

Andrew Metcalfe & Ann Game

EVERYDAY PRESENCES

Introduction

This article signals a shift from the desire-based post-structuralism of our book *Passionate Sociology* to a more inclusive love-based understanding of sociality in our recent book *The Mystery of Everyday Life*. The problem we found was that despite all our attempts to refigure desire, the primacy of separate terms remained: self, identity and linearity are unavoidable where there is desire. The basic formulation of desire – self and other – refers to two terms that interact with each other, rather than a relational logic. In this article, we provide an account of the time-space and being involved in a relational logic.

This conceptual shift has implications for the significance of a sociology of the everyday. This relates, for example, to understandings of the unknown and the unknowable. In desire-based logics, the Other is elsewhere, eluding the self in an endless deferral: an excess that is unknown. A relational logic, on the other hand, presumes the possibility of a meeting with the unknowable, a meeting that takes place in the here and now of the everyday. Within this logic, then, contra Derrida, ‘the present’ and ‘presence’ have a mysterious quality that can be

‘known’ through our participation in the world.

The everyday and the exceptional

The everyday is normally aligned with the mundane and profane, as the opposite of the sacred. Accordingly, for Buber, in his early years, religious experience was ‘the exception . . . the experience of an otherness which did not fit into the context of life’ (1966, p. 17). However, Buber’s understanding and experience of the everyday changed:

Since then I have given up the ‘religious’ which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. . . . I do not know much more. If that is religion then it is just everything, simply everything that is lived in its possibility of dialogue.

(1966, p. 18)

‘Each of us’, said Buber,

is encased in an armour which we soon, out of habit, no longer notice. . . .

[Only when] a moment has imposed itself on us [do we] . . . take notice and ask ourselves, ‘Has anything particular taken place? Was it not of the kind I meet everyday?’ then we may reply to ourselves, ‘Nothing particular,

indeed, it is like this everyday, only we are not there everyday.'The signs of address are not something extraordinary . . . The waves of the aether roar on always, but for most of time we have turned off our receivers.

(2002, pp. 12–13)

This article explores the implications of this different understanding and experience of the everyday, offering an account of an everyday experience, and then surveying the range of conceptual issues raised by the example.

Love at first sight

It is the second week of the school year, and my younger son, Max, is in his first year at kindergarten. In the afternoons, he tells me that his days have been 'all wonderful', but in the mornings his nerve is still occasionally failing him. Three days ago, still unable to console him long after the other parents had left the classroom, I had to pull him from me and abandon him to the teacher's care. As I walked away, I could see him huddled wretchedly under a low table, crying. This morning Leo and Max were to make the trip to school with their uncle and cousin, but at the last moment Max panicked. He would not go to school unless I took him. Then, when we parked near the school, he said he would not leave the car. His refusal only lasted a moment, but it triggered in me a spasm of cold fear, to which I reacted with anxiety and irritation. This was still my

condition as we stood outside the car and the boys put on the school backpacks that always seem too big for them.

Then, leaning over to help Max, I noticed from the corner of my eye that we were being watched. About ten steps from us, an office worker entering her building had been stopped in her tracks by the sight of Leo and Max struggling to put their arms through the right straps. She was slim and quite tall; she was too young, probably, to have children of her own; I sense she held a takeaway cup of coffee in one hand and a workbag on the other arm. I cannot tell you anything more about her appearance, and I would not recognize her if I passed her in the street, but at that moment I had an overpowering sense of the bright and lively look in her eyes. It wasn't as if she had stopped to stare: it looked instead as if the sight she had come upon had captivated her, incapacitated her, opened the most tender feelings. The woman and I caught each other's looks for a moment, and we smiled in recognition, unguarded smiles of what I clearly felt was love. Then the spell broke, and we all went about our business.

So is this, I wondered later, what happens when people fall in love at first sight? When this woman became lost in this detail of the morning, lost in the vision of my children, her eyes showed that she no longer knew who or where or when she was, so am I also right in feeling, I wondered, that this everyday

occurrence raises profound questions about time, space, ways of being and ways of knowing?

When did this happen?

Abba Justus, a Coptic monk, had just one question for the people he encountered: ‘What time is it now?’ Had I been asked that question on this morning, I would have been able, in one sense, to give a very precise answer. It is 7:50, and the boys have not yet dressed for school; it is 8:20 and these traffic lights are going to make us late. Yet, the more precise this sense of time, the more incapable I was of answering the monk’s question. 7:50 is never now.

