

Commentary

## Otherness and Love

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### Abstract

Love relationships have a contingent and temporary nature, tied to the encounter between flesh-and-blood individuals. Yet, at times, one can detect within them, in the form of an aspiration to eternity, an echo of Plato's idea of *Eros*. In reality, love, with its possible outcomes, is more like a clash, a hand-to-hand fight: a happy ending is by no means guaranteed. Eugenio Colorni's lesson is eloquent in this regard, making absolute respect for the other's otherness the hallmark of love, even in disappointment. Themessuchas the harmony of diversity, after all, were already posed, for example, by Aristotle and the Renaissance Platonists. The loving bond, then, is nourished by both need and desire; it is, at once, flesh and symbol. But what truly guides it is *Polemos*, understood as a "clash" between two (or more) people. And the reason for love is precisely "that" person, beyond their changing qualities and attributes.

### Keywords

Contingency, Eternity, Encounter, Difference, *Polemos*

## 1. Eros, Between Singularity and Eternal "Idea"

A philosophical treatment of love harks back first to Plato. Yet, at the same time, the "phenomenology of love" is as far removed from the Platonic Idea as can be imagined. Let's listen to Salvatore Veca:

Now, from the perspective of the philosophical treatment of the idea of beauty, the philosopher always tends to extract from this singular story what can be brought to a level of abstraction, where the concrete beauty experienced by a concrete person becomes the beauty anyone can find if they recognize "that which the philosopher indicates" as beauty. This is a typically Platonic move: the search for ideas. Philosophy fundamentally does this. Consequently, when faced with love, the philosopher immediately runs a very serious risk: if he generalizes too much, he loses something of the meaning of love

itself. [1].

Love, in fact, feeds on contingency, uncertainty, incompleteness, and, above all, on the *uniqueness* of her or him. Love, Veca continues, «is madness, it is enchantment that alters the order already given» [1]. In the experience of love, the philosopher argues, «the place of delirium, of madness, and the place of joy» [1] takes shape in the lives of flesh-and-blood individuals. A joy, however, to be cultivated, to be cared for, always exposed to the risk of loss and dissipation. A true test. And again: «The relationship is born from the attraction of one ego to another, remaining itself, but also generating a third reality, which has its own unpredictable and mysterious life» [1]. The third reality is what binds the two "singularities"; it is, therefore, the love relationship itself. And yet Veca evokes

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Plato, saying that love «is wealth and poverty» [1], according to Plato's celebrated definition of *Eros*. Moreover – as the philosopher himself points out – the yearning for eternity is constitutive of the feeling and the loving relationship: hence the meaning of expressions and phrases like “yours forever”. The fragility of the relationship, of every relationship, «does not renounce the persistent *echo* of the lesson of Socrates and Diotima. Something *remains*, as in the model of the Parthenon» [2].

Jacques Derrida, among others, has captured the intimate tension between individuality and union, separation and attraction, distance, respect and “con-fusion” inherent in the loving bond, even casting doubt on Kant's distinction between friendship and love. For the Königsberg philosopher, in fact, love is a kind of attraction, while the respect characteristic of friendship, understood as a limitation of intimacy, is a kind of “repulsion”. Here Derrida poses, almost provocatively, questions aimed at overturning the Kantian framework. Let's listen:

Why would love be merely the burning force of an attraction tending toward fusion, union, and identification? Why wouldn't the infinite distance that opens respect, and which Kant seeks to limit with love, *also* open love? And even more so, perhaps, in the experience of love or in *aimance* in general, precisely as if one were to say the opposite: infinite distance in love, a certain closeness in friendship? And why would the moral principle be on the side of friendship and not love? [3].

From another perspective, Jean-Luc Marion considers love – and *the gift*, linked to it – as *the* essential philosophical question, sometimes in the foreground, sometimes more in the background.

The aporia of the question of being is not primarily due to the fact that it has always been missing, but rather that it has always been posed again and again in the first place, while it remains – at best – a derivative, secondary, conditional question. Neither first nor last, it too is the expression of a secondary philosophy, at least when another question – “What for?” – plagues it, and a more radical philosophy asks, “Does *someone* outside of me love me?” [4].

The “someone” unequivocally signals the particular and personal nature of the question. The theme of the gift, for its part, raises at least two further questions: can there be a gift removed from the logic, however veiled, of exchange? And again: does love always require reciprocity? In rare cases, the author argues, the gift completely escapes the *do ut des*. And one can love without being loved in return. In this, the phenomenologist is not far from Derrida, for example, who, drawing on other authors, emphasizes the priority of loving over being loved. Being loved represents an accidental, contingent, and, above all, passive condition. Loving implies a “taking a stand”, it is an active attitude, not an accident. Hence the possible reversal of the question that Marion himself poses. One might ask, in fact, “Do I love *someone* outside of myself?”.

