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The Romantic Concept of Love

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that there are four central features of the concept of love among the German romantics. These are: 1) an opposition to dualism, whether between the mental and physical or the spiritual and sexual; 2) an insistence that love be based on individuality; 3) a commitment to the social and political importance of love; and 4) a belief in the religious or metaphysical dimension of love.

Keywords: German romanticism, love, Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, Schleiermacher

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article défend l'idée selon laquelle le concept romantique de l'amour se caractérise par quatre traits principaux : 1) une opposition au dualisme, le dualisme du mental et du physique, du spirituel et du sexuel ; 2) une insistance sur le fait que l'amour doive reposer sur l'indivi-dualité ; 3) un engagement en faveur de l'importance sociale et politique de l'amour ; et 4) une croyance en la dimension religieuse ou métaphysique de l'amour.

Mots-clés : romantisme allemand, amour, Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, Schleiermacher

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For the German romantics, there is no more important concept than love.[1] The very name "romantic" seems to imply as much. The concept appears constantly in the writings of the young romantics, especially those of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis and Schleiermacher. Love was the dominant concept of their ethics, their politics and their religion. In his novel *Lucinde* Friedrich Schlegel wrote of "*die Religion der Liebe*".[2] That phrase perfectly encapsulates the romantics' new *credo* and worldview.

The romantic concept of love was innovative, indeed revolutionary in its day. It has also been highly influential. In fundamental respects, it has laid down the foundations for our own *modern* concept of love. When we think about love today, we betray our romantic roots. We believe that marriage should be based on love; we demand that love should be free, unconstrained by convention, tradition and authority; we assume that love expresses the innermost desires and feelings of the individual; we suppose that the object of love is not an abstract ideal but a unique individual; and we recognize that the quest for love might involve having many partners. All these are very modern assumptions; but they are also *romantic* assumptions. They began with the romantic movement in the late 18th century. Today, whether we recognize it or not, we are all romantics.

For all its importance and influence, it is not easy to pin down the meaning of the romantic concept of love. The romantics gave the term many meanings, where its meaning depends on its specific context and use. They never define the concept; nor do they analyze it into its sufficient and necessary conditions. If we are to understand what the romantics mean by "love" (*Liebe*), we have to *reconstruct* its meaning from many scattered sources and contexts, each of which stands in need of reconstruction.

Reduced down to its simplest elements, there are four central features of the romantic concept of love: 1) its opposition to dualism, whether between the mental and physical or the spiritual and sexual; 2) its insistence that love be based on individuality; 3) its commitment to the social and political importance of love; and 4) its belief in the religious or metaphysical dimension of love. We will examine each of these elements in turn.

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[1] This piece was first presented at the 18th annual NYU Conference on Issues in Modern Philosophy: Love and Friendship, November 10, 2023. I would like to thank the organizers for their invitation.

[2] *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe,* ed. Ernst Behler *et. al.* (Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1979), V, 12. (Abbreviated KA.)

1. Opposition to Dualism

When we compare the romantic concept of love with the Christian or neo-Platonic traditions, its most salient feature is its opposition to the dualism characteristic of these traditions. Love does not take place in a purely ideal or spiritual realm where it transcends everything physical; rather, it has its roots in the physical realm, which is transformed into the spiritual. The romantics are therefore utterly opposed to the separation of the ideal and the real, the mental and the physical, the spiritual and the sexual. Friedrich Schlegel gave emphatic and explicit expression to this opposition when he wrote: "The total separation and fragmentation of human powers, which are only healthy in free unification, is the real original sin of modern culture."[3] Novalis too rejected dualism when he said that "The opposition between body and spirit is one of the most conspicuous and dangerous…"[4] And Schleiermacher, no less an opponent of dualism, claimed that the ideal of human perfection was "the unification of a high degree of the sensitivity of feeling with a high degree of the consciousness of reason."[5]

Contrary to dualism, the romantics insist that love is *the unity* of the mental and physical, the ideal and the real, the spiritual and the sexual. The spiritual must be sexualized, the sexual must be spiritualized. Love cannot be entirely spiritual, as if the sexual were only an impurity; but it also cannot be completely physical, as if it were only a matter of sexual pleasure. For the romantics, love is the realization of the *whole* human being, where all aspects of humanity are redeemed and united into an indivisible whole.

