

Potential Space and Love

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Biographical Details

The authors teach together in the School of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2052. They have written four books collaboratively: *Passionate sociology*; *The mystery of everyday life*; *The first year experience*; and *Teachers who change lives*. Additionally, Ann is co-author of *Gender at work* and author of *Undoing the social*, and Andrew is author of *For freedom and dignity*.

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Abstract:

Potential space is the term that Winnicott uses to describe the space of good parenting, therapy, creativity and aliveness. In this paper we associate this space with love. Love is not subjective, not an emotion that one subject feels for an object or even for another subject. Love is the primordial experience of infinite space; not an experience of unity but a meeting of sameness and difference. This undefined space needs to be distinguished from the familiar locational form of Euclidean space if we are to be able to distinguish love from the desire that a subject might have for one thing or another. We make this argument through a case study from our research on student-teacher relations, and through the theoretical work of Buber, Winnicott and Merleau-Ponty.

Keywords:

Potential space, meeting, love, desire, between, infinite

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Introduction

Winnicott uses the terms potential space and holding space to describe the place ‘where we are when we are experiencing life’ (1991: 104), the space of creative living:

What for instance, are we doing when we are listening to a Beethoven symphony or making a pilgrimage to a picture gallery or reading *Troilus and Cressida* in bed, or playing tennis? What is a child doing when sitting on the floor playing with toys under the aegis of the mother? ... The question also needs to be posed: where are we (if anywhere at all)? (1991: 105)

This is a space, he says, which cannot properly be described by the terms ‘inner’ or ‘outer’ and, thus, from the perspective of ubiquitous Euclidean space, cannot exist (1991: 107). Based on the paradoxical logic of both-and rather than either/or, this is the space *between* mother and baby; it is also the space of pedagogy, therapy and creativity. Often theorists who use the term ‘between’

maintain a Euclidean logic, by posing it as the third term between two primary terms, but Winnicott is proposing a different space, an infinite space that does not permit the counting of terms. For Winnicott, holding space is important because it allows for states of un-integration and formlessness, states of *just being* where identity can be suspended in creative play, in the absorbed exploration of potential (1991: 53-64; see also Bohm 1985). There is both sameness and difference in these states but these are not identifiable or locatable.

In this piece, we will explore the nature of potential space through a pedagogic example. We will show that potential space involves an ontological shift, from the identity logic of Euclidean space to the relational logic of potential space. In other words, potential space involves a different being in a different world. In this space, potential is not a quality of a subject. As an open way of being, potential is neither internal nor external, but is the non-finite difference that emerges through *relation*. Intertwining and flesh are Merleau-Ponty's terms for this non-finite space (1968); ecology is Bateson's term (1972); intimate space is Bachelard's (1969); love is the term used by Buber (1958) and Serres (1995); Heidegger (1962) calls it being-in-the-world. While conventional social theory presumes the existence of subjects located in Euclidean space and linear time, these relational terms challenge the view that subjects are created by and create

the social. These terms also indicate that a state such as love can take different forms: the relational condition of love cannot be understood as an emotion felt by a subject.

Emotion, Space and Society has been established as ‘a forum for interdisciplinary debate on theoretically informed research on the emotional intersections between people and places’. The following account, of the spatiality of love and the meeting with difference, is designed to highlight the need for such debate. It is important to be conceptually rigorous about the particular time, space and ontology of different social situations. An emotional intersection between people and places could take a subject-based or a relational form, taking place in either Euclidean or ecological space. The emotion form will vary, with the space, time and ontology.

Opening

We became highly aware of these different spaces during our recent study of ‘teachers who change lives’ (see Metcalfe and Game 2006). As teachers told us, you can immediately distinguish a classroom that is working, by a particular experience of space. Whereas a distressed classroom is characterised by

distance, distraction, disconnection or exclusion, there is absorption and buzz in the lively classroom. Conventionally, it would be assumed that the latter environment is a by-product of the actions of the good students, but teachers insisted that a more communal and relational logic was at work. The atmosphere came about, but was not caused by the actions of individual subjects; moreover, teachers told us, this form of space was a *precondition* of absorbed work.

