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Disciplinary Brief

LOVE AND THE SHAPE OF PRACTICAL REASON

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A Reading Guide to O'Donovan's "Sovereignty of Love"

O'Donovan's Brief opens with the love-command as the summary of all moral direction and concludes with a double warning against abstract norms of knowledge and action on the one hand, and against "an impractical idea of love confined to attitude and feelings" on the other. Between these poles, the Brief moves through love's relationship to law, knowledge, virtue, and justice. For readers formed by C. S. Lewis's *The Four Loves*, the Brief will feel both familiar and disorienting. Familiar, because O'Donovan shares Lewis's conviction that love is irreducibly various and affectively rich. Disorienting, because O'Donovan embeds love within a structural logic that Lewis never attempted. Two features make O'Donovan's account distinctive: love's location within the *logic of practical reason*, and its essentially *communicative* character.

I. Love within the Logic of Practical Reason: What "Practical Reason" is and its Reorientation by the Gospel

Suppose you are about to leave for work, and it is raining outside. You grab your umbrella and head out. Everything happens habitually and smoothly. You act, as we say, "without thinking." Yet, suppose your co-worker—coming from another side of town where it was not raining—is surprised to see you carrying an umbrella and asks: "Why did you bring an umbrella?" You answer: "It was raining." Your answer points to the *reason* or *ground* of your action, allowing your co-worker to trace your *train of thought*, from your perception of reality to how you acted in response to it. Human action is rooted in thought, and practical thought is the name we give to the kind of thinking that accompanies our actions. Put simply, practical reason is the way we think toward action broadly conceived. Neither reserved for moments of crisis nor decision, practical thought is the most common of our rational exercises. [1] It is the ordinary, everyday thought toward how to live and act we engage in all the time throughout the day.

For O'Donovan, ethics is precisely "an explanation of the *logic of practical reason* that directs our conduct, individual and collective." [2] O'Donovan uses three terms to describe the journey of practical thought

from awareness to action: *responsibility* names the awareness of ourselves as subjects of action. Reflection and deliberation names the two complementary poles of practical thought: in *reflection*, we reach an understanding of the world; in *deliberation*, we carry that understanding in determining how we live and act in time. Practical thought has therefore three points of reference: the *self* who acts, the *world* as a value-laden order in which action must fit, and the opportune *time* open for action. To return to our example above, you (self) perceived it was raining outside (reflection on the world), therefore, you took an umbrella on your way out (deliberation in time). O'Donovan's moral theology locates love within this logic, addressing what love has to do with the way we live and act in the world. In other words, the way we exercise our freedom.

Importantly, O'Donovan also holds that the gospel calls forth the conversion of practical reason to life in the Spirit, reordering it eschatologically toward the kingdom of God. [3] Taken up in this conversion, responsibility is perfected by faith, reflection by love, and deliberation by hope. Faith perfects responsibility by locating the self within God's prior call to agency. Love perfects reflection by attending to the world as God's ordered creation destined to eschatological fulfillment in the kingdom of God. Hope perfects deliberation by opening the immediate future onto God's promise. [4] For instance, Christians undertake academic work by faith that God has called them to it as an aspect of their vocation, attending to what they are called to understand in the world (in the form of a text, a community, a dataset) as a form of love, and responding to it in hope that God sanctifies their work for his purposes.

Love's Attentiveness and Its Relationship to Faith and Hope

The logic of practical reason as responsibility, reflection, and deliberation and love's placement within it are decisive for understanding O'Donovan. Love belongs to the *reflective* pole of practical thought, which is why the Brief defines love as “an affective and directive attention to a good.” For academics this affective moment is familiar: the *excitement* of a discovery or the *quiet warmth* when we see what we had not seen before in an article, or the *frustration* with an experiment. The point is that before love can direct action, it must attend to whatever is before us: be it the life cycle of flowers or a community's practices in ethnographic fieldwork. O'Donovan's Brief notes that “attentive acts, such as listening, learning and wondering, have a certain priority over the busy and energetic acts.” This is so because reflection precedes deliberation in practical thought. [5]

