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Can Love Be Excessive? Baumgarten and Kant on Love, Respect, and Friendship

1 Introduction

In the ‘Doctrine of Virtue’ in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant states that the relationship between love and respect in the moral world can be conceived by analogy with the relationship between attraction and repulsion in the physical world. This analogy has troubled some commentators. The source of this perceived trouble can be traced back to Marcia Baron’s interpretation of the analogy as counterintuitive and merely metaphorical (Baron 2002, 392). Against this interpretation, Eleni Filippaki attempted to understand the analogy more substantively and concluded that conceiving the polarity between love and respect as attractive and repulsive forces is crucial for understanding Kant’s conception of friendship, where love and respect mould each other as opposing yet complementary moral forces (Filippaki 2012, 23, 25, 46). In this paper, I further Filippaki’s interpretation by revealing Kant’s engagement with and criticism of Baumgarten’s conception of friendship.¹ Comparing Baumgarten’s and Kant’s concepts of love, respect, and friendship, I argue that Kant reconstructs Baumgarten’s concept of friendship because he considers Baumgarten’s concept of love to be ‘excessive’ and therefore in need of mitigation by respect. I argue that, for Kant, it is not the case that love ‘includes’ respect so that they are ‘less different and less opposed’, as Baron insists (Baron 2002, 395f., 407)², nor is it the case that love and respect merely complement each other, as Filippaki claims. Rather, Kant gives respect a special function whereby it actively contains the ‘excess’ of love.

¹ For lack of space, I do not go into detail here about why Baumgarten is relevant for considering issues in Kant’s ethics, which I have explicated elsewhere (Osawa 2018a, Osawa 2018b).

² Baron mentions Velleman 1999 and Johnson 1997 as supporting her position that love and respect do not differ from each other to any significant extent.

2 Kant's Analogy: Love/Attraction and Respect/Repulsion

Kant's clearest formulation of the analogy of the relationship between love and respect with that between attraction and repulsion can be found in the following passage from the 'Doctrine of Virtue':

In speaking of laws of duty [...] and, among these, of laws for human beings' external relations with one another, we consider ourselves in a moral [...] world where, by analogy with the physical world, *attraction* and *repulsion* bind together rational beings [...]. The principle of *mutual love* admonishes them constantly to *come closer* to one another; that of the *respect* they owe one another, to keep themselves *at a distance* from one another [...]. (MS, AA 6: 449)³

Here Kant claims that love and respect are two 'real' opposed moral forces in the same way that attraction and repulsion are opposed as physical forces. When one exercises love, one comes closer to another person in the same way that a physical substance approaches another substance by the force of attraction. When one exercises respect, on the other hand, one keeps a distance from another person in the same way that a substance departs from another substance by the force of repulsion.

In the same work, Kant later elaborates on this analogy by implying that if one increases one's degree of love towards another person, the degree of respect towards the other person decreases:

[H]ow can he [a human being] be sure that if the love of one is stronger, he may not [...] forfeit something of the other's respect, so that it will be difficult for both to bring love and respect subjectively into that equal balance required for friendship? —For love can be regarded as attraction and respect as repulsion, and if the principle of love bids friends to draw closer, the principle of respect requires them to stay at a proper distance from each other. (MS, AA 6: 470)

My focus in this paper is not so much on the analogy between moral and physical forces but rather on Kant's peculiar idea that love and respect are opposed, or in conflict. Contrary to Baron's interpretation, on the one hand, we can establish the analogy as given if we take into consideration both Kant's pre-critical

³ All translations of Kant's works are taken from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

essay, *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy*,⁴ and Herder's notes from the *Lectures on Ethics*.⁵ On the other hand, however, in order to understand what Kant considers to be problematic in friendship, namely what I call 'excessive love', we need to understand the sense in which love and respect are real opposing forces and therefore in conflict.

3 The Duties of Love and Respect: Baumgarten and Kant

In what follows, I first discuss Kant's conceptions of love and respect and then proceed to discuss the implications of Kant's claim that respect is required to regulate the excess of love. The key concept in these discussions is duty, which connotes 'being bound' in its etymological sense and is therefore the expression of moral forces. I argue that it is in response to Baumgarten that Kant argues that love must be mitigated so as not to be excessive, when examining the extent to which one is bound to love and respect another person—for Kant problematises Baumgarten's duty of love as being unrestrictive due to the lack of an appropriate definition of a duty of respect. In this section, I address the following two questions: (1) What constitutes Kant's conception of a duty of love, and in what sense is it a criticism of Baumgarten's conception of a duty of love? (2) What constitutes Kant's conception of a duty of respect, and what does Baumgarten's not addressing this duty mean?

