STUDIA UBB. PHILOSOPHIA, Vol. 69 (2024), 3, pp. 43-62
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphil.2024.3.03

Wonder, Wandering, Mystery: Ricoeur on Sexuality and Eroticism – With a Brief Comparison to Marion and Levinas

Erzsébet KEREKES*

ABSTRACT. In this paper, we aim to introduce and analyze a lesser-known text by Paul Ricoeur, "La merveille, l'errance, l'enigme", which was originally written as an introduction to the November 1960 issue of the journal Esprit, dedicated to the theme of sexuality. Along the two paths of sexuality—tenderness and eroticism—what becomes evident is that sexuality, fundamentally, proves impenetrable to reflection and remains inaccessible to human dominance.

After presenting Ricoeur's reflections on sexuality and eroticism, this paper will also briefly compare his views with those of Jean-Luc Marion and Emmanuel Levinas, highlighting the distinctive contributions of these philosophers in relation to the themes of love, eroticism, and the self-other dynamic.

Keywords: *sexuality, eroticism, love, tenderness, mystery, Eros, marriage, erotic reduction, Ricoeur, Marion, Levinas*

This text was later included in subsequent editions of the essay and study collection *Histoire et vérité/*History and Truth (Third Edition. Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1975, pp. 198–209. This text was not included in the first edition of the volume, published in 1955.), a volume comprised of writings prompted by various events – discussions in working groups, colloquia, notable anniversaries, and conferences. Despite their varied origins, the texts in this collection are closely related in their themes and rhythm, demonstrating a coherent unity.

* Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babes-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Romania, erzsebet.kerekes@ubbcluj.ro

©2024 Studia UBB Philosophia. Published by Babeș-Bolyai University.
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

Let me first say a few words about the Ricoeur's collection. The essays in *History and Truth* are organized around two central poles: a methodological pole and an ethical one (in the broadest sense of the word). The first section (*Truth in the Understanding of History*) contains studies dedicated by the author to the significance of historical action. These essays are arranged in such a way that they move from an examination of the historian's craft in its strictest sense, with its demand for objectivity, to the philosophical-theological problem of history's full or ultimate meaning. The essays in the second section are grouped under what Ricoeur calls a critique of civilization. In these writings, he seeks to revisit certain civilizational impulses of our time through reflection, with all of these texts oriented toward a political pedagogy (in the sense elaborated in the pages dedicated to Emmanuel Mounier). Ricoeur rejects the opposition, introduced by Marx, between contemplative thought and transformative praxis. Nothing could be more foreign to the 'style' of these essays, Ricoeur writes, than the so-called dichotomy between committed and non-committed thought. Each of these writings, both individually and collectively, aims to testify to the futility of such a dispute.

(In various ways, these texts assert that the emergence of contemplative thought – whether in the form of Parmenides, Plato, or Neoplatonism, to take an extreme example – has transformed the world. By negating sensory appearances and manipulations, this mode of thought has provided us with Euclidean mathematics, followed by mathematical physics, and, through the mediation of measurements and calculations, the world of machines and technical civilization.)

The unity of rhythm, to which we previously alluded, is made quite explicit in the essay "Work and Word". There, Ricoeur explores the alternation of contact and distance within the act of articulation – a dynamic that is always present in the responsible behavior of an "intellectual" when confronted with a problem. According to Ricoeur, this is why the more methodologically oriented reflections found in the first three essays are inseparable from the ethical-political approach to human relations that emerges in the second part of the collection. (...) "I believe in the efficacy of reflection, because I believe that human greatness lies **in the dialectic of work and word**" (p. 15.), Ricoeur asserts. To speak and to act, to signify and to perform – these are so deeply intertwined that it is impossible to establish a lasting and profound opposition between *theoria* and *praxis*.

The first part of the collection, titled *Truth in the Understanding of History*, comprises two chapters. The first chapter, *Critical Perspectives*, includes the following studies: "Objectivity and Subjectivity in History", "The Unity of the History of Philosophy and Truth", "A Note on the History of Philosophy and the Sociology of Knowledge", and "The History of Philosophy and Historicity". The second chapter,

Theological Perspectives, contains the essays "Christianity and the Meaning of History", "The Companion, Friend, and Neighbor", and "The Image of God and the Human Epic". The second part, titled *Truth in Historical Action*, is composed of four chapters. The first chapter, *Personalism*, focuses on Emmanuel Mounier's philosophy. The second chapter, *Speech and Praxis*, includes essays such as "Truth and Falsehood", "A Note on the Dream and Task of Unity", "Sexuality, Wonder, Wandering, Enigma", and "Work and Word". The third chapter, *The Problem of Power*, features writings on "The Nonviolent Person and Their Presence in History", "The State and Violence", "The Political Paradox", "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", and "Economic Forecasting and Ethical Choice". The fourth chapter, *The Power of Affirmation*, contains "True and False Anxiety", and "Negativity and Fundamental Affirmation".

Let us return to the theme of sexuality, which is addressed in the second chapter of the second part (*Speech and Praxis*) and, as noted earlier, was originally written as an introduction to an issue of *Esprit*. One might ask why *Esprit* dedicated an issue to sexuality rather than to love or affection. Isn't love the more encompassing term, the uplifting pole, the spiritual motivator? Certainly. However, for the editors, nothing was more desirable than to move the reader beyond the conventional mystical and lyrical shadows. Instead of a hymn of praise dedicated to love, they preferred an examination of sexuality that did not evade any of the difficulties that render human existence *problematic* as a sexual existence. The difference between the sexes intersects humanity differently from distinctions such as those between species, social classes, or intellectual categories. The editors of the issue thus gave voice to scholars, philosophers, literary critics, and ordinary people alike, including questionnaires and responses. As for Ricoeur, in the introduction to this collective work, he attempted to reveal the most evident aspects of our wonder before the mystery of sex, as he himself expresses it.

