

Love and Barriers to Love: An Analysis for
Psychotherapists and Others

Raymond M. Bergner, Ph. D.*

[Reference: Bergner, R. (2000). Love and barriers to love: An analysis for psychotherapists and others. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 54, 1-17.]

ABSTRACT: It is vitally important that psychotherapists bring a strong understanding of the nature of love to their work with the many clients who are struggling, in one way or another, with love relationships. With this in mind, the present paper is designed to accomplish two purposes. The first of these is to provide an adequate answer to an old and perplexing question: “What is romantic love?”, and to do so in a way that illuminates why this one relationship possesses the extraordinary importance and centrality in human existence that it so clearly does. The second is to identify and discuss the most common barriers to persons being able to love that are encountered in clinical practice.

* Professor of Clinical Psychology, Illinois State University. Mailing address:

Department of Psychology, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4620.

“My bounty is as boundless as the sea,/ My love as deep; the
more I give to thee, / The more I have, for both are infinite.”

--Shakespeare (*Romeo and Juliet*, II, ii, 333-35)

Clearly, love is one of the foremost preoccupations of humankind. Not only is it the single most prevalent focus of literature, drama, poetry, song, and the popular media, but most people, including most who seek psychotherapy, are highly involved in it. Some are trying desperately to find love and/or to become personally capable of achieving it. Others, having found it, are concerned with preventing its erosion or its loss. Yet others, having experienced such erosion, are keenly interested in recovering the quality of relationship that they have lost.

Because love occupies such a central place, it becomes vitally important that psychotherapists bring a strong understanding of its nature to their work with the many clients who are struggling, in one way or another, with love relationships. With this in mind, the present paper is designed to accomplish two purposes. The first of these is to provide an adequate answer to an old and perplexing question, “What is romantic love?”, and to do so in a way that illuminates why this one relationship possesses the extraordinary importance and centrality in human existence that it so clearly does. The second is to identify and discuss the most common barriers to persons being able to love that are encountered in clinical practice. The present work was undertaken within the broader framework of Descriptive Psychology (6, 18).

The Formulation of Romantic Love

Sources of this analysis

The present conception of romantic love derives from a body of conceptual and empirical research by Roberts (1,2), Davis (3), Davis and Todd (4), and Bretscher and Bergner (5), all of which built upon the earlier conceptual formulations of Ossorio (6) within Descriptive Psychology. It is highly consistent with other prominent formulations, most notably that developed by Singer (7-9) in his classic three-volume series tracing the evolution of the concept of love from Plato to the modern era. It is also consistent with the formulations of Buber (10) in

Love 3

his famous analysis of “I-Thou” relationships, of Yalom (11) in his portrayal of “needless love,” and of Maslow (12) in his discussion of “B-love.” Finally, the present conception was validated in empirical research by Davis and his associates (3,4) as embodying the prototypical set of distinctions that most people in fact employ when they distinguish romantic love from friendship and other relationships.

In this body of work, a paradigm case formulation of romantic love was developed. This is an *ideal* or *archetypal* case that embodies all of the relevant features that a real world case of love might exhibit. Employing an ideal case is useful because it provides us with a standard or template from which to view actual lovers and actual love relationships. Even though we rarely, if ever, observe the fulfillment of all the features embodied in this standard, understanding it enables us to do such things as to identify where particular individuals are limited in their ability to love, to assess what is missing from a given romantic relationship, to discern areas of strength in individuals and relationships, and more.

Since the present conception is archetypal, I shall in that spirit designate our male and female lovers, respectively, as “Romeo” and “Juliet.”

Characteristics of romantic love

To say that “Romeo loves Juliet” (or vice versa) in the romantic sense of that term is to say that Romeo has a certain kind of *relationship* to Juliet. This relationship is one in which he has given Juliet a certain kind of *place*, or *status*, in his world. This place is one of extraordinary honor, value, and centrality; and is perhaps the ultimate such place that one human being can bestow upon another. In the giving of it, which at the outset has the quality, not of choosing, but of “falling” in love, a highly affirming relationship is established between Romeo and Juliet. The characteristics of this relationship will be the subject of this section.

