

Philosophy & Love

Is Love An Art?

Kathleen O'Dwyer asks if we can learn how to love, with Erich Fromm and friends.

"For one human being to love another; that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation" Rainer Maria Rilke.

"Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it" Jelaluddin Rumi

Love is a universal human phenomenon: we all need to love and to be loved. An acknowledgement of this need is beautifully portrayed by Raymond Carver in his poem 'Late Fragment', from *Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times*:

And did you get what

You wanted from this life, even so?

I did.

And what did you want?

To call myself beloved, to feel myself

Beloved on the earth

However, love is also a uniquely personal experience which can never be fully articulated. From a philosophical viewpoint, the concept of love raises many questions: What does it mean to love? What is the relationship between love of self and love of others? Is love an instinctive emotion, or is it a decisive and rational commitment? In his best-selling 1956 book *The Art of Loving*, German philosopher and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (1900-1980) examines these questions and others relating to love, and he puts forward a strong argument that love is an art which must be developed and practiced with commitment and humility: it requires both knowledge and effort.

Fromm provides specific guidelines to help his readers develop the art of loving, and he asserts that "love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence" (p.104, 1995 edition). This assertion carries a strong echo of the words of Sigmund Freud: "Our inborn instincts and the world around us being what they are, I could not but regard that love is no less essential for the survival of the human race than such things as technology" (from *The Life Cycle Completed*, Erik Erikson, 1998, p.20). Fromm puts forward a theory of love which is demanding, disturbing and challenging. He based it on the contradiction between the prevalent idea that love is natural and spontaneous – and

consequently not requiring application or practice – and the incontestable evidence of the failure of love in personal, social and international realms.

The human need for love is rooted in our awareness of our individual separateness and aloneness within the natural and social worlds. This is one of the existential dichotomies which characterize the human condition: “Man is alone and he is related at the same time” (Fromm, *Man for Himself*, 1947). Many philosophers have addressed this paradoxical aspect of being human, and there has been a general consensus on the essential relationship between well-being, flourishing, even survival, and the experience of loving relationships and friendships. As the Irish poet Brendan Kennelly notes, “the self knows that self is not enough, / the deepest well becomes exhausted” (from *Familiar Strangers*). The possibility of love exists within an acknowledgement of this insufficiency.

According to Fromm, aloneness creates an experience of “an unbearable prison” which may be a significant source of anxiety, shame and unhappiness: “The deepest need in man, then, is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness” (Art, p.8). Therefore, the individual continually reaches out for connection and communication with others; he or she strives to attain the experience of love.

Thus one’s existential aloneness and need for relationship and connection propels the desire for mutuality and intimacy on a variety of levels. However, when this desire is grounded in the belief that one’s fulfilment can be achieved through the devotion and support of another, the emphasis is placed on the experience of being loved rather than on loving, and the loving other is distorted and diminished in order to facilitate this. This need-based motivation is not Fromm’s understanding of love, and it does not answer the problem of human separateness.

Fromm claims that love has been widely misunderstood. According to his interpretation, love “is a relatively rare phenomenon and its place is taken by a number of forms of pseudo-love” (Art, p.65). For instance, the desire to escape aloneness may be expressed in a passive form of submission or dependence, wherein a person seeks an identity through another. Here, the individual renounces their responsibility and sense of self, and attempts to live through the perceived greatness or strength of the other. This mode of unhealthy relatedness may be experienced at a personal, social, national, even religious level. In all cases, the individual looks to another for the answers to the problems of living, and thus attempts to escape the challenges and demands of freedom and responsibility. There is often simultaneously the practice of domination and

control on the part of the perceived more powerful partner. Yet the controlling partner is often equally dependent on the submissive other for the fulfilment of their own desire. Fromm interestingly points out that the two modes of living are frequently exercised by the same individual, submissive or dominating in relation to different people.

Such expressions of 'love' are synonymous with certain forms of romantic literature and music. 'Love' is cited as the motivation of both parties, based on the assertion that neither can live without the other. In either case, the individual is attempting to dispel the anxieties of aloneness and difference through a symbiotic or co-dependent union which places the focus of creative and productive living on a being outside the self: "for if an individual can force somebody else to serve him, his own need to be productive is increasingly paralyzed" (Man for Himself, p.64). Fromm describes such a union as 'fusion without integrity', and he considers it an immature form of love which is destined to disappointment and failure. Or in the words of W.H. Auden, "Nothing can be loved too much, / but all things can be loved / in the wrong way."

