

“This Worldly Religion of the Heart”: The Relevance of Hegel’s Concept of True Love for Today’s Social Theory and Philosophy of Religion

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ABSTRACT • Seeking to elucidate the idea of “true love” that we have known all along, albeit not in a clearly spelled out form, Hegel employs the core notion of his philosophy: “Spirit [Geist]”, defined as a dialectical process. *Part I* of the paper highlights the reciprocal character of his conception: Hegel portrays “true love” as a mutual involvement with “this person as a whole” that cherishes and supports “this person’s singularity”. *Part II* explains that, by understanding love in terms of “Spirit”, Hegel provides a well-argued foundation for assessing deficiencies of modern life. The discussed issues include, firstly, the current trend toward “atomistic” social conditions, secondly, the naturalistic reductionism in common clichés of gender relations, thirdly, the objectifying presentation of women which increases in public culture. *Part III* explains Hegel’s thesis that “true love” opens up a perspective that transcends finiteness, as elaborated in his thoughts on the pain of mourning. Linking this thesis with Kant’s conception of the “postulates” of future life and the existence of God, the paper sheds light on Hegel’s reading of the Christian teaching that “God is love”.

KEYWORDS • Love, Spirit, Hegel

One term—multiple meanings

What do we mean when we use the term ‘love’? Looking at the ways in which this term has traditionally been employed—in ordinary language as well as in theoretical discourse –, we find a diversity of meanings that cover a broad range of relations. Regarding relations among humans, the term has been specified by expressions such as Eros, *agape*, *caritas*, mercy, and

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solidarity,¹ and has included references to the biblical idea that we ought to love all fellow human beings, even our enemies. In theological context, the meaning of the term is extended even beyond the sphere of human interaction, as the relationship between God and human beings, as well as (in Christianity) the inner-Trinitarian relation, is characterized as a loving one. In contemporary mundane language, however, the term ‘love’ has, to a large extent, lost its comprehensive meaning: it is normally associated with what is called ‘romantic love’, or refers exclusively to the sexual relation, as in the expression ‘to make love’. ‘Romantic love’, typically, is understood in terms of popular images of happy intimate relations as they are transmitted by advertising, for instance, in the branches of fashion and dating agencies. At the same time, however, this notion is widely considered as expressing an obsolete ideal. As more and more people experience painful processes of separation, which often result in rather fragmented forms of life, the question arises whether the ideal they had expected to come true had been flawed from the beginning.²

In order to seek clarification, different approaches are called for. One focus has to be on the socio-economic conditions that shape contemporary life: Could it be that currently dominant social practices, in both the public and private sphere, constitute hindrances for love to be realized? In this respect, the discourse on ‘modernity’ needs to be taken into consideration. On the other hand, the common ideal of love, as an intimate bond, requires in-depth examination. Taking a closer look, we encounter different conceptions: While the mainstream view is shaped by the imagery of ‘romantic love’, as it is ubiquitous in commercial contexts and, at the same time, dismissed as un-realistic, we find that humans also know of a more complex conception that might be termed ‘true love’. This alternative conception does, however, remain largely inexplicit in the present context, due to the popular rhetoric that sweepingly dismisses any idea of long-term bonding.

Obviously, we need to search for a consistent conception of ‘love’. First it is important to note that the task of spelling out such a conception cannot be

¹ For a theological account of these distinct concepts of love see: Wilhelm Dancă, “When is Love Right? Justice as Form of Love,” in *Caietele Institutului Catolic*, 21 (2013), 69–79.

² See, for instance: Karl Lenz, “Romantische Liebe—Ende eines Beziehungsideals?” in Cornelia Hahn and Günter Burkart (eds), *Liebe am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts. Studien zur Soziologie intimer Beziehungen* (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 1998), 65–85, and Mary Evans, *Love: An Unromantic Discussion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

met by methods of empirical research, like those employed in psychology and the social sciences. Rather, a philosophical approach is required that explores, and thinks through, the semantic content of the term ‘love’. Such an approach is not only of theoretical relevance, as it seeks to provide differentiated categories that allow us to reflect our concrete relationships in a more precise as well as subtle manner. Also, it should lay a well argued foundation for a clear assessment of both the theoretical shortcomings and oppressive consequences of popular clichés.

