

Impersonal Intimacy or Impossible Theory? Appraising a Recent Psychoanalytic Rethinking of Intimacy and Love

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Abstract

This paper discusses the theory of impersonal intimacy proposed by theorist Leo Bersani and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips in their book *Intimacies* (2008). They propose we are mistaken in thinking that knowledge-of-self enables intimacy and that intimacy is necessarily personal. Working within a psychoanalytic framework, they claim that a key component of being human is our inherent destructiveness, which stems from the ego's perception of the world as different-from-self and thus as something to be mastered. This mastery is outwardly aggressive and inwardly narcissistic insofar as the world is perceived as threatening and its mastery yields pleasure and is self-satisfying. Having laid out this psychoanalytic model of the self's aggressive and potentially murderous but nevertheless narcissistically pleasurable encounter with the world, Bersani and Phillips suggest that there is a second form of narcissistic pleasure which can instead nurture intimacy. Based on a reading of Socratic love, Bersani radically rethinks the polarity self/other by proposing a theory of impersonal relationality. This impersonal intimacy reconceives of love not as love for a lost or substitutive object nor as pure narcissism but as love of the self-in-the-other. This theory is appraised for its radical potentials, and questions about its practical effect are raised.

Keywords: Bersani, Phillips, impersonal intimacy, narcissism, psychoanalysis, Freud, Plato, Socrates, personality.

What if we are mistaken in our assumption that intimacy is, de facto, good for us? What if our concentration upon intimacy as always and necessarily personal is not as helpful as we often think? And, what if the ways in which we practice intimacy also reinforce the kinds of exclusivity which underlie more societal and ideological types of boundary-drawing and exclusion, those with unpleasant consequences, such as nationalism, racism and misogyny? This paper will present and discuss the ideas of two theorists whose recent work raises these and similar questions, starting from the premise that our intimacies, which we prize and place so much emphasis upon, do not necessarily make us happy and

that the way in which they are formed, developed and reinforced might be processes that carry with them orientations to the world and others which ultimately lead to the dysfunction of those intimacies. In other words, our intimacies may contain the seeds of their own (self-)destruction. Lauren Berlant, a notable academic in intimacy studies, reminds us that intimacy “is also formed around threats to the image of the world it seeks to sustain”.¹ Thus, intimacy depends upon sustaining differentiations between public and private; it results in institutions such as marriage, intended to “protect” us from the unhappiness and loneliness perceived to result from nonconformity with the hetero-normative couple-to-family trajectory. Intimacy would be, from this perspective, essentially conservative. Yet what attracts Berlant, and the two theorists I wish to draw upon in detail today, is the potential for our intimate relationships to be radically reconceived, opening new possible forms of intimacy: not doing away with the intimate, but recasting it and opening new avenues in terms of understanding and practice. For, what many theorists of intimacy agree upon is that the realm of the intimate is beset with serious personal and emotional risks, many of which are linked to the kind of gender and familial stereotypes which inevitably effect the ways we are intimate. Resultantly, despite the desire shared by many that their intimacies bring them lasting romance, friendships and family relationships, many do not achieve this and in not doing so, are deeply hurt and suffer great unhappiness, loneliness and pain. The problem, as Michel Foucault understood so well, is one of power; both the power-relations within intimacy - those which give, for example, a parent power over a child - and the power intimacy has in drawing boundaries that mark out difference, distinctions which exclude “others” from the couple, the family, the friendship group, and so on.

Into these debates, the recently co-authored book *Intimacies* plunges headlong. One author, Leo Bersani, is an American academic whose work has involved a sustained and critical engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis in relation to literature, art, culture, identity and sexuality. The other, Adam Phillips, is a British psychoanalyst who is fairly well-known through his frequent articles for *The Guardian*, *The Observer* and *The New York Times*. Mainly written by Bersani and then, in only one chapter of his own, commented upon by Phillips, *Intimacies* was published in 2008. Whilst affirming the historical importance and impact of psychoanalysis, especially in highlighting “the reach of childhood, the necessities of frustration, the significance of sexuality, the terrors and temptations of solitude and self-sufficiency, the lure of violence in human relations and the secrets kept from oneself and others”, the authors are seeking to rethink intimacy in order to avoid some of the outcomes and negative consequences that

psychoanalysis maps for intimate encounters.² In the preface they lay out what they call the contentions of the book, which constitute an argument with the psychoanalytic legacy and the widely-practiced therapies it has inspired. They write that:

psychoanalysis has misled us into believing, in its quest for normative life stories, that knowledge of oneself is conducive to intimacy, that intimacy is by definition personal intimacy, and that narcissism is the enemy, the saboteur, of this personal intimacy considered to be the source and medium of personal development.³

Bersani and Phillips do not present a fully-formulated, neat theory but instead a series of fertile questions and theoretical challenges. Summarizing their main ideas and pursuing some of the implications for new relationalities that open up from their thinking will involve initially recounting two outwardly different stories about love which Bersani draws upon, one taken from Freudian psychoanalysis, and one, strangely not so dissimilar, taken from Plato.

