

# The Transcendental Priority of Touch: Friendship as a Foundation for a Philosophy of Touch

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**Summary:** 1. The Primacy of Touch. 2. Harassment: Ancient and Modern attempts to Legislate Touching. 3. A Religious Model for Transcendental Touch. 4. Friendship as a Foundation for a Philosophy of Touch.

**Abstract:** As the boundary between the body and the external world, *skin* has a transcendental status not possessed by other organs. Considered in this way, touch is the most fundamental sense: sight, hearing, smell, and taste can all be regarded as forms of touch. Increasing sensitivity to touching leads modern societies to intensify sexual harassment laws. Anti-touch legislation is nothing new, as a review of relevant biblical texts demonstrates. Surprisingly, the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus can serve as a model for modifying touching taboos: when employed responsibly, touch promotes moral/spiritual renewal. Correlating the five senses with five types of love, *friendship* love corresponds to the central role of touch. Touching becomes an ethical and/or legal concern only when it occurs outside the bounds of friendship.

**Keywords:** touch, boundary-conditions, sexual harassment, love, friendship.

## 1. The Primacy of Touch

What part of the human body is most significant from a philosophical perspective? Most philosophers would place the *brain* in this honored position, because mainstream science regards it as the seat of our ability to think. Some Romantics would select the *heart*, the symbolic home of human feelings.<sup>1</sup> Thoughtful ethicists might opt for the *belly* (including the digestive and reproductive organs),

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<sup>1</sup> Paul PEARSALL, *The Heart's Code* (New York: Broadway, 1998), argues convincingly that the heart itself actually thinks and remembers. This helps explain numerous otherwise inexplicable facts, such as that the heart of a person who is brain dead

because it generates the most basic, animal desires that cause us to struggle over issues of right and wrong. While these answers are plausible and surely identify crucial aspects of what it means to be human, focusing on any one of them would be too rigid. After all, many *human* desires arise out of our rational reflections on life goals, just as human *feelings* are often inextricably linked to romanticized musings on a possible sexual relationship. In this essay I therefore defend a fourth alternative.

For philosophers who regard their primary task as *discovering boundaries* (e.g., of knowledge, moral action, and beauty<sup>2</sup>), the *skin* has a special significance that is prior to that of the brain, heart, and belly, and thus gives rise to a unique set of real philosophical concerns. No thought about an empirical object can form in the brain (assuming this is where thoughts are formed) without being related to sensory input that originates primarily in the skin.<sup>3</sup> No feeling can arise in the heart (assuming this is where feelings arise) that does not also manifest itself, at least subtly, on the skin. And no desire can hold sway over the belly (assuming this is where desires reside) without the skin being involved in its quenching or resisting (or both). The skin is the meeting-point between individuals and the world. It is what Kantians might call the “transcendental” boundary<sup>4</sup> of our physical being.

Touch, the primary function of the skin, is the foundation of the bodily senses. This assertion might seem dubious, especially for those accustomed to thinking of sight as the primary sense. Yet deeper reflection reveals the latter to be mistaken. While we may accurately speak of blind people as “seeing with their hands”, we could hardly interpret such metaphorical language literally. With touch,

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sometimes continues to pump on its own.

<sup>2</sup> This is the essential feature of the “transcendental” approach to philosophy as employed by Immanuel Kant, whose philosophical method I follow here, by referring to touch as a boundary-condition and therefore as *transcendental*. Kant examined the boundary-conditions of knowledge, moral action, and beauty in his *Critiques of Pure Reason, Practical Reason, and Judgment*, respectively. For a thorough-going interpretation of his philosophy along these lines, see my book, *Kant’s System of Perspectives: An architectonic interpretation of the Critical philosophy* (Lanham: University of America, 1993); hereafter *KSP*.

<sup>3</sup> I limit this statement to thoughts about *empirical objects* because there are, of course, various kinds of thoughts about *non-empirical objects* (such as numbers) that do not seem to require any sensory input. Kant argues, for example, that mathematical truths such as  $7+5=12$  have a *synthetic a priori* status. Their “synthetic” feature means that they *are* rooted, at least in some general way, in human *sensibility*; but their “a priori” feature means that their truth does not depend on our experience of any *specific* sensory object. For a detailed discussion of Kant’s theory of a priori knowledge, see my articles, “A Priori Knowledge in Perspective: (I) Mathematics, Method and Pure Intuition”, *The Review of Metaphysics* 41.1 (September 1987), pp.3-22, and “A Priori Knowledge in Perspective: (II) Naming, Necessity and the Analytic A Posteriori”, *The Review of Metaphysics* 41.2 (December 1987), pp.255-282.

