



# *Besieged By Beneficence: Love, Justice, and the Autonomous Self*

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*For I in my simplicity imagined that the topics of praise should be true; this was to be the foundation, and that out of them the speaker was to choose the best and arrange them in the best order. And I felt quite proud and thought that I could speak as well as another, as I knew the nature of true praise. Whereas I see now that the intention was to attribute to love every species of greatness and glory, whether really belonging to him or not, without regard to truth or falsehood—that was no matter; for the original proposal seems to have been not that you should praise, but only that you should appear to praise him. And you attribute to love every imaginable form of praise, and say that “he is all this,” “the cause of all this,” in order that you may exhibit him as the fairest and best of all; and this of course imposes on the unwary, but not on those who really know him; and a noble and solemn hymn of praise have you rehearsed.*

Socrates, in Plato  
The Symposium<sup>1</sup>

Socrates' admonition about excessive and inaccurate praise of love is more instructive today than ever. Unlike Kant's notion of good will, for example, love itself cannot be seen as an unqualified good, as something that shines purely and perfectly irrespective of the interests it serves.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as the pace of our lives becomes ever more hectic, and as we have increasingly embraced

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\* I am tremendously indebted to Robert Howse and Roxanne Mykitiuk for very stimulating discussions about this film. I am also very grateful to Robert Howse, Robert Zuber, Bruce Ziff, Larissa Behrendt, Lillian MacPherson, and David Kahane for insightful comments on earlier drafts of the paper.

<sup>1</sup> *Symposium and Phaedrus* (New York: Dover, 1993) at 23 (at the end of Agathon's speech).

<sup>2</sup> I am very grateful to Robert House for the comparison to Kant's notion of good will here. For a very interesting discussion of the role of love within liberalism, see R. House, *Attachments by Choice: Liberalism and the Problem of Community* (LL.M. Thesis, Harvard Law School 1990).

the task of creating or choosing our lives with originality and autonomy rather than simply participating in well defined traditional roles, we have also increasingly invested in love as the way to meaning and fulfilment.<sup>3</sup> Love has come to be perceived as the way out of exhaustion and disillusionment back to enthusiasm and enchantment. Love relationships are the context in which many of us struggle most passionately toward authenticity and connection in our lives. Carrying the weight of so many of our expectations, love comes to claim for itself a powerful justificatory force.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in attributing "every species of greatness and glory" to love, we sometimes go so far as to assume that all that is loving is, for that reason, good and that all action motivated by love is, for the same reason, defensible or at least excusable.<sup>5</sup> Further, in giving love "every imaginable form of praise", we are sometimes even compelled to invest it with the qualities of other valued ideals, such as justice, and to conclude that all that is loving is, *for that reason*, also just.<sup>6</sup>

This essay looks at the strong connections drawn between love and justice in the film *Besieged* directed by Bernardo Bertolucci and written by Bertolucci and Clare Peploe.<sup>7</sup> It argues that while the story in *Besieged* puts forward a compelling version of love as humble beneficence, we should be slow to presume this conception of love has either self-evident ethical legitimacy or a strong structural relationship to the ideal or the idea of justice.

### I. LOVE AS HUMBLE BENEFICENCE

In his book, *Personal Love*, Mark Fisher elaborates a notion of love as humble beneficence: the desire *for the sake of the beloved*, the good of the beloved, *as she understands it*, and the corresponding willingness to act so as to bring

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<sup>3</sup> For a full discussion of this idea, see U. Beck & E. Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, trans. M. Ritter & J. Wiebel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> On this point, see P. Pettit, "Love and Its Place in Moral Discourse" in R. Lamb, ed., *Love Analyzed* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997) at 153.

<sup>5</sup> For a striking example of this form of reasoning from love to excuse, one can refer to a quote from O.J. Simpson in the January 1998 issue of *Esquire* magazine. He said: "Let's say I committed this crime, even if I did do this, it would have to have been because I loved her very much, right?"

<sup>6</sup> For an interesting argument about this sort of causal relation between justice and caring, see R. West, *Caring for Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> *Besieged* (Fine Line, 1999). *Besieged* had its world premiere at the Toronto Film Festival in September of 1998. It was released to theatres in June of 1999. It met with mixed reviews. Don Irvine, for CBC Radio's *Definitely Not the Opera*, called it "active, passionate, emotionally provocative and beautiful" (7 June 1999). On the other hand, *The Village Voice* called it "clueless and condescending", stating that it "should come with the disclaimer 'Danger: Artiste at Work.'" See J. Hoberman, "Artists In Love" 26 May-1 June, 1999.

