

The Evental Conception of Love

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Abstract

This article proposes a critical presentation and development of Alain Badiou's theory of romantic love, at the center of which is an understanding of the phenomenon in terms of a truth-generating event. I discuss this notion against the more familiar ontological modes of theorizing love: as the subject's intentional attitude and as an activity of internal value. Arguing that the evental conception of love poses a preferable alternative to the former mode, my analysis focuses on its complementary relations with the latter, of which I take Stanley Cavell's theory of marriage as a representative. My further argument is concerned with the place of sexuality in the evental conception of love, compensating for what I argue to be the shortcomings of Badiou's treatment of the topic by turning to Roger Scruton's account of the immanent significance of the sexual.

This article is concerned with the theory of romantic love proposed in the work of Alain Badiou. I call this theory the *evental* conception of love, for at its basis is an understanding of love in terms of a truth-generating event. Deeply embedded in his overarching and intricate philosophical system, Badiou's views on the topic have been mostly discussed so far in the context of this system's interpretation and were never yet seriously elaborated as a viable position in the thematically oriented field of the philosophy of love. My aim in this article is to fill this lack, arguing that Badiou's conception of love captures the metaphysical core of the idea constituting for us the domain of romantic experience and enables explicating an array of its necessary invariant structures. To discharge this phenomenological potential, however, I allow myself to dissociate Badiou's theses from their original context, putting them in dialogue with some other theories of the amorous phenomenon—most substantially those of Stanley Cavell and Roger Scruton.

To forestall misunderstandings, it should be emphasized that while the bulk of the text that follows is busy interpreting Badiou, this exegesis is entirely subservient to the goal of producing a theory of love defensible in its own right. Framing the pursued theory as *phenomenological* I wish further to stress that its regulative purchase lies solely in the clarificatory power it may possess with regard to our pretheoretical notions of romantic experience. The selectivity of my reliance on Badiou stems, therefore, not only from the particularity of

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this essay's topic, but also from the significant discrepancy of the announced agenda with the characteristic metaphysical abstraction of Badiou's major works. Indeed, proclaiming in his seminal "What is Love?" (first published in 1992) to construe love specifically as a "category of philosophy" (2008, 180), Badiou appears to explicitly distinguish his conceptual endeavors from the mode of philosophizing I attempt to exercise in his footsteps. Yet, a more recent book of interviews *In Praise of Love*—which also happens to be Badiou's only book-length publication on the subject—turns to articulate the relevant parts of his metaphysical system as they "correspond to everyone's experience" (2012, 27), leaving out those aspects thereof which seem not to withstand the test of such correspondence. I hence take this book as the major source for my presentation of Badiou's views on love and as the prism through which I interpret the earlier texts.

Since I believe that the most important—while, seemingly, least intuitive—tenet of the eventual conception of love is the very idea "to set out from love as a process, and not from amorous consciousness" (Badiou 2008, 188), my presentation takes an ontological approach to the subject. The approach, as one of its proponents has recently put it, demands us to "ask first what *kind* of phenomenon love is, where a kind should here be understood as the most general category to which a given phenomenon belongs" (Naar 2017, 2). The premise of my argument is that with regard to this question theories of love can be grouped in three camps, considering it in terms of intentional attitude, activity, and occurrence, respectively. I will refer to those as three ontological modes of theorizing love, noting at the outset that the camps they define are of unequal magnitude: the first houses most of philosophizing on love throughout history, the second outlines a noble but much more marginal tradition of amorous thought, whereas the third reflects a rather new philosophical tendency, of which Badiou remains a pioneering and still the most significant representative. In sections 1 and 2 of this article, I briefly introduce the first two modes, taking the Platonic *eros* and the Aristotelean *philia* as their paradigmatic versions. This setting will enable me, after the initial presentation of the eventual conception of love in section 3, to substantiate it in section 4 by examining its relation to the other two paradigms. I will argue that while posing a preferable alternative to the subject-object dichotomy and the economy of lack fundamental to love-as-desire, the eventual conception of love forms a theoretically productive synthesis with the understanding of love as praxis. The last two sections of the paper are dedicated to the place of sexuality in the eventual conception of love: section 5 presents Badiou's views on the topic, and section 6 attempts to compensate for what I find to be their shortcomings.

1 | LOVE AS INTENTIONAL ATTITUDE: THE EROTIC CONCEPTION OF LOVE

The first and most common mode of theorizing love conceives of it in terms of subjective intentional attitude, whereas its most widespread version—among laymen and philosophers alike—is the identification of love as a kind of emotion. So, for example, outlining, in what aims to be a most general introduction to the topic, the questions with which the conceptual clarification of love is concerned, Raja Halwani seemingly takes such identification for granted: "Is romantic love an emotion similar to others, like hate, compassion, envy, and anger, or is it something else altogether, like a desire or attitude?" (Halwani 2010, 1). The identifications of love with concern, with endurable disposition, or with valuing belong to the same group, as much as they take an intentional comportment of the subject to the object of love as love's primary mode of being. Whether it is considered as appraisal or bestowal, as lack-driven *eros* or unconditional *agape*, as a "nonvolitional feeling that derives from the body, or as a movement

of the will”—as two of Descartes's takes on the subject go (Schmaltz 2007, 95)—what is so described is an intentional subjective attitude.

