

## Love as a Super Power

### *What is Sanctity but the Genius of the Ethical Realm?*

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I would like to offer a few reflections on supernormal altruistic behaviours, in particular focussing on the notion that they have something to do with access to resources of love of which humans are normally not conscious. By 'not conscious,' I mean that they arise from the unconscious, but understood in something like Jeff Kripal's broad and non-reductive sense as a 'secret dimension or dimensions of the human person of which he or she is not aware' (Kripal 1998: 43) rather than in the narrower Freudian sense. I will refer to the manifestation of such unconscious resources of love as *ideal/anomalous experiences of love*.<sup>1</sup> These love experiences, which constitute a near-universal religious category, are marked by gracefulness and spontaneity rather than moral effort and are clearly distinguishable from normal human love experiences.



When Frederick Myers speaks about sanctity as ethical 'genius' he has ideal/anomalous experiences of love in mind. I take it that his point is that true altruism (which, borrowing Kripal's practice of using 'super' to designate the *more* of these experiences, I will refer to henceforth as 'super loving') doesn't appear to arise either from suppression of selfish instincts or from cultivation of pre-existing (consciously accessible) prosocial instincts, or from any kind of volition, at least not exclusively. Super loving seems to be *sui generis* in the sense of not achievable through conscious moral effort. Distinguishing between 'self-regarding virtues' (i.e. enlightened self-interest) and the 'altruistic' ones (i.e. super loving), Myers notes that the former involve suppression or control of selfish instincts, whereas in the case of the latter, 'after a certain point of helpfulness and kindness has been reached, the higher strains of generosity, self-abnegation, impersonal enthusiasm, lie outside the field of ordinary education'. Instead, they are achieved by 'conversions – changes and elevations of character ascribed to Divine Grace' (Myers 1903: 526). Myers observes that super love, or love-as-subliminal-uprush, may not necessarily be superior to gradual moral effort in terms of the degree of goodness attained, but it is certainly a distinct form of altruistic action.

We find a similar distinction in Carl Jung. Discussing the 'divine' quality of authentic neighbour love (agape, in the super loving sense), he notes that the 'energy' of the archetype is 'not at the disposal of the conscious mind', so the 'specifically human' types of love are to be contrasted in this way with the

'divine' sort (Jung [1911-12] 1967:101)<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, Henri Bergson distinguishes between the 'instinct-like' love of the mystic and the ordinary love of the non-mystic in his *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1935). Pitirim Sorokin, the great theorist of love, also makes a distinction between ordinary and 'supreme' or 'supraconscious' love: '[L]ike supreme creativity in the field of truth or beauty, *supreme love can hardly be achieved without a direct participation of the supraconscious and without the ego-transcending techniques of its awakening*' (Sorokin [1954] 2002: 125).

All these authors appeal to the unconscious (in a broad sense) in their models of super love. But Sorokin is distinctive in his insistence that true altruism can't be achieved without the activity of the supraconscious in humans, and this can't happen unless they effortfully engage in techniques which can awaken the supraconscious in them.<sup>3</sup> Sorokin lists a great many techniques, including prayer, isolation, meditation, silence, asceticism, ecstatic trances, and claims that in nearly all the cases of exceptional altruists, these techniques are 'practiced, regarded necessary, and found effective for their purpose' (Sorokin [1954] 2002:139).

Sorokin is making two important interrelated claims here: (1) the activation of the supraconscious may be a necessary condition of super loving; and (2) invoking the supraconscious (for instance, through prayer, or other techniques of the above sort), generally facilitates its activation. Sorokin's account however exhibits a characteristic ambivalence: he claims that super love can be facilitated via technique, but also that '[o]nly persons blessed by such an energy apparently can be eminent creators in the field of love as well as in the field of truth and beauty' (Sorokin [1954] 2002:142). So it seems like he is saying both that all persons can facilitate the operation of the supraconscious in their lives through technique, and that the degree to which the supraconscious can operate in them is fixed and outside their control. I suppose in strictness this is consistent – it means that through technique individuals can in principle realise their full altruistic potential, but also that these potentials are not equal (just as through education, Einstein and the present author may both become better physicists, but we will not become equally eminent physicists (!)).

It is noteworthy about all these accounts of super loving that in addition to placing super love in the unconscious (in the broad sense), they have what might be called a discontinuous model of love, according to which mere biological sociality (i.e natural love) and effortful attempts at extending it does not transmute into super love. This is not to suggest that super love does not fit into an evolutionary panentheist model, according to which the evolutionarily higher manifestations of super love are beginning to appear in a sporadic way here and there in exceptional individuals, but phenomenologically and in their effects they are clearly discontinuous, even if ontologically they may lie on a continuum.

<sup>1</sup> I have adopted the helpful category 'ideal/anomalous' from Ann Taves.

<sup>2</sup> 'The energy of an archetype communicates itself to the ego only when the latter has been influenced or gripped by an autonomous action of the archetype. From this psychological fact one would have to conclude that the man who practices a spiritual form of love has already been gripped by something akin to a *donum gratiae*, for he could hardly be expected to be capable of usurping, on his own resources, a divine action such as that love is' (Jung [1911-12] 1967:101).

<sup>3</sup> Sorokin distinguishes between unconscious and supraconscious, but for our purposes here we can subsume his unconscious/

*supraconscious under a broad definition of unconscious.*

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