about that desired good.<sup>8</sup> As a conception of love, humble beneficence appears to accommodate at least some of the demands of justice. Love as humble beneficence focuses on the good of the beloved and also gives her the unqualified authority to determine the substance of that good. Thus the two justice-related conditions that humble beneficence seems to incorporate into love are first, through the condition of humility, respect for and deference to the autonomy of the beloved as a chooser of her conception of the good and, second, through the condition of beneficence, the non-instrumental valuation of that good. Fisher describes humble beneficence as “the desire that the other person obtain what she desires, not for reasons related to my good but simply because it is what she desires—the reasons are hers, and because they are hers they are mine.”<sup>9</sup>

Though Fisher elaborates the core case of humble beneficence in the context of sexual love, he sees it as a golden thread running through virtually all forms of love of persons, with the exception of love of children where paternalism about the child’s conception of the good is appropriate. But with respect to love of equals, humble beneficence, by honouring the beloved’s autonomy, eliminates those controlling or exploitative elements that can oppose love to justice. Humble beneficence, as an acid test for love, appears to disqualify as loving many unjust, unequal, or exploitive relations.

Fisher’s conception of love owes much to Aristotle’s discussion of love and friendship: desiring the good of the friend for the friend’s sake.<sup>10</sup> Fisher’s modifications to Aristotle, however, bring a distinctly liberal flavour to his understanding of love. For Aristotle, the good of the friend was determined by agreed upon standards of virtue. For Fisher, however, the good of the beloved is constituted by her choice. Fisher’s understanding of love, desiring the beloved’s good as she sees it, dovetails into the liberal conception of the self as a maximiser of autonomously chosen interests. For Fisher, the liberal understanding of the self as a chooser of life plans or conceptions of the good acts as a conceptual mould into which the liquid idea of love is poured.

## II. BESIEGED BY BENEFICENCE

We now turn to Bertolucci’s film *Besieged* as an illustration of humble beneficence as a compelling conception of just love. The story begins as Shandurai, a Black African woman (of mesmerizing beauty played by Thandie

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<sup>8</sup> (London: Duckworth, 1990) at 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) at 263. See also D. Kahane, “Diversity, Solidarity, and Civic Friendship” (1999) 7, 3 *Journal of Political Philosophy* at 267-86.

Newton),<sup>11</sup> loses her school teacher husband when military police burst into his classroom and arrest him for crimes related to his critique and ridicule of the ruling dictatorship. Shandurai is devastated and terrified as her husband is taken away to jail. Unable to assist him, she moves to Rome to continue her study of medicine. There she takes a job as the live-in housekeeper in an elegant Roman palazzo owned by Mr. Kinsky, a reclusive British pianist played by David Thewlis. Between classes at medical school, she carefully attends to his inheritance—washing intricate mosaic marble floors and dusting a vast collection of *objets d'art*. As the film progresses we gradually discover Kinsky's passion for Shandurai. Though the presence of his desire is initially mysterious and even threatening, once he declares his love for her, Kinsky begins to take shape as the just and gentle prototype of the humbly beneficent lover.

In the pivotal scene where he confesses his love to her, the perfect stage is set for a dramatic example of love as humble beneficence. Desperately he tells her he loves her and he would do anything for her. She is offended and angered by the naive confidence of his feelings. Her anger fuels his desperation and determination to find a way to her heart. Awkwardly casting around for a way to please her, he suggests they could go to Africa together. She lashes out at him angrily replying: "What do you know about Africa?" Though he has never spoken to her about anything more than her cleaning duties, he struggles to redeem the credibility of his feelings. Yet he is confronted with his lack of knowledge of her. He is limited by his own imaginings of what it is she desires. Finally he asks: "What can I do? I will do anything. Please." Still angry, she shouts back: "Get my husband out of jail." Her response reads more as a flat rejection of his advances than a serious answer to his question. He is immediately shocked and chastened as his projected understanding of her falls into ruins. Recoiling with embarrassment he says: "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were married." His words seem to include both the conventionally expected apology for declaration of love to a married woman, and also a more meaningful apology for the depth of his ignorance of the substance of her life and character.

This jarring disappointment begins the unfolding of Kinsky's determination to bear out the implications of their conversation and his sense of himself as a humbly beneficent lover. At first, Kinsky appears to completely abandon his attempts to win Shandurai's love. He retreats into a shy but respectful

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<sup>11</sup> Newton also gave a memorable performance in her role as Beloved in Oprah Winfrey's disappointing production of a film based on Toni Morrison's novel: *Beloved: a Novel* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

reservedness in relation to her. Gradually we learn, however, that he is hard at work doing everything he can to bring about her conception of the good as she has stated it. Little by little, lavish art and furnishings in the house begin to disappear as he has them sent to auction, sacrificing his riches to raise the money to finance a defence for her husband. He begins to make important connections with people in the African community who assist him with the necessary political manoeuvring to secure Shandurai's husband's release.