This placement also explains why love cannot be assigned a foundational role in practical thought. O'Donovan turns to the Pauline triad to show this. Most readers know it from 1 Cor. 13:13 in the order faith, hope, and love. But O'Donovan notes this is neither the only nor the typical New Testament ordering. The early church knew the sequence as faith, love, and hope: faith as the root of action, love as its social embodiment, hope as its ground of endurance. [6] Put otherwise, faith initiates our moral life through trust in Christ, love enacts that life through our relations with others, and hope directs it toward its final fulfillment. When Paul inverts the triad in 1 Cor. 13, placing love at the summit, he is making a statement about love's eschatological finality. Love crowns faith and hope without replacing them. Thus, O'Donovan

is suspicious of theologies that make love do everything.

This suspicion puts O'Donovan at odds with any love ethics that reduce morality to a single concept of agape such as Anders Nygren. Nygren's *Agape and Eros* (1930-36) remains the benchmark for agape-monism in twentieth-century Protestant ethics. The Swedish Lutheran theologian argued that Christian agape and acquisitive eros stand in irreducible opposition, such that true Christian love is a purely self-giving descent from God that owes nothing to any loveliness in its object. It also places him in tension with accounts attentive to “types” of love (e.g. eros, philia, storge, agape) while overlooking the role of faith and hope from which love is inseparable. For O'Donovan, to isolate love is already to miss how it contributes to action. For example, C. S. Lewis's *The Four Loves* richly maps love's forms but operates largely apart from faith and hope. He describes love and how it behaves but without the structural logic of the triad. Implicitly, love ends up being its own foundation, which is precisely what O'Donovan resists. Lewis's charity (his equivalent of agape) also retains a strongly kenotic shape: it is gift-love, self-giving, directed outward. Lewis' *The Four Loves* ends with a beautiful chapter on charity but without unpacking the eschatological finality of love; the shape of what action arrives at, not merely what motivates it.

From Types to Moments and Love's Objectivity

The discussion above also clarifies why the Brief also insists on love's “moments” rather than its “types.” The Brief warns against the temptation to “fix on one moment, and declare it to be the only 'real' love—perhaps loyalty, or sensitive feeling, or practical helpfulness, or sacrifice.” Because practical thought must pass through faith, love, and hope, no single moment of love can be elevated to represent the whole without collapsing the structure of practical thought. Love is an extended event that unfolds through its moments across a life, which is why the Brief can move from love of the world, to love of knowledge, to love of persons, without treating any one as the essence.

Consider a scholar's lifelong relationship to a single discipline. It begins as wonder at a first text barely understood; it matures into the patient care of years spent mastering a subject; it becomes devotion as the field's questions become one's own; and it continues in the labour of handing the discipline on to students. No one of these—not the wonder, not the care, not the devotion, not the sacrifice—is “the real love” of which the others are pale copies. They are moments of one love extended across a vocation. In this sense, even Lewis' *four* loves are a straight-jacket on love's multi-varied moments. In his writings O'Donovan addresses at least eleven moments of love, and even these are not exhaustive for him but only a heuristic (see Appendix below).

Love's location in the reflective pole of practical thought also means that it is essentially objective. Love is typically described as that which *drives* action—a motive, a desire, a disposition—and such accounts typically locate love first within the subject. [7] Following Augustine, O'Donovan insists that love is first a feature of the *world*. [8] By virtue of being created, the world is lovable, and therefore able to evoke admiration, desire, care, devotion and the other moments of love. [9] For example, the field linguist did not resolve in advance to find a dying language fascinating; its intricacy summoned her attention and held

it. The interest was not manufactured and then aimed at the world; it was evoked by a world already worthy of it. So too with a face, a landscape, or a piece of music that elicits love before any decision to love has been made.

