

# WHAT IS LOVE?

## A BIG WORD

Love is a big word, yet it flows so easily from our lips. Countless songs extol the raptures of “true love” or the pleasure and pain when someone “steals your heart away”. Humble in size, this word not only serves to describe our most crucial emotions and actions. It is also a recurring element in our everyday language and in the music that surrounds us: on our earphones going to school or work, at the bus stop, at a concert, at the gym. Everywhere we hear songs about love – especially love gone wrong.

Love runs through and anchors the emotional rainbow of our lives. The pot of gold at one end holds the ordinary glue that bonds us to our children, our partners, our families. At the other end is a hot cauldron fed by a cascade of words and images that boil down to one of the most hackneyed themes in the Western entertainment industry: romantic love.

So what is love, actually? Put simply, it is the intimate relationships we have with other people. Relationships so emotionally intense they can shape our will and our desires.

In physical love this intimacy is tangibly manifested in bodily contact of a sexual nature. Here the intensity is associated with erotic feelings, but affectionate lovers also

share devotion, trust and a sense of belonging. Non-sexual intimacy can be just as sweeping and powerful. Just look at parents and children. Even parents of adult children retain a special mix of affection, pride, trust and protective instincts. We have similar relationships with our closest friends when love, friendship and respect blend into one, as in the Greek word *philia*, which translations of ancient texts render as “friendship” and as “love”.

In other words, love consists of emotions – intense and in the plural. **Love is basically a mixture of warm emotions fuelled by our wish to be with another person**, but warm feelings are not always pleasant, and they run the gamut from elation to anguish. Taking a cue from the British singer-songwriter Bryan Ferry, you might say we are all “slaves to love”, for better and for worse. It hurts to miss a loved one, or to be wracked by doubt and distrust. Even when not pathological or obsessive, jealousy can still be an agonizing, debilitating force.

## **LOVE IS INSIDE US**

Theoretically, a person’s inner self can be divided into three parts that enable us, respectively, to think, decide and feel. One part is cool and well-reasoned. Another is bold and inclined to act. Yet another is hot and emotional. Love is forged by our heat and our will to act. Blind passion plus brave choices.

We are directly motivated by what we love, whether seeking to protect it from external dangers or overcoming obstacles and separation. The highest levels of aggression,

regardless of gender, arise when parents are prepared to kill to protect their child. The greatest hardship and torments we endure are those suffered while hoping to be reunited with a loved one. **In short, love frames our eventful lives and actions, our plans and goals.** Love is everywhere, although it cannot explain everything, and it informs and elucidates the choices we make – more or less consciously – to take or leave, to include or omit.

Less conscious choices are often made when we react to love. A case in point was a young female patient of the Swiss psychoanalyst Ludwig Binswanger. She had become mute after her mother refused to let her meet with her love interest, a young officer in the navy. At the time, psychoanalysts were generally obliged not to interfere with the personal lives of their patients, but in this case Binswanger made an exception. He admitted the young woman for treatment in 1929. Wracked by bouts of convulsive hiccuping and hyperventilation, she had suddenly lost the power of speech. When he learned her seizures had begun after she was forbidden to see the man she was in love with, Binswanger chose to treat her silence as an unconscious decision to stop communicating with the world around her. Fortunately, her hiccuping and mutism were cured after Binswanger convinced her mother to let the young couple give their love a chance. Although physical, the young woman's symptoms expressed something mental: an unconscious choice not to "swallow" – accept – her mother's decision. During her seizures Binswanger performed very concrete interventions on her

neck and throat, helping her to swallow. This also helped the mother to see the futility in forcing her daughter to choose between one kind of love (her mother) and another (a man). Incidentally, the young woman's love for the officer did not last. Her affliction did not return, however, since the pressure of choosing had been removed.

## **A BALANCED SOUL**

This division of a person into three parts was already proposed in ancient Greek philosophy, most notably by Plato, who situated love firmly within and outside the person. He linked a person's abilities with their endeavours; internal workings with external works. Just as love must be lived by having the three parts of a person form an alliance, he wrote, people together must produce the ideal state, which consists of separate classes corresponding to reason, courage, and appetite. Only by combining a just state and a balanced soul can humankind achieve the highest truth, the greatest good and absolute beauty. Here, too, human happiness is regarded as an alliance of three elements: truth as the ideal of reason, goodness as the ideal of will, and beauty as the ideal of human emotions. We will look more closely at this last element in one of Plato's dialogues, his preferred format when writing philosophy. *Symposium*, "the drinking party", is one of Western culture's most important texts about the nature of love, at least the type of love Plato calls eros (which, when capitalised, refers to the Greek deity of love).

