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How to Think about Love

Max Weismann
interviews
Mortimer Adler [1993]

LOVE AS FRIENDSHIP

WEISMANN: *I would like now to develop a fuller understanding of this kind of love: love between friends, love between parents and children, love of country, or of truth, or of God.*

To recap: we have discussed the contrast between two kinds of love: sexual or erotic love on the one hand, and fraternal or friendly love on the other.

These two kinds of love are often fused. In order to examine the second kind of love in complete separation from all elements of sexuality or erotic desire, you proposed that we consider it in an imaginary world—a world in which there was no sex, but everything else would be the same. In such a world, there would be desires on the one hand—desires like hunger—and, on the other hand, there

would be love—parental love, the love of friends, the love of patriots for their country, and love of God.

Not only would love and desire be quite separate, but they would be sharply opposed to one another: as liking is to wanting, as giving is to getting. We have here impulses tending in quite opposite directions: the impulses of love being generous and benevolent, the impulses of desire being selfish and acquisitive.

I would like our discussion to center on the love which is fraternal or friendly, the brotherly love or friendship which is not rooted in acquisitive or selfish desires .

But before we start, there's one thing I have to know, and so does everyone else probably. In which world are we going to carry on this discussion—the real world, or your imaginary world without sex?

ADLER: Let's start off where we all are—in the real world. When it becomes necessary to move into the imaginary world without sex, I'll give you notice—in plenty of time to get your imagination working in tune with mine.

I will start with Aristotle's analysis of the reasons why men associate with one another. Men value things in three ways: as *useful*, as *pleasant* or sources of pleasure, and as *excellent*, or as intrinsically admirable or honorable.

Examples of these kinds of associations are: 1) associations based on utility (business relationships, political alliances, marriages of convenience); 2) associations based on pleasure (sexual attachments, infatuations, perhaps also the conviviality of bon vivants); and 3) associations based on the excellence of the persons involved (friendships arising from mutual admiration and respect).

WEISMANN: *Is my understanding of Aristotle's thesis correct in that only the third type of human relationship—based on mutual admiration of personal excellence—is genuinely love? The first is not love at all, and the second is not love either, unless it is somehow joined with the third, but the third, without any trace of either the first or the second, is love—true love?*

ADLER: That is correct. The first two are imitations or counterfeits of love; they resemble love insofar as they

do involve some mutuality or reciprocation. There is no mutuality in ordinary desire: the hungry man wants to eat the food, but the food does not reciprocate—it doesn't want to be eaten. But this resemblance, while present, is superficial, because the mutuality is based on something outside the persons involved. It is a *quid pro quo* relationship—a fair exchange of favors; each serves the other in some way, or each gives the other some pleasure.

As a result of this, those kinds of relationships are highly precarious and unstable. Love is more permanent; as Shakespeare says in one of his Sonnets, "*Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds.*"

Most important of all, *desire* is the root of relationships based on utility or pleasure—desire for money, fame, or power, desire for bodily pleasure of one sort or another. In sharp contrast, in relationships based on the excellence of the persons involved, *love* is fundamental and is the root or source of whatever desire comes to exist.

WEISMANN: *You said at the beginning that love differs from desire as giving differs from getting. Now you speak of love as being the root or source of some desire. Do you mean a desire to give as contrasted with a desire to get?*

ADLER: That is precisely what I mean. The desire to give, or perhaps it would be better to say the benevolent wish or impulse, the impulse of goodwill toward the person loved, is the very essence of loving. Loving someone may involve more than goodwill toward them—wishing to benefit them or give to them, but it must involve at least that. If it doesn't, it isn't love at all.

WEISMANN: *Wait a minute. Let's look at this point a little more closely. As soon as you say "goodwill", a question comes to mind. Is the loving will the only form of goodwill? Isn't the just will also a form of goodwill to other men? If so, what is the difference between love and justice—between the goodwill of loving and the goodwill of being just?*

ADLER: That is a most important distinction, and I'm glad you raised it. The answer is that love consists in giving *without* getting in return; in giving what is *not* owed, what is *not* due the other. That's why true love is never based, as associations for utility or pleasure are, on a fair exchange. We love even when our love is not requited. That's why we say: "It is better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all."

Here's a more concrete example: when we are sorry that someone doesn't love us as we would like to be loved by them, we don't complain that they are not being fair or just to us. When we ask for love, we don't ask others to be fair to us—but rather to care for us, to be considerate of us. There is a world of difference here between demanding justice (and here we have a right to demand) and begging or pleading for love (and here we have no right).

WEISMANN: *I find this distinction between love and justice to be of crucial importance. Could you be more explicit?*

ADLER: Though both involve goodwill toward one's neighbors and one's fellowmen, they are quite different in all other respects. Justice consists of paying our debts; it is obligatory—we discharge our just obligations; fairness of us in relation to others. In contrast love consists, not in paying our debts, but in giving gifts; its acts are not obligatory but gratuitous; it prompts us to show consideration toward others. Let me give you two examples of heroic acts of love, and you will see how they differ from the dutiful acts of justice.

