

Love as Desire of the Good or Love as Value-response? Plato and von Hildebrand on the Essence of Love

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to compare Plato's and Dietrich von Hildebrand's philosophical account of the essence of love. The author proceeds by gradually working out the similarities and differences between the two accounts of love and by attempting to explain the differences between them, partly by identifying the different metaphysical assumptions of both authors. The main philosophical interest of this paper lies in showing how, in these two philosophical accounts of love, elements of desire of the object of love and elements of responsiveness to its value are contained, although, in each of the accounts, in different way and with different final outcome.*

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— Diotima of Mantinea, who may be assumed to be a literary figure expressing Plato's own theory of love,¹ sums up her account of love in the *Symposium* as "the desire to have the good forever" (*Symp.* 206a12–13). This desire, she adds, finds its expression "in giving birth in beauty in body and mind" (*Symp.* 206b9–10). According to "proto-phenomenological" analysis of the act of desire, which Socrates carries out in his short exchange with Agathon in the passage preceding the speech of Diotima

(*Symp.* 199c–201c), one essential feature of love *qua* desire is that it is necessarily linked to an object (or value) which is not (yet) possessed by the desiring person. If we wish to express the result of this analysis somewhat more formally, we may express it in the following way: A is able to desire X only if X is not (yet) possessed by A. The word "yet" indicates a time factor, since a may, as a matter of fact, desire an object it possesses but not during the time it actually possesses it. Its possession may be desired for some future period, during which its possession is not considered guaranteed (*Symp.* 200c–d).

What results from this brief analysis of the essence of love as desire is that it is essentially impossible for the lover to possess the object of his/her love. From

1 The following argumentation is based on a hermeneutic premise that Diotima of Mantinea is a "mask" of Socrates, the literary figure of the dialogue, who in his turn is a "mask" of the author of the dialogue, i.e., Plato. For the justification of this hermeneutical premise, see Platone 2001, pp. LVIII–LXXII. See also Reale 1997a.

this conclusion by Socrates, Diotima then derives the famous platonic account of *Eros* as the intermediary being: the being that is neither good nor bad, neither beautiful nor ugly, neither human nor divine: a *daimon*, a messenger between God and man.²

In this paper, I would like to compare Plato's account of love with that of Dietrich von Hildebrand.³ I will start this comparison by pointing out that the conclusion drawn by Socrates from the essence of love as desire, i.e., that in order to love we must be lacking the object of our love, seems to be in tension with a similarly foundational claim about love made by von Hildebrand, namely that love is essentially a value-response.⁴

The reason for the tension between the two claims is that every value-response, in von Hildebrand's sense of the term, essentially presupposes the possession of the value to which it is a response.⁵ The term "possession" is meant here in the cognitive sense of both knowledge and a pre-theoretical,

intuitive grasp of values.⁶ The account of love in terms of a value-response implies then that the loving person possesses through knowledge or a pre-philosophical intuitive grasp the value to which it responds.⁷

Now, it would seem that possession in this sense is a much thinner sense of possession than the one implied in the Diotima speech in the *Symposium*. After all, what Socrates and Diotima have in mind when agreeing that love is "the desire to have the good forever" is the possession of the good in the sense of the realization of true virtue, i.e., becoming good oneself, not just possessing the good spiritually by knowing it. In fact, at the highpoint of her speech Diotima says: "Don't you realize that it's only in that kind of life, when someone sees beauty with the part that can see it [i.e. with the rational part of the mind], that he'll be able to give birth not just to images of virtue [...], but to true virtue

2 For the question whether the description of *Eros* as a daemon is to be understood literally or merely in a figurative sense, see Karfik 2005.

3 See Hildebrand 2009. Further cited under the abbreviation "NL".

4 The following qualifications have to be made: 1) love is (according to von Hildebrand) a particular kind of value-response, namely an *affective* value-response; 2) it is a response to a value through which the person *qua* person is fully and thematically given as intrinsically precious or valuable, 3) love is a "super value-response" (*Überwertantwort*). For a more detailed exposition of these points, see Cajthaml 2010.

5 NL, 24.

6 As early as in his doctoral dissertation, von Hildebrand argues that the knowledge of values is always rooted in an intuitive grasp of values, a *Werterfassen*. He distinguishes two forms of it there: a) the more outwardly *Wertsehen* and b) the more inwardly *Wertfühlen*. See Hildebrand 1969.

