

Respect the One You Love?

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In her article, “Strength of Character,” Margaret Holmgren considers a case in which children learn that their parents have been collaborators in Nazi war crimes, and addresses the integral stress that such knowledge creates. As Holmgren describes the situation, we can imagine that the children love their parents but are unable to cope with the reality of what they have done.¹ My interest in Holmgren’s treatment of this example is not in her primary thesis regarding strength of character (which is interesting in its own right), but with the questions she raises regarding love and respect in her discussion of this example. According to Holmgren the psychological difficulty for these children is, presumably, in reconciling the feeling that they cannot any longer respect their parents because of their past actions, and the belief that they cannot love someone whom they do not respect. Holmgren, like many other authors, seems to assume that love and respect must go hand in hand. In doing so, she advocates a form of respect for the parents that involves respecting their humanity, even if not their actions, arguing that to do otherwise would over-simplify their identities, reducing them to merely the sum of their actions. This discussion, I think, raises a really interesting philosophical question, namely, whether it is possible to love someone we do not respect. In this paper, I wish to reconsider the common assumption that love and respect must go hand in hand.

I argue that though in the best of relationships, love and respect are part and parcel of one another, that the relationship need not necessarily hold. The connection between love and

¹Margaret Holmgren, “Strength of Character” *Journal of Value Inquiry* v. 38, no. 3, 2004, 398. Holmgren is very clear that this example does not originate with her. Holmgren is responding to arguments regarding integral breakdown proposed by George Harris in *Dignity and Vulnerability: Strength and Quality of Character* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). The example originates, however, with Peter Sichorvsky, *Born Guilty*, trans. Jean Sternberg (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

respect, I maintain, is dependent upon the kind of loving relationship we are considering and the way in which we conceptualize the nature of respect. In the first section, I consider romantic love and friendship, as they are typically taken to be the models for all loving relationships, and in these kinds of relationships, it is hard to imagine loving someone without respecting her in all her particularity. This, I argue is partly because the one we love is thought to reflect upon us and our choices. My argument will depend upon a distinction between the Kantian notion of respect for persons as human beings deserving of a certain kind of moral appraisal and a more contentful notion of respecting the person as the particular individual she is. In the second section, I consider how the model of friendship or romantic love carries over to the relationship between parents and children, arguing that there are significant differences in the way that people in these relationships should love and respect one another. I maintain that though the sense in which we identify with our parents or children may be equally strong or even stronger, and we may feel a distinct sense of responsibility for who our children become, the fact that these relationships are not chosen allows for the possibility of love without this deep and particular form of respect.

I. Friendship and Romantic Love

Companion friendship is often thought to provide the model for all loving relationships. In the Aristotelian spirit, companion friends share a mutual relationship of goodwill, and the goodwill that one companion friend feels for another is a result of who the friend is, not merely for any usefulness or pleasure the friend may bring. Such friends wish one another well “for their own sake,” that is, they love one another as ends in themselves.² Loving another for her own sake cannot be matter of simply loving the particular qualities that she has, but must be, somehow or another, dependent upon her specific characteristics as she exhibits them. The

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by 1156a.

goodwill felt must be for who the friend is essentially, in all her richness and completeness as a person. For Aristotle, who the friend is, is of course, a matter of character, so that companion friendships are most properly found between two good people and what companion friends love in one another is their respective good characters. The idea, however, is not that just that *any* two people of good character must be friends. Presumably a person of good character would feel admiration for, and perhaps even good will toward, any other person of good character, but the friendship is based not just on the qualities that give the other a good character, but as Neera Badhwar describes it, on the “unique, irreplaceable individual” that the friend is.³

Though the companion friend is recognized and valued for her uniqueness and separateness as a distinct individual with her own life, ends, and perspective,⁴ Aristotle also describes the companion friend as a “second self.”⁵ In important ways, friends identify with one another, and as such, the friend is not only a source of satisfaction, support, and companionship, but also fosters self-reflection and understanding. The idea is that because friends find such commonality with one another and identify so thoroughly with one another, that gazing upon and contemplating the friend can be in many ways much like contemplating oneself. Because self-reflection may not always be all that effective—as Aristotle puts it, we tend not to view ourselves very objectively—sometimes the same traits and characteristics are much more readily understood when we see them in another. And, inasmuch as the companion friend shares much in common with us and we have a distinct affinity with the friend, with respect to character and views, it is through companion friendship that we can most effectively come to understand ourselves. Whether Aristotle’s argument for self-understanding as it arises through friendship is

