

AGAPE, SPECIAL RELATIONS, AND THE GLOBAL CARE CRISIS:
CHALLENGING A “TWO-TRACK” UNDERSTANDING OF THE OBLIGATIONS
OF CHRISTIAN LOVE

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Introduction: The Crisis in Dependent Care

Feminist sociologists and feminist political theorists have begun to speak of a “crisis of care.” They point to the very large numbers of children, frail elderly, permanently or temporarily disabled, and sick persons, both in our country and globally, who require intensive care from others. Often enough, they are not getting care, are getting inferior care, or are getting care from caregivers who are themselves exploited through poverty-level wages, poor working conditions, and social invisibility.

Of course, the need for care has always been with us; human beings always have and always will enter the world in complete vulnerability. Many of us will live long enough to require assistance with daily living, and many of us are born with conditions that require more or less intensive care throughout our lives. But these care needs have increased, proportionate to the availability of caregivers. In prosperous countries, the increased need for care results from longer life-spans, and thus longer periods at the end of life which require assistance from others in daily living. At the same time, a shortage of care results from the influx of a particular category of women—mostly white middle- and upper-class women—into the workforce, and their concomitant need for assistance in

caring for their own children. (Poor women and women of color have always balanced work with the demands of raising children, out of necessity.) In poorer countries, a care deficit too often results from the phenomenon of the “feminization of immigration,” a trend in which young women immigrate to serve as nannies and maids in wealthier countries. They thereby help resolve richer nations’ care deficits, while leaving their own children behind for years at a time in the care of grandmothers, aunts, or neighbors.¹

At earlier points in history, some have argued, our human needs for care were a more visible and accepted part of life, and thus greater importance was placed on seeing these needs met and honoring the caregivers who met them. In her compelling study of the economic and policy roots of the “work and family” dilemma, theological ethicist Gloria Albrecht demonstrates the ways in which dependent care has systematically been undervalued and rendered invisible. With the advent of industrialization, “the necessary work of social reproduction (access to basic needs, the care of dependent persons, nurturance, and socialization),” lost status.² This occurred partly because men were doing less and less of this work as their labor moved out of the home, and partly because the work of social reproduction was not paid work. Today, though more and more of our basic needs are provided through the market—frozen foods, cheap imported clothing, electric appliances for cleaning—the market itself employs more and more low-wage service workers to produce these goods, workers who often also have dependent care responsibilities. Those doing this work are no longer seen or valued:

¹For a number of compelling (and heartbreaking) narrative accounts of this phenomenon, see Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, eds., *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002).

² Gloria Albrecht, *Hitting Home: Feminist Ethics, Women’s Work, and the Betrayal of “Family Values”* (New York and London: Continuum, 2002), 139.

These are the invisible workers crucial to making middle- and upper-income standards of living possible. Not seeing these women supports the illusion that meals appear, bathrooms become clean, silicon chips are made, blackboards are washed, waste cans are emptied, and people are cared for without human efforts.³

The invisibility of such work is buttressed by the fact that so many low-wage service workers are women, people of color, or immigrants. This invisibility also enables support for policies such as the 1996 welfare reform bill, which seem blind to the difficulties involved in single-handedly supporting the wage needs and the dependent care needs of a family. In the words of Eva Feder Kittay,

AFDC... was jettisoned in favor of a harsh policy insisting that women caring for children under conditions of dire poverty, with no other support available, are to sweep streets and take care of other people's children, rather than tend their own.⁴

The situation has even inspired some feminist thinkers to demand a "right to care." As Deborah Stone articulates such a right, it incorporates three elements:

*A right to care means, first, that families are permitted and helped to care for their members... A right to care means, second, the right of paid caregivers to give humane, high-quality care without compromising their own well-being... Last, a right to care must mean that people who need care can get it.*⁵

Similarly, Kittay proposes an addition to the list of "primary goods" which ground John Rawls's theory of justice: "The good *both to be cared for in a responsive dependency relation if and when one is unable to care for oneself, and to meet the dependency needs of others without incurring undue sacrifices oneself.*"⁶

In light of this felt need for a "right to care" among political and sociological thinkers who attend deeply to the realities of dependency and dependent care in human

³ Albrecht, 83.

