

An Aristotelian Apology for Romantic Love

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Dante's *Vita Nuova*, Shakespeare's *Othello*, and Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* portray romantic love as a mental juggernaut: it ravages the mind and disrupts channels of reasoning. Love appears as something akin to an illness.¹ This contradicts Aristotle's writings in Books 8 and 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he defines and outlines the realm of human friendship – including romantic love. He claims that friendship follows rational and reasonable thought. Aristotle's remarks seem at odds with the stories depicted by Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe; thus, either love acts as counter-reason (as depicted in the poem, the play, and the story) or the characters' irrational behavior results from some personal quality other than love. After close examination of the four works, it becomes apparent that the irrational behavior develops from character weaknesses and not from the mere presence of love. Aristotle classifies love as the greatest external good; consequently, it has the greatest propensity to spark unbridled desire.² Dante, *Othello*, and *Werther* behave irrationally because they cannot restrain their desire for their beloved and because they cannot cope with the loss of their love. Thus, their intemperate pursuit of and desire for love motivates them to behave unreasonably. *Werther* – believing love to be necessary for a happy life – errs in making love his sole purpose in life (and provides the most explicit example of this error out of the three examples).³ Contrary to *Werther's* convictions, Aristotle shows that while virtuous friendship is necessary for a happy life, love is not; love is a luxury.

In Books 8 and 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle outlines the concept of friendship in order to examine its rationality and virtue. He divides the class of friendship into three sets: friendship for utility, friendship for pleasure, and complete friendship.⁴ The class of friendship includes most forms of cooperative human relationships, ranging from contractual relations (within the set of utility) to romantic love (within the set of complete friendship).

Friendship for utility lasts only as long as each person finds the other useful. "Those who love one another for utility love the other not in himself, but only in so far as they will obtain some good for themselves from him."⁵ Such friendship lacks altruism and affection: the entire friendship revolves around greed and is more a matter of contract than of love. Friendship for pleasure is similar, except its greedy motivation is a desire to gain pleasure instead of material good.⁶ In both instances, the relationship depends not on a person's virtue of character or any other personal quality, but only on his or her usefulness or ability to please. The shallow nature of such relationships makes them unstable, and they last only so long as each remains useful or pleasurable to the other.

On the contrary, “complete friendship is that of good people, those who are alike in their virtue: they each alike wish good things to each other in so far as they are good.”⁷ Of the class of friendship, Aristotle considers complete friendship to be the most virtuous. By definition, each friend feels an affinity towards the other’s virtuous character. “They are disposed in this way towards each other because of what they are, not for any incidental reason.”⁸ The mutual affinity causes both members to strive for a more virtuous life in an attempt to become more desirable to their lover. “Training in virtue emerges from good people’s living in each other’s company.”⁹ Thus, friendship for each other’s sake lasts longer and produces stronger bonds than the weaker two forms concerning utility and pleasure. “Such friendship is, as one might expect, lasting, since in it are combined all the qualities that friends should have.”¹⁰

Aristotle’s disaggregation of the class of friendship reveals that the concept of romantic love must fall within the set of friendship he classified as “complete friendship.” Romantic love is not transient, but rather a lasting affection for another individual and is focused on the qualities of their character. “[It] tends to be a sort of excess of friendship, and it is felt towards a single person.”¹¹ Aristotle then continues his discussion by considering the necessity of complete friendships (romantic or otherwise). He observes, “A human is a social being and his nature is to live in the company of others.”¹² This characteristic of human nature motivates individuals to seek companionship; it is similar to a drive for external goods such as hunger and thirst. (It is not equivalent to such a drive, however, because its motivation is a desire for virtuous emotional and intellectual gain). “Anyone who is to be happy, then, will need virtuous friends.”¹³ However, once a person has reached a happy state by obtaining friendship, he or she will be reluctant to let go. If circumstances should require that a felicitous relationship dissolve, then a rational person (after exhausting reasonable attempts to save the relationship) would accept the sad situation and then move on with his or her life.

However, by extrapolating from Aristotle’s arguments, it seems possible for people to become so addicted to the pleasures of love that they act unreasonably in its absence; love does not cause the anxiety and the unruly behavior, but rather this is a product of personal inability to deal with a significant loss. Through love, a person becomes so attached to their beloved that they find it difficult to function without them. The loss of his beloved forces him to reconstruct his personality (since the beloved’s personality had become intertwined with his, and her absence creates gaps in his personality). This process requires strong character, and if the person is already jealous or weak-minded by nature, then he may not be able to deal with the loss in an appropriate manner. Ergo Dante’s depression, Othello’s murder, and Werther’s suicide all stem from this key problem.