To explore these issues, and give a sense of the ontological and spatial transformations that occur in potential space, we will look at one interview from this research project. In this interview, a student, Guy Hungerford, describes how his art teacher, Jane Wisner, taught him to 'be a human being'. Guy spoke of Jane opening his heart, and we will see that by this he means that his bodily and spatial form was altered.

Before I met her, I was very anxious, very very needful of control. I'd separate myself from other people, or from situations, and close in on myself. These lessons were the first chance I had to open myself, to really trust other people and to relax and allow myself to enjoy the warmth of being around others without worrying about who's winning or trying to impress myself or other people.

Jane said *You tend to draw very tight pictures. You draw these tiny little things and try to fit all this detail in them and you need this enormous amount of white space and I want you to try to use that space more and try and draw big lines.* At first I was quite scared by the idea of filling up all the white space. She said that basically I was just drawing with my finger tips and that I needed to loosen my grip and use my arm as well, because otherwise I'd be trapped in these very tiny pictures.

At this point in the interview, Guy gestured with his arms, opening his chest. Jane, it was clear, was urging him to breathe more deeply, to use his capacities more expansively, to allow a free flow between what was inside and what was outside. He should recognise, as she obviously did, that he could do more, that he and his ideas were important enough to occupy more space. A different way of drawing called for a different body. When closed in on himself, he was psychically and physically constrained and thus unable to draw anything beyond a small familiar field.

Guy told us that the more he tried to be in control, the more frustrated he became. The fantasy of getting it right made him so fearful that he was unable

to sustain a working relation: his art was a lifeless attempt to find and erase mistakes. Jane's lessons taught him to be a human being because they showed him how to stay in open relation with his work, and with himself. No longer a distinct and judgmental subject, Jane taught Guy by allowing the work of teacher to be suffused through a trustworthy environment.

I remember sitting on the floor of her studio with my piece of paper and there'd be something in the middle of the room that I was to draw. Jane was generally off to one side and she was drawing as well. Because I was completely focused on the drawing, I could feel her presence but I wasn't particularly conscious of what she was doing. It didn't feel like someone watching every stroke of my pencil. I could do what I liked, but she was there as a supervisor, or guardian, a kind of safety net, so that if I went too far off the track there'd be someone who'd shepherd me back. It was amazing how focused I was on the drawing. I'd just get lost in it.

I'd had this experience of concentration before, on my own, but being in that classroom helped me to sustain the feeling. When I was drawing on my own there'd be some detail that I couldn't get right and I'd get

frustrated and I'd just walk away. Whereas when I was drawing with Jane and I got stuck, she'd suggest something like *Just leave that alone for a moment and work on something else*. She'd notice I was having problems even before I got really frustrated. Occasionally I'd ask for help, and she usually gave the same advice: *Don't worry about it now, it's not important*. After a while with Jane, I began to develop more patience and an ability to relax and stay with something. When problems come up, just keep drawing. Let the solutions come from the rest of the picture rather than try to pull it out of myself.

Love as Space

Guy's description reminded us immediately of Winnicott's account (1990) of the mother whose unobtrusive and intimate presence allows the child to safely play. Whereas parental identification and interference would destroy the fullness of this environment, by forcing the child to organise itself around its parent's limited desires, this playful space is infinite because there is connectedness and difference without either being locatable. This infinitude is the quality of potential. Given these theoretical associations, it is interesting

that, when Guy subsequently reflected on experiences like the one he had with Jane, he insisted that they were based on love, that there can be no learning or teaching if it is not a form of love (Hungerford, 2007). To understand what Guy means by this, we need to consider the spatiality and ontology of his art classes.

