

THE DIFFICULT ENCOUNTER BETWEEN TENDERNESS AND SENSUALITY IN SEXUALITY. THE ROLE OF THE IMAGINATION

Antonello Correale

Sexuality has always been a difficult part of human experience and a complex subject to address from a scientific perspective. This difficulty stems from the fact that several different themes converge in sexuality, including sensuality, narcissism, the search for intimacy, the relationship between body and mind, aggressiveness and power.

Here, however, I would like to focus on one particular aspect of this theme, which I will call 'the difficult encounter' in sexuality between tenderness and sensuality. Clinical practice provides us with countless experiences of men and women who feel tender love for a partner but enjoy no sexual pleasure with them, or subjects who find intense sexual pleasure with people with whom they feel no meaningful connection. In some cases, intimacy, the need for protection, the emotion provoked by the fragility of the other can be a real obstacle to sexual investment. In some other cases, sexual investment seems to want to dispense with all feelings such as tenderness, affection, gentleness, and to let itself be swept away by an excessive and irresistible impulse, almost to lose itself in it.

In an important work of 1912, 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love' (SE XI), the second of his three contributions to the psychology of love, Freud asks why it is so common in clinical practice to find many men, but also a number of women, who, while feeling passionate love for their partner, then seek sexual satisfaction with subjects they consider inferior or even contemptible. In the same work, Freud points to the overly tender and intimate attachment to the mother as an obstacle to the free expression of sexuality. The question, I think, can be expressed in terms of the difficulty of bringing together, of finding a synthesis, a harmony, a congruence, between tenderness and sensuality in sexuality. When the two currents converge, the sexual relationship becomes powerful and rich. When they do not, contradictions arise, often painful, with consequences that are easy to imagine, including betrayal, lies and deception.

At this point I would like to elaborate on what I mean by tenderness and sensuality, before concluding this analysis with the idea that a bridging role can be played by the imagination. This is a psychic function that has been studied extensively in philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis, but which somehow remains elusive and imprecise.

Tenderness

Tenderness is an aim-inhibited sexual current. This means that someone who feels tenderness experiences an intense investment in the body of the other and not just in their mind, but this investment takes on more of the character of emotion, of a softening, of intimate closeness, protection, warmth, rather than of erotic discharge. Implicit in the concept of tenderness is something that involves the relationship between adult and child, where the child displays such a fragility, a defencelessness, I would say almost an exposure to life and its blows, that the adult feels a desire for protection and at the same time for a softening and an affectionate proximity.

Tenderness contains an element of looking after, but also of surprise, of seeing life manifest itself in an almost candid, immediate, spontaneous, we might say helpless way, and this generates a desire to satisfy the child, but also to protect it. An element of tenderness is therefore related to defencelessness. A feeling of being touched by the bare life of the other. What we mean here by bare life, drawing on a rich philosophical tradition, is something that concerns the pure and simple desire to live, a desire that is rooted in the depths of corporeality and that has not yet acquired the characteristics of the subject bearer of that life. This is reminiscent of Spinoza's poignant expression when he says that each living individual strives to persevere in its own being. There is something in the desire for a life reduced to its essentials that stirs very intense feelings of closeness, of protection, but also of a common bond in the mystery of existence.

Another aspect of tenderness we might call an exchange of intimacy. Here I do not mean intimacy as a feeling related to sexuality, but as a sharing of the other person's bodily secrets, something that the other person normally keeps hidden, but which manifests itself in tenderness. A good expression of this is nudity. We are used to associating nudity with the intense excitement that the sight of a seductively exposed body evokes in us. But there is another, more secret aspect to nudity, which is not related to displayed nudity, but to concealed nudity. My naked body also expresses humiliation, modesty, weakness and aspects that can lead to rejection or even disgust. This direct physical expression of the life of the other, naked and raw as it were, arouses intense contradictory emotions of acceptance and rejection. These emotions are very strong in the case of a child or an animal, but much less so in the case of an adult.

A final aspect of tenderness involves the mingling of two bodies, a certain fantasy of blurred contours. It is as if a double affect arises in tenderness. On the one hand, the two subjects remain separate, but on the other, the vitality of one seems to pass almost imperceptibly into the vitality of the other, giving rise to a sense of communion. Usually these feelings are described as beauty or pity, and the skin of the other attracts us not for a kiss or sexual arousal, but for a caress or a light touch.

