**Towards a Political Account of Love**

Philip McKibbin

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Abstract

Around the world - and in the US, especially - political leaders are calling for love. But what does love consist in, and can it really guide our politics? In this paper, I address the need for a political account of love, then I articulate a conception of love. In doing so, I discuss the Māori concept of ‘aroha’, which Cleve Barlow describes as ‘an all-encompassing quality of goodness, expressed by love for people, land, birds and animals, fish, and all living things’; Black feminist accounts of love (specifically, the work of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Jennifer C. Nash); and the role love has played in feminist, civil rights, and LGBTQIA+ movement. Drawing on multispecies theories of justice, I demonstrate that by attending to the more-than-human world, love can challenge anthropocentrism, and generate new possibilities for relationality. Love can be thought of as an ‘orientation’, or way of relating, and it involves feeling, thought, and action. It is multidimensional, combining elements such as compassion, responsibility, and understanding (significantly, these qualities can be brought to bear on politics as values). I argue that this conception of love could underpin our entire politics, from how we treat ourselves and each other, to the policies, laws, institutions, and systems we enact. In defending this conception, I discuss the relationship between love and care.

Keywords: love, politics of love, Indigenous, Black feminism, multispecies justice

[Mihi]

Love is a way of relating.

This statement seems straightforward enough - right?

Right.

But I’d be willing to bet that if, instead of saying ‘love is a way of relating’, I had said, *love is an emotion*, most of you would have happily nodded along. And judging by the session I find myself presenting in - on *affect* - it seems that this is where the organisers’ minds went, too, when they reviewed my abstract.

Love is not only - or even primarily - an emotion. As you will see, I - and others - argue that it *often involves* emotion; but that is not all it involves. I believe it is better understood as *a way of relating*.

I would go even further and suggest that the fact that I can propose a paper on the Politics of Love and have it assigned to a session on affect says something problematic about the conceptual categories in which Western philosophy and political science deals. Given the ways in which Western thinking privileges reason over emotion, relegating ‘love’ entirely and unequivocally to the realm of affect - when there are strong critical traditions which emphasise its other dimensions - is a way of relegating it *out of politics*.

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Why am I interested in love and what love ‘is’?

For several years now, I have been developing and articulating a vision of politics, which I call ‘the Politics of Love’. The Politics of Love is a radical vision. It re-imagines our entire politics in loving terms - from the ways we treat ourselves and each other, to the policies, institutions, and systems we establish. Of course, the idea that politics can be loving isn’t new: it has precedents in our relationships, and in the everyday acts of kindness we show to one another, as well as in feminist, civil rights, LGBTQIA+, and animal liberation movement. What *is* new about the Politics of Love is that it represents a coherent ‘framework’, one which - when it is articulated - will support us in a range of contexts.

Before I proceed, I want to clarify what I mean by ‘politics’. I understand politics as a dimension - specifically, the *social dimension* - of ethics. Ethics concerns how we act, and politics involves those of our actions that bear on others. Because almost all of our actions bear on others, we can confidently say that *(almost) everything is political*.

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Why do we need a political account of love?

Around the world - and in the US, especially - political leaders are calling for love. We see this in speeches given by politicians, as well as in books written for popular audiences. And yet, despite all of this movement, we have not embraced a coherent account of love. Right now, love is understood in a wide variety of ways. Consider the difference between the love people typically feel for their romantic partners, the love dairy farmers claim to have for the cows they exploit - and my love for Leonard Cohen. The word ‘love’ cannot mean everything it is currently used to mean, at least not in politics. The various meanings that attach to the word ‘love’ are confusing, and when it comes to discussing love, we frequently find ourselves talking past each other. Even those of us who agree that politics can and should be loving often have very different views about what such a politics will entail. This is problematic, because in order to realise loving politics, we require a shared conception of it.

I believe we can articulate a coherent account of love, which can sit *at the centre* of the Politics of Love. Such an account would unify us, engage us, and give us guidance.

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In elaborating the Politics of Love, I have found it helpful to (selectively) use a Multispecies Justice frame - one which incorporates and elaborates the influences of ecofeminism and veganism of colour. Love is not a central theme in any of these theoretical traditions; however, related concepts - such as care, kindness, and responsibility - *are*.

Significantly, Multispecies Justice critically interrogates anthropocentrism. As Danielle Celermajer explains, it considers, ‘what happens to the concept and practice of justice when it moves beyond the human and even beyond sentient animals to encompass a broader range of the ‘more-than-human’ and their relationships’ (Celermajer et al., p. 477).

Multispecies Justice draws attention to urgent problems, such as the climate crisis, the loss of ecosystems, and our exploitation of non-human animals. By focusing our attention on the more-than-human world, it inspires possibilities for relationality.

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Within the academy, ‘love’ attaches to a number of traditions, including: feminist ethics of care; philosophy of emotion/affect; anarchist theory; and Black-feminist love politics.