1. Investment in the Well-being of the Beloved.

Singer (7) articulates this dimension of love well when he says: “The lover takes an interest in the beloved as a person, and not merely as a commodity.... He bestows importance on her needs and her desires, even when they do not further the satisfaction of his own.... In relation to the lover, the beloved has become valuable for her own sake” (p. 6). In love, then, Juliet is invested in the well-being of Romeo *for his own sake*, and not merely for how his well-being might benefit her. In Kantian terms, he has become for her an “end” and not merely a “means” to her

Love 4

ends. Such an investment in the well-being of the beloved is expressed as a willingness to act--and even to give one's utmost if need be--on behalf of the beloved. This might include such things as acting to further his interests and goals, supporting or assisting him in times of need, and avoiding or preventing anything from happening that would harm or hurt him. In love, Romeo is not for Juliet a mere "commodity"--is not an entity that, like her automobile or her garage mechanic, has a place in her world which consists essentially of satisfying her needs. (This is not to say, of course, that in any relationship there is not some admixture of love and self-interest.)

If love has an essential characteristic, it is this feature of investment in the well-being of the beloved for his or her own sake. It is the one characteristic that transcends all of the different varieties of personal love such as romantic love, parental love, brotherly love, deep friendship, and Christian love or "agape." Conceptually, consider the contradiction inherent in saying of any alleged love relationship: "She loves him, but she has little interest in his well-being, and values him only insofar as he can satisfy her needs" (cf. "She loves him, but her investment in him is entirely narcissistic.").

2. Appreciation/Admiration.

To say that Romeo loves Juliet is to say that he possesses a supreme appreciation and admiration for the person she is. In the early phases of love, such appreciation is often expressed in glowing and idealized accolades: Juliet is "extraordinary"... "remarkable"... "the most wonderful woman in the world"...even "perfect." Later, if the relationship has progressed successfully from falling in love to being in love, idealization will typically wane to a certain degree, but there remains a deep appreciation and admiration for the partner. The lover may now be more inclined to speak, not in the ways described above, but in terms of "her sweetness, her care, her strength, her freshness and honesty, the way she is utterly committed to our children, the way she is always there for me..."

Appreciation presupposes both acceptance and respect, but goes beyond them. In presupposing *acceptance*, it implies that Romeo does not wish or require Juliet to be other than the person she is--that he is not, as it were, evaluating her with some mental "measuring stick" and finding her wanting as a person in significant and fundamental ways. In presupposing *respect*, it implies that Romeo takes Juliet seriously as a person. It means that he does not find

Love 5

her someone who could, for whatever reason, be discounted, disregarded, or taken lightly; but rather someone who, for whatever reasons (e.g., her qualities of integrity, self-possession, competence, and/or care), commands his respect.

3. Sexual Desire.

Romantic love entails physical desire. Juliet desires physical intimacy with Romeo. She wishes to touch and to be touched, to hold and to be held, and to make love to him.

4. Intimacy/Inclusion.

Love implies that Romeo give Juliet the central place in his intimate world. He wishes to be *with* her, and to be with her *intimately*. He strongly desires not to be cut off from her, either in the sense of being physically separated or in the sense of being emotionally excluded by her. He makes a place in his world for her as his primary confidante and “soul mate,” confiding in her about important personal matters such as his hopes, dreams, triumphs, failures, concerns, insecurities, hurts, and joys; and he desires in turn that she share such matters with him. He takes pains to avoid anything that would disrupt their relationship or drive them apart, and strives to restore mutual inclusion and closeness when such disruptions occur.

5. Commitment.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of this dimension comes to us from Shakespeare: “Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the receiver to receive... it is an ever-fixed mark, that looks on tempests and is never shaken.... Love’s not time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks within his bending sickle’s compass come.... Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom” (from Sonnet 116).

Love implies, on Juliet’s part, a commitment to constancy--to love Romeo forever, “in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, ‘til death do us part.” Even though, in many cases, the tide of events may render this impossible for her--Romeo may mistreat her, betray her, or in other ways destroy her love; or she may change or fail in unforeseen ways--still without this aspect of commitment, Juliet cannot truly be said to love Romeo in the fullest sense of that term.

6. Exclusivity.

Romantic love implies that, for Romeo, Juliet is his “one and only.” It implies exclusivity. It implies that Romeo reserves the kind of relationship that he has with Juliet--the intimacy, the sexuality, the commitment, the willingness to give his utmost--for her and her alone. And,

Love 6

exclusivity implies that he (and she) would count it a very fundamental betrayal of their relationship if he did not do so.

7. Understanding.

Finally, love implies understanding. It implies that Juliet know Romeo in the sense that she understand who he is--that she comprehend his world view, values, life goals, interests, desires, sensitivities, and vulnerabilities. It is this knowledge that ensures that Juliet loves the *actual* Romeo, and not some false conception of him that she might have.

