

Falling in Love

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*Can we only love/
something created by our own imagination?*

T.S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*

Abstract: The phenomenon of falling in love is undoubtedly highly valued but at the same time is often viewed with skepticism. The “face-to-face” nature of romantic love, accompanied inevitably by a measure of obsession, seems to conflict with the more stable friendship-love, imagined as “side-by-side” and focused – as in Aristotle – on the cultivation of virtues of character. In this paper I argue that a more positive take on romantic love is made possible by a certain kind of metaphysics of the person. In particular, Feuerbach’s notion of the “inner life” constitutive of personhood, can be expanded beyond Feuerbach’s materialism to ground the possibility of fully transferring one’s self-love to the other person. Key to this interpretation is Rahner’s idea of the human being’s openness to an infinite horizon, corresponding to the infinite longing of romantic love, and not at all doomed to the frustration that Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, would have it. I draw on Aquinas’ distinction between love that is concupiscence and love that is friendship, to make this point.

Keywords: Romantic love; inner life; Feuerbach; Rahner; Aquinas; Sartre; limerence; God.

I’m interested in falling in love. Both for its own sake, and as a preliminary project to better understand what is meant by “love of God”. I take my cue from the remark by Robert Doran, in his *Theology and the Dialectics of History*¹ that an inquiry into romantic love is the best way to understand the love of God. From the sheer volume, in the various media, of lyrical descriptions – and from common observation too – falling in love would seem to be highly valued, although not always unambiguously so. The idea

¹ Robert Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 31.

that true love is “spontaneous and wells from within,” argues David McCarthy², and that it is “free over against the routines of everyday life,” is likely to undermine the rooting of married love in the institutionalized spirituality of the church. Drawing on Michael Walzer’s analysis, he points to the private bond of love, negotiated through “the date”, which is free from all constraints apart from individual choice. But this means that the unconditionality of married love seems to conflict with what “love” has come to mean. Other critics argue that love can and should be re-described in pre-personal categories, for example, to do with evolutionary biology.

Common to both points of view is the idea that the projection that is part and parcel of romantic love will necessarily frustrate the growth of the kind of intelligent friendship that would enable both persons to flourish. In this paper I will interrogate the grounds for the high regard for romantic love, and argue in particular for more notice to be taken of the important metaphysical questions. Taking my cue from Feuerbach’s notion of the human person as “having an inner life” I argue that the capacity to project the infinite raises a (strictly religious) question about the motivation behind such ideals. Contrary to what is maintained in reductionist accounts of human behaviour, in the drama of romantic love qualities of character play a central role. It remains to explain why it is not, however, *character* that is the term of romantic love (which would impossibly strain the relationship), and in the final section of the paper Aquinas’ concept of love as connaturality opens the way toward understanding how the radical self-affirmation of the kind that is seen in the capacity to have an inner life, can be transferred to another person, in an attitude of other-affirmation.

Outlining the problem

The academic literature on love is so vast and impressive that one’s choice of key orientating texts is bound to be somewhat arbitrary. As starting point we can take Robert Johnson’s (1983) still useful account of the (Jungian) psychology of romantic love, by way of an analysis of the legend of Tristan and Isolde. This brings out the long-established idea, which began with medieval courtly love, that the object of one’s being-in-love must by

² David McCarthy, “Becoming One Flesh: Marriage, Remarriage, and Sex,” in S. Hauerwas and S. Wells (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 283.

definition be unattainable – implicitly implying that the projection, if realised, will be shattered in the reality of the person loved. How could it be otherwise? What one desires is the perfect counterpart to all one's basic longings as a person.

Robert Johnson comments on the courtly protagonists in contemporary culture:

They refuse to make a real commitment to a human being, because they will only commit themselves to their inner vision, their inner idea. Their search for the perfect manifestation of anima or animus, their search for the divine love. Since they have not learned that this is an inner task, ...they must always reserve the right to follow wherever the inner ideal is projected.... Instead of realizing he is longing for the divine love, for the inner experience of anima *that is his own responsibility*, he finds fault with the woman. She is not making him happy; she is not good enough; she does not fulfil his dreams.³

As is often remarked what is needed in moving from the falling in love, to loving, is commitment. But the nature of that commitment is obscure, for in order not to betray the genius of the original love it must disregard the fact that the other person is “merely” finite. (The romantic vision, the “inner ideal”, seeks something unlimited, corresponding – this is what I will argue – to the unlimited capacity of our intellectual powers and to the scope of our willing.) This would make the relationship inherently unstable.

What Johnson means here by their search for “the divine love” can be understood by referring back to the idea that courtly love will always struggle against conditions which disallow the love. In one version of the legend, Isolde is already married to the king, for example. The *capacity* for such absolute love is there, but the *actualisation* of such love is beyond the powers of the protagonists. The interaction between the inner longings and outer circumstances constitutes the challenge to the characters, and the interest for the audience in the romantic narrative. The working out of their personal history is not entirely in their hands, and fulfilment can only come about through a power which is beyond their own (fortuitous encounters? Cupid smiling on them?), even though working through them. For Johnson,

³ Robert A. Johnson, *The Psychology of Romantic Love* (Penguin, 1983), 140.

as for Jung, the story will always have an implicit religious dimension. A failure to be conscious of this will contribute to the failing of the project. Johnson⁴ argues that “at the end, their only concern is to use each other to break free completely from the ordinary search, to fly to that magical, imaginal world where “great singers sing their songs forever””.

