

CAN PHILOSOPHY LOVE?: REFLECTIONS AND ENCOUNTERS

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One may feel initially sceptical about a book that purports to combine philosophy with love. And justifiably so. Have we not had enough of books that subject philosophy to the logic of feel-good, self-help, motivational publishing rackets? Will this volume not be yet another insincere, mediocre attempt at popularising philosophy à la Alain de Botton's bland bestsellers *Essays in Love*, *The Course of Love*, etc.? And is the coupling of philosophy with love—yes, the pun is intended—not, at best, a matter for acerbic satire and scandalous pornography, as graphically shown in the Marquis de Sade's notorious *La philosophie dans le boudoir*?

Thankfully, there's a lot more to the rapport between love and philosophy than the agendas of contemporary commercial publishers or the perversions of libertine satirists. For one thing, *love* is already imbedded in *philosophy*, as the Greek *philosophia* (φιλοσοφία) means, of course, the love (*philia*, φιλία) of wisdom (*sophia*, σοφία). Furthermore, it is not only anodyne celebrity writers but also rather serious contemporary philosophers who find love a worthy topic for intellectual enquiry. Alain Badiou's anointment of love as one of his grand, *evental* conditions of truth—on par with politics, science and art—and his *Éloge de l'amour* are two recent examples of philosophers' ongoing engagement with the questions of amorous attraction, attachment, and their consequences for thought and human subject. Finally, let us not forget that at least

one kind of love—of the more mental, non-physical kind—that is, platonic love, is named after a philosopher.

But these observations do not sidestep the challenges of bringing love and philosophy together. Could this combination not result in a misrepresentation of love—which, even in its most platonic manifestation, has something to do with urges, desires and all that is uncontrollable and perhaps even irrational—due to the austere, cerebral dictates of philosophy? And, conversely, would the fusion of thinking and feeling not run the risk of subordinating contemplation to passion, the brain to the heart? Perhaps. But it seems to me that these objectionable syntheses would occur only if we think of philosophy as simply a (verbose) style of logical argumentation, and of love as some kind of quaint, incomprehensible mystery. To render love thinkable, then, one must also show that philosophy can be lovable. Such is the intention of Cindy Zeiher and Todd McGowan, the editors of *Can Philosophy Love?*

This collection has, generally speaking, two major strands, each originating in one aspect of the central contradiction of love's rapport with philosophy. These strands are—again, very broadly—idealism and psychoanalysis. The book brings together an impressive array of mostly younger philosophers, some of whom are already emerging as important figures in contemporary Continental thought. As such, whilst the general orientations of the perspectives in the book are the notoriously 'Continental'—*difficult* and *non-analytic*—figures of Hegel and Lacan, the authors are not given to the excessive linguistic convolutions of some Continental thinkers. There is, however, at the same time, a good deal of originality and flair in many of the pieces, which helps with obviating the perception that a philosophical enquiry may automatically turn the experience of love into an emotionless, over-intellectual discourse.

I'll address the book's Hegelian trajectory first, as it precedes the psychoanalytic provenance, at least chronologically. In the book's first chapter—following on from the editors' introduction in which they admit that “one of the great appeals of love is

its resistance to our critical faculties”¹—one of the book’s editors, Todd McGowan, argues that love is not only one philosophical object amongst many, but that is it the exemplary philosophical object—and perhaps even *the* philosophical objective—*par excellence*; and that it is via a thinker often credited with such a proposal, the great Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, that it may be shown that not only is philosophy compatible with love, but that philosophy may even depend on (a theory of) love for its sustenance. McGowan suggests that love is “the animating principle of the system” of Hegel’s early thought², and, even after “the concept (*Begriff*) has taken over the central place in Hegel’s system”,³ love remains a model for key elements of his later philosophy, such as the concept itself.⁴

But what, precisely, is love according to Hegel and the tradition of thought which follows on from him? McGowan writes:

Love for Hegel has nothing to do with narcissistic self-affirmation through the other. It is rather a profound disturbance for the subject’s identity. Hegel’s definition of love has a radicality that he would sustain in his love-inspired definition of the concept. He writes, ‘love can only occur against the same, against the mirror, against the echo of our essence’.⁵

It is important to note that this definition of love does not have purely or even primarily ethical implications—insofar as it might be seen as an injunction to love the truly differentiated other and to not love the false other (one’s own fantasy) of the same, as reflected in a mirror—and that its primary topic is the subject. The *profound disturbance* that McGowan notes is not merely some kind of personal, aesthetic or emotional intensity—as may be found in a Hollywood fantasy such as *Eat, Pray, Love*—but a *radicality* that breaks our perception of who we are, and makes the subject (as

1 Cindy Zeiher and Todd McGowan, eds. *Can Philosophy Love?: Reflections and Encounters* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), xii.

