



# Global Faculty Initiative

**The Faculty Initiative  
seeks to promote the integration  
of Christian faith and academic disciplines  
by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars  
across the spectrum of faculties  
in research universities  
worldwide.**

[www.globalfacultyinitiative.net](http://www.globalfacultyinitiative.net)

Disciplinary Responses to Theology Brief Preview

## **THEOLOGY, DEFINITIONS, AND EMPIRICAL SCIENCE ON INTERPERSONAL LOVE**

Tyler VanderWeele

John L. Loeb and Frances Lehman Loeb Professor of Epidemiology, Harvard University School of Public Health  
Co-Director of the Initiative on Health, Religion and Spirituality and Director of the Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University

---

I thank Professor O'Donovan for his reflections on love and its relation to the will, knowledge, the virtues, and justice; and I appreciate his many succinct insights.

### **Definitions and Unitive and Contributory Love**

Concerning definitions, however, he states, "We should not, then, expect a taut definition of love." I think more progress can in fact be made than is sometimes thought. Roughly following Aquinas (1274/1948) and Stump (2006), I have argued elsewhere (VanderWeele, 2023a) that all uses of the verb "love" have either unitive or contributory aspects, or both. More precisely, the position I put forward in the article is that whenever the expression "He/she loves . . ." is employed, then "love" is used to indicate either "a disposition toward desiring a perceived good or desiring union with it, either as an end itself or with it being a source of delight in itself" (i.e., unitive love) or "a disposition towards desiring good for a particular object for its own sake" (i.e., contributory love). I believe such a characterization helps make sense of the vast range of different uses of the word "love" and the objects to which it is applied.

### **Empirical Research on Interpersonal Love**

While much attention has rightly been given to love in theology, more work could be done on empirical research concerning love. If love can indeed in some sense unify moral teaching, and fulfills the law, then we should also take its empirical study and measurement more seriously. To that end, the research staff at the [Human Flourishing Program](#) at Harvard University have been working together to develop a series of interrelated measures on interpersonal love, including both its unitive and contributory aspects, and extending to parent-child love, romantic and spousal love, friendship love, love of neighbor, love of enemy, love of stranger, and even love of God. Some of these measures are now already available (VanderWeele, 2023b) and we hope that this work will eventually result in insights into how to promote love within society. While considerable work remains to be done, the promotion of love might ultimately be brought to

---

bear in considerations of public health and public policy (VanderWeele, 2024).

## References

Aquinas, T. (1274/1948). *Summa Theologica*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. 5 vols. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press.

Stump, E. (2006). Love, By All Accounts. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 80:25–43.

VanderWeele, T.J. (2023a). [On an analytic definition of love](#). *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 25:105-135.

VanderWeele, T.J. (2023b). [Love to Overcome Hate](#). *Psychology Today*. Human Flourishing Blog. October 2023. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/human-flourishing/202310/love-to-overcome-hate>

VanderWeele, T.J. (2024). [A Theology of Health: Wholness and Human Flourishing](#). University of Notre Dame Press. Notre Dame, IN.

**For more information**

**[www.globalfacultyinitiative.net](http://www.globalfacultyinitiative.net)**