“They have not learned that this is an inner task.” What this means will be explored later. Sometimes this very failure is taken as paradigmatic of romantic love, as in Dorothy Tennov’s (1979) well-known descriptive study of the state of – the term she coins – “limerence”. Limerence has certain basic components: intrusive thinking about the limerent object; acute longing for reciprocation; some fleeting and transient relief from unrequited limerence through vivid imagining of action by the limerent object that means reciprocation; fear of rejection and unsettling shyness in the limerent object’s presence; intensification through adversity; acute sensitivity to any act, thought, or condition that can be interpreted favorably, and an extraordinary ability to devise or invent “reasonable” explanations for why neutral actions are a sign of hidden passion in the limerent object; an aching in the chest or stomach when uncertainty is strong; buoyancy (a feeling of walking on air) when reciprocation seems evident; a general intensity of feeling that leaves other concerns in the background; a remarkable ability to emphasize what is truly admirable in the limerent object and to avoid dwelling on the negative or render it into another positive attribute.

A further claim made is that the limerent object must be a potential sexual partner. Whatever the truth of this is, it would seem to point to an essential element in the phenomenon, namely the awareness of vulnerability and need evoked by the other person. There is an awakening to a need in oneself that has been repressed, and which is accompanied by fear and anxiety at a new sense of one’s lack of control over how things turn out. This point is well made by Allan Bloom (1994) in his study of modern romantic literature, heralded, says Bloom, by Rousseau. Rousseau, he says, “marks the beginning of the frantic sexual search for genuine human contact and

⁴ Ibid., 142.

reciprocity in the isolation of bourgeois life that endures in one form or another up to our own day.”⁵ Rousseau himself writes as follows:

In love everything is only illusion. I admit it. But what is real are the sentiments for the truly beautiful with which love animates us and which it makes us love. This beauty is not in the object one loves; it is the work of our errors. So, what of it? Does the lover... any the less suffuse his heart with the virtues he attributes to what he holds dear? ... When those romantic maxims began to become ridiculous, the change was less the work of reason than of bad morals.⁶

And earlier, Bloom quotes Rousseau along the same lines:

And what is true love itself if it is not chimera, lie and illusion? We love the image we make for ourselves far more than we love the object to which we apply it.⁷

Bloom then moves through various novels effected in one way or another by the latter ideas: Stendahl’s *The Red and the Black*, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*.

For both Bloom and Rousseau romantic love is basically seen as, if one can put it this way, a worthwhile project. But in terms of the nineteenth century novels he discusses, the vote is divided, two in favour (Austen, Stendahl), two against (Flaubert, Tolstoy). In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, the attitude of possessiveness on the part of Darcy, or desire for independence on the part of Elizabeth, will frustrate any loving partnership, but this is made possible through greater self-knowledge, and deeper acceptance of the other, in each case. The great loves of *Madame Bovary*, or of *Anna Karenina*, however, are in both cases frustrated, in both cases suicide is seen as the only way out.

For Bloom, the stumbling block to a positive view of romantic love is the current philosophical thesis, often termed scientism, that “modern natural

⁵ Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 39.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

science is the only form of knowledge, a denial of the view that the methods for studying the instrument of knowing must be different from those appropriate to knowing [non-human] nature.”⁸ This denial is misplaced, he argues. It is precisely one’s imagination itself that, so far from being an obstacle, gets to the reality of the person, whether self or other.

A more developed thesis, along the same lines, is given in Christopher Booker’s (2004) study of premodern and modern European fiction (see the discussion). No personal growth of the kind that is beneficial to the project of romantic love is facilitated, argues Booker, in the modern culture. This is due to a loss of a sense of nature as normative for us (as it was, for example, for Shakespeare). “In the dramatic advances of scientific knowledge,” Booker contends, “of which the immense material changes being brought by the industrial revolution was only the most obvious outward sign, man had begun to step out of his natural frame in a way that had no precedent.”⁹

How the experience of romantic love is interpreted will therefore depend on one’s philosophical presuppositions. For Shakespeare love fails when an aspect of “nature” (going against what a man or woman is and by nature has to do or develop) is neglected: an example would be obvious character flaws shown up in the characters in *Anthony and Cleopatra*. For contemporary writer Sebastian Moore (1985) intimacy, or what he calls “mutual in-existence” is not to be understood, as romantic love sometimes is, as just something that *happens* to you (people say, Oh the chemistry is just not there anymore...). “Rather, we have to see it as something more like a skill, a virtue (= a power), that can and should be developed. A person can become more attentive to self and other in more and more encounters. One can create the optimal conditions for some degree of intimacy... to occur.”¹⁰ Following Moore, we will posit a continuum between the experience of falling in love, and the development of certain important virtues which would sustain the friendship. But the problem can be heightened by looking at it in the following way.

