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A PSYCHOLOGIST LOOKS AT LOVE

Victor B. Cline, PhD

Few if any scientific studies have investigated love. This is probably because of its subjective nature, its lack of precision, and even its lack of accurate definition. In fact, most psychological and psychiatric textbooks not only show no interest in love but seem to be unaware of its very existence.

The word *love* has by far the highest reference frequency of any word in *Bartlett's Book of Famous Quotations*. And certainly love is the single theme of greatest importance, use, and consideration by poets, novelists, playwrights, movie directors, clergymen, and us in our everyday behavior and relationships with our betrothed, spouses, children, parents, and friends.

Yet few words have been so badly beaten out of shape as the word *love*—too much use and misuse have left it where it may imply almost anything. It can be a synonym for God, patriotism, adolescent romance, narcissism, the platonic love of eternal ideas and forms, compassion for the poor, or adultery.

M. F. Ashley Montagu recently wrote that the tendency of matter to cohere is the most primitive form of love. The nuclear binding forces of the atom, he says, are a form of cooperation, while the bonds holding atoms together in a molecule exemplify interdependence. These same characteristics are variously manifested by all life forms: amoebas, plants, animals, and humans. Yet only in the last instance are such characteristics called "love." The German physician-scientist Buchner wrote, "The chemical bonds holding atoms together are the ultimate form of love—potassium and phosphorous entertain such a violent passion for oxygen that even under water they burn—that is, unite themselves with the beloved object."

So initially, it is important that we agree on some definition more precisely spelling out what love is. I would propose that four different

kinds of relationships have *all* confusingly been called “love”: (1) friendship, (2) affection, (3) sexual or libidinal love, and (4) charity, or so-called “Christian” love.

1. In *friendship*, a mutuality of interests is required. It is a relationship that can flourish between more than two people. It springs out of common enthusiasms and implies good rapport and easy communication between the participants. Acceptance, tolerance, and understanding are three of its cardinal virtues. Friendship is a prime outlet for our social needs; it gives us a sense of security and being accepted, respected, and liked.

A young, unmarried female friend of mine recently complained to me, “My main trouble is that all of my men friends treat me like a buddy—they enjoy talking to me by the hour and discuss all of their problems with me—but they never show any romantic interest in me whatever.” In other words, they were her friends, but not much more.

2. In *affection*, a significant psychological and emotional attachment to another specific person exists. Affection is (in a sense) “intense friendship” and in its extreme might be called infatuation. Affection is not always reciprocated completely, but it usually is. It can blind us and at times cause us to be irrational. We see it in a mother’s love for her child, between adolescent lovers, between an uncle and nephew, between two comrades at arms who risk their lives for each other, and also between spouses. There is a real sense of loss when the other person is away and a real sense of joy and satisfaction in his or her presence.

3. *Sexual love* (here I refer only to a biological urge) is the product of body chemistry. It is characterized by a state of physical tension. It has its reference within the single organism and would exist even if the individual were reared in complete isolation or on a desert island. In sex, the only interest is getting release from the tension—a quest for physical satisfaction. Thus when the poets refer to sexual love, they call it lust, passion, or animal appetites, and they imply that it is essentially egocentric—that how or with whom the tension is reduced is of secondary importance. Thus, the sex act can be performed with a prostitute for whom the individual may have complete contempt, or as an act of hostility as in rape. Another person may not even be required—the individual may effect the tension reduction himself. As Plato put it in the *Republic*: “There is no greater or keener pleasure than that of bodily love—and none which is more irrational.”

Not long ago I was involved in some marital counseling where the man and wife would be rated zero in the areas of friendship and affection. They literally couldn’t talk to each other; there was no

communication at all. They had no common interests except that they were extremely compatible and responsive to each other in the sexual area, and this was the only bond they had ever had. They had hoped, I guess, that in marriage they could also learn to be friends and to develop some affection for each other. Unfortunately, they did not, and the marriage failed miserably.

These three types of love—friendship, affection, and sexual love—can be found united in one relationship—as say in a healthy marital union, or they can exist independently of each other. In so-called romantic love we get, as Caleb Cotton once put it, “an alliance of friendship and animalism.”

4. The fourth kind of love is *charity* or “*Christian love*,” although the use of this term is not intended to restrict it to any one religion. This is a love that implies a powerful, deeply genuine, compassionate interest in one’s fellowman. Charity is a giving relationship that expects nothing in return, the central core of which is personal sacrifice. It is deep, steadfast, and enduring. It does not demand. In it we abandon ourselves in the service of others. It is the kind of love exhibited by such men as Tom Dooley, Albert Schweitzer, Jesus, and some of the other great social reformers. It is the kind of love that changes the most bitter foe into a potential friend and brother. It is the kind of love that Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians. The practice of this kind of love has been called the “highest exercise of freedom.” Charity often involves courage and fortitude because the person who gives this love must often endure and suffer much for the sake of others. This kind of love has the capacity to regenerate and transform people. Martin Tupper, the English poet, puts it eloquently: “This love is the weapon reserved to conquer rebel man when all of the rest has failed—reason he parries, fear he answers blow for blow, future interest he meets with present pleasure. But love is that sun against whose melting beams the winter cannot stand. There is not one human being in a million, nor a thousand men in all the earth’s huge quintillian whose clay heart is hardened against this love.”

