and wellbeing of the beloved child (Huppert et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2019ab). Parental love in most cases will involve both unitive and contributory aspects – both desiring to be with the child and contribute to their good. Many of the existing studies use assessments of parental warmth or relationship quality that may serve as a proxy for such love. These measures often include participation in nurturing relations (e.g., helping a child understand moral goodness), as well as meaningful togetherness and involvement in life activities, which collectively contribute to a “virtuous cycle” of flourishing (Chen et al., 2019a:70). Using longitudinal data from the Midlife in the United States study across a 10-year period, Chen et al. (2019a) provided evidence that the experience of parental warmth growing up was associated with greater flourishing, including greater emotional wellbeing (life satisfaction and positive affect), psychological wellbeing (personal growth, mastery, purpose, positive relations, autonomy, and self-acceptance) and social wellbeing (e.g. social integration, and social contribution) as well as less depression and drug use. Huppert et al. (2010), using a British sample, likewise provide similar evidence for effects of parental care or warmth on psychological wellbeing (personal growth, mastery, purpose, positive relations, and self-acceptance). Chen et al. (2019b) examined various parenting practices and presented evidence from several years of longitudinal data indicating that authoritative parenting styles characterized by high levels of both warmth and discipline were associated with greater emotional processing and expression, fewer health problems, lower risk of obesity/overweight, less depression, and less overeating. Importantly, when examining other parenting styles, it appeared to be parental warmth that was especially dominant in giving rise to longitudinal association with these outcomes, and child self-assessed relationship quality, possibly a proxy for love, was effectively the strongest parenting predictor of the wellbeing outcomes (Chen et al., 2019b).

A second body of evidence concerns marriage and marital love. Once again, in the context of a healthy marriage, the love that is present will generally have both unitive and contributory aspects. Most of the relevant rigorous longitudinal research does not, at present, specifically assess love, but rather uses assessments of relationship quality, or marriage itself, as its measure. Marriage and relationship quality within marriage are at best only proxies for love, yet proxies that, within many marriages, may bear a relatively close connection to love itself. Marriage in many contexts is a source of love, though certainly not all. However, viewed through such a lens, the evidence is considerable (cf. Long and VanderWeele, 2023). Marriage and marital quality have been associated in longitudinal studies with lower risk of mortality. One study indicated that those in high-satisfaction marriages were over three times more likely to be alive 15 years

after heart surgery compared to those who reported low marital satisfaction (King and Reis, 2012); another study indicated that unmarried persons had nearly two times the hazard of dying after cardiac surgery compared to married persons (Idler et al. 2012). Meta-analyses of longitudinal studies have also indicated associations between marriage and lower all-cause mortality in non-clinical samples (Manzoli et al., 2007; Wood et al., 2007). Meta-analyses of longitudinal studies likewise indicate that not just marriage itself but also marital quality is associated with lower mortality risk (Robles et al., 2014). With respect to other outcomes, an analysis of National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) data found that as adolescents grew up and transitioned to marriage, they experienced a decline in depression symptoms and suicidal ideation (Amato, 2015); a longitudinal study of African American couples found a reduction in the number of serious health conditions following marriage (Haldane et al., 2010), reduced likelihood of diabetes for women, and reduced likelihood of death for men (Schwandt et al. 2010). Other reviews of the relationship between marriage and health have found consistently positive, albeit nuanced, relationships between marriage and subsequent wellbeing (Koball et al. 2010, Wood et al. 2007). Chen et al. (2023) report longitudinal associations over 25 years between entering marriage and lower mortality, coronary heart disease, and stroke; lower depression, loneliness, and smoking; and greater happiness, purpose in life, and hopefulness; and all of this even taking into account that entering marriage entails the possibility of subsequent divorce which can detract from wellbeing. There is also a considerable body of evidence that marriage itself shapes the wellbeing of children (McLanahan and Gandefur, 1994; Waite and Gallagher, 2000; Maier and Lachman, 2000; Amato and Sobolewski, 2001; Wood et al., 2007; Wilcox, 2011). It is possible that love of spouses within a healthy marriage is critical in having the children themselves feel loved – love can have the capacity to spill over from one relationship to another, a phenomenon that we will turn to again later. While these studies do not directly study the phenomenon of love, healthy marriages will almost inevitably involve various aspects of love, and for many are the primary adult relationship context in which love is experienced.

A third body of evidence concerns forgiveness. Forgiveness has sometimes been defined as the replacement of ill-will towards an offender with good-will (Worthington, 2013; VanderWeele, 2018). Understood as such, forgiveness might be seen as a restoration of contributory love following an offense. Large longitudinal studies have indicated that forgiveness of others is associated with subsequently lower levels of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress and higher levels of happiness, self-esteem, emotional processing, social integration, and volunteering (Chen et al., 2019c; Long et al., 2020). Even more compelling evidence comes from randomized trials of forgiveness interventions. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses of such intervention studies have indicated that these interventions to promote forgiveness have effects not only on increasing forgiveness, but also on reducing depression and anxiety and increasing hope (Wade et al., 2014, 2020). Components of these interventions have been converted into a self-directed workbook format, and a large randomized trial in five countries likewise indicated effects of the use of the workbook on increasing forgiveness, reducing depression and anxiety, and increasing various aspects of flourishing including happiness, self-rated health, meaning, character, and social relationships (Ho et al., 2024).