7 In fact, the very idea of a response as a peculiar kind of intentional act is always developed in von Hildebrand's works by 1) opposing responses to various kinds of cognitive acts and 2) by stressing the fact that responses essentially presuppose cognitive acts because the objects to which responses as spontaneous acts are directed must be given in cognitive acts, which are essentially of a receptive nature. Cf. M. Cajthaml, *Dietrich von Hildebrand's Moral Epistemology*, forthcoming.

[*aretén aléthé*]” (*Symp.* 212a2–6, transl. Ch. Gill). Therefore, in “the desire to have the good forever” (*Symp.* 206a12–13), love aims at the *realization* of true virtue, not just at an intellectual comprehension of the Form of the Good (which, in this dialogue, is made thematic under the aspect of Beauty).⁸

This observation is correct; yet, in the passage just quoted it is also stated that true virtue can be realized only on the basis of an intellectual vision of the Form of Beauty. Indeed, in the immediately preceding passage such a vision is said to come about “suddenly” (*exaifnés* – *Symp.* 210e4) and imparted only to the one who has been “educated in the ways of love” as they are described in the *scala-amoris*-passage (*Symp.* 210a–d). Thus, even the intellectual grasp of the value, which makes the realization of true virtue possible, is only reached at the end of the whole process, i.e., as the final step of the *scala amoris*.

It seems, therefore, that for Plato love as “the desire to possess the good forever” does not only imply that true virtue as the final object of human desire is reached by the lover at the very end of his/her ascent of the *scala amoris*. It also implies that the final object of knowledge upon which the realization of true virtue is contingent, i.e., the Form of

Beauty, is intellectually grasped by the lover only at the end of his/her spiritual ascent of the scale of love.

One might suppose, therefore, that even if we understand possession in the thin epistemological sense, both accounts of love differ significantly, since, in von Hildebrand’s account of love, the experience of the beauty of the beloved stands at the very beginning of the process of loving: as it were, it is what enkindles love in the lover. He writes, for example: “It is essential for every kind of love that the beloved person stands before me as precious, beautiful, lovable. As long as someone is just useful for me, as long as I can just use him, the basis for love is missing. The self-giving and commitment proper to every kind of love, be it love for my parents, love for my child, the love between friends, the love between man and woman, is necessarily based on the fact that the beloved person stands before me as beautiful, precious, as objectively worthy of being loved.”⁹

It seems that there are two basic reasons that help explain this contrast between the two accounts. The first concerns the divergent understanding of the primary addressee of love and the nature of the loving subject.

For von Hildebrand, the proper addressee of love is the person, both human and divine.¹⁰ Obviously, the human

8 In literature (Taylor, Cornford, Natorp, Krüger, Jäger, Bury etc.), the Form of Beauty discussed in the *Symposium* is often identified with the Form of the Good from Book VI of the *Republics*. The identification is justified by the argument that ultimate reality can either be an object of rational cognition (the Good) or of love (Beauty).

9 See, NL, 17.

10 Although he recognizes that there is a legitimate sense in which we can speak of love of music, landscape, language, etc., the object of his analysis is love as a “fremdpersonaler” act, i.e., love as an

person is a being that is directly given in our life world. One can even argue with some philosophers that other persons are the primary constituents of our human life-world, of our experience as persons. Indeed, since, according to von Hildebrand's personalist metaphysics, the person is the most perfect being, the *ontós on*, he does not think that the level of personal love must be surpassed in order to give love its proper, metaphysical status.¹¹ In fact, according to von Hildebrand, all specific features of love are discovered through the analysis of interpersonal love. For example, the "gift of love" in all its aspects presupposes that the addressee of love is another person, and not a non-personal being.¹² *Intentio unionis*, one of the fundamental traits of love according to von Hildebrand's analysis, reaches its highpoint with interpersonal love.¹³ *Intentio benevolentiae*

(the desire of happiness of the beloved) is present only in this kind of love, since only persons can be meaningfully desired to be happy or unhappy.

However, it is not just the case that the primary and most proper object of love is the person. The person is also the exclusive *subject* of love, which follows directly from the basic conceptualization of love in von Hildebrand's work. Drawing on the conceptual resources of early phenomenology, he conceptualizes love as a specific kind of intentional act, i.e., an act of which only personal beings are capable of.

