The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love

Edited by
Robert C. Solomon and
Kathleen M. Higgins

Foreword by Arthur C. Danto

University Press
of Kansas

Irving Singer

from The Nature of Love

Irving Singer is professor of philosophy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the author of the already classic three-volume study The Nature of Love.

Concepts of Love in the West

There are historians who say that love between men and women, what we would ordinarily think of as sexual love, came into existence only after Western civilization achieved a particular stage of development in the early Middle Ages. Those who have held this view often claim that love was virtually unknown in the ancient world and only a rare occurrence among non-Western societies. Anthropologists, for instance Malinowski in his research with Trobriand Islanders, have documented the fact that Western ideas about love seem to be meaningless in many other cultures, some of them quite advanced; and orientalists have often remarked that before the intrusion of European mores, Eastern thinking about relations between men and women contained little of the West's attempt either to purify sex through love or to make erotic passion into an ideal on its own. This effort, which dominates so much of life in the modern world, is said to have arisen in a particular place—Southern France, or Spain, or Northern Africa—at a particular time in the eleventh or twelfth century, and to have evolved in an uninterrupted manner from then until the twentieth century.

Through this way of thinking about the history of love has often engendered useful scholarship, it is confused in several respects. For one thing, is the view I have been summarizing a theory about behavior or about the history of ideas? Is it claimed that non-Westerners or Europeans in the ancient world did not experience with one another the intimacy, longing, and interpersonal oneness that we associate with sexual love? Even Malinowski notes that while the young Trobrianders defined their relation to one another in terms of sexual interest, easily gratified and generally hedonistic in character, they too experienced strong attachments, emotional dependency, and even occasional jealousy. Surely it is reasonable to assume that people in other lands and in earlier times were not so different from our-

selves as to have lived without sexual love until a handful of poets in Provence, or elsewhere, discovered or invented it. It seems much more plausible to think that love, in all its varieties, exists as a complex but common occurrence within human nature as a whole. William James is very persuasive when he says of romantic adoration: "So powerful and instinctive an emotion can never have been recently evolved. But our ideas *about* our emotions, and the esteem in which we hold them, differ very much from one generation to another; and literature . . . is a record of ideas far more than of primordial psychological facts."

In saying this, James correctly implies that the *concept* of sexual love has not existed uniformly and fully developed in all cultures and at all times. There is as little reason to assume a unitary structure in this respect as there would be to think that science or technology has been identical throughout the growth of mankind. What happened in the Middle Ages is important as one among other developments in man's thinking about moral goals, about human possibilities, about sexual ideals that influence his conception of himself whether or not they govern his behavior. Great changes in thought did occur in a particular place, Northern Africa and Southern Europe, at a particular time, around the twelfth century, and very dramatically; and these changes did contribute to a massive flowering that continues into modern consciousness. But the principal events occurred in the history of philosophy and the literary arts. By lending dignity and the sense of rectitude that always comes from conformity to social expectations, ideas about love have also had an effect, sometimes an enormous effect, upon Western behavior. Concepts and, above all, ideals mold and subtly modify our experience of the world. The given is never wholly distinguishable from its interpretation. And though men and women may feign to feel whatever kind of love is approved in their society while really having other interests, the feigning becomes a type of behavior that contributes its own reality. Human nature is itself an interaction between mental constructs acquired through patterns of accumulated experience, individual or communal, and biological mechanisms genetically programmed.

To study the history of love completely, we would have to investigate the ways in which developments of mind—developments in ideation and idealization—are capable of altering behavior while also following a course of evolution within their own domain. That is a task for philosophy and the life sciences, but one in which very little progress has been made as yet. And though I hope my work may be of help in this enterprise, I do not address myself to it in the present book. I wish instead to analyze and clarify

the concepts themselves. They diverge considerably, so much so that one may wonder whether there is in the West a common culture or a system of common ideals at any time. The diversities can, however, be systematized to a considerable degree; and I begin by suggesting that Western thinking about sexual love may be categorized in terms of two basic approaches. On the one hand, there is the idealist tradition that Plato codifies for the first time, that Christianity amalgamates with Judaic thought, that courtly love humanizes, and that romanticism redefines in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, there is what I shall call, for want of a better term, the realist tradition that from the very beginnings has rejected the pretensions of idealism as unverifiable, contrary to science, and generally false to what appears in ordinary experience.

In the history of thinking about love, the idealist tradition has always been dominant in the sense that its theories were the most interesting and the most fruitful for later speculation. Early in the development of idealism the concept of love became attached to religious and metaphysical doctrines that sought to penetrate nature's secret mysteries. The realist response took the form of critical disbelief, encouraging reliance upon the verities of sensory experience. Whether as an ideal for changing the world or as a psychological state that mattered to many people, love was to be analyzed in terms of what man could learn about himself through empirical observation. The realist tradition usually turns to the latest science in the hope of attaining accurate insights into nature, including human nature; but only in the twentieth century has science provided the knowledge that realism needed to articulate a vision of its own. In studying realism's past responsiveness to concepts generated by various types of idealism, we can see what realists may finally achieve in the present. We may also find that they can accept more of the idealistic attitude than has often been supposed. Particularly in those areas where idealism furthered humanistic perspectives, an accommodation between the two traditions may now be feasible as never before.