⁸ Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 264.

⁹ Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots. Why We Tell Stories* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 364.

¹⁰ Sebastian Moore, *Let This Mind Be in You. The Quest for Identity through Oedipus to Christ* (Winston Press, 1985), 24.

In the love of friendship (*philia*) the image is that of “side by side”, “two persons walking together”. The friendship is constituted by what both parties are, separately, interested in, for example, competitive sport. To the extent that that interest is peripheral (say, a shared passion for La Liga football matches) or more central to their lives, to that extent is the friendship shallow or else deeper. In Aristotle’s account of friendship the deepest is when the parties are friends for the sake of virtue: they are both interested in goodness, and in the growth of happiness or flourishing in themselves and the other.¹¹ Now the image for erotic love, in contrast, is “face to face”. The interest of each is precisely the other person themselves. And if falling in love involves projection, being captured by an illusion, then we have to ask whether this might be simply out of synch with the kind of friendship-love which would sustain a partnership in which both flourish. Even if you add commitment to the attraction of each to the other, it might be the case that no, or no adequate, growth occurs in self-*understanding* and in virtues of the kind that would enable both to flourish. One could for example love or be committed to the commitment, not, ultimately, to the person. How, as projection, can romantic love *not* lead to frustration, impeding such growth?

The result would then be the following: any long-term union of two persons would have to be based on a commonly agreed set of common beliefs and values. The occurrence of limerence, or falling in love, would be seen as a kind of *trap* which drops one into a commitment which has no particularly sound base for sustainable friendship-love. In other words the basis for the union, the common interest, would be a “construct”, something invented, with a certain arbitrariness attached to it, and only altered with difficulty and with trauma on both sides. For example, who constitute our mutual friends? What are the values we both agree on? And so on. Each change in these sets of beliefs by one partner would seem to endanger the union. In a previous age and culture these sets of beliefs about values could be specified by one’s social class (‘what people like us believe’) and it would be courting disaster to choose a partner outside one’s class.

The problem is exacerbated by contemporary liberal society which, prioritizing autonomy as locus of human dignity, is centrifugal so far as

¹¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), esp. 1156-1157.

concerns moral values, making friendship of the Aristotelian kind – entailing shared beliefs about shared values – difficult. Terry Eagleton, for example, remarks that in a liberal culture, so far as concerns values, “everyone may believe more or less what they want – but only because they don’t matter much in any case, and because the idea of human solidarity has withered at the root.”¹² The identification with the other (as in Brontë’s novel, *Wuthering Heights*, where Catherine Earnshaw confesses, “Nelly, I am Heathcliff”) is likely to be seen as a “trap”. At which point some evolutionary biologists – one can think of Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* – not afraid to move beyond the bounds of their discipline, are quick to fall vulture-like on the corpse of erotic love, giving credence to this interpretation. Roger Haight points to the problem: “Metaphysics as a constructive enterprise comes close to the basic beliefs of a religious faith commitment. [Hence] the sheer diversity of lifestyles and worldviews surely encourages metaphysical skepticism.”¹³

Bringing in a metaphysical dimension makes it appropriate to turn to the most metaphysical of commentators on love, namely Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre’s take on this is well known. Sexual love, at least, is doomed to frustration. For Sartre, romantic love or erotic love does indicate something to do with yourself as a whole, something “infinite”. The desire, he says, takes hold of you, or as he puts it, “compromises you.”¹⁴ His description comes close to that of “limerence”, with its obsessive character. You slide towards a passive consent to the desire: it takes hold of you, it overwhelms you, it paralyzes you. This being its nature, Sartre concludes that love of the kind we have been calling a worthwhile project, is impossible; in the terminology of this paper, I cannot in principle “get” the other.

At the root of the problem is Sartre’s understanding of knowing as “looking”, a view taken apart in his classic of cognitional theory by Bernard Lonergan (1970). (I am rehearsing here). In “the look” the other confronts me as an object “out there”, opposing me or my subjectivity. But this is a very truncated view of how one knows anything, including other persons.

¹² T. Eagleton, “The Pope of Russell Square. T.S. Eliot’s Conservative Modernism,” *Commonweal*, May 26, 2022, <http://commonwealmagazine.org/pope-russell-square>.

¹³ Roger Haight, *The Nature of Theology. Challenges, Frameworks, Basic Beliefs* (New York: Orbis Books, 2022), 11.

¹⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (Washington Square Press, 1956), 404-405.

