



THE THEORY OF LOVE

Otto Bird

Love, at least in the writings about it, continued to provide me with a subject of study after I left Ann Arbor. It supplied me with the dissertation topic for which I received the doctoral degree in philosophy at the University of Toronto in 1939. Dante's *primo amico*, Guido Cavalcanti, wrote a famous "Canzone d' Amore", entitled after its beginning "Donna mi priega" ("A lady asks me"). Dino del Garbo, a Florentine physician and natural philosopher, wrote a commentary upon this, and it was this that I edited, translated from its Latin, and annotated with historical and philosophical observations. Del Garbo's commentary was almost contemporary with the poem, since its author died in 1327, just twenty-seven years after the death of Cavalcanti.

The study of love broadened and intensified for me, culminating years later when, in 1961, I joined a team of six engaged in analyzing the major theories of love with the aim of charting and clarifying the controversy on that subject. This research eventually resulted in a large book, entitled *The Idea of Love*, which was written by Robert Hazo and published in 1967. Participating in this research led me to develop a plan of my own for describing and

analyzing theories of love, a plan that became the basis for several courses taught at Notre Dame in the early 1970s.

As I saw it then and still maintain, the complexity of love and of the theories about it are best disentangled by the use of two general principles: one is the identification of the kind of love that an author takes as a paradigm for all the basic varieties of love; the other is the number of analytical components that an author employs in the construction of his theory.

Classical Greek had no one word for all the loves such as English possesses in the word “love”. Hence, to speak of love in Greek usually amounted to referring to only one kind of love. There were for this purpose four basic words: *eros*, *philia*, *storge*, and *agape*. This linguistic fact had both an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage lay in the fact that talk about love was usually about one definite kind of love: about *eros* or erotic love; *philia* or friendship; *storge* or affection, especially that between parents and children; or *agape*, the regard and affection that one has for a superior. The disadvantage of having no one word such as the English “love” appeared when one attempted to deal with all the four kinds as somehow one, for this effort tended to result in the attempt to make one kind paradigmatic of all the rest.

The clearest example of this tendency is the account of *philia* that Aristotle gives in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (bks. 8-9) as well as in the *Eudemian Ethics*. That he is demanding a lot of work from *philia* is clear from the many uses that he claims can be made of it: it can be said of family members, kinsmen, comrades, children, parents, husbands and wives, the hospitality shown to guests and foreigners, to the erotic relationship, and even to oneself. However, *philia* cannot be had for wine, for the cosmos, or for God, since in these cases Aristotle maintains there can be no reciprocity.

That the main and paradigmatic use of *philia* is for that which we call friendship is clear from his assertion that *philia* is an analogical term. In its range of uses it does not always refer to one and the same thing, or to the species of one genus, and yet it is not entirely equivocal. For all of its uses are related to one that is primary. In this respect *philia* is like the word “surgical”, which can be said of an instrument, of a person, or of a certain knowledge. It is the last one of these that is primary, since it is the knowledge that is the cause and principle of the instrument being of use in surgery, just as it is the possession of that knowledge that qualifies a person as a surgeon.

To identify the primary reference of *philia*, Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of goods that can serve as its object: those that came to be known in Latin as the *utile*, the *delectabile*, and the *honestum*. Accordingly, there are three corresponding friendships: a friendship for utility, such as the partners in a business venture; one exclusively for pleasure, such as a man seeks in a bordello; and a friendship for that which is intrinsically good, as good in and for itself. This last one provides the primary reference and the paradigm for all the others and is exemplified in the friendship of two good and equal persons who are devoted to the good, and which also has its share of utility and pleasure. The other two friendships are like it but are not as complete, and in fact may not be morally good at all. An erotic relationship may at an extreme seek nothing but pleasure and be neither useful nor morally good, just as a business friendship may also be based on nothing but its utility for those who are associated only for this reason.

In still another respect, Aristotle's analysis of *philia* is exemplary for one wanting to understand theories of love. It avoids the attempt to locate one univocal definition for all the varieties of love. While maintaining that *philia* is primary, he claims that three analytical terms are needed to identify and distinguish the basic kinds of love. These three terms are provided by the three senses of "good" that he distinguishes: the *utile*, *delectabile*, and *honestum*.

By identifying and disengaging the two general principles that Aristotle uses in his account of *philia*, we can obtain a method for understanding and comparing the various theories of love. A brief illustration of how such a method may be applied is provided in the following.

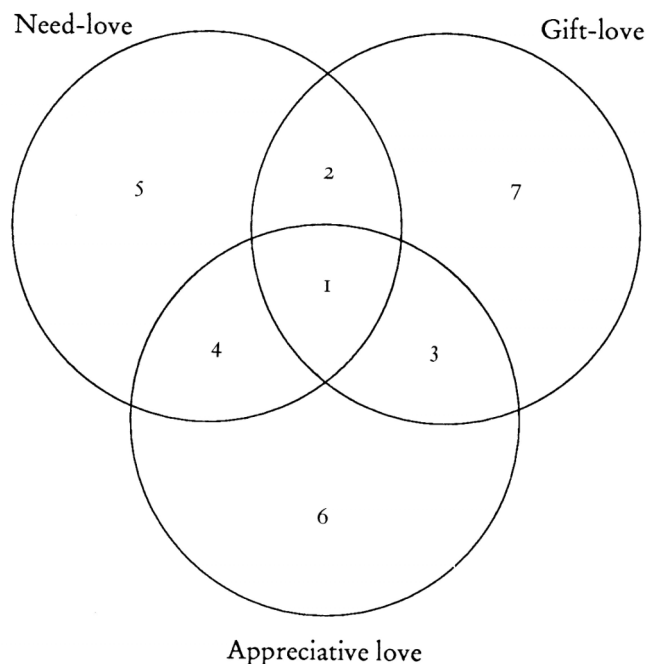
The first cut that separates theories of love is obtained by identifying the kind of love that is taken as the paradigm for all the rest. In the ancient world of the West it is *philia* or *amicitia* that holds the place of honor, with Aristotle and Cicero its main exponents. In the Christian Middle Ages it is *agape*, the love of charity found in God's love for us and our love for God, that is primary and with reference to which all the other loves can be explained, as in the theologies of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas. It is not until our modern times that the erotic love of man and woman is considered to be the essential one for understanding the nature of love.