With this task in mind, it seems promising to turn to Hegel who does, like hardly any other scholar in modern times, place love in the centre of his philosophical thinking. As he elaborates the core concept of his system —‘Spirit/*Geist*’ —, analysing the inner process of Spirit, i. e., what he calls the dialectical movement, Hegel claims explicitly to be following the basic structure of ‘love’ between humans. He maintains that “in love [...] those phases are present, in its content, which we cited as the fundamental essence of the absolute Spirit”³. Thus, a careful analysis of the intimate human relationship provides Hegel with the paradigm concept which he then employs far beyond this type of personal relations, using it, for instance, as the matrix for his understanding of theological conceptions such as ‘incarnation’ which Christian literature describes in terms of God’s love for the world. In this manner, Hegel demonstrates how the seemingly different specifications of love, some of which have been listed above, may be understood as intrinsically connected. As regards his main claim, Hegel, rather than elaborating a detached philosophical idea, seeks to describe the idea of ‘true love’ that we have known all along, albeit not in a clearly spelled out form.

In the following, only a brief outline of Hegel’s theory can be provided, though. While referring to a number of Hegel’s writings and posthumously published lectures, I shall not discuss whether any variations within his understanding of love can be detected; my main concern is rather to re-construct the main features of Hegel’s conception. (One difference will have to be addressed, however: Hegel’s notion of ‘love’ is hardly compatible with his portrayal of ‘marriage’—it is not, by the same token, a theory of conventional marriage.)

³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. II, 539.

Getting involved with “this person as a whole”⁴

Hegel emphasizes that only a being who is Spirit is able to love, and that genuine love can occur only in the encounter with another being of the same kind: “Love can only happen towards the same, towards the mirror, towards the echo of our nature.”⁵ As true love occurs only under the condition that the relevant other is a being of the same nature, it is implied that “the other in which the spirit remains communing with itself, this other can only be spiritual over again, a spiritual personality”⁶. It is important to note that Hegel’s concept of ‘Spirit’ must not be understood in the sense of ‘ghost’. Spirit is not a separate entity, detached from the physically given; rather it is the characteristic feature that distinguishes the human being from all other living creatures, embracing the human being as a whole. In order to provide an illustration, Hegel points at the fact that the human face always shows a specific expression, in this way never presenting itself merely as part of an organism; at all instances our face is shaped by personal ‘inner’ experience⁷.

⁴ For the following, cf. our previous article, “Issues of Gender in Catholicism: How the Current Debate Could Benefit from a Philosophical Approach”, in Charles Taylor, José Casanova, George F. McLean (eds), *Church and people: disjunctions in a secular age. Christian Philosophical Studies, I* (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), 155–186, here 175–186.

⁵ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Entwürfe über Religion und Liebe*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 1, 243. (I shall refer to the German edition of Hegel’s works—translating the cited passages on my own—in case the English translation does not contain the passage in question, and in case no English translation is available.)

⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. II, 539. As Cornelia Eșianu points out, Friedrich Schlegel, in a fragment of 1798 that focuses on friendship, uses the expression “symmetry of the spirit”. See: Cornelia Eșianu, “The Conception of Love in Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schlegel: Its Relevance for a Comprehensive Theory of the Human Being”, Brigitte Buchhammer (ed.), *Re-Learning to be Human in Global Times: Challenges and Opportunities from the Perspectives of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2018), 192–193. It would seem worthwhile to investigate concurrences with Hegel’s approach in this regard.

⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. G. B. Baillie (New York-Evanston: Harper and Row, 1967), 337–372. What is said here with regard to facial expression does apply to the entire human body. Based upon a different philosophical approach, Wittgenstein reaches a similar conclusion as he views the body as a ‘sign’ of

In order to underscore the reciprocity of the bond between Spirit and Spirit, Hegel often uses the gender neutral grammatical form, speaking of ‘the one’ and ‘the other’ even where he addresses the bond between a man and a woman. (Unfortunately, this distinct mode of expression has not been preserved consequently in English translations of Hegel’s work.)

