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Dialogales — V.

LOVE AS A PROBLEM

Phenomenology of Attachment in the Age of Sentimental Algorithms

"Love is the desire for immortality."

Plato, The Symposium

"To love is to fear for the other."

Emmanuel Levinas

"I want to understand what is happening to me."

Roland Barthes, A Lover's Discourse: Fragments



2026

PRELUDE

A Room, an Unguarded Question

Professor Verne entered that morning and placed nothing on the table.

No book. No photograph. No stone. Nothing.

He sat down directly — at the center of the circle, among them, hands clasped on his knees — and looked at them with that particular silence that always preceded the questions he judged important.

— I am going to ask you a question. One that philosophers rarely ask in class — because it is too close, too personal, too exposed. But this seminar cannot begin any other way.

He looked at them one by one.

— Are you in love right now? Or have you been recently — recently enough to truly remember it?

A few smiles. A slight movement in the room — the movement of those who had not expected to be reached there.

— I am not asking you to answer aloud. I am asking you to remember. To find the state again — that particular state, recognizable above all others, that Stendhal called crystallization. That moment when someone occupies your thoughts in a way that obeys no logic. When their presence changes the quality of the air.

— Now — I ask you the philosophical question. This state — what is it? Not psychologically. Not neurologically. Philosophically. What is really happening when one loves?

— **Malia:** One steps outside oneself. That is the first thing I would say. Someone else becomes — for a time — more important than oneself. More real than oneself, almost.

— **Thomas:** One loses something. A certain control. And it is at once unbearable and — one does not want it to stop.

— **Iris:** One is exposed. Truly exposed. Someone can hurt you in a way that others cannot. Because you have given them access to what matters.

— **Noa:** One recognizes someone. Not in the sense of having already seen them. In the sense that — this someone corresponds to something one was carrying without knowing it.

— You have each just described, in your own way, what three philosophers took millennia to articulate. Plato said: love is the desire for a lost wholeness. Levinas said: love is exposure to the vulnerability of the other. Barthes said: love is the recognition of an irreplaceable singularity.

He rose.

— And now — here is why this seminar is urgent. Because everything you have just described — this stepping outside oneself, this loss of control, this exposure, this recognition — all of this is precisely what dating algorithms claim to render unnecessary.

He went to the board. He wrote:

The algorithm promises love without risk. But love without risk — is it still love?

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I. Plato and the Desire for Eternity — Love as Lack and Ascent

— I would like to tell you a story.

He sat on the edge of the table — that posture they knew as the posture of moments when he wanted to be closer.

— About four hundred years before the common era, in Athens, a group of men gathered for a banquet. They decided — instead of drinking as usual — to give speeches about love. And then Aristophanes comes — the comic poet — and he tells a myth. A myth that Plato invented for him, but which has crossed twenty-five centuries because it says something true about what we feel when we love.

He rose. Went to the board. He wrote:

The myth of the spherical beings.

— In the beginning, says Aristophanes, human beings were spherical — two faces, four arms, four legs. They were complete, self-sufficient, powerful. So powerful that they threatened the gods themselves. So Zeus cut them in two. And since that moment, each half searches for the other. That is love.

— This myth is magnificent. And philosophically problematic. What is magnificent — is the idea that love is recognition. Not a rational choice — a recognition. What is problematic — is the idea of wholeness. It says that love is a fusion. And this legacy is sometimes toxic. It says that jealousy is proof of love. That dependency is depth.

He wrote:

Love as fusion — the temptation and the danger.

— But Plato himself does not stop at Aristophanes. He lets Socrates speak. And Socrates reports the words of a woman — Diotima of Mantinea. And Diotima says: love is not a god. Love is a daemon — an intermediary between the mortal and the immortal. A lack. A quest.

He went to the board. He wrote:

Eros — neither rich nor poor, neither beautiful nor ugly. Eros — the desire for what one does not yet have.

— And Diotima proposes the ladder of love — an ascent. One begins by loving a beautiful body. Then one understands that the beauty of one body resembles that of another. Then one loves beautiful activities, beautiful kinds of knowledge. And finally — at the summit — one glimpses Beauty itself. Beautiful absolutely, eternally, immutably.

