THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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LOVE IN RELATION TO NEEDING, WANTING, AND LIKING

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Knowing and thinking, perceiving and judging, do not exhaust the uses of our minds. We also have desires and emotions. We want things, need them, love them, and like them. They also sometimes arouse in us fear and anger.

This enumeration of the various ways in which we respond to things gives rise to a distinction between two fundamental types of mental activity or reaction. One is called cognitive, the other appetitive. Our desires and emotions belong in the appetitive sphere, our knowledge and thought in the cognitive sphere.

The prime characteristic of the appetitive is its tendency or impulse to act in a certain way toward the object of our appetite, whatever that may be. This tendency or impulse is usually, but not always, ac-companied by feelings or sentiments, sometimes involving almost overpowering bodily turmoil, as in the case of fear and anger, and sometimes quite mild affections, as in the case of some bodily pleasures and pains.

Putting aside the emotional or feeling aspect of our appetites, let us consider here only the tendencies or impulses to action that are involved in such things as wanting, needing, and loving.

We say we desire something or that we love someone. We also say of things and persons that we like them. What precisely is meant by such expressions? Do we always say precisely what we mean when we use them?

Acquisitive Desires

Hunger and thirst are the most obvious examples of acquisitive desire experienced by everyone at one time or another. We often eat without being hungry and drink without being thirsty. But when we are famished or parched, we experience a strong desire or impulse to go and get something edible or drinkable. That tendency or impulse is acquisitive desire in its most obvious manifestation.

In every instance of acquisitive desire we are impelled to seek something for ourselves—to get it, lay hold of it, consume it, appropriate or possess it in some way. All acquisitive desires are selfish in the sense that they are self-seeking impulses, desires that, when satisfied, leave us momentarily contented.

When we experience such acquisitive desires and are impelled by them to such self-satisfying actions, we sometimes say “I want this” or “I need it.” What is the difference between wanting and needing? When is it correct to say “I want” rather than “I need,” or the reverse?

The philosophers of antiquity provided us with a basis for distinguishing these two major forms of desire. They called our attention to the fact that, on the one hand, we are born with certain desires or appetites inherent in our human nature. Then they called our attention, on the other hand, to desires that differ from one individual to another because these desires arise from the differing circumstances of their individual lives.

The first group of desires, which they called natural or innate, are necessarily the same for all human beings because, being members of the human species, we share a common nature and everything that is inherent in it.

The English word “need” accurately names natural desire. We all need food and drink. We also need sleep and shelter of some kind.

These are our basic bodily needs or natural desires. We share these needs with other, nonhuman animals. Reproduction is necessary for the survival of the species, but it is not an individual human need.

We have distinctively human needs—for pleasure, for freedom, for friends, and for knowledge. As Aristotle said, all human beings by nature desire—or need—friendship and knowledge.

Wants, in contrast to needs, are acquired desires. One person, under the conditions of his or her own personal experience, comes to want something—a house in the country, a sailboat, or a sports car—that is not wanted by another. It would certainly be incorrect for that person to say "I need a house in the country," or "I need a sailboat," when it is obvious that not all human beings have a desire for such things, as we do when it comes to food and drink, or freedom and knowledge.

Anyone can verify this by the following simple experiment. Assemble ten persons and ask all of them to list the things they need, things that they simply cannot get along without. Then ask them to list the things they want for each of themselves in the coming year. If they understand the instructions, the two lists will differ remarkably. The ten lists of needs will be either the same or approximately the same. The ten lists of wants will differ markedly in ten different ways.

Children, as all parents know, are given to saying "I need" when they should say "I want." They say "I need an ice cream cone," "I need a baseball glove," or "I need a doll," when they should say "I want" these things.

Unfortunately, such misstatements are not confined to the young. Adults, who should know better, often elevate their wants to the plane of needs, even though it should be perfectly plain to them that what they want, not everybody else desires. They may suffer dis-contentment if they do not get what they want, but this does not mean that they need it, because if others can get along without it, so can they.

Benevolent Desires

Not all our desires or appetitive impulses are acquisitive and self-seeking. We sometimes, even often, have desires and consequent impulses to do something for the benefit of another. We are impelled to give to another instead of getting something for ourselves.

Just as the words “want” and “need,” properly used, name all the forms of acquisitive desire, so the word “love,” properly used, should be reserved for all forms of benevolent desire—and for the impulse to give rather than to get. As acquisitive desires and getting represent the selfish aspect of our lives, so benevolent desires and giving represent the altruistic aspect.

We are selfish when we are exclusively or predominantly concerned with the good for ourselves. We are altruistic when we are exclusively or predominantly concerned with the good of others. Our selfish impulses are all for our own benefit.