We can characterize the romantic concept of love as a *via media* between the Christian and empiricist traditions. The Christian tradition made love entirely spiritual; the empiricist tradition saw love as completely physical because it was equated with the feeling of pleasure. The romantics oppose these extremes by insisting that love is *both* spiritual and physical, that it is the *interdependence* of these elements. If the spirit of love must be embodied, the body of love must be spiritualized.

The romantics stress the importance of the physical dimension of love, and even teach that its spiritual dimension has its roots in the sexual or physical. However, they refuse to reduce its spiritual to its sexual or physical dimension. What makes any empiricist reduction fail, in their view, is that the empiricists cannot explain even the *experience* of love, which is their

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3 Review of Jacobi's *Woldemar*, KA II, 58.

4 Novalis, *Fragmente und Studien*, in *Novalis, Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe*, ed. Hans-Joachim Mähl and Richard Samuel (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1978), II, 836.

5 Schleiermacher, *An Cecilie*, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Hans-Joachim Birkner et.al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988) I/1, 200-1. (Henceforth abbreviated as KGA.)

foundation for the concept. The experience of love for the romantics consists in *longing (Sehnen)*, which is more than mere desire. It is the *striving* for unity, the *need* for wholeness, where that unity or wholeness is achieved only in and through another person. The object of longing is therefore not just pleasure, a mere feeling; rather, it is a whole state of being, unity or wholeness with the other.

The romantics developed their concept of love in reaction against two 18th century novels, Rousseau's *Julie* (1761) and Jacobi's *Woldemar* (1794).[6] Both Rousseau and Jacobi conceive the ideal relationship for their heroes as Platonic friendship, where male and female sublimate their sexual feelings onto a higher intellectual plane. They wanted their readers to believe that sex was not only demeaning but also dispensable for friendship, which is the true ideal of love. The romantics, however, were not buying it. They found St. Preux's relationship to Julie, or Woldemar's relationship to Henriette, oppresssive, affected and self-deceptive. The sexual needs of Julie and Henriette were natural and irrepressible, just as much in need of satisfaction as those of their male partners.

2. Entwinement of Individualities

Another basic feature of the romantic concept of love is individuality. Love, the romantics maintain, consists in the awareness and appreciation of someone's individuality, i.e., what is unique to, and singular about, a person. The object of love is not, therefore, an ideal, a perfect form, which is common to many individuals; rather, it is the individual alone, the concrete particular person.

The experience of love involves, therefore, the entwinement of personalities, where lover and beloved discover, express and explore their distinctive personal characteristics through one another. These characteristics are only implicit or potential before the experience; but through it they become explicit and actualized. Love is the stimulus for individuality, the means and instrument for our awareness of it; but it is also an end in itself, that for the sake of which we develop our individualities.

For the romantics, the most valuable characteristic of a human being is not their rationality, still less their sensuality, but their individuality. Rationality and sensuality are universal qualities which everyone has as a human being, so that they are common or familiar. But individuality differs with each individual, so that it is rare or unique. The concept of individuality

[6] Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse, Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1964), II, 6-741; and Jacobi, *Woldemar,* in *Werke* (Leipzig: Gerhard Fleischer, 1820), V.

seems to isolate and separate human beings from one another, so that people have to develop their individuality on their own. But the romantics insist that we develop our individuality only in and through others, through the give and take of social interaction. Individuality is the glue that makes a society cohere, that forms it into an organic whole.