The priority given to the internal experience of the subject in this mode of theorizing love cannot be allocated with “modern subjectivism,” as the reference to Descartes might have suggested. Indeed, its most significant and significantly problematic traits are established in Socrates's account of love in Plato's *Symposium*.¹ In what follows, I will keep this account's master notion—*eros*, love-as-desire—as the paradigmatic representative of the subjective mode of thinking love altogether. Let us abbreviate a few well-known points. The asymmetrical relation of the *erastes* (lover) towards the *eromenos* (beloved)—the empirical object of clarification and the point of departure for the conversation in the polylogue—is taken by Socrates as an expression of love's fundamental intentional constitution: “Love is love of something” (199e). This intentional attitude is identified with desire, construed as a lack within the subject—“There is no desire if there is no lack” (200a–b)—which to a certain extent the possession of the object of love (let us assume we understand what such possession would amount to) promises to fill. I do not wish to dwell here on Plato's identification of this lack—or the object/cause of desire as its counterpart—in terms of a property of the beloved (e.g., beauty), detachable from them, and hence undermining love's personal character as one of our most fundamental intuitions with regard to romantic love.² The problem is much broader. Even if we do not wish to pin desire to detachable properties, but direct it instead to the person as their bearer, the erotic seriality—the scandalous interchangeability of the objects of love, contradicting the idea of uniqueness implied in our regarding of each *as* an object of love—follows from the very precedence of the lack to the object filling it.

Some theories of love that wish to consider it as a necessarily symmetrical relationship or to foreground reciprocity as one of its essential traits still take the intentional attitude—and, particularly, desire—as a primary ontological unit in the construction of their accounts. So, for example, Robert Nozick, famously emphasizing the formation of joint identity essential to the phenomenon, defines romantic love as the “*wanting* to form a *we* with that particular person” (1991, 418; first emphasis added). Consequently, as Nozick admits (418), and as it is true for this general mode of thinking love altogether, reciprocity remains external (and in this sense contingent) with regard to the core concept of love, making unrequited love—as solipsistic as it may come to be—a logically nondeficient mode of love's being. The inability to include the duality of subjective positions as an intrinsic dimension of the phenomenon is related to another, rarely discussed deficiency of the erotic mode of theorizing love: love is discussed primarily as the experience of the one loving, whereas the experience of being loved remains secondary, if not entirely neglected. Finally, as much as it takes the attitude of the subject as love's primary medium, the erotic conception of love cannot do justice to the objective, material dimension of love as a phenomenon of the world. To jump forward, it is in view of these worries that we should attend to such a provocative declaration of Badiou's as the following one:

... love is by no means given in the immediate consciousness of the loving subject. The relative poverty of all that philosophers have said about love, I am convinced, is because they have come at it either through psychology or a theory of passions. But even though it involves the erring ways and torments of those in love, love does not by any means present its own identity in these experiences. (2008, 182)

¹All the translations from the *Symposium* are taken from (Sheffield, 2008).

²On this, see: Vlastos (1981).

2 | LOVE AS ACTIVITY: THE PRAXICAL CONCEPTION OF LOVE

The second mode of conceptualizing love conceives of it in terms of activity: love, on such an account, would be first and foremost not something we feel, but rather something we do. An immediate advantage of this mode of thinking love is that it brings attention to the necessary external dimension of this phenomenon. However intensely experienced from the first-person perspective, love is always already embedded in certain practices and behaviors, which not only manifest it as a preexisting feeling, but function as its very medium. The sociological approaches to love, which consider it in terms of “cultural practice,”³ rightly point at the immanence of the phenomenon to a historical configuration of habits and rituals: courtship, intimacy, marriage etc. For the philosopher, however, who wishes to go beyond the merely descriptive toward the normative dimension of the amorous phenomenon, thinking of love in the ontological mode of activity might likely bring it under the rubric of *praxis* in a more committed Greek sense—that is, an activity of intrinsic value, in which some aspects of the human essence are being exercised and cultivated. So, for example, a recent study, conceptualizing love with regard to the notion of freedom in German idealism, posits love as a “sense-making practice”: “a fundamental activity through which we make sense of our world and each other” (Kottman 2017, 4–5). Sex—as for most accounts necessary, yet for many a highly problematic element of romantic love—may be another material focus of its *praxical* conceptualization.⁴ Whatever is the focus of the praxical mode of thinking love, it will take it as a sphere in which human excellence—or what the Greeks called virtue—can be cultivated: the art of loving, to use Erich Fromm's expression.

Aristotle's conception of *philia*—usually translated as friendship—can be taken as the paradigm of the praxical conception of love. Famously identifying the ultimate goal of human existence with happiness, understood as activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, Aristotle believed that sharing within the virtuous activities contributes to their better practice and constitutes a good in its own right—an indispensable part of *eudaimonia*. In this sense, *philia*—in its highest form, based on virtue, rather than interest or pleasure—“is an excellence or implies excellence, and is besides most necessary with a view to living” (NE, 1155a3).⁵ Although in Aristotle's discussion what we regard as romantic love figures as one of the extremes, in relation to which the virtuous friendship would be the mean, Aristotle's *philia* involves some features—and specifically a certain idea of partnership—that we would usually associate with the best-case scenario of a romantic involvement: “living together and sharing in discussion and thought” (NE, 1170b13).⁶ Moreover, although we usually think of the Aristotelean friends as two male citizens engaging in philosophy, politics, sports, and occasionally warfare, Aristotle's remark that “between man and wife friendship seems to exist by nature” (NE, 1162a15) inspires, if not sanctions, some modern attempts to transpose the eudaimonistic conception of *philia* into an account of the amorous partnership.

Such is the praxical conception of love operative in Stanley Cavell's account of marriage, which he theorizes as a primary territory in which the overcoming of metaphysical isolation, as the existential problem of modern subjectivity, is being pursued: “the progress from narcissism and incontinent privacy to objectivity and the acknowledgment of otherness as the path and goal of human happiness” (1981, 102). Negotiating the sexual and the social, marriage, for Cavell, is a fundamental perfectionist project of achieving one's higher self—which, of course, takes place not as a one-time occurrence, but rather as an open-ended process of gradual transformation. Cavell describes

³See, for example, Illouz (1997).

