Love is Transference?
John Waterston, MA, UKCP accredited Psychotherapist

Love is, arguably, the central preoccupation of human beings whilst transference is, the central preoccupation of psychoanalysis. At the core of each phenomenon is an emotional experience. However, I will also show that whilst they are thus similar, they are also two phenomena of considerable difference. The distinction is found in differing function and, more specifically, the simplicity and the solipsistic inner-directedness of the transference as contrasted with the complexity and relational, object-directedness of love.

Given that both love and transference are particular forms of human emotional experience I will attempt to work towards an understanding of emotion. Emotional experience is central to what it is to be human, and furthermore, certain kinds of feeling define a meaningful existence. By this I mean that the ‘feeling’, literally the sensation, of being engaged in a meaningful life what seems to matter, not whether my life is indeed, by some rational argument, meaningful. It has been argued that the pursuit and attainment of this sensation is no less crucial to survival than the satisfaction of the biological drives (Frankl, 1969).

‘How do you know that you are happy?’ can be answered in many ways but, I would contend that only one answer is ultimately satisfying and irreducible – that I know I am happy because I feel happy. I have an organically anchored sensation that I have come to name as ‘happy’. No amount of ‘...because I have a new car, a beautiful wife, a satisfying job, and a meaningful life’ will actually answer the question – such answers only beg further questions.

We might equally ask the question ‘how do you know that you love?’ As I hope to show as I progress, the only authentic answer lies in the same realm. I will attempt to show that we know and accept beliefs because we experience the emotional truthfulness of them and the irreducible core of this emotional experience is the sensational content. Perhaps even in the realm of logical analysis we could say that the solution is the one that passes the tests of proof but also because it is emotionally satisfying. The pursuit of truth progresses as much by reason of its beauty as because of its logic.

The human emotional experience is a complex and dynamic event which is embedded in the narrative structure of an individual life. Elements of the emotion comprise stimulus, sensory perception of bodily changes, expressive activity (reflex and volitional), thinking and feeling. The sensation is central to what an emotion is. It is the sensation which is integrated and entangled in the emotion’s narrative thereby giving it a cognitive meaning. The ‘feeling’ is essentially a sensory experience which is linked by association in consciousness with the object to which the emotion is intended.
The core of the emotional experience is cognitively irreducible in that it is reflexive in nature and grounded in the organisms autonomic self-regulatory systems. Therefore, like all reflex mechanisms, the core of the emotion has a pre-determined constellatory process which it will attempt to progress through. This pre-determination is the evolutionarily developed functional organic process. The core of the emotional response is therefore designed to operate within, and be subject to, homeostatic principles. The primary function of the emotional response is homeostasis in the face of fluctuating environmental stimuli. Thus, by the ‘feeling’ of the emotion I mean the sensory perception of these somatic processes as they are perceived by my conscious self.

The feeling content of the emotion is the closest we might get to commonality of shared experience of emotion, prior to mediation by the individual narrative. For each core feeling there will be a corresponding somatic constellation of changes but these changes are made sense of in the light of individual experience. (Damasio, 2000) A further modification is also possible in that the reflexive response can itself be distorted (in effect, re-wired) through environmental conditioning – in this instance the whole edifice of the emotional response will suffer a corresponding distortion. (Reich, 1942, 1945). This is the very essence of neurosis and I will return to this theme in consideration of the transference phenomena.

Thus, I see the feeling content of the emotional experience as being primary to that experience and essentially reflexive, though capable of conditioning. At this primary level, it has been shown that the emotional response is essentially adaptive, self-regulatory, and aimed at survival (Darwin, 1889, Damasio, 2000). However; I am also wishing to demonstrate that the apperception of the event, when mediated by higher consciousness, will be quite unique to each person. Thus, there are two levels of emotional experience: the visceral, being mediated through the evolutionary/organic, and the imaginative being mediated through the personal and cultural narrative.

