The Link between Love and Power

Ethel S. Person

In this talk, which is about power and love, I have been influenced by several backgrounds that I want to acknowledge right away. Any practitioner in my field hears a lot about love and love problems, and love has been a major force in my own life. If I talk about my life truly, I always talk about the love relationships in my life. One of the influences on this paper, however, comes not from my personal life, nor from psychoanalysis and what I have learned there, but from what I learned from a political scientist, the late Hans Morgenthau, who taught at Columbia for a while. He was a master theoretician of power and power relations, and occasionally he turned that lens not just on international politics or national politics, but also on everyday, human politics.

Love is one of the great experiences in all of our lives, whether we are speaking of romantic love, familial love, or of another intimate interaction or attachment. Love is also important in our devotion to a cause or a belief system. Although in the end I don’t think any of us can truly analyze love, there’s much that can be said about it as a crucible for personal change. Because of the identification with the person we love that always occurs in passionate love, love often demands a significant reordering of values and priorities. In love the self is exposed to new risks that result in enlarged possibilities. We may even feel free, born again, as love rewrites the narrative of our lives through its own force. Love can be seen as a paradigm for any profound realignment of personality and values, such as those that occur in the great religious conversion experiences, and in the process of psychoanalytic therapy. Love gives us meaning and generally leaves us feeling more powerful, more full than we feel generally.

Given the many pleasures of love, love and power would seem
Ethel S. Person

to be mutually exclusive. A love relationship can only be achieved through mutual choice, which demands that both participants be sovereign subjects. Even if someone of high status falls in love with someone of low status, the very act of love obliterates that power differential. In contrast, a power relationship is based on the domination of one person by another, with the more powerful partner attempting to affect through domination or control what lovers seek by way of mutual grace. Yet despite the apparent disjunction between love and power, love is never free from the influence of power, and may be corrupted by it. Whenever there's a question of priority—and there is in every human relationship—some balance of power is established, or a struggle for power ensues.

Power relationships, like relationships of love, are the ground of human experience. Power may be role related, affected by social, sexual, physical, or financial factors; or it may be related only to the force of a personality. Because all relationships involve power balances, so do all love relationships. Whether or not two people are consciously aware of it, the balance or imbalance of power between them is a fact of life. A link between power and love is also intrinsic to hierarchical situations, where the link is more easily acknowledged. For example, the love of the commoner for the king, or the soldier for his commander or for his country, witness to charismatic despots' appeal for the love of their subjects. Love and power play sometimes synergistic, sometimes antagonistic roles, whether in the personal realm or in the organizational and political realms. While power stabilizes love, it may sometimes corrupt it. Love always oscillates, or fluctuates, with an individual's feelings of power and powerlessness.

Let me speak very briefly about love and idealization. Our knowledge of ourselves is always tied to our intimate relationships. The pleasure we take in relationships is such that they may come to supercede other pleasures, pleasures of the flesh, for example. Our happiness in being connected to another person generally takes priority over experiences that are narrower. This is the power of love. Because "falling in love" is a complex psychological act, it should come as no surprise that there are precursors to it as we grow up. Indeed there's a developmental series of what I call love dialogues, the culmination of which in our culture is the mature act of achieving mutual love. One element that is paramount in all of these precursors to love is idealization of the Other, and therefore our ability to idealize plays a very important role in our develop-
The Link between Love and Power

ment. We can idealize many different people; idealization can be directed toward friends, mentors, political figures, and charismatic leaders. But my focus for the moment is on idealization in romantic relationships.

One observes in people the capacity—actually the necessity—for the transference of idealization away from parents. You see this in psychoanalytic treatment, or in child development, in what is called the family romance. It’s quite common for children to construct imaginary parents who are generally grander that their own parents. Essentially they are fantasies that one is really the child of better parents. These fantasies are adaptive, offering hope for the future and sometimes evolving into life plans. It’s interesting to observe in clinical situations how many people from devastating backgrounds have been able to save themselves by getting someone—whether teacher, employer, relative, or parent of a friend—to step in as a kind of surrogate parent. As children grow up and begin to find gratification on their own in the real world, these family romance fantasies are subsumed into other fantasies, particularly romantic fantasies, which often include an element of being rescued. Thus the family romance is a precursor to the fantasy of amorous rescue.