Aristotle shows the rationality of motivation for complete friendship by noting the mutual, virtuous gains it produces. “Mutual friendship involves rational choice.”¹⁴ At times, it is possible that love would be distracting, but the decision to love remains rational. Why is it, then, that Dante behaves so irrationally and pines for the company of Beatrice? And Othello? He behaves foolishly and unreasonably when he allows small, irrelevant accusations to convince him that his wife had been unfaithful and is deserving of death. What about Werther’s suicide? Does love have a propensity to make humans act irrationally, and is it so necessary that Werther could not live without it? All three cite true love as their motivation – “[I] loved not wisely but too well,”¹⁵ “Love governed my soul,”¹⁶ “I alone love her completely and devotedly.”¹⁷ But how could their irrational behavior stem from love, if love is rational? If love is pure and rational, then the irrational behavior must stem from some other source. For comparison, it is useful to note that other human drives occasionally produce desperate behavior. A person who is

extremely hungry, thirsty, or tired may neglect responsibilities and obligations in order to satisfy his or her needs. Love is more complicated since it is not a mere physical desire, but rather an emotional and intellectual state. Friends are the “greatest of external goods”¹⁸ and romantic love is the greatest form of friendship. It seems then that the desire to maintain love would be greater than any other desire, and that people who are usually temperate and rational may go to unprecedented means (relative to themselves) to maintain love. Thus, the irregular behavior sometimes seen in lovers (such as Dante, Othello, and Werther) results from their inability to control their desire for love and allowing vices of jealousy, greed, and intemperance to take control of them. A drunkard may neglect nourishment in order to acquire drink, a scholar may neglect physical health in order to learn, and a lover may neglect reasonable and necessary activities in order to maintain love. What appears to be irrational behavior inherent in love is really an intemperate attempt to maintain love; the irrationality lies in the character of the individual.

In *Vita Nuova*, Dante describes his extreme love for Beatrice. He elucidates the purity and sincerity of his feelings towards her through his admiration of her virtue; there appears to be no doubt that his love falls under Aristotle’s set of “virtuous friendship.” He explains that he “found her so full of natural dignity and admirable bearing that certainly the words of the poet Homer suited her well: ‘She did not seem to be the daughter of any ordinary man, but rather of a god.’”¹⁹ However, Aristotle would not count their relationship as a “virtuous friendship” since Beatrice does not reciprocate his feelings. “For goodwill is said to count as friendship only when it is reciprocated.”²⁰ Beatrice’s lack of reciprocation renders Dante an obsessive man, not a devoted lover.

Throughout the poem, Dante spends much time alone thinking about Beatrice. “I returned to the loneliness of my room and began thinking of this most gracious lady.”²¹ “I had become wholly absorbed in the thought of this most gracious lady.”²² “Love, many times without warning, attacked me so violently that no part of me remained alive except one thought that spoke of this lady.”²³ Dante admits to being obsessed with Beatrice: not only does he obsess over her, but he also becomes unable to function healthily. It is not that he spends his free moments thinking about her; rather, he devotes his entire consciousness to her.

Although Dante’s obsession with Beatrice is excessive, Aristotle notes the natural desire to be in the presence of the beloved. “But finding enjoyment in the form of the other does not mean that one loves him; this happens only when one longs for him in his absence and wants him to be there.”²⁴ “What the lover likes most is the sight of his beloved, and this is the perception he chooses over the others.”²⁵ That Dante spends time thinking about Beatrice is natural, but the extent to which he allows such thoughts to control his actions is not. Although Dante claims he never allowed Love to rule him “without the trusted counsel of reason,”²⁶ there are several instances of his acting irrationally, even when such behavior was not conducive to the development of his love. In one instance, Dante’s proximity to Beatrice paralyzes him.²⁷ He allows his health to deteriorate: he spends hours focused on the thought of his lady and often loses his appetite to the thought of her beauty. Dante claims that his sole motivation is love, and that love’s sole restriction is reason. However, his behavior is conducive neither to the advancement of his relationship with Beatrice nor to the maintenance of his own health. Aristotle recognizes love as mutual admiration of personal virtues and a mutual desire for the partner’s good. However, Beatrice does not reciprocate Dante’s feelings, and Dante’s pining does not benefit either of them. (Dante might argue that he grew spiritually, but this is not apparent, since he began and ends as an emotional wreck). Thus, by Aristotelian standards, Dante does not act in

accordance with reason. He loves Beatrice, but his irrational behavior is not a direct product of his love; rather, it stems from flaws in his character (viz. intemperance of thought, evident by his relentless concentration on Beatrice). It is appropriate for Dante to admire Beatrice's virtue and to desire her presence, but it is excessive to waste his life away meditating on her virtue without attempting to learn from her and live a normal – but more virtuous – life. After Beatrice's death, Dante's condition worsens: he spends his days weeping and writing of how “so sweet an urge to die [comes] over [him].”²⁸ His perpetual sorrow gains him nothing, and though he credits his woeful state to love, its true source is his inability to deal with reality. Additionally, Dante's attempts to sadden others with Beatrice's story do not follow from friendly motives. While in his depressed state, Dante observes pilgrims passing through the town and thinks, “If I could detain them awhile, I certainly would make them weep before they left this city.”²⁹ However, as Aristotle notes, “someone of a manly nature will take care that his friends do not share his own pain.”³⁰ The lesson of the contradiction between Aristotle's ideal and Dante's actions is that Dante's actions result from his inability to cope with a downturn in his life's direction, and not from love.

