

## Our Search for the “Good Life”: Connecting Welfare to C. S. Lewis’s *The Four Loves*

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While C. S. Lewis sometimes talked about finding “meaning” in life, discussions that focus on this term seem to me to be largely modern discussions. I do not think you will find historically many philosophers writing about the conditions for a “meaningful life”. But philosophers *have* talked a great deal about a “good life”, and they’ve offered theories as to what makes a person’s life go well for that person. Aristotle stressed that the human exercise of our unique capacity for rationality—which we use to navigate between behavioural extremes—holds the key to achieving a good life. John Stuart Mill conceived of a good life as one which has maximized pleasure over pain. A popular view among philosophers today is that your life goes well for you when your desires are satisfied.

The Christian tradition’s understanding of a good life involves us being in loving relationships with God and with others. Because we are created in the image of a Trinitarian God, our lives go well for us inasmuch as our relationships mirror the self-giving relationships among the members of the Trinity. This account of well-being is what moral philosophers call “perfectionist” in nature. Perfectionist theories of well-being present a specified ideal for all humans; and the extent to which a person’s life is a good one is the extent to which the person’s life exemplifies this specified ideal. So, on a Christian perfectionist theory of the good life, all people’s well-being ultimately rises and falls with the state of their relationships with others.

I shall not give arguments for the plausibility of this Christian account of well-being (although I think such arguments do exist). Instead, I shall simply take it as a starting point. I want to focus on *what we can do to enter into* the kinds of relationships which mirror the relationships within the Trinity, so that our lives ultimately go well for us.

Christians have always understood the kind of love exhibited by the persons of the Trinity to be a self-giving love: a love which seeks to honour and glorify the other. As we look to mirror these relationships, we see that Jesus indicated that “no greater love has a man than this: that he lay down his life for a friend.”<sup>1</sup> And St. Paul, in writing about love, reminds us that love is not “self-seeking”.<sup>2</sup> So, one way to spell out the nature of ideal relationships—i.e., the ones enjoyed by the members of the Trinity and, as creatures in God’s image, the ones in which we flourish—is to stress how each person focuses on the *other* person’s well-being. (And if our response to God is not best understood in terms of furthering God’s *well-being*, then we might talk in terms of serving God, glorifying God, honouring God, and joining God in God’s ongoing work in the world.) On the question of how we *enter* into these God-like relationships, the natural answer would seem to be that we simply focus on the welfare of others. It is as simple as that. Or so I want to argue.

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<sup>1</sup> John 15:13.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:5.

A good many philosophers and other writers have argued that things are *not* in fact quite as simple as that.<sup>3</sup> In C. S. Lewis's work *The Four Loves* we find what seem to be three reasons for thinking that healthy, loving relationships are not simply a matter of each person focusing on the well-being of the other person. These three reasons stem from Lewis's comments on (1) Appreciative love, (2) Eros, and (3) Friendship. In what follows I want to argue that Lewis's possible objections to our simple thesis do *not* in the end prevail. And instead, it is Lewis's remarks on these natural loves that need to be revised a bit. Specifically, I shall argue that Lewis understates the role of personal *welfare* in his various discussions of the natural loves. I shall then suggest that, once we establish the proper link between welfare and the natural loves, Lewis's key point about the supreme, Christian love of *Charity* is actually strengthened.

### **Appreciative love: Do we focus on intrinsic qualities instead of welfare?**

The first challenge from Lewis's writings comes from his description of Appreciative love, which plays a role in the three natural loves of Affection, Friendship, and (especially) Eros. The simple thesis which I want to defend understands God-like love to be a matter of pursuing the other person's well-being. But Appreciative love, as Lewis describes it, is a love that does not focus on the *welfare* of either ourselves or the other person. Rather, we love another person with an Appreciative love when we appreciate the intrinsic qualities of the person—above and beyond any personal feelings or pleasures we (or they) derive from our interactions. Appreciative love, by its nature, applies equally to impersonal objects as to other people. Lewis says that when we appreciate other objects or people, "They make us feel that something has not merely gratified our senses in fact but claimed our appreciation by right."<sup>4</sup>

Lewis here is challenging the thesis of *Welfarism*. Welfarism insists that there is a conceptual connection between "the good" and someone's welfare. Something can only be good if it is good *for* some person (or for some other sentient creature or divine being). I myself think the thesis of Welfarism has a great deal of intuitive appeal. If you were to recount approvingly to me how it was "good" that some event occurred, but you could not identify anyone who benefited from the event, I am not sure why I should share your sense of approval that led you to call the event "good". Conversely, if you lamented the occurrence of a "bad" event, but you could not identify a single person whose flourishing was in any way diminished, I am not sure why I should think of the event as a "bad" thing.