— **Thomas:** But this ascent — it abandons particular persons along the way. If love rises from the beautiful body toward absolute Beauty — what remains of Marie or Jean? Do they not become mere rungs?

— Yes. And that is the most profound critique one can make of Platonic love. Gregory Vlastos formulated it precisely: Plato does not teach us to love persons. He teaches us to love qualities. And qualities are interchangeable. If I love beauty in you, I can love the same beauty in someone else.

He wrote:

The problem with Plato — he teaches us to love qualities, not persons. Yet persons are not reducible to their qualities.

— **Iris:** There is something in Plato you have not yet said. This idea that love is the desire for immortality. And this idea seems to me very contemporary. Romantic love today —

with its fantasies of the soul mate, of the perfect encounter — is it not a desire for eternity disguised as feeling?

— Yes. And Denis de Rougemont — in *Love in the Western World* — says that Western culture has constructed an ideal of love that is fundamentally an ideal of death. Passion is the desire for the absolute. And the absolute is incompatible with duration, with the everyday, with finitude.

He went to the board. He wrote:

Passion — the desire for the absolute in a world of finitude. It can only satisfy itself in impossibility.

— And that is the trap into which our era has fallen — and which algorithms have made worse. These algorithms promise the perfect encounter while making it infinitely easier to move on to someone else the moment perfection seems imperfect.

He wrote:

The algorithm + Platonic passion = the infinite search for impossible perfection. And the inability to inhabit real love.

— **Noa:** But then — what is real love? If Platonic passion is a trap, if the fusion of Aristophanes' myth is toxic — what remains?

— That is where something enters that neither Plato nor algorithms can think. What Levinas calls the caress.

He paused.

— The caress is not possession. The caress is the gesture of one who touches what eludes. Who reaches what withdraws. Levinas says — and this may be the most beautiful sentence ever written about physical love — that the caress consists in seeking nothing.

He went to the board. He wrote slowly:

The caress consists in seeking nothing. It is the encounter with what cannot be possessed.

— That is the exact opposite of what the algorithm proposes. The algorithm seeks. It optimizes. Levinas's caress is the gesture of one who renounces reducing the other. Who consents to never possessing them entirely. Who accepts that the beloved always remains mysterious.

— And perhaps that is mature love. Not fusion. Not absolute and impossible passion. But something more difficult and more precious — the capacity to remain in relation with someone who is not us, whose irreducible strangeness is precisely what we love.

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II. Levinas and the Vulnerability of the Beloved — To Love Is to Fear for the Other

— I would like to begin with an experience you have all had.

He sat down directly among them — without preamble.

— You love someone. And this person is late. Not very late — an hour, let us say. They are not responding to your messages. And something happens inside you — something irrational, disproportionate to the objective situation. A growing anxiety. A fleeting image — an accident, a fall, something serious.

— Who has experienced this?

Everyone raised their hand. Immediately. Without hesitation.

— And now — ask yourselves: what does this anxiety reveal? Not psychologically — philosophically. What does it say about the nature of love?

— **Malia:** That we hold someone in a way that exceeds our control.

— **Thomas:** That someone has become a part of us. That their disappearance would be our loss.

— Yes. And Levinas says something still more precise. He says that this anxiety — this fear for the other — may be the most accurate definition of love. To love, he says, is to fear for the other. Not to fear losing what the other brings us. To fear for them — for their own existence.

He went to the board. He wrote:

To love — is to be a hostage to the vulnerability of the other.

— Hostage. That is Levinas's word. He says: in love, I am a hostage. Not in the sense that the other holds me against my will — in the sense that my well-being now depends on an existence that escapes me. I do not control the other. I cannot protect them from everything. And yet their exposure to the world has become my concern. My responsibility. My torment.

— **Iris:** But is that not a definition of love that makes it inseparable from suffering? If to love is to be a hostage — why would we want something essentially painful?

— The potential suffering of love — this vulnerability to loss — is not a flaw in love. It is its measure. It says something about the importance of what one loves. And Levinas goes further: he says that it is precisely because the other can die, can suffer — it is precisely because they are mortal — that their existence carries this absolute weight for us.

He went to the board. He wrote:

The mortality of the beloved is what makes them irreplaceable. Without finitude — no true love. Only admiration.

— **Noa:** On one side — Plato says that love aspires to eternity. On the other — Levinas says that love is born of mortality, of fragility. Do these two visions not contradict each other radically?