Love is spatially distinct from desire. Desire is linear, narrowing the world by defining it in terms of the subject's future objectives; love, on the other hand, is open, not abstracting an object from the whole. Guy's lessons were life-changing because they allowed him to suspend objectives. This does not mean that Guy had to shun objectives; it means that, in these lessons, Guy did not have to make such choices, did not have to work with this rather than that objective in sight. Potential space is holding space because it can *hold* possibilities, without seeking to settle the space through definition.

We imagine that when Guy began his classes with Jane, it was with the aim of learning the secrets that would perfect his drawing technique. Later, we imagine, he attended the classes without any single purpose; he did them 'just because', just because they seem called for, as part of the fullness of life. He didn't love just his drawing, just his teacher, just art, but instead experienced a love that connected teacher, drawing, art, the world, Guy himself. When he

says that Jane taught him to be a human being, he alludes to this experience of implication and wholeness. The space of love allowed Guy to realise that the subject is not the only source of energy. In love, no-thing happens and yet there is a creative unfolding of potential. There is at once stillness and movement.

The best account of love that we know is given in Martin Buber's account of ethics. Buber (1958) uses the term 'I-It' to describe the desirous logic of finite subjects and objects, and the term 'I-You' (sometimes translated as 'I-Thou') to describe relations based on love. Although some modern readers (e.g. Sidorkin 1996) presume that Buber's I-You refers to intersubjective (subject to subject) experiences, Buber insists that love is *not* personal, *not* a feeling or desire of one subject for another. Instead, it is the quality of the I-You relation that arises without anyone bringing it about. Love isn't something we do but a state we are in. Love is the experience of the infinitude of space:

Feelings are 'entertained': love comes to pass. Feelings dwell in man; but man dwells in his love. That is no metaphor, but the actual truth. Love does not cling to the *I* in such a way as to have the *Thou* only for its 'content', its object; but love is *between I and Thou*. The man who does not know this, with his very being know this, does not know love... . Good people and evil, wise

and foolish, beautiful and ugly, become successively real to him [who takes his stand in love]; that is, set free they step forth in their singleness, and confront him as *Thou*. ... Love is responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou*.' (1958, pp. 14-15)

As this quotation indicates, everything relies on the preposition *in*. Like Heidegger (1962: 70-85), Buber would insist that it is necessary to specify whether this word is being understood in Euclidean or wholistic terms. In the former sense, it implies containment: there are insides and outsides demarcated by walls. Chalk is *in* a box, just as the subject is *in* the categories that define them (*in* the working class). But in the latter sense, which Buber and Heidegger say is primordial, *in* implies involvement and implication. When we are *in* love, or *in* a mood, or absorbed *in* our work, we are in a relation that does not locate insides or outsides or identities. This is often mistaken for oneness ("I am at one with the world"), but oneness remains a categorical concept based on exclusions and inclusions in Euclidean space. Implication instead is infinite: not-countable, non-definable. As Guy's example makes clear, there is difference and wonder in love, but these are not locatable and not emanating from identifiable sources; there is clear focus on particularities but it is not focus on individual things.

This distinction between the meanings of *in* helps us to understand what Buber means when he says that love and the I-You relation allow people to be seen in their singleness. He is referring not to individuality but to uniqueness and incomparability, which include but are not exhausted by any classification or accountancy. Incomparability is not finite, or identifiable, or oneness, for these are the products of desire. Uniqueness, only experienced through direct encounter, is no-thingness or infinitude. Buber puts it this way: 'Inseparable, incomparable, irreducible, now, happening once only, [my concrete world reality] gazes upon me with an awesome look' (1966, 22). But, of course, this is a non-directional vision, and not the gaze of a subject onto an external world.

