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—Mortimer Adler

How to Think about Love

Max Weismann
interviews
Mortimer Adler [1993]

SEXUAL LOVE

WEISMANN: *But we also know that friendly love exists in the real world where it is often **mixed** with sexual desire to form another kind of love—erotic or sexual love. That is the problem I would now like us to focus on—the nature of erotic love, or love between the sexes—the problem of understanding how love can be sexual and also truly love?*

ADLER: The natural reaction of anyone who has been following our discussion might be: What’s that? What did I hear you say? How can love be sexual and at the same time truly love? How is that a problem? They might even be tempted to say that the real problem is the very opposite: How can anything be truly love if it is not

erotic, if it does not involve sex directly or indirectly? This requires a word of explanation before we go any further. Did I say a word? Perhaps, a little more than that.

In the first place, I must call your attention to the fact that everyone uses the word love in a broader sense than merely “love between the sexes.” Granted that when the word “love” appears in newspaper headlines or in television and motion picture advertisements, it usually means sexual love. Granted that most of the great stories of love—in novels and plays—are stories of erotic love. Granted that such common phrases as “love at first sight” or “first love” immediately call to mind the image of a boy and girl.

Nevertheless, it is not only in the weighty discourses of the philosophers and theologians that the word “love” has another meaning. It has other meanings for all of us—for all of us speak of the love of parents for children, of children for parents, of patriots for their country, and of religious persons for God. The love which moves the world, according to common Christian belief, is God’s love and the love of God.

WEISMANN: *I am not a Freudian, but those who are might object that you’ve overlooked the fact that, according to Freud, all these other loves are merely extensions of sexual love—sublimations, that’s the word, isn’t it?*

ADLER: That’s the word all right. Your question anticipates what I was just about to say. Remember I began by saying “in the first place.” In the second place, I was going to come to Freud; there are two theories of love, of which Freud represents one extreme and Aristotle the other.

Freud’s view is that *all* love is sexual in its origin or in its basis. Even those loves which do not appear to be sexual or erotic have a sexual root or core. They are all sublimations of the sexual instinct.

Aristotle’s view, on the other hand, is that relationships based solely on sexual pleasure are not truly love; nor does love have its origin or basis in sexual desire, or any desire that is selfish and acquisitive. On the contrary,

the mainspring of love is the benevolent impulse of goodwill toward another person. Only if they are somehow associated with a love that is independent of them, can sexual desires participate in the nature of love.

I know this looks like an irreconcilable opposition. But I think it is not quite as bad as that. I don't mean that we can ever get Freud and Aristotle to agree completely, but I do mean that they come very close together on the main point—on what is involved in the nature of sexual love.

WEISMANN: *I am curious to know how you are going to show us this? How are you going to proceed?*

ADLER: You are impatient today. I was just about to say that I am going to proceed as follows: first, by stating the problem itself a little more clearly; then, some attempt at its solution, and, finally, the difficulties that remain.

The characteristics of love, whether they exist apart from sex or involve sex, everyone agrees that there are two things which must be present in any relationship that deserves to be called love. They can be summarized as: 1) Benevolent impulses: To benefit, to do good to, and 2) Desire for union: To be with, to become one with.

Everyone agrees also that without these two things you have mere sexuality, but not sexual love. Let me explain what I mean by "mere sexuality." By mere sexuality I mean the gratification of sexual impulses or desires, the fulfillment of the sexual or reproductive instinct. We find this, and I think only this, in animals. The mating of animals is a purely sexual act, totally devoid of love. There is no evidence of love in the behavior of animals.

WEISMANN: *Hold on there. Now you are going too fast for me. Most people who have animal pets certainly think that their cats or dogs or horses love them—often love them more or better than most human beings do. Furthermore, you said that the desire for union is a mark of love. Well, isn't animal mating an expression of the desire for union? Why isn't that love?*

ADLER: I don't think that domesticated animals or pets love their domesticators. But that's one argument I don't want to get into today. I know that you can't convince people who have pets about this. As for your other question, let me say first that animals which mate show no benevolence toward one another. This mark of love is completely absent. Secondly, since the desire for union is entirely on the bodily level, it differs from the kind of union that is the aim of love, at least, of human love.