³ Neera Badhwar, “Friends as Ends in Themselves,” in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, v. 48 n. 1 (September 1987), 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵ Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, 1213a10-26.

altogether sound is not of central importance to my argument; for my purposes here, I will accept that his argument regarding the effects of this affinity has some plausibility.⁶ I am more interested in his claim that we do in fact tend to find a certain affinity with the friend. Surely friends need not be exactly alike to share companion friendship, and in fact, it is hard to imagine two people who share every character trait, interest, or talent. Yet, some commonality must be present in order to provide the motivation for, or grounding for, a friendship at all. It is, in part, the shared identity or shared outlook that provides the support for such an intimate relationship.

Many authors consider romantic love to be a radically different form of relationship than companion friendship, yet it is a little difficult to say where the significant difference lies. I do not mean here to underestimate the possible differences, but for my purposes considering some of the commonalities will be enough. I have often suspected that many of the expectations that we have for contemporary marriages or other romantic partnerships are not all that different from Aristotle's notion of the companion friend, albeit with a sexual component, though it certainly is an over-simplification to just attach a sexual relationship to a companion friendship. On the one hand, romantic love is often thought to carry with it a sense of madness or passion that is frequently missing from a companion friendship; nonetheless, we can imagine having something like a "crush" on a friend, or someone we hope will be a friend. Some of this difference may be dependent on the nature of romantic love and the social role of marriage which has changed so radically since Aristotle's writing. Aristotle seemed to presuppose that lovers were simply in a relationship based on pleasure, an inferior sort of relationship that would end when the pleasure ended. Yet it is now expected that lovers will be partners, that marriage is not merely a social arrangement, but a satisfying relationship between companions. And many lasting relationships

⁶ The issue is considered in much fuller detail in John M. Cooper, "Friendship and the Good in Aristotle" in *The Philosophical Review*, v. 86 n. 3 (July 1997), 290-315.

seem to be grounded in companionship more than in passion. In this sense, our expectations for romantic relationships have taken on many of the components of companion friendship. Yet, interestingly, this may not be only a contemporary phenomenon. Perhaps one of the most notable literary examples of a marriage that models Aristotle's companion friendship is that of Odysseus and Penelope; though husband and wife, their love is based not only in a sexual relationship but in their two good and noble characters. And Homer makes abundantly clear to the reader that it is in light of their shared virtue that they are deserving of one another. They are by no means the same—their good character manifests itself in different ways, and they remain distinct, concrete individuals. Homer even suggests that their virtues are different: Penelope is typically described as circumspect and loyal, whereas Odysseus is courageous and well-spoken. But their good characters, as they each manifest them, give them common commitments, goals, and ideals, and make them equal companions.

All of this discussion so far has presupposed that the friends or lovers must be for the most part, alike. But what then of the idea that opposites attract? We can certainly bring to mind instances of couples who seem to be completely at odds with one another or to have almost nothing in common. The relationship between James Carville and Mary Matalin may be just such an example. They were two political operatives working for opposing candidates; it would have seemed to an on-looker that their candidates were so contrary that to have worked so hard to defend candidates with such conflicting values and attitudes, that Carville and Matalin must have perceived each other as fighting for the enemy. It's hard to imagine how one finds common ground there. From another perspective, however, they may share many interests and commitments—to political action, the value of political debate, and a passion for the work they do. Perhaps these commitments and the values and characters they share are not then so

contrary. Likewise, we can certainly imagine finding traits admirable in others that we lack ourselves—for example, I often admire the gutsiness and spontaneity of one of my friends, while recognizing that these are traits that I lack; similarly, she is open regarding her admiration for my orderliness and attention to detail. However, the common grounding for our friendship is found elsewhere in more fundamental values and commitments. Without these other shared commitments, there would be little to support the love and intimacy of friendship. Perhaps the barrier is that “character” feels too heavy-handed a description of what the friends or lovers share; we may think of the essential features of ourselves in less constructed terms. Sometimes, it may be more a shared understanding of the world, a shared emotional grounding, a shared vision of religious commitment, or a shared life-altering experience.

