

Against Voleficence

Abstract. I argue against the “voleficence view”, that what love rationally inclines one to pursue for the beloved’s sake is her *ends* (as opposed to her good). My suggestion is that, though the voleficence view’s major strength would seem to be its handling of cases of loving participatory action (especially those which are primarily one partner’s prerogative), in fact it does not countenance the most loving sort of participatory action even within this domain. Since the beneficence view—on which reasons from love *do* aim at the beloved’s good—is preferable in this case as in others, we should prefer it overall.

1. Introduction

According to one view of love’s motivations, what a lover (as such) properly aims at is not the beloved’s good, but the beloved’s fulfillment of her ends. Consider a case in which the beloved—your daughter, let’s say—is enchanted by the stories of Mother Teresa, and has decided to join the Missionaries of Charity.¹ As you see it, this is exceedingly likely not to turn out for your daughter’s good. She is certain to fall ill many times, to struggle physically and spiritually, to be lonely and unappreciated, to have almost nothing to live on, and to be exhausted by it all in the end. Your daughter knows all of this. But she feels called to love those most in need of it, and this is the path she has chosen.

It seems that the loving thing to do is to support your daughter in her decision. Accordingly, what you should hope for (in love) is that your daughter be given the opportunity to serve in this way. If she applies to the Missionaries of Charity, you should not sabotage her but help her. If she is accepted, you should be glad for her (though you will also have a loss of your own to sorrow over). These judgments suggest that love is not about doing what is good for the other *per se*, but rather sharing the other’s ends: of coming alongside her in her pursuit of what she has set her heart on.

I’ll call a view which endorses this idea—that love moves the lover to pursue the beloved’s *ends* as such—a “voleficence view”. (From “volo” and “facio”, after the fashion of “beneficence”.) On the more traditional *beneficence view*, the motive of love is simply for the beloved’s *good*.

When I say “the motive of love”, I mean the one at issue in this conversation: love’s rationally motivating one to pursue something *for the beloved’s sake*. I do *not* require either view to maintain that the beloved’s good or ends is the *only* motive of love. In fact, my own view does not: I think love has a two-part motivational dimension which aims *also* at togetherness with the beloved. But togetherness is not (*per se* and in the relevant sense) what one pursues for the beloved’s sake. And, in

¹ I will use the terms “lover” and “beloved”, but I hope that starting with a case of parental love makes it clear that this paper is about love *simpliciter*, not just romantic love.

any case, love also gives rise to non-actions: e.g., feelings of affection. None of this is my subject right now. My question is strictly whether the aspect of love's motivation on which the two views at issue differ—in which love rationally moves us to do things for the beloved's sake—concerns the beloved's good as such or her ends as such. A voleficence view says that love does rationally move one to pursue the latter; on a beneficence view, it's (only) the former.

Note also that “love's motivations” are motivations arising from love, not motives (or reasons) *to love*. My subject is only the former. And, as a final clarification, note a potential ambiguity between love *the psychological state* and love *the relational state*. I myself think the motives (properly) arising from love the attitude and from loving relationships, *qua* loving, are the same. If you disagree, simply read what follows as concerning both.²

The most prominent defender of a voleficence view is Kyla Ebels-Duggan. The case above parallels one of hers.³ She takes herself to be giving, if not Immanuel Kant's view, then at least a view which can be drawn from Kant.⁴ Others have endorsed the view in the courses of other projects.⁵ And a version of the view is also defended by Melissa Seymour Fahmy on which voleficence is one of three distinct and equally fundamental inclinations (the others being inclinations toward *ends shared with the beloved* and toward *the beloved's good*), so that love does seek the beloved's end as such, just not exclusively.⁶

The voleficence view seems to do well securing the right role for love in participatory action, especially in cases like the one above, in which one partner is supporting the other. Indeed, that is the main motivation for the view. And it is no insignificant motivation: participatory action, on any account, is one central domain (*the* central domain?) of loving activity. But I will argue that, in fact, the voleficence view does not get love's role quite right even in these cases.⁷

My argument has two aims. First is to undermine the just-mentioned motivation for the voleficence view as opposed to the beneficence view. Second is to help us see, in that light, what about the beneficence view is positively attractive.