Love is a powerful state; however, it remains up to the individual to regulate it. Like any other desire (physical, spiritual, or emotional), it provides motivation, but individuals must determine the appropriate level to which they will allow each drive to control their actions. Aristotle describes complete friendship as the highest *external* good, but intellectual activity as man's characteristic activity and end: “Happiness, therefore, will be some form of contemplation.”³¹ Dante fails to restrain his urge to think about his beloved. Aristotle grants that it is normal to desire to see one's lover, but this desire should not always be the mind's dominating thought. To waste time focused on nothing but an absent person would only produce frustration; it would never progress towards happiness or any other end. If Dante obeys laws of reason, they certainly are not those of Aristotelian philosophy.

Dante's lack of self-restraint over his emotions complicates his life and jeopardizes his health. He becomes so obsessed with his beloved that he allows himself to go to unnecessary, illogical means to maintain love. Additionally, if Dante (or other such people) spend too much time concentrating on their love, they might jump to unreasonable conclusions and fail to distinguish between fictions of the mind and reality. For example, it would be possible for an insecure husband to allow his mind to synthesize hearsay into an elaborate scheme of marital deception and infidelity.

Shakespeare provides such a love conundrum in *Othello*. Othello is a prominent Venetian general and married to the beautiful daughter of a senator. Even from the beginning of their marriage, Othello feels a number of insecurities: he is much older than Desdemona (his bride), he is a Moor, and they have been married without her father's consent (her father warns Othello that if she would betray her father she might eventually betray her husband).³² Initially these factors do not disturb Othello; he remains mild-mannered and rational. However, as the play progresses, the antagonist, Iago, fills Othello with suspicion and false concerns regarding his wife's fidelity. His mischievous actions include framing Desdemona in a conversation with Cassio (Othello's lieutenant)³³, proposing that Cassio was jealous of the marriage³⁴, planting a gift from Othello to Desdemona in Cassio's room³⁵, proposing sexual misconduct³⁶, framing Cassio in a conversation with himself (Iago)³⁷, and proposing that Othello take revenge by murdering Desdemona³⁸. Had Shakespeare formulated the play so that Othello were a third party observing a friend's relationship, Othello would not have jumped so quickly from assumption to assumption and convicted the wife, much less sentenced her to death. However, Othello allows

his feelings of fear and jealousy to corrupt his feelings of love, and in the end strangles his wife for a crime that had occurred only in his mind.

Othello had worked his way to the top of the Venetian army and earned much political respect in the process. He would not have been able to keep himself in high regard had he been persistently ill-tempered and vicious – although ill-tempered and vicious are perfect descriptions of his behavior through the end of the play. It initially seems that love brings about this change in his personality; effectively, it appears that love makes him irrational.

As with *Vita Nuova*, *Othello* seems to provide a contradiction to Aristotle's assertion of love's rationality. However, like Dante, Othello merely fails to control his desire for love. Love in and of itself remains rational: as Aristotle outlines, the process of loving and being loved for virtuous characteristics is conducive to both parties' well-being. However, like a drunkard who neglects reason and drinks himself into dysphoria, Othello neglects reason and closes his mind to all else besides thinking of the terrible possibility of marital infidelity. Had his sole motivation been love, he would most appropriately have confronted his wife and expressed his frustration: if his concerns materialized, he would have ended the relationship, not her life. To love someone is to wish them the best, to wish them happiness in every aspect of their life. If a partner ceases to reciprocate love, the loving response would be to wish the beloved well and then farewell. Aristotle describes even-temper as a virtue in Book 4 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Othello errs to the side of irascibility in his response (even if Desdemona had been unfaithful, but especially in her innocence and on the weak nature of Othello's evidence). This fundamental vice could not be a product of love – it was already present within Othello's personality. "Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ."³⁹ His excessive desire for love (surely one of the greatest desires he had ever experienced) proves to be too much: his even-temper collapses in the face of his desire for love and (after he believes he has lost love) revenge.

Additionally, Othello's relationship with Desdemona lacks an important characteristic of complete friendship: trust. "Friendship based on virtue involves a refusal to listen to slander."⁴⁰ After letting Iago persuade him that an affair was likely, Othello grabs Iago by the throat and orders: "Villain, be sure thou prove / my love a whore! . . . [Or else] Though hadst been better have been born a dog."⁴¹ Othello's desire for Iago to prove his wife a tramp does not stem from love; he no longer trusts his wife, and since there would be no possible way to prove her innocence, the only possible way to relieve his anxiety would be to find her guilty. It seems that Othello (who claimed to love Desdemona dearly) trusted her no more than Beatrice trusted Dante (who she did not intimately know, let alone love). When Beatrice heard rumors of Dante's promiscuity, she acted differently towards him: she believed the slander.⁴² When Othello heard rumors of Desdemona's promiscuity, he acted differently towards her: he believed the slander. This lack of trust raises questions about the nature of Othello's feelings towards Desdemona. According to Aristotle, Othello's willingness to listen to slander suggests that his feelings towards her no longer stem from virtue: his greedy and jealous (essentially, his vicious) motives take control of him. Truthfulness is a virtue,⁴³ and so if Othello could find her vicious in this respect, then he could not admit to "admiring her virtue." This mistrust invalidates Othello's state of love with Desdemona. "Friendship and justice seem to be concerned with the same things and to be found in the same people . . . the demands of justice also naturally increase with the friendship."⁴⁴ If the lover were to do something dreadful and deceive his or her partner about the nature of their relationship, such as pretending to love the other for his or her character when the lover truly seeks only pleasure, then "we can justly complain against the deceiver – more justly even than we can against those who counterfeit coinage."⁴⁵ Since Othello believes that

Desdemona had committed this injustice against him, he can no longer (by the Aristotelian definition) even consider her a friend. If he had attempted to talk to her and trust her statement of innocence, their relationship could have continued as normal. However, his desire to find her guilty implies a latent (and by the end of the play, blatant) mistrust. Essentially, his belief of her viciousness means that his subsequent actions could only result from a desire for revenge, not for love.

In Act III, Othello's statement of his insecurity segues into Book 8 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Othello laments, "O curse of marriage! / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!"⁴⁶ Othello signals his fear that Desdemona would not reciprocate his love if he could not fulfill her sexual appetite; in Aristotelian terms, he doubts that their relationship is one of love under the set of "complete friendships" and fears that his wife thinks it nothing more than friendship for utility or pleasure. "We might complain if a person were to like us for utility or pleasure, but pretend that it was for our character. For, as we said at the start, most differences arise between friends when they are not friends in the way they think."⁴⁷ Thus, it is not love, but rather the thought of his love's vanity that motivates Othello's rash decisions.

Othello plagued his mind with nightmares of his wife's infidelity and with fears that he might lose his cherished love. Another potential problem an intemperate lover may encounter is that he or she becomes so engrossed in the thought of the beloved that the lover is unable to function. Dante lends himself well to this example, but to his credit, he restrains his feeling; he does not harass Beatrice. Goethe's Werther, however, does not even attempt to control his behavior. On the contrary, he makes a nuisance of himself.

Werther suffers from an insatiable desire for romantic love. His case seems to be a dangerous synthesis of Dante and Othello's problems: he is obsessed and overly emotional like Dante, and like Othello, he is exceedingly jealous (even to the point of suicide).

At the beginning of the *Sorrows of Young Werther*, Goethe portrays a happy young man who derives pleasure and contentment from the beauties of nature. Werther's first talk of love begins when he recalls the lover of his adolescence: "She was mine, I felt her heart, her great soul, in whose presence I seemed to be more than I really was because I was all that I could be."⁴⁸ His reminiscing made it apparent that he looked back on his time spent with this lover as the best of his life. Additionally, he believed that he was tremendously lucky to have found her (and from this that he would never find such a girl again). "Alas, that I ever knew her! I should say to myself: You are a fool to search for something that cannot be found on this earth."⁴⁹ However, contrary to his expectations: he met another such girl, Lotte.

Within a few days of meeting Lotte, Werther writes to Wilhelm, "I cannot describe to you how perfect she is, or why she is so perfect; enough to say that she has captured me completely."⁵⁰ She most certainly had captured him completely; within a day of meeting her, he professes, "for me there is neither day nor night, and the entire universe about me has ceased to exist."⁵¹ Werther does not show any attempt to restrain his emotions or to consider that he might find some flaw in Lotte, which could cause his initial infatuation to dissipate. However, this unfettered desire and behavior follows from his previously stated beliefs. In an earlier letter to Wilhelm, he expressed his belief that true love must be an all-out effort that does not yield to anything, even rationality. He relates his feeling that love should hold a mental hegemony through the story of a young man who falls in love and wastes all of his strength, time, and fortune to be with his beloved. It is likely that such a man would receive a rebuke to set aside some time for work, and to subject his love to a schedule. However, Werther protests, "should the young man follow this advice, he will certainly turn into a useful member of society . . . but

his love is done with.”⁵² Thus, Werther believes that love must feel no boundaries, not even reason. This is a departure from Dante’s desire to adhere to “the trusted counsel of reason.”⁵³ While Dante mistakes reason, Werther rejects it: holding true to his own philosophy, he professes his love for Lotte and begins to obsess over her soon after their first meeting. Aristotle would consider this an intemperate pursuit of an external good (romantic love). Intemperance is a vice; Werther’s irrational actions were not the product of pure love, but rather of his intemperate pursuit of love (which stemmed from his belief in the necessity of such a pursuit).