Plato conceives of love more broadly (both in respect to its subject and object) than von Hildebrand, and in this sense in a less "personalist" manner. According to Diotima, the subject of love is "mortal nature" (*Symp.* 207a–d), wherein not only human but also animal nature is subsumed. Both strive for immortality with the difference that whereas human nature understands the reason for doing so, animal nature does not (*Symp.* 207b). Connected to this broader conception of the subject of love is the fact that love is, for Plato, not restricted to conscious (intentional) acts and that it can also exist on the subconscious level, e.g., in the sexual behavior of animals. Thus, Plato conceives of the subject of love *more broadly* than

intentional act that is essentially directed toward (other) person(s).

- 11 NL, 1. On this point there is undoubtedly a disagreement with Plato, for whom the most perfect being (*to ontós on*) are the Forms in general, and the Form of the Good in particular (or, if the so-called "unwritten doctrines" are taken into consideration, the highest Principle of One-Good). See Reale 1997b, pp. 159–227.
- 12 With the "gift of love" von Hildebrand means that "I in a sense exceed or surpass all that is due to the other in virtue of his or her value, and that in this sense I give the other an unmerited gift." (NL, 58, n. 1) He analyzes the "gift of love" in Ch. 3 of NL.
- 13 The deepest form of union between the lover and the beloved can be reached only on an interpersonal level, i.e., in the "I-Thou" situation (von Hildebrand speaks here of the "Ineinanderblick der Liebe"). He writes: "The contact among persons surpasses in a formal respect

not only all possible union that non-personal things are capable of, but even all kinds of contact that persons can have with non-personal goods. The union among non-personal things is so different from the union among persons that one can use the term 'union' only in a very analogous sense" (NL, 124).

von Hildebrand. Also, Plato interprets the object of love in such a way that, although love for persons is central, it does not become an exclusive form of love. Moreover, the final object of love is, for Plato, the Form of Beauty, i.e., an entity that is suprasensible, but not personal in von Hildebrand's sense of the term. The Platonic Forms, although originally present in the mind before the incarnation of the soul, are entities that are experientially given only after the long process of the soul's anamnesis, and even then "suddenly", i.e., this givenness is not warranted. It involves a moment of unexpectedness and unrepeatability that makes it more akin to a mystical experience than a rational insight, with its predictable and repeatable character. Moreover, the anamnesis theory of knowledge implies using the skill of dialectics, which is difficult to learn and which only a few, even after many years of practice, can master.

Given that, for both authors, the most perfect being is also the most proper object of love, their diverging views on the nature of the most perfect being are arguably the ultimate explanation for their diverging accounts of love. In brief, the metaphysics of the Form (or of the One-Good) stands against personalist metaphysics, which is inspired by a distinctly Christian tone.¹⁴

14 Note, however, that such a metaphysics is, in von Hildebrand's published work, not fully developed. Its most systematic presentation is to be found in von Hildebrand's lectures on philosophical anthropology (Philosophy of Man) delivered in 1942–43 at Fordham University. See Premoli De Marchi 1998, pp. 12–13. For

Another reason that helps to explain the divergence in Plato's and von Hildebrand's account of love is the way each of them conceptualizes the notion of the good. Plato (cf. esp. *Symp.* 205e–206) defines the good as the object of desire. He thus inaugurates a millennial tradition of the conceptualization of the good. It is within this tradition that Aristotle defines the good as "that which all desire" (NE, I,1,1–3). And it is within the same tradition that Aquinas, elaborating on the nature of this definition, remarks that it captures the good in terms of its effect. The good, being a first principle, he says, can only be defined by what comes later, i.e., by its effect. Aquinas thus comes to the definition of the good in terms of its proper effect: *ratio enim boni in hoc consistit, quod aliquid sit appetibile* (ST I, q. 5, a. 1). In Antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages, this basic approach to the good prevails.

