

From Fraternal Love to Fallible Love: An Alternative Ethics for the Social Bond

Do Amor Fraternal ao Amor Falho: Outra Ética para o Laço Social

Del Amor Fraternal al Amor Fallido: Otra Ética para el Lazo Social

De l'Amour Fraternel à l'Amour Fallible : Une Autre Éthique pour le Lien Social

 10.5020/23590777.rs.v25i1.e16972

Flávia Tridapalli Buechler  

Psychologist (Regional University of Blumenau Foundation) and psychoanalyst. Specialist in Child and Adolescent Psychopathology (UNISOCIESC) and in Psychoanalysis: Subject and Social Bond (University Center of the Brusque Educational Foundation). MSc in Psychoanalysis: Clinic and Culture (UFRGS). PhD student in the Graduate Program in Psychology at Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF). Researcher at Laboratory for Studies and Research in Psychoanalysis and Culture (LITORAIS, UFRGS) and at the Laboratory of Psychoanalysis and the Social Bond (UFF). Research and publications focus on psychoanalysis and the social bond.

Gabriel Inticher Binkowski  

Assistant Professor in the Department of Clinical Psychology at the University of São Paulo (USP), affiliated with the Graduate Program in Clinical Psychology (Institute of Psychology, USP). MSc in Transcultural Clinic and PhD in Psychology from Université Sorbonne Paris Nord (Doctoral Contract as researcher and instructor, 2011–2014). Specialist and former resident in Community Mental Health (Faced-UFRGS). BA in Psychology, UFRGS. Postdoctoral fellow in the Graduate Program in Clinical Psychology at USP (2017–2022), with a FAPESP postdoctoral scholarship (2018–2021).

Abstract

This article offers a critique of love's effectiveness within today's social bond, with particular attention to its narcissistic and fraternal forms — both strongly underwritten by religious discourse that, between 2019 and 2022, merged with state policy. The guiding problem is framed as follows: how can other modalities of love foster each subject's subjective engagement in the ongoing task of safeguarding a plural, non-totalitarian social bond? Drawing on clinical, cinematic, and literary vignettes, we deepen the theoretical discussion surrounding this question.

Keywords: love, social bond, psychoanalysis, religion.

Resumo

Este trabalho se dedica a produzir uma crítica sobre a eficácia do amor no laço social de nossa época, especialmente o amor nas versões narcísica e fraterna, fortemente sustentado pelo discurso religioso que, no período entre 2019-2022, fundou-se com uma política de Estado. O problema que norteia a estrutura do texto se revela pela questão: como outras modalidades do amor podem contribuir para o engajamento subjetivo de cada sujeito na interminável tarefa de salvaguardar um laço social plural e não totalitário? A partir de vinhetas clínicas, cinematográficas e literárias, enriquecemos a discussão teórica acerca do tema.

Palavras-chave: amor, laço social, psicanálise, religião.

Resumen

Este trabajo se dedica a producir una crítica sobre la eficacia del amor en el lazo social de nuestra época, especialmente el amor en sus versiones narcisista y fraterna, fuertemente sustentado por el discurso religioso que, en el período entre 2019 y 2022, se fusionó con una

política de Estado. El problema que orienta la estructura del texto se revela en la siguiente cuestión: ¿cómo pueden otras modalidades del amor contribuir al compromiso subjetivo de cada sujeto en la tarea interminable de salvaguardar un lazo social plural y no totalitario? A partir de viñetas clínicas, cinematográficas y literarias, enriquecemos la discusión teórica sobre el tema.

Palabras clave: amor, lazo social, psicoanálisis, religión.

Résumé

Ce travail se consacre à une critique de l'efficacité de l'amour dans le lien social de notre époque, en particulier l'amour dans ses versions narcissique et fraternelle, fortement soutenu par le discours religieux qui, entre 2019 et 2022, s'est fusionné avec une politique d'État. Le problème qui guide la structure du texte se manifeste par la question suivante : comment d'autres modalités de l'amour peuvent-elles contribuer à l'engagement subjectif de chaque sujet dans la tâche interminable de sauvegarder un lien social pluraliste et non totalitaire ? À partir de vignettes cliniques, cinématographiques et littéraires, nous enrichissons la discussion théorique sur le sujet.

Mots-clés : amour, lien social, psychanalyse, religion.

Why develop a critique of love's effectiveness for sustaining the social bond in a time so marked by hate speech, unrestrained violence, and the desire for the other's death? Isn't it precisely the lack of love that engenders the worst in human beings today? There are many ways to approach love in the social bond, and the path we take here proceeds from: 1) a theoretical analysis of the 2019–2022 presidential period; and 2) a critical reflection on the religious belief that fraternal love constitutes an efficient social resource — one that overlooks the impasses this mode of attachment poses for an ethical relation between subjects (Bachler, 2020).

We often hear that the contemporary world is in crisis. Just as often, we encounter ready-made experts with cures at the tip of their tongues — answers marked by reductions as violent as the crisis they claim to remedy. Every crisis compels us to revisit a period's impasses through new questions so that we may reassess certain assumptions; after all, “a crisis becomes a disaster only when we respond to it with preformed judgments, that is, with prejudices” (Arendt, 1954/2014, p. 223). Thus, to cling to simplistic answers, outsource responsibility, and — neurotically — seek exits along well-worn paths is to sharpen the crisis rather than seize the opportunity for reflection and creation that it affords.

To proceed, we must recognize that the society that defends freedom and democratic principles is the same one that clamors for domination and voluntary servitude (La Boétie, 1576/2016). This becomes evident in today's Western context, where fundamentalist discourses and polarizing movements return in an attempt to (re)instate a mythical order within the social field.