⁴Such is Richard Shusterman's notion of “the practice of *ars erotica*” as “an important mode of self-cultivation” contributing to “the highest art of all: the art of living” (2021, 2).

⁵All the translations from *Nicomachean Ethics* are taken from (Aristotle, 2014)

⁶On Aristotle's concept of living together, see Liu (2010).

the practice of marriage so construed as “meet and cheerful conversation”—a phrase he borrows from John Milton's tract on divorce, emphasizing the duality of the sexual and the discursive meanings of “conversation” that it implies (87, 151). This account, as Cavell admitted two decades after its initial presentation, has Aristotle's theories of happiness and friendship as the primary source of inspiration (2004, 357). Yet, in relation to his ancient predecessor Cavell makes a crucial twist. If for Aristotle the identification of virtue is conceptually independent from the practice of friendship in which it is being cultivated, for Cavell, what is exercised in a perfectionist marriage is “happiness without concept”: an “experimental journey” discovering the understanding of oneself and of life that this partnership uniquely makes possible (360–67). Such creative exploration *is* the activity of intrinsic value pursued in Cavell's conversation of marriage, and hence—besides this formal characterization—what constitutes a marriage is not known prior to its actual practice; it is rather something “it is up to each individual pair to invent” (2005, 156).

This notion is interestingly in line with Michel Foucault's conception of homosexual friendship as a search for a new way of life, which—to use bell hooks's phrase—could rightly be called “love as a practice of freedom.” Foucault's argument is that as much as homosexual desire has no readymade, consolidated cultural forms to be poured into, it may fuel a creation of a new lifestyle. The lovers “have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless, which is friendship,” and, cautious as he is with normative language, Foucault understands such an invention to be of intrinsic value (1997, 136–38). Countering sexual liberation, where sex is taken in its own terms, Foucault's posits love as a framework in which sex provides the basis for a “creative life” (163)—a possibility, hopefully, not forbidden to lovers of any sexual orientation, and fully congruent, as we shall see, with the evental conception of love.

3 | LOVE AS OCCURRENCE: THE EVENTAL CONCEPTION OF LOVE

The evental conception of love conceives of it as a kind of occurrence: not, fundamentally, something we feel or do, but rather something that happens—manifesting in our emotions, demanding our actions, and thus making us who we are. At the core of Badiou's philosophy of love is, indeed, an occurrence of a very special kind: *event* in the strong ontological sense—a notion originating in Martin Heidegger's influential doctrine of *Ereignis*.⁷ Unlike the regular kind of occurrences, of which we think as happening within some preexisting coordinates of reality, an event in this sense is the coming to being of such coordinates themselves. Unthinkable in terms of a preceding state of affairs, the event inaugurates a new framework of intelligibility—“truth” as both Heidegger and Badiou call it—“by rupturing with the order which supports it, never as an effect of that order” (2009, xii). Heidegger spoke of such spontaneous inauguration as world-opening (2002, 20–21)—a wording Badiou also adopts—emphasizing thus the overarching totality of the new it procures for those involved, who are thereby constituted as an historical community (2001, 40–43).⁸

⁷Among other philosophers thinking of love in terms of event, who alternatively develop the ideas of Badiou's major influences, are: Slavoj Žižek (2014) and Alenka Zupančič (2017, 134–39), who base their views on Lacan, and Iain Thomson (2017), who builds directly on Heidegger.

⁸My presentation of Badiou's event emphasizes the *foundational* function it shares with the iteration of the idea in Heidegger (2009, 175)—that is, the very notion of a world-disclosing occurrence—so as to focus then on the more specifically Badiouian grammar of the truth-procedure it generates. What is left out of my discussion is “the matheme of the event” as the “infinite multiple” or the “ultra-one” (Badiou 2009, 178–83), considered by some as the hallmark of Badiou's metaphysics, but which I find of no particular relevance to the evental conception of love pursued in this article. It should be noted that Badiou himself—having in mind, apparently, such a “phenomenological” mode of inquiry as mine—states that love as “the existential matrix of the thinking of difference as such ... i.e., of experiencing how the world can be approached or dealt with from the point of view of the Two ... does not need to be related to mathematics” (2016, 99–100). And, indeed, *In Praise of Love*, the main source of my argument here, does not mention mathematics even once. For a nuanced commentary on Badiou's construal of the event, emphasizing its mathematical aspects, see Hallward (2004, 107–52) and Ling (2010b); for an introduction to Heidegger's *Ereignis*, see Polt (2005).

According to Badiou, truth-generating events occur in four fundamental domains of human experience: politics, science, art, and love. Badiou calls them the four truth-*procedures*—for, as we shall soon expand upon, in his conception, the evental production of meaning is not a momentary occurrence, but a rather demanding process unfolding in time. In the first three procedures, about which we shall say nothing more in this article, the community of the event is an undetermined multiplicity of individuals—ranging, say, from an audience of a particular artwork to the scientific community, potentially coinciding with humanity as a whole. In case of love—and this, from the perspective of our study, is indeed *the* great phenomenological contribution of Badiou's appropriation of Heidegger—the ontological model of *Ereignis* operates on the existential human scale of the romantic couple: an “intrapersonal, microcosmic version of the event,” as one of Badiou's commentators has put it (Jöttkandt 2010, 77). The essence of love, according to its evental conception, then, is the establishment of “the truth of the collective's being” (Badiou 2009, 17) for a “collective” of two individuals, whose fundamental sense of reality is constituted within the amorous truth-procedure. The event of love, Badiou argues, determines “the entire meaning of two lives that have met, paired off, that will engage in the extended experience of the constant (re)-birth of the world via the mediation of the difference in their gazes” (2012, 41).