There are also a great many subjects who cannot tolerate tenderness, who experience it as an intrusion, as an invasion by the other's corporeality; they do not want to be forced to participate and want to withdraw. In short, they experience it as a form of feminisation or passivity. It takes a degree of courage, so to speak, to allow oneself tenderness.

Finally, there is no doubt that the feeling of tenderness, as Freud points out, takes us back to that very ancient experience of the encounter between mother and child, and later between father and child, in which the emphasis is not so much on play or care or looking after, but on the direct experience of the other's body, the pressure of their hands, the intensity of their voice, the softness of their breasts, the smell of their skin, and so on. If these experiences occur within a shared interplay of emotion and fantasy, tenderness takes hold. If, on the other hand, they take place within a regime that is too detached or invasive, tenderness will not take hold, and feelings of compensation based on possession, domination, tyranny, or fearful or disdainful withdrawal will take its place. I would not hesitate to say that most perversions, which are the more brutal forms of tyrannical love, which reach the point of cruelty towards the object of love, are directly proportional to the lack of tenderness: an absence of tenderness corresponds to an increase in perversion and tyranny.

I would add that tenderness is part of an ability to *dislocate* oneself, meaning by *dislocation* the ability to imagine the way another person might feel in their body and not just in their personality. A child who sees a small dog with very short legs being pulled on a leash by its fast-paced master may ask: 'I wonder what it's like to have such short legs, what the world looks like from that height, whether the doggie is proud of those short legs or sees them as a handicap'. Another example would be identifying with an insect trying to squeeze out of a narrow crack. Not to mention the innumerable examples related to caring for a sick person, where the carer's imagination has to engage in empathising with the patient's touch, with the effect of the pillow on their head, for example, or the taste of certain foods, and the examples could continue.

We could say that tenderness belongs to a pre-symbolic moment where what seems to be more active than the intellect is the ability to make the physical sensitivity of the other person resonate in us: their feeling stretched or constrained, expanded or contracted, sped up or slowed down, chilled or warmed, and so on. The moment of tenderness in sexuality can perhaps be found in falling asleep together after sexual intercourse, when the warmth of the other's body becomes one with the warmth of one's own, but without losing the boundaries of one's own subjectivity.

Sensuality

We can now turn to the subject of sensuality.

Implicit in sexual intercourse is the fact that a good part of the pleasure is related to turning oneself into an object and turning the other into an object. There is undeniably a fantasy of transforming oneself and the other into pure flesh, in which every part of the other's body is desired as something to possess, to bite, scratch or squeeze, according to an impulse of absolute dominance over the other, which is experienced mutually. But this absolute dominance of ours intersects with the absolute dominance of the other over us, and a fulfilling sexuality is linked precisely to this exchange, in reciprocally becoming the object of the other. 'I'll be your object now, then you'll be mine'. And this is an aspect of sexuality that contains a certain degree of violence, and also something without which sensuality itself would remain partial and halved.

In psychoanalysis, Freud suggested that the key to interpreting this phenomenon lies in the erogenous zones. The mouth certainly seeks a love object, but at the same time it wants to bite, chew, swallow, lick and savour it. The same can be said of the anal orifice, and displaying the genitals. That is to say that infantile sexuality, based on the partiality of the erogenous zones and their partial independence from each other, is never completely erased by genital sexuality, based on reciprocity, but it flows into it without ever disappearing. In other words, the erogenous zones have their own logic, one might say their own philosophy, which does not allow itself to be completely subdued and retains its own powerful autonomy.

An important contribution to this topic was also made by Melanie Klein (1955). She pointed out that an irresistible impulse in the child subject, which continues into adulthood, is related to the desire to penetrate the mystery of the inside of the other's body. Many children break objects to see what they look like inside, others want to peer into their parents' intimate moments to see what comes out of their bodies, and children are notoriously curious about what comes out of their own bodies.

Meltzer (2018) strongly emphasised the importance of fantasies of losing oneself inside the mother's body, dividing the different parts of this interior into more secluded parts and parts more open to the exterior. There is no need to stress the extreme importance in sexuality of fantasies of penetrating all the orifices of the other's body, and the way in which these are almost an expression of the fantasy of losing oneself in the mysterious labyrinth of the other's interiority.