Let me return to the subject of love and power. The intermingling of love and power is mandated by the developmental history of love. Affectionate bonding has its earliest roots in infancy and is closely tied to the child’s state of dependency. The child creates a concept of the good mother, or some other caregiver, to minister to his needs. The child’s image is based on his mother’s gratification of his needs, but he superimposes on his real-life mother the fantasy of eternal bountifulness. This earliest of idealizations, the exaggeration of maternal solicitude, is believed by analysts to be the projection of the infant’s desire for omnipotence onto his mother. If the infant isn’t all-powerful, he wants to be related to somebody who is all-powerful and who will look after his needs. He can command something of the world by being able to command that figure in his life. Only later in childhood does the child integrate negative features into his image of the parent or the mother, giving up the absolute dichotomy of the good mother and the bad mother, the powerful mother and the devalued mother.

Socialization of the child proceeds in part because the child fears the loss of love should he not comply with parental demands. Similarly, the adult lover often harbors the underlying belief that
Ethel S. Person

the beloved must be placated to ensure her constancy. Because of the early link between affection and dependency, subsequent attachments often reflect the deep-rooted idea of an inherent power differential in love.

Philip Rieff takes this observation even further. According to him, because love is related to the "parental fact of domination," it follows that "power is the father of love, and in love one follows the paternal example of power, in a relationship that must include a superior and a subordinate." Moreover, he argues that while Christianity proclaimed the ultimate authority to be the source of love, "Freud discovered the love of authority."1 These observations enable us to understand the impetus to the birth of love in, for example, the therapeutic situation, where the close relationship between love and love of authority may predispose a patient to believe that he or she is in love with the therapist, which is known as the erotic transference in the psychoanalytic and psychiatric world. But lovers may identify with either the all-powerful parent or the helpless child. What I'm trying to explain is that we each grow up with feelings of weakness or strength depending on our experiences and our identifications, and internally we experience a mix of power and powerlessness, and we bring some of this to our love relationships.

While pleasure and a sense of empowerment are intrinsic to feelings of love and being loved, establishing a balance of power between the people involved is also a component in every relationship. Whatever the terms of the relationship, and regardless of whether or not the people who love each other are aware of these terms, the balance or imbalance of power is a fact of life that imbues all relationships.

The most extreme way that love can be contaminated with power is manifested in a tug-of-war, a pervasive struggle that often occurs when love is on the wane. Or one may put this the other way around, and say that love is on the wane when such conflicts occur too frequently. These struggles crystallize around the conflict between two antithetical poles of desire: the desire for interrelatedness and the desire for independence. This internal tug-of-war goes back to the earliest stages of life. Just as a child begins to experience a wish to be independent and to express that wish through her ability to toddle away, she becomes aware of her mother's inner life and of her need for her mother. But it is not only babies who swing between the desire for mutuality on the one hand and the desire for
autonomy on the other. All of us need independence and self-enhancement as well as closeness, care, the folding of our body into another body—the experience of a wrapped-up, protected self that can almost become part of another. The demands of intimacy on the one hand and the demands of autonomy on the other must be balanced. Most of us come close to another person, then back off; we want to be loved but not swallowed. Thus, invariably, intimacy waxes and wanes.

The dichotomy between love and intimacy on the one hand and autonomy and independence on the other may underlie Freud's dictum that mental health can be defined as the ability to work and to love. Love empowers us through recognition by others, and work empowers us through our independent action. Throughout life we keep balancing these two sides to our personal development. This, sadly, is the human condition.