Looking, Lonergan points out, simply provides the *data*; this calls for the further act of intelligent interpretation of the data, and, finally, the act whereby one's interpretation is judged to be reasonable or not. An objective view of things, for example of the other person, is not reached through looking alone, but is the fruit of our personal cognitional powers, the fruit of attentiveness, intelligence and reasonableness. The argument, as Lonergan says, turns on "what no subject can avoid. You cannot avoid experience. You cannot avoid trying to understand..." If you want to play the fool, to play being stupid, still you do that intelligently. "Again, you cannot avoid the exigences if your own reasonableness... If you to renounce your reasonableness you would find yourself asking reasons for it."¹⁵

The problem is thinking of the object of knowing as "out there", to be looked at, i.e. confronting oneself as a subject. Knowing is thought of by Sartre as a confrontation of self and other, a confrontation that *necessarily* denies of the other the status of being a *subject*. Sartre writes:

In the primordial reaction to the Other's look I constitute myself as a look. But if I look at his look in order to defend myself against the Other's freedom... then both the freedom and the look of the Other collapse.... The Other escapes me... If I have preserved my awareness of a transcendent freedom in the Other, this awareness provokes me to no purpose by indicating a reality which is on principle beyond my reach and by revealing to me every instant the fact that I *am missing* it, that everything which I do is done 'blindly' and takes on a meaning elsewhere in a sphere of existence from which I am on principle excluded.¹⁶

The upshot is that all I can love is the object of my own imagination. Thus for Sartre, the blindness of love is evident; it is a trap, and it leads to frustration.

For these reasons I want to explore the philosophical anthropology that seems to be entailed in the claim that a mutually fulfilling outcome is

¹⁵ Bernard Lonergan, *Phenomenology and Logic The Boston College Lectures on Mathematical Logic and Existentialism*, vol. 22 (University of Toronto Press, 2001), 317.

¹⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 510-511.

possible for romantic love. In the notion of the inner life developed in the post-Hegelian tradition of Feuerbach and others, exactly this is the case. Feuerbach is linked in an interesting way to the novelist George Eliot, his translator into English: in Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, the love connection is, as already mentioned, given only a fantasy resolution, where the corpses of the two protagonists are seen together, floating down the river Floss.

The inner life: openness to an ever-broader horizon of being

*Either you had no purpose/
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured/
And is altered in fulfilment.*
T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*

In the first place, by “inner life” is not meant the Cartesian idea of a privileged and direct access to knowledge of my self in a way that is different to my knowledge of other things and persons. I do of course have self-awareness, or better, self-awareness is what constitutes me as a subject, the awareness that accompanies my acts of knowing and choosing. What is meant by “inner life” is a life which is not entirely determined by the encompassing pressures from its environment, but to some extent “from the inside”, precisely through this self-awareness. The self-awareness is not equivalent to but the *condition for* insight into myself. Explicit self-awareness is achieved in the same way as any other knowledge; only the object here is the acting subject itself. This means such knowledge is always incomplete, a tentative grasp of the self, never fully luminous. The capacity for an inner life refers not to the actual achievement of complete luminosity about oneself but rather to the ability to confront oneself as a whole, to raise questions particularly about values and so to necessitate the use of some such term as ‘responsibility’ as the only phenomenologically adequate description of human behaviour. And this in spite of what one can say about the *conditions* (psychological, biological, social) circumscribing the exercise of free agency. The appropriation of this capacity is done bit by bit, in a never complete way. One grows in one’s inner life.

We can understand this better by recalling some ideas of Hegel. Hegel sees his task as overcoming the unhelpful isolations, inherited from Kant, of mind from body, of reason from inclination, and of one individual from

another. The first term he uses to express the unity of the person is “life”. This names the idea that one’s inner unity expresses itself in a manifold of *development*, in accordance with its natural potentiality. “Life is the union of union and non-union” is an early formulation of this idea in his essay “Fragment of a System.”¹⁷ This way of putting it points to the never final nature of any achieved union of the self, which must always reckon with what is still *not* assimilated. The term “spirit” (*Geist*) clarifies this idea by pointing to the fact that it is self-consciously and *freely* achieved. The basic idea is that the “other” – the non-union with yourself – is not, finally, a restriction on oneself but is taken up and used creatively in order to enact oneself freely. You are able, “within yourself” to go out of yourself.

For example, through insight, reflection and judgment you can judge the truth about things as they really are, and so move from having a biologically finite animal habitat to living in a world shared with others through the meanings expressed in language. Likewise you can value and affirm things, without limit, and so “take on” the world, take it into yourself, as it were. Hegel’s mature term for this capacity is “spirit”. The implications for our topic are evident. If you can truly “go out of” yourself in this unlimited way, then there is the possibility for what one longs for (union with the other) is not necessarily doomed to frustration. We have an unlimited side to us. We have the capacity for in some way sharing in the actualization of that dream-person envisioned by the other. And this is evident in the normal everyday experience of being a subject. In this sense one’s finiteness does not *per se* constitute a barrier to accepting the other as open to growth, and vice versa. You are what you are only through interaction with your environment, and in particular through other persons. A contemporary writer who develops this idea is Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy writes, in the spirit of Hegel, of love and communion with the other through his idea of “having in another the moment of one’s subsistence.”¹⁸ His analysis is very much along the lines of our own, affirming a natural desire for loving, for transcendence, but without any clear resolution thereof – this is clear not only in his chapter on love, but also that on community.

¹⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, “Fragment of a System,” Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 312.

¹⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 12; 95.

We want, long for, some other who can “get” me, perfectly: but that would mean without the constraints of their finite limitations. What would this mean? We have an unlimited side to us, and so can envisage a corresponding fulfilment, an objective correlate to the subjective capacity. We have seen in the Hegelian notion of spirit the idea of a power which can go out of itself to what is truly *not* itself (non-union) but at the same time remaining itself. But what is not self is of course without limit, limitless. In this sense one’s finiteness does not *per se* constitute a barrier to accepting the other as open to growth. True or authentic union with the other, sharing, would seem at least *possible*.

