

## C. S. Lewis on Situation Ethics

Lewis, C. S., 2016. Charity. In: Lewis, C. S. The Four Loves. London, UK: William Collins.

The natural loves (i.e. affection, friendship, and eros) are not self-sufficient; they require regulation by the divine love (i.e. charity). For example, by analogy, a garden is not self-sufficient. Without regulation by a gardener, it becomes a wilderness; however, with regulation by a gardener, it becomes a spectacular paradise. Unlike a wilderness, a garden produces amazing sights and smells throughout the seasons. Discussion of the relationship between the natural loves and the divine love should not be undertaken prematurely for two reasons. First, most people have enough trouble cultivating the natural loves without worrying about their relationship with the divine love. Second, people can avoid the problem of idolising the natural loves before discussing the divine love. Some people cut themselves off from the natural loves to avoid suffering heartbreak. Augustine of Hippo cautioned people never to love something or someone that they might lose and instead to love only God. However, this approach appears to lead to hardness of heart and lovelessness, neither of which God wants for his creatures. By attempting to avoid suffering heartbreak, people only succeed in making their hearts irredeemable.

The natural loves can be an obstacle to the divine love; in other words, the love people have for other human beings can be an obstacle to the love they have for God. However, this does not mean that people should love other human beings less; instead, they should love God more. According to the New Testament, Jesus commanded his listeners to hate their parents, spouses, children, and siblings (Luke 14:26). However, by this, Jesus did not mean that his listeners should despise their families; instead, he meant that they should reject their families if their families came between them and God. Some people find this duty too easy, and others find it too hard; to avoid suffering, people should be careful to order their loves so that misunderstandings and genuine hatred do not arise. For example, the poet Richard Lovelace wrote about leaving his lover, Lucasta, to go to war for his honour. According to Richard Lovelace's poetry, this was relatively easy because both Lucasta and he had agreed that their love was subordinate to honour. People can avoid suffering and hatred between friends and family members if the subordination of the natural loves to the divine love is established early.

The divine love is a form of gift-love; in other words, it is given, it does not have a corresponding need to be loved back (i.e. need-love). This divine love is what inspired God to create a universe of unnecessary and entirely superfluous creatures. God is like a host that creates his own parasites (i.e. creatures), which feed on the divine love that he freely gives. The natural loves can take the forms of gift-love (e.g. the devoted mother or the benevolent ruler); however, the divine love is a different type of gift-love. The divine love gives to others, regardless of relationship or obligation, to criminals, enemies, idiots, and outsiders. This is why the divine love is called "charity". Additionally, God gives people two forms of need-love, a need-love of God and a need-love of other people. First, God gives people the need-love to be loved by God for what they are, as creatures entirely dependent on him who cannot do anything (including exist) in his absence. Second, God gives people the need-love to be loved by other human beings, not because of their positive attributes (which is how the natural loves like friendship and eros work) but despite their absence. For example, when a husband with a degenerative disease is cared for by his wife, he receives a form of need-love. People are created to receive charity, the divine love, from both God and others.

When God is admitted to the human heart, he transforms both gift-love and need-love. God inspires people to give charity freely to those with whom they have no relationship and to whom they have no obligation. God inspires people to need charity and accept it graciously from both him and other people. Sometimes, God requires people to reject the natural loves in specific instances (e.g. Abraham rejecting his ancestors); however, more often, he inspires people to transform them. In this way, the relationship between the natural loves and the divine love is similar to the relationship between God and humankind in the incarnation of Jesus. Just as human flesh is turned into an instrument of God in the incarnation, people can turn natural loves into instruments of the divine love (i.e. charity). This process should not involve the sort of showy display that some Christians are inspired to produce; instead, the left hand should not know what the right hand is doing. Additionally, people should never find this process completed; there are always invitations to transform the natural loves into the divine love. When people inwardly complain about the infuriating nature of their children, the extravagance of their spouses, or the meanness of their parents, they are being called to be more charitable in their relationships with their family members.

It is necessary for the natural loves to be transformed into the divine love because only that which is heavenly can enter heaven. For example, by analogy, just as the resurrection body is transformed from the earthly body so that it can enter heaven, the natural loves must be transformed, too. Some theologians wonder about whether or not the relationships that exist on Earth will exist in heaven. If earthly relationships are translated into heaven, presumably only the eternal aspects of these relationships survive; in other words, presumably only the aspects of these relationships that embody the divine love (instead of the natural loves) survive. For example, by analogy, a reunion with a friend or relation in heaven may be compared to a reunion in adult life with a friend from primary school; unless there exist real shared interests beyond childhood games, the relationship has no chance of survival. Heaven provides the promise of eternal existence in which anything that is not eternal is out of date. Christians will not have to reject or turn away from their earthly friends or lovers because they obstruct their love of God; instead, they will find their earthly friends and lovers in their love of God. God provides two graces under the word "charity", a gift-love that we give to other people, and a need-love that we receive from God and other people; however, he provides a third: a supernatural appreciation of God that is the true centre of all human and angelic life.

### George Thinks

This chapter of *The Four Loves* concludes a much longer contemplation on love and its different types. As C. S. Lewis's book title suggests, there are four different varieties: the first three are natural (i.e. affection, friendship, and eros). These are the types of love we're biologically hardwired to experience, and C. S. Lewis takes plenty of time to describe them and to point out some of the problems that arise when we idolise them. The fourth variety is different, it's divine (i.e. charity), and it has the power to transform the natural loves into greater, eternal versions of themselves. Unlike other works related to situation ethics, there isn't an explicit argument here; *The Four Loves* is more of a meditation on the different types of love C. S. Lewis believed people can experience, coupled with an attempt to relate them to the Christian conception of God. This chapter, on charity, the divine love, attempts to show how all types of love are loftiest when they are selfless and inspired by Jesus.

Although C. S. Lewis doesn't make any reference to agape, situation ethics, or the work of Joseph Fletcher (which he may or may not have known about), his writing does seem to anticipate this turn in Christian thinking. At its core, this chapter encourages Christians to love one another fully by giving and receiving charity freely, not just among friends or family but everyone, especially those in need. Nevertheless, the lack of argumentation can make it a frustrating read. C. S. Lewis was clearly writing with a Christian audience in mind, and his encouragement to charitable behaviour relies entirely on a traditional, Christian conception of God as an omnipotent being somewhere out there beyond the universe. In this regard, it lacks much of the complexity of John Robinson's reconception of God, which made his contemplation of a similar subject an international bestseller. Comforting reading, then, for a conservative Christian readership, but a little woolly, in my opinion.