Thus, love and knowledge always go together. The Brief's critique of Anders Nygren runs on exactly this line: Nygren's idealized agape “has no place for the qualification of love by knowledge,” but love “must be judged in part by the truthfulness with which each grasps the reality of the other.” Love and knowledge are inseparable. A tutor may be genuinely fond of a student and yet love only an idealized version of her, say, the student he wishes her to be, and in that fondness fail to know, and so fail to serve, the student actually in front of him. The Brief's working definition (“affective and directive attention”) holds both together: affective, because love is not cold cognition; directive, because it is not mere feeling either.

Crucially, O'Donovan resists defining love as self-sacrifice or kenotic self-emptying. [10] Whatever ecstatic quality love has is borrowed from faith and hope, not native to love itself. Love's own mode is being at home with its object. Recall those moments in which you are so immersed in lab research, fine tuning a paper or discussing an exciting topic with a colleague that you do not even notice the time pass by. For O'Donovan, love's features, as Paul describes them in 1 Cor. 13, also move around a well-described circle: restraint of competitive self-assertion, acceptance of others' activities and initiatives, flexibility in waiting upon them, and readiness to give them time and space. Picture the seminar in which a senior figure holds back from seizing the floor so that a junior colleague's half-formed thought has room to take shape. Or perhaps the co-authored paper in which each writer accepts the other's framing rather than overwriting it. Restraint, acceptance, flexibility, the gift of time and space are essential for academic cooperation, which leads us to the next section.

II. Love is Communicative

The Brief's subsection on “Communication” concludes that communication “brings the love of knowledge into immediate connection with the love of persons.” This is the hinge between the Brief's two main movements: from love of the world to love of neighbor, from love of goods to love of God. Love's engagement with the world has the essential communicative structure of practical reason. When we want people to act freely, that is, in a way that engages their practical thought rather than overriding it, we communicate with them. We use many kinds of social communications to shape and direct each other's actions, for instance, laws, commands, advice, counsel, teaching, instruction, and so on. O'Donovan is inviting us to see the world as communication. The world does not just exist. It is not just an inert fact. Rather, the world is addressed to us by God as a good; a communication that evokes our response. [11] God's self-disclosure in Christ is the fullest form of this. “He has shown you, Adam, what is good” (Mic. 6:8). The good is communicated, and as it is communicated, it is recognized and affirmed in being loved. This is why love is fulfilled in obedience (John 14:21), which in Greek already includes both hearing and doing, believing and acting. Love is not merely a disposition of practical thought but it's readiness to attend and respond carefully to what the world, and ultimately God, communicates as objects of love.

Would there ever be academic writing apart from attention?

Love and (Academic) Community

The communicative nature of love also explains love's arrival at community: the point of Paul's inverted triad. “A community is constituted by a communication,” O'Donovan writes, and “it is the founding work of love to receive the communication and to share it with one another.” Love constitutes community through the specific act of passing on received testimony. This is why the Brief can move from love of knowledge to love of persons. It is in the act of communicating received knowledge that love of goods is associated with love of neighbors. Think for a moment of the elements of academic life: citation is more than bureaucratic convention but a moral act, acknowledging that what you are saying was given to you, and passing it on under its proper name. Peer review, at its best, is a exercise in love, helping a communication become truer to its object of attention before it circulates further.

Combating Pathologies of Academic Life

The familiar pathologies of academic life (e.g. citation cartels, careerist performance, the erosion of disciplinary memory) are, on this reading, variants of a single failure: the refusal to receive a communication and pass it on in love. Academic communities are irreducibly trans-generational: we receive from authors we will never meet and will one day be read by students not yet born. An academic discipline is not merely a group of people who happen to share interests; it is the ongoing circulation of testimony (e.g. through findings, arguments, methods, canons) received from predecessors and passed on to successors. Strip the act of communication and the “community” evaporates; what is left is a credentialing bureaucracy.