2 Ibid., 4.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 6.

5 Ibid., 11.

opposed to the fantastic image of the subject, i.e. identity) possible and thinkable. Following on from this, it may be said that it is love (and perhaps *only* love?) that makes it possible for one to repudiate the narcissistic falsehood of hearing only an echo of one's own essence, and to approach a true subjectivity that entails the capacity for thinking the concept. Love, then, is the crucial prerequisite for philosophy.

As we shall see, Lacan and the Lacanians have things to say about this idealistic account of love. For now, I'd like to note that one of the great virtues of *Can Philosophy Love?* is the editors' inclusion of essays that challenge their own theses. Frank Ruda's "Love-Life" and Agon Hamza's "Against Love as a Political Category" take issue, in different ways, with the central philosophic prominence accorded to love by McGowan. Ruda agrees with McGowan's account in so far as he too notes that, apropos of (the young) Hegel, "love is the concept"⁶; but this love-as-concept must avoid "the mortification of love" found in other intellectual or transcendent abstractions of love's immanence (e.g. in the Kantian *cosmopolitan love*).⁷ To do so, Hegel must claim that, whilst love is infinite or transcendent, it also, at the same time, possesses a sensual and living "form in which this infinity manifests"; and, therefore, the eventual destination of amorous subjectivity is not the province of thinking and the philosophical, but "that of feeling".⁸

Hamza takes issue with the political implications of the idealization of love. Citing a love letter from Hegel's most famous, most heretical disciple, Karl Marx, in which Marx distinguishes the radically transformative love that he feels for the letter's addressee (his wife, Jenny von Westphalen) from a more speculative, more ideal kind of love (e.g. a politicized sentiment such as "love for the proletariat as a class"⁹), Hamza argues that the dialectical tension here is not so much between the particularity of romantic love (for a sensual other) and the universality of fraternal love (for

6 Ibid., 109.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 110.

9 Ibid., 135.

one's comrades), but the constitutive, absolute separation between the fields of love and politics.¹⁰ Furthermore, Hamza insists—in a fundamentally dialectical, Maoist or Badiouian spirit—that the two should be kept separated, and that it is perfectly possible, even desirable, for one to achieve true (political) subjectivity without recourse to any kind of love. Hamza reminds us that even Hegel himself, when considering history, “would differentiate the concept of politics that is produced by political history, from the concept of love at stake in the history of love;”¹¹ and that, ultimately, if love has a political task, it is nothing other than to “fight for preserving *intimacy*” from domination by “political ideology.”¹²

But what is intimacy, and do we really want it? And is love really possible or even desirable in the first instance? This scepticism is the basic premise for the psychoanalytic direction of the essays collected in this volume, and this trajectory is exemplified by the notoriously aporetic Jacques Lacan's assertion, “*il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel.*”¹³ As shown in the book's final chapter by its other editor, Cindy Zeiher, whilst for Hegel and Hegelians love possesses or allows for the possession of something—the concept, feelings, intimacy, etc.—for Lacan love is founded on possessing nothing whatsoever, on “how we experience lack.”¹⁴ As Zeiher writes:

Lacan indicates that the function of love is an endeavour to make up for the lack of sexual relationship—that is, the paradox that although loving another subject constitutes a whole, demanding love in return is to ask for the loved one to reveal and confront his or her own lack. The specificity of love as the most logical signifier of alienation is crucial if love is to be recognized by the subject.¹⁵

As with Hegel's idealization of love, then, Lacan's non-idealization of love is also a complex, paradoxical matter. Zeiher shows,

10 Ibid., 136.

11 Ibid., 137.

12 Ibid., 144.

13 Perhaps Lacan's best known slogan: “There is no sexual relationship.”

Eds.

