



THE GREAT IDEA OF LOVE

Max Weismann

interviews

Mortimer Adler [1993]

Mortimer Adler and I have often discussed the fact that although the idea of Love is one of the most important and pervasive of all the Great Ideas, it remains along with the idea of Happiness, one of the most misused words and misunderstood ideas in our language and everyday lives.

So in an effort to shed some light, we will examine Dr. Adler's insights on the Great Idea of Love. Unfortunately, time will only permit an overview of some of the profound issues about love that concerns us all. We will inquire into four major aspects of love:

- 1) The Kinds of Love
- 2) Love as Friendship
- 3) Sexual (or erotic) Love
- 4) The Morality of Love (good love and bad love)

THE KINDS OF LOVE

WEISMANN: Welcome to our discussion today on the Great Idea of Love. Last week, as I was telling some people about this interview with you, they seemed puzzled by the reference to love as an idea. They think of love as an experience or emotion rather than an idea—something you feel or suffer, not something you think about.

ADLER: I hope you told them that love is both. Just as taxes are something you pay and complain about, you can also think about them—there are theories of taxation. So there are theories of love.

WEISMANN: I know from the literature and from everyday experience that any discussion of love must involve consideration of the difference between the ideas of love and desire. Let me start our discussion with the following questions: Are they identical, or separate? Can there be love without desire? Desire without love? Is desire born of love, or love of desire?

ADLER: Before we get into the relation between love and desire, I would like to point out that in the great books theories of love are found in the works of the scientists, philosophers, and theologians. The great books also contain the experiences—that is, the vicarious experiences of love, these are found in the books by the poets and historians who tell us the stories of love and lovers.

Both sorts of these books agree about one basic fact: there are many varieties of human love. To illustrate the variety of loves, let us first go to the poets and historians. I have made a brief list of some famous lovers, and have put them down in contrasting pairs. Let us consider the kinds of love they represent. As I mention them by name, think of the character of the love they exemplify in each case: Paris and Helen compared with Achilles and Patroclus, Romeo and Juliet compared with Dante and Beatrice, Othello and Desdomona or Antony and Cleopatra compared with King Lear and Cordelia.

WEISMANN: You have now presented us with some case materials—pairs of famous lovers or famous examples of love. Are these examples of desire as opposed to love, or are they all examples of love?

ADLER: They are all cases of love but not the same kind of love. The main difference in the kinds of love these examples represent turns on the relation of love to desire. The word “love” is generally misused as if it were a synonym of “desire.” For example, when

children, or adults as well say that they love pleasant things to eat or drink, or that they love to do this or that, they think they are saying no more than that they like something, that it pleases them, or that they want it. This misuse of the word is corrected (though it probably will never be prevented) by a better understanding of the relation between love and desire than most people have.

WEISMANN: In order to help us to better grasp this relation, first clarify what the psychological distinctions are that we should understand about love and desire?

ADLER: The most basic psychological distinction is in the sphere of our mental acts and in our overt behavior and is made by the line that divides the cognitive from the appetitive. Our desires and emotions or passions belong on the appetitive side of that line; our acts of knowing, understanding, and thinking on the cognitive side.

In the appetitive sphere, the most fundamental distinction is between acquisitive and benevolent desire. It is the latter to which the word “love,” properly used, should be attached.

The prime characteristic of the appetitive is its tendency or impulse to act in a certain way toward the object of appetite, whatever that may be. This tendency or impulse is usually, but not always, accompanied 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.

Let us put aside the emotional or feeling aspect of our appetites for now and consider here only the tendencies or impulses to action that are involved in such things as desiring—wanting, needing, and loving.

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 for something edible or thirst quenching. 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, 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 say, “I want this” or “I need it.”

WEISMANN: But not all our desires are acquisitive and self-seeking. We sometimes, even often, have desires or impulses to do

something for the benefit of another. We are impelled to give to another instead of getting something for ourselves.

ADLER: That is correct, 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—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 or unselfish 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. To act benevolently is to confer benefits upon others.

WEISMANN: If people generally misuse the words “need” and “want” saying they need when they mean they want, would you say it is even more generally the case that most of us misuse the word love?

ADLER: Yes, for example, 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 the goods they acquisitively desire and that they want their parents to get for 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.

WEISMANN: Then in the sphere of our adolescent and adult relationships when we often say that we love other persons are we in fact saying we need them for some self-satisfaction or want them for some selfish purpose?

ADLER: Yes, sometimes there is not any benevolent impulse concerned with the good of the other person.

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, usually in the form of sensual pleasure, that wrong desire takes the form of lust rather than love. If one needs another for some selfish purpose, such as acquiring wealth, the desire is still acquisitive rather than benevolent. Only when loving another is rooted in liking or admiring 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: 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.

WEISMANN: We will return to that subject later. As I understand it, there are two main theories of love—one that identifies love with desire, and one which holds that some love is desire, and some love is not.

ADLER: That is correct. The first theory says that love is the same as desire or rooted in desire—to love is to desire. All love is sexual love. The mythology of love shows that this is an ancient and popular view of the matter. Think of the character of Venus and her son Cupid, and the arrows of Cupid...cupidity. Love is something to be feared, even dreaded or avoided, as the worst enemy of peace of mind and repose. Listen to the attack on love made by Lucretius:

“Venus should be entirely shunned, for once her darts have wounded men, the sore gains strength and festers by feeding: day by day, the madness grows, and the misery becomes heavier.”

“This is the one thing, whereof the more we have, the more does our heart burn with the cursed desire.”

“When the gathering desire is sated, the old frenzy is back upon them.”