While this may seem to disqualify the not uncommon phenomenon of “love at first sight” as a valid case of love, it need not. From the present point of view, “love at first sight” is an ex post facto description. That is to say, many couples meet and experience very powerful feelings of infatuation for each other. In some of these couples, with continued exposure to each other, the partners find that the other is not the person he or she initially seemed to be, the infatuation wanes, and they discontinue the relationship. In other couples, partners find that the other is indeed who he or she seemed to be; the relationship endures, deepens, and culminates in a long-term love relationship. It is in the latter cases that one looks at the initial infatuation and describes it, ex post facto, as “love at first sight.”

Conclusion: Why Is Love So Valued?

Romantic love, then, is paradigmatically a relationship in which two persons give each other a place of enormous honor, value, and centrality in their worlds. This place embodies characteristics of investment in the well-being of the beloved, admiration, sexual desire, intimacy, commitment, exclusivity, and understanding. One of the things that this conception of love serves to clarify is why this one relationship possesses the enormous and pervasive importance that it does in peoples' lives.

In the paradigm case, both loving and being loved convey enormous behavior potential. That is to say, they carry with them a greatly expanded world for persons--a world where they enjoy many more behavioral possibilities, and highly valued ones, than they do without love. Perhaps the best way to convey this is to describe the difference that it makes in a person's life when he or she first falls in love. One can then readily extrapolate that the endurance of what is acquired at this point would remain a matter of supreme importance in most persons' lives.

Loving another, in the sense described above, enables lovers to achieve a kind of

Love 7

transcendence. In a manner that perhaps only religion or some deeply felt cause can match, love adds an additional dimension of meaning to the lover's actions and existence. Prior to falling in love, the future lover is typically engaging in actions primarily to secure his or her mundane, self-directed ends: to get a good job, to succeed at that job, to earn a good wage, to maintain health and personal appearance, to spend enjoyable time with friends, and so forth. Having fallen in love, many of these same actions have new and added meaning: they are now done "for us...for our love...to build something wonderful together." They are now done "for the other...to make the other happy...to help the beloved achieve important goals or desires...to help the beloved in a time of need." Love, then, takes people outside of themselves and their mundane worlds--for a while this world may even fade into unimportance--into a world where the person of another, the well-being of this other, and the sharing of a world with this other become abiding ends and purposes. All of this occurs naturally and without effort at the outset: one "finds oneself" a lover, and one perhaps who "didn't know I had it in me to be so caught up in someone beyond myself." The lover is elated, then, by the presence in his or her world of the valued other, by the transformation in self, and by the sense of cause and purpose afforded by the new world of the love relationship.

Loving another may also bring about actual expansions in the capabilities of lovers. It can bring out the best in them and allow them to achieve things or to become persons that would not have been possible without love's impetus. For example, the central aspect of love, investment in the well-being of the other, enables some lovers to make sacrifices and to achieve things on behalf of the beloved that would not otherwise have been possible. In other cases, love can be a source of inspiration: the support and encouragement of the beloved, as well as the desire to succeed for him or her, enables some individuals to achieve things that, left to themselves, they could not have achieved.

Being loved by another also carries with it an enormous expansion of behavior potential. At the outset, individuals have, often quite suddenly, a new and greatly expanded place in the world. Paradigmatically, they have not played a role or worn a mask in the relationship, but have been themselves and let the other know them authentically. In response to this, the beloved, this supremely valued other, has declared in effect: "You, and you alone, are the person I want to spend the rest of my life with. You are so very admirable, attractive, and desirable to me. You

Love 8

are someone whose well-being is of vast importance to me, and I will act in whatever way needed--I will give my utmost--to see to it that your aims and desires are furthered, that your failures and unhappinesses are minimized, and that no harm will come to you. I want to be your dearest friend, your soul mate, your sexual partner, the person with whom I share everything. I want you to be the person with whom I build a life, with whom I create and raise a family, with whom I have fun. You are the most important and supremely valuable person in my world.” In the end, having another fall in love with one constitutes the most profound personal affirmation that most persons experience in their lifetimes.

It is no wonder that falling in love, like winning the lottery or receiving a vast promotion, entailing as it does such a rapid expansion of one's place and possibilities in the world, should be the occasion of such “cloud 9” euphoria. And it is no wonder, in the longer term, that the ongoing presence of love in their lives constitutes the most important element in most people's existences.

Barriers to Love

In this section, a number of important barriers to persons being able to love that are encountered frequently in clinical practice will be discussed. Gleaned from the author's 31 years of clinical experience, from research, and from the observations of other clinicians, some of these barriers represent limitations that are confined primarily to one of the parameters of love, while others affect the entirety of them. These barriers are, in the order that they will be discussed, (a) an inability to understand and treat persons as persons, (b) a lack of understanding and appreciation for love itself, (c) personal needs or motives that preclude deep investment in the person of another, (d) hypercritical tendencies that interfere with respecting and admiring others, and (e) senses of personal ineligibility for the love of other persons.