However, the trend changes in modern times, arriving at a turning point here, as elsewhere, with Kant's philosophy. Indeed, it is Kant's approach to the (unconditional, moral) good, in terms of good will, that von Hildebrand relates himself to, albeit polemically. Von Hildebrand shares Scheler's critique of Kant's "formalistic" account of the good.¹⁵ Nonetheless, his way of conceptualizing the good is ultimately akin to Kant's and not to traditional philosophy, since he sees the good – in his terminology: "the value" or "the important in itself" – as

an explication and further development of this metaphysics, see Seifert 1989.

15 Cf. M. Cajthaml, *Dietrich von Hildebrand's Moral Epistemology*, forthcoming.

that which calls for an adequate response (or as that which issues a claim to such a response). Although this claim need not always be morally relevant, it is essential for any value in von Hildebrand's sense to issue a call for an adequate response.¹⁶ The addressee of this call is exclusively a personal being.

It seems that this diverging account of the good (value) explains to a large extent the diverging accounts of love. After all, if the good is fundamentally conceptualized as "that which all desire", it is understandable to see love as primarily the desire to possess the good. Understanding value as that which calls for an adequate response suggests the account of love as an act through which a response is given to a value.

However, notwithstanding the differences that, as I suggest, are linked to diverging, basic presuppositions concerning the subject and the object of love as well as the notion of the good (or value), there are also converging points

worth noting in the two accounts of love. Let me mention some of them.

First, it seems that in Diotima's theory of love there are also elements of the value-response in von Hildebrand's sense. Some traces of the value-response are found in the description of the love for bodies (the first step of the *scala*). Even more clearly, the value-responding character of love is implied on the level of the love of souls (minds). For example, Diotima says that the lover should "regard the beauty of minds as more valuable (*timióteron*) than the body, so that, if someone has goodness of mind (*epieikés tés psychés*) even if he has little of the bloom of beauty, he will be content with him, and will love and care for him, and give birth to the kinds of discourse that help young men to become better" (*Symp.* 210b6–c3, transl. Ch. Gill).

Let us first note the term *timióteron*. Christopher Gill's translation of *timióteron* as "more valuable" is very good – and quite "Hildebrandian", since, arguably, Diotima wants to say that the soul stands higher than the body in terms of its intrinsic preciousness, and not its utility or pleasurableness.¹⁷

16 In his dissertation, he expresses this point in a very Platonic manner: „Jeder Wert besitzt seine ideal ihm gebührende Antwort, unabhängig davon, ob in Wirklichkeit je eine solche stattfindet...“ This ideal *Zugehörigkeitsbeziehung* does not obtain between the value as phenomenally given, i.e., experienced, and the content of a response, but between the value as property of a being and the content of the response. See Hildebrand 1969, 39 f. Thus, the ideal "belonging" of a particular kind of response to a particular kind of value is not a relation between our responses and the values as we perceive them, i.e., within the conscious sphere, but in the "platonic" realm of ideal objects and the laws governing them. In *Christian Ethics*, this platonic underpinning of von Hildebrand's value theory is latent, but not absent.

17 This reading of *timióteron* finds support in the famous passage from *Phaedrus* 278b–e in which the critique of the written word is presented. The expression *ta timiótera* is used there to denote the dimension of the "dialectical orality", which is declared to be "more valuable" than the written word. It is hardly meaningful to translate here *ta timiótera* as "more useful" or "more pleasurable", since Plato apparently wants to say that the "dialectical orality" is, compared to the written word, for the reasons explained in the passage, of *higher value*.

Second, the best translation of the term *epieikés*, predicated of the mind, is the one actually used by Gill, namely “goodness”. Liddell-Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* confirms this choice: *epieikés*, in English, if used of persons, means “fair”, “kind”, or “moderate”. All these terms are typically value predicates in von Hildebrand’s sense. It should be further noted that *epieikés*, in the Czech translation of the *Symposium* by F. Novotný, is translated as “ušlechtilý”, i.e., “noble”. “Noble” is one of von Hildebrand’s favorite examples of value predicates.

Third, the *response* to the beauty of the individual soul is described in terms of love and of *care* of the soul. The care is realized by discourses (*logoi*) designed to make young men better. This description of the care of the soul is a clear hint at the Socratic way of caring for the souls of his fellow citizens as we find it described in Plato’s dialogues. The response to the beauty of the individual soul in terms of the Socratic kind of care does not suggest that Diotima refers to something describable in terms of utility or pleasure, not even in terms of striving for one’s own self-perfection.