⁴ Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 117-118 (italics in original).

⁵ Deborah Stone, "Why We Need a Care Movement," *The Nation*, 13 March 2000, 13-16 (italics in original).

⁶ Kittay, 103.

life, we must ask why, in Christian theological ethics, relationships of dependent care are so often either invisible or seen as problematic.

Outka's Conception of *Agape* as Equal Regard and the "Problem of Special Relations"

From the perspective of this global "care crisis," I would like to re-examine a recent debate in Christian ethics about the relation between "*agape*" and "special relations." The latter refer to particular, intensive bonds with our kin, friends, colleagues, fellow citizens, or co-religionists. The relation between the inclusivity of neighbor-love as defined by Jesus, and the importance of particular, intensive bonds has been a question in Christian ethics since the beginning of the tradition. However, the contemporary debate is largely sparked by Gene Outka's important 1972 work, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*, in which he describes *agape* as follows:

Agape is a regard for the neighbor which in crucial respects is independent and unalterable. To these features there is a corollary: the regard is for every person *qua* human existent, to be distinguished from those special traits, actions, etc. which distinguish particular personalities from each other.⁷

Outka then explicates this definition further, drawing on Karl Barth: *agape* means "identification with (the loved one's) interests in utter independence of his attractiveness."⁸ Outka summarizes this understanding of *agape* with the term "equal regard." In a later work, Outka uses the term "universal love";⁹ although he has altered

⁷ Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 9.

⁸ Outka, *Agape*, 11-12, quoting Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, tr. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 745.

⁹ Gene Outka, "Universal Love and Impartiality," in Edmund M. Santurri and William Werpehowski, eds., *The Christian Love Commandments: Essays in Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 1-103.

his terminology, Outka has indicated that he intends no major alteration in the *content* he presumes for Christian love.¹⁰

This conception of *agape* has been profoundly influential. Many subsequent writers seem to take Outka's understanding of *agape* as the definitive voice of tradition, perhaps because Outka himself presents his project as a descriptive one. He offers "equal regard" as the common "normative core" of meaning in a wide body of treatments of Christian love published between 1932 (the date of Anders Nygren's seminal *Agape and Eros*) and his own writing.

But it is important to interrogate the assumption that "equal regard" represents the unified voice of tradition regarding the content of *agape*. It is difficult to see how Outka's conception of "equal regard" reflects the normative *core* of a number of theories published during the timeframe he is concerned with—for example, Catholic personalist theories of Christian love as mutuality aimed at communion.¹¹ Such theories would seem to highlight precisely the particular qualities of the persons loved, and to valorize love relationships in which the lover receives something in return for her love. Catholic personalist thinkers would of course affirm a basic and universal regard for human dignity, but this is not the core of their discussions. In general, Outka's "normative core" marginalizes understandings of love emerging from the Thomistic tradition. Furthermore, an overview of theories from 1932 to 1972 is likely to reflect modernist assumptions about the nature of Christian love, and it is likely *not* to reflect many forms of human

¹⁰ Gene Outka, "Comment on 'Love in Contemporary Christian Ethics,'" *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 26/2 (Fall 1998): 438.

¹¹ See, for example, Robert O. Johann, S.J., *The Meaning of Love: An Essay towards a Metaphysics of Intersubjectivity* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1959); Jules Toner, *The Experience of Love* (Washington/Cleveland: Corpus Books, 1968); and Martin D'Arcy, S.J., *The Mind and Heart of Love: Lion and Unicorn: A Study in Eros and Agape* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956).

experience, particularly the experiences of women or persons marginalized by race, class, or nationality.¹²

The conception of *agape* as “equal regard” also gives rise to a host of characteristic problems. Perhaps the most persistent question about this notion of *agape* is one that was raised by Outka himself in his 1972 work: the “problem of special relations.” These become problematic, in his view, because “agape enjoins one to attribute to everyone alike an irreducible worth and dignity, to rule out comparisons at the most basic level, to refuse to defer to the particular social and ethnic groups to which individuals happen to belong.”¹³ Special relations, on the contrary, are *based on* particularity and preference. Outka’s conclusion is that special relations do not express *agape*, although they may be “bounded and protected” by *agape*, so that, for example, we remain faithful to our spouses even when we no longer find them particularly attractive. Outka acknowledges the common-sense understanding that some “special relations” are morally compelling, but argues that they must have a different grounding, separate from *agape*, which he does not consider part of his project to elucidate.