— They do. They contradict each other. And this contradiction is productive. It says something true about love itself, which is always in tension between these two poles. Between the desire that it endure and the acute awareness that it will not.

He went to the board. He wrote:

Love lives in the tension — between the desire for eternity and the consciousness of finitude. It is this tension that gives love its intensity.

He sat down among them again.

— Ricœur had a way of speaking about the promise that I find decisive. The promise is the act by which a human being opposes something to time. Not to deny that time changes things. But to say: despite that, I will be there. This faithfulness — this keeping of one's word against time — is perhaps the deepest form of love.

He went to the board. He wrote:

The promise — keeping one's word against time.

— Passion burns. It is intense, magnificent, unbearable. And it consumes itself. But there is something that can succeed it — if one accepts it, if one does not panic in the face of transformation. Something the Greeks called *philia*. The love of friendship. The love that has passed through time, that knows the other in their duration, in their revealed fragilities. And that chooses to remain.

He wrote:

Eros — the love that desires. Philia — the love that knows and remains. Both are necessary. Neither alone is sufficient.

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III. Barthes and the Impossible Language of Love — Speaking Without Being Able to Say

— I would like to read something.

He had brought a book that morning — small, worn, its white cover slightly yellowed by time. He placed it on the table, opened it to a page marked by a bookmark, and read — without preamble, without explanation:

I am crazy about you. I am consumed by an inescapable torment. I am gripped by an obsessive idea. I suffer in silence. I am in love.

He closed the book.

— These phrases — you have said them. Or thought them. Or felt them without being able to say them. They are in the book by Roland Barthes — *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, published in 1977. And Barthes says something strange about them. He says that these phrases do not belong to him. That they come from everywhere — from novels, from poems, from conversations, from clichés. And yet — these worn, common, hackneyed words — sound absolutely new when one says them oneself, in one's own mouth, to that precise person.

— That is the paradox of the language of love. It is at once the most common of languages — everyone has spoken of love since the dawn of time — and the most singular.

He went to the board. He wrote:

The language of love — universal and absolutely singular. All the words have already been said. And yet each time it is the first time.

— **Malia:** I thought about what you asked us last week. A phrase said or received that changed everything. It was not a grand declaration. Someone said to me one morning — we had just argued, the silence was heavy: do you want some coffee? And that was it. Those three words. Which meant something else. Which were a way of saying: I am still here, we can go on.

— Barthes would have said that it is precisely because it is banal that it carries so much. Grand declarations are sometimes empty — too expected, too prepared. And the small ordinary phrases — those that arise in the real space of the everyday — can carry a considerable emotional charge. Precisely because they are not trying to.

He went to the board. He wrote:

The language of love does not always say what it seems to say. It says something else — beneath it, beside it. That is why it is untranslatable.

— **Thomas:** But does speaking about love not risk killing it? There is something in love that resists analysis.

— That is the classic Romantic objection. But Barthes answers it decisively. He says that the danger is not speaking about love — it is speaking about love with the wrong words. What Barthes seeks is to find a language equal to the singularity of the experience of love. Not a language that explains love — a language that resembles it. Fragmented, incoherent, full of silences.

He went to the board. He wrote:

Barthes does not describe love. He imitates its form — fragmented, contradictory, singular.

— **Iris:** There is a figure in Barthes that haunts me. The figure of absence. He says that the absence of the beloved is a way of being present — a negative presence that occupies all of space.

— Yes. And that is one of Barthes's most precise intuitions about the phenomenology of love. The absence of the beloved is not an emptiness — it is a painful fullness. The space they occupied remains occupied by their absence.

He went to the board. He wrote:

Love transforms the world into a world inhabited by the beloved. Even in their absence — especially in their absence.

— **Noa:** I would like to push this idea. We are all made of the same material. The same emotions, the same fears, the same fundamental desires. And yet each of us is absolutely singular. And love — perhaps more than any other experience — reveals this double truth. It is universal. And it is absolutely singular.

Professor Verne remained silent for a long moment.

— You have just formulated something I have been trying to say since the beginning of this seminar without finding the exact words. Love is perhaps the place where the tension between the universal and the singular is most visible. Most vivid.