The order that Ricoeur follows is not the somewhat didactic sequence used in the issue, which progresses from a global perspective on the problem (Part I) through external, scientific, and objective knowledge of sex (Part II), to ethical issues (Part III), then modes of expression (Part IV), and ultimately concludes with concrete practices (Part V). Instead, Ricoeur adopts a highly subjective order: he begins with what he perceives as a *wonder*, then moves to what he considers a *mystery*, traversing through what renders sex *perplexing* (and deviant).

He starts from what personally piqued his interest: **the search for a new sacrality in contemporary marital ethics**. He then shifts his focus to what threatens to undermine the meaning of sexuality, constituting this threat and connecting it to the problem of eroticism.

Sexuality as wonder

For Ricoeur, it seems that all our problems related to sexuality stem from the collapse of an old sacrality – a cosmic-vital sacrality, which provided a complete meaning to human sexuality. He views modern family ethics as a relatively successful response to this collapse.

Indeed, one cannot understand the adventures of sexuality without considering those that were recognized as sacred among people of the past. Ricoeur speaks of imaginative repetition and the symbolic branching of rituals. In those times, rituals proclaimed a complete integration of sexuality into the sacred through actions, while myths supported this sacred establishment with their ceremonial and glorious narratives. The imagination did not cease "back then" to imbue things with sexual symbols in exchange for those symbols derived from the great rhythms of plant life, which, in turn, held symbolic significance through the endless play of correspondences involving the lives and deaths of gods. However, from this ancient sacredness, only small fragments remain; the entire network of correspondences that once linked sexuality to life and death, to food, to the seasons, to plants, animals, and gods, has become a large (disjointed) puppet, embodying our desires, our perceptions, and our needs.

But let us be clear: this sacredness had to collapse, at least in its direct, immediate, and naive form. It yielded to the influences of ethical monotheism and technicist intelligence. The former, ethical monotheism, largely "demythologized" the cosmic-vital sacred, its plant and infernal deities, its hierogamies, its violences, and its deliria/illusions, in favor of a greatly impoverished symbolism – more "heavenly" than "earthly" – of which the admiration for the sideral/astronomical order – the starry sky above us – became the most important remnant, which we possess within ourselves. But the **transcendent sacred** is far more suited to supporting a **political ethics** centered on justice than to supporting the lyrical dimension of life. In relation to the sideral archetype of order, sexuality appears as an aberrant phenomenon, one whose sacredness has been emptied by the "demythologization" of infernal and plant deities. This is not because the transcendent sacred, such as that of the Heavenly Father, lacks any meaning for sexuality; rather, it cannot reabsorb the latent demonism, creativity, and violence of Eros. It can only support the institutional discipline of marriage, which it regards as a fragment of the *total order*. Just as order and institution gain validation for sexuality within the ascending sacredness and ethics, Eros must be integrated into this order and institution as best as it can, whether well or poorly. This is the origin of a strict ethics focused on a single axiom: sexuality is a social function, specifically for reproduction; it has no meaning

beyond reproduction. (It is thus evident that this eminently social, communal, political ethics, derived from the transcendent sacred, is more skeptical of the errant virtuality of Eros. Eros always retains a dangerous and forbidden foundation from the ancient, faded sacrality.) The sacred, as something separate and untouchable, has survived the participatory sacred, but tends to imbue sexuality with a diffuse sense of guilt.

It is true that in **Judaism**, the condemnation of sexuality beyond the strictly utilitarian and communal function of family continuation was not emphasized. This is because, after a difficult struggle against Eastern mythology, the faith of Israel was able to rise to a meaning of creation, to an immanent-transcendent sacred, for which the whole earth together with the heavens sings the glory of Eternity. The exultation of flesh and body rising toward the heavens finds its magnificent expression in the cry given to the first man's mouth in the sacred texts when he discovered the first woman: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!"

Ricoeur here speaks of both a physical and spiritual sense, but one that could not compensate for the deeper decadence of the old cosmic-vital sacredness. Before it could create a culture of its own magnitude, it suffered the assault of ***dualistic waves***, of Orphic and Gnostic waves. Humanity simultaneously forgets that "flesh", Word, Desire, and Image are indivisible; it comes to "know" itself as a separated, lost Soul, a prisoner of the body; simultaneously, it "knows" the body as Other, Enemy, and Evil. This "gnosis" of the Soul and Body, this Gnostic Dualism, seeps into Christianity, sterilizing the meaning of creation, distorting the confession of evil, and confining the hope of full reconciliation to a narrow and withered horizon of spiritualism. Thus, in Eastern religious thought, hatred of life and anti-sexual ressentiment proliferate, which Nietzsche believed to be the essence of Christianity.

Here, **modern marital ethics** represents a limited effort, somewhat successful, to reconstruct a new sacrality, focusing on the fragile alliance of the flesh and spirit within *the person*.

The essential achievement of this ethics, according to Ricoeur, is that it brings to the forefront the value of sexuality as a **language without words**, as a means of mutual recognition and personalization – in short, as *expression*. This is what he refers to as the **"dimension of tenderness"**, which he contrasts with **"eroticism"**. This ethics continues the Jewish creationism and Christian Agapé, insofar as Christianity rejects its Gnostic tendencies and the false opposition between Eros and Agapé. Ricoeur tends to see in this ethics an attempt by Agapé to reappropriate Eros. This ethics continues the tradition of Jewish creationism and Christian *Agapé*, as Christianity rejects its Gnostic tendencies and *the false dichotomy between Eros and Agapé*. Ricoeur is inclined to see in this ethics an attempt by *Agapé to reappropriate Eros*.

