

Rethinking Love as Union: “As if our boundaries were melting...”

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Abstract. This article reconsiders one of the most important theories of romantic love in contemporary philosophy, the theory of *love as union*. Drawing on observations from transpersonal research, the article raises the question whether it is not worthwhile to accept, at least partially, a strong sense of union in the context of love. Thus the article takes a position that is not taken by anyone in contemporary philosophy. In this context, the article also briefly analyses one of the most important variants of love as union, a union with God. At the end, the suggestion is made that it makes more sense to talk about connections rather than relations in the case of fulfilled love.

Keywords: philosophy of love, romantic love, love as union, fusion, emotions, God

Meilė kaip vienis: „Tarsi mūsų ribos būtų išnykusios...”

Santrauka. Šiuo straipsniu naujai persvarstoma viena svarbiausių romantinės meilės teorijų šiuolaikinėje filosofijoje – *meilės kaip vienio* teorija. Remiantis iš transpersonalinio tyrimo kylančiais pastebėjimais, straipsnyje klausiama, ar nebūtų verta pripažinti, kad meilė neatsiejama nuo stipraus vienio jausmo. Taigi autorius laikosi nuostatos, kurios šiuolaikinėje filosofijoje nesilaiko niekas. Šiame kontekste straipsnyje taip pat glaustai apžvelgiamas vienas iš svarbiausių meilės kaip vienio variantų – vienio su Dievu. Straipsnis baigiamas pasiūlymu, kad, kalbant apie išsipildžiusią meilę, būtų prasmingiau kalbėti apie ryšius, o ne apie santykius.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: meilės filosofija, romantinė meilė, meilė kaip vienis, susiliejimas, emocijos, Dievas

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*Love is Union. Here, there is no duality.
Either you exist or Love exists. That's it. That's what it is.*

Jalaluddin Rumi

Resistance to fusion

There are several contemporary theories of love, that is, the theory of *love as union* is competing with other theories. Contemporary theories conceptualize love as robust concern (e.g., Frankfurt 1999), as valuing (e.g., Velleman 1999), according to the dialogical model (e.g., Krebs 1995), as an emotion (e.g., Baier 1991), and there are also intermediate positions (e.g., Jollimore 2011). This division can be misleading since everyone seems to agree that love somehow unites lovers, and that it makes sense to talk about a couple as a union of lovers. So, in a very broad sense, everyone is in favor of the union view. However, as far as the *Strong Ontological Sense of Union* (SOSU) is concerned, it has met with a great deal of resistance from theorists of love (e.g., Soble 1997; Singer 1994; Helm 2009). Why? Romantic love, according to SOSU, is a union of lovers so that they dissolve into each other or into a higher entity. Within this hybrid entity, the original individuals as separate beings no longer exist. Accordingly, for example, it is possible that $1+1=1$, in the same way that the union of two raindrops results in a single raindrop. The new combined self now has co-owned desires, feelings, thoughts, choices and actions. Knowing all this, it is obvious why this theory has provoked considerable opposition. SOSU seems to eliminate individual autonomy, and it also seems to deprive of their essence phenomena that are fundamental to love, such as concern or self-sacrifice for the other. Moreover, this model could hardly account for conflicting interests, just as it would be strange if the union view tried to capture unrequited love. SOSU does not seem to be phenomenologically convincing, either, since, as critics suggest, this is not how lovers experience the state they are in (e.g., they are not bound as Siamese twins, as Nozick suggests (Nozick 1989: 70)).

It is worth noting that, while SOSU is often sharply attacked, it has actually almost no representatives in contemporary philosophy (for earlier periods, Plato's dialogue, *Symposium*, and Hegel's fragments on love are usually mentioned). Even the philosophers who have momentarily come close to SOSU are, on closer inspection, usually found not to be actually adherents of this idea. For example, while Solomon writes about how "to make new sense out of 'love' through a literal rather than metaphoric sense of the 'fusion' of two souls" (1988: 24) and about "fusion of two-into-one" (1988: 26), he himself stresses the unattainability of any total fusion (1988: 65, 68, 251), and also claims that "it does not follow that individual roles and differences are submerged" (*ibid.*: 152). Nozick, who has also made an important contribution to the theory of love as union, puts it this way: "To be part of a we involves having a new identity, an additional one. This does not mean that you no longer have any individual identity or that your sole identity is a part of the we" (1989: 71). He also claims that, in a romantic 'we', "each also needs the other

to be an independent and non-subservient person" (*ibid.*: 74). Friedman defined love as "flexible interpersonal equivalent to a federation of states" (1998: 166). It is also worth mentioning Fisher who emphasizes that "the process of fusion can never be completed, since the completion of the process would involve the lovers becoming one person" (1990: 30), and also that "[...] the fusion of selves [...] is always only partial. [...] There is no common view; we see things utterly differently" (*ibid.*: 30–31).