Our altruistic impulses are all for the benefit of others. To act benevolently is to confer benefits upon others.

If people generally misuse the words “need” and ‘“want,” saying they need when they mean they want, it is even more generally the case that all of us misuse the word “love.” Children, and not only children, say they love ice cream, or that they would love to have a sailboat or a sports car. Such things are not loved; no benevolent desire or impulse is involved. We also say we love our freedom, which is something we certainly need but do not love. Only when we say that we love our friends, our spouses, or our children, and perhaps even our country, is the word love, being used properly.

Even then, when we use the word to express our feelings about or impulses toward another person, it is not always the case that we are properly using the word “love.” For example, when young children say they love their parents, they do not mean that they have any benevolent impulses toward them. On the contrary, they do need their parents for a variety of goods they acquisitively desire and that they want their parents to get for and give to them. Parents, on the other hand, who are unselfishly concerned with the good of their children and are impelled to confer upon them all the benefits within their power to bestow, truly love their children.

In the sphere of our adolescent and adult relationships, we often say that we love other persons when, in fact, we need them for some self-satisfaction or want them for some selfish purpose. Not present at all is any benevolent impulse exclusively or predominantly concerned with the good of the other.

There are four things that one person can say to another: “I want you”; “I need you”; “I like you”; and “I love you.” If one wants another only for some self-satisfaction, the desire takes the form of

lust rather than love. If one needs another for some selfish purpose, the desire is still acquisitive rather than benevolent. Only when loving another is rooted in liking that other—and when our liking of what we find good in that person impels us to do what we can to benefit him or her—is it correct to say that we love that person. We can, of course, like persons that we do not love; but with one important exception, to be noted presently, we cannot love persons (in the sense of having benevolent impulses toward them) without first liking them, which consists in admiring what is good about them.

The Three Forms of Love

We have only one word in English for "love," where speakers of Greek and Latin had three words. The three Greek words were "eros," "philia, " and "agape." The three Latin words were "amor," "amicitia," and "caritas." But in addition to the word "love" in English, we also have such words as "friendship" and "charity," and such phrases as "erotic love" and "sexual love."

The Greeks used the word "eros" and the Romans used the word "amor" for the kind of love we call erotic, amorous, or sexual. Such love may involve sexual pleasure. Nevertheless, it is love rather than sexual lust or unbridled sexuality if, in addition to the need or want involved, there is also some impulse to give pleasure to the persons thus loved and not merely to use them for our own selfish pleasure.

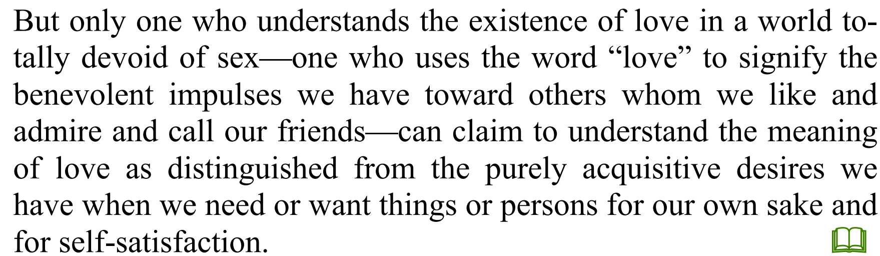
When no sexual desire and impulse is involved in our relation to another person that we say we love, we have the form of friendship that the Greeks called "philia" and the Romans "amicitia." We like others for virtues in them that we admire; and because we admire or like them, we love them in the sense of wishing to act for their good and to enhance it by whatever benefits we can confer upon them. This does not exclude obtaining self-satisfaction from such love. It may not be totally altruistic. A friend whom one loves in this way is an alter-ego. We love him or her as we love ourselves. We feel one with them. Conjugal love, or the friendship of spouses, persists after sexual desires have weakened, withered, and disappeared.

Finally, the third kind of love, which the Greeks called "agape" and the Romans "caritas," we sometimes refer to as "charitable love," and sometimes as "Divine love," or the love of God and of human beings, ourselves and others, as creatures of God. Such love is totally unselfish, totally altruistic. We bestow such love even on

persons we do not admire and, therefore, do not like. It is giving without any getting. It is the love that impels one human being to lay down his life for another.

Love in a World Without Sex

It is not a misunderstanding of love or a misuse of the word to associate love with sexual desire. Erotic or sexual love can truly be love if it is not selfishly sexual or lustful.



But only one who understands the existence of love in a world totally devoid of sex—one who uses the word "love" to signify the benevolent impulses we have toward others whom we like and admire and call our friends—can claim to understand the meaning of love as distinguished from the purely acquisitive desires we have when we need or want things or persons for our own sake and for self-satisfaction.

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