WEISMANN: *How then would you state the problem we are concerned with?*

ADLER: Let me say this, here we are not concerned with mere sexuality apart from love, or with love apart from sex. We are concerned with those human relationships which involve *both* sexuality and love, when these two things are fused together to form the remarkable amalgam known as sexual or erotic love—which draws both on the physical and animal side of human nature and also on its rational and spiritual side.

It is here—and perhaps only here—that Aristotle and Freud tend to agree. Let's review their positions. Aristotle: the desire for sensual pleasure must be subordinated to respect and admiration for the other person, if love is to exist between the sexes. Freud: uninhibited sexuality, sexuality which is not somewhat controlled and sublimated, is not love. Love results only when, with some inhibition of sexuality, tender feelings toward the object of sexual desire enter into the picture—and there is more love and less animal sexuality in proportion as tender impulses predominate over selfish desires.

Let me read you Freud's own words on this point: "Being in love is based upon the simultaneous presence of direct sexual tendencies and of sexual tendencies that are inhibited in their aims. So that the object draws a part of the narcissistic ego-libido to itself."

WEISMANN: *What does Freud mean by that statement?*

ADLER: He means that when a person is in love, he ceases to love *only* himself—"narcissistic ego-libido"

—and some of that love is given to another person—the object loved. More important, what does he mean by “sexual tendencies that are inhibited in their aim” —which is the cause of this shift from purely selfish desire to love?

We must turn to another passage in the same essay for his answer. Freud goes on to tell us here that when sexual instincts are “inhibited in their aim,” the emotions which we feel toward the objects of our sexual interest “are characterized as *tender*.” Then he goes on to say: “The depth to which anyone is in love, as contrasted with purely sensual desire, may be measured by the size of the share (in the love) taken by the tenderness resulting from inhibited sexual instincts.”

WEISMANN: *Is it your contention that it is here that Freud and Aristotle come very close to agreeing—on the problem of how sex and love can go together?*

ADLER: Yes, let me elaborate. The first step is to understand the difference between sexual desires and all other bodily desires like hunger and thirst. Ordinary desires are for things to be used or consumed, but sexual desire, like love, is not for a thing to be used, but for a person—another human being.

It is never a desire simply for pleasure, for the sexual instinct is the reproductive instinct, and therefore its aim is to produce something—that is, to reproduce or procreate, to give birth to an image of itself. An image of what? Not of either person, but of both united. This leads us to the deepest insight—that sexual desire is a *desire for union*.

WEISMANN: *I think I am beginning to see what you are driving at. You made the desire for union an essential of love. Now, you make union the main aim of sexual desire. Is that how you fuse sex and love together into sexual love?*

ADLER: Yes, that’s the heart of the matter, but I still have not fully explained the point. Let me go on. See if

what I am now about to say doesn't really make it clearer.

If you leave sex out, what is the nature of the union lovers seek? It is a spiritual, not a physical union—a union which consists in their sharing things, through knowledge of one another, and above all through conversation with one another. Only thus can they become one through spiritually entering into one another's lives.

Now let me call your attention to the words that are used to refer to sexual union in the Bible and in the law. In the Bible it is *know*; Abraham *knew* Sarah. In the law it is *carnal* conversation. I cannot make enough of this fact, for what it leads us to see is that sexual union is to be understood as the physical expression of a spiritual desire; or, if you like, that spiritual union is a sublimation of sexual desire. In either case, the same point remains—that union in body *together with* union in soul make up sexual love—sexuality with love, love with sexuality.