Discussing what it means when the sameness of ‘the one’ and ‘the other’ fails to be acknowledged, Hegel notes: “As long as the subject retains the form of the subject, and the object [of love] the form of the object,” love is prevented from happening, “no union has been achieved. The subject, the free being, is the superior strength, and the object, nature, is being subdued”⁸. Apparently, these reflections take issue with the understanding of gender difference—*en vogue* in the 18th century⁹—which projected the dyad of ‘Spirit’ and ‘Nature’ onto the sexes in order to legitimate male dominance. (We shall return to this topic later.) Challenging this view Hegel contends, “only in love one is in union with the object, it is not dominating nor being dominated”¹⁰. He further explains that “true union, or love proper, exists only between living beings who are alike in power and thus in one another’s eyes living beings from every point of view”¹¹. It is important to note that Hegel does not perceive this kind of ‘union’ as the result of a fusion that levels the singularity of the individuals involved; rather, he portrays it as the unity of persons who are, and remain, unique.

the subject which can be read like a text. (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [New York: MacMillan, 1958]) It is precisely this phenomenon which the more recently coined term ‘body language’ refers to.

⁸ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Entwürfe über Religion und Liebe*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 1, 242.

⁹ For research examining 18th century conceptions of gender difference see: Lieselotte Steinbrügge, *Das moralische Geschlecht. Theorien und literarische Entwürfe über die Natur der Frau in der französischen Aufklärung* (Weinheim—Basel: Beltz, 1987).

¹⁰ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Entwürfe über Religion und Liebe*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 1, 242. Unfortunately Sarah Hoagland is not aware of this point of Hegel’s concept of ‘love’. She gravely mis-represents his thinking as she criticizes “the Hegelian understanding of difference as oppositional, hence a threat [...]. So I try to dominate the Other as the Other tries to dominate me”. (Sarah Lucia Hoagland, “Lesbian Ethics,” in: Alison M. Jaggar and Iris M. Young (eds), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (Malden, MA—Oxford, UK: Blackwell’s, 1998), 405–406.

¹¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 304.

„The beloved one is not opposed to us, but in unity with our being; we see ourselves in this other who then, however, is not identical with ourselves—a wonder that we are incapable of comprehending.”¹²

Characterizing true love in this manner, Hegel employs what he views, in general, as the logical structure of the Absolute: “the identity of identity and non-identity”¹³.

As lovers we get involved with the other in an unrestricted manner: with “this person as a whole”¹⁴. This implies that individuality receives the highest esteem. Precisely because—as Spirit—we share the same mode of being, our uniqueness does deserve equal attention. Therefore to love someone means to relate to that particular person’s “whole subjective personality—with all that it is and contains”¹⁵. (For further elucidation of this point one might refer to Hannah Arendt’s considerations attributing to love an unparalleled awareness of the “Who” of the beloved person.¹⁶) In order to illustrate the importance of individual distinction, Hegel refers to Shakespeare:

„Compare Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*: ‘the more I give to thee, the more I have’. This wealth of life love acquires in the exchange of every thought, every variety of inner experience, for it seeks out differences and devises unifications ad infinitum; it turns to the whole manifold of nature in order to drink love out of every life.”¹⁷

¹² Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Entwürfe über Religion und Liebe*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 1, 244.

¹³ Jonkers explains in which way Hegel’s early writings on love prefigure his later systematic work. (Peter Jonkers, “Liebe,” Paul Cobben (ed.), *Hegel-Lexikon* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), 307)

¹⁴ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Entwürfe über Religion und Liebe*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 1, 246.

¹⁵ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. II, 562.

¹⁶ See: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (8th ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). An in-depth examination of Arendt’s approach provides Maurizio Passerin D’Entrèves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (London-New York, 1994). For a detailed elaboration on the importance of individuality for the loving relationship see: Martha C. Nussbaum, “Love”, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London-New York: Routledge, 1998), 842–846, and Martha C. Nussbaum, “‘Beatrice’s Dante’: Wie liebt man das Individuum?” Dieter Thomä (ed.), *Analytische Philosophie der Liebe* (Paderborn: Mentis, 2000), 45–64.

¹⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 307.

This mode of full involvement entails that love liberates our “opposite of all foreign character [...]. In love the separate does still remain, but no longer *as* separate, rather as something united.”¹⁸ Hegel acknowledges, however, that—understood in this comprehensive way, not as a momentous affair—love is very demanding.

