THE QUESTION OF LOVE

Richard C. Richards & Marty Richards

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CHAPTER 1 - PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

"What on earth do philosophers have to do with love," and since it is a very good question, we will answer it. Many different disciplines are involved in the study of love, and each discipline has a different approach or perspective on the various problems associated with it. Philosophy, concerned primarily with conceptual clarity, may very well be the foundation for any study of love. For example, a psychologist who decides to study love must decide what is to be studied, or to put it more clearly, must decide exactly what love is, at least for her or his purposes. That decision is technically a philosophical project since philosophers study the ways in which words function and how they can best be made to function effectively. Each discipline, then, does its own philosophizing.

Philosophers are concerned primarily with the semantical considerations of what words mean or should mean, so philosophy has a fundamental role to play in the study of love, whether that role is undertaken by someone outside the discipline of philosophy or not. Philosophers are usually more experienced with regard to the problems involved when trying to work with a concept as general and abstract as love.

"What kind of clarity can philosophers give?" Again it is a good question. There is, after all, no final answer to the question "What is love?" There are a number of answers, such as "Love is an emotion," or "Love is giving," or "Love is bonding," to list a few. Some people claim that "people will never agree on the answer, and since the whole issue is so subjective, why bother at all? Each person has an opinion, so agreement will never be reached. It is a labor of fools to even

explore such questions." This is a common line of objection to the whole philosophical quest for clarity in any of the areas in which scientific truth cannot be attained. Are we reduced to the idea that the only two possibilities are scientific truth or subjective opinion?

We think there are many more possibilities, and the foundation of this book is based on that belief. Even if answers are subjective and agreement cannot be reached, it is still possible that among various answers given, some may be much better than others. One way some answers can be better is with regard to the clarity of the answers. Philosophy is involved with gaining conceptual clarity. We can learn more from the clearer answers.

Lack of agreement in itself is also not a reason for not proceeding with an intellectual quest. Lack of agreement is common in many areas. People may never agree about the quality of a painting, but talking about the painting may still be worthwhile, and we can learn from those who talk clearly about it. Besides, it is surprising how much agreement can be reached among concerned people with regard to such an issue as the quality of a painting. Here "quality" does not mean economic value, since some paintings which have sold for a large amount of money have little inherent quality, and some very good paintings sell for very little. We are trying to make this issue clear in the preceding few sentences. Is that worthwhile or not?

We assume conceptual clarity is worthwhile, especially with regard to issues like those surrounding love. We do, after all, have a life to live, and we want that life to be worthwhile. We need to decide what is worth having in this world, and different people have different opinions on these important questions. Scientists are often silent or hesitant about these questions, and give at best partial and incomplete answers. A number of people think the nature of love is a very important question, since love is worth having, they claim, and will make your life better.

We suggest that not only can some answers to the question of the nature of love be clearer than others, but also that some answers can be more accurate for describing things as they are. One can say, "Love is an emotion," or "Love is a bowl of cherries," or "Love is an illusion," or "Love is bonding." Some of these answers may be better

than others, not only because they are clearer, but also because they help us understand our experience. To say "Love is a bowl of cherries" is not very clear, and perhaps downright misleading. Saying it may make a point, but the point itself may be confused or mistaken, though there may be a reason for saying it.

"But," it might be protested, "aren't poets better than philosophers when describing love?" It all depends on what you want. Poets are good at causing feelings in the listener that are similar to those of the poet, and at causing people to be more aware of their own feelings. These are worthwhile activities. When the poet e.e. cummings says

> lady through whose profound and fragile lips
> the sweet small clumsy feet of April came
>
> into the ragged meadow of my soul.

he conveys at least in part the surprise, the gratitude, the delight, that is part of the experience some call love, and he does it (if he is e.e.cummings) in a manner that catches our attention, even jolts us with the improbability of his metaphors. He causes in us some of the feelings he has experienced, and he helps us focus on some of the feelings we may have experienced, or will at some point experience. But he doesn't tell us much about what love is.

Having now given at least some reason for believing that the philosopher has just as much right as the poet to be prancing on the field of love, and recognizing each as having different as well as legitimate functions, we now focus on what philosophy can do.

Philosophy can give us conceptual clarity, and it does this by relentlessly pursuing clear definitions of terms. Celebrities, authorities, nonentities, and ordinary people use "love, " "emotion," "bonding," and other such words, sometimes clearly, sometimes obscurely, in the belief that it is important to talk about these topics. Such discussions are important because love is important and worth pursuing--if we can just figure out what it is. That is one of the jobs of the philosopher: to figure out what it is. Or more precisely, to find out what the word "love" means, or in some cases should mean.