Now I will speak of power in romantic love specifically. Romantic love presents a special case of intense idealization and intimacy. In Western culture, romantic love may be the single most powerful passion that many of us experience in our lives. Power enters into romantic love in a very specific way. Just as in passionate romantic love there is an impulse to surrender—to say "I'm yours"—so there is a will to possession: "I want to own you body and soul." The wish for possession is dramatic and even paramount in lust, but in some degree it is also, always, a component of romantic love. This is the meaning of Socrates' profound reservation about love, "As wolves love lambs, so lovers love their loves." Hans Morgenthau has described the existential problem in less extreme terms. He says, "It is the paradox of love that it seeks the reunion of two individuals while leaving their individualities intact." This paradox often destabilizes love, either through the lovers' insistence on doing away with separateness through self-surrender, or through domination. While surrender and feelings of merger must be regarded as an essential part of passionate love, they can be realized only for brief moments. Most of these epiphanies are experienced during sex, though they can occur at other times as well. Between merger on the one hand and enslavement on the other there can be a kind of self-surrender that is more sustained than intermittent moments of merger, but evokes a feeling of elevation of the self, not masochistic degradation. Though the lover surrenders part of his autonomy, he holds onto his self-identity and also his pride in being able to love, to be a nurturant caregiver.
The greatest proclivity to submission is seen in religious devotion. Expansion of the self through submission is a cardinal feature of the love for and submission to God. It may also be observed in political extremism.

I want to turn now to love and power in hierarchies, rather than love and power between two people. Feelings of power can be achieved through individual enterprises such as climbing Mount Everest, through creative endeavors, through the mastering of skills, and so on, but what I'm addressing here is how feelings of power and powerlessness play out in hierarchies, whether they're familial, corporate, organizational, governmental, or religious. If love is necessarily infused by elements of power and sometimes corrupted by it, it must also be said that those in power seek love, as do the subjects who serve them. Love in hierarchies is a different kind of psychological relationship from the sense of merger that is part of romantic love, insofar as in a hierarchy one individual controls the other through the influence he necessarily exerts over the other's will. Compliance with such power pivots around fear; the hope for some kind of gain, including the promise of eternal life; or respect for leaders or institutions, and it is elicited by persuasion, the authority of the leader's position, charismatic presentation, or a combination of these factors. But both the ruler and the subject, the dominant and the submissive, conspire to clothe the nakedness of their relationship in the garb of love.

The aims of love and power are closely related, but the means used to achieve each are different one from the other. In both love relationships and power relationships the Other is mobilized as an affirmation of one's own subjectivity and will. It goes without saying that love and power constitute two different strategies to overcome our inevitable sense of weakness and to address our dependency needs. Given the fact that love and power run parallel and that their aims can never be entirely achieved, it's inevitable that one may be called upon to bolster the other. It's no accident that in monarchies, a belief or fiction is cultivated that the ruled invariably love their rulers. Even despots seek a modicum of love, just as lovers seek a modicum of power. And just as romantic love has a precarious side, so too does any relationship based primarily on power. How to overcome the resistance of the Other, how to make the will of the subject congruent with one's own will, are the crucial issues with which all patriarchs, rulers, and bosses must come to terms.

Both rulers of monarchies and elected officials seek the love
of their subjects. In Nazi Germany, Hitler was always referred to as “our beloved leader.” But the paradox is that insofar as the subject is coerced to love his ruler, the ruler knows that he is not loved for himself alone. Thus the ruler must always doubt the sincerity of his subjects’ love. For some despots, such as Stalin, the fear of not being loved, of being duped, has metamorphosized into absolute paranoia.

The hierarchical structure of the psychotherapy situation provides the impetus for some patients in therapy to fall in love with their therapists. It is patients’ latent love of authority that predisposes them to develop erotic transferences. Reciprocally, the vulnerability or neediness of some therapists predisposes them to fall in love with, and sometimes marry, their patients.

I would like to conclude with some remarks on the roles of love and power in belief systems. Sooner or later all of us must face our own mortality. In the same way that a fear of emotional estrangement stokes the desire for renewing interpersonal ties, knowledge of our biological frailty and the brevity of our time on earth motivates us to look for meaning in our lives, and impels many of us to seek some form of transcendence. There are three modalities we invoke to establish meaning. First, we may find meaning through a sense of continuity with our children, who provide us with symbolic survival through succeeding generations. Second, some of us hope that our intellectual and creative contributions will stand the test of time. Third, we may attach ourselves to a shared secular goal—for example, acting to build a good society or overthrow a bad one—that serves to ratify our own worth. However, transcendence usually trumps temporal ambitions, because it offers the hope that we may be personally transformed, or the hope of life everlasting. We seek to assuage our anxieties through mysticism or a form of transcendence that invokes a godhead.