There is one point on which realist and idealist accounts of love tend to agree. They usually begin with the loneliness of man. All animals are aware of otherness; they recognize the possible threat in things that are not themselves. Human beings are especially sensitive to the dangers of isolation. The feeling of separateness is distinctly human. Not that men and women have it on all occasions, but they have it sufficiently often to make

the phenomenon a central fact in their experience. Its importance is symbolized in the Book of Genesis by the intimation that only man comes into being without a mate. Only after God realizes that it is not good for Adam to be alone does he create Eve. In Plato's *Symposium* the gods are described as being complete within themselves, self-sufficient, autonomous by virtue of their absolute perfection. But for that reason, Plato insists, it would be absurd to think that the gods love anything but themselves. That is the great difference between the gods and human beings. Ideas about the desirability of loveless self-sufficiency recur throughout Western thought, for instance in Rousseau's belief (renewed in different ways by Thoreau, Ibsen, and others) that man is often happiest when he lives in isolation, freed from the shackles of interpersonal dependency. But more characteristic is that passage in Milton's *Paradise Lost* where Adam, reminding God that a mortal such as himself cannot hope to attain the blessedness of divine solitude, requests the making of a fellow creature with whom he may communicate. Adam suffers through the love which then ensues, but he successfully eliminates the sense of loneliness that belonged to his original condition.

In the tradition of idealistic love, man's primordial loneliness and felt separation provide the impetus to his erotic adventures. The lovers are frequently orphans, like Tristan, or persons cut off from home, like Iseult. When we first meet Romeo, he is out of favor with his lady Rosaline and isolated in his sadness, though surrounded by jovial, admiring friends. The realist tradition recognizes something similar. In Proust, who aspires to a realism relevant to the twentieth century, the long first section of *Remembrance of Things Past* begins with the solitary anguish of the child waiting for his mother's goodnight kiss. The entire work consists of a series of attempts to overcome separateness from other people, and from ideals (such as artistic creativity) that matter to the narrator. In psychoanalytic theorists like Fromm and Reik, love is seen not only as the striving to regain oneness with the mother, which Freud emphasized, but also as a healthy means of coping with the necessary separation from her.

Despite the importance it accords the state of isolation, idealist thinking generally considers it surmountable. For the lovers are one, and in some sense always have been. Throughout all possible separations, and despite the blind interference of external forces, they are really indissoluble. How are we to understand the word "really" here? I think it refers to the nature of the oneness itself, the lovers' union, which the idealist refuses to treat as merely a psychobiological fact about man's existence. According to the realist, people come together for the sake of individual benefit: men and

women live with one another as a convenient way of satisfying their needs. This kind of community, whether in society or in the love of man and woman, the realist interprets as an overlapping or wedding of interests rather than a merging of personalities. Yet it is merging through love that the idealist tradition often seeks to glorify. For things only conjoined can be readily separated; they may fit together but they cannot become an essential part of one another, and to that extent the overcoming of separateness remains incomplete. What is merged, on the other hand, contains a common element, an identity that defines the nature of both participants equally well. In finding the beloved, each lover discovers the hidden reality which is himself. In this sense, the lovers have always been united, despite their physical separation, for they have always shared the same self-definition. Just as two heaps of salt may be referred to by the same word because there is some property that both possess, so too—the idealist insists—are lovers jointed by a single oneness that is their merged condition.

Though it has always posed difficulties for theologians, the possibility of merging between man and God was affirmed by mystics in the Christian tradition. The idea of merging between human beings in love with one another develops throughout the Middle Ages as a humanization of the mystical approach. It reaches a peak in Renaissance descriptions, such as John Donne's, of intermingled souls and eye-beams twisted upon one double string, the two lovers being one. In the Romantic era the unity that comes from indissoluble merging is often named as the sole defining attribute of an authentic love between man and woman. A great deal of the idealist tradition could be explicated in terms of the concept of merging along.

The notion that people can merge with one another is, however, a strange idea, elusive, baffling. In everyday life, we realize that one person's experience may have something in common with another's. We see the same bear and it frightens us in the same way. In our joint fright, a sense of kinship may develop. But we would not ordinarily speak of merging in our personalities, of being or becoming one another. We are distinct individuals, each living his own life, each responsible for what he does. In the idealist conception, however, people lose their individuality, or revert to a profounder oneness that preceded it. They are caught up by, immersed in, something bigger and grander than themselves as separate entities, something that negates and even destroys the boundaries of routine existence. Nor should we dismiss such ideas, however fanciful they may sound. Emotion is always volatile; when sufficiently torrid, it can melt our sense of individuality and possibly wash it away. The idealist lover no longer feels that

he belongs to the world of separate selves, and that is why he often loses all concern for former responsibilities. He may lie, he may steal, he may kill—there is nothing a Tristan or Iseult will not do in order to preserve their sense of oneness. In merging with the beloved, lovers in the idealist tradition believe that they have transcended the restraints of ordinary life, even though they cannot escape them entirely.