Eventually Shandurai receives a letter telling her that her husband is to be let out of prison and that he will be arriving in Rome in only a few days. She is overjoyed about the news of his safety and his return to her. Yet as the weeks have progressed, Shandurai has begun to see many loveable traits in Kinsky. As the house once overflowing with opulence has become empty and stark, Kinsky's character, once flat and menacing, has become complex and seductive. He is gentle, caring, and compassionate. He treats her and others with dignity and respect. He is a talented and passionate musician and composer. As the story unfolds, Kinsky emerges as a person of considerable depth and sensitivity—someone Shandurai could love.

Realizing that Kinsky has sacrificed so much to have her husband released, Shandurai is overwhelmed with gratitude, desire, and confusion. She is pulled to Kinsky and also to her husband. She is moved by the depth of Kinsky's devotion to her and by the lengths he has gone to help her, even when he knows success is likely to bring about an end to their connection. On the eve of her husband's arrival in Rome, Shandurai struggles with the task of communicating her feelings to Kinsky. She tries to write him a letter and produces one page which repeats only the words: "THANK YOU". She writes another letter that reads simply: "I LOVE YOU". The tension between gratitude and love as responses to another person's humble beneficence is reflected in her internal contest between the two letters. As the film ends, Shandurai has given Kinsky the "love letter" and the two are naked in bed together in an awkward half-embrace that reflects the poignant confusion of the moment. Shandurai's husband arrives at Kinsky's front door and we are left watching him ringing the bell, waiting for an answer. Still worlds apart, Shandurai and Kinsky lie together in silence and stillness. Everyone waits for Shandurai to know what to do.

The story makes humble beneficence both credible and seductive as a compelling and just form of love. Indeed, the story lends considerable ethical dignity to humble beneficence. The two just conditions of this love are respect for the autonomy of the beloved and non-instrumental valuation of the beloved's good. These are both satisfied by Kinsky in important ways.

First, the vast distance between his conception of the good and his beloved's seems to make more certain the presence of both humility and beneficence. His humility is found in his uncritical endorsement of her conception of the good which he accepts as being both prior to their relationship and independent of his love. Commitment to humble beneficence requires that Kinsky pay attention to the reality of who Shandurai is. It requires that he not rely on culturally scripted presumptions or projections about her conception of the good. An important moment of justice between the lover and beloved occurs during their conversation—the moment of genuine discovery and understanding of the complex subjectivity of the beloved. Kinsky's exceptional humility and his willingness to pay attention to the reality of her prior understanding of her good seems to give his love a distinct quality of justice.

Second, since succeeding in his endeavour to have her husband released from jail will potentially result in Kinsky never seeing her again, it is at least possible that he is authentically beneficent in the sense that he is acting for her sake, distinct from his own, in doing what she has asked. Yet the question of beneficence and the separation of "sakes" provides one of the central ambiguities of the film. Indeed, Kinsky's beneficence—his non-instrumental valuation of Shandurai's well-being as she defines it—is continually in tension with his desire and his sexual aspirations which reflect his concern for his own ambition in relation to her. The question of whether Kinsky has made such sacrifices simply to express and experience his love for her, come what may, or whether his efforts to have her husband freed were specifically directed toward securing the fulfilment of his desire for her for his own sake, is left unanswered. Nevertheless, this tension is a normative basis on which we are asked to judge the quality of his love. If Kinsky is truly acting for her sake, and is sacrificing his time and his inheritance out of the depth of his concern and love for her, then the integrity of his love is magnificent. If proving his love to her and to himself is more important to him than any other benefit he might receive in return, he fulfils an ideal of a just lover. By contrast, however, if he is trying to hold her to a bargain he has foisted upon her through his own narcissistic imaginings then we would judge his actions as manipulative, unloving, and unjust. The fact that we do not know the answer to this question reflects the continual ambiguity surrounding the motivation behind beneficence, and the instability of separate "sakes" within relations of desire.

Yet to the extent that we are willing to give Kinsky the benefit of the doubt on this point, and it seems evident that the film asks us to do so, it is easy to think of Kinsky's actions as both loving and just, *because* they are both

humble and beneficent. I will, however, now question these connections. Is it really his humility in valuing her autonomous choice that lends a quality of justice to his love? Is his willingness to act so as to bring her conception of the good into being, no matter the cost, an act that transcends and subsumes the demands of justice? I suggest that while these powerful aspects of Kinsky's way of loving give a quality of breathtaking generosity to his actions, it is not the resonance of Kinsky's actions within the conceptual framework of humble beneficence that make Kinsky's love just. Rather, to the extent that we see Kinsky's love as just, it is first because of the justice that is inherent in Shandurai's conception of the good, and second because of the distributive justice or increased equality that Kinsky brings about by contributing his energy and resources to Shandurai's concerns. Because the source of the justice in their relation cannot be located in the structure of humble beneficence itself, we should be slow to be seduced by humble beneficence as a conception of love which claims to be compelling, at least in part, because of its strong resonances with an ideal of justice.