There is no unique romantic love for psychoanalysis. Adult love is always a revival of old love, a love that piggy-backs upon our two early infantile loves: the mother and our “idealized infantile self”, the narcissistic ego we were before we learnt how little we knew, before we learnt we were not the centre of the universe.⁴ For Freud, all love has this element of self-love: at heart, we are all narcissists and narcissism is our first relation to self and to the world. This makes love intensely personal insofar as it is, in the common phrase, “all about me” (and my mother, of course). Instead of being conceived of as an openness to difference, in this psychoanalytic landscape love is instead inclined towards the self-same and the familiar: our later loves are a reactivation of earlier ones. In the second tale of love Bersani draws upon, from ancient Greece, this negatively inflected conception of love as narcissism appears in a more positive light. In *The Phaedrus*, Socrates explains the reason for the success of love between an older man and a young boy. The highest love in Plato’s texts comes from the contemplation of pure Forms, which is reserved for the gods and can only be imperfectly participated in by the souls that follow them through the celestial realms. Once embodied, the soul will cause the man it inhabits to seek those who remind him of the god he followed and in whose company the soul glimpsed, perhaps, something of the beauty of pure Forms. In the beloved young boy, the man sees something of the god, and thus something of his own soul, for he seeks one with the same type of soul; one who would also follow the god. The

relationship as Socrates describes it is one where the lover gradually nurtures the godlike qualities of the boy, ennobling his soul-type. The boy in turn learns to love the lover because he is learning – being taught – to love what is like himself, the same soul. A kind of circular love is set up between boy and man which is bound by their relationship to the god they follow. Bersani sees this reciprocal love-of-the-same-in-the-other as a way of rephrasing what psychoanalysis classes, unattractively, as narcissism. I should, as an aside, be clear here: Bersani is *not* advocating the grooming of young boys by older male paedophiles any more than he is claiming to believe in the Greek gods or the soul. What interests him is the way in which self-love is conceived by Plato as the fulfilment of an ideal love relation, not castigated and dismissed as “not really love”, which is rather the way in which psychoanalysis has understood its own teaching (“There is no sexual relation”, goes the Lacanian mantra, somewhat grimly).⁵ Bersani believes there is a modelling of narcissism in Plato which is both similar to Freud’s teaching, and different in its emphasis and value. It is the universality of the relation between boy and lover, in the first place, which intrigues Bersani and in which he finds a redress to the personalising that psychoanalysis seems to be always committed. It is not the boy’s personality which the lover loves nor is that what the boy loves in the lover; it is not a preference for individuality that their love expresses but a recognition of a shared part of their being, a universal, so to speak, for those whose soul is of that type.

Regardless of the questions such an account raises were we to take literally its specifics, what is striking for Bersani is that the seeing-of-the-self-in-the-other, which psychoanalysis glumly places under narcissism, is treated in its earlier Platonic configuration as a much more affirmative affair. Moreover, in this model the self is divested of its idiosyncrasies. Bersani’s phrase for this, “impersonal intimacy”, is perhaps better translated as intimacy that is not about personality: what is important is what links people, what they share, not what makes them individual, not what reinforces or underlines difference.⁶ There is in this an implicit critique of a specific twentieth-century (and twenty-first century) conception of individualism. The focus upon the individual inherent in liberalism and humanism has been robust enough to segue neatly into the ideologies and rhetorical scaffolding of consumerism. Today, the “individual” is not so much an entity conceived of as separate from the state as it is a composite synonym for a person’s particular style and taste. Psychoanalysis - as a corollary of its foci, its teachings, and its therapeutic practices - has facilitated and enabled the continuation and health, so to speak, of this sense of the individual as personalised, replete with his or her own unique past, complicated desires,

specific neuroses and singular symptom-set. Accompanying such a concentration upon the individual self is a concomitant and seemingly inevitable perception of others as potentially infringing upon that individuality, threatening it constitutionally through the vying individuality of the other self. In a “me”-centred universe, others can only detract from me or be appendages to me: there’s no parity and very little space for effective reciprocity. Thus it is that psychoanalysis lays out a developmental scenario for the psyche that sets us up and off in a direction where the other ends up as a substitute, a threat, or an eternal disappointment – the mother who I realise does not always put me at the centre of her life. Both Bersani and Phillips seem uncomfortable with this legacy, highlighting the ways in which psychoanalysis has been complicit in the cultural creation of such a highly personalised sense of a self. Seeing others as different, and as potentially hostile, dangerous or threatening to our own protected intimate spheres is, for Bersani, the root of war, aggression and all types of exclusionary measures, ideologies and identities, from nationalism to homophobia. This stems from the fact that aggression and violence are relations to the other which also induce narcissistic pleasure, an aggrandising of the self and its power to limit the power of others, to overpower them and master them.⁷