Therefore, it seems that for Plato love is the force, which, under specific conditions, leads the imperfect, limited subject through the hierarchy of values to the absolute value – Beauty itself. We can arrive at this absolute value only by ascending the hierarchy of values step by step from the bodily level, through the level of souls, practices and laws as well as forms of knowledge, until we reach the absolute and final level – the Form of Beauty.

Even if Plato probably does not exclude the possibility of the prophetic voice of love speaking of what we unconsciously yearn after,¹⁸ he stresses in the “initiation in the mysteries of love” the crucial importance of the “correct leading”. This means that in order for me to ascend the scale of love, I need someone who is more experienced than myself in the “subject of love” (*ta erótika*) to lead me. This expert in the “subject of love” is *the philosopher*. In fact, Socrates in the *Symposium* says of himself that the “subject of love” is the only one that he is an expert on (*Symp.* 177e1). Therefore, it is in the relationship of the “philosophical lovers”, as they are described in the *Phaedrus*, that the “initiation in the mysteries of love” can be realized.¹⁹

In this interpretation, the value-responding character of love is linked to the type of value to which one is able to respond at a given point on one’s ascension of the scale of love; whereas, the desire-aspect of love is linked to the Form of Beauty and to the “true virtue” that are reached only at the very end of the *scala amoris* and that, according to Diotima, not everybody

18 Consider the account of love as the nostalgia of the lost unity that is so beautifully expressed in the myth of Aristophanes. This myth is, later in the dialogue, appropriated in a modified form by Socrates – as the nostalgia of the One-Good, i.e., as the nostalgia of the highest Principle that would be the ultimate end of the *scala amoris* according to the “unwritten doctrines”. Cf. Reale 2005; see also Platone 2001, pp. XLVII–LIII, 202.

19 On the relationship of the philosophical lover (*erstés*) to his younger beloved (*eromenos, paidika*), cf. Cajthaml 2005.

is expected to reach.²⁰ Thus, in this interpretation, (1) there are elements of the value-response in Plato's theory of love, whereby (2) these elements can be integrated in the overall account of love as the "desire of the lasting possession of the good".

In von Hildebrand's account of love, which is fundamentally an account of love in terms of a value-response, there are important elements of desire. There is, however, one sense of desire that von Hildebrand categorically excludes from his account of love: the desire engendered by a need immanent to human nature.²¹ Von Hildebrand stresses *essential heterogeneity* between love as a value-response and this type of desire. While the *principium* of love as a value-response is the intrinsic value of the object loved, the *principium* of the positive importance of the object of desire refers to the tendencies, needs and desires immanent in the desiring subject (hunger, thirst, etc. on the physical level, or the need for community and the urge to develop one's gifts, etc. on the psychic or spiritual level). Therefore, desire in this sense cannot be a constitutive element of love as a value-response in von Hildebrand's sense of the term.

There are, however, two forms of desire that, according to von Hildebrand, are essential elements of love as a value-response: 1) the desire for the

spiritual union with the beloved (and the desire for one's happiness engendered by this union); 2) the desire for *his or her happiness*. These two forms of desire are not only considered central to the phenomenon of love, but they, in fact, according to von Hildebrand, constitute the *proprium* of love, i.e., they are that by which love distinguishes itself from all other kinds of value-responses.²² Von Hildebrand ascribes to these two properties of love the Latin terms *intentio unionis* and *intentio benevolentiae*, analyzing them with great care in chapters 6 and 7 of his work.²³ He does not see these two forms of desire as compromising the value-responding character of love. Rather, he sees them as features of love that deepen its responding character.

To summarize von Hildebrand's account: he interprets love as, by its very essence, an affective value-response. The value to which love responds is the unique value of the beloved person *qua* person. The givenness of this value in the experience of the lover is taken to be a necessary condition for his/her love. However, he also acknowledges two essential elements of desire rooted in this value-response: the desire for the spiritual union with the beloved and the desire for the happiness of the beloved. Both these desires are possible only as long as that which is desired in them is yet to be fulfilled. Therefore, the formal structure of the act of desiring, which is disclosed by the Socrates

20 If we put it into the language of the mysteries, which Plato himself uses here, we may say that not all that have been introduced to the "lover mysteries" will also be allowed to enter the "higher" ones.

