

سعادت غائی و عشق الهی*

ونسان برومر

چکیده

سعادت غائی چیزی است که ما به هنگام نیل به حیات طیبه از آن برخوردار می‌شویم. ولی "حیات طیبه" چیست؟ سنتها و دیدگاههای دینی آرمانهای گوناگونی در باب حیات طیبه ارائه می‌دهند که به زندگی ما جهت می‌بخشند و ادعا شده است که نیل به آن آرمانها ما را نهایتاً سعادت‌مند می‌سازد. در شرایع و حیاتی مانند اسلام و مسیحیت غالباً سعادت غائی را در برخورداری از عشق الهی می‌دانند. ولی ماهیت عشق الهی چیست و به چه معنا این عشق سعادت‌غایی ما را تأمین می‌کند؟

معمولاً عشق الهی را شبیه به رابطه عاشقانه بین ابناء بشر تفسیر و تعبیر می‌کنند. اما از آنجا که خدا مانند سایر مردم نیست، عشق او نمی‌تواند با عشق بین انسانها یکسان باشد. بنابراین لازم است که محدودیتهای تشبیه عشق خدا به عشق آدمیان را روشن کنیم. من در این مقاله ابتدا پنج خصیصه اصلی عشق بین افراد بشر را بررسی می‌کنم. سپس سه تفاوت قاطع خدا و افراد بشر را مورد بررسی قرار می‌دهم و نشان می‌دهم که این تفاوتها چه تفاوتی را بین عشق الهی و عشق بشری لازم می‌آورند. سرانجام نشان خواهم داد که مراد مؤمنان مسلمان و مسیحی از اینکه سعادت غائی در برخورداری از عشق الهی است، چه می‌تواند باشد.

* این مقاله متن سخنرانی پروفیسور ونسان برومر می‌باشد که در تاریخ ۲۱ مهر ماه ۱۳۸۰ در دانشگاه شیراز ایراد شده است.

Ultimate Happiness and the Love of God

Vincent Brümmer

Abstract

Ultimate happiness is something we enjoy when we achieve the good life. But what is the 'good life'? Religious traditions and views of life propose a variety of ideas of the good life which provide direction for our lives and the achievement of which is claimed to make us ultimately happy. In theistic traditions like Islam and Christianity the ideal of ultimate happiness has often been sought in the enjoyment of the love of God. But what is the nature of the love of God and in what sense does that provide us with ultimate happiness?

The love of God is usually interpreted as analogous to the loving relationship between human beings. However, since God is not like other people, his love cannot be identical with the love between human beings. We need therefore to explore the limits of the analogy between human and divine love. In this lecture I will first of all discuss five key features of love between human person. Then I will discuss three crucial difference between God and human persons and show what these imply for the difference between divine and human love. Finally I will show in what sense believers in Islam and Christianity might claim that ultimate happiness consists in participation in the love of God.

Key Words: 1-Love 2- Happiness 3- Mysticis
4- Union with God

1. The good life

Ultimate happiness is something we enjoy when we achieve the good life. But what is the "good life"? Religious traditions and views of life propose a variety of ideals of the good life which could provide direction for our

lives and the achievement of which is claimed to make us ultimately happy. Usually they also suggest ways in which we should strive after ultimate happiness and ways in which we might cope with the dilemma's of human finitude. In this paper I would like to discuss the way in which these issues are dealt with in theistic traditions like Islam and Christianity where the ideal of ultimate happiness has often been sought in the enjoyment of the love of God. A proponent of this ideal is Augustine. He argues¹ that "no one can be happy who does not enjoy what is man's chief good, nor is there anyone who enjoys this who is not happy" (*De Moribus* 3.4). But what is this chief good for human existence? It must be something "than which there is nothing better" and at the same time something "which cannot be lost against the will. For no one can feel confident regarding a good which he knows that can be taken from him, although he wishes to keep and cherish it. But if a man feels no confidence regarding the good which he enjoys, how can he be happy while in such fear of losing it?" (*De Moribus* 3.5). It is clear, says Augustine, that God is the only Being who can fulfill these requirements. "Our chief good, which we must hasten to arrive at in preference to all other things, is nothing else than God". There is nothing greater than God. Allahu akbar. And, since nothing can separate us from His love, this must be "surer as well as better than any other good" (*De Moribus* 11.18). From this, Augustine concludes that "God then alone must be loved, and all this world, that is, all sensible things, ... are to be used as this life requires" (*De Moribus* 20.37). Since our human goods are finite and since we know that they can be taken from us although we wish to keep and cherish them, they cannot provide us with ultimate happiness. Instead, Augustine advises, we should seek our ultimate happiness in the love of God since that cannot be taken from us