Let us assume that the concept of merging makes sense. But how could merging possibly occur in the world as we know it? By means of magic. At least, whatever provides the love for which an idealist yearns will seem magical to everyone else. It is magic that violates empirical laws of nature, thereby creating that which cannot be obtained by ordinary means. Magic violates by its very being: it destroys the orderliness and comfortable routine that characterize everyday existence. To merge in the manner of idealistic love is to obliterate the old reality, one's former way of life. Magic tries to accomplish this, and it may well symbolize radical transformations that love can actually institute.

The techniques of magic are familiar to everyone who has studied the concept of love in the Western world. There is the love philter that Tristan and Iseult drink, believing it is cooling wine—in other words, a good that belongs to their normal, civilized world, whereas instead it destroys their capacity to benefit from civilization. There are the arrows of Cupid that rain down upon Dido and Aeneas, arrows being instruments of war that represent the suffering unto death that soon follows. There are more subtle means as well: the sudden exchange of glances that signifies the meeting and mingling of souls, in *Romeo and Juliet* as in hundreds of courtly romances that preceded it; the delicate touching of fingers that communicates the electric charge which is life called forth by love, in Michelangelo's version of God creating Adam as well as in *La Bohème* when Mimi and Rodolfo grope for her key under the table; the ritualistic kiss with which the prince awakens Sleeping Beauty to heightened consciousness through love, and which Leontes in Shakespeare's romance *The Winter's Tale* wishes to bestow upon what he presumes to be the statue of his dead wife.

The Winter's Tale ends with Leontes' realization that love can be a socially acceptable and wholesome magic. For the statue—his wife in her frozen and withdrawn condition, a state of alienation parallel to the former madness of Leontes alienated from himself—comes alive now that he loves her again. As in Greek mythology the statue of Galatea becomes a living woman for Pygmalion thanks to the magical powers of Aphrodite the goddess of love, Leontes feels his wife respond to his embrace. "If this be

magic," he says, "let it be an art/Lawful as eating." If it were lawful, however, love would no longer be magic. And if, like eating, it were a commonplace occurrence in ordinary life, it would not interest the idealist. For him, love is always an *extra*ordinary event, an epiphany of the mystical oneness which is the merging with another person. That, as we shall see, is why the mature Shakespeare can never align himself entirely with the idealists.

The idea of love as merging through magic receives one of its earliest expressions in the speech that Plato gives Aristophanes in the *Symposium*. After explaining how present-day men and women are only half of the totalities they originally were, and which the gods bisected, Aristophanes describes love as a yearning for the other half from whom one has been severed, the person who belongs to us "in the strictest sense." He has Hephaestus, the wonder-worker, ask two lovers: "Is the object of your desire to be always together as much as possible, and never to be separated from one another day or night? If that is what you want, I am ready to melt and weld you together, so that, instead of two, you shall be one flesh; as long as you live you shall live a common life, and when you die, you shall suffer a common death, and be still one, not two, even in the next world."

Aristophanes is not Plato's spokesman, of course, and when Socrates delivers the final speech, he says nothing about melting or welding. Instead he depicts true love as the knowing of absolute beauty provided by a special faculty of reason. Absolute beauty, the form or defining principle of beauty (and goodness), is a metaphysical entity the lover contemplates. In the *Symposium* Socrates does not say that men can merge with it, though in the *Republic* he does mention this is a possibility. Nevertheless, his speech at the end of the *Symposium* is basic to all idealistic thinking about love as merging. Where Aristophanes had spoken mainly of unifying bodies, making the lovers into one flesh, Socrates insists that the object of love is not a specific instance of beauty, certainly not this or that beautiful body, but rather *absolute* beauty—the idea, the essence, the formal character, of beauty wherever it occurs. Since everything is beautiful sub specie aeternitatis, Socrates concludes that absolute beauty is the ground of all being. Aristophanes called love "the pursuit of the whole," meaning the primordial spherical body of man that the gods bisected. For Socrates too, love is the pursuit of the whole—the whole universe seen as a totality and understood by reference to its ideal form, its eternal value.

Plato left the matter there; but Christianity did not. It combined the eroticism of Aristophanes' myth with the spirituality of Plato's conception of an ideal good. The Hebraic God became the object of love, displacing

absolute goodness, which served as one of his major attributes. Throughout a long tradition in the West, religious love was defined as a search for union with the supreme reality which was God. For many mystics God was a person with whom one merged as one might with a human lover. It is this strand of mysticism, bristling with physical imagery, that led some realist critics to consider religious love a sublimation of sex. In the religious love of other mystics, however, the independent personality of God—and everything else that might enable one to treat divinity anthropomorphically—vanishes to a point where supreme reality becomes the mystical experience itself. For these mystics, the sense of oneness, the act of merging with all being, contained within itself the religious import that was formerly accorded to an encounter with a separately existent deity.