² In personal correspondence, Kyla Ebels-Duggan indicates that she maintains her view as a view of the latter—the motives arising from love the relational state—so that will be my implicit emphasis.

³ “Against Beneficence”, §III, esp. p.155 – 156; p.152 – 155 for the case.

⁴ Ebels-Duggan, “Against Beneficence”, n.24. Cf. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* 6:452 etc.

⁵ E.g., Quinn White, “Love First” (§3.2.2), or Daniel Koltonski, “A good friend” (n.5 & §2).

⁶ Fahmy, “Love's Reasons”. Sam Shpall endorses a similar thought (“A Tripartite Theory of Love”, p.107).

⁷ It is important to keep this limitation of focus in mind, for there are many other sorts of loving action. Lovers may share goods as common from the start, or pursue each other's individual goods—sharing or not sharing the pursuit itself, and the goods shared in love may, or may not, thereby *become* common—or they may set their goals together, or set goals separately which are later ordered to a further shared goal, or set goals separately and then, rather than coming to share them, pursue them *reciprocally*. For reasons I've just given, my focus here is on the cases in which lovers share a pursuit of something which is not itself initially common, but I do not deny the rest. Note also that my uses of the terms “partnership” and “participatory” will not depend on *analyses* of them as opposed to their familiar meanings.

2. Setup

To begin, let us isolate the formal difference between the beneficence view and the voleficence view, setting aside for now any substantive “goodness” talk. Let us distinguish two senses in which something can be your end. Something can be your end *in that you have chosen it*, or it can be your end not in that you have chosen it but (logically) *prior to your choice*. An Aristotelian would say “your end simply in that you relate to it as to a final cause”.⁸ (Among ends of the second sort I include ends which are suitable *because* of your choices, so long as they are not ends *in that* they are objects of your choice—e.g., raising a virtuous child is an end for someone who has become a father even if he has never thought about it.) For example, one of a birch tree’s ends, in the second sense, may be the production of a new birch. Birches do not have ends in the first sense because they do not make choices.

I will use “aims” for ends in the first sense and “teloi” for ends in the second sense. This allows us to state the voleficence view a little more precisely, like this: love’s motives are toward the beloved’s aims as such (as opposed to her teloi).

Now note that, when we have aims, it is because we have teloi. When we choose ends, we do not choose them *qua* aims, but because we see them as things to be chosen. This follows from the less obvious but (in philosophical circles) more commonplace observation that we see *something in virtue of which* they are to be chosen. That is, when we choose, it is on some basis logically prior to the choice itself. “For a reason”, we say. And so, when we take things as ends—i.e., when they become our aims—it is because (for whatever reason) they are apt to be our aims. They are teloi.⁹

For the beloved too, then, her taking something as *her end* presupposes its being (to her) an *apt end*. To her, her aims are teloi. And that completes our setup.

I will not deny that love’s concern is for the beloved’s ends in any sense, but only that its concern is for her *aims as such*. (For that is what the voleficence view says.) Nor will I deny that a lover typically has reason to pursue the beloved’s ends, even in the sense of her aims—just not as such. It may well be, for example, that achieving your aims is one of the many things which are good for you, and if so, then the beneficence view will say that love does generally incline the lover to

⁸ The “final cause” language is not a definition—it’s only to help suggest the idea. Cf. n.10.

⁹ Even in philosophy, where just about any view can find at least one skeptic, what I’ve said here is quite safe. It may be helpful to think of my claim as a Guise of the Good Thesis sans anything to do with goodness—a “Guise of *Something or Other* Thesis”, if you will. (Cf. n.13.) It is accepted on any action theory on which our choices are, from the agential point of view, explicable in terms of their objects. Elizabeth Anscombe’s definition of intentional action constitutes one such view (e.g., *Intention* §5). Donald Davidson’s view is another (e.g., “Actions, Reasons, and Causes” §1). And between the two of them, almost all contemporary action theory is accounted for. Even the usual contemporary opponents of the Guise of the Good Thesis (cf. n.13)—e.g., David Velleman (“The Guise of the Good”) and Michael Stocker (“Desiring the Bad”, e.g., §IV)—all accept what I’ve called ‘teloi’. Kieran Setiya (“Sympathy for the Devil”, esp. §1 & 4), in fact, in claiming that the thesis is really a thesis not about value but about reasons, is leaning on a distinction which is extensionally equivalent to the one between *good* and *telos*. Even Jean-Paul Sartre agrees (cf., e.g., *Being and Nothingness* p.433). I don’t know of any notable figure who unequivocally does not.

