



ISSN: 2472 2472

Love: A Challenge for Philosophy¹

Sergio Benvenuto²

Abstract

Starting from the Freudian theory of love—as an illusion of something that love is not—the author develops an approach to love that owes a lot to Wittgenstein’s thought. He poses the problem of to what extent love can be altruistic without being reduced to a dynamic (whether Freudian drives or biological genes) that determines it. He proposes a fresh approach that draws love closer to ethics and aesthetics, insofar as it aims not at the beloved or desired object as such, but at the actual reality of the other. Love illustrates the human need for the real.

1.

We are all convinced that love is one of the most important themes, even in philosophy, yet we know how difficult it is to know what love is. Proof of this is that even in languages very close to English, the terms for “love” do not have coinciding meanings. Many languages (including Italian and English) use “love” to mean what in other languages would be expressed as “like.”

The Italian *amore* and the French *amour* come from the Latin *amor*, which denoted sensual lust, while love in a more spiritual sense was *caritas*. For this reason, in many languages, it is now quite uncommon to say “to make love” with reference to the sexual act, but rather “to have sex.” We have accepted the fact that we can make love without love.

Has psychoanalysis succeeded in explaining what this thing that matters to us most—love—really is? I will give a brief overview of the Freudian point of view.

¹ The original Italian version of this article was published in 2022 under the title “Una sfida per la filosofia” in *Philosophy Kitchen, Revista di Filosofia Contemporanea*, 16(101), 25–39. The article was translated into English by the author.

² Sergio Benvenuto is a researcher in psychology and philosophy at the National Research Council (CNR) in Rome and a psychoanalyst. He is an editor of the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* and a member of the editorial boards of *American Imago* and *Psychoanalytic Discourse* (PSYAD). He teaches psychoanalysis at the International Institute of Psychology of the Deep in Kiev and at the Esculapio School of Specialization in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy in Naples. His latest book in English is *Lacan, Kris and the Psychoanalytic Legacy: The Brain Eater*, published by Routledge.

2.

Freud does not believe in love. He believes in desire, for which he uses the Latin term *libido* and which in German is *die Lust*. Then he resumes the eros of the Platonic *Symposium* (Freud, 1955b/1920). For Freud, as for Spinoza, the essence of the human being is desire, not love.³ Some human beings may love no one, not even themselves, but no one can help desiring. As long as there is life, there is desire. Desire is *explanans*, love is *explanandum*.

Within desire, or libido, Freud distinguishes between *objectual desire* and *desire of the ego* (both subjective and objective genitive), which he also calls narcissistic desire. In other words, human beings either desire an object (primarily sexual, but not only), or themselves, or an ideal image of themselves. Sometimes, the desired object and the desired ideal overlap, and in these situations, we have the *Führer* of what Freud calls *Massen* (“crowds”) (Freud, 1955/1921).⁴

While desire (libido, drives, eros, *Lust*) is irreducible, love (*Liebe*) is instead reducible to something that is not love in the strictest sense. Freud distinguishes between two types of love: narcissistic love and anaclitic love (*Anlehnung*), which is love “for support.” In narcissistic love, the person I love (Freud does not consider love for objects or ideas, which we will consider later) is love for my image; I love the other because the other an ideal image of myself. This is true for both homosexual and heterosexual love. A man may love a woman because in her he sees a feminized image of himself. He loves himself as a woman. There is something “trans” about every love that combines sexuality and tenderness. This is evident in *trophy girls*, the young and beautiful women whom successful older men tend to choose and display as their reward for social success. But is this prize what they possess or what they would like to be?

The other kind of love, love for support, is love for the nurturer. I love a woman or a man because they feed me, literally or metaphorically. As an old Sicilian proverb says, “Take a spicy woman as a lover, take a woman who cooks as a wife”; the woman is either a sexual object (spicy) or an object of love for support (someone who cooks). Similarly, we find women who marry to be supported by their husbands so that they can concentrate on *Kinder Küche Kirche*. This means that according to Freud, love is only apparently altruistic, that in fact, love is appearance—*semblant*, Lacan would say. Love is selfish: it either leads back to self-love (*amour propre*, as La Rochefoucauld called it) or it refers to the need to be nourished. What complicates the picture, however, is that in narcissism, Freud includes all processes of idealization, which we usually consider high, noble. But for Freud all idealization is ultimately self-idealization. Do we have enough evidence to accuse Freud of reductionism?

³ Spinoza used the Latin word *canatus* (effort, attempt).

⁴ See my analysis of Freud’s essay in Benvenuto (2021).