<sup>4</sup> See note 3. For Kant the term “transcendental” refers to any condition that is necessary for the possibility of experience. Interpreters generally agree that the complete set of transcendental conditions for any human endeavor (e.g., knowledge or moral action) constitutes the *boundary* between what can and cannot count as an “object” of the relevant type of experience. For a more detailed discussion of this term, see *KSP* §IV.3.

by contrast, the reverse is true: sight and the other three senses are, quite literally, forms of touch. Sight cannot take place until light waves<sup>5</sup> *touch* the retina of an eye; hearing begins when sound waves *touch* the ear drum; taste and smell likewise require the sensing organs (the tongue and olfactory glands) to have direct contact with — to *touch* — the sensed object or the particles it emits. We do not typically regard these other four senses as forms of touch because each involves a sensing organ located *within* the body. The word “touch” normally refers to contact between something in the external world and our skin, whereas sight, hearing, smell, and taste require something in the external world to penetrate the body’s boundary (i.e., to go deeper than the level of the skin) by contacting something inside our body.

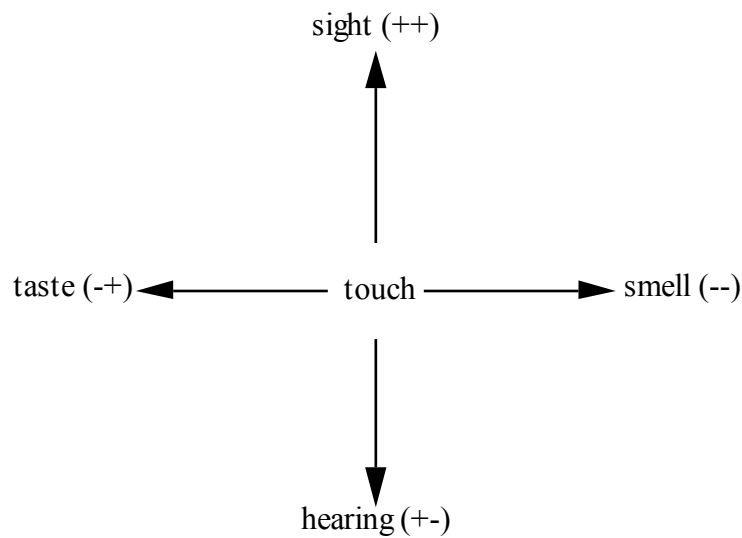
The logical relationship between the four senses that function as secondary (internalized) forms of touch can be depicted as a perfect second-level analytic relation.<sup>6</sup> Let the wave-nonwave<sup>7</sup> distinction define the first “level” (corresponding to the first “+” or “-”, respectively, in each component shown in Figure 1); the second level (corresponding to the second “+” or “-” in each component) then distinguishes between senses whose organs are active (+) or passive (-) in selecting input. A sense is active if the body has a built-in mechanism (such as the eyelid, for sight) that can close off the relevant organ in order to limit input from the outside world and passive if the body has no such functionality (e.g., the ears cannot flap shut if we decide to limit our ability to hear something). As such, seeing and tasting are both active, because we can shut our eyelids and close our mouth, whereas hearing and smelling are passive, because we cannot use our ears and nose to plug themselves but must employ external intervention (such as the fingers) to block out unwanted sensory input. Taken together, the relations between the four secondary senses can be mapped as follows, locating touch at the center to indicate its primary status as the core of all sensation:

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<sup>5</sup> Light, of course, can be understood either in terms of waves or particles (photons). To facilitate a more systematic arrangement in Figure 1, I focus on the wave aspect of light. This should not be taken as a denial of its dual nature, but only indicates how light (being itself invisible) *appears* to operate in common sense perception.

