

Hedgehogs and the Art of Love and Life

by [Christopher Garbowski](#) (August 2024)



The Wedding Candles (Marc Chagall, 1945)

Isaiah Berlin had a knack of coming up with crisp philosophical formulations that caught the scholarly imagination, whatever one thought of their substance. For instance, his stance on what he termed positive and negative freedom, which bordered on a truism regarding the pertinent categories, remains a relatively frequent point of departure or element for discussions on the nature of freedom. Another one of his notions concerned the differentiation of dominant long term scholarly approaches that he summarized as falling into the categories—which he metaphorically termed—on the one hand, that of the fox, that rather restlessly digs into one problem after another, on the other hand, that of the hedgehog, which tenaciously sticks to one problem, penetrating deeper and deeper.

One can argue that in scholarship on occasion the two approaches could be complementary. Digging deeply into a particular problem has the more obvious rewards, but researching a number of problems can illuminate where they perhaps cross over. With regards to “crossing over,” one can extend this metaphorical terminology to the search for and acquisition of love. The fox is potentially there in the genuine search for love, for instance in a mature culture of dating. Not only does one carefully judge the potential for a genuine relationship, but one learns about oneself, since it’s not just about finding the ideal partner, it’s also becoming ready for that full relationship by discovering whom one truly is in the deepest parts of the self in relation to another. When that mature lifelong partner is discovered the hedgehog takes over, delving profoundly in the art of love, even finding it where others only see the mundane routine. It’s not without reason that Roger Scruton claimed true love between a man and a woman continually grows. And if we return to Berlin’s scholarly hedgehog, in this true love we certainly learn much more profoundly about ourselves and the

other—attaining wisdom is crucial in both love and scholarship.

However, as Victor E. Frankl expressed it in his classic *Man's Search for Meaning*, "existential frustration often eventuates in sexual compensation." Returning to our metaphorical interpretation, at a social level more and more people are failing to transcend the fox stage of love, in which case it degenerates. At an earlier stage of this development, this is what has to no small extent happened more frequently on account of the sexual revolution of the sixties, which engendered a terrible legacy of shallow relatively short-term relationships and hyper-individualism, with all the attendant social side effects. In her book *Primal Screams* (2019) Mary Eberstadt suggests the revolution played a role in the growth of identity politics. At the very least it has played a significant role in the rise of a hyper-individualism in the West that has led to the breakdown of many relationships.

A popular motion picture that has memorably examined what might be termed the hedgehog relationship to love in this context is *Groundhog Day* of 1993. That we choose a groundhog to represent the hedgehog can be called a providential form of serendipity. The American Groundhog day has a largely forgotten religious background, since it evolved from the folk traditions that early Germanic immigrants to the country practiced on the day of the Feast of Candlemass, more formally known as the Feast of the Presentation of Christ, on February 2. The practice of waiting to see whether or not the groundhog would see its shadow was an extension of a similar tradition back in their European homeland, where the hedgehog was the center of attention—whose closest American equivalent was the groundhog. Although currently submerged the religious element of the holiday is also important. Worth adding, for North Americans who likely can't picture a hedgehog, the native groundhog is close enough to help understand Berlin's metaphor.

In the motion picture the protagonist Phil starts off as an aged, moreover degenerate, "fox." Initially he becomes trapped in Punxsutawney, but it becomes evident the trap is largely of his own making. He does not make love in a mature lasting relationship but hooks up in a predatory fashion. In our transformation from fox to hedgehog self knowledge is essential, and it is hard work. The movie dramatizes this fact by the narrative device of the time loop in which it takes ages for Phil to discover himself, starting with a knowledge of his faults: notably, at the axiological turning point he admits he is "a jerk."

Virtue ethicists divide the virtues into intellectual, moral and aesthetic. In *Visions of Virtue in Popular Film* (1999), philosopher Joseph Kupfer has found all three of these dimensions developed by Phil once he makes his conversion. Virtues require work: for instance, his aesthetic sense is inspired when he detects a divine spark in Rita, and tells her he sees an angel in her. Later in the time loop after he has worked diligently at the art of ice sculpture, he sculpts a beautiful angel, which Rita sees, but does not at this point intuit it refers to her.

When Phil realizes how much he loves Rita, he makes a confession to her as she is falling asleep at his side. Earlier he had tried to seduce her, now after his conversion he expresses a heartfelt: "I don't deserve someone like you ... but if I ever could ... I swear I would love you ... for the rest of my life." In *The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts* (1995), through interviewing her subjects Judith S. Wallerstein finds that it is common in genuine love we feel we do not deserve the other.

Unsurprisingly the movie ends when the hedgehog has triumphed in the relationship. The art of love makes its crucial point but its long term is most often hidden from viewers in motion pictures with their time limits, and thus must be studied in life. Wallerstein found the work that helps a marriage succeed

in the long term is hard but rewarding. Thus the art of love is most fully entwined in life for its duration. But it is worth exploring one more point that arises in *Groundhog Day*.