Like any reappropriation that is not merely repetition, this one simultaneously sanctifies both the remnants of the old sacred and its transformation. It sanctifies the remnants because the theme of the person, of mutual personalization, is alien to the cosmic liturgy of the vegetative/plant sacredness and its call for individuals to immerse themselves in the flux of generations and regenerations. In the infra-personal stage of the old sacred, reproduction remains fundamentally irresponsible, accidental, and bestial. **The Sacred must cross the threshold of the person.** By crossing this threshold, humanity becomes **responsible** for the gift of life, just as it is responsible for all of nature; the control of reproduction is a faultless sign of the death of the old sacred, an irreversible gain for sexual culture. One could elaborate on its ethical significance and new dangers. However, these dangers are the reverse of the greatness of human sexuality: with the control of reproduction, procreation ceases to be a destiny at the same time that the dimension of tenderness, where the new sacred is expressed, is liberated. At the same time, what destroys the old sacred Eros is what allows it to be saved in the light of *Agapé*. Through tenderness, we attempt to reconstitute a symbol of innocence, to ritualize our dream of innocence, and to restore the integrity and wholeness of the flesh/body. But this attempt presupposes the emergence of the person; it can only be inter-personal. The old myth of androgyny remains the myth of non-differentiation; it must transform into a new myth, that of reciprocity, of corporeal mutuality. The restoration of the primitive sacred at another cultural and spiritual level presupposes that *Agapé* is not only (image) destroying but can also save all myths, including that of Eros.

But is this approach possible? It already contains a seed of uncertainty due to the simple fact that, in order to gain intensity and permanence, sexual attachment must be molded by the discipline of *institution*. We have seen that the transcendent sacred is a necessary component of this history of sacredness; but the transcendent sacred, which generates an ethic of political law, of social justice, has brutally forced the anarchy of Eros to bow to the laws of marriage. Sexual ethics, having suffered the impact of politics, has become burdened with rights and obligations, duties and contracts: the prohibitions, bans, and inhibitions that accompany the taming of instincts are well known. The price paid for socialization. Eros, of course, is terrible. Yet no modern society envisions giving up the channeling and stabilizing of Eros's demonism through the institution of the conjugal family. It is conceivable that there exist individual destinies exempt from legal constraints—there are notable examples, especially among artists and great creators of culture, whose fates cannot be imagined confined within the bonds of marriage. But which *legislator* would find an argument in this for "deinstitutionalizing" sex and prescribing this singular destiny as a universal rule? We know well that humanity and the humanization of sexuality have not been achieved solely through the discipline of marriage, which is costly in many respects.

An unstable pact has been forged between Eros and the institution of marriage, one that is not without suffering and sometimes carries the risk of destroying humanity itself. **Marriage represents a cardinal bet in our culture regarding sex**; this bet has not been fully won, and it is doubtful that it ever can be. Therefore, the case against marriage remains a potential, useful, legitimate, and urgent task. It falls to literature and the arts to expose the hypocrisy of a society that continually seeks to conceal its betrayals under the pretext of its ideals. All coercive ethics generate deceit and trickery; hence, literature holds an irreplaceable scandalous function, as scandal is the scourge of deceit. Deceit will continue to accompany humanity until it can reconcile the uniqueness of desire with the universality of the institution. In our civilization, marriage always operates under the sign of duty to some extent, and many marriages are precisely shattered by this duty. Marriage aims to protect the duration and intimacy of sexual bonds, thereby making them humane, but for many, it is precisely this very duty that shatters their duration and intimacy.

The bet of an ethics of tenderness means that *despite* the risks, **marriage offers the greatest chance for tenderness**. What this ethics preserves from the transcendent sacred is the idea that the institution can serve as a discipline for Eros, translating the principles of justice, respect for the other, legal equality, and mutual obligations from the political sphere to the sexual sphere. In exchange, by integrating the institution, the **ethics of tenderness** changes its intention; within the spirit of the institution, the primary goal of marriage is procreation and the perpetuation of humanity as a species. The ethics of tenderness seeks to incorporate procreation into sexuality, rather than incorporating sexuality into procreation, **placing the *perfecting* of interpersonal relationships at the forefront of marital objectives**.

The promotion of the personal and interpersonal as the ultimate goal is where a movement that allowed the replacement of the ancient family model with the marital family has led, moving from inter-family pacts to the mutual recognition of partners. **But is the fusion of the institution with sublimated Eros in tenderness always successful?** Nothing can guarantee this. (This is why there is a latent threat that humanity might face a rift in the completeness of human sexuality, as it seeks to achieve multiple divergent objectives.)