Bataille expresses another aspect, perhaps the most important, in his work *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1986). In this important contribution, Bataille stresses the concept of the continuity of being. According to his thinking, each subject wants to overcome the distance that separates two beings, to find a sense of continuity, a union that is not a fusion but the overcoming of difference. In fact, the diversity of the body of the other stimulates even more the desire for continuity. Shared, arousing sexuality is therefore based on possessing the body of the other and allowing one's own body to be possessed by the body of the other, all in the pursuit of that continuity which Bataille considers to be one of the highest aspirations of human beings.

Another aspect of sensuality concerns what we might describe as taking possession of one's own body. The mind-body relationship has always been studied in countless forms. In fact, we could say that no one is ever a hundred per cent inhabitant of their own body. Our bodies, despite everything, retain a certain element of strangeness, as if the mind could never fully master a logic that is organic, physiological, drive-led and not merely mental. Our body becomes alien when it is occupied by unsatisfied drives, but it also becomes foreign to us during the great phases of change in our corporeal life, of which adolescence is the most studied, but which are at work in devastating forms in old age. In these cases, the body seems to follow a logic for which it has not asked the mind's permission; it goes ahead of its own accord. I would propose the idea that the fire of excitation that fuels making oneself flesh and treating the other as flesh allows for a kind of momentary union with one's own body, as if the moment of sexual heat, in orgasm, for example, allowed for the much craved synthesis of mind and body in a moment of union that is at once wonderful and terrifying.

We are now in a good position to return to the theme of the meeting between the two states.

The unifying function of the imagination

I would like to introduce the idea that the potential meeting of two such distant modalities of being can be made possible by the role of imagination. But before I give a definition, however partial, of imagination itself, I would like to add another element which I think is useful to clarify the problem further. In both tenderness and sensuality there is a blurring of boundaries. The separating membrane, or, if we prefer, the skin that marks the boundaries of each subject, is perforated to some extent, and something of the other is passed on within us in ways that are more corporeal than psychic. Things happen without any specific intentionality, but as something spontaneous; like being carried along. A particular pleasure of both emotions is precisely that of partially losing oneself. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two states. In tenderness we find a sort of splitting. The defencelessness of the other, their exposure to the trials and tribulations of fate, their susceptibility to illness, their mortality, prompts an acceptance of one's own defencelessness, of one's own transience, but in a manner of closeness and participation. It is as if an exchange of roles took place, with each individual acknowledging their own defencelessness while assuming the defencelessness of the other. In the history of art, the image of a woman holding a mortally wounded man in her arms has been defined as *pietà*.

Tenderness, then, is not a complete loss of subjectivity, but a type of splitting in which the protector and the protected exchange roles and meet without cancelling each other out. In sensuality, on the other hand, there is an almost total losing of oneself in the power of the body of the other and of one's own body.

We could express what has been said so far more effectively by emphasising the difference between sensation and perception. As has been pointed out very often in phenomenological literature, and in particular in Straus (2000), there is something open and indefinite in sensation that evokes a sense of infinity: a colour, a shape, a bright hue, a wavy line, a straight line. Conversely, in perception there is a delimitation, and somehow the infinitude contained in sensation finds a form of circumscription. My suggestion is that in the sensual component of sexuality, sensation prevails over perception, and that the parts of one's own body and the other's body become purely real, even excessively so, with no room for the symbolic, like something pulling us into a vortex or a whirlpool. We could say that in the sensual component of sexuality the body becomes pure nature, meaning by nature a spontaneous and immediate manifestation of the purely biological.

How do we reconcile two such distant aspects? I would suggest addressing the theme of the imagination. It is certainly beyond my scope to review the immense philosophical, psychological and psychoanalytical literature on the subject. However, I would like to offer a very partial definition, which I hope has the merit of indicating a precise domain. By imagination I mean the ability to question the body of the other. Our body and the body of the other are constantly sending messages that tell us about our own and the other's psychic life, but also about primal experiences, primordial contacts, very ancient reactions that have remained in time and are largely unintentional. We are not in the presence of non-verbal communication here, but of something that every living being emanates from itself as a corporeal being. We are in the presence of very ancient experiences, which we could define more in terms of space-time than otherwise.