14 Ibid., 301.

15 Ibid.

via considering and reconciling Badiou's and Alenka Zupančič's somewhat divergent theories of love, that the (Lacanian) lack may itself be seen as a thing—in fact, as *the Thing* (*das Ding*)—because, precisely due to its lacking an “entirely visible, locatable or trusted” content, it posits a love that transcends mere reality and “promises access to the Real.”¹⁶ As Zeiher notes, Lacan famously claimed in *Seminar VIII* that “love is giving what you don't have to someone who does not want it.”¹⁷ But this statement should not be read as a witty dismissal of love. It is an exact formulation of the absence of sexual or amorous rapport, and the fact that, according to this formulation, love is only made possible due to this absence. It is precisely because the beloved negates the lover's projection of his or her own negation that, far from the beloved becoming the repository of the lover's (narcissistic) fantasy of an other who is in fact simply a reflection of one's own (absent) self, the lover instead comes face to face with the radically transformative “core of subjective difference.”¹⁸

There is more than a whiff of the Hegelian *negation of the negation* in this description of Lacan's theory of love. In many ways, the overall project of *Can Philosophy Love?* may be described as a fusion of Lacanian and Hegelian perspectives, a synthesis which is proving to be one of the most fertile and interesting currents in today's Continental philosophy. One may discern, for example, a semi-Hegelian philosophy of art in Jelica Šumič's explicitly Lacanian readings of medieval mystics in her contribution to the volume, “Towards a Limitless Love or Mystical ‘Jouissance of Being.’” Šumič contends that the jouissance or the ecstatic quality of mystical texts (those written by female mystics, in particular) is the product of an encounter with an invisible, unsayable divinity, and that it “arises from the relationship that cannot be written, that is the sexual relationship.”¹⁹ Importantly, the impossibility of writing (directly and prosaically) about one's relationship with God, far from resulting in a Wittgensteinnian “injunction to silence”, com-

16 Ibid., 305.

17 Ibid., 303.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 48.

pels “the mystic to speak, succeeds to inscribe itself in writing.”²⁰ This “fundamental contamination of the signifier by jouissance”²¹ does not seem so different to Hegel’s view of art (and of quasi-mystical Romantic poetry, in particular) as material works animated by the Spirit.

My reading of this collection, as focussed on the Hegelian and Lacanian themes and perspectives, does not necessarily exclude contributions that address the question of love’s thinkability via philosophers other than Hegel and Lacan. These include Sigi Jöttkandt’s fascinating “Cordelia’s Kiss” which considers an episode in Kierkegaard’s *Enten – Eller (Either/Or: A Fragment of Life)*, a work which, according to Jöttkandt, “invites a reading as an allegory of Hegelian dialectics”²², an allegory which comes undone as a result of what seems strikingly similar to a kind of linguistic jouissance in the work itself, in the signifier of “a sacred kiss.”²³ Monique Rooney’s “Love’s Intermediary: The Aesthetics of Rousseau’s *Amour de Soi*” also draws on literary compositions by a philosopher—Rousseau’s *Narcisse (Narcissus: Or, the Lover of Himself)* and *Pygmalion*—to deconstruct the opposition between Rousseau’s potentially idealistic ‘*amour de soi*’, and the less ideal, far less desirable *amour propre*²⁴. In short, even the contributions that do not openly or substantially refer to Hegel or Lacan can be seen to be concerned with Hegel’s crucial discovery of love as a philosophical category, and with Lacan’s problematization of this discovery.

What, then, can be said about love’s relationship with philosophy? Is this too a kind of Lacanian non-relation which, due to its impossibility, compels a philosopher to write about love even more obsessively? Or is there no thinking without thinking about love (or in love), as a young Hegel might have it? Whichever view

20 Ibid., 49.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 193.

23 Ibid., 203.

24 In French both *amour de soi* and *amour propre* means something akin to ‘self-love’ in English; Rousseau uses them to distinguish love of one’s self based something intrinsic from self-love based on the esteem of others.’ For Rousseau, the former is natural, the latter artificial. Eds.

one finds more compelling—and I think it would be fair to say that most of the thinkers included in this insightful collection take something from both approaches—one cannot deny that love is far from unthinkable. Love may be the subject of innumerable cultural products of our world, many of them superficial, exploitative and ideological, but this book is most certainly not one of those. It shows us that love is an area rich with profound and serious thinking and writing.