

CHAPTER 3

The Concept of Love from Irving Singer's Perspective

3.1 Irving Singer's Biography

Irving Singer was born in Brooklyn on December 24, 1925. He skipped three grades in school, graduating from Townsend Harris High School at age 15. He enrolled at Brooklyn College, then served in World War II. At that time he wrote a book about his infantry's activities, culminating in a document titled "*History of the 210th Field Artillery Group*" (U.S. Army, 1945). He later collected his letters home to his brother in an unpublished anthology, which he called "*Memories of World War II*". After studying for a short time at Brooklyn College before the war and attending Biarritz American University in Paris after the war, he went to Harvard University on the G.I. Bill, joined Phi Beta Kappa and graduated summa cum laude with an A.B. in 1948. He did his graduate studies at Oxford University and Harvard, receiving a doctorate in philosophy from Harvard in 1952.

He taught briefly at Harvard, Cornell University, the University of Michigan, and Johns Hopkins University. He joined the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the Department of Philosophy and Linguistics in 1958, first as a lecturer, then promoted to associate professor in 1959, and full professor at 1967.

He was awarded a Fulbright research scholar grant, a Guggenheim fellowship, and a Rockefeller Foundation grant. He retired from MIT in 2013

Irving Singer died February 1, 2015, at the age of 89. His extensive works are currently being collected and reprinted by a new MIT project, *The Irving Singer Library*.

3.2 Irving Singer's General Concept

Irving Singer wrote 21 books in the field of humanistic philosophy, focusing on topics such as the philosophy of love, the nature of creativity, moral issues, aesthetics, the philosophy in literature, music, film and the philosophy of George Santayana.

The beginning of focusing on the philosophy of love started from his family members who urged him to be more affectionate. He spent years on researching and writing a three-volume examination of the subject titled "*The Nature of Love*" (1966–1987), a three-volume exploration of the idea of love in Western philosophy. Constructing intellectual histories rather than highbrow versions of the Kama Sutra, he attempted to explore whether romantic love was a recent invention and placed it in his three-volume philosophical context of the subject titled "*Meaning in Life*" (1992–1996), which addresses the creation of value, the pursuit of love, and the harmony of nature and spirit. Additionally, there still lingering problems about the relation between love and imagination, idealization, consummation, and the aesthetics. He has wrestled with them in the books, notably "*Feeling and Imagination: The Vibrant Flux of Our Existence*" (2001) and "*Explorations in Love and Sex*" (2001), that are organically derivative from the earlier studies on the nature of love. To finish, he made a brief of his philosophical thought about love in the "*Philosophy of Love: A Partial Summing-Up*" (2009).

Irving Singer spent a long time reflecting on the concepts which is matter a great deal to people. He can talk precisely and insightful about the concept of love which most people experience and would like to understand better. He was delivered from empiricism thinkers such as David Hume, John Stuart Mill, John Dewey, etc. His philosophy of love is tangible, based on verifiable assumptions which do not exceed the limits of our knowledge. He regards love as an imaginative act, an almost natural bestowing of value on another, but he wants to root it in the sexiness of biology. Neither idealist nor materialist, he puts himself forward as a pluralist of love. Irving Singer described himself as a "*reconstructed romantic*" who did not believe in romantic love. He said that "*The best one can expect is meaningful moments of real happiness.*"

3.3 The Concept of Love from Irving Singer's Perspective

While feelings of love may be universal among human beings, ideas about it are particular to a culture or historical period, ranging from the highbrow assumptions of Plato to the pluralistic ideals of the late twentieth century.

Western thinking about sexual love may be categorized in terms of two basic approaches. There is the idealist tradition from Plato which Christianity merges with Judaic thought, that courtly love humanizes and that romanticism redefines in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, there is the realist tradition that from the very beginnings has rejected the pretensions of idealism as unverifiable, contrary to science, and generally false to what appears in ordinary experience.

