

Love and Lovability

CAN MORAL ENERGY BE GENERATED?

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LOVE thy neighbor as thyself" is a precept which in various forms is found in most of the higher religions. The love that we are enjoined to give our neighbor is not the passionate attachment of a youth to his sweetheart or a mother to her babe; for an affection of this sort arises spontaneously and cannot be commanded. It is a disposition of the will rather than an emotional state. We must have the same regard for our neighbor's welfare as we have for our own. We must be as careful not to injure him as we are to preserve ourselves from harm, shield him from perils as zealously as we guard ourselves.

Obviously, this ancient and widely held rule of conduct is not consistently followed by those who profess it. If applied to our closer neighbors, it would put an end to personal and social injustices, ugly lawsuits, and all the malicious gossip that disfigures so much of our conversation. If applied, as in the teachings of the greatest seers and philosophers as it is intended to apply, to all our "neighbors" no matter how far distant from us in space, wars also would cease. We might even stop much of our harshness and cruelty to animals; for on the widest view, as in several Oriental religions, our neighbors whom we must treat with loving regard include all those creatures who share with us the spark of life.

Why has the precept to love our neighbor as ourselves not been more effective? After being widely preached for well over two thousand years, why



has this simple and beautiful rule failed to improve human relations as it might be expected to do? In childhood, love is repeated conspicuously. Why then are so many people deficient in loving their neighbors?

Is it because we have such slight capacity for love and benevolence, which vainly contend against our intense self-love and powerful egoistic motives? Is it because social and economic arrangements nearly everywhere stimulate competitive rather than altruistic endeavor and yield the coveted prizes,

not to those who are most thoughtful of their neighbors, but to those most selfishly intent on promoting their own interests? Or is it simply that we do not love our neighbors because they are not sufficiently lovable?

All of these causes of our deficiency in love for other men are effective, but perhaps the most powerful is the last. By their selfishness, harshness, crudeness, wickedness, ingratitude, intolerance, and other unamiable qualities, our neighbors all too often turn away our friendly interest, shrivel our kindly impulses.

Since the love which we are commanded to have for them is not an emotional state but a settled disposition of the will, it should ideally be independent of their affability or their merits. By sustained religious or philosophic discipline, one can cultivate a benevolent attitude toward one's personal enemies, hardened criminals, venomous snakes, destructive insects, and other beings that we naturally regard with

loathing or aversion, so that we carefully avoid injuring them and even benefit them on occasion. But it is far easier to be kind and helpful to those whose amiable qualities excite our spontaneous affection than to those who annoy or disgust us. Benevolence toward the latter requires a more or less intense effort of the will—of this few are capable.

It appears, then, that in order to increase love among mankind, with all the blessings that flow therefrom, the first necessity is to make ourselves more lovable by the cultivation of those qualities which render us pleasing to our fellows. One of the chief of these is, perhaps unfortunately, a gift of nature rather than something acquired by deliberate effort.

Scarcely anything so excites love as physical beauty, and where we find it we spontaneously expect all the other good and amiable qualities that seem to be its natural complement. Until we have been disillusioned by sad experience, we can hardly believe that the charming person whom we are eager to love and serve can be cruel, deceitful, wicked, or otherwise than as beautiful in character as he is in face and limbs. Hence it is pitifully easy for the attractive man or woman who is lacking in principles to exploit for his own selfish advantage many of our finest human traits.

It is for the comely person to realize that in endowing him with personal beauty nature has placed him under a special obligation—that of making all his thoughts, words and deeds correspond to his external loveliness, so that no one who is led by first impressions to expect a matching beauty of spirit will ever be deceived and embittered. One whose charming face masks a hideous soul is perhaps even more loathsome than the person who is equally deformed in character and in features, for the latter seems to be more straightforward and consistent.

Although we can do little to increase our corporeal beauty, and the effort to do much will repel all persons of discernment and good taste, there are other ways of increasing our superficial attractiveness to our fellows. Among the more obvious of these are cleanliness and neatness in person and attire.

Courtesy among men makes strangers less forbidding and intimates more agreeable. Cheerfulness, especially the sort that springs spontaneously from inner contentedness, is one of the most amiable of all spiritual qualities, while surliness turns friendship away. The helpful gesture stirs up kindly feelings, at times out of all proportion to the service actually rendered. A timely word of praise or appreciation draws others closer to us.

