

Love: The Greatest Wisdom Virtue

By Walter G. Moss

Following the [lead](#) of Copthorne Macdonald, founder of the Wisdom Page, it has become commonplace for wisdom scholars to talk about wisdom values or virtues. Indeed, the latest [Wisdom Page update](#) (March 2013), features several pieces that address this question. Generally, scholars list many such values or virtues, but much less commonly prioritize them. Nor will I, *except* to argue that love, primary of the *agape* type, is the greatest of the wisdom virtues.

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's* entry on “love” [states](#): “‘*Agape*’ has come, primarily through the Christian tradition, to mean the sort of love God has for us persons, as well as our love for God and, by extension, of our love for each other—a kind of brotherly love.” Since non-Christians, including atheists, are fully capable of “brotherly [and sisterly] love,” I do not limit such love to believers. Nor do I exclude the type of love that spouses might have for each other, even though it may fall outside the definition of *agape* and include elements of romantic love. Both “brotherly love” and spousal love should be primarily concerned with seeking the good of the other(s), which is our main concern here. Love also implies a depth of concern and commitment that exceeds any mere “liking.”

Although few scholars have argued for the primacy of love among wisdom values, many have included it in their lists of wisdom values or virtues—see, for example, [Macdonald's lists](#), where he also mentions as “expressions of wisdom”: “being deeply loving, and able to manifest love in appropriate ways,” “being compassionate,” and “behaving in ways that benefit others.” Richard Trowbridge in his [The Scientific Approach of Wisdom](#) refers to St. Thomas Aquinas’s belief that “the gift of wisdom is made possible by love” and that “love, in turn, is essential for wisdom to attain its knowledge.” Trowbridge also quotes an “insight into wisdom” described by Viktor Frankl, which “occurred to him while marching to his work detail in a concentration camp” during WWII:

I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man is through love and in love.*

Two other wisdom scholars hint at “brotherly love,” or at least concern for others’ well-being, in their definitions of wisdom. Tom Lombardo [states](#) “Wisdom is the highest expression of self-development and future consciousness. It is the continually evolving understanding of and fascination with the big picture of life, of what is important, ethical, and meaningful, and the desire and creative capacity to apply this understanding to *enhance the well-being of life, both for oneself and others*” [my italics]. Robert Sternberg

[has written](#): “People are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God.” In the same article Sternberg has argued that “smart and well-educated people” are often unwise because of four fallacies, which he labels the egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence, and invulnerability fallacies. All four are tied up with too big an ego and with overestimating one’s own importance and powers.

Because these fallacies suggest the triumph of egoism over love, St. Paul’s [words](#) about love come to mind: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

The primacy of love as the main wisdom virtue also echoes Paul’s other words in this same epistle: “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

The preeminence of love dawned on me only slowly when writing the [most recent of my wisdom profiles](#) for the Wisdom Page. It was on Dorothy Day. As stated there:

To her, love was the principle virtue Two of her favorite quotes were “Hell is not to love anymore” and “Love is the measure by which we will be judged.”

In a 1958 letter she wrote: “If we could only learn that the only important thing is love, and that we will be judged on love—to keep on loving, and showing that love, and expressing that love, over and over, whether we feel it or not, seventy times seven, to mothers-in-law, to husbands, to children—and to be oblivious of insult, or hurt, or injury—not to see them, not to hear them. . . . not judge, not do anything, but love, love, love.”

A decade earlier, in a column of September 1948, she wrote: “What is God but Love? What is a religion without love?” She also paraphrased a character in Camus’s *The Plague*, “who says that he is tired of hearing about men dying for an idea. He would like to hear about a man dying for love for a change. . . . More of this column, however, was devoted to thoughts expressed by the Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev in his book *The Meaning of Love*. She quoted various passages from it such as, “The true significance of love consists not in the simple experience of this feeling, but what is accomplished by means of it, in the work of love.” In her 1948 book *On Pilgrimage* she wrote, “To love with understanding and without understanding. . . . To see only what is lovable. To think only on these things. To see the best in everyone around, their virtues rather than their faults.

