

‘Through the Eyes of Love’: Looking at International Politics Differently

Written by Simon Polinder

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SIMON POLINDER, SEP 10 2024

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In the 1970s, Melissa Manchester’s song ‘Through the Eyes of Love’ was nominated for an Oscar. It became the wedding song for thousands of couples, often used for the first dance. In 2023 it was re-envisioned and re-recorded, because (according to Manchester) ‘the message of this song still stands true and timeless’. Why did this song become so popular, amongst so many other songs about love? I think that it is because – as the song says itself – looking ‘through the eyes of love’ leads to one ‘finding out what’s true’. This idea goes against the tendency, especially dominant in the field of international relations, that we should be honest about the real fact that states and people are driven by fear. As a result of this conviction, many students and diplomats are trained to analyze, understand and approach the world of international politics through the lens of fear. But what if it is more accurate to approach the world through the perspective of love? In this article, I will argue for a love-based perspective on international relations. I will start by describing the fear perspective on international relations and point out some of its shortcomings. After that, I will sketch the love perspective, and discuss some of its advantages. Finally, I will compare fear and love in addressing the question of what matters most.

Seeing the World through the Lens of Fear

It is not my aim to deny the impact that fear has and the role it plays in the world. The historian Herbert Butterfield says that fear ‘is a thing which is extraordinarily vivid while we are in its grip’ (Patterson and Joustra 2022, 5). He also points out that we do not always realize or do not want to recognize ‘how often a mistaken policy, an obliquity in conduct, a braggart manner, or even an act of cruelty, may be traceable to fear’ (Patterson and Joustra 2022, 5). Fear plays a huge role in international relations.

A couple of months ago, Europeans were able to vote for the European Parliament. ‘Never again’ is one of the slogans which politicians like to use to promote the European Union: Since the EU was founded to prevent the outbreak of another world war, reasonable people can do nothing other than vote for more European Union, the argument goes. Fear is used here to mobilize people to vote for a certain cause.

In an interview with Gustave Gilbert during the Nuremburg trials, the high-level Nazi leader Hermann Göring once said:

Naturally, the common people don’t want war; neither in Russia, nor in England, nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship.

The interviewer Gilbert responds: ‘There is one difference. In a democracy the people have some say in the matter through their elected representatives, and in the United States only Congress can declare wars.’ But then Göring

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said:

Oh, that is all well and good, but, voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country (Mölder 2011, 242).

Thomas Hobbes believed that fear played a crucial role in creating our social institutions; Niccolò Machiavelli advised the Prince that it was much safer to be 'feared than loved' because the 'dread of punishment' never fails; and Thucydides before them suspected that 'prestige, fear, and self-interest' are indeed the most powerful motives of political actors (Edinger 2021, 1).

The fear perspective as we know it in the study of international relations is as follows. International relations are characterized by anarchy. That means that there is no higher supranational authority to keep aggressive or egoistic states in check. Therefore, balance of power is an important instrument and strategy. Because you cannot be sure about the intentions of other states, you better assume the worst, as offensive realism does. The other option – called non-offensive realism – is that you take institutional measures (for example, establishing the EU) to reduce the uncertainty about the intentions of others and the fear that comes with it (Tang 2008, 451).

However, this fear perspective has its shortcomings. In the first place, it is often historically inaccurate or inadequate. Was fear indeed the primary drive and motivation for the project of European unification? Let us have a look at one of the founding fathers of the European unification. Robert Schuman saw Europe as a spiritual and cultural community going back at least 2000 years. As a result of the Peace of Westphalia, this unity had already been disintegrated. World War II marked a terrible compromise of this unity. Thus, there were other, more positive motivations for the start of the project of unification: for example, to restore the unity of Europe which has disappeared since the Peace of Westphalia. The founders of the EU were not so much *against* something as *for* something, namely unity (Harryvan and Polinder 2021, 14-19). So the starting point was not fear but the love of unity in Europe. Politicians might play the fear card when it comes to Europe – emphasizing the necessity of a strong EU because of the threat of Russia or dependence on China, for example – but I think that this overlooks the fact that people love, and care *for*, a European culture, its social welfare system, its solidarity, and its human rights.

In the second place, fear does not provide any norm or direction. If fear is the starting point of your analysis, which norm do you use to decide to what extent this fear is justified (Hartnett 2023, 211)? According to Joustra:

Fear, after all, is not a primary emotion. It is a responsive emotion, related to the more fundamental feeling of attachment, desire, and love. We would hardly fear a thing if we did not love something first. We fear for our lives because we love them. We fear for injury or pain because we love our health, the ease and motion of our bodies. We fear collectively for loss of power, wealth, and prestige because we love these things, and not always improperly. Power, wealth, and status are all needed in some measure for clean water, safe streets, profitable business, and raising children. If there was no threat of their abasement or erasure, we would have nothing to fear. But fear, then, is a second thing, not a first. (...) It is a secondary response to the more fundamental thing that animates our politics and our commonwealths: love (Joustra, 2024).