On the whole, it seems that no one in contemporary philosophy wants to systematically argue for SOSU, although attacks on it are widespread. When Helm writes, for example, that the union view "undermines the separateness of the two persons" (2009: 40), he is actually guilty of the straw man fallacy. Similarly, Soble misses the point when he criticizes the position "according to which two lovers merge into a single entity" (1997: 77, cf. Singer 1994: 18–26). In fact, almost all the proponents of the union view are in favor of the moderate ontological model, or what Schmidt called the striving model (2018: 709–710). According to the former, love is the result of the union of lovers, with the lovers continuing to exist as individual entities, and, according to the latter, complete fusion is impossible, and people can only desire it. Let us make no mistake: the milder versions have also been criticized, but the really vehement criticism has been of the idea that the union is an entity where individuals disappear – an idea in which probably very few contemporary philosophers can believe.

It is worth noting here that this aversion to the alleged excesses of SOSU, the resistance to advocating a mystery or an extreme position, can in fact be embedded in a broader theoretical debate. Relevant here are the debates in contemporary philosophy concerning shared intention. Just as theorists of love often speak of a union in merely metaphorical terms, theorists of a shared intention, such as Bratman (1999: 98–99) or Searle (1990: 404, 406) are also careful when speaking of 'we', i.e., they interpret it basically in metaphorical terms, and resist talking about super-agent or some kind of group consciousness.

These discussions also refer back to earlier debates in which similar questions were raised. This is particularly true of the phenomenological tradition which, in many respects, anticipated contemporary analyses, and sometimes the question of love was also explicitly raised. It is worth quoting Husserl himself first: "the individuality of souls implies an unbridgeable separation [...] this separation does not prevent, but is rather the condition of possibility for monads to be able to 'coincide' and thus be in community with one another" (1973: 335). And, in the context of *eros* as unity, Husserl puts it this way: "we do not have separate fulfilments each in the one and the other primordially but a unity of both primordialities that is brought about by means of the fulfilment of one-within-the-other" (*ibid.*: 34). Several phenomenologists have written that togetherness and feeling an experience as ours do not imply the abolition of the first-person singular perspective, nor do they imply that persons are united in a higher mental state. Such insights can be found, for example, in Arendt (1958: 176), Walther (1923: 70–85), Sartre and Beauvoir (for an analysis of both, see Heinämaa 2023). It is on these and similar traditions that Zahavi draws when he writes that individuation of consciousness prohibits any fusion between streams of consciousness (Zahavi 2023).

As regards the phenomenology of love specifically, we can also note the resistance to fusion. Lévinas writes in the context of the phenomenology of *eros*: “the relation with the Other does not nullify separation. It does not arise within a totality nor does it establish a totality, integrating me and the other” (1969: 251). For Lévinas, “radical separation and relationship with the other are produced simultaneously” (*ibid.*: 299). He even makes it clear that he conceptually replaces union with fecundity: “in this unparalleled conjuncture of identification, in this *trans-substantiation*, the same and the other are not united but precisely [...] – engender the child” (*ibid.*: 266). There is, however, one passage where Lévinas begins to speak, cautiously, of fusion, or at least of that brief moment when lovers join at a tangential point: he says there is a “coinciding of the lover and the beloved” (*ibid.*: 270). And Lévinas seems to counterbalance separation when he writes that “this community of feeling constitutes the acuity of voluptuousity” (*ibid.*: 265).