Thus Outka bequeathed to Christian ethics a “two-track” understanding of *agape* and special relations, universal and particular commitments; these compete, and we must balance them. There is always a danger that “special relations” will trump *agape* or universal regard, precisely because “special relations,” as Outka constructs them, reflect personal choice and preference.

¹² Feminist thinkers have been appreciative of Outka’s inclusion of the self in the scope of humanity deserving of “equal regard,” in contrast to thinkers who see self-sacrifice as the core of Christian love. See, for example, Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, “Agape in Feminist Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9:1 (1981): 69-83; and Christine Gudorf, “Parenting, Mutual Love, and Sacrifice,” in Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Christine E. Gudorf, and Mary Pellauer, eds., *Women’s Consciousness, Women’s Conscience: A Reader in Feminist Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 175-192. Still, Outka’s work requires more rigorous critique from a feminist perspective, which I am trying to provide here.

¹³ Outka, *Agape*, 269.

There is a characteristic unease with special relations. For obligations pertaining to them may become the effective center of gravity, so urgent and really ultimate that they swamp universal human dignity as such. The latter retreats to a vague, residual status of “common humanity.”¹⁴

Some thinkers have responded to Outka by arguing for the *centrality* of special relations. Usually this argument has focused on the importance of particular, intensive bonds (primarily the parent-child relation) to the emotional well-being and the moral formation of young persons.¹⁵ Without the devoted attention of loving parents, goes the argument, children are deeply damaged and cannot grow up into mature Christians capable of self-giving and other-regard. This argument frequently overlaps with concerns about the “family crisis” in a modern society pervaded by single parenthood and divorce, as in the work of Stephen Post, Don Browning, and others.¹⁶ Certainly such thinkers refocus our attention on the central importance of particular and familial relationships in human life, although Outka himself would say he has never meant to undermine the importance of such relations. And yet, arguments for the centrality of “special relations” do not generally highlight the fulfillment of basic material human need which occurs primarily in the context of such relations.

¹⁴ Outka, *Agape*, 272.

¹⁵ See, for example, Stephen G. Post, *A Theory of Agape: On the Meaning of Christian Love* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1990), and *Spheres of Love: Toward a New Ethics of the Family* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1994).

¹⁶ See, for example, Don S. Browning, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon, and Robert M. Franklin, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000) (1997). The authors advocate “the committed, intact, equal-regard, public-private family” (2). Although they engage Outka and others on the nature of Christian love, their use of “equal regard” is not equivalent to his. In particular, they do not insist on the feature, central for Outka, that “equal regard” will prescind from attention to the attractiveness or particular qualities of the loved one. Rather, “equal regard” for Browning et al. seems to mean something like a basic equality of respect between husband and wife, and is almost interchangeable with “mutuality.” This is one reason why they can use the term precisely to define an ideal form of a “special relation.” For Outka, equal regard does not preclude mutuality and the other-regard involved in equal regard may even help bring about mutuality; but equal regard in itself is defined by its fidelity even without mutuality.

In the course of this debate, the “two-track” understanding of Christian love has not been seriously challenged. Recently, Stephen Pope offered a summary of the conversation about *agape* and special relations. Pope’s thesis is that the debate has reached something of a convergence. Advocates of “equal regard” recognize that special relations are also important and have their own moral grounding. Advocates of special relations of course believe that any Christian ethic must include something akin to “respect for persons,” or honoring the dignity of every human person no matter their relation to us. Pope concludes: “Agape, in other words, is inclusive—it encompasses both universal respect and particular affections.”¹⁷

