

THE ABILITY TO LOVE – A VIRTUE-BASED APPROACH

Abraham Maslow (1954) was amazed of the scarcity of research on love. According to Maslow (1954, p. 235), it was surprising how little empiric sciences had to offer to the theme. Especially weird in his opinion was the silence of psychologists because studying love should have been their special responsibility. Maslow thought that the situation possibly originated in academic researchers' besetting sin: they would rather do what is easy than what is necessary. Research on love and emotions has been taken with suspicious and even the facts that people behave in relation to other people and that people live in the net of human relationships from birth to death have not furthered the research (Berscheid, 2006). Nevertheless, the context of human relationship net that is present everywhere both affects an individual's behavior and vice versa (Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000).

Negative emotions and experiences such as anger or fear have been studied much more than love. It is the case regardless of the fact that the word love is one of the most popular words in the English language (Berscheid, 2006). Focusing research on the dark side of human behavior may originate in the desire to eliminate and control the negative. Or what could be the reason for skewed research foci?

Seizure of love with research has been regarded with suspicion: is it possible to even study love? Even having success in love seems to be difficult in practice. According to common sense, the hallmark of true love is that one cannot control it. Epicurus's thought from two thousand years ago describes the phenomenon well: "A wise man does not fall into love and it is not true that love would be manna from heaven" (Vander Waerd, 1987). This thought supports the idea that love is suspicious and even dangerous and one's sense or mind does not have anything to do with love. Merely, the main character of love is lunacy as many authors wrote already in the 19th century (e.g., Stendhal, 1830/1957). Certainly, people do things in the name of love that are morally suspicious: people can for example tell lies in order to help their objects of love (see e.g., Halwani, 2011). This is also why love's moral worth has been criticized.

As is well known, Freud (1971) considered love as irrational by its essence. Freud did not distinguish irrational love from love that is a manifestation of mature personality. Falling in love is, according to Freud, a sort of abnormal phenomenon of which lack of the sense of reality and abusiveness are typical. Therefore, it is just about transferring love from childhood targets of love toward new ones. Freud did not consider that love as a rational phenomenon, the highest testimony of human satisfaction, would be worth studying because he did not think that this kind of love would even exist. On the other hand, Arman and Rehnsfeldt (2006) have stated that

No modern concept can properly describe the acceptable and appropriate love to others in a wider sense but in some cases love as a concept today risks being misunderstood or implied as an intimate or physical relationship (p. 6).

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According to the traditional definition of Platonic love, love is directed toward ideas and especially what is good and beautiful is the best form of love. However, one has to develop one's ability to love: first one loves the other one's body but little by little learns to love the beauty that is part of all beautiful bodies. After that, the lover finds out that it is more valuable to love souls than bodies. As the ability to love progresses toward more general things, for example laws and knowledge, the lover will ultimately learn to love the idea of beauty (e.g., Nehamas, 2007).

In Plato's Symposium, Plato discusses the virtue (or dissoluteness) or eros. However, Sheffield (2006) claims that Plato does not directly reveal whether eros is good or bad, virtue or dissolute, but merely his contemplation is grounded on various themes such as good and happy life and the relation between eros and civilization and wisdom. Apparently, true and genuine eros would enhance good things and would not lead to superficial, selfish, and ethically bad actions. Thus, authenticity and genuineness always lead to virtuous things that are worth aspiring (Sheffield, 2006; see also Nehamas, 2007).

Later on, for example Sternberg and Grajek (1984) contemplated the essence of love through three classic theories of intellectuality seeking the answer to the question of what kinds of factors love consists of. Is love one multifactorial group that is not possible to analyze thoroughly and is characterized by plentiful, positive emotions and by the difficulty of identifying these factors (when compared with Spearman's (1904) theory of general intellectuality)? When adapting Thompson's (1992) theory of the factors of intellectuality to describing the structure of love, it is possible to understand love as feelings that together and separately identified form an experience that we call or name as love. Thurstone's (1938) theory of intellectuality is based on primitive factors. In the light of this theory, the experience of love can be divided into various factors that correlate with each other and that form a conception of the essence of love as a whole.

