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Couple *in* therapy. The couple as an opportunity for mutual becoming

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Abstract. – The underlying intent of our contribution is to delve deeper into some aspects of clinical practice in working with couples within the framework of Relational Psychoanalysis and, more precisely, starting from Michele Minolli's theory of the I-Subject. A psychoanalytic approach in couple therapy is particularly relevant nowadays since the romantic relationship has increasingly become invested with expectations that partners will take care of individual vulnerabilities, offering support and understanding. As a result, the romantic relationship inevitably becomes the place where individual existential crises take place. "YOU make me feel bad" is one of the accusations that we often hear in different forms from couples in therapy. This accusation symbolically summarizes the entire mechanism of delegating responsibility to the other for one's emotional experience. This relational pattern – of demanding and, at the same time, of depending on the Other – is understood as resulting from modern society's tendency to hyper-individualism. In this context, self-affirmation seems to be an indispensable condition for one's existence in relation to the rest of the world, resulting in the individual experiencing a state of radical inconsistency. We refer to our clinical work with couples as 'couple in therapy' rather than as 'couple therapy' precisely because what underpins our theoretical frame and techniques aims to support the individual to work towards taking back their investment (in this case, a romantic one) in the Other. This is an opportunity for individual growth and development that wouldn't be achieved alone. Therefore, the therapist plays a fundamental role in helping to take back this investment. During the early stages of therapy, the couple can easily start requesting that the therapist offer quick fixes for solving daily struggles. The aim of therapy is instead to support the couple to rediscover themselves at this time of crisis: in this way, the I-Subject becomes central, as I is the one who loves, relates, and is in crisis. The I-Subject does not passively suffer struggles but experiences them, even when they become difficult and painful, making it much harder to own and stay with those experiences. Recognizing human symmetry is a precondition to clinical practice, alongside an ethical sense of care, to work with patients, not instead of them or in a better way than them. This leads to a shared understanding of the issues, the loss, emptiness, and inconsistency of being a human being. By taking this stance and awareness, the therapist will be able to support couples in a process of gradual relinquishment of delegating to the Other the condition of their existence, helping them to experience the

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relationship not as a romantic and idealized wholeness but as an opportunity for mutual becoming. In the proposed work, these aspects will also be explored in depth through the use of clinical material.

Key words: couple's psychotherapy, psychoanalysis of the relationship, I-Subject, crisis, ethics of the therapist.

Before delving into the theoretical and clinical themes addressed in this reflection, it is obligatory to express gratitude to Michele Minolli and his research partners, Romina Coin, Francesco Dettori, Laura Girelli, and Massimo Schneider, 'psychoanalysts of the relationship', who inspired the study and our daily clinical work with couples.

Michele Minolli is a master who has traced new routes to follow and continue to explore. For this reason, it is precisely the case to represent ourselves as 'dwarfs on the shoulders of a giant', animated by the desire to give our contribution to apply in the present and project his theory into the future, aware that it is full of ideas that can potentially still be developed.

The theory of the I-Subject, and in particular its application in the study of couple investment, represents a positive vision of the human being, not understood as a lacking organism in constant search of the other to complete or validate them, but as an autonomous and complete individual, equipped with all the resources necessary to take responsibility for oneself, even within the constraints imposed by genetics and environment.

The investment in the other as an emotional and sexual partner represents a particular form among the many investments that the human being makes during their life, and when this investment is reciprocal, it is called couple love. The analogy with the economic meaning of the term 'investment' is interesting: "financial activity aimed at increasing assets or acquiring new resources with the ultimate goal of obtaining a greater profit or increasing one's personal satisfaction". From this perspective, we understand investment also in our clinical work with couples as extraordinary opportunities to know oneself and to take possession of one's life; in short, to 'get rich'.

From economics to sociology, we believe it is essential to outline some key aspects that help us understand the phenomenon of couples in the context of the present time, in line with the intentions of this forum, which investigates the applications of psychoanalysis in postmodern society.

For some time, we have observed how psychoanalysis has been dealing with pathologies attributable to an existential malaise typical of the era of well-being and consumerism, while at the same time becoming a receptor of needs for identity, belonging, and social connection, welcomed in the past by various social agencies. The challenge is therefore to provide tools that alleviate the void of meaning without slipping into the exaltation of narcissistic

gratification and the primacy of individual needs. The transition from a normative to a narcissistic society pays the price of anomie and the void of identity. It therefore has strong repercussions on the sphere of intimate relationships that often become a catalyst for the request for a reason for living, for self-confirmation, for an urgent need to feel 'recognized'.

In fact, the couple increasingly aims to respond first and foremost to the emotional needs of the individual, unlike in the past, when the marital bond served an instrumental function in preserving assets and guaranteeing a lineage. This change has characterized the couple as an increasingly conscious choice, where idealization and disillusionment coexist in a very delicate balance no longer guaranteed by social norms that acted as stabilizers of the bonds. It is therefore legitimate to affirm that social evolutions have transformed the couple, just as the growing awareness of the importance of the relational quality of the couple has increased the psychological tools available to couples who request therapeutic help in moments of crisis.

