Luc Ferry On Love
A philosophy for the twenty-first century
On Love
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The global crisis in which we find ourselves enmeshed has intensified the feeling that the world is out of control, that political remedies, on the Right and on the Left, no longer have any purchase on reality, that the values in whose name we act apply less and less to our way of life. We cannot continue to give in to this schizophrenia, this bad faith that makes us think of the present in terms of yesterday’s ideas – ideas that are now clearly obsolete. The aim of this book is, firstly, to show how and why this long period of bewilderment is producing, without our yet being fully aware of it, a new principle of meaning that will enable us to regain control over our destinies, give coherence to our way of seeing the world and set up ideals we can believe in; and secondly, it seeks to analyse the profound concrete changes that result from it in the great domains of individual and collective existence, namely, the family, politics, education and art.

The public discourse of republican values (values that are no longer an issue in the debate, since we all support them, from the extreme Right to the extreme Left) is now light years away from the real questions of our lives as we see them (our children’s futures, the most important man or woman in our lives, the coming of a society that will enable everyone to flourish freely). Hence the sterile stand-off between, on the one side, governments churning out endless measures that are doubtless technically or
tactically justified, but whose overall aim is clear to nobody; and, on the other side, the anger, fear and indignation that have gripped ordinary people in so many countries.

It would be ungracious to lay the blame at the feet of politicians alone since each of us is prey to the same symptoms. Like them, we defend principles that no longer correspond to the way we act. The same people who protest every day against the snare and delusion of consumption will change their iPhones every six months; those who think we ought to go back to the old grey smocks that all French children used to wear still let their children post images of themselves in skimpy clothes on Facebook; and everyone swears by what is ‘eco-friendly’, but still owns a four-wheel drive – and there’s nothing very fair about that. This is called ‘accepting one’s contradictions’, a haughty way of saying that we are accepting nothing except our inability to choose ideals that we really agree with. In short, our representations no longer match up to the truth of our intimate experience; and this consigns us all to the position of ‘do as I say, not as I do’.

How can this divorce be explained? For over a century and a half, the arts, philosophy and our lifestyles have continued to liberate and then give value to hitherto forgotten, marginalized or repressed dimensions of human existence: to sexuality, the unconscious, the feminine element in men and the masculine element in women; to childhood, and our animal and natural aspects. Baudelaire was not the first to have been ‘as bored as a dead rat’, but he was the first to turn this into art, to reveal all the wealth, the authenticity, the freedom of imagination that can unfold in these moments of ‘spleen’. In this way, he opened up a domain to which we are all heirs. From Philippe Delerm’s *The Small Pleasures of Life* to Bénabar’s songs, from a weekend at Center Parcs to the ‘right not to be a perfect mother’, we never cease recycling his work, for good and ill. As a result of this movement, paradoxically taken up and amplified by global capitalism even though it originally claimed to be radically anti-bourgeois, private values have become the main source of public values. All the great ideals that gave life meaning (God, one’s country, the Revolution) are now in a fragile state in Europe; love is henceforth the only value in which we all unreservedly believe. This is why education, health, assistance for dependants, the preservation of the planet for future generations and, more generally, all the initiatives designed to
foster the full realization of each person have become central themes in the political debate.

But the problem is that the main frameworks at our disposal for understanding collective life do not take into account this now decisive aspect of our existences. Liberalism is no better than socialism or nationalism at integrating private life into the dynamics of public life. Indeed, they do the complete opposite: they reject it from the political sphere on principle. Of course, this was originally done out of a still legitimate concern to guarantee the full autonomy of the private sphere by taking it out of the illegitimate control of public powers. Today, however, it is the opposite movement that needs to be given its due place since it is clear that a growing number of collective issues arise from new common expectations deeply rooted in the convergence of individual aspirations. This means we need to acknowledge that we were mistaken to limit politics just to the managing of interests: in fact, passions have always played a decisive role in it. A reading of Shakespeare should have been enough to make us realize this.

In other words, we are in one of those rare but decisive transitional periods when our frameworks of understanding, our now outdated cultural markers, no longer enable us to find our way through events as they happen, and even less guide these events effectively. This calls for an in-depth metamorphosis in the way we envisage our lives.