A fourth body of evidence concerns randomized trials of interventions to promote compassion. Compassion might be understood as the extending of contributory love in the context of the suffering of another. There is evidence from randomized trials that interventions to promote compassion and loving-kindness can improve various aspects of wellbeing (Jazaieri et al., 2013, 2014; Galante et al., 2014; Kirby et al., 2017). Many of the randomized trials have

focused on some form of compassion training or loving-kindness meditation; although a number of these studies have not in fact examined effects on compassion or love itself, a few have, and have found effects (Jazaieri et al., 2013; Kirby et al., 2017). In addition to promoting compassion, some of these various interventions have been found to have effects on greater happiness (Jazaieri et al., 2014; Kirby et al., 2017); greater mindfulness (Jazaieri et al., 2014; Galante et al., 2014; Kirby et al., 2017); less depression (Galante et al., 2014; Kirby et al., 2017) and less worry or anxiety (Jazaieri et al., 2014; Kirby et al., 2017). A number of the compassion training programs focus specifically on love or compassion in the context of suffering, but the loving kindness meditation interventions are in principle more general and potentially suitable for widespread use, in the promotion of love and enhancing the various aforementioned aspects of flourishing.

A fifth body of evidence concerns experimental studies on beneficent action (cf. Curry et al., 2018; VanderWeele, 2020). Such beneficent action intended to promote good of others is again not the equivalent of love since one can carry out beneficent action for reasons other than love. Nevertheless, love in most cases will result in beneficent action, and beneficent actions are often motivated by love and may in turn prompt love. Beneficent actions once again may be taken as serving as a proxy for love. Evidence from randomized trials suggests that being instructed to carry out several acts of kindness (that one would not ordinarily otherwise do) each week, over the course of several weeks, can increase one's happiness and life satisfaction, and make one feel more engaged, less anxious, and more connected (Buchanan and Bardi, 2010; Ouweneel et al., 2014; Kerr et al., 2015). A recent meta-analysis combining evidence across 27 different trials found similar effects on happiness and positive emotions (Curry et al., 2018). Such acts of kindness can thus promote not only the wellbeing of others, but the wellbeing of the actor as well. Relatedly, a number of longitudinal studies have indicated that volunteering, which might be seen as a sort of commitment to repeated acts of kindness, can contribute to one's own wellbeing. Volunteer organizations also can provide a powerful sense of social connection, and a common purpose. Observational studies, and meta-analyses of these, supported by some small randomized trials on promoting doing good, giving to others, and volunteering, have also indicated that those regularly engaged in volunteering tend to subsequently be happier, have more social activities, have better physical and mental health, and also live longer (Okun et al., 2013; Anderson et al., 2014; Pool et al., 2017; Post, 2017; Kim et al., 2020). There is also evidence that acts of kindness often further encourage others to undertake similar acts of kindness, and these acts of kindness can thus propagate (Fowler and Christakis, 2010; Jordan et al., 2013; Chancellor et al., 2018). Fowler and Christakis (2010), for example, present experimental evidence that the recipient of an action of goodwill is more likely to go on to act similarly, that the contagion effects of altruistic action may extend so far that a positive interaction between two persons can propagate through a social network and ultimately affect the interaction of two other persons neither of whom know either person in the original pair. In their experiments they estimate that each additional contribution a subject initially makes to the public good is eventually tripled by other subjects who are directly or indirectly influenced to contribute more as a consequence.

As noted above, the longitudinal empirical study of love is in a relatively early stage of its development. Until more adequate measures are available and are widely deployed, empirical evidence concerning the potential effects of love on flourishing, and on various ways of promoting love, will often remain indirect. Nevertheless, the accumulation of the both direct and indirect empirical evidence on love has, over the last couple of decades, become increasingly compelling. With respect to the promotion of forgiveness and compassion, the evidence is arguably fairly direct. The interventions that have been developed to promote love in these forms have indeed been successful at increasing forgiveness and compassion, and have moreover been

successful at improving mental health and happiness, at alleviating depression and anxiety, and at enhancing flourishing more broadly. The evidence concerning the effects of parenting and marriage and of acts of kindness and volunteering on wellbeing has become increasingly rigorous but its relevance for love is somewhat more indirect. Family and marriage are a common context for love and loving relationships, though this is not necessarily universal. Acts of kindness are often motivated by love and result in deepening love, but do not necessarily correspond to love per se, as such beneficent acts can also have other motivations. Nevertheless, the cumulative sum of the present evidence, across these five distinct literatures, taken together, strongly suggest that love has effects on outcomes as diverse as longevity and health; happiness, hope, and purpose; social integration and social relationships; depression, anxiety, and drug use; along with a variety of composite measures of flourishing. The evidence moreover suggests that interventions to promote various aspects of love can indeed be effective. In the next section we will draw upon the various empirical evidence, along with the theoretical considerations above, to consider what actions and policies might be employed to promote love and thereby enhance human flourishing.

