Inability to Separate

The Woman I Love and the Woman I Cannot Live Without
By Martin S. Bergmann

In our clinical work we have become familiar with couples that feel they have nothing to say to each other. We are also familiar with the patient who would like to separate but feels too old or too unattractive for a new relationship and is afraid to remain alone. In this paper I have chosen to deal with a far less common phenomenon that to my knowledge our literature has not faced thus far.

I owe the title of this paper to an analysand to whom this came as a major insight that very quickly led him to terminate treatment. The patient was a professional man, long married, who fell in love with a woman who reciprocated his love. Although he loved the woman very deeply he found he could not leave his wife. Our work revealed two factors that made separation impossible. The first factor was that the patient had a very close relationship with his daughter, who had left home for college a year ago; the beloved woman was a substitute for the now missing daughter. A further complication was a fire that broke out in his home when he was 10-years-old, in which a sister two years younger perished. The mother saved the patient but the father could not save the sister because she had locked herself up in her closet. What further added to the trauma was that the mother, in a moment of exasperation, told him “the wrong child survived.” The choice between the two women stood for his childhood survival and he could not decide between them because in his unconscious separation meant that the one not chosen would die. We had done considerable work when the patient exclaimed the phrase I have chosen for the title of this paper. It became clear that the power of “the woman I cannot live without” was stronger than that of “the woman I love” and the
patient decided to give up the woman he loved and to stay with his wife, whom he could not live without; at this point the treatment ended. This patient opened my eyes to the realization of the difference between two types of relationship of a man towards women. The first one is love, a desire for her company, and sexual longing. The other is one of dependency and the inability to do without a particular person. This relationship may not even be called love; it may be ambivalent, but life without this person is inconceivable.

In another case, essentially similar, the man feared that his wife would commit suicide should they separate. It is quite difficult to know whether that fear is real, as some people have killed themselves after losing a mate, or whether we are dealing with projection. Perhaps this man has a woman he cannot live without but has projected this inability to survive without the spouse onto his wife.

Another analysand, a twice-divorced man in his sixties, has a girlfriend with whom he is very unhappy. She berates him for how he dresses, how he eats, how he snores, how he clears his throat, and why he refuses to put her into his will. He would like to free himself from her but is in fact very submissive. What he fears most is that if he leaves her all their friends will choose her over him and he will be relegated to the role of a shunned outcast. The men discussed here are very different diagnostically but they have in common the inability to separate from a woman they do not love. They share a loveless dependency.

In another case a bisexual professional man’s bisexuality manifested itself in a compulsive way. Whenever his relationship with a woman reached a certain intensity he felt the need to go to either a homosexual bath or peep show where he had anonymous homosexual relationships. What characterized his bisexuality was that the two needs
were not on the same psychosexual level: the heterosexual relationship was a real relationship while the homosexual one was furtive, anonymous, and brief. He married a very anxious and dependent woman of a significantly lower status than the women whom he previously dated. The relationship became an unhappy one and they eventually divorced. However, even after the divorce he insisted on continuing to take care of his ex-wife. From women he met after he divorced he demanded that they accept this caring relationship without jealousy, but he never found a woman willing to tolerate this nonsexual caretaking relationship. While the other cases involved women the men could not live without, this man also projected his need on the women as the one who could not live without him. The patient belongs in this group because he fears finding the woman he cannot do without.

As a fifth example I will cite a female patient in a long marriage whose husband succeeded in infantilizing her. He did everything he could for her. He did every chore, when they traveled he made all the arrangements, and wherever she had to go he took her there and waited until she finished. The project was a success and the woman became entirely dependent on him. She could not travel alone or in any way become separated from him. When she entered treatment she did not know whether she loved her husband or not but felt she could not exist without him.

Freud’s major contribution to the understanding of love was stated in the Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905); Freud stated that all love is in fact the refinding of earlier love and that infantile prototypes determine who is chosen as the love object (p. 202). His new and revolutionary idea was the contrary to what the lovers believe in and proclaim (that they fell in love because the love object is so wonderful
and possesses unique qualities), they have fallen in love because the person in some way unconsciously reminded them of an early love during infancy for the mother, father, or a sibling, or more rarely a nursemaid or grandparent. We also encounter cases where our patients went out of their way to avoid the incest taboo by selecting love objects that belong to other races or other, often remote, cultures, but this defense mechanism is subject to erosion. For example, a Caucasian man in a relationship with a Chinese woman complains that she looks less Chinese every year. The same fear of the incest taboo catching up was expressed by a man whose mate was considerably older than he was, and as she aged she became more similar to his mother. That he selected an older woman was already a sign that he was searching for a mother substitute but now he fears that the loved woman will increasingly recall the mother at the cost of the sexual attraction.