On the imaginative level, there is much evidence to suggest that emotional responses are indeed highly defined by cultural influences. A great deal has been made of evidence from judgement tests (Ekman, 1972) and component analyses (Ekman, 1994) in their attempts to demonstrate an absence of culturally determining factors. However such analyses are limited by their emphasis on the external manifestation of emotion. There is no consideration of internal experience. In a follow-up subjects were re-tested where previously the forced choice had been between ‘anger’ and ‘contempt’. In the re-test there were 40 different emotions named in responses to the ‘anger’ expression and 81 for the ‘contempt’ expression. In addition subjects often resisted giving a single word answer and were inclined, if unprompted, to begin to tell a story. (Russell, 1994) This, combined with other cross-cultural studies (Wierzbicka, 1995, Russell, 1991) suggest a much lower degree of convergence than thought and point towards a social constructivist explanation that emotional experience is inseparable from personal narrative (Scheman, 1996).
I, therefore, want to define an emotion as a highly complex event which can be usefully understood only from the personal perspective. There is a personal point of view to the emotional phenomena which is essential to its understanding. In essence, emotion can only be understood if it remains embedded in the narrative of a particular life. Thinking, reflecting and talking about my emotion, and the emotions of others, will be from the point of view of a self-conscious person who is capable of thoughts and feelings, and one who will engage in reflection and cognitive reasoning. This is in contrast to the thinking, reflecting and talking of the empirical sciences. For example, when I claim ‘I am afraid’ this cannot be said to equate with ‘you are afraid’. Inasmuch as the physiological response may be similar (qualitatively though not quantitatively) the personal experience of fear cannot reasonably be claimed to be synonymous. For every emotional phenomenon there will be a corresponding narrative structure. It is the pervasive influence of the narrative structure which will define and colour the feeling content of the emotional event. The feeling content of the emotional experience which makes the experience irreducible whilst the entangled narrative structure makes it unique.

This leads to another aspect of the examination of emotional experience in that the understanding of the ‘why’ of an emotion will also necessarily be from a personal point of view. The point of view from which we interpret ourselves and others can be seen as rational and normative i.e. based on the presupposition that there is something that we ‘should’ feel and do in response to a given stimulus. However, in the instance of emotional responses this ‘should’ has again to be viewed within the narrative structure of the person concerned. How we should respond emotionally cannot be seen in the same light as how rain should fall given prevailing weather circumstances.

Going further into the realm of understanding, explaining and predicting emotional experience we come across notions of intelligibility, appropriateness and proportionality. Again, here we fall into many difficulties if we stick to tests based on normative values alone. This is probably particularly the case with appropriateness and proportionality which most clearly have ethical and cultural dimensions which will go far beyond purely rational explanation. For example, it might be relatively straightforward to apply satisfactory tests of intelligibility, appropriateness and proportionality to a fear response emanating from my suddenly, unexpectedly, seeing a double-decker bus bearing down on me as I cross the road and leading to my jumping for cover. However, a fear response upon hearing gossip that my wife is having an affair is a far more complex phenomenon and would require a biographical thesis to elucidate and comprehend.

Emotional experience has as a characteristic in that emotions are intentional. They are object related and in this I would say that all emotions are aggressive in nature – they drive towards and attach to an object in the world. When we have an emotion, we are engaging with the real and the imaginary which is not ‘I’. When I feel fear, there is something that I am afraid of. Even if the thing is a nameless thing it remains a thing. The object of an emotion is that which thoughts and feelings are directed during the episode of the emotion. As already mentioned, the ‘intention’ of
the emotion can be defined through an analysis of beliefs and desires (both instinctual and learned). To take my previous example – it is perfectly reasonable to analyse my response to the bus of the previous paragraph in terms of simple beliefs and desires. I believe the bus will collide with me, I believe it will harm me, I have a desire not to be harmed – the emotional event and response are intelligible, appropriate and proportional based on a rational, normative analysis. However, the second example could not, I would contend, be elucidated using the same criteria. No two persons would, I suggest, have the same feeling response to this situation. In order to pursue understanding of this experience a further intentional element needs to be introduced. This is that of the feelings towards the objects involved.

Feeling towards can be defined as feeling, whilst thinking of. I think the introduction of this notion into psychoanalysis marks the historical and conceptual watershed between drive-based analysis and object relations analysis. Feeling towards involves an engagement with the world that simple belief-desire explanations do not – it implies an attachment to the object above and beyond personal self-regulation. It is this notion that I will return to later on in my consideration of the emotion of love.

The Transference Phenomena as an Emotional Experience

The discovery of the transference phenomena proceeded through a process of therapeutic failure. The successive therapeutic disappointments resulting from the application of technique based upon suggestion, then hypnosis, then the cathartic method, then urging and cajoling in the absence of hypnotic trance all led to the discovery of the resistance. The discovery of the resistance led to the ‘fundamental rule’ and the method of free association which in turn begat the central therapeutic tool of the interpretation.