Yet, the question of which factors love consists of has to be studied more closely. In the literature review, we will introduce some important and relevant theories of love as well as ideas about the connection between love and well-being. We will view them through the things that emerge from three separate data collected among Finnish young adults and seniors. Based on their opinions and experiences on love, our purpose is to create an illustration of love as a phenomenon that grounds on the factors that could be seen the areas in the essence of love.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Love as Feelings and Acts

When reviewing the various forms of love, it is possible to notice the compilation of different emotions, knowledge, and acts that combine the forms. Traditionally, concern and caring are salient acts of love and the feelings of empathy are significant not only in mother's and parents' love, affection between a child and care giver

(Bowlby, 1988; Määttä, 2006; Reis et al., 2000), love for fellow humans (Eriksson, 1989; Janako, 1993), teacher's pedagogical love (Haavio, 1948; Skinnari, 2004; Määttä and Uusiautti, 2011b), romantic love (Beck-Gernsheim & Beck, 1995; Hatfield, 1988; Määttä, 2005b; Person, 2007), and so on.

Among the numerous ideas and categorizations of love, one of the most famous theories is Robert Sternberg's (1986) triangulation theory. According to the theory, love consists of three factors: passion, intimacy, and commitment. Acts and feelings that correspond to the above-mentioned define love. Passion is a functional and motivational component, intimacy is an emotional component, and commitment is an intellectual or rational component of decision making. The emotional shades of these factors differ from each other so that the component of intimacy can be considered warm, passion hot, and commitment cold. After creating the triangulation theory, Sternberg (1998) found a new explanation to love: love is a story which is one-of-a-kind, partly unconscious formation of feelings and acts, to everyone who experiences and witnesses it.

Love and Well-Being

Research on love and positive human behavior has increased recently (Seligman et al., 2005, Seligman, Parks, & Steen, 2004; Gable & Haidt, 2005). It is quite well-grounded because along with evolution *Homo sapiens* has survived and will survive as it is capable of creating and maintaining collaborative relationships with other people. People seem to be born to create strong, lasting and harmonious intimate relationships with their ilk—in other words, to love them, as Harlow (1958) expressed it simply.

Nowadays, developing interventions to increase happiness is a major focus of positive psychology. At the personal level, positive psychology concentrates on subjective experiences, well-being, satisfaction, flow, joy, pleasure, and happiness, as well as on optimistic and hopeful attitude and confidence in the future. Furthermore, love has been defined as one of the people's basic strengths within the virtue of humanity (see Seligman et al., 2005). At the group level, the interest of positive psychology is in the civil skills and institutions that turn individuals into better citizens—responsible, flexible, and ethical workers (Seligman, 2002).

Positive emotions support problem-solving skills and the ability to act in an innovative way and thus human well-being. The importance and potential of this may seem surprising as the feelings of happiness are so simple and common in nature (Isen, 2006). However, experience has already shown that the healthier and more satisfied people are the better they function and work (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2011c). Indeed, it has been suggested for example that education should include training that increase positive emotion through various trainings of activities on savoring and mindfulness; gratitude, optimism and resilience, such as stress reductions skills training; life-planning and goal-setting skills training; problem-solving skills training; and training that aims at identifying individuals'

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signature strengths and having them employ these strengths in their daily lives (Maddux, 2002).

The predictive strength of affective reactions depends on social-contextual factors, such as the nature of the interpersonal relationship (e.g., cooperative or competitive), prevailing (cultural) norms (e.g., “display rules”), and the way the emotion are expressed (Fischer & van Kleef, 2010). In Wörnå, Lindholm, and Erisson’s (2007) research, four main virtues—pride, honesty, generosity and love—were found as important for health at work, and they form a wholeness of health. Certain basic features seem to be common to all genuine forms of love. These are caring, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. Love, indeed, means taking care of the object of life actively: when this activeness is missing, also love is missing.

The Purpose of This Study

Studies on the essence of love lack many answers. As researchers, we have studied both the phases and process of love (Määttä, 2010; Määttä, 2011c) and seniors’ experiences of love (Määttä, 2011b) and divorce (Määttä, 2011d) and even narcissistic version of love (e.g. Määttä, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2011). After having viewed love from various points of view, we ended up asking: what do people mean when they talk about love and how do they understand love? What kinds of features of love can be controlled, directed, or learned? If the essence of love was analyzed consciously, it could more and more clearly turn into a positive ability to love.