„Love is therefore the most immense contradiction; the understanding cannot resolve it, because there is nothing more intractable than this punctiliousness of the self-consciousness which is negated and which I ought nevertheless to possess as affirmative. Love is both the production and the resolution of this contradiction.”¹⁹

Obviously, love in the sense of such a comprehensive bondage does have an exclusive character: “The human beings whom one is able to love and towards whom love is real, are only a few special ones.”²⁰ These reflections also bring to light the specific temporality of love: The ‘exchange of every thought’ and the overcoming of ‘all foreign character’ can be aimed at only in a continuous process. Moreover, individuality always remains open to change—as long as we live it does never reach a point of completion. Therefore, love unavoidably has an aspect of futurity. Hegel maintains that this close relation involves subjectivity “as this individual, as I was, am, and will be”²¹. From this perspective, he emphasizes the importance of forgiveness, arguing in the following way: When one of the partners has offended the other, they both fall back into separateness; yet, while it is evidently impossible to undo an offensive act, love is able to bring about full reconciliation—“only love is capable of forgiving”²². It is worth noting here that Hegel’s Jesus, “the prophet of universal love”, represents primarily the attitude of “loving forgiveness”²³.

¹⁸ Ibid., 305. The English translation was slightly altered here by H. N. -D., according to the German original.

¹⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 199.

²⁰ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion II*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 17, 283.

²¹ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T. M. Knox (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. II, 562.

²² *Hegels Theologische Jugendschriften*, hrsg. v. Hermann Nohl (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), 393.

²³ H. S. Harris, “Hegel’s intellectual development to 1807,” in Frederick C. Beiser (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 30.

The competence which allows us to develop such a personal attachment is feeling. While the other human competences—rationality and reason—seek to establish an order by operating with clear oppositions, Hegel argues, love proceeds in a different manner—“love neither restricts nor is restricted [...]”. It is a feeling²⁴. Yet, it “is not a single feeling [among other single feelings]”²⁵. Hegel contends that we need to consider the difference between love and a fragmented Eros. The latter, typically, is guided by a “single feeling” and therefore bound to move on continuously:

„A single feeling is only a part and not the whole of life; the life present in a single feeling dissolves its barriers and drives on till it disperses itself in the manifold of feelings with a view to finding itself in the entirety of this manifold.”²⁶

This aim can never be achieved, however, since dispersion can only result in a series of “many particular and isolated feelings”²⁷, Hegel maintains. In the medium of film, Federico Fellini has taken up this topic, in an ironic manner, in his film “8 ½”²⁸, as he shows his leading actor Marcello Mastroianni sitting in a wooden bathtub, in the kitchen of an old farm house, surrounded and cared for by all the women of his life—from his mother onwards. In contrast to such an idea, Hegel emphasizes that in love the “whole life is not contained [...] in the same way as it is in this sum of many particular and isolated feelings”²⁹. It is a feeling of a different kind where love is located in Hegel’s view—a feeling that lies beyond the sphere of momentous attraction and alienation, and also of momentous “happiness and unhappiness”³⁰. Hegel describes this feeling as “the deep feeling of the spirit”³¹, that “has the

²⁴ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 304.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 304

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 305.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 305.

²⁸ Federico Fellini, *Otto e mezzo*, Italy 1963.

²⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 305. The English translation was slightly altered by H. N. -D.

³⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 7, 312. (This passage is not contained in the English translation used here.)

³¹ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. II, 539. The German expression

form of feeling, concentrated into itself,” which, “instead of revealing its content [...], rather draws directly together into the simple depth of the heart that content’s extent and boundlessness”³².

Within the framework of true love, Eros achieves a specific meaning. Hegel first points out a characteristic tension: Precisely because love is not “restricted,” is not “not finite at all,”³³ individuals in love are painfully aware of their finiteness. “[L]overs can be distinct only in so far as they are mortal” and “may be separated by death”³⁴. “But love strives to annul even this distinction [...], this possibility of separation, and to unite even the mortal element and to make it immortal”³⁵. For Hegel, this is the key feature of Eros. In his view, Eros does not only lead us to “forgetting oneself in another self”³⁶, but also implies the claim to overcome death. On this basis, Hegel elaborates his interpretation of shame:

„If the separable element persists in either of the lovers as something peculiarly his [her] own before their union is complete, it creates a difficulty for them. There is a sort of antagonism between [...] the cancellation of any opposition in complete union and a still subsisting independence. [...]; love is indignant if part of the individual is severed and held back as a private property. This raging of love against [exclusive] individuality is shame.”³⁷

From this perspective, shame is “an effect of love”:

„Shame enters only through the recollection of the body, through the [...] sensing of an [exclusive] individuality. It is not a fear *for* what is mortal, for what is merely

Hegel uses here is “Innigkeit des Geistes”. See: Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 17, 154.

³² Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. II, 540.

³³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 304.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 305.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 305–306.

³⁶ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. II, 539. Hegel discusses here the “Vergehen und Vergessen”. See: Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 17, 155.

³⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 306.

one's own, but rather a fear *of* it, a fear which vanishes as the separable element in the lover is diminished by [...] love."³⁸

Underscoring the comprehensive character of love, Hegel contends: "In the lovers there is no matter; they are a living whole."³⁹ Consequently, it would seem totally inappropriate to view love as being grounded in a desire focusing on bodily features or on the social status of a person. In Hegel's terms, such a form of fixation would mean "that something dead here forms one term of the love relationship, [that] love is girt by matter alone"⁴⁰. Similarly, any attempt to "captivate"⁴¹ someone by means of physical attractiveness would disclose an attitude which attributes "intrinsic worth" to the "mortal body"⁴². Hegel reads the expression "shameless" as designating this kind of attitude. In this context, he also addresses the scandal of sexual abuse: as he points out, the "hostility in a loveless assault does injury to the loving heart itself"⁴³.

In contrast to such modes of insisting on one's own self, genuine love does not leave the individuals untouched but rather shapes them. Each individual does not only bring into the relationship his or her specific identity—as something external, as it were—rather, both lovers are also being shaped by their relationship. It is only through their love "that they acquire their subjectivity [...] which constitutes their personality"⁴⁴. In this manner a shared identity is being developed which does, eventually, allow the lovers to speak in terms of 'we,' i. e., to speak as one single person. Addressing this relational aspect of identity, Hegel chooses a poignant mode of expres-

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 305. The German formulation of this thesis has received much attention: "An Liebenden ist keine Materie. Sie sind ein lebendiges Ganze". See: Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Entwürfe über Religion und Liebe*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 1, 246.

⁴⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 303.

⁴¹ In the German original, Hegel uses the verb *fesseln*. See: Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Entwürfe über Religion und Liebe*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 1, 247.

⁴² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 306.

⁴³ Ibid., 306.

⁴⁴ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion II*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 17, 233.

sion: “The I is ‘we’ [a plurality], and the ‘we’ is a single I.”⁴⁵ In other words,

„love is the distinction of two who are, at the same time, absolutely indistinct for one another. The feeling and consciousness of this identity is what constitutes love, this being beside myself: I have my self-consciousness not in myself but in the other, yet this other, in whom alone I am satisfied [...], as he is equally being beside himself, has his consciousness only in me, both of us being nothing but the consciousness of this being beside oneself. To perceive, to feel, to know this unity—this is what constitutes love”⁴⁶.

Challenging social pathologies of “our time”

By defining ‘love’ in terms of ‘Spirit’, Hegel provides an insight that enables us to expose deficiencies of modern life, and to advocate an unabridged conception of humanity.

Only three examples of this critical potential can be specified here.

Firstly: Hegel addressed, early on, the social problems resulting from capitalism. Economic structures that incite competition, he argues, have led to an increasing isolation of the individual, generating a trend towards “atomistic”⁴⁷ social conditions. As people insist in their separateness, they fail to fully get involved with the other. This observation may prove true even more today, as sociological research highlights the loneliness of young professionals, male as well as female, in mega-cities across the globe. Hegel describes this development in terms of a significant loss in humaneness: Where self-centeredness prevails, the singularity of individuals is denied the appreciation and enrichment that only mutual involvement can engender;

⁴⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. G. B. Bailey (New York-Evanston: Harper and Row, 1967), 227.

⁴⁶ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion II*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 17, 222.

⁴⁷ Hegel portrays the bourgeois society as a “system of atomistic” in which the individuals remain independent “as private persons”, having their aim in the cultivation of “their own petty selves and particular interests”. See: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind. Part Three of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, trans. J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 256–257.

one consequence is an incapability of feeling the pain of separation and of mourning. Hegel notes: As the individual

„is an independent unit for whom everything else is a world external to him [...], and, while his objects change, they are never absent [...]; this is the ground of his tranquility in face of loss and his sure confidence that his loss will be compensated, because compensation here is possible”⁴⁸.

