

Luc Ferry On Love

A philosophy for the twenty-first century



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On Love

A Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century

Luc Ferry

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polity

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Preface

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 reintegrate 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 pedagogic 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, anthropological, 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

Introduction: A Brief History of the Meaning of Life

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: in short, as an attempt to answer the great question of what the meaning of life can be for mortals. This is what I have called a secular spirituality and a doctrine of salvation without God. Why? Because, unlike the great religions, and even though they have the same aim in view (identifying the conditions of a good life for those who are doomed to die), philosophy really does try to provide its own definition of the ultimate meaning of our lives, without going through God, without going through faith.

I'm sometimes told that there is no such meaning, that the concept of 'the meaning of life' is meaningless, except from a religious point of view, since it would require us to stand outside life, so to speak, if we are to give it a purpose – and this is possible only for believers. Maybe. This objection, however, is based on a piece of sophistry that it would be pointless to dwell on too long. Let's just say, so as to remove any doubts that might trouble my readers, that *in all the major philosophies it's a question of asking what is*

meaningful within *our lives*, what may comprise their final purpose when seen from within. Spinoza, for example – and we can't suspect *him* of yielding to any illusions about a meaning that transcends life – never stops insisting on this: there is a final aim that human beings can set up for themselves thanks to philosophy, and this aim is salvation and joy, obtained through wisdom and understanding. He says the same thing in the very last lines of the *Ethics*, where we find him convinced that he has shown the true paths that lead to a blessed life for all humans willing to follow them. Unlike the ignorant person, who has not read the *Ethics* or gone through the stages that lead to a true understanding of things, the truly wise person

is hardly troubled in spirit, but being, by a certain eternal necessity, conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, he never ceases to be, but always possesses true peace of mind. If the way I have shown to lead to these things now seems very hard, it can still be found. And of course, what is found so rarely must be hard. For if salvation were at hand, and could be found without great effort, how could nearly everyone neglect it? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare. (Part V, prop. 42, scholium, tr. Edwin Curley)

Here we see that, for Spinoza – but he is expressing a conviction shared by all great philosophers – philosophy can be reduced neither to 'thinking well', nor even to the idea of autonomy. These two qualities are of course required for it, but they are merely necessary, and not sufficient, conditions for philosophizing properly. For in the final analysis, philosophy is indeed, not an art of eloquence, but a doctrine of secular salvation, a wisdom without God, or at least without God as understood in the great monotheistic religions, and without the succour of faith, since it is through the lucidity of reason, with the means we have to hand, that

we are to attain real wisdom. So here we have a meaning, a purpose assigned by philosophy to human life.

As a great historian of the ancient world, the late Pierre Hadot, has shown, in the philosophical schools of Ancient Greece, the aim was not learning to wax eloquent about general concepts or to put together school essays with beginnings, middles and ends: it was learning to live, to attain wisdom. Hence the exercises that were imposed on disciples, among the Stoics, for example. I've often mentioned the case of the dead fish which the disciples of Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school, were requested to drag around on a leash in the market square in Athens. What was the aim of this strange exercise in wisdom? It was to learn to disdain what other people might say, the 'bourgeois' conventions, and turn one's gaze to the truth, which, after all, disdains artificial rules. To attain the good life, it's no doubt better to think properly, but we also need to *live* our thoughts, not to stay at the level of theory alone.

This theme is also found in Schopenhauer, even though he can be considered the founder of contemporary thought: in spite of the 'pessimism' which is all that hasty and superficial readers see in him, the aim of his philosophy is mainly to get through the stage of learning how to think and to attain the good life by following the principles of an 'art of happiness', a 'eudaimonic art' – titles which Schopenhauer himself had chosen to organize his last thoughts.