### **III. JUSTICE IN THE SUBSTANCE OF THE BELOVED'S DESIRE**

In analyzing the source of the justice in Kinsky's love it is important to be mindful that Shandurai's conception of the good is not justice-neutral. The task she gives to Kinsky has its own justice. Her husband has been wrongfully imprisoned by a repressive regime. The attempt to free him then is beneficent not merely in relation to an idiosyncratic set of desires held by Shandurai; rather, the beneficence of Kinsky's labour of love connects significantly with our pre-existing understandings of fairness and respect for human rights. Indeed, Shandurai's gift to Kinsky is an opportunity to be heroic in a way that resonates deeply with our already strong beliefs about the value of resistance to oppression. She gives Kinsky a meaningful and just conception of the good to pursue, delivering him from the life of an isolated dilettante to a life focused on serving justice.

While humble beneficence enlists Kinsky in a project of justice, we can certainly imagine instances in which the humble and uncritical endorsement of another's conception of the good would aid the cause of injustice and inequality. Love as humble beneficence might just as easily enlist the lover in the pursuit of a conception of the good that values wrongdoing toward others. Consider a drastic example. Karla Homolka assisted her husband Paul Bernardo in abducting, sexually torturing, and murdering a number of young women. Infamously, in return for testimony against Bernardo, Homolka negotiated immunity from further prosecution and pleaded guilty to manslaughter. Though she was never brought to trial, there was intense

public debate about her role in the killings.<sup>12</sup> Some argued that she was independently evil and that her participation in the violation of the victims was motivated entirely by her own desire. Others saw her as a battered woman acting under duress, having been coercively deprived of the capacity to resist Bernardo's demands. Still others, however, speculated that it was her love for Bernardo that explained her willingness to participate in the killings. She did not desire the murders herself, nor had Bernardo overborne her will through violence and abuse. Rather, her humbly beneficent love for him had led her to uncritically adopt his inhuman conception of the good.<sup>13</sup> Interpreted in this light, the Homolka-Bernardo relationship demonstrates that humble beneficence can be as unjust and depraved as the most twisted of desires. Further, the risk is that our faith in humble beneficence, as an ethical conception of love, will allow love to pass for an excusing condition like duress in relation to wrongful conduct inspired by love.

Another unjust permutation of humble beneficence occurs where the beloved's conception of the good entails inequality and domination as between the lover and the beloved. Where the lover desires and is willing to act so as to bring about the beloved's conception of the good, and the beloved desires the subordination or humiliation of the lover, humble beneficence again enures to the cause of injustice. This injustice can be gross or subtle, ranging from a brutal sadomasochism to a patriarchal marriage in which the wife endorses the husband's conception of the good which in turn entails her subordination to his will. This coincidence of desire does, however, solve the perennial incoherence of reciprocal humble beneficence. Where I desire whatever you desire, and you desire whatever I desire, then we are likely to become locked in a paralyzing cycle of mutual deference. Indeed, there are only two ways out of this "deadly embrace".<sup>14</sup> The first is found when we discover that we each have substantive conceptions of the good that are

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<sup>12</sup> See A. McGillivray, "A moral vacuity in her which is difficult if not impossible to explain: law, psychiatry and the remaking of Karla Homolka" (1998) Vol. 5, Nos. 2/3 *International Journal of the Legal Profession* 255. The debate has been recently reignited by Homolka's application for parole and her potential suit against the Federal government for denying the application. See also R. Rix, Letter to the Editor, "Karla and Christian Values" *The Globe and Mail* (9 November 1999) A18; K. Stobbs, Letter to the Editor, "Love Thy Neighbour" *The Globe and Mail* (8 November 1999) A20; H. Camber, Letter to the Editor, "Much Outcry Over Homolka" *The Globe and Mail* (6 November 1999) A24; M. Wente, "The New and Self-Improved Karla Homolka" *The Globe and Mail* (6 November 1999) A25.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, McGillivray points out that in Karla Homolka's prison letters, "the only death overtly mourned is that of her relationship with Bernardo". *Ibid.* at 271.

<sup>14</sup> Fisher, *supra* note 8 at 30. "Or what if we get locked into what programmers call a deadly embrace, immobilized by the impossibility of assigning any content to our current desires, since each of us desires precisely whatever it is that other desires?"



already the same. The second is where we both hold conceptions of the good that posit one of us as the boss.