As for a love that seems completely altruistic, such as maternal love, Freud reduces it to a narcissistic compensation for the woman; with the child, she “owns” an *ersatz*, a surrogate, of the penis. We know how devastating the prolongation of this maternal love can be for certain male children, who will never be able *to have* the phallus, since they will always *be* the mother's phallus—destined in all probability to be cannon fodder for the *mother* country (in French, *mère-patrie* [mother/fatherland]). For Lacan, every male must succeed in this feat: cease *being* the (mother's) phallus in order *to have it*.

Then what kind of narcissism is the basis for paternal love? We can imagine what Freud might have said. The pride that many fathers take in their offspring, the proud display of “look what I've managed to produce!” exalts male phallic narcissism—as if the father, by producing children, multiplied his penises. Today, we no longer say penises, but *genes*; however, the logic is the same. According to neo-Darwinism, parental pride consists in spreading one's genes in one's offspring. For the psychology known as evolutionist, a *selfishness of the gene* (as Richard Dawkins calls it) lies behind the altruism of the individual. The *explicans* is no longer desire, but the gene.

Freudian reductionism therefore finds a mirror in another reductionism, the biological, which takes up Darwin's notions in a hyper-simplified form. The typical hyper-Darwinian explanation consists in finding adaptive logic even in the most bizarre, eccentric, and seemingly self-defeating human impulses. By adaptive logic, a Darwinian always means the optimization of the possibility of reproducing one's genes. To adapt is to be able to multiply oneself.

3.

Yet, there is an embarrassing difference between humans and (other) animals. Does a female dog or cat have a maternal sense *before* having puppies or kittens? When giving birth, the mother dog or cat, thanks to supposed specialized genes, behaves like a perfect mother. No one teaches her to be a mother; she just has an innate knowledge. In short, we suppose that a female mammal does not *desire* to be a mother, that a male mammal does not *desire* to be a father, while human mammals *may desire* to become fathers or mothers. They can *think* of being fathers or mothers. Is this a substantial difference? It probably is, as the desire to be a parent can vary historically. According to demographers (Hütte, 2008), contraception began in Europe in the eighteenth century and then spread all over the world, moving from the most technologically advanced countries to the least developed. There are historical fluctuations in the desire to be fathers and mothers. Today, as we know, in industrialized countries, the desire to have children is decreasing, which is why populations are in decline (and pension funds are short).

This leads many to think that the desire to be mothers or fathers, and the love that comes with parenthood, are cultural constructions: since childhood, adults educate

us to desire to be parents. Objects of desire are also cultural products. We give girls dolls so they can play at being mothers, and we give boys toy rifles so they can play at being soldiers. Feminist thought has insisted that traditional male and female roles are social constructions, not natural expressions of gender. The same could be said of parental instincts: they also seem to be culturally produced. This analysis implies a clear-cut distinction between *nature* and *nurture*, which is one I do not believe in. The distinction between natural and cultural is provisional, relative, conditional—but a critique of the opposition between nature and culture would require a separate book (see Benvenuto, 2020). Here, it will be enough to cast doubt.

Even today, women suffer from frustrated maternal desire. Many childless women on the threshold of menopause are seized by a desperate fury to become mothers: they would spend any sum of money and risk their health or even their life to have a child. This cannot be explained by love for one's young, as they do not exist yet. Can you love someone who does not exist? Is it possible to *reduce* the desire for motherhood to some other selfish desire, or must we surrender to the power of the selfish gene?

Love for children does not really explain the craving to have a child. If the real spur were the pleasure of breeding young humans, adopted children would be just fine, but the woman who longs for motherhood considers adoption a fall-back. She wants a child to come from *her own bowels*; it is the budding of a foetus within her and its coming out that gives her pleasure. So, a frustrated mother prefers heterologous fertilization to adoption; even if the child to which she has given birth is not her own, it is better to give birth to it with the pains of labour than to find it "readymade."

In other words, a woman experiences giving birth as an *act of power*. Although being fertilized and generating does not require any particular talent—the woman is completely passive—these acts are experienced as power. Psychoanalysis takes into account the will to power, even if it puts it on the tab of narcissistic desire. Even some men may suffer from not being fathers, but here the frustration is alleviated by the fact that men can become fathers at any age, more or less. For a woman not to be a mother is a disaster similar to being phallically impotent for a man.

4.

Love is a complex series of molecules, which should be analysed in atomic components. Is this analysis, which is also a reduction, possible? The point is not to love something or someone but to ask to what extent this love *transcends the subject itself*. Transcending, in the Husserlian sense, means that love goes to the things themselves. Concretely, if I love someone, for example a woman, *what* do I love in this woman? In psychoanalytic terms: do I love in her something that goes beyond both objectual desire and narcissistic desire? To love would then be a desire that the theory does not contemplate because it questions us about the reality of the other *for us*. But can we say that the other as other, as the other-in-itself-and-for-itself, *exists* for us?