Marion’s phenomenology of love is also relevant. On the one hand, Marion writes: “loving requires distance and the crossing of distance. In the drama of love, actions must be accomplished effectively over distance – distributing, going, coming, returning” (2007: 46–47). Marion also emphasizes that lovers are not annihilated: “The two egos are accomplished as lovers, and mutually allow their respective phenomena to appear, not of course according to an imaginary and fusional logic – by exchanging or sharing a common intuition which would abolish the distance between them” (*ibid.*: 105). According to Marion’s analysis, even intimacy is characterized by distance: love is received “from the most intimate exteriority” (*ibid.*: 102). So it seems that Marion is alien to the idea of fusion, as he considers the idea of being able to feel how the other feels ‘absurd’ (*ibid.*: 115), and he sees what mystical theology says about spiritual union with God as hyperbolic exaggeration (*ibid.*: 149). However, there is also a completely different tendency in Marion’s *Erotic phenomenon*. For example, he says that caressing allows “the in-distinction between my flesh’s feeling and its feeling itself feeling, for my flesh feels not only reciprocal feeling, but also the other flesh’s feeling of itself” (*ibid.*: 120). He also claims that, in the erotic experience “the flesh does not experience a part but rather the totality of the other, and vice versa. Nothing of her or of me must remain on the side” (*ibid.*: 124), and that “the crossing of our flesh in our suspended gazes renders our common soul finally apparent – at least to us, the lovers” (*ibid.*: 170). The most striking is the part where Marion writes that “the white lightning of the orgasm blurs us, one in the other, jumbles us together, and finally no one, no person, appears” (*ibid.*: 154). Marion’s book is, of course, open to many interpretations, but one thing we can say is that flesh, in the Marionian sense, which here denotes the direct self-affection of the body, is nevertheless capable of fusion, despite all the claims to the contrary. Even if Marion does not find depersonalizing and dissolving orgasms desirable, he seems to descriptively accept the possibility of such states.

Many tensions permeate the texts about the fusion of lovers. The theory of complete fusion is often vehemently attacked, but is nonetheless typically attributed to those who do not advocate it, or critics vaguely mention it, that is, without telling who the specific representatives of the theory are. It also happens again and again that those who advocate

it despite the attacks begin to distance themselves from it demonstratively a few pages later. The idea of fusion sometimes haunts the margins of the texts, and only attentive interpretation can detect its presence. And when we are confronted with expressions like the 'crossing of fleshs' or the 'coinciding of lovers', we may feel a sense of inadequacy, or we may start accusing (veiled) union theorists of advocating mystery. We begin to long for a more precise definition, a more obvious confrontation with the conceptual challenge. Is a text possible that finally argues transparently and systematically for the possibility of complete fusion? The author of this kind of text should be aware of exactly what he or she is undertaking. The question this author should be looking to answer is not what are the aspects that should necessarily be included in a definition of love, but rather the question that Schmidt poses in the title of her comprehensive article on union theory: "Are Lovers Ever One?" (2018). Her second question is closely related: "How far can we meaningfully speak of 'union' in the context of love relations?" (2018: 710). We are convinced that such questions must be answered not on the basis of mere impressions or *a priori* assumptions, but on the basis of experience itself.

Fusion and the phenomenology of sexuality

Romantic love as union is worth studying in the form that is arguably among the most unifying ones, that is, as sexuality. Romantic love typically involves a sexual dimension, although whether it is possible to have romantic love that is asexual is open to debate. Sexuality, especially if it goes hand in hand with love, can touch the deepest layers of our being, almost a re-enactment of the primal relationship between a mother and a child on a higher level, as the sexual act also offers the opportunity to give oneself to the other, to reveal oneself in one's vulnerable nakedness and to push the boundaries of the ego. It is precisely this last point that is the most important for the union view, since going beyond the limits of the lovers' egos is a precondition for any fusion. As for the phenomenology of this experience, transpersonal research on sexuality and research on sexuality as an altered state of consciousness (for overviews, see Wade 2013; Maliszewski et al. 2011) can be a particularly important resource. In contemporary philosophical debates on love, this kind of union of lovers is not completely unknown (Schmidt mentions in passing: "the feeling of fusion arising from the sexual act" [2008: 711], or Friedman writes that there is a "special capacity of sexual intimacy to cross or blur the boundaries of embodied personhood and link selves profoundly" [1993: 163]); nevertheless, the phenomenology of this experience does not seem to help anyone to make the theory of romantic love as union as precise as possible. This section is intended to break this practice.