The differences between these two religious attitudes contribute to the differences between medieval and Romantic mysticism. Both were attacked by Christian orthodoxy, which maintained that man could not merge with God though they might be wedded to one another in a union that retained their ultimate diversity. To the extent that Christian dogma denied the possibility of merging, it has always incorporated some of the realist approach to love. It was mystical beliefs about oneness, however, that enabled concepts of religious and human love to influence each other reciprocally throughout the history if idealistic theorizing. Not only was there a similar emphasis upon indissoluble merging, but also a comparable belief in what is, in effect, magic as a means of initiating it. As the erotic lover is suddenly and madly overcome by love, so too does the religious lover undergo miraculous, usually spontaneous, conversion and revelation. The avowals, commitments, I-love-you's of the one are duplicated by the ritual phrases, prayers, and cabalistic utterances of the other. Even in orthodox religions that deny the possibility of merging with the godhead, elements of magic insinuate themselves in various ways. Thus communion occurs when the believer eats bread that is the body of Christ and drinks wine that is his blood. Christ, himself the merging of man and god, undergoes the Passion—a love that magically enables the world to transcend itself, i.e., to merge with the world beyond. The mystic abstracts this aspect of established doctrine and singlemindedly makes it the principle of his loving aspiration.

Mysticism is not limited to Christianity. But it is largely through the Christian reinterpretation of Greek philosophy that the tradition of idealistic love developed. Aristophanes' myth was probably taken from the Orphic mysteries, and even in Genesis we find the notion of a primordial human whole, Eve having been created from one of Adam's ribs. But only

Christian mysticism (abetted by related developments in Judaism and Islam) was able to synthesize ideas about love-as-merging with the cosmic metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle. Though concepts of idealistic love between men and women may have had forerunners in the ancient world, their most inventive expressions occur after Christianity entrenched itself throughout the West. The two major approaches to ideal erotic love—medieval courtliness and modern romanticism—both consist of attempts to humanize the love that Christian mystics had generally reserved for man in relation to God. Whether or not its object is suprahuman, the idealist tradition seeks ultimate oneness through the magic of merging with another person.

Appraisal and Bestowal

I start with the idea that love is a way of valuing something. It is a positive response *toward* the "object of love"—which is to say, anyone or anything that is loved. In a manner quite special to itself, love affirms the goodness of this object. Some philosophers say that love *searches* for what is valuable in the beloved; others say that love *creates* value in the sense that it makes the beloved objectively valuable in some respect. Both assertions are often true, but sometimes false; and, therefore, neither explains the type of valuing which is love.

In studying the relationship between love and valuation, let us avoid merely semantical difficulties. The word "love" sometimes means liking very much, as when a man speaks of loving the food he is eating. It sometimes means desiring obsessively, as when a neurotic reports that he cannot control his feelings about a woman. In these and similar instances the word does not affirm goodness. Liking something very much is not the same as considering it good; and the object of an obsessive desire may attract precisely because it is felt to be bad. These uses of the word are only peripheral to the concept of love as a positive response toward a valued object. As we generally use the term, we imply an act of prizing, cherishing, caring about—all of which constitutes a mode of valuation.

But what is it to value or evaluate? Think of what a man does when he sets a price upon a house. He establishes various facts—the size of the building, its physical condition, the cost of repairs, the proximity to schools. He then weights these facts in accordance with their importance to a hypothetical society of likely buyers. Experts in this activity are called appraisers; the activity itself is appraisal or appraising. It seeks to find an objective value that things have in relation to one or another community of

human interests. I call this value "objective" because, although it exists only insofar as there are people who want the house, the estimate is open to public verification. As long as they agree about the circumstances—what the house is like and what a relevant group of buyers prefer—all fair-minded appraisers should reach a similar appraisal, regardless of their own feelings about this particular house. In other words, appraising is a branch of empirical science, specifically directed toward the determining of value.

But now imagine that the man setting the price is not an appraiser, but a prospective buyer. The price that he sets need not agree with the appraiser's. For he does more than estimate objective value; he decides what the house is worth to *him*. To the extent that his preferences differ from other people's, the house will have a different value for him. By introducing such considerations, we relate the object to the particular and possibly idiosyncratic interests of a single person, his likings, his needs, his wants, his desires. Ultimately, all objective value depends upon interests of this sort. The community of buyers whose inclinations the appraiser must gauge is itself just a class of individuals. The appraiser merely predicts what each of them would be likely to pay for the house. At the same time, each buyer must be something of an appraiser himself; for he must have at least a rough idea of the price that other buyers will set. Furthermore, each person has to weigh, and so appraise, the relative importance of his own particular interests; and he must estimate whether the house can satisfy them. In principle these judgments are verifiable. They are also liable to mistake: for instance, when a man thinks that certain desires matter more to him than they really do, or when he expects greater benefits from an object than it can provide. Deciding what something is worth to *oneself* we may call an "individual appraisal." It differs from what the appraiser does; it determines a purely individual value, as opposed to any objective value.

Now, with this in mind, I suggest that love creates a new value, one that is not reducible to the individual or objective value that something may also have. This further type of valuing I call bestowal. Individual and objective value depend upon an object's ability to satisfy prior interests—the needs, the desires, the wants, or whatever it is that motivates us toward one object and not another. Bestowed value is different. It is created by the affirmative relationship *itself*, by the very act of responding favorably, giving an object emotional and pervasive importance regardless of its capacity to satisfy interests. Here it makes no sense to speak of verifiability; and though bestowing may often be injurious, unwise, even immoral, it cannot be erroneous in the way that an appraisal might be. For now it is the valuing alone that *makes* the value.