In Brazil, for example, since the penultimate presidential election we have witnessed the intensification of religious discourse in politics (Binkowski, 2021), which has contributed, among other effects, to the strengthening of the politics of enmity (Mbembe, 2021) — i.e., policies that organize society through a we/them division while fueling the perverse fantasy of a hierarchy of the human. Whether through the outgoing president's recurring sign-off after official addresses — “Brasil acima de tudo, Deus acima de todos” (Brazil above everything, God above all) — or through the “defense of the family” as a hallmark of a government intent on establishing an ideal model to be followed by “every decent Brazilian citizen,” recent years have shown what the absence of the plural in the defense of The Family betrays: a reductionist, segregating violence that shaped that administration's policy, as if the return of old moralisms and prejudices could resolve our era's social impasses. In this sense, we concur that the weakness of the State and, in Brazil's case, the State's complicity with religious movements “leave many openings for this type of discourse to be invoked by groups that come to power” (Binkowski et al., 2020, p. 262).

The documentary *Intervenção – Amor não Quer Dizer Grande Coisa*, directed by Tales Ab'Sáber, Rubens Rewald, and Gustavo Aranda (2017), shows how problematic it can be to align religious discourse with political governance. Composed of multiple clips, it captures the denialism, paranoia, and fervent cultism of far-right groups who mobilized against the sitting government between 2015 and 2016. The hate-filled speeches we witness — replete with insults and threats — expose the human species' precariousness when faced with the challenge of sustaining a world without wishing to offend or kill one another.

Among these discourses, some still resonate today: the veneration of military intervention; resistance to abortion's legalization; and the belief that no act in the name of the Lord can be called a sin — as seen in the pastoral counseling depicted in Gabriel Mascaro's film *Divino Amor* (2019): “This sentence justifies in itself every kind of absurdity. It licenses lying for the Lord's cause; it licenses insults (...) and, ultimately, it licenses killing for the Lord's cause. The theological eschatology the film suggests is the saddest part for me” (Gonçalves, 2019, p. 9).

Psychoanalysis has long recognized that psychic and social life are structured by an irresolvable conflict between the interests of the ego and those of the group (Freud, 1912-1913/2012). In the interplay that constitutes the subject, mechanisms of domination and subjection — along with feelings of love and hate — are at work; thus, even as we strive for a will to power (Checchia, 2020), we readily settle into positions of subjection. These dynamics also appear in the ties many subjects forge with religious leaders and ideas (Freud, 1921/2011; 1927/2014), reinforcing Hirt's (2007) thesis as recalled by Binkowski (2021): "both psychoanalysis and religion concern themselves with the same space of psychic life, the one left open by the absent object" (p. 41).

In light of these considerations, the pages that follow will examine: 1) the theoretical-clinical contributions psychoanalysis offers for analyzing this force field that marks human psychic and social life; 2) the religious "thing" and the function it performs within the psyche; and 3) the problem posed by the religious belief in fraternal love as an efficient social resource for an ethical relation between subjects. Our aim is to sketch pathways toward the central question of this work: how can other modalities of love foster each subject's engagement in the never-ending task of safeguarding a plural, non-totalitarian social bond?

Subject Formation and the Social in Freud

Psychoanalysis offers a theory of subject formation — i.e., the constitution of psychic life in humans — and this sets it apart from other fields of knowledge, especially because it does not understand our functioning through a consciousness-centered rationality. A few years after publishing *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud (1911/2010a) formulated what he called the two principles that govern psychic life: the reality principle and the pleasure principle. According to Freud, such life rests on a conflict that is both structural and irresolvable. It is structural because the demands of the social collective often do not allow the ego's impulses to achieve pleasure (Freud, 1912-1913/2012). And it is irresolvable because achieving constant homeostasis in psychic life would be tantamount to its death (Freud, 1930/2010c) — i.e., psychic death. Being alive, therefore, involves managing the tensions and helplessness produced by this conflict in each subject.

When Freud recognizes the existence of the unconscious and the incidence of this structural conflict on the subject and on social phenomena, he effectively reaches the point from which we can say today that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the "individual" does not exist — meaning our psyche cannot be characterized as indivisible. We are not a totality, because the structure is, fundamentally: 1) a split between the unconscious and the conscious; and 2) a conflict marked by a play of forces between the demands of social life and the ego's drive-based exigencies. This undoing of the notion of the individual also appears in Freud's work when he states the impossibility of achieving completeness (Freud, 1930/2010c). In other words, we are marked by a permanent absence — a lack that breaks with the imaginary of a whole, autonomous individual. Despite the discomfort it causes, this psychic fact is precisely what allows movement toward life, with its states of tension and relief, polysemy, continuities, and discontinuities.

As split subjects subject to all the consequences that this division brings to each person's life, Freud could not avoid reflecting on the impact of his discoveries on the origins and configuration of social organization. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud (1912-1913/2012) narrates a parricide — the killing of the father of the primal horde — an event that opened the possibility of a social arrangement no longer anchored in the will and whims of a tyrant. Bound by the crime, the brothers — men who did not occupy the father's exceptional place — were able to live together without the One's desires prevailing over everyone else's will. The construction of the totem, meant to keep the group's history alive, consecrated the lasting memory of the brothers' union in committing the deed, an act that instituted prohibitions on their own impulses. Thus, even if someone wished to ascend to the position once held by the father, a life free from tyranny for all required the engagement of each person in keeping that exceptional place empty.

Beyond parricide, Freud also notes numerous convergences between what he calls the psychology of "peoples of nature" and the psychology of neurotics, since he treats the myth of the primal horde as a narrative that "addresses the origin of religion and morality" at the foundation of society (Freud, 1912-1913/2012, p. 17). Among the similarities observable in so-called "primitive" and "civilized" peoples are, for example, limits imposed on sexual impulses, severe punishment for those who violate taboos, and the worship of higher entities — principles that organized the totemic system and that also organize religious systems.

