

Love in the passions



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There exists a debate between Rousseau, Plato and the philosophers of the Encyclopedia over the experience of the passions. While Plato and the philosophers choose to philosophically debate over the reasons behind love and sexuality, Rousseau, who insists that “imagination wreaks so much havoc,” unfastens philosophy from the passions and argues that they are independent ideas that need not be interconnected. One could delve in to this dispute from two sides; one being that love is a difficult concept whose reasons need high levels of inquiry to achieve understanding, or that the passions are straightforward and do not need an in-depth exploration. These two opposing sides are not only battling for and against segregation of thought and reason, they are also at odds on the definition of love itself. In Rousseau’s “The Basic Political Writings,” he claims that “the more violent the passions are, the more necessary the laws are to contain them.” Noting that the passions are ‘violent’ already offers them a negative overtone, which is only enhanced by Rousseau’s insistence that “even if [the laws] were capable of repressing [the passions], the least one should expect of them would be that they call a halt to an evil that would not exist without them.” (Rousseau, p. 56) It seems that Rousseau fears going further with the idea of love; one which supposedly brings about the existence of evil by being active. So what exactly does he believe ‘repressed’ love is, and why does love need to be held back at all? Rousseau writes about love like it is an animal of sorts that should not be allowed to run wild; perhaps he sees it as an unnatural distraction, reserved for nearly savage beings. Besides the fact that it seems that Rousseau believes that the passions should be separate from activities of thought or internal investigation, it appears that he also views the exaggeration of love as an interference with the natural order of

things. Rousseau brings in an example of the Caribs, an ancient people who “ of all existing peoples, are the people that wandered least from the state of nature...least subject to jealousy, even though they lived in a hot climate which always seems to occasion greater activity in these passions.”

(Rousseau, p. 56) Therefore, from this statement, it is possible to sense that Rousseau views the emotion of jealousy as straying from “ the state of nature.” The Caribs are acting righteously, according to Rousseau’s opinion, because of their removal from temptation i. e. love, etc. (especially considering the climate conditions). According to this evidence it can be said that Rousseau sees jealousy as an abstract idea (whereas love should not be), and as being a reaction to succumbing to the passions. In addition, by stating that although enticement was present for the Caribs, and that they were able to suppress their ‘ vulgar’ emotions, so to all man has the ability to resist desire. Rousseau seems to operate in a different way than he admits. It seems that all of his justifications as to why love is an unnecessary evil and should not be left for the imagination, actually counteract their initial purpose. Philosophy is the attribution of a set of beliefs towards ideas; it is in some sense a way of thinking and an attitude one possesses towards life. It seems that Rousseau tries to separate the passions from philosophy but rather ends up connecting the two by offering insights. One other possible idea involving Rousseau is that his objection may not stem from the idea of love at all, but rather violence; he views violence as unpleasant. However, he associates the two in that they coexist as one. “ What would become of men, victimized by this unrestrained and brutal rage, without modesty and self-control, fighting everyday over the object of their passion at the price of their blood?” (Rousseau, p. 62) It seems that he has pre-constructed an image of

what love is; a battlefield. Because of his accepted definition he explores from this angle alone and sees no reason to leave his sphere of personal understanding. Having undergone much gender debate over the years has raised various important questions on the roles of men and women. However, there has always been agreement in one area; one sex cannot exist without the other. The passions motivate uncommon actions and helps arouse new emotions and ideas. Yet if these bonds are a 'necessity' to the human race then why are we so disconnected from its true meaning? There has yet to be a one universal explanation of love and there has yet to be one who understands its powers fully. As in Plato's Symposium, when the enlightenment influenced the exploration of thoughts, even to the wisest of men love was still a concept that was bewildering. Rousseau understood love as an opinion, whereas Plato and the philosophers understood it as a question. Plato's "Symposium" serves as a text that depicts some of the guidelines of love as seen by the philosophers of Plato's time. One of these philosophers, Diotima, speaks of her interpretation of love and its effects on those swayed by it. She connects physical attraction (physical love) to the creation of new ideas (intellectual love). By interweaving these two forms, she actually proves that if one exists it reawakens the other. "The result is that our lover will gaze at the beauty of activities and laws and to see that all this is akin to itself, with the result that he will think that the beauty of bodies is a thing of no importance." Thus, the initial physical attraction ultimately leads to an enlightening state; opposing Rousseau's notion of detachment. Furthering her elucidation, Diotima adds that "gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom, until, having grown and been strengthened there,

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he catches sight of such knowledge, and it is the knowledge of such beauty.”

(Plato, p. 58) The speech of Pausanias sheds light on another matter.

Pausanias insists that, “ the plain condemnation of Love reveals lust for power in the rulers and cowardice in the ruled, while indiscriminate approval testifies to general dullness and stupidity.” (Plato, p. 15) By this observation Pausanias implies that love has the ability to weaken those defeated and those who succumb to it in its entirety. In some way this statement insists that it is impossible to be correct by neither the approval nor disapproval of love. So what is left if not these two options? It would seem that Pausanias insists not on choosing a side, but rather on that love should be interrogated. If “ Symposium” is a drunken discussion with various ideas protruding from all sides, what makes the idea of a chaotic dialogue on the passions more comprehensible than Rousseau’s opinion that they should be aimed at disjointedly? I believe it to be that no one is very sure of how to identify the passions, and there is no need to. It is a subject that should be open to many individual impressions. One who experiences love does not experience the same love as his neighbor; you have to take into consideration the idea of personal experience intruding on every separate personality. Therefore, regarding the passions, they not only should be combined with philosophy, rather it is necessary they do so for the sake of defending the passions for what they are; nothing in particular or open to interpretation.