<sup>6</sup> See especially Chapter 5 of *The Tree of Philosophy*<sup>4</sup> (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press) and *KSP* §III.3. I define a second-level analytic relation as two opposing twofold oppositions that combine to create four logically possible alternatives. The “+” and “-” symbols generate a logical apparatus for representing these oppositions systematically, which I call “the Geometry of Logic”.

<sup>7</sup> I use the term “nonwave” rather than “particle” because light can *also* be viewed as particles (see note 6), whereas taste and smell are *not* also waves functions.



**Figure 1: The Five Senses**

Recognizing the primacy of touch among the five senses can elucidate why skin-to-skin contact between persons is such a sensitive<sup>8</sup> issue in most cultures. When two people touch each other, they *share the same space* at the point where their skin comes together.<sup>9</sup> This is why even a slight touch can attract a person’s full attention, serving as a meaningful expression of some emotional or intellectual message. Whereas a picture may be worth a thousand words, a touch is often priceless. Between persons who are mutually open to the language of touch, it can be used as an appropriate means of communicating the intimacy of deep friendship, without being regarded as sexually intrusive. As I shall argue in section 4, with the help of an application of Figure 1, friends can share themselves physically at

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<sup>8</sup> This word has an interesting array of meanings. A “sensitive” person may refer to someone acutely aware of what is happening to one’s own *skin*, or to someone closely in touch with one’s own spiritual well-being (who can, as a result, more readily come into meaningful contact with other people on a spiritual level). By contrast, being “sensitive” can have negative connotations, referring to someone whose feelings are very easily hurt. Likewise, skin can be *too* sensitive, so that everything we touch causes pain or irritation.

Significantly, the word used for becoming more consciously aware of our skin’s condition, becoming “sensitized”, can also apply to one’s moral/spiritual condition. Just as people tend to remain unaware of their inward condition most of the time, unless they engage in special activities that focus attention explicitly in that direction, so also people usually remain unaware of the outward sensations being registered by their skin. *Some* degree of unconscious functioning is a necessary characteristic of a psychologically healthy life, just as it is for healthy skin.

The human spirit functions paradoxically as both the dividing line and the bridge between God and humanity. (I have explained this further in chapter 2 of my book, *Dreams of Wholeness*<sup>2</sup> [Hong Kong: Philopsychy, 2008]), where I introduce the more specific terms “positive spirit” and “negative spirit” as a way of conceptualizing this paradox.) The same is true of the skin: it both separates us from and unites us to all that is outside the body—the physical world as well as other people.

<sup>9</sup> For a ground-breaking analysis of the psychological and cultural implications of the skin, see Ashley MONTAGU, *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

a level appropriate to the depth of their relationship. The most intimate form of touching, sexual intercourse, takes this to the highest extreme by merging one's whole being with another.<sup>10</sup>

A negative side-effect of the technological advances of “westernized”, post-industrial society is that they gradually erode the natural way people traditionally tended to touch each other; touching then becomes a “problem” that feeds many of our worst social maladies, from alienation and psychological illness to suicide and divorce, and the only solution appears to be the institution of laws prohibiting unwanted sexual contact. The remainder of this essay uses biblical texts as a springboard for philosophical insight, in an effort to understand why touching has become such a difficult social, ethical, and legal issue throughout the post-Christian westernized world. While my main goal is to reach a philosophically sound conclusion regarding the role of touching in personal relationships, I shall appeal along the way to various religious and theological perspectives on sexual harassment, in hopes of gleaning insights that might provide a new understanding of how touching can be ethically responsible without sacrificing the genuine advances provided by the legal safeguards already in place in most countries around the world.

## **2. Harassment: Ancient and Modern attempts to Legislate Touching**

Touching and being touched are vital to maintaining health, both emotionally and physically.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, many people living in contemporary societies find their experience of touching tends to decrease as time goes by. One explanation for this paradoxical situation is that touching has become excessively objectified as part of sexual harassment legislation. The more laws we institute relating to sexual harassment, the more aware and concerned people become of the *dangers* of expressing themselves in this manner, so the less likely people are to risk touching others.