1. Inability to understand and treat persons as persons

Earlier, Singer was quoted as saying that “The lover takes an interest in the beloved *as a person*, and not merely as a commodity” (7, p.6). Love is a relationship in which, for the lover, the beloved is another person--is, in Buber's terms, a “thou” and not an “it.” To have such a relationship requires that the lover have a full understanding and appreciation of what it means to be a person, not merely in some logical or definitional sense, but in the form of *an ability to*

Love 9

regard and treat the other as a person. Thus, Romeo encounters Juliet with a full and abiding sense of her as a sentient being who is also encountering him. His awareness of her is the awareness of a “thou” who, like him, is the conscious center of her own world, a fellow maker of choices, an entitled holder of rights, values, and life goals, and an experiencer of joys and sufferings. Further, just as he has given her a place in his world, Romeo appreciates that Juliet is herself a status assigner who has given him a place in hers. Finally, he appreciates that she, like he, is fundamentally entitled to negotiate, and to accept or refuse, any place that he might wish to assign her in his world (2).

Any individual who lacks such an operative understanding of persons must perforce regard and treat them as something else, which will preclude loving them in the fullest sense. Any belief, ideology or world view that would render Juliet less than a person in Romeo’s eyes, if that view be the genuine operative one in terms of which he approaches her, will be a barrier to his loving her. Quite simply, one cannot love a “commodity” or an “it” in the same way that one can love a person.

Such inability to understand and treat others as persons have been noted historically in connection with a number of clinical syndromes. These include, for example, the antisocial, narcissistic, and paranoid personality disorders. While the terminology traditionally employed to describe such persons (e.g., “inability to recognize how others feel or think,” “insensitivity and indifference to the rights of other people”) differs from that in the previous paragraphs, the picture that emerges in clinical descriptions of these persons is of individuals who suffer severe restrictions in their ability to understand and treat others as persons.

In the following paragraphs, portraits of two less familiar characters are drawn. In each of these portraits, the heart of the matter is that the individual in question does not conceive others fully as persons, but rather as some, perhaps subtly, defective version thereof.

Portrait A: “Imperialistic Status Assigners”

Imperialistic status assigners were initially described in empirical research by Roberts (2) on I-Thou relationships. Couching her findings within a dramaturgical model, Roberts described imperialists as individuals who, like everyone else, have “roles” or “parts” that they would like others to play in their worlds (e.g., roles such as “romantic lover,” “best friend,” and “drinking buddy”). Like others, further, they informally “screen” others for their suitability, and, if

Love 10

indicated, endeavor to assign them to these roles. However, unlike most people, imperialists regard the others' playing of their assigned roles as a nonnegotiable obligation on their part. Further, if they fail to do so to a significant degree, imperialists are likely to reject them and look for someone else to "take the part." In this scenario, the needs, values, and feelings, as well as the rights of others to negotiate their place in the world of the imperialist, are either not a part of the imperialist's awareness or, if marginally so, are of little importance. As one woman rather starkly put the matter to her husband, "When I tell you to do something, you are not supposed to question it. You're not supposed to argue. You're not supposed to question whether it needs to be done. You're not supposed to ask if there's a better way to do it. Don't you get it, goddamit--you're just supposed to do it!"

The imperialist, as this quote illustrates, is entirely analogous to a drama director who might say to an actor: "Look, this is the part I need played in my drama; your needs, interests, values, and point of view are neither part of my awareness nor are they of any concern to me; follow the script I've written for you or I'll find someone who will." In this scenario, the other is not a person but a thing; not an aware, personally entitled, fellow status assigner but a commodity whose essential function is to meet the needs of the imperialistic status assigner.

Portrait B: "Rote Status Assigners"

A second example of individuals who are restricted in their ability to regard and treat persons as persons comes from the same research by Roberts (2). Rote status assigners are individuals whose conceptions of persons, both themselves and others, is that they are kinds of creatures who essentially carry out the "rules" prescribed by the social roles that they occupy. Thus, the man who is a husband, father, churchgoer, and banker essentially carries out what seem to him the narrowly prescribed dictates of these roles, and his fundamental view of others is that they are doing precisely the same thing. In the world of the rote status assigner, there is little freedom, little negotiation of the places persons are to have in each others' lives, and little in the way of individual differences since "when in church, one does what people in church do; when at the bank...etc." What passes for love in this world must of necessity be a remote approximation to that described in our paradigm case. If Romeo is little more than a rote enactor of appropriate role behavior, there is little distinct about him, little inner life to appreciate, and little there to deeply love. He is in essence closer to being a robot or a zombie (famously caricatured

cinematically in “The Stepford Wives”) than a real person.