The first possibility creates ideal conditions for a fused self in love. However, the second possibility also provides for a kind of theoretically harmonious though unequal fusion. Indeed, this kind of inequality in marriage has historically been understood as partaking of an important form of justice as right ordering. As Foucault points out in *The History of Sexuality*, the Greeks saw the unequal relation between husband and wife as a matter of justice and as analogous to the just inequality between ruler and ruled.<sup>15</sup> Formalized inequality within the relationship is seen as the very source of its justness. Justice, then, is a matter of the fulfilment of a natural order. Yet the question remains as to whether reciprocal humble beneficence, which enshrines inequality as between the lovers, is, for that reason, unjust. If one person *does desire* a perpetual state of deference, what is the source of the injustice in the relation? This perennial question of false consciousness in relations of inequality is now, perhaps, more vital when posed to practices of sadomasochism than when posed to patriarchal marriage.<sup>16</sup> I want to suggest, however, that a potential source of the injustice in either case is found in the abdication of selfhood entailed in this configuration of relation. Though I have framed this hierarchical structure in terms of reciprocal humble beneficence, it is clear that the personal costs of sustained humility and selflessness are born entirely by the “bottom” in either case. Thus, while such a structure can appear to carry the justice of reciprocity, it continually places one person in a position of surrendered selfhood and gives the exclusive power and right of self-definition to the other. Within this hierarchical structure one person renounces the duty of self-creation. In doing so they relinquish important aspects of their humanness. One person gives away that which they have no right to give—their power of self-definition, while the other person takes that which they have no right to hold—the power to create the other. It is for this reason that humble beneficence, as the establishment of ruler and ruled, is inescapably unjust.

A third form of potential injustice in humble beneficence is found in the situation where the beloved’s conception of the good is unjust *vis-à-vis* him or herself. Here, humble deference to the beloved’s theory of the desirable

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<sup>15</sup> M. Foucault, *Use of Pleasure, The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, trans. R. Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1992) at 180.

<sup>16</sup> For a very interesting nuanced and sophisticated discussion of false consciousness and sadomasochism, see S. Phelan, *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989). In particular, see Chapter 6 “Sadomasochism and the Meaning of Feminism”.

creates injustice as it may ultimately cause harm to the beloved. Consider a common example. A heterosexual woman has a core desire to be extremely thin and she acts to fulfill that desire by severe dieting and arduous exercise. If we accept humble beneficence then we are committed to the conclusion that to love her, one must desire this conception of the good *as she sees it* for her sake. Her lover must be willing to do what he can to assist her in achieving this good—perhaps helping her stick to her diet and exercise program. Certainly men do sometimes adopt anorexic aspirations for the women they love. In most cases, however, one assumes the lover has endorsed her hyper-skinny conception of the good *for his own sake*. He desires the prestige of having a strikingly slender lover, or perhaps he wants to see her struggle against her body. While there are many unloving motives one might have for supporting a lover's anorexia, it is at least possible, nevertheless, to imagine a man who endorses his lover's anorexic world-view and actions for her sake—because of what she feels it brings her. Perhaps she desires thinness because it gives her a sense of power and mastery over the world and makes her feel in control. Because she desires it, so does he.

Yet here again, the lover's renunciation of the task of critical reflection about the substance of the beloved's understanding of her good renders the humility in humble beneficence a potential source of injustice. Taken here to the extreme, love as humble beneficence could lead the lover to support, affirm, and desire the ultimate self-destruction of the beloved. Thus, it is clear that the substance of the beloved's conception of the good must itself be just in order that love as humble beneficence be just also. Our investment in the ethical dignity of this conception of love derives from narratives of humble beneficence elaborated in contexts such as *Besieged* where numerous other factors line up in order to produce a just outcome.

#### **IV. HUMBLE BENEFICENCE, EQUALITY, AND DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE**

Another significant aspect of the story of *Besieged* which contributes to our sense of the justness of Kinsky's humble beneficence is the power relations between the lovers. Kinsky is white, male, British, wealthy, and an employer. Shandurai is Black, female, African, poor, and his employee. Thus Kinsky clearly enjoys race, gender, culture, and class privilege over Shandurai. As a result, Kinsky's willingness to subordinate his own conception of the good to Shandurai's brings about a move in the direction of equality and rectification of the power imbalance between the two. Again, of course, this depends upon his *bona fides*. If he is merely trying to oblige her to return his love, then his beneficence, though humble in the sense of deferring to her wishes, is only strategically so. However, if his beneficence is genuinely directed toward

her well-being, then the circumstances are such that his actions bring about greater equality. His abdication of power to her over the definition of the substance of his projects is a gesture of justice-making generosity that extends beyond the two of them. Further, the transfer of wealth that occurs when Kinsky sells the valuable objects hidden away in his villa and uses the proceeds to assist Shandurai's husband effects a form of distributive justice. Through Kinsky's love, resources once trapped in meaningless indulgence are now usefully deployed to effect socially important change.