The purpose of this article is to dissect Finnish people’s conceptions about love. What do people of different age talk about when they talk about love? What love is? What kind of feelings, knowledge, and acts does love consist of when contemplated by people of different age?

METHOD

The data in this research were collected through three methods and phases as a part of a larger research project at the University of Lapland. The first set of data was collected among students at the University of Lapland. They were under 25 years old. 35 students were interviewed (22 women and 13 men). Open interview was chosen as the interview method because it allows the participants describe freely what they think love is. The themes for interviews emerged from the participants’ views, thoughts, and experiences of love. What happens when one falls in love, what does love give and demand, how could love be strengthened, and what kinds of phases and contents does love involve or could involve? The interviews lasted between one to two hours, they were recorded and written up word by word.

In the next phase, the interview data were expanded by essays. Teacher students (N=20) who studied at the University of Lapland wrote an essay about “Then, I was in love” as an exercise of the Finnish course. The data comprised anonymously written essays that were between two to five sheets long.

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The third set of data was collected among Finnish seniors by inviting them to write about the theme “I would give my all to you, I would carry you on my arms”. The invitation was transmitted via a popular Finnish magazine. Altogether, 117 love stories were received. The authors were 50–91 years old. 72 of the writers were women and 38 of them were men. Seven of the stories were signed together by both spouses. The lengths of the letters varied between a few sheets to over one hundred pages detailed biographies.

RESULTS

Some of the participants could not analyze the essence of love. They seemed to be confused about the phenomenon or unable to find the right words. Some concentrated on describing characteristics that they look for in a partner or deliberated for example the question whether love can be even verbally described. Many participants included descriptions about what kinds of feelings, knowledge, and acts are connected to love in their opinion. These features of love—emotional, cognitive, and operational—are interconnected but still can be analyzed separately. Next, our purpose is to reach concrete essence of love by studying these three areas of love through the participants’ stories of their experiences and opinions on love.

Love as an Emotional Experience

The participants’ conceptions of love emphasize its meaning and content as an emotion. Love is experienced as an emotional phenomenon and its essence is understood at the emotional level and as experiences. However, it is difficult to analyze love as an emotional phenomenon inside out because many participants found it difficult to express their feelings of love in words. Yet, some categories seemed to repeat in stories.

Joy and happiness. In Spinoza’s ethics, the emotional tone of love appears as joy. When Spinoza outlined the picture of wise and rational life, he emphasized the meaning of love, joy, and happiness. They mean increasing perfection. Hate, anger, and disregard are similar to grief and mean decreasing perfection. In this research, students associated the feelings of joy with love:

You see things as extremely sunny; you have to do the greatest plans immediately... it has a positive effect on your life style. (Man, 21 years, unmarried)

Everything in life felt so wonderful. (Woman, 35 years, married)

Also seniors described their feelings of happiness and joy. The elderly told that they act like children, in a childish and foolish way, and could laugh and notice new reasons for laugh in their everyday life.

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I do nothing but laugh with him. (Woman, aged 60)

I, a grouch, straight-faced man, find myself laughing aloud. The dark matters are often put aside nowadays. (Man, aged 76)

Happiness and satisfaction must be understood as the outcome of an interaction process between individual characteristics and aspirations on the one side, and social relations and macro-social structures on the other side (Haller & Hadler, 2006). From this point of view, it is important to realize the interpersonal nature of love: it is an indisputable fact that emotions are mostly reactions to other people, take place in settings where other people are present, and are expressed toward other people and regulated because of other people. Therefore, the elicitation of love by understanding other people as the cause, target, or thirdparty observer of these emotions is necessary (Fischer & van Kleef, 2010).

Love refers to a variety of different feelings, states, and attitudes, ranging from pleasure to interpersonal attraction. “Love” may refer specifically to the passionate desire and intimacy of romantic love, to the emotional closeness of familial love, or the platonic love that defines friendship, to the profound devotion of religious love. This diversity of uses and meanings, combined with the complexity of the feelings involved, makes love unusually difficult to be defined consistently, even compared to other emotional states.

