THE PATHOLOGY OF LOVE AS ATTACHMENT TO THE NARCISSISTIC EGO: How to Read It How to Cure It

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“Love is that magistery that resolves all dualities, all contradictions, and all the suffering of the world”

Raphael

The integral context

According to Jung, the need to assert oneself, or will to power, and the need of love, or lust, is the mainsprings of the ego’s desires: thus, two are the causes of psychic catastrophes, love disappointments and the failure of one’s claims of self-assertion. These mental catastrophes are found not only in overt pathologic conditions with clinical manifestations, but also in personalities held to be normal, in the course of an ordinary and apparently healthy existence. And it is not the disappointment of one’s will of power or need of love as such to be the causes of the mental trouble, but rather what is their frequent outcome, that is, the denial of frustration and the flight from the feeling of being worthless and not loved.
These narcissistic reactions of denial are the very basis of the actual pathology of love, which identifies with compensatory and destructive behaviours (such as having recourse to alcohol or drugs, wild sex, or an excessive or defective food intake with related nutritional troubles). The destructiveness that characterises the pathology of love does not only represent an intrapersonal behaviour, but also accompanies relational troubles that project into the outer world the devaluation and aggressiveness that the subject experiences within him/herself.

An outlook to the dynamics of destructiveness in the individual and social condition makes us understand the importance of dealing with the pathology of love, not only in the specific context of psychotherapy but for the very life of humanity on the planet, which shows a widening radical crisis of love, and with it, of the wisdom that can understand and create.

In this writing, the theme of the nature and healing of the pathology of love is dealt with in the context of the integral approach proposed by Ken Wilber, the theoretical leader of transpersonal psychology. The integral approach is characterised by the association of the knowledge of the meditative tradition with that of modern psychology, and by the emphasis on the spirituality that transforms and is applied to life.

The synthesis between ancient wisdom and psychology proposes a quantum revolution in the theories of mental health and development, widening the possibilities for the diagnosis and healing of mental suffering in all aspects and contents.
In this respect, as noted by the leading transpersonal psychiatrist Roger Walsh, when future historians lean back, they will find that the evolution of psychology in our time is not really due to new discoveries, but rather to the rediscovery of ancient wisdom.

According to ancient wisdom, the human being is composed of a bodily, a mental, and a spiritual dimension.

The ego is the center of the conscious personality, identified with the body and ordinary mental processes, and is as such impermanent, illusory, and in constant struggle for the problems of existence.

The Self is its spiritual source, and is defined as a permanent, organising center that lies behind the ego and mental phenomena. The Self cannot be influenced by the latter, whereas its influence can profoundly modify the psychophysical conditions. With an analogy, it can be said that as the sun nourishes the earth, likewise the Self nourishes the ego, provided the latter opens up to its influence and becomes its container.

Related to universal life and the archetypes of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, the Self has as its essence, Love—understood as unconditioned inclusiveness and creative principle that offers itself to life with no return.
Graph 1. A pictorial representation showing the interrelations of body, mind, soul, and the Self
Personal love and the transpersonal Love

The Masters who have realised the Self are the most profound knowers of Love and the greatest therapists of the pathology of love: their writings are manuals of healing. We will just refer to one for antiquity, Plato, and one for modern times, Raphael.

According to Plato, the soul possesses Love as an a priori essence, bringing along Truth and Intelligence, but these qualities-forces are shrouded in a cloud of non-knowledge, imprisoned by ignorance. The Platonic myth of the cavern prisoner represents the chaining of the ego to ignorance: the prisoner does not live in the reality, but among shadows that reflect reality, set apart from reality and condemned to an obscure immobility.

The cavern symbolises the obscurity of the egocentric consciousness, identified with the sensorial aspects of life and set apart from the spiritual ones: such is the state of the ordinary ego and its illusoriness.

According to Plato, the liberation from the cavern is the task of Eros, the helmsman who ferries the Soul from sensible existence to the intelligible world, from the contingent to the transcendent, from the individual to the universal.

Eros is the light of unity and completeness, driving the ego to search for its Source. Eros in action is burning will of liberation, a Fire of vocation and redemption.

In the Platonic vision, Love is born from the Idea of Goodness. The identification of Love with the Idea of Goodness expresses itself in the Will to Goodness, which operates through an ordering intelligence, the nous.
In Plato’s words, the ordering intelligence expresses itself in accordance with the universal and manifesting its archetypes, and it leads to justice in interpersonal relations and the relation to life.

