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Analyzing Love by Robert Brown

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**Analyzing Love.** ROBERT BROWN. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987. Pp. 127.

While the whole world sings of the mystery of love, so that (almost) everyone knows that (almost) everyone knows that no one knows what is this thing called love, Robert Brown's analysis of love begins, boldly or blindly, but thusly: "We seem to possess all the information that we could possibly wish to have concerning love as a relationship between people" (p. 1).

Apparently, nothing is hidden, at least regards love, because "The vocabulary by which we express or describe love and affection is known to almost everyone" (p. 4), and the essential truths of love "remain hidden from us unless we are clear as to the way in which emotion-terms are actually used to explain our behavior" (p. 11).

The Introduction's allusions to linguistic philosophy suggest that Brown's conclusions will have the form: "If A loves B, A must, as a matter of definition,..." (cf. p. 1). Yet the arguments and analyses of the text are mainly in the material mode; reference to language is intermittent. The data are never syntactical and not frequently explicitly or impeccably semantical. Mainly they look like chunks of commonsense lore of love, with a dash of Freudian dicta, all framed by a conception of emotions as states of feeling and physiology caused by evaluations, beliefs and desires. The evidence that all or most of Brown's theses are in some strict sense conceptual or in any sense linguistic is well hidden.

For various reasons, it may be for the best that Brown's forays in the formal mode are few. Consider: "emotion-terms are...used to explain our behavior...not merely by being used to report our inward experiences—our sensations and feelings—but by referring also to our beliefs, desires, appraisals and evaluations" (p. 11). (Whatever the sentence or statement "A loves B" may say or imply about A, does it—or the word "love"—really *refer* to any of A's beliefs, desires, appraisals or evaluations, or *report* any sensation or feeling, except, perhaps, a feeling of love?)

The list of topics is certainly ample for a slender text:

[F]irst, the problem of identifying the relevant features of love: its distinction from liking and benevolence...and from sexual desire...; the kinds of objects that can be loved and the kinds of judgments and objectives required by it...Second, the problem of recognizing love, both in its inception and its maintenance, and hence the grounds for claiming it to be present or absent in particular cases...The third problem...is...comparing love with common emotions such as fear and anger; but...also...contrasting emotions generally with attitudes, and...finding an appropriate place for love with respect to these categories. Finally...the problem...of justifying our loves, of deciding whether we can have, or need, reasons for loving, what sorts of judgments are displayed in love and what grounds we can have for criticizing the judgments and evaluations made by lovers of the objects of their love. (pp. 11-12)

Brown simplifies his task by taking all his cues from the prior three decades of analytical philosophy, beefed up by a half dozen references to Aristotle and Aquinas and a like number to Freudians, and by presuming that the nature and concept of love are essentially transcultural constants. The Preface's rationale for the enterprise seems to be that "the character of personal relations in advanced industrial societies is constantly being altered, so to understand what sort of people we are in the process of becoming" we need to understand such "basic elements" as love,—as though the latter, like lithium, stayed stable amidst all flux (p. vii).

The problem receiving the lengthiest treatment and least precedented solution concerns, somehow, the particularity of a beloved. What is problematic here is

itself a little elusive. Allegedly, if A loves B “merely because of valuing particular qualities of B,” then “anyone else who possesses these qualities would be equally worthy of love by” A (p. 41). Apparently, Brown finds this puzzling because he inexplicably infers that A “would seem to be committed to loving equally well anyone else who possessed that same combination of qualities” (p. 41). But surely being worthy of something never entails that someone is committed to providing it; and A isn’t committed to loving anyone, B included, by loving B for some quality of B, but only, if at all, by something A does distinct from merely loving B. In any case, Brown then poses the puzzle as: how A can love B “for that person’s self alone—for something distinctive of the beloved” (p. 41). That does puzzle, because, first off, while loving B for B’s self alone may be a common phenomenon, it is a most uncommon (and questionably coherent) *reason* for loving the person B, and secondly, the succeeding phrase (“for something distinctive of the beloved”) is a puzzling paraphrase of the former. Then too, neither expression seems to pose the problem later posed as differentiating “loving a person and loving that person’s manifestation of certain qualities” (p. 45). On the other hand, the puzzle is also said to be that when A loves B because of some of B’s qualities, it seems that A “merely loves part of a person, not the entire person” (p. 42). But then the problem is also said to be to explain “why love for a particular person is not reducible to an unrepeatable instantiated complex of qualities” (p. 106). It is possible that Brown is here asking why love *of* a particular person is not reducible to love of an unrepeatable instantiated complex of qualities.

These variant formulations may put one in mind of a familiar problem in the contemporary analytical literature on love. However, since the conceptualization of a problem is so critical in philosophy, it is perilous to presume that vaguely similar statements state the same philosophical problem. Moreover, Brown’s solution to *his* problem(s) seems not charitably construed as a contribution to the resolution of the issue others have discussed, since the nub of his solution is this: “To love a particular person is often to commit oneself to an open-ended relationship.” The details of the commitment and the complete character of the love relationship are unspecifiable until the relationship ends. “Similarly, the object of love cannot, at a particular time, be identical with a specifiable complex of qualities. The complex is essentially incomplete, and hence so is the object of love” (p. 107).

Brown can be credited with correcting various errors in the idiosyncratic theses of some prior writers. For example, he points out that desiring reciprocation of love from the beloved is not a conceptually necessary feature of love. Yet this book is not without its drawbacks, not the least of which is its timing. Its appearance coincides with that of books touching its topics by De Sousa, Greenspan, Rorty, Santas, and others who have read more widely, thought more acutely, and written more carefully.

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