21 NL, 29.

22 NL, 50–52.

23 NL, 123–179.

of the *Symposium*, is retained even in von Hildebrand's account and, in some sense, integrated into it.

Let me sum up the main results of the preceding analysis: Love as a value-response and love as a desire are mutually exclusive accounts of love, in so far as the object of response must be experientially within the reach of the responding subject while the object of desire must be absent from it. This mutual exclusiveness does not imply that accounts in which the response-element and the desire-element of love are presented as co-existent are impossible. The examples of such accounts are both Plato's and von Hildebrand's theory of love. In each of the two accounts, the desire-elements and the response-elements of love are connected in different ways. In Plato's account, love is conceptualized as desire while containing elements of a value-response. In von Hildebrand's account, love is conceptualized as a value-response, while containing elements of desire that are co-constitutive of it.

I would like to conclude this article with a critical comment on von Hildebrand's own assessment of Plato's theory of love.²⁴ In this short text amounting to less than one page, von Hildebrand argues that, although in Diotima's account of love "the importance of the values on the object side is strongly stressed" and that, for Plato, "love is a response to the beauty of the beloved", Plato's account of love is nevertheless not a full-fledged value-response. In particular, he says,

the *intentio unionis* is, in Plato, not an element of a value-response but *appetitus*, i.e., an immanent yearning for perfection. He writes: "The inner movement of love is not seen as a value-response, as something the source of which is value, as an act of self-donation having a strongly transcendent character, but rather as something that is indeed engendered by the beauty of the other but that in the final analysis turns to the beloved out of an immanent yearning for perfection. This holds all the more for the *intentio unionis* which in Plato completely overshadows the *intentio benevolentiae*."²⁵

I would like to call into question both the claim that the *intentio unionis* is, in Diotima's speech, understood as an immanent yearning for perfection and that it "completely overshadows" the *intentio benevolentiae*.

In *Symp.* 205e, Diotima corrects the standpoint of Aristophanes that the object of love is the other half of the original whole (the male-female original creature). She says that the object of love is neither the half, nor the whole, unless it is something good. This is a crucial qualification which, when further developed, leads to the definition of love as "the desire to have the good forever" (*Symp.* 206a12–13). Von Hildebrand's claim that Plato understands the *intentio unionis* as an immanent desire would mean that the reason why the good is desired lies in the immanent structure of the desiring subject and that it is not motivated by an object-rooted

24 NL, 123.

25 Ibid.

attractiveness of the good. This might be a fitting description for some of the lower steps of the *scala amoris*. However, on the level of the love for souls (and higher) it would lead to a very reductive reading of Plato's text. Interpreting *Symp.* 210b6–c3, I have argued that the response to the beauty of the individual soul is described in terms of love and of care of the soul, and that this care does not suggest that Diotima refers here to something describable in terms of striving for one's own self-perfection. In particular, what perfection can the older philosopher gain from his effort to awaken in the soul of his younger friend the desire for the quest of philosophical knowledge? I think the passage can only be interpreted as displaying, in the relationship of the philosophical *erastes* to the *eromenos*, the donative and benevolent character of love. It is only the inverse love-relationship, i.e., that of *eromenos* to *erastes*, that can be feasibly interpreted as motivated by the

desire for self-perfection. If this reading is correct, then the second claim of von Hildebrand (namely that, in Plato, the *intentio unionis* entirely overshadows the *intentio benevolentiae*) is also clearly overstated.

I think von Hildebrand is right in seeing a lack of transcendence and of self-donative character of love in Plato's theory of love. However, as I have argued above, this lack results from the different metaphysical underpinning of the two accounts. It is not that Plato misses the donative aspect of love in the interpersonal sphere. The real difference lies in the less personalist account of both the subject and the object of love. In Plato's metaphysical vision, if I may put it in these terms, the path to ultimate transcendence does not lead through the self-sacrificing love to the other person but through both the emotional and cognitive ascent to the suprasensible realm of being, which is not of an essentially personal nature.

ABBREVIATIONS

Aquinas, Thomas

ST Summa Theologiae

Aristotle

NE Nicomachean Ethics

Plato

Symp. Symposium

Hildebrand, D. von

NL Hildebrand, D. von (2009). The Nature of Love (trans. by John F. Crosby with John H. Crosby). South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press.

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