When I met Luc Ferry, over twenty years ago, we immediately ... had a huge row! About pretty much everything: modern art, education, politics .... I was dead set on giving their full meaning to the new forms of existence that now lie at the heart of our lives, while his main concern was first of all to integrate these new aspects into a ‘non-metaphysical’ reformulation of humanism that would preserve their definitive contributions. In any event, we agreed that we couldn’t leave things there and that the available philosophies were no longer adequate, either because they were immediately vulnerable to the objections of Nietzsche and his successors, or because they led to a permanent double discourse that consisted, for example, in radically criticizing the idea that there are universal moral values while calling one’s neighbour a bastard in the name of these same values.

Since that time we have become the best of friends. Over thousands of hours of discussion, I have gradually seen a philosophy
take shape – one that, if I may speak as I find, makes it possible not just for our differences to be overcome, but above all for an answer to be given to our need for a way of thinking that will really shed light on the present world and the very kernel of the lives we live in it. Since neither of us was in bad faith, the human experiences on which we based our arguments all had some truth in them. From then on, the aim of the conversation was not to win out over the other by having the ‘final word’ in the argument but to understand the reason for our differences of opinion.

I now feel that, in his latest books, Luc Ferry has succeeded in developing an altogether original philosophy based on a new principle that gives us a much more direct and profound access to the experience of the world that is now ours. For the first time in decades, or even a whole century, he has laid a foundation and a way of building on it which will enable us to construct a real philosophical system, in other words a way of giving a proper coherence to the diversity of our experiences, and thus of endowing our lives with overall meaning.

Of course, you can always retort that you’re a pragmatist and that you won’t have anything to do with ‘ideas’: after all, why not? And yet, there is nothing more illusory than this affectation of pure realism: experience proves that those who claim that they are happy to stop there are nonetheless forever telling us ‘what we need to think’ about things. The only difference is that they serve up stale ‘received ideas’ which, as we have seen, have nothing very fruitful to say to us anymore. Unlike what many people imagine, philosophy is not of use to philosophers alone, or even mainly. When Descartes constructed a philosophy based on ‘common sense’ alone, ‘the most widely shared thing in the world’, and on the well-known words ‘I think, therefore I am’, he provided us with a framework which, right up to the French Revolution, liberated whole generations whose ancestors had long been at a loss about whether to follow the commands of the Church, those of the prince, the thoughts of Aristotle, the demands of tradition, the wishes of their fathers, or their own free will: you need only read the plays of Molière to see how the characters’ love affairs can be hampered by conflicts of legitimacy. In this sense, everyone has benefited from Descartes, even those who haven’t read him! In the nineteenth century, the limits of the purely rational and moral vision of the world that had led the French
Revolution to a complete dead end forced philosophers to reinte-
grate forgotten dimensions of human life within its purview: history in Hegel, class struggle linked to relations of production in Marx, the will to power and the unconscious in Nietzsche.

It is a comparable revolution which Luc Ferry is proposing to us. But in my view this new philosophy has not previously appeared in its fullest guise, partly because the author, for peda-
gogic reasons, has given a great deal of room to several other philosophers, partly because he needed to give his ideas a firm foundation by drawing on various analyses (historical, anthropo-
logical, conceptual). Probably, too, the very idea that one has put one’s finger on the long-awaited solution inclines one to caution and to a certain discretion in the presentation of one’s discovery.

The project of this book, indeed, is to try and set out, as clearly as possible (this time without any side tracks or false modesty) this new philosophy that we so much need, and to show how it will help us better to find our way in this world of ours, in the most concrete areas of activity. Like all true philosophies, it is not in the least some fanciful idea pulled out of thin air to be imposed on the more credulous among us. Rather, it is an effort to focus on what drives us all at the deepest level – something for which we hitherto did not have the words, or any adequate vision.

Claude Capelier
Luc Ferry: First, a few words on the title I’ve chosen for this book. Why this homage to Stendhal? Of course, I was initially wary of reusing his title On Love (De l’amour). I was worried that such a borrowing might seem too pretentious, since he placed the bar so high. Of course, the title should be taken as the expression of a debt of admiration, as a homage to Stendhal’s confession, which I find so deeply moving and with which I can identify so closely: ‘Love has always been, for me, the greatest thing of all … or rather, the only thing!’ What Stendhal means is that love isn’t just one feeling among others, a common passion like other passions such as fear, anger, jealousy or indignation. It’s a new principle of meaning, a principle that shapes a completely new conception of the good life: it inaugurates a new era in the history of thought and of life, as I shall be attempting to show over the following pages.

