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Autor: Jasper, Adam / Othenin-Girard, Guillaume

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Love is a kind of Knowledge

Adam Jasper in conversation with Guillaume Othenin-Girard

Love is not an extreme emotion, the highest expression of an affinity. Rather, all responses within a subject can be placed on a scale of attraction and repulsion. Love has many degrees, from very mild to passionate. Scheler extends love to cover the entire experiential universe. It corresponds to something like Newtonian mechanics, in which, instead of gravity, love is the glue holding it all together. The presence of love saturates the world.

Adam Jasper

The cosmos of love is not different from our everyday world. For a «cosmos» is not a place, but rather a system of order. The ancient Greek *kosmein* means to prepare, or to arrange in the proper way. It is this sense of order that links the words «cosmos» and «cosmetics». One reconstructs the proper order of the universe by—as one said in English in the 1950s—«putting on one's face.» All the transactions of daily life depend upon a subtle hierarchy imposed by the heart, by what Max Scheler called the *Ordo Amoris*. Max Scheler was—measured by the number of books he sold—amongst the most popular philosophers in Germany in the 1920s, but his writing was suppressed by the Nazis, and he is today almost forgotten. His work revolves around the centrality of love for the understanding of the world, and the difference between pure reason, and what the philosopher Pascal called the «logique du cœur»—the logic of the heart. Scheler's mixture of optimism and scholasticism motivated a young priest called Karol Wojtyła to write his doctoral thesis on «value ethics». Years later, that priest would attempt to modernise the Catholic Church under the name of Pope John Paul II.

According to Scheler, you know what something really is when you have understood what it is that you love about it. This use of love puts the ordinary use of the word on its head, for instead of making love the result of a judgment, or even an amorphous passion, Scheler makes love the prerequisite of reasonable judgment. Said differently, you do not assess something first, weigh up its pros and cons, and then decide if you love it or merely like it, rather, the emotion comes first. Love teaches you what to pay attention to. Love is intentionally directed. You always love *something*. We experience it as if it is produced by things in the outside world, for it is experienced in concrete relation to things and events. It is through our emotional response to the contingencies of the world that we come to know our own ethos, come to discover our possible selves. Love is a matter of epistemology—not because we can know what it is that we love, but because it is through love that we come to know.

Love is not an extreme emotion, the highest expression of an affinity. Rather, Scheler extends love to cover the entire experiential universe. Love has many degrees, from very mild to passionate. It corresponds to something like Newtonian mechanics, in which, instead of gravity, love is the glue holding it all together. The presence of love saturates the world.

Love is normative, but not in the sense that it follows norms. Rather, it sets them. There is no cultural relativism to love, although the *Ordo Amoris* by which love is applied varies. Love animates all cultures, all people, across all times and places. The sorts of norms that love sets reveals

the culture to us. Every ritual of politeness, of gift giving—everything that a sociologist might call a «total social fact»—reveals the culture in this way. At the centre of every culture, of every ethical system, is a radically unknowable, even monstrously irrational truth, like the mortice and tenon joint at the centre of Christianity. You might remember a story you were told about a student of Mies van der Rohe who had made an inelegant structural connection between two interior walls. The story is probably not true, but this is not important. In the story, Mies van der Rohe pointed to the fudge and told the student that the connection was bad. «But», the student said, «no one will see it». «God will see it, and fail you», Mies replied. Is Mies van der Rohe, in this story, a theologian, or is God an architecture tutor? What was the student hiding, anyway? Was it their *Ordo Amoris*?

The material world is your unconscious. The way that you come to know the secrets of your own heart is through immersion in the world. It is this that makes you an amateur.

But—what am I saying?—we could welcome Scheler's extension of love, except that, by extending its domain, he threatens to annihilate its meaning. For the flipside of drenching all the universe with love is that we must accept a kind of totalitarianism. All our gestures and transactions can be placed upon the scales of the *Ordo Amoris*, to be weighed as very good, very bad, or just a little kinky. According to Scheler's own philosophy we can only know another culture through the degree to which we love it or hate it. But what possible criteria give us the right to pass judgement on the judgements of others? And can our descriptions ever be neutral if they are saturated with love or hate? To make sense of this, we would need a concrete case study. Politics is in the plan.

