

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

Mortimer J. Adler

### **PART IX**

**Questions About Love and Friendship**

**93. THE KINDS OF LOVE**

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*The poets tell us that love makes the world go round and that love conquers all. But what is this thing called love? Is it passion, affection, admiration? Are there various kinds of love? What do they have in common that makes us call them love?*

A. L. R.

*Dear A. L. R.,*

Most of us when we hear the word “love” think immediately of the way of a man with a maid. This is certainly a very real and evident form of love. It is not only the staple of great dramas, Hollywood movies, and romantic fiction. It is also one of the basic expressions of wedded union, of the permanent bond between two persons that makes them one flesh.

But this is only one of many forms of love. There is not only the love of David for Bathsheba. There is also the love between David and Jonathan, and the broken-hearted love of David for “Absalom, my son, my son.” There is also the love of Plato for Socrates, the love between Jesus and the disciples, the love between persons who belong to a religious or intellectual fellowship. Men love their native or adopted land, their family, their ideals, and their God.

We often feel vexed that we must use the same word for so many different kinds of relationships. The Greeks had not one word for it, but three: *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*, which may be roughly translated as “friendship,” “desire,” and “charity.” *Philia* is the Jonathan-and-David kind of love, a comradeship or fellowship, usually, though not always, between persons of the same sex. *Eros* is the desirous, longing kind of love that is satisfied only by the possession of the loved object. For us it normally signifies the sexual love between a man and a woman. *Agape* is religious love, both between man and God and between man and man. It is the love enjoined in the Bible toward God and neighbor, following the pattern of God’s redemptive love for man. The emphasis is on self-giving, on devotion and service, rather than on attaining some finite satisfaction.

These three types of love, even the erotic, are directed toward someone or something else. We are tempted to say that love is always for another. But what about self-love? Does not the injunction to love your neighbor as yourself imply that you can and should love yourself? Yet moralists and psychoanalysts frown on

self-centered love as a kind of perversity and immaturity, and religion counsels us to abandon our petty self-concern. Perhaps there is a right and wrong form of self-love, and we are enjoined to love not our petty, grasping egos but what is true and good in ourselves.

It is not easy to separate the three kinds of love. For instance, in France lovers call each other “my friend,” and no one can deny that there can be true friendship and comradeship between lovers. There can also be real self-sacrifice and devotion in romantic love. Erotic love is perhaps harder to pin down than religious love, for it seems to include everything from the trivial to the sublime. It runs all the way from the puppy love of youngsters nibbling at the bonbons of amorous delight to the solid bond between two adults who have pledged themselves to one another.

Freud, of course, thinks that sexual or erotic love, derived originally from animal instincts, is the basic type of love, and that all other types are refined forms of it. I disagree with this. I believe that love essentially is good will—thinking well of others and wishing them well. It is a state of the will, not of the animal passions. Even in its earthiest form it is a giving as well as a taking. People who cannot give of themselves can never know love.

The real problem about erotic love arises from the strange fusion of animal passion, aesthetic sensibility, and the loving will that makes it what it is. Perhaps this is just another paradoxical characteristic of that strange mixture of things—man. Even in what seem to be animal enjoyments he is at his most human. Erotic love is specifically human love, and in it man may find the way to a deeper love and reality. Sexual love should be the gateway, not the barrier, to human fulfillment.

## 94. LOVE AND LUST

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*What is the difference between love and lust? I suppose the distinction would lie in the stress on giving or taking. But isn't there a large element of wanting and of pleasure in the fulfillment of desire in most of the relations which we commonly include in "love"? Certainly this seems to be true in the love relation between a man and a woman. Is sexual intercourse an expression of "love" or of "lust" or of both?*

*D. J.*

*Dear D. I.,*

When St. Augustine was asked, “What is time?” he replied: “If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to someone who does ask me, I do not know.” To define love is equally difficult. Freud, near the end of his long life confessed: “Up to the present I have not found the courage to make any broad statements on the essence of love and I think that our knowledge is not sufficient to do so. . . . We really know very little about love.” However, we can gain some insight by considering the views of various philosophers, poets and psychiatrists, all of whom have contributed to an understanding, if not a solution, of the problem—what is love?