In elaborating the Politics of Love, I have been influenced by: te ao Māori (the Māori world), Black-feminist love politics (specifically, the work of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Jennifer C. Nash), and political movement - especially *radical* movement.

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Among the most important influences from te ao Māori is *aroha*.

Aroha is a key concept in te ao Māori, and it is usually translated as ‘love’.

In his book, *Tikanga Whakaaro: Key Concepts in Māori Culture*, Cleve Barlow (1991), of Ngā Puhi, explains that aroha has a profound, even sacred, power.

He also writes:

What is aroha? Aroha in a person is an all-encompassing quality of goodness, expressed by love for people, land, birds and animals, fish, and all living things. A person who has aroha for another expresses genuine concern towards them and acts with their welfare in mind, no matter what their state of health or wealth. (p. 8)

As Barlow’s description illustrates, aroha is not confined to the interpersonal; it extends beyond us: to the natural world, and to all those who inhabit it.

Although it is usually translated as ‘love’, the word ‘aroha’ has distinct connotations. Unlike the English term, it carries with it a sense of sorrow, pain, even agony; it often accompanies distress, and as such, it entails a deep concern with *suffering.*

In these ways, aroha has influenced my understanding of love.

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I have also been influenced by what Jennifer C. Nash (2013) refers to as ‘Black feminist love-politics’ (p. 2).

It would be problematic for me to attempt to explain what a Black feminist conception of love consists in - in part because it isn’t static - and it is beyond the scope of this presentation to describe the full extent of its influence on *my* understanding of love. However, the work of Black feminists has convinced me our account of love must incorporate the following:

* a recognition that self-love is foundational to loving practice
* the notion that love is one, but can be expressed in different ways
* an affirmation that love involves deliberate choice
* the notion that love takes work, to learn and to practice
* the notion that love often involves nurturing growth
* a strong opposition to all forms of oppression
* and, a commitment to finding unity in diversity

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Another important idea, which has informed my understanding of love, is articulated by Zen master Thích Nhất Hạnh. In his little book *How to Love*, he discusses the notion of skillfulness. He writes:

Since we’re human beings, we make mistakes. We cause others to suffer. We hurt our loved ones, and we feel regret. But without making mistakes, there is no way to learn. If you can learn from your mistakes, then you have already transformed garbage into flowers. Very often, our mistakes come from our unskillfulness, and not because we want to harm one another. I think of our behavior in terms of being more or less skillful rather than in terms of good or bad. (Nhat Hanh, 2015, p. 67)

This concept is important, as it affirms our capacity to become *better at* loving.

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Finally, I believe our understanding of love must incorporate a commitment to non-violence. Martin Luther King, Jr., famously linked love and non-violence, and other thinkers make this connection, too.

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I offer the following as a tentative political account of love:

Love is a way of relating. It involves feeling, thought, and action; also, it often involves spirituality. We can love ourselves, each other (including non-human animals), and the wider world (including plants, fungi, the land, ecosystems, the planet…). Love combines qualities such as care, commitment, understanding, respect, responsibility, and trust, which can be thought of as its ‘dimensions’. When we love, we typically nurture our own or others’ well-being; this often entails supporting ourselves, or others, to grow, and it can involve healing. To love is a choice, and we can commit to it as individuals and collectively. Love is incompatible with domination: it is opposed to racism, sexism, and all forms of oppression - including exploitation of other animals and the world we share. Love is committed to non-violence. Significantly, both learning how to love and practising it take work.

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This account has a number of advantages.

First, it is expansive, encompassing a variety of perspectives and experiences; for this reason, many people will find their understandings of love reflected in it. Second, it combines inspiration with flexibility, so that individuals and communities can apply its insights in their political decision-making. (As well as informing our day-to-day decisions, it could guide our policies, institutions, and systems.) Third, it is multidimensional, and as such it is sensitive to the complexities of the world in which we live. Also, its ‘dimensions’ lend themselves to values. Loving values - such as *care*, *responsibility*, and *trust* - can help ‘translate’ the abstract, ‘pure’ concept of love for the messy realities of social life.

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Before I conclude, I would like to offer two clarificatory comments.

First - and as I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation - love is not *only*, or even *primarily*, a feeling. As my account of love suggests, love combines feeling, thinking, and action; and it often involves spirituality. Unless our account of love embraces intellect and work, it will not dismantle harmful systems (like patriarchy), nor will it succeed in imagining and creating viable alternatives. Efforts to understand love solely, or even primarily, in terms of emotion or ‘affect’ are insufficient, and misguided.

Second, ‘love’ is not synonymous with ‘care’. bell hooks convincingly argues that love and care are distinct. She demonstrates that care is often shown in contexts where love is absent (e.g. in abusive relationships, and in parent-child relationships where the child’s material needs are met, but they are not known, respected, or truly valued). Care can, instead, be thought of as a *dimension* of love, and put into practice as *a loving value*.

*Tēnā tātou.*

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