2. Inability to understand and appreciate love itself

Love, as should be clear from the analysis in part one, cannot be reduced to anything so simple as a naturally occurring feeling that is a human birthright by virtue of one’s biological makeup. It is, rather, a kind of relationship of one person to another, which relationship is describable in terms of the places or statuses that lovers give each other in their worlds. If an individual lacks an *understanding* of that relationship and that place, or cannot *appreciate* the value inherent in such a relationship, that person will be restricted in his or her ability to love.

That a substantial number of persons do not in fact understand or appreciate romantic love is demonstrated in some further findings from Roberts’ research (2). In this research, Roberts drew an important distinction between what she termed “insiders” and “outsiders.” An “outsider” with respect to any given social practice or form of life is someone who lacks the requisite sensitivities, appreciations, and judgments for him or her to enjoy that practice or form of life for its own sake. An outsider with respect to the game of golf, for example, would be an individual who could not understand why anyone would engage in that activity unless he or she had some further end in view. Asked about the desirability of golf, the outsider might say such things as: “I can’t see the point of knocking a little white ball into a hole in the ground, and then repeating the procedure 17 times, unless I could make some good business contacts that way or derive some other benefit.” Insiders with respect to any given social practice or form of life, in contrast, are persons who possess the kinds of understandings and appreciations of these that permit them to participate with no further end in view, i.e., to participate intrinsically. Asked why he or she plays the game, the golf insider might say something like: “I just love it. There’s just nothing more satisfying than being out there on the course immersed in a great round of golf.”

In her research, Roberts’ found that only 13% of her sample of 166 participants were complete insiders with respect to romantic love relationships, while an additional 33% exhibited a partial degree of insider appreciation. Fully 54% of her sample, then, were substantially outsiders. In the research, when the latter persons encountered instances of romantic love relationships, they neither truly understood them nor, consequently, were able to appreciate them. In describing the plight of such persons, Roberts used the analogy of tone-deaf persons

who attend a symphony concert. While such persons may hear all the same notes and exhibit all the same behaviors that everyone else does, they cannot truly understand and appreciate the music and, consequently, derive the considerable intrinsic satisfactions that the music affords to many others. Thus, one of love's requirements is that persons be insiders with respect to romantic love--that in the first place they understand it, and in the second that they possess the relevant appreciations and sensitivities that would lead them even to seek such a relationship, and would allow them subsequently to participate in and to derive the considerable intrinsic satisfactions that such a relationship can afford.

Oftentimes, what stands in the way of persons possessing such understandings and appreciations of love is the fact that they have alternative conceptions of it that are highly maladaptive. Two such maladaptive conceptions of love that are empirically common among psychotherapy clients will be related and discussed briefly.

Problematic Conception: Love as Feeling.

Among clients, the public at large, and many psychological thinkers (e.g., 13), there is a widespread belief that the term "love" designates a certain kind of feeling, namely, one of extremely strong affection. Intellectually, this view is problematic. Pragmatically, it is potentially destructive of love for those who hold it. Let me explain.

First, as Buber (10) long ago asserted, the equation of love with a feeling is invalid. If the view that has been taken in this paper be granted--that love is a *relationship* in which Romeo gives Juliet a place in his world characterized by aspects such as investment in her well-being, admiration, exclusivity, and commitment--it is hard to see how such a complex relationship could be reduced to a simple feeling. Rather, loving someone is a more comprehensive state of affairs that *includes* feelings of strong affection, but also includes much more. A helpful parallel here might be found in the assertion that "Rivalry is not the name of a feeling, but there are feelings of rivalry." In this proposition, the first term ("rivalry") denotes a certain *relationship* that comprises a number of aspects. The second term ("feelings of rivalry") designates what it feels like at certain (but far from all) times to be so related. It is the same with love. Finally, even if we wished to equate love with a feeling, we would be forced to ask, "Which feeling?", since loving another as a rule encompasses *many* feelings in addition to that of warm affection: yearning for the beloved when she is away, concern for her when she is ill or in jeopardy,

Love 13

sympathy for any plight she might be in, anxiousness for the furtherance of her best interests, and enjoyment of her company, to name but a few.