But Lewis (and a good number of other philosophers) have argued that this Welfarist intuition does not do justice to the attitudes we have toward fine art, fine music, and other things which supposedly have intrinsic value. Here is an example Lewis gives:

The connoisseur does not merely enjoy his claret as he might enjoy warming his feet when they were cold. He feels that here is a wine that deserves his full attention; that justifies all the tradition and skill that have gone to its making and all the years of training that have

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<sup>3</sup> It is true that there are innumerable details that would need to be fleshed out in terms of the relationship between others' welfare and our own. But I do agree with the simple thesis as a general thesis; and for the purposes of this paper, I'm going to defend it in its simple form.

<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Fontana Books, 1963), 18.

made his own palate fit to judge it. There is even a glimmering of unselfishness in his attitude...Even if he were on his death-bed and was never going to drink wine again, he would be horrified at the thought of this vintage being spilled or spoiled or even drunk by clods (like myself) who can't tell a good claret from a bad.<sup>5</sup>

And again in talking about feelings of Appreciative love,

It is the feeling which would make a man unwilling to deface a great picture even if he were the last man left alive and himself about to die; which makes us glad of unspoiled forests that we shall never see...We do not merely like the things; we pronounce them, in a momentarily God-like sense, "very good".<sup>6</sup>

Lewis is certainly correct that we appreciate the qualities in a fine wine or a fine piece of art. But the key question is whether these qualities have *intrinsic value* which we merely recognize as "very good". I want to argue that these qualities are not intrinsically good, but rather are good inasmuch as they are good *for* us (or for others).

Consider Lewis's example of the claret. Presumably, the connoisseur enjoys it because he is able to detect subtle flavours and aromas, and these sensations evoke mental images of lavender fields and hot summer breezes and whatever else connoisseurs think about when they are swishing wine around in their mouths. But it seems to me an entirely contingent matter that humans should be roused by such things. Many Americans were introduced as children to *Tang*, a powder which, when mixed with water, yields a very sweet, artificially orange-flavoured drink. Those who are familiar both with *Tang* and with expensive clarets will no doubt tend to prefer the latter. But what if the human senses of taste and smell were such that we could detect the subtle ingredient changes that take place among factories that manufacture *Tang*? What if we could detect whether factories mixed ingredients in copper pots or aluminium pots? Gatherings of connoisseurs in high-end society might debate the merits of particular packages of *Tang*. Although this scenario might initially seem silly, the fact is that it is an entirely contingent matter that humans should be roused more by the aromas of lavender fields and wind-swept valleys than by the aromas of copper pots and indoor factories. So, I do not think there is any value *intrinsic* to a glass of claret which we simply recognize as good—over and above the way it is good *for* us in certain respects.

Perhaps the critic might still insist that some pieces of artwork and music simply contain more complexity than others. Mahler's second symphony, for instance, contains innumerable more chord progressions and melody motifs than does Elvis Presley's *Blue Suede Shoes*. However, it again seems an entirely contingent matter that we should judge as especially creative the surprising chord progressions and melodic turns of Mahler's second symphony. It is possible to imagine creatures for whom creativity is always measured by the simplicity of artwork—just as sometimes simple elegance is for us a sign of creativity. For this society of creatures, perhaps most everyone is capable of writing long, complex symphonies—whereas only a few souls (those seen as true creative geniuses) are able to condense the complex melodies running through their heads into clear, simple tunes like *Blue Suede Shoes*. And at

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, 20.

any rate, there is still the question of why creativity should be seen as a good thing in the first place. Creative pieces of art and music inspire us, challenge us, remind us of our commitments, and so forth. Yet, beyond these kinds of effects which art and music have *on us*, we again come to the Welfarist intuition that there seems to be nothing left to commend them.