support the beloved's aims. My claim is that love's motive, that in which love rationally moves one to act for the beloved's sake, is, properly speaking, for the beloved's *teloi*.¹⁰

3. Central Premise

Consider now Alva and Bjorn, two acolytes in the village temple serving under High Priest Calder. Every day, Alva and Bjorn both go out into the fields, select the most rambunctious yak, and ride it until they fall off. The difference between Alva and Bjorn is that, whereas Bjorn has no idea why he is doing this, Alva has been let in on the secret: the ritual is a symbolic expression of gratitude to the goddess Diana (who is a great fan of yaks, and of slapstick humor) for graciously delivering the village from the invading hordes of Visigoths almost twelve years ago.

Alva, it would seem, is more truly *participating* in something with Calder. Both Alva and Bjorn are following a command from the high priest, but Bjorn is doing it only on the supposition that there must be some reason for it. He does not know what that reason is. Alva knows the reason. She knows what Calder is doing, the good for the sake of which he has put them to their silly ritual. Consequently, Alva is able to adopt Calder's goal—thanking Diana—as her own. And Alva is therefore able to *pursue* this goal *along with* Calder in a way in which Bjorn is not.

It is the same with your beloved's aims. You can pursue them *as aims*, just because they are the aims of someone you love, just as you can follow a command simply on authority. But it is better—it is more truly *participatory*—to pursue those ends *as teloi*: to endorse them for your beloved just as your beloved endorses them for herself. Again, if you do not endorse them, you can support her, e.g., simply because it is good for her when her hopes and projects come to fulfillment.¹¹ But this, again, is second best. Better to pursue your beloved's aims *as her teloi*, as she herself does.

The voleficence view, then, in its attempt to make two people equal participants in their relationship, does make them equals, but not fully coparticipants: rather, it makes them *reciprocal followers*, agents who follow each other's leads in turn. I choose, and you support my choice, and likewise in the other direction. That is well and good, but if this were the fullest mode of cooperation constituting the relationship, it would be more suitable for respectful coworkers or co-citizens. It is not the whole (nor the core) of loving participation.

I'd suggest that lovers do not (ideally) each employ the other in their own pursuits, and become employees themselves in turn. Rather, they shape each other's pursuits, sometimes in that one pursues the other's good along with her, more often in that they set their common goals together. In either case this mutual pursuit need not—at best, does not—take one lover's determination of the end as its premise. Moreover, it is because the same dynamic governs *all* loving action that lovers

¹⁰ To be conservative, it also does not matter for present purposes whether this distinction between the two views applies essentially (vs. accidentally), or even universally (vs. generically). I happen to think it does both, but my argument will not depend on it. Cf. n.9 and n.13.

¹¹ Again, generally. If her hopes and dreams are bad, then it is bad (*ceteris paribus*) for them to come to fulfillment. There may be *some* good *in it*—perhaps she will be pleased, or perhaps she will learn, or perhaps there is some good in the mere fact of her doing what she thinks best. But if her ambitions are gravely misdirected, then fulfilling them will be bad *simpliciter* despite these littler goods.

sometimes act in *non*-participatory ways, not *only* supporting each other but sometimes simply doing things *for* each other, or even reproaching and correcting each other—yes, in their very capacity as lovers. They do not first and foremost exercise reciprocal practical authority. First and foremost, they simply act for each other’s sakes—often together, but in any case each toward what are, by each one’s own lights, *telo*i.

Here, then, is the central premise of my argument. Insofar as love leads one to participate with another, it is more loving to act together—to act toward shared *telo*i—than to act each on the basis of the other’s choices (in like fashion to acting under authority, each pursuing the other’s aims as such). The voleficence view does not secure for love the fullest sort of participation.