Singer began his study in the philosophy of love at a time when hardly any philosopher in the Anglo-Saxon world considered that subject professional or even respectable.¹ His approach to love in philosophy, literature, music, and psychology is classical throughout, as it arises out of the distinction between eros and agape as conceptual forces that underlie much of the Western tradition. Singer's explorations of Freud and Santayana guide his thinking. Both his historical analyses and his own philosophizing express a respect for the play of imagination in science, literature, and art. He approaches things from an empirical point of view. He prefers horizontal perspectives in the case that they enable us to understand love in terms of diversities within nature itself. He said that human and their fundamental types of relations are ineluctably plural.

Singer shows us the development of the concept of love through his writings from ancient Greek transcendental love until Christianity religious love—love of God, then the way to democratize the concept of love to ordinary people from the emergence of courtly love, and later developed into a romantic love which is currently influential.

Singer questions that romantic love as a recent idea was mistaken and find out whether his doubt would be accepted. Most of his discussions about love focus on romantic love between people. His discussion spends proportionate time on romantic love. He suggests

¹ Analytical philosophy is a style of philosophy that became dominant in English-speaking countries at the beginning of the 20th century.

that to study the philosophy of love completely we would have to investigate the ways in which developments of mind are capable of altering behavior while also following a course of evolution within their own domain.

3.3.1 The Nature of Love

Irving Singer began to make sense of the historical progression of thought and inspiration within a framework of distinctions. He is best known for *The Nature of Love*, an extensive three-volume study of how love has been comprehended throughout the philosophic tradition and how he thinks love ought to be viewed in modern times. The work begins with Plato's treatment of love and proceeds to study the various perspectives of other philosophers, theologians, authors, playwrights, and poets throughout history.

In *The Nature of Love*, Singer characterizes love as an attitude rather than as a simple feeling. He devotes the first section to discussing two philosophical traditions on love: the idealist tradition beginning with Plato and the realist tradition which seeks to understand love in terms of the biological, neurological, and social natures selected for us by evolution.

For the idealistic tradition, Singer begins his thought with Plato, who suggests the idea that love is an instinctual which human beings transcend their limitations in time and space. He concludes that two major themes of Plato's philosophy are transcendence and merging. Singer describes his interpretation of Plato's sense of love as a striving toward the Good, starting with overindulgence in sex (to remove earthly desires) and proceeding from there in stages toward the ultimate goal in life, full perception of the Good. Singer sees the Platonic journey from primitive love of erotic and physical pleasures to intellectual and spiritual love of the Good as "*the most fertile and powerful single body of thought on love that anyone has ever created throughout Western civilization,*" his presentation of Plato's ideas is one of the longest and most sustained in the book.

From this beginning in Plato, Singer steps back and remarks on the way the dialectic of ideas proceeds—Plato's idealism. Singer avoids the attempt to find a single key

to the universe and instead allows us to see love in its diversely plural manifestations. Pluralistic standpoint is an important aspect of his thinking on various concepts, particularly, concept of love. He believes that instead of looking for one answer, like Plato, we should ask questions about reality and what is valuable in it as persons who recognize the variegated character of their involvement in nature. Love is not just love of persons; it is the love of things and ideals as well, and each of these categories can have unlimited variations within it.

Singer criticized the tradition of transcendental love. He recognized the importance of transcendental love as it falsifies the way in which love is related to normal responses that belong to human as part of nature rather than reach beyond nature. He rejected the idea that we transcend ourselves when we are in love and bring down a worldly concern about love. Love has to be understood in terms of what happens to ordinary relationship.

“When love succeeds, it is a transcendent good but there is no transcendental object that necessarily defines its beings. The relationship of love is something that people, men and women, establish in their day-by-day experience with each other—assuming they have learned how to do so.”