The body can convey the idea of elevation/lowering, expansion/contraction, acceleration/slowdown, heaviness/lightness, agility/rigidity, vitality/mortality. An Italian psychoanalyst, Mauro Mancina, has defined as musical this type of experience, which remains under the radar in the physical life of each of us, which is not part of the repressed unconscious, but of an unconscious that has never fully come to light because it is too sensorial and concrete. In sexual intercourse, the extreme closeness of the two bodies activates this musical level of the body, and profoundly changes the course of excitation, depending on whether it is directed more towards tenderness or sensuality. If this musical experience, as Freud tells us in the work quoted at the beginning, is overcharged with passion or rejection, the tendency of the participants, or of one of them, will shift entirely towards sensuality. If, on the other hand, tenderness prevails, that is, the power of the soft body of the other, the subject will be seized by an incestuous terror and will not be able to complete arousal. In short, in the absence of the ability to question the other's body, tenderness and sensuality go in reverse order. We could even say that sensuality becomes a way of compensating for the lack of tenderness. Many perversions take the form of attempts to take possession of the object, because the other is not presented as a body to be questioned, but only as one to be conquered.

In a chapter of his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge (2014 [1817]), makes a very interesting and precise distinction between imagination and fancy. He attributes to fancy the ability to

create stories, to work with whole objects and to gratify the subject's desires. What is instead active in the imagination, according to Coleridge, is the ability to decompose and recompose, to accentuate the value of a particular element, to question a detail, to become moved by a shadow or a nuance. In other words, fancy works with entire objects, while imagination operates through breaking down and reassembling. An example might be a subject who is moved by seeing the knuckles of the person they love, or noticing that one of their shoulders is higher than the other, or that their neck is too long. If the subject dwelled on these details, rather than taking them for granted, they might be able to feel these details as pathways into the corporeality of the other, as if in this way they could feel something more specific about the other's being alive and their desire. In this regard, Bion speaks of reverie, a term that has been immensely successful, but perhaps not sufficiently explored (Bion 1962; 1963; 1965). What I think Bion meant by reverie is the ability to imagine what the child's body is telling us through the way it moves, the way it cries, the way it moves its legs, the way it clenches its fists.

Finally, it is important to distinguish between what we have said about the imagination and the question of fetishism. In fetishism, the partial object takes the place of a missing object and in this way becomes very arousing, because behind the arousing object one seeks the missing object. In short, fetishism is an emptiness that is filled; in this way it is at the service of narcissism.

In the imagination as we have partially defined it, the corporeal detail does not cover the void, but on the contrary opens up a way for us to decentralise ourselves, to come out of ourselves, as if there were a pleasure in being him or her, in being the other, as if it helped me to be more myself. In short, imagination is at the service of an exchange of roles and also at the service of an exchange of desires. In this exchange of desires, tenderness and sensuality can finally meet. Achieving this, of course, requires a great deal of work to free oneself from ghosts and to overcome memories that are too intrusive and too fixed. An overcoming that, if completed, can offer one of the greatest joys in life, which is to make love with a person as if each time were the first.

References

Bataille, G. (1986). *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (trans) M. Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

Bion, W. (1962). *Learning from experience*. London: Heinemann.

Bion, W. (1963). *Elements of Psychoanalysis*. London: Heinemann.

Bion, W. (1965). *Transformations*. London: Heinemann.

Coleridge, S. T. (2014) [1817]. *Biographia Literaria* (ed) A. Roberts. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Freud, S. [1912d]. On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol XI* (ed and trans) J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Klein, M. (1955). The psychoanalytic play technique *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 25 (2): 223-37.

Mancia, M. (2004). *Sentire le parole. Archivi sonori della memoria implicita e musicalità del transfert*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri.

Meltzer, D. (2018). *The Clastrum: An Investigation of Claustrophobic Phenomena*. London: Karnac Books.

Spinoza, B. de. (1988). *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (ed. and trans) E. Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Straus, E. (2000). *Du sens des sens. Contribution à l'étude des fondements de la psychologie*. Grenoble: Jérôme Million.