Here is the gap. Or, due to this dissonance, which threatens the fragile compromise between Eros and Civilization, a centrifugal force, anti-institutional, operates, culminating in contemporary "eroticism". **Our era is influenced by two opposing movements: one towards the re-sacralization of love, and the other towards its desacralization/profanation.**

Wandering, or eroticism versus tenderness

The term **eroticism**, as Ricoeur discusses it, is **ambiguous**: first, it can refer to an element of human sexuality, specifically the instinctual and sensual aspects; second, it can denote the art of love based on a culture of sexual pleasure, which, in this sense, is also one aspect of tenderness – provided that the concern with mutuality, mutual satisfaction, devotion, and gifting is more important than egoistic and narcissistic gratification. However, eroticism becomes a wandering desire for pleasure when it breaks free from the close bond maintained by a lasting, intense, and intimate interpersonal relationship. It is at this point that eroticism presents problems. As Freud taught us – especially in his work *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* – sexuality is not straightforward, and integrating its many components is an indefinite task. This disintegration, which is not seen as a failure but is explored as a technique of the body, leads to eroticism positioning itself as the opposite pole to tenderness. In **tenderness**, the relationship with the other is more important and can control eroticism; in **eroticism**, the egoistic culture of pleasure takes precedence over mutual giving and exchange.

Eroticism, in its limited and pejorative sense, has always existed (some argue that it is currently in regression within a utilitarian and work-focused civilization); the culture of pleasure is a fundamental aspect of human sexuality simply because it cannot be reduced to mere animal reproduction. It is playful and becomes play; this is its nature, and it must be understood and accepted. **The demonism of Eros represents the dual possibilities of eroticism and tenderness**; the compulsion exerted by the institution through tenderness does not cease to intensify the centrifugal force of eroticism at the same time that the institution works on integrating eroticism into tenderness.

If "eroticism" represents a possibility and an internal threat to sexuality, as much as it appears in new human and contemporary forms, we would like to clarify these in the following sections. Ricoeur **limits his focus to three phenomenological groups**, which are also interconnected through mutual actions:

I. **Loss of Meaning** (falling into oblivion). The removal of sexual prohibitions has led to a bizarre effect unknown to the Freudian generation: the loss of value through *ease of facilitation*. Reduced to an accessible and simple biological function, sex becomes insignificant. In this sense, the extreme point of the destruction of the cosmic-vital sacred also becomes the extreme point of the dehumanization of sex.

To this first phenomenon, many factors have contributed: the blurring of gender roles in economic life and education, the advocacy for women's equality that grants access to sexual freedom previously reserved for men. Everything that facilitates easy sexual encounters also promotes the descent of meaning and value to zero.

To this, we add the entry of vulgarizing sex literature into the public sphere. A person becomes more aware of themselves from the moment their sexuality becomes public; but by losing its secret nature, it also loses its intimacy. As Béguin said, "We, these mammals..." Something irreversible occurs: thanks to the dissemination of human sciences, these phenomena become new cultural phenomena, part of the situation to be embraced.

The final point is that sexuality bears the consequences of all other factors that operate in terms of depersonalization and anonymity. The insights from American psychoanalysts are quite telling; they observe that the type of repression that characterized the Victorian era is gradually disappearing, replaced by much subtler and hidden symptoms. The disappearance of affective contracts, the inability to love or hate, and an increasing number of clients lamenting their inability to fully engage their entire personality in sexual acts – engaging in sex without love – illustrate this shift.

The descent of sexuality into meaninglessness is both a cause and a consequence of this emotional decadence, as if social and sexual anonymity mutually stimulate each other.

II. The second phenomenon: to the extent that sexuality becomes **insignificant**, it concurrently becomes increasingly **urgent** to address the grievances and disillusionments experienced in other areas of human life under the pretext of retribution or revenge. As sexuality, having exhausted its compensatory and retaliatory functions, is drained of its relevance, it becomes detached from reason. What are the disillusionments in question?

a) Firstly, **the disappointments encountered within the context of work.** It would be valuable to undertake significant studies on this subject: the civilization of work and sexuality. The fact that work functions as a factor in the sublimation of instincts due to its anti-libidinal nature has been thoroughly explored within the Freudian school's ego psychology (Hartmann, Erikson, etc.). It is well established that personality development, from the perspective of instinctual drives, involves the acquisition of autonomy through non-conflictual situations. Work, along with language and engagement in institutional life, constitutes one such non-conflictual (or "conflict-free" sphere, as termed by

Erikson) situation. However, the consequences are also significant. The modern individual experiences a profound dissatisfaction within a society perceived as a struggle against organized nature. This disillusionment runs deeper than mere rejection of the economic or political system; it is a disillusionment with the technological world itself. Consequently, one's sense of purpose shifts from work to leisure. In this context, eroticism emerges as one dimension of leisure time; it often becomes nothing more than the cheapest form of relaxation, at least when it pertains to what we might call an eroticism of inadequate cultural or intellectual sophistication.

b) This primary disillusionment is further compounded by the **"political"** dimension. We are witnessing a certain failure in the political definition of the individual. The person, disillusioned with history, strives for the non-historical. They reject defining themselves as a social "role" and dream of being an unqualified person from a civil perspective. (...) In this light, eroticism emerges as a grand retort, not only as a response to leisure versus work but also as a counter to the private sphere versus the public one in general.

III. Finally, on a deeper level, eroticism expresses a more profound disillusionment – the **disillusionment with "meaning"**. There exists a covert connection between eroticism and absurdity. When nothing seems to have meaning, fleeting pleasure and its fireworks become all that remains. This trait leads us to a third phenomenon, which further illuminates the nature of eroticism. If errant sexuality is simultaneously **insignificant** and **urgent** as a form of retribution, it also becomes **intriguing**. Thus, eroticism not only serves as retribution or compensation against work, politics, and language but also embodies the futility of sexuality itself. This is where the quest for a mythical or legendary sexuality originates. This quest liberates a fundamental potentiality of human sexuality previously alluded to: that is, to separate procreative pleasure from the procreative function, but not only from this (as tenderness-love does the same), but also from tenderness itself. One sees that humanity appears in a struggle against the psychological impoverishment of pleasure itself, which is no longer susceptible to perfection within its biological brutality. Eroticism will be constructed within the interval of the imaginary, the mythical, hedonistic disintegration, and emotional finitude. This is why its approach has a quasi-desperate character: a life devoted to sexuality's quantitative eroticism – sophisticated eroticism, ever-watchful for variations – constructs its imaginary eroticism within the play between "letting see"/"hiding" or "rejecting"/"giving". This voyeuristic intellectual eroticism refers to itself as a third party in every erotic role. Through each such pathway, a sexual legend or myth is constructed, reflected in various heroes of