The impersonal intimate relation is one which Bersani sees as prefigured in the scenario between analyst and analysand in the psychoanalytic consulting room, where talk about the most intimate details takes place within an understanding that, to paraphrase Phillips, this is “talk without sex”: the intimacy which occurs within this space does not have repercussions for the relationship between the two outside the room.⁸ In effect, the two people continue to be what we recognise as strangers. Yet Bersani does not want to do away with eroticism; instead he wants us to take sex less personally. That is one of the primary lessons he is extrapolating from the Socratic dialogue: love and sex can be possible without the personal or the concentration on personality. And it might be emotionally or psychically safer. Interestingly, Phillips picks up on this point in his reading of Bersani’s chapters and extends it in a less sexual direction.⁹ There is a similarity, Phillips observes, between Bersani’s impersonal intimacy and the very early relationship between mother and baby. Suggesting that this experience, the “impersonality of early motherhood”, might be a place we can look for a model of an impersonal narcissism which is universal, as opposed to gender specific, he asks:

What, after all, is more central to the post-Freudian accounts of early mothering than the notion of what Bersani calls ‘reciprocal

self-recognition in which the very opposition between sameness and difference becomes irrelevant as a structuring category of being?¹⁰

Phillips is highlighting the way a mother's love for her baby is not predicated upon personality, or informed by difference: the self-other binary which is usually the structuring model for our relationships is not applicable here, in the first connection each of us has. In pointing this out, Phillips opens the chance for this impersonal intimacy to be constitutive and to replace – or at least be primary to – the psychoanalytic (and often philosophical) picture of self-formation which sees the first important relationships as initially incipient upon loss, lack or threat (see, for example, some of the founding moments of the recognition of consciousness and subjectivity as discussed in Freud, Hegel, and Sartre). Such an adjustment would constitute a significant shift for psychoanalysis, a realignment which would place personality and difference in the background and foreground our first experience as one of sameness and mutual narcissism. This would recast the founding experience of relationships with others in different terms, allowing for different models of intimacy to follow from it. That, indeed, is its most appealing potential.

However, such a move has consequences which are unlikely to be welcomed in fields and areas where intimacy has already been examined, challenged and reconceived. Feminists, queer theorists, those interested in race and identity politics, to name a few, have long been raising issues about the construction of intimacy, its spaces and the rhetoric around it, interrogating the mainstream for its assumptions of sameness which can operate to veil a conservative political agenda aiming to maintain the status quo by excluding or silencing otherness. Such groups have fought to question the logic of sameness which can obliterate the specificity of their difference; they have examined both the way their particular group are constructed and labelled "other" as a tool to suppress them *and* insisted upon this otherness as a way of altering perceptions and political agendas. Basing a philosophy of self-formation and relations with others upon sameness threatens to reinforce the gesture these groups actively and bravely are committed to exposing. This is a problem it is interesting that Bersani, as a gay man and a queer theorist, doesn't tackle; his response would be, no doubt, that to discuss it in these terms is still to remain within the same/different paradigm that he is attempting to avoid. Thus, it is not that an affirmation of sameness is an obliteration of difference; it is an affirmation of difference too but difference which is not about personality: Bersani calls it – in difficult and vague

formulations – at one point “a general, universal individuation”, at another “a family of singularity”.¹¹ Phillips is quick to articulate the problem here: we need a sense of difference – a way to reject what is harmful and dangerous - otherwise there would be, constitutively, no “outside” of the world; no “inside” of the self.¹² It is the way in which such boundaries are constituted and maintained that Phillips thinks we should evaluate: he seems much less certain that it would be possible to dispense with the self/other or same/different paradigms altogether. Campaigners for feminism, race and gender equality and other pressure groups for minority or sidelined voices would no doubt agree that whilst in some longed-for future utopia there would be no need for these paradigms (a fair and non-misogynistic society would presumably not need feminism, except as a historical category), we need them at the moment in order to combat dangerous, homogenising and repressive kinds of assumed “sameness”. The abuse of a rhetorics of sameness could manifest itself as a demand for conformity to the status quo, the majority, the mainstream, in a world where there is no recourse to gods and ideal forms.