The early response to Outka was vitriolic enough that it was, in fact, necessary to show these commonalities among most participants in the conversation. However, the need to show that academics agree on something rather common-sensical is also a clue that the “equal regard” and “special relations” debate is based on misguided premises, premises that do not accord with some basic elements of human experience. We might also note that despite the convergence, most recent ethicists would say that the *Christian moral life* is inclusive, without honoring special relations with the title of *agape*. The assumption of two *separate* obligations that need to be balanced has not been overcome, despite Pope’s thesis.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan: Christian Neighbor-Love as the Fulfillment of Stark Material Need

I believe that the flaw underlying this sharp division between special relations and *agape* lies in the marginalization of *material human need* and its fulfillment—and

¹⁷ Pope, “‘Equal Regard’ or ‘Special Relations’?: The Inclusiveness of Agape,” *Journal of Religion* 77:3 (July 1997): 354.

therefore of dependent care—in discussions of Christian love. The division has not been overcome because Outka, along with both his defenders and his critics, has not fully attended to fulfillment of material need as a core element of *agape*. Outka’s conception of *agape* focuses on what *agape* does *not* regard—the attractiveness of the object of love—rather than what *agape* does regard: stark human need.

But Jesus focuses on both elements in the story of the extravagant and very particular love bestowed by the Good Samaritan.¹⁸ Most commentators on the parable of the Good Samaritan focus on the shocking fact of the *identity* of the man who fell among thieves and of the one who helped him. In the former case, the important point is that we have no way of knowing *who*, exactly, the unfortunate man is; he is naked, which leaves him “without the signs of either nationality or social status—both of which are indicated by clothing, especially in first-century Judea.”¹⁹ In the latter case, the identity of the helper is both known and thoroughly surprising—the one who helps is a Samaritan, belonging to a group viewed with great contempt among Palestinian Jews in Jesus’ time. William Spohn has suggested that the description “Good Samaritan” would have sounded to Palestinian Jewish ears something like “the good terrorist” would sound to us today.²⁰ This aspect of the parable lends itself to interpretations of Christian love that support inclusivity: the extension of love to any human person, even if a complete stranger or a member of a despised group.

But the parable is shocking in a second way, a way that is less often noted. The parable is shocking because of the sheer extravagance of the care bestowed by the Good Samaritan on the unfortunate traveler. Perhaps the shock would be more palpable today if

¹⁸ See Luke 10:25-37.

¹⁹ John R. Donahue, S.J., *The Gospel in Parable* (Fortress Press: 1990), 130.

²⁰ William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 91.

the man who had fallen among thieves was a homeless person on the corner or a single mother forced to navigate the laws and bureaucracy governing our welfare system. Our moral dilemma is usually: Should I give a dollar, or should I not? Or it is: how many months shall we help this woman to feed and house her children before we force her to leave them in sub-standard child care while she works for minimum wage? The intensive care provided by the Good Samaritan goes far beyond the threshold we tend to consider.

We might recall the oft-noted transformation that Jesus makes: when he is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” he responds with the parable and the question, “Who do you think proved neighbor to the man?” Jesus directs attention from the object of love to the subject of love and the *content* of love—in effect, he asks, what does it mean to prove neighbor? The answer is clearly: attending to stark human need. Jesus’ shift of focus might seem to privilege somewhat the second shocking element of the parable. Outka’s treatment of Christian love, however, like many post-Enlightenment studies, focuses primarily on the non-exclusive nature of love exemplified by the identities of both the giver and the receiver in the Good Samaritan parable. Such an interpretive emphasis would seem to reflect certain characteristically modern (and profoundly important) preoccupations, including the problem of our moral obligations to persons outside of our direct circle of concern, or to those whom we will never meet. However, the definition of *agape* as *primarily* “equal regard” renders problematic the second aspect of the parable, the intensity and extravagance of the Good Samaritan’s care. Such care, calling forth gifts of time, energy, and resources in attending to the very particular needs of the individual recipient, is most often exemplified in the arena dubbed “special relations” by contemporary moral theory, because these relations often *demand* such intensive care.

That is, we generally bestow this kind of Good Samaritan care on our children, parents, and friends.