against our will. For Augustine, then, ultimate happiness consists in the enjoyment (*frui*) of the love of God.²

This Augustinian view on ultimate happiness is also reflected in the way in which mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux understood the *unio mystica*, the mystic union with God, which is the goal of the mystic's life. The *via mystica*, the route along which the mystic seeks ultimate happiness, culminates in the enjoyment of a loving union with God. Mysticism is, however, not a uniform phenomenon and various mystics have held a variety of views on the nature of this mystic union with God.³ Thus, for example, mystics like Eckhart, Tauler and Suso who were influenced by the pseudo-Dionysius and the neo-Platonism of Plotinus, tended to interpret the *unio mystica* as a kind of "fusion" in which the personal individuality of the mystic is eliminated. Ultimate happiness then becomes a kind of "deification" in which the individual existence of the mystic is merged into "the divine". Another interpretation of the mystic union, which is especially popular in contemporary literature on mysticism influenced by the work of William James, emphasises the experiential aspects of mysticism. Here the mystic union is taken to be an ecstatic experience and the question is even raised whether such experiences of ecstasy can not also be achieved by the use of drugs.⁴ Bernard, however, understood the mystic union with God as a loving relationship analogous to relationships of love between human persons. In his sermons on the Song of Songs, Bernard explored this analogy in detail. Of course this can be no more than an analogy since God is not like other people nor is the love of God like human love. In order to understand how mystics like Bernard conceived of ultimate happiness, we need to explore the limits of this analogy between divine and human love. Let us therefore examine the relevant features

of love relationships between human beings (section 2) and the most important ways in which the love of God differs from human love (section 3).

2. Human Love

What is the nature of a relationship of mutual love or fellowship between humans?⁵ For our present purposes we could distinguish five aspects which are characteristic for such relationships:

2.1. Identification

First of all, in such relationships each partner strives to know and to serve the true interests of the other, and not primarily his or her own interests. Or rather, each partner *identifies* with the other by treating the interests of the other as his or her own interests. By this identification, your interests have become my own and I serve them as being my own. By, thus, serving your interests as my own, I love you as myself. In this sense such relationships are primarily relationships of mutual identification.

2.2. Irreplaceability

A second characteristic of such relationships is that the partners are for each other unique and irreplaceable. I do not serve your interests in order that you might serve mine in return. In that case, I would be trying to buy or earn your services and you would have for me a merely *instrumental value* as a means to further my own interests. You would then be replaceable for me by any other means as effective for this purpose. I am here not concerned with furthering your interests but with procuring your services to further my interests. My relationship is not with you as irreplaceable individual but as replaceable means to further my interests. Anybody else who could do the same would do as well.

In love, however, I further your true interests because through identification they have become my own. In this way you and the realization of your true interests have acquired *intrinsic value* for me. For me you cannot be replaced by anybody else. You are for me, in the words of Immanuel Kant, an end in yourself (“Zweck an sich selbst”) with unconditional value and not something which only has value for me on condition that it is useful for furthering my interests. By thus identifying with each other in love, we bestow on each other a unique value as irreplaceable and indispensable individuals. In brief, we are not only dependent on the recognition of others for our identity as persons, but our value as persons, is also determined by their identification with us. “ To be esteemed by another secures one’s own self- esteem, and gives body to one’s own sense of identity. To know that one is loved is to be able to anchor one’s own existence in the affections of others. ‘Who am I?’ ‘ I am the person that Mother loves’ or ‘that Jill loves’ or ‘that God loves’. It means that my actions matter, not only to me but to someone else in the outside world, and that therefore they have a significance which is not solely solipsistic.”[Lucas: 60]

