



THE GREAT IDEA OF LOVE

Max Weismann

interviews

Mortimer Adler [1993]

Part 4 of 4

THE MORALITY OF LOVE

WEISMANN: Now I would like us to move on to our last topic and consider the problem of the morality of love. Not just the distinction between moral and immoral love, but the real difference between good love and bad love.

ADLER: When the words “love” and “morals” are used together, as in the phrase “the morality of love,” one problem, and only one, usually comes to mind. And that problem concerns only one kind of love and only one aspect of that kind of love.

We tend to think that the only moral problem concerning love involves erotic or sexual love—love between the sexes, and that it is a problem concerning the sexual aspect of such love—a problem of proper as opposed to improper sexual conduct. So much so is this the case that the words “moral” and “virtuous” have almost come to mean “proper sexual conduct.”

WEISMANN: That's true. When we say that a man, or more frequently a woman, is moral or virtuous, we usually mean that he or she is chaste, not that he or she is courageous, or temperate, or just, in most of the affairs of life. But do we mean that he or she obeys the rules, or conforms to the prevailing local customs in regard to sexual behavior?

ADLER: There is no question that chastity is a virtue in this sense; but, it is certainly not the only or the chief virtue as one might be led to believe by the way the word "virtuous" is now used by so many people. What is even more regrettable, because it tends to confuse or obscure the problem of the morality of love, is that we speak of "lawful and illicit love," or of "sanctioned and forbidden love."

WEISMANN: Doesn't this manner of speech tend to suggest that the distinction between the lawful and the illicit, or between the sanctioned and the forbidden, applies to the love itself—usually the love between man and woman?

ADLER: No. I think the distinction may more significantly apply to the sexual conduct which is a consequence or an aspect of the love.

Now again, there is no question that certain sexual conduct is lawful and sanctioned, and that contrary sexual conduct is illicit or forbidden; but after we recognize this, and even understand why it should be so, we are still left with what is a more difficult and even a more interesting problem—the problem of distinguishing between good and bad love, and the problem of understanding what makes some loves good as love, and some loves bad as love.

WEISMANN: May I interrupt you at this point to be sure I understand what you mean. Are you saying that there are two distinct problems concerning the morality of love, or are you saying that there is really only one such problem, and that the other, often confused with it, is a problem of the morality of sexual behavior?

ADLER: I would like to be understood as saying the second case rather than the first. My reason for wanting to distinguish the problems in this way is that I think the problem of the morality of love is much broader and deeper, and more difficult, than the problem of the morality of sexual behavior. Let me see if I can distinguish the two problems for you, and tell you why I would like to concentrate our attention today on the second problem, as sharply distinguished from the first.

To do this I am going to borrow the phrases that you just used, and call the first problem the problem of the morality of sexual behavior, and the second the problem of the morality of love.

WEISMANN: It seems to me that most people confuse the second problem with the first, so I would like you to not only distinguish them, but also get them clear in their own terms.

ADLER: The problem of the morality of sexual behavior is, for the most part, a problem of justice, not a problem of love. In all human societies, primitive as well as civilized, certain types of sexual behavior are prohibited; and, in our Western civilization, these prohibitions are found in Divine as well as human law. It is in terms of these prohibitions that we draw the line between the lawful and the illicit, between the sanctioned and the forbidden.

For the most part, these prohibitions are like the prohibitions against killing and stealing. They are prohibitions against injuring other persons, against taking what does not belong to you, and against abusing or degrading yourself. In short, they are prohibitions against injustice rather than prohibitions of love.

This can be seen another way. Just as the prohibitions against murder and theft serve to protect the very existence and the institutions of society, so the prohibitions against sexual promiscuity or misconduct serve to protect the existence and institutions of the family. That is why such prohibitions are universal, and are to be found in every tribe and culture.

WEISMANN: But our common experience tells us that such prohibitions do not solve the problem of what makes love good or bad. Not even when the love leads to or involves sexual conduct that is prohibited, unlawful, or illicit.

ADLER: That is correct. Let me offer you some evidence to show that such prohibitions do not solve the problem of what makes love good or bad. The evidence comes to us from the poets, the novelists, the dramatists—the writers of stories about the love between men and women. In addition, most of us will be able to verify the point from our own experience, and from the moral judgments we ourselves make.