Badiou's term for the world constructed in the amorous event “on the basis of difference” is the Two-scene (*la scène du Deux*; 2012, 23–29). The Two is indeed the most central ontological identification of love for Badiou; one may say—its mathematical substance. “Love is precisely this: the advent of the Two as such” (Badiou 2008, 188). This importantly “de-subjectifies” the phenomenon, denying the psychological interiority of the individual the status of its ontological ground. The twosome of the amorous couple is not a sum—or even a symbiosis—of reciprocal subjective compartments, but the primary and objective constitution of what makes it amorous. It is “the becoming of the couple and not the mere satisfaction of the individuals that are its component parts,” Badiou asserts, which is “the real subject of a love” (2012, 90).⁹ Furthermore, the understanding of love in terms of the “immanent Two” opposes it, as Badiou repeatedly underlines, to its understanding in terms of a union, the ecstatic becoming one with the beloved—a conception Badiou identifies with Romanticism (2008, 181; 2012, 30–31), but which defines a variety of conceptions of love from Aristophanes's speech in the *Symposium* to Hegel. It is the *acknowledgment* of difference (as Cavell might have put it) and not the overcoming thereof, which is definitive of love, according to the evental conception.

Let us now have a closer look at the internal constitution of the amorous phenomenon, articulating the necessary moments of what the evental conception posits as its essentially temporal or, indeed, narrative structure. A love begins with an *encounter*, which for Badiou is the particular moment to which the term “event” in the described sense applies: it is the “evental site” which “initiates the amorous procedure” (2008, 184). Now, as it happens with phenomenological postulations of an “always-already,” the discovery here appears to be equally fascinating and trivial: the coming across each other of two individuals is conceptually implied as a narrative point of departure for any case we think of in terms of love. The far less trivial and all the more insightful

⁹My construal of the evental conception of love presupposes that the ontological Two Badiou speaks about is phenomenally manifested in the amorous couple: a pair of two human individuals. While the whole discourse of *In Praise of Love*, and specifically the annotated quote, clearly confirms that Badiou shares this notion, the rhetoric of some passages in the earlier “What is Love?” may lead to the impression that this is not the case (Chavez 2016, 278): “We must carefully distinguish love from the ‘couple.’ The couple is what, of love, is visible to a third. The couple is therefore a two counted in a situation where there is a third.... The phenomenal appearance of the couple, which is submitted to an external law of count, does not say anything about love” (Badiou 2008, 187). If we are careful enough, however, there is no contradiction here. The couple is, indeed, the external *phenomenal* appearance of what is *ontologically* constituted as “the immanent Two,” and *phenomenologically* comes about as the experience of the world from the perspective of difference—that is, the “existential matrix of difference” incorporated, so to say, within the first-person perspective itself. It is in this sense that the subject of a love is always-already the couple: the Two, ontologically prior and numerically irreducible to the 1 + 1 of the individuals partaking in it.

of Badiou's claims, however, is that although in the encounter the two meet, it is only in virtue of this encounter that the two become the two that they are. The encounter is “the advent of the Two,” since it creates the difference, which is about to define the fundamental conditions of intelligibility—the world—for the subject of the amorous event. And it is precisely due to this radical productive ontology that the moment of the encounter, as Badiou conceives of it, “doesn't enter into the immediate order of things” (2012, 28); a world-opening “can't be predicted or calculated in terms of the world's laws” (32).

The moment of the encounter—the ecstasy of infatuation and the mythology of the first sight—is one of the most celebrated in literature and film and the one endlessly recounted in the personal narratives of amorous couples. Yet, it is another central tenet of Badiou's conception of love that, as crucial as it is, the encounter is only the starting point of love, and not the site of its ultimate actuality. Indeed, the claim is that the encounter becomes an event of love retroactively¹⁰ and within certain duration. “Love cannot be reduced to the first encounter,” Badiou argues, “because it is a construction” (2012, 31).

There are several interrelated ideas to be unpacked in this claim. Badiou believes that although the amorous subject (or, indeed, any subject whatsoever) becomes what it is in virtue of the event (2009, xiii), the event acquires its evental status owing to the activity of the subject engaged in the truth-procedure. The truth of the event is not established in its actuality and completeness in a certain moment of time, but is rather produced within an indefinite time span. Such production of truth is enabled by the subjective—or, better yet, subjectivity-generating—phenomenon of *fidelity*: the individual's commitment to the existential demand put on them by the event. It is only through the fidelity of the subject, Badiou argues, that “the absolute contingency of the encounter with someone I didn't know finally take[s] on the appearance of destiny” (2012, 43). Subscribing to such a commitment, according to Badiou, is the meaning of the *declaration of love*—which, for this reason, he theorizes as another constitutive moment of the amorous phenomenon, “inscribed in the structure of the event itself” (40). The words “I love you” are not a mere expression of feeling, or an indication of a preexisting fact, but the very “transition from chance to destiny,” in which the encounter is “sealed” and the truth-procedure is set on its way (43). But, then again, despite the special significance given in relationships to the first instance “the L-word” is pronounced, the declaration of love as an ontological phenomenon is not exhausted within this instance, but continues to function as the performative anchoring of fidelity reoccurring throughout the amorous procedure with altering degrees of explicitness. “In love,” Badiou writes, “fidelity signifies this extended victory: the randomness of an encounter defeated day after day through the invention of what will endure, through the birth of a world” (45–46).

4 | FIDELITY *VERSUS* DESIRE AND THE PRACTICE OF LOVE AS A TRUTH-PROCEDURE

A further look at the notions of fidelity and truth-procedure will enable us to see how the evental conception of love stands with regard to the erotic and the praxical conceptions.