Secondly: Hegel’s approach also allows us to challenge naturalistic reductionism in conceptions of human relations.⁴⁹ A case in point are common views on love that focus on the sexual distinction of the body that humans share with a number of other species in nature, and on a desire which reflects the anatomical dyad ‘male/ female’. From this perspective, love among human beings appears as a secondary phenomenon which is ultimately anchored in biology. Today, views of this kind are expressed in various contexts, from social biology to conventional theological theories of natural law. One shared feature is the concept of a social order based on gender roles. In contrast, Hegel’s emphasis on our being ‘Spirit’ allows us to address the shortcomings of such clichés. Since genuine love requires that the partners each acknowledge the uniqueness of the other, the concept of gender roles clearly is at odds with love. As this concept suggests viewing everyone primarily as representing his/ her gender, attributing to men and women a respective shared character, it neglects the relevance of human singularity. The impact of this shortcoming must not be underestimated: until this very day, not only views on intimate relations but also social practices in the public sphere have, typically, been based on the concept of gender roles.⁵⁰ One indication of this deficit is the grammatical singular often used: Common norms concerning what ‘a woman’, and ‘a man’, ought to be like, or do, prove to be an abyss in which individual diversity gets submerged.

⁴⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 303.

⁴⁹ For Hegel’s rejection of conceptions based upon the idea of natural right see, for instance: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 201 (§161, addition).

⁵⁰ A discussion of unresolved issues resulting from traditional Catholic conceptions of the natural law is provided in: Herta Nagl-Docekal, “Issues of Gender in Catholicism: How the Current Debate Could Benefit From a Philosophical Approach,” Charles Taylor, José Casanova, George F. McLean (eds), *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), 155–188.

Talents, interests, and inclinations that are not associated with the respective ideal will not receive support or will even be considered inappropriate. In short, naturalistic views fail to acknowledge the legitimate claim of individuals to find support in developing their uniqueness.⁵¹

Regarding women in particular, we find another grave theoretical flaw. The common view shaped by the bourgeois gender conception of the late 18th century associates the dyad ‘Spirit/ Nature’ with the biological sex difference. As a consequence, women—other than men—are defined primarily by their sexuality. There is no lack of clarity in the way Rousseau has expressed this difference—albeit not from a critical point of view—in his *Emile*: “While the man is a man only in certain moments, the woman remains a woman throughout her life—or at least as long as she is young.”⁵² (The latter part of this reflection articulates an opinion that, to this very day, has resulted in an enormous disadvantage for women. Where women are perceived primarily under the perspective of sexual attraction and/or procreation, elderly women find it hard to achieve a decent social standing. The fact that, among the elderly who are poor, the percentage of women is remarkably high—a fact that is captured by the term ‘feminization of poverty’—must be seen in light of this cliché.) As mentioned above, Hegel points out clearly that conceptions which apply the dyad ‘Spirit/ Nature’ to the intimate relation promote a structure of dominance that prevents the emergence of a loving unity. However, we encounter an inconsistency in Hegel in this respect: His portrayal of the married couple adopts the bourgeois way of considering individual singularity a prerogative of men; he

⁵¹ By contrast, where loving partners both come to consider it vital for their relationship to promote, in a reciprocal manner, the unfolding of individual distinction, they will agree on the need to work out a fair division of domestic labor. Obviously, deliberations seeking such a fair solution will have to discuss the distribution not only of labor but also of spare time. See, for instance: *Angelika Krebs, Arbeit und Liebe. Die philosophischen Grundlagen sozialer Gerechtigkeit* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2002).

⁵² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 389. For a critical examination of Rousseau’s views on women see: Lynda Lange (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), and Herta Nagl-Docekal, “Philosophy of History as a Theory of Gender Difference: The Case of Rousseau,” Herta Nagl-Docekal and Cornelia Klinger (eds.), *Continental Philosophy in Feminist Perspective* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 77–100.

shares the expectation that women—located in the domestic realm—would remain within the scope of a rather homogenous identity, as he maintains: “The wife is without the moment of knowing herself as *this* particular self in and through the other.”⁵³ Thus, Hegel fails to reflect that the traditional understanding of the married couple is in sharp contrast to his idea of genuine love, as defined by the unity of two individuals who are alive in every respect.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, employing Hegel’s thesis that each partner must be respected as ‘Spirit’ allows us to challenge traditional encrusted patterns of life as representing something “dead”—“matter” that is taken as “something absolute”⁵⁵.