The idea that the beloved is a second self also explains many of our other intuitions about friendship and love, most notably, that the beloved reflects upon us, that is, that the object of my love says something about who I am. This claim is more compelling with the understanding that, in some sense, the beloved is chosen for who she is, that our relationship is a matter of choice.⁷ In many ways, our intimate relationships may feel anything but chosen—we may feel ourselves inexplicably drawn to another, we may find the other person so compelling that we can’t help but want to be in her presence, or we may feel as though we simply stumble upon the beloved. All too often, even our most intimate relationships seem to happen *to us* rather than being chosen. Yet even if a relationship begins in the most unpredictable of ways, ways seemingly out of our control, the continuation and deepening of the friendship is surely chosen. Upon meeting, we intentionally seek each other out, we voluntarily and willingly spend time together, and perhaps even organize our lives around one another. Thus, it makes sense that the beloved reflects upon

⁷ For a further discussion of the nature of choice in friendship, see Laurence Thomas, “Friendship” in *Synthese* 72 (1987), 217-236.

who we are—not only do we intimately identify with the beloved, we chose the beloved. And the beloved, then, is a reflection of us, and of our choices.

So, where is the respect in all of this? Often when moral philosophers talk of respecting someone, they have in mind a Kantian notion of respect as expressed in the categorical imperative, whereby what we are supposed to respect is the humanity in someone, independent of any of their particular characteristics as a human being and it is due to all human beings simply in virtue of their humanity. Just that someone is rational is sufficient to warrant this Kantian form of respect. Respect of this sort is morally important in many ways, and I do not mean to underestimate its value, for it is fundamental to our human communities and probably holds us to higher moral standards than we typically acknowledge. We cannot begin to have relationships with one another without this kind of respect; for it is the respect that must inform the most basic of our interactions with one another. Moreover, it's the violation of this sort of respect for other human beings as ends in themselves that has been missing in many of the atrocities that have occurred in human history and even in our personal relationships.

I argue, however, that in our friendships and loving relationships, we want and need another more intimate and richer form of respect. We want our friends to respect us not simply as human beings or in the same way that they respect everyone, but as the specific, unique individuals that we are. We want our friends and lovers not only to think we are worthy of a certain sort of treatment because we are rational, but we also want them to respect our actions, decisions, motives, responses and perspectives. We want them to not only tolerate our choices because we are autonomous, but in some sense to approve of or at least understand those choices. In some ways this kind of respect may sound like admiration, but equating this deeply contentful form of respect with admiration over-simplifies the issue. We may, in fact, want admiration

from our friends, but not necessarily if it isn't deserved. The sort of respect we want from our friends could be consistent with their disapproval, at least in some circumstances, or at least their skepticism or neutrality. We might disapprove of a friend's action without losing respect for her; we might well even make our disapproval known, even at the same time as we confer respect for her in all her particularity. The kind of respect we want from our friends is probably more akin to understanding though understanding that carries with it affirmation, at least on the whole.

In a companion friendship or loving relationship that is chosen where the other is thought of as another self, it is hard to imagine not having this sort of mutual respect that is grounded in all the particularities of the individual. The beloved has been chosen for who she is, and insofar as she is loved for who she is in all her particularity, it would be difficult to imagine maintaining such a friendship without this concrete sort of respect. In this sense, then, love and respect go hand in hand. But the reason we assume that love and respect must *always* go hand in hand is that we typically model loving relationships on friendship or romantic love. I have argued thus far that in our adult relationships it is typically thought that the one we love reflects our values and commitments in some important way, and thus that we ought to respect the beloved. However, it is the matter of choice that makes these relationships radically different and makes respect an important component of these relationships. Relationships between parents and children, however, are radically different in precisely these ways.

