

Humberto Maturana Reflexionen über Liebe. *Z. System Ther.* 3 : 129-31. 1985.

## **Reflections on Love**

Whenever I speak of love, my audience, however this may be composed, becomes uneasy. *Love* is a dangerous word. It seems that we usually think that love is too human to be accessible to the reflections of a scientist. But, is it indeed so?

What I think is the following:

Living systems may interact with each other recurrently. If they do so their ontogenic structural drifts, that is, the paths followed by their continuous structural changes, follow courses contingent to their recurrent interactions, and their ontogenies become coontogenies or coontogenic structural drifts. As a result an observer may see coordinations of actions which, if they constitute recursive coordinations of actions upon coordinations of actions, become language. But at the same time what an observer sees are social phenomena, that is, phenomena of coexistence, of living together in a domain of coordinations of behavior in which the life of the participants is involved as such. Socialization results from recurrence of interactions that result in living together in a coontogenic structural drift, and language is a manner of living together. Yet, how come that living systems interact recurrently? How come that we human beings interact recurrently and become social, and even languaging entities?

My contention is that we human beings interact recurrently under circumstantial constraints (external pressure), out of intentional design with the purpose of obtaining something, or spontaneously, out of no reason, in the pleasure of it. Indeed, it is my contention that this latter case, the recurrence of interactions in the spontaneity of pleasure without justifications, is the phenomenon of socialization. Or, in other words, it is my contention that social phenomena are the phenomena of coexistence that take place when living systems spontaneously interact recurrently with each other in the flow of their living just because it happens to them in their conservation of organization and adaptation. Moreover, I claim that this spontaneity of recurrence of interactions in living systems is expression of their circumstantial structural congruence: two or more living systems begin to interact recurrently with each other because they spontaneously fit together in the dimensions of the domain in which their recurrent interactions take place.

I claim that this condition of spontaneous dynamic reciprocal fitting that gives rise to recurrent interactions with conservation of individual organization and reciprocal adaptation along the ontogeny of living systems, while it lasts, is the phenomenon that we call *love* in the human domain. Or, in other words, I am saying that love is the spontaneous dynamic condition of acceptance by a living system of its coexistence with another (or others) living systems, and that as such love is a biological phenomenon that requires no justification: love is a spontaneous dynamic reciprocal fitting, a happening that either takes place or does not. As a spontaneous dynamic reciprocal fitting, love either occurs or does not occur. If love occurs, there is socialization, if it does not occur, there is no socialization. Furthermore, I am also saying that as such love is expression of a spontaneous structural congruence that constitutes a beginning that can be expanded or restricted, and even disappear, in the coontogenic structural drift that begins to take place when it takes place. And, since I say that social phenomena are the phenomena that take place in the spontaneous coontogenic structural drift, I am also saying that love is the fundament of social phenomena and not its consequence, and that social phenomena in any domain of interactions last only as long as love lasts in that domain.

I can also say this in a slightly different manner when speaking specifically about what happens with us human beings in this respect:

Love consists in opening a space of existence for an other in coexistence with oneself in a particular domain of interactions. As such love is expression of a spontaneous biological congruence and has no rational justification: love takes place because it takes place and lasts as long as it lasts. Also love is always at first sight, even when it appears after circumstances of existential constraints that force recurrent interactions; and this is so because it takes place only when there is an encounter in structural congruence, and not before. Finally, love is the source of human socialization, not a result of it, and anything that destroys love, anything that destroys the structural congruence that it entails, destroys socialization. Socialization is the result of operation in love, and takes place only in the domain where love takes place.

There are several difficulties for understanding or accepting what I say about love, of which I shall mention two:

- a) We like love to be something special, and to say that it is such a humble biological phenomenon as a mere structural congruence that results in the recurrence of interactions is not pleasant, it destroys a myth. Love is not a special human phenomenon, but in humans it may take place in such few dimensions as those involved in the simple coexistence of going together in a train in mutual respect, or it may take place in many dimensions as when two persons live together as a loving couple, or it may even take place in the peculiar dimensions of coexistence in which one may live with a pet. What is especially human in love is not love, but what we do in love as humans.
- b) We like love to be a consequence of socialization, not its source because we like relations that destroy love, such as competition, to be legitimate social relations. Competition is antisocial, competition as a human activity entails the negation of the other by closing its domain of existence in the domain of competing: competing negates love. Members of modern cultures praise competition as a source of progress. I think that competition generates blindness because it negates the other and reduces creativity reducing the circumstances of coexistence. The anthropological origin of homo sapiens is not through competition but through cooperation, and cooperation can only take place as a spontaneous activity through mutual acceptance, that is, through love.

What makes us human beings is our particular way of living together as social beings in language. And in this particular way of coexistence that makes us humans, love is the biological phenomenon that permits us to escape from the antisocial alienations that we bring forth through our rationalizations. It is through reason that we justify tyranny, the destruction of nature or human abuse in the defense of our possessions, material or ideological. We justify tyranny by claiming that other human beings should obey our whims about truth or reality because we possess a privileged access to them; it is through reason that we justify the destruction of nature in its subordination to our designs because we possess it; and it is through reason that we claim that human life should be subordinated to some transcendental purpose. But love, the biological claim that makes us accept the presence of the other besides us without reason, brings us back to socialization and changes the reference of our rationalizations. The acceptance of the other without demands is the enemy of tyranny and abuse because opens a space for cooperation. Love is the enemy of appropriation.

If we accept the other, we can justify his or her presence with reasons that validate his or her presence: love or not love commands, and social ethics begins there. We human beings are not rational animals, we human beings are animals that use reason, language, to justify our emotions, whims, desires... and in the process we devalue them because we do not see that our emotions specify the domain of rationality that we use in our justifications. But at the same time we are animals that through reason, through language, can become aware of their emotions, and thus experience their change, and in this love is central. We exist as human beings in social existence, and language, reason and self-consciousness arise and take place as social phenomena: without socialization there is no language, no reason, no self-consciousness, no awareness of emotions, and without love we are not social beings.

This is not an apology of love. This is only an invitation to reflect on the biological condition that is at the base of humanity. I am not even recommending love, I am only saying that without love as a spontaneous biological phenomenon there is no socialization, and this is not trivial in human life.

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