2.3. Mutual Freedom

A third characteristic of such relationships is that they can only be established and maintained in mutual freedom. Love cannot be earned or coerced. Jean - Paul Sartre points out that someone who longs to be loved does not want to turn his beloved into his slave [Sartre: 367]. He does not want to become the object of a passion flowing forth mechanically from his beloved. He does not want to possess an automaton, and if we want to humiliate him, we need only try to persuade him that his beloved’s passion is not freely bestowed on him but is the effect of a psychological determinism. The lover will then feel that both his love and

his being are cheapened. If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone. This is well illustrated in the popular song 'Paper Doll':

I'm going to buy a paper doll that I can call my own,
A doll that other fellows cannot steal.
And then those flirty flirty guys
With their flirty flirty eyes
Will have have to flirt with dollies that are real.
When I come home at night she will be waiting.
She'll be the truest doll in all the world.
I'd rather have a paper doll to call my own.
Than have a fickle minded real live girl.

Far from being a love song, this is a lament on the absence of love. In the words of Sartre: "If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone"- alone with his paper doll. It is clear that a relationship of love can be maintained as long as the personal integrity and free autonomy of *both* partners is maintained. As soon as I try to control you as an object or allow you to treat me as an object, our relationship is perverted into something other than love. Love must by its very nature be a relationship of free mutual give and take; otherwise it cannot be love at all.

2.4. Vulnerability

This voluntary nature of love suggests a fourth characteristic, namely its vulnerability. If I cannot force or oblige you to return my love, I remain dependent in relation to you. A relationship of love is therefore vulnerable since it depends for its initiation as well as its maintenance on the freedom and the dependability of both partners. This vulnerability causes doubt, uncertainty and suffering in the lovers because of the tension between the desire to be loved and the inability to bring this about. This tension often becomes unbearable with the result that we are tempted to

coerce or oblige our partners to return our love. By giving in to this temptation, the quality of our loving identification with each other is seriously impaired. I no longer seek to serve your interests purely because I have made them my own, but also in order to oblige or even coerce you to serve my interests in return. In many subtle ways I try to earn your love and your services or somehow to *make* you commit yourself to me. In this way I fail to treat you consistently as a person, and you often become for me an object which I somehow seek to control. Because of our fallibility and finitude, our human love is therefore rarely pure.

2.5. Personification

This raises a fifth characteristic of love: It is a relationship between *persons*. Here personhood has two sides to it:

i- on the one hand a person is a being who is treated in a personal way. I am a person to the extent that others treat me as a person and do not use me as an object, as an end in myself and not as a means to be used for some further end. Here Martin Buber⁶ distinguishes two fundamental attitudes we adopt in relation to our environment: 'I - thou' and 'I it'. Persons differ from objects because we adopt an 'I - thou' attitude towards them and not the 'I - it' attitude we adopt towards objects. So too P.F. Strawson distinguishes the attitude constitutive for personal relations from the 'objective attitude' in which we treat something as an object. "To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject of what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something ... to be managed or handled or cured or trained"[Strawson:9].

ii- Although we can adopt an objective attitude toward all entities (including people) by treating or controlling

them as objects, we cannot adopt a personal attitude toward all entities. Only free agents, who as moral beings are able to initiate and bear responsibility for their own actions, can be approached as persons. This also entails that persons are also self-conscious rational beings because these characteristics are a necessary condition for purposive and responsible agency. Although persons are on the one hand the intentional objects of a personal attitude, they are on the other hand also the bearers of all those personal characteristics that are the necessary condition for being approached as persons. In approaching someone as a person, I therefore presuppose that he or she is the bearer of these characteristics. Only with persons in this double sense can we establish a personal relationship in which we in mutual freedom, can identify with each other in love and assume responsibility for each other's true interests.