According to Plato's narrative, which is usually considered to be the main cultural source of the union view, the gods bestowed upon human beings sexuality in order to satisfy their desire for unity. In addition, generally speaking, many ancient cultures considered unity during sexual intercourse to be the closest to divine bliss that human beings can achieve (Gilles 1978). We can find many examples of the experience of fusion in

religious traditions. For example, Neff writes that practitioners of tantric sex participate in “a rapture that transports them beyond their ordinary selves and an inexpressible state of timelessness. Their limits and edges seem to dissolve; they merge into one being” (quoted by MacKnee 1996: 103). Among the many possible examples is the American Oneida Community which had non-ordinary sexual habits with the goal of an “ultimate union” between lovers, a “mystical, spiritual oneness” (MacKnee 1996: 103). In view of all this, it is no coincidence that Schmidt notes that the theories of love as union are particularly well represented in theological contexts today (2018: 206). However, we will not only use examples based on religious traditions, but will also build on accounts where sedimented cultural content seems to have little impact. In fact, we are lucky because Maslow’s complaint that sexology lacks phenomenological studies (1965: 135) has now been somewhat invalidated (e.g., Davis 1983; Ogden 1999, 2006, 2007; Sokol 1986, 1989).

We can particularly benefit from Wade’s qualitative research which culminated with a sample of 91 individuals (Wade 1998, 2000, 2001, 2004). Two aspects appeared consistently in the accounts, one of which was the union during sexual intercourse. The first example is the account of ‘Blake’ (here and in the following the first names are pseudonyms), in which the union is presented in an ambivalent way: “When I’m with her, it goes beyond a sense of merging. [...] There’s no sense of union because that implies one thing merging with another. [...] Is there a sense of union? No, but there’s not a sense of duality either. There’s no sense of me and other in this kind of experience. I break apart, where I fall into the Light [...]” (Wade 2004: 182, 184). There is also an account, notably that of ‘Eve’, which speaks of a cosmic experience, but also of a mereologically specific, non-symmetric merger: “I had actually attained a higher plane, feeling one with – and satisfied with – the whole universe. My partner was an extension of my physical being” (*ibid.*: 89). ‘Eve’s’ partner, ‘Hamilton’, reports a kind of metamorphosis, and at the same time seems to repeat the asymmetry by attributing to ‘Eve’ the ontologically highest level of existence: “Eve becomes to me who others describe as God. It’s my perception that my soul and Eve’s soul [...] simply fuse” (*ibid.*: 91). ‘Roland’ in turn describes the experience of a slow sexual act that resulted in the experiential space of sex beginning to vibrate: “There was a real sense of connectedness to each other. We were looking into each other’s eyes a lot, and I started feeling as if our boundaries were melting” (*ibid.*: 61–62). The following account is from ‘Kyle’ who also starts talking about an event where it is not possible to distinguish who is responsible for the activity or passivity, thus raising the problem of tracing: “Then any sense of separateness between us dissolved. I couldn’t even tell whether I was making love to her or being made love to. I can hardly even tell you what our physical bodies were doing because it was like our bodies were part of the flow and ebb of all this energy and Spirit body. We were all mixed together in this mysterious, melting dance” (*ibid.*: 85).

We could cite many examples, but, to avoid repetition, we can content ourselves with recalling six more significant accounts, from six different sources. One example is the interviews MacKnee conducted with practicing Christians, many of which are characterized by accounts of ‘intense union’, such as “Really connected; there was no separation be-

tween us" ('Patty'); "We were totally one. There were no walls up. It was very vulnerable" ('Cherry') (for other examples, see 2002: 238–239). One further example in particular has value because it focuses on the disappearance of agency: "When we make love, it's like I disappear. Athletes talk about being in the zone – this is like being in the zone for hours. It's not like I'm doing anything or making anything happen. In some religions they say, it's the dance, not the dancer. This is like I'm being danced" ('Alex') (Maurer 1994: 456). It starts with the fading of the 1st person perspective, and then seems to continue with the transcendental egoic perspective in 'Trisha's' account: "There was no me. [...] There is no difference between anything whatsoever. [...] There is only apparent difference. [...] I felt as if I had just been born in that moment, or that I had been asleep all my life and had just awakened. [...] I was simply being what I AM, and what everyone else IS, in truth" (Feuerstein 1992: 35–36). The following is an account of the increasing realization of total fusion: "There is a unitive energy where the two truly become one. And once in a while, you transcend even that, and you become one with the universe. [...] It's like a great light, but that doesn't exactly describe it, either. [...] That is just the doorway you pass through into something beyond, something transcendent" ('Roseanne') (Bonheim 1997: 40–41). Sokol's account uses hyperbolic rhetoric to first deny that union has taken place, but only to characterize sexual intercourse as the realization of pure union: "There was not a 'union' of 'I' with lover, or 'I' with the scorpion, spider, or galaxy. Rather, there was only undifferentiated unity and consciousness as all that" (Sokol 1989: 116). We conclude the quotes with 'Ann's' account of a mystical sexual experience that mentions quieting the mind: "My mind becomes very still and a feeling of unity occurs. Unity with my lover but it's more like a universal 'being-ness'" (quoted by Elfers 2009: 80).