Scheler's kind of woozy dogmatism drove Ordinary Language Philosophers nuts when they read German Phenomenology. J. L. Austin would never have begun a theory with a string of metaphysical definitions, like Scheler did. Rather, he would have asked how we typically use the performative expression «I love you» as opposed to other kinds of merely constative expression, such as «I love ice cream», and if such expressions really have anything in common. To love a person is a commitment, one that not only reveals present desires, but also makes claims about future behaviour. To say «I love you» is always a promise, or more exactly, a vow. Is it perverse to say you love architecture? The French writer Bataille once wrote: «I defy any art lover to love a painting as much as a fetishist loves a shoe.»

Guillaume Othenin-Girard

Nevertheless what still puzzles me, or what I miss, is the presence of the body. How do we experience love? Where is the source of the mechanism you are describing?

You start by saying that love is a matter of epistemology «because love is how we come to know», but this is somehow the second phase—the realisation of loving something. What happens at the origin of this sensation of love, if you put aside the possibility of a spiritual, or religious hypothesis? We do not think love, we feel love, or we are in love. Is love above all anchored within the physicality of an experience that we have the need to intellectualise in order to form the basis of a knowledge of that something?

(In parenthesis, I have always been interested in the way languages translate the sensation of love into words, describing and placing the source of the latter in different areas in the body; *je t'aime de tout mon cœur*, «I love you from all my heart» in French, in Farsi one says «I love you from all my guts/belly», the Japanese love from the head.)

Your introduction of love as a form of knowledge, deriving from the idea of «cosmos» as a system of order, implies the disembodiment of this sense of place, which then excludes the body in question. But if a

knowledge implies an understanding deriving either from acts, information, or skills acquired through experience or education; knowledge being the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject, and if love is knowledge, where does it come from?

Love as a strong feeling of affection can also be regarded as a great interest and pleasure in something. As in «pleasure is a wonder that teaches me that I am me» (cf. Amélie Nothomb). Pleasure, from a psychoanalytic point of view, is discharge. Pleasure in this view is the result of desire, of an inner psychic tension linked to what we miss and what we tend to do because of our condition of incompleteness. The principle of pleasure is to satiate one's impulses without taking into account reality and its constraints. The newborn, for example, who seeks to satisfy its impulses, because it believes itself to be all-mighty, experiences very quickly a feeling of frustration imposed by the external reality, when the mother refuses to give it the breast, which leads to a narcissistic wound. The newborn faces the principle of reality, the need to postpone or temporarily suppress one's need for instinctual satisfaction so as to obtain pleasure or love in a second step. If there was no pleasure, there would be no desire either. We simply would not exist. Pleasure, love, teaches me that I am me because I am sensitive to a constellation of particular pleasures. So it defines me as a single entity, like me. It is a differentiation, an individualisation. It means that I have a specific identity that is identifiable in relation to everything that exists, to others.

Does saying «I am me» mean that I dominate, that I master this entity that I call myself? According to the pleasure principle, we submit to our instincts and our impulses, while the reality principle is precisely to control oneself, to restrain our impulses. It is knowing how to impose limits to our own pleasure, to shape our love for this something, in order to control it. Is love the only way to learn that I am me? Love—pleasure—is one aspect that teaches me that I am me, but there is the perception of the external world, which refers me to the difference of what I am in relation to what I perceive. And then, there is also the forbidden, that through deprivation hurts me, and teaches me that I am me. Another questions that intrigues me is where does the «intention» you are mentioning come from? Are you familiar with the work of the French philosopher and writer Jean d'Ormesson's, particularly his essay on nothingness *«Comme un chant d'espérance»*? His definition of love is beautiful and in the end undeniably tends towards an understanding of God (if we have a bit more time I can dig in it, but I have a feeling I missed the train...).