We should quickly add that, when connoisseurs cultivate their appreciation for wine or artwork, they will be focusing their attention on the qualities of the wine or artwork itself. They will not be thinking consciously about the enjoyment they are personally receiving from their pursuits. But this fact does not undermine the conclusion that their own enjoyment is indeed giving rise to the favourable attitude they have toward the objects in question. It is a well-known phenomenon that people can often best enhance their own well-being by focusing their attention on things *other* than their own well-being. While playing a game of basketball, I will enjoy myself if I concentrate on the game and say to myself, “Make the basket; make the basket.” By contrast, if I keep saying to myself, “Enjoy the moment more; enjoy the moment more!”, my experiences will not be as enjoyable.

C. S. Lewis recognized a similar point in talking about how we enjoy gardens.

Say your prayers in a garden early, ignoring steadfastly the dew, the birds and the flowers, and you will come away overwhelmed by its freshness and joy; go there in order to be overwhelmed and, after a certain age, nine times out of ten nothing will happen to you.<sup>7</sup>

What is important for our purposes is the point that we can most enjoy a walk in the garden or a game of basketball when we’re not consciously focused on the enjoyment we are drawing from it. At the same time, the *reason* some people take walks in gardens and play basketball—while others prefer different pursuits—is that they *enjoy* these things. So in the end, it again seems that what is good about garden walks or other pursuits is the *effects* these things have on us, even if these pursuits affect us most when we focus on the pursuits themselves.

Appreciative love can involve the recognition that something has qualities which are *instrumentally* good in that they lead to someone’s enhanced welfare. But I think we should side with the Welfarist who insists that intrinsic goodness is confined to the well-being of people (and other creatures and divine beings) who are capable of having a welfare. Accordingly, we remain free to spell out the nature of moral decisions in terms of *whose* welfare we seek to promote. This was our original, simple thesis. Given that Lewis does not demonstrate that intrinsic value exists apart from people’s welfare, his remarks on Appreciative love do not serve to undermine our simple thesis.

### **Eros:**

#### **Do we desire the beloved him/herself, apart from anyone’s welfare?**

Lewis’s discussion of Eros provides a second possible challenge to our simple thesis that ideal, loving relationships involve each person pursuing the others’ well-being as his or her ultimate goal. Eros, as Lewis describes it, does not have as its simple goal

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<sup>7</sup> Lewis, 25.

the well-being of the beloved; that goal would be more in line with Charity, which we will discuss later. And Eros does not have as its goal one's own well-being. Lewis declares, "In some mysterious but quite indisputable fashion the lover desires the Beloved herself, not the pleasure she can give."<sup>8</sup>

I do, however, want to dispute this idea of 'desiring the Beloved', as I am not sure how to make sense of it. Admittedly, Lewis's description of Appreciative love relies on the idea of desiring an object for its own sake. And Lewis does see Appreciative love as an important element within Eros. But Eros extends beyond Appreciative love. Whereas appreciative love identifies intrinsic worth in the object, Lewis describes Eros as, again, "desiring the Beloved". And presumably this desire is not necessarily proportionate to the intrinsic value of the qualities we identify in the Beloved.

In arguing that "Eros does not aim at happiness,"<sup>9</sup> Lewis offers the following observation.

Everyone knows that it is useless to try to separate lovers by proving to them that their marriage will be an unhappy one....For it is the very mark of Eros that when he is in us we had rather share unhappiness with the Beloved than be happy on any other terms. Even if the two lovers are mature and experienced people who know that broken hearts heal in the end and can clearly foresee that, if they once steeled themselves to go through the present agony of parting, they would almost certainly be happier ten years hence than marriage is at all likely to make them—even then, they would not part....Even when it becomes clear beyond all evasion that marriage with the Beloved cannot possibly lead to happiness—when it cannot even profess to offer any other life than that of tending an incurable invalid, of hopeless poverty, of exile, or of disgrace—Eros never hesitates to say, "Better this than parting. Better to be miserable with her than happy without her."<sup>10</sup>

There are a couple ways we might plausibly interpret the behaviour Lewis describes, though these ways do not serve to undermine our simple thesis about focusing on people's welfare. First, when Lewis talks about a life of "tending an incurable invalid", we can imagine a case of altruistic love where a person sacrifices his or her own well-being in order to promote the well-being of the Beloved. But this case would be a kind of Charity; and Lewis means to distinguish Eros from Charity. So, this interpretation of altruism will not help Lewis make his point about "desiring the Beloved".