Because love as humble beneficence involves a transfer of power from the lover to the beloved—the lover gives of his energy and resources in aid of the beloved's projects—it has the capacity to either alter existing power relations or to entrench them. In this case, power relations are altered in the direction of equality. However, this does not inhere in the structure of humble beneficence itself. Where the lover is less powerful than the beloved, love as humble beneficence can just as easily effect a transfer of energy and resources from the powerless to the powerful. Therefore, there are significant risks in seeing humble beneficence as a structure that is in itself ethically grounded. If we look at a relationship like that of Kinsky and Shandurai and take it as a demonstration of the justice of humble beneficence as a conception of love, we risk infusing a particular conception of love with undeserved ethical legitimacy. We wrongly harness the appeal of equality-making humble beneficence and transfer it to contexts where it works to entrench existing inequality. *Besieged* theorizes and even valorizes humble beneficence in a context of unequal power relations, where a more powerful lover gives power to the less powerful beloved. Love as selflessness, when theorized or practised in this top-down situation, piggybacks onto the justice of equality. Yet all too often, love as humble beneficence is practised by the bottom in relation to the top.

The issue of equality is further complicated by the power behind Kinsky's privilege. Though his sacrifice is dramatic, it is also clear that Kinsky is only able to perform such impressive feats because of his wealth and position. Love as humble beneficence gives those with more resources more capacity to love convincingly and to fulfil the beloved's conception of the good. Humble beneficence creates the possibility for both heroic and impotent love. Where the lover is without the resources to advance her beloved's conception of the good as he sees it, the experience of love is inescapably frustrating and the value of love is inevitably in question.

This privileging of the privileged as lovers, coupled with the transfer of resources from the lover to the beloved involved in humble beneficence, has the potential to alienate less powerful persons from the strength of their own

love. The structure of love as humble beneficence counsels the less powerful to remain as the object and not the subject of love. If love is humble beneficence, then the political consequences of a less powerful person occupying the position of lover are potentially very dangerous. For the less powerful, love as humble beneficence entails serious risks of increasing inequality and injustice. The less powerful must remain as objects of love to secure their own selfhood and to resist a further giving over of power to an already more powerful beloved. Rather than being a source of power and selfhood for the oppressed, love as humble beneficence is a source of further deprivation and exploitation.

This, of course, accounts for the ways in which women's love for men has been a force that has replicated gender inequality far more often than it has transformed it. At least a partial explanation of why the idea of a man's humbly beneficent love for a woman is so seductive for women is that it carries the promise of an equalization of power. The seductive pull of this possibility perhaps inspires women to give what they hope to receive in humble beneficence. Compelled by the senses in which humble beneficence can be a transformative force toward greater justice where the lover is more powerful, women attempt to bring about a humbly beneficent attitude in men by offering humble beneficence themselves. The interplay of giving and receiving is confused. One gives in the hope of inspiring reciprocal giving. The desire to be loved in a particular way directs the sense of how to love others as well. However, the result is too often a disappointing increase in injustice as the woman gives over her resources and her power of self-definition to a more powerful man and the reciprocal giving that is hoped for never takes place.

Again, humble beneficence is theorized and made attractive in the context of a more powerful lover infusing the beloved with strength. Unfortunately, it is all too often practised in circumstances where the less powerful lover abdicates power to an exploitive beloved. Thus, the final scene of *Besieged* is suffused with anxiety around the potential negative consequences of the beloved Shandurai stepping into the space of lover in relation to Kinsky. As beloved recipient of passionate humble beneficence, she has held the considerable derivative power of his love. However, if she reciprocates by adopting a humbly beneficent attitude in return, we do not know where it will leave her.

Perhaps it is as a result of the associations between love and humble beneficence that heterosexual feminism has for the most part been so deeply sceptical of love as a potential force toward greater gender justice. Heterosexual women's love for men has always held this potential as a force

toward injustice. Ironically, for both conservatism and radical feminism, women's power in intimate relation to men has been seen to stem not from their capacity to love, but from their capacity to withdraw and withhold love and affection. Again this has often had the consequence of alienating women from the power and energy of their love. Indeed, one of the most difficult demands of feminism for many women has been the extent to which it has appeared to require a capacity to distance oneself from one's love for men.

Of course, lesbian feminists have been much more optimistic about the possibilities of love as a transformative force.<sup>17</sup> The transgressive nature of lesbian love squares that love with aspirations for change and greater gender justice. Lesbian love—even as humble beneficence—is an unequivocal affirmation of women who historically have been less powerful and viewed as less valuable. Lesbian humble beneficence continues to invest women with authority and significance and does not risk the transfer of women's energy and resources back into the service of the projects and desires of men. The clear conscience of the exuberant lesbian “yes” in love—the purity of its politics—is enviable from the position of straight women. Women loving women with humble beneficence again promises at least potential transformation toward greater equality in the broader society. As women affirm each other's conceptions of the good through humble beneficence toward each other, they gather strength and confidence to take into their dealings with the rest of the world.