4. Further Remarks

The reader will perhaps have noticed that my argument so far has been normative, in this sense: our central premise, and the story supporting it, only get us to our conclusion on the further assumption that what love’s motivations properly incline lovers to do is just what it is best (on the standard internal to love) for lovers to do. This assumption is plausible, and it is common ground between defenders of the views in dialogue, so I will not defend it here.

The reader may also have noticed that what our central premise establishes, strictly speaking, is a conclusion about an end *presupposed in* choice—what I called “*telo*i”. That term was introduced so that the argument could proceed on neutral ground regarding the nature of *telo*i, for there is a good deal of recalcitrant disagreement about how exactly to understand the general grounds of action. But recall that my secondary aim was to provide support for the beneficence view—that love’s motives are for the beloved’s good—and strictly, that’s a further claim requiring further work.¹² I have two things to say.

First, what I said at the beginning was that we would see what’s attractive about it with the help of my argument against the voleficence view. I said it that way because establishing the action theory which constitutes the difference between a “mere *telo*s view” and the beneficence view is a job which cannot be done here. I will simply note that our argument does *pretty nearly* establish the beneficence view. For one thing, the requisite action theory—what is lately known as the “Guise of the Good Thesis”—is historically the default view in Western philosophy, and has been explicitly

¹² In personal correspondence, Ebels-Duggan expresses sympathy for my picture of participation, but maintains that it is insufficient as a whole picture of loving action. I agree (cf. n.7). Hopefully what I say below, in suggestion that the beneficence view *can* account for the fuller picture of loving action, can serve as the piece of my response which is relevant for the present task, even if an actual demonstration of that claim would require me to give a fleshed-out theory of love, which of course I will not do here. But I do say more elsewhere (Sigourney, *Charity as a Foundation of Ethics* ch. 2-5).

defended many, many times.¹³ For another, the beneficence view is the only mainstream view of love's motives which meets §3's demands.¹⁴

Second, even if one wanted to accept only what my argument *does* strictly establish, one's view would then be that love's motivations are not aimed at the beloved's fulfillment of her chosen ends—her aims—but at what is apt to be taken as an aim of hers—her *telo*.¹⁵ In that case, the view one has is not a voleficence view but a proto-beneficence-view: something which would be a beneficence view if the content of “*telo*” were filled in in the usual way. And if that is what this paper has accomplished for a few readers, I am satisfied.

Finally, remember the wider domain of comparison between beneficence and voleficence views of which our focus here has been one part. I have emphasized one sort of participatory action, because that is what's foregrounded by dint of the difference between beneficence and voleficence views. But love sometimes also leads us to act together differently, or to pursue something for the beloved's sake even if she is not pursuing it herself, or even to admonish or correct her.¹⁶

¹³ The “Guise of the Good Thesis” is the view that action (or appetite generally) aims at the good. The argument of §3 is an argument for the beneficence view if we simply exchange §2's distinction for a distinction between aims and *goods* (though, of course, the distinction would not then be exhaustive). For a few representative endorsements of the thesis, see Plato (e.g., *Gorgias* 467-468 & *Meno* 77-78b), Aristotle (e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics* I.1 & III.4, or *Eudemean Ethics* VII.2), Boethius (e.g., *The Consolation of Philosophy* III.2), Augustine (e.g., *Confessions* II.4-10), Aquinas (e.g., *Summa Theologiae* I.5, I.80-82, I-II.1 & 30, and I-II.8.1), David Hume (e.g., *Treatise* 1.3.10.2; cf. Francesco Orsi, *The Guise of the Good* ch. 8), Immanuel Kant (e.g., *Critique of Practical Reason* 5:57-58 etc.), Elizabeth Anscombe (e.g., “Practical Inference”, or *Intention*, esp. §37-41), Joseph Raz (“On the Guise of the Good”), Sergio Tenenbaum (e.g., *Appearances of the Good*), Sebastian Rödl (e.g., “The Form of the Will”), Matthew Boyle and Douglas Lavin (“Goodness and Desire”).

