

'LOVE IN RELIGION': THE 'FRONTIER ISSUES'

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Martha Nussbaum describes compassion as 'the basic social emotion'. The viability of all human societies depends on our human capacity to put the other first, even in small ways. 'Heroic' and exceptional forms of compassionate love, which are often associated with world religions, are the rich instantiation of what is an everyday phenomenon between human beings - those who know each other and those who don't - without which human social viability begins to break down. The recognition of love is intrinsic to our humanity, but we also set it apart. In world religions there is the intuition that strong love manifests our human ultimacy and indeed that in love the reality of our universe is disclosed among us. But understanding *what love is* becomes a considerable challenge. It is only through studying the forms of love's objectification in the world that we can stand outside the love that makes us what we are, and so begin to develop a more far-reaching understanding of love. But beyond its objectification in the shared thematisation and practices of love in world religions, where else is our human love objectified? Where else can it be studied?

We naturally look to science for important forms of objectification. But scientific knowledge, while authoritative, is also highly specialized. Love on the other hand, if we are to follow the religious objectification of love, concerns our human wholeness, as ultimacy and universal reality. It seems then that science on its own cannot objectify human wholeness, since it cannot escape the limits of its own specialization which is intrinsic to the scientific method. But in a parallel way, we cannot expect the humanistic disciplines to attain through interpretation the same authoritative objectifications that science can give.

But science as we know never stands still, and very new science may be opening up perspectives on love with implications for new, and significant, levels in the objectification of love. The two innovative scientific developments concerned are evolutionary anthropology and the neuroscience of social cognition. Evolutionary anthropology with its 'extended evolutionary synthesis' (EES) is currently replacing Neo-Darwinism as the dominant form within evolutionary theory. EES allows a behavioral dimension within natural selection, which can also be characterised as the process of 'niche construction' (NC). With its developmental plasticity and developmental bias, the organism itself is now recognized to play an active part in its own future, through the interactive formation of its niche. NC in turn becomes part of its genetic and epigenetic inheritance. This emphasis upon behavior in EES underlines our capacity for 'hyper-cooperation' (HC) as being central to our human survival and as distinctive to our lineage (we are the sole surviving hominin species out of 30 or so). Broadly speaking, the evolutionary history of our HC, within NC and EES, is also the human story of our inherited capacity for everyday and exceptional love.

The neuroscience of social cognition (SC) has its origins in the 1970s with the development of an understanding of information processing in distinctively social contexts. More recently, it has become a clinical field of science that is associated with the study of Autism (where deficits in social information processing occur). Unlike the temporal dimension of evolutionary anthropology, SC engages with our sociality from an anatomical

perspective of space, analysing the distribution of socially stimulated activation in discrete areas of the brain. We can regard SC then as potentially offering insights into the present, internal structure of what EES understands to be our ancient HC.

As a discipline close to archaeology, evolutionary anthropology appears to have little to do with the neuroscience of SC with its base in clinical, medical practice. Certainly, until recently they have shown little contact with each other. What contact there has been is in the theorizing religion on the basis of cognitive and evolutionary structures (e.g. Ara Norenzayan and 'Big Gods' theory). The first key 'frontier issue' confronting us then is the combination of evolutionary theory in the form of EES, NC and HC with the neuroscience of SC. The integration of these two fields may open the way to a new, enhanced objectification of love.

The point that such an integration of these two quite separate scientific fields may be very difficult to achieve will be well made however. Arguably, such an integration would presuppose that the human person herself comes into view, as both evolved and present, both an observable 'other' and sentient consciousness. The very possibility of *qualia* presupposes an underlying unity of the human such that my sense perceptions are not your sense perceptions, for instance, and my acts are not your acts. If the current scientific literature on the neurological 'self' is to be followed, then a scientific justification of an integrated, evolved and present personal self may not be realizable.

But since EES and SC both agree that they are concerned with our primary human sociality, there is surely scope for optimism that such a shared focus in what is as fundamental and distinctive to us as our human sociality can in fact find a point of integration precisely where our sociality is in play: even perhaps in our capacity for love. It may be important to emphasize that we may be looking here not for an abstract unified 'self' as such but rather for a specific functionality or set of complex functions within which a certain *identifiability* or unity of the self appears to manifest. A 'science of love' may point to a movement towards the other, or a point at which we choose to internalize the other.