Bonding and the sense of togetherness. According to the interviews and essays, mutual harmony and like-mindedness increase the sense of belonging together. Sharing similar values and attitudes as well as social background, education, and personal characteristics seemed important (e.g. Bruze, 2011).

I have a burning desire to be with the other; it’s impossible to be without that person. (woman, 21 years old, married)

It was so easy and good to be with him at once... I felt that he really understood me. (Woman, 26 years, married)

With common hobbies and shared interests life stays rich and active and spending together feels amusing and pleasant.

After recovering from illnesses, we have participated in voluntary work actively, we write, paint... by encouraging each other. (woman, married for 55 years)

Many older couples found it binding that they could be proud of their children and told that they enjoy how their children take care of them. Good relationships with children are important especially in later life.

In rearing, we have tried to stick to the forbiddance so that children did not have to ask the same thing from the other parent. Our relationship with children has remained good. Otherwise, it has been important in our life that we have

tried to cherish our promises, including the wedding vow. (Man, married for 59 years)

Shared activities form a fund of experiences which is like an emotional bank account. It also functions as a safe for a rainy day. It is easier to confront trouble if the couple has built strong confidence that difficulties can be solved (Hatch & Bulcroft, 2004). The positive fund of experiences protects the marriage against problems and provides strength for finding favorable solutions (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2009; Maisel & Gable, 2009).

We enjoy being together and appreciate the life we live. We have developed our own language over the years by which we sort out things; and outsiders would certainly not understand our intentions.

I felt strong congeniality; I did not have to say all. I felt that she was the one for me. (Man, 20 years, unmarried)

Appreciation and the sense of responsibility. In addition to bonding and needing the other, love manifests itself as appreciation and responsibility. The participants had used the words of appreciation and admiration abundantly. However, there were love stories where people blame themselves for not giving Enough credit to the other.

The words of appreciation, respect, and thanking enhance self-esteem and coping. They are pleasing and inspiring.

Love means tenderness and noticing the other; it involves the sense of responsibility. (Man, 33 years, married).

It certainly is the number one in life and gives content to life. Soon you'll notice, that little by little you start making plans in your life so that you take the other into account as well in those plans. (Woman, 22 years, unmarried)

Swinging emotions and accepting changes in feelings. The participants also reported the swing in the emotional experiences: at times, love appears as a good feeling similar to euphoria while some other times, it leads to the depths of depression. Daydreaming, sleeping trouble, restlessness, and concentration difficulties come with the territory:

I can't define that love; it's just a sort of mood, a certain note in yourself... on the one hand, you are extremely energetic and somehow active and on the other hand, you are like you were not on the planet at all. So, you just hope that you could be and let yourself float... It has, you know, two opposite sides. (Woman, 21 years, married).

Love involves actually quite a lot of despair too. Love is like walking on broken pieces of glass before you know whether you'll get requited love or

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not. It occupies your mind quite comprehensively, brings meaning in your life.
(Woman, 31 years, married).

It is important but also hard to accept dissimilarities and changes in the other. Thus, it is impossible to predict the degree of changes. Only a few know in advance how they will react to changes in work tasks, the birth of a child, or moving, economic pressure, or ageing. Even the changes in one self may surprise (Riehl-Emde et al., 2003).

Of course, you sometimes miss the unique feeling of falling in love and going for someone but still I wouldn't change it to this feeling of security and protecting and taking care of the other. Or who knows? (Woman, 26 years, married)

Love as Knowledge and Skills

Besides emotional experiences, love consists of knowledge and skills. Five different groups of skills and knowledge could be distinguished from the participants' stories and they all have a special role in love.

Accepting oneself and the other as is. Because of the natural resistance to change (e.g., Gottman, 1993), people try to mold their own lives and acquaintances according to their own wishes and needs. Yet, other people cannot be owned or treated like an object but one has to allow everyone to maintain their differences and independence. Furthermore, the differences and the inevitable and even unpredictable changes in others and oneself have to be tolerated.

I noticed new things in myself: I would laugh more and be more social. I learned to take others' opinions into consideration. I felt that I was filled with energy. It was a lovely feeling. (Woman, 23 years, unmarried)

Interaction skills. Many kinds of trouble, hardships, and conflicts come with the territory and are a part of our everyday life. Ultimately, it is not about the number of problems but the way the problems are solved (see also Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). Ability to interact, listen and speak, were considered valuable.