Sally Purvis makes a similar point. She offers a model for *agape* grounded in the experience of a paradigmatic special relation, the mother-child relation. This relation involves certain characteristics that Outka highlights: mother-love is steadfast even in the face of disappointment with the child or changes in the child; mother-love is not dependent on the particular characteristics of the child.²¹ But mother-love also involves feeding, bathing, dressing, and housing the child. Commenting on the intensive and compassionate material care offered by the Good Samaritan, Purvis notes: “Rather than suggesting that special relations are in substantive conflict with the demands of *agape*, this parable suggests that one is the model for the other.”²² But Purvis goes on to write:

Is it not odd to recommend as a model for *agape* a form of love that can be as consuming, physically, emotionally, psychologically, even morally as mother-love? Does not mother-love so eclipse concerns for others that there is in fact a conflict between mothers’ love for their children and considerations of the needs, even rights of others? ... The objections would be fatal were I equating mother-love and *agape*. That is not my position. Rather I am suggesting that mother-love can provide an excellent model for the content of *agape*. I am suggesting that *agape* fully experienced would be similar to mother-love extended to the whole of humanity.²³

This is a rather paradoxical result: mother-love is a *model* for *agape*, but it can never *be agape*. The paradox, I suggest, points to a fundamental problem in Outka’s understanding of *agape*, a problem that Purvis does not identify or overcome in her analysis. The problem is that a definition of *agape* that focuses on the individual agent cannot simultaneously achieve a universal scope. The tension here is sharpened when we

²¹ Sally Purvis, “Mothers, Neighbors, and Strangers: Another Look at *Agape*,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7:1 (Spring 1991): 19-34.

²² *Ibid.*, 31.

²³ *Ibid.*, 32.

recognize that *agape* involves attention to material need, since such attention can be, as Purvis notes, all-consuming. Thus in our concrete moral decisions about how to allocate our time, energy, and material resources for caring, we still do experience a substantive conflict between *agape* so understood and “special relations.”

Certainly, the inclusive aspect of the parable implies that we must be concerned about meeting the material needs of *all* persons. But as I will argue, a conception of *agape* that attends to material need *and* strives for universality cannot focus solely on the individual agent. We must collaborate in order to “love” universally in any sense that goes beyond adjusting our own internal attitudes. Furthermore, we must be attentive to the ways in which our social structures actually *prevent* this kind of care within some families. Love for the stranger or the enemy today may mean supporting her in her ability to provide Christian love—that is, intensive material care—to her own children or her aging parents.

The Marginalization of Material Need in *Agape* as “Equal Regard”

Outka’s marginalization of the reality of deep human need emerges from several features of his argument. First, Outka constructs special relations as based on preference. For example, in *Agape*, he mentions three classes of difference between persons that may serve as a basis for special relations. These include

obvious physical differences such as age, sex, intellectual endowments, and beauty; differences in particular interests, tastes, and values, many of which may not be the appropriate subject for moral praise and blame; meritarian differences, reflecting the possessor’s use of his talents and opportunities.²⁴

²⁴ Outka, *Agape*, 270. In a similar vein, see page 262, where the “particularity” that Outka says *agape* may attend to without violating equal regard is assimilated to “achievements” and “excellences.”

The absence of any reference to kinship as a basis for special relations is striking. Outka seems not to register the fact that many relationships—almost all relationships, in many cultures and historical periods—are not the result of choice; they are biological or cultural givens. In his later work, “Universal Love and Impartiality,” Outka does give brief attention to special relations which are not chosen: his example is our fellow members of the Christian community, whom we do not choose.²⁵ But this example, again, does not highlight basic fulfillment of material need. Relationships of dependent care are far from view here.

In most cultures and most periods of history, “special relations” have primarily served basic survival needs. This is not, of course, to say that people did not form deep affective relationships; but the relationships were not formed based on optimization of the opportunities for affective satisfaction. The relationships were given, part of pre-existing kinship networks, or socially constructed liaisons formed largely for survival purposes, such as those in patronage societies.