Dictionaries

"So why not look the word up in a dictionary and be done with it?" we hear the more pragmatic among us say. If only it were that simple. While one of the jobs waggishly assigned to philosophy is to make the simple more difficult if not incomprehensible, we don't think that accusation fits here. Love is a difficult subject in so many ways. If you look up the word "love" in a dictionary, you find out a lot, and at the same time, frightfully little. Let's give Webster a chance. That dictionary defines love as "strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties, warm attachment, enthusiasm, or devotion, the object of attachment, devotion or admiration, unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another..."

There are several more meanings which only make the issue more complicated. From the citation above it is clear that "love" has more than one meaning. Many of the words in the definitions themselves need definition, and ultimately the words will all come back in each others' definitions. Dictionaries are circular sets of words which have value partly because we already know most of the words, or at least have a rough idea of what many of the words mean. We philosophers want more precision than that.

Besides, many things called love will not fit the dictionary definitions. Making love for self (self-love or self-esteem) fit into the categories of affection, attachment, enthusiasm, or devotion will not be easy, and probably not very clear. Raw sexual lust is an "enthusiasm," and the "devotion" of the obsessed jilted lover is not much fun to behold. It is, however, a legitimate subject for our attempts to understand the inadequacies of the dictionary. Although both lust and obsession are "attachments," and the latter could show considerable "devotion," neither of those two appears to be love to most people.

In addition, love transcends any of these dictionary definitions. Many people who know love first hand report that not only is it full of positive feelings (as indicated by the definition) of affection, attachment, enthusiasm and devotion, but also less positive, though equally real, feelings such as anger, frustration, anxiety, confusion, despair, and many more. Ask any parent what feelings come as the

result of undertaking the challenge of loving and raising a child. Ask any lover about the feelings that sit on his stomach when his loved one does not arrive when expected. Now tell us what the true and genuine feeling of love is. We maintain that love involves most of the feelings of which human beings are capable. Why does the dictionary single out only the positive ones?

The Structure of Definitions

Now that we have raised some doubts regarding the adequacy of dictionaries, let us suggest a more complete context into which we can put this whole issue of the definition of love, and the nature of definitions in general. Most philosophers recognize the existence of three different and distinct kinds of definition. We will deal with each in turn, and apply it to the task of defining love.

The first kind is called "ostensive" definition. This is definition by pointing or by example. We talked about how you need to know some words to even make sense of the dictionary's definitions. Ostensive definition is definition by pointing to simple objects, qualities, or actions, or by giving examples. It is the way in which we teach language to infants initially.

Most of us don't remember going through the process, but we see ostensive definition in action when we hang out with very young human beings who do not know many words. We present them with an object and say the name of the object: "ball," Mama," "cat," "bird," "eat," "red." We do this most successfully when we see where the child's attention is focused, and supply the appropriate word. We may say the word "cat" to the child many times. When the child begins to look for the furry object when the word "cat" is said, then we know the process of learning what the word means and how to use it is occurring. Later the child will proudly announce "Cat eat red bird." We then know that whatever is left over from the child's description is best classified as a former parrot. (For a more complete discussion of dead parrots, please refer to the work of the late, great British philosopher, Montgomery Python.)

Ostensive definition can consist of more than simply pointing. We occasionally give examples of objects when we think that

someone does not understand a term. A person might ask, "What does the musical term 'blues' mean?" We could say, "Do you know a song called the "St. Louis Blues, or B.B. King's 'The Thrill is Gone.'" If the person knows either song, we can say, "Well, that's what the blues are," and we will have given an ostensive definition. If the reply is in the negative, we can get out our priceless collection of the blues, and keep playing them until he understands.

Teaching the definition of "the blues" ostensively might take a while. General and abstract terms such as "the blues" (and "love") are very hard to teach ostensively. What would you point to while you play the blues? What would you point to in order to teach the term "love" to someone who did not know the term? A person taking care of a child? A man and a woman walking hand in hand in the moonlight? Someone giving a handout to a homeless person? Would it help to understand if the person is being paid to take care of the child, the man wants to get into the underwear of the woman (preferably while she is in it), or that the person giving a buck to the homeless feels a bit guilty since he is the landlord who threw the homeless man out onto the street in the first place?

So we come now to the dictionary to learn of love. Granted that we know the language pretty well, what does a dictionary tell us? Surely it tells us something. It tells us how the word we are interested in is used in fairly contemporary speech. We do use the word "love" to mean many of the things listed in its definition. But the dictionary is not sufficiently precise. Since philosophers are in the clarity business, we have to go elsewhere.