Let us say that I love this woman for certain “objects” she possesses: her beautiful legs, her fine speech, her sense of humour. Will I continue to love her when these objects are no longer there? When, as she becomes older, her legs will no longer be so beautiful, and she may even have lost her fine manner of speech and sense of humour? If my love ceases because of this, can we say that mine was *true love*? We take true love to mean loving some-*body* beyond all the seductive *objects* that the loved person exhibits. But does this true love exist? We may ask our beloved: “What *do* you love about me?” The correct answer ought to be “What I love about you is the fact that you are you,” but would that be a truthful answer?

The literature and cinema of the virtual insist that we can not only desire but also love virtual objects, such as machines, robots, and software, as long as they display the *right* objects.⁵ Desire always invests objects that are basically virtual, but can we love something real?

Bernard Shaw wrote that “Love is a gross exaggeration of the difference between one person and everybody else” (as cited in Freud, 1955/1921) But what leads us to this strange exaggeration? The difference between one woman, for example, and all the others is that... this woman *is just her*. Is to love, then, to love the being of the beloved object?

On the other hand, what leads us to loving a son or daughter for our entire lives, even when they become very different from the fragile young things they were in childhood? Do I continue to love the woman who has lost the “objects” for which I loved her and her children who are now grown up and independent because it is my duty? Do we love the thing without the lovable objects because we have been taught that we must be capable of “true love”? Could the duty to love be an effective cause of love for humans? Just as the social duty to be fathers and mothers makes us genuinely desire to be fathers and mothers, could we not say that the duty to love our woman, our man, or our children makes us genuinely love them? It is not a question of conformism or hypocrisy; accepting a social norm can be a source of authentic affection. For some, on the contrary, it is impossible to appreciate something if it is propounded as sound by any social norm.

What complicates the picture of human feelings is that they are inseparable from *knowledge*, which in humans is a symbolic knowledge that passes through language. A female dog *knows* that the puppies are hers, and she protects them by instinct because sensory *signals* tell her, “this is what you must take care of!” In humans, there are no such sensory signals. If a mother abandons a baby boy shortly after birth and sees him again after 20 years, she will not recognize him as her own child, so what makes the mother

⁵ Films in this genre include *Her*, directed by Spike Jonze (2013), in which a man falls in love with an operating system; *Titane*, directed by Julia Ducournau (2021), in which a woman falls in love with cars; and *And We Like Assholes Stood and Watched*, directed by Pierfrancesco Diliberto (Pif) (2021), in which a man falls in love with a female hologram.

love him once he has declared himself to be her son? There is nothing *natural* about this because recognition occurs through linguistic signals. For human beings, it is *knowing that we are* father and mother that matters in order to love.

In the film *Filumena Marturano*, directed by Eduardo De Filippo (1950), we follow the story of a middle-aged man who learns that the woman who was his lover has three grown children, one of whom is actually his. When he discovers this, he starts craving to know which of the three is his offspring, but the woman refuses to tell him. The question is how can knowing that a young man is my son be the cause of my love for him? What forces me to love someone just because *I know* he has 50% of my genome? Could I not love a young man who is not my son much more, a boy I *want* to love as I would a son? Knowing, desiring, and enjoying become tangled up inextricably, and it is within this tangle that psychoanalysis operates.

Someone might naively say that we love our children because they look like us.⁶ Do we love adopted children, who do not resemble us, any less? If a son looks much more like his mother than his father, does this mean that his father will love him less than he loves a son who looks more like his father? I am not aware of this ever having happened.

You might say that authentic love is what we feel for domestic animals, since we do not have an investment in them, neither narcissistic nor “of support” (unless we use a beast for useful functions). There is no pride in having dogs or cats.⁷ All they offer us is their presence. There is no symbolic knowledge behind this love. Love for animals is groundless, and therefore, perhaps it is the noblest of all loves. We could say that love for pets is the truth of love for our offspring, not the other way around: loving beings simply because they are *alive* and *helpless*. Bare lives. Evidently, a biological command leads us to wanting to protect and love *helpless little creatures*, no matter whether they are animals or humans.

5.

Biology is only apparently reductionist, if we assume that everything we call natural is also cultural, and vice versa. If everything is biological, knowing that the other is an offspring or a parent is biological, too. The biological scene can be a screen on which we can project everything that we consider affective, psychic, mental, and cultural. Perhaps this is what Freud (1964/1938, p. 299–300) meant when he said that “psyche is extended and knows nothing about it.” *Res extensa* is what we call “biological.”