These Freudian considerations support the claim that the passage from the primal horde to social order does not indicate the superiority of the latter over the former — an interpretation sometimes offered by developmental readings that imagine the newer structure as more advanced than the earlier one. This matters because what is at stake between cultures is not which is superior, but that — regardless of technological advances and scientific progress — every culture organizes the social bond by electing taboos. What varies between cultures, beyond their habits and customs, is what they deem to be interdicted:

Wundt therefore maintains that taboo is the expression and derivation of primitive peoples' belief in demonic powers. Later, it freed itself from this root and continued to be a power simply because it was one, by a kind of psychic obstinacy; thus it became the root of our moral commandments and our laws (Freud, 1912-1913/2012, p. 51).

We can understand this psychic obstinacy to which Freud refers as the split subject's need to cling to something that provides limits for managing the play of forces marking human psychic and social life — and meanings that help bear the helplessness proper to our condition as incomplete subjects. In this sense, the malaise that structures psychic and social life is a historical invariant; what varies historically are the forms we invent to control our drives and manage our helplessness. In other words, we are psychically vulnerable to seeking a sovereign capable of punishing and loving us.

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud (1921/2011), drawing on Le Bon's reflections on the "collective soul," returns to the French polymath's account of what constitutes a psychological crowd and its effects on an individual's psyche. For Le Bon, a psychological crowd arises from the union of different parts; that union forms a totality composed by the sum of the parts, producing a new being endowed with characteristics unlike those of each part taken in isolation. The immediate effect of this union on psychic life is the disappearance of the subject's particularities upon integration into the whole, an erasure that intensifies affectivity and considerably diminishes intellectual capacity. Thus, in the phenomenon of the psychic crowd, "the heterogeneous is submerged in the homogeneous" (Freud, 1921/2011, p. 20); i.e., the subject becomes subject to a mode of functioning that largely erases differences.

This submission is not without a yield of pleasure, insofar as the psychological crowd "tolerates no delay between its desire and its fulfillment. It feels omnipotent; [and] the notion of the impossible disappears" (Freud, 1921/2011, p. 25). It also brings a reduction in displeasure, given that the leader — perceived as not subject to fundamental helplessness and therefore occupying the place of exception — functions as guarantor of meanings that assuage the anxiety provoked by the conflict that constitutes us. In this mode of social communion, the resemblance to the organization of the primal horde is no coincidence, since the leader becomes "a paternal substitute" (Freud, 1921/2011, p. 47). The longing for the providence of a great Father corresponds to the magnitude of the need for protection in the face of human impotence and the defense against helplessness (Freud, 1927/2014).

In the same essay, Freud notes that the Church, with its community of believers, and the Army, with its armed forces, appear as two "highly organized, enduring, and artificial" masses in human history (Freud, 1921/2011, p. 46). As one illustration, we can look at statistics and estimates for the number of adults who identify with some religion. According to the 2010 Census, 86.8% of Brazilians identify as Christian, and the number of Evangelicals has been steadily increasing; over the last 30 years — across the 1991, 2000, and 2010 Censuses — the Evangelical population grew by 61% in Brazil (Gaier, 2024; Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2010). The 2022 Census has not yet finalized data for this category, but numerous reports point to continued growth in the Evangelical share of the Brazilian population (Capomaccio, 2023; CartaCapital, 2024).

Churches, religious groupings, and the Army are artificial masses because "a certain external constraint is employed to prevent their dissolution and to block changes in their structure" (Freud, 1921/2011, p. 46). This external constraint can be understood as a fictional construction of an illusory character — something the masses cannot renounce, for the price would be their very dissolution. Along these lines, Freud observes the striking similarity between the functioning of the psychological mass and the psychology of neuroses when considering the predominance of fantasy life in both cases:

We have found that what holds for neurotics is not shared objective reality but psychic reality. A hysterical symptom rests on fantasy rather than on the repetition of real experience; the obsessive neurotic's guilt rests on an evil intention never carried out. As in dream and in hypnosis, in the mental activity of the mass, reality-testing recedes before the force of wishes invested with affect (Freud, 1921/2011, p. 29).

But what is the affect to which Freud refers in explaining a community's renunciation of reality in favor of the homogenization of the human and of an illusion that sustains an omnipotent figure? It is precisely love. In his clinical route toward elaborating psychoanalytic theory and technique, one representation of love is what Freud calls libido. For psychoanalysis, libido names a large quantity of energy that mobilizes drive vectors toward "everything that can be encompassed by the word 'love'" (Freud, 1921/2011, p. 43). Freud states that this energy "comes from the theory of affectivity" (Freud, 1921/2011, p. 43) and that, on the one hand, it allows the subject to love themselves; on the other, it allows the subject to love the other — an insight that led Freud to hypothesize that relations of love "also constitute the essence of the collective soul" (Freud, 1921/2011, p. 45). With this, Freud proposes that, beyond love being the force impelling the union of a community characterized as a psychological mass, the homogenization of the subject is justified "for love of them" (Freud, 1921/2011, p. 45) — i.e., for the love of those others and of that Other that compose the (comm)unity.

These considerations raise questions about the challenge every society faces in sustaining a world without killing one another. If reveling in recognition and love from the other depends on erasing one's own difference — i.e., on always agreeing with the mass and never opposing what keeps it cohesive — how do we avoid segregating those who resist the erasure of singularity and avoid intolerance toward those who do not mirror my image and likeness? And if the existence of alterity is not subordinated to the sovereign's authority — if the other's presence exposes and weakens the illusion that fuels the fraternal love affect — what resources are necessary for ethical relations between subjects to exist without needing to be circumscribed in the name of that love?

