

The Greatest of These

The science of love.

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***Love at Goon
Park:
Harry Harlow
and the Science
of Affection***

by Deborah Blum
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paper

Science is often at odds with common sense. In fact, some would read the history of science as the steady retreat of commonly held misperceptions about the world in the face of controversial but ultimately compelling scientific explanations. Did not the moving earth have to displace the commonsense stationary earth? A bizarre quantum physics replaced the intuitive classical physics; relativistic time and space replaced their everyday counterparts; and so on. Albert Einstein was once challenged by a critic, upset that his theories flew in the face of common sense. The great scientist was dismissive: "Common sense is a body of prejudice laid down in the mind prior to the age of eighteen."

There is, to be sure, some truth in this simple picture of an uninformed common sense steadily retreating in the face of scientific advance. But the reality is much more complex, and there are some interesting counterexamples. I suspect that the current enthusiasm for multiple universes will eventually wane and return to the traditional commonsense view; likewise the genetic determinism of some scientists will give way to the old-fashioned idea that parenting, friendships, and life experiences are critically important.

But the most striking counterexample to the simplistic picture of

"science trumping common sense" would have to be the early 20th-century conviction that physical affection, human contact, and love were irrelevant to infants. For a rather long period of time, the psychology of early childhood went completely off the rails and ran at right angles to common-sense notions of childrearing.

Alas, this particular departure from common sense was not so benign as Galileo's discussion about the motion of the earth. Far from it. This misunderstanding resulted in the death of tens of thousands of children, victims of a profound confusion about the nature and importance of love. Unknown to the science of the time was a central "mystery" that is still being unraveled—namely, that little children need lots of love. They need to be held, hugged, kissed; they need someone to play peek-a-boo with them and swing them in a circle. There is something in these natural, primitive activities that strengthens little children in mysterious ways, making their immune system more robust, giving them the strength to fight off childhood illnesses.

Beloved, let us love one another. For love is of God, and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God, for God is love. 1 John 4:7,8

The data supporting this are both horrible and incontrovertible. Consider the Hospital of the Innocents in Florence. In two decades in the middle of the 18th century, this orphanage took in more than fifteen thousand babies. Ten thousand of them died before they reached their first birthday. Nineteenth-century America witnessed similar tragedies. More than half of the unhappy orphans assigned to an institution in Buffalo between 1862 and 1875 died before the age of one.

Convinced that the deaths were the result of infections spread by touch, the homes developed sophisticated procedures to reduce the chances that the babies would get germs of the sort that might be spread by hugging, rocking, or that most ghastly and irresponsible act of germ warfare—kissing. One hospital devised a special box with inlet sleeves that would allow an attendant to interact with the child—change a diaper, for example—without

actually touching the child. Similar boxes are used today by technicians who handle dangerous chemicals.

The sterile environments recommended for medical reasons, which must surely have horrified some of the caregivers, fit nicely with the prevailing wisdom in psychology. In the early 20th century, the president of the American Psychological Society, John B. Watson—famous as the founder of behaviorism—warned of the "Dangers of Too Much Mother Love," insisting that responsible parents refrain from kissing and hugging their children, lest they become emotionally needy or—horrors—get germs. Watson's bestseller on raising children was praised by everyone from Bertrand Russell to *Parents Magazine*.

But still the children kept dying, germs or no germs.

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love. 1 John 3:14

The dark world of child psychology was deeply and clearly in need of a revelation. And like another revelation about love 2000 years ago, this one was heralded by a lone voice calling from the wilderness. The lonely voice calling American psychology to repentance was that of Harry Harlow, an eccentric psychologist who spent most of his controversial career at the University of Wisconsin.

Harlow's story is told with elegance and passion by Deborah Blum in *Love at Goon Park*. It is a tale of love or, more accurately, the absence of love and the tragic consequences that ensue when love does not flow naturally and freely into the nooks and crannies that Mother Nature has provided for this most basic of human emotions.

Love at Goon Park chronicles the exposure of this shocking and demoralizing state of affairs as it slowly gave way to our modern celebration of parental love. Credit for this overdue scientific revolution goes largely to Harlow, whose work appears in just about every introductory psychology text. You may recall the touching photos of a baby monkey clinging to an artificial cloth-covered "mother." Harlow's highly original experiments on baby

primates revealed an unimaginably profound need for love—a love that could only be communicated by touch. Forced to choose between a cloth mother that felt "maternal" or a wire mother with a supply of milk, baby monkeys always chose the former, abandoning her only momentarily to feed.

Harlow fought an entrenched establishment led by luminaries like John Watson. He needed powerful weapons to dislodge the near universal scholarly consensus that parental love for children should be checked. Harlow's intellectual weaponry came in the form of highly illuminating experiments on primates. What happens when a baby is raised with no love? What happens when a baby is raised in total isolation? What happens when comforting sources of love are removed? And so on.

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear. 1 John 4:18

Harlow led psychology away from the paradigm of clinical sterility that had (mis)guided a century of research into child-rearing. Given the tragic state of children in "scientifically informed" institutions, there can be no doubt that a great many lives were saved by the work of Harlow and his colleagues. The life-saving revelations came with a price: Harlow's primate subjects were treated with extreme cruelty—not gratuitously, but by the very design of his experiments. Was it worth it? Read *Love at Goon Park* and decide for yourself.

There is however, a much deeper question here than Harlow's experimental procedures. How was it that something as natural and commonsensical as the importance of love for children could be so thoroughly misunderstood by the scientific community? Picture a sophisticated, well-educated, high society mother listening to classical music while her baby cries in the next room. An expensive table lamp illuminates the pages of the book she is reading—a parenting book warning against the dangers of giving her baby too much attention. She chides herself for the primordial instinct that tells her to go to her child, pick him up, and offer some comfort against the terrors of the night. Juxtapose this image with that of an illiterate rural farmer's wife comforting her newborn at her breast. She is completely ignorant

of the scholarly consensus that her actions will ultimately undermine her child's development. She is unaware that her actions require much thought for she is simply doing what comes most naturally. She is doing what every mother would do, unless instructed by science to do otherwise.

There are lots of "natural" behaviors, of course, and certainly no case to be made that indulging tendencies simply because they come "naturally" is a good idea. Middle-age college professors should not be encouraged to go chasing after attractive freshman coeds just because it seems "natural". But the profound love that parents have for children, a love that almost always requires sacrificial and altruistic behavior to put into practice, is precisely the kind of love that has consistently been promoted, celebrated, even demanded by Christianity. God became incarnate because he loved the world; God, as revealed in Jesus, is a God of love; Jesus commanded his followers to love; Christians are to be known by their love and so on. Never mind how far short we fall and how often we fail to love as we should; we all know that Christianity calls us to embrace a profound, all encompassing, love—a love of the sort that, when received by infants and baby monkeys, literally gives life.

Science does not always advance by boldly going where nobody has gone before. Science sometimes advances by finally getting to where everybody has already been.

And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:13.