What these accounts provide material for is a phenomenology of sexual intercourse, not an ontology of particular entities. One could say that these accounts are not arguments for SOSU, but arguments for at least a strong phenomenological sense of union. We can agree with Friedman that lovers can merge in many ways: (1) In subjectivity, as the subjects of experience; (2) in agency as in joint undertakings; (3) in objecthood, as objects of attention or concern, or recipient of harms or benefits (1998: 165). In our approach, subjectivity undoubtedly plays a prominent role, and we might even consider it a subjective union theory, insofar as it gives priority to how the lovers themselves experience, or how they are inclined to describe their own experience. As for the experience itself, in contrast to the vast majority of the theories mentioned in the first section of this article, which have mostly *prima facie* declared the idea of complete fusion unacceptable, these accounts refer exclusively to literal fusion, not some metaphorical sense, and mostly to complete fusion, not a partial one. The total fusion here refers to the suspension of physical, psychical, spiritual ego boundaries, of separateness, which is sometimes experienced even as cosmic – where the account is not simply of entities entering into union, but of no single entity remaining outside of pure union.

Most of the accounts extend their claims for all levels of human existence, and do not, for example, suggest that there is something, such as the stream of consciousness or the flesh, that was left out of the event of union. Furthermore, without exception, these

accounts all refer to temporary peak events, not to long-term states (i.e., the plateau experience), that is, they cannot be accused of assuming ‘continuous flowing-into-one-another’. Because the experiencers within a certain time return to their ordinary state of consciousness, the events of fusion also cannot be accused of being an accomplice to a robust loss of autonomy, nor can they be accused of once for all eliminating basic love factors such as care or self-sacrifice. Rather, the observation applies here that a temporary phase of loss of autonomy “can be all right, even quite wonderful” (Nussbaum 1995: 290), or that a complete fusion event can even trigger additional factors such as the ability to surrender, or the ability to become absorbed in experience (for a discussion of this in relation to sexuality, see Scantling and Browder 1993). In principle, it would be possible to have accounts that focus on the creation of a new entity from the original individuals, which, as it were, embraces them, but the examples that were cited are by far dominated by those that report the annihilation of the original subject of the 1st person perspective or of both original individuals. Interviewees sometimes also suggest that one party merged into the other, or that a higher entity was present. Whatever the case, it is worth using an affirmative interpretive framework as well: when the accounts refer to the agencyless event of fusion or describe the emergence of a new limitless horizon, they are not so much referring to the creation of a new single person by combining existing persons, nor are they only referring to the destructive process of depersonalization, but also to the opening of a transpersonal dimension (for details on the precise meaning of ‘transpersonal’, see, e.g., Daniels 2013). To put it differently, it is not only about the decrease of self-identity or the disappearance of the ego, but also about what *ek-stasis* etymologically means: being beyond oneself. That which is beyond takes many forms, both (self-)transcendent and transcendental, but, in any case, it goes beyond the limits of the suspended ordinary ego. Unless we adopt a quasi-neutral, external perspective of a ‘view from nowhere’, we cannot claim that it is simply a matter of shared intentionality or joint action, but rather we must say of the modification of the participant’s existence as a whole which is ready to merge – and at some point in the merger, ‘sharing’ starts to lose its meaning.