Sexual harassment laws are not as new as some people might think. The *term* is new, but the *idea*

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<sup>10</sup> Sexual intercourse is in a different category from the “touching” I am examining here, because when people have sex, the outer boundaries of their skin *penetrate* each other in certain specific places. This is more than just touching; calling sex “the touch of touches” would be one way to express this element of transcendence, or of breaking through the boundary that other forms of touching merely acknowledge.

<sup>11</sup> This claim has been justified by so much empirical research that the evidence hardly needs to be cited. See Montagu's *Touching* for numerous examples.

has been around for almost as long as human beings have been aware of sexual difference. In the biblical creation story, after God tells Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, Eve misrepresents God's command as a prohibition against inappropriate touching: she tells the serpent that God had said "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, *and you must not touch it*, or you will die" (Gen. 3:3); yet the text of the original command (Gen. 2:16-17) only disallows *eating* the fruit, not merely touching it. This example may seem trivial, as it does not mention touching between persons. Nevertheless, it is not irrelevant, because theologians from the early Church Fathers down to the modern day have often regarded the forbidden fruit as a symbol of sexual relations. Moreover, Eve's intensification of God's command illustrates a common human tendency to associate touching with transgression. Even to *touch* the taboo fruit would be to share the same space with it, so she assumes that this would be just as bad as ingesting it.

The ancient Hebrews regarded touching as such a powerful act that it can transmit holiness (see e.g., Ex. 29:37; 30:29; Lev. 6:18,27; Num. 4:15) or defilement (see e.g., Lev. 5:2-3; 7:19-21; 11:18-47; 12:4; 15:5-28; 22:4-6) from one object or person to another. The effect of touching can be so strong that it is sometimes put on a par with sexual intercourse, as when Proverbs 6:29 depicts, perhaps metaphorically, just *touching* another man's wife as making a man worthy of punishment. Starting with the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18), many Old Testament passages reiterate a sanction against touching those one has no legal right (e.g., through marriage) to touch.

Modern sexual harassment laws depend on the same core assumption as these Old Testament laws: that morality can be enforced through externally-legislated norms. Ethicists and lawmakers, in their efforts to help protect people from unwanted touching, have been mainly responsible for the increasingly widespread legislation concerning sexual harassment. In such cases, of course, harassment can occur even without literal touching. Sometimes, verbal abuse alone constitutes a serious form of harassment. In most cases, however, the point when an annoyance (e.g., merely verbal innuendo) becomes actual harassment is the point when the sacred space of a person's *skin* is violated by

unwanted touching. In cases where the harassment is merely verbal, the words typically incorporate a symbolic or spiritual meaning that “touches” the victim involuntarily: when one person says something in an effort to “touch” (influence) the “heart” (emotions) of another person who is not open to being touched, the latter is likely to feel harassed. In this sense, harassment (whether or not it is sexual) is essentially a touch-centered issue.

The point of the observation made at the beginning of this section can now be expressed more precisely: the enactment and enforcement of sexual harassment laws tends to make people more aware of the *dangers* of touching, but typically without educating them on its *benefits*. Moreover, touching has another, deeper aspect that an over-emphasis on sexual harassment threatens to inhibit—to the detriment of some of the highest values of human life.

### **3. A Religious Model for Transcendental Touch**

Although the Old Testament often portrays touching as an act of defilement, it also views touching as a means of transmitting divine power to others (see e.g., Jer. 1:9; Dan. 10:18-19). The New Testament brings this latter theme to the forefront: touching becomes one of the most powerful tools Jesus uses to restore sick people to health (see e.g., Matt. 8:3,15; 9:20-1,29; 14:36; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 3:10; 5:27-34; 6:56; 7:33; 8:22-25; Luke 5:13; 6:19; 8:44-48; 22:51). He uses the power of touch not only to heal the sick, but also to calm his followers when they are afraid (Matt. 17:6-8), to bless babies and small children (Mark 10:13; Luke 18:15-16), and even to raise the dead (Luke 7:14-15). Indeed, the restorative power of touch was so highly regarded in Jesus’ day that in one case a woman believes she can be healed (and reportedly *is* healed) merely by touching Jesus’ *clothing* (Matt. 9:20-22)! The early church followed in Jesus’ footsteps by using “the laying on of hands” as one of the primary methods of communicating the spiritual power of love, brotherhood, and divine healing to fellow believers (see e.g., Acts 6:6; 8:17; 2 Tim. 1:6; cf. Luke 4:40) — though they did recognize the need to exercise caution (see e.g., 1 Tim. 5:22).

