

The Art of Loving

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The Art of Loving is a book written by psychologist and social philosopher Erich Fromm (1900-80). In this work, Fromm recapitulated and complemented the theoretical principles of human nature found in Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* and *Man for Himself* - principles which were revisited in many of his other major works.

Fromm presents love as a skill that can be taught and developed. He rejects the idea of loving as something magical and mysterious that cannot be analyzed and explained, and is therefore skeptical about popular ideas such as "falling in love" or being helpless in the face of love. Because modern humans are alienated from each other and from nature, we seek refuge from our aloneness in romantic love and marriage (pp. 79-81). However, Fromm observes that real love "is not a sentiment which can be easily indulged in by anyone." It is only through developing one's total personality to the capacity of loving one's neighbor with "true humility, courage, faith and discipline" that one attains the capacity to experience real love. This should be considered a rare achievement (p. vii).

We are starved for love, yet all our attempts to attain love in Western society are bound to fail, unless - like any thing else we want to do well - we practice and improve our self discipline, concentration and patience, and place high priority on our mastery of the art of loving (pp. 99-123). Readers will be disappointed if they expect the kind of easy answers and techniques often presented in self-help psychology bestsellers. Perhaps the closest that the book comes to such a recipe is the idea that the active character of true love involves four basic elements: care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge (p. 24). Each of these is difficult to define and can differ markedly depending on the people involved and their circumstances. Seen in these terms, love is hard work, but it is also the most rewarding kind of work.

One of the most interesting concepts in the book is self-love. According to Fromm, loving oneself is quite different from being arrogant, conceited or egocentric. Loving oneself means caring about oneself, taking responsibility for oneself, respecting oneself, and knowing oneself (e.g. being realistic and honest about one's strengths and weaknesses). In order to be able to truly love another person, one needs first to love oneself in this way.

Fromm is sceptical of exclusive love, which he calls *égoïsme ? deux* - a relationship in which each person is entirely focussed on the other, to the detriment of other people around them. In a healthy marriage, faithfulness applies to sex, but not to Fromm's concept of love, because love means a generally caring, responsible, respectful and honest attitude toward all other people.

The book includes explorations of the theories of brotherly love, motherly and fatherly love, erotic love, self-love, and the love of God (pp. 7-76), and an insightful examination into love's disintegration in contemporary Western culture (pp. 77-98).