Its intellectual adequacy aside, the view that love is a feeling is demonstrably maladaptive for its adherents, and is so for several reasons. First, reducing love to a feeling takes a profound human bond and trivializes it. If Juliet's love for Romeo is not a committed relationship to him, but only a private feeling or sensation that she experiences, why attach any major importance to it (certainly it is nothing to die for!)? Perhaps, as some have suggested, it is merely the experience of some internal biochemical events. Second, feeling states are inherently ephemeral. Notoriously, they come and go. Were Juliet to view her love, or that of Romeo, as such an ephemeral feeling state, then she would ipso facto have grave questions and concerns about any possible permanency of love. Indeed, she would quite reasonably view it as an inevitably transitory passion. Third, and closely related to the previous point, if Juliet were to equate love with certain feelings, this would serve her poorly in assessing her relationship to Romeo at critical times. Clearly, there are dry spells in all relationships--periods of antagonism, boredom, frustration, preoccupation with other pursuits, and more. If individuals were to equate the two questions, "Do I still love X?" and "Am I having strong affectionate feelings for X right now?", this would scarcely be a sound method of appraisal, and would pose an active danger to the permanency of all relationships.

While I wish to avoid the equation of love with a feeling, I do not wish to deny the importance of feelings. Certainly, how individuals in love relationships do feel about one another is a matter of great importance to them, and there are good reasons why this should be so. Feelings designate what Putman (14) has called "an actors' knowledge of relationship" (p. 133). That is to say, where our knowledge of the relationships between others is derived primarily through observation, our knowledge of our *own* relatedness comes importantly through our feelings. Thus, Juliet's feelings of love for Romeo are vital experiences informing her of her relatedness to him. Should they wane, and wane for a very long time, this too would be informative. Their absence would be *information* to her that something was amiss in their relationship, and that the nature of this something needed to be established and appropriate action taken. Depending on the particulars, this might range all the way from addressing an unresolved issue to dissolving the relationship. Thus, the position taken here is that feelings have

their (very considerable) value as a kind of critical *knowledge*. However, in the end, they are knowledges of relationship, and should not be confused with the relationship itself. Love, one might say, is deeper than feeling. Love is the real world connectedness that feelings can only be feelings about.

Problematic Conception: Love as Self-interested Attachment.

One psychological author has written that: “Love is the positive emotion experienced by one person (the person loving, or the lover) in an interpersonal relationship in which the second person (the person loved, or love-object) (1) meets certain important needs of the first, or (2) manifests or appears (to the first) to manifest personal attributes (beauty, skills, status) highly prized by the first, or both” (9, p. 392). In a similar vein, widely espoused “equity theories” within psychology maintain that love is an essentially economic relationship in which individuals give to their partners in order to receive from them, and experience positive emotions when they believe that they are receiving a fair return relative to what they are putting into the relationship (15). Such views of love are widely prevalent in social science, which has long been dominated by theories that maintain that humans are inherently and universally motivated by self-interest (e.g., the reduction of their own sexual and aggressive drives, or the achievement of positive reinforcement). Such scientific views have their everyday counterparts in, and have no doubt influenced, widely held views on the part of laypersons that, at bottom, everyone is always and everywhere acting out of self-interest, and that what is called “love” can of necessity be nothing more than a disguised form of such self-interest.

Such a “theory of love” reduces love to self-interest, and in doing so becomes in effect a denial of the reality of love. The view is problematic on both empirical and conceptual grounds. Empirically, one does observe relationships (of romantic, as well as parental, brotherly, and other forms of love) in which one person exhibits a deep and selfless concern for the well-being of another, and even at times relationships in which such persons sacrifice their own well-being for the other. An example of such a relationship was the subject of “Elegy for Iris,” a true account of the devoted care of an elderly man, John Bayley, for his wife, the famous novelist Iris Murdoch, who had become completely disabled by Alzheimer’s disease, and who clearly would never recover and be “of use” to him again (16). While the determined reductionist may still insist that, “Really, despite appearances to the contrary, his actions are motivated primarily by self-

interest ,” the observed facts of the case, taken on their face, strongly indicate a man who is quite unselfishly devoted to his wife’s welfare.

Conceptually, as noted previously, the element of unselfish investment in another’s well-being seems to be the one essential factor that transcends all the various forms of human love. In the all-important social contract which is the shared meanings we assign to words in order to communicate with one another, this is *the* factor most central to our concept of love. Thus, most people would consider it a *contradiction in terms* to say: “He loves her, but he has little interest in her well-being, and values her only insofar as she can satisfy his needs.” In the end, the theory that love is an attachment based entirely on self-interest, like one that would assert that all bachelors are actually married, is one that violates the very concept it attempts to explicate.