7:50 is an experience of clock time, its specific qualities based on quantification and measurement in minutes, hours, days, years. Clock time is a line of distinct, separate, identical units, and it is this line of past, present and future units that allows us to live nostalgically in the past or future, alienated from where we presently are. When everyday life becomes a matter of achievements and points of arrival – getting to school on time, raising the children successfully – you are no longer experiencing life. The everyday becomes either an endless repetition of the past or a desirous rush to arrive at some other time when, you fantasize, life will really begin.

Now let us think about my meeting with love. In such moments, we do not think about time as a repetition of the past or the means for arriving in the future; we are not fighting time or saving it, not trapped in it, not measuring it according to the vibration of quartz atoms. The experience is invigorating and creative because we are living the time of life's flux and flow, a time, indistinguishable from cycles of living and dying, in which everything moves and changes.

Yet it is in this now, when our receptors are open to the roaring waves of life, that we feel held in moments of timelessness, awe-filled moments 'out of time' which we experience through a sense of infinitely tender compassion.

There is space here for everything. Time stood still, we say, when describing experiences of belonging with whatever changes occur. It is in the moment that we find eternity.

Eternity, on this understanding, is not an exception to the everyday. It is not a long time period and it is not a forever after that stretches beyond the end of the measurable line of time. Eternity is the everyday. It is experienced as a return to and not an escape from ordinary life. When we are rushing about purposefully, aware of the smallest movements of the hands of our clocks, we are absent from here and from now. Eternity is the return of these humble life truths.

As Berger notes, no matter how elaborated our measurements and understandings of clock time, there remains hidden within them this sense of the local and cyclical:

The calculation returns from the astronomic to the local, like a prodigal son. This weakness of the mind, this homesickness which cannot or will not altogether abandon the here-and-now, can be interpreted in two ways. It can be seen as the revealing weakness which proves how lost and impotent man is in the universe; or it can be seen as the vestige . . . of the original truth.

(1991, p. 37)

Like Berger, we think that the here and now are indispensable truths about the nature of life everyday, but Berger's notion of 'the vestige' cedes too much to the chronological. Eternity is not a survival of an origin but the presence of the origin. It remains the original time without which chronology is inconceivable.

Rather than being the impossibly thin sliver of life designated by a clock time, now holds all temporal possibilities. There is room here for all time, but the past is not here a discrete flashback and the future is not a discrete glimpse of what is yet to come. The past and future exist in the eternal as phenomena of the present. In chronological time, the past was, but in eternity it is. Eternity has no need for vestiges because times are not alienated on an abstract line.

I saw this experience of eternity on the face of the office worker. Although my children were apparently strangers to her, her fond expression showed that she saw in them a deep familiarity that she had forgotten she knew. Perhaps what she saw touched her own first days at school, perhaps it touched her own eagerness and vulnerability, but it did not simply refer to these personal experiences. She was not simply remembering something from the past, and my children were not simply symbolizing something located elsewhere, for even though her look was soft, it was bright and vital and not faraway or nostalgic. There was archaic recognition in her look, but also new and ongoing amazement. Whatever amazed her was present to her, and through her, but also went beyond her and included my children.

Awe, which Durkheim put at the heart of religious experience (1976, p. 416ff), is central to this experience of *nowness*. The officeworker had been walking along, distracted from the roaring waves of (her) life, when there suddenly swept over her a sense of this very moment. In this revitalization of significance, this revelation of the *Ah!* of life, she felt at once a moment of newness and a sense of *I know this already; I've always known this*.

Here then we have an experience of repetition – of the everyday – that differs from the blasé and enervating sense of daily repetition. The eternal feels so alive

not because it is an escape from the everyday routines, but because it is present to these repetitions! We can think here of Eliade's account of the significance of the eternal return in primitive cultures (and while doing so we should note that 'the primitive' loses its chronological and vestigial sense when understood within Eliade's terms). Citing several examples of rituals celebrating origin myths, Eliade discerns

the same 'primitive' ontological conception: an object or an act becomes real only insofar as it imitates or repeats an archetype. Thus, reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation: everything that lacks an exemplary model is 'meaningless', i.e. it lacks reality. Men would thus have a tendency to become archetypal and paradigmatic. This tendency may well appear paradoxical, in the sense that the man of a traditional culture sees himself as real only to the extent that he ceases to be himself (for a modern observer) and is satisfied with imitating and repeating the gestures of another. In other words, he sees himself as real, i.e. as 'truly himself', only, and precisely, insofar as he ceases to be so.

(1971, p. 34)

The experience of eternal repetition is creative – original, originary – because it is accompanied by a sense of 'newness': the original takes us back to

origins by giving us the sense of 'for the first time'. This is the temporality of love at first sight. This is the original originary eternal love.