Thirdly: Hegel also provides tools for identifying the love-less attitudes marking public life in many ways. One issue stands out: A portrayal of women from the perspective of sexual availability has increasingly shaped public culture. Notably, fashion has gradually adopted a pornographic style⁵⁶. Also, the sharp increase in the international trafficking of women and in sexual violence is based on this attitude. What these phenomena have in common is that women are being treated as objects rather than respected as subjects who are entitled to decide on their own whom they would like to get involved with. Hegel’s reflections prove instrumental for clearly marking the difference between a sexual relationship on equal terms, on the one

⁵³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. G. B. Bailey (New York-Evanston: Harper and Row, 1967), 477.

⁵⁴ A more detailed account of the inconsistency in Hegel’s conceptions of love and marriage is presented in: Herta Nagl-Docekal, “Liebe in ‘unserer’ Zeit: Unabgegoltene Elemente der Hegelschen Ästhetik,” Herta Nagl-Docekal, Erzsébet Rózsa, Elisabeth Weisser-Lohmann (eds), *Hegels Ästhetik als Theorie der Moderne* (Vienna: Böhlau/ Berlin: Akademie, 2013), 197–220.

⁵⁵ While addressing “the extent to which sexual inequality is essential to the Hegelian family”, Frederick Neuhouser suggests to focus on the more “fundamental” elements of Hegel’s account of the family, arguing that Hegel’s concept of “substance” provides “no reason to think that procreation, child rearing and the bonds of familial love depend essentially on women’s subordination to men”. See: Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel’s Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA-London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2000), 276–277.

⁵⁶ A critical assessment of the oppressive implications of pornography is elaborated in Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1981), and Jessica Spector, *Prostitution and Pornography: A Philosophical Debate about the Sex Industry* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

hand, and a sexualization of power relations—which implies that women are treated merely as ‘matter’—on the other. The focus on the uniqueness of each human being also makes room for challenging the discrimination of individuals who represent groups that have notoriously been confronted with discrimination, for instance people involved in same sex relations.⁵⁷

In general, it is important to consider: While Hegel explains that we are able to love, in the comprehensive sense of the term, only very few people, his thinking does, nevertheless, imply a guideline for how to approach human beings in general. According to the conception of ‘Spirit’, everybody is entitled, first, to be acknowledged as equal to everyone else, and secondly, to be respected and supported in his/her uniqueness. In this manner, Hegel’s conception covers common inclusive meanings of the term ‘love’, such as charity, agape, and mercy (as listed above).

Transcending finiteness

Elaborating on the intimate bond among humans, Hegel highlights one far-reaching aspect: As the involved individuals experience a “spiritualization of the sensual relation”⁵⁸, they perceive in an immediate manner what “Spirit” is all about. Based on this thesis, he places love in the context of his distinction of three forms of the “absolute Spirit” (art / religion / philosophy), designating love as “this secular religion of the heart”⁵⁹. This thought must not be read as referring specifically to religious people; it

⁵⁷ The gender neutral language Hegel introduces, as he portrays the intimate bond between “the one” and “the other”, has been taken up by Brigitte Buchhammer who searches for a philosophical theory of same-sex love relations. Although this way of using Hegel is obviously not in agreement with his explicit opinion, it is interesting to see which form of re-contextualizing his thinking is open to. See: Brigitte Buchhammer, “Religion und Homosexualität. Eine Relektüre von Hegels Religionsphilosophie,” Herta Nagl-Docekal, Wolfgang Kaltenbacher, Ludwig Nagl (eds), *Viele Religionen—Eine Vernunft? Ein Disput zu Hegel* (Vienna: Böhlau/ Berlin: Akademie, 2008), 211–233. Similarly, Frederick Neuhaus notes that Hegel’s understanding of true love seems compatible “with a rejection of the presumption that spouses must be of opposite genders”. See: Frederick Neuhaus, *Foundations of Hegel’s Social Theory*. (Cambridge, MA-London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2000), 277.