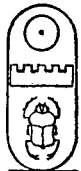
In the effort to make ourselves pleasing to our fellows by the foregoing methods lurks a subtle danger. Courteous speech and gentle manners may mask an evil disposition or a heart full of venom. All too often these are the methods which scheming persons adopt to ingratiate themselves with those whom they intend to cheat or destroy.

True lovability rests on a more solid foundation. Although the young and the foolish may be dazzled by superficial attractiveness, the mature judge of men demands other qualities in those whom he includes among his friends. To him, it is moral goodness above all that makes one worthy of love. Where there is a solid core of such spiritual qualities as sincerity, responsibility, kindness and good will, a pleasant exterior makes one a more agreeable friend; where these are lacking, no amount of external polish can make a man even an endurable companion. As Cicero remarked, they are worthy of friendship who have within their own souls the reason for their being loved.

But nothing makes a human being so lovable as the love of which he himself is capable. We can hardly avoid being strongly attracted to the person who serves with devotion something that he loves, whether it be his children, friends and community, or his garden, his art or science, or some ideal end. Love breeds love, and the loved person is above all the loving person.

Make Yourself Worthy

It appears, then, that the injunction "Love thy neighbor as thyself" should be supplemented by another of at least equal importance: *Make thyself lovable to thy neighbor*. Perhaps the second is more fundamental; for where lovability is present, love springs spontaneously and need not be commanded. Indeed, it



might be argued that to make thyself lovable is the highest moral precept, from which all other maxims and rules may be deduced as corollaries. The truly lovable person is the truly good person, and the man of highest character is the one most worthy of our love. To become lovable to those who judge not superficially but with insight is the highest human achievement.

It is hardly possible to exaggerate the moral and social importance of making it easier for others to respect and love us. As was earlier remarked, the love for others enjoined by religious and moral teachers is primarily not an affection but a disposition of the will. We should treat them as though we loved them tenderly, whether our feelings toward them are warm or cold.

If our will is strong enough, we can be gentle and helpful even to those whom we spontaneously loathe; and perhaps in the course of this service our loathing will abate and even be replaced by love, as has sometimes happened with saints. But few of us have an unlimited reserve of will power, and we are soon exhausted by the effort to force ourselves to perform distasteful duties. We act much more easily and naturally under the promptings of spontaneous affections than in obedience to the stern commands of duty. The more lovable we are to our neighbors and they to us, the less likely we are to be harmful and unjust to each other and the more consistently will moral rules be observed.

If by becoming lovable to my neighbor I make it easier for him to be good and just where I am concerned, I do not thereby cause the relaxation of his will, wherein, according to the sterner school of moralists, all moral worth resides. He will still have abundant opportunity to prove the strength of his will by being kind to others who are less agreeable to him. In its actual state, the world cries out for unselfish service, and this requires a fund of moral energy so far in excess of the present supply that whoever makes it easier for men to be good performs an undoubted service.

Of the other causes of the deficiency of love among neighbors, not the least is the structure of the competitive societies in which we live. Since Plato's

day, philosophers and social reformers have amused themselves by planning ideal states, in which men would become better and happier. I believe that if a profound thinker tried to devise a state in which people would become more miserable instead of happier, would hate rather than love one another, he would have a competitive economic system such as prevails in most parts of the world today.

Many of the philanthropic social planners have envisioned a noncompetitive community in which money is unknown. But if it be true that we need less vicious social arrangements in order to produce better men, with greater love for their fellows, it is also true that until we have better, more loving men, more benign social arrangements might be impracticable. We are thus caught in a vicious circle, from which it will be difficult to extricate ourselves. But without waiting for vast social readjustments, each of us might start by trying to make himself more lovable to his neighbors, and to love them more.

The remaining cause of the deficiency of love among men, the strength of our self-love, is in my opinion of far less weight. As Bishop Butler long ago pointed out, there is not too much self-love in the world but too little. Although a man may be intensely selfish, it does not follow that he loves himself truly and intelligently; it is not his real and enduring self, but certain superficial aspects of himself that his egoism serves. No man can have too much self-love, provided that he loves himself with understanding.

Morality is an outgrowth of self-love; for if there were no beings to whom continued existence and well-being are momentous, all moral effort would be pointless. What could be more futile than to be careful of the welfare of beings who care nothing for themselves? Moreover, if I were not myself intensely eager to perfect myself and be happy, I could hardly appreciate the significance of a similar impulse in others, and in the absence of this awareness I could not become a moral being. Enlightened self-love is not deplorable but laudable, and one of the highest expressions of such self-love is the desire to make oneself lovable to others.