A New Era with Old Answers to the Same Questions

For much of history, the Church was regarded as a central institution of the civilizing process, operating as a regulator of subjectivity and the social field. It claimed its place in the world through a specific discourse, took on the mission of supporting humans in the face of death, directing them toward spiritual elevation and the love of God, and protecting them from inner and outer forces that lead to worldly habits and pleasures.

Religious discourse — understood as a moral rationality and a factory of meaning for human life (Freud, 1927/2014) — is characterized by establishing what is good and what is evil. It constructs a universal vision of the world and of being, a model historically nurtured by the ideal of the European white man, as in the case of the Roman Catholic Church. As spaces of communion for those who defend and preach the same ideals, churches foster the union of communities worldwide, all governed by principles their leaders set as a compass for the right formation of the world and of the human being.

Yet the human world predates the rise of the Catholic Church by far. Returning to the example above, we cannot ignore that those united “in Christ’s love” have long excluded — and still exclude — anyone who does not conform to the ideal with which the brothers identify.

The deeper problem is not simply the failure to integrate the “other” into the group or religious institution. It lies in the historic fixation of those others in the place of barbarians and deviants for resisting a life oriented by a model preestablished by an Other — fixations that induce particular ways of seeing and acting toward the different. This is why the secularization of the State is so crucial for civil organization: a secular State is a society capable of freeing itself “from any influence of a religious system over its civil, political, and legal organization” (Binkowski et al., 2018, p. 112).

Examples of extermination resulting from the fusion of governance and religious systems include persecution and murder in the name of the Inquisition and the catechization of enslaved peoples in the Americas under the banners of conquest and “civilizing” progress. In such cases, if the “barbarian’s” fate was not death, survival required subjection to homogenization and docility so they could be governed easily without disturbing the order set by ecclesiastical tribunals or slaveholders.

Civilization, in this sense, can be read as a massive effort — on the part of masses who defended progress through the colonization of the other — to reject the plurality of cultures that compose the human world. They did so by refusing to abdicate the attempt to install a Father, inflate a single meaning for human existence, and capitalize society through a we/them division. The consequences are grave for those who refuse to submit to a mass identity that seeks to render all other forms of being and relating invisible. These consequences are captured in Freud’s observation that “in the blindness of love, the individual may, without remorse, become a criminal” (Freud, 1921/2011, p. 72).

Since Lacan (1985), we know that a discourse determines a particular form of social bond — i.e., the ways desires, prohibitions, and criteria for qualifying or disqualifying modes of being are organized within a society, based on a symbolic architecture that takes on the value of truth:

Discourse is a structure founded in the very logic of language and its effects on reality. It is, moreover, organized such that it establishes historical forms of social bond. Thus, discourse is not conceived as a “primary reality to be interpreted for its meaning,” but as the effect of the signifier’s combinatorics on the world (Rabinovich, 2001, p. 2).

This means that, within discourse, the places and their rules of articulation precede and prevail over the destinies of how speaking beings are linked (Couto et al., 2018, p. 95).

The social bond, then, can be understood as a way of forming ties with others through a shared discourse to which we feel we belong — but also to which we become alienated — since our way of looking at and approaching the other is mediated by a linguistic operation that predetermines places and rules. Under this condition, in the eyes of religiously anchored leaders and their disciples, difference often appears as a grave threat and offense, insofar as the grammar of ecclesial commandments carries a historical inscription that treats difference as a dangerous flaw, an error to be corrected.

The hatred and intolerance directed at those who sustain singularities and mark differences enact the fear of exposing this fantasy — the one that covers over the incompleteness of the split subject, a fantasy that has mobilized religious masses for centuries. This is not to devalue the psychic function of fantasy — psychoanalysis treats it as a fundamental operator of psychic life. Our critique targets the return, in a new era, of old fundamentalist answers to the same question: how are we to handle helplessness and difference — elements that inscribe humanity at its root?

According to Binkowski (2021), the “religious thing” appears as the promised object that plugs the split subject’s fundamental helplessness, relieving the anxieties of inner conflict and meaninglessness. From this, we can infer that the religious subject — understood here as someone who cannot separate from the mass — effectively resigns the psychic work of coming to terms with their incomplete condition, insisting instead on a truth forged by an Other rather than on encountering their own truth-as-lack. When recognized, that absence allows the ego “to produce itself as a subject out of difference” (Binkowski, 2021, p. 41).

In terms of psychic constitution, *On Narcissism* warns of the necessary psychic work of separating from the desire of the maternal Other for the ego — understood as the instance capable of projecting a psychic image of the body — to emerge (Freud, 1914/2010b). Differentiating from this first Other is necessary psychic work; when the subject abdicates it, constitutional impasses appear. Beyond this, Freud (1914/2010b) also outlines a modality we can call narcissistic love: love directed toward the same, toward the one who mirrors my image and likeness — akin to the symbiotic mother–infant bond — which we regard as the most common version of love in today’s social bond (Jorge, 2019).

Through narcissistic love — like the “religious thing” — we seek a completeness that promises to free us from our condition as split subjects, as well as from a non-total encounter with the other. Characterized by a love that recognizes only the register of the Imaginary, in which single, closed meanings seem possible, narcissistic love follows this logic:

If I love someone, they must deserve my love in some way. (...) They will deserve my love if they are sufficiently like me, in important respects, that I can love myself in them; or they will deserve it if they are so much more perfect than I that I can love my ego ideal in them. (Freud, 1930/2010c, p. 59)

Brief clinical vignettes from analytic practice illustrate the sting of dealing with this form of love. A young Jehovah’s Witness — previously disfellowshipped for a habit repudiated by the group’s principles — manages to return to the congregation only to face repeated episodes of exclusion, prompted by “brothers’” concern over the “bad influences” his allegedly worldly behavior might exert. When asked in analysis why every request for distance comes from fellow Witnesses, he falls silent and, surprised, notes that he has never had problems with outsiders over his way of being — or the fact that he is divorced. Another common scenario involves Jehovah’s Witness women who do not separate from their husbands for fear of being cut off from the group, and who blame themselves for failing to fulfill the “duties of a woman toward a man,” even when the husband is a heavy drinker. Not infrequently, this is coupled with a wish that the husband would commit adultery so they could leave without tarnishing their own image before the group.