Early in the course of the protagonist's inner transformation he is reading to a sleepy Rita, and comes across the line: "Only God can make a tree." The motion picture makes the obvious point that even with all his power in the time loop Phil cannot control everything, like when the beggar he nobly wishes to save continually dies. But at a deeper level the viewer can ponder the role of God in human love, and here we can leave the movie.

For Catholics, marriage is a sacrament. At one level this can be understood that the marital union is a vocation, and this at least is not limited to one Christian denomination. People tend to concentrate on the lower, more personal level of the calling, but the ultimate teleological source is transcendent, which cannot be ignored in understanding the nature of love, even in its more human levels. And this higher level is where the personal level finds its ultimate source, and deepest level of the actions that bring self knowledge and union with the other. Many of course do not see this in their relationships, much as most Americans do not see the religious source of *Groundhog day*, which does not mean it isn't there.

The task involved in the vocation of marriage is hardly easy, with numerous trials, but profoundly rewarding. The inner hedgehog has his work cut out, since it is obvious each generation faces similar as well as unique difficulties in the art of life. Also the rewards extend beyond the marriage into the community that is enriched by such relationships.

At times this is evident even in the political community at its more hidden depths, and emerges when hardly expected. One relatively recent historical example of this can be found in the annals of the late Soviet communist regime. Significantly, communism denigrated the traditional family almost to the same

extent as it did religion—the subordinate states were officially atheist—since individuals segregated from the flourishing influence of marriage could be more easily manipulated. How devastating this could be is witnessed by the observation of British journalist Peter Hitchens in his *Rage Against God* (2010) during his stay in early post-communist Russia, that “in mile after mile of mass-produced housing you would be hard put to find a single family untouched by divorce.” This demoralizing reality affected most of the countries of the Soviet Bloc.

A prominent exception was Poland. Here the support of the family on the part of a powerful Church had the effect that only one in five marriages in the country ended in divorce: despite the fact that there was hardly any legal impediment to the procedure. The strength of this pillar to community no doubt played a role in the success of the Solidarity movement of the 1980s at its various levels, for which it has been observed, “the most important thing was an unusually intense experience of community. The most essential meaning of the initial solidarity was the widespread awareness of the deep bond with others.”

Although it is currently largely forgotten, unfortunately even in Poland, Solidarity, the first independent trade union in a communist country together with its adjacent actions played a crucial role in bringing the totalitarian Soviet empire to its end. And although the undoubted role of the Church is given credit by some, what is largely unnoted even by the historians is the subtle role of the love that maintained so many families, empowering the movement at the most basic level, through the strength of the most fundamental communal unit, augmenting a society in the face of tremendous trial.

However, as suggested earlier free societies likewise have their trials. The sexual revolution can be considered part of a more profound change. In his book *The New Leviathans* (2023), political philosopher John Gray gives a penetrating diagnosis

of the prevalent axiological trauma that has evolved in our times, creating a contemporary “Leviathan,” which it may be argued the West currently confronts. According to the author:

Liberalism was a creation of Western monotheism and liberal freedoms, part of the civilization that monotheism engendered. Twenty-first-century liberals reject this civilization, while continuing to assert the universal authority of a hollowed out version of its values. In this hyper-liberal vision, all societies are destined to undergo the deconstruction that is underway in the West.

It seems the author bears out the Augustinian insight that evil—labeled a “Leviathan”—stems from a negation of the good since it is rarely creative in and of itself, and what he sees is that liberalism betrays itself. In this context it seems when the young search for love it is the fox whose often undoubted ethical authenticity—which philosopher Charles Taylor noted some time ago—is hampered by narcissism that is so difficult to overcome in contemporary society. Thus it is much more difficult for the inner hedgehog to come the fore in order for the art of love and life to augment relationships. A source of hope is their tenacity and virtue when they are given free reign within. Something along these lines was witnessed through the motion pictures of the 1990s; alongside *Groundhog Day* there were a number of popular romantic comedies and Jane Austen adaptations where virtue ethics were quite evident in relationships.

At dawn in the neighborhood in Poland where I live you can sometimes see single hedgehogs crossing a street. When uninterrupted they move in a smooth straight line. It is this consistent movement that likely inspired Isaiah Berlin in his

scholarly metaphor. But the philosopher was onto something more than he could imagine when he singled out hedgehogs for their metaphorical role. As I have suggested, these unassuming creatures can symbolize the augmentation of our key hylomorphic feature: the body and soul at the base of our love, which are driven by a vast array of dynamics, to which the “hedgehogs” within bring gentleness and tenacity—among the factors that united promote a durable love. We have largely forgotten slow and steady wins the race—the race of life.

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