sexuality; this slides from one form to another, from mingling and cohabitation to desolate, defeated, sorrowful loneliness. **Eroticism's intense despair** – reminiscent of the Greek legend of the leaky barrel – **lies in its failure to compensate or make up for the loss of meaning and value by amassing some form of tenderness *substitutes* (Ersatz, surrogates).**

The mystery of sexuality

Ricoeur does not wish to conclude his reflections on a pessimistic note but instead aims to juxtapose and integrate the two aspects of his analysis. Along the two paths of sexuality—tenderness and eroticism—what becomes evident is that sexuality, fundamentally, proves impenetrable to reflection and remains inaccessible to human dominance. Perhaps it is this opacity that accounts for its elusiveness, as it does not fully encompass either the ethics of tenderness or the non-ethics of eroticism. It is *represented only symbolically*, through what remains mythical within us.

Ultimately, when two beings embrace each other, they are unaware of what they are doing, what they want, what they are seeking, or what they will find. What does this desire mean, which drives one towards the other? Is it the desire for pleasure? Yes, of course. But this is a superficial answer, as we also sense that pleasure alone does not hold meaning in itself; it is figurative, symbolic. But what does it symbolize? The vivid and obscure consciousness we possess suggests that sex participates in a network of virtualities, whose cosmic harmonies have faded into oblivion but have not been erased; that life is something more than mere existence. Ricoeur seeks to convey that life is more than the battle against death or the delay of fatal destiny; **that life is unique, universal, whole in everyone, and the joy of sexuality grants access to this mystery**. The truth of romanticism, as of sexuality, lies in the fact that one does not become an ethical or legal person merely through formal designation but by immersing oneself once again in the waters of Life. Yet this living, vivid consciousness is also obscure because we are acutely aware that the universe in which sexual pleasure participates has collapsed within us; that sexuality is the wreckage of a sunken Atlantis. Hence its mystery and secrecy. This displaced universe is no longer accessible to naïveté but rather to the scholarly *exegesis* of ancient myths; it is not revived except through *hermeneutics* or the interpretative techniques of today's otherwise silent texts. A new void separates the remains of meaning restored by the language of this hermeneutics from the other fragment of meaning that sexuality inherently uncovers without a single language.

Let us proceed: **the enigma of sexuality lies in the fact that it cannot be reduced to the trilogy that defines humanity: language-tool-institution**.

i) On the oone hand, indeed, the human being is linked to a pre-linguistic existence; even when *expressing* itself, the expression, which it assumes, is infra-para-supra-linguistic – beneath, beyond, or above language. It mobilizes a language but transcends it, embraces this language, sublimates it (turning it into an airy form), deceives it, scatters it into murmurs and appeals for help, invalidates it, neutralizes it as a mediator; it is Eros, not Logos. Therefore, its complete restitution within the element of Logos remains radically impossible.

ii) On the other hand, Eros pertains to the pre-technological existence of humanity; even when a person assumes responsibility and integrates into a bodily technique (whether it is merely the art of sexual compatibility or more precisely the technique of preventing reproduction), sexuality remains **hyper-instrumental or beyond the instrumental**. Its tools must disappear from view; sexuality remains fundamentally alien to the "intention-tool-object" relationship. It retains a remnant of non-instrumental immediacy; the body-body relationship, or better, the "person-flesh/flesh-person" interaction, remains essentially non-technical. As soon as attention is fixed or concentrated on the technique of compatibility or the technique of sterility/infertility, its enchantment dissipates.

iii) Finally, Eros, regardless of any balance it might achieve within marriage, is **not institutional**. It is an offense to reduce it merely to a contract or spousal duty; its natural bond can be analyzed in terms of rights and obligations; its law, which is no longer a law, is the reciprocity of giving. Thus, it is "intra-juridical, para-juridical, supra-juridical" – within the law, very much against the law, above the law. Consequently, it fundamentally threatens the institution, including marriage, with its characteristic demonism. Love, as it has been refined within the frameworks of our culture, advances between two chasms: that of wandering, errant desire and that of hypocritical pleasure, which is caused by its permanence – the rigorous, moral caricature of fidelity.

A meeting – experiencing fidelity – between the impatient Eros and the institution, which humans cannot maintain without sacrifices, remains happy and rare.

Comparing Philosophies of Love: Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Luc Marion, and Emmanuel Levinas

In addition to Ricoeur, Jean-Luc Marion also has important things to say about love and eroticism (See his following works: *The Erotic Phenomenon, Prolegomena to Charity, Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness).* While both philosophers engage deeply with the phenomenology of human relationships, they approach the topic from very different perspectives. Marion's view of love is rooted in a complex interplay of gift and loss, where love is understood as a movement toward the other that fundamentally transforms both the lover and the beloved. Unlike Ricoeur, who treats love as a phenomenon embedded within structures of meaning and reciprocity, Marion emphasizes a radical form of love that is both an act of self-giving and a loss of control over one's own identity. This is particularly evident in his conception of erotic love, which he approaches through what he terms the "erotic reduction"—a process that removes the self from the equation in favor of an other-centered love that never seeks to possess, but rather continuously gives.