One of the most touching stories in the Gospels comes in Luke 7:36-39f, where a prostitute tenderly washes Jesus' feet with her tears, then pours perfume on them (cf. John 12:3). The scene takes place at the house of a respected religious leader, a Pharisee, who naturally condemns the action. But Jesus, far from rejecting the woman's touch, welcomes it as a spiritual symbol: an anointing that prepares his body for impending death. On the night before his crucifixion Jesus performs a similar action by washing his disciples' feet (John 13:4-5). These are just two of many examples of how the biblical text portrays Jesus' spiritual power as being intimately bound up with his willingness to touch and be touched.

Ironically, religious people nowadays (even those who claim to follow Jesus) often tend to be so closed to a biblical appreciation for the value of touch that if they saw someone doing today what the Bible reports Jesus as having done, they would be as shocked as were the religious elite in Jesus' time. For the Bible portrays Jesus as exemplifying a radical freedom that deeply offended the Pharisees and other respected religious leaders. Jesus and his followers broke some of the most important religious laws, including several relating to the all-important Sabbath rest (Matt. 12:1-14). The leaders responded by planning how they could use such actions to have Jesus put to death (Matt. 12:14). Instead of giving in and submitting to the Pharisees' misuse of laws, Jesus began speaking all the more boldly and openly against anyone who tries to put political authority in the place where the moral authority of the human spirit should be (see e.g., Matt. 23). The way Jesus and his followers touched each other would be at least as offensive to modern religious sensitivities. While the claim of some gay Christians, that Jesus had a homosexual relationship with his favorite disciple, John (who might have been the one referred to as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" [John 13:23-25]), is probably misleading in our contemporary context, the text certainly does indicate that Jesus and John *touched each other affectionately*. Sincere religious believers have been cut off from communion with their fellow congregants for committing no more serious a "crime" than this!

Turning to the writings of St. Paul, we do not find such a detailed record of how he conducted his ministry; still, various passages do portray him as rejecting the overly-harsh, anti-touch aspects of



his legalistic upbringing. For example, in Colossians 2:20-23 we read:

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! *Do not touch!*”? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Just as this passage refers specifically to touching forbidden foods, Romans 14 puts one of the Ten Commandments, keeping the Sabbath, on a par with eating sacrificed meat. The principle defended in such passages can be adopted as an essential feature of a philosophy of touch: people should not constrain themselves with artificial touch taboos, but should follow Jesus’ example by manifesting a loving spirit through appropriate expressions of affection.

But what can prevent this “freedom in Christ” (Gal. 5:1) from unwittingly turning those being touched into victims of sexual harassment? If anti-harassment laws “lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence”, how can citizens of post-Christian cultures in the twenty-first century model their relationships on Jesus’ example in touching others, without the risk of transgressing the proper interpersonal boundaries that such laws are designed to protect? To answer such questions, we need to reflect more philosophically on the fundamental boundary-conditions of a philosophy of touch.

#### **4. Friendship as a Foundation for a Philosophy of Touch**

Without attempting to outline a full-fledged philosophy of touch in this brief essay, I shall conclude this study by introducing a metaphor that can serve as a *foundation* for a more complete treatment of the topic. The metaphor correlates the five senses, as depicted in Figure 1, with five basic forms of love. The correlations I propose here are intended to be suggestive; much further analysis would be needed in order to verify that this way of articulating the metaphor is optimal.

By “love” I mean the desire and/or (if possible) the choice to *be present with* another person through shared activities or actions performed in hopes of respectfully prompting a reciprocal

response.<sup>12</sup> As such, love manifests itself in many different forms. Out of these, five of the most common are: sexual attraction, kinship (i.e., blood relations), friendship, marriage, and divine love (i.e., God's love for a person or a person's love for God).