WEISMANN: *Can you now give us a clear statement of the solution to this problem?*

ADLER: I will try with three points: 1) Human sexuality can take two directions: sex in the service of love, and thus elevated and humanized by love; or sex divorced from love, and so degraded to the animal or bestial level of mere sexuality. 2) Sex divorced from love is nothing but lust, sensuality, mere bodily desire, a desire for pleasure even separated from the reproductive aim. This is the very opposite of love, even of sexual love, because it is entirely selfish, acquisitive, and even cruel. 3) Sex in the service of love or sublimated into love is genuinely love. It is erotic love, not mere sexuality, because it involves these three things: a) desire to please as well as to be pleased, b) compassion as well as passion, c) understanding of sexual union as a physical form of knowledge or conversation.

WEISMANN: *The way in which your third point pulls together the first two points—the first one about love and the second one about sex—quite dramatically shows how sexuality and love can be fused to constitute the thing we*

call erotic or sexual love. Is that the complete solution of the problem with which we started?

ADLER: Not quite. There's one further difficulty which I am not sure I can solve. It involves a question to which Freud and Aristotle seem to give different answers. I am not sure I know which is right.

The problem still facing us is this: In sexual or erotic love, is sexual desire the root of love, or is the love of the other person the source of sexual desire? Let me put the question more concretely. When people fall in love, which comes first—liking or wanting. Granted that, when a man loves a woman, he is saying two things “I like you” and “I want you” which does he say first? Can we say which comes first—admiration, respect, liking—or wanting? And does it make a difference?

Let's review the opposed theories on this question. Aristotle's: that even in sexual love, liking always comes first; then sexual desire can be added to it to complete it, but it can never be its origin or root. Freud's: that sexual love *usually* grows out of sexual desire, by some inhibition and sublimation of the drives of the sexual instincts. I say “usually” because Freud seems to admit exceptions. He says: “Erotic wishes develop out of emotional relations of a friendly character, based on appreciation and admiration.” And he goes on to say, “On the other hand, it is more usual for direct sexual tendencies, short-lived in themselves, to be transformed into a lasting and purely tender tie; and the consolidation of a passionate love marriage rests to a large extent on this process.”

WEISMANN: *Perhaps, there is no single answer to this question; perhaps sexual love happens both ways—with liking following wanting, or wanting following liking. But even though it may happen both ways, would not the result be the same?*

ADLER: No, and here's why. When sex comes first, and especially if it remains primary, then the love that is based on it will be fickle and short-lived—as changeable as sexual interest is. When love—or liking—comes first,

then the relationship is stable in its foundations, and has more chance of lasting. It can endure all the vicissitudes of sex, and can even outlast the complete dissipation of sexual interest.

One further point: I find the selectivity of erotic love—the choice of this man or this woman—much more intelligible if liking the person is the origin of sexual interest, rather than the other way.

But before we move on to the morality of love, there is one point I mentioned earlier to which I would like to return. It is the point about the procreative or reproductive aspect of sexual love. I wonder if most people ever ask themselves why love is connected with reproduction. And if they do ask themselves about this, I wonder what answer they give.

The only answer I know, or at least the only one that seems satisfactory to me, is given by Plato in his dialogue on love called *Symposium*. May I say in passing that both Aristotle and Freud learned a great deal from this dialogue. It is not only the first, but also, perhaps, the greatest single work on love in the whole of Western literature.

He points out that love is of the good, and that it wishes to possess the good everlastingly. Love wishes to perpetuate itself. Love wishes for immortality. But we are mortal. How, then, can love attain its aim? “It is to be attained,” Plato tells us, “by generation, because generation always leaves behind a new existence in the place of the old...We should not marvel, then, at the love which all men have of their offspring; for that universal love and interest is for the sake of immortality...”

That is why I said earlier that one of the aims of sexual union is procreation—the creation by reproduction of an image of itself, of the union. This aim is not alien to love’s wish to perpetuate itself for as Plato says, “...men hope that their offspring will preserve their memory and give them the blessings of immortality which they desire.”

Plato goes on to develop this insight by comparing the love that is involved in the procreation of children with the love of beauty or truth that underlies the creation of works of art.



Next issue, *The Morality of Love*

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