Earlier, we did not sweep our disagreements under the carpet but they were thrashed out immediately. (Woman, married for 53 years until widowed)

Love is not easy because when you live together with someone, you have to make compromises all the time. Perhaps you have to give a piece of yourself but certainly you'll receive it back doubled. (Woman, 22 years, unmarried)

The participants of this research regarded positive attitude and willingness to solve the conflicting situations as important. Appreciating words and actions protect love. Then, love is built on a positive basis: it is not worth avoiding problems. Instead,

one should have the courage to address them understanding that disagreements are a natural part of life. Furthermore, one has to accept the fact that one cannot always be right.

Problem-solving skills and gaining strength from trouble. No one is perfect nor does everyone manage to avoid problems. “The pitfalls of our relationship have turned into resources along with the difficulties,” noted one senior couple. A hardship either binds or separates depending on whether it is solved or tolerated. How people handle indisputable problems and conflicts, tolerate them, and, if possible, are able to solve them are the most essential factors (see also Gottman et al., 1998).

We argue and make up. Afterwards, we can seemly laugh at everything. We don’t bear a grudge. (Man, 42 years, married)

Furthermore, the seniors of this research had noted that if life had been stormy and colored by hardships, the spouse’s company provided a safe stronghold. Therefore, according to the data, not only problem-solving but also learning and gaining strength from it appeared as skills of love.

Self-control and forgiveness. Accepting changes requires compromises, flexibility, and bargaining but not excessively (see also Uusiautti and Määttä, 2012). The things that are and are not negotiable should be made clear. Maybe those people who are able to overlook others’ annoying characteristics, small faults, and soft spots enjoy their human relationships the most. On the other hand, patience, self-control, and ability to overlook the other’s annoying traits may become a shortcut to happiness.

If we argued, he would come to me and say that we don’t have time to argue because life is short. If one has some flaws, so does the other as well; there isn’t such a thing as perfect human-being. (Woman, married for 60 years until widowed)

Disappointment, mistrust, and muteness crumble the relationship. We two, my love and I, have settled ourselves against these with determination. (Woman, 35 years, married)

Enthusiasm and humor. Playfulness and sense of humor protect against many problems. Some seniors said that they have their own inside thing because of which others do not always understand them. Sense of humor also helps tolerating or accepting unpleasant things such as the other’s minor but irritating features or obstacles that hinder one’s own activities.

My daughter told us parents one that you both are so funny that you deserve each other... shared “whimsy” belongs to the bright side of our marriage. (Woman, 32 years, married).

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Love as Acts

The third main category in our concrete illustration of love is the acts of love. Love is not just emotions or skills. Love also has to be manifested through actions. Without this area of love, love would not show in practice. Nor would it be possible to evaluate the depth or sincerity of love if people did not show the essence of their love through action.

Active observation and caring. According to the data, the phrase I will does not automatically guarantee marital happiness. A marriage requires sensitivity and effort to notice each other, to support, and to gratify. The numerous moments spent in peace and harmony become significant.

Thus, love seems to require activeness that is manifested by various acts that show that the other cares and notices. Regardless of age, people find the feeling of getting support, comfort, and security important. Active observation and caring are shown in empathetic acts not only in the highlights of the life but during ordinary weekdays as well.

The older you grow, the more necessary the spouses find each other. Two people cope better at home as well by helping each other. (Woman, married for 50 years)

I want him to be happy, I couldn't love him more. When he is at his weakest, I feel almost bursting with love and tenderness. (Woman, 21 years, married)

The elderly told that they were glad to take care of their partners although sometimes, a spouse's conditions require plenty of work, 24/7 caring, and limit one's life strictly. With this act for love, people can strengthen their belief that they have lived in the right way and borne their responsibility.

You care for the other so much that you want start taking care of so much that it even transcends your own needs. (Woman, 21 years, unmarried)

Caring derives from the Latin concept *caritas* which stands for giving altruistic love to fellow human beings. Thus, caring is connected to love. According to Arman and Rehnsfeldt (2006), caring as a virtue and act of ethics is—from both a natural and professional points of view—inseparably related to love as universal value.