## 2. The Question of Otherness

The oscillation between the two questions – “Does anyone love me?” and “Do I love anyone?” – actually signals that raising the issue of love means raising the issue of the other, *of otherness*. Love cannot exist without the other. And this is where my temptation to reread the “phenomenology of love” stems from in the light of Emmanuel Levinas's thought and, conversely, to attempt to reread Levinas's contribution, Levinas's “other” (or “the Other”), in the light of the relationship and feeling of love.

After all, it is Maurice Merleau-Ponty who situates the origin of *the question of the other* as a central philosophical theme.

This is why the problem of knowing the other is never raised in Kantian philosophy: the transcendental Self it speaks of is both that of the other and mine. The analysis is placed immediately outside of me. I must only bring to light the general conditions that make a world possible for an I (which identifies both with myself and with the other), and it never encounters the question: *who meditates?* Conversely, precisely because it seeks a more radical awareness, contemporary philosophy takes the fact as its primary theme, and for it the other becomes a problem. Reflection cannot be complete, it cannot be a complete elucidation of its object, if, while becoming aware of its results, it does not become aware of itself. [5].

Emanuele Severino, for his part, sees the soul of Western madness in the claim to combine faith in identity with faith in *becoming-other*. Technology would be the greatest realization of this becoming-other. The philosopher, on the other hand, glimpses the possibility of a becoming that is not becoming-other [6]. That is, he poses the question of otherness, grasping its paradoxical, or absurd, nature with respect to that of identity, primarily in diachronic terms. In this way he grasps at least three decisive elements: identity (A is equal to A), nothingness (in becoming-other A first of all becomes non-A), the other (B). Love, for its part, poses the question of otherness in synchronic terms: *here and now* A and the other exist. It is the possible outcome of a “body to body” encounter, real or symbolic, with the other. It is therefore characterized as a powerful, engaging, visceral experience of encounter (or clash) with otherness. And here, what Freud and the psychoanalytic tradition define as the *unheimlich* plays a significant role: the uncanny, the disquieting. What unsettles and disturbs us is certainly foreign, unfamiliar, but perhaps above all because it activates and awakens something that was already within us, even if dormant; it resonates with the stranger within us. Between me and the other, therefore, there is no complete estrangement. Indeed, what the other arouses in me (and what I might arouse in her) also depends on what is *already* within me (or in her/him). Perhaps here too lies one of the most profound meanings of Friedrich Hölderlin's celebrated verse, “*We are a conversation*”, precisely to indicate how each human being

is the expression and fruit of an inexhaustible interplay of internal dialogues and dialogues with others, of references and resonances between interiority and encounters. A game that each person experiences and unfolds in a peculiar and unique way: “a conversation”, different from all others.

Hence the complexity, the problematic nature, the temporariness, and the mutability of what are called the alchemies of love. The loss and dissipation of the loving bond, while not inexorable, are constitutive of it. Love and failure can be read in a single word, even though nothing is predetermined a priori. Indeed, according to the German poet's suggestion and definition, the meaning of *an encounter* is not (necessarily) in the erotic-sentimental “happy ending”.

### 3. The Lesson of Eugenio Colorni

So much so that Eugenio Colorni captures the strength and intensity of his feelings precisely in disappointment. His is not a self-consoling discourse, but rather an attempt to identify and *define* the essence of love, which he conceived as «the most serious and important thing in life» [7]. In the dialogue *On Anthropomorphism in the Sciences*, Colorni (under the name Commodo) writes:

The true way to truly understand another person is to let them exist, not to transform them in my own way, but to enjoy their being different from me. This is what I call love, and understanding another person. Don't *do to others what you wouldn't want done to you*, but *do to others what they would want done to them*. *To know others, don't look within yourself; to know others, look at others*. [7].

And in his will to his daughters, he adds: love is «what brings us closer to another being, forgetting ourselves and wanting it to live in its essence, profoundly different from ours» [7].

In such an approach, I wonder, how can we not also discern that dawning experience of philosophy: wonder, amazement?

### 4. Between Aristotle and the Renaissance Platonists

After all, an author like Aristotle already raises the question of similarity and difference in relation to *philía* (friendship/love). Let's listen.

Some, in fact, define it as a kind of resemblance and maintain that similar men are friends, from which comes the saying that “like goes with like”, and “a crow goes with a crow”, and the like; others, on the contrary, maintain that all men who resemble each other are like potters to potters. And on these same subjects, Euripides conducts a more profound investigation, based more on naturalistic considerations, when he says “the parched earth loves the rain, and the venerable sky, pregnant with rain, loves to fall on the earth”, and Heraclitus when he says that “opposite is useful”, “from different sounds the most beautiful harmony is born”, and “all things are born from

discord”. Contrary to these, others, and especially Empedocles, say: “it is like that tends to like”. [8].