In 1914, in the paper “On Narcissism,” Freud expanded the range of object choice to include two types of love (p. 90).

1. A person may love according to the narcissistic type
   a. what he himself is
   b. what he himself was
   c. what he himself would like to be
   d. someone who was part of himself.
2. According to the attachment type
   a. the woman who feeds him
   b. the man who protects him.
It is evident that my patient who chose the woman he could not live without fits into Freud’s fourth category, loving someone who was part of himself, but while the first three categories are easy to find and understand, the fourth one is not nearly as obvious. To love someone because that person reminds us of ourselves may be called mirror love; it is what happened to the legendary Narcissus. To fall in love with what one was is the unconscious reason that some men fall in love with boys. Psychoanalysis has shown that the loved boy represents the self before the trauma occurred. The third category consists of falling in love with one’s own ego ideal. The last category, someone who was part of oneself, is the category I am trying to explain. It is not easy to explain and Freud made no effort to illuminate what he meant. If “the woman I cannot live without” is also a refinding, then it is the refinding of the infantile state of utter dependency. This refinding may be painful or, as Freud would put it, “beyond the pleasure principle.”

In 1920, when Freud learned to appreciate the power of the repetition compulsion, it became clear that the repetition compulsion can determine the selection of the love object. For example, the daughter of an alcoholic father will refind this relationship with an alcoholic husband, whom she will attempt in vain to reform.

Freud saw the repetition compulsion as operating beyond the pleasure principle. As such it is likely to be a major contributor to the creation of “the woman I cannot live without” syndrome. The men and women who suffer from this syndrome show a deficiency of healthy narcissism. Too much narcissism is a well-known contributor to the inability to love but now we also find the opposite, an insufficient amount of narcissism, can create such a dependent relationship that love cannot take place.
That love is refinding and not finding has remained the characteristic psychoanalytic thinking on love. However, it also raises many problems. If love is based on refinding, how do lovers avoid the incest taboo? Experience has shown that many lovers cannot avoid it and remain sexually inhibited. In 1912 Freud observed, “Where they love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love,” and impotence makes its appearance whenever an object that has been chosen with the aim of avoiding incest recalls the prohibited object through some feature, often an inconspicuous one” (Freud 1912 p. 183).

In Civilization and Its Discontents (1930), Freud wrote:

At the height of being in love the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away. Against all the evidence of his senses, a man who is in love declares that ‘I’ and ‘you’ are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact. (p. 66)

For the next chapter on the history of the relationship between psychoanalysis and love we turn to Margaret Mahler. In the 1971 Festschrift of Margaret Mahler, edited by McDevitt and Settlage, I published a paper titled “Psychoanalytic Observations on the Capacity to Love.” In that paper I stressed the relationship between love and symbiosis, going as far back as Plato’s Symposium.

In the well-known myth told in the Symposium, man was originally a double. As punishment for his rebellion against the gods, he was cut in half, and the two halves forever yearn to be reunited.

For the intense yearning which each of them has towards the other does not appear to be the desire of lover’s intercourse, but of something else which the soul of either evidently desires and cannot tell, and of which she has only a dark and doubtful presentiment. Suppose Hephaestus, with his instruments, [were] to come to the pair who are lying side by side…and said to them…”do you desire to be wholly one: always day and night to be in one another’s company? for if this is what you desire, I am ready to melt you into one and let you grow together…” there is not a man of them who when he heard the proposal would deny that this meeting and melting into one another, this becoming one instead of two, was the very expression of
his ancient need [Symposium, 192, Jowett translation]. (Bergmann 1971 pp. 508-509)

…

According to Mahler’s findings, after a brief, normal autistic phase, the infant enters into the symbiotic phase. Mahler (1967) writes: “The essential feature of symbiosis is hallucinatory or delusional, somatopsychic, omnipotent fusion with the representation of the mother and, in particular, delusion of a common boundary of the two actually and physically separate individuals…”

…

We may conclude therefore that love revives, if not direct memories, then feelings and archaic ego states that were once active in the symbiotic phase. (Bergmann 1971 p. 522)

…

Hitschmann quotes George Bernard Shaw as having said, “Being in love means greatly exaggerating the difference between one woman and another.” Following Mahler, we can say that it is the symbiotic phase and its successful resolution in the individuation-separation phase which makes it possible for some to exaggerate the difference between one human being and another, and hence enables them to love. (Ibid pp. 525-526)

When I wrote the book The Anatomy of Loving in 1987 I considered Freud’s idea of refinding and Mahler’s awareness of the period of symbiosis the two pillars upon which the psychoanalytic view of love was based.