However, Freud still discovered that interpretation alone still produced disappointing and short-lived results. Patients would listen to the interpretations, even agree with them, but their content remained alien to the ego and therefore no real change occurred. Feud realised that even with the most accurate interpretations, the resistance to the reversal of repression remained intact which led him to the discovery of the defence mechanisms – the ways in which the ego achieves rejection of the repressed material.

Freud began to notice other phenomena occurring during the course of his interpretations. He realised that the patient, at key point in the process of interpretation, appeared to loose interest in the ‘analysis’ and turn their attention, often in a highly emotionally charged manner to the person of Freud himself. Realising that this phenomenon occurred precisely at the point at which he might have expected some realisation on the part of the patient, Freud began to see that instead of remembering the complex, the patient instead reproduced the emotional content of that ‘remembered’ situation. The emotional event would then be referred
through a mistaken mental connection to the present relationship and person of the analyst.

‘With this observation Freud had obtained two most important understandings of this phenomenon: firstly that it was an expression of the resistance, and secondly that these feelings were a displacement repetition of older ones, pertaining to the emotional infantile complexes, that is to say, originally directed to the first objects – usually the parent and siblings – of love and hate, desire and fear. The impulses and feelings directed towards the analyst were thus, transferred from the original objects.’ (Racker, 1968).

Racker goes on to stress the central importance of these discoveries:

‘…some years after discovering it, Freud (1912) considered that the decisive battles for the recuperation of mental health are fought on the field of the transference. He counsels analysts to ‘concentrate all of the patients libido in the transference’, and to free him of his repressions through the analysis of his psychic relations to the analysts in which all his infantile conflicts return. If this is achieved, Freud says, the patient remains free of repressions in his other relationships too, once the analysis is terminated. (Racker, 1968).

The key question of primary relevance to the present essay lies in an examination of the function of the transference. The answer lies in returning to the idea that emotional experience has a feeling core which is essentially organic in nature. The transference is a part of our self-regulating mechanism. As I have already stated the ‘feeling’ core is a reflex and as such is cognitively irreducible but does, nevertheless, act as a defining foundation to the whole of our emotional experience. One way of constructing repression on this model is that it might be defined as an interruption to the reflex arc of the feeling core. The defence mechanism as it proceeds in to higher consciousness is, as Freud rightly stated, a psychological phenomenon. But, I would contend that it has at its core, and providing the mechanism for maintenance of the repression, an incompletely regulated reflex response. This ‘interruption’ being the original response of the infant to perception of danger consequent upon allowing the reflex to complete – in effect the emotional experience is foreshortened which is then the first step towards repression. The infant achieves this, in the first instance by a contraction of the body – breath-holding is a good example of this primary, organic, defensive manoeuvre on the part of a very young child.

As I think I have already stated my view is that the narrative construct of the emotion (and hence the repression) is secondary to this essential interruption. Thus we can more fully understand the function of the transference – as an attempt to self-regulate. As Perls would have it, to complete the unfinished gestalt (Perls, Hefferline, Goodman, 1951) of the experience and thereby, as Freud would have it, free him of his repressions (Freud 1912). It becomes now clearer why this can only be achieved through the medium of reawakening the incomplete reflex in the
context of a ‘real’ emotional experience with another human being in the person of the analyst.

Love

The Victorian biologist and social philosopher Herbert Spencer, whose theory of evolution preceded Darwin’s and who coined the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’ wrote that mind can only be understood by observing how mind evolved (Spencer, 1855). My starting point here then is that love can only be understood by discovering how love evolved. In evolutionary terms, there are several possible behavioural precursors of human love: sexuality, empathy, group coherence and the mother/infant attachment.

Freud clearly stated his preference in his assertion that love is the confluence of ‘tender, affectionate feelings and the sensual feelings’. The fusion of the two constitutes what he calls the ‘fully normal attitude in love’ (Freud, ). Freud does develop his ‘love’ theory through three more distinct stages: namely; love as libidinal energy, both aim-inhibited and aim-uninhibited; love as Eros, the drive which attaches people to each other and love as a combination of Eros and Thanatos, from which it is inseparable. Throughout, however, whilst he is continually extending his concept of sexuality he does not deviate from his central thesis which is that the core of love is libidinous. Furthermore, Freud’s conception of love is firmly rooted in the romantic tradition – his description of ‘oceanic feeling’ is wholly synonymous with the merging which is the ideal par excellence of the romantic illusion. Limitations of space prevent a fuller critique of this critically myopic view of the possibilities of human love. Perhaps suffice to point out here that Freud nowhere considers other models of love except, it seems to me to view them as, at best, sublimated forms of his ‘fully normal attitude’ and, at worst, as grim candidates for pathology. I refer here to erotic love, as advocated in Plato (Kosman, 1976); Christian love (Arendt, 1958); moral love, as found in Kant (1949) and Kierkegaard (1962); love as power, as found in Hegel (1967) and Satre (1947) and finally, mutual love as described by Aristotle (Murdoch, 1992) and Irigaray (1985).