In Marion's work titled "The Erotic Phenomenon. Six Meditations," he problematizes the concept of love, continuing the tradition of Plato, Ficino, and Spinoza. Jean-Luc Marion argues that love matters for who we are more than anything-more than cognition and more than being itself (See *Cassandra Falke. (99+) The Phenomenology of Love and Reading*) Marion creates a univocal concept of love that is free from all oppositions. With this concept, she outlines a new form of rationality: erotic rationality. This concept must serve as the foundation for the most diverse erotic phenomena, which is why its elaboration is exceptionally rich. One important aspect is the question of the certainty and assurance of love, or foundation of love, according to György Czétány (2014) which is also given considerable emphasis in the work and can, in a certain sense, be regarded as the book's true central issue. In the first meditation, the question is examined of what can provide the assurance that the personal self can overcome the feeling of futility and that life can become meaningful. All of this cannot be sustained by the certainty of the self-directed ego. Self-love also focuses on the certainty of the ego's existence. The second meditation examines the aporia arising from self-love.

The starting question of the first meditation is what can provide the security for the personal self to overcome its sense of futility and for life to become meaningful. The certainty of the self-directed ego cannot provide this. Self-love is also directed at the certainty of the ego's existence. The second meditation deals in detail with the aporia arising from self-love: since the ego, which is directed toward itself and certain of its own existence, is unable to make itself lovable either to itself

or others, its self-love turns into self-hatred and hatred of others. Therefore, this dubious egological certainty must be abandoned in favor of a security that simultaneously overcomes the feeling of futility. Marion finds this in the 'erotic reduction,' through which the personal self becomes a lover and finds security in itself as a lover who approaches the beloved being as a non-possessed, transcendent other. Marion presents this process in the third meditation.

Love, which is not subordinated to the interests of my existence, can only be realized if I do not wait for eros to strike me from outside, but rather if I love first. It is about an event that originates from me, during which 'I am ready to lose everything I give, indeed, I am ready to risk my own existence in this gesture without regard for any gain or for any return proportional to my investment or my possession (ousia, foundation, goods).' It is precisely this loss, the renunciation of my gift, that guarantees that the event originates from me and that it is not tied to the certainty of my existence. This certainty refers only to the act of love and the gift; it is realized not in the certainty of reason, but in the certainty of feeling. Since reason is concerned with the certainty of the ego's existence, it makes love dependent on reciprocity as its sufficient foundation. However, radicalized erotic reduction loves without hope for reciprocation, that is, without a sufficient foundation in this sense. What alone grounds this love is nothing other than itself: love is its own sufficient foundation or reason (ratio sui).

To love first, to love without being loved: this spontaneous event is directed at a still undefined other. The other, as a beloved being, only becomes phenomenal in the erotic reduction created by the lover. This means that the other becomes visible as an irreplaceable, singular beloved being because the lover pulls them out of the uniformity of objects determined by the system of exchange values. The lover is 'the one who first notices the other, the singular, the irreplaceably unique, who is more than just an object.' But this also implies that the lover must again and again repeat the initial leap, the radicalization of erotic reduction, which can be suspended at any moment, losing the beloved being, who thus becomes one among mere objects. The lover must continually expose themselves to the risk of unreciprocated love. The lover can do this because they possess the coming possibility of becoming otherwise: this constitutes their self. Herein lies the originality of Marion's concept of eros: contrary to the Platonic or Freudian eros, which is directed toward a previous state, a past origin, for Marion, eros is the desire for a coming event.

However, if I love by projecting onto a future possibility without being loved in return in the present, this means that I do not make my present gift dependent on reciprocity. I can love first only to the extent that I can accept the possibility that the other may not reciprocate. This carries with it the risk of my own emptying, for the interest in the certainty of my existence cannot limit or hinder my love. 'To love

without being loved in return—this is the definition of love beyond being or without being.' Therefore, love is realized when I expose myself to the danger of losing myself.

The only proof of love is in giving without holding back or desiring gain, in giving that does not calculate, does not fear loss, and does not even shrink from the loss of itself. This assurance is greater the greater the loss in terms of one's own being. The more one loses one's own being in the act of giving, the more one gains oneself as 'love without being.' 'The more one loses (gives, disperses, that is, loves), the more one gains (because one still loves).

The condition of love, with respect to being, lies in a threefold passivity: in vulnerability, approach, and risk. The erotic reduction is not governed by the principle of exchange, equality, and reciprocity but by the principle of gift and loss.

In this way, the lover can meet the other not as a usable object, but as transcendence. The other's transcendence means that the other 'comes when they please, when they decide to manifest from the distance of another world.' The arrival of the other is contingent; this is where the other's freedom lies. In the erotic reduction, I cannot possess the other. The only thing I have is the hope that someone will love me and thus save me from the futility that threatens my existence. This hope, since it is directed toward an unknown future, is without an object. Love is 'a perception that is intentionally directed toward another, but without being directed at any specific other. In short, it is an intentional perception without an intentional object, a perceptual fulfillment without a concept to be fulfilled.' At the same time, the meaning attached to it must come from outside. This meaning is the oath given by the other, the oath of 'Here I am!' The oath is only realized when it comes from a face, arriving as an unexpected event, disrupting my expectations—while I, too, take the same oath. The meaning is given by the other's counter-intentionality. The indeterminate other that I hoped for receives its determination and uniqueness, but not from me, rather from the arrival of the other themselves. However, even in their self-giving, the other can withdraw at any time; the lover is never free from the threat of unreciprocated love. The erotic reduction can be interrupted at any moment, by either party, as both must continually start again, as if they were loving for the first time. 'To continue the same unique erotic reduction, we must always start again, without interruption. We love each other only on the condition that we remain in a continuous new beginning, a quasi-continuous creation, without an endpoint or repose.' The fourth and fifth meditations problematize this process of deepening, interruption, and restarting the erotic reduction. Instead of going further into these details, however, let us move ahead and ask whether the radicalization of the erotic reduction can truly be considered a process that grounds itself. Or put differently: Is Marion's concept of love capable of becoming its own sufficient foundation?