On the other hand, Kendrick and Robinson (2002) have reflected the meaning of tender, loving care (TLC) in relation to agape and nursing. This kind of perspective to love represents the core purpose and essence of caring engagement with patient. The authors claim that often the concepts of love and care are treated as identical.

Encouragement. Encouragement as a part of loving acts is manifested by comfort and support in the tumults of life. In addition, the participants reported that it is important to encourage the significant other to use his or her talents and develop

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as a person. According to the data, love stays alive in times of trouble if partners are willing to slow down, soothe, stay by each other's side, introduce new views, encourage, and seek a better life arising from even the most intolerable situations (Carrère et al., 2000).

The pitfalls of relationship have become strengths through difficulties. (Man, 28 years, married)

My wife inspires me the most when she is satisfied with herself. When she is happy and enjoys her life and doings, I, too, enjoy her the most. (Man, married for 32 years)

When a spouse supports and appreciates, acknowledges and backs up, family life becomes rewarding and inspiring: the spouses can lean and rely on each other in times of hardship.

We lost all our possessions but not each other. (Woman, 32 years, married)

Empathy. Empathy is the capacity to recognize and share feelings (such as sadness or happiness) that are being experienced by the other. A benign atmosphere results from caring and being interested in each other's well-being without ignoring oneself either. According to the participants' opinions, empathy is shown in little, everyday things but which are extremely meaningful. An empathetic partner expresses his or her ability to observe and recognize the other's feelings and act accordingly. Empathy is, thus, a manifestation of putting one's soul into the other's state of mind and situation or being on the same wavelength—understanding the other completely. It is therefore slightly different from caring and active observation as the latter can be done without fully understanding the other's feelings.

The decision of commitment. Commitment means a willing and strong decision to stick to that particular relationship, and not to give up easily. In other words, commitment is an intention to act or refrain from acting in a specified way. Therefore love is also a matter of decision: when the first fascination of love has faded, the decision of commitment has the more important role. Commitment represents the motivation to keep up love and to work at it.

You cannot give up too easily—in life in general nor when living together with someone. You also have to appreciate your family. (Couple, married for 52 years)

DISCUSSION

Sometimes, love may manifest itself in a negative, oppressive, addicted, or repressive form (e.g. Bergman, 1995; Capell-Sowder, 1994; Määttä, Uusiautti, 6 Määttä, 2011; Peele, 1988; Person, 2007) but in this research its positive contents were emphasized.

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Perhaps, the reason for it lies in the phrasing of a question which in this research was free-form and allowed the participants to elicit those thoughts and views that they had in mind spontaneously either as their own experiences or hopes. Maybe people tend to see love in a way they wish to see it and thus emphasize positive points of view or believe in the possibility of positive love.

However, the results encouraged us to expand our analysis: what if the ability to love was compared to human virtues. After having read all kinds of categorizations about human virtues—starting from Aristotle and Plato, the Old Testament to the Talmud, Buddha, Bushido and the Boy Scouts—Seligman and Peterson and their research group managed to define six virtues that seemed to be common in all these above-mentioned views. The virtues were Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Justice, Temperance, Spirituality and transcendence, and Love and humanity (see Seligman, 2002, p. 132–133). According to this view, love means deep caring for others and it makes life worth living. In other words, love is an emotion of strong affection and personal attachment. Furthermore, love can be seen as a virtue or strength representing human kindness, compassion, and affection (e.g. Seligman et al., 2005). Likewise, according to Wörnå, Lindholm, and Eriksson's (2007) research, love is a central virtue and it enriches health by its meaning of giving strength to health and giving strength of life.

Based on the results of this research, love at its best appears as a phenomenon that covers those emotions, knowledge, attitudes, acts, and decision-making that are typical of human virtues. The ability to love can be actualized and it can become as a part of human well-being (see [Figure 2](#)).

