



“Love”

The Philosophical Dictionary

Voltaire

There are so many sorts of love that one does not know to whom to address oneself for a definition of it. The name of “love” is given boldly to a caprice lasting a few days, a sentiment without esteem, gallants’ affectations, a frigid habit, a romantic fantasy, relish followed by prompt disrelish people give this name to a thousand chimeras.

If philosophers want to probe to the bottom this barely philosophical matter, let them meditate on the banquet of Plato, in which Socrates, honourable lover of Alcibiades and Agathon, converses with them on the metaphysics of love.

Lucretius speaks of it more as a natural philosopher: Virgil follows in the steps of Lucretius; *amor omnibus idem* (love is the same for everyone).

It is the stuff of nature broidered by nature. Do you want an idea of love? look at the sparrows in your garden; look at your pigeons; look at the bull which is brought to the heifer; look at this proud horse which two of your grooms lead to the quiet mare awaiting him; she draws aside her tail to welcome him; see how her eyes sparkle; hark to the neighing; watch the prancing, the curvetting, the ears pricked, the mouth opening with little convulsions, the swelling nostrils, the flaring breath, the manes rising and floating, the impetuous movement with which he hurls himself on the object which nature has destined for him; but be not jealous of him, and think of the advantages of the human species; in love they compensate for all those that nature has given to the animals—strength, beauty, nimbleness, speed.

There are animals, even, who have no enjoyment in possession. Scale fish are deprived of this delight: the female throws millions of eggs on the mud; the male coming across them passes over them, and fertilizes them with his seed, without troubling about the female to whom they belong. Most animals that pair, taste pleasure only by a single sense, and as soon as the appetite is satisfied, everything is extinguished. No animal, apart from you, knows what kissing is; the whole of your body is sensitive; your lips especially enjoy a voluptuousness that nothing can tire; and this pleasure belongs to no species but yours: you can give yourself up to love at any time, and the animals have but a fixed time. If you reflect on these superiorities, you will say with the Count of Rochester—“In a country of atheists love would cause the Deity to be worshipped.”

As men have received the gift of perfecting all that nature accords them, they have perfected love. Cleanliness, the care of oneself, by rendering the skin more delicate, increase the pleasure of contact; and attention to one’s health renders the organs of voluptuousness more sensitive. All the other sentiments that enter into that of love, just like metals which amalgamate with gold: friendship, regard, come to help; the faculties of mind and body are still further chains.

Self-love above all tightens all these bonds. One applauds oneself for one’s choice,

and a crowd of illusions form the decoration of the building of which nature has laid the foundations.

That is what you have above the animals. But if you taste so many pleasures unknown to them, how many sorrows too of which the beasts have no idea! What is frightful for you is that over three-fourths of the earth nature has poisoned the pleasures of love and the sources of life with an appalling disease to which man alone is subject, and which infects in him the organs of generation alone,

It is in no wise with this plague as with so many other maladies that are the result of our excesses. It was not debauch that introduced it into the world. Phryne, Lais, Flora, Messalina and those like them, were not attacked by it; it was born in some islands where men lived in innocence, and thence spread itself over the ancient world.

If ever one could accuse nature of despising her work, of contradicting her plans, of acting against her designs, it is in this detestable scourge which has soiled the earth with horror and filth. Is that the best of all possible worlds? What! if Caesar, Antony, Octavius never had this disease, was it not possible for it not to cause the death of Francois I? "No," people say, "things were ordered thus for the best." I want to believe it; but it is sad for those to whom Rabelais dedicated his book.

Erotic philosophers have often debated the question of whether Heloise could still really love Abelard when he was a monk and emasculate? One of these qualities did very great harm to the other.

But console yourself, Abelard, you were loved; the root of the hewn tree still retains a remnant of sap; the imagination aids the heart. One can still be happy at table even though one eats no longer. Is it love? is it simply a memory? is it friendship? All that is composed of something indescribable. It is an obscure feeling resembling the fantastic passions retained by the dead in the Elysian fields. The heroes who, during their lifetime, shone in the chariot races, drove imaginary chariots when they were dead. Heloise lived with you on illusions and supplements. She kissed you sometimes, and with all the more pleasure that having taken a vow at the Paraclet monastery to love you no longer, her kisses thereby became more precious as more guilty. A woman can barely be seized with a passion for a eunuch: but she can keep her passion for her lover become eunuch, provided that he remains lovable.

It is not the same, ladies, for a lover who has grown old in service; the externals subsist no longer; the wrinkles horrify; the white eyebrows shock; the lost teeth disgust; the infirmities estrange: all that one can do is to have the virtue of being nurse, and of tolerating what one has loved. It is burying a dead man.

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