A second plausible interpretation of Lewis's examples also will not help him make his point. When Lewis talks about lovers refusing to part company, even with both of them knowing that in the long run they will each be better off if they *do* part, he points to an interesting fact about human nature. But this fact seems to be a more general point about *prudence*, rather than anything particular to love relationships where we somehow "desire the Beloved." It is a generally accepted fact that we humans are quite capable of sacrificing our perceived long-term best interests for the sake of lesser, immediate enjoyments. For example, flipping through the television channels late one evening, you may find a B-movie playing which you've previously seen. Knowing that you must get up early for work the next morning, you recognize

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<sup>8</sup> Lewis, 88.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, 98.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, 98-99.

that, all things considered, you will be better off by going to bed immediately and getting a good night of sleep. And yet, you may well stay up to watch the movie, lamenting this fact both when you finally do go to bed and, especially, when your alarm clock goes off the next morning. Imprudence is a matter of preferring lesser, immediate well-being to greater, long-term well-being. And if imprudence explains why two lovers stay together while knowing that their long-term better interests lie elsewhere, then the struggle is not, as Lewis suggests, between welfare and some desire “for the Beloved”. Rather, the struggle is between short-term well-being and greater, long-term well-being.

Once we set aside the interpretation of an altruistic desire for the Beloved’s welfare, as well as the imprudent desire for one’s own lesser, immediate welfare, it becomes difficult to make sense of the idea of “desiring the Beloved” (beyond the idea of Appreciative love, which we critiqued in the previous section). So, Lewis’s remarks on the nature of Eros do not, as far as I can see, give us reason to revise our simple thesis that an ideal, loving relationship exists as each person focuses on the *welfare* of the other.

### **Friendship: Can it exist without considerations of welfare?**

A third challenge to our simple thesis comes from Lewis’s comments on the nature of friendship. Specifically, Lewis describes how friendships arise: “Friendship...is born at the moment when one man says to another, ‘What! You too? I thought that no one but myself...’”<sup>11</sup> The suggestion seems to be that we can at least begin to have friendships before even contemplating such things as whether we will promote the other person’s welfare instead of our own. And inasmuch as friendships increase our well-being, then the implication seems to be that we can in some respects find a “good life” without having to concern ourselves with questions of promoting people’s interests above our own.

Lewis is certainly correct in pointing out that the discovery of shared interests can have a positive impact on us. Indeed, there can be powerful healing qualities that come with meeting a stranger who at least understands—even if he or she does not fully share—our concerns and point of view. But I would suggest that the reason such experiences have a positive impact on us is that they lead us to anticipate the kind of ideal, loving relationship in which our well-being truly consists. The discovery itself that someone understands us is not sufficient to make our lives go better for us. If you were to discover that a stalker had been collecting data on the intimate details of your life, you would feel unnerved, not comforted. And the recognition that others share your interests, if accompanied by the knowledge that they mean to exclude you from gatherings where they pursue these interests, will be more bitter than sweet. Any encouragement we experience upon finding that others share our interests and pursuits is linked with our thought that they are treating us in loving, collegial ways that serve to end, not extend, our feelings of isolation. And our excitement upon finding a new friend involves our contemplation of future cooperative projects. Even within established and ongoing friendships, relationships remain positive only if further

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis, 74.

discoveries about the other person do not uncover areas where that person is prepared to sacrifice our well-being to his or her own.

So, the positive feelings we associate with a friendship stem from our belief that we are—or will be—in a relationship marked by mutual concern for the other person. Lewis’s comments on Friendship help us see a certain context in which we can enjoy self-giving relationships. But his comments do not undermine our original, simple thesis that ideal relationships are indeed marked by self-giving commitments.

### **Charity: Strengthening the role of this supreme love**

Thus far I have argued that Appreciative love does not actually exist, at least as Lewis seems to view it. I have argued that Eros must make reference to people’s well-being if it is to make sense, and that Friendship impacts us positively inasmuch as it presupposes that the other person has some commitment to our well-being. I want now to argue that these suggested, Welfarist revisions to Lewis’s thoughts on the natural loves can serve to strengthen the central point he wants to make about the nature of Charity, the supremely Christian love.