The way I formulated this in 1971 and later in 1987 was that the symbiotic phase leaves a psychic residue in the form of longing for merger and this state of longing is re-evoked when one falls in love (1987 p. 240). Now I would like to add that this formulation was correct but it covered only half of the territory between the two states. Mahler thought that we long for the mother of symbiosis from cradle to grave while Kohut thought that we refind her in the self-object (1987 p. 250).
In *The Anatomy of Loving* I further elaborated that love is a revival of symbiotic yearnings but it can also be experienced as a loss of the boundaries of the self. When the symbiotic yearnings are too strong and a fear of merging is experienced, one often falls in love with someone living in a distant part of the world to defend against the danger of merger. In this scenario meetings are necessarily short and take place only after a prolonged and psychologically necessary period of separation.

What the analysands who have a conflict between the woman they love and the woman they cannot be without have taught me is that the relationship between love and symbiosis is more complex than I realized a generation ago. The aim of lovers, as Plato formulated it, is a re-merger, but if this re-merging is successful the result is not “the woman I love” but “the woman I cannot live without.” In love the otherness of the love object has to be recognized. A happy love can be defined as a balance of the two needs: the need to merge and the need to maintain a sense of separate identity. This equilibrium may be threatened from both sides to become either too symbiotic or too separate. Love is dependent on this delicate balance. If we ask a man who is involved with “the woman I cannot live without” he may call this relationship a love relationship, but I believe it is an early form of love against which the more mature ego is raising objections.

When lovers are separated the urgent question they ask is “Did you miss me?” and they are right to ask this question. The capacity to miss someone is a prerequisite for the capacity to love. In analysis we encounter patients who have satisfactory sexual relationships but when the partner is not available they immediately find a substitute. To
yearn is to know that the love object is not replaceable. Those who are afraid of yearning for and missing someone cannot love.

A couple married for a long time often takes on parental qualities with the husband assuming paternal qualities for the woman and the wife assuming maternal qualities for the man. This transformation makes it possible for the Oedipal constellation to be established once more. The fact that couples can enjoy their sexual love for a long time but that at certain times the sexual wishes become weaker and even dissipate altogether convinced me that even when the incest taboo has been overcome for some time it can reassert itself either after marriage or after the birth of a child. Repression should not only be seen as moving the Oedipus complex from the conscious state to the unconscious but also as breaking the Oedipus up into various components. As time goes on, however, these separate components may reunite and the Oedipus complex enters the preconscious and re-establishes the Oedipal taboo.

The discovery of the Oedipus complex is generally regarded as Freud’s most important discovery. It was first divulged to his friend Wilhelm Fliess on October 15, 1897 (Masson 1985). When he analyzed the Wolf Man (1918) Freud discovered that it consists of two parts, positive and negative. It is of interest that this central and universal constellation never emerged as a unit in psychoanalytic treatment; only more or less disturbed derivatives emerge. Therefore, strictly speaking, it can never be interpreted; it is always constructed by the therapist.

What I am stressing in this presentation is that if desire for a symbiotic relationship is close to success, love becomes impossible. Some “otherness” in the love object has to remain or the bliss of refinding does not occur.
The more complicated relationship between love and symbiosis may be described as follows: When some couples live together for many decades they tend to create something akin to symbiotic merger. They become mutually dependent on each other and separation even for one night may be difficult. Sometimes, when they work at the same place, they are literally never apart. For sexuality to remain alive there must be two psychologically distinct people to fall in love with each other. Merger operates against sexual attraction. If the merger has taken place, yearning for separation individuation reasserts itself and one of the partners falls in love with someone else.

There is yet another form of merger to describe, when the partner takes on superego functions. When this happens the condemnation of the partner is feared. One lies to or conceals information from the partner. Such a re-externalization and projection of the superego on the partner can be a significant contribution to the idea of “the woman I cannot live without.” The superego is in turn the representative of the parent, and to be separated from the superego is experienced as a new separation anxiety.

Symbiotic yearning for merger is necessary for falling in love. One cannot love if one cannot tolerate missing the beloved, but this symbiotic yearning should not find fulfillment. If it does, love becomes oppressive. Sexual love has two powerful enemies: the re-entrance of the incest taboo into the life of the couple and the re-establishment of the symbiotic phase. Once more I find how much psychoanalysis owes to Greek culture: “everything in moderation.”
Works Cited


Freud, S. (1913). The Theme of the Three Caskets. S.E. 12