5. Social policy

5.1 *The ubiquity of opportunities to love and population impact*

The population-level impact of a phenomenon, or exposure, or intervention is often taken as a function of two things: first, the size of the effects on the relevant outcomes, and second, the prevalence of the exposure or phenomenon under consideration. Exposures or interventions which are both common and have large effects on the outcomes that one cares about are going to shape population outcomes. When there is the possibility of contagion or spillover effects of a particular phenomenon or intervention then a third consideration concerning population impact relates to the extent and magnitude of such spillover (VanderWeele and Christakis, 2019).

With respect to love then, these various considerations suggest that the population-level impact of love on human flourishing is very substantial indeed. As indicated in the previous section, there is evidence that various forms of love in different types of relationships have notable effects on a variety of outcomes ranging from health to happiness, depression, social connectedness and broad composite measures of flourishing. Moreover, the opportunities for love are ubiquitous. They are present in all types of relationships: with family, and with friends; with colleagues, and with neighbors; and potentially even with strangers and with enemies. They are present in schools and workplaces, in neighborhoods and religious communities, within politics and national life, and even in unexpected everyday interactions. The opportunities both to give, and to receive, love are almost endless. But finally, in addition to the large effects of love on wellbeing and the ubiquity of the opportunities to love, it is also the case, as indicated above, that love has the potential for considerable contagion and spillover. On these various grounds, we should expect love to shape population-level health and wellbeing. If this is indeed the case, then the neglect of social policy aimed at promoting love is a critical missed opportunity. It is perhaps in part the very ubiquity of the opportunities to love –that it arises every day in all sorts of contexts– that may make us blind to its potential for the promotion of flourishing.

Unfortunately, however, this is not the whole story. Accompanying the opportunities to love are corresponding opportunities to hate. In each of our interactions with each person – whether face-to-face or virtual – we have the opportunity to love and respect the other, but analogously the opportunity to hate, disrespect, ridicule, despise or otherwise do harm to others. In some contexts, love may seem to come more naturally, as within families (though even in families there is of course the potential for harm and hate as well). However, in other contexts, hate and disrespect may seem the primary mode characterizing interaction, as perhaps today with political

polarization or sometimes with social media use. Our relative neglect of the opportunities to promote love carries with it a corresponding failure to make use of opportunities to prevent hate. And there is evidence that hate and harmful actions also can have considerable contagion (Huesmann, 2018). This too can shape population-level wellbeing. The promotion of love is important to enhance human flourishing; the promotion of love is also important so as to more effectively prevent hate and the toll it can take on human wellbeing.

In what follows, we will thus consider various evidence-based strategies, grounded in the empirical literature and the theoretical considerations above, that might be employed to promote love in a variety of contexts and settings. We will consider the promotion of love within family and friendships; within schools and workplaces; within religious and other communities; within academic study; within politics and economics, and within news media and social media. Each of these contexts, we will argue, provides opportunities to promote love in distinct ways. Some of these opportunities for promotion are more obvious; some are more subtle. But if greater effort at both the individual level, and at the level of social policy, were oriented towards the promotion of love, the evidence we believe suggests that love would indeed be effectively facilitated and human flourishing powerfully enhanced.

5.2 Love within family and friendships

As noted above, love within parent-child relationships seems particularly important for the subsequent wellbeing of children (Huppert et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2019ab). Attachment theory likewise points to the importance of love (Cassidy et al., 2013; Holmes, 2014). In some ways, love provides the foundation and security for the child's subsequent development. While other parenting practices are of course critical as well, love within parent-child relationships is central. Discipline and control, in the absence of loving, does not on average lead to particularly good outcomes (Chen et al., 2019b). Love is needed. This has a number of important policy implications. First, given the importance of that experience of love and nurturing during the first years of a child's life (Thurow, 2017; Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2019), parental leave policies could be shaped so as to allow for a more generous allocation of time for the parents to be with, and to love, their children. Second, while parenting skills are often passed down within families across generations, greater efforts at providing training for evidence-based parenting approaches that facilitate love could be offered (Cedar and Levant, 1990; Gordon, 2008). Third, since love requires time with children, policies could be shaped so as to allow for having such time. This pertains both to policies aimed at sufficiently flexible work schedules to facilitate family life (Fox et al., 2022) and also to adequate, living, or family wage structures so that even if only one parent is in paid employment family life can be sustained so as to allow more total time of the parents with the children (Brenan, 2019; Greco, 2023; Lind, 2023; Case et al., 2025). These various strategies could help further facilitate parent-child love.