Stipulative definition is the third kind of definition. (We have already examined ostensive definition and dictionary definition.) A stipulative definition is any definition created by anyone for a specific purpose. When philosophers and other people interested in clarity stipulate a definition, it is for the purpose of clarity. If the dictionary is not sufficiently clear and precise, then someone has to stipulate a definition for a term. It is grim work, but someone has to do it. The definitions stipulated may be more or less clear, and more or less useful in understanding what the term "love" is used to denote in ordinary speech. Some stipulations, since stipulations are human creations, will be better than others. Not everyone's opinion is as

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good as everyone else's. Some opinion, as captured in a stipulative definition, may not be much good at all.

If our purpose is clarity and an understanding of this thing called love, some definitions will not very helpful, but perhaps several will be. The helpful ones may not agree with each other, but may nevertheless all be useful, clear, and therefore valuable. Each may help us to understand something important about this thing called love, and this thing called philosophy. Lack of agreement among various stipulative definitions does not reflect on the value of any of them. We may also find more agreement than we expected to find in an area as subjective as love.

At this point we can be more clear about what this book is going to do. It is going to examine stipulative definitions of the word "love," and will encourage you to create your own stipulative definitions. While philosophers do more than create and examine stipulative definitions, that task in itself is a large undertaking, and it will occupy us well enough.

Aristotelian Structure

By now you should be asking, "If some stipulative definitions are more useful than others, or help us understand more than others, are there other criteria for judging the value of a definition?" Clarity is another criterion we mentioned earlier, and one of the factors which makes a definition clear is having an intelligible structure. Definitions can have many different kinds of structures, but philosophers have found, from studying definitions for centuries, that a certain structure is particularly clear. That structure is called the Aristotelian structure of definition, or just Aristotelian definition for short. Aristotle, an ancient and now thoroughly deceased philosopher, did not invent this structure, but he was the first to pay special attention to it and to describe it in detail. While Aristotelian structure is not at all common in ostensive definitions, it is seen fairly often in the dictionary, and it is the main structural criterion we will use in evaluating stipulative definitions, whether our own or those of others.

Briefly, the Aristotelian structure has three elements: the term to be defined (often called the species), a term denoting a larger category

(often called the genus, the plural of which is "genera"), and a term denoting differentiating or distinguishing characteristics. Lest we end up with a one-sentence paragraph, let us add that we will give an example in the next paragraph.

Let's take a simple, short word like the English noun "bat." "Bat" is the term to be defined (Aristotle's first element). The second element will be a term ("term" here means a word or group of words) denoting a larger category, and in this case there will be several possible larger categories, giving us a choice of how to define the word "bat." A bat can be classified as a mammal, an animal, a living thing, or a being, to name just a few of the categories which will make perfectly dandy generic terms for our second element in the Aristotelian definition of "bat." Some of the generic terms are more comprehensive than others, and that will affect the structure of the definition in different ways.

The third element in this Aristotelian definition of "bat" is a term denoting differentiating or distinguishing characteristics. Our job is now to make sure that the definition of "bat" denotes bats and only bats, and does not include more mammals than we want, or leave out some mammals we do want to include in our definition. The definition must exclude flying foxes, for example, but include all the various animals which are bats, such as the fruit bat, the vampire bat, and the Louisville Slugger. The last is not properly a bat in our sense at all, and we just threw it in to see if you are still paying attention.

To get back to the job, the third term will include reference to the ability of bats to fly, thus eliminating such mammals as whales from the definition. Even the possibility of whales flying is frightening. Birds are bad enough. So while we have eliminated many mammals by including reference to the ability to fly in our third part of the definition of "bat," we still need to do more, since we need to eliminate the flying fox, for example, which is another flying mammal. Since the flying fox does not navigate in the dark by means of high pitched sounds, mention of that trait in our third element of the definition will eliminate the flying fox as a possible designee of our definition, and yet include all the varieties of bats we want to include. Our definition thus becomes: a bat is a flying mammal which navigates in the dark by means of high pitched sounds. If we leave

out the reference to the ability to fly, we might have included Michael Jackson. Probably not.

If we would have selected the word "animal" as our second element in the definition, the definition would have read "a bat is a flying animal...." That larger genus would have changed the structure of our definition, since the category of animal contains many more and much more diverse members than that of mammal, and we would have had to find a way to exclude birds as possible designees of our definition, perhaps through reference to being featherless. Perhaps our insistence that the thing called a "bat" must navigate by means of high pitched sounds will do the job well enough. We do not know if any birds navigate in this way, but if some do, the reference to being featherless would eliminate them.

We are ready to apply what we now know about definition to the concept of love, and since that is a complex undertaking, we need a new chapter. Fortunately we have one.

CHAPTER 2 - LOVE IN GENERAL

We explore the topic of the nature of love in general in this chapter, and we can be more precise by referring to ideas developed in the previous chapter. First, we need to make some key points.