Individuality was the central concept of romantic ethics, its distinguishing feature from the two major ethical traditions of the late 18th and early 19th century, namely, utilitarianism and the Kantian-Fichtean ethics of duty.[7] Their ethics of individuality was a reaction against both these traditions, which had failed to recognize the importance of individuality. The utilitarians gave supreme importance to happiness, in the attainment of which individuality played no necessary role. The Kantian-Fichtean ethics stressed the importance of ratio-nality, of acting on universal principles which are valid for everyone alike. Individuality had no place, therefore, in the formulation or performance of duty. Fichte even went so far to say that the goal of ethics was to eradicate indivi-duality, so that all people would become identical in a perfectly rational society.[8]

An important corollary of the romantic concept of love was the repudiation of sexual roles or stereotypes. If love is a realization of individuality, then it must not involve conformity to stereotypes, which are generic ways of acting. Friedrich Schlegel realized this perfectly well when he said that masculinity need not involve activity, and femininity need not involve passivity; there would be only true freedom, he wrote, when men explore their passivity and women their activity.[9] This rejection of sexual stereotypes is one of the most modern aspects of the romantic concept of love.

The romantic concept of love was first formulated in the late 18th century. One of the essential stages in its development came from the discussion of the concept of love in the writings of the Dutch philosopher Franz Hemsterhuis. In his *Lettre sur les désirs,*[10] Hemsterhuis put forward the thesis that the goal of the longing soul was complete unification with its object, so that there is no separation at all between lover and beloved.

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7 The *locus classicus* for the romantic concept of individuality is Schleiermacher's *Monologen* (Berlin: Spener, 1800), 40-1.

8 See his *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten* in *Werke,* ed. I.H. Fichte (Berlin: Vet & Comp, 1845.1846), VI, 310.

9 Schlegel, *Ueber die Philosophie,* KA VIII, 46. See also Schlegel, *Ueber die Diotima,* KA I, 93.

10 Franz Hemsterhuis, *Lettre sur les désirs* (Paris, 1770). See the German translation, 'Ueber das Verlangen', *Vermischten philosophischen Schriften des Herrn Hemsterhuis* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1797).

Hemsterhuis argued that the soul could not attain this goal completely, because in its present state on earth its striving was limited by the need to use organs and media, which separated it from its object. Love did *not* involve individuality for Hemsterhuis because complete union with its object means the removal of all individuality, which separates one person from another.

One of the first reactions to Hemsterhuis's theory came from a proto-romantic thinker, Johann Gottfried Herder. In an article in the *Teutsche Merkur,*[11] he argued that love could not be the complete identity of lover and beloved because then there would be no one to benefit from the experience; lover and beloved would just disappear in a total unity. Love required not only the moment of unity or identity, Herder argued, but also the moment of separation, where lover and beloved retained their distinctive identities apart from their fusion. Love therefore required something paradoxical, Herder concluded, namely, identity-in-difference, unity-in-plurality.

The lessons of Herder's article were not lost upon another proto-romantic thinker, one whom we do not usually regard as a romantic at all: G.W.F. Hegel. We usually think of Hegel in his later years when he engaged in a hostile critique of romanticism, specifically Schlegel's concepts of irony and divine egoism. But in his early years, those from the late 1790s to early 1800s, Hegel was very much part of the romantic movement, a close ally of his romantic friends, Schelling and Hölderlin. Some of Hegel's early manuscripts from this period reflect on the concept of love.[12] Hegel develops the thesis that love consists in identity-in-difference, not only the union of lovers but also the different identities between them. Out of these reflections grew Hegel's famous concept of spirit (*Geist*), which involved the moments of unity and difference in the concept of love. This concept of identity-in-difference is notoriously obscure and it seems to be utterly mystical; but we can begin to understand it if we regard it as what it originally intended to be: an analysis of the necessary and sufficient conditions of love.[13]

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[11] Herder, *Liebe und Selbstheit, Der Teutsche Merkur,* December 1781, 211-235. Cf. *Johann Gottfried Herder, Werke* (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), IV, 405-424.

[12] These fragments, which are identified by their *incipit,* are '*Positiv wird ein Glaube genannt…*', which was written in July 1797, *Werke* I, 239-3; '*…so wie sie mehrere Gattungen kennenlernen…*', *Werke* I, 243-4, which was written in the summer of 1797; and '*…welchem Zweck denn alles Uebrige dient…*', *Werke* I, 244-50, whose first draft was written around November 1797, and whose second draft was written around autumn-winter 1798. References to *Werke* are to the *Werkausgabe* edition, ed. Evan Moldenhauer and K. Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970).