The five senses presented in section 1 can be metaphorically correlated to these five manifestations of love. Consider sight. Sight requires *light* in order to function. Perhaps because it is portrayed as appearing first in the biblical account of creation (Gen. 1:3), light is a common metaphor for God's nature (e.g., 1 John 1:5). Of the five senses, only sight directly depends on light; sight is therefore an apt metaphor for divine love. Just as we can impede sight simply by closing our eyes even if there is plenty of light, so also human beings can choose to reject divine love even when it is freely available for them to accept. Experiencing divine love, like seeing, requires active participation: *each person must open his or her own eyes*. Just as light can be understood in terms of two seemingly incompatible models (as a wave as well as a particle), so also divine love is universal in its scope, even though it is somehow focused (at least potentially) on each individual.

Like divine love, kinship is fundamentally universal. They differ, however, in that kinship (being involuntary at the outset) has a *passive* origin: we do not choose our blood relatives. Moreover, families are (or should be) the primary source for learning an *oral tradition*. Divine love and the love of human family members are therefore polar opposites: the latter corresponds to the sense of hearing, which (as we saw above) is passive but wave-like. Although technological advances over the past century gradually transferred much of this responsibility to radio and television, and from there to computers and the internet — so that nowadays most people can feel *at home* as long as they have their cell phone in hand! — families should still be the most significant context for sharing love that focuses on *hearing*.

That sexual attraction is enhanced more by *smell* than by any other sense<sup>13</sup> might be disputed, especially by those with a poor sense of smell. But recent research into the role of pheromones in the process of attraction confirms this correlation. Both smell and sexual arousal share an extreme form of

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<sup>12</sup> This description of love is adapted from John McMurty's essay, "Sex, Love, and Friendship", in Alan SOBLE (ed.), *Sex, Love, and Friendship* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 169-183. This book's many other articles provide an impressive range of philosophical viewpoints on issues closely related to the present topic.

<sup>13</sup>The traditional Chinese maxim that the size of a person's nose is in direct proportion to that person's level of sexual potency provides anecdotal support for this correlation.

individuality: what pleases one person sometimes repulses others. Moreover, sexual attraction and smell share the *formal* characteristic of being largely passive responses to stimuli: just as we have to employ external intervention (i.e., to plug our nose) in order to avoid smelling a nearby odor, people (especially men) can experience sexual arousal as a virtually automatic reflex. Likewise, just as a certain smell enters the nose in the form of particles, so also sexual arousal is not universal, but specific to persons who are perceived to be attractive at the time. Thus, the other four manifestations of love relate to sexual attraction in a way comparable to the way the other four senses relate to *smell*.

Marriage, like taste, is first and foremost a matter of choice. Even in traditional societies that maintain a system of arranged marriage, whereby parents consult with other parents to choose a spouse for their children, a *choice* must still be made before a wedding can happen. Similarly, we have to open our mouth and actively put something into it in order to taste anything. Just as tasting is a particle-based sensation (i.e., it requires particles of matter to touch the tongue), so also marriage is normally regarded as an exclusive relationship between individuals.<sup>14</sup>

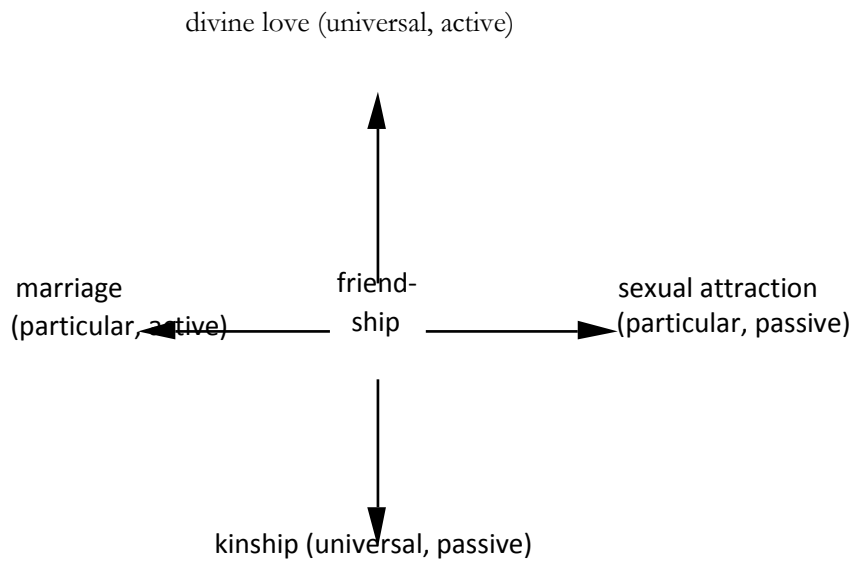
The foregoing correspondences suggest that the remaining form of love (i.e., friendship) may relate most closely to the remaining type of sensation (i.e., touch). This turns out to be particularly appropriate because, as I have argued in detail elsewhere by examining Aristotle's theory of friendship (see *WL*, Chapter 10), the other four forms of love are (or should be) *species of friendship*, just as the other four senses are species of touch. With this in mind, we can initially summarize the foregoing