For Badiou, the fundamental subjective structure involved in the phenomenon of love is the fidelity to the event. This, of course, is not to deny the plethora of intense subjective experiences that have another person as their intentional object and constitute the most immediate phenomenal “interface” of love, so to say. Yet, according to the evental conception, all these are founded in the more primordial relation of the amorous subject to the truth-generating event as a nonsubjective source of existential meaningfulness. “Love,” Badiou argues, is not “an experience of the other, but an experience of *the world*, or of the situation, under the postevental condition that there are

¹⁰For Žižek, too, such retroactive causation is among the defining ontological features of the event: “This is why love ... is evental. It is a manifestation of a circular structure in which the evental effect retroactively determines its causes or reasons” (2014, 4).

Two” (2008, 181–82). More fundamentally than reciprocating an interpersonal relation, “sharing love” means cobelonging within the event, in which the relata of this relation are being formed. “What love founds,” again, “is the Two and not the relationship between the Ones in a Two” (191). Fidelity, hence, as the structure of amorous subjectivity, should not be confused with restriction of sexual intimacy to one partner, which the word signifies in the common usage (although there may be some essential reasons for it being expected to manifest in this way). Fidelity in its ontological meaning is the commitment of the subject—embodied by each of the couple's members—to the wondrous event of the Two, in which the copresence of this particular other became definitive of what the world is and what life is about.

Although Badiou himself does not, to my view, sufficiently emphasize it, a great advantage of the evental conception of love is that in foregoing the subject-object relation as its basic conceptual unit, it poses an alternative to the logic of the lack, which is persistent in the erotic conception. Consequently, it is capable of doing phenomenological justice to the experience of being loved, overshadowed in the erotic conception by the narrative of pursued desire (with its traditionally militant rhetoric of “winning someone's heart”), and whose overwhelming immediacy is belied by the economic model of exchange underlying the figure of reciprocation. For the evental conception of love, it is, on the contrary, the experience of being loved as an experience of a gift that may be allotted paradigmatic status with regard to the economic constitution of the amorous phenomenon. Love is, fundamentally, not about coming to possess something desired—whether it is the other as an object, the other's desire, the other's wellbeing, or a possible “we”—but about doing that which is claimed to be done with what has been already given.

But what exactly is to be done? How does the adequate fidelity to an amorous event come about? Questions of this kind belong to the “ethics of truths,” which is the practical branch of Badiou's teaching, deriving from his ontology. Put most schematically, its fundamental tenet is that since what makes a human animal into a subject is the fidelity to truth-generating events, the idea of such fidelity is the normatively binding standard of human agency (Badiou 2001, 40–57). This is to say, the very commitment to the question regarding the practical realization of fidelity *is* the a priori normative aspect of the amorous truth-procedure. But then this procedure, as a practice so regulated, perfectly fits with the praxical conception of love, conceiving of the phenomenon as a domain in which an essential aspect of being human comes to be exercised. Yet, due to the evental ontology underlying the faithful procedure as a practice of love—and in important conformity with the “without concept” version of the praxical conception proposed by Cavell—finding each time the particular answer to the question of fidelity is precisely what the commitment to this formal principle boils down to. Taken as a practical task, the fidelity to the event of the Two is the discovery—or, indeed, the invention—of the practices adequate to the truth of these two persons' being together. It is in this sense that, according to Badiou, “love is a re-invention of life” (2012, 33): “Sexuality, but also living together, social representation, outings, speech, work, trips away, conflicts, children—all these constitute the materiality of the procedure, the trajectory of the truth in the situation” (2008, 192).

The items on this heterogeneous list are of unequal standing: the first two—sexuality and living together—are of a privileged ontological status, albeit in a different sense. Both should be taken as necessary, a priori features of the amorous procedure—figuring, we may wish to note, in the almost entirely colloquial “man-in-the-street” answer as to what a realized love is, which will normally involve life partnership (marriage, in most traditions) and sexual “consummation.” “Living together”—a notion one could, as well, trace to the Aristotelian *to suzên*—is to be understood here as the general project of a life shared in its reinvention, and not as the practice of cohabitation under the same roof. The latter should be added to the other phenomena in the passage, forming a nonexhaustive list of possible elements that the reinvention of life might be reinventing. Some of them may be, of course, thematized as essential (as, for example, Cavell's foregrounding of speech in his thinking of

marriage as a “conversation”) or be disputed in this status (as, for example, Badiou's denying the ontological significance of procreation dear to many Judeo-Christian conceptions of love [2012, 33]).¹¹ It is, however, not these rubrics as such that are of our interest here, but the ontological phenomenon of the truth-procedure underlying them and the theoretical explication of which could serve as the basis for their further philosophical study. In what sense sexuality—although, undoubtedly, being one of the things to be reinvented—belongs with the more primordial dimension at which we are aiming would be part of our detailed exploration of the topic in the next two sections.

Concluding the current discussion, I wish to emphasize once again the striking analogy between the idea of the “reinvention of life” as the essence of the amorous truth-procedure, and the notions of “inventing what marriage is” and “creating a lifestyle,” which we have encountered in Cavell and Foucault, respectively. The conclusion that should be drawn from this analogy, to my view, asserts the complementary relation between the evental and the praxical conceptions of love. Specifically, Cavell's philosophy of marriage should be read as implying something like the evental conception as its ontological ground. Accepting Cavell's conversation of marriage as a practice of internal value essential to our fulfillment as human beings, we must give proper weight to the fact that it is part of the very idea of this particular practice that—unlike meditation, yoga, philosophy, or other activities that may claim the same status—it cannot be taken on with just anyone of sufficient merit or motivation to engage in it. As a matter of fact, Cavell seems to believe—as, I think, most of those who will agree with his perfectionist view of marriage—that this practice is possible only within a pre-given essential bond with a unique other. Cavell, in his way, accounts for this fact by claiming that only those already married are capable of marriage, and hence the essence of the latter is remarriage (1981, 127). I take this circularity, which Cavell articulates by pointing at the persisting motif in romantic comedies of some mythical past—for example, the couple who feel as if they have always known each other or have been children together (31, 60–61)—to be an expression of the reciprocal conditioning of the event and the truth-procedure, explicitly theorized by the evental conception of love. Providing a broader ontological model and accounting for the evental constitution of the Two that underlies the practice of the perfectionist marriage, the evental conception of love, on the other hand, could easily accept this version of the praxical conception as a valid elaboration of one of its own necessary moments. A practice of love is regulated by fidelity to the event initiating it, which, however, acquires its evental status only through the subjectivity-forming activity of the amorous truth-procedure.