The lover must love first, before anyone else loves them, and this love must be its own foundation, its own ratio. However, since the other is transcendent, coming from outside and thus independent of me, there remains the possibility that the other may never arrive, meaning that the lover may indeed not be loved by anyone. The intentional orientation remains without meaning. But even if the other does come and makes me a lover by becoming a lover themselves, does this guarantee that I am loved? The radicalization of the erotic reduction—that I love first—can only provide the security that I love, but not the security that the other loves me as well. Thus, it remains questionable to what extent the erotic reduction can ensure that the lover can free themselves from the sense of futility and find meaning in life. It seems that the meaningfulness of the lover's life is entirely exposed to the contingency of the transcendent other. But how long can love without the security of reciprocation establish itself, give itself meaning, and remain ratio sui? Is this not too heavy a burden? Don't we encounter here a similar problem to the one Marion diagnoses with the cogito: the problem of the impossibility of living out of oneself? Will not love without the certainty of reciprocation eventually turn into hatred and self-hatred, losing its love along with its life? It seems that solid love still needs a firmer love that precedes and grounds it. Marion's thoughts in the final two paragraphs of the work also point in this direction. Here, Marion writes that the lover's advance cannot simply be an act that grounds itself; this advance can only happen because the other is already waiting for them and calling them. The erotic reduction must always be preceded by another lover. The lover does not ground themselves; their becoming a lover is based on the call of a lover who loves them. This call is the condition that enables me to enter the erotic reduction, to love first. However, it remains unclear how I can be certain that the other loves me. The examples that Marion mentions here—the love of procreating parents, the love of a conversation partner, a future lover—do not necessarily lead to the collapse of this uncertainty." "So, is the final conclusion that love cannot have a solid foundation? Yet, in the very last pages, a possibility does appear, namely God as the best lover, God who is love. However, in the context currently being discussed, the question is whether God can be called the guarantor or foundation of love. At the end of Marion's book, he himself reveals the common features of his concept of *eros* and Christ's *agape*. Among these, he mentions that in both cases, the lover asks for love and also loves first. For the believing Christian, divine grace is this first love, the absolutely first virtual *agape*, preceding all actual forms of *agape* as the calling Word. For the believer in the Word, this faith gives support for realizing the life of Christ's love. Perhaps in this sense, God does not perform a separate act of love in His transcendent perfection, as Marion hints in the final lines, but rather forms the

invisible level of the love that becomes visible in every act of love following Christ. 'For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And He has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

From all this, it seems that only faith can provide a solid foundation for love. But might it not also be that reason itself is capable of doing this, despite everything Marion says about reason and the principle of insufficient grounding? Is not reason capable of achieving this through intellectual love of God? In his book, Marion also addresses Spinoza's *Ethics*. In his critique, he focuses on the proposition of *conatus in sua esse perseverandi* (the striving to preserve one's being) and, on this basis, qualifies Spinoza as a philosopher of self-love. According to Marion, in Spinoza, the fundamental role of self-love remains unchanged even when one has adequate ideas instead of inadequate ones. Yet, in the *Ethics*, it is precisely the adequate ideas that lead to the transcendence of self-love and love based on inadequate ideas of passions, leading to the recognition that the *conatus* at work within me is an expression of the power of acting that is common to all beings, the immanent cause of all existence, and which illuminates every being, including myself, as a modified expression of divine substance. This knowledge—knowledge of the third kind—leads to a love that is indestructible, because—unlike passionate love—it has no opposite that could destroy it. This indestructible love is intellectual love of God.

We can say that while reciprocity and equality are very important in Ricoeur's case, in Marion's, the erotic reduction is not determined by the principle of exchange, equality, and reciprocity, but rather by the principle of giving and loss.

For Marion, erotic love is characterized by its openness to the unknown and the possibility of loss. It is not a relationship based on exchange, as Ricoeur might conceptualize it, where partners engage in a reciprocal understanding of one another, but rather a radical giving that exposes the lover to the risk of non-reciprocation. Marion's philosophy situates erotic love as a form of self-transcendence, where the lover is not seeking the union of two selves, but rather the perpetual act of giving oneself to the other. This contrasts with Ricoeur's more balanced, reciprocal view, where love involves a movement between self and other that allows for the mutual recognition of each person's unique subjectivity. Marion's emphasis on the erotic reduction as a form of perpetual giving resonates with his theological commitments, where love is also a constant motion towards the divine, without the expectation of complete fulfillment. For Marion, erotic love is not merely an emotional bond or a physical attraction, but a philosophical and spiritual act that speaks to the depths of human existence, where the lover is both transformed and defined by the act of loving.