At the root of such immature expressions of love is a predominantly narcissistic preoccupation with one's own world, one's own values, and one's own needs. This precludes an openness to otherness and difference, and it diminishes the possibility of relationship, and thus of love, through an exclusive reference to one's own perspective. The person who experiences life through such a narcissistic orientation inevitably views others either as a source of threat and danger, or as a source of usefulness and manipulation. From this perspective, the other – person or world – is not experienced as they are, but rather through the distorting lens of one's own needs and desires.

True Love

In opposition to this naïve, selfish, drive to escape separateness and aloneness, Fromm insists that "paradoxically, the ability to be alone is the condition for the ability to love" (Art, p.88), and that the ability to experience real love is based on a commitment to the freedom and autonomy of both partners: "Mature love" he writes "is union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality... In love the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two" (Art, p.16). Thus the need for connection is answered through a relatedness which allows us to transcend our separateness without denying us our uniqueness. According to the German poet Rilke, this is the only solution to the dichotomy of separateness and connection. Rilke argues that "even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, [but] a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between

them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole and against a wide sky" (Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties, p.34).

Fromm says further that one must reach out to the other with one's whole being: "Love is possible only if two persons communicate with each other from the centre of their existence" (Art, p.80). According to Fromm's interpretation, real love is motivated by the urge to give and to share rather than by a desire to fulfil one's own needs or to compensate for one's inadequacies. This is only possible if the individual is committed to a 'productive orientation' towards life, since a productive character is more concerned with giving than with receiving: "For the productive character, giving... is the highest expression of potency. In the very act of giving, I experience my strength, my wealth, my power. This experience of heightened vitality and potency fills me with joy. I experience myself as overflowing, spending, alive, hence as joyous. Giving is more joyous than receiving, not because it is a deprivation, but because in the act of giving lies the expression of my aliveness" (Art, p.18). However, in order to give, an individual must experience a sense of self, from which to draw that which is given: "What does one person give another? He gives of himself, of the most precious he has, he gives his life ... he gives him of his joy, of his interest, of his understanding, of his knowledge, of his humour, of his sadness" (Art, p.19).

For Fromm, mature love is an act of giving which recognizes the freedom and autonomy of the self and the other, and in this sense, it differs radically from the passive, involuntary phenomenon suggested by the phrase 'falling in love'. To Fromm there is a "confusion between the initial experience of 'falling' in love, and the permanent state of being in love, or as we might better say, 'standing' in love" (Art, p.3). Indeed, Fromm claims that the intensity and excitement which accompanies moments of infatuation is frequently relative to the degree of loneliness and isolation which has been previously experienced. As such, it is commonly followed, sooner or later, by boredom and disappointment. Many thinkers, from Freud to the contemporary philosopher J. David Velleman, also emphasise the blindness of romantic love. In contrast, mature love is an active commitment to and concern for the well-being of that which we love. "Love, experienced thus, is a constant challenge; it is not a resting place, but a moving, growing, working together" (Art, p.80).

Fromm's theory of love demands commitment, humility and courage, as well as persistence and hope in the face of inevitable conflicts and difficulties. But how is mature love to be developed and practised? How are the pitfalls of resentment, disappointment and indifference to be avoided, or, at least, constructively managed and overcome? Fromm declares that the art of loving is

based on the practice of four essential elements: “care, responsibility, respect and knowledge” (Art, p.21). These evoke a radically different response than that more commonly associated with romantic or sentimental love.