5 | THE PLACE OF SEX IN THE EVENTAL CONCEPTION OF LOVE

Clarifying the relation between love and sex is one of the most difficult challenges for any theory of romantic love, and such is for us the required account of sexuality—by which let us mean sexual activity and/or its constitutive potential—as a supposedly necessary dimension and/or moment of the amorous truth-procedure. My guiding intuition with regard to this task is that sexuality is implied in the very preliminary projection of the phenomenon, which the construal of the evental conception of love aims to clarify. For, indeed, it appears that *romantic* love—which is the sole concern of our analysis—is colloquially defined, at the ordinary pretheoretical level, by its constitutive sexual component. (Which, of course, does not make sex a subset of love, for there is an array of sexual acts and practices—such

¹¹Interestingly enough, here too, Cavell is of a compatible opinion, interpreting in this vein the consistent childlessness of the married couples in romantic comedies, on the analysis of which he is basing his theory (1981, 58–59).

as masturbation, prostitution, or rape—external to the amorous field of experience). But then it is precisely this component and the nature of its relation to other essential features of the phenomenon that we would rightly expect from its theory to clarify. If, indeed, as we have suggested earlier, living together and sexuality are two a priori aspects of the amorous truth-procedure, the difference between their modes of necessity could be put as follows. While the moment of living together is implied in the idea of fidelity to the event of the Two-scene, sexuality appears to define *the kind of Two* so produced. This, at least, could be the headline of Badiou's account of the topic. According to an alternative account I will suggest in the next section, the case is rather that sexuality defines *the kind of scene* that the Two-scene is.

In Badiou's earlier formulations of his conceptions of love, sexuality figures under the master concept of sexual difference, defining, as Badiou argues, the differentiating disjunction involved in the amorous event. By some interpreters this is taken, indeed, as one of the most fundamental aspects of his theory (Hallward 2004, 185–91; Ling 2010a, 141; Jöttkandt 2010), but I—admittedly—find it the least phenomenologically convincing. On this account, love as a truth-procedure is a “treatment” of the philosophically scandalous paradox that humanity, whose oneness is implied in its being the “support to the generic of truth-procedures” or “the historical body of truths,” is always already divided between two sexuated positions of experience—the male and the female (Badiou 2008, 184–86). I find it difficult to accept as easily as the mentioned commentators do that this fact entails that “*nothing* in the experience is the same from the position of man or from that of woman” (183). The issue is made somewhat less disturbing—yet hardly more comprehensible—by Badiou's repeated insistence that man and woman he is talking about are not biologically defined (179) and that the account of love he proposes is equally relevant for homosexual twosomes (2008, 196, 2012, 50). Indeed, for him, sexual difference belongs specifically with love and not with sex: “woman and man only ever exist in the field of love” (2008, 196).

But then while acknowledging the necessary sexual component of the amorous procedure, Badiou's doctrine of sexual difference employs the notion as a rather abstract paradigm, standing for the idea that the difference between the positions of the Two-scene—should we assume they are given once and for all or allow them to change in the course of the procedure's unfolding?—is a qualitative rather than simply numerical one. Being defined in disjunctive differentiation one from the other, the positions are both conceptually interdependent and, most importantly for Badiou, incommensurable—that is, unlike yin and yang, or the sexes for Hegel, form no dialectical unity. Such a construal reinforces the strong ontological status of the amorous Two, precluding not only its collapse into any sort of a mythical One, but—even more empathically—its opening to an undetermined multiplicity of positions. Embracing the “immanent Two” as the irreducible feature of love and leaving for another occasion the possible controversy over this thesis with the proponents of polyamory,¹² I find its construal in terms of sexual difference rather misleading with regard to the role of sexual activity in the amorous truth-procedure. Tellingly, in *In Praise of Love*, where Badiou explicitly addresses the latter issue, sexual difference, in the relevant sense, turns to be “the simple difference between two people and their infinite subjectivities” (2012, 27)—that is, precisely, numerical and not qualitative difference. It is *individuation* rather than sexual difference, as I will argue more extensively in what follows, that defines the amorous problematic of sex.

¹²Note that the question of polyamory may arise at two different levels. While the possibility, which Badiou never explicitly denies, of simultaneous fidelity to several amorous events foregrounds a problem intrinsic to Badiou's ethics of truths (the subject being constituted by a multiplicity of possibly conflicting conditions), the more specific ontological controversy would concern the possibility of the amorous event of more than two participants.