Furthermore, Day perceived a connection between the love she once had for the man in her life (and the father of her child) and a more general, charitable Christian love. In a 1938 autobiographical work she wrote, “It was human love that helped me to understand divine love. Human love at its best, unselfish, glowing, illuminating our days, gives us a glimpse of the love of God for man. Love is the best thing we can know in this life, but it must be sustained by an effort of the will. It is not just an emotion, a warm feeling of gratification. It must lie still and quiet, dull and smoldering, for periods. It grows through suffering and patience and compassion. We must suffer for those we love, we must endure their trials and their sufferings, we must even take upon ourselves the penalties due their sins.”

In [another essay](#), dealing more with Day’s relationship with the Catholic monk Thomas Merton, I have indicated that he shared her emphasis on the primacy of love for achieving wisdom—he praised, for example, in an essay on Faulkner “a wisdom based on love.” In a 1960 work, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, he noted how the early Christian desert saints stressed the “primacy of love over everything else in the spiritual life.” In a prose poem of 1963, [“Hagia Sophia,”](#) he writes of this Holy Wisdom as being the love that unites all creation.

Both Day and Merton realized that a wisdom grounded on love involves not just feeling, but action, and will-power and self-discipline. She stated that love “is a hard, hard doctrine,” involving such discipline. He wrote that wisdom “has two aspects. One is metaphysical and speculative, an apprehension of the radical structure of human life. . . . The other is moral, practical, and religious, an awareness of man’s life as a task to be undertaken at great risk, in which tragic failure and creative transcendence are both possible. He also indicated that a theology of love must seek to deal realistically with the evil and injustice in the world, and not merely to compromise with them. A theology of love may also conceivably turn out to be a theology of revolution.”

The emphasis of these two radical Catholic thinkers on the primacy of love convinced me that not only is it the principle virtue we should strive for, but that it is the chief wisdom virtue. Their Catholicism and St. Paul’s status as an important disciple of Jesus Christ should not prejudice non-Catholics or non-Christians against them. It is true that such Christians believe something that agnostics or atheists do not share: that the love of God is an important dimension of love. But both Day and Merton thought that non-believers like Camus, whom they greatly admired, can be both loving and wise. The two Catholics were also open, ecumenical thinkers who believed in dialogue with people of other faiths, as well as with agnostics and atheists. In fact, they were both often criticized by more conservative Catholics for their openness. Both of them had great admiration for the wisdom of Gandhi. Merton also emphasized the insights of Zen Buddhism and valued the thinking of the famous Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki, whom he first met in 1964. Upon parting with Merton after this meeting, Suzuki said to him, “The most important thing is love,” a sentiment that we have seen Merton shared.

In writing about Shakespeare, Alan Nordstrom also [stresses](#) the importance of love for wisdom: “Wisdom for Shakespeare has far more to do with the heart than the head. Though it is prudent to be canny and not gullible, and it is astute to be alert to the dangerous ways of the world (the flesh, and the devil), what is still more essential is a true and faithful heart, radiant with love, care, and devotion, brimming with compassion and forgiveness.”

These words suggest a link between love, caring, and compassion, and the same could be said for many other wisdom values that scholars list such as empathy or, as St. Paul indicated, patience, humility, and hope (or positivity).

But this emphasis on love does not mean that it and its affiliated values are alone sufficient for wisdom. Historian and wisdom scholar Andrew Achenbaum, who shares my admiration for Dorothy Day’s wisdom, has [written](#) of the “synergistic interaction of feeling, thought, and action that is the hallmark of wisdom.” Although Day correctly emphasized that love involved both feeling and action, she placed less stress on the third element of Achenbaum’s triad necessary for wisdom— “thought” (or in Nordstrom’s phraseology “the head”).

Overwhelmingly, however, wisdom scholars recognize the importance of a clear and fertile mind for achieving wisdom. Paul Baltes, for example, [writes](#) that “seven properties are generally, if not universally, accepted as inherent in any definition of wisdom,” and then begins by stressing knowledge and understanding:

- (1) Wisdom addresses important and difficult questions and strategies about the conduct and meaning of life.
- (2) Wisdom includes knowledge about the limits of knowledge and the uncertainties of the world.
- (3) Wisdom represents a truly superior level of knowledge, judgment, and advice.
- (4) Wisdom constitutes knowledge with extraordinary scope, depth, and balance.