Other civilizations and peoples have tried different approaches in dealing with love than we have in the modern-day Western world. A brief glimpse at two prominent cultures, the Greek and the Roman, might be enlightening.

When it came to love, the Greeks tried out a specialization of labor. One class of women were “faceless” prostitutes. Sex only (not love) was involved here in a “short-order” type of harlotry. These women were called the *pornae*. Another class, the *heterae*, were mistresses and courtesans. They were captivating, intelligent, and

complex women who provided companionship, mental stimulation, and sex. Their residences were places of beauty and refuge for their lovers. Their gowns, hair, and make-up were elegant. Greek literature referred to such a woman as a “noble companion,” and her status was vastly higher than any other class of women. The third class of women were wives. They came from extremely sheltered, protected backgrounds; they lacked sophistication and education, functioning mainly as housekeepers and bearers of legal heirs for their husbands—but not much else.

Greek men, experimenting with love via the specialization of function in their women and occasional homosexual affairs with young boys, were caught in a dilemma from which they could not find any escape. None of the three classes of women completely satisfied them. When Greek men were so unfortunate as to fall in love with the *hetera*, or mistress-type female, the relationship was essentially and ultimately commercial, which often caused considerable financial distress. In addition, they had to contend with a succession of other lovers in this woman’s life, lovers which she needed to support her extravagant style of living. These men hungered for a faithful and constant kind of love, but the *heterae*, by the very nature of their role, were unable to give it. So when a man did fall in love with one of these women, he frequently suffered greatly and regarded it as a great affliction. Since Greek wives, by nature of the system, lacked education and to some extent sexual sophistication, they were unable to interest or to find further involvement with their husbands.

The Romans attempted another approach to finding satisfaction in love relationships. In the case of middle- and upper-class Romans, adultery became the model type of behavior with divorce extremely common, and marriage being broken by any trivial excuse. Men with political ambitions married many times in the process of self-advancement. Because of this frequent changing of mates and lovers, childbearing became increasingly unpopular and undesirable. Contraception, abortion, and infanticide were very common. Extremes in sexual license were practiced by both men and women. The net effect was that sexual pleasure, the stimulation of one’s nerve endings, became the highest good and foremost goal. The family disintegrated as a social unit. Marriages became increasingly infertile. By the early part of the second century A.D., only one of the 45 great senatorial families that had lived in Rome under Julius Caesar was, 165 years later, in existence. A “sexual-psychological” disease virtually exterminated the former middle and upper classes. Thousands of tombstones were signed, not by the children of the deceased, but by their freed slaves. Thus

in the case of Rome, when sex moved outside of marriage and called itself love, marriage itself lost its value and the long decline in population began—a kind of genocide—which even the social reformer Caesar Augustus was unable to check with his Julian laws. By the second century A.D., many great Roman cities became virtually deserted and a large percentage of Roman farms were abandoned for lack of manpower. While history details the further collapse and fall of this great civilization, a reading of Ovid, Catullus, or any of the other Roman writers on love and marriage practices, can lead the reader to only one conclusion—that sexual gratification alone is not love and cannot fulfill or replace the need for deeper and more enduring relationships.

While Rome was falling, the small but dedicated minority known as Christians interpreted and conceived of love differently than merely sexual stimulation and gratification. Frequently, especially among the clergy, there was an outright rejection and denunciation of the sexual impulse altogether. In the sixth century A.D., an Irish holy man, St. Scuthin, always slept in bed with two extremely beautiful and voluptuous virgins on either side of him. In this “Trial by Chastity,” he and others like him saw great merit in exposing themselves to a maximum of temptations so as to gain virtue by resisting. One day the religious superior of St. Scuthin, a man by the name of St. Brendan the Navigator, chided him about taking such great risks. St. Scuthin challenged St. Brendan to prove himself equally capable of virtue. St. Brendan did try it and managed to resist temptation; but he found himself unable to sleep and quickly cut the experiment short.

Again we come back to the question of, “What is love?” We in our age and civilization still don’t seem to understand “love.” I know of a young married physician (in another community) who has been out of medical school four years, has a rapidly rising income, shows great promise in his field, is active in his church, and is just beginning to live, but who has become romantically involved with his receptionist (an impulsive, emotionally unstable, not too bright female). His comment, “I know it’s all wrong, so crazy, but I love her.”