Although love is, no doubt, as old as humanity, and although it is always ambiguous, being accompanied by its opposite (hatred), its emergence within the modern family – in other words the shift from arranged marriage (or marriage of convenience) to marriage chosen freely through and for the flourishing of love (especially the love of children) – has changed the tenor of our lives, and not just in the private sphere. Art and politics have also been profoundly altered by this change, and it is the impact of these
revolutions in private life on the public sphere that I would like to explore in this essay. This is why, in spite of my initial hesitations, I finally decided that *On Love* was the only possible title for this book.

I must warn our readers that we will not really be analysing this new principle of meaning, and – as they say – ‘talking about love’ straight away, but only in the first chapter that follows this introduction. Then, in the second chapter, I’d like us to discuss how this new principle is going to bring about a radical change at the most collective and most public level of all, namely politics, so as to drive home the lesson that we’re not just talking about the history of private life. Finally, within the same framework, we’ll be talking about art and education.

But in this introduction, the first task is to give a quick overview of the historical dynamic and the human problems that make this change of paradigm necessary. We can’t avoid this preliminary stage if we are to gain a proper understanding of what is entailed by the idea of a ‘new principle of meaning’, ‘a new definition of the good life’ that requires a completely new kind of philosophical thinking. This is why, by way of preamble, I would like to do something I’ve not really done before and highlight the connection between the two main themes that I have discussed in my previous books. On the one hand, there’s the definition of philosophy as the quest for the good life, for wisdom or for a secular spirituality – in other words, the idea that (like religion) philosophy strives to define a blessed life for us mortals, but without going via God or faith. And on the other hand, there is what I’ve called the ‘revolution of love’ that accompanies the shift, in modern Europe, from arranged marriage and the traditional family to marrying for love as it underlies today’s family life.

In my view, these two themes are inseparable in so far as the second theme, which implies a formidable rise in the influence of love as the organizing principle of our lives, necessitates – on the philosophical and not just existential level – a new definition of the good life, of the meaning of life, and of the wisdom required if one is to attain it. Obviously, the history of private life was bound to have an impact on collective, public, and even political life, and it is mainly this which I would like to analyse here. As we shall see, this way of thinking marks such a break from traditional political systems that it is still difficult to discern. The liberal
tradition, like the socialist tradition – the two lines of thought and action that have dominated the history of modern Europe ever since the French Revolution – have shared two major features. First, they both relegated everything that belonged to the private sphere and ‘civil society’ to a realm that lay outside the field of noble politics. Second, they considered politics merely as a way of managing private interests in the name of the general interest, whereas – as I will be showing – passions often play a much more predominant role in history than do interests as such.

We’ll be coming back to this. But let’s start by summarizing, albeit briefly, the main guideline of my philosophical thinking.

**First guideline: a definition of philosophy as the non-religious quest for the good life**

I’ve already set out this theme quite clearly in my book *Learning to Live*. Philosophy is actually quite different from the way it is usually presented in the final year of French secondary schools. The pedagogic literature on philosophy teaching tends to see it as no more than a general art of argument, a sort of ‘method of thinking’, a training in ‘critical thought’ which would ideally aim at getting pupils to ‘think for themselves’, to become more independent, by doing exercises such as writing essays or commentaries on texts. Of course, I’m not in the least averse to this kind of focus. Indeed, it’s an excellent plan. It’s just that it falls more within the scope of an intelligent civic education than within philosophy as such – to which it is only very distantly connected. If anyone had told Plato, Epicurus, Spinoza or Nietzsche that they were philosophizing in order to write ‘essays’ or to ‘learn how to think properly’, I reckon they’d have simply roared with laughter! *Philo-sophia*: etymologically, ‘quest for’ or ‘love of’ ‘wisdom’ – the word had a meaning for them, as we can see even in Nietzsche, in aphorisms such as the one entitled ‘Why I am so wise’ …

What I wanted to show, in *Learning to Live*, was this: throughout the philosophical tradition from the ancient world up to Heidegger, by way of Spinoza, Lucretius, Kant and Nietzsche, philosophy was always conceived – at least by the greatest thinkers, without any exception – as the attempt to define the good life, the highest good, the blessed life and the wisdom that leads to it: