

Love and Hate

by [Robert Lewis](#) (March 2023)



Love, Robert Rauschenberg, 1965

If string theory represents the astrophysicist's attempt to explain the subtle workings of the universe (he wisely doesn't concern himself with the recent emergence of—for the lack of a better word—intelligent life on the planet Earth), the 'strings' calling the shots as they concern human behaviour

are love and hate. One way or another, everything we do is their issue. Love and hate are the categories, the impulses through which we negotiate our happiness, decide on the things we hold on to and let go, the causes we support and reject, the choices that irrevocably define for us what is meaningful in life, and, in general, the how and on what we spend our time, our human capital. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, in *The Little Prince*, writes, "The meaning of a rose is the time I spend with it."

Since all life is characterized by movement or, pace Heraclitus, flux, and all movement requires agency, we inferentially designate love and hate as our species-specific prime movers. Love and hate direct our movement either towards or away from things. Our first volitional gestures are subsumed in love and hate: towards the mother figure who provides warmth and succour, away from a cold and indifferent universe. "Love," says philosopher Merleau-Ponty, "is an impulse that carries us towards another."

When we love, we want to possess the object of that love, we want it to endure, to flourish, we want to be in relationship with it. Our relationships with the things we love are special. We become known or identified by what we love and love to do: the clothes we wear, our commitment to a religion, a cause, a hobby, a life-style, living for work, working to live. Like implements used to clear brush, we employ love and hate to find our way to what we value in life: we hate racism so we practise tolerance; we value life for life's sake, so we lead healthful life styles; we value pleasure for its own sake so we seek out pleasurable activities; we love to be respected so we conceive of plans and exceptional projects that will confer that outcome. Much of what commands our attention in the arts results from the artist's exceptional need of love, which he pursues through his gifts and dedication.

Be as it may that love and hate are symmetrical in their weight and expression, we are constitutionally given to prefer

being in the loving rather than hating mode. There are quantifiable physiological indices that reveal we are rewarded when, consequent to our choices (and sometimes luck), we move away from hating towards loving: stress levels drop, our immune systems function more optimally, we are more socially integrated, we eat, sleep and perform better. Human nature—that unseen, uncompromising puppeteer on the strings—encourages us to remove ourselves from, overcome, avoid, neutralize or vanquish all that which causes hatred to well up in us. If I hate myself for being indifferent to my child, I am rewarded when I attend to that child, which is consistent with life's first principle: to preserve and perpetuate itself.

The hating mode implies the existence of an entity from whose effective range we want to distance ourselves, or an activity we want ourselves or others to cease or refuse. I hate a particular smell so I move away from it. I hate the loud music coming from my neighbour's adjacent flat so I ask him to turn down the volume. But what about those things we cannot move away from, and the activities of others over which we have no influence: a schoolyard bully, an abusive spouse, an organization's terror? What is my nature asking me to do concerning the persons or group or organization I rightly or wrongly hold responsible for the world's ills? What is the likelihood that I will choose to dispassionately interrogate the cause of my hatred when my instinctive response is to relieve myself of it—now?

Are we not constituted to hate so as to want to eradicate the person who has raped and murdered our child, since his removal from existence is consistent with the upkeep and conservation of a healthy and thriving gene pool? In such a seemingly open and shut case, the desire to remove is so insistent we don't apologize for it—nor is an apology expected. Nonetheless, we allow for the fact that the laws that vary from one country to another may arbitrarily describe the removal process as an act

of vengeance at one end of the scale, or justice at the other. As civilization advances, we devolve the execution of Nature's instinctive response to capital crime to institutions that have been evolved for that purpose, the result of which invariably satisfies polite society but rarely the parents whose child has been taken away, whose hatred will only and gradually subside with the passage of time. But for the jealous man who comes to hate his wife for having an affair, and either by his own hand or hired hand eliminates the cause of his hatred, he will be immediately rewarded—physiologically and psychologically—in a manner that dwarfs the consolations offered by civil society and its institutions (the long and drawn out judicial process). The failure to recognize how easily we, as a species, are moved to relieve ourselves of the things and activities that give us cause to hate leaves us perilously impervious to the culture of law and order that distinguishes mankind from the lower orders.

Despite our practised abhorrence of all activity associated with genocide—acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, racial or religious group—its historical expression has been more frequent than granted in part because the institutions dedicated to its prevention have not sufficiently understood the workings of human nature. Without exception, when one group comes to harbour hatred of another, human nature predicts that the former will at a minimum desire the elimination of the latter. What encourages the hating group to carry out the deed – and the world to sometimes turn a blind eye—is the biological disposition (the reward system) of the hater to be relieved of his hatred. It is the same sequence of genes operating when Tribe A, with only enough food and water for itself, is threatened by Tribe B, for whom that same food and water mean the difference between life and death. But when Tribe A wipes Tribe B off the map for all time, we don't call it genocide but survival of the fittest.

Since there is no escaping the DNA-fixed modalities of love and hate that continue to underwrite in dry pages the blood-soaked pageant of human history, what remains as an option is the decision to seize upon what is contingent in that one-sided contest that overwhelmingly favours human nature, so we can at least provisionally call into question the manner and degree in which love and hate operate through us. We can't change the chemistry of love and hate, but we can prepare for a more civilized, reason-based outcome if we come to understand that what we love and hate, upon closer inspection, might be the loves and hates of individuals more forceful than ourselves, or those a society or institution has imposed on us for its own ends.

When it comes to love and hate, the challenge of every individual over the course of a lifetime is to author his own values.

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