As we have shown, Augustine and Bernard claim that ultimate happiness consists in enjoying a personal relationship of love with God. It is now clear that this claim presupposes that not only we humans but also God must be a personal being. Not only are we to approach God as a person and not as an object, as a 'Thou' and not as 'it'; We also presuppose that God is the bearer of those personal characteristics required in a personal relationship: God is a free and self-conscious agent who identifies with us in love and desires that we should enjoy the ultimate happiness of a loving relationship with Him. In the words of Bernard: "When God loves, He desires nothing but to be loved, since He loves us for no other reason than to be loved, for He knows that those who love Him are blessed in their very love." [Bernard, Sermon:83]

3. Divine Love

God must therefore be a person for them who believe that ultimate happiness consists in enjoying the love of God. And yet, God is not like other people. Unlike us, finite humans as we are, God is unlimited in His goodness, knowledge, power and faithfulness. This has important consequences not only for the nature of His personhood, but also the nature of the personal relationship of love we might enjoy with Him. As persons we are finite and limited in our relations with each other and also in our relations with God. God, however, is infinite and free from the limitations of our human condition. This does not mean, however, that God is an impersonal being. On the contrary, as infinite and perfect being, He is also perfect in His personhood. With an impersonal God, we cannot enjoy a personal relationship of love nor find our ultimate happiness in His love. Only with a personal God who is also free from the limitations of our human condition, can we find that perfect love the enjoyment of which is ultimate happiness. Let me explain this in the light of three fundamental differences between God and ourselves and the implications which these differences have for the kind of relationship which we might have with God:

3.1. Interests Vs. Will

The first crucial difference is the following. Love between humans entails that by mutual identification each partner makes the interests of the other his or her own. However, the interests of my beloved are not necessarily identical with his or her wishes and will for the same reason that my interests are not necessarily in accordance with my wishes and will. As humans we are fallible and weak, and consciously or unconsciously we often will things which are not good for us and not in accordance with our true interests. Therefore love between humans does not necessarily require that I always grant my beloved what he

or she wills, but only that I should try to serve the *true* interests of my beloved as I honestly but fallibly understand these to be. Of course, this does not mean that I am indifferent to the will and wishes of my beloved. In my practical deliberations I will always take the wishes and will of my beloved into account, but this does not mean that I will always automatically grant these. The wishes and will of my beloved always remain fallible in the same way as my own wishes and will remain fallible.

In contrast to our human will, the will of God is perfect and infallibly good. In fact, for believers, the will of God counts as the ultimate standard of goodness. To do the will of God is to do what is good. Our love for God is therefore our identification with His perfect will. It is only when through love we have made God's will our own, that we can find ultimate happiness in a life in accordance with His will. This suggests an essential requirement for ultimate happiness: It can only be achieved when as persons we realize our *true* interests and these consist in realizing the ultimate good in our individual lives. In the words of Augustine quoted above: "No one can be happy who does not enjoy what is man's chief good, not is there anyone who enjoys this who is not happy." For Augustine 'man's chief end' is to do the will of God, since to do that is to do what is ultimately good.

This does not mean, however, that in seeking to do the will of God we always do so out of love and not merely out of duty. When we do the will of God out of duty, we experience it as an external law imposed on us from outside and not as something which through the identification of love has become our own. Then the 'good life' can be for us no more than being virtuous out of duty and not doing the will of God out of love. We then do the will of God because we ought to and not because we find our ultimate happiness

in doing it. This suggests a further essential requirement for ultimate happiness: to be ultimately happy it is not enough to do what is ultimately good in our individual lives. We should also do so authentically because we choose it with integrity. Realising the good in our individual lives as a duty imposed on us from outside, can not make us ultimately happy. Sartre is right in his claim that we should choose our individual identity with integrity and not allow it to be imposed on us from outside. But then we can only be happy when we do the will of God out of love and not merely out of duty.