The encounter with the “religious thing” — with a single meaning — is not always wholly negative, since it can soothe anxiety by giving sense to the Real for the one who loves (Jorge, 2019). Still, the illusion produced by discourses structured around narcissistic love exacts both a personal and a cultural price:

This legacy of religious conceptions is generally presented to us as divine revelation. But that presentation is itself part of the religious system, which completely ignores what is known of the historical development of these ideas and their differences across eras and cultures (Freud, 1927/2014).

In the Western world, the management of religious discourse in the face of fundamental helplessness and the discomfort of difference occurs through monotheism:

Monotheism — as read by psychoanalysis since Freud and with Lacan, among others — bears a history of violence, erasures, and subversions. What monotheism installs (...) is a vast system of filiation, alliance, and recognition in which the ancient gods become demons, and where the deity remains almost always outside the register of image, language, and the sensory (Binkowski, 2021, p. 41).

Psychoanalysis maintains that this illusion is not an “error,” since its motive is wish-fulfillment; but it also recognizes how religious belief can approach psychiatric delusion (Freud, 1927/2014), particularly through the reparative function it tends to take on in relation to the reality of human condition and world. The strengthening of monotheism — i.e., validating and elevating a single divinity — feeds multiple radicalisms to the point of turning religion into “a warlike element that cancels any negotiation of difference” (Binkowski, 2021, p. 42). When such crude attempts to “repair the world” by erasing or segregating difference are absorbed into state policy, society is subjected to deadly imperatives — deciding, for example, which lives deserve state protection and which do not, which lives may/should be killed and which may not (Levine, 2019; Mbembe, 2018).

Even while acknowledging the psychic value of religious conceptions, Freud (1927/2014) argues that humans can forgo the consolations of religious illusion, and he rejects the idea that we cannot bear life’s weight and reality’s hostility without relying on faith in God:

It is something already if a person knows they can count only on their own forces; then they learn to use them properly. And humans are not entirely without resources; since the time of the Flood their science has taught them much, and it will further increase their power. As for fate’s inevitabilities, against which there is no remedy, they will learn to endure them with resignation. Of what use is the mirage of a vast estate on the Moon whose harvest no one has ever seen? (Freud, 1927/2014).

Another brief vignette from the consulting room speaks to our time. A nine-year-old boy struggled with the starkly different economic conditions and modes of upbringing he experienced in his maternal and paternal families — the latter

committed to Christian values and financially stable, the former living in social vulnerability. He recounted being expelled from a classroom at the Adventist school he attended after the teacher felt disrespected by a comment he made. Curious, I asked what he had said. He recalled the teacher telling the class that Jesus always looks after everyone on Earth. Affected by the contradictions he perceives in adults — and by the contradictions he lives between two very different family worlds — he replied: “The Earth is too big and too full of people for Jesus to take care of everyone.” In that moment of disbelief and indignation at the truth he already senses about the world, the child did what children often do: he punctured the adult’s fantasy. Confronted by the child’s exposure of her own truth-as-lack, the teacher could not tolerate it and demanded that the little “whistleblower” leave the classroom.

Fraternity: Another Version of Narcissistic Love

Bachler (2020) offers important reflections on the ambiguities of fraternity. In addressing the question “why live together?”, he notes that the logic of forming groups rests on recognizing a similitude — often physical or psychic — which becomes the shared point that allows us to be with the other. Drawing on Sartre, Bachler shows how precarious this initial logic is: what enables group formation is whatever happens to us in common, whether around a history, an idea, a cause, or a sermon. On this view, fraternity is not entirely negative; it allows people to choose freely to unite, since, for Sartre, the human being is free to choose solitude. Freedom, therefore, is what humanity holds in common (Bachler, 2020).

Beyond the broad debate that the notion of freedom invites — one that would require a separate text—this work emphasizes the impasses of union through fraternal love, the affect that undergirds bonds within religious institutions. Bachler (2020) argues that this conception of living together has serious consequences, including that:

Once [fraternity] is freely instituted, it also creates constraints for group members — reciprocal obligations. These constraints, necessary for the group’s life, create a right of all over each one, which may even reveal itself in the form of violence. At every moment, the group risks exercising this violence against the individual (Bachler, 2020, p. 51).

In this way, much as Freud describes the subject’s erasure within the mass and under narcissistic love, fraternity also appears as a mode that imposes the One — the ideal — over the singularity of real subjects. Fraternal love can produce strong bonds, sometimes crucial for collective struggle in the social field, but it also risks, at every turn, agglomerating the individual so as to avoid any difference or dissenting voice that might destabilize the group’s cohesion. In this sense, fraternal love often operates as a variant of narcissistic love.

Silas House’s novel *Southernmost* portrays this dynamic. The story follows Asher, a pastor in a small, conservative town in Tennessee. The narrative opens during a natural disaster that leaves families homeless. Amid the chaos, Asher’s nine-year-old son goes missing while searching for the family dog, then returns with a gay couple who found him — and who have just lost their home to the flood. Out of gratitude and compassion, Asher decides to shelter the couple in his home, a choice immediately blocked by his wife, who insists: “They can’t stay here. (...) What will the congregation say? It isn’t right. (...) I know what they are. (...) They are... you know what they are, Asher. We can’t let them get close to Justin” (House, 2019, p. 29).