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<sup>14</sup> Although marriage is always an exclusive relationship, the common assumption that the westernized world's preference for monogamy is grounded in the Bible is ultimately untenable. The Old Testament *assumes* a person may have more than one (dyadic) marital relationship (see e.g., Deut. 21:15). To interpret the seventh commandment (against adultery) as forbidding *any* affectionate touching outside of a monogamous marriage relationship ignores this historical context; those who believe that the Bible unilaterally teaches monogamy therefore tend to ignore the question of whether any genuine love or fidelity can exist between two persons in an extra-marital relationship. Such interpretations impose foreign cultural presuppositions onto texts that were written at a time when multiple marriage was both common and legal.

If we interpret the Ten Commandments in the way Jesus did, as *fundamentally* addressing questions of the heart, then the command to avoid adultery forbids *sex without fidelity*. Some New Testament texts do recommend a "one spouse each" policy (see e.g. Mk. 10:11-12); but in most cases these are presented as cultural accommodations whose purpose is to avoid becoming a stumbling block (see note 16). This policy is therefore recommended in 1 Tim. 2:3,12 and Titus 1:6 as a *rule of prudence* to be followed by church *leaders* because of their public position. Likewise, the advice in 1 Corinthians 6:12-7:6, concerning the acceptability of marriage for those who cannot live a purely celibate life, comes immediately *after* St. Paul's "Everything is permissible" maxim and is immediately *followed* by the caveat: "I say this as a concession, not as a command." Without going into detail here, let it suffice to say that a case could be made for defending *some types* of multi-partner relationship (i.e., what I elsewhere call "polyfidelity") as consistent with biblical principles. I explore some implications of this possibility in Chapter 9 of my book, *The Waters of Love* (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press, 2003); hereafter *WL*.

correlations by mapping the five forms of love onto the same cross used in Figure 1, as follows:



*Figure 2: Forms of Love*

This correlation between friendship and touch suggests numerous implications regarding the proper role of touching between friends. For instance, the deeper a given friendship is, the more intimately the two people can communicate nonverbally through touching without transgressing any legitimate ethical principle. Moreover, if we regard friendship (broadly defined) as a necessary requirement for love, then a marriage license on its own does not automatically sanction intimate touching between spouses. A wife who forces her husband to have sexual relations, without doing so on the moral/spiritual basis of a *friendship*, may be committing a more ethically-questionable act than a pair of long-term (unmarried) friends who mutually choose to express the depth of their spiritual commitment through an appropriately intimate form of touching.

Admittedly, this extended comparison between the five senses and five types of love raises as many questions as it answers. In addition to the issues already addressed, readers with religious commitments (who should be most open to viewing Jesus as a model) are likely to have concerns over issues relating to marital fidelity and sexual promiscuity. Addressing such concerns is beyond the scope

of this essay; inasmuch as I have dealt with these and related concerns at length in *WL*, we can for our present purposes let it suffice to say that biblical writers are far less dogmatic about what spiritually well-tuned people can and cannot do with their bodies than is often assumed. Biblical writers depict human beings as divinely created, *embodied persons*; this provides an apt model to explain why a wise use of the body in personal relationships can be a source of tremendous healing. A religious person's hope of being "touched" by God's love is more likely to be realized in a cultural context where friends permit each other to touch and be touched in the same unassuming way that members of a close-knit family share appropriate levels of affection without the threat of feeling harassed. Just as the four senses that are focused in the head all share a transcendental grounding as forms of touch, so also the four types of love that are normally considered to be most intense must function as forms of friendship, if they are to maintain their status as genuine types of love.

