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# LOVE AND THE MORALLY AMBIGUOUS



WHEN LOVE invites Marvell to taste his meat, he takes some convincing before he accepts that, despite being guilty of dust and sin, he is still worthy of the highest love. There is a tendency to think that an entity that has a morally ambiguous history is unworthy of love. However, it is a fact of life that those whom we love most are often of a morally ambiguous nature and we must find a way to love them whilst still being able to acknowledge their moral ambiguities.

When it comes to nations, the magnitude of moral ambiguities is amplified dramatically. Does the patriot cease loving his country when he discovers its chequered history? Should he suspend his love of country until he has passed moral judgment on it?

Early this year, the University of London's Institute of Education released the findings of a study advocating that patriotism—the love of one's nation—should be taught as a controversial issue in history classes. The study asks, "Are countries really appropriate objects of love?" Michael Hand, a co-author of the report, argues that it is not desirable to inculcate love of country because countries are morally ambiguous entities: "Loving things can be bad for us, for example when the things we love are morally corrupt. Since all national histories are at best morally ambiguous, it's an open question whether citizens should love their countries."

Dr Hand believes that young people should not be encouraged to love morally ambiguous objects, or at least that they should suspend their love of such objects until they have resolved their moral status. But this is clearly the wrong logic. For most of us, the central objects of our love are other people. Yet few people can be described as wholly morally unambiguous. If the love of country is a model for the kind of loving interpersonal relationships that we might hope our young people will develop in later life, they should learn how to love morally ambiguous objects in spite of their

moral ambiguity.

I am not saying that every nation is worthy of love or even that the British nation is particularly worthy of love. There may be a lot of good reasons not to love a particular nation. And I am not saying that the way to cultivate love is through a certain understanding of national history. I just want to say that an object's having a morally ambiguous status is not a particularly good reason not to love it. Only the most mundane objects will be lovable on such an account.

There comes a time when most young people discover that their parents are not paragons of virtue. In an age of high divorce rates, this time is likely to come earlier rather than later. Do we cease to love our parents when we discover their moral flaws? Is it an open question whether we should still love them? Ought we to suspend our love of them whilst we resolve our judgment of their moral ambiguities, and only afterwards decide whether to resume our loving relationship? No. What is required is the ability to continue loving them whilst we struggle with the moral ambiguities we have discovered, and ultimately to find a way to love them notwithstanding any moral judgment.

Most children have a healthy experience of the unconditional love of their parents. At some point during their childhood, they have committed some transgression which their parents have expressed disapproval of without withdrawing their parental love. In this case, young people have first-hand experience of the fact that love is not contingent upon maintaining a particular moral status. It is this that they must take into their later lives, both in terms of their relationships with other people and with entities such as nations.

Despite Hollywood's forceful claims to the contrary, we should not encourage young people to seek perfection in their personal relationships. Moral perfection is rarely a characteristic of those we encounter in life. Ultimately, our happiness depends upon our ability to

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forge loving relationships with people who are to one degree or another morally ambiguous. And we require the resources to sustain such love at times when the flaws become exposed. It is only in the context of the loving relationship that we can resolve how to deal with the moral ambiguities of those we love.

To some extent we are all alone on an emotionally windswept moor and, like Cathy, we can become transfixed by such dubious characters as Heathcliff. Great literature provides a means by which we can explore experiences of love and the implications of loving morally ambiguous people. This is but one reason why the study of literature is an important part of a proper education. The study of history, it seems, might also be able to help people in their emotional development. If, like personal histories, national histories are at best morally ambiguous, a young person's relationship to his or her nation might serve as the basis for learning about the relationship between love and moral judgment.

IT IS ENTIRELY CORRECT that students should be exposed to both the moments of light and the descents into darkness in their nation's history. They should also be encouraged to appreciate that what might appear to be a great achievement can also be interpreted as cruel, wrong or exploitative. But what is most important is that they also see that sentiments of

love can persist whilst resolving how to interpret such moral ambiguities. The patriot can love his country for being the first to abolish the slave trade whilst still being mindful of the immorality of the nation's tremendous economic benefit from that trade.

Through understanding that love of country is not inconsistent with moral judgment of it, students learn that in all spheres of their life it is possible to love morally ambiguous people and entities, and that they can resolve their judgment of such entities without suspending their love of them.

There are a number of different reasons why we might study history. For some historians, it is a matter of understanding our forebears' mindset. This might be taught in a way that does not involve patriotism. There might also be reasons why patriotism is not desirable, or at least why certain strains of nationalism are not. Preventing the love of moral ambiguities, however, is not a reason for avoiding patriotism in history classes or any other context. On the contrary, it offers a useful opportunity to learn how to love morally ambiguous entities whilst still being able to evaluate their moral status; a lesson that will stand students in good stead for life.

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### CZECH REPUBLIC (2)

As I travelled the countryside  
Following communism's fall,  
I was struck by the damage half  
A century of neglect had done

To statues of Christ crucified.  
Thick lichen, missing faces, limbs,  
Could make them difficult to pick,  
And even though, against the odds,

He often clung for dear life to  
A broken bit of Cross, His man-  
Forged tree, it was sun's splintering light  
Transfiguring the clusters of

Red rowan berries spread like flesh  
Throughout the branches which meant He'd  
Always, regardless of art's fate,  
Survive the horrors of the times.

*Graeme Hetherington*