Regarding Kant's conception of a duty of love, we first need to resolve one complication surrounding it: He approves a duty of love at one point but disapproves the same duty at another point. However, this complication can be resolved if we understand Kant's distinction between love conceived as a mere pathological feeling and love understood as what he calls 'practical love'—which I call a 'rational feeling' that is qualitatively differentiated from a mere pathological feeling.⁶

⁴ See the passage where Kant draws an analogy between physical forces and mental forces (NG, AA 2: 191f.) See also Zinkin 2006, 45–47.

⁵ See Kant's claim that 'self-interested feeling' and 'disinterested feeling', as well as attraction and repulsion, are '*in conflictu*' (V-PP/Herder, AA 27: 4).

⁶ For a helpful guide on the distinction between pathological love and practical love, which can be traced back to the *Groundwork*, see Rinne 2018, 116–118.

On the one hand, following the definition of a feeling as ‘the capacity for having pleasure or displeasure in a representation’ (MS, AA 6: 211),⁷ Kant claims: ‘Love is a matter of *feeling* [*Empfindung*], not of willing, and I cannot love because I *will* to, still less because I *ought* to (I cannot be constrained to love); so a *duty to love* is an absurdity’ (MS, AA 6: 401). Thus, Kant rejects a duty of love when it is a mere pathological feeling.

On the other hand, Kant approves a duty of love when it is a rational feeling. In the context of discussing the ‘laws of duty’ (MS, AA 6: 449) that include a duty of love, he writes:

[L]ove is not to be understood as *feeling* [*Gefühl*], that is, as pleasure in the perfection of others; love is not to be understood as *delight* in them⁸ [...]. It must rather be thought as the maxim of *benevolence* (practical love), which results in beneficence. (MS, AA 6: 449)

Although Kant says here that ‘love is not to be understood as feeling’, I take Kant to mean that love as a duty is not to be understood as a mere pathological feeling but rather as a rational feeling, a feeling of a special kind that is specific to human beings who have duties. As we will see below, it makes sense to see a parallel between the duties of love and respect and take Kant to be ascribing the status of ‘rational feeling’ to love (albeit not all sorts of love) and respect, among other feelings.

Let us now turn to the question of how Kant’s conception of love is a criticism of Baumgarten’s conception. Both argue that one justifiably loves those who one feels are close to oneself more than others. Baumgarten claims that it does not contradict ‘philanthropy’ or ‘love of human beings’, which he defines as general love (see E §302 [V-Eth/Baumgarten, AA 27: 818]), if we vary our degrees of love towards other persons depending on how much those persons concern us:

[...] [Y]ou are not obligated to love yourself and other human beings totally equally. Indeed, to love one person more than another, those who are more perfect more than those who are rather more imperfect, those whom you know more than those whom you do not know, to prefer those who are more useful to you than those who are less useful to you, to look after those whom you are better able to look after than those to whom you cannot be useful very much, does not contradict universal philanthropy. (E §304 [V-Eth/Baumgarten, AA 27: 818])

⁷ See Baumgarten’s fairly similar definition: “[E]ither I intuit the perfection of something and am *pleased*, or I intuit its imperfections, and am *displeased* [...]” (M §651 [HN, AA 15: 40]).

⁸ Here we see Kant’s direct criticism of Baumgarten’s definition of love: ‘delight in the perfection of someone’ (M §648 [HN, AA 15: 39]).

Baumgarten then explicitly justifies varying the degrees of love:

In loving others, it is not only allowed but also postulated, among the determining grounds, to quantify the degree of perfections in others who must be loved, the degree of familiarity that lies between us, and indeed usefulness as well. (E §305 [V-Eth/Baumgarten, AA 27: 819])

At first glance, Kant seems to duplicate Baumgarten's justification for varying the degrees of love: '[T]he benevolence present in love for all human beings is indeed the greatest in its *extent*, but the smallest in its *degree* [...]' (MS, AA 6: 451). To provide more details about this extent/degree compatibility claim, Kant goes on to argue:

If one is closer to me than another (in the duty of benevolence) and I am therefore under obligation to greater benevolence to one than the other but am admittedly closer to myself [...] than to any other, then it would seem that I cannot, without contradicting myself, say that I ought to love every human being as myself, since the measure of self-love would allow for no difference in degree. —But it is quite obvious that what is meant here is not merely benevolence in *wishes*, which is [...] *only taking delight in the well-being of every other* [these italics mine] [...]; what is meant is, rather, [...] practical benevolence (beneficence), making the well-being and happiness of others my *end*. For wishing I can be *equally* benevolent to everyone, whereas in acting I can, without violating the universality of the maxim, vary the degree greatly in accordance with the different objects of my love (one of whom concerns me more closely than another). (MS, AA 6: 451f.)