Where did this happen?

This discussion of time has already implied that there is a spatial sense that accompanies eternity. The woman looked at my children and felt life revitalize.

This implies an undoing of the distance that guarantees the separate existences of the subjects and objects of knowledge in the familiar Hegelian scenario.

To highlight this point, let us take a contrasting example of an everyday encounter, as described in Hegelian terms. 'Hell is other people', Sartre famously claimed, and in *Being and Nothingness*, he locates hell in a public park. He imagines sitting there, in the park, grass and trees at measurable distances around him. Then another man passes:

[I]nstead of a grouping toward me of the objects, there is now an orientation

which flees from me . . . [T]here is a total space which is grouped around the Other, and this space is made with my space; there is a regrouping in which I take part but which escapes me, a regrouping of all the objects which people my universe . . . [T]he very quality of the object, [the grass's] deep, raw green is in direct relation to this man. This green turns toward the Other a face which escapes me. I apprehend the relation of the green to the

Other as an objective relation, but I can not apprehend the green as it appears to the Other. Thus suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me . . . [I]t appears that the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being and that it is perpetually flowing off through this hole.

(1992, pp. 342–343)

In this account, the world is an array of objects set out in an abstract empty homogenous Euclidean space that is centred on the subject. The other is a thief who steals my world by threatening to turn me into an object of his world. In other words, the world is stolen because I cannot be where the other is without losing where I am. The world is his or it is mine: we do not bring the world alive for each other but steal it from one another. Social life is a matter of him or me, even though we cannot do without each other. I am here or there. I look at him and, rather than revitalization, feel life drain from me.

This is a good description of how I was when terrified that Max's tantrums would steal away my identity as a parent who is capable and lovingly protective, would steal away my program for the day and the week, would steal away my sense of the world as a stage for my projects. There was a distance between Max and me, but it was an empty space that registered opposition rather than difference. Because it threatened me in ways I did not dare admit, even to myself,

it was a distance that I would have to appropriate by a masterful display of effective parenting. No wonder there was a self-righteous urgency in my determination: I was indeed out to save the world, my world!

Let us compare the Sartrean situation with that set out by Merleau-Ponty.

The latter uses the term ‘flesh of the world’ to remind us of the primal fact that we are made of the same stuff as the world, and that this, for phenomenologists, is how we know: ‘Immersed in the visible by his body . . . the see-er does not appropriate what he sees . . . he opens himself to the world . . . [M]y body is caught in the fabric of the world’ (1964, pp. 162–163). We know the world with and through our bodies: ‘Things arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence’ (1964, p. 164). We are in the world, and the world is in us: relational logic reversibly entwines inside and outside:

Since things and my body are made of the same stuff, vision must somehow take place in them . . . ‘Nature is on the inside,’ says Cezanne. Quality, light, colour, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our body and because the body welcomes them.

(1964, p. 164)

The spatial logic set out by Merleau-Ponty was at play this morning for the office worker. What did she see in my children? Nothing! Everything! Where was she

positioned, here or there? Both! Nowhere! Who is she? No one! Everyone!

Whatever she recognized, it was not a finite external thing that could be grasped or known once and for all. She recognized no-thing-ness, without being able to define the limits of what she recognized. Feeling part of the world she saw, she felt what she saw: the tenderness she felt was a tenderness of as well as a tenderness about. These are all ways of saying that in this moment of captivation, the woman was no longer an observer of an external world but a mystical participant in vision. In an inner-city street, a busy young woman on her way to work was astonished by a radiant vision of the blooming of life itself.

This discussion implies that the infinite space that is characteristic of eternity arises from the primacy of participation. This is a point also made by the physicists Bohm and Peat:

there is indeed a meaning to a reality that lies outside ourselves but . . . it is necessary that we, too, should be included in an essential way as participants in this reality. Our knowledge of the universe is derived from this act of participation which involves ourselves, our senses, the instruments used in experiments, and the ways we communicate and choose to describe nature.

(2000, p. 55)

The universe is not infinite because it is bigger than anyone can measure. It is infinite because we who would know are part of the 'it' we would know. Infinity, then, is not just endless counting but an inability to even begin counting. Not an immeasurably long way away, infinitude is always here, just as it is always now, the condition of our belonging to the universe and each other. Infinitude is the fundamental quality of all relations.

Who looked and what was seen?

I have described this everyday incident as an experience of love, and yet I cannot describe the office worker, even though I was looking at her with such interest.