Hegel’s notion of the reality of spirit is usually interpreted idealistically, as occurring on an ideal, or mental plane. In his classic of philosophical anthropology, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841/1957), Feuerbach’s aim is to translate these ideas within a non-idealist framework: for him, union with the other is indeed the natural actualization of our human potential. It is our consciousness, he says, that distinguishes us as human. And this means relating ourselves to our “species-being” (his term for our union or connectedness with others).

Consciousness is given only in the case of a being to whom his species, his mode of being, is an object of thought. Although the animal experiences itself as an individual – this is what is meant by saying that it has a feeling of itself – it does not do so as a species.¹⁹

And this means knowledge in the exact sense of *science*, is possible. Feuerbach continues: “Only a being to whom his own species, his characteristic mode of being, is an object of thought can make the essential nature of other things and beings an object of thought.” So an animal has a simple life but the human being a twofold life: an inner and an outer, i.e. relates himself to his mode of being – he “thinks, converses, enters into dialogue with himself... Man is in himself both ‘I’ and ‘You’.”²⁰ He can make his essential mode of being an object of thought.

¹⁹ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

Consciousness, in other words, is not something *added onto* our bodily being: the human being is incorrectly thought of as “an animal but one possessing consciousness in addition.” Rather, there is a qualitative difference. What this must mean is that the human being can relate himself to himself as a whole: he can determine himself (as a species). This means that the human being is not *limited* by factors which are pre-fixed: those limits are precisely what are incorporated into his further interaction; and this consciousness of his power is consciousness of being free, unlimited, being not finite. Feuerbach argues that, in contrast, a “really finite being has not even the slightest inkling, let alone consciousness, of what an infinite being is... .”²¹

What has this to do with our topic? Just this: such a description seems to correlate with what is required of the *ideal object* of romantic love. From Sebastian Moore we have the idea of this ideal object, that deep longing expressed in the romance narratives, for something that can be:

*knowing me like I know myself;

*but without limit, since the limitedness of the other *prevents* them knowing me in this way;

*other than myself;

*but not like others are other, because of their finite, or limited nature.

For Moore, this yields an idea of God. Feuerbach on the other hand is concerned to deconstruct the religious interpretation of the sense of being without limitations. Since only sensuous beings actually exist, he argues, the notion of God must be an incoherent one: such a being would be other than ourselves, external to us, and so would be *either* simply figuratively external (and so possess a figurative existence only) or else a real non-figurative “external” being in real space and time, existing even when I am not thinking of it, or seeing it. It is clear that the latter would be a finite being.

But our interest lies rather in something other than this. What we are sensing is our *own* capacity for freedom as self-determination, and also for love. Feuerbach is correctly translating a premodern, dualistic way of thinking of “spirit” into a contemporary “secular” worldview: “If you think the infinite, you think and confirm the infinity of the power of thought; if

²¹ Ibid.

you feel the infinite, you feel and confirm the infinity of the power of feeling.”²² It is we ourselves who have the capacity to love and create true human community.

As we have seen, romantic love highlights both this capacity or infinite longing, and the conditions radically adverse to its fulfilment. So in spite of Feuerbach’s criticisms of the notion of God, there seems to be an inevitable ethical and religious dimension here – one can always ask, Is it worthwhile to hope? Religion, mentioned by Johnson as a component of the romantic equation, has to do with a human capacity whose actualization and fulfilment is not entirely at one’s free disposal.

To get any further with this exploration of romantic longing we are forced, then, towards a critical metaphysics which addresses this issue. Feuerbach’s position seems not fully coherent: we are beings that have the capacity to determine ourselves freely, for example through science as a method; but the only beings that exist in reality are those demarcated by the empirical sciences (“sensuous beings”); and such beings are fully determined by finite forces, and *not*, therefore, freely determining themselves through their capacity to make their own essential being an object of thought. Feuerbach’s genius, following on Hegel, is to bring out the extent to which we participate in the making of our social and religious world through our creative imagination, through our projections. But such insight does not determine one way or the other, the question of the adequacy of our imagination to how things truly are. We can project and find identity in an imagined object, such as, say, our family, and this object of our imagination has objective reality; or we can project and find identity in an imagined object, such as the superior Aryan race, for example, and this has no objective reality. In the first case, our imagination contributes to actualizing something which is truly identity-giving and, other things being equal, will contribute to the realisation of greater identity through family in some humanly beneficial way (contributes to human happiness); in the second case, this is not the case, we are deluding ourselves and only able to sustain our identity through falsifying the facts, or suppressing questions. Thus it is not the case that all we have is imagined projections of our imagination, without any recourse to verification. For this reason, Feuerbach is mistaken in arguing that “God does not exist for me, if I do not

²² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 9.

exist for him; if I do not believe in a God, there is no God for me. Thus he exists only in so far as he is felt, thought, believed in; the addition ‘for me’ is unnecessary.”²³

