

Love, Reality, and Psychoanalysis

Michael Lacewing

The idea that love is one of the most fundamental forces in the world, if not the most fundamental force, has a long and influential history. Empedocles argued that it was through love and strife that the four elements of nature – water, fire, air, and earth – were bound together to make everything around us. Plato argued in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* that love is our response to the Forms - the higher form of reality, the models for everything that exists. The thought that God is love, and through love created the world, that love will redeem us and bring us into a ‘true’ relation with God, the ultimate reality, is the foundation of Christianity, and has echoes in many other major world religions.

But does the idea of a fundamental connection between love and reality have a future? Can it hold any meaning for us if we do not believe in God? I want to offer some speculative thoughts that it can, thoughts that derive from a philosophical reflection on psychoanalysis. In these speculations, I am drawing heavily upon Jonathan Lear’s fascinating book *Love and Its Place in Nature*. My central claim is that love reveals and points us toward reality, that to exist ‘for us’, reality has to depend on love.

In the many differing theories of child development there is one common element: we are not born with a self. A self is something that a newborn baby has yet to develop. From the very beginning, a baby is, in philosophical speak, an ‘individual’; it has an existence and a unity of its own, which is given biologically. But to become a *psychological* individual, the baby must develop a self.

A self is a strange thing. Having a body doesn’t depend upon having a sense of having a body; something can be a physical or biological individual without any idea that it is. But to be a self, a psychological individual, a creature must have some sense of being an individual. The existence of a self, then, depends upon a psychological representation of a self. A self *just is* a representation of a self.

A human self is a representation of oneself not merely as a body, but as a psychological individual as well. In the case of many animals, a sense of self may be no more than a sense of being a biological unity, sustained through awareness of a body as a distinct and unified part of the world. To have a sense of one’s individual body, one needs to be able to distinguish it from the rest of the physical world, to have gained a sense of its boundaries. Whether babies are born with a primitive awareness of themselves as biological unities is disputed; but everyone seems agreed that their sense of themselves as psychological unities has to develop. To have a sense of being a psychological individual, one needs to have gained a sense of one’s experience as ‘bounded’; one must be able to distinguish one’s psychological unity from the rest of the psychological world, i.e. the other people with whom one interacts.

What this shows is that the origins of the self are entwined with the origins – psychologically speaking – of the world. A self can’t be represented without a representation of what it is distinct from, viz. the world. And so the development of the self depends on the parallel development of a representation of the world as well.

To develop as a psychological individual, a baby needs love. It is possible to keep a child alive by meeting its physical needs alone (although research indicates that even for life itself, a certain amount of holding and stroking is necessary). But this will

produce an individual who is extremely mentally disturbed, an individual with no firm sense of itself or the world. Freud argued that psychosis is a 'loss of reality', a withdrawal from the external world and (usually) the psychological creation of an alternative 'reality'. The distinction between what is of the self – the alternative 'reality' – and what is of the world, is lost. In some forms of psychosis, perhaps particularly schizophrenia, there are also episodes in which the self is lost, its unity dissolving in the face of often terrifying experience.

To develop a secure and accurate representation of the self and the world, a child needs loving care. The attention from its parents, and others, needs to be responsive and sensitive to its needs and emotions. If it is neglected or meets with a lack of understanding, the child will be insecure in its sense of self and hostile towards the world. So to develop a psychological self and a stable sense of reality, a baby must be loved.

So far we have been speaking of the role of love in developing the self from 'outside', the love that the baby needs to receive. Freud turned this around to speak also of the role of love from the inside, a person's need to love. His understanding of the loving instinct, which he called the 'libido', as sexual love in the first instance, has always caused controversy. He liked to point out, though, that on this he did not differ from Plato. Particularly on the question of the origin of love, I don't think this is strictly true, but both thinkers did emphasise a strong connection between sexual love and all love. In the *Symposium* we are presented with the view that what is usually called love, i.e. sexual love or *eros*, is a central part of love. Plato claims that love is for the beautiful, and *eros* is the desire to give birth to beauty. Love is for the good, the everlasting possession of the good. *Eros* is the desire to procreate – the desire for immortality together with good.

However, Freud's views changed over time. In identifying sexual love as the core of the concept of the libido, he distinguished the libido from our instinct to preserve ourselves, expressed, for example, in hunger and thirst. But he came to believe that our love for ourselves, and so our instinct of self-preservation, was itself an example of the libido. It is now questionable whether, as Freud maintained, the libido is, at root, sexual; or whether sexual love is a manifestation of something more basic. In any case, he came to believe that love can be found in our interest in anything. This is once again in agreement with Plato: "all desire of good and happiness is only the great and subtle power of love". The desires for the beautiful and the good, and the love they express, can be found not just in sexual and parental love, but also in creativity and, most important for my argument, the quest for reality.

For Plato, it is love that leads us to the Forms, the ground of reality. For Freud, anything that we seek to understand and relate to, we invest with libido – in other words, we love. In psychosis, people withdraw their love from the world, they lose touch with reality, they are not interested in how things really are. Why? Because for them, reality is not lovable. If the cause of psychosis is deprivation of love, a baby's reaching out to love the world is not being met by the world loving it in return. Receiving (enough) love from the world is what makes the world lovable, it is what sustains our ability to love the world, i.e. to continue to be interested in reality. It is not just that we must be loved in order to have a secure sense of self and the world; but also that we must love – both self and world – for reality to be reality to us.