If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things.... Thus human being is not *He* or *She*, bounded from every other *He* or *She*, a specific point in space and time within the net of the world.... [W]hole in himself, he is *Thou* and fills the heavens. ... I can take out from him the colour of his hair, or of his speech, or of his goodness. I must continually do this. But each time I do it he ceases to be *Thou*. (1958, 8-9)

We have seen, in Guy's case, this coexistence of *I-You* and *I-It*. Love is not an exclusion of desire, for that would reinstall Euclidean space, but nonetheless love cannot be reduced to desire. Whereas desire precludes meeting, because, as Hegel (1977, 104ff) showed, a meeting would be the assimilation of difference and the end of desire, love *is* meeting. Love is the bringing together of sameness and difference. When Guy desired to produce the perfect picture, he was unable to be open to possibilities that offered themselves. When he was working in a space of love, his drawing revealed possibilities he hadn't known he had known. When he could go out to meet the world, his drawing could draw him out. Whereas subjects have trajectories through time and space, this drawing did not involve direction. Any movement out was simultaneously a movement in. This is why movement and stillness co-exist in this time-space.

If we say that love is meeting, we can also say that love is presence: 'the present arises only in virtue of the fact that the *Thou* becomes present' (Buber 1958, 12). This present is a here and now that cannot be defined in Euclidean and linear terms. Because *here* is not exclusive, it is particular and yet 'fills the heavens'. Because *now* is not a point separate from the past and the future, it gathers past and future (Guy found out through his drawing what he didn't know he had wanted to draw). Here and now are terms that open us to the infinite and eternal.

Conclusion

The work of theorists like Buber reminds us that social theory has not always been careful enough about the specific time, space and ontology of different social situations. An emotional intersection between people and places could take an *I-It* or an *I-Thou* form: the *between* can be a third term or can be the infinite; the *intersection* can be the market place where there is exchange by two subjects or it can be the sociality of the meeting.

Guy's example shows both logics. When Guy was self-conscious, in an *I-It* state, the world was at once distant and threatening. He treated the drawing, and the world he wanted to represent, as objects to be mastered, but in doing so he over-identified with them, basing upon them his worth as a subject. He was terrified of the blank space on the page, for it offered him nothing and sought to negate him. Guy oscillated, sometimes full of pride for his skill, sometimes exhausted and humiliated by the effort of, as he put it, 'pulling [the picture] out of myself'.

Through their meeting, Jane and Guy produced the space of *I-Thou*, where neither felt the need to identify what was theirs and what was the other's, a potential space where Guy could easily uncover possibilities hidden from his controlling mind. A problem at one point of the page would dissolve when it revealed the potential of another point of the page; no longer finite and external, the drawing was a drawing out of potential, of Guy, of Jane, of the particular qualities of this paper and pencil, of the world.

When Guy is in potential space, in love, the drawing is *of* and not *about* the world. The drawing emerges as presence rather than taking a representational form (see Steiner, 1989). As Merleau-Ponty makes clear, we know the world with and through our bodies: 'Things arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence' (1964, 164). We are in the world, and the world is in us: relational logic reversibly entwines inside and outside:

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. ... 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, 162-4; see also 1968)

Like theorists such as Buber, Heidegger, Bateson and Winnicott, Merleau-Ponty is insisting that the Euclidean world of subjects who possess bodies and emotions rests upon the denial of a primordial world of infinite differences and potential that he describes as flesh. It is necessary to start, he says, with differentiations in the whole of Being (1968, 270), with an ‘ontology of potentiality’ (1968, 149). This is a logic of infinitude as no-thing-ness, participation and wholeness: ‘It is the same thing to be nothing and to inhabit the world. ... [T]o be is not to remain in identity’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 57). From the perspective of identity logic and Hegelian negation, it is impossible to understand the world of differences, ‘density, depth, the plurality of planes, the background worlds’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 68).

Just as an understanding of infinite space cannot be derived from Euclidean assumptions, it is not possible to derive an understanding of many ‘emotional’ states from the assumption that emotions are qualities of subjects. Our example here has been the distinction between the subject-based state of desire and the relational and non-finite state of love, but the point applies more generally.

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