[13] See my *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 110-123.

3. Social and Political Commitment

The romantics were so enamoured with the concept of love that they even made it the basis of society and state. The bonds of society and state should be formed by love, they believed, rather than forged by law. Society and state should be more like a family, held together by affection, than like a business, formed by self-interest. This *social* and political role of love was conceived by Schlegel in his lectures on *Transcendentalphilosophie,* by Novalis in his *Glauben und Liebe,* and by Schleiermacher in his *Brouillon zur Ethik.*[14]

It seems wildly idealistic, even fantastic, to make love the basis of society and state, for love is very limited in its extent, restricted to those I know and have affection for. I can *respect* my fellow citizens, it seems, but I can hardly *love* them. I respect my mailman and my lawyer, and I might even like them; but I do not love them. Love seems more appropriate for a sect or club; but nothing as large as society or the state.

But this common objection against the romantic theory fails to understand, I think, the object of love: it is not the individual person, or even the mass of persons, but the social or political body as a whole. Political bodies or groups can be individuals no less than persons. A society, state, community or country can be individual too because they are wholes or unities which have unique or *sui generis* characteristics. There can be love for such individuals too, because we also speak of love of a country, a nation or a land. Love in this sense involves feelings of affection, just as love of a person does. Such love is called patriotism, an affection which they romantics admired and fostered.

The romantics viewed love as the antithesis to, and antidote for, self-interest, which was the competing theory of the basis of the state. They were hearty opponents of social contract doctrine, which made self-interest the basis of the state. The problem with self-interest, the romantics argued, is that it cannot secure allegiance to the state if the interest of the individual is threatened. A completely self-interested individual will not obey the law in any case that requires self-sacrifice, for example, in cases of paying taxes or wartime. The romantics had historical experience with this problem, having seen how, in 1806, the Prussian army, composed of conscripts and mercenaries, collapsed in the face of the French.

The great advantage of making love the basis of society and state, the romantics argued, is that love is freely given, flowing from the heart of the

[14] Schlegel, *Transcendentalphilosophie,* KA XII, 52-3, 70-1; Novalis, *Glauben und Liebe, Werke,* II, 300-1; and Schleiermacher, *Brouillon zur Ethik (1805/06),* ed. Hans-Joachim Birkner, (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1981), pp. 49, 56, 59.

individual, whereas the law applies constraint, punishing those who disobey it. Love cannot be commanded, it is often said; but that it is its strength, not its weakness. For this reason, the romantic thought of love is the ally of freedom. While the law punishes wrong-doers, love forgives them, and in forgiving them sets them free.

The romantics saw love as the basis for all the "sympathetic virtues", i.e., virtues like sympathy, kindness, charity and benevolence. These were for them the most basic virtues, the heart of any *Tugendlehre.* They were less disposed to a *Pflichtenlehre,* and were completely opposed to Kant's moral philosophy because it made all virtues into duties. A duty made an action or practice onerous, presupposing that one had an inclination *not* to do it, and prescribing penalties for all failures in execution.

4. The Metaphysical Dimension

The fourth and final characteristic of the romantic concept of love is its religious or metaphysical dimension. This is the least modern characteristic of the romantic concept, which never renounced its Christian heritage. This religious or metaphysical dimension appears as soon as we put the experience of love in its cosmic context. When two individuals fall in love, they not only exchange personal feelings; the experience is not only about them. This is because no feeling is purely personal, a property of the individual alone; feelings take place in the cosmos and they are therefore also manifestations of the universe as a whole. When I love you, God also loves you through me.

