

“On the Metaphysics of Sexual Love” (1819)

by Arthur Schopenhauer

[[A public domain translation; this abridgment follows that of Jill Berman at Trinity College.]]

One cannot doubt either the reality or importance of [sexual] love. Instead, therefore, of wondering why a philosopher for once in a way writes on this subject, which has been constantly the theme of poets, rather should one be surprised that love, which always plays such an important rôle in a man’s life, has scarcely ever been considered at all by philosophers, and that it still stands as material for them to make use of.

It is not my intention to be either influenced [by] or to contradict what has been written by my predecessors; the subject has forced itself upon me objectively, and has of itself become inseparable from my consideration of the world. Moreover, I shall expect least approval from those people who are for the moment enchained by this passion, and in consequence try to express their exuberant feelings in the most sublime and ethereal images. My view will seem to them too physical, too material, however metaphysical, nay, transcendent it is

fundamentally. First of all let them take into consideration that the creature whom they are idealising to-day in madrigals and sonnets would have been ignored almost entirely by them if she had been born eighteen years previously.

Every kind of love, however ethereal it may seem to be, springs entirely from the instinct of sex; indeed, it is absolutely this instinct, only in a more definite, specialised, and perhaps, strictly speaking, more individualised form.

If, bearing this in mind, one considers the important rôle which love plays in all its phases and degrees, not only in dramas and novels, but also in the real world, where next to one’s love of life it shows itself as the strongest and most active of all motives; if one considers that it constantly occupies half the capacities and thoughts of the younger part of humanity, and is the final goal of almost every human effort; that it influences adversely the most important affairs; that it hourly disturbs the most earnest occupations; that it sometimes deranges even the greatest intellects for a time; that it is not afraid of interrupting the transactions of statesmen or the investigations of men of learning; that it knows how to leave its love-letters and locks of hair in ministerial portfolios

and philosophical manuscripts; that it knows equally well how to plan the most complicated and wicked affairs, to dissolve the most important relations, to break the strongest ties; that life, health, riches, rank, and happiness are sometimes sacrificed for its sake; that it makes the otherwise honest, perfidious, and a man who has been hitherto faithful a betrayer, and, altogether, appears as a hostile demon whose object is to overthrow, confuse, and upset everything it comes across: if all this is taken into consideration one will have reason to ask —“Why is there all this noise? Why all this crowding, blustering, anguish, and want? Why should such a trifle play so important a part and create disturbance and confusion in the well-regulated life of mankind?” But to the earnest investigator the spirit of truth gradually unfolds the answer: it is not a trifle one is dealing with; the importance of love is absolutely in keeping with the seriousness and zeal with which it is prosecuted. The ultimate aim of all love-affairs, whether they be of a tragic or comic nature, is really more important than all other aims in human life, and therefore is perfectly deserving of that profound seriousness with which it is pursued.

As a matter of fact, love determines nothing less than the establishment of the next generation.

The existence and nature of the dramatis personae who come on to the scene when we have made our exit have been determined by some frivolous love-affair. As the being, the existentia of these future people is conditioned by our instinct of sex in general, so is the nature, the essentia, of these same people conditioned by the selection that the individual makes for his satisfaction, that is to say, by love, and is thereby in every respect irrevocably established. This is the key [to] the problem.

What manifests itself in the individual consciousness as instinct of sex in general, without being concentrated on any particular individual, is very plainly in itself, in its generalised form, the will to live. On the other hand, that which appears as instinct of sex directed to a certain individual, is in itself the will to live as a definitely determined individual. In this case the instinct of sex very cleverly wears the mask of objective admiration, although in itself it is a subjective necessity, and is, thereby, deceptive. Nature needs these stratagems in order to accomplish her ends. The purpose of every man in love, however objective and sublime his admiration may appear to be, is to beget a being of a definite nature, and that this is so, is verified by the fact that it is not mutual love but possession that is the essential.

Without possession it is no consolation to a man to know that his love is requited. In fact, many a man has shot himself on finding himself in such a position. On the other hand, take a man who is very much in love; if he cannot have his love returned he is content simply with possession. Compulsory marriages and cases of seduction corroborate this, for a man whose love is not returned frequently finds consolation in giving handsome presents to a woman, in spite of her dislike, or making other sacrifices, so that he may buy her favour.

The real aim of the whole of love's romance, although the persons concerned are unconscious of the fact, is that a particular being may come into the world; and the way and manner in which it is accomplished is a secondary consideration. However much those of lofty sentiments, and especially of those in love, may refute the gross realism of my argument, they are nevertheless in the wrong. For is not the aim of definitely determining the individualities of the next generation a much higher and nobler aim than that other, with its exuberant sensations and transcendental soap-bubbles? Among all earthly aims is there one that is either more important or greater? It alone is in keeping with that deep-rooted feeling inseparable from passionate love, with that

earnestness with which it appears, and the importance which it attaches to the trifles that come within its sphere. It is only in so far as we regard this end as the real one that the difficulties encountered, the endless troubles and vexations endured, in order to attain the object we love, appear to be in keeping with the matter. For it is the future generation in its entire individual determination which forces itself into existence through the medium of all this strife and trouble. Indeed, the future generation itself is already stirring in the careful, definite, and apparently capricious selection for the satisfaction of the instinct of sex which we call love. That growing affection of two lovers for each other is in reality the will to live of the new being, of which they shall become the parents; indeed, in the meeting of their yearning glances the life of a new being is kindled, and manifests itself as a well-organised individuality of the future. The lovers have a longing to be really united and made one being, and to live as such for the rest of their lives; and this longing is fulfilled in the children born to them, in whom the qualities inherited from both, but combined and united in one being, are perpetuated.

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