II. Parents and Children

Numerous authors have discussed the proper filial relationship between parents and children, what children owe their parents, and whether or not children and parents can be friends. I am not concerned to address all of these issues, but want to focus on how the parent and child relationship compares to other loving relationships with respect to the connection between love

and respect. In order to do so, some important distinctions in the parent-child relationship must be addressed, namely the sense of identity felt between parents and children, the power relationship that holds between parents and children, and the parental sense of responsibility for who the children become. All of these components of the parent-child relationship alter the interplay between love and respect.

One of the central components of friendship that supplied the support for mutual respect was the shared identity and commitments between the friends. Between parents and children there may also be a shared identity, but this shared identity takes on a radically different form. Parents and children may even more strongly identify with one another than the most perfect of all friends. In the most obvious sense, parents and children typically share a biological identity, and these shared genetics may contribute to all sorts of similarities.⁸ Frequently children look like their parents, and in some families the resemblance may carry for generations. But genetic identity may be about much more than appearance—parents and children may share genetic weaknesses or strengths, such as a propensity for alcoholism or a remarkable athletic ability, or genetic predispositions for certain sorts of diseases. Consider for example, the Bach family where nearly every male member of the family was a musician, or the families in the ballet world who have been dancing for generations. In some ways this shared talent is probably genetic, but in others it may be attributable to a shared environment, another source of a shared identity. It is often no surprise that the children of musicians are also talented musicians, due partly to the constant presence of music in their lives. But it is not only talents and abilities that are passed on from generation to generation through a combination of genetics and the household environment, but also values, commitments, moral outlooks, and strengths and weaknesses of character. And

⁸ Some of my comments here will seem to apply only to parents and children with a biological relationship, but many of the same ideas (independent of the genetic connection) would apply even in different parenting situations.

on this front, the power differential between parents and children becomes a central issue, for these shared commitments are often intentionally passed on from parents to children, with parents often trying to foster children who will develop in their own image, whether conscientiously or not.⁹ It's just that sometimes this image is a valuable one and sometimes it isn't. The members of the polygamist sect of the LDS are intentionally raising their children to share their values; similarly, I have neighbors who are very conscientious about the values they portray at home and expose their children to in the world. In this shared environment, there is often then also a sharing of identity, and common projects and prospects. Whether we like it or not, or embrace or reject the influence, parents are radically influential in making us the people we are.

Between friends and equals, our shared identity is chosen because we have chosen the friend for who she is and thus have first been able to affirm what we find valuable in and about her. For parents and children, it seems that there is a shared identity whether the parties choose it or not. Parents are obviously the ones with the upper hand here, for they have control in the relationship, but sometimes less control than they think. Parents may do everything they can to help their children turn out one way or another, only to have their plans go awry at every turn. Though parents may choose to have children, they cannot choose the children they have. For parents, however, the sense of identity may also carry with it a sense of responsibility. Children are in many ways a reflection of their parents and parents will be praised or blamed for what their children become, at least to some limited degree, no matter how much control they really have. There is a commonly understood tension here. We readily acknowledge that it is the parents' responsibility to bring children up well, helping them to learn discipline, self-control,

⁹ There will certainly be cases in which parents are trying to provide a different, and presumably better, life for their children than they had themselves. But in doing so, they are still transmitting values and commitments.

compassion, manners, etc. Yet we also acknowledge that there are some cases in which no matter how thorough, genuine or well-intentioned the parents' efforts, they will be for naught. Eventually, children must confirm or deny these values and commitments for themselves. Only once children are grown can we suggest that the relationship between parents and children is one of choice.

Thus the love between parents and children must have a radically different grounding than that between friends or lovers. The love between parents and children is much more dependent upon the relationship and the history that they share, though this love may seem to be present even before there is much of a history. Many parents, I'm sure, have had the experience upon the birth of a child of knowing that they love this child already and will love this child no matter what, that their love will not be conditional in any way. This is to be distinguished here from the claim that their approval or respect in the rich sense I defend above is unconditional. I am quite cognizant of the fact that I love my daughter simply because she is my daughter. In the case of friends or lovers, we love the friend for who the person is contentfully; in the case of children, the parents love is likely dependent upon nothing else but the relationship. Thus, whereas a friendship may end if the person changes radically, at least with respect to her essential traits, a child never stops being your child and it makes more sense for the love to be unconditional.¹⁰ And thus it is also understandable how this unconditional love may not be intimately tied with respect in a rich, substantive form.