He went to the board. He wrote slowly, beneath everything that preceded:

Love — where the universal and the singular meet in all their tension. Where what is common to all becomes absolutely proper to two.

— And that is why algorithms — however sophisticated they become — cannot replace love. They operate on the side of the universal. And love lives on the side of the singular — of that irreducible haecceitas that Barthes sought in his fragments.

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IV. Love in the Age of the Market — What Emotional Capitalism Does to Love

— I would like to begin with a number.

He had arrived that morning with a printed sheet that he placed face down at the center of the table.

— Before looking at this sheet — how much do you think the global dating app market represents in annual revenue?

A few tentative guesses. He turned the sheet over.

9 billion dollars. In 2022.

— Nine billion dollars. Per year. To sell love. Or rather — to sell the promise of love. To monetize the most fundamental human desire. Loneliness. The need for the other. The hope of finding someone.

He went to the board. He wrote:

An industry that sells love has an interest in love never being quite found.

— Eva Illouz — whose work is perhaps the most important on this subject — shows that contemporary capitalism does not content itself with selling material goods. It sells emotional experiences. It produces representations of what emotions should be. And these representations shape expectations. They say: this is what love should look like. And if your love does not look like that — there may be a problem.

He wrote:

Romantic love + the logic of the market = the demand for an impossible perfection in a context of infinite choice. This is the recipe for contemporary romantic unhappiness.

— **Iris:** There is a figure in Barthes that haunts me. This inability to commit. Not out of fear of commitment itself — but out of fear of missing something. This particular anxiety of the irreversible choice in a world where everything seems reversible.

— Yes. And Zygmunt Bauman — liquid love. He says that contemporary love has become liquid — fluid, adaptable, difficult to fix. Relationships are investments. And when the return seems insufficient — one liquidates the investment and seeks another.

He went to the board. He wrote:

Liquid love — Bauman. The relationship as investment. Commitment as a risk to be managed. Breaking up as rational disinvestment.

— **Malia:** But then — if that is the problem — what resistance is possible? One cannot simply decide not to be influenced. One cannot step outside the market.

Professor Verne looked at her for a long moment.

— I am going to tell you what I think. Not what Levinas or Barthes or Illouz think — what I think. Personally.

He went to the board. He wrote — slowly, as though each word were weighed:

Resistance — is not rejecting the tools. It is changing the framework within which one uses them.

— Dating apps are not bad in themselves. Resistance is not rejecting them. It is refusing the market logic implicit in them. Entering into a relationship — even one begun on an app — with Levinas's disposition rather than that of the 'maximizer'.

— Concretely — this means accepting that the person opposite you is not a profile but someone. Someone who has zones of shadow and contradictions. Someone whose way of disappointing you will be precisely the way in which they are themselves.

He wrote:

Loving resistance — choosing the encounter with what is rather than the search for what should be.

— Kierkegaard had a way of describing the stages of existence that I still find accurate. The aesthetic stage — life organized around the pursuit of the beautiful, the new, the

intense. And the ethical stage — life organized around commitment, faithfulness, building over time. Dating apps are machines of the aesthetic. And the leap into the ethical — the moment when one chooses someone and stays — this leap is difficult to make from within that logic. Because the logic always says: wait. There may be someone better.

He wrote:

Kierkegaard — the leap into the ethical. From the desire for the new to faithfulness to what one has chosen. This is what the market makes difficult. This is what remains necessary.

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CLOSURE

What We Have Learned About Love

There was nothing on the table that morning.

No Barthes. No printed sheet with numbers. The bare table — the same ordinary wood as since the beginning of the seminars.

Professor Verne entered. Set down his coat. Sat among them — at the center, directly.

— Have you written your fragments?

Silence at first. Then a collective hesitation. As though the instruction had reached something the others had not reached. Something more exposed.

It was Noa who spoke first. And in his voice there was something not yet heard there — a quiet nakedness.

— **Noa:** I wrote. Not one fragment — several. All week. Fragments about someone I loved a long time ago. What I loved in her was not her qualities. It was a way she had of looking at things as though they always surprised her. Which was entirely hers. Which I never found anywhere else. And which I had not known how to see when she was there.

— **Thomas:** I wrote a single sentence. The sentence is: I did not know I loved until I feared losing. That is all. I do not know if it is philosophical. But it is true.

