

New currents of research on altruism and the ethics of love

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I am a cultural anthropologist, and so I am interested in cultural phenomena of all people.

In recent years, I have considered mostly the western culture, that is our own, particularly intellectual cultures, rather than customs or mass culture, with the objective of discovering the ideology hidden in the western thought, in the philosophical and scientific disciplines of the west.

Through this talk I will seek to provide information on research relating to love and altruism that, even if hardly noticed, has developed in the last century in the west. What is traditionally known about man is in contradiction, and emanates from a negative and pessimistic vision, due to famous philosophers, some theologians, and also to social scientists who study human behavior.

In recent studies, published in the nineties, the subject of altruism appears to be often preceded by a critical examination of western thinking on human nature. The thinking is negative and pessimistic, as underlined above and, without any proof, takes for granted that man is egoistic, violent, seeks only his own interests, and, if not threatened or does not receive a special grace, is incapable of profound love. There is, for example, a work of Batson, who is an American social psychologist, which examines the position of altruism in this tradition.

I wish to go back in time, to the nineteen fifties, when Sorokin, who published his principal work, as has been mentioned here, founded the Centre for studies on altruism at Harvard University, in the United States, where he taught. Sorokin was isolated and very badly viewed by colleagues in Sociology, but his weight was different when it came to intellectual knowledge in general. In the fifties, for example, Fromm wrote "The art of love". In Great Britain, Morris Ginsberg, a student of Hobhouse, was a great scientist and philosopher (his works were, unfortunately never translated in Italy), and wrote a monumental work at the beginning of the twentieth Century on ethics in evolution (*Morals in evolution*). In its various editions up to the fifties, oriental sources (Chinese and Indian) were used for the first time in a text on ethics in evolution. This aimed at discovering the development and evolution of universal love, with abundant reference to texts from taoism, confucianism, Buddhism, jianism, that were not known in the West from this perspective. Hobhouse had already followed the "forgotten" vocation of sociologists, considering that the word and concept of "altruism are owed to Comte, the founder of sociology". He coined the term "altruism" and gave impulse and a headstart to the discipline. Hobhouse simply followed the indication of Comte, and Ginsberg in turn followed his master. Cultural anthropologist at university La Sapienza in Rome

In the fifties, another notable fact occurred in Germany. Karl Jaspers, an existentialist philosopher, when studying the history of humanity discovered an epoch, called the "Asian epoch", from the 8th to the 2nd, century B.C., in which, for the first time in the history of humanity, love and universality was discovered. The climax of this development was the 6th Century, in which, surprisingly, we see the contemporary birth of Buddha, Vardhamana Mahavira, founder of Jianism in

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India, Confucius, Lao Tse (and Mo Tsu, less known, but a great writer on love) in China. The comparative historian Arnold Toynbee brought to the fore this discovery of Jaspers, and developed it, adopting the formula of the "Asian epoch".

It was only in the seventies that the negative and pessimistic view of human nature, which we mentioned earlier on, was subject to criticism; and we saw the contemporary birth of branches of research open to love in various disciplines (psychology, economics, political, science, psychopedagogy, moral philosophy).

Social psychology, for example, has given a formidable contribution to research with the discovery that the child, far from being the perverse polymorphy of Freudian memory, is rather the good Samaritan: at the age of one day, the child cries if it hears another child cry, while any imitation of the sound via computer leaves it indifferent; at the age of two, it caresses and offers toys to suffering persons. I will indicate here some sources of this research: Waxler and Yarrow¹ who studied pre-adults for many years, discovered that altruism is a human dimension, a human ability, founded on empathy, that is innate and is later mortified by the development of culture oriented mainly towards competitive individualism, to the extent that it buries those altruistic tendencies present within the child, as recorded in the psychology of pre-social behavior of the seventies.

In the eighties, the psychology of moral development became more consistent, and was greatly advanced by Kohlberg. Psychology grew in six fixed stages, culminating in a seventh stage, that of love, and saw the experiment of Just Communities, in order to promote justice, in various schools in the U.S.A. Then there is the development of transpersonal psychology that studies all that is divine in man, of which we have spoken in connection with Sorokin, that is the divine dimension in the human personality, linking itself, at a scientific level, to what is called the psychology of tradition, that is psychological forms that are mainly oriental or of Christian-Judaic mysticism (and also Islamic, as well as of Sufism). The most beautiful experience of this transpersonal psychology is the institution of a group of discussion and dialogue of Buddhists and other religions and human scientist, called "Mind and Life" that has set and continues to meet (luckily some of the articles are translated into Italian) with important contributions by the Dalai lama, who considers these studies an important part of his commitment in the construction of universal and inter-religious ethics, to which he has dedicated himself also in other works. Important themes are destructive emotions and healing emotions. Emotions, which are an important part of our behavior, are often reduced, at least in recent years, to sex and aggressivity, and this is due not only to psycho-analysis. Now these emotions are being rediscovered, through the philosophical and religious eastern as well as western doctrines, as emotions of infantile origin. The visions of the world, precisely that vision emerging from Christianity, is the one that has laid most emphasis on the return to childhood, to that age in which emotions are discovered that lead to spirituality. I shall stop here, but I hope to have another opportunity to talk about this again².

¹ Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow.

² For bibliography references refer to my: *Interessi e Ideali tra natura, cultura e storia*, Kappa, Rome 2003; *Amore, norme, vita*, Meltemi, Roma 1996; D.LAMA-D.GOLEMAN: *Le emozioni distruttive*, Mondadori, Milan 2004.