For this to happen, for universal Love to manifest itself, one must be free from conditioning factors, fears, needs, and not spend time unwisely – in other words, one must be free from the burden of egoism. This is why the love relation requires the so-called *metànoia*, or ascesis, consisting in the purification of the mind from the factors which keep consciousness imprisoned into ignorance and egoism. Though words may differ, the concept of *metànoia* is intrinsic to all spiritual traditions, as is the concept of universal Consciousness.

In his book, *The Science of Love*, Raphael, a modern Master of the Perennial Philosophy and particularly the Vedanta tradition, refers to universal love as a state beyond the sensible and the bodily dimension, a heritage of all humanity and a gift of life. This inborn power is only attained by those who undertake a developmental path of deep meditation, which leads to transcend the ordinary ego.

In line with Plato, Raphael makes a distinction between transpersonal Love and personal craving, the former being of the Self, the latter of the ego.

The ego-centred personal craving stems from incompleteness: it is always searching for satisfaction and is never content.

Transpersonal Love is instead allocentric and oblative, and stems from a sentiment of totality that is peculiar of
the Self: it therefore has nothing to ask for, and irradiates Love freely as creative passion and light.

Transpersonal love is a unifying influx, which transfuses the grace of joy, and overflows and involves all that it touches upon: it is a driving force, which resolves all dualities, contradictions, and sufferings of the world, fostering joy and deep peace.

To be separated from this creative fire means to live in insignificance and deprivation: hence the need and the lack of love. Being defective and overburdened with need, the individual part of human totality looks outside for the sources of its completion: and it is this attempt to find love out of oneself that generates selfishness and eventually the very pathology of love.

The association of the pathology of love with the state of incompleteness of the ego is evident throughout the Vedic, and particularly the Yoga tradition.

Personal love – egocentric, incomplete, burdened with needs and expectations – is related to the expression of the first three chakras (manipura, svadhishthana, muladhara), which operate under the control of the separate ego and refer to the energies of the instinctual, emotional, and self-assertive components of the personality.

Transpersonal Love, oblative in nature and free from needs and expectations, operates through the higher chakras (anahata, vishuddha, ajna), associated to the energies of the intuitive intellect, or superconscious capacity of transcendent vision.
The elective seat of transpersonal Love is *anahata*, the so-called heart-chakra, corresponding to the seat of the soul.

The task of a healthy and complete growth of consciousness and identity is the opening of the higher chakras, whereby energy can flow from below to the above and find its ultimate synthesis in the *sahasrara* chakra.

The realisation or opening of this chakra, which collects the entire flow of the individuality, corresponds to the Enlightenment or Liberation from all the suffering caused by ignorance.
Graph 2. Diagram of the chakras
The quality and law of transpersonal Love

Precisely because it is associated to the intuitive intellect and is an expression of love-wisdom, love has qualities that are governed and expressed by the heart and centred on comprehension, that is, the association of compassion for the other and the capacity to understand his/her inner nature.

Associated to comprehension, are forgiveness, generosity, care, patience, and tolerance.

The nature of the transpersonal qualities of love is not solely addressed to individual beings but to life in its entirety, and has as its apotheosis the Love for God, or Love for the Absolute.

Raphael describes Love as an ontological source (p. 89). As expression of the primordial energy of the universe, it represents the fundament of the cohesion of cosmos, and as the initiator of life it operates through universal laws.

- **The law of directional will** – gives the right direction to vital development: it is the tension for the unity of purpose.
- **The law of attraction** – creates the magnetic interrelation among the cosmic elements.
- **The law of cohesion** – brings the multiplicity of life to unity. This law indicates the implicit tendency to overcome oppositions and integrate them into one and the same unity, the symbol of which is the *coincidentia oppositorum*.
- **The law of the light radiation** – represents the original “fiat lux” which gave light and heat to everything.

As a driving force that makes things grow toward unity and wholeness, transpersonal Love is to be sought not
only as the end of a healthy and integral development, but as an element to evoke in any process of healing from mental suffering, in which the pathology of love expresses itself.

The unitive qualities of transpersonal Love should be fostered in all those conditions in which suffering is the sign of separation and conflict, and whenever the aim is to bring to peace and harmony that which is distant and diverse.

**Phenomenology of the pathology of love**

In the context of the integral vision of the human person and love, which implies a twofold level, personal-narcissistic and transpersonal-spiritual, the thesis of this presentation is that all mental suffering is a sign of the pathology of love, a manifestation of the separation of the ego from the Self.