I am calling on the whole continental tradition in philosophical psychology as interpretative framework for understanding the phenomenon of falling in love. I am using this phenomenon, apart from its intrinsic interest, in part as an illustration of the continuing importance of philosophical debates of this nature. To further emphasise this point I want to draw upon a recent discussion about how to interpret human behaviour, the example here being that of the behaviour of the central characters in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. For reasons of space it is only possible to point to, rather than give a full treatment of, what I take to be salient points in this debate. The *Oedipus Rex* example is of further interest because the legend is picked out by one commentator – Sebastian Moore (1985) in his *Let This Mind Be in You*, subtitled, *The Quest for Identity through Oedipus to Christ* – as marking a huge cultural shift from an external rule-based regulation of social order to one regulated through the dialectic of the inner life, and, taking this a step further, by the exigencies of romantic love. The latter, according to Moore, can be seen as part and parcel of our inherited culture, a characteristic feature of our imaginative landscape. In the case of the Oedipus story the unquestioned divinely sanctioned external rule is the taboo on incest.

The ethical dimension of the Oedipus drama is discussed by Grant Gillett and Robin Hankey (2005): the interest lies in the focus on the kind of moral effort and moral discernment required for normal complex situations. Thus both Laius and Jocasta, as well as Oedipus, have failings of a moral nature – for example Oedipus is too impulsive in retaliating to a blow to the head with a murder (of the king, his father, in disguise), while Jocasta gives up on trying to do the right thing in the adverse circumstances:

Why should man fear since chance is all in all
for him, and he can clearly foreknow nothing?
Best to live lightly, as one can, unthinkingly.²⁴

²³ Ibid., 200.

²⁴ G. Gillett, and R. Hankey, “Oedipus the King: Temperament, Character and Virtue,” *Philosophy and Literature* 29 (2005), 279. DOI: 10.1353/phl.2005.0022.

The attempt to assert control over one's life (scepticism is also a kind of control) leads to tragedy. But this notion that character is important only makes sense if persons can indeed appropriate their lives, by their ideas and choices determining their own character at least to some extent Gillett and Hankey are concerned to show, against Gilbert Harman (1977), that this is in fact the case.

Harman appeals to certain well known psychological experiments involving subjects who seem to act in ways contrary to their formed moral character. Harman argues, as Gillett and Hankey write,²⁵ that “human behaviour is situationally driven rather than indicative of enduring character traits.” The precise details of these experiments mentioned by Harman – that of Stanley Milgram and the Good Samaritan Experiment – are not our concern here. However we can note (Gillett and Hankey do not) that in each case the deception of the subjects is integral to the experiment, and they are for that reason subject of debate in the context of ethics of scientific research. In other words, we can subject them to a value critique; and this implies that there is a framework of values *not established through the empirical science itself*. In both cases there are criteria for arguing that the deception involved can be justified. But unless this argument begs the question, it will have to involve the controversial idea of the overriding human good (in the face of which the lesser evil – deception – is seen as justified because necessary, in this particular case). This assumes the capacity for human transcendence. Harman, on the other hand, wants to claim that aspiring to be virtuous is an incoherent project, as pointed out by Gillett and Hankey.²⁶ But this would seem counter-intuitive: while social psychology might (as the authors suggest) have an a priori commitment to the contextual thesis (to which one would have to add, or/and the thesis about innate aspects of temperament), practical discernment of what is best to be done would seem a perfectly common-sensical value to aspire to.

Only if we take into account those realities discussed in this section, the transcending subject as spirit, dealing with himself or herself as a whole, the presence to the subject of a horizon without limitations, without which we could not be present to ourselves, the drawing power of objective value (affirmed for reasons perhaps not entirely made explicit), can we make

²⁵ Ibid., 270.

²⁶ Ibid., 271.

sense of love as a union which enhances, because awakening and engaging the inner life. At least this is what we have argued.

It would make sense, then, to prescind from Feuerbach's restrictions on "being" as *necessarily* "sensuous", i.e. material. But is the horizon of our inner life real, in this sense? We can recall Bloom's contention that science must yield its place as sole arbiter of what counts as knowledge, and a place must be given to knowledge through the imagination. What is needed for our purposes is a philosophical justification for this. The notion of the person as able to *relate* to his or her incompleteness gives the lie to the tendency to restrict our notion of "real" to "middle-sized objects in the world" (Quine). And contemporary science and religion discussions draw our attention to the changing shape of what might, given the evidence from the sciences, be reasonably affirmed as "real". In their account of the evolutionary science of the universe, Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, for example, point to how this insight can come as a surprise to the researcher: "Suddenly," they write, "with a shock of recognition, we discovered ourselves as humans emerging within this process."²⁷

The existentialist writers too point to the anxiety or angst accompanying this awareness of subjectivity. From Kierkegaard on they have stressed how in confronting your idea about something or disposition towards something of value, you confront your own freedom. This point is well brought out by the German theologian Karl Rahner, who has learnt from this kind of philosophical thinking. He is worth quoting at length.

Man experiences himself as infinite possibility because in practice and in theory he necessarily places any sought-after result in question. He always situates it in a broader horizon which looms before him in its vastness.