When a man and woman fall in love they desire each other, but not in the same way that they desire food or water. Human sexuality takes two directions: there is sex in the service of love, and there is sex: divorced from love (i.e., lust). To desire a person as one desires food or drink is lust—a completely selfish desire. But, sexual love implies a fusion of soul and body. It seeks to realize itself in a union which involves knowing, understanding, compassion and self-sacrifice.

We may never be able to tell which comes first—“liking” or “wanting.” Does love spring from desire, or desire from love? Aristotle felt that benevolence comes first; Freud felt that sexual love grows out of desire. While the question is perhaps insoluble, it does seem to make a practical difference which way love does happen. If sex comes first, the union is likely to be short-lived; if love comes first, a more stable, fruitful union seems likely because, among other things, a more intelligent choice has been made.

The observations of the poets and the clinical experience of the psychoanalysts and psychiatrists seem to confirm this point. “Love and sex often coincide,” writes Theodore Reik, the well-known psychiatrist, “but coincidence is not evidence of identity . . . There is no doubt among psychoanalysts that there is sex without love, sex ‘straight.’ [But] they vehemently deny that there can be love without sex.” Another psychiatrist, Erich Fromm, the author of *The Art of Loving*, warns us: “Since erotic love is the most deceptive form of love there is. . . it becomes important to distinguish sexual desire *per se* from love. If erotic love is not also brotherly love, the union is likely to be orgiastic, transitory.”

The great poets support these views. Indeed, fascinated by the subject, they long ago anticipated some of the findings of the psy-

chologists. If they fail to come up with a precise definition, they do at least discern some of the attributes of human love.

Love implies passion, or as Milton put it in *Paradise Lost*:

... with new Wine intoxicated both  
They swim in mirth, and fansie that they feel  
Divinitie within them breeding wings  
Wherewith to scorn the Earth.

Love implies constancy, or as Shakespeare declared:

Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds.

Above all, love implies union, a union of body and soul, or as John Donne expressed it:

Love's mysteries in souls do grow  
But yet the body is his book.

According to an ancient Greek myth, man was originally a composite being, half male and half female. A capricious god split him in two, with the result that the separated male and female have sought ever since to become reunited with the "other half." Modern psychologists make the same point in a somewhat different way when they say that "the deepest need of man is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness."

## 95. LOVE OF THINGS AND OF PERSONS

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*There are apparently many objects of love. "I love coffee, I love tea," the popular song begins, before noting the love of boys for girls. But isn't there something essentially different between the love for a beverage, a smoke, money, fame, etc. and the love for another person? Does it lie in the difference between a purely selfish and a partly benevolent emotion? Or is it a matter of a one-sided as versus a mutual relationship? Just what is this thing called "love"?*

*B. B.*

*Dear B. B.,*

Descartes noted in *The Passions of the Soul* that the term “love” may be applied to “the passions of an ambitious man for glory, of a drunkard for wine, of a brutal man for a woman he wants to rape, of a man of honor for his friend or his mistress and of a good father for his children.” Since Descartes defines love as the will to join oneself to something or someone, he considers all these passions as forms of love. However, he makes one essential distinction.

The glory seeker, the miser, the drunkard and the rapist, he says, only seek possession of an object for their own use and pleasure without regard to the good of the object. In this kind of love, even human persons are treated as mere instruments of use or pleasure. The friend, the lover and the good father, on the other hand, wish for the good of those they love. In this kind of love, the lover will often sacrifice his own interests for the sake of the beloved.

However, Descartes rejects the traditional distinction between “concupiscent” and “benevolent” love, because he thinks that in actual psychological reality, the two are always intertwined. We feel benevolent toward what we wish to be united with and we also desire it, “if we judge that it is good to possess it . . . in some way other than through the will.” It would seem then, that the merely instrumental relations are not really love, except in some formal or empty sense.

The kind of love embodied in the lover-mistress relation is sexual or erotic love. Many people regard it as the definitive form of love, with all other forms of love as metaphors or sublimations of it. Others regard it as mere self-satisfaction, and hence, not really love at all. Tolstoy, a notable opponent of the erotic in his later years, called it “this false feeling that men call love, and which no more resembles love than the life of an animal resembles the life of a man.”