Care for the other implies a concern for their welfare characterised by our willingness to respond to their physical, emotional and psychological needs. This involves a commitment of time, effort and labour, which means responsibility. However, this commitment to care is tempered with a humility and openness which refrains from any attempt to mould the other to an image or ideal; it does not say ‘I know what is best for you’, but rather respects the autonomy and individuality of the other: “I want the loved person to grow and unfold for his own sake, and in his own ways, and not for the purpose of serving me. If I love the other person, I feel one with him or her, but with him as he is, not as I need him to be as an object for my use” (Art, p.22). Respect thus implies the absence of exploitation: it allows the other to be, to change and to develop ‘in his own ways’. This requires a commitment to know the other as a separate being, and not merely as a reflection of my own ego. According to Velleman, this loving willingness and ability to see the other as they really are is foregrounded in our willingness to risk self-exposure: “Love disarms our emotional defences; it makes us vulnerable to the other... in suspending our emotional defences, love exposes our sympathy to the needs of the other” (Self to Self: Selected Essays, 2006, p. 95).

Love Variations

Of course, there are many kinds of love: sexual, parental and brotherly love are only some manifestations of the phenomenon, and are motivated by different desires, needs and hopes. But Fromm asserts that the experience of mature love has in all cases a similar foundation and orientation: if a mature attitude to love is being practiced, the other will not be an object to serve my purpose. The converse is also the case: Fromm refers to the various forms of subtle exploitation and manipulation which may be discerned behind the mere appearance or assertion of love. For example, sexual encounters may be primarily motivated by the desire for physical excitement, pleasure and release, or by the urge for domination or submission. In either case, the intimacy experienced is momentary and limited, and the relationship is not characterised by the core elements of care, responsibility, respect and knowledge, but by using the other as a means to an end. Parental love is assumed to be marked by the exercise of unconditional care, concern and devotion, and this is often the case. However, since Freud, we cannot ignore the idea that some parents are sometimes motivated by factors not conducive to the healthy growth of the child. For instance, whatever the reasons, when parental love is offered or

withdrawn on conditional terms – obedience, compliance, success, popularity, pleasantness, etc – the child senses that he/she is not loved for his/her self, but only on the condition of being deserving. Psychoanalytic theory explores the lasting impact of such experiences for the resulting adult as the desire for unconditional love remains an unsatisfied craving.

Fromm offers a very interesting analysis of two possible approaches within the parental role. Using the images of 'milk' and 'honey', Fromm differentiates between a care-focussed love, and one which is imbued with vitality: "Milk is the symbol of the first aspect of love, that of care and affirmation. Honey symbolises the sweetness of life, the love for it, and the happiness in being alive" (Art, p.39). The ability to give honey-love is dependent on one's sense of happiness and joyful engagement; hence, it is rarely achieved. The ensuing effect on the child is profound: "Both attitudes have a deep effect on the child's whole personality; one can distinguish, indeed, among children – and adults – those who got only 'milk', and those who got 'milk and honey'." (Art, p.39). Perhaps this suggests a fifth element for Fromm's list of the basic aspects of mature love. Care, responsibility, respect and knowledge are praiseworthy qualities in the loving person, an expression of a mature and genuine concern for the other; however, is there not a desire for something other than generosity and concern in the experience of love? Is there not a desire for 'honey' – for a sense of the lover having joy in the beloved, enjoyment in their very existence? Perhaps this is a necessary addition to Fromm's already demanding view of love.

The concept of self-love is also a perennial subject of argument from philosophical, psychological and religious perspectives. Analysis ranges over the apparent dichotomy between our obligations to ourselves and to others, as well as interpretations of selfishness, narcissism and self-centredness. In many cases, the issue rests on the varying interpretations of the phrase. The negative connotations of 'self-love' usually emanate from associations with an exclusive and obsessive focus on oneself and one's world, and a disregard for anything outside this self-contained cosmos. In contrast, the idea of a healthy self-love posits no contradiction between love of self and love of others; rather, the former is seen as an essential starting point for the latter. This is Fromm's view: "Love of others and love of ourselves are not alternatives. On the contrary, an attitude of love towards themselves will be found in all those who are capable of loving others. Love, in principle, is indivisible as far as the connection between 'objects' and one's own self are concerned" (Art, p.46). So self-love and love of others are not mutually exclusive, but co-existent. Fromm strengthens this argument by pointing to the distortions which ensue when the conditions of self-love or self-acceptance are not met; the parent who sacrifices everything for

their children, the spouse who 'does not want anything for himself', the person who 'lives only for the other'. Fromm discerns such expressions of 'unselfishness' as often being façades masking an intense self-centredness and a chronic hostility to life which paralyses one's ability to love self or others.