I suspect that she would be equally unable to identify Leo, Max and me. What does this tell us? Why do I have such a keen sense of the keen fascination in her look but no sense of her eyes' colour or shape, no sense of what her face looked like? The answer is that my sight had no destination. It did not conclude, in a knowledge claim, when arriving at the objective characteristics of the woman's face. It is not so much that I saw her, as I might see some thing, but that I saw with her, with her aid, with her eyes.

Levinas puts this well in his account of face-to-face relations:

You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. When one

observes the colour of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that.

There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defence. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is most naked, though with a decent nudity. It is the most destitute also: there is an essential poverty in the face. . . .

The face is . . . signification without context. I mean that the Other, in the rectitude of his face, is not a character within a context . . . a professor at the Sorbonne, a Supreme Court justice, son of so-and-so . . . Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself. You are you. In this sense one can say that the face is not 'seen.' It is what cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond.

(1985, pp. 85–87)

When Levinas says 'you are you', he is not associating you-ness with a self-contained identity. The word you is like the words now and here: it indicates a presence that can be experienced as a whole but never known as a totality, never defined, contained, represented in absentia. I can only use the word you to you, with you, in the course of a meeting with you. It is a participatory word that emerges from meeting, as part of a relationship. Whereas I am master of what I

discern as the objective characteristics of the other, and probably prefer to list these characteristics without the other being present (for their presence would bias my objectivity), it is your presence that puts the word you in my mouth.

Within the sort of relation that Levinas is discussing, the other is at once different to me and the same as me, and there is a mysterious incapacity to say where the boundaries of this sameness and difference fall. The other fills me with wonder, yet this wonder teaches me about the strangeness I find in myself. In relation, the boundaries between inside and outside are suspended, making it impossible to clearly distinguish entities, showing how everything belongs together, is implicated in everything else.

This is the point of Buber's discussion of the difference between I-It and

I-Thou, which, Buber says, are the two primary words, pertaining to different

forms of relation:

If Thou is said, the I of the combination I-Thou is said along with it.

If It is said, the I of the combination I-It is said along with it. . . .

The life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone.

It does not exist in virtue of activities alone which have some thing for their

object.

I perceive something. I am sensible of something. . . . This and the like together establish the realm of It.

But the realm of the Thou has a different basis.

When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. . . . Thou has no bounds. . . .

The relation to the Thou is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between I and Thou. . . . No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between I and Thou. . . .

(1958, pp. 3–12)

These accounts by Levinas and Buber of presence – of nothingness, nakedness, destitution, primitiveness – are of great conceptual significance, for they remind us of a relational domain that cannot be discussed in the familiar concepts of Hegelian thought: viz. subject, object, identity, negation, desire, mastery, movement, self-certainty, representation. In the meeting, there are no identifiable subjects, objects and desires. It is not that these are transcended or negated: there is room for all these possibilities but at the same time it is clear that no identification can be adequate, that no identities stand alone, that none can serve as a conclusion of knowing. What I know in the eternity of the meeting is infinite, which is not a huge amount of or even an endless amount of knowledge but a

knowledge of the mystery, the no-thing-ness, of the whole.

Levinas' account of face-to-face relations can also be located within contemporary discussions of vision. In contrast with Jay's (1993, pp. 556–560) reading of Levinas, we take him to be saying that there are different ways of looking.

Whereas the Sartrean look, for example, is a powerful, objectifying gaze, a face-to-face encounter implies a dialogic way of looking. In other words, Levinas' meeting has a similar logic to that of Merleau-Ponty's entwinement of vision and the visible (1964, pp. 162–164).

How do I know?

Knowledge of relations is only available through participation. It is not an alienated knowledge about but a knowledge with and through. As Buber notes, 'I [cannot] . . . describe the form which meets me, but only body it forth. And yet I behold it, splendid in the radiance of what confronts me' (1958, p. 10). It is the logic that the Persian poet Rumi had in mind when he tried to explain how you learn of the silent person's hidden nature:

I sit in front of him in silence,
and set up a ladder made of patience,

and if in his presence a language from beyond joy
and beyond grief begins to pour from my chest,
I know that his soul is as deep and bright
as the star Canopus rising over Yemen.

And so when I start speaking a powerful right arm
of words sweeping down, I know him from what I say
and how I say it, because there's a window open
between us, mixing the night air of our beings.

(1995, p. 30)

This is how I know the office worker, and how she knows my sons and me. We know because we met, because her look captivated me just as the sight of my children transfixed her.