Shaken by his wife’s rigidity and prejudice, Asher spirals into anguish and self-questioning about the life he has built around his community’s principles — including his rupture with his own brother. He recalls that when his brother came out, the family could not bear it, and the brother — hoping for Asher’s support — found himself alone when Asher echoed the parental discourse. Guilt follows, as does concern for his son’s upbringing, for Asher begins to see that the love he preached from the pulpit was not the love the faithful practiced — a love that erects walls, isolates, and harms.

Asher divorces Lydia, unable to share her way of living, and is excommunicated from the church. The novel unfolds around his desperate attempt to reconcile with his brother and protect his son from a formation that reads the other-as-different as a human flaw. As he leaves that community to search for his brother in another state, the narrator reflects on the brothers’ mother:

After Luke left, [Asher] went through a kind of brainwashing. She convinced him Luke didn’t care about them, that when [Luke] pointed that gun at him, he’d been trying to save his soul from hell. Tough love, she said. The kind of love God showed the world by sending the Flood, when only Noah heeded His call. The kind of love God showed Abraham when He convinced him to kill his son Isaac—then stopped him at the last minute. The kind of love Job endured. (...) *Let’s pray together, Asher; let’s pray for Luke’s soul so that he can see the errors of his ways* [emphasis added] (House, 2019, p. 122).

The brothers’ reunion — after more than a decade apart — is one of the novel’s hardest passages, especially when Luke finally voices the long-silenced truth:

I didn’t run away to punish you. I ran because you all (...) made me feel ashamed. Do you know what it’s like to walk through this world with people thinking they know everything about you? (...) In Tennessee people didn’t accept me [emphasis added]. They tolerated me. Even you. And I didn’t want to live like that, as the town freak (House, 2019, p. 265).

Throughout, the novel shows the symbolic desertification and narrowing of meaning produced by religious discourse, as well as the suppression of plural forms of existence when religious experience — within family or community — guarantees the attack on the other. Asher's choices, made in acute anguish, bring heavy consequences; at the same time, they open him to another way of living — new places, people, and knowledges that deconstruct him so that he might reconstruct himself on his own terms. He does not find a fairy-tale ending, but he finds a lighter condition of life, free of prejudice and guilt.

With this in mind, and moving toward a conclusion, we turn to the questions: how might love be thought from a logic other than narcissistic love? What logic — though it can guarantee nothing — could still support each subject's engagement in producing an ethical relation with the other-as-different?

Another Logic for Love and Ethics in Relations Between Subjects

As Freud labored to secure a place for psychoanalysis distinct from other fields — such as Wundt's psychology — he marked its singularity through a crucial stance: psychoanalysis responds ethically, not technically, in clinical practice (Darriba et al., 2009). In this sense, Freud breaks with a scientific logic oriented to perfecting method, which calls on the object to yield; psychoanalysis, by contrast, sustains a clinic that “yields to the object” in an ethical key (Darriba et al., 2009, p. 172).

Lacan (1991) recognizes this particularity when he asserts that the practice of psychoanalysis is its ethics. Psychoanalysis is not a toolkit of procedures for control; it is oriented to reflecting on and expanding each subject's desiring/lacking condition — the motor of life: “in this direction, the author argues that the aim of ethical action for Freud is not the Good but the Real, introducing here the notion of *das Ding*” (Amaral & Costa, 2020, p. 115).

Without delving deeply into *das Ding*, it is tied to “the Thing” — the fictive object imagined to plug structural lack and thus to resolve helplessness — akin to the “religious thing” mentioned earlier. To “yield to the object,” in other words, is to renounce the fantasy that such a Thing exists, or that there is an Other who can complete the ego; this renunciation is essential to entering the experience of desire and love on the “scene of Two” (Badiou, 2013).

To think this scene, we must recognize that love “takes account of chance and encounter and is, fundamentally, of the order of disjunction and difference” (Pacheco, 2015, p. 31). On this logic, love is not essentially safe — like the encounter, it “cannot be theorized or rationalized (...); it belongs to what escapes and should escape every program. We are there, and something breaks in. The presence of the other does not leave us at peace” (Cifali, 1999, p. 145). Love on the “scene of Two” does not cower before the vagaries of desire, nor does it seek to pervert Two into One by chasing completeness. To abolish lack would be to sign love's death warrant as a motor for life — for the ego and for the other.

The “scene of Two” envisions a love that accepts difference; that lets (it) desire; that sets words in motion; and that makes room for bodies, experiences, and dreams. This is another logic of love, one that allows us to see that beyond narcissistic and fraternal forms there is an *amour-manqué* — a love that, thankfully, fails to meet our usual expectations of it. For such a love — capable of fostering an ethics of desire in relations between subjects — to take root in the social bond, Siqueira (2014) argues that we must:

Introduce lack at the heart of the question of love. In other words, we must curb the excess of narcissistic plenitude that blocks the emergence of a desiring condition, owing to egotistic hypertrophy, and we must also minimize the reciprocity expected between subjects in love (Siqueira, 2014, p. 8).

In the field of love as in psychoanalysis, no promise of completeness can be made, regardless of how it is dressed up, on pain of narrowing the gap of desire until life is doomed to homogenization. The result is the impoverishment of singularity and of the social bond, through a desertification of the modes of being available in the world.