Greed acts as another catalyst to his irrational behavior. Throughout the story, just as Othello becomes anxious when he sees Desdemona speaking with Cassio, Werther becomes irritated whenever he witnesses other people enjoying Lotte’s company (especially her husband, Albert). Ironically, Werther complains when he sees jealousy in other people. When visiting a pastor’s family, Werther senses jealousy from the daughter’s suitor (Herr Schmidt, Friederike’s suitor) when Werther is too polite to Friederike. Werther scoffs that people should not put on moody faces, but should “mutually spoil their few good days.”⁵⁴ Whether or not Herr Schmidt was justified in his jealousy, he behaved in a way that was no more childish than Werther at the ball with Lotte, when Werther became jealous because Lotte shared her oranges with another lady.⁵⁵ Towards the end of the story, his envy of Albert grows. “Sometimes I cannot understand how another *can*, how he *dare* love her, since I alone love her completely and devotedly, knowing only her, and having nothing in the world but her!”⁵⁶ Werther’s jealousy grows to the point of his wishing that Albert die,⁵⁷ yet he asks of Wilhelm, “Is not my love for her the most sacred, the purest, the most brotherly love? Have I ever felt any culpable desire in my soul?”⁵⁸ Apparently, Werther did not believe himself culpable for wishing to violate the bonds of marriage or for wishing that Albert disappear. Like Othello, Werther allows his jealousy to interfere with his rational thought process, and proceeds to consider extreme actions (such as murder). However, beyond Othello’s error, Werther rejects rational thought and declares it separate from (and sometimes opposed to) love. This jealousy and rejection of rationality – not love – caused his irrational behavior. Furthermore, even though his affinity towards Lotte resulted from a respect for her virtues, their “complete friendship” suffers because of Werther’s greed. Lotte admits to herself that (to a limited degree) she reciprocates Werther’s compassionate feelings (through her fondness of him and his characteristics). This differentiates Werther’s case from Dante’s: Dante’s emotions do not fall under the category of “complete friendship” because Beatrice does not reciprocate his feelings, while Werther’s relationship is not one of “complete friendship” because it does not follow from rational choice. “It is rational choice that characterizes a friend and virtue.”⁵⁹

Aristotle describes virtuous friends as a necessity for a happy life.⁶⁰ However, he does not describe these friendships as ends in themselves; they help people attain a more virtuous way of living. Werther contradicts Aristotle on this point. “I have so much in me, and the feeling for her absorbs it all; I have so much, and without her it all comes to nothing.”⁶¹ Rather than pursuing his friendship with Lotte, he insists upon forcing a romantic aspect. Lotte wishes that Werther could have married one of her friends, so that they (Lotte, Werther, and Albert) could have maintained a healthy, longstanding friendship.⁶² Werther does not even have to face the difficulty of a jealous husband; Albert tries to make him feel at home and often leaves the room so that Werther and Lotte may be alone. Had Werther not acted so irrationally, he could have pursued a long-lasting (complete) friendship with Lotte and Albert. His greed and unfettered desire for a romantic relationship with Lotte cause his misery and lead to his suicide.

Werther often complains that his “heart [is] almost suffocated by the rush of emotions.”⁶³ He has a propensity to obsess over such emotions, and the result of his obsession is usually depression and irrational behavior. Werther mimics Dante’s obsession and depression. It seems that both neglect Aristotle’s warning, “Excitable and passionate people are especially prone to impetuous incontinence.”⁶⁴ Their desires for love and for the thought of love are impetuous, while they are incontinent in their inability to resist such desires. Werther’s greed and lust for Lotte, along with his inability to resist this “rage of passion”⁶⁵ prompt his irrational behavior. This behavior agrees with his preconceived notion that reason should not hamper love. Love does not corrupt him; he allows his greed and desire for love to take his mind. As Albert warns Werther, “when a man is carried away by his passions and loses all power of reflection; he can then be considered a drunkard or a madman.”⁶⁶

Werther claims that he can justify his irrational behavior by what he believes to be the necessary role love plays in the pursuit of a happy life. He challenges that – without love – there is no purpose to life. Romantic love falls under Aristotle’s category of complete friendship and is – by definition – rational. But is it necessary? Aristotle claims that friendship is necessary, but what about love specifically? Werther would scoff at the question of love’s necessity; he would argue that it is life’s sole necessity, and that all else is vanity. “There is a certain monotony about mankind. Most people toil during the greater part of their lives in order to live, and then the slender span of free time that remains worries them so much that they try by every means to get rid of it.”⁶⁷ He also observes, “All human activity is directed toward procuring satisfaction for needs that have no other purpose than prolonging our miserable existence.”⁶⁸ He makes these comments before he meets Lotte, and so it is not the case that meeting her makes him forget about the other virtuous aspects of life (since he already holds that there are none).