⁶ Before genetic knowledge, we spoke in terms of *blood*. It was common to say that “one tends to love one’s blood relations.” However, having the same blood does not necessarily imply similarity. I would say the opposite: we *want* our blood relations (i.e., those with a fair percentage of genes in common with us) to be like us.

⁷ Nevertheless, *Homo sapiens* are so incurably narcissistic that they become proud even of their dogs and cats. People spend much of their time singing the praises of their pets.

Thanks to neuroscience, we have discovered that many things we attribute to intellectual judgment are actually perceptions, and that it takes ad hoc brain organs to have these perceptions. For example, saying that something is on our left or on our right is not the effect of a reflection that abstracts us from the perception itself, given that the left/right opposition—as has been discovered—is a fact of objective perception; in fact, some individuals with brain injuries lose the ability to see everything that is to the left of their visual field (unilateral *spatial neglect*⁸). This may indicate that—in contrast to Kant’s transcendental aesthetics—the spatial arrangement of things is a perceptive datum, not an a priori structuring of space. Therefore, we can say that if someone tells us that a certain girl is our daughter and proves it, this triggers a paternal or maternal feeling not unlike that of the mother cat who recognizes her kittens. We do nothing but find in the cerebral *extension* what we know as a *mental intension*. The point is that, apart from some “monstrous” exceptions, a cat will always protect and love her kittens, while a human mother could even kill her newborns (as happens not infrequently). Symbolic knowledge is fragile, always questionable.

If I continue to love my woman even when she becomes old and ugly and has even lost many of her spiritual qualities, this is not an artefact of symbolic knowledge; we can assume that our brain reads *a person’s identity*, although, as we know, this reading can be deceiving. We still find the person we love because the symbolic signal (“this old woman is still her, my beloved”) is correlated with something affective. The human symbolic is a prosthesis that ultimately makes us behave like other animals; *Homo sapiens* is like someone born disabled who needs a device to be “normal.”⁹ Language is the artificial prosthesis that allows us to live “naturally” like any other animal. Therefore, the opposition between nature and culture does not hold. This is not as unusual as it might seem. Other animal species need prostheses to be themselves, for example, the common cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*). Cuckoos lay their eggs in the nests of other passerines, and the young cuckoos are fed by their hosts because adult cuckoos have no food for their hatchlings. *Homo sapiens* is a cuckoo of the symbolic. Those who speak of “true human nature” fly into the cuckoo’s nest.¹⁰

The symbolic command of many of our affective impulses makes them extremely variable, flexible, and non-universal. That is, the linguistic (or cultural) prosthesis makes *Homo sapiens* much more unreliable than other animals. Some human beings are capable of great love, others are completely devoid of this ability. Let us therefore forget about trying to explain how certain affective tropisms, such as love, imply universal propositions

⁸ I tried to articulate the philosophical implications of this brain injury in Benvenuto (2021).

⁹ This is what many philosophers, especially Arnold Gehlen, have stressed in praise of human *neoteny*.

¹⁰ The film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, directed by Miloš Forman and based on the novel of the same name by Ken Kesey, plays on the two meanings of *cuckoo* (the bird and the colloquial term for a mad person); however, in reality, cuckoos do not have nests; hence, no one could ever fly over a cuckoo’s nest.

about humans. To explain is not to find the universal; it is to find a connection that may exist in some cases and not in others.

6.

The question, “What do we really love about the other?” cannot be addressed without taking into account the challenge posed by phenomenology. Sartre (2003/1936, p. 89) said that “if we love a woman, it is because she is lovable”—I see my love *in* the woman I love, so it is not about that woman and only about me.¹¹ “Returning to things in themselves” means that our relationship with the other as another subject is not a mental construction that starts from external signals (the virtual objects I mentioned earlier) but is, rather, something immediate: for me, the other is *ab initio* another subject. I do not infer the subjectivity of the other; I see it. In this sense, phenomenology, according to Derrida (1967, p. 117), is always a phenomenology of perception.

This reverses the reconstruction made by cognitivism, according to which each of us, from very early childhood, builds a theory of mind (ToM) that allows us to recognize the other as another subject; that is, we *learn* to consider others as subjects—and not anthropomorphic robots—insofar as we adhere to the theory that the others are individuals with minds like our mind. We learn that others exist as minds in exactly the same way as we learn that fire is hot and work makes you tired.