This broader horizon, always the backdrop for human subjectivity and agency, is not an object in time and space.

For the object of such a transcendental experience does not appear in its own reality when man is dealing with something individual

²⁷ Brian Swimme, and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 232.

and definable in an objective way, but when in such a process he is being subject and not dealing with a ‘subject’ in an objective way.²⁸

In this Rahner is in agreement with Feuerbach. But it also makes no sense to identify *oneself* as this horizon, as Feuerbach seems to do. As Rahner²⁹ continues: “Man is not the unquestioning and unquestioned infinity of reality. He is the question which rises up before him, empty, but really and inescapably, and which can never be settled and never adequately answered by him.” If, on the contrary, one identified oneself with the horizon what is aspired to (that fulfilment to which one’s sense of self points), would be reducible to mere, i.e. only subjectively grounded, projection or wish fulfilment. Eric Voegelin sees the whole trend of this kind of thinking in modernity, a *deformation* – by Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Lenin and others – of the original insights into the transcendence of the human spirit, into the divine grounding of ordinary human experience. “A radically egophanic ‘history’ is constructed with the intent of leaving no room for theophanic experiences and their symbolization.”³⁰ And in a similar vein, Robert Tucker saw in the Hegel-Marx philosophical tradition a “dialectic of aggrandizement.”³¹

To speak about what it is to be “subject” (or “spirit”) is to speak at the same time about a reality which cannot be the subject matter of any science, which deals with the terms and relations within a system of finite objects. Subjectivity is not one “part” of the person alongside other parts (the body, say) but it is *constituted* by its capacity to take stock of its relation to everything that is “other” than itself. The units within any finite system confront one another in an “external” way; while spirit or subjectivity denotes a way of living an “inner” life. This ability constitutive of our being human is not to be thought of as another element *alongside* the body (reason, or the immortal soul). The ability to be related to oneself, as Rahner elaborates, “constitutes the subjectivity of man as distinguished from his

²⁸ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. W. Dych (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1978), 31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁰ Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age. Order and History*, vol. 4 (Louisiana, United States: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 261.

³¹ Robert C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 57 ff.

objectivity, which is the other aspect of him.”³² Any system determinable through the sciences, in other words any finite system, argues Rahner,

cannot confront itself in its totality... It does not have a relationship to its own point of departure [which in its case is imposed on it]. It does not ask questions about itself. It is not a subject. The experience of radical questioning and man’s ability to place himself in question are things which a finite system cannot accomplish.³³

The link with our topic is clear. Romantic love touches on this sense of one’s subjectivity. To be sure the context is not primarily questioning in the intellectual sense, but one involving one’s conative and in particular affective dimensions. Still, the longing associated with romantic love seems to evoke an awakening of the idea of relating intensely to what is not finite. An intense sense of being worthy of being known, loved, affirmed, of wanting to share yourself, of overcoming the perceived limits of finitude. And either the moral effort of trying to create this kind of relationship is worthwhile, or it is not. The decision about this is the “inner task” of which Robert Johnson drew our attention in his analysis of Tristan and Isolde.

Ralph Ellis (2006) disagrees. He points to the problem of projection and the lack of selfless love: “since no *extrinsic* or *instrumental* value can exceed the *intrinsic* value of the experience it facilitates, this circle of egocentricity automatically renders all other objects less valuable (experientially) than the self and its own experience...”³⁴ But here Ellis overlooks the experience of the worth of our being, against the ever-broader horizon of being: affirming oneself in this experience, one opens oneself to transferring that affirmation to the other person. Ellis lacks any adequate metaphysical equipment.

For Jane Austen, for example, love and virtue are mutually enhancing through growth in self-knowledge and self-affirmation. (For our purposes, we can ignore how Austen overlooks the social conditions of the personal drama, the role played by money and, in addition, the exploitative colonial

³² Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 30.

³³ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

³⁴ Ralph Ellis, “Spiritual Partnership and the Affirmation of the Value of Being,” *The Pluralist* 1 (2006): 10.

origins of English middle-class wealth, a point made by Sagar.³⁵ For George Eliot on the other hand, virtue (ties of engagement) *competes* with passion, with the longing that is romantic love. Or at least, as already seen, this is the case in *Mill on the Floss*. Stephen and Maggie Tulliver find a resolution only in death. (One could imagine Sartre asking why she did not simply follow her passion; his point would be that there is no *objective* resolution of this choice, it is entirely subjective or arbitrary.) As English translator of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, George Eliot was surely influenced here by what she had absorbed from him, that *disallows* the kind of opening-into-being that is crucial for the project that we have proposed.

In the drama of romantic love, then, qualities of character play a central role. The sense of subjectivity that is awakened can reasonably be affirmed as an indication of a reality which is beyond any finite object and also a value unconditional because constitutive of my sense of self. The moral effort, focusing on developing oneself in accordance with values common to self and other and therefore making friendship possible, would therefore seem worth one's while. This would be in accord with one's "infinite longing". It remains to clarify why nevertheless it is not exactly these qualities of character that are the *object* of love – a mistake that would strain any relationship to breaking point. And here the pre-romantic Thomistic concept of love as connaturality can, rather surprisingly, throw light on this. For his concept of love benefits from a metaphysics of the person as "spirit", as self-enacting. And this means that the "infinite longing" can be affirmed not only of one's self but also of another.