Thoughts of suicide ran through Werther’s head even before he began experiencing difficulties in his relationship with Lotte. Werther met Lotte in June 1771, but on May 22, 1771 he wrote to Wilhelm on the depressing nature of life, “And then, however confined he may be, he still holds forever in his heart the sweet feeling of freedom, and knows that he can leave this prison whenever he likes.”⁶⁹ Werther indicates to Wilhelm that, when carrying his “burden” of life, he finds comfort in the fact that he may end it whenever he feels it has become too much.

In another letter to Wilhelm, Werther details an adventure to the peak of a mountain, where he looks down and feels attracted to everything. But he feels disappointed. “I hurried here and there and came back, not having found what I hoped to find.”⁷⁰ His account of his trip to the top of the mountain seems to be a metaphor describing his search for happiness; he has been attracted to many of life’s pleasures, but feels dissatisfied after trying them. In the same letter, he mentions the story of a vagabond who has (in vain) searched the world for happiness, only to find it in the arms of his wife and children in his small hut in his native land.

The hope he holds in suicide and his metaphor of the mountain elucidate the motivation to his subsequent actions: he has searched the world for pleasure in vain and he takes this to mean that the sole source of happiness in life is romantic love. Thus, his falling in love with Lotte is synonymous with his making her his end. To summarize, Werther believes that there are a finite number of paths to happiness (and thus a purpose in life). His analogy of his view from the top of the mountain indicates his awareness of these paths, and the analogy of the unsatisfied vagabond indicates his belief that he has exhausted all of these routes except one: that of romantic love. (His reflections upon the love of his teenage years reveal his belief in the worthiness of love as a means to happiness). Hence, he finds himself in a miserable state with all but one possible route to happiness exhausted. He believes in the ability of love (the last route) to

bring him happiness because of his previous experience with it, and he considers Lotte the only woman who is or ever will be worthy of his love. Lotte is thus both a means and an end to Werther: she is a means to love and yet obtaining her is Werther's ultimate goal. When his relationship with Lotte deteriorates, Werther sees it as the deterioration of his purpose in life, meaning that the happiness he could extract from life could no longer outweigh the burden of living; consequently, he decides to leave his prison.

Suicide offered him more than just an escape from his prison; it also provided him with a final (twisted) way to express his love for Lotte. Aristotle describes how a good person will die for his friends if he must. "He would prefer a short period of intense pleasure to a long period of mild pleasure . . . a *single noble and great action* to many trivial ones."⁷¹ Werther acts upon his paradoxical belief: the purpose of his life is to love Lotte, but the only remaining way he sees to do this would be the single, great action of suicide (to show the world how highly he regards Lotte, and to hasten the process he believes will culminate in his unification with Lotte in the afterlife). He twists the noble idea of self-sacrifice that Aristotle presents: as he expresses in his final letters, he believes that the only way to save the well-being of the members of the triangle (Werther, Lotte, and Albert) is to eliminate one of the members. Through a process of elimination, he decides that it would be best for all of them if he were to die. He looks at his suicide as the highest form of love: self-sacrifice. Considering all of his options, Werther decides that he could not continue living since he would no longer have his love (and this was his sole end), and that suicide is his most worthy decision: it prevents his having to live without love, and at the same time, it acts as the highest possible expression of his love.

On the contrary, Aristotle does not advocate love as an end in itself; he views it as a form of assistance to living a virtuous life and seeking happiness through contemplation. Aristotle classifies friendship as the greatest external good and determines that is necessary for a happy life. But is love (which belongs to the set of complete friendship) necessary for a happy life? Aristotle – disagreeing with Werther's treatment of love as man's telos – argues that it is not necessary, although it is preferable. To begin with, he acknowledges that friends are the greatest external goods.⁷² Thus, as with other external goods, individuals must temper their desire and pursuit of friends: friends are not an individual's end, happiness is. In this context, Werther is wrong to devote so much energy to his search for love. It is true that friends are the greatest *external* goods, yet they are still only external goods. The thrust of Aristotle's argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is that man's end is happiness, which he finds most successfully through his characteristic activity, viz., intellectual and virtuous activity. Reliance upon external goods is only bestial and not conducive to man's end. Friends are important insofar as they inspire their companions to live virtuously: they provide an example and an extra motivation. In an Aristotelian context, Werther complicated his philosophy (and thus his life) by his dependence on external goods. Aristotle warns, "Some pleasures are necessary, while others are not. The necessary ones are necessary only up to a point."⁷³ Thus, when Aristotle declares that virtuous friends are necessary for happiness, the need for friends is limited; it should not become an individual's sole aim in life.