If we look at this passage with an eye to Kant's criticism of Baumgarten's formulation of love as 'delight in the perfection of someone', however, we can infer that Kant is here claiming a need to demarcate our duty of 'practical benevolence' from mere benevolence, which he thinks cannot be qualified as a duty. Wishing well for others, or mere benevolence, is not enough for being called a duty. I argue that Kant's demarcation of love as a rational feeling as opposed to pathological feelings corresponds to Kant's distinction between practical benevolence (beneficence) and mere benevolence. Beyond wishing well for others, therefore, we have a duty to act on rational love, or to rationally do something about how we feel about others. For example, we have a duty to donate our share to those who are less unfortunate, rather than just to wish them well.

Regarding Kant's conception of a duty of respect, I argue that for him all kinds of respect are feelings of a special kind, namely rational feelings. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he claims that the respect that belongs to the overarching concept of moral feeling is 'the negative effect on feeling', which 'is itself feeling' (KpV, AA 5: 72f.). This feeling is rational, as Kant claims a little later in the same work, because it works as 'an incentive to make this law [the objective

moral law] the maxim' (KpV, AA 5: 76) and therefore receives a special, rational, status of feeling that is distinct from 'mere pathological' feelings.

Based on this identification of respect as a rational feeling, then, Kant claims that respect is our duty:

The *respect* that I have for others or that another can require from me [...] is [...] recognition of a *dignity* [...] in other human beings. [...] Every human being has a legitimate claim to respect from his fellow human beings and is *in turn* bound to respect every other. Humanity itself is a dignity [...]. (MS, AA 6: 462)

According to Kant, human beings have a duty to respect others in order to sustain the condition that no one's dignity is violated. Moreover, one is bound to respect all others, even if one does not have personal interactions with each one of them. Ultimately, then, the duty to respect others implies that one has a duty to respect humanity itself.

Remarkably, in contrast, we cannot find a passage where Baumgarten discusses a duty of respect. What lacking an appropriate—from Kant's perspective—place for the duty of respect means becomes clear if we analyse how Kant engages with and criticises Baumgarten's conception of friendship. With this view in place, we are now in a position to assess Kant's diagnosis of Baumgarten's 'excessive' love in relation to respect.

4 Love and Respect in Friendship: Baumgarten and Kant

An appropriate place from which to assess Kant's diagnosis of Baumgarten's 'excessive' love is Kant's discussion of the concept of friendship, since it exhibits the importance (and unimportance) of the relationship between love and respect. To begin with, Kant defines friendship as follows:

Friendship (considered in its perfection) is the union of two persons through equal mutual love and respect. [...] But it is readily seen that friendship is only an idea (though a practically necessary one) and unattainable in practice, although striving for friendship [...] is a duty set by reason [...]. (MS, AA 6: 469)

Because of our finite nature, perfectly equal balance between love and respect is unattainable in friendship. But this does not mean that we should abandon our journey towards achieving the perfect balance, even if it is impossible for finite beings.

In light of the unattainability of the perfect balance between love and respect, Kant proposes what he calls ‘moral friendship’ as the second best option, as it were, for finite humans to pursue: ‘*Moral friendship* [...] is the complete confidence of two persons in revealing their secret judgments and feelings to each other, as far as such disclosures are consistent with mutual respect’ (MS, AA 6: 471). Although friendship as an idea is unattainable, when considered from the perspective of two persons in close proximity, we discover ‘moral friendship’ as a form of friendship we can work on in our real-life situations, with the aim of approximating the perfect balance between love and respect.

Baumgarten, on the other hand, conceives of a different route to the deepening of friendship, although it also entails mutual disclosure between friends. His discussion of friendship centres around the importance of the ‘signs’ of love in friendship and how to make it stable:

Since the other human being cannot know what is being exercised inside your mind if it is not signified, often it is of importance, not only to you, but also to the other person, that he knows [...] in what way and how much he is loved by you. Since the just degree of philanthropy can never or very rarely intrude into the persistent work of charity from its own cause, you are also obligated to signify your philanthropy, and therefore to build the proficiency of signifying it, which is called *humanity* [...]. (E §309 [V-Eth/Baumgarten, AA 27: 820])

Here Baumgarten assumes metaphysical premises about a ‘sign’—he claims that we must denote the reality of another thing by means of a sign, and the signified thing then becomes real by being attributed to the sign as its meaning:

A *sign* is the means for knowing the existence of another thing and the end of the sign is the *signified*. Hence, the sign is the principle of knowing the signified, and the nexus between the sign and the signed is [...] *meaning* [...] when attributed to the sign. (M §347 [HN, AA 17: 102])

In ethical terms, then, we need a sign as a way to show that we love other human beings, since without that sign others cannot know that we love them. Moreover, if we keep showing that sign to others in various ways, our disposition eventually becomes a proficiency, which Baumgarten calls ‘humanity’. To summarise, friendship is established through the mutual signification of love between two persons and does not involve respect.