As discussed above, the flourishing of both children and spouses is often facilitated by the love within marriage. Such love could likewise be promoted. Evidence-based relationship enhancement strategies have been developed (e.g. Babcock et al., 2013; Nichols, 2018), and these could be widely disseminated. Likewise, evidence-based marital counseling programs to help address marital problems have advanced in recent years (Halford and Doss, 2016; Doss et al., 2016; Ooms, 2019). These too could be widely disseminated so as to try to address marital problems before they seem so bad that divorce seems like the only options. Online evidence-based programs (Doss et al., 2016) may hold special promise in terms of relative ease of widespread dissemination, low cost, and low barriers to use. These various strategies could help

advance love within marriages, both between spouses, and then in turn also a greater experience of love for children as well.

Love can of course also occur within friendship. The powerful effects of relationships and community life (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Hong et al., 2023; Shor and Roelfs, 2013; Kim et al., 2023) are likely in part shaped by such relationships and friendships providing a context for love. Opportunities for the formation of these friendships need to be provided, and prioritized, through the fostering of a stronger community life. Policy aimed at community building and social connectedness (Holt-Lunstad, 2022; Murthy, 2023; Case et al., 2025), and policies oriented towards adequate time and sufficiently stable schedules (Lind, 2023; Case et al., 2025) so as to allow for social connection could go a considerable way in fostering love within friendships as well. Fostering love within family life and within friendships would enhance childhood development, the stability of relationships, social support, and the intrinsic good of social connection.

5.3 Love within schools

Love can be facilitated not only within families and friendships, but in educational settings also (Chatmon and Givens, 2019; Lee et al., 2021; Lee, 2022; Lee and Pearson, 2025). Children are formed not only by their families, but also by their schools. If educational efforts were made to better facilitate and promote love for others, the long-term societal effects could be profound. While the development of love for others, for neighbor, and for strangers, is not something that can be forced, it can be fostered. School programs promoting acts of kindness and volunteering might help facilitate love (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Curry et al., 2018). Likewise, teachings in schools on the dignity and value of each human person might help students to understand, and to be shaped by, the grounds for a more universal love of neighbor. For students who are somewhat older, schools could also promote and disseminate the evidence-based loving-kindness meditation and forgiveness interventions described above (Jazaieri et al., 2013, 2014; Galante et al., 2014; Kirby et al., 2017; Worthington, 2021; Ho et al., 2024), which might likewise help in the developmental process of forming more loving persons. Fostering love within schools would assist with child development, a more prosocial orientation within society, and possibly better learning as well.

5.4 Love within workplaces

Love might also be promoted in workplace settings (Lee and Wellinghoff, 2024). The interventions described above could potentially be widely disseminated in workplace contexts. Workplaces could foster love in a variety of other ways as well. A manager's loving disposition towards his or her employees has the potential to shape business policies and practices to maximize their flourishing rather than to simply maximize their profit (Chapman and Sisodia, 2015; Lee and Datta, 2025). Likewise, a loving disposition of business management to society in general may help realign business practices towards providing the best possible set of products and services that enhance societal flourishing. As noted above, flexible work schedules might facilitate family life (Fox et al., 2022) and the love therein. Managers might also work towards developing a more compassionate workplace environment that facilitates understanding and care for others. The workplace itself can thus become a forum in which love can be experienced and practiced.

Longitudinal research has demonstrated that a strong *compassion climate* (Nolan et al., 2022) and *caring climate* (Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2023) at work are both associated with several domains of wellbeing and flourishing within work groups. A strong compassionate climate is

present when individual members perceive that their department, unit, or team collectively notices, feels, and is motivated to respond to the suffering of other members. A strong caring climate is present when members feel respected at work, feel that they are treated fairly, trust organizational leadership, and feel recognized for their work. Compassionate and caring climates are likely to emerge when “organizations foster a recurring set of practices that build relationships, encourage sharing and caring for one another, and set the stage for compassionate responses” (Nolan et al., 2022:3). Such practices must be legitimated, propagated, and coordinated by leadership (Kanov et al., 2004) to create a high level of solidarity that, in turn, positively affects the group processes that shape organizational effectiveness. These group processes include positive collaboration, innovation, and adaptability to change and disruption (Nolan et al., 2022; Trzeciak and Mazzairelli, 2019; Worline and Dutton, 2017). Promoting love within workplaces might thus lead to better relationships, more meaningful work, greater financial security, and better work outcomes, benefitting individuals, companies, and broader society.