Its intellectual merits aside, the reductionist view that love is actually, as one cynic put the matter, the “subtlest form of self-interest,” is actively pathogenic. Since the position is tantamount to a denial that love exists, those persons who subscribe to it are rendered thereby restricted in their ability even to believe in love, much less to love. They cannot believe in love because, in their world, what passes for love is always self-interest. It is a world where no one, themselves and their partners included, *actually* cares about another’s wellbeing and happiness except insofar as it redounds to their own benefit. Further, not believing that anyone truly loves, their ability to love is impaired. It is difficult to desire or to seek what one does not believe in, and perhaps even cynically dismisses as “softheaded” or “delusional.” It is also difficult to love when one’s core belief system is one that devalues the love object. If Romeo, at their first encounter, had conceived Juliet as an inherently and universally self-interested being, and one who was thus incapable of truly caring about him or anyone else, that would have been a very different Juliet than Shakespeare’s Juliet. Certainly, it would not have been the woman who uttered the words quoted in the inscription to this paper: “My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep. The more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite.” Romeo’s ability to respect her, to admire her, to trust her (except to look out for herself), and more--and thus his ability to love her--would have been impaired by his conception of the ineluctably selfish creature that she must be.

3. Preemptive needs and motives

Love 16

One of the most common barriers to love is the presence in individuals of personal needs and motives that interfere with, and may even totally preempt, the possibility of their unselfishly investing in other persons. Such needs and motives, when they are sufficiently strong, tend to preoccupy, and even consume, individuals with their fulfillment. They assume a priority in persons' lives such that, relative to them, nothing else matters very much. All personal energies must be directed toward meeting the needs of the self, and there is nothing left over for others. Two examples of such a pattern are well described in the work of Kernberg (17) and of Yalom (11).

Kernberg (17) in his classic analysis of the narcissistic personality, describes narcissists as persons who, despite appearances to the contrary, are gripped by enormous underlying self-hatred. Unable to meet their own esteem needs, and standing badly in need of some sense of esteem, their personal situation is one that engenders enormous needs for external validation. These needs are of such great magnitude that narcissists, in a manner analogous to heroin addicts, become consumed by efforts to secure their "supplies" of admiration and applause from others. In this quest, they are preemptively motivated to use others to meet their needs for personal affirmation, and substantially incapable of taking any true interest in these others for their own sakes. In the world of the narcissistic, Kernberg relates, others can count only as applauders and affirmers of the self. They cannot count as ends in themselves. They cannot be loved.

In a similar but broader vein, Yalom (11) in discussing what he terms "needless love," asserts that the failure to acquire personal qualities such as "inner strength," a "sense of personal worth," and a "firm identity" leaves many individuals with powerful, unmet personal needs. The presence of such needs in turn leads these persons to use others to meet them, and impairs their ability to care for these others for their own sake. When we as individuals fail to acquire such personal qualities, Yalom contends, "we will be prone not to 'care for' but to 'use' others for a function--to treat them not as persons or 'thou's,' but as 'equipment' or 'tools' or 'its' that serve a function" (p.374). We will use them, for example, to affirm our existence, to endorse our worth, to offer us refuge from loneliness, to be subservient to us, to provide us with fleeting sexual unions, to raise our social status, and to serve other functions in our worlds. In the end, then, we will exploit others and treat them as less than fellow persons. We will fail to love them.

4. Hypercritical tendencies

A tendency to be extremely critical is for many persons a formidable barrier to being able to love another. As noted previously, fully loving another includes accepting, respecting, admiring, and truly appreciating the person who he or she is. While lovers, especially those in mature love relationships, will not as a rule be blind to the faults of the beloved, and take issue with them, there is a certain line that they do not cross. This is the line where, in their criticism, they would degrade the beloved to a status wherein he or she became undeserving of their bestowal of love. (NB: An exception to this does occur when appropriately critical persons find out that their partners are not the persons they took them to be--that they are, for example, philanderers or child abusers. In such circumstances, it is not uncommon for individuals to degrade the other to a new status: "someone other than who I thought you were...and whom I do not love.")

For other persons, however, their critical ways are such that others are routinely degraded to degrees where they are found unworthy of love. Prospective lovers, who perhaps at first blush are found attractive and promising, are later found too uncultured, or unintelligent, or insensitive, or unambitious, or unadventurous, or socially inept. And, by virtue of these flaws, they are disqualified from the possibility of acceptance, much less the sort of respect and admiration that love implies. Most clinicians are familiar with persons who have gone from relationship to relationship, criticizing each new partner on such grounds, and in the end disqualifying each as a lover. While the reasons for such a hypercritically dismissive pattern are beyond the scope of this paper, the fact that it represents a major barrier to being able to love another human being must be underscored.