In describing the nature of Charity, Lewis states that “In God there is...only plenteousness that desires to give”<sup>12</sup> and that “Divine Gift-love...is wholly disinterested and desires what is simply best for the beloved.”<sup>13</sup> Thus far, Lewis’s description of Charity seems right in line with what our original, simple thesis affirmed: God relates to others while focused on their well-being; and as creatures in the image of God, we will achieve the good life God intends for us as we do the same. It is Lewis’s discussion of the relationship between Charity and the natural loves which proves more difficult.

Lewis acknowledges how the three natural loves of Affection (which we’ve not discussed), Friendship, and Eros will ultimately fail us unless they are transformed by Charity. He provides terrific insights into how this can happen. The beauty of the outdoors can “die on” the lover of nature; and family Affection, Friendship, and Eros can all become twisted and self-destructive. These things happen, says Lewis, when they “become gods” to us—that is, when we treat them like the highest ideals of love.

To prevent these loves from being deified such that they actually become “demons” for us, Lewis emphasizes that they must be *transformed* by Charity.

The invitation to turn our natural loves into Charity is never lacking. It is provided by those frictions and frustrations that meet us in all of them; unmistakable evidence that (natural) love is not going to be “enough”.<sup>14</sup>

Lewis’s phrase of “turning our natural loves into Charity” may lead us to think that Charity somehow *replaces* the natural loves of Affection, Friendship, and Eros. But Lewis is clear that this is *not* how we should conceive of transformation.

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis, 116.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, 117.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, 123.

the Divine Love does not *substitute* itself for the natural—as if we had to throw away our silver to make room for the gold. The natural loves are summoned to become modes of Charity while also remaining the natural loves they were....As Christ is perfect God and perfect Man, the natural loves are called to become perfect Charity and also perfect natural loves.<sup>15</sup>

At this point Lewis's position becomes a bit unclear. It is not at all obvious how the natural loves—Affection, Friendship and Eros—can both remain *and* become the love of Charity. Either one's ultimate concern in relating to someone else is the well-being of that other person—which is the hallmark of Christ-like Charity—or it is not. If it is, then it is unclear how Lewis means for us to think of the natural loves as *remaining*. After all, Lewis describes the natural loves as involving desires and appreciations which are not tied to anyone's well-being.

But I have argued that the natural loves *are* in fact tied to well-being. Whether it is Appreciative love, Eros, or Friendship, I have argued that the attractions and value placements inherent in the natural loves are ultimately rooted in the thought that someone's welfare is enhanced. My suggestion now is that we should view the natural loves as leading strings of Divine grace which provide us with *motivations* to pursue other people's well-being.<sup>16</sup> Whereas the natural loves serve as types of *motivation*, Charity is not so much a kind of motivation as a Christ-like *goal*: namely, the goal that other people's lives go well for them.

Our original, simple thesis was that ideal, Christ-like relationships are established when each person seeks to promote the other person's welfare. This is the goal of Charity. A goal, of course, can be pursued for different reasons. The natural loves provide differently nuanced motivations to pursue this single, Christ-like goal of Charity. This understanding of the relationship between Charity and the natural loves would allow Lewis quite easily to explain how Charity reigns supreme in the life of the maturing Christian, even though the natural loves are not so much *replaced* by Charity as they are *transformed* by Charity. They are transformed in the sense that they serve as motivation in the life of the Christian to perform acts of service for the sake of others, instead of serving as motivations to pursue selfish ends by the person who places his or her own well-being above others. The motivations associated with the natural loves are given to all of us by God. How we use them depends on whose interests we choose to focus on. Of course the great paradox of the Christian faith is that, when we “lose our life” in self-giving focus on God and others, we find that our own well-being has indeed increased. (We discussed earlier how we can often increase our well-being by focusing on things *other* than our well-being.)

In summary, my suggestion in our earlier discussions of the natural loves was that Lewis understates how the feelings we associate with Appreciative love, Eros, and Friendship involve considerations of someone's welfare. And with a more Welfarist understanding of the natural loves, we can see them as divine leading strings, as motivations, which prompt us to join God in the charitable pursuit of others' well-being, thereby attaining the “good life” God has designed for us.

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<sup>15</sup> Lewis, 122.

<sup>16</sup> Just as moral reasoning can provide an impetus for personalities like Immanuel Kant to promote other people's well-being.