5.5 Love within medicine and other forms of caregiving

Caregiving within medicine, and other forms of caregiving, regularly have the potential to manifest love and compassion, though contemporary pressures can sometimes make this challenging. For example, after spending time listening to community members describe what they needed from the health care system and physicians in particular, only 5.6% of first-year medical students felt that their preclinical training was helping them to meet the needs expressed by community members who had been medical patients (Vaizer et al., 2020). This misalignment of patient’s expectations and clinical training was particularly acute with regard to the desire patients have for clinicians to deeply listen and practice compassionate love in the face of their suffering. Compassion and empathy may sometimes even be trained out of students during medical education, not as a result of the formal curriculum, but because of a dehumanizing hidden curriculum delivered by “role model” faculty who exhibit a striking lack of these traits (Trzeciak and Mazzairelli, 2011:18). Trained observers sometimes find that health care providers exhibit a conspicuous absence of compassion, even in Intensive Care Units where compassion for patients and their families is critical to health (Trzeciak and Mazzairelli, 2011). Given the important role that compassion plays in promoting human flourishing, this situation has significant implications for clinicians themselves and for the wellbeing of the organizations in which they work (Nolan et al., 2022; Pearl, 2021; Trzeciak and Mazzairelli, 2011).

Such dehumanizing processes may shed light on why medical residents self-report quite low levels of flourishing, lower than financially precarious factory workers in Mexico, China, and Cambodia (Kelly-Hedrick et al., 2020). More generally, when medical “culture aligns with what patients desire and deserve” (i.e., compassionate care), clinicians “achieve superlative outcomes in the most compassionate ways imaginable” (Pearl, 2021:334). Quality care and compassionate care are not in conflict, they are deeply aligned: “When [health care] providers have compassion for a patient, they are more likely to be meticulous about their care, have higher quality standards, and are therefore less likely to make a major medical error” (Trzeciak and Mazzairelli, 2019: location 1026). Likewise, the degree of “companionate love” expressed by employees toward residents at a long-term healthcare facility—as measured longitudinally by employee surveys, observations of outside trained observers, family member surveys, and cultural artifacts—was positively associated with a variety of desired outcomes. These included higher employee satisfaction and teamwork, as well as better mood, quality of life, and satisfaction among residents, and fewer trips to the emergency room (Barsade and O’Neil, 2014). Such

compassionate love is perhaps especially needed in end-of-life contexts, both to provide for physical needs, but also to make sense of the contours of a person's life and seek satisfactory conclusions of relationships (Roberts et al., 2009; Symons et al., 2024). Promoting love within medicine might thus result in better physical and mental health for patients and clinicians alike, fewer errors and better medical outcomes, less burn-out, and more meaningful patient-clinician interactions.

5.6 Love and religious communities

Religious communities can and should be powerful influences in the promotion of love. Religious teachings themselves explicitly promote love. The Jewish Law, the New Testament, and the Quran all speak of, and even command, "love of neighbor," with the Jewish Law extending this to "stranger" (Deuteronomy 10:19), and the New Testament even to "enemy" (Matthew 10:44). The context in all of these cases suggests love in a contributory sense of seeking good for one's neighbor or stranger or enemy (Goodman, 2008).

In addition to the ethical teachings concerning love of neighbor, several religious traditions also in some sense provide *grounds* for love of neighbor. It was commented above that the dignity and value of the human person is often taken as the grounds for love. Religious traditions in some sense ground the motivation for love yet further back. Human persons have such value and dignity precisely because they were created by and loved by God. Under this perspective, there is a radical equalizing of dignity and value of persons because that value is not grounded in capacities, but in God, in God's creation, in God's love. Certain religious traditions furthermore provide motivation for the love of others in so far as this is itself grounded in and empowered by love of God (Aquinas, 1274/1948; Balint, 2008; Lee et al., 2013; Levin, 2014; VanderWeele, 2024). This grounding of love of others in the love of God can take a variety of forms including love of God helping to empower one to carry out the command to love one's neighbor; or the experience of God's love itself making one more loving; or seeing one's neighbor as someone who is in fact loved by God. Religious teaching might thus distinctively advance love within society by framing all of ethics around love, by extending that love to love of enemy, and by grounding love of others in the love of God.

Participation in religious communities itself provides a forum in which to love, to be loved, and to learn to love. In many cases, members of a religious community are taught to love and care for one another, and to provide for the needs of those within the community, and also outside the community (Long et al., 2025). The teachings themselves, reinforced by the words and actions of others in the community, and a context in which to "practice love" might all help contribute to the formation of more loving and generous persons (Putnam and Campbell, 2012; Shariff et al., 2016; Nakamura et al., 2022; Koenig et al., 2023). It is perhaps the formation of a community wherein one of the central tasks of its members is to love and support one another that in part gives religious communities their powerful effects on health and wellbeing (Chen et al. 2020; Balboni et al., 2022; Koenig et al., 2023).