Nevertheless, friendship is an "absolute necessity in life . . . it benefits those in their prime by helping them to do noble actions."⁷⁴ In fact, Aristotle associated complete friendship with justice.⁷⁵ Virtuous friendships help individuals seek a virtuous life. Additionally, they bring pleasure to the friends. Aristotle notes that even a person who has all of the other external goods in life would feel incomplete without friends. "For a human is a social being and his nature is to live in the company of others."⁷⁶ Werther's actions testify to this point. When he first leaves his

home he records, "The solitude in this heavenly place is sweet balm to my soul."⁷⁷ Later, however, after he had spent much time alone thinking about Lotte, he warns, "Nothing is more dangerous than solitude."⁷⁸ Indeed, when he leaves Lotte and Albert to take a new position, he meets a new girl and admits that he never thinks to write Lotte. However, after he resigns and finds himself alone and pensive in a hovel, the obsession returns, and he wants to write to her.⁷⁹ By an Aristotelian examination, Werther convinces himself that romantic love is necessary because it is the only type of complete friendship he knows. He communicates with Wilhelm only through long distance correspondence, and his friendship with Albert is a product of his friendship with Lotte. Aristotle observes that complete friendship is necessary, and the fact that Werther's only complete friendship is romantic (at least in his mind) leads him to believe that romantic relationships are necessary.

"Anyone who is happy will need virtuous friends," since "a sort of training in virtue emerges from good people's living in each other's company."⁸⁰ Love – as a member of the set of "complete friendship" – would satisfy this requirement. By Aristotle's definition, love is sufficient for happiness, but not necessary for it. Love is an excess of virtuous friendship.⁸¹ It is possible to have a small number of "complete" friends, but it is only possible to have one lover. Thus, the attachment to a lover is stronger than the attachment to any other individual friend; the feelings that are normally divided among few close friends become concentrated into a relationship with a single person. Hence, a romantic relationship will bring more pleasure than ordinary "complete friendships," but both satisfy the need for virtuous friends that Aristotle described, making love a luxury as opposed to a necessity.

Werther protests, "What would the world mean to our hearts without love!"⁸² To him it would mean nothing, since he has made love everything. "I am going to see her," is my first cry in the morning . . . And thus I have no other wish for the rest of the day. Everything, everything is drowned in this prospect."⁸³ Werther's mistake is similar to that of a drunkard or a chronic gambler: he devotes all of his energies to the pursuit of an external good and neglects all other aspects of his life. Werther's case simply disguises itself better. The virtuous nature of love makes its pursuit seem virtuous (even in extraordinary circumstances); however, Werther's pursuit was one of greed and jealousy, not virtue. Had Goethe written the story so that Werther were obsessed with some other external good (e.g. food), then readers would have called him a glutton and a fool. The appearance of irrationality in the actual situation is clouded only because he acts under a pretense of virtuous love. Humans need food to live, but there is a boundary between necessity and luxury. Likewise, Aristotle claims that humans need virtuous friends to be happy, but there is a boundary between necessity and luxury. Werther's demand for a specific instance of a specific type of complete friendship is like a man who will not eat anything besides a certain, fine entrée. When the man does not have the means to buy this entrée, he starves. However, his starvation was not necessary, he had several alternatives; his stubbornness prevented him from seeking the alternatives and led to his own downfall. Likewise, Werther could have pursued an unromantic relationship with Lotte and thus satisfied his need for friendship. He made it appear that love is necessary only because he refused to seek other forms of virtuous friendship.

Dante, Othello, and Werther portray love as an overpowering, immobilizing, and irrationalizing force. They behave as if love had strangled them and their actions were subject entirely to its force on their thoughts. Dante withers away while pondering the virtue of a woman he speaks to only infrequently, while Othello murders his wife, and Werther kills himself, out of jealousy.⁸⁴ These cases seem to act as counterexamples to Aristotle's claim that friendship (the

set under which he classified love) follows rational choice. However, examination of the characters' personalities reveals that it is not love but rather the desire for love that motivates such irrational behavior (or, as in Othello's case, the bitterness resulting from the frustrated desire for love). It is natural for Dante, Othello, and Werther to feel a desire for friendship, just as they do for other external goods (those which depend upon something other than our own intellect). Friendship's status as the "greatest external good" makes it all the more desirable, and accordingly with love (as the greatest form of friendship). Thus, the much greater (and frustrated) desire for love overpowers their capacity for self-restraint, even though they had been impervious to lesser desires. As with a substance addiction, they are unable to pry themselves from the pleasure of love. It is not the fact that they are in love that causes them to behave irrationally but rather their inability to cope with the frustration and loss of their love. Contrary to Werther's beliefs, love does not contradict rationality, and it is not necessary for a happy life. Just as Aristotle defends the rationality of love, he also defeats Werther's claims of its absolute necessity. After superimposing Werther's arguments onto Aristotle's virtues and systematic definition of friendship, it is clear that Werther's belief in the necessity of love stemmed from his treating it as the sole source of happiness in life. Werther stubbornly ignores other paths to happiness: his greed and jealousy lead him to believe that love is necessary. Aristotle successfully maintains his argument that love is rational and a luxury above and beyond the necessity of virtuous friendship.