However, the attempt to reduce sexual love to mere selfish gratification meets with some difficulty. In the first place, it is an important element of conjugal love, upon which the family, that model of benevolent union, is founded. Secondly, even on the physical and aesthetic level, mutuality and benevolence are essential for the ideal consummation of sexual love. Thirdly, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to separate the physical and the spiritual in such an intimate human relation.

Something of this inseparability is suggested by the word used in the Bible for the sexual relation. The word is “knowing.” Perhaps this indicates that in this, as in all true love relations, persons come to know one another in their fullness and uniqueness. And in so doing they may also come to know themselves. Many persons first realize their own essence and worth in loving and being loved by another person.

Cynics and pundits call such personal knowledge in erotic love “idealization” or “over-valuation” of the love object. But perhaps what they call “idealization” is simply realization of what exists potentially in the beloved person and is first actualized in love. This may be true also on the external level of physical beauty. That the homely face of a person we love appears beautiful to us is a common human experience.

An instance of this is provided in the recent novel, *A New Life*, by Bernard Malamud, in which the hero falls in love with a woman who is almost completely devoid of the pectoral development which is currently regarded as essential to feminine charm. Yet he comes to find her flat-chestedness beautiful and right, for it is an attribute of the woman he loves.

## 96. THE MARITAL STATE

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*Marriage seems to have a remarkable enduringness as a human institution, in spite of all the stresses and strains it has been subjected to by our present society. Is there something about the very nature of marriage that accounts for this? Have previous societies also regarded marriage as essential to the fulfillment of life, and singleness as an abnormality? Did they connect love with marriage as we do?*

*J. M.*

*Dear J. M.,*

Ancient and primitive man regarded marriage, like birth and death, as one of the decisive moments in human life. It was accordingly attended by the most solemn religious ceremonies, to mark the crucial “jump” that is involved in the transition from the single to the wedded state. Through solemnly sanctioned marriage, the individual was empowered to create the small community of the family

and thus, to join actively in maintaining the great community of the race.

We would like to think that we are more matter-of-fact about marriage, and not affected by any sense of awe at the supposed prospect of “a new life.” But the figure of the nervous and apprehensive bridegroom still seems to be with us, and our jokes about weddings and about marriage in general may indicate something of our own anxious awareness of the potent change involved. Perhaps marriage, like adolescence, can be made into something automatic in modern society, but human nature may prove to be refractory to such a transformation.

In the revered beginnings of our own religious tradition, the union of man and woman is held to be essential to the attainment of full humanity as well as to the continuance of the human race. “Male and female created he them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam [Man], in the day when they were created.” The association of this basic idea with the precept to increase and multiply was traditionally understood to imply a divine command to marriage—God’s first commandment to man.

In ancient Judaism, not to be married was considered abnormal and wrong. “An unmarried man is not a man in the full sense,” says the Talmud. A similar attitude was prevalent in ancient Greece and Rome, where remaining unmarried was considered an impious affront to the family gods. Moreover, celibacy seems to have been forbidden by law or subject to certain penalties in ancient Rome, in Sparta and other Greek city-states. The ancient attitude was that the individual has no right to halt the transmission of the family and racial life that has been handed on to him.

It is hard for us today to grasp this collective or communal attitude towards marriage. We tend to think of it almost wholly in terms of individual choice, preference and decision, as a personal agreement between individuals rather than as a solemn event involving the whole community. And, above all, we associate it with romantic love, agreeing with the popular song that “love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage.”

That romantic love should normally be fulfilled within the marriage relation is a comparatively recent idea in Western society, one which has flamed into popularity only within the past centuries. Certainly it would have astonished the ancients, who either did not make such satisfaction a central concern of their lives, or sought it outside of marriage.



Hegel, the German philosopher who dealt with all things systematically, has provided us with a systematic view of love and marriage. According to this, the natural union of male and female to carry on the race attains the ethical quality of marriage when it is based on the free consent of the two parties and culminates “in their love, trust and common sharing in their entire existence as individuals.” But marriage involves something far wider than individual fulfillment, for it is the first step in the making of a family, the primary form of the human community, that is ultimately fulfilled in the great society of the state. Hegel associates the substantial ethical bond of marriage with what he calls “ethico-legal love,” as opposed to the merely subjective feeling, desire, or interest which we often call “love.” Therefore, he considers the formal wedding ceremony an indispensable element of a real marriage, as a necessary social sanction, not as a mere superfluous formality.

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*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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