In addition to the religious teachings and the communal experience of love, various practices of prayer and meditation have been developed to promote love. As noted above, loving kindness meditation has been examined in randomized trials and has been found to have an effect on promoting compassion and also on greater happiness and mindfulness, and less depression and anxiety (Jazaieri et al., 2013, 2014; Galante et al., 2014; Kirby et al., 2017). Loving kindness meditation as typically examined in these trials comes out of Buddhist practices, though it is arguably also applicable to more secular or pluralistic contexts or could be adapted for use in other world religions (VanderWeele, 2024). Such practices often involves four steps (cf. Wiebel,

2008): 1) sitting or lying with closed eyes and mindfully focusing on the breath and body; 2) imagining receiving love, kindness, and compassion from a person who loves, or has loved, one deeply; 3) attempting to send the same feelings of kindness, love, acceptance, and unconditional regard to oneself; 4) imagining sending those same loving feelings outward sequentially to different recipients, further and further removed from oneself (e.g., family and friends, one's community, all people, all beings). Such practices can, as noted above, also be utilized within secular contexts, or could be adapted to theistic religions so that the imagining of the receiving of love includes also love from God and the extending of love might likewise include God (VanderWeele, 2024). Similarly, within theistic religions and contexts, what is sometimes described as the "practice of the presence of God" (Lawrence, 2009) might likewise help facilitate a love for others, though definitively establishing efficacy for promoting love would require further empirical study. In any case, the dissemination of such loving kindness practices within religious communities and elsewhere holds considerable potential for the promotion of love. Fostering love within religious communities might thus enhance social connection, a greater pro-social orientation within society, a greater appreciation of the inherent worth and dignity of each person, an overcoming of polarization and divisions, and a greater sense of compassion.

5.7 Love and forgiveness

As noted above, there is strong observational and experimental evidence that forgiveness interventions are effective not only at increasing forgiveness but also in alleviating depression and anxiety and promoting flourishing (Wade et al., 2014; Wade and Tittler, 2020; Ho et al., 2024). Forgiveness can of course also go a long way in bringing healing to relationships and to restoring love.

These forgiveness interventions have been converted into self-guided workbook formats which evidence suggests are likewise effective (Worthington, 2021; Ho et al., 2024). Such interventions have the potential for wide dissemination at local, national, and even international scales (VanderWeele, 2018; Ho et al., 2024). The experience of being wronged is very common and many people struggle with anger, often further resulting in depression, anxiety, and possibly worse physical health. The broad dissemination of these forgiveness interventions has the potential to make major contributions to flourishing and to relationships.

Questions are sometimes raised as to the morality of forgiveness and these must be taken seriously if efforts are to be made in promoting forgiveness throughout society. Forgiveness, conceived of the replacing of ill-will towards the offender with good-will, should be distinguished from excusing or forgetting, from not demanding justice, and from reconciliation (Worthington, 2013; VanderWeele, 2018; Sinclair et al., 2020). One can, for example, forgive, and hope for the ultimate good of the offender, while still pursuing a just outcome. With these distinctions in mind, arguments have been put forward that, provided the victim does not deny the wrongdoing itself, and provided the above distinctions are kept in mind, forgiveness as the replacing of ill-will with good-will towards the offender, is always morally appropriate (Holmgren, 1993). If this is so, then the promotion of forgiveness, even at national and international scales, could arguably be carried out in an ethically responsible manner. Doing so has the potential to make substantial contribution to population mental health, and also, when appropriate, to the restoration of relationships and communities. Forgiveness can thus promote love of neighbor, and even love of enemy, and may thus also help heal divisions. Forgiveness is a restoration of love of neighbor; the evidence powerfully suggests that promotion of forgiveness could in turn restore love and promote human flourishing. Widespread dissemination of resources to help people who want to forgive, but are having trouble doing so, could thus go a

long way in the societal promotion of love. Promoting the restoration of love through forgiveness might thus help heal relationships and societal divisions, improve mental health, and lead to greater flourishing.

5.8 Love in communities and in politics

Love also arguably plays an important role in our communities and in our politics. Community life is fostered by and also contributes to loving relationships. The fostering of love within families, schools, workplaces, and religious communities has the potential to further foster love in other relationships and other communities. It has the potential to foster what in various religious traditions has been referred to as love of neighbor, a loving disposition towards anyone that one encounters. This has the potential to enhance relationships and to improve interactions within neighborhoods and local communities, and to improve interactions within political life as well.

Although political disagreement over both the ends being sought, and the appropriate means to attain them, will almost inevitably always be present within human society, political interactions could likewise be improved by more loving dispositions towards all, towards one's neighbor, and even towards one's opponents or enemies (Brooks, 2019). Seeking the good of others, even those with whom one disagrees, has the potential to better enable understanding of divergent viewpoints and of finding greater common ground. Recognizing the inherent dignity and value of political opponents has the potential to limit harmful actions taken against others, and may enhance a political community's capacity to work together across disagreements. A loving disposition towards others and a recognition of their dignity and value also may help in trying to ensure justice and the preservation of their rights. Such identifying of common ground and working together across disagreements and differences, has the potential to help facilitate the common good of all people. Moreover, as noted above, loving and beneficent action tends to propagate (Fowler and Christakis, 2010; Jordan et al., 2013; Chancellor et al., 2018) as does hostile action (Huesmann, 2018) and thus the facilitation of a more loving set of dispositions in politics has the potential to reverse cycles of polarization and hatred.