Fromm's claim that love of self and of others is intricately linked, is based on his argument that love for one human being implies a love for all – when I love someone, I love the humanity of that person, therefore, I love the humanity of all persons, including myself: "Love is not primarily a relationship to a specific person: it is an attitude, an orientation of character which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole, not towards one 'object' of love" (Art, p.36). Therefore this theory of love is opposed to exclusivity or partiality. In this sense, Fromm concurs with the concept of universal love. He argues that "if I truly love one person, I love all persons" (p.36).

This idea is rejected by Freud, who points to various historical manifestations of its incongruence, for example, "After St Paul had made universal brotherly love the foundation of his Christian community, the extreme intolerance of Christianity towards those left outside it was an inevitable consequence," he writes in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* on p.51. Freud's argument rests on the premise that one cannot love everyone one meets. He also stresses the concrete and practical nature of love over universal theories. Friedrich Nietzsche states the case for that in his typically aphoristic style: "There is not enough love and kindness in the world to permit us to give any of it away to imaginary beings" (*Human, All Too Human*). Interestingly, Freud's argument against the possibility of universal love echoes Fromm's thoughts on care and responsibility; but Freud maintains that we cannot exercise these values on a universal scale, and would not choose to do so.

In his analysis of the concept of neighbourly love, contemporary philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek poses the question 'who is the neighbour?', and concludes that the injunction to 'love thy neighbour' and correlative preaching about universal love, equality and tolerance, are ultimately strategies to avoid encountering the neighbour in all their vulnerability, frailty, obscenity and fallibility: "it is easy to love the idealised figure of a poor, helpless neighbour, the starving African or Indian, for example; in other words, it is easy to love one's neighbour as long as he stays far enough from us, as long as there is a proper distance separating us. The problem arises at the moment when he comes too near us, when we start to feel his suffocating proximity – at this moment when the neighbour exposes himself to us too much, love can suddenly turn into hatred" (*Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, p.8). Thus the popularity of humanitarian causes lies in their inherent paradox, whereby

one can 'love' from a distance without getting involved. Žižek offers a pertinent challenge: "'Love thy neighbour!' means 'Love the Muslims!' OR IT MEANS NOTHING AT ALL!" (etext).

Velleman argues that human beings are selective in love because it is not constitutionally possible to know and so to love everybody: "One reason why we love some people rather than others is that we can see into only some of our observable fellow creatures" (Self to Self, p.107). Our choice of love objects is inevitably limited by our own limitations, but this is not to deny the potential value of others as worthy of love: "We know that those whom we do not happen to love may be just as eligible for love as our own children, spouses, and friends" (ibid, p.108). Perhaps the resolution of this apparent paradox resides in the humble acknowledgement that every person is worthy of love, but that our ability to love is limited to those whom we choose to know and cherish on a personal level. As Velleman says, "knowing the other is essential to love, and this, in part, points to 'the partiality of love': Personal love is... a response to someone with whom we are acquainted. We may admire or envy people of whom we have only heard or read, but we can only love the people we know" (Self to Self, p.10).

Love Begins and Ends

Fromm's treatise on the art of loving is provocative and insightful. It exposes the myriad problems associated with the experience of loving and of being loved. It confidently asserts that love is essential to human flourishing and survival, while also highlighting the demands and responsibilities associated with its practice. Is Fromm's understanding of love idealistic and unrealistic? I leave the final words to Carl Sandburg:

There is a place where love begins and a place where love ends.

There is a touch of two hands that foils all dictionaries.

There is a look of eyes fierce as a big Bethlehem open hearth furnace or a little green-fire acetylene torch.

There are single careless bywords portentous as a big bend in the Mississippi River.

Hands, eyes, bywords – out of these love makes battlegrounds and workshops.

There is a pair of shoes love wears and the coming is a mystery.

There is a warning love sends and the cost of it is never written till long afterward.

There are explanations of love in all languages and not one found wiser than this:

There is a place where love begins and a place where love ends – and love asks nothing.

('Explanations of Love')

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Kathleen O'Dwyer's book *The Possibility of Love: An Interdisciplinary Analysis* (2009) is published by Cambridge Scholars Press. It's a philosophical investigation into the complex experience of love.