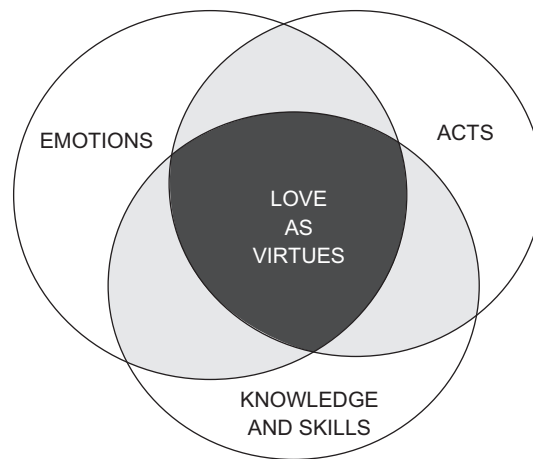


Figure 2. Love as virtues.

[Figure 2](#) illustrates the interconnected nature of the three areas of love introduced in results. When these areas are mixed in a balanced manner, the result can be regarded as love that grounds on and is equal to virtues. Next, we will use some time

contemplating our idea further on and discuss the idea of love as equal to virtues from various points of view.

The concept of virtue is widely discussed in both theological and philosophical literature but virtue combined with health or well-being is not that popular issue (e.g. Wörnå, Lindholm, & Eriksson, 2007). It is not possible to summarize its philosophical analysis into one chapter comprehensively. Instead, we will bring out some interesting and somewhat conflicting ideas about love and whether or not it can be seen equal to a virtue.

What is comforting in Seligman's view about human virtues and strengths is that "with enough time, effort, and determination, the strengths – can be acquired by almost any ordinary person (Seligman, 2002, p. 135)". Seligman employs the term signature strength when referring to those features that are the most characteristic to each person. Using one's signature strengths every day in the main realms of life is supposed to bring abundant gratification and authentic happiness. Seligman asks: how to use these strengths in work, love, parenting, and in having a meaningful life?

Christine Swanton (2010) has studied the concept of universal love as virtue. She regards universal love, then, as a high level of abstraction compared to its sub-virtues or elements such as kindness and forgiveness. Merely, Swanton considers love as preparedness to be kind or forgiving or whatever is defined as the elements of universal love to anyone. Shortly put, her definition of universal love is the following:

The virtue of universal love is a preparedness to manifest love toward any human individual regardless of attractiveness, merits, and so forth, and is expressed by actual manifestations where appropriate (Swanton, 2010, pp. 155–156).

Thus, preparedness refers to a fundamental emotional orientation to the world as a whole.

This preparedness is somewhat similar to Fahmy's (2010) interpretation of Kantian practical love.

The duty of practical love is the duty to cultivate a benevolent disposition toward other human beings as well as practical beneficent desires (Fahmy, 2010, p. 321).

In Fahmy's thoughts 'benevolent disposition' may be considered similar to 'preparedness to manifest love' in Swanton's definition. Is the virtue of love then an attitude or a certain kind of position toward other people and the whole world?

Crisp (2010) has analyzed the nature of virtue ethics and his thoughts strongly seem to ground on Aristotle's ideas: Acting virtuously requires that the agent acts with knowledge, acts from rational choice of the actions for their own sake, and acts from a firm and unshakeable character. Thus, if love was defined as a virtue, one should always act in a loving way. Crisp (2010) points out that it is not enough to know what a virtuous people would do but also to act accordingly. In this sense, virtue can and should be manifested in practice—and indeed, love as acts was one important finding in our research as well.

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In addition to act, we argued that love is also emotions. What about emotions as a part of a virtue? Our illustration shows that emotions are part of love but whether emotions and feelings should or could be part of virtue has been questioned. The reason for it lies in ethics. According to Meyers (2008), the moral worth of a virtue must be dependent on its conduciveness to acting rightly. From this point of view, sympathetic feelings (typical of love as well), unlike sense of duty, can motivate someone to do wrong. Therefore, Meyers suggests that virtues should not be identified with feelings. Instead, Meyers (2008, p. 244) uses the term “practical sympathy” that is not a feeling but, according to our interpretation, merely the ability to understand what it feels like to be in another person’s situation. This kind of sympathy gives people and their actions moral worth and can be considered a virtue. The core question is, from this point of view, “what should one do” instead of “what should one feel”. Therefore, Meyers also calls it the virtue of cold-heartedness or cool-heartedness.