In the most ideal of relationships between parents and children, a friendship, or at least an approximation of a friendship may develop, with the parent and child gaining the kind of deep

¹⁰ A full discussion of whether love should be unconditional is more than I can enter into here. Badhwar, however, addresses the issue in "Friends as Ends in Themselves." See also Derek Edyvane, "Against Unconditional Love" in *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, v. 20 n. 1, 2003, 59-75.

and abiding respect for one another that grounds their love even more deeply.¹¹ But with this framework proposed here, we can make sense of cases of parents who find considerable disappointment in how their children turn out, but continue to love them. As a parent, I love my daughter not because of the particular characteristics that she has, though her desirable traits make loving her all that much easier, but simply because she is my daughter. And I trust that this love will continue regardless of the person that she becomes—I love her merely because she is mine. Though certainly all parents want their children to develop and mature in productive and responsible ways, presumably parents love their children even if they go astray. The mother of the mass murderer or the parents of the pedophile may have great difficulty respecting their children in any very contentful sense, and they may experience tremendous sadness, but still love them simply because they are theirs. This love may be strengthened and sustained not so much by who the child has become, but by the memory of who the child was, and the history of their relationship. The shared identity and the parental bond may result in a form of guilt about who the child has become, and this guilt may well be connected to the identity they feel with their children—that somehow or another who their children have become is a reflection on them, that they bear some responsibility for who the child now is, through genetic material, upbringing, or habit formation. Some parents do, of course, reject children who disappoint them. This, I think, reflects a failing on the parents' part, perhaps a lack of compassion or sympathy, rather than an affirmation of the possibility that they can't love them if they don't respect them.

¹¹ Notably Joseph Kupfer argues compellingly that even once children are grown, parents and children cannot be friends in the truest sense for inequity in the relationship remains. See "Can Parents and Children Be Friends?" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, v. 27 n. 1, January 1990, 15-26. In contrast, Jane English argues that the only proper basis for any kind of obligation between parents and children is friendship. See "What do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?" in Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers, eds., *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*, (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 714-720.

So, in Holmgren's case of children who come to realize that their parents have been conspirators in Nazi concentration camps, the psychological issue is not merely one of respect, but also of self-identity, and presumed guilt. We can only imagine that they might feel "tainted" or guilty by association. It's not that their parents have merely engaged in some action of which they don't approve, such as having an affair or having an abortion that might be explained by a fuller understanding of the situation, rather their parents have been part of some of the most horrific events of the past century. Rightfully or not we have often considered those who took part in Nazi war crimes to be among the worst of us, deporting them and socially ostracizing them. So, though the children will certainly be torn about the proper response to their parents, it is not simply a matter of respect, but of their own perceived guilt and identity. Not only are they biologically connected, their parents have taught them nearly everything they know about the world and shown them how to engage with it. The children's attitudes towards their parents are also, then, part and parcel of how they view themselves. Thus they may feel considerable psychological pressure to distance themselves, for their parents will seem to be people they don't even know or at least people radically different than the ones they thought they knew. Presuming that they had a relationship in which they respected their parents prior to this revelation, the grounding for their respect may no longer be present. It is possible that they could come to understand their parents and their circumstances well enough to regain this respect, but this information may be too much to overcome. This doesn't, however, entail that they cannot continue to love them, for their love can be grounded in the simple fact that they are their parents. Moreover, the children may continue to love their parents for the upbringing they were provided, for the love and affection they were shown, and for the history that they have shared. This love may last even if the relationship is forever altered and their parents' past

actions undermine the respect the children held for them as individuals. It is conceivable that the children could continue to love their parents because of the bond that they share without being able to respect the people they now seem to be. Thus, parents and children do not need to have respect for one another in anything but a Kantian sense of respect for one another simply as human beings to continue loving one another, and that this is what makes these relationships radically different from romantic loving relationships between adults.