The number of analytical terms that a theory employs as the elements or components needed to account for the primary love and its difference from others provides the means for making a second cut among theories of love. Some theories are monadic in that they

claim that all love at its root derives from but one element. Thus for Freud all love comes from the energy of libido seeking sexual gratification, whereas for Scheler it derives from a reaction to value and its enhancement. Other theories are dyadic in that they claim two elements are needed to explain the phenomenon of love. Such is the case of D'Arcy in his use of the notions of *animus* and *anima*, and so too of Nygren with his distinction between *eros* as a wholly self-centered love and *agape* as entirely directed toward another person and his good. Triadic theories are those like that of Aristotle that require three basis elements or components.


Of the triadic theories, I find that the most suggestive and convincing is the one that C. S. Lewis proposed in the book entitled *The Four Loves*, which was first published in 1960. As the title indicates, the book was not intended as a systematic and detailed exposition of a triadic theory of love. Rather, he offered that theory as the best way he could find of describing the four loves with which he was concerned, namely, affection, friendship, eros, and charity. The three components he identified as Need-Love, Appreciative-Love, and Gift-Love. These three are capable of a much fuller exploitation than Lewis gave to them, and, as rich as his book is, to do so would make his account still richer. The simplest and briefest way of indicating such a development may be by means of a simple diagram:

THE DIAGRAM OF LOVE



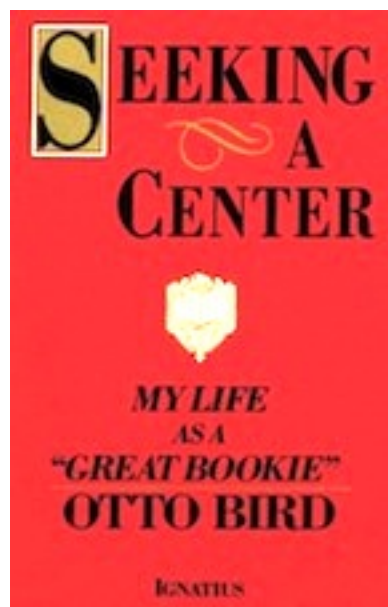
Let the three component-loves each be represented by a circle and so arranged as to intersect and form seven regions. The three external regions not intersecting with any other represent each of the components in its pure state, as it were: naked need entirely self-seeking without any mixture of appreciation or benevolence, pure appreciation and admiration regardless of needing or giving, and pure giving-love as in the charity of God.

There are three regions where two of the circles overlap: the union of Need- and Gift-Love as in the affection of a parent for an unworthy and unlovely child; that of Gift- and Appreciative-Love where there is no need of the self apart from the admiring and the giving; and third, the union of Appreciative- and Need-Love, as in the love of knowledge that is a need of the self but which may be directed toward an object for which there is no possibility of giving, such as an astronomer's love for the stars.

Finally, there is one region in which all three circles overlap, which diagrams the union of Need-Gift-Appreciative-Love. As such, it best represents the paradigm of any complex theory of love that has need of at least these three components. So much is true whether the paradigm be friendship as it is for Aristotle, or erotic love as Lewis conceived of it, or the love of charity that God has for us and that we by divine grace have for him. 

Part of Chapter I, from his book, *Seeking A Center: My Life as a "Great Bookie"* - Ignatius Press, 1991.

From the back of the book:



This is a stimulating intellectual and spiritual autobiography of Otto Bird, a pioneer in the Great Books movement in this country. It tells of his involvement with the exciting and influential reforms of Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins at the University of Chicago, his training as mediaevalist under the renowned Etienne Gilson at the Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto, and his founding of the Great Books Program at the University of Notre Dame.

Then, in describing a personal philosophical search, Dr. Bird shows how, by pursuing the methods introduced by Gilson and Adler, he was able to make sense out of the confusion of philosophers and provides an example in an analysis of the controversy concerning the idea of justice. The center that he sought was found in the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas and in the Roman Catholic church to which he became a convert. Bird's story provides unique insights into the development of the Great Books Movement and its influence upon American college education, to which a large part of his life was devoted by way of teaching, and writing through association from the beginning with the set Great Books of the Western World, published by Encyclopaedia Britannica.

“A moving account of Bird's pursuit of the truth in diverse directions, and of his success in getting his efforts focused by his gift of faith. It is an exemplary tale of learning and of self-development.”

—**Mortimer J. Adler**

“Dr. Bird's search has wonderfully fulfilled the commandment to ‘love thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.’ He has interpreted this as directing him to a life of learning, and the result is an intellectual odyssey that is as instructive of ideas well-explored as it is convincing in its example of faith maintained.”

—**John Van Doren**

Editor's Note:

For more on the Idea of Love, see:

Philosophy is Everybody's Business, Volume 10, Number 4,
Spring 2004

TGIO 195-198

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor
Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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