We contend that this logic of fallible love — *amour-manqué* — grounded in the Symbolic and the Real, appears as a new form of discourse, counter to religious discourse, opening possibilities for inventing the social bond: “love, in this text, is the sign—so designated — that another reason is at stake (...) We change reasons, which is to say: we change discourse” (Lacan, 1985, p. 23). To that end, we must be rid of narcissistic impassés that condemn love to the mirror relation and to unconditional reciprocity. Only then can another logic of love emerge, against the injunction “love thy neighbor as thyself,” and in favor of each person's engagement in the unending task of sustaining a more plural and ethical social bond.

Given all this, it is no exaggeration to say that psychoanalysis promotes and safeguards a rationality of ethics that makes room for alterity, the premise underlying every relation oriented to desire. This condemns us to be affected by everything our lacking condition implies. Against the strong egoism we erect as protection from the impossibles of the malaise that structures us, we must begin to love: “after all, one must begin to love in order not to fall ill, and one inevitably falls ill when, owing to frustration, one cannot love” (Freud, 1914/2010b, p. 29). Only then can love function as an ethics for the social bond and for the subject's singularity — operating as a way of making do with fundamental helplessness and with the conflicts of difference that mark our humanity.

Final Considerations

This work does not aim to delegitimize love or religion. It seeks, through psychoanalysis, to reflect critically on these two human phenomena by analyzing their incidence in today's social bond. Religion and its complexity within human experience must remain objects of study and reflection. We have tried to show that love — socially recognized as a salvific sentiment — has limits with respect to the expectations we place on it, and that in the social field it may take different forms, each with consequences for the subject and for the social bond.

Drawing on clinical, cinematic, and literary vignettes, we have reflected on the problems embedded in religious discourse, especially where it results in unrestrained violence against the other, against difference, and against the plurality of persons and cultures. In *Why War?* — a 1932 letter to Einstein — Freud (1932/2010d) warns that war cannot be abolished; still, he insists that everything that works in favor of culture helps to avoid war. In the terms that structure this study, to work in favor of cultivating plurality in human experience is to prevent religion from mooring itself in the world “as if it were an anchor thrown into a wellspring of meaning — of meaning for existence, for life with alterity, for the relation of dependence and ambivalence one bears toward others” (Binkowski et al., 2018, p. 117). To insist on this is to resist casting religion as a warlike element.

As for religion, each person should be free to draw on beliefs that serve as a private resource for calming anxiety in the face of fundamental human helplessness. Religious premises should never become the law of the human world, because — as psychoanalysis warns — when religion is the Law, there is no law to which religion is subject.

As for love, may it exist in its most fallible version — one understood through the registers of the Symbolic and the Real — instances that foster each subject's engagement in the endless task of safeguarding a plural, non-totalitarian social bond, precisely because such love keeps the gap of desire open.

By recognizing that no one escapes a condition of incompleteness, we can enter a desiring condition that allows us to move toward the other and forge bonds grounded in an ethical relation between subjects. In this sense, the experience of *amour-manqué* entails never losing sight of this: a claim to a love that makes one desire must be matched by the will that there be love and desire for the other as well.

References

- Ab'Sáber, T., Rewald, R., & Aranda, G. (Diretores). (2017). *Intervenção – Amor não Quer Dizer Grande Coisa* [Documentário]. Cérebro Eletrônico; Confeitaria Cinema.
- Amaral, R. E. C., & Costa, C. A. R. (2020). Questionamentos em torno do desejo e da dimensão ética do amor. *Estudos Contemporâneos da Subjetividade*, 10(1), 111-122. <http://www.periodicoshumanas.uff.br/ecos/article/view/2980>
- Arendt, H. (2014). *Entre o passado e o futuro*. Perspectiva. (Trabalho original publicado em 1954).
- Bachler, L. (2020). Vivre ensemble, pour quoi faire? *Revue Spirale*, 3(95), 45-56. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-spirale-2020-3-page-45.htm>
- Badiou, A. (2013). *Elogio ao amor*. Martins Fontes.
- Binkowski, G. (2021). A psicanálise e sua estranheza frente à religião: Rastros e implicações de um objeto êxtimo entre clínica, cultura, política e sociedade. *Boletim Formação em Psicanálise*, 29(1), 39-55. <https://doi.org/10.56073/bolformempsych.v29i1.27>
- Binkowski, G., Ferreira, P., & Rosa, M. D. (2018). Ferramentas psicanalíticas para uma abordagem da interação entre religião, política e democracia: Breve panorama sobre uma questão contemporânea. In A. C. Veiga (Org.), *Religião e política: Encontros, desencontros, possibilidades* (pp. 105-126). O Som da Palavra.
- Binkowski, G. I., Rosa, M. D., & Baubet, T. (2020). A discursividade evangélica e alguns de seus efeitos: Laço social, psicopatologia e impasses teóricos e transferenciais. *Revista Latinoamericana de Psicopatologia Fundamental*, 23(2), 245-268. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1415-4714.2020v23n2p245.6>
- Capomaccio, S. (2023, 06 de setembro). Um em cada três adultos no Brasil se identifica como evangélico. *Jornal da USP*. <https://jornal.usp.br/radio-usp/um-em-cada-tres-adultos-no-brasil-se-identifica-como-evangelico/#:~:text=Os%20evang%C3%A9licos%20foram%20o%20segmento,popula%C3%A7%C3%A3o%2C%20agora%20s%C3%A3o%2022%25>