3.2. Limitation

A second relevant difference between God and ourselves is related to the limits of our human knowledge and capacities, which in turn sets limits to the range and intensity with which we can identify with others. Thus “real friendship takes time and energy which human beings have in limited amounts. We cannot have too many friends for the same reason as we cannot do too much work. We cannot spread ourselves too thin” [Oppenheimer, 1983:136]. Apart from such restrictions of time and energy, it is especially the limits of our knowledge of others, which determines the range and intensity of our fellowship with them. I can only identify with your good to the extent that I know what your good is, and I can only take your feeling, desires, intentions, dispositions, values, preferences, character etc. into account in my own practical reasoning to the extent that these are known to me. For this reason “love cannot do without information. The lover is relentlessly curious as to his beloved’s sorrows, joys, and desires, which concern him as his own” [Scruton:231]. There is a limit to the number of people whom we can come to know and the amount of knowledge we can acquire about them. There is also a limit to the number of people with whom we can achieve real

fellowship and great differences in the intensity of the fellowship we are able to establish and maintain with different people. We know very few people well enough to identify with them intensively, and even our knowledge of our nearest and dearest is finite and fallible. We can be mistaken about the true interests of others in the same way as we can be mistaken about our own. We know very little about most people with whom we interact in life, and the few things we do know about them, we also find in others. Hence they remain for us not much more than comparable bearers of those properties which they share with others and as such replaceable by those with the same properties. It is therefore difficult for us to treat them as irreplaceable persons.

For believers this is different in their relationship with God. For God all hearts lie open, all desires are known and no secrets are hidden. God cannot be mistaken about our true interests, and since all our feelings, desires, intentions, dispositions etc. are fully known to Him, He can infallibly take them into account in His dealings with us. Since God knows every one of us fully, 'He need not treat us as though we were all equal in his sight and therefore able to replace each other in His affection. "No human being is worth less than another in God's sight, not because they are all worth the same, but because each one is irreplaceable" [Oppenheimer, 1983: 81]. In this way God's love for us is not impartial but partial in the sense in which "partiality is a matter of looking to see what the special individuality of the other person really is and attending positively to it. God can have this kind of special love for each of His creatures" [Ibid:135] Elsewhere Helen Oppenheimer expands this point as follows: "God loves each of His creature: but even 'each' is still too abstract here, and to bring out the full sense one must risk the subjective, 'God loves *me*': not externally but

with a 'partial' love which enters completely and as of right into my unique point of view... God abides in me in this sense, that He associates himself to the point of identification with the pettiness as well as the glory of every creature He has made ... To form the idea that God is the 'ground of one's being in the sense that He is more concerned for one, more 'partial' to one, more on one's side, than one is oneself, that one's humanly private point of view is so to say anchored onto the divine: is assuredly to feel that one has 'got more than one bargained for'." [Oppenheimer, 1973:191-2]. As the Koran says, Allah is closer to me than my jugular vein. In this way God's love is 'partial' to every single one of us.

Nicholas of Cusa illustrated this 'universal partiality' of God's love graphically with reference to the kind of portrait paintings in which the person in the painting looks the onlooker straight in the eye [Nicholas of Cusa, 3F]. A well-known example would be Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa. If you stand before the Mona Lisa, she looks straight at you in a way that makes you feel that you are the only person in the world to whom she is attending. If you move over to the right or to the left, she will still be looking at you like that. It is as if her eyes follow you wherever you go. However, if I were to look at her from the right and you from the left, she would look at each of us separately as if each of us were the only one to whom she was attending! Because of this effect, Nicholas calls this kind of portrait painting an 'icon of God': God looks on each of us *individually* since each one of us is irreplaceable in his sight. By contrast, the Pope on his balcony looks inclusively at the whole crowd of people on St. Peter's square without looking at anyone in particular. God's love, however, is both inclusive and exclusive at the same time. For believers, God alone knows each one of us well enough to be able to identify with the

true personal interests of each of us individually. God alone is able to treat each one of us individually as a person, as a 'thou'. In this respect too God is perfect as a person and free from the limitations of our finite personhood. This suggests an important reason why ultimate happiness can only be found in the love of God. God alone knows me well enough to consistently treat me as an irreplaceable individual and hence to bestow individual identity and value on me as a person.