Combating Principalities and Powers in Academia

We also ought not to forget that, although “all authority is from God” (Rom 13:1), not all authority is *directly* God's authority. There are authorities belonging to the structures of creation, mediating God's authority to us. Elsewhere, O'Donovan points out that the fact that these authorities are from creation is “how the possibility arises of corrupt 'rulers and authorities' of this world . . . which will in the end direct our freedom onto self-destructive paths.” [12] Academic life too is permeated by what St. Paul calls “principalities and powers” in rebellion to God and God's life-giving ways. Academic life is often a site of pride, competitive self-assertion, intellectual reductionism, academic policies and procedures, as well as a host of failures of work, that erode academic life and the role of love within it. Yet, the sanctification of academic life is also possible, opening up academic work as a site of indirect witness to God's eschatological purposes for humankind in Christ. [13]

Love and the City of God

This brings us to love as end of action at the end of the Brief: “Love is to be the end of our knowing and

acting, not only the beginning of it.” Once again, the logic of practical thought explains this: Love is an end of action in two senses: (1) the purpose and (2) the termination of every good action. As the first reflection of practical thought, prior to action, love is attention to the world: the affective cognition of reality that makes purposive action possible at all. As a second reflection of practical thought, on the far side of action, love is rest in accomplishment: the posture of an agent who has acted and can now include that accomplished action in the good she is given to love.

Academic life is full of these second moments reflection on the far side of action. For instance, celebrating with colleagues at a pub how surprisingly well the conference went given the constraints; joy after submitting the final book draft to the publisher, sharing with a co-worker and co-author how challenging it was to write the manuscript. Or, perhaps, an award ceremony where we get to celebrate someone's accomplishment or we ourselves are celebrated. We discover that resting in action, both ours and that of others, can afford anticipations of that final rest God has promised us in the kingdom of God where God has justified in Jesus Christ every good work he has prepared and given us to do (Eph 2:10).

O'Donovan notes then that when love is relocated at the summit of the triad, as Paul does in 1 Cor. 13, it is, as O'Donovan puts it, “a statement about the finality of community.” Love is not only what action looks like when it reaches its completion, but also the shape of community fully arrived at, and as such, the eschatological horizon from which faith emerges and towards which hope strains: the city of God, the community of perfect love.

Appendix

O'Donovan's “Eleven Loves” [14]

1. **Admiration:** Love's contemplative pole, absorbed in its object with a kind of self-forgetfulness. It responds to excellence — good that stands before us on its own terms, independently of our interest. Its double form is joy at the presence of the good and grief at its passing. Its perversion is complacence: remaining a spectator of what is admired without letting it make demands on action.
2. **Desire:** Love's temporal form—the opening of the self to goods distributed across time, to what is not yet, no longer, or not all at once. It is the form of love most marked by disturbance and sorrow, since every possible good carries counter-possibilities. Far from being a defect, sorrowing desire is morally essential: it prepares deliberation by identifying the one possibility that points toward action.
3. **Eros** *(subclass of desire)* Desire at a heightened intensity in which the self becomes powerfully aware of its own possibilities through encounter with a good. Where ordinary desire wants satisfaction, eros generates creativity — photography, poetry, inquiry, scholarship. Its horizon is not possession but living in relation to the good that excites it, "to give birth in beauty." Its sin is ideology: closing off inquiry by substituting a fixed representation for the open promise of the real object.
4. **Identification / Storgē** Love as the affective bonding that situates the self within particular historical loyalties — the love of one's own. Storgē names its most instinctive form: the small boy's

love for his mother, the given fabric of familial and communal belonging. It is neither benevolent nor erotic but primordial — the path by which we humans enter the world and pass through it. The Gospel transforms it into discipleship, recentering all particular loyalties on the central historical moment of Christ's resurrection.