Love seems to have a privileged status. Love seems to retain some honor even when it defies the laws or standards of conduct. The great lovers remain heroes, in fiction or in history, even when they are also trans-gressors of the moral code in regard to sexual behavior.

But this is not true of men who are immoral because of their failure to control other passions. Then we regard them as brutish or bestial. For example, when a man is a coward, unable to control his fear, we call him a jackal or a scaredy-cat. When a man is a glutton or a drunkard, we call him a pig. When a man is simply lustful, indulging sexual desire quite apart from love, we call him a wolf. But when men fail to control their sexual passion because they are

in love, we regard them as human, not brutish or childish. We can forgive them, and we may even admire them.

Literature depicts the great lovers—think of Lancelot and Guinevere, Abelard and Heloise, Tristan and Isolde, Faust and Margaret, Anna Karenina—as heroic figures in spite of their transgressions, although because of them they may also be tragic heroes.

They almost seem justified, poetically at least if not morally—in acting as if their love exempted them from ordinary laws, as if their love was a law unto itself. In fact, that is precisely what one of Chaucer’s lovers says in so many words: (The Knight) “Love is a greater law than man has ever given to earthly man.”

WEISMANN: Hold on there. The Knight may be right that love is a greater law than man has ever given to man, but aren’t you forgetting that in the Christian tradition at least, God has given a law of love to man? In the course of these discussions, you have said that the most fundamental of all Christian teachings is the Divine law of love—the two precepts of charity. Don’t these have some bearing on the morality of love, and I mean now the morality of love, not the morality of sexual behavior?

ADLER: Indeed they do, and when we understand them, we understand the difference between good love and bad, not just between right and wrong sexual conduct. For example, the love of money or of worldly goods, according to Christian teaching, is bad love. In fact, it is said to be the root of all evil. You cannot love both God and Mammon. But that is only one type of bad love. There are at least two others, and they can all be understood in terms of the Christian law of love—the precepts of charity.

WEISMANN: Could you help us and begin by naming the three bad loves and explaining why they are bad as love—in Christian terms?

ADLER: You may be shocked at first to see what they are—love of money, pride, and romantic love. At first they don’t seem to go together, they seem like such different things. But what they have in common (the principle they all violate) is that they are either loves of the wrong subject, or loves of the right objects but in the wrong way. All three violate the precepts of charity. All three consist in displacing God, in deifying something other than God—in loving Mammon rather than God; in loving oneself as if God, the sin of Lucifer; in loving a man or woman as if divine, worshipping or adoring another human being.

WEISMANN: I know it was I who raised the question about the Christian law of love—the precepts of charity, and you have now answered it. That answer may do for many of us, but it may not

satisfy all our readers, some of whom may want to know if, apart from the Christian religion, there is any morality of love—any way to distinguish good and bad loves?

ADLER: I am glad you asked that question, because I am sure there are many who will want an answer to it. You ask whether, without reference to God or Divine law, and in purely naturalistic terms, we can distinguish between good and bad loves. The answer is certainly yes. We can. And when we do, we will find exactly the same three loves which are bad as love—only they will be called by different names.

To show you this let me go to a psychologist like Freud, who is deeply concerned with love, not just sex. First let me translate from Christian into Freudian terms. The three bad loves are the same, though they are differently named and described. In Christian terms, they are love of money = love of the wrong object; pride and romantic love = love of the right object but in the wrong way. In Freudian terms, they are love of money = neurotic object fixation; pride = narcissistic attachment to ego; romantic love = adolescent overestimation or idealization of sexual object.

According to Freud, each of these bad loves either is, or is symptomatic of, a neurotic disorder. None is a healthy or wholesome love. To be a healthy person, to be an adult, to be well integrated, one must get over such loves or be cured of them.

WEISMANN: Most of us can see that Freud is right about the love of money, or narcissism (the excessive love of one's self). But I think most people may be puzzled about romantic love, or what Freud calls adolescent love. What, in psychological terms, is wrong with romantic love?