As a whole, the pathology of love accompanies the more overt forms of suffering with clinical symptoms as well as that more concealed and confounded form that expresses itself in unawareness, and in those attitudes of criticism, indifference, lack of compassion, shortly in the egotism that is the essence of the narcissistic traits of the personality considered as healthy and normal.

From a phenomenological point of view, the pathology of love consists in being indifferent to that which is good, and in choosing instead, unaware, that which is bad. It expresses itself through an aggressive use, either overt or masked, of feelings, thought and will, and is associated to fear, insecurity, mistrust and loneliness.
Its more serious forms express themselves in hate. Hate toward the inside, which can reach to the point of self-destructiveness and suicide; and hate toward the outside, which is the root of manipulation and exploitation, injustice and violence unto nature and the weak.

Because the pathology of love is not only a symptom of the unawareness of the ordinary ego, but also translates into splitting and hostile social behaviours, its study and treatment does not only belong to psychotherapy but is also relevant for the developmental and educational therapies at the social level.

How does the pathology of love act, and what does it cause in the life of personality and in interpersonal behaviours? The characteristic of the pathology of love is the state of dependence: the ego’s need of love cannot be gratified without the intervention of others, who thus become objects of desire and must be conquered and possessed.

In the state of dependence from the others, the need of love combines with the need of acceptance and comes to represent an interface. In the experience of the narcissistic ego, being accepted is the condition to be loved: this deprives of freedom, inhibits autonomy, and restrains those choices that may not meet the others’ approval.

The state of dependence makes the ego a satellite of the other, but also generates manipulative behaviours meant to conquer the object of love. The behaviour of the ego in search of love easily becomes insincere and unauthentic, fostering the development of masks meant to
please by hiding one’s limitations and defects for fear of being criticised.

Associated as it is to dependence and fear, the need of love engenders jealousy, which fills life with distress and deprives it of ethical value.

In the state of dependence, the repression of one’s own potentialities and authenticity is also implicitly an attempt on the potentialities of the person on which one depends.

Dependence is as such accompanied by hostility and competitiveness; in fact, it is impossible to love that on which one depends, nor to accept his or her growth and freedom, since this is an attempt on one’s own security.

**The role of narcissism in the pathology of love**

In the distress of the pathology of love, a crucial role is played by narcissism. In this context we are not referring to the pathologic narcissism described in psychoanalysis as a borderline condition, but to the ordinary narcissism which characterises what Maslow called the “psychopathology of normality”, defined as a collective infirmity, that just because it is so common, we take to be health.

The characteristic of this condition is the natural focus on having rather than on being, on the contingent rather than the transcendent. This brings to a superficial relation with life and the others, in which there is no awareness. The lack of knowledge of oneself is also a lack of sense of life, which brings to an extreme vulnerability and a terror of death, as well as to the constant search for substitutive
compensations that may drive away the idea of death and of one's frailty.

In the relation with others and life, the stigma of narcissism appears throughout the defence mechanisms of idealisation and devaluation: these are the two faces of the narcissistic need of love, which by itself implies the non-acceptance of one's limit and weakness. Idealisation is associated to ideas of omnipotence, which exclude difficulty and frustration.

In the idealising context, the relation of narcissistic love brings along the unrealistic pretence that the other be just as one needs – and because such pretence is regularly deceived, the consequence is anger and devaluation.

Ordinary narcissism is based on those poisons of the mind that have only recently become an object of study in psychology but have for long been the focus of the meditative tradition: ontological unawareness, pride, greed, and will to power, stemming precisely from the feeling of one's frailty. These aspects are all directed at the assertion of oneself and competition, passions that implicitly destroy any possibility of true love for the others.

These poisons of the mind are the primary roots of the pathology of love, and the nourishment of violence, indifference, and injustice: they nourish stress and psychosomatic disorders, and come along with more or less masked forms of conceitedness, arrogance, overbearingness.

In addition to the narcissism that is overtly pathologic and to the ordinary form described above, that is intrinsic to the ego and its elementary egoism, a more subtle form of narcissism exists, that more than to needs of self-
assertion and superiority, is related to the extreme individuation of the postmodern individual.

This is in a way a more mature form of narcissism, less marked by aggressiveness and dependence, but still a source of illusoriness. Postmodern narcissism can be understood as the attachment to one’s separate ego, to its personal importance and the ideas and assumptions of which it is made. This attachment drives not only toward the possession of objects, persons, success and prestige, but also toward that of one’s freedom and self-determination.