(Singer, *Explorations in Love and Sex*, 2001, p. 78)

3.3.2 The Pluralistic of Love

Singer claims for the pluralistic character of love. Pluralistic love according to Singer is the idea of indiscriminately loving other human beings and other species, the idea of loving the love that all living creatures do or want to feel for themselves, their love of love. The most prominent meaning of the pluralistic is love can have many different objects. The religious love which he discusses in his works will fit into his categories of the love of people, things, and ideals, or whether he would add a fourth category. In separating these three types, Singer characterizes himself as a maker of distinctions, claiming that the best we can do as philosophers is explore a vast subject matter and try to clarify it with ever-finer analysis or dissection.

However, he reminds us how the love of things and ideals can be good, and includes examples from his own life: how he loves the writing process, loves the computer he uses in it, loves humanism and philosophy. He said that human nature is extremely broad and very intricate. There are many social and biological vectors at work within it. He sees no need to reduce all forms of love to either passionate love or some romanticized inclination related to it. He rejects that one definition can fit a large-scale terms like love. Love is an enormous human nature phenomena that we cannot justifiably constrict them with a single, fixed and all-embracing, definition of the kind that Plato pursued. There will be realities of feeling and experience that do not fit. It is a matter of the paradoxical which is a kind of human nature.

Pluralism causes Singer to resist both the narrowing or reductive tendencies of famous figures like Plato and Freud, and also the expansive tendencies of a famous figure like Nietzsche. His pluralism helps to support his criticism of Freud's reduction of all love to libidinal desire. Pluralism also suggests to Singer that Nietzsche's notion of "*amor fati*," stretched into a love of everything. We can love many different kinds of things but only so many total objects. It is simply impossible to be familiar enough with everything in the universe to bestow on it all the value and attention that characterize love.

3.3.3 The purpose of love

Although we are limited in the number of things we can love, Singer does not reduce the importance of loving in itself. In the prefatory note of *Philosophy of Love: A Partial Summing-Up*, he writes;

“I realized that understanding love or its related conditions required an investigation into problems about meaningfulness in life as a whole and the human creation of value in general.”

To make our lives most meaningful is to love objects outside ourselves and to love loving those things. Singer and Harry Frankfurt ²(1929-) have those aspect in common. Singer mentions many harmonious ideas. He says that;

“What matters most is doing what you can for the sake of living most fully in the present, while you are still active and in command of your faculties. Only by exercising a vital effort of this type can you love the life in others and in yourself.”

(Singer, *Philosophy of love : A partial summing-up*, 2009, pp. 96-97)

Love is believed by both of them that involves bestowing value on the beloved. Frankfurt adds that in doing so, the lover's welfare is bound up with the beloved's, and in that sense it becomes a part of the lover. This is in turn good for the lover because loving things motivates him or her to act on their behalf or in enjoyment of the things loved, and thus gives him or her reasons to keep going.

Toward the end of the book, *Philosophy of Love: A Partial Summing-Up*, Singer picks up a theme that first appears midway through: the relationship between scientific and humanistic thinking on love. As a humanist who takes a naturalistic stance, Singer acknowledges with some admiration the interest and importance of work taking place in cognitive science. Yet, he suggests that there is a lack of proper recognition of the role of feelings, of affective realities, that are not wholly amenable to the current modes of investigation. The scientific approach is too rationalistic and therefore rests on a fundamental mistake. Psychologists and cognitive study emotion by thinking that it can be explained in terms of the rationalistic concept. There is the underlying aesthetic dimension in life that is surely not reducible to the current parameters of a traditional scientific investigation.

² Harry Gordon Frankfurt (1929-) is an American philosopher whose major areas of interest include moral philosophy, philosophy of mind and action, and 17th century rationalism. He is well known from his 1986 paper *On Bullshit*, a philosophical investigation of the concept of "bullshit"

Ideas alone never create a feeling and by themselves feeling never amount to ideas because each of them must be processed cognitively as well as effectively. He believes that we need a completely new lexicon and analytic approach to understand the affective side of love in all its glory and messiness: emotions, intuitions and instincts, sexual desires, and so on. He expresses a worry that the humanities are undervalued in the name of technological advancement and pragmatic values. Still, he offers little in the way of concrete suggestions as to how the collaboration between them would look. He does mention that his work on love and sex is an effort in this vein.