For phenomenology, on the other hand, we have no need for a ToM: we *perceive* the mind or subjectivity of others. Note that the discovery of mirror neurons (by the team headed by Rizzolatti¹²) has given ammunition to a phenomenological vision in neuroscience, too: mirror neurons show that there is a supposed original indistinctness between myself and the other, in the sense that *I am already the other*. I perceive the other as a subject because I am, prior to any inference, the subjective double of the other. I do not recognize the other as a subject-as-me; on the contrary, I recognize myself as a subject-like-the other.

Phenomenology is a challenge to science insofar as it aims to reconstruct our being-in-the-world *non-analytically*, whereas psychoanalysis embraces the scientific model of analysis (this is the reason that Freud gave it this name) of fragmenting a whole into its parts. If, according to phenomenology (and to me as a person in love), “loving a woman” is a whole, the analytical method aims instead to distinguish the various traits that make a woman lovable to me and not to others. For phenomenology, love for someone needs no explanation, it merely needs to be described phenomenologically; on the other hand, for scientific objectivity, the best way to describe love is to explain it.

¹¹ On further analysis, if woman’s amiability is what makes her lovable to me, there is no lovability in itself in the woman; lovability will always be a relationship between a woman and those who love her.

¹² See Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia (2006). Some of the neuroscientists involved in this line of research, in particular Vittorio Gallese, make explicit references to phenomenological philosophical theories.

This leads to the disturbing effect of doubles and the uncanny character of identical twins, to the extent that they appear as the same person to us. Many classic comedies (e.g., *Menaechmi* by Plautus, Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, and *The Two Venetian Twins* by Goldoni) are based precisely on the exchange and the *quid pro quo* created by twins or doubles. In David Cronenberg's film *Dead Ringers* (1988), a woman has sex with twins, thinking they are the same person. This raises a question about whether it possible to believe that you love one person while loving two. Yet, two twins are never absolutely identical in psychical terms. The confusion about doubles could be used as an argument against phenomenology: the being of the other, for us, is identified with what the other *has*; therefore, two individuals who have the same traits take on the same *being* for us. In biological life, the logical principle of the identity of the indiscernible¹³ leads to incorrect assessments.

In Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Roxane is convinced that she loves just one man, Christian de Neuville, but then she eventually discovers that she has loved two: Christian for his beauty and Cyrano for his spirit. Whether someone's seductive trait is their erotic beauty or their talent as a writer, even in this case, love does not touch the being of the beloved.

Explaining (rather than understanding) love means reconstructing what traits make a person lovable to me, for example, as in our earlier example, the shape of my beloved's legs, her ability for fine speech, or her sense of humor. Once these traits cease to exist, love ought to cease, too, yet it can happen that love lasts a lifetime—not always, but it does happen. Two elderly people who love each other both think the other has remained, in a sense, forever young. They grasp the continuities with the past and ignore the discontinuities. You continue to love the other even if they suffer a stroke and end up in semi-vegetative state. Several recent films have paid tribute to these borderline loves for people in semi-conscious or unconscious states, for example, the films *Talk to Her* (Almodóvar, 2002), *Amour* (Haneke, 2012), and *Two of Us* (Meneghetti, 2019).

Scientific objectivity is not discouraged by this; our psychic apparatus supposedly tends to establish a continuous temporal thread for which a person, in particular someone we love or hate, tends to appear the same, in spite of changes in them over time. This is the basis for what we call the *identity* of ourselves and others; identity is a construction, not a datum of consciousness, as phenomenology thinks. This is similar to the way we perceive a continuum in a movie, for example, while it is actually a sequence of discontinuous frames.

On the other hand, each of us yearns to be loved, and to be *loved for who we are*, not for our traits that are of interest to the other. Even if, in order to be loved, we are

¹³ *Eadem sunt, quorum unum potest substitui alteri salva veritate,*" Leibniz "Non inelegans specimen demonstrandi in abstractis", § 1 (1687), first edition, in Leibniz (1840, p. 94).

satisfied to be loved for what we possess, we come to terms with the desire of the other; we grin and psychologically bear the ontological game. After all, Nietzsche (1996) said that the demand to be loved is the greatest of all arrogant presumptions. A woman can make herself beautiful to attract male desire, but when she loves a man, she wants to be loved back; in short, she has the presumption that the man loves her for what she is, not for what she possesses. Is this lovable being an illusion? Do we not always love someone only for what they *possess*? Precisely so—the other can permanently *possess* something that is their being-that-and-not-another. Even being can be reduced to something you possess. *Love is eternal while it lasts*, as the Italian comedian Carlo Verdone said, but it can be eternal if the being of the other lasts.

7.