Notes

¹"Love" has several connotations, but it will here be restricted to consideration of romantic love. Specifically, it is restricted to the emotional, excessive, and benevolent feeling as in Aristotle's concept of complete friendship.

²From an Aristotelian standpoint, an individual should desire the greatest external good more than any other external good. The extra desire may motivate the individual to seek love in extreme ways.

³While Dante, Othello, and Werther all submit themselves to their desire of love, Werther does so in a unique way by describing love as man's end. Dante claims to hold reason above love, and Othello holds justice and revenge above love, but Werther holds nothing above love. Hence the extra focus on him: analysis of Werther provides the most palpable argument for love as man's telos and is most useful when asking, "Is love necessary?"

⁴Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 146-47. All subsequent references to Aristotle refer to this work and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

⁵Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 146.

⁶Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 146.

⁷Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 147.

⁸Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 147

⁹Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 178.

¹⁰Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 147.

¹¹Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 180.

¹²Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 177.

¹³Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 179.

¹⁴Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 150.

¹⁵William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. Edward Pechter (New York: Norton, 2004), V.2.349. All subsequent references to Shakespeare refer to this work and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

¹⁶Dante, *Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), book II, 4. All subsequent references to Dante refer to this work and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

¹⁷Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. Elizabeth Mayer and Louise Bogan (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 102. All subsequent references to Goethe refer to this work and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

¹⁸Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 177.

¹⁹Dante, *Vita*, II, 4-5.

²⁰Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 145.

²¹Dante, *Vita*, III, 6.

²²Dante, *Vita*, IV, 8

²³Dante, *Vita*, XVI, 30.

²⁴Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 171

²⁵Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 182.

²⁶Dante, *Vita*, II, 5.

²⁷Dante, *Vita*, XIV, 25-26.

²⁸Dante, *Vita*, XXXI, 65.

²⁹Dante, *Vita*, XL, 80.

³⁰Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 181

³¹Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 198.

³²Shakespeare, *Othello*, I.2.290-291.

³³Shakespeare, *Othello*, III.3.37.

³⁴Shakespeare, *Othello*, III.3.167.

³⁵Shakespeare, *Othello*, III.3.322.

³⁶Shakespeare, *Othello*, IV.1.3.

³⁷Shakespeare, *Othello*, IV.1.100-65.

³⁸Shakespeare, *Othello*, IV.1.201.

³⁹Shakespeare, *Othello*, III.3.323-25.

⁴⁰Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 151.

⁴¹Shakespeare, *Othello*, III.3.359-363.

⁴²Dante, *Vita*, X, 17.

⁴³Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 76.

⁴⁴Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 154-5.

⁴⁵Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 168.

⁴⁶Shakespeare, *Othello*, III.3.270-72.

⁴⁷Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 168.

⁴⁸Goethe, *Sorrows*, 10.

⁴⁹Goethe, *Sorrows*, 10.

⁵⁰Goethe, *Sorrows*, 20.

⁵¹Goethe, *Sorrows*, 32.

⁵²Goethe, *Sorrows*, 15.

⁵³Dante, *Vita*, II.5.

- ⁵⁴Goethe, *Sorrows*, 37.
- ⁵⁵Goethe, *Sorrows*, 28.
- ⁵⁶Goethe, *Sorrows*, 102.
- ⁵⁷Goethe, *Sorrows*, 141.
- ⁵⁸Goethe, *Sorrows*, 135.
- ⁵⁹Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 165.
- ⁶⁰Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 179.
- ⁶¹Goethe, *Sorrows*, 113.
- ⁶²Goethe, *Sorrows*, 143-144.
- ⁶³Goethe, *Sorrows*, 124.
- ⁶⁴Goethe, *Sorrows*, 132.
- ⁶⁵Goethe, *Sorrows*, 62.
- ⁶⁶Goethe, *Sorrows*, 58.
- ⁶⁷Goethe, *Sorrows*, 9.
- ⁶⁸Goethe, *Sorrows*, 11.
- ⁶⁹Goethe, *Sorrows*, 13.
- ⁷⁰Goethe, *Sorrows*, 33.
- ⁷¹Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 176. (emphasis added)
- ⁷²Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 177.
- ⁷³Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 131.
- ⁷⁴Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 143.
- ⁷⁵Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 144, 154.
- ⁷⁶Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 177.
- ⁷⁷Goethe, *Sorrows*, 4.
- ⁷⁸Goethe, *Sorrows*, 78.
- ⁷⁹Goethe, *Sorrows*, 84.
- ⁸⁰Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 179, 178.
- ⁸¹Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 150,180.
- ⁸²Goethe, *Sorrows*, 47.
- ⁸³Goethe, *Sorrows*, 48.
- ⁸⁴Othello also commits suicide, but his suicide is in response to the injustice he committed against Desdemona, unlike Werther's suicide (which he claimed to be completely in the name of love).