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*Love Matters, Hegelian Patterns*  
*A Symposium on Paul Kottman's Love as Human Freedom*

Edited by Alberto L. Siani  
with a reply by Paul Kottman

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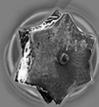
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# Preface

Alberto L. Siani

Love is a classic topic for philosophy, beginning with the very word *philo-sophia*. Authors as different as Plato and Cavell, Augustine and Butler, Hegel and Foucault, just to name a few, have not only dealt philosophically with love, but also reinterpreted in different ways the erotic dimension intrinsic to philosophy. Paul Kottman's *Love as Human Freedom* fits perfectly into this important philosophical tradition, offering an innovative and challenging perspective. The book starts with the end of love's history, that is with recent changes in the way we conceive and practice love, from the gradual weakening of the opposition to same-sex marriages, to the ever-increasing efficacy and accessibility of contraceptives and abortion, to the slow, yet continuous erosion of gender divides in the workplace, up to new familial compositions and reproductive technologies, causing the species' reproduction to be less and less the direct aim of our social and sexual practices.

Kottman sees these phenomena as the latest ramifications of an immense transformation in human history, namely that of love as human freedom. These different ramifications have a common ground, that is the emergence, establishment, and expansion of the authority of love in determining, in a more and more thorough way, the central events, practices, and institutions of human existence (birth,

marriage, death, domestic economy, education, work management, role and limits of the state, and so on). While indeed taking into accounts such empirical facts, *Love as Human Freedom* does not however fall into cheap sociology and easy activism, and addresses instead the strictly philosophical question of what may be taken to count as the cause and reason of such an immense transformation. In connection with this, the book also asks what may count as the cause and reason of the situation that the affirmation of love's authority came to challenge and eventually revoke, i.e. that situation that we may broadly call "patriarchal", revolving around sexual reproduction, fertility, control of bodies and sexuality, opposition to non-reproductive practices and forms, and so on.

Kottman hence interrogates love philosophically, based on a conception of freedom declaredly rooted in the tradition of (Hegelian) idealism, as a social-historical achievement bound to the development of the authority of "objective" forms, in which framework alone practical autonomy and action can be exercised in a meaningful way. Along with Kottman's provocative discussion of several literary classics, the idealistic rooting is probably the most stimulating and innovative aspect of the book's approach. Already in the rich Prologue, Kottman suggests that "love should be regarded alongside human practices like philosophy, religion and art as an unavoidable way in which we have made intelligible the deepest threats to the sense we make of our lives"<sup>1</sup>. Put otherwise, love is a practice

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<sup>1</sup>Kottman 2017, p. 5.

addressing the loss of, or the threat to, our sense-making, and based on which the possibility for a new sense-making arises, both conditioned by and conditioning love itself. Hence, love is for Kottman a fourth form of Hegel's absolute spirit. However, unlike the classic triad of art, revealed religion, and philosophy, this fourth form develops only in and through our bodily practices and interactions, in the way we treat others, talk to them, touch them, react to their bodily expressions etc.

Love is therefore not simply understood as an empirically and historically given phenomenon, passion, emotion, or feeling making up the groundwork for certain social changes. It is instead conceived as a unifying, disruptive authoritative practice through which those changes have emerged and become a fundamental piece of our freedom, an "unavoidable way" in which we understand our world and our position in it. Without such an overarching, ambitious concept of love, Kottman continues, we would not really be able to thoroughly make sense of and bring forward those changes. Hence the organic, non-coincidental character of the connection of the two terms constituting the book's title, love and freedom: "Ultimately, [...] love is also one way we teach ourselves that we are free and rational – capable of leading lives for which we are at least provisionally answerable and whose possibilities we open for ourselves, while taking on board all the accidents and misfortunes of life in the world"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibidem*, pp. 5-6.

*Love as Human Freedom* is both a lucid and an ambitious philosophical inquiry into one of the defining, most sensitive dimensions of our existence. As such, it both elicits and deserves radical critical engagement as well as further development. The papers collected in this special issue pursue both aims, just like the Roundtable on Kottman's book that took place in Pisa on June 27th, 2019, when the idea of this issue of *Odradek* was first conceived.

My own paper *Freedom as Human Love* opens the dialogue by suggesting that a fuller appreciation and appropriation of Kottman's own Hegelian background may contribute to a further development and clarification of his argument. In particular, by stressing that Hegel's conception of freedom also entails a discourse about modernity, I raise the issue of whether Kottman's reconstruction of the emergence of love's authority should be read in terms of progress, and to what extent this emergence can claim a universal value.

Romagnoli's *The Phenomenology of Love in Hegel's Aesthetics* turns to Kottman's interpretation of artworks in the context of his analysis of love and connects it to Hegel's aesthetics. By unfolding Hegel's phenomenology of love from Christian to secular love, she shows that the last moment of the romantic form of art can best explain love as individual freedom within the limits of art, whereby love eventually exceeds these limits and calls for systematic autonomy. In this way, she pursues both a confirmation and an explication of Kottman's understanding of love as a fourth, peculiar form of

Hegelian absolute spirit.

In *Love as Human Struggle: Questioning Love with the young Hegel, Sartre and Butler*, Vero adopts a rather critical perspective on Kottman's argument. Through a focused reading of authors as different as the young Hegel, Sartre, Butler, and Beckett, she underscores the elements of struggle, violence, death and unfreedom that are structurally bound to love. Thus, to Kottman's "romantic" idea of love she opposes a "melancholic" one, asking whether, despite the constitutive unfreedom of the world we inhabit, free love is still an open possibility for human beings.

Matějčková's *Living in the Times of Love's Death* similarly follows a critical path. She takes up Kottman's Hegelian framework but suggests that love is not freedom: in fact, it is an anti-modern agent clashing with Hegelian modern subjective freedom. Our modern time is a time after the death of love: lasting, solid love relationships are the exception rather than the rule. At the same time, love maintains its power over us exactly because it runs contrary to individual autonomy, offering itself as an always ambivalent gift.

*Instituting Love: Tolstoy and Hegel* by Katsman goes back to the connection between the Hegelian conception of love, freedom, and family and Kottman's phenomenology of literary works. In particular, she argues that Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* teaches us phenomenologically how traditional, loveless marriage came to be experienced as unlivable by its participants. Tolstoy's novel hence works similarly to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in that it shows how

only by living out our conceptions and eventually failing to do so, our conceptions change form over time in order to accommodate our practically lived freedom.

In *Matter(s) of Love. Natural Reciprocity between Hegel and Lanthimos*, Di Riccio challenges standard recognition-based accounts of Hegel's philosophy (especially by Honneth). While appreciating Kottman's shift of the recognition paradigm from the *Phenomenology's* struggle to death to the relationship between lovers and the connected shift from an intersubjective paradigm to an institutional-critical one, she also highlights the risk of a loss of materiality in Kottman's own account of love. Through an analysis of Lanthimos' movie *The Lobster*, she then shows that intellectualistic accounts of love risk leaving us blind to the institutional reality.

The issue is closed by Kottman's engaged, thorough Reply to the papers. Both the papers and the reply bear witness to the importance of the philosophical discourse on love and, more in general, to the sensitivity of this topic in our concrete lives. It is hence no surprise that, unlike mainstream love stories, the dialogue instituted in this volume does not have a happy ending. On the contrary, disagreements prevail, sometimes in a radical form, leaving much open to further discussion. I personally believe this can be seen as a sign of success for such a philosophical enterprise, but of course this is left to the readers' evaluation.

## Bibliography

Kottman, P. (2017): *Love as Human Freedom*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.