In this section, we have sought to answer the question of whether it is possible to talk about SOSU, at least in some context. Let us remember that SOSU means that the original individuals cease to exist, i.e., in some way they dissolve into each other, or they dissolve in a higher entity. A long line of testimonies suggests that it is, if not yet ontologically, phenomenologically plausible to refer to the event of a strong sense of union. Zahavi claims that the ‘we’ is not something that can be observed and adequately described from the outside, the ‘we’ is something that is experienced from within (Zahavi 2023). Accordingly, we have paid attention to the accounts of the subjects of experience, leaving behind mere impressions or *a priori* assumptions. The accounts listed could be accused of being influenced by, for example, the Platonic or Romantic ideal, i.e., that prior and/or retrospective interpretation distorts experience, but the large number of consistent accounts makes this unlikely – the auto-phenomenological agreement is striking. In the light of all this, it seems totally inconceivable that contemporary theorists will want to argue also for SOSU. Anyway, in contrast, this article attempts to argue for a position

that is not held by anyone in contemporary philosophy. Make no mistake: we are not all suggesting that fusion events should serve as a standard for love in either a prescriptive or a descriptive sense.

***Unio mystica* as fusion**

If we want to expand our phenomenology, we could use quite a different set of examples in the context of love as union, namely, of the examples of *unio mystica* with God. Several examples will suffice. The following quote from Ruysbroeck assumes beyond doubt a complete union:

In this transcendent state the spirit feels in itself the eternal fire of love. [...] The spirit forever continues to burn in itself, for its love is eternal; and it feels itself more and more burnt up in love, for it is drawn and transported into the Unity of God, where the spirit burns in love. [...] It is undifferentiated and without distinction, and therefore it feels nothing but unity (1951: 185–6, cf. 244–46)

The following text of Bernard of Clairvaux is also relevant:

When will we experience this kind of love, so that the mind, drunk with divine love and forgetting itself, making itself like a broken vessel, should throw itself wholly on God and, clinging to God, become one with him in spirit [...]? [...] To lose yourself as though you did not exist and to have no sense of yourself and almost annihilated, belongs to heavenly not to human love (1987: 195).

Finally, the account of Francis Ludovicus Blosius is also apt: "The loving soul, as I have said, flows out of itself, and completely swoons away, and, as if brought to nothing, it sinks down into the abyss of divine love, dead to itself, it lives in God, knowing nothing, save only the love that it experiences" (1955: 84). In all of these cases, there is a strong, all-pervasive sense of love, and, furthermore, there is an elementary transformation, a metamorphosis of the soul that can eliminate the sense of self, even to the point of annihilation. Divine love appears here as the quasi-‘substance’ which, after the disappearance of differences, remains as the absolute constituent of total union. Although these quotes seem to have a self-evident meaning, there is some debate in the relevant literature about whether these descriptions really refer to complete fusion (Pike 1992: 33, 156). For our part, however, we are convinced that, after romantic love, we have now provided another example of total fusion, at least in the phenomenological sense.

Love as connection

There is a renewed debate in contemporary philosophy about the nature of relations, and the question of love is central to clarifying the dilemmas that arise (most of the discussions can be found here: Marmodoro-Yates 2016). We will not go into further details of these debates and the various views, but instead we are concerned with what they have

in common. First of all, it is that they do not consider love in its actual reality and in its entirety, but instead consider the mere mental states of the lovers. The lovers analyzed in these debates do nothing, they do not interact with their beloved, and they may not even see them. Of course, it should be acknowledged that it is not the intention of these theories to provide a satisfactory conceptualization of love, and that the feeling of love is for them merely an illustration of the more general problem of relations. Whatever the case, we are convinced that if we wish to contribute to the theory of the realization of love itself, we have to rely on alternative theoretical sources, namely the syndesiologic¹ quasi-tradition of the notion of connection as distinct from relation, which stretches through the Stoics and Peter Auriol, Ockham, Hume and Leibniz, to Baumgarten, Bergman and Whitehead (for a summary, see: Losoncz 2019).