An historical perspective on the sociology of friendship may help illuminate the ways in which Outka’s understanding of special relations (and of *agape*) is bound to modernistic assumptions. Sociologist Allan Silver has described the emergence during the Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century of the contemporary ideology of friendship.²⁶ This ideology posited personal relations as chosen based on something good and attractive about the friend (for the Scots, it was virtue), and free from entanglement with the satisfaction of our needs for material goods, physical security, honor, or prestige. David Hume, Frances Hutcheson, and Adam Smith shared a deep distaste for pre-modern

²⁵ Outka, “Universal Love and Impartiality,” 90.

²⁶ Allan Silver, “Friendship in Commercial Society: Eighteenth-Century Social Theory and Modern Sociology,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 95:6 (May 1990): 1474-1504.

forms of personal relationships based on *necessitudo*, or reciprocal responsibility for each other's interests. Such relations were seen in court society, in aristocratic friendships based on honor, and in mercantile guilds. In fact, prior to the advent of commercial society, the world was largely divided into "friends" and "enemies." The stranger was not one of a mass of anonymous persons collaborating through the market, but a potential threat. The social world consisted of those sworn to protect one's interests and those inclined to further their own interests by harming one.

With the advent of commercial society, it was possible to meet one's material needs through the market, and to achieve basic security through the state's policing function. Thus, individuals were freed to choose their friends based on common interests and mutual admiration for virtue, rather than on the need for mutual protection and support. It is friendship thus conceived that Outka both assumes and reacts to when he defines Christian *agape* as distinctive in its *disregard* of the attractiveness of the loved one.

We can appreciate the benefits of this sort of friendship, of course. But we should not lose sight of the extent to which choice in our personal relations, and the ability to spend time nurturing them, is the result of social and historical privilege. Commercial society did not eliminate the work required to meet human need. Industrialization, as well as this new form of preferential friendship, was still dependent on certain forms of labor that were not mediated through the market. Specifically, commercial society was dependent on the labor of social reproduction performed primarily by women: giving birth; meeting children's needs for food, shelter, clothing, holding, emotional nurture, and socialization; maintaining the household. Human relationships will always be profoundly

intertwined with the provision of basic human needs. In the wake of commercial society, these needs have been pushed into the domestic sphere. But we still need to eat, to sleep, to wear clothes, to be cared for when sick; and while some of this need can be mediated through the market, a thorough commodification of caring labor generally involves a cost to the quality of the relationship and, often enough, involves exploitation of the caregiver.

Outka also renders pervasive human need less visible by employing analyses largely based on a dyadic model of self and other. This model grows out of his primary concern with the proper extent of self-love and his sense of the strength of human sin and selfishness, which he then measures in terms of decisions about whether to pursue one's own desires or those of another. But this model is deceptive, because we are always in relation to multiple other persons, and ultimately to all human beings and non-human creation. This reality is perhaps most evident to those who are striving most against their own limits of time and energy in order to love others—dependent caregivers meeting the basic material needs of others. At a mundane level, any mother of more than one child knows the daily reality that two of her children will need something from her at the same time, and she cannot attend to both at once. In our society, many persons, particularly poor single mothers, are stretched to the limit by caregiving demands that exceed this mundane example. Even in contexts that seem exclusively dyadic, the energies we choose to expend or conserve are energies that could be spent in other pursuits, to benefit or harm other persons. And a conception of Christian love that emphasizes provision for material needs also recognizes the extent to which, today, this “love” may be mediated through the market. Love, even when it is profoundly other-regarding, has material

prerequisites, and our system for allocating for material needs is not dyadic: it is more and more global every day.

Outka treats cases of multiple others as exceptions, though he notes that these situations are “precisely where many of the most difficult moral problems arise.”²⁷ However, his primary exploration of such cases engages the debate about just war versus pacifism: the Christian tradition may prohibit self-defense, but does it sanction harm of a guilty person to protect innocent others?²⁸ In other words, for Outka, multiple others come into play in questions of harm prevention, rather than the everyday moral dilemma of how best to expend our *positive* energies in order to address some of the deep and varied human needs we confront.