Think of what happens when a man comes to love the house he has bought. In addition to being something of use, something that gratifies antecedent desires, it takes on special value for him. It is not *his* house, not merely as a possession or a means of shelter but also as something he *cares about*, a part of his affective life. Of course, we also care about objects of mere utility. We need them for the benefits they provide. But in the process of loving, the man establishes another kind of relationship. He gives the house an importance beyond its individual or objective value. It becomes a focus of attention and possibly an object of personal commitment. Merely by engaging himself in this manner, the man bestows a value the house could not have had otherwise.

We might also say that the homeowner acts as if his house were valuable "for its own sake." And in a sense it is. For the value that he bestows does not depend upon the house's capacity to satisfy. Not that love need diminish that capacity. On the contrary, it often increases it by affording opportunities for enjoyment that would have been impossible without the peculiar attachment in which bestowal consists. Caring about the house, the man may find new and more satisfying ways of living in it. At the same time, the object achieves a kind of autonomy. The house assumes a presence and attains a dignity. It makes demands and may even seem to have a personality, to have needs of its own. In yielding to these "needs"—restoring the house to an earlier condition, perhaps, or completing its inherent design—the homeowner may not be guided by any other considerations.

In love between human beings something similar happens. For people, too, may be appraised; and they may be valued beyond one's appraisal. In saying that a woman is beautiful or that a man is handsome, or that a man or woman is good in any other respect, we ascribe objective value. This will always be a function of *some* community of human interests, though we may have difficulty specifying which one. And in all communities people have individual value for one another. We are means to each other's satisfactions, and we constantly evaluate one another on the basis of our individual interests. However subtly, we are always setting prices on other people, and on ourselves. But we also bestow value in the manner of love. We then respond to another as something that cannot be reduced to *any* system of appraisal. The lover takes an interest in the beloved as a *person*, and not merely as a commodity—which she may also be. (The lover may be female, of course, and the beloved may be male; but for the sake of brevity

and grammatical simplicity I shall generally retain the old convention of referring to lovers as "he" and beloveds as "she.") He bestows importance upon *her* needs and *her* desires, even when they do not further the satisfaction of his own. Whatever her personality, he gives it a value it would not have apart from his loving attitude. In relation to the lover, the beloved has become valuable for her own sake.

In the love of persons, then, people bestow value upon one another over and above their individual or objective value. The reciprocity of love occurs when each participant receives bestowed value while also bestowing it upon the other. Reciprocity has always been recognized as a desired outcome of love. Since it need not occur, however, I define the lover as one who bestows value, and the beloved as one who receives it. The lover makes the beloved valuable merely by attaching and committing himself to her. Though she may satisfy his needs, he refuses to use her just as an instrument. To love a woman as a person is to desire her for the sake of values that appraisal might discover, and yet to place one's desire within a context that affirms her importance regardless of these values. Eventually the beloved may no longer matter to us as one who is useful. Treating her as an end, we may think only of how we can be useful to *her*. But still it is we who think and act and make this affirmative response. Only in relation to *our* bestowal does another person enjoy the kind of value that love creates.

In saying that love bestows value, I am not referring to the fact that lovers shower good things upon those they love. Gifts may sometimes symbolize love, but they never prove its existence. Loving is not synonymous with giving. We do speak of one person "giving love" to another, but what is given hardly resembles what we usually mean by a gift. Even to say that the lover gives himself is somewhat misleading. Love need not be self-sacrificial. In responding affirmatively to another person, the lover creates something and need lose nothing in himself. To bestow value is to augment one's own being as well as the beloved's. Bestowal generates a new society by the sheer force of emotional attachment, a society that enables the lovers to discard many of the conventions that would ordinarily have separated them. But such intimacy is only one of the criteria by which bestowal may be identified.

The bestowing of value shows itself in many different ways, not all of which need ever occur at the same time or in equal strength: by caring about the needs and interests of the beloved, by wishing to benefit or protect her, by delighting in her achievements, by encouraging her independence while also accepting and sustaining her dependency, by respecting

her individuality, by giving her pleasure, by taking pleasures with her, by feeling glad when she is present and sad when she is not, by sharing ideas and emotions with her, by sympathizing with her weaknesses and depending upon her strength, by developing common pursuits, by allowing her to become second nature to him—"her smiles, her frowns, her ups, her downs"—by having a need to increase their society with other human beings upon whom they can jointly bestow value, by wanting children who may perpetuate their love. These are not necessary and sufficient conditions; but their occurrence would give us reason to think that an act of bestowal has taken place.