Despite the ethicality or moral worth of love, there are numerous contemplations whether love is a matter of feeling or deciding. Even Kant has defined in *Doctrine of Virtue* love as a matter of feeling on the one hand and on the other hand there are duties of love to other people (see e.g., Fahmy, 2010). Our viewpoint is that emotions that are connected to love are positive and produce good as such, for example feelings of joy and pleasure and the sense of togetherness.

Moreover, if love is not seen only as an emotion that is beyond our control, it can be seen as a decision that is manifested by acts. In a relationship, by defining love as a decision Bardi (2011) means a lifetime effort and persistency, not just being with someone because of holding to a decision instead of love. Considered from this point of view, by moving between the darkness and finding love again, people develop constancy in their gifts of love to others.

This view is supported by Fromm (1956) and Solomon (2002) as well. Solomon regards constancy as a virtue in love although love toward the other can be ignited for a variety of reasons ranging from the noblest character or just the beauty of the beloved. Fromm (1977) has pointed out that love is not about just an affect or a passive inner emotion but active aspiration to help the beloved to grow and be happy. This aspiration must be based on one’s ability to love.

The ability to love, thus, represents knowledge and skills that are essential in love: knowing and paying attention to not only others but also oneself; problem-solving skills; interaction and negotiation skills. It is worth noticing that these skills are also achievable to any ordinary person. Therefore, this kind of interpretation of love supports the idea that love is controllable and voluntary virtue that can be learned.

CONCLUSION

The definitions of love may vary but the contents of definitions do seem to share the basic idea of love. It is reasonable to suggest that love should be directed to people as an abstract version of persons (Landrum, 2009) or toward all and thus everyone is loved (Mooney, 2002). Love, then, refers to an attitude or emotion that is directed in

every human being or a human being as such—not in a particular group of people—and can be enhancing everyone’s well-being.

Considering love consisting of virtues and its connection to well-being seems not only important but also necessary in the modern world of self-centered projects. Erich Fromm (1977) has aptly asked whether today’s people’s selfishness manifests true love to oneself as an individual including all one’s intellectual, emotional, and sensitive characteristics. Or is it merely a testimony to the lack of self-love? Fromm continues his analysis by saying that if love for fellow humans is a virtue, then self-love also has to be a virtue—instead of a vice—because one self is a human creature. Self-love is actually the opposite of selfishness: selfish people are not capable of loving other people including themselves.

It is important to know that love can be utilized for the common good. We live our lives with other people and we experience ourselves choosing and feeling in relation to other people and events, in other words, acknowledging human interdependence. Bertrand Russell has said: “The good life, as I conceive it, is a happy life. I do not mean that if you are good you will be happy; I mean that if you are happy you will be good.”

Likewise, Storh (2009) successfully combines love with the idea of “minding others’ business”. She explains that the requirement in question is easy to accept when the minding is aimed, for example, at preventing one person from violating others’ rights. Yet, she suggests that the idea would expanded so that we might be morally required to intervene in someone’s life in order to promote that person’s own happiness raises. Storh (2009, p. 136) concludes:

My flourishing depends on the flourishing of others. That makes it all the more important to permit wise intervention in others’ affairs, for in minding others’ business, we are also often minding our own (p. 136).

Why is this research important to educators? If love is something learnable, it can be employed to enhancing others’ well-being and therefore, it concerns everyone and especially the educators of today when the main emphases seem to be in efficiency, competitiveness, and individualism that lead in increasing insecurity and constantly changing world. Indeed, the ethics of caring (or bothering) concerns teaching (Gilligan, 1982). In fact, caring has been argued to be the central aim and method of education (see Noddings, 1988; Burns & Rathbone, 2010). In this case, the emphasis is on the special value of love and concern for learners. A teacher’s caring means genuine love, aspiring to understand and make an effort for pupils’ protection, support, and development. Because of this pedagogical caring, the teacher especially pursues pupils’ potential to develop and thus help them to find and use their own strengths.

Drawing parallels between love and virtues is just one definition of love but one with a quite wide perspective. In today’s world, many phenomena tend to make the emergence of love more and more difficult while at the same time it seems that love is the most needed. In this article, we have introduced a very comforting viewpoint that love is not that mysterious and uncontrollable after all. Instead, its various factors can be named, and the skills and knowledge of love can be learned.