To better facilitate love at local, state, and national levels, assessments could be carried out by governments as to loving dispositions, as to the frequency of acts of benevolence towards others, and as to attitudes towards those of different political parties. Such assessment could make clear strengths and weaknesses of communities at local, state, and national levels and facilitate efforts to promote more loving dispositions within politics and within communities. Local, state, and national level campaigns could also be put into place to emphasize the dignity and value of each human person, the importance of love of neighbor and love of enemy, and the need to work together across difference and disagreement to find common ground and to pursue the common good. Local, state, and national level efforts could likewise be made to disseminate evidence-based interventions on love within marriage, loving-kindness meditation, and forgiveness interventions discussed above, along with future evidence-based interventions concerning the promotion of love once their effectiveness is clear. Assessing and promoting love within society and across political divides might lead to a greater societal cooperation, a greater prosocial orientation, and better relationships within society.

5.9 Love within economics

Love is both fostered and manifested in interpersonal interactions, and these interactions may occur within families and friendships, in schools and workplaces, in religious communities and within business and political contexts. While the formal structures of an economy may not

constitute interpersonal interactions per se, the economic policies and structures that are in place have the potential to indirectly contribute to, or impede, love within human relationships. Economic incentives and policies that facilitate parental leave so as to allow for closer parent-child relationships, or allow flexibility for work-family balance, or that provide for sufficient leisure time to pursue relationships and community life, or that allow families to live suitably on a single income (Brenan, 2019; Fox et al., 2022; Greco, 2023; Lind, 2023; Case et al., 2025), have the potential to allow for a greater pursuit of loving relationships within family and friendship.

Love can, moreover, in turn alter the dynamics concerning economic interactions. As noted above, a manager's loving disposition may alter business decisions so as to better assist in employee flourishing and so as to make central the aim of providing products and services that enhance customer flourishing (Chatmon and Givens, 2019; Lee et al., 2021; Lee, 2022; Lee and Pearson, in press; Chapman and Sisodia, 2015). Business leaders can seek to shape management structures so as to create a more compassionate workplace climate in which both interactions and transactions occur with the good of the other in mind. As these changes take place, the very nature of economic interactions themselves are then more oriented towards love. Economic policy itself can powerfully shape the facilitation of loving relationships, but loving relationships themselves also shape how people engage in economic life. Structuring economic and business policy to take into account, and facilitate, love might thus improve relationships and family life, enhance workplace relationships, and help re-orient business and economic activity to the promotion of flourishing.

5.10 Love in academic study

To better promote love, and thereby flourishing, we also need to better understand the phenomenon of love itself. We need a more adequate empirical study of love, and greater attention to love in our various disciplines. As noted above, the diversity of measures of love has been a challenge, and a more coherent set of measures for different forms of interpersonal love could considerably empower its empirical study (Enright et al., 2022; Templeton, 2022; Levin, 2023). To that end, as part of a Templeton-funded project on the assessment of interpersonal love, we have been developing a series of closely related measures assessing both contributory and unitive love across different types of relationship types, including parent-child love, romantic and spousal love, friendship love, love of neighbor, love of stranger, and love of enemy. These measures are now available, and we have reported on the psychometric properties of the love of neighbor assessment, and similar work is underway for the other measures as well (VanderWeele et al., 2025). Embedding such measures of interpersonal love into longitudinal cohort studies would likewise considerably strengthen the evidence available (Levin, 2000, 2023), as too much of the existing evidence comes from cross-sectional studies.

Further randomized trials of interventions to promote love could also be employed. The evidence from randomized trials of loving-kindness and forgiveness interventions provide promising models for doing so, and are also suggestive of the possibility that other types of interventions in families, schools, workplaces, and communities might likewise effectively facilitate love. Greater attention could be paid to love in various academic disciplines including considerations of the role of love in relationships, in communities, in ethics, in bringing about justice, in emotion, and in psychology more generally, in shaping economic decisions, in schools, in businesses, in medicine, and in shaping our politics. Consideration of the role of love in each of these settings could open up important and new directions of research, and also provide insights that might enable a more effective promotion of love and promotion of flourishing. It is arguably the case that the absence of love from academic discourse is not because of a lack of

importance, but simply because of neglect. As evidence for the importance of love, in shaping society and flourishing, accumulate, efforts should be made to more substantially consider the role of love within each of the various academic disciplines. Such work could be carried out across cultures with an eye towards understanding which dynamics seem to be culturally specific and which are universal. A greater academic study of love could help provide evidence-based approaches to promote love in society and thereby enable human flourishing.