5. **Sorrowing Love** Not a separate moment so much as a morally significant dimension of both admiration and desire. Sorrow accompanies admiration as "the vital awareness of its limits" — if joy is the awareness of created reality, sorrow is the awareness that created goods are not final. It accompanies desire as grief before unrealized possibility. The Stoics denied sorrow a rational form; O'Donovan insists it is a way of knowing and loving the good, prompting us to hear wisdom's call.
6. **Gratitude** An explicitly named form alongside eros, distinguished by the self's *assured* position rather than its unfulfilled possibilities. In eros the self strains toward future self-development; in gratitude the self already counts on its secured place as a gift of the beloved. Both are marked by strong self-awareness — unlike admiration, which forgets the self — but gratitude is love that knows itself loved first, resting in what has already been given rather than reaching for what is not yet.
7. **Amor Complacentiae** The self's loving gaze on itself as a created thing in God's world — not as agent, but as object. When reflexive self-knowledge arrives and I find myself among the things God made and pronounced good, I can receive myself with this love: "Love what God made in you." It is not smugness but the self's participation in God's own appreciation of his creation, and it is structurally necessary for loving the neighbor "as yourself."
8. **Amor Benevolentiae toward the Self** The paired counterpart to complacence: the self's active, merciful willing of its own good as moral agent. "Have mercy on your own soul." Where complacence rests in the self as created object, benevolence toward the self wills its growth, faithfulness, and flourishing. Together these two modes of proper self-love are the condition of neighbor-love rather than its competitor.
9. **Friendship / Philia** A distinct form given a full chapter in *Entering into Rest*: selective, voluntary, and equal, constituted by frank mutual truth-telling and a shared enterprise. It differs from storgē (given by circumstance) and charity (universal in scope) by being freely chosen and requiring genuine equality. In his reading of John 21, O'Donovan argues philia can be more precise than agapē — friendship is the specific form love takes when persons are made party to each other's deepest purposes. It has its own sabbath-rest structure: the pause between cooperations in which partners see each other as persons, not merely co-workers.
10. **Devotion** Named tentatively in *Entering into Rest* as the love that exceeds both admiration and desire: "the love that rests finally in its object and is wholly fulfilled in it." It is love at the eschatological summit — not straining (desire) nor simply beholding (admiration), but wholly at rest in its object. It names the inward, personal dimension of what charity names communally: the complete fulfillment of the loving subject in the good it has been given to love.
11. **Charity** Love's eschatological culmination in community — the form love takes on the far side of action and decision. Its defining character is delight in and acceptance of others' accomplishments: the author who finds perfection in Augustine's sermon that will never be reached in her own work

and is confirmed rather than diminished by it. Freed from the pressure to act, it rests in the cooperative work of God and neighbour. It is what Paul names when he relocates love to the summit of the triad — not a feeling or a motive but the shape of community fully arrived at.

EndNotes

[1] See Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, *Ethics as Theology, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 3.

[2] Oliver O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and The Anglican Communion* (Eugene: Cascade, 2008), 36.

[3] See O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 105-33. For a full account of O'Donovan's theological account of practical reason, see my Ruan Bessa, “Oliver O'Donovan and the Bible and Ethics Debate: The Significance of Practical Reason for Understanding the Relationship between Scripture and Christian Ethics.” (Ph.D diss, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2025), chapter 2.

[4] See O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 1-20.

[5] See Oliver O'Donovan, “Christian Moral Reasoning,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 132.

[6] See O'Donovan, *SWT,* 98.

[7] This distinguishes O'Donovan from accounts that center love in the reordering of desire toward God (Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 2013), or as motivating disposition toward human flourishing (Miroslav Volf, *For the Life of the World*, 2019).

[8] See O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 112f.

[9] This is also why the risk arises of the moral agent loving the world wrongly (1 John 2:15).

[10] Contra Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God* (2015), and the Moltmann tradition more broadly.

[11] See Oliver O'Donovan, *Finding & Seeking*, *Ethics as Theology, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 71f.

[12] Oliver O'Donovan, “The Moral Authority of Scripture,” in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics*, eds. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 165.

[13] See Oliver O'Donovan, *Entering into Rest, Ethics as Theology, Volume 3* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), chapter 4 and 5.

[14] See O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, chapter 4-6, and O'Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, chapter 1.

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