¹⁴ There are minority views on which love's distinctive (perhaps only) motive is for union with the beloved: most famously, Nozick's (“Love's Bond”). On such a “mere union” view, love has no motive of the sort the beneficence and voleficence views disagree on: the motive to act “for the beloved's sake”. If it were taken strictly enough to count as a true alternative to the beneficence view, then such a view would again run into our argument, for it would leave unaddressed the ends other than union which we can share in love. If we *do not* pursue any such other ends together, then loving participatory action does not occur except when its goal is mere union, which is contrary to experience; if we *do*, we're back where we started.

¹⁵ This is the view one would likely come to if one rejected the Guise of the Good Thesis. (Unless one accepted a view of love on which its motives are for whatever agents generally or normatively choose, and allowed that *the good* does play at least *that* role.) Cf. everyone I cited in n.9, plus Setiya's “Love and the Value of a Life”, which is of particular interest in this connection.

Now, if the beloved ever acts on no basis whatsoever, i.e., what she chooses is not therein her *telos*, then the only ground for participatory action is (as I've mentioned) that the lover may at least take it to be good for her that she has what she chooses. Personally, I think this would be irrational, therefore not loving. But the important point is just that one can accept these action-theoretic possibilities and also accept my argument in favor of the beneficence view, only with a qualm about whether it establishes *the beneficence view* specifically rather than a view alike in form but differing in some fringe cases.

¹⁶ And again, recall the other things I set aside in the latter half of §1.

Now, I myself think the wider space of possibilities only reinforces the attractions of the beneficence view, which accounts not only for loving participatory activity, but for loving action *generally*, and in a neatly unified way.

For one thing, as I've mentioned a few times now in passing, cases in which lover and beloved both pursue the beloved's aims can be accounted for as cases in which they pursue the beloved's good. But the converse does not hold.

For another thing, some other cases cannot be treated as cases of pursuing the beloved's aims, since the beloved may have no corresponding aims, and may even have contrary ones; but these, again, *can* be treated as pursuits of the beloved's good. On Ebels-Duggan's own view, when the beloved has chosen something bad, so that adopting her ends would be inappropriate, love must yield to morality.¹⁷ Love would have us promote the other's ends, but, this being impermissible, we have countervailing reason to reject the beloved's practical authority instead. I think this misrepresents the situation. When Saint Monica loved the young Augustine, it was precisely in her love that she was so worried about his pride and prodigality, and prayed that he would change. Far from stirring some internal conflict, love pulling her to support her son's debauchery and the law of God commanding her not to, the two went together.¹⁸

Now, in general, it is not that a voleficence view cannot *in principle* account for cases like St. Monica's—only that it cannot account for them under one unified banner like *the beloved's good*. To readers who consider it a virtue of a theory that it delivers a single clean explanation for the many and varied phenomena it accounts for, the beneficence view is, to that extent, more attractive. And, moreover, the beneficence view neatly accounts (in the same move) for the fact that the cases in which love seems to incline one *not* to support the beloved's aims are precisely those in which her aims are bad (for her).

5. Conclusion

I have argued that the voleficence view, on which love inclines us to act for the beloved's ends rather than for her good (as such), does not satisfactorily account for loving participatory action. Such actions are most fully participatory only when they are most fundamentally pursuits of the beloved's good. In cases like the one with which this paper began—in which your daughter joins the Missionaries of Charity—the beneficence view suggests that you have a better sort of acting-together, a better way to support her, if you support her choice not just because it is her choice, but on its merits. And you can do so if there are aspects of it which sadden you. If you cannot, you can still support her choice *simply as* her choice, but this, as I say, is a subtle break in the relationship which we should not attribute necessarily and paradigmatically to love. So we have reason, even from

¹⁷ Ebels-Duggan, "Against Beneficence", p.161-162.

¹⁸ Maybe it goes without saying (but I'll say it anyway) that one escape route which might occur to a voleficence theorist—that, in these cases, love would have us do what the beloved *should* or *would rationally* take as ends—is just a way to abandon the voleficence view.

considering the very phenomenon which the voleficence view is best equipped to capture, to prefer the beneficence view instead.¹⁹

¹⁹ I warmly thank Marshall Bierson, Kyla Ebels-Duggan, Mark LeBar, John Schwenkler, Andrea Westlund, and the anonymous referees for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

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