The model proposed here could be used to establish guidelines for how and when (or even *if*) people should appeal to laws concerning sexual harassment to settle problems that may inevitably arise in regard to unwanted touching. Here I have merely hinted at how this might be done. A fully developed philosophy of touch would need to pay close attention to numerous more specific issues that are beyond this scope of this introductory essay. For example, a key question would be: at what level of intimacy does explicit, verbal consent by two friends become a necessary requirement for morally unobjectionable touching? Furthermore, how will those who follow this model of moderating one's level of touching according to the level of friendship in any given relationship avoid the danger that, in exercising one's freedom to touch in this way, one might inadvertently have a negative effect on those who regard the rules and norms of their society as religiously binding in a more rigid way?<sup>15</sup> Our answer to such questions should be guided by a twofold insight: we should feel free to exchange appropriate expressions of tenderness with those who are or want to be friends; yet utmost restraint is required when (or *if*) touching anyone who is *not* a friend or even in the company of others whose

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<sup>15</sup> Romans 14:13-21 refers to this kind of situation as becoming "a stumbling block", and warns that a prerequisite for the exercise of radical freedom is that a person's actions must not lead others astray. Likewise, Jesus ominously warns that a person who touches inappropriately, or in a way that leads *others* to touch inappropriately, is better off *without* (for example) hands and eyes (Matt. 5:29-30; 18:6-9).

sensitivities are likely to be more rigid.

This suggests the following definition: sexual harassment is touching or trying to touch another person (using *any* of the five senses depicted in Figure 1) when a corresponding level of friendship does not exist as a basis for such touching, so that the (prospective) recipient of the touch does not welcome the other person's advances. An advantage of this definition is that it resists the tendency to adopt a one-side formulation that makes the alleged "harassee" into the only victim. For it acknowledges the social reality that the harasser may be in a state of friendship-deprivation — at least toward the person who believes he or she is being harassed, and probably more generally as well. This is not meant to excuse the harasser, and certainly not to blame the victim for the problematic situation; rather, this new perspective is meant help anyone involved in such a situation to see it in a more human light, in terms *other than* as a simplistic and one-sided legal issue.

Given the above definition, the best and only sure way to end a case of sexual harassment without resorting to the application of legal force is for the two parties to become friends. For this challenging option puts the responsibility for changing such an unhealthy situation onto *both* parties. If the two people do genuinely become friends — a requirement that may be no easier for the harasser to meet than the harassee! — then *either* the harasser will come to realize that his or her advances are inappropriate and (out of respect for the friendship) will stop attempting to touch where touch is unwanted, *or* the harassee, recognizing that this newfound friend really does have good motives, will allow the touching to take place in the hope of receiving the spiritual benefits that loving touches bring. Obviously, this ideal solution does not solve the underlying problem, if the harasser and the harassee are, for whatever reason, *unable* to be friends. In that case, the foregoing argument implies that the relationship should be broken off altogether: if one person cannot help but interpret another person's gestures of friendship as unwelcomed harassment, then the friendly thing to do is to walk away. And the likelihood that this may sometimes be too difficult a choice for a person to bear is the reason that we still need to formulate laws to cover such situations that involve harassment; the best way of formulating such laws, however, is beyond the scope of this essay. Not beyond our scope, but at the

very core of our concern, is to establish a way of thinking about touch so that the existence of such laws does not prevent people from taking the risk of touching others.

Could the foregoing, friendship-based model of touching provide an effective alternative to the law courts when issues of harassment rear their ugly head? Or is it an impossible ideal—a dream that could never become a reality in contemporary societies, now that we are more than halfway through the second decade of the third millennium C.E.? Do the roots of this model in a religious tradition that many now regard as outdated render it irrelevant? Even if these potential impediments do not prove to be prohibitive, would people nevertheless be too easily misunderstood if they began putting it into practice? Could the risk of such misunderstanding be worth taking, for religious and non-religious persons alike? While I have not answered these questions here — again, I fully recognize that this study raises far more questions than it answers! — I nevertheless hope to have demonstrated how important it is for every sensitive person to think seriously about how a greater openness to touching within the appropriate context of a friendship might solve many socially-generated problems that no laws can ever solve.