Such knowledge is not masterful. When the naked vulnerability she accepted from Max and Leo was given to me, it returned me to a presence that is deeper than the finite and deeper than any things or names or identities that I might describe. For an amazed moment of recognition, I experienced a direct understanding of mystery and infinity: I knew the mysterious infinity of this woman, these children, this world, and therefore, because these encounters kept showing me more about myself, of me. We are often afraid of poverty and

destitution, thinking of them as conditions of weakness and incapacity, yet such humility is the only way to know the mystery of the life in which we participate. This primitive poverty brings riches. These riches are not ours, but we share in them.

This discussion changes the way we might think about love. While Hegelian terms work well in discussions of desire (see Game & Metcalfe 1996), they are not able to talk of love without reducing it to a mirror-play of identities. This everyday experience of love at first sight suggests that love is not a personal matter. I do not love someone because of who they are: because of the total set of their attributes. I love them just because, regardless of who they are. I love not their personal qualities and accomplishments but their tender vulnerability, their nothingness, with which and through which I experience the wholeness that accompanies the infinite. Love is never exclusive but always infinitely inclusive.

These are not easy issues to discuss in academic discourse. As Steiner observes in *Real Presences*, a book on art as annunciation:

To try and tell of what happens inside oneself as one affords vital welcome and habitation to the presences in art, music and literature is to risk the whole gamut of muddle and embarrassment. . . . Structuralist semiotics

and deconstruction are expressions of a culture and society which 'play it cool'.

(1989, p. 178)

So let us not play it cool. We are saying that the principle of love is angelic, that the nothingness we encounter in the meeting that is love is annunciatory, an announcement and manifestation of our primitive infinitude (see Serres 1995, Metcalfe & Game 2002). Love is what connects us with, allows us to belong to, the universe. Without love, we are alienated and only capable of alienated knowledge. Without love, we are trapped outside the vitality of life. Without love, the everyday is a time and space we must get through to arrive at the otherworld: the fantasy time and space where life really happens. With love, we return to the everyday and find there – here, now – the wonders of life. As Buber puts it: 'man dwells in his love. That is no metaphor, but the actual truth' (1958, p. 14).

A vision of the street

In *Preludes*, T. S. Eliot talks of having 'a vision of the street as the street hardly understands'. In commuter traffic of tramping feet and evening newspapers and short square fingers stuffing pipes, Eliot feels something else, though the word 'something' is not quite right:

I am moved by fancies that are curled

Around these images, and cling:

The notion of some infinitely gentle

Infinitely suffering thing.

Through giving himself over to the details of particular moments in the street, Eliot senses the endless compassion of the eternal and infinite: the universal acceptance that holds together and holds apart this newspaper reader, these tramping feet, this pipe-smoker. In a similar way, the fleeting detail of two little boys struggling with shoulder straps gave an office worker a vision of eternity and infinity.

Theoretically, these 'details' can be understood in the relational way that Deleuze and Guattari speak of a specific body or form:

There is a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, or substance. We reserve the name haecceity for it. A season, a winter, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing, even though this individuality is different from that of a thing or a subject.

(1987, p. 261)

Deleuze and Guattari make the important point that it is not a matter of either/

or: a relational logic insists that any 'individuality' is simultaneously thing and no-thing, finite and infinite (1987, p. 262)

Two children putting on schoolbags may seem scarcely worth attention, but, in a way that was both mundane and inspired, this moment changed my world.

I had not seen these children when I had been busy looking for trouble from Max; I had not seen them in their particularity, but only as objective reflections of my subjecthood. However, the beautiful lively vulnerable fearless openness of this woman's look swept away my irritations and purposes and self-consciousness, and gave me a vision of the heartbreaking beauty of children struggling with their schooling (the heartbreaking beauty of this woman, of these passers-by, of me, struggling to be good people). These boys, so nervous, so open, so keen, with their match-stick legs and with, at this age, no self-conscious swagger in the constant dishevelment of their uniforms, these boys seemed to bloom with the tender freshness of life. We talk of the bloom of a rose or a peach, referring to the down on the skin that affirms the swelling life inside the flower or fruit, but we also see this blooming when, with soft eyes, we're amazed by the impossibly tender hair on the skin of children, by the vulnerable eagerness of their softly freckled faces.

Of course, I could not see my children like this without seeing the world

afresh. When my perspective was lowered by my fear of a tantrum, I had not noticed the glorious open blueness of the sky or the vital greenness of the street trees. This was the first sunny morning after days of rain, and the world was clean and full of promise. As Max and Leo and I walked to school, hand in hand, I could feel the world smiling at us, with us, through us.

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