

Southport Pips

Thursday, 1st April 2021

Philosophy of Love

Presented by

Malcolm

Since the time of the Ancient Greeks the nature of love has been a mainstay in philosophy, producing theories that range from the materialistic conception of love as a purely physical phenomenon (an animalistic or genetic urge that dictates our behaviour) to theories of love as an intensely spiritual affair that, at its highest, permits us to touch divinity. Love is an abstract noun or a verb which means, for some, that it is a word unattached to anything real or sensible - and that is all. For others it is a means by which our being, our self and its world are irrevocably affected once we are 'touched by love'. Some have sought to analyse it while others have preferred to leave it in the realm of the ineffable.

For me love is relationship, the force of attraction. When two people 'fall in love' there is an attraction to a person's form or body that can be purely physical. It can also be mental and intellectual: an attraction to someone's mind and their interests or their wisdom. It can be of the spirit: an attraction to the characteristics manifested by a person such as caring about others, tenderness, courage, amiability and wit. And, of course, it can be a combination of any of these.

Plato's Symposium presents love as being characterized by a series of elevations, in which animalistic desire or base lust is superseded by a more intellectual conception of love; which is also surpassed by what may be construed as a theological vision of love that transcends sensual attraction and mutuality.

For Aristotle, learning *virtue* is a matter of habit and proper training; and he placed little importance on rational argument in moral development, which is the opposite of Kant who averred that morality comes from reason. For Erich Fromm real love "is not a sentiment which can be easily indulged in by anyone". It is only through developing one's total personality to the capacity of loving one's neighbour with "true humility, courage, faith and discipline" that one attains the capacity to experience real love. This should be considered a rare achievement he says and, similar to Aristotle's emphasis on love as an activity, "in order to master the art of loving, one must practice discipline, concentration and patience in every facet of one's life". Plato's six loves become five for Fromm: brotherly love, motherly and fatherly love, erotic love, self-love and the love of God.

So, returning to the two people above who have 'fallen in love' through the force of attraction, continuing in love is going to require maintenance because things will happen to disturb their initial equilibrium. The force may be weakened by external and internal change: "Nothing endures but change" (Heraclitus).

People grow and mature at different rates for a variety of reasons: physical, educational, social and political powers shape us. Having come together these forces, working inwardly and outwardly, may affect the strength of the force of attraction. The level of attraction may be challenged, by a partner losing a leg or a breast from injury or disease. At the beginning of the relationship there is probably a closeness of ideals and thinking, but that can change if either or both parties acquire new beliefs or ideals that may supersede former traditional or cultural ones. Thus attraction may become repulsion unless one or both can help themselves, or be helped, to new (and higher?) dispositions that will resolve the negativity and restore harmony.

Hobbes would view relationships as a power struggle, as each struggled to gain felicity through a "perpetual and restless desire for power after power ...". Some learn too late that commitment is not a loss of freedom but an exercising of freedom. External authority limiting conflicts in relationships can be religious, civil or philosophical. With the weakening of the pillar of religion people now have independence from religious authority but individualism can lead to a certain amount of social anarchy. Philosophical ideas when explored jointly, with or without outside help, can act as an external authority when those ideas are mutually respected. As Hobbes puts it: "During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in a condition which is called war". He would argue the wise course is to give up some power in exchange for getting some security by cooperating with others.

Maintenance then, in relationship terms, involves rational work in harmonising and composing one's differences. If both realise that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and work through their differences together, then attraction is maintained. In I-Ching philosophy you may not be wholly responsible for a situation, but you do have an obligation to find the best way through once you are in it. If you take the worst way to accomplish what you want, there will be problems further on.

I'll finish with a two part question: What is the opposite of love and how does the 'coincidence or unity of opposites', work in practice?

Malcolm.

References

Plato's Theory of Forms and Ladder of Love:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GANjSZk1PXo>

Analysis of Socrates's speech in Plato's Symposium:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Tzl7KtVXQE>

If you want to review the other speeches (the also rans!) go to:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_sbM4lLzFao&list=WL&index=53

Quotations

"To fear love is to fear life, and those who fear life are already three parts dead."

Marriage and Morals by Bertrand Russell.

"You know, it's quite a job starting to love somebody. You have to have energy, generosity and blindness. There is even a moment, in the very beginning, when you have to jump across a precipice: if you think about it, you don't do it. I know I'll never jump again."

Nausea by Jean-Paul Sartre.

"The final aim of all love intrigues, be they comic or tragic, is really of more importance than all other ends in human life." - Arthur Schopenhauer.