Love as normal expression of the inner life

And the fire and the rose are one

T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*

At first glance what goes for "love" in Aquinas' philosophy is far removed from the "infinite longing" that characterizes romantic love, for "love" in Aquinas is basically "connaturality", a sharing of one's nature, a natural affinity. To take the extreme case, gravity could be seen as the love of stones. Nevertheless it is useful to draw upon the Thomist distinction between *amor concupiscentiae* and *amor amicitiae*, literally love of concupiscence and love of friendship, but as reformulated by Augustine Shutte (2024)

³⁵ Keith Sagar, *Literature and the Crime Against Nature* (Chaucer Press, 2005), 271.

(whom I am, in part, summarizing in what follows) in terms that are less likely to sow confusion, namely desire on the one hand, and direct love on the other. (Shutte is drawing on the classic elaboration of the philosophy of Aquinas on love, Robert Johann's (1966), *The Meaning of Love*.)

This distinction has its roots in Aristotle. Love of the friendship kind, for Aristotle, is "to wish good to the other". Or more elaborately, "wishing for him what you believe to be good things, not for your sake but for his, and being inclined, so far as you can, to bring these things about."³⁶ The two elements that can be distinguished in this definition are the good things that one wishes or desires, and the other person *for whom* one wishes them. The object of direct love is the person, not the good things (for example, character traits) that one wishes for them: the latter are the objects of *desire*.

We can now address the question posed above, namely, whether it is not the case that love, which is "face-to-face", will always have to be put aside in favour of the need to create a long-lasting friendship ("side-by-side") based on agreed common interests. Those interests, we can now see, are what are *desired* for both self and other, but this is not the *foundation* of the union of the two persons, which is the *direct love* of each for the other. We saw that the understanding of the person as having an inner life means they have a relation to themselves as a whole and in this way go beyond any single set of finite determinations, in discerning the truth of things and consenting to what is seen as of real value. To affirm oneself as subject in this way is precisely the affirmation of self-less or "transcending" nature. In these typical human acts one orientates oneself in accordance with what it of value, regardless of 'advantage' to one's self. For example in judging the truth of a point of view one takes into account possible biases one might have. So there is no reason why this act of affirmation, of self-love in this sense, cannot be transferred to another. I can "see" that it applies to them as it does to me.

It is clear that here I do not affirm myself as a *kind* of thing, but myself in act, as subject and only in one's acts as subject. For Aquinas, when I know anything, say a cat, I know that it is the *kind of thing* that cats are, but I also know or affirm that it is a *really existing* kind of that thing (a unicorn,

³⁶ Aristotle, "Rhetoric II," trans. R. Rhys Roberts, in R. McKeon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 1328.

or phlogiston, are kinds of things, but not real), I affirm it being itself. So I cannot *love* a cat (with love of friendship or direct love) because I cannot transfer my act of self-love to the cat. The difference is illustrated in the recent film, *Grizzly Man* (dir. Werner Herzog, 2005). There is a break-down of personal integrity on the part of the protagonist, who, lacking a sense of self, attempts to achieve it through “falling in love” with grizzly bears. His unresolved ambivalence towards achieving communion with other persons is illustrated time and again in the improper term of his disproportionate anger.

Why *should* I transfer my act of self-love to another person? In the experience of romantic love this question seems to answer itself: I am awakened to the sense in which I am worthy of being known and affirmed by another, and, as I desire my own flourishing, I desire, in the same movement, the friendship for its own sake. This is the infinite longing of romantic love.

This sense that the project is a worthwhile one, depends upon a metaphysics of the kind we have averted to above. One can objectively affirm the reasonableness of “being subject”, along with the conditions for such opening out to the infinite horizon. One persuasive indication of this reality would be the experienced fact of direct love for another person, never grasped as a “fact” but always held to with some uncertainty. Sebastian Moore calls this experience, affirmed as the condition for subjectivity (which is also the origin of our capacity for science, thus an irreducible datum), the experience of “the other within” – it entails the inner task of which Johnson spoke, in other words it has an ethical dimension. There is a “strangeness” at the heart of one’s experience of oneself as subject (the “non-union” of which Hegel spoke, part and parcel of one’s personal unity). And this allows one to accept the radical strangeness of the *other* person, taking the pressure off intimacy. As Moore³⁷ points out, “If it is only the intimacy between two persons that is the alternative to their radical strangeness to each other, then there is going to be some fear that this strangeness will threaten the intimacy.” But the intimacy has its grounds in one’s very subjectivity, one’s capacity for transcendence. My own affirmation of the project being worthwhile includes the other in this affirmation.

³⁷ Moore, *Let This Mind Be in You. The Quest for Identity through Oedipus to Christ*, 19.

It is this capacity for an inner life, then, that can allow the kind of commitment and sympathy that is required for the combination of passion and friendship we have posited as the possible term of romantic love.

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