Psychological development doesn't end with the establishing of a self. Staying in touch with psychological reality – both one's own and that of other people – is a

continuous task. Psychoanalysis argues that we have a constant tendency, particularly in the face of painful experiences, to unconsciously pervert our experience of reality by imagining it to be different. This is rarely clearer than in our personal relationships. For example, I might deny that I am envious or resentful of your success, and so not recognise the angry barb in my comment that life comes easily to you. We imagine ourselves not to have emotions and desires that in fact we do, or we might tell ourselves that they are not as important or significant as they are. Or we experience other people differently from how they are, believing they have feelings or desires that in fact they do not. We can mistakenly attribute our own feelings to them. I might experience you as needy and dependent when in fact I need things to be arranged just so, so that I feel independent.

Freud found that when we can come to acknowledge our emotions and desires as they really are, this leads to a better, truer, less perverse relationship with ourselves and with reality. We need to understand and accept our feelings for what they are. This inevitably leads to a transformation in them, for the feeling develops from something that perverts reality into an expression of something real and in so doing becomes integrated into the self rather than being a threat to the self. Very often, the 'edge', the frightening force, of the emotion is lost, and it becomes manageable. A step in psychological development has occurred.

But how can this step be taken? It is through a transformation of our emotional stance towards our own desires and emotions, one that Freud felt psychoanalysis could help bring about. Rejection of our desires and emotions needs to be replaced by a sympathetic understanding, an acceptance that we do, in fact, feel this way. The analyst presents patients with a loving acceptance of the desires and emotions that patients have alienated themselves from. This is not an endorsement of those desires and emotions, but a message that it is understandable to feel that way, that the patient is still lovable. Analysts express the sympathetic understanding of these desires and emotions that the patient later takes up.

Through love, therefore, we come to a better understanding of reality; in the first instance, this is the reality of who we are (what we want and feel), but then also, because our experience of others is now less clouded by our attempts not to recognise ourselves, we become more in touch with the reality of others. So we can say that love points us in the direction of reality; to love is to be able to know what is real.

It may be objected that the argument so far has missed out a crucial aspect of love. Love does not allow us to better distinguish ourselves from reality; it famously blurs the boundaries between ourselves and our beloved. Isn't love a search for the unification of that which is, in fact, different? Doesn't it involve transcending the boundaries of the ego? Freud writes of the 'oceanic feeling' of love, when "At the height of being in love the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away. Against all the evidence of his senses, a man who is in love declares that 'I' and 'you' are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact." He attempts to explain this as a search – an impossible one – for the unity we experienced with our mother prior to the development of 'self' and 'world'. Nothing could be more regressive, more opposed to the direction of development towards reality.

The myth in Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium* explains love as a regressive search for our 'other half' or soul mate (phrases that are with us still), created when Zeus split the original human beings, who had four arms, four legs,

two faces, etc. into two. So Plato joins with Freud in remarking on the search of love as a search for a lost unity, a desire to 'lose oneself', to deny or overcome the differentiation of what is differentiated. This is never clearer than in the case of sexual love, but it can also be found in the mystic's desire for unification with God (in fact, Freud's 'oceanic feeling' is first of all a description of religious experience) and perhaps implicitly in Socrates' account of the lover's desire to eternally possess the good.

I accept that the search for unity is central to love, and that this search can have a regressive tendency. But I do not accept that this is an objection to my view that love is a force for development. First, even if all love is a desire to unify, not all unifications are regressive. Love can want to bring together, but it can seek differentiated unities. The desire to be with someone is not to be equated with a desire to obliterate their differences from oneself. The desire to understand ideas is a desire to bring that which is different into a greater unity. The desire to create can include the desire to reflect the awe-inspiring diversity of the world. Second, we may, with justice, call this type of response to difference where it exists 'more loving'. Love that desires always to obliterate, not to recognise difference, not to respect the boundaries between self and other, is not love at its most complete; it is often rather a disguise for anxiety and a desire for control. Love will, we may accept, always have a regressive tendency; but unless this regressive tendency is brought into check by its progressive tendencies, love itself has not developed into its most loving form.

Eventually, Freud understood eros as a force present throughout nature which drove all life towards ever greater complex unities, and hence as a guiding force in the evolution of psychological beings such as ourselves. Even if we do not wish to follow him in this, there is a sense in which we may understand love as underpinning reality itself.

We cannot develop a self nor an idea of the world without a world that loves us, without a world that is lovable by us – and these two conditions amount to the same thing. But we may go further than this. For what is it for there to be a world at all? What we mean by a 'world', Kant argued, is the idea of something that we could experience as a world. Even as we speak of a world that could exist without us, without our experiencing it, we refer to something that could potentially be experienced by us. But for us to be able to experience a world, I have argued, is for us to be able to love the world. As Jonathan Lear explains, 'It is a condition of there being a world that it be lovable by beings like us... This is more than a psychological condition of there being a world *for us*. There is no content to the idea of a world that is not a possible world for us. And a world that is not lovable (by beings like us) is not a possible world.'

The idea that love and reality are connected at the very deepest level is alive and well and has a secure future.