

HAPPINESS AND LOVE

by Marvin Kohl

The following discussion was stimulated by Werner Mendel's spalosophy seminar.

Happiness, over a life-time, depends upon having and appreciating continuous success at meeting basic needs and correlating interests and, where possible, upon achieving excellence. It is generally agreed that love is a basic human need; that it is the primary emotional good; and that it involves, in a deep and important way, the experience of acceptance as well as other empowering experiences.

But does love demand, or even suggest, complete acceptance? That is to say, does love require that we accept a loved person completely as he or she is?

A positive answer to this question may involve a confusion between agape (or unconditional) love and non-agape (or conditional) love. I say, "may involve a confusion" because I do not wish to deny that there are special circumstances in which the preferred thing to do is to love unconditionally. Nor do I wish to deny that conditional love requires commitment to the welfare of the loved object.

To love someone, in the most central sense of the term, is to be emotionally attached to, and generally delighted in the contemplation of, that person and want his or her good. Accordingly, if A loves B, A must cherish and desire the well-being and happiness of B.

What the latter means is that there is often a conflict between what is in a person's best interest and what they want. Someone, for example, may want to overeat because gluttony has become an essential condition for their happiness. But it does not follow that gluttony is a condition of well-being. Similarly, someone may want to smoke cigarettes because this habit has become need-like and they feel happier smoking than not smoking. But few would want to argue that this behavior is conducive to their physical well-being. Exactly how a loving person should approach such problems is difficult to say. But it is odd, if not deeply counter-productive, to say that

A loves B, yet completely accepts B's self-destructive behavior.

Note: Marvin Kohl, Professor of Philosophy and Associate Dean for Arts and Humanities, SUNY at Fredonia, has been a frequent guest at NAHS.)