For Baumgarten, the transition from general friendship to moral friendship, to paraphrase Kant, is seamless, and friendship at its general level is already real, not merely an idea. Hence, establishing friendship between two persons in close proximity occurs as a result of applying philanthropy (love of human be-

ings; general friendship) to the specific relationship between two persons (special friendship; what amounts to Kant's 'moral friendship') in a seamless manner as a matter of changing a 'degree' of philanthropy: "[g]eneral [...] friendship is brought to all human beings only if it is mutual" (E § 313 [V-Eth/Baumgarten, AA 27: 820]), while "[s]pecial friendship is a degree of philanthropy, inasmuch as you are not obligated to exhibit it to all human beings" (E § 491 [V-Eth/Baumgarten, AA 27: 867]). Consequently, the deepening of moral friendship works for Baumgarten as follows: The more we show our signs of love to each other, the more we will love each other and the deeper our friendship will be. In short, Baumgarten defines moral friendship as a deepening of mutual love between two persons, without the involvement of respect, through the seamless application of their proficiency in humanity to signifying their specific love to each other.

Let us now try to get a clearer picture of what Kant's criticism of Baumgarten's 'excessive' love consists in. Unlike Baumgarten, Kant does not consider friendship to work exclusively as a deepening of mutual love, for he is adamant about not completely trusting the delicacy of human affections. Instead, Kant sees respect as a counterforce to mitigate the wavering of feelings:

[F]riendship is something so delicate (*teneritas amicitiae*) that it is never for a moment safe from interruptions if it is allowed to rest on feelings, and if this mutual sympathy and self-surrender are not subjected to principles or rules preventing excessive familiarity and limiting mutual love by requirements of respect. (MS, AA 6: 471)

I argue that it is in response to Baumgarten that Kant includes the concept of respect in his articulation of friendship, for he believes that Baumgarten's version of friendship allows love to be excessive.

To support this argument, I turn to an essential characteristic of Baumgarten's conception of love: 'tender love (*amor tener*)'. This is defined as 'endeavouring completely to please someone who is loved' (E §80 [V-Eth/Baumgarten, AA 27: 759]). In Baumgarten's ethical cosmology, which is underpinned by the concept of perfection, all moral imperatives demand the study of love: love for God, self-love, love for others, and even 'tenderness' toward all kinds of beings, including our natural environment. Consequently, unlike Kant, Baumgarten does not regard 'excessive familiarity' as an obstacle to friendship. On the contrary, he even encourages us to make mutual love as 'excessive' as possible in order to further friendship, to paraphrase Kant. I argue that Kant inverts the meaning of tenderness in friendship so that 'tender' or 'delicate' no longer means 'loving kindness', but rather means that friendship is delicate. This is why Kant insists that we should restrict our excessive love through the counterforce of respect,

which he conceives of by analogy with a physical force of repulsion: keeping ourselves at a distance. From Baumgarten's perspective, however, Kant's claim that excessive love is unsustainable is groundless, since it is tantamount to saying that we might possibly 'exceed perfection'.

5 Conclusion

The preceding discussion can be summarised as follows. First, Kant's analogy of the relationship between love and respect with that between attraction and repulsion is not a metaphor, since he considers them to be two 'real' opposing forces. Respect cancels the effects of love in the same way as repulsion cancels the effects of attraction. Second, Kant criticises Baumgarten for his faulty conception of the duty of love. From Kant's perspective, Baumgarten's conception of the duty of love allows one to not act rationally on love, i.e. to be satisfied with just wishing well for others. Third, Kant's conception of the duty of respect highlights that Baumgarten does not address this duty. Fourth, Kant's conception of friendship, in which the two real opposing forces of love and respect are required to be balanced, reveals Kant's criticism of Baumgarten for allowing 'excessive' love: Against Baumgarten, Kant structures a concept of friendship in which respect mitigates the 'excess' of love.

These four conclusions suggest that considering Baumgarten's conception of friendship is of real benefit for reassessing what it means to say that love and respect must ideally be balanced in Kant's conception of friendship as well as how respect is given possible primacy over love in its function to regulate the latter.

Note on Abbreviations for Baumgarten's Works

- E *Ethica philosophica* (3rd ed., 1763; AA 27) [my translation].
 M *Metaphysica* (4th ed., 1757; AA 15 and 17) [I consult the English translation by Fugate and Hymers].

I omit cross-references to earlier and later paragraphs as well as to his other works.

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