Of course, in every great philosophy there is also a theoretical part (generally known as the 'theory of knowledge') and a 'practical' part (which concerns ethics and politics). Our traditional school textbooks used to be generally divided into two volumes: 'Knowledge' and 'Action'. The doctrine of wisdom or of salvation without God properly speaking is, of course, merely the final stage of philosophy, its ultimate or higher end, so to speak and it, as it were, crowns two other areas whose importance I really

don't want to underestimate. *First, there is a theoretical part*, generally known as the 'theory of knowledge', in which are found the various attempts (empiricist, idealist, criticist or phenomenological, for example) to explain our human ability to forge objective representations of the world and our experience. This is obviously an essential part of philosophy, as I would be the first to admit. The fact remains that this theoretical aspect is always connected with the question of wisdom, of the good life: this is indeed what distinguishes philosophical theories from scientific theories. Of course, the point is to understand the world, to form an idea or representation of it, and the great philosophers make use of the scientific knowledge available in their time (in astronomy, biology, physics, etc.) in order to do so. Despite what is sometimes said, most of the great philosophers of the past tended to be good scientists, or at least they were well informed about the science of their time. And it is worth noting that their theories of knowledge considered the sciences from an original standpoint: it was less a matter of knowing this or that sector of the real, the living things studied by biology, forces and matter in physics, planets in astronomy, and so on, than of trying to create *an overall image of the world as the playing field of human life*, i.e., as the field in which our existence has to take place: is this world knowable or mysterious, favourable or hostile, beautiful or ugly, harmonious or chaotic – how can we know it, and so on? These were the questions raised by ancient philosophy: they are quite clearly different from individual scientific inquiries. Thus, as is very clear in the case of the Stoics and Epicureans, there is always a connection – even in the most theoretical part of philosophy – with the central question of what a good life for mortals might be. Pierre Hadot brought out extremely clearly how decisive this preoccupation was in the theories put forward by the philosophers of antiquity. Even in the theoretical part, the world is not analysed from an absolutely objective point

of view in the way a scientist would see it. Even less is it a matter of analysing one part of the world, in the way a biologist focuses on life, a sociologist on society or a physicist on matter or energy. The philosopher is different: he or she tries to draw on all the knowledge available so as to form a general representation of the world. This again shows that what is crucial is the world seen from a 'soteriological' point of view (the quest for salvation) or from an ethical standpoint: the world as the playing field of human life.

After the theoretical part, there is, in every great philosophy, a practical part. The importance of this is also something I have no wish to minimize: it includes ethical and political philosophy. Basically, *the preoccupation of ethics* is not the playing field itself, but *the rules of the game which are to govern the dynamics of life as played out between human beings*. How can humans and their relationships be pacified when they are free and thus tempted by egotism, by conflict, by anger? There again, when we look at the great theories of ethics since the birth of western philosophy in Greece, we soon realize that they too are always connected to the third dimension of philosophy that I call 'the question of the good life', the question of wisdom and spirituality.

Now these two parts of philosophy, whose importance I wouldn't dream of denying, gain meaning only when related to a third 'level', which I analysed in *Learning to Live* and which again corresponds to the question of the good life, wisdom, the *meaning of life* - expressions which should here be understood as equivalent. In every case, we need to define what *gives meaning* to our lives, in other words to grasp what in the final analysis motivates our actions and justifies, as it were, our lives, sometimes without our even being aware of it - the 'background motivation', we might

say. This is the first main guideline and I'd now like to link it to the second.

Second guideline: how love finally became the main source of the meaning of our lives

The second guideline is the one that lies at the heart of my book *La Révolution de l'amour* (*The Revolution of Love*). It is based on an analysis that may initially appear somewhat historical, but which in reality is essentially philosophical. However, nobody philosophizes on just anything, simply to wax eloquent about general concepts. We philosophize about the real, and in this respect it's always seemed crucial to me to root philosophical thinking in the natural sciences as well as in the sciences of history. My approach to the 'revolution of love' happens to be based first and foremost on the indispensable and enthralling work of historians such as Philippe Ariès, to whom I pay homage, as well as Jean-Louis Flandrin, Edward Shorter, John Boswell and François Lebrun, all of whom gave us new ways of thinking about daily life in ancient times. They founded what is called the 'history of mentalities' or 'the new history'. Instead of concentrating on great battles, diplomacy between states or social classes - all of them fundamentally 'grandiose' themes - they dwelt on the warp and weft of the day-to-day life of ordinary individuals in bygone periods: what they ate, how they died, how they educated their children, how they got married, what sort of families they had ... In the light of the new horizons opened up by these historians, I have taken a great interest in what, in my view, appears as the main source for the great revolution which our lives are currently undergoing: the shift from the 'marriage of convenience', the arranged marriage (arranged not just by