In general, we consider it symptomatic that the analyzed accounts themselves literally refer to connection or connectedness. The first thing to note is that if we assume, roughly, that love is “an emotion through which we create for ourselves a little world – the loveworld, in which we play the roles of lovers” (Solomon 1981: 146), then we must add that without an extrinsically advenient cement this ‘little world’ would be disjointed. Connection is not merely having a certain attitude towards another, but a type of link between entities that creates a communion between them – it can be mere contact, which is maximum proximity without fusion, but it can also be fusion, which is a composition of two entities such that there is no discernible boundary left. In fact, there are many degrees of connectivity, and love can take many forms accordingly. Furthermore, loving connections seem to be potentially reflexive (the autoeroticism of flesh can perhaps be interpreted in this way), symmetric (unlike the loving relation, for which it is not true that if x is in love with y , then y is in love with x), oriented to somebody except for the complete fusion (mostly, they cannot be directionally neutral) and non-transitive (if x has a loving connection with y and y has a loving connection with z , then it is not necessary that x has also a loving connection with z). Moreover, from the fact that fulfilled love is seen first and foremost as a connection and not merely as a relation also follows that, unlike the external relation and the internal relation, connection as love necessarily implies change. While in many connections it is true that only one of the connected entities changes (as, for example, in the case of asymmetric connections), in the case of fulfilled love it is obvious that both entities undergo a metamorphosis.

In principle, the transformative power of connection can also manifest itself in different forms, for example, by coming into operation as individuating powers or even by the creation of new holistic entities which do not fall under the same sorts as the previously existed ones. This is roughly what Schmidt meant when she wrote in the context of love: “‘union’ in the moderate ontological sense can be understood as *a connection of two or more entities (in this case: of persons) where such a connection is more than the mere sum of the entities concerned*. In this regard, the original entities continue to exist as individual beings, but together they can be said to fuse or to form a new entity” (Schmidt 2017:

¹ As Nef explains, syndesiology is the science of connection (Nef 2017: 11).

710–711). That is, through the closest possible connection, a couple is created of which both members pays attention to the other's needs, they carry out actions in tandem, etc. This is precisely the transformative power of connection discussed above, but we differ from Schmidt in that we would consider the total fusion possible at least in the strong phenomenological sense, and would reserve the notion of fusion for those process for which previous individual entities do not persist, or in other words, cases where entities cohere in a way that "leaves no discernible boundary" (see Koons and Pickavance 2017: 509). It also follows that, while we have sympathy for suggestions that "phenomenological fusion" as plural awareness of a shared affective concern is possible (Schmid 2014: 9–11), we think this is a distortion of the notion of fusion and ignores the essential components of the fusion spectrum. Rather, Krebs (2010) is right when she argues – albeit critically, negatively – that phenomenal fusion implies that participants in shared emotions forget that they are separate persons, and confuse their identities with those of others. And even much closer to the model we advocate is a study on identity fusion (Páez and Rimé 2014), which, inspired by Durkheimian insights among others, talks about emotional communion or about perceived emotional synchrony by emphasizing that the experience "expands the self and opens it to experiences of self-transcendence with feelings of unity and social fusion" (*ibid.*: 207), so that participants may even feel that "I lost consciousness of myself," "I felt like I was transported out of myself," etc. (*ibid.*: 208).²

Of course, the experience of those who go through a complete love fusion requires a special syndesiology. First, there is a special case of blurring, since the distinctions between individuals are entirely eliminated. There is also an extreme difficulty of tracing, in so far as it is impossible or almost impossible to determine to whom an element of the love event (desire, belief, etc.) is attributable. Finally, however, it should be noted that there does not seem to be the problem of what Inwagen called fastenation (1990: 56), whereby unified entities can be separated in only a few ways without breaking up or distorting them. It would be more accurate to say that the partial separation happens by itself as the merger event fades away.

Conclusion

In opposition to the consensual contemporary philosophical resistance to full fusion in which individuals cease to exist as separate entities, we have sought to show, by drawing on auto-phenomenological accounts of those experiencing sexual union and mystical union, that there are certain contexts in which it is worthwhile to talk about lovers being one, that is, that a complete union has been established between them. Research on transpersonal and altered states of consciousness has helped us to understand that there are also degrees of union, from full fusion to more 'modest' forms, and we have added

² I am particularly grateful to my colleague Igor Cvejić from the University of Belgrade, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory for his suggestions on social fusion.

to this insight the philosophical point that it is the notion of connection through which this gradualness is worth grasping. One challenge for future research is to reconcile the ontological and phenomenological perspectives of fusion. We are convinced that the concept of connection, which could allow us to integrate aspects of both perspectives, can be crucial in this respect.

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