3.3. Faithfulness

A third relevant difference between God and us has to do with God's immutable faithfulness. If I love you, I commit myself to serving your true interests as being my own. In this way serving your interests becomes part of my chosen identity as a person. It is incorporated into the ideals I strive to realise in my life and in which I find my identity. However, this is only possible as long as my chosen identity remains compatible with serving your interests. As humans, however, we are not only able to become unfaithful to each other and to our identification with each other, but the circumstances of our lives could give rise to changes in our chosen identity which make it difficult for us to continue to identify with each other. Our chosen identity as persons is not immutably stable. Thus you may change in the course of time in ways which make it increasingly difficult for me to identify with you with integrity. Or I myself may change in ways that prevent me from continuing to identify with you as before. Lovers and friends can grow apart in the course of time. Changes in our personal identity do not follow with unavoidable necessity from changes in the circumstances of our lives, but they do result from the ways in which we decide to respond to such changes. If lovers respond to changing circumstances in ways that are incompatible, they will grow apart. If

however they seek to respond in ways that are **compatible**, their personal identities will change and develop in concert and they will grow together in the course of time. In this sense a relationship of love or fellowship is a joint venture. In the long run it can only be maintained to the extent that both partners commit themselves to it and manage to grow together with integrity in the ways in which they respond to changes in the circumstances of their *lives*. However, the partners in such a relationship can never have any cast-iron guarantee that neither of them will ever change in ways that might lead them to grow apart. Not only do fair weather friends let each other down, as the prodigal son discovered to his distress. Real friends and lovers also remain finite and fallible in their commitments to each other. In this way our human love always remains risky and vulnerable. Not only can lovers fail to **maintain** their loving identification with each other but also, as we have argued in the previous section, the quality of their mutual identification remains finite and impure. I try to limit the risk of losing you against my will by somehow coercing or obliging you to maintain your identification with me.

In this respect too, God is not like other people. Love of God is not risky like human love since we can not only count on God to remain faithful to His character, but His character is also stable and unlike ours it does not change. Hence believers would claim that estrangement from God could never result from God changing and growing apart from us, but only from our becoming unfaithful to God, and turning our backs on Him. In the words of Augustine: “No one can lose you, my God, unless he forsakes you”.^[Augustine:8] This suggests a further reason why *ultimate* happiness can only be found in the love of God. No one will deny that we can anchor our identity and self-esteem in the affections of others and hence that we can

find happiness in human fellowship and love. Nevertheless, human love remains finite and fallible. Since God's love is eternally dependable, we can never lose it against our will. For this reason believers claim that the love of God is the only eternally dependable anchor for our ultimate happiness.

Notes

- 1- Quotations taken from "On the Morals of the Christian Church" in Philip Schaff (Cede), *The Nicene and post nicene Fathers IV*, Grand Rapids 1979. for an extended discussion on Augustine's Views on the Love of God, see my book, *The Model of Love*, Cambridge, 1993, chapter 5.
- 2- Augustine's eudaimonistic ideal of the good life is perfectly expressed in the answer to the first question in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* of 1644: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever (*Deum glorificare eodemque frui in aeternum*)".
- 3- For an extended analysis of the various views of nature of mysticism, see my book *The Model of Love*, Chapter 3.
- 4- See, for example, Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, London, 1975.
- 5- For an extended analysis of the nature of such relationships, see chapters 7-9 of my *The Model of Love*.
- 6- Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Edinburgh, 1952.

Bibliography

- 1- Augustine, *Confessions*, IV.
- 2- Bernard of Clairvaux, (1971-1980) *Sermons on the Songs of Songs*, 4 vols. Kalamazo.
- 3- Lucas, John, (1960), *Freedom and Grace*, London.
- 4- Nicholas of Cusa, (1969), *The Vision of God*, New York.
- 5- Oppenheimer, Helen, (1973), *Incarnation and Immanence*, London.
- 6- Oppenheimer, Helen, (1983), *The Hope of Happiness*, London.
- 7- Sartre, Jean-Paul, (1956), *Being and Nothingness*, New York.
- 8- Scruton, (1986), *Sexual Desire*, London.
- 9- Strawson, P. F. (1974), *Freedom and Resentment and other Essays*, London.