Like Plato in antiquity, we too must approach love in its

entirety, prepared for views of vast landscapes where much more than feelings grow. Today we still see love as reaching beyond emotional attachments and the arts, moving into the field of what is good or beneficial, just as Plato pointed out. The fact is, love is much more than a personal emotion or a central theme in art and entertainment. Love is also our salient relationships with other people, built on trust and acceptance. This makes love a driving force not only in creating bonds between people but also in enabling conversations and a sense of community to arise at all. Love determines our experience of happiness, and it also defines our responsibilities.

## **YOU'RE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR ROSE**

We often say love works in mysterious ways, not always comprehending why people choose one partner over another. But whether, in choosing, we commit ourselves body and soul or only touch each other's lives briefly, such meetings bring consequences and responsibilities. The emotional involvement and the motivated interpersonal bonds are always relevant in an ethical sense.

Consider a teenager uncertain of how to prioritise friends, school, work and sports activities. Not just anyone can step in with support. Parents are obligated and must advise and understand, and they do so in a way no one else can. Not necessarily because all parents know their own teenager best, but because they are the ones who love their child most. Conversely, children will dare to openly lean on those who love them most. Humans reciprocate love

with trust and love, which in turn lays the mind open to happiness – and to sadness.

For couples, love also means daring to meet trust with trust. Daring to love and be loved. Trusting we will not be rejected when revealing our mind to the other. Love makes us responsible for those to whom we bind ourselves with ties of love, and who rely on our devotion and our care. As the philosophical fox explains in *The Little Prince*, a whimsical tale by the French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry published during World War II: “You become responsible forever for what you’ve tamed. You’re responsible for your rose.”

## **SEEING WITH THE HEART**

Love is an important part of lived human life. This makes it a precious element in our lives we can either nurture or neglect. It takes repeated, wilful acts to benefit the object of our love. As many couples realise after spending several years together, it takes work to make love work, and our reinventions of love give sustenance to the choice we originally made with our heart.

The point is that in love we see and understand with our hearts. By seating love in the heart rather than the brain, we illustrate that loving can be well-founded even though our reasoning may seem baffling. More precisely, we stop reasoning before we’ve even begun. We stop, convinced that the reason is our beloved. We didn’t specifically choose him because he is tall, kind-hearted, smart, or organised, and that’s not why we stay with him. Then again, had he

not been smart and kind, we might not have noticed him in the first place, so a partner's qualities do help form our perception of them.

If someone asks us to, we can easily explain things like how well our partner's practical, sensible approach to life complements our own dreamier disposition. But when it comes to love, that's not what counts. It's not his IQ or his talent as an organiser that makes me willing to do anything for him. What counts is who he is.

The French polymath Blaise Pascal already clarified this several centuries ago in the *Pensées*, a note-based volume of his thoughts published posthumously in 1670. Here, playing on the word *raison*, he famously phrases how choices of the heart have their own impenetrable reasoning. Like its English sister, *raison* has two basic meanings: cause, and common sense. Hence his famous quote, "The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know."

The inscrutability of love does not mean love is limited to an inner realm inaccessible to others. Even so, what typifies the choices we make on behalf of love is that we put ourselves at risk, at stake – we give ourselves over to someone else. This act of surrender expresses wishes and desires that often surprise us, and others.

Wishful thinking in love is not always symmetrical. Far from it. **Love is not always returned in kind.** Some give themselves over in a way the other person cannot reciprocate. We must sometimes ignore an appeal for mutual surrender if it is awkward, inconvenient, emotionally draining. Yes, we may be failing to appreciate

a valuable thing, but had we embarked on a relationship without the warm feelings that requires, we would be making a personal sacrifice that was not in the best interest of the other. Acting out of pity or for the sake of convenience makes both parties unfree.

With all this in mind, initially it is fair to define love as warm feelings that are cultivated through a certain amount of wilful exertion. We can also acknowledge that giving ourselves over to another person creates powerful ties that bind our choices and our will to that other person, making us responsible for them. Finally, we can establish that love can be mutual and reciprocal, although that is not always the case.