

Love and Fidelity: Reflections on Levinas and Marcel and the Labor of Love

By

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Rilke writes that “love is the ultimate calling, perhaps that for which human lives as yet scarcely suffice.” This “great exacting claim” that Rilke describes is importantly first and foremost, a calling out or away from ourselves. What does it mean that, as much as we try, this movement in apology, away from our own meanings and understandings, is never complete? For Levinas and Marcel, this calling requires the constant labor of lifelong commitment to make room for the Other within ourselves. There are no formulas, no systems, and certainly for Levinas, no limits to how much we will be required to give, humbling ourselves, allowing our egos to be endlessly hollowed out by the Call of the Other, and therefore creating a vessel through which the Other may emerge. This is truly what he means by the labor of love. For Marcel, this work is inherently situated, personal and participatory. He characterizes this labor as “creative fidelity” which rests not on the idea of love, truth, and faith, but the actual practice of the greatest mystery of human existence, the ability to be transformed in each moment by loving and being loved by someone beyond reason and knowledge. To do this, Marcel writes, we must practice permeability or porousness. In other words, we must work at all time to make ourselves radically open to the Other. In this presentation, I will explore some of the insufficient names we have for this practice of love in the contexts of psychotherapeutic practice and in the life of the person of the therapist. I will also describe the perils and risks of this devotional practice, which at all times necessarily exceeds our language, ideas, and, if we labor for love with “creative fidelity”, especially our heartbreak.