This focus on abstention from harm emerges in the very example Outka provides to illustrate the moral danger of special relations as he conceives them:

A man sits in his living room and watches the evening news on television. There is the daily report on casualties in the Vietnam War. He listens with indifference or mild satisfaction to euphemisms about the ‘body-count’ of enemy soldiers. The tendency to apathy about the fate of those beyond the range of his special obligations, or outside the groups with which he identifies, needs no historical documentation.²⁹

Outka is surely pointing to an important moral problem—we see examples every day of families so caught up, for example, in advancing their own children’s chances of entry into a prestigious college or business school that they ignore the needs of families who are struggling to feed their own children. But let us consider Outka’s example. The

²⁷ Outka, *Agape*, 22.

²⁸ Outka, “Universal Love and Impartiality,” 18-44. Here Outka is discussing the work of Paul Ramsey, among others; thus it is interesting that he does not follow Ramsey in recognizing that we live “in a world where *there is always more than one neighbor* and indeed a whole cluster of claims and responsibilities to be considered.” Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1950), 42. Ramsey still considers the standard for Christian ethics to be that which would be demanded of us in a purely dyadic self-other situation, which is problematic from the point of view developed in this paper; but he recognizes that such dyadic situations do not exist in the world as it is.

²⁹ Outka, *Agape*, 273.

offense of the man in his living room is one of attitude, not primarily one of action (or inaction). There is not much that the man can do for the dying North Vietnamese soldiers, except perhaps to engage in political action to help end the war, and in this he will remain one among many whose actions may have limited effect. But the man is sitting in his living room by himself, and this fact is not construed as the problem. The man's moral duty, as construed by Outka, is quite literally one of *regard*; the man should *regard* the North Vietnamese soldiers as fellow human beings with inherent dignity. The moral duty incumbent on him is in fact, in Outka's view, to endow the North Vietnamese soldiers with "a vague, residual status of 'common humanity'"—precisely Outka's worry about the effect of special relations. If this man represents the meaning of a failure of *agape*, then we have not really given our self-absorbed, prosperous families a compelling reason to change their consumption patterns. They can meet their moral obligation by thinking kindly of poor families.

“Universal Love,” Public Policy, and Social Cooperation

Many have argued that Outka's understanding of “equal regard” or “universal love” amounts to little more than a version of Kantian respect for persons. In response, Outka has emphasized both the theological grounding of his concern for a universal and equal regard, and the presence of such concerns in the Christian tradition prior to the Enlightenment. In Outka's 1992 article, entitled “Universal Love and Impartiality,” Outka makes a theocentric case that Christians are called to love universally.

Love for God—as the most basic and comprehensive human love of all—includes fidelity to God in loving whom God loves... Many Christians affirm that God's love toward human beings is universal in scope, for all people are created,

sustained, and redeemed by God. Thus, our love should correspond as far as possible to this universal scope.³⁰

There is no question that Outka's concerns are theologically driven. But this grounding of "universal love" is problematic; even the term "universal love" is problematic, though it is certainly a common enough term. For what can it mean to speak of "universal" love, when we cannot see, communicate with, even conceive of every human person? Loving as God loves can never, for us, mean universality in the sense that God can love universally. Christians traditionally believe that God knows each and every human person intimately, as their Creator and the ground of their being. Obviously, human beings cannot love universally in this way.³¹

When we use this language, we end up envisioning Christian love as *primarily* defined by adjusting our inner attitudes toward distant strangers, like Outka's man watching the news in his living room. An approach to agape that is simultaneously *individualist* and *universalist* must be a primarily negative one, in the sense of abstention from harm, for there is not much that we can concretely *do* for others, as individuals, in proportion to the vastness of human need in the world, even if we exhaust ourselves in the effort. But we can do much for *a few* others, and we can lay the groundwork for collaboration and political action to help many others.

³⁰ Outka, "Universal Love and Impartiality," 2-3.

