

Gestures

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The Gesture of Loving

A phenomenology of the gesture of loving must negotiate two dangers, sensationalism and prudery. They probably cannot be avoided. In any case, they immediately immerse the inquiry in an atmosphere that is unique to this gesture. For they show that what conceals this gesture from view is not a cover woven from habit, as is the case for most other gestures, but from repression. We don't pay attention to most gestures because we don't pay attention to what is familiar, and so when we concentrate on them, they seem new and surprising. But we don't see the gesture of loving because social pressure demands that it be private, and private is by definition invisible, and if through some counterforce it becomes public, then it appears to be a controversial gesture, obviously changing its character, which has nothing to do with exhibitionism and ostentation. In the gesture of loving, we have one of those few gestures (other examples are flag waving and saber rattling) that appear on posters everywhere, in newspapers and television programs. It is the task of phenomenology to strip the appearance of exhibitionism away. Only the gesture of flag waving is motivated by exhibitionism. It is pornographic at its core, and the task of phenomenology is to expose the exhibitionistic core behind the exhibitionistic pose. Meanwhile, exhibitionism in the gesture of loving, to which we are currently far more exposed than we are to that of flag waving, makes the gesture seem strange. The task of phenomenology is to show that it is not pornographic and so to expose the core of the gesture, which is in danger of being lost.

Any observation of the gesture of loving must start from its ubiquitous depictions in our environment. We practically live among images of this

gesture, which is to say that our codified world is a sex shop, which differs from specialized businesses in its use of the gesture as a means of attraction and as a tool for selling nonsexual goods. This broadband sexualization of our codes (everything, even gasoline and cat food, has sexual connotations in posters and shop windows) conforms to a dialectic that in fact has little to do with the gesture of loving but of course affects the gesture through complicated feedback pathways. The sexualization of codes originated as a reaction to Victorian prudery. But it played itself out so quickly that both a constant expansion and a constant recoding were needed to keep it from turning into its opposite, a dreary desexualization. Unlike most other gestures, the gesture of loving allows few variations (despite there being more and more positions), a fact that surely affects our understanding of the gesture. For example, it is possible to write or swim or sing in diverse ways, but for loving, the diversity is not so great. And that is a problem for the sexualization of codes, for to avoid falling into their dialectical opposite, the codes continually need new variations of the gesture. This heightening and recoding of the gesture deflects attention further and further from the essential thing about the gesture, that is, away from the concrete experience and toward the technoimaginary. The messages we receive acquire sexual connotations that have hardly anything to do with love in a concrete sense. As feedback, that has an effect on the gesture of loving that should not be underestimated. The gesture itself becomes technoimaginary, which is to say technical, imaginative, and codified, an instance of scientific theories being linked to hands-on experience. One might even claim that the gesture of loving is one of the few gestures to which a vast majority of people apply both scientific theories and accumulated experience. And in this way the capacity to love is lost.

It is, of course, possible to bracket this entire complex of the sexualization of codes out of the observation of the gesture of loving so as to focus on the gesture itself, as it seems to be in actual experience. But this effort has to fail, because it is impossible to separate one's own experience from the social program. One is constantly reminded that the gesture of loving is to be clearly separated from that of reproduction, and that the pill has permitted women in particular to act on this separation, and so at last to be able to make a genuine gesture of loving. That is correct, but not complete. Equally important is the distinction between the sexual

gesture and the gesture of loving. Here the codified program by which we live plays a significant part. To put it bluntly, one might say we are programmed for the gesture of reproduction and for the sexual gesture but no longer for the gesture of loving. If we are nevertheless able to carry it out from time to time, then it will be as an independent discovery, in stark contrast to the broad-spectrum sexualization of the cultural program in which we live.

The difficulty in releasing the gesture of loving from its entanglement with sexual and reproductive gestures is not based solely in the complexity of the concrete fact of the gesture itself but has above all a linguistic basis. The word *love* is usually applied inexactly to all three of these gestures, for we have lost, along with the capacity to love, the capacity to think precisely about love. The Greeks, for example, made distinctions among *eros*, *philia*, *charisma*, *empathia*, and many other concepts of love, while we distinguish at best between sexual and nonsexual love and, in doing so, start to water down the concept of love in earnest. For when it is said that the sexual revolution permits "free love," or when "make love, not war" turns organism rather than patriotism into a political program, sexuality has been identified with love at a level that is not conscious. That such identification is an error is clear not only from concrete experience: there can be sexual experiences without love experiences, and the reverse, perhaps, love experiences without sexual ones. But the error in the identification is also clear from observing the codified character of the sexual gesture, which rules out almost any gesture of loving. For the sexual gesture has become so technoimaginary that, for many, the phallus has become a phallic symbol. In such a highly coded universe of sexuality, there is no space left for love, and the gesture of loving has to assert itself against the gesture of sexuality. This cultural situation may not be unique in history (one thinks of the love poems of Catullus), but it is characteristic of the current situation.

Although we must distinguish between sexuality and love, there is no avoiding the close connection between the two contexts. For in doing so, both sexuality and love are lost (and it happens from both sides, the moralizing, impotent side in Westerns as well as the pornographic, commercial side in, for example, refrigerator advertisements). For sexuality, without any love, turns into that ridiculous, tiresome mechanical movement,

reminiscent of hard labor, that is shown in pornographic films. And love, without any sexuality, becomes that saccharine sham that has as little to do with real love as the recitation of scripture has to do with real faith. So we should take it as a fact characteristic of our present situation that we can remove the gesture of reproduction from context but that things do not work in the same way with the gesture of loving, despite the recoding of the sexual gesture. In other words, to make authentic love, we must engage in sexual gestures, although in technoimagination, these gestures contradict the gesture of loving. And that is another way of saying that we are about to lose the capacity to love.