⁵⁸ The German original uses the expression *vergeistigte Naturverhältnisse* (Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 14, 183).

rather applies to anyone who dearly loves somebody—any love, Hegel argues, is shaped by “the infinite abstraction from all worldliness”⁶⁰. Thus, true love opens up a perspective that transcends our finiteness. Hegel addresses, in particular, the way in which we mourn the death of a beloved person: The suffering of “infinite pain”⁶¹ over the loss of this precious unique individual, he argues, carries with it a sense that death does not have the final word. Since love represents a relation between Spirit and Spirit, “this pain implies necessarily that the spiritual is being elevated towards heaven [...], as the natural, obviously, is not identical with the spiritual”⁶². In his lectures on art, Hegel interprets the medieval paintings of Mary under the cross as the most subtle rendering of this insight. “The heart of this mother is broken, but her pain does not petrify her like Niobe”⁶³; the expression of her face rather reveals “that Spirit is blissful elsewhere”⁶⁴.

With regard to the history of philosophy of religion, it would be worth investigating how Hegel’s thoughts relate to Kant’s thesis that our pure practical reason “postulates” eternal life and the existence of God.⁶⁵ It seems that Hegel has a modified version of the conception of the “postulate” in mind: He does not present our ultimate hope in terms of a future harmonization of morality and bliss, but—unlike Kant—in terms of an infinite duration of the bond of love.⁶⁶ It is from this perspective that Hegel refers to the Christian

⁵⁹ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T. M. Knox (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. II, 565. Hegel uses the term: *weltliche Religion des Herzens*. See: Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 14, 186.

⁶⁰ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion II*. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 17, 301.

⁶¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophie der Kunst. Vorlesung von 1826* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2005), 211.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 160.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁶⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), 126–139.

⁶⁶ For a more detailed examination of the way in which the experience of grief may provide the basis for a specific “postulate of future life” see: Herta Nagl-Docekal, “Kant’s Concept of Reasonable Hope,” Miloš Lichner (ed.), *Hope. Where Does Our Hope Lie?* International Congress of the European Society for Catholic Theology, Bratislava, 2019 (Zürich-Münster: LIT, 2020), 177–192.

teaching that “God is love”⁶⁷. As he maintains, only our idea of, and experience with, true love as intimate involvement among humans, prepares us for understanding this religious teaching: How else could we grasp the meaning of this particular characterization of God?⁶⁸ Evidently, Hegel adopts here the traditional conception of *via eminentiae* that focuses on the mediation between human notions and attributes of God. More specifically, Hegel elaborates the idea “God is love” in terms of an internal process that resonates with human experience, as he notes:

“The life of God [...] can, if we like, be spoken of as love disporting with itself; but this idea falls into edification, and even sinks into insipidity, if it lacks seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative.”⁶⁹

Against the backdrop of these reflections, the need to challenge current atomistic tendencies appears even more urgent. As Hegel demonstrates, the widely shared view that, in “our time”⁷⁰, the notion of ‘true love’ is obsolete does, by the same token, bereave people of the hope for eternal bliss. One devastating impact of this loss of hope is that human existence can no longer be viewed as, ultimately, making sense. In their critical analysis of modern conditions, Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno claim that humans, typically, consider themselves captivated in a world “which has no exit”. Regarding the consequences of this impression, Horkheimer and Adorno address

⁶⁷ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T. M. Knox (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. II, 541.

⁶⁸ See: Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften 1830, III*. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), vol. 10, 300–301. Seeking to explain religious love, Hegel compares it here with “ordinary love”.

⁶⁹ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. G. B. Baillie (New York-Evanston: Harper and Row, 1967), 81. Hegel further explains that the divine life must not be defined as “abstract generality”—we must not “neglect altogether the self-movement which is the formal character of its activity. [...] The truth is the whole. The whole, however, is merely the essential nature reaching its completeness through the process of its own development. Of the Absolute it must be said that only at the end is it what it is in very truth, and just in that consists its nature, which is to be actual, subject, or self-becoming, self-development” (Ibid., 81–82).

⁷⁰ Referring to his present, Hegel often uses the expression “our time”. See, for instance: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophie der Kunst. Vorlesung von 1826* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2005), 86.

“the panic which nowadays is ready to break out at every moment: men [people] expect that the world, which has no exit, will be set on fire by a totality which they themselves are and over which they have no control.”⁷¹

Taking a look at the products of cultural industry that currently are highly esteemed across the globe, like horror films and vide games based on science fiction, we find, I think, ample evidence for this disturbing diagnosis.

⁷¹ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 2016), 29.