Badiou's account of this problematic, however, revolves around the famous Lacanian dictum—"there is no such thing as a sexual relationship"—which abbreviates for Badiou both the incommensurability of the two sexuated positions (2008, 212–13) and the supposed mutual isolation of two individuals engaged in a sexual act. According to Badiou, the seclusion of each of the partners in their sensations is the definitive character of sex taken as such, which, hence, "separates, doesn't unite," and usually eventuates in emptiness and estrangement (2012, 18). For sexual desire, Badiou thinks, the other serves as a mediating object of relation to oneself, and, hence, "desire is unable to found the thought of the Two" (2008, 196). What allows Badiou not to turn totally "sex-negative" on the basis of these considerations is a further Lacanian claim he adopts: "love is what fills the absence of a sexual relationship." Going beyond the fetishistic nature of desire, directed to particular qualities or attributes of the lover, love redeems sex, so to say, by focusing on the "very being of the other"—the substrate (or, indeed, the void) of subjectivity irreducible to any definable predicates that it bears—and turns the sexual nonrelation to the amorous truth of difference (2012, 18–21). The ontological opposition between the object-cause of desire and the subject-void addressed in the "you" of the declaration of love is further articulated as the supplementation of the phantasmatic frame, predetermining the possible object of sexual interest, by the aleatory nature of the amorous encounter with the singularity of an actual person (Badiou 1999, 177–78).¹³ For without the function of supplementation (*fonction de suppléance*) so understood, wouldn't, for example, a teenager's awareness of their sexual orientation compromise the evental, subjectivity-inducing status of their first love to come? Indeed, Badiou employs the supplementation thesis to counter the reductive conceptions of love that construe it as "no more than an imaginary canvas painted over the reality of sex" (2012, 19). Whether or not we agree with Badiou's uncheerful depiction of this reality (that is, of "sex as such"), the maneuver importantly defends the metaphysical core of the evental conception of love without at the same time diminishing its inherent libidinal aspect. The conception thus successfully passes, to use Adrian Johnston's neat turn of phrase, "between the Scylla of sexual triviality and the Charybdis of desexualized sublimity" (2005, 70). For it should not be overlooked that another side of the supplementation thesis, as we shall soon claim more emphatically, is the (onto)logical *dependence* of love on sex: love is what makes up for the sexual nonrelation.

Yet, while departing from an accurate understanding of the role of sexuality in the ontological constitution of love, Badiou's account of the manifestation of this role in the amorous truth-procedure—that is, the sexual practice it involves—remains insufficient. Comparing love to friendship—nonsexual, as we usually think of it, and not implying, as I tend to agree with Badiou, an evental reinvention of life—Badiou says: "Love, particularly over time, embraces all the positive aspects of friendship, but love relates to the totality of the being of the other, and the surrender of the body becomes the material symbol of that totality" (2012, 36). Although, I believe, the "totality" Badiou speaks about rightly sets the phenomenological direction, which an adequate explication of the matter must develop, the interpretation of sexual practice as the *symbol* of this totality is symptomatic of his failure to articulate the *immanent* amorous significance of embodied sexual contact. Consistently ambivalent toward sex, Badiou's account keeps it at a safe distance from the metaphysical backbone of the truth-procedure, placing it in the structurally important, yet rather restricted, moment of declaration. Sexual intercourse, Badiou argues, supplements the pronouncement of "I love you" "as one of those rare material proofs, totally linked to the body, that love is more than a mere declaration of words." It is "the material expression of...the idea that the promise to re-invent life will be fulfilled" (37).

¹³For a detailed discussion of the supplementation thesis in Badiou and Lacan, to which my interpretation thereof owes a great deal, see Johnston (2005); for alternative, rather different takes on the issue, see Langlois (2012) and Park (2021).

6 | FROM SEXUAL DIFFERENCE TO THE *TELOS* OF THE SEXUAL

An alternative way of incorporating sexuality into the eventual conception of love—such as will elevate it from the material means of expression to the very matter at stake—should take clues from those conceptions of romantic love that construe it with regard to the existential problematic of embodiment. So, for example, as much as the metaphysical significance of the practice of marriage, for Cavell, stems from his understanding of love as staking one's general capacity “for acknowledging the existence of others and for revealing [one's own] existence in relation to others” on a unique person (1979, 430), its necessary sexual component is accounted for by the understanding of sexuality as “the field in which the fantasy of finitude, of its acceptance and its repetitious overcoming, is worked out” (492).

Roger Scruton, whose congenial and much more detailed account of the matter is especially valuable as it builds up a theory of romantic love *departing* from an analysis of sexual desire, discusses the latter “in terms of a ‘trouble’ which all rational beings have reason to overcome—the trouble of seeking to grasp in another's body the perspective which peers from it and which can never be grasped” (1994, 129). For Scruton, the metaphysical core of sexual desire—let us think of it here as a metonymical denotation of the sexual as such¹⁴—is the “mystery of incarnation”: “I wish you to be your body, not in the straightforward sense in which this is always true, but in the metaphysical sense in which it can never be true, the sense of an identity between your ‘unity of consciousness’ and the animal unity of your body” (128). If so, then the “totality of the being of the other,” Badiou evokes as pertaining to love and being expressed in sex, is immanently definitive of sex—for which, as Scruton convincingly argues, personhood (and not the fragmented, fetishized body, as Badiou thinks) is a primary category (14). Notably, though, this totality is not a *factual premise* of sexual activity—for, as a matter of fact, it has no empirical existence at all—but, rather, an idea pursued within it (*acknowledged* in the Cavellian sense). Sexual practice, for Scruton, hence, has a sort of transcendental significance, for it uniquely compels us to recognize the other's embodiment as an essential premise of morality. Erotic love, he argues, is “fundamental to a full understanding of what it is for persons to be ‘ends in themselves’” (251).