Having arrived here, the Stagirite suspends judgment. The theme of harmony, however, also harks back to the Platonic conception, taken up by the Neoplatonists and perhaps brought to completion by “Renaissance Platonism”, of love as a cohesive force in the entire universe. Thus, for example, Sebastiano Gentile summarizes the third oration of Marsilio Ficino's *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis de amore* (better known simply as *De amore*). It is «understood as a force that pervades and *unites* the entire universe. For there is love both from superior causes towards their works, and from works towards their causes, and, finally, there is love between equals, as seen in the elements, in the humors of bodies, and finally in the tendency of living beings belonging to the same species to unite» [9].

This idea of love as the principle and guarantor of universal “harmony” and “cohesion” is certainly challenged by that of love as the expression, or possible outcome, just like hatred and indifference, of *the collision* with otherness. And this conception of “collision” tends rather to confirm the Heraclitean aphorism according to which *Polemos* is the father of all things.

This “collision” consists, as I wrote earlier, in a real or symbolic “body-to-body” encounter. What characterizes bodies that “collide”, then? What drives them to “collide”? Let us listen to Maria Teresa Catena.

### 5. Beyond Need and Desire: Polemos

There is, therefore, no privileged knowledge of the body, but rather an overlapping of perspectives and discourses that often do not meet, yet nevertheless provide a fragment of this difficult-to-reunite multiplicity. Thus, the body as a biological entity proposed by science must be compared – and to this extent its position in the so-called natural space must be negotiated and repositioned from time to time – with that historical and cultural body which, as the studies of Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch, Norbert Elias, Georges Canguilhem, and Michel Foucault have clearly demonstrated from admittedly different perspectives, is influenced not only in its attitude and gestures, but also in its so-called natural functions such as nutrition, hygiene, sexuality, and even illness, by the mental atmosphere of the time to which it belongs. In the same way, the representations and images that historical evolution stratifies in the physicality of man *intersect with that phantasmagorical entity, produced by the disorienting and transversal force of desire*, which the body also harbors within itself. [10].

And shortly after, the author evokes «what Marc Bloch called *the never-static adventures of the body*» [10]. So, what do these “adventures” feed on? They are located at the interface between need and desire, it seems to me. And Catena rightly emphasizes the «disconcerting and transversal force of desire». A desire that is not disembodied, but rather intimately linked to need. Even our relationship with food, for example,

is conditioned by both factors: need and desire, precisely. The peculiarity of sex and love, however, consists in the interhuman nature of what desires and needs imply. The question of otherness clearly comes back into play. The needs and desires of “A” can meet and/or conflict with those of “B”, where “A” and “B” are two humans (although it is not necessarily a dual relationship). Desire, in the erotic-sentimental sphere, is not disembodied, nor is need aimed at mere subsistence (or even the mere survival of the species). Need and desire are expressed here precisely in that symbolic or real “hand-to-hand” encounter with the other. And to further clarify the connection, and the intertwining, between need, desire, and love, let’s listen to Ugo Perone.

My personal belief is that no distinction should be made. Above all, it seems to me that there is a connection between need and desire that cannot and should not be denied. Therefore, desire is never pure, or even, if it is pure, it risks becoming almost like the purest of angels, who became devils, according to the story of religious tradition. Pure desire can also be risky, just as pure need is risky. There is *a dialectic*, an intertwining of desire and need, and perhaps the most authentic desire is that which succeeds in fulfilling a need, but without extinguishing it; that valorizes the need and therefore opens the need to higher needs. And perhaps this is the dialectic of love, which certainly also has a selfish element, if we want to call it that, and it is the element for which I expect to be loved; but there is a connection between loving and being loved that should not be lost, and indeed it is this that we must work on. I think I understood from Marion’s lessons that the perspective he proposes to us is not far from what I just said. [11].

The connection between loving and being loved is *one* of the possible outcomes of “body to body”. A problematic connection, therefore; precisely for this reason, as the philosopher states, «we must work on this».

Needs and desires should thus be conceived as *motives* (especially in the phenomenological sense) of love, which, in its peculiarity, remains dominated by *Polemos*.

As if to *temporarily* close the circle, let’s return to Salvatore Veca, who quotes Robert Nozick:

Love is not transferable to someone else with the same characteristics, even if they score higher on those characteristics. And love endures through changes in the characteristics that gave rise to it. One loves that particular person one actually

met. The reason why love has a historical nature, and is therefore associated with people and not characteristics, is an interesting and puzzling question. [2].

A question on which perhaps this small contribution sheds some light.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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