In contrast, Emmanuel Levinas (Levinas 1969, 1985) offers a profoundly ethical approach to love, grounded in his philosophy of responsibility and the face-to-face encounter. Like Marion, Levinas is concerned with the selflessness of love, but for Levinas, love is always embedded within the ethical imperative of responding to the needs of the other. Love, for Levinas, is not an abstract ideal or a romantic fantasy; it is a responsibility that arises from the encounter with the face of the other. This ethical responsibility calls the self to place the needs of the other above their own, and it is within this framework that Levinas explores various forms of love, including maternal, erotic, and paternal love. Unlike Marion, who sees erotic love as a movement towards union, Levinas insists on the irreducible separation between the self and the other. Erotic love, in Levinas's view, must preserve this distance in order to maintain the freedom and responsibility of the self. This ethical dimension of love challenges any understanding of eros as fusion or completion, which is more typical in romantic or traditional interpretations of love. Levinas famously states, "Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relationship with Being, in general, remains under the obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitable to another power, to imperial domination and tyranny" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46-47).

Levinas's approach to eroticism also involves a critique of Western philosophies of subjectivity, which he believes have often subordinated the relationship to the other in favor of a more abstract, impersonal connection to Being. Drawing on his critique of Heidegger, Levinas argues that any philosophical system that overlooks the importance of the other's face risks becoming an ontology of totality, where the other is absorbed into the self, leading to forms of domination and oppression. Love, in this context, is not a reconciliation of differences but an acknowledgment of them, a recognition that the other can never be fully known or integrated into the self. For Levinas, the erotic encounter is not one of fusion but of radical separation, where the lover remains distinct from the beloved, even in the intimacy of love. This concept of erotic love, which emphasizes the need to honor the other's alterity, places Levinas at odds with both Marion's view of union and with Ricoeur's more integrated vision of mutual recognition.

Comparing these three thinkers, we can see that while there is overlap in their understanding of love as a transformative, selfless act, their views diverge significantly in their treatment of eroticism and sexuality. Ricoeur's approach to love focuses on the dialectic of self and other, with love serving as the arena for a balanced exchange that allows each partner to maintain their autonomy while also engaging in a reciprocal relationship. His conception of eroticism acknowledges the complexities of desire, passion, and sexual intimacy, but it remains rooted in the phenomenology

of language and interpretation. For Ricoeur, love is not just a feeling or a simple emotional bond, but a complex, interpretive act where individuals come to understand themselves and each other through their engagement in love.

Marion, on the other hand, reinterprets eroticism through the lens of the *erotic reduction*, which he presents as a movement that transcends the self in a way that risks both the lover's identity and autonomy. His vision of love, particularly erotic love, is one of continuous self-giving, where the lover becomes defined not by their ownership of the other but by their exposure to the loss that comes with giving oneself without the guarantee of reciprocation. Marion's eroticism is teleological, but it is a teleology that never fully reaches a state of completion. The lover gives, and in giving, they lose, only to begin the act of giving again. This endless movement of love towards the other, without expectation of return, makes Marion's philosophy distinctly different from Ricoeur's and Levinas's views, both of which retain a more reciprocal or responsibility-based approach to love.

Levinas's contribution to the discourse on love is perhaps the most radical in its ethical commitment. He rejects any notion of eroticism that seeks fusion or completion, and instead, insists that the ethical call of the other is a perpetual responsibility. Erotic love, in Levinas's framework, is not a romantic pursuit of union, but a call to ethical action that arises in the face of the other. His philosophy challenges traditional understandings of desire and eroticism, emphasizing that true love does not seek to possess or to complete the self, but to recognize the irreducible otherness of the beloved. For Levinas, the erotic encounter is always marked by a sense of distance and separation, which allows the lover to maintain their responsibility to the other while also recognizing the radical autonomy of the beloved.

While all three philosophers treat love as a profound, transformative experience, their views diverge in terms of the role of the other, the nature of erotic desire, and the ethical dimensions of love. Ricoeur's view of love emphasizes reciprocity and mutual recognition, where love is understood as a process of interpretation and understanding between partners. Marion's view, by contrast, emphasizes the endless self-giving of love, which exposes the lover to the risk of non-reciprocation and loss. Levinas, meanwhile, grounds love in an ethical responsibility to the other, where erotic love is not about fusion or fulfillment, but about a continual commitment to the other's needs. Each of these philosophers brings a unique perspective to the discourse on love, eroticism, and sexuality, and together, they offer a multifaceted understanding of the complex ways in which love shapes human existence.

In conclusion, while Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Luc Marion, and Emmanuel Levinas all engage with love, eroticism, and sexuality from different philosophical vantage points, their reflections collectively enrich the conversation about the role of love

in human experience. Ricoeur's emphasis on reciprocity and interpretation, Marion's focus on radical self-giving and perpetual loss, and Levinas's insistence on the ethical responsibility to the other each provide important insights into how love, as a human phenomenon, shapes both individual subjectivity and our relationships with others.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cirelli, Blaise. "Levinas and Marion: A Comparison on Eros." *Academia.edu*. Accessed November 12, 2024.

Czétány, György. "A szeretet biztonsága." *Különbség* Vol. XIV, no. 1 (2014): 231-236.

Falke, Cassandra. "Phenomenology of Love and Reading." *Academia.edu*. Accessed November 12, 2024.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.

Marion, Jean-Luc. *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Marion, Jean-Luc. *The Erotic Phenomenon*. Translated by Stephen E. Lewis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Marion, Jean-Luc. *Prolegomena to Charity*. Translated by Stephen E. Lewis. New York: Fordham University Press, 2002.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Histoire et vérité* / *History and Truth*. 3rd ed. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975. 198-209.

Tang, Joseph. *Before or Outside the Text: A Comparative Study on Jean-Luc Marion and Paul Ricoeur's Idea of Revelation*. Toronto, ON: 2010.