“Like the world itself, love is an emanation grounded in matter, and comparable to its parental origin. It is a dynamic and always changing process. At the same time, it can empower us to live our brief lives with significant fulfilment, sometimes with joy, and often with a sense of residual satisfaction.”

(Singer, *Philosophy of love : A partial summing-up*, 2009, p. 105)

Singer also criticizes about the way to study philosophy. It is an interesting phrase that shows us how he understand various concepts, especially, the concept of love:

“If you are a philosopher, you can only make a personal portrait that may be true to yourself, to your times, to your style of thought or writing, and thereby proffer imaginative and possibly genuine insights into the nature of human experience. If what you write is both lucid and suggestive, it may excite the imagination of other people, and that's marvelous.”

(Singer, *Philosophy of love: A partial summing-up*, 2009, p. 94)

3.3.4 Love as appraisal and bestowal

From the first volume of *The Nature of Love*, Singer laid a foundation for his concept of love by distinguishing appraisal and bestowal.

Singer describes the difference between bestowal and appraisal. He prefers the idea of love as wedding rather than merging, which means he senses of love as an imaginative and creative acceptance of another human being, the pluralistic nature

of love (love of things, of persons, and of ideals), and the hope that a dialogue between humanistic and scientific thinking on love can add much more to the conversation on both sides.

Appraisal is the ability to discover value in oneself or in other people. Apart from appraisal, no love would exist—we would not even know what the other is like. Bestowal is a way of creating new kind of value apart from the same kind of appraisal. We do experience people, thing or even ideal at every moment in terms of some appraisive value we care about. Bestowal is an engendering of value by the relationship we have established, by one's appreciative attitude toward the person, thing or ideal to which we attend. It is a kind of projection. It is a creating of affective value, both in oneself and in the other, which reveals why appraisal alone cannot clarify what love is. We are able to transcend all appraisive attitude through bestowal without eliminating the unavoidable presence of appraisal. We do so by creating the new kind of relationship that is essential for love. In bestowal, there will always be a concomitant appraisal, but you go beyond appraisal itself and may even disregard it.

Singer understands love as a matter of bestowing value on the beloved. To bestow value on another is to project a kind of intrinsic value onto him. This fact about love is supposed to distinguish love from liking: *"Love is an attitude with no clear objective,"* whereas liking is inherently teleological. There are precisely standards for bestowing such value, and this is how love differs from other personal attitudes: *"love...confers importance no matter what the object is worth"*. (Singer, *The Nature of Love Volume 1: Plato to Luther*, 1984, pp. 272-273)

Singer says that to bestow value on someone is a kind of attachment and commitment to the beloved, in which one comes to treat him as an end in himself and so to respond to his ends, interests, concerns, etc. as having value for their own sake.

For it to be comprehensible that I have bestowed value on someone, I must respond appropriately to him as valuable, and this requires having some sense of what his happiness is and of what affects that happiness positively or negatively. Yet having

this sense requires knowing what his strengths and deficiencies are, and this is a matter of appraising him in various ways. Bestowal as a consequence assumes a kind of appraisal, as a way of “*really seeing*” the beloved and attending to him. However, Singer claims that it is the bestowal that is primary for understanding what love consists in: the appraisal is required only the commitment to one's beloved and his value as thus bestowed has practical import and is not “*a blind submission to some unknown being*”. (Singer, *Meaning in Life Volume 2: The Pursuit of Love*, 2010, p. 139)

He adopts an idea of love as the specific attitude of being willing to sacrifice for the benefit of another. In his view of love, one person bestows value on another person and wishing for forming a relationship with that person because of that assigned value. Singer acknowledges that falling in love may be due to passion, but claims that being in love involves an individual's choice to change his or her life, and being in love is, therefore, “*the actual making of a new world*”. Staying in love, to Singer, is the greatest achievement because it tests a relationship against the outside world and allows a person to share his or her life with another.

ลิขสิทธิ์มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่
Copyright© by Chiang Mai University
All rights reserved