- Carta Capital (2024, 03 de outubro). Você sabia que o Brasil pode se tornar de maioria evangélica até 2032?. *CartaCapital*. <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/cursos/voce-sabia-que-o-brasil-pode-se-tornar-de-maioria-evangelica-ate-2032/>
- Checchia, M. A. (2020). *Origens psíquicas da autoridade e do autoritarismo*. Dialética.
- Cifali, M. (1999). Educar, uma profissão impossível - Dilemas atuais. *Estilos da Clínica*, 4(7), 139-150. <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.1981-1624.v4i7p139-150>
- Couto, L. F. S., Casséte, J. L. Q., Hartmann, F., & Souza, M. F. G. (2018). Os discursos lacanianos como laços sociais. *Revista Subjetividades*, 18, 93-104. <https://doi.org/10.5020/23590777.rs.v18iEsp.6562>
- Darriba, V. A., Bencke, A. M. C., Cardim, E. B., Carvalho, P. B. M., Lima, D. A. P., Pestana, G. M., & Oliveira, D. H. (2009). Algumas evidências da função ética da psicanálise em “A Psicoterapia da Histeria”. *Estudos de Psicanálise*, (32), 171-180. http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0100-34372009000100020&lng=pt&nrm=iso&tlng=pt
- Freud, S. (2010a). *Observações psicanalíticas sobre um caso de paranoia relatado em autobiografia (“O caso Schreber”), artigos sobre técnica e outros textos* (Vol. 10, pp. 108-121). Companhia das Letras. (Trabalho original publicado em 1911).
- Freud, S. (2010b). *Introdução ao narcisismo, ensaios de metapsicologia e outros textos* (Vol. 12, pp. 13-50). Companhia das Letras. (Trabalho original publicado em 1914).
- Freud, S. (2010c). *O mal-estar na civilização, novas conferências introdutórias à psicanálise e outros textos* (Vol. 18, pp. 13-122). Companhia das Letras. (Trabalho original publicado em 1930).
- Freud, S. (2010d). *O mal-estar na civilização, novas conferências introdutórias à psicanálise e outros textos* (Vol. 18, pp. 417-435). Companhia das Letras. (Trabalho original publicado em 1932).
- Freud, S. (2011). *Psicologia das massas e análise do eu e outros textos* (Vol. 15, pp. 13-113). Companhia das Letras. (Trabalho original publicado em 1921).
- Freud, S. (2012). *Totem e tabu, contribuição à história do movimento psicanalítico e outros textos* (Vol. 11, pp. 13-244). Companhia das Letras. (Trabalho original publicado em 1912-1913).
- Freud, S. (2014). *Inibição, sintoma e angústia, o futuro de uma ilusão e outros textos* (Vol. 17, pp. 231-301). Companhia das Letras. (Trabalho original publicado em 1927).
- Gaier, R. V. (2024, 29 de junho). Número de evangélicos cresce 61% no Brasil, diz IBGE. *Terra*. <https://www.terra.com.br/noticias/brasil/numero-de-evangelicos-cresce-61-no-brasil-diz-ibge,c0addc840f0da310VgnCLD200000bbcceb0aRCRD.html>
- Gonçalves, A. (2019, 17 de julho). “Divino amor”: Filme futurista é uma crítica à hipocrisia do Brasil evangélico de Bolsonaro. *Intercept Brasil*. <https://theintercept.com/2019/07/17/divino-amor-critica-evangelico-bolsonaro/>.
- Hirt, J.-M. (2007). La psychanalyse entre athéisme freudien et ouverture à l’écoute de “l’évènement intérieur” du sujet. *Conferência no Cycle Psychanalyse et Spiritualités - Lyon, Quatrième Groupe* (Organisation Psychanalyse de Langue Française). https://www.quatrieme-groupe.org/pdf/pdf_01075LEPSY.pdf
- House, S. (2018). *Southernmost: Rumor ao Sul*. Faro Editorial.
- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE]. (2010). *Censo demográfico*. <https://www.ibge.gov.br/estatisticas/sociais/populacao/9662-censo-demografico-2010.html?edicao=9749&t=destaques>
- Jorge, M. A. C. (2019). Só o amor pode fazer o gozo condescender ao desejo. *Reverso*, 41(77), 75-81. http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0102-73952019000100009&lng=pt&nrm=iso

- La Boétie, E. (2016). *Discurso da servidão voluntária*. Editora Nós. (Trabalho original publicado em 1576).
- Lacan, J. (1985). *O Seminário, livro 20: Mais, ainda (1972/1973)*. Jorge Zahar.
- Lacan, J. (1991). *O Seminário, livro 7: A ética da psicanálise (1959/1960)*. Jorge Zahar.
- Levine, E. (2019, 06 de março). La vulnérabilité des “Sans-Visage”. *Philosophie Magazine*. <https://www.philomag.com/les-idees/la-vulnerabilite-des-sans-visage-37761>
- Mascaro, G. (Diretor) (2019). *Divino Amor* [Filme]. Desvia Filmes; Snowglobe.
- Mbembe, A. (2018). *Necropolítica*. N-1 Edições.
- Mbembe, A. (2021). *Políticas da inimizade*. N-1 Edições.
- Pacheco, A. L. P. (2015). Para sempre é por um triz. *Stylus Revista de Psicanálise*, (30), 31-41. <http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/pdf/stylus/n30/n30a04.pdf>
- Rabinovich, D. (2001). *O psicanalista entre o mestre e o pedagogo*. <https://doceru.com/doc/nnnsxe00>
- Siqueira, E. (2014). A metáfora do amor. *Opção Lacaniana*, 5(15), 1-12. http://www.opcaolacanianana.com.br/pdf/numero_15/A_meta_fora_do_amor.pdf

How to cite:

Buechler, F. T., & Binkowski, G. I. (2025). From Fraternal Love to Fallible Love: An Alternative Ethics for the Social Bond. *Revista Subjetividades*, 25(1), e16972. <https://doi.org/10.5020/23590777.rs.v25i1.e16972>

Correspondence address:

Flávia Tridapalli Buechler
E-mail: flaviatbuechler@gmail.com

Gabriel Inticher Binkowski
E-mail: gabriel.binkowski@gmail.com



Received on: 07/26/2022.

Accepted on: 04/13/2025.