Reductionism tempts us all. It is reductionist to say that “true love” does not exist, that it is an illusion. True love should be unconditional, while in fact it is conditional. After all, nothing in our affections is unconditional. The beloved object would be nothing more than a patchwork of lovable traits. We could close the matter here. However, love always leans on some other feeling that is the prerequisite for love. In couples, the basis of mutual love is sexual attraction. In love for one’s children, animals, and younger relatives, the drive to protect the weak is involved. In love for one’s parents, there is a feeling of gratitude. In love for one’s mentors, there is admiration and respect. In love for people who have been or are close to us, there is the affective bond of familiarity and custom.

At the base of all love, we find these five bonds: eroticism, protection, gratitude, admiration, and custom, which in themselves do not necessarily lead to loving a person, but they seem to be the condition for love. They form the *pathetic* basis of love. (I take “pathetic” from the “pathologica,” which Kant [1996/1781] speaks of to distinguish it from the authentic ethical act.) Can there be a love that is not the radicalization of these pathetic drives? Is there something of the transpathetic about love?

The paradigm of pure love—when love detaches itself completely from the pathetic—is *to give up one’s life for the beloved*. A simple, melodramatic truth: you really love someone when you are ready to die for them. As long as it is a question of giving up one’s life to help one’s child or brother survive, a Darwinian explanation is always possible: you exchange your life for that of someone who shares your genes; therefore, the amorous altruism here does not necessarily contradict the selfishness of the gene.

I am thinking rather of the non-pathetic choice of Alcestis who, in Euripides’ tragedy, gives her life in exchange for the survival of Admetus. Here, Darwinism does not hold, even if the gene is unselfish. In fact, if Alcestis had still been of childbearing age at the time of the drama, remaining a widow and having offspring with another man would have given her a genetic advantage. The truth is that in love, the beloved thing is actually the entity that survives us.

After all, this is what makes us have children: what parent hopes to survive their children? If they did, we would say they were a degenerate parent. We are supposed to have children out of love, insofar as their continued survival after we die is entirely desirable. When the lover dies, the beloved ceases to be loved by the dead lover, and this is what counts in love: a beloved is such not because they are the object of love for *me*, the lover, but because they are a subject in-themselves-and-for-themselves. We could even say that to love is to free the beloved from the mortgage of our love. To love is to free the other from the pathetic weight of our love, of our *caritas*. Is there a masochistic mysticism in love?

We can therefore say that love for a Cause, however abstract, is true love. Perhaps we should explain love for people starting from our love for a Cause, rather than vice versa; in love for a person, the beloved becomes our Cause. Let's say that I give my life for socialism or for the homeland. I love socialism or the homeland insofar as they must win, *live*, independently of me, free from being *my* ideals. The Cause, except in special cases, does not need me. We love the Cause insofar as it must survive us, exactly like our children.

Consider sublime loves such as a mountaineer's passionate love for the mountain or a solo sailor's love for the sea. Their passions are pathetic in the sense that it is not enough for them to contemplate the mountain or the ocean, they want to *enter them*. They want to live with the apparently inviolable mountain, with the apparently inhospitable ocean. I was struck by the fantasy of some mountaineers that they would die on the mountain and of sailors that they would die in the middle of the ocean. Here, the beloved object, the mountain or the sea, is the Cause: what you want to die *for* and *in*. Hence, there is a romantic coincidence between love and death: if the beloved is the other for whom we are willing to die, then the other will dilate hyperbolically into Death, which deep down we love.

Paradoxically, love is *apathetic*—not in the sense that it is not something affective; on the contrary, love is the strongest affection as well as the most extreme pain—but in the sense that it poses itself as an affection without pathos, a forgetful affection, which renounces its subjectivity. Nor can we say that we love *a person*, since the beloved is rather our *Cause*.

In a sense, true love forgets that it is love. It forgets above all to be *my* love. Love, this desperate optimism, is an *impersonal* affection.

Being impersonal, true love—in which the beloved is freed of my love, especially if I, the lover, die—is the true overcoming of narcissism in the Freudian sense. Narcissists are capable of great love, as long as this remains tied to their own selves, imprisoned in them. Narcissists love the other to the extent that love for the other makes them love themselves, to the extent that, in short, the beloved remains loved-by-me, *my* object of love. Narcissists love their love for the other more than they love the other.

One might ask: Is the ambition of many to “remain after their death”—for example, through their books, or through fame, or genetically through descendants—not narcissistic in itself? Can narcissism not be posthumous? Many scientists say that they would like to give their name to a certain discovered entity, even when it goes to a malignant entity, as in the case of Alois Alzheimer, for example. In fact, remaining eternal thanks to an accomplishment—a passion that devours many intellectuals—has a narcissistic face (when alive you derive pleasure from the supposed future permanence of your fame and name as a dead person), and since only your name remains when you are dead, it is a narcissism of the Name: you want your Name to survive. However, even this narcissism of one’s Name has an altruistic face, insofar as what remains of me only matters for *others*. I will not derive pleasure from the love of others for my Name.