This religious dimension is clear and emphatic in all three romantic authors. Schlegel writes that "the sense of the world" becomes clear to us only through love,[15] and that love, like nature, is to be referred to divinity.[16] Novalis tells us that "the heart is the key to life and the world", that love is "the final goal of history", "the one of the universe" and that "God is love".[17] And Schleiermacher is perfectly explicit: "God must be in the lovers; their embrace is really his enclosure, which they together feel and later will. I do not admit any pleasure in love without this enthusiasm and without the mystical…"[18]

We are inclined to see the religious dimension of the romantic concept of love as its most self-indulgent and extravagant aspect. It is enough to make

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15 *Lucinde,* KA V, 67.
16 *Transcendentalphilosophie,* KA XII, 54.
17 Novalis, *Vorarbeiten, Werke* II 396, and *Das Allgemeine Brouillon, Werke* II, 480 and 486.
18 Schleiermacher, *Vertraute Briefe über Friedrich Schlegels Lucinde* (Lübeck: Friedrich Bohn, 1800), p. 44.

a positivist cringe. And yet it is the necessary consequence of perfectly plausible premises. To understand how, let us take a brief look at romantic metaphysics.

The romantics' religious conception of love is ultimately rooted in their metaphysics, specifically, their *Naturphilosophie* or philosophy of nature, which was formulated chiefly by Schelling in the late 1790s and early 1800s.[19] *Natur-philosophie* was first and foremost a rejection of Cartesian dualism, which was based on a specific concept of matter. Descartes saw matter as sheer extension, as what occupied space; matter was inert, in the sense that it could not move unless it was moved upon. Toward the end of the 18th century, this concept of matter hit upon hard times—it could not explain the new phenomena of magnetism and electricity—and it was eventually rejected in favor of a more dynamic concept, one which saw motion as central to matter, as part of its very essence. This new dynamic concept already blurred the distinction between *life* and matter, and ultimately that between *mind* and matter. According to Aristotle, what is characteristic of life is its power of self-movement; but it was just self-movement that seemed involved in the dynamic concept of matter. The mind now seemed to be a higher degree of organization and development of the living powers of the body; and, conversely, matter was only a lower degree of organization and development of the living powers of the mind. The mediating concept between mind and body here is living force, *vis viva*, which is the power of self-movement inherent in matter.

The father of this dynamic view of matter was Leibniz, who developed it in reaction against the mechanical physics of Descartes. The concept was further developed by Herder, who made it the basis of his organic concept of nature. Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* grew out of the dynamic view of matter first developed by Leibniz and then popularized by Herder. The romantics in turn adopted Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* as their own philosophy of nature.

We must place the romantic concept of love within this organic concept of nature. Their acceptance of *Naturphilosophie* explains how they could maintain the physical basis of love without lapsing into materialism, given that force, which has its highest manifestation and development in love, is inherent in matter itself. It also shows how the experience of love could be part of nature as a whole. Since I am part of nature, and since nature forms an organic whole, every part of which is inseparable from it, my feelings are

[19] See Schelling, *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* (Breitkopf und Härtel, 1797), in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1857), II, 74-343; and *Von der Weltseele* (Hamburg: Perthes, 1798), II, 379-583.

a product of nature herself; they are indeed an expression, manifestation or revelation of her living powers. Even if I am not aware of nature acting through me, it is still doing so because I am part of her.

For love to have a religious dimension, we only have to add a pantheistic concept of God to this organic concept of nature. The whole of nature that acts through me, and that forms an inseparable unity, is infinite because there is nothing outside it. But if it is infinite, we can then regard it as God itself.

All the romantics—Schlegel, Schleiermacher and Novalis—were Spinozists and pantheists in this sense. They believed in the infinity of nature as well as the organic concept of nature. They were therefore perfectly justified in attributing a religious dimension to the experience of love. What two lovers saw in one another is what God saw in and through them; their love was the manifestation of all the dynamic powers of nature, which is nothing less than the revelation of God.

Extravagant metaphysics? Perhaps. Self-indulgent mysticism? Perhaps that too. But there was a rhyme and reason to it all. It was at least consistent, a valid consequence from two plausible premises: an organic concept of nature and pantheism. Add these premises together, and we have to see love in a cosmic, indeed religious, context. Love becomes nothing less than the *self*-revelation of God through you and me.

So, there you have it. The romantic concept of love in its entirety, in all its four dimensions: 1) the non dualistic, 2) the individual, 3) the social-political and 4) the metaphysical. As far as I know, there are no other dimensions. But these are surely enough. The presence of these four dimensions should show you what a rich, complex and dense concept the romantic concept of love was.