An objection might be raised that the foregoing deals with theoretical, not with phenomenological, observations and that there can be no doubt about loving in the gesture itself. The theoretically impossible division between love and sexuality is, one might say, experienced concretely, in fact, as sexual love. There is a pitched moment that has something to do with orgasm but that occurs at a different level of being, in which there is complete absorption in the other without loss of the self, and exactly this moment is love. At the existential level of love, the tipping over into another, which makes "I" and "you" into "we," appears as a climax, achieved by the organism, its sexuality, although it binds two people together afterward and beforehand with no sexuality at all. Seen in this way, the gesture of loving appears to be a gesture that makes use of sexuality, like the gesture of painting makes use of a brush. Not that the brush isn't critical for painting. It characterizes painting, and without a brush, painting is empty talk. And yet the brush does not occupy the same existential level as painting. That, as the objection might have it, is theoretically difficult but concretely obvious.

This objection is untenable. For if the performance appeared to be theoretical instead of phenomenological, this is due to the widespread theorization of the concrete act of the gesture of loving itself. When we make love, we watch ourselves, so to speak, as we do in all our other gestures. This theoretical, ironic distance is characteristic of gestures, of human existence in general. But this absence of naïveté has a particular character for the gesture of loving that is different from that of other gestures. There, it may provide a critical distance, a means of perfecting the gesture; here, with the gesture of loving, which is finally the gesture of merging

with another, it is destructive. Perhaps this critical distance toward loving is what is meant by "original sin." But in any case, a phenomenological observation of the gesture of loving must take this theoretical aspect into account above all others and so must take on a theoretical character of its own. So the gesture of loving could essentially be characterized as the gesture of overthrowing theory. It is the gesture in which a human being becomes most embarrassingly aware of his theoretical alienation and, at the same time, the one to which he is indebted for his most successful efforts to overcome this alienation. This is a roundabout way of saying that the gesture of loving would be the one in which a person is most concretely in the world and that therefore occupies a central position in life.

What is strange is that the gesture of loving cannot be described as a body movement at all. For if you try it, you suddenly notice that you have described the sexual gesture instead. Conversely, any attempt to describe the concrete experience of this gesture is equally doomed to failure. For if you try this, you suddenly notice that you have described a mystical experience instead. Of course, it is possible to circumvent this difficulty, as yoga books do, by saying the sexual gesture is a technology of mystical experience. But this sort of claim serves to reinforce mistrust of yoga books rather than to better understand the gesture of loving. For one comes no closer to love by acquiring the technique of the sexual gesture and probably moves further away. By analogy, one might conclude that enlightenment will probably not result from perfect yoga technique. Still, there is more in the impossibility of representing the gesture that is worth thinking about.

The problem probably looks like this: a human being has weak instincts, and so he can gesticulate, make movements for which he has not been genetically programmed. Obviously there is also instinctive behavior in humans, even if it has largely been culturally reprogrammed. The most striking among such behavioral patterns is the sexual one, so striking that many of our psychologists believe it to be the basis for all behavior. The sexual instinct in human beings is culturally reprogrammed as, among other things, the sexual gesture, and this gesture can be described mechanically. But beyond this, people build a whole program around this instinct, which we know from psychological, psychoanalytical, and similar writings. This program in turn leads to gestures of a completely different

sort, which also can be described mechanically. And still a human being is not completely programmed. He can let himself go and calmly escape all programming. Such serenity is not a gesture but passivity, not an activity but an omission. Obviously such a situation is difficult to describe mechanically. Such resignation and passion¹ take part, become active in the gesture of loving, and that is probably what makes it impossible to get at what is essential in the gesture through description.

If it is not possible to describe the gesture of loving either as a movement of the body or as inner experience without losing what is essential about it, it is still possible to use this impossibility of a means of recognizing the gesture. We could say, for example, that the essential quality about the gesture of loving is the sexual experience as mystical and the mystical experience as sexual. The mystical without the sexual is not love, and no sexualization of any kind, for example, on the part of Saint Theresa, can cover it up. We know from our own experience, however, that sex without a mystical dimension is not love. We can conclude that the panoramic sexualization of our world is just one aspect of the process of losing our capacity for love. The other side is the panoramic mystification of our world. The way to find concrete experience, then, would be through a mystification of sex and a sexualization of the mystical.

Of course, that's nonsense. For one of the distinctive qualities of the gesture of loving is exactly that one can't want it, for it involves surrender of will. One must, as the English language suggests, allow oneself to fall in love. The gesture of loving does not occur within a program but rather moves away from a program and so cannot itself be programmed. But strangely, it does not mean that the gesture is any more likely to follow from letting oneself go than it is from self-discipline. For the gesture of loving is bound up with limitations, with what is called "loyalty." However, a consideration of these limitations would lie outside the topic set out here.

The blurring of sexuality with love that characterizes our situation makes it difficult to see the authentically close relationship between the two contexts. Technoimaginary codes program us for sexual gestures, which we often confuse with gestures of loving. Because sexual inflation devalues sex, the gesture of loving, too, is devalued as a result of the confusion. And because we are steadily losing the innocence required for

serenity, becoming increasingly technical, imaginative, and critical, we have difficulty achieving the basics of the gesture of loving. It is individually and socially tragic. For the gesture of loving is the way we can lose ourselves in another and so conquer our alienation. Without the gesture of loving, any communicative gesture is an error. Or, as it should have been called earlier, sin.