Be Not afraid of Love

I am not the first to argue for a love perspective. I take this idea from Robert Joustra. He himself is inspired by the ideas of Augustine on love (Patterson and Joustra 2022, 7, 8). In Augustine's view, love is the basic attitude of all human beings towards reality. According to Augustine, love is not merely an emotion or a fleeting sentiment; rather, it is a profound orientation of the soul, a driving force that directs our actions, desires, and pursuits. Augustine delineates love into two primary categories: love of God and love of self. Human beings are constituted and moved by their loves. These loves can be good or bad depending on the direction or orientation. There is self-serving love, or *cupiditas*, which finds expression in self-interest, pride or *superbia*. Sacrificial love or *caritas* finds expression in disinterested concern for the other. Each human being, and also nations, are a mixture of both loves. Rightly ordered love legitimizes: 'love and do what you will' (Hartnett 2024, 210).

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In other words, the basic disposition of human beings towards the world is love, but the direction of this love can be good or bad. It remains, however, an act of love.

The challenge is to make this (sacrificial) love relevant for international politics. Reinhold Niebuhr attempted to do this. For him, non-resistant love was the principle of criticism under which every scheme of justice stands. Justice is the approximation of brotherhood, which takes various forms in different times and places, and requires some sort of balance of power. This would, however, always be in a dialectical tension with the ideal of love, because justice without the pull of love would degenerate into mere order. This does not mean that order is not important, because order is needed to approximate justice, but order without justice could not long endure (Epp 1991, 16, 17). For Niebuhr, justice is love making its way through the world (Rice 2008, 275).

The liberal internationalist Eckhard Zimmern, a very influential man who did much to birth and shape the field of international relations, held that love, understood as family love, constituted the Commonwealth. Zimmern played an important role in reconceiving the British Empire as the Commonwealth. According to him, love constituted the Commonwealth, and supplied the moral purpose for it: ‘the Commonwealth is an organization designed with the ruling motive of love and brotherhood’ (Hartnett 2024, 206-208).

Another example is the classical realist Hans Morgenthau. In 1952 he told his students: ‘no political society can exist for any length of time in any harmonious and stable way which does not take into consideration both the desire for power and the desire for love’ (Hartnett 2024, 218). Power based on dominion is incomplete and tenuous, power that is sustained by love promises longevity. Rule, ideas, ideals and institutions are not sustained by coercion, but ‘spontaneous consent’ (Hartnett 2024, 218). Love has a normative function. It is a normative framework evoked to constitute community, legitimate coercion and empowerment. It offers the glue that binds groups and frames feelings to enable and constrain action. It is integral to the working of power (Hartnett 2024, 202).

Looking at international relations through the eyes of love has certain advantages. In the first place, it does more justice to historical events to start from the perspective of love, as we have seen with the emergence of the project of European unification. In the second place, love can restrain and sanction action (Hartnett 2024, 214). You need love to be able to direct power. Love orders by giving meaning or purpose to the international (Hartnett 2024, 219). Otherwise realism, also called ultrarealism, becomes cynical, making the national interest and the pursuit of power the ultimate criterion for political action. As Robin Lovin states: ‘We have to trust in a judgment that lies beyond our judgment. We have to have hope beyond the results of our actions that we can see, and finally we have to have love that keeps us from being locked into our own self-interest’ (Sabella 2017, 61-63).

In the third place, the concept of love explains why people appeal to higher norms in politics, and why so many governments and dictators attempt to appear as servants of the people: they have loves (Sabella 2017, 97)! In the fourth place, since love can be directed wrongly, it also accounts for cases in which love is absent and fear dominates. Is fear not often a surrogate for misdirected loves? Finally, love is a source of creativity and therefore hope (Hartnett 2024, 212). Niebuhr is more optimistic or hopeful than Morgenthau, because he believes in ‘the important residual creative factor in human rationality’ that could be a source for justice, understood as love making its way in the world (Rice 2008, 275). Former President Barack Obama even built his presidential campaign on the virtue of hope. According to Obama:

Hope is not blind optimism. It’s not ignoring the enormity of the task ahead or the roadblocks that stand in our path. It’s not sitting on the sidelines or shirking from a fight. Hope is that thing inside us that insists, despite all evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it, and to work for it, and to fight for it. Hope is the belief that destiny will not be written for us, but by us, by the men and women who are not content to settle for the world as it is, who have the courage to remake the world as it should be (New York Times, 2008).

What Matters Most: Fear or Love?

Even though love might be a more adequate or convincing way to look at the world of international relations, an important counterargument could be that fear matters more than love in this cruel human world.