5. Ineligibility for love

Personal beliefs to the effect that one is ineligible for love constitute for many persons formidable barriers to their finding it. Such beliefs may come about through personal histories of rejection or criticism; and/or through perceptions that one is possessed of disqualifying characteristics such as physical unattractiveness, lack of personal appeal, moral undesirability, or sexual inadequacy. Whatever its bases might be, these individuals believe themselves ineligible for the extraordinary place of honor in another's world that is embodied in being loved. Believing themselves so disqualified, they act on this in various ways that serve to ensure their failure to achieve a satisfying love relationship.

Love 18

For example, Jan, a 33-year-old, single woman who was being seen for severe, longstanding depression, began to mention in the course of her sessions that a single man in her office kept coming around to her desk, asking her about herself, sharing somewhat personal matters with her, and inviting her to lunch. Jan both admired this man and was quite attracted to him. When his name had arisen for perhaps the fourth time in the course of her therapy sessions, I commented to her that “it sounds like he is attracted to you.” Jan responded to this remark with a look that conveyed utter shock and incredulity. Such a possibility was totally out of the question, she asserted, and the man’s behavior was attributable to nothing more than the fact that he was “just a nice guy.”

In Jan’s world, it was an unquestioned given that she was ineligible for the love of a decent fellow human being. In her case, the upshot of this was that she failed to see what clearly seemed the attraction of such a person to her, failed to treat it as such by being unresponsive to the man’s initiatives, and in the end discouraged him. In other cases, clients with such beliefs have been impeded in their search for love not only in this way, but also by entering into relationships in very insecure and tentative ways, gripped by strong convictions that sooner or later others would realize their lack of worth and surely reject them. For some individuals, this certainty of ultimate and devastating rejection created powerful temptations to abandon very promising relationships in which they cared greatly for their partners.

Acknowledgements: Many important ideas contained in this paper were imparted by Dr. Peter Ossorio in private conversations with me and others. While these cannot be cited as references, I wish to acknowledge my great indebtedness to him for these ideas. I also wish to thank my wife, Dr. Laurie Bergner, for her extensive and very helpful editorial assistance with this paper.

REFERENCES

1. Roberts M (1982). Men and women: Partners, lovers, and friends. In K. Davis and T. Mitchell (Eds.), *Advances in Descriptive Psychology*, Vol. 2. (pp. 57-78). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
2. Roberts M (1985). I and thou: A study in personal relationships. In K. Davis and T. Mitchell (Eds.), *Advances in Descriptive Psychology*, Vol. 4. (pp. 231-258). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
3. Davis K & Todd M (1982). Friendship and love relationships. In K. Davis and T. Mitchell (Eds.), *Advances in Descriptive Psychology*, Vol. 2. (pp. 79-122). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
4. Davis K (1985). Near and dear: Friendship and love compared. *Psychology Today*, (February), pp. 22-30.
5. Bretscher F & Bergner R (1991). Relational qualities as factors in mate selection decisions. In M. Roberts & R. Bergner (Eds.), *Advances in Descriptive Psychology*, Vol. 6 (pp. 107-126). Ann Arbor, MI: Descriptive Psychology Press.
6. Ossorio PG (1997). Essays on clinical topics: The collected works of Peter G. Ossorio (Vol. 2). Ann Arbor, MI: Descriptive Psychology Press.
7. Singer I (1984). *The nature of love*, Vol. 1: *From Plato to Luther* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
8. Singer I (1984). *The nature of love*, Vol. 2: *Courtly and romantic love* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
9. Singer I (1987). *The nature of love*, Vol. 3: The modern world (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
10. Buber M (1958). *I and thou* (2d ed.). New York: Scribners.
11. Yalom I (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.
12. Maslow A (1968). *Toward a psychology of being*. New York: Van Nostrand.
13. Berscheid E & Walster E (1974). A little bit about love. In T. Houston (Ed.), *Foundations of interpersonal attraction* (pp. 355-381). New York: Academic Press.

14. Putman A (1998). Being, becoming, and belonging. In J. Jeffrey & R. Bergner, (Eds.), *Advances in Descriptive Psychology*, Vol. 7 (pp. 127-162). Ann Arbor, MI: Descriptive Psychology Press.
15. Hatfield E, Traupman J, Sprecher S, et al. (1985). Equity in intimate relations: Recent research. In W. Ickes (Ed.) *Compatible and incompatible relationships* (pp. 91-117). New York: Springer.
16. Bayley J (1999). *Elegy for Iris*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
17. Kernberg O (1975). *Borderline conditions and pathological narcissism*. New York: Jason Aronson.
18. Ossorio, P.G. (2006). *The behavior of persons*. Ann Arbor, MI: Descriptive Psychology Press.