“To avoid being drawn into the meshes of love is not so hard a task as, when caught amid the toils, to issue out and break through the strong bonds of Venus.”

WEISMANN: It seems that even elements of modern science and especially modern psychology have taken this view of love.

ADLER: Yes, they have identified love with attractive force. Think of Gilbert's metaphor: "the love of the iron for the lodestone," or with William James' comparison of iron filings and the magnet with Romeo and Juliet: "Romeo wants Juliet as the filings want the magnet, and if no obstacles intervene, he moves toward her by as straight a line as they. But of course Romeo and Juliet, if a wall be built between them, do not remain idiotically pressing their faces against its opposite sides."

This view of love is also epitomized in the writings of Sigmund Freud: all forms of love are either sexual love or sublimations of sexual love. Let me read you Freud's own words on this: "The nucleus of what we mean by love consists in sexual love with sexual union as its aim—we do not separate from this, on the one hand, self-love and on the other hand, love for parents or children, friendship and love for humanity in general, and also devotion to abstract ideas. All these tendencies are expressions of the same instinctive drives—the drives of sex."

WEISMANN: We are aware that one kind of love is sexual and involves desire, but we also know there are other kinds of love which are not sexual and do not involve such desire. What is the other main theory of love?

ADLER: I think it is best stated by Aristotle's distinction of three kinds of friendship, two of which involve desire, and the third which is quite distinct from desire. Aristotle exemplifies this in familial relationships, and love of country (patriotism). There is also Christian love. Remember the words of St. John: "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God and God in him."

WEISMANN: Why do we persist in using the same word for all these things which seem to be so very different? Isn't that the cause of much confusion? If we used different names for different things, maybe we would recognize that we had two or three different ideas here, not just one.

ADLER: That's a good point, in fact the Greeks and Romans had different names for the different kinds of 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. 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 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 the 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, can persist even 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. Yet, as Augustine points out, namely, that the Scriptures “make no distinction between *amor*, *amicitia*, and *caritas*,” and that in the Bible “*amor* is used in a good connection.”

We have only one word in English for “love.” In English we must use adjectives to distinguish the different kinds of love for which the ancients had distinct names. We are familiar with some of these adjective phrases: “sexual love,” “love of friendship,” and “love of charity.”

WEISMANN: Then is it a misunderstanding of love or a misuse of the word to associate love with sexual desire?

ADLER: No. As I mentioned before 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.

WEISMANN: It seems that the naming of the different kinds of love doesn’t solve the problem. It merely states it more clearly for us. As I see it, the problem can be stated in two questions: 1) How do these kinds of love differ, especially the first kind as opposed to the second and the third? 2) How are they related—as kinds of love, in some profound sense that is common to all these varieties?

ADLER: In an effort to resolve this problem, let me propose an experiment in thinking about love: two worlds, an imaginary world vs. the real world. 1) The imaginary world: one without sex in it, without gender, without male and female, without the familiar biological processes of reproduction. 2) The contrast between this imaginary world and the real world (with sex in it) should help us to understand what love is apart from sex and desire.

WEISMANN: In trying to imagine your world without sex, I am immediately compelled to ask, would there be desire in it? Would there be love? If so, would they be quite distinct?

ADLER: My answer to your first question is yes. Of course, there would be desire. Animals and men would be hungry, thirsty, cold, tired, etc. They would have the emotions of fear and anger, as these feelings or emotions involve desire. Let's again take hunger as the prototype of all desires, certainly of all bodily desires, and let's try to understand the nature of such desire.

There are three main points in the understanding of desire: 1) Need or want: emptiness, lack, imperfection, "uneasiness." 2) The object of desire or the desirable is something that remedies this condition. The result is satisfaction; to say I am satisfied is to say that my desire is fulfilled. 3) The object of the desire is a good to be used, consumed, even incorporated into myself to fill me up.

I have two further comments on this: a) This explains why we cannot say God desires as we say God loves or is love. b) It suggests that desire should be of things, not persons—because it is improper to use a person.

WEISMANN: Concerning my second question about our imaginary world without sex, would we find love in it?

ADLER: Yes, again we would, and it would be something quite different from all desires of the sort represented by hunger; for example, friendships; parental and filial love; patriotism; philanthropy; philosophy—love of wisdom or of truth; and charity—or the love of God.


With this understanding of desire, we can see more clearly the difference—the deep difference—between loves such as these, and desires like hunger or thirst.

WEISMANN: I understand there is quite a difference between a love like patriotism and a desire like hunger, but isn't there another sort of desire which is associated with the kind of love that is pure friendship, or purely philanthropic love?

ADLER: Indeed there is. Love—still in our imaginary world without sex—does not involve a desire like hunger, but it does involve goodwill or well-wishing toward the beloved. If you love some person, you wish him well—and you can, therefore, be said to have a desire—a desire to benefit him. You have benevolent impulses toward that person. This is what we have in mind when we say, “Greater love than this hath no man, that he lay down his life for his friend.” Hence, two kinds of desire having opposite directions: desire apart from love seeks one’s own improvement or benefit; and desire arising from love—goodwill or wishing the other well—seeks to benefit the other person, the person loved.

WEISMANN: A thought just occurred to me. What is meant when we say that children should be loved—that they thrive on being loved, that it is one of the most essential ingredients in the rearing of children?

ADLER: It means that it is important to the child to be admired and respected, shown consideration and courtesy—and through these things to be the object of goodwill and well-wishing on the part of its parents.

The reverse of this is also the case. That is the meaning of the fifth commandment: honor thy father and thy mother means to love them, in the sense of respecting them, showing them consideration and courtesy, acting with goodwill toward them. 

Next week, [Love as Friendship](#)

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