I also know of a college-educated woman and mother of three children with a devoted, responsible, loving husband. She is very involved with church activities. Yet, she is having an affair with a welder who has deserted his own wife and two other women, whom he subsequently lived with for varying periods of time after getting each of them pregnant. He has a history of repeated venereal disease infection and on occasion has physically assaulted and severely beaten his women companions. This woman knows all of this but concludes, “I can’t help it . . . I love him.”

Occasionally, mismatched teenagers get married. When there appears almost no chance for a successful marriage, however, they end all discussions of the matter by saying, "But we love each other."

What kind of madness is this thing called love that leads in many instances to such dangerous, self-defeating, and irrational behavior? In some cases we might liken it to someone blissfully jumping off of the Walker Bank Building exclaiming, "Isn't the view wonderful!"

It is unfortunate that, as in the case of the physician, not only are the chances infinitely great that he will wind up with a terrible burden of personal stress and trouble but that the psychological damage to his wife and children will be incalculable. But this is not the end. This psychological damage may be felt like seismic shock waves two and three generations later. It is not unusual in our mental health clinics to work with as many as three generations of the same family. They reinfect and pass on their insecurities, neuroses, and emotional problems, which are frequently every bit as contagious as a viral infection.

In trying to answer this riddle about the nature of love, we might look briefly at the great loves found in our epic poetry, literature, and folklore. These have more psychological validity than we might at first suspect; they summarize and epitomize the quality and character of love in the cultures from which they emerge. Take Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, or the more updated ill-fated lovers in *West Side Story*. One Salt Lake marriage counselor has commented that these great love affairs have at least two things in common: (1) a tremendous, overpowering yearning and longing experienced by the lovers for each other (in fact the song "Tonight" from *West Side Story* magnificently captures this sense of longing and emotional need of the lovers for each other); (2) the fact that they never lived together or had a chance to become man and wife (if they had, they probably would have wound up in the office of a marriage counselor or had difficulty, at best, as marriage partners). What this implies is that the "courtship of love" is very different from married love (or male-female relationships). The courtship kind of love (that is, the intense longing for the other party), the overpowering infatuation, while very dramatic, is also very fickle, unreliable, and changeable and is, for the most part, prompted and stimulated by certain kinds of childhood experiences and fixations which are aroused and triggered by the love partner (the sexual aspect is in many ways only of secondary importance). In addition to people's obvious physical and biological needs, they also possess deep-seated psychological and emotional hungers. If we have experienced or suffered significant emotional deprivation or trauma as children, these may tend to reappear in various forms in adolescent or adult life.

I know of a woman who finally confided in her therapist that the thing she really wanted in a husband was someone to take her in his arms and rock her like a baby. She could never tell any man this, but this was the kind of relationship she really wanted and had deep, unsatisfied hungers for. This secret wish stemmed back to her earliest relationships and experiences with her mother. Sometimes when an apparently mature individual gets involved in an obviously inappropriate and self-defeating romantic relationship, it may be in response to these early childhood emotional hungers and needs which are stimulated and reawakened. It makes no difference if the other party in this infatuation be Frankenstein's monster or the Wicked Witch of the West. If he or she happens to pass by or enter the person's life when certain needs are awakened, he or she may be magically transformed into a beautiful and seductive creature, momentarily like Prince Charming or Cinderella. But 12 o'clock inevitably arrives, and whether your name be Elizabeth, Sophia, Natalie, Marilyn, or Thomas, George, Charles, or Bill, the magic spell always ends at midnight—and as you turn to face your marital or love-starred bed partner, you invariably have to come face to face with reality.

Since the good fairy plays this nasty trick so often, on nice decent people as well as on others, some have argued that choice of a marriage partner should be made by one's parents or some marriage broker, or even an IBM machine where male and female could be matched in an objective, completely impassionate, but at least rational and sensible way. However, this extreme approach will win little favor in a democracy such as ours where we demand the right to free choice—even in making mistakes. Does anyone even have the right to suggest that only compatible people have the right to marry and have children? What about all the petty, selfish, immature, neurotic, infantile adults? Would we deny them the opportunity to try to work out their problems, even in marriage? In fact, sometimes the needs and illnesses of neurotic spouses compliment each other. The dependent husband and the aggressive, shrewish wife may need each other more than anyone realizes, and while they appear unhappy together, they would be much more unhappy with most any other partner, and still more miserable alone.

Probably the most impressive fact is that in a time when divorce is generally easy to get and relatively acceptable to society, the majority of Americans prefer to accept what happiness marriage has brought them rather than seek further for it. They may not have realized their daydreams, but they have found something they are willing to accept as a realistic substitute. Certainly, few people have ever loved sublimely,

and few really expect to. But many are content with the love they have. This, after all, is Earth, not Heaven.

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