The first is that there are several kinds of love, or as some philosophers have said, several objects of love. While there is some debate about the number and nature of these different types of love, and even debates about what they should be called, the kinds of love we will discuss are parental, self, neighborly, friendship, and romantic. These are all types of love between or among human beings. I have no doubt that in some sense human beings can love animals, inanimate objects including geographic locations and principles, and perhaps divine beings, but we have enough trouble just learning about human love for human beings, so the other possible types of love or objects of love will not be examined here.

A crucial consideration now faces us. If we consider, for example, parental love, how would we define it? Utilizing Aristotle's three part definitional form, we would decide that parental love is our first element (or the term to be defined), and we need a second element (term denoting a larger category) and a third element (term denoting distinguishing or differentiating characteristics). We suggest an easy second term to use: love in general, or generic love. We will work on the third definitional element in the next chapter. We have a sufficiently large project now, and that is to understand the nature of love in general, or generic love. Note that generic love, or love in general, is not a specific form of love. Parental love, on the other hand, is a specific form of love.

In planning for this book it was difficult to decide whether this discussion of love in general should be undertaken early, before we had investigated the various kinds of human love, or at the end of the book, when we will have a better understanding of the different kinds of love, and can appreciate the question of what makes them all forms of love. Our decision is that the issue is sufficiently difficult that a discussion of the issue both before and after the detailed study of the various kinds of love would be helpful. So you have not heard the last of this issue after we wrestle with it in this chapter.

An analogy makes this issue of the nature of love in general a bit easier. Most of us have had experiences involving those animals called cats. We also are familiar with dogs, horses, cows and a host of other animals. We could define a cat as "an animal with whiskers, fur and a sense of self-sufficiency bordering on psychosis." While we wait for the cat-lovers to stop complaining, let us point out that we were following Aristotle's suggestion regarding definitional structure here. Our first term is "cat,", our second term is "animal" and our third term involved the possession of whiskers, etc. We call attention to the second term, "animal." A cat is an animal. We know that. A dog is an animal. That's not news. The same is true for horses, cows and others. The question is, why do we call all these creatures "animals?" What is common to them all that enables us to classify them as animals? What, exactly, is an animal? Those who suspect that we should soon be calling for a definition of "animal," the second term in our definition of "cat," have a good point. We will not stipulate that definition now. We have enough trouble already.

Understanding how to define the word "cat" is not our goal. Our goal is to understand the functioning of definitions, especially definitions involved with the concept of love. Let us therefore pursue the analogy to help us understand that goal. Just as we classify the cat, the dog, the horse and other creatures as animals, we can also classify parental love, self-love, neighborly love, friendship and romantic love as types of love, or as belonging to the genus of love in general, also called generic love. That makes initially for an easy definition of each kind of love. For example, we can define parental love as "that form of love which...." and come up with a sufficient number of distinguishing or differentiating characteristics to complete the third part of our definition. We could define neighborly love as

"that form of love which..." and again come up with different distinguishing or differentiating characteristics. And just as we sooner or later came to the problem of defining "animal" after we had defined the cat as a type of animal, and the dog as a type of animal, now we have the problem of defining love in general, or generic love, as part of the project of defining each kind of love in particular. The relationship of "cat" to "animal" is the same relationship as that between "parental love" and "love" (or "generic love," or "love in general." These terms are interchangeable).

We postpone a more complete investigation of the definition of love in general until the end of the book, when some of the difficulties can be more effectively appreciated. Now we can at least explore the problem in a preliminary way, and we can do that by examining how some philosophers have dealt with this question of the nature of love in general.

Erich Fromm on Love in General

One writer, a psychologist by profession, but very knowledgeable about and sensitive to the proper use of definitions, handled the question of the nature of love in general in an interesting way. The Art of Loving by Erich Fromm can be read with profit along with this book for maximum understanding, especially since we draw heavily from it. As his title suggests, Fromm stipulates that love in general can best be defined as an art. So parental love is a an art, an art involving specific behavior, attitudes, motives, intentions and perhaps even feelings. The same is true for all the different kinds of love, and we are taking parental love only as an example. This is a step forward, but we need to know what an art is.

Fromm provides some help here, so we can understand what he means by the term. He gives some ostensive definitions, in this case by giving examples. Examples of arts are painting, sculpture, music and architecture, but he also includes carpentry, medicine, and as we now suspect, loving. Apparently what he is referring to by his use of the word "art" would be classified as both practical and fine arts, rather than simply as fine arts. Fromm also adds that arts involve both theory and practice: you have to know something and do something with that knowledge. It is not knowledge in the abstract, with no