Note that we have shifted from sex to love halfway through the formulation of this conception, as we shall immediately expand, because for Scruton this immanent significance of sexuality is realizable only within the amorous framework (let us, for the sake of our argument, assume the equivalence of his description thereof as the “course of love” with Badiou's truth-procedure¹⁵). But as much as the realization of the properly sexual, so construed, determines the metaphysical *raison d'être* of love as a truth-procedure, then, paradoxically, it is not the sexual difference, but rather the existential separateness—“the simple difference between two people and their infinite subjectivities”—that defines the constitutive gap between the two individuals of the Two-scene. Like Badiou, Scruton allots much importance to the “distinction between man and woman” involved in the human “condition of sexual existence” (14). Yet, according to his account, this condition defines the metaphysical problem of love not as the necessary partiality of two sexuated positions with regard to the ideal unity of humanity, but

¹⁴Insofar as it is the structural relation of the sexual and the amorous, and not the structural analysis of the sexual, for which we turn to Scruton, desire as the master concept of his account stands in a tension of no great significance to our earlier positing of the term as the paradigm of the erotic conception of love. Yet, as much as the eventual conception of love entails an eventual conception of sexuality, the sexual *encounter* rather than sexual *desire* should serve as the privileged locus of the sexual.

¹⁵It is, needless to say, beyond the possibilities of this article to sufficiently analyze the general compatibility of Badiou's and Scruton's theories of love—the latter, given its highly problematic, and not intrinsically related to the theses discussed here, views of gender, homosexuality, and other issues, requires a particularly delicate reading. Yet, it is my belief that Scruton's construal of love in terms of a long-term process of “mutual self-building,” involving a retroactive interpretation of its initiating moment (1994, 241–43), makes the common denominator salient enough.

rather as the epitome of human embodiment—the personal isolation that it entails and the immanent redemptive potential that it harbors.

How should we then define the structural placement of sexuality within the amorous truth-procedure? Our previous identification thereof as a necessary dimension of love's fulfillment in the faithful reinvention of life is only partially true, as it does not reflect the ontological nonprecedence of the amorous to the sexual in the most fundamental constitution of the procedure. The following thesis of Scruton, apparently reversing our initial contention, enables us to capture the relation between the two phenomena at this structural level. “Love is the fulfilment of desire,” Scruton claims, “and therefore love is its *telos*” (339). This is to say, being—as both Scruton and Badiou think—a phenomenon of a higher ethical order, love does not externally *supplement* the sexual “nonrelation,” but rather *realizes* its inherent potential. Compatible with the essential tenets of the evental conception of love, this thesis enables us to modify it with two significant specifications. The first asserts that it is not just an aspect of the amorous procedure but the very evental encounter that should be defined in sexual terms. The sexual is not a station of the procedure's itinerary, as in Badiou's claim that love must pass “through desire like a camel through the eye of a needle” (2008, 190), but, rather, its point of departure. Such reframing does not *necessarily* mean that a full-bodied sexual act must be placed at the beginning of love's narrative. (As a matter of fact, Scruton, the conservative, believes that there are good reasons to postpone it until a life commitment can be secured, whereas his phenomenology of smiles, glances, and blushes suggests an inspiring mode of articulating the immediate erotic dimension of the amorous acquaintance at its most nascent stages.) Yet, I think that an important intuition the discussed thesis supports is that it is the realization of desire in the unprecedented bodily contact acknowledging its reciprocity that launches the claim to fidelity and should hence be conceived of as the encounter in the Badiouian sense. It seems to me clear, for example, that it is the overwhelming eruption of the first intimacy between the two cowboys—and not any preceding point of their acquaintance—which marks the evental site of the love narrative portrayed in the film *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee, 2005).

To say that love is the *telos* of desire is also to say that it is the idea under which the truth-potential intrinsic to sexuality comes to be realized. The ontological point of this assertion should be understood in light of Badiou's belief in the principal heterogeneity of sexual pleasure to the order of truth, for which it must remain in the status of the unnamable Real (2001, 86). While in Badiou's own work this view is responsible for downplaying the role of sexual activity in the amorous procedure, for the version of the evental conception of love I propose it helps to define the ontological centrality of sex. For if the event, as underlined by some of Badiou's commentators, *is* the subject's encounter with the Real (Badiou 2001, 52; Hallward 2004, 125), then it makes sense to locate the fidelity-claiming origin of the amorous truth precisely in the unsymbolizable domain of sexual pleasure. And as we are allowed by at least some Lacanians to identify the notoriously polyvalent notion of the Real, in the amorous context, with “the body and its range of possible satisfactions” (Fink 2015, 5), could we not suggest that it is the merely natural “matter of animality” in which human sexuality is rooted (Scruton 1994, 254), which in the event of love induces the ethical transformation of the human animal into a subject? Badiou appears to imply as much when he pronounces that “it is love which makes the truth of which sex is capable” (1999, 178). But then sex is not a material expression of the idea of love as a truth-procedure (as when considered in terms of “material proof”); it is, rather, the other way around—love is the idea providing access to the sexual (coming about in a particular sexual encounter) as a truth-generating source.

Here, we may say, the transcendental significance of sexuality as the domain in which the constitutive role of materiality in our existence as freedom is being acknowledged meets the retroactive causation pertaining to the constitution of the amorous event. Erotic love, as Scruton puts it, is a “response to an inflicted destiny—the destiny of desire,” which “becomes love at once, but only because it is so interpreted” (1994, 232–36). Substituting sexual encounter

for sexual desire, and associating the “at once” with the moment of declaration as understood in Badiou, we may clearly see that, structurally, this account conforms to Badiou's notion of the event acquiring its eventual status retroactively in the course of the truth-procedure that it has launched. But sexuality is, of course, not only at the eventual origin so interpreted; it is also, as we have earlier suggested, a necessary dimension of the interpretation itself—that is, invention and cultivation of the particular couple's sexual practice involved in the amorous truth-procedure. It may be said then that sexuality remains both transcendent and immanent within the Two-scene—persisting as its unsymbolizable origin and defining it all the way through as the kind of scene that it is.¹⁶

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