All this is very theoretical. What practicalities do these theorists suggest? Somewhat flatly, Bersani calls, in a final addendum to the book, for “a thorough reappraisal of how we have been trained culturally to think of difference”, and for a way of resisting the excitement and narcissistic satisfaction that violence and aggression bring.¹³ He suggests as “concrete steps”, “a re-thinking – within, for example, the analytic exchange - of how we conduct dialogue; reorganizations of education and cultural institutions; training children never to see the world as ‘outside’ the family, as something from which the family ‘protects’ us”.¹⁴ Not small requests, nor very specific, which is both understandable and somewhat disappointing. Of course, it makes sense that if it is the interpersonal we are seeking to alter then it is our cultural, educational and familial thinking and training which needs substantial adjustment. Yet such large shifts are ultimately effected politically and institutionally not just personally, which can be a disheartening prospect considering the intractability, inflexibility and conservatism which tends to dominate mainstream political thinking. Nevertheless, on top of the possibilities of recognising the same in the self of the other as a way around an exclusionary and damaging focus upon difference, there is an additional area where I think Phillips and Bersani identify something specifically radical as well as key to many of the various thinkers who are tackling intimacy at the moment. This little book challenges the assumption that intimacy comes through knowledge and therefore that greater knowledge of someone deepens intimacy. It can do, of course, but intimacy is not dependent

upon knowledge and even the way that such an equation is formulated betrays the inherent sense of mastery and exclusivity that so often accompanies claims to knowledge, as well as an inability to allow the other, the “known”, to develop, change, alter, and thus to shift in and out of one’s field of knowledge. Assuming one can know the other perfectly; assuming the other is a fixed and, ultimately, transparently knowable entity is likely to cause us – and them – suffering and disillusion in the long run. Hence, I think the greatest insight this reassessment of impersonality intimacy has to offer – and it is not a slight one but a fundamental one – is the argument for a new conception of relationality which is about being-with, and a conceptualisation of the future of the relationship as a unpredictable unknown. Such an intimacy would be “attuned to what each is becoming in the presence of the other”, as Phillips explains it.¹⁵ As Bersani extends it, this would entail a “prioritising of being over knowledge” which is also to turn the time of our relations with others on their heads.¹⁶ Instead of thinking of our trajectories with our most intimate partners and friends along a “depth” and “length of time” model, we would instead be concentrating upon “a displacement from the search for [psychic] truth to an experience and experiment in relational transformations”.¹⁷ If knowledge of the other could be about the lived moment together, rather than a personalised past or scripted commitment to a future already imagined, then we might be on the way to breaking the connection that exists between knowing the other and mastering the other. Couple this with an appreciation of how we are similar, what unites us in our intimacy as a non-personalised universal, then there exist the potential ingredients to reformulate our intimate relations in order to escape a register of sameness and difference that interprets difference and otherness as hostile and threatening. Such an intimacy would be with the process of being-with, of being-intimate, with another person instead of being intimate with a personality considered knowable. It would be an intimacy responding to the other personally but not with an eye to personality, like a mother to a new-born, like two lovers in love with each other’s love as opposed to with each other’s personalities.

Notes

¹ Lauren Berlant, (ed), *Intimacy*, 2nd Ed., Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 7.

² Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. vii.

³ Bersani and Adams, op. cit., p. vii-viii.

⁴ Bersani and Adams, op. cit., p. 73.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, 'Oedipus and Moses and the Father of the Horde' in Jacques-Alain Miller (ed), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg, New York, Norton, 2007, p. 116.

⁶ Bersani, and Adams, op. cit., p. 27.

⁷ As Bersani summarises, this is because "satisfied aggression is accompanied by narcissistic enjoyment", op. cit., p. 60.

⁸ Bersani and Adams, op. cit., pp. 1-2.

⁹ One not dependent upon minority homosexual sexual practices: Bersani has a chapter on barebacking – the practice of unprotected sex in the gay community.

¹⁰ Bersani and Phillips, op. cit., p. 104.

¹¹ Bersani and Phillips, op. cit., pp. 82 and 86 respectively.

¹² Bersani and Phillips, op. cit., p. 99.

¹³ Bersani and Phillips, op. cit., p. 125.

¹⁴ Bersani and Adams, *ibid.*

¹⁵ Bersani and Phillips, op. cit., p. 113.

¹⁶ Bersani and Phillips, op. cit., p. 120.

¹⁷ Bersani and Phillips, *ibid.*

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