³¹ There is some indication that Outka himself has come to recognize this problem. Recently, he has stated the following in an exchange with Stephen Pope: "I think now that we require an account of love that draws on *both* differences *and* points of correspondence between God's action and our own. For we move between attesting to God's sovereignty and grace and covenant love, and actively corresponding to this, on our own level and with our own capacities. We may genuinely follow God, in the pattern our own attachments, kinds of action, and virtues assume. Yet we follow at a distance, a distance that God's alterity and our creatureliness, including our finitude and the corruption under which we now labor—combine to effect. To do greater justice to both differences and points of correspondence suggests the center of gravity to which I hope to adhere in future discussions." Outka, "Comment on 'Love in Contemporary Christian Ethics,'" 439.

A frequent motif among those who accept the notion that Christian love must be universal, but who also wish to affirm the importance of our families and other particular relations, is to envision the Christian at the center of a series of concentric circles expanding outward. We are to muster all the other-regarding energy we can and direct it first toward our immediate family members and friends, gradually expanding our circles of concern toward the universal community. I must confess that I find this image of the Christian moral life exhausting to contemplate. It seems to imply that we can and should stretch infinitely. It almost seems to mock the caring efforts of the many women and men in our society who are being pushed to the limit of their physical and economic capacities to provide dependent care.

Such a metaphor places the individual Christian in the center of the circle, when we should be envisioning a network of points connected to each other in a web (granted, another unoriginal metaphor) aimed at meeting the basic human needs of all. In contemporary commercial and democratic societies, our webs take many forms. Sometimes they are social and cultural networks of kin and friends who collaborate to care for the material needs of children, the disabled, and the aged. Some of our webs are market-based, as we compensate (unfortunately, usually poorly) home health care workers, child care providers, and nurses. Some of our webs are based on public policy—and these webs have been slashed and mutilated with recent welfare reform policies and budget cuts. If we are truly concerned about *universal* love, about inclusivity in our loving—as Outka is rightly concerned—our conception of *agape* must attend to these structures of relationship. *Agape* is not simply a question of individual ethics; it is a question of Christian social ethics.

Outka is correct to note that conceptions of “universal regard,” of inclusivity, existed in Christian tradition prior to the Enlightenment. Such inclusivity is, of course, central to the message and ministry of Jesus. But one can read Jesus’ practices of radical inclusivity as aimed at breaking down *structures* of relationship that met human needs in oppressive and inadequate ways, and recreating *structures* of relationship that met human needs more fully and more dependably, with greater dignity. Likewise, our focus must not rest solely on individual objects of love, but on the social, political, and economic structures that mediate the fulfillment of basic human needs—like the needs for food, clothing, shelter, and health care which the Good Samaritan fulfilled for the unfortunate man who fell among thieves.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to contribute to an understanding of the nature of *agape* through attention to a neglected aspect of the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus’ own depiction of the nature of Christian neighbor-love, and to a neglected aspect of human experience: the experience of dependent care, of attending to basic material human needs. This experience of dependent care has accrued primarily to women, and it is women and children who have been harmed by its marginalization; accordingly, the understanding of *agape* developed here is a Christian feminist understanding. It corrects recent interpretations of *agape* with an eye to the experience and well-being of women.

Though dependent care has largely been rendered invisible both socially and in Christian ethical theory, it comprises a very significant portion of human moral effort. It simply takes a great deal of energy and resources to meet the survival needs of human beings. We must not marginalize this effort in our social life, by thrusting it on to

vulnerable people under exploitative conditions or by neglecting to care for those who desperately need it; and we must not marginalize it in our moral theory, by describing “special” relations as preference-based distractions from the real business of Christian love.

If loving our neighbor means giving her food, clothing her, providing medical care, giving her a place to sleep—as it certainly did for the Good Samaritan—then we had better attend to the relations of care in which such love occurs. We must analyze the structures by which we arrange for the fulfillment of material need—structures which are very different from those of Jesus’ time, but which can be evaluated by the same criteria: whether they facilitate the dependable and dignified fulfillment of the basic needs of all persons. We must attend to the ways in which we hire strangers to do the work of “special relations,” and treat those strangers as enemies through the exploitative economic and political structures which mediate these arrangements for dependent care. A Christian feminist understanding of *agape* must, in short, include “special relations” as expressions of *agape* and transcend the sharp division and balancing act between “special relations” and “universal regard” in contemporary Christian ethics of love.