This more mature form of narcissism expresses itself in the passions of the ego seen as one’s intrinsic needs: the passions of the intellect, of creativity, of knowledge, and even the spiritual passion itself can be part of this type of narcissism, when such passions represent an attachment which conditions the existence of the separate personality in the world, hindering its capacity to love and unite with life.

Healing the pathology of love

The interpretation of psychoanalysis is that the wound of love originates from early traumatic experiences due to the void of parental mirroring and protection and the consequent lack of stable and reassuring relations.

In psychoanalysis, healing the pathology of love requires a revision of the interiorised object-relations and a transformation of internal objects into forms apt to better grant trust and care. A peculiar feature is the treatment of the dysfunctional superego which embodies the parental normative messages.
In this context, when facing the need and suffering of love, one must explore the defence mechanisms used by the ego to reduce as much as possible the suffering related to the state of lack: namely, the denial and removal of the need of love, for fear of suffering. This denial of the need of love and the related suffering determines an unaware flight into destructive compensations, which in turn close the heart to the inner sources of love.

Since the negated need of love becomes a fundamental element of the major pathology of love, psychotherapy needs to explore the realm of emotions, particularly through the psycho-corporeal approach, which facilitates emotional expression.

In the integral approach, these psychoanalytic and humanistic theories are combined and represent the basis of the work of healing, though not the whole of it. In fact, the theories of scientific psychology fail to focus on the deeper and most important cause of the pathology of love, that is to say, the separation of the egocentric consciousness from its spiritual source, the fracture between the ego and the Self.

To overcome the pathology of love, the methods of psychotherapy are not enough: spiritual practice is also needed, promoting access to the heart of the Self through the transformation of egoism. The combination of psychotherapy and meditation allows to progressively overcome the suffering of the narcissistic ego and the poisons of the mind hindering the opening of consciousness to the sources of love.

By spiritual practice are meant the inner disciplines of awareness and transformation taught in the texts of the meditative tradition. In this context, of use are the ethical
practices and the evocation of spiritual virtues, which represent true qualities of health capable to dissolve the poisons of the mind. The integral approach requires also a revision of one’s lifestyle and rhythm, and the purification of the energies of body, thought, speech, and behaviour. Of fundamental importance is to offer oneself in disinterested service, joining a project that goes beyond the ego and may do well for the others.

Overcoming the aims of psychotherapy, the integral approach progressively discloses the intuitive intellect and opens the heart, making Love flow and leading individual life closer to its very universal home. Such translogic intelligence prepares universal Consciousness.

Universal Consciousness manifests itself as a capacity of superconscious vision penetrating into the essence of reality beyond apparent forms.

Universal Consciousness reveals the impersonality of experience: it leads to recognise that human beings all have the same experiences and fall into the same universal continuum of alternation of pleasure and suffering, in the cycle of birth, growth, and death.

Universal Consciousness also shows interrelation as the tissue of unitary reality. Because the biologic, psychological, sociologic, cosmic, and spiritual phenomena are interconnected, to damage any of these is to damage the whole, to harm the others and nature is to harm oneself.

Universal Consciousness also shows the order that underlies the disorder, the basic harmony of life, and finally the indissoluble link between the Self and the transcendent Source wherefrom all derives.
Universal Consciousness discloses what is behind the unwanted events of one’s life, behind suffering and death, and the apparent fortunes or misfortunes of existence.

Universal Consciousness also reveals the sacred task of every Soul in its voyage of incarnation, which each of us has to do in life, and to do which we were born.

In conclusion, and in agreement with the Socratic predicament that evil and suffering stem from ignorance, we are convinced that the solution to the pathology of love lies in the development of the non-ego-centred awareness, which is a goal of the knowledge of oneself.

Beyond the clinical overcoming of the pathology of love, this path of knowledge and development is:

For those who are not happy with the quality of their life and perceive a gap that must be filled;

For those who feel the need to understand, to be awakened, to get into the essence of themselves and the meaning of their life;

For those who wish to discover their inner treasure and express it in life; and finally,

For those who want to take part in the evolution of the universe with a developmental task.

A transpersonally oriented American psychologist, J. Jampolsky, writes that the only lesson to teach is love, because love is what we really are.

To this I would add that, if love is what we really are, its release and blooming require us to cease being that which we are not, and dare with courage undertake the
golden path of the knowledge of ourselves, which implies transcending the ego with which we are biographically identified and which separates us from the Self. This path allows us not only to develop our potentialities and free ourselves from a useless and self-generated suffering, but also to repossess the dignity of our intrinsic divine nature, recognising it as a manifestation of the divinity of life and a witness to its Beauty.

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