

**REVIEW ESSAY: Eduardo A. Velásquez, ed., Love and Friendship: Rethinking Politics and Affection in Modern Times. (New York and Oxford: Lexington Books, 2003. Pp. 637, hardback). *Interpretation*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 95-101**

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The theory and practice of liberalism faced a wave of criticism in the 1980s and 1990s alleging that its disproportionate emphasis on individual freedom and fulfillment detracted from key aspects of a healthy social order, such as social and civic responsibility, public-spiritedness, social capital, and stable family structures (see, for example, Bellah 1986; Glendon 1991; MacIntyre 1981; Putnam 2000; and Sandel 1982). It was alleged that the liberal social and economic system fostered an “atomistic” or anti-communitarian form of life (Taylor 1979). Responses to the so-called “communitarian” challenge took a variety of forms, including a renewed emphasis on liberal virtue (Galston 1991; Macedo 1990; Berkowitz 1999) and community (Dworkin 2000). Yet, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Allen 2004; Irrera 2005; Schwarzenbach 1996; and Scorza 2004), little attention has been paid to love and friendship, which seem, on their face, important and central aspects of a healthy and stable community. The reigning assumption among liberal theorists—even those of a more “communitarian” bent—seems to be that bonds of friendship and love, however important for human life in general, have little bearing on our public life. Yet this assumption is rarely argued for explicitly, and Eduardo Velásquez’s edited collection of essays, *Love and Friendship: Rethinking Politics and Affection in Modern Times* (2003), gives us good reason to examine more closely the role of love and friendship in the public sphere before dismissing it from consideration.

It is difficult to do justice to a book of this size and breadth in a few pages. It has a broad-ranging and somewhat eclectic range of contributions from no less than nineteen authors, spanning ethics, political theory, sociology, moral theology, and literary theory. The editor’s introduction provides a valuable clue to the book’s general orientation. These reflections on love and friendship in the modern era are to be loosely held together by a few fundamental questions and assumptions. First, by and large the authors of this volume take for granted that affection must play an important role in the self-understanding of any citizen, including modern citizens: as Velásquez puts it, “[w]e cannot speak of politics in any meaningful sense in the absence of

affection. We cannot consider ourselves a ‘people’ or ‘citizens’ without some kind of affectionate response to those we think of as citizens” (introduction, xx). Second, this book questions the assumption that friendship, love, or affection can be safely relegated to the private sphere. Borrowing explicitly from Plato’s *Republic*, Velásquez maintains that any regime, including the liberal one, instills some range of affections in its citizens. So the question of the book becomes, “[w]hat kind of affection emerges as a consequence of our commitment to democratic principles and practices?” (xxi). This basic question quickly raises some doubts about the success of modern politics at incorporating and channeling the bonds of human affection. In particular, can a contractarian society that exalts individual autonomy support the practice of friendship and love among its citizens? As Velásquez notes towards the end of his introduction, “[i]t is hard to make a community out of the language of ‘autonomy.’” (xxv).

But if there are grounds for doubting the compatibility of a liberal community, conventionally understood, with love and friendship, the question naturally arises whether the modern polity can be somehow reinterpreted in a way that is more accommodating towards friendly and loving relationships. Indeed, the book’s sub-title, *Rethinking Politics and Affection in Modern Times*, nicely captures its intent, for these essays are best understood not as an *attack* on modern liberal culture and politics, nor as a straightforward analysis of the relationship between modernity and friendship, but as an attempt to *rethink* the philosophical and practical basis of modern culture in light of the perennial human experience and aspiration of love and friendship. The common thread that ties these nineteen reflections together is a longing to reconcile modern social, political, and economic life with the joys and consolations of affection, love, and friendship. As such, these essayists sound a note of hopeful realism: they are realists insofar as they exhibit an awareness of the obstacles posed to love and friendship by the modern emancipatory project: in loosening the bonds of marriage, family, and various civil associations, and in stressing the practical primacy of individual choice in the social and economic spheres, modern society seems to threaten the inherently interdependent and often other-regarding ties of

love and friendship. On the other hand, the essays have a constructive dimension insofar as they propose resources both within and without the liberal tradition for enhancing the understanding and practice of love and friendship in a world in which they often seem “under siege” (549).

It seems fitting to dwell briefly on the grounds for the worry about the fate of love and friendship in the modern polity that runs through this book. First, the traditional philosophical justification for the modern state is a social contract among free and equal individuals, with no pre-political or “natural” ties of mutual authority or subordination. This contract is supposedly grounded in psychological and physical self-interest, fairly narrowly conceived. But friendship and love, whether platonic, sexual, or divine, seems to call for a willingness to sacrifice one’s own interests for the beloved. By expunging self-sacrifice from politics, the liberal state is liable to damage citizens’ capacity for self-giving and for the more noble forms of love. For example, commenting on Lockean liberalism, Scott Yenor remarks that “[c]ritics worry that Locke’s emphasis on the self leaves no room for that which transcends the self—for love, friendship, love of beauty, morality, community, compassion, or genuine public spirit” (140).

Second, by focusing attention on the needs and appetites of the body rather than the soul, the modern polity tends to discourage or even suppress what is arguably the highest and most self-transcending form of love: love for God or for the “good” that transcends all human calculation. This sort of critique is presented by Germaine Paulo Walsh in “God is Love, or Love is God? Denis de Rougemont and Allan Bloom on the Grounds and Goals of Love.”