Through bestowal lovers have "a life" together. The lover accords the beloved the tribute of expressing *his* feelings by responding to *hers*. If he sends her valuable presents, they will signify that he too appreciates what she esteems; if he makes sacrifices on her behalf, he indicates how greatly her welfare matters to him. It is as if he were announcing that what is real for her is real for him also. Upon the sheer personality of the beloved he bestows a framework of value, emanating from himself but focused on her. Lovers linger over attributes that might well have been ignored. Whether sensuous or polite, passionate or serene, brusque or tender, the lover's response is variably fervent but constantly gratuitous. It dignifies the beloved by treating her as *someone*, with all the emphasis the italics imply. Though independent of our needs, she is also the significant object of our attention. We show ourselves receptive to her peculiarities in the sense that we readily respond to them. Response is itself a kind of affirmation, even when it issues into unpleasant emotions such as anger and jealousy. These need not be antithetical to love; they may even be signs of it. Under many circumstances one cannot respond to another person without the unpleasant emotions, as a parent cannot stay in touch with a wayward child unless he occasionally punishes him. It is when we reject the other person, reducing him to a nothing or expressing our indifference, that love disappears. For then instead of bestowing value, we have withdrawn it.

In general, every emotion or desire contributes to love once it serves as a positive response to an independent being. If a woman is *simply* a means to sexual satisfaction, a man may be said to want her, but not to love her. For his sexual desire to become a part of love, it must function as a way of responding to the character and special properties of this particular woman. Desire wants what it wants for the sake of some private gratification, whereas love demands an interest in that vague complexity we call another person. No wonder lovers sound like metaphysicians, and scientists are

more comfortable in the study of desire. For love is an attitude with no clear objective. Through it one human being affirms the significance of another, much as a painter highlights a figure by defining it in a sharpened outline. But the beloved is not a painted figure. She is not static: she is fluid, changing, indefinable—*alive*. The lover is attending to a *person*. And who can say what that is?

In the history of philosophy, bestowal and appraisal have often been confused with one another, perhaps because they are both types of valuation. Love is related to both; they interweave in it. Unless we appraised we could not bestow a value that goes beyond appraisal; and without bestowal there would be no love. We may speak of lovers accepting one another, or even taking each other as is. But this need not mean a blind submission to some unknown being. In love we *attend* to the beloved, in the sense that we respond to what *she* is. For the effort to succeed, it must be accompanied by justifiable appraisals, objective as well as individual. The objective beauty and goodness of his beloved will delight the lover, just as her deficiencies will distress him. In her, as in every other human being, these are important properties. How is the lover to know what they are without a system of appraisals? Or how to help her realize her potentialities—assuming that is what she wants? Of course, in bestowing value upon this woman, the lover will "accentuate the positive" and undergo a kind of personal involvement that no disinterested spectator would. He will feel an intimate concern about the continuance of good properties in the beloved and the diminishing of bad ones. But none of this would be possible without objective appraisals.

Even more important is the role of individual appraisal. The person we love is generally one who satisfies our needs and desires. She may do so without either of us realizing the full extent of these satisfactions; and possibly all individual value is somehow based upon unconscious effects. Be this as it may, our experience of another person includes a large network of individual evaluations continually in progress and available to consciousness. At each moment our interests are being gratified or frustrated, fulfilled or thwarted, strengthened or weakened in relation to the other person. Individual value is rarely stable. It changes in accordance with our success or failure in getting what we want. And as this happens, our perception of the beloved also changes. Though the lover bestows value upon the woman as a separate and autonomous person, she will always be a person in *his* experience, a person whom he needs and who may need him, a person whose very nature may eventually conform to his inclinations, as well as vice versa. The attitude of love probably includes more, not fewer, individual appraisals than any other. How else could a lover, who must respond from his own point of view, really care about the beloved?

Love would not be love unless appraising were accompanied by the bestowing of value. But where this conjunction exists, *every* appraisal may lead on to a further bestowal. By disclosing an excellence in the beloved, appraisal (whether individual or objective) makes it easier for us to appreciate her. By revealing her faults and imperfections, it increases the importance of acting on her behalf. Love may thus encompass all possible appraisals. Once bestowal has occurred, a man may hardly care that his beloved is not deemed desirable by other men. Given a choice, he may prefer her to women who are sexually more attractive. His love is a way of compensating for and even overcoming negative appraisals. If it were a means of repaying the object for value received, love would turn into gratitude; if it were an attempt to give more than the object has provided, it would be generosity or condescension. These are related attitudes, but love differs from them in bestowing value without calculation. It confers importance no matter *what* the object is worth.

When appraisal occurs alone, our attitude develops in the direction of science, ambition, or morality. To do "the right thing" we need not bestow value upon another person; we need only recognize the truth about his character and act appropriately. Admiring a woman's superiority, we may delight in her as an evidence of the good life. We feel toward her what Hume calls "the sense of approbation." We find her socially useful or morally commendable, which is not to say that she excites our love. If she has faults, they offend our moral sensibility or else elicit our benevolence. In short, we respond to this woman as an abstraction, as a something that may be better or worse, an opportunity for judgment or for action, but not a person whom we love. Appraisal without bestowal may lead us to change other people regardless of what they want. As moralists or legislators, or as dutiful parents, we may even think that this is how we *ought* to behave. The magistrate will then enforce a distance between himself and the criminal, whose welfare he is quite prepared to sacrifice for the greater good of society. The parent will discipline his child in the hopes of molding him "in the most beneficial manner." On this moral attitude great institutions are often built. But it is not a loving attitude. We are not responding affirma-

tively toward others. We are only doing what is (we hope) in their best interests, or else society's.