Freud remained throughout his life an adherent to the commonly held view that love and sexuality are inseparable. In ‘Civilisation and its Discontents’ Freud clearly has Schopenhauer in mind – Schopenhauer it was who wrote: ‘every kind of love, however ethereal it may seem to be, springs entirely from the instinct of sex’ (1970). This linking of sexuality with love is, in my view, possibly the weakest and most unconvincing of Freud’s writings. It has been adequately criticised elsewhere and I do not intend to reproduce well worn arguments here (especially Singer, 1987 and also, Bergmann, 1987). Perhaps most the intimate critique comes in a wholly unambiguous form from Theodor Reik who found Freud’s relationship between love and sex totally mistaken: ‘sex and love are different in origin and nature….sex and love are so different that they belong to distinct realms of research fields; sex to the domain of biochemistry and physiology, love to the domain of the psychology of emotions. Sex is an urge, love is a desire’ (Reik, 1941).
The question then remains: what is love and specifically, is it synonymous with emotional experience and the transference phenomena as herein described. My method will be to attempt an understanding of love from the perspective of its possible evolutionary aspects.

Love appears to be a uniquely human phenomenon. There are behaviours, among other animals, that look similar to human love – for example, monogamy and fidelity, group attachment, protective aggressions on behalf of other group members. However, since the essence of human love is not behaviour but a state, or feeling, an emotional state in all its complexity as previously described herein, it would be mistaken to infer animal love from animal behaviour. (Lorenz, 1968).

Empathy is a very plausible candidate for a precursor to love. It exists in many animals and is a mode of perception which relies on interpretation of bodily states of other animals, as a guide to response and behaviour. Empathy is not love but it is hard to imagine love existing without empathy – without recognition of the ‘state’ of the other. The second likely candidate is the mother/infant bond which exists in higher animals (Wilson, 1975) but again, in itself, cannot be reliably equated with love – social insects display elaborate forms of care for the young but love cannot be inferred. Apparently ‘loving’ behaviour is not love. Other evolutionary advances in the human animal will have contributed to the development of the capacity to experience what we call ‘love’. In summary: the altricial nature of the human infant due to the enlarging brain, the long period of infant dependence, increasing cognitive capacity, the development of language, communication, foresight and planning and, perhaps of foremost importance the developing ability to perceive one’s own perceptions – the development of self consciousness.

Human love is, unlike the feeling core of emotional experience or transferential states, essentially an interpersonal, relational phenomenon. Further, I would suggest that it is not an organic/bodily relation but a relation of self-consciousnesses. It depends upon the prior development of a self/other relation and for this reason it may be doubted that the very young infant is, in fact, capable of love. Love is the experience that the existence and structure of another person comes to be an integrated part of one’s own structure. This, in effect, will alter patterns of motivation and alter the way in which the world is perceived – the parameters of concern of for the ‘self’ are expanded to involve the other. Without the development of self-consciousness human love would not exist.

Here then emerges an understanding, through evolutionary tracking, of the uniquely human state we call love. That love evolved on the basis of the mother/infant relation, dependent on empathy as a mode of perception. With the growth of a self-aware consciousness, and the capacity for language, perception extends more profoundly into the self of the other and primitive attachment can develop into interpersonal love. In these terms love can be understood as essential in increasing the fitness for survival of the group as a whole inasmuch as the fitness of the group depends upon the effective coherence of the group and on the patterns of its rituals, traditions, behaviours, skills, beliefs and moralities. Furthermore, to
consider the existential needs of humanity Bertrand Russell wrote ‘love is something more than a desire for sexual intercourse: it is the principle means of escape from the loneliness which afflicts most men and women throughout the greater part of their lives. Love, the capacity to love and be loved is an evolutionary step forward in man – a civilising, elevating experience. (Russell, 1929)

In conclusion we can say that transference and love are indeed varieties of emotional experience they far from being synonymous. In essence, I have defined transference as a mode of self-regulatory mechanism whilst love is a highly sophisticated, highly evolved and complex phenomenon increasing both the human animals’ fitness for survival and providing a panacea for his existential struggles.

References


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