

**Irving Singer**

*Philosophy of Love: A Partial Summing-Up.*

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Irving Singer has been writing deeply and seriously about love at least since 1966 when his *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther* was published. This work eventually became the first volume of his trilogy on love, the latter two volumes covering *Courtly and Romantic* love and *The Modern World* respectively. Feeling this trilogy was ‘too sketchy, too narrow, and incomplete’ (xvii), he began a second trilogy on the *Meaning of Life* and on the ways in which love influences that meaning. But even these six volumes do not constitute the entire corpus of Singer’s writings on love. Indeed, *all* his work, it could be argued, discusses this issue at least obliquely, and often in much more direct terms. Hence, a short work summing up his thoughts on love is a monumental task. To make matters even more difficult, Singer does not have a simple answer regarding the nature of love (110). Rather, trained in the analytic tradition, he sees himself as ‘a maker of distinctions. And the more distinctions I make,’ he says, ‘the more varied are the aspects in which I am able to think about the nature of love. I don’t promote any a prioristic or overarching theory. I’m very suspicious of that. I don’t think that large-scale terms like love, happiness, meaning of life, ... and such, are able to have any one definition’ (15).

As a result of this, Singer has approached love along various lines, which often begin with an historical examination of the subject. Hence, in perhaps the best-known aspect of his work, Singer traces the Greek notion of love conceived as Eros, contrasts it with the Christian notion of love as ‘agapē’, and attempts a kind of synthesis of the two. In the love as Eros tradition, our love of something or someone is based on the beloved’s qualities or characteristics. Thus, for example, we love an object for the beauty it possesses; or, at its highest level, as Socrates informs us in the *Symposium*, we love the Form of Beauty itself. Singer calls this form of love ‘appraisal’, where value inheres in the object itself and hence can be discovered there. In the love-as-agapē tradition, love is based on what he calls a ‘bestowal’. God’s love of humans is taken as the exemplar of such a love, where God loves us *in spite of* our being fallen, sinful beings. Here, value is created in the relationship itself rather than discovered as a property the beloved possesses independently.

While there is dispute about exactly how to read Singer’s thesis on this issue, one interpretation is to say that romantic, sexual love requires an initial positive appraisal of a person, but for love to be complete there must be value bestowed on the person as well. This would seem to imply that both appraisal and bestowal are individually necessary for romantic, sexual love, and jointly sufficient. Singer employs this distinction (and synthesis) in a number of places. For example, he uses it to critique Freud’s view, arguing that Freud misunderstood love as involving only an appraisal. Because of this, Freud took all love to be an ‘overvaluation’ (53) based on an inflated appraisal, and hence it was, in Freud’s opinion, an illusion of self-deception of some sort. But this is because Freud

‘doesn’t perceive the character of the lover’s more-than-merely-selfish creativity in relation to that other person and whatever blemish he or she may have’ (54).

As noted, the distinction between appraisal and bestowal is but one of the many that Singer considers. There is, he says, ‘the idea of interdependence rather than dependence ... ; there is love as an acceptance of another being; there are different kinds of love—the love of things, the love of persons, the love of ideals; there is the distinction ... among the libidinal, the erotic, and the romantic; and so forth’ (110). In addition to exploring the history and philosophy of these distinctions, Singer also borrows evidence freely from literature, religion, psychology, and wherever else there are fruitful ideas to pick.

Consider, to take just one example, the issue of ‘merging’, and the extent to which lovers are dependent or interdependent upon each other. As far back as Aristophanes’ myth in the *Symposium*, we have been cursed with the notion that true and complete love is a merging with another (our other half). Singer quite rightly rejects such a view. ‘In our personhood we do not merge; we cannot merge. The most that can happen is that you think you’re merging, you end up falsifying ingredients in the reality of your relationship’ (19). And yet the idea of merging has had a strange attraction for people over the centuries and in different contexts. The medieval period was particularly concerned, for example, whether we could merge and ‘be one’ with God, an idea that was often taken in that period as blasphemous. Then, in the Romantic period, with its belief in the transformative power of the imagination and its ability to create new, merged identities from originally disparate entities, there was a focus once again on people merging through love. Indeed, Singer argues, people began to think that the love of humans, conceived in this sense, could replace the love of God.

In the Foreword to *Philosophy of Love: A Partial Summing-Up*, Alan Soble, noted philosopher of love and sex, recommends that all ‘those potential students of the philosophy of love and sex ... should start ... [f]irst [with] this book, then *The Nature of Love*’ (xi). Not everyone will agree with this assessment, for some will think the book too informal and lacking academic rigor. Personally, however, I found the style of the book charming—rather like listening to a fireside chat from a wise master with fascinating things to say as he reflects upon his life-long thoughts. And while I did at times find the book—especially the last quarter—a little too vague, that has simply increased my desire to read more of Singer’s work (or read it again) and more generally to work on the subject of love. Surely, that is a mark of success for any literary and philosophical work.

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