The character in the Woody Allen film *Love and Death* (1975) plans a political assassination so that his name will stand in history; his name is Sydney Applebaum. Our name, if it will stand in history, will always be a lame name like Sydney Applebaum.

8.

It is not only illusion that we have in love. Isn’t our feeling that, by loving, we love the person themselves, their being, a way of escaping from the illusions of amorous desire?

Dr. Samuel Johnson’s aphorism that love is the wisdom of the fool and the folly of the wise, highlights this paradox, in which love is both completely illusory and, at the same time, an extreme way of touching the real. It is like the sense of the sacred: on the one hand it leads to religious superstitions, while on the other hand, it aims at ecstasy as a raw relationship with reality.

Love is also the opposite of illusion. That is, we all know that the object of desire is evanescent: one day we may like it, another not. The beloved object changes, but we also know that this mutation does not bring along with it the being of the subject. In short, we know that in relation to desire, in our libidinal world, everything that causes affections and sensations in us belongs to the cave. When we believe that we love, we think that we do not simply desire the shadows connected to the fires of desire, but that we affectively invest the (loved) things themselves, the things that are not at the bottom of the cave. To love is to give extreme importance to the fact that the other *is*, and this being that is so important to us is love.

To love, therefore, is not only the illusion of grasping the real, it gambles on the fact that grasping the real is not a mere illusion.

Let us return to the Platonic allegory of the cave. The Platonic philosopher is the privileged one who is granted the chance to emerge from the cave and see real things in the bright light of day. However, we can assume that the philosopher is the only one who *supposes* that there are things beyond the shadows, although he has never seen them himself. He knows that real things exist, but in fact, he too has only shadows as his objects

of experience. Hence, there is the suspicion that the true light is an illusion and that the shadows are the only reality to be taken into account (thus, common sense considers philosophers delusional—people who live on Aristophanean clouds). Yet, knowing that what we see are shadows is disenchantment: we know they are not the real, yet the *awareness that they are shadows* is fundamental. In this way, we split Being. Philosophy, from its earliest beginnings (for us, the earliest Greek beginnings), is a splitting of Being. It *wounds* being, doubling it in a way. On the one hand, we have the semblances and on the other hand, we have what is, and the relations between the two are extremely problematic.

In short, philosophers today can see themselves as *amateurs* of the real. They are not specialists or professionals of the real. Likewise, even those who really love are *amateurs* of the other's being.

I believe that when human beings love they make a sort of philosophical gamble that there is a bond with the other that transcends the semblance of the pathetic. They bet on the fact that the beloved—to paraphrase Shaw—is not merely their objectual difference from everyone else. That is, love *does not overcome* the erotic, protective, grateful, admiring, or customary semblances of desire, but it “knows” that it cannot overcome them. When you truly love, you accept going all the way into a deadlock. Every desire invests objects, which are only desirable traits; they are not the thing in itself. In love, we gamble on the thing in itself beyond desire, even if we suspect we could confuse it with desirable objects. We desire an object that is not an object-for-me (every object is always an object-for-a-subject) and which is *the beloved thing*. Love is a hyperbolic claim by desire.

Love is in fact distinct from *loving desire* in the sense that the latter gambles on the eternity of desire, whereas love lies in what Kierkegaard (1854/1968) called *øjeblikkelig*, the instant or the moment, the blink of an eye, something that stands beyond time and history, like the Cause for which I am ready to die, which is timeless for me. Perhaps Nietzsche meant something similar when he wrote, “True love thinks of the instant and eternity, never of duration” (Nietzsche, 1878/1996). Duration is always the time of desire, subjective time. Desire does not last because duration tires it out, extinguishes it. Love, on the other hand, is something instantaneous and, precisely for this reason, it is eternal: it is a pure event. Duration is speech, articulation, deferral, while the eternal instant is the dazzling imposition of something unrelated. To love someone is to love them out of time... as long as you love them. Did Nietzsche and Verdane perhaps mean the same thing?

Thus, like philosophy, love is a gamble on the real, and we know how many illusions both philosophy and love have both produced!