When love intervenes, morality becomes more personal but also more erratic. It is almost impossible to imagine someone bestowing value without caring about the other person's welfare. To that extent, love implies benevolence. And yet the lover does not act benevolently for the sake of doing the right thing. In loving another person, we respect *his* desire to improve himself. If we offer to help, we do so because *he* wants to be better than he is, not because *we* think he ought to be. Love and morality need not diverge, but they often do. For love is not *inherently* moral. There is no guarantee that it will bestow value properly, at the right time, in the right way. Through love we enjoy another person as he is, including his moral condition; yet this enjoyment may itself violate the demands of morality. Ethical attitudes must always be governed by appraisal rather than bestowal. They must consider the individual in his relations to other people, as one among many who have equal claims. Faced with the being of a particular person, morality tells us to pick and choose those attributes that are most desirable. It is like a chef who makes an excellent stew by bring out one flavor and muffling another. The chef does not care about the ingredients as unique or terminal entities, but only as things that are good to eat. In loving another person, however, we enact a nonmoral *loyalty*—like the mother who stands by her criminal son even though she knows he is guilty. Her loyalty need not be *im*moral; and though she loves her son, she may realize that he must be punished. But what if the value she has bestowed upon her child blinds her to the harm he has done, deters her from handing him over to the police, leads her to encourage him as a criminal? Her love may increase through such devotion, but it will be based on faulty appraisals and will not be a moral love.

Possibly the confusion between appraisal and bestowal results from the way that lovers talk. To love another person is to *treat* him with great regard, to confer a new and personal value upon him. But when lovers describe their beloved, they sometimes sound as if she were perfect just in being herself. In caring about someone, attending to her, affirming the importance of her being what she is, the lover resembles a man who has appraised an object and found it very valuable. Though he is bestowing value, the lover *seems* to be declaring the objective goodness of the beloved. It is *as if* he were predicting the outcome of all possible appraisals and insisting that they would always be favorable.

As a matter of fact, the lover is doing nothing of the sort. His superla-

tives are expressive and metaphoric. Far from being terms of literal praise, they betoken the magnitude of his attachment and say little about the lady's beauty or goodness. They may even be accompanied by remarks that diminish the beloved in some respect—as when a man lovingly describes a woman's funny face or inability to do mathematics. If he says she is "perfect" in that way, he chooses this ambiguous word because it is used for things we refuse to relinquish. As in appraisal we may wish to accept nothing less than perfection, so too the lover calls perfect whatever he accepts despite its appraisal. The lover may borrow appraisive terminology, but he uses it with a special intent. His language signifies that love alone has bestowed incalculable worth upon this particular person. Such newly given value is not a good of the sort that appraisal seeks: it is not an attribute that supplements her other virtues, like a dimple wrought by some magician to make a pretty woman prettier. For it is nothing but the importance that one person assigns to another; and in part at least, it is created by the language. The valuative terms that lovers use—"wonderful," "marvelous," "glorious," "grand," "terrific"—bestow value in themselves. They are scarcely capable of describing excellence or reporting on appraisals.

If we have any doubts about the lover's use of language, we should listen to the personal appendages he usually adds. He will not say "That woman is perfect," but rather "To *me* she is perfect" or "*I* think she is wonderful." In talking this way, he reveals that objective appraisal does not determine his attitude. For objective appraisal puts the object in relation to a community of valuers, whereas love creates its own community. The men in some society may all admire an "official beauty"—as Ortega calls her. Every male may do homage to her exceptional qualities, as if the lady were a great work of art; and some will want to possess her, as they would want to steal the crown jewels. But this is not the same as love, since that involves a different kind of response, more intimate, more personal, and more creative.

For similar reasons it would be a mistake to think that the lover's language articulates an individual appraisal. If he says that to him the woman is perfect, the lover does not mean that she is perfect *for* him. Unless the beloved satisfied in some respect, no man might be able to love her. For *she* must find a place in *his* experience; she must come alive for him, stimulate new and expansive interests; and none of this is likely to happen unless she has individual value for him. But though the beloved satisfies the lover, she need not satisfy perfectly. Nor does the lover expect her to. In saying that to him she is perfect, he merely reiterates the fact that he loves this woman. Her perfection is an honorific title which he, and only he, bestows. The

lover is like a child who makes a scribble and then announces "This is a tree." The child could just as easily have said "This is a barn." Until he tells us, the scribble represents nothing. Once he tells us, it represents whatever he says—as long as his attitude remains consistent.

In being primarily bestowal and only secondarily appraisal, love is never elicited by the object in the sense that desire or approbation is. We desire things or people for the sake of what will satisfy us. We approve of someone for his commendable properties. These are causal conditions for love: as when a man loves a woman *because* she is beautiful, or *because* she satisfies his sexual, domestic, and social needs, or *because* she resembles his childhood memory of mother. Such facts indicate the circumstances under which people love one another; they explain why this particular man loves this particular woman; and if the life sciences were sufficiently developed, the facts could help us to predict who among human beings would be likely to love whom. But explaining the occurrence of love is not the same as explicating the concept. The conditions for love are not the same as love itself. In some circumstances the bestowing of value will happen more easily than in others; but *whenever* it happens, it happens as a new creation of value and exceeds all attributes of the object that might be thought to elicit it. Even if a man loves only a woman who is beautiful and looks like his mother, he does not *love* her for these properties in the same sense in which he might *admire* her for being objectively valuable or *desire* her for satisfying his needs.