Third, by inculcating uniform needs and desires in citizens through consumer culture and the mass media, liberalism fosters a form of cultural and political conformism that makes idiosyncratic and truly personalized friendships difficult to achieve. This uniformity and its implications are pushed to their logical extremes in *1984* and *Brave New World* (as discussed by Corey Abel). Fourth, as Kraemor argues in his critique of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, by treating men and women as not merely equal in dignity, but essentially the same, liberalism (or at least a certain strand of feminist liberalism) destroys differences between the sexes that are

essential to the love of *eros* between man and woman, as well as the essential and unique contribution of mothers who literally bear the future of our society within them.

Does liberal democracy have the resources to meet such challenges without being transformed beyond recognition? To what extent can we “rethink” liberal democracy in order to better accommodate rich friendships and loves, without regressing to a pre-modern or anti-liberal form of community? Perhaps because it is an edited collection, Velásquez’s volume contains no sustained answer. However, the *beginnings* of an answer do emerge from time to time in various of the essays. For example, a good number of these essays undertake to reexamine the liberal tradition itself in search of resources for confronting the question of friendship. Surveying the political and social thought of thinkers such as Montaigne, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Smith, Burke, and Tocqueville, we find that in many cases, modern thinkers do indeed evince a real sensitivity to problems of love and friendship, even if we are not entirely convinced by their answers. Adam Smith, for example (as discussed by Lauren Brubaker) points to the natural human sentiment of sympathy reinforced by social pressures that penalize anti-social behavior; Tocqueville (as elaborated by Alice Behnegar) places a great deal of store on the resources of civil society, especially religious faith, as a counterbalance to the social fragmentation of egalitarian societies; Locke (as explained by Scott Yenor) attempts to balance the partisan excesses of friendship with an independent and impartial spirit; and Rousseau (as interpreted by Pamela Jensen) seeks to educate the body politic in habits of freedom “by means of a revolution in taste, or love of the beautiful,” which must take place first and foremost in familial and marital relationships.

Other authors in this collection respond to the problem of friendship by mining the resources of pre-modern traditions. Velásquez’s introduction appeals to Plato’s *Republic*; Steven Berg looks to Plato’s *Symposium*; Ronna Burger examines Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*; and Walsh invokes the biblical and classical traditions. Pre-modern perspectives open a radically different panorama onto the meaning of friendship than that we moderns are accustomed to:

friendships of virtue are viewed by Aristotle as the highest and most complete form of human friendship; *eros* or erotic love for the divine is believed by Plato to be the closest a human comes to realizing his true nature; and *agape* or pure self-giving love is deemed the pinnacle of virtue in the Christian tradition. Though we should not underestimate the relevance of pre-modern traditions, the disadvantage of this kind of response is that pre-modern thinkers did not have in mind the unique problems of our times, and it is not immediately obvious how their insights should be applied to modern industrialized societies.

A third response, which is one of the special contributions of this collection, is to mine modern works of literature for insights into the meaning of friendship in modern societies. Works discussed include Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (Inger Sigrun Brodey), Schiller's *Don Karlos* (Fred Baumann) and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (Velásquez). These sorts of literary discussions do not merely vividly exemplify philosophical principles, but supply independent sources of insight into human experience. To the extent that they are less philosophically "filtered" accounts of the human experience of love and friendship, they nicely complement more abstract and analytic treatments that we find elsewhere in the collection.

If this book is taken for what it is—a collection of methodologically and topically diverse papers united loosely around the themes of love, friendship, and modernity—then it offers a valuable resource to those curious about this neglected topic. If the reader is prepared to forego expectations of a "streamlined," narrowly focused volume of essays, he will probably enjoy dipping in and out of the various essays, gleaning insights into this or that thinker, literary work, or philosophical problem. However, those more predisposed towards a highly focused and problem-driven discussion may find themselves somewhat frustrated, and will likely find the degree of diversity in styles, methods, and themes a little overwhelming. While it would be unfair to expect a work of this nature to provide a sustained and continuous treatment of the topic in hand, it does seem fair to demand that all of the essays come more or less firmly within the orbit

of a few overarching questions. But beyond a general exploration of the role of affection in modern life, and the conviction that it is of fundamental importance to our self-understanding, the thread that binds these essays together is a loose one indeed. While the book undoubtedly presents a helpful and broad-ranging resource on the role of friendship and love in modern life, it is probably overly ambitious in scope, since the contributions are too eclectic both methodologically and thematically to constitute a coherent conversation. Some of them offer a close textual exegesis of a particular philosopher on love or friendship; others treat of some aspect of love in a particular novel or play; others critique very specific aspects of modern society's treatment of love (e.g. neo-Darwinian political science, or feminism); and yet others discuss the broad questions motivating this study in a more explicit fashion. More analytically-inclined readers will likely be left with a sense of dissatisfaction, as the key question raised at the outset—the question of the compatibility of modern liberal democracy with friendship and love—is frequently given little sustained and explicit treatment by individual contributors.

Even if *Love and Friendship* is somewhat over-ambitious in scope, it offers some timely and probing reflections on a topic that seems to easily slip between the cracks of the so-called “liberal-communitarian” debate. With all the talk of “constitutive” community, “dialogic” identity, and “thick” citizenship, the themes of love and friendship have not yet been adequately integrated into discussions of the modern polity. This may be because liberals are uncomfortable with politicizing love and affection, and thus spoiling the simple joys of private life; while their critics recognize the limited capacity of modern politics to satisfy the deepest longings of the heart. And these reservations seem perfectly legitimate. However, Velásquez's *Love and Friendship* reminds us that the relation between love and politics calls for a subtle and discriminating treatment that is not afraid to grapple with the public significance of bonds of love, all the while recognizing that the heart has its reasons which *public* reason does not know.

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