5.11 Love and news media and social media

The importance of knowledge and information in the promotion of love is relevant not only in academic study, but in the media and in general discourse. The media also has incredible potential to promote or hinder interpersonal love (VanderWeele, 2023; VanderWeele and Brooks, 2023). The media routinely presents us with various goods that can prompt love. The media likewise reports on individuals, actions, and groups sometimes in a positive, though more often in a negative, light. This too shapes our loves, and our sense of solidarity with others, with our country, and with groups with whom we may disagree. The media shapes our sense of whether we want to love, and whether we think others are worthy of our attempting to contribute some good, or of our being with them. Our witnessing of positive or negative events, conveyed by the media, shapes whether we go on to act altruistically towards others, which, as noted above, in turn has effects on the actions of those with whom we interact (Fowler and Christakis, 2010). The media thus shapes both our actions and our loves.

Unfortunately, however, the content of news media has become dramatically more negative over the past several decades. There has been an approximately three standard deviation increase in the negative tone of news reporting from world broadcasts between 1979 and 2010 (Leetaru, 2011, Figure 11), likely prompted by “negativity bias,” the human tendency to focus more attention on negative events than on positive events because of the greater dangers. While this tendency may, in much of life, have various survival advantages, it is potentially destructive when it comes to media consumption, as the potential for consuming negative news media is essentially limitless. Because of this negativity bias, however, media outlets have incentive to report on negative events because it is more likely to capture the attention of readers or viewers. Given the potential effects of viewing positive versus negative reporting, this should be of central concern in thinking about fostering love. Although the effect of each individual viewing is likely to be minimal, since there is both repeated exposure, and also a vast reach of media with subsequent contagion of either benevolent or hateful actions and words, the cumulative effects of media and news exposure on our love of neighbor is likely profound.

The role of the media in facilitating or hampering love and solidarity, and the ensuing consequences for human action and human wellbeing, may thus be one of the most important, and neglected, moral questions of our age (VanderWeele, 2023). Editors, writers, newsagents, managers, and anyone contributing to news media ought to take seriously the cumulative moral implications of their decisions to carry out extensive negative reporting. An excessive focus on negative reporting throughout society will tend to hinder, rather than prompt, love. This may be especially true with political reporting.

If news media were to commit to running *at least* one positive story presenting loving action, for every three negative ones, this could go a long way in potentially slowing the unending spiral of negative reporting (VanderWeele and Brooks, 2023). Within the political context this could, for example, require the reporting of at least one story concerning bipartisan action for every three commenting upon political frictions. Media bear considerable responsibility for the success of the political system itself in fostering or hampering loving dispositions. However, readers and

viewers themselves bear some responsibility as well. There is choice involved in what is read and consumed. This is true at the individual level, but also collectively. If consumers of media were to refuse engaging in any media outlet which did not itself commit to at least fairly minimal standards of positive news reporting, then this too might help incentivize media outlets to proceed with more positive reporting (VanderWeele and Brooks, 2023). We have come to a very bad equilibrium concerning news reporting and with social media interactions (Gudka et al., 2023). The promotion of love within human relationships requires that this change. This will need to change if we hope to be able to build a civilization of love.

6. Building a civilization of love

In the sections above we have considered the empirical evidence related to the importance of love in contributing to human flourishing, and we have considered potential social policy concerning love. We have discussed the possibilities of the promotion of love within families and friendship, within schools and workplaces, within religious communities, within political and economic life, within academic study, and within news and social media. All of these efforts might help foster building what some have described as a “civilization of love” (John Paul II, 1991; Catholic Church, 2004, 580-583; Osewska and Simonič, 2019): “In order to make society more human, more worthy of the human person, love in social life – political, economic and cultural – must be given renewed value, becoming the constant and highest norm for all activity... Love must thus enliven every sector of human life and extend to the international order. Only a humanity in which there reigns the ‘civilization of love’ will be able to enjoy authentic and lasting peace... Charity is the greatest social commandment. It respects others and their rights. It requires the practice of justice and it alone makes us capable of it. Charity inspires a life of self-giving” (Catholic Church, 2004:582-583).

This paper has provided an empirically grounded and evidence-based set of strategies to try to help foster such a civilization of love. Love might rightly be viewed as a proper goal in and of itself, but this paper has further presented evidence that the promotion of love is likely to in turn enhance human flourishing in a variety of other ways as well. Most of the strategies put forward are not, at present, widely utilized. That can and should change. We need to pursue both individual efforts and social policy to promote love, to promote flourishing, and to build a civilization of love.

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Tyler VanderWeele and Matthew Lee jointly conceived of the paper. Tyler VanderWeele wrote the initial draft of the paper, and Matthew Lee provided critical review, additions, and edits.

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