ADLER: Here is what Freud has to say on the subject: The adolescent tries to combine unsensual, heavenly love with sensual earthly love, but is usually defeated by the phenomenon of overestimation or idealization of the object. As this over-estimation or idealization increases, "the tendencies whose trend is towards direct sexual satisfaction may now be pushed back entirely, as regularly happens with the adolescent's sentimental passion. The ego becomes more and more unassuming and modest, and the object more and more sublime and precious, until at last it gets possession of the entire self-love of the ego, whose self-sacrifice thus follows as a natural consequence. The object has, so to speak, consumed the ego."

This happens, Freud points out, with greatest intensity when erotic love is not consummated sexually, as it is in marriage. Freud compares such adolescent or romantic love with being hypnotized. "The hypnotic relation," he says, involves "the devotion of someone in love to an unlimited degree," with the object loved

completely replacing all ego-love, and “with all sexual satisfaction excluded.”

This explains, psychologically, what is wrong with romantic love—why it is adolescent rather than adult—in terms that have a striking resemblance to the theological criticism of romantic love as the over-estimation or idealization of a human being, as if divine. Now, on the naturalistic plane, and without reference to God, the proper object of human love is another human person.

WEISMANN: Then these three bad loves are bad as loves because each in its own way defeats the good love that enriches human life.

ADLER: Precisely. Let me summarize. The love of money distorts the love of persons; narcissism (or pride) prevents loving another and being loved by another, and so ends in lovelessness and loneliness; romantic or adolescent love destroys amour-propre or—proper self-respect, and so ends in destroying itself, since love cannot long endure without self respect.

WEISMANN: You can turn on any television talk-show today, and you will see the results of bad (romantic) love and the loss of self-respect. People suffering the worst lives imaginable, filled with pain and hatred. And yet they always blame the other person (whom they originally wrongly idolized) almost never recognizing what really lies in fault for their misery. We could do a whole discussion on this aspect alone.

However, we are just about out of time. In closing how would you briefly summarize the morality of love?

ADLER: The morality of love can be summarized in two simple statements. The first is: love only that which is truly lovable—God or persons, not things. The second is: love whatever is lovable in proportion to its goodness, neither more nor less.

In a sense, the morality of love is the whole of morality or at least its essence, for morality consists in having a right sense of values, in putting goods in the right order, and loving them accordingly. It might almost be said that a man whose loves are in the right order can do no wrong.

WEISMANN: St. Augustine said precisely that. If I remember correctly, he said: “Love, and do what you will.” Doesn’t that mean you can’t go wrong if you act in the light of love?

ADLER: Yes, it does mean that, but one qualification may have to be added. The love St. Augustine is speaking of is the perfect love, the love of God. Hence he does not need to qualify his statement. But if other less perfect loves are considered, then it is necessary to say: Love that which is better more than that which is less good. Then you can’t go wrong.

The poets have said this, too, in their own way. You know the famous lines of Sir John Suckling, “I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honor more.”

WEISMANN: That will have to sum up the morality of love, at least for this session, but I do not think it solves all the problems of love in human life. There are many we haven’t had time to deal with.

ADLER: Is there time just to mention a few of them?

WEISMANN: Mention, yes, but not discuss.

ADLER: The first ones that occur to me are connected with the main themes of today’s discussion. There is the problem of love and marriage, and here particularly the problem of the relation of romantic love to conjugal or married love. Another difficult problem is the degree to which we should love our fellowmen in terms of how they are related to us.

Let me read you some of the questions St. Thomas asks:

“Whether, out of charity, man ought to love himself more than his neighbor?”

“Whether a man ought to love sinners out of charity?”

“Whether we ought to love one neighbor more than another?”


“Whether we ought to love those who are better more than those who are closely united to us?”

“Whether a man ought, out of charity, to love his children more than his father?”

“Whether a man ought to love his wife more than his father and mother? His benefactor more than one he has benefited?”

Finally, there is the psychological problem of the relation between love and hate, and the equally difficult psychological problem of the cause and cure of jealousy.

Will that suffice as an indication of the problems that remain to be resolved?

WEISMANN: Yes, thank you. I hope we can return to these problems at another time. 

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