For what then does a man love a woman? For being the person she is, for being herself? But that is to say that he loves her for nothing at all. Everyone is himself. Having a beloved who is what she is does not reveal the nature of love. Neither does it help us to understand the saint's desire to love all people. They are what they are. Why should they be loved for it? Why not pitied or despised, ignored or simply put to use? Love supplements the human search for value with a capacity for bestowing it gratuitously. To one who has succeeded in cultivating this attitude, *anything* may become an object of love. The saint is a man whose earthly needs and desires are extraordinarily modest; in principle, every human being can satisfy them. That being so, the saint creates a value-system in which all persons fit equally well. This disposition, this freely given response, cannot be elicited from him: it bestows itself and happens to be indiscriminate.

To the man of common sense it is very upsetting that love does not limit itself to some prior value in the object. The idea goes against our purposive ways of thinking. If I wish to drink the best wine, I have reason to prefer

French champagne over American. My choice is dictated by an objective goodness in the French champagne. If instead I wish to economize, I act sensibly in choosing a wine I value less highly. We act this way whenever we use purposive means of attaining the good life, which covers a major part of our existence. But love, unlike desire, is not wholly purposive. Within the total structure of a human life it may serve as a lubricant to purposive attitudes, furthering their aims through new interests that promise new satisfactions; but in creating value, bestowing it freely, love introduces an element of risk into the economy. Purposive attitudes are safe, secure, like money in the bank; the loving attitude is speculative and always dangerous. Love is not *practical*, and sometimes borders on madness. We take our life in our hands when we allow love to tamper with our purposive habits. Without love, life might not be worth living; but without purposiveness, there would be no life.

No wonder, then, that the *fear* of love is one of the great facts of human nature. In all men and women there lurks an atavistic dread of insolvency whenever we generate more emotion than something has a right to demand of us. In everyone there is the country bumpkin who giggles nervously at an abstract painting because it looks like nothing on earth. Man finds the mere possibility of invention and spontaneous originality disquieting, even ominous. We are threatened by any new bestowal. Particularly when it means the origination of feelings, we are afraid to run the usual risks of failure and frustration, to expose ourselves in a positive response that can so easily be thwarted. As a character in D. H. Lawrence says of love: "I am almost more afraid of this touch than I was of death. For I am more nakedly exposed to it." Even Pascal, who spoke of the heart's having reasons whereof reason does not know, seemed to think that love adheres to a secret, mysterious quality within the object that only feeling can discern. But Pascal was wrong. Love is sheer gratuity. It issues from the lover like hairs on his head. It can be stimulated and developed, but it cannot be derived from outside.

Love is like awakened genius that chooses its materials in accordance with its own creative requirements. Love does not create its object; it merely responds to it creatively. That is why one can rarely convince a man that his beloved is unworthy of him. For his love is a creative means of *making* her more worthy—in the sense that he invests her with greater value, not in making her a better human being. That may also happen. But more significantly, the lover changes *himself*. By subordinating his purposive attitudes, he transforms himself into a being who enjoys the act of bestowing.

There is something magical about this, as we know from legends in which the transformations of love are effected by a philter or a wand. In making another person valuable by developing a certain disposition within oneself, the lover performs in the world of feeling something comparable to what the alchemist does in the world of matter.

Martha Nussbaum

The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of Plato's Symposium

***Martha Nussbaum** is professor of philosophy and classics at Brown University and, most recently, the author of* The Fragility of Goodness *and* Love Matters.

> He had a golden shield made for himself, which was emblazoned not with any ancestral device, but with the figure of Eros armed with a thunderbolt.
>
> *Plutarch,* Alcibiades, *16.*

> Alcibiades: I'm going to tell the truth. Do you think you'll allow that?

He was, to begin with, beautiful. He was endowed with a physical grace and splendor that captivated the entire city. It did not decline as he grew, but flourished at each stage with new authority and power. He was always highly conscious of his body, vain about its influence. He would speak of his beauty as his "amazing good-fortune," and his "windfall from the gods." But this was not the limit of his natural gifts. Energy and intellectual power had made him one of the best commanders and strategists Athens had known, one of the most skillful orators ever to enchant her. In both careers his genius was his keen eye for the situation—the way he could discern the salient features of the particular case and boldly select appropriate action. About all these gifts he was no less vain—vain, and yet also almost morbidly concerned with criticism and gossip. He loved to be loved. He hated to be observed, skinned, discovered. His heart, generous and volatile, was rapidly moved to both love and anger, at once changeable and tenacious. He was, then, a man of great resources who made deep demands on the world, both emotional and intellectual; and he did what resource and courage could to guarantee success.

What else? He hated flute-playing, and the flute-playing satyr Marsyas. . . . He laughed, he staged jokes—at the expense of enemies, of lovers, at his own. He once arranged for a suitor of his, a resident alien, to