Moreover, there is a hint in both EES and SC as to what that functionality might be. Both assume the importance of language for human sociality, for instance, but neither is able precisely to 'locate' our advanced language and so advanced linguistic consciousness (ALC). SC primarily studies pre-thematic, pre-linguistic, interactive reflex responses in the 'primitive' Social Neural Network and Mirror Neuron System, while evolutionary theory generally resists dating the full emergence of the linguisticity that supports ALC, and there are disputes too around what distinguishes it (logical and semantic 'recursion' or the internalisation of thousands of random verbal signs?). The scholar trained in Arts and Humanities is unsurprised at this ambivalence not only in the light of the fact that advanced language is for us the mode of objectification (and so how can it be itself objectified?), but also since we are all already committed to linguistic practices (as poets, car dealers, A&H scholars or scientists), none of us can claim to have a 'clean-slate' to work from. It may be that language is so difficult to objectify scientifically since it is itself the creative medium of our functional 'unity'. We express who we are through the ways in which we use language, becoming who we will be, discovering ourselves as both particular and *identifiable*.

If it is indeed the case that in modern human beings (ALC) our capacity to use words is closely bound up with our capacity to love, then the ways in which our capacity both to use language and to love as these come into view at the macro-level in world religions may become a much more powerful form of objectification than it has hitherto been. We may be close to a new understanding not only of the human in our capacity to love, but also of

religions as specific social and cultural modes of the expression of what makes us ultimately human. Words and love, we recall, can both make a legitimate claim to being responsible (or free).

We encounter our second 'frontier issue' then at the point where the combination of the temporal perspective in EES and the spatial in SC begin to combine in ways that are mutually illuminating and this new integration of the two perspectives begins to engage with the macro-level data of world religions. A series of questions find their focus at the point where a scientific understanding of language and hermeneutical philosophies of language meet. In terms of the former, language is a semantic system of material signs which are lodged according to their material properties in voxals of the late-developing neocortex, which encompasses both sides of the brain. This is a separate though related system from the much earlier social system identified by SC. Moreover, EES identifies our advanced language as being associated both with ancient hominin social grooming on the one hand and with tool-use on the other. To the former it owes its power of bonding and to the latter its power of ordering, controlling, hierarchalizing and attacking. As a 'global workspace', ALC can switch off our social cognition system, channel it, or enhance it. At the very heart of our human language then, we can discern a tension between a controlling and a bonding function.

From an evolutionary perspective the rise in modern language is linked with changes in our social environment, especially through territorialism and township settlements, bringing a need for social cohesion within larger groups. The earliest signs of world religions also date to the early Neolithic. These become a strongly cohesive force, perhaps reflecting the origins of language in bonding, but they also generate the capacity to designate 'out' groups as not fully human, and so as subject to violence. This may reflect the more ambivalent origin of language in tool use. Our second 'frontier issue' then concerns the relation between EES and SC from the perspective of our advanced human language and in particular how language is used in religions. This may be through the material properties of the sign, accessing and channelling the social cognition system: suggesting ritualized processes as dance, rhythm, chant, calligraphy, or singing. From the perspective of love and its communication across time, this may also involve processes of *lectio divina* and mystical texts which can project intense experiences of love across the centuries through the use of a distinctively transformational language that is saturated with human and divine intimacy. How comparable are the structures of different religious mystical traditions in the light of our new understanding of the social cognition system. But there is the possibility too of the internalisation of the language of sacred texts, particularly those which convey precepts which govern values and practice. Many religious texts convey ethical imperatives that have to be thought through within the concrete situations of life and thoroughly internalized. There are substantial questions here regarding whether the kind of practical, prudential or even 'social' reasoning that arises from these imperatives resonates with the participative and processive reasoning of the body's own social cognition system. Activation of the mPFC in both linguistic and pre-linguistic social reasoning points to the possibility of a certain 'convergence' here.

Finally, we need to take account of the fact that there are mechanisms of potential and actual harmonisation in play here between our ALC, with its potential for both instrumentalisation and grooming, and the open, inclusive social embodiment that we inherit from our lineage. The latter constitutes the strongest form of our rootedness in life and so too the ultimacy and intimacy of our belonging in this universe. Moreover, these

harmonising mechanisms may be particularly involved in the phenomenon of love (as the mind 'returns' to the body which gives it life, through its free, patient and vulnerable assent to the body's 'option for the other'). Since the scientific emphasis on the material nature of the sign, and so also of ALC, gives emphasis to the potential harmonic materiality of the convergence of ALC and our social embodiment, we can begin to ask questions too about 'what grounds are there for thinking that love, in religious consciousness and practice today, is the ultimate reality of the universe?'. Here again EES will be important as we begin to place language within NC, as bringing about a form of internal NC which is the ground of the HC that shapes our external human niche. The role of religions in this higher level of integration, and of the intensity of consciousness, involving both a cosmic (imaginative) and an internal (ethical) form of NC, becomes important here. This brings us before a third 'frontier issue'. Here there is a place for a comparative theological study of how religions image that ultimate reality and its transformational power in terms not only of a simultaneous cosmic and internal form of NC, but in terms too of our ultimate and intimate belonging in this universe as 'open' human beings.

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