Human beings, however, are attracted to the real. We know how our perception corrects the purely optical data of our sensations. If we look from below at a parallelepiped-shaped skyscraper, we will not see, according to the perspective, the

rectangle of the façade narrowing upward; we will always see a rectangle. If someone puts a hand before our eyes, we will not see it becoming enormous—as it would appear to a camera; rather, the hand will maintain its realistic dimensions. In short, perception corrects egoic appearances *in a realistic sense*, de-egotizing our sensations. In the same way as our perception corrects our feelings, love corrects desire *realistically*. In love for others or for a Cause, the same process of de-egotization occurs at both the affective and non-perceptive levels: love straightens desire toward the real. The difference is that perceptual correction is completely automatic and universally experienced, whereas not everyone is capable of loving or loving in the same way. Knowing how to love is an ethical vocation for the real. You always love the in-itself, not the for-me. In contrast to perception, the human being is torn between narcissism (in which the object is loved as a for-me) and love (in which the thing is of value in itself). This oscillation or dyscrasia is present in practically everyone—excluding certain extreme cases of absolute narcissism or of sacrificial devotion to the other. For this reason, human beings are at once the most selfish of mammals and the hungriest for altruism.

9.

We can say that love is a philosophical challenge, in the same way as, in other respects, ethics and aesthetics are, and for some, even the sense of the divine (which goes far beyond the historical religions). I refer here to Wittgenstein's thesis that ethics and aesthetics—which he says are the same thing (Wittgenstein, 1922, 6.421) are not of this world, but rather *das Mystische*. This in the context of the idea that there are no values *in the world*.

Yet, we know that for humans, values are essential—ethical and aesthetic values, but also the value of love. Is love then always mystical love? We distinguish between sacred and profane love. It has been said of mystics, in particular female mystics, that they bear witness to a love relationship with the Other that does not involve sensual desire (Lacan, 1975). What if truly loving, whether a woman, a man, or an animal, ultimately meant loving something divine—even for atheists, of course, since the divine does not need God?

Wittgenstein, too, expresses in his own way this split of being, this wound in the unity of the Being which, in my opinion, is the matrix of every philosophical discourse and passion. Ethical concerns, aesthetic enjoyment, and loving exaltation all have to do with non-entities, yet we know full well that they are *something*. How to put it then? In other words, *where* do we place them in being?

Love poses the same—not only philosophical, but also existential—problems of ethics, aesthetics, and the sense of the divine. Empiricist and pragmatist conceptions have no problem in considering these ethical, aesthetical, and mystical values as wiles of human nature. Ethics is confined to the appropriate regulation of our relationship with others; the Ten Commandments actually regulate our relations with the Other (God) and

with others, our neighbours. Aesthetics is a specific form of pleasure that allows us to see the world represented, or the creation of an artifactual world. As for the divine (which is not necessarily the religious), it is the enjoyment of a beneficial illusion: we feel protected by an entity that transcends our fragile daily existence. According to empiricism–pragmatism, these value experiences ultimately contribute to the perpetuation of Homo sapiens as a species.

As we have seen, Wittgenstein (1929/1965) did not share this opinion. Ethics and aesthetics *lie outside the world*, that is, outside the limits of our language, which is propositional. Wittgenstein thinks of the world as an isomorphic to propositions: a set of facts. Language is a *Bild* of the world, but values are not representable and, therefore, are not of the world. However, the fact that they are not of the world does not imply that they are not there. Then, what way of being do they possess? From its very beginnings, philosophy has in fact broken what *is*.

Today, we are struck by the ethical act of Antigone, who gives her life to bury her brother Polynices, an act forbidden by the Polis, and an act that intrigues and moves us precisely because no utilitarian logic can explain it.¹⁴ In fact, Polynices does not ask to be buried, because he is dead, yet Antigone *must* bury him. One wonders whether every ethical act, even if pragmatically explainable, has this essence of futility, connected to its Kantian absoluteness. Alcestis and Antigone, these two heroines of futile goodness (and the fact that they are women may not be accidental) put us in touch with an essential, non-utilitarian, ethics. A *cuckoo ethics*, I would call it.

Of course, art gives us pleasure, but often a paradoxical one, because it also makes us cry. What then distinguishes the pleasure of art from the pleasures offered to us by sport, sex, knowledge, and philosophy?

Those with a religious faith are perhaps more satisfied than those without one, but the sense of the divine is not a faith in knowledge, like that which comes to us from scientific propositions. Not all religions imply the proposition “God exists,” and moreover, God’s manner of existence is not the same as that of stars or quarks. The sense of the divine is not only a comforting feeling of protection; the divine is often threatening, terrible, distressing, and disturbing. God is not a belief but *a feeling*.

¹⁴ I refer here to philosophical utilitarianism (Hume, Betham, Mill), according to which ethics is in fact everything that contributes to maximizing our pleasure or minimizing our sorrow.

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