— **Malia:** I wrote about my mother. I wrote about the way she holds her coffee in the morning — with both hands, like something precious. And I realized that it is this gesture I love. Not her qualities. Not her values. This gesture. This way of holding her coffee. Which resembles nothing else.

— **Iris:** I wrote about absence. I wrote: you are not here and the world is full of you. And I realized that certain people — even after years — still occupy entire zones of the way we perceive. And that this occupation is not sadness. It is a form of presence.

— **Sonia:** I wrote about my husband. We have been married for eleven years. And I found this: he always says we'll see when I worry about the future. Not to minimize. Because he truly believes the future is open. And this way he has of believing in the openness of the world — in a world that taught me to be wary — that may be what I love most deeply.

— **Léo:** I wrote something strange. I wrote about someone I have not yet met. About what I hope for. Not the qualities I hope for. But the way of being with someone that I hope for. And in writing, I realized that what I hope for resembles the caress of Levinas. Someone whose strangeness would inhabit me.

Professor Verne listened to them all. Then he remained silent for a long moment. Looked at his hands. And said:

— You have just done something that Plato, Levinas, and Barthes did not entirely manage to do. You have spoken singular love. Your singular love. Not love in general — love as it exists in your particular, irreplaceable, non-optimizable lives.

He rose.

— The way Noa describes that woman's gaze. The way Thomas discovered love in the fear of loss. The way Malia loves her mother's gesture with the coffee. The way Iris is inhabited by someone gone. The way Sonia is loved by her husband's openness to the world. The way Léo hopes for the strangeness of the other. All of this — no algorithm can produce it. No compatibility score can optimize it.

He went to the board. Beneath everything that preceded, he wrote, slowly, simply:

Love asks that we consent to not understanding everything. To not possessing everything. To remaining with what escapes. And to calling that richness — not lack.

He set down the chalk. Turned around.

— I want to tell you something about what I believe. Not what Plato believes, not what Levinas believes. What I believe — after years of the philosophy of love and after a life spent trying to love truly, with all the clumsiness that entails.

— I believe that love is the only human experience that forces us to renounce the illusion of mastery. The only one that says: you are not in control. You cannot optimize. You can only — if you have the courage — remain. Remain with someone who is not you, who will never complete you perfectly. And choose to find in this irreducible imperfection not a failure of ideal love — but the real form of possible love.

He went to the board one last time. And wrote — this time without looking at the board, as though he already knew what he was going to write:

To love — is to choose the irreplaceable in a world that offers the infinitely interchangeable.

He set down the chalk. Picked up his coat. Buttoned it — slowly, as always.

— Love teaches something. It teaches — through joy and through suffering — what it means to truly exist. To be concerned by an existence other than one's own. To be transformed by that concern.

He paused on the threshold.

— Keep loving. Badly, well, clumsily, with courage. With all your faults and all your blind spots. Keep loving — because it is through loving that one learns to be human. And not otherwise.

And he left.

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They remained.

As always — but differently. With something simpler, more bodily. A feeling of quiet fullness — like after a long conversation with someone one has loved for a long time.

Noa closed his notebook — the one in which he had been writing his fragments all week. Held it for a moment in his hands. Then slipped it into his bag with the care one takes in putting away something precious.

Thomas looked at the board — all the accumulated phrases, all the names, all the tensions. And said, very softly, for no one in particular — or perhaps for everyone:

— **Thomas:** I am going to call someone tonight.

Malia smiled — that particular smile of someone who recognizes something in another person's words.

And Sonia — discreetly, without the others noticing — took out her phone. Not to check her messages. To send something. Three words, perhaps. Or even fewer.

Something simple.

Sufficient.

* * *

Somewhere in the world, an algorithm was optimizing the encounter.

Somewhere in the world, someone was evaluating a profile.

Somewhere in the world, someone was choosing the next one.

And in the room on the top floor, someone was going to call someone tonight.

Not because it was optimal.

Not because it was perfect.

Because it was him.

Because it was her.

Because it was irreplaceable.

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END

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"Love is the desire for immortality."

Plato, The Symposium

"To love is to fear for the other."

Emmanuel Levinas

"I want to understand what is happening to me."

Roland Barthes, A Lover's Discourse: Fragments