However, love as humble beneficence entrenches the primacy of heterosexuality for women. If we accept humble beneficence as the dominant conception of love, it continues to carry with it the threat that a powerful man's love will forever be more compelling and satisfying than the love of a less powerful woman. The possibility that a powerful man could—if he chose to love with humble beneficence—bring greater resources, cultural capital, and significance to a beloved woman's desires than any woman ever could, keeps the value of lesbian love, *qua* humble beneficence, insecure and unstable. Humble beneficence as a conception of love always privileges the more powerful as more compelling lovers. Within the story of *Besieged*, Kinsky's love would remain as impotent and as pathetically “gulping and snuffling”<sup>18</sup> as it was at its inception were it not for his considerable reserves of cultural and material capital.

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<sup>17</sup> See e.g. A. Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press, 1984); C. Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> *Supra* note 7. These are the words that Hoberman uses to describe Kinsky's proposal to Shandurai at the beginning of the film.

A further difficulty with humble beneficence is that it can create a dangerous illusion of having accomplished an inversion of systemic power hierarchies in the relation between the lovers. Because love as humble beneficence accords a kind of superiority to the desires and projects of the beloved, it can appear to nullify pre-existing power imbalances. While Kinsky may genuinely feel that Shandurai and the substance of her desires control him, this does not by any means cancel out the salience of his privilege in their relation. Indeed, part of what is troubling about the interactions of Shandurai and Kinsky is that, other than in the moment of his advance toward her, she sustains a stance of tense deference toward him. We have the sense that this deference is motivated by an intuition about self-preservation informed by complex understandings of the dynamics of race and gender hierarchies in contexts of desire. Shandurai perhaps knows that she must remain as both Kinsky's servant and fantasy child of Africa in order to continue enjoying the fruits of his beneficence. For Kinsky, however, his beneficence may appear to justify the delusion that he has surrendered power to her.

#### **V. AUTONOMY, MUTUALITY, AND THE LIMITS OF LOVE**

Beyond being merely a compelling illustration of love as humble beneficence, the story in *Besieged* contains the fulfilment of an irresistible fantasy: Kinsky is an emotionally vulnerable person who is able to respond to the rejection of his love by giving his beloved a gift of immeasurable meaning. He knows that his gift will truly help her and he is certain that he will at least win her respect and gratitude if not her love. Kinsky elegantly succeeds in remaking himself as a desirable lover through a moving display of humility and beneficence. Thus, on some level, the story is both romantic and seductive. Yet there is something deeply unsatisfying about it nonetheless. While Shandurai does, on the face of things, come to return Kinsky's love, the two remain at an enormous emotional distance. Shandurai's relationship with Kinsky is both puzzling and uninteresting. Her real life as an animated and engaging person is only revealed outside of the confines of Kinsky's house and their stilted rapport. Interactions between the two are charged with intensity and meaning yet they remain neither intimate nor mutual.

I want to now extend this critique of humble beneficence to suggest that this failure of the relation between Kinsky and Shandurai, this lack of a demand for mutuality, is found in the very structure of the concept of love as humble beneficence. Further, the overlap between humble beneficence and a liberal conception of the self is a significant source of the deficiency. To explore this claim, we can look at John Rawls' liberal conception of love as elaborated in

*A Theory of Justice*.<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, Rawls adopts an understanding of love that is virtually identical to Fisher's love as humble beneficence. Thus Rawls speaks of love as an affirmation of the other's autonomously chosen interests. He writes: "Now love clearly has among its main elements the desire to advance the other person's good as this person's rational self-love would require."<sup>20</sup>

Thus Rawls, like Fisher and Kinsky, sees love as a process whereby a lover endorses and acts so as to maximize conceptions of the good that are already existing or predetermined by the autonomous choice of the beloved. He says: "[L]ove and benevolence are second order notions. They seek to further the good of beloved individuals that is already given."<sup>21</sup>

The substance of what one affirms and desires in loving is fixed and prior to the lover's endorsement of it. Interestingly, Rawls derives the impulse to create justice from this conception of love when applied to humanity as a whole. Indeed, for Rawls, love of humanity leads directly to the problems of justice since loving one's fellow humans entails desiring the advancement of each individual person's good as they see it. Of course, these various goods will conflict. Thus love of humanity is ever frustrated by inevitable clashes of interests of beloved individuals and, therefore, always leads the lover of humanity to seek principles of justice that minimize such conflict. Rawls famously posits his two principles of justice<sup>22</sup> as providing maximum freedom for individuals to pursue chosen conceptions of the good within conditions of basic political equality. However, in his discussion of love, he maintains that the principles of justice arise as solutions to the problem of co-existence whether one assumes that individuals are mutually disinterested and self-interested or mutually loving and benevolent. Rawls writes: "[A] love of mankind that wishes to preserve the distinction of persons, to recognize the separateness of life and experience, will use the two principles of justice to determine its aims when the many goods it cherishes are in opposition."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1972).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* at 190. Here Rawls does not expressly constitute the individual as the ultimate authority on the substance of self-love; rationality is presumed and interposed between the individual and the substance of her self love. Yet it would appear that rationality would act as a guide for the lover in ascertaining what to do in order to love rather than as a principle that would override a beloved's stated conception of her interests as she understands them.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* at 191.