The role played by obedience and rebellion in our lives and in the world beyond our personal lives is pertinent to understanding the psychology of the transcendent experience. While seeking transcendence, we make use of our dual dispositions to submit to authority and to resist authority. For me there are three strategies we use as we try to deal with our need for transcendence while still bound to the fundamental motives of resistance and submission. First, we may try to seize for ourselves the power of the gods—that is, we may seek to become the godhead. Second, we may try to nes-
Ethel S. Person

tle in the protective embrace of one or another god. Third, we may attempt to cloak a mere mortal in godly power.

Let me discuss the first of these, seizing the godhead. Our sense of autonomy begins with our natural resistance to external authority. This resistance is symbolically depicted in Adam and Eve’s disobedience of God. For Erich Fromm, the Adam and Eve story depicts “disobedience [as] the condition for man’s self-awareness, for his capacity to choose, and thus . . . this first act of disobedience is man’s first step toward freedom.” For Fromm, only when man was expelled from paradise could he move toward freedom. The Adam and Eve story can be read as a mythic version of the universal plotline by which each of us emerges from the embeddedness of early life. But we should remember exactly what the serpent said when he tempted Adam and Eve. The promise was immortality, and “ye shall be as gods” was the clincher. Beyond our natural resistance to authority there lurks within us an impulse to seek power, a hunger to achieve power in our own right. As Morgenthau has noted, however, those who persist in trying to achieve transcendence through personal power and absolutism, who seek the godhead through total conquest, are inevitably destroyed one way or another. This is the fate of all world conquerors, from Alexander to Hitler, a fate that is symbolically rendered in the legends of Icarus and Faust.

The second strategy we may use in seeking transcendence is submission to God—generally a submission that is called love, and may really constitute both. For centuries people have sought salvation not through the exploration of human freedom, but by means of a personal relationship to God. Yet we are so constructed that we will not cede personal power, we will not genuflect, to something that does not seem real to us. In recognition of this difficulty, all the world’s great religions interpose a human relationship between man and the godhead, be it a relationship with a priest, mullah, lama, or guru. Even in Buddhism, where the annihilation of the self is both the path and the goal, the seeker is given someone to follow as mentor and model.

Finally, in our desire for transcendence, we may turn to what I call the godfather fantasy, after Mario Puzo’s The Godfather. I use the godfather fantasy to talk about the temporal means some of us use to achieve power, in which we cloak a mere mortal in godly power. The few may seek to become a figure like Puzo’s Don Corleone, procuring to themselves a secular version of the godhead.
The Link between Love and Power

For many more, the fantasy is about seeking vicarious power through connection with another powerful mortal—a godfather or godmother, a mentor, a religious leader, a totalitarian ruler—whom they imbue with the mystique of power and to whom they pledge obeisance. Such a figure holds out the promises of wealth, of knowledge, of vicarious authority, in the here and now.

Love and the wish for power often come together in our political lives, and fanatical leaders seem to know this instinctively. Our need for vicarious power is often justified by our love for a religious or political savior. The appeal of fanaticism of all sorts lies in part in the fact that its promise of transcendence, of immortality in whatever form, does not come at the expense of renunciation of the world or the self. Fanaticism, to put it another way, preys on a frustrated will to power and offers to make its promise of restitution good in this lifetime. I point to Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* as a concrete example of this.

Let me conclude. Love plays a role in our intimate lives, in our professional and political lives, and in our existential longings. In all these domains love has the capacity for enriching us. At the same time it's transparent that love may lead in two directions—sometimes toward transcendence and authentic growth, sometimes toward subjugation and destruction. But at its most sublime, love offers us the rare opportunity to liberate ourselves from our own subjectivity. The state of mind that enables this to occur is empathy, not complete identification. One feels with an Other, one does not become the Other. Imagination, the act of mind and spirit that love and literature have in common, may be so pleasurable precisely because of the fine line on which it lives, the line between identifying with and submerging one's identity in an Other. In love, the balancing act of remaining on that line creates a tension that is both intensely pleasurable and potentially problematic. Love is by turns and in varying degrees both a safe harbor and a storm. But what it is most profoundly is a voyage, the destination of which is largely unknown. Love is not an ultimate solution to our problems, but a continual reaffirmation of a process within which we find no answer other than the ongoing attempt to achieve completeness and goodness.
Notes