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The question of to what extent something matters in international relations has been a topic of research for me for quite a long time. My dissertation was on the role of religion in international relations. In that context, people would easily ask or echo Stalin's question: 'The Pope, how many divisions has he?' (Tréguer 2022). The saying is often used to disregard the importance of religion and morality over material power. The same seems to be the case with love. Is not love a sentimental feeling that always loses out compared to fear? It seems that fear is the more real thing, a more certain thing to rely upon, while love is something that also requires faith and trust.

The problem is also that it is difficult to prove what matters most in international relations. For how do you measure fear? Herbert Butterfield says: 'it is almost impossible to capture *feeling* in history: how to understand and interpret the terror Napoleon inspired, or the German dread of Russia, the atmosphere of Robespierre and his reign of terror?' (Patterson and Joustra 2022, 5). The same could be said about love. How do you measure that?

But even if you could measure the role of fear, your conclusion would also depend on your presuppositions, values, and worldview by which you interpret the empirical fact of fear. For example, do you see the world as essentially good or as absurd? That attitude shapes also how you interpret events in the world and the course of history. Is the world 'going down the drain', is there an endless struggle between good and evil, or is the course of history one of progress and evolution? Or, again, is everything the result of a coincidence of circumstances, an absurd play in which people are puppets? The fact that presuppositions and personal values and worldviews matter does not mean that one position cannot be more plausible than another. So let me try to demonstrate why I think that the lens of love matters more than fear.

The dictionary defines fear as: 'an unpleasant emotion or thought that you have when you are frightened or worried by something dangerous, painful, or bad that is happening or might happen'. Fear is not a vice, but it can lead to the vice of cowardice when someone is not able to overcome its fear in situations in which she or he has most reason to do so. Fear can require the virtue of courage and overcoming fear is a courageous act. The opposites of fear include calmness, confidence, faith, and trust, or love.

Love is a virtue and we know that virtues matter. It is possible to see international relations as a social practice. By this I mean, inspired by Alasdair MacIntyre, that it is a coherent form of human cooperation aimed at realizing certain goals or goods based on certain standards. The players in the practice of international relations are all kind of institutions with a state or non-state character. The goal of this practice is justice and the basic rule is that you need power to accomplish this goal. The execution of power is conditioned by cultural, economic, social, juridical rules. The practitioners of this practice, such as policymakers, state leaders, diplomats, and activists, have their professional qualities, but the extent to which they possess virtues is very important (Polinder 2024, 186-204). For example, the virtue of practical wisdom is crucial when the demand for power clashes with the pursuit of justice. Even the well-known neorealist Kenneth Waltz admits that to overcome the anarchy of the system, 'virtuosity, skills, and determination can help' (Waltz 1986, 344). Virtues sustain practices and the relevant kind of quest for the good. It enables practitioners to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions we encounter, and it will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and knowledge of the good (Ainley 2017, 7).

So, if love is a virtue and fear an emotion, how they relate and matter? I think it is safe to say that, quoting others:

Virtues are the teachers of our emotions and desires. The virtues partly determine how we intuitively sense things, how we see ourselves, what we are 'ashamed' of or what we praise. In this way they partly determine our emotional preferences, decisions and choices (Nullens 2023).

Much like ideology and worldview shape an individual's perceptions and the range of policy options they consider, fear can act as filter through which institutional actors perceive other institutions or states. Information that runs counter to the established view of the other side and the threat emanating from it is more likely to be filtered out (Edinger 2021, 4).

In other words, virtues are the disposition of the players and practitioners in the international relations practice and emotions are the filters through which these practitioners view the world. To me, the disposition of a player or actor in

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international relations seems to be more basic than the filter through which someone sees the world. That is why I think that love matters more, but at the same time it should be said that the filter through which someone sees the world can be very impactful and limit the options available.

Conclusion

The song *Through the Eyes of Love* was originally written for a film, *Ice Castles*, in which the main character, Lexie, who has become blind due to a skating accident, overcomes her fear and troubles and fulfils her dreams because she is able to look through the eyes of love. In the same way, love dispositions players in the practice of international relations to be hopeful and not be captivated by fear. Maybe our fears and anxieties are out of pace with the reality of the world and what we can do about it. Love brings in another perspective and helps us to see the beautiful and the good, such as people traveling to remote areas to help refugees, women standing up to fight violent extremism in Nigeria, soldiers risking their lives to protect citizens, countries helping each other during natural disasters, etc. (Patterson and Joustra 2022, 6).

Fear as an emotion matters and it filters how we see the world and the judgments and decisions people make. You can really be in the grip of fear. I would nevertheless say that fear is not the best analytical lens to see international relations through. I rather prefer love to be that perspective.

Let me close with Butterfield again:

We seem unable to subdue the demon of frightfulness in a head-on-fight. (...) Let us take the devil by the ear, and surprise him with a dose of those gentler virtues that will be poison to him. At least, when the world is in extremities, the doctrine of love becomes the ultimate measure of our conduct (Patterson and Joustra 2022, 6).

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