<sup>22</sup> Rawls' two principles of justice are stated as follows: "First: each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others. Second: social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all." *Ibid.* at 60.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* at 191.

Because it consists in endorsing the self-interested choices of others, love itself leads to a kind of vicarious ethic of self-interest which again leads straight back to justice. As it is distributed across ever greater numbers of people, love gives rise ever more urgently to problems of justice.

This notion of love as an endorsement of the beloved's autonomously chosen interests is attractive for precisely the same reasons that liberalism as a political theory is attractive. Love as humble beneficence incorporates liberal justice-based concerns so as to eliminate tyrannical and exploitive relations as legitimate instances of love. Nevertheless, humble beneficence, as Rawls and Fisher conceive it, replicates and exacerbates many of the problems associated with liberalism as a theory of justice. In love as humble beneficence, one loves the beloved *qua* chooser of a conception of the good—affirmation of the substance of autonomous choice is constituted as the activity of love. Thus love as humble beneficence fails to offer a richer conception of the self than does liberalism as a theory of justice. Love as humble beneficence holds the beloved in a focus on the objects of her autonomous choice. It does not ever require that the lovers face and encounter one another.

We can find a far more vital conception of love, which may also sustain a more vibrant connection between love and justice, in the notion of right relation elaborated by Martin Buber. He begins his famous book *I and Thou* with these words:

The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude.

The attitude of man is twofold in accordance with the two basic words he can speak.

The basic words are not single words but word pairs.

One basic word is the word pair I-You.

The other basic word is the word pair I-It; but this basic word is not changed when He or She takes the place of It.

Thus the I of man is also twofold.

For the I of the basic word I-You is different from that in the I-It.<sup>24</sup>

Speaking later of this conception of the I-You relation in love, Buber discusses marriage. He says:

Marriage can never be renewed except by that which is always the source of all true marriage: that two human beings reveal the You

<sup>24</sup> Trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970) at 53.



to one another....This is the metaphysical and metapsychical fact of love which is merely accompanied by feelings of love. Whoever wishes to renew marriage on another basis is not essentially different from those who want to abolish it: both declare that they no longer know the fact.<sup>25</sup>

Buber's understanding of right relation, discussed here in the context of marriage, has, at its core, an understanding of reciprocity and mutuality that evokes a sense of wholehearted engagement with the other. In the I-You relation—the essence of mutuality—one neither experiences nor consumes the other but rather one is present to the other without reservation. Right relation as a conception of love prohibits a withholding of the fullness of the self. It demands that we address the other with our entire being. It likewise prohibits a stance in relation to the other that views her as less than the richest possible awareness of one's own subjectivity. Right relation requires lovers to fully face one another and to risk the considerable perils of authentic and reciprocal receiving and revealing. While *Besieged* seems to offer a compelling form of love, it offers no glimpse of a conception of love that demands such unreserved encounter.

If love, as Fisher and Rawls conceive it, only affirms that which is already given by rational self-love, it fails to require the lovers to face one another. Love does not take either the lover or the beloved beyond and through the I-It and into the I-You relation. A liberal version of love as humble beneficence, such as the one Fisher and Rawls offer, requires the lover to become constituted by the beloved's I-It agenda. The lover potentially relinquishes control over the substance of his conception of the good, allowing it to be given by the beloved, yet the lover is stabilized and protected from the demands of engagement by the I-It consciousness of the beloved. He "incorporates by reference" the I-It agenda of the beloved and does not assume the risks of relationality, the in-betweenness of I-You consciousness.

## VI. CONCLUSION

To return then to Socrates' concern, we must be wary of the temptation to give too many accolades to love. Compelling love stories offer us contingent instances of love. They also often valorize particular conceptions of love and draw love so as to make it consistent with and complimentary to our understandings of other values. Thus love stories can falsely seduce us into

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* at 95.

acceptance of a particular understanding of love as having within it an inherent and necessary connection to justice. In this, love stories can fuel the mistaken conclusion that all that is loving is just. Yet such stories also give us contexts in which to question perceived points of overlap between love and justice. They give us the cultural tools with which to explore possible points of significant contact between love and other values.