

## **The Uniqueness of the Beloved: Reflections upon Levinas' View**

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At the basis of Levinas' important view of love is his emphasis on the uniqueness of the beloved. While I agree that uniqueness plays an important role in love, it is not the only significant factor; the qualities of the beloved are just as important. Certainly, Levinas' view states an ideal worth cherishing, but it fails to adequately describe the psychological nature of love.

In Levinas' view, love and uniqueness are closely connected: love is "the condition of the very possibility of uniqueness"; he sees the beloved as the "one and only" (1988: 168). This uniqueness in love arises from having been chosen: Uniqueness stems from the choice to become responsible for the other—a choice that is "inescapable and nontransferable" (1998: 202). Levinas based his notion of love on the unique origin of the relationship, rather than on any of the lovers' attributes. He says that "the responsibility for the other is the originary place of identification" (2001: 110). He further argues that "The other is not other because he would have other attributes, or would have been born elsewhere or at another moment, or because he would be of a different race. The other is other because of me: unique and in some manner different than the individual belonging to a genus. It is not difference which makes alterity: alterity makes difference." (2001: 106). Since this uniqueness is based upon an arbitrary origin, it can seem irrational: "The recognition of the unique, the recognition of the other, the priority of the other is, in a certain sense, unreasonable." (2001: 111) The considerable weight of the beloved's uniqueness significantly reduces the weight of the beloved's reciprocity and hence characteristics. Indeed, since Levinas' view considers the other to constitute the center and the ultimate preoccupation of a person's meaningful world, "the relationship with the other is not symmetrical... at the outset I hardly care what the other is with respect to me, that is his own business; for me, he is above all the one I am responsible for." Love "is originally without reciprocity, which would risk compromising its gratuitousness or grace or unconditional charity" (1998: 105, 228–229).

There is no doubt that uniqueness plays a role in emotions in general and love in particular, but the aspect of uniqueness cannot fully explain the phenomenon of love.

In analyzing the emotional impact of an event, we may refer to two basic elements: the nature of the event and its relevance to the self. The first element refers to the quality of the event's characteristics and can often be quantified and compared to other such characteristics in different events. The analysis of the second element is more complex as the relevance to the self consists of different factors, some of which move in different directions. Uniqueness is a major factor in determining the relevance to the self; another such related factor is that of stability and change.

The uniqueness of the emotional object is expressed in the partial nature of emotions. Emotions are partial in two basic senses: they are focused on a *narrow* target as on one person or a very few people; and they express a *personal* and interested perspective. Emotions direct and color our attention by selecting what attracts and holds our attention; they make us preoccupied with some things and oblivious to others. Emotions are not detached theoretical states; they address a

practical concern from a personal perspective. Not everyone and not everything is of emotional significance to us. The intensity of emotions is achieved by their focus upon one or very few objects. Emotions express our values and preferences; hence, they cannot be indiscriminate (Ben-Ze'ev, 2000: 35-40).

The uniqueness of the emotional object stems from the two senses of partiality: (a) the emotional object is the focus of the agent's attention, and (b) it is related to the agent in a very special manner. Such uniqueness does not refer in any way to the nature and qualities of the object; rather, it refers only to the external factor—from the point of view of the other—of her relationship to the agent. Uniqueness is surely not enough to generate all the emotions involved in love; reference to the object's qualities and attitudes is also needed. We would certainly not say that we are romantically in love with someone because she is uniquely ugly; in fact, we are unlikely to say that we love someone only because she is uniquely beautiful. Romantic love involves a positive evaluation of the beloved's various qualities. If we based love merely on uniqueness we would be ignoring the other's qualities and attitudes.

Uniqueness, in the sense used by Levinas, is not concerned with qualities ("attributes") of the beloved, but rather with the origin of the relationship. In this view, the "sweetness" of the beloved has no connection whatsoever to the love relationship; the only aspect that matters here is her unique connection to the lover. If this is indeed the case, then changes in the environment or in the behavior of the beloved should have no impact upon the lover's adoration. I would argue that whereas Levinas' view is in some sense correct concerning parental love, it is mistaken concerning romantic love.

In parental love, the relationship to the self is most crucial: the child is part of the parents in the sense that they created her and she is psychologically close to them, as well as highly relevant to their well-being. The element of change is of hardly any relevance to this love. The fact that another child is more talented or more handsome than my son is of little significance to my love to him; it will not alter my profound attitude toward him. The uniqueness of our relationships with our children (which is a consequence of our being their parents, our shared history, our instinct to protect and nurture them, and our psychological closeness, among other factors) is in most cases sufficient to maintain our profound love to them.

The case of romantic love is more complex. Whereas the element of the sweetness of the beloved is very important in romantic love, the element of uniqueness—with reference, for example, to shared history—is of less significance. The fact that two people met at a certain point in time and found each other very attractive does not mean that they will be able to maintain this evaluation for ever. There is no unique, irreplaceable bond, such as pertains between parent and child. The abundant romantic alternatives available in modern society make this increasingly true.

Another consequence of basing love merely on uniqueness would be to eliminate the role of reciprocity in romantic love. This would conflict with the psychological nature of love. For both sexes, mutual attraction is the most highly valued characteristic in a potential mate (Buss, 1994: 44). People like, even need to hear that they are desired. The lover wants to be loved in return, to be kissed as well as to kiss. Levinas' denial of the necessity of reciprocity in love can only be accepted if it is taken to refer to the mechanical calculation of what each partner gives to the other. In such a calculation, it is indeed true that reciprocity does not play a significant part in love. When I do something for my love, I do not do it because I

expect to get it in return. I do it because I want to do it, in order to increase my beloved's well-being. This type of mechanical reciprocity has no place in genuine love. Although even in such love, we would find it hard to accept if only one partner gave the other birthday presents, remembered anniversaries, or offered cups of tea—while the other offered none of these symbolic acts of giving gifts. Here it is not the mechanical giving that matters as much as the symbolic act of gift giving or remembrance, acts that signify the other's significance. Genuine romantic love does involve a profound reciprocity in which each person seeks the happiness and well-being of the other. It should be noted that such reciprocity is not necessary in parental love. A mother can love her son even if at this point in his life the son is extremely ungrateful.

Levinas' view of love can be described as an other-validated model of relationships. This view stems from a highly moral position in which the other has an absolute precedence over the self. Levinas' view is quite problematic even in the moral realm, as it is not easy to accept and even harder to apply the requirement that I should sacrifice my life for the other. The difficulties of this view are considerably greater in the emotional realm, where the self occupies a central place. This model can also pose a danger at the psychological level of everyday behavior where people, particularly men, might interpret this model as permission not to invest in maintaining their relationships or in helping their spouses to flourish (Ben-Ze'ev & Goussinsky, 2008).

The encounter with the other is central to emotions, as well as to ethics. Levinas bases his notion of our relationship to the other on the other's uniqueness to the self. As such uniqueness stems from the external factor that the other is associated to me, it does not take account of the other's qualities. According to this view, the other's reciprocity of my love has no impact on my love for her. I have argued, however, that both the qualities of the other, as well as her relationship to me, are important in emotional attitudes. In romantic love, both the sweetness of the relationship as well as the unique nature of the relationship to me are of great importance. Levinas' view of the role of the other in love may remain as an important ideal in our times where the significance of the other, and in particular the other's uniqueness, are so easily forgotten. However, it seems to be incomplete as a psychological description of what love is.

### References

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