Only after such a beginning emphasis does he list two of the other points we have previously alluded to:

- (5) Wisdom involves a perfect synergy of mind and character, that is, an orchestration of knowledge and virtues.
- (6) Wisdom represents knowledge used for the good or well-being of oneself and that of others.

The Oxford English Dictionary (2d ed., 1989) stresses the mind in a slightly different way, defining wisdom as “the capacity for judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct; soundness of judgment in the choice of means and ends.”

In our everyday lives, we have all probably met good and loving people who are not wise. In the political realm this is especially apparent. But I would not contend, for example, that there are no loving people among conservative global-warming deniers

because I know some who are very loving on an individual basis. In addition to being loving in such a way, however, we need to do other things if we wish to exercise the maximum wisdom we can. To take just one example out of many that could be offered, here are [some of Macdonald's characteristics of wise behavior](#):

- seeing things clearly; seeing things as they are
- acting in prudent and effective ways
- acting with the well-being of the whole in mind
- deeply understanding the human/cosmic situation
- knowing when to act and when not to act
- being able to handle whatever arises with peace of mind and an effective, compassionate, holistic response
- being able to anticipate potential problems and avoid them.

Macdonald [also wrote](#): “The world is not divided into wise and unwise people. None of us is perfectly wise or totally unwise,” and each “wise person’s wisdom . . . [has] a distinctive character.” This a helpful reminder, and we could also say something similar about love: None of us is perfectly loving or totally unloving. Moreover, one could argue that if we acted as wisely as possible by incorporating all wisdom virtues (of the head, heart, and will) we would be greater “lovers,” more capable of maximizing our love, of achieving Day’s goal: “If we could only learn that the only important thing is love, and that we will be judged on love—to keep on loving, and showing that love, and expressing that love, over and over, whether we feel it or not.” Who can deny that the enlightened love of a parent—one, for example, who is capable of “seeing things clearly; seeing things as they are” —is better than unenlightened parental love?

Or who would deny that in order to seek the “common good” effectively, as Sternberg suggests is characteristic of wise people, intelligence is needed? The political philosopher Isaiah Berlin writing about political wisdom indicated it was “an acute sense of what fits with what, what springs from what, what leads to what; how things seem to vary to different observers, what the effect of such experience upon them may be; what the result is likely to be in a concrete situation of the interplay of human beings and impersonal forces.” We cannot be very wise (or loving) in the political arena, cannot contribute much to the common good, if we are ignorant about the world that surrounds us.

The realization of the necessity of knowledge for love has led writers like Erich Fromm to argue that “all forms of productive love” require not only care, responsibility, and respect, but also knowledge. To love a person, for example, we must “see a person as he is.” In his book *On Caring* philosopher Milton Mayeroff writes: “To care for someone, I must *know* many things. I must know for example, who the other is, what his powers and limitations are, what his needs are, and what is conducive to his growth; I must know how to respond to his needs, and what my own powers and limitations are” (the emphasis is Mayeroff’s). Thus, love requires, as Achenbaum has written of wisdom, the “interaction of feeling, thought, and action. And great love and great wisdom should go together.

In conclusion, if we examine [Macdonald's Consolidated List of Wisdom Values](#) (32 in all), we see many values that various writers have linked to love: clarity about what is, empathy, humility, patience, positivity, respect, responsibility, and self-discipline. Other wisdom values such as commitment, generosity, openness, and passion are suggested by what we have seen of love above. French philosopher Gabriel Marcel wrote that “a *wisdom* which does not include passion . . . is not worthy of being called wisdom,” while poet Carl Sandburg thought that “at the root of love—romantic, patriotic, platonic, family love, love for life—was passion.” Requiring patience and commitment, wisdom necessitates perseverance in the pursuit of the common good. Passion provides the fire and energy needed, and love, in turn, helps fuel that passion.

Still other wisdom values that Macdonald lists—such as creativity, curiosity, equanimity, insight, integrity, intuitive understanding, self-awareness, self-knowledge, truth, and a sense of wonder—as important as they are, seem individually less crucial than love and all it implies.

We may not wish to go as far as St Paul did in saying, “If I . . . can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge. . . but do not have love, I am nothing,” but it is hard to see how without love we can be very wise.