The first is the legendary Roman hero, Marcus Curtius. He plunged himself and his horse into a deep chasm in the Roman forum. It had been prophesied that this chasm would not close unless Rome's most valuable possessions were thrown into it. So, Marcus knowing that Rome's most precious possession was a good citizen, threw himself into the pit and it closed on him.

Another example of heroic love is the American hero—Nathan Hale, who was hung as a spy during the Revolutionary War. At the base of his statue are en-

graved his last words: “My only regret is that I have but one life to give for my country.”

Think how different human societies would be if they were based on love rather than justice. Think of Aristotle’s penetrating remark: “When men are friends, they have no need of justice.” But no such societies have ever existed on earth. Most societies are those in which justice prevents discord, rather than societies in which love produces concord.

WEISMANN: *Are we now ready for a definition of love?*

ADLER: I think we are. But instead of giving you my own words just now, I am going to read you two passages which state the definition perfectly.

The first passage is from Montaigne’s essay on friendship. He says: “In true friendship, I give myself to my friend more than I endeavor to attract him to me. I am not only better pleased in doing him service than if he conferred benefit upon me; but, moreover, had rather he should do himself good than me.”

The second passage is from Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Book IX, Chapter 4. Here Aristotle defines friendship: “We define a friend as one who wishes and does what is good for the sake of his friend; as one who wishes his friend to exist and to live for his own sake, which is what mothers wish for their children; and as one who grieves with and rejoices with his friend, and this, too, is found in mothers most of all.” Notice that Aristotle uses a mother’s love for her child as the prime example of love or friendship.

WEISMANN: *Are we to understand that true love is entirely benevolent, entirely unselfish, entirely selfless? That the lover wants absolutely nothing for himself—not even to be loved in return? If you mean that, then you are living—or rather thinking—in an imaginary world—not only with sex removed, but most of human nature, too.*

ADLER: No, no, no. That would be going too far. Love *can* be unselfish, in the sense of being benevolent and generous, without being selfless. Moreover, it is perfectly proper for the lover to wish something good for himself,

as well as for his beloved. These two wishes go together; they are quite compatible.

Let me explain. Proper self-love is *inseparable* from the true love of another. In fact, it is its basis and measure. It is the second precept of charity. The mutuality of love arises from loving in ourselves the same excellence we love in others. Without *amour-propre* or proper self-respect, true love would be **impossible**.

WEISMANN: *Then when we love another person, we wish them well, we wish something good for them. Hence the question: when, in loving another, we also love ourselves, what do we wish for ourselves—what good do we seek for ourselves?*

ADLER: We wish to be loved, and with that we wish the joy of love—the joy of companionship, of being in the presence or company of the other, ultimately, we wish the joy of perfect union with the person we love.

Let me summarize the three wishes of love for you. They are: 1) to benefit the other; 2) to be loved in return; and 3) to enjoy the closest union with the beloved.

WEISMANN: *That word “union” troubles me. I cannot help asking—which world are we in—the world with sex or without it?*

ADLER: Let me clarify what union means in this sense, quite apart from sex. Hence, please move into the imaginary world with me .

Eliminating physical contacts of all sorts, what sort of union do we mean when we say that love wishes the joy of perfect union? The answer is *spiritual* union: through compassion and sympathy, through sharing and liking the same things, through living a common life, through knowing and understanding each other.

The reference to *knowledge* helps us to understand this point. We can possess things in two ways, *physically* and *spiritually*; by consuming them and by beholding them, by using them and by knowing them. Love possesses its object in the manner of knowledge. Love is like knowledge, only better than all forms of purely intellec-


tual knowledge. That's why Aquinas says: it is better to love God than to know Him, and better to know *things* than to love them.

WEISMANN: *I had a discussion recently with a college professor who asserted that "love is merely a cultural accretion that is in no way essential to man's existence, and that the human race will probably sometime learn to dispense with it." What is your comment on that statement?*

ADLER: I am glad to give it. The need for love is one of the deepest needs in human nature, because we are by nature social. But we are social persons, not social animals. Hence we cannot be satisfied, as the gregarious animals are, simply by herding together, simply by being useful to another, or simply by the pleasures of bodily contact.

We want to share one another's lives. How can this be done? Only by conversation—which is indispensable to love. *Love without conversation is impossible.* Conversation without love is quite possible, but then it is only abstract discussion, not the heart-to-heart talk which is the conversation of lovers.

Unless we love and are loved, each of us is alone, each of us is deeply lonely. Unless we enjoy the community of love—the communication or conversation of love, we cannot get out of ourselves, and we are shut out from all others, as animals are, even when they herd closely together.

Everything I have said today about love as friendship indicates that it can exist in a world without sex. My last point about conversation shows this quite simply. 

Next issue, *Sexual Love*

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