Psychoanalysis has historically been reluctant to approach the couple relationship compared to other clinical approaches (think, for example, of the systemic school): it was born as an individual intervention and has always given centrality to the intrapsychic life of the individual, while the other (the 'Object') is a contingent and secondary element, mostly investigated in its function of support for individual psychic life. In the theory of the I-Subject to which we refer in the clinic with couples, we intend to broaden this vision, following a relational/interactionist perspective that enables us to understand the human being as an active subject driven by motivations, such as genital attraction and self-actualization. Such vital drives place the partners of the couple in a real, current dimension: the intrapsychic dynamics of narcissism or transference that lead back to the relationship with the parents, for example, are certainly elements that participate in the couple's relationship but do not represent the constitutive or explanatory aspects of the structuring of the bond. If this were the case, they would pollute and hinder love, because they would condemn the individual to a mere repetition of the relational patterns of childhood, what we call 'configuration'.

We instead understand the couple's relationship as the potential context for growth and individual emancipation; it is an adult relationship in which each individual continues to become. It is therefore not a finish line but a propitious occasion for the individual evolutionary process of its components.

A few words on falling in love, the 'starting block' of the couple's history.

The extraordinary experience of falling in love consists in the fact that up to that moment, we feel lovable to the extent that we correspond to the expectations of the other, generally our parents, but also our teachers or friends. For a lifetime, the relationship with the other is mediated by the judgment of one's own behavior or way of being; it is therefore very likely that an experience of unlovability prevails, since it is so difficult to satisfy expectations. Falling in

love is like starting on your own, going beyond expectations, experiencing firsthand that the other person is on our side, accepting us as we are.

Accompanying this feeling, we find a paradoxical characteristic of falling in love that carries within itself the seed of the crisis: falling in love is a moving outside of oneself, a displacement into the other.

The I-Subject certainly continues to exist, but it is muted because the other becomes the salt of life. I am worth it because You validate me, I exist because You make me exist. It is easy to understand how this exploitation of the other as a guarantor of one's existence cannot be sustained for very long, once the altered state of consciousness known as falling in love has been overcome.

Let's try to apply what has been exposed to a clinical situation.

P. accesses a mental health service at the age of 17, accompanied by his father, for the onset of panic attacks during the consumption of THC. After a short therapeutic course, the symptoms subside, and P. interrupts the course, driven by the need to regain control of his own. After twelve years, he contacts the same therapist again at her private practice because he is overwhelmed by a malaise that has affected him for about a year, which he says was caused by a crisis in his relationship with A. During P.'s individual course, the possibility of therapeutic work as a couple opens up for P. and A. (both almost thirty years old) with another therapist. From the intertwining of the two works, reflections on love investment and existential suffering arise.

P. and A. both come from a country in the Balkan Peninsula, and both share a migratory history initiated by their families of origin. P.'s father is an engineer, his mother is a housewife. P. spent his childhood between Italy and his country of origin, his parents tenaciously preserved their traditions, careful not to invest in relational terms in the 'host' country, with a style of acculturation that Berry could define as 'separation'.

P. always moves in search of doing and filling, pleases his friends in an attempt to be chosen. His mother goes through several deep depressions, manifests hysterical crises, exercises control through feelings of guilt; his father maintains a rigid but reassuring armor. P. graduates with difficulty as an accountant and starts several jobs driven by the need to prove he can do it alone; at the same time, he cultivates his greatest passion, music. After years of study, waiting, and frustration, he manages to first get a job as a sound engineer and then as a producer, until he conquers collaborations with important musical exponents, but without yet managing to obtain economic stability.

A. has a sister and two brothers who, during her childhood and adolescence, because of their restlessness, occupy and worry her parents. She is left with the possibility of being seen through her caregiving and pleasing of the other. A. is desperately seeking attention and love, and during adolescence, suffers from eating disorders. She finishes hairdressing school with determi-

nation, works as an employee for several years, and in the last year, she opens her own business with excellent results.

P. and A. meet at the age of 18 through mutual friends; both remember that meeting in great detail, full of emotions, curiosity, passion, and certainty that the other would give meaning to their life.

At the beginning of their relationship, P. appears very jealous, obsessed with the possibility that other men could enjoy A.'s beauty even just with a glance, seeing in this a possible damage to his virility. However, A. manages to offer P. a reassuring predictability, feeling protected and desired: this balance makes possible years of harmony, complicity, fulfilling intimacy, and stability.

Certainly, this extraordinary phase of transitory madness that every individual finds himself going through sooner or later does not occupy a central role in clinical work with couples: it is unlikely that one would turn to a therapist when immersed in such a state of bliss, unless they are heavily defending themselves against it. Precisely because it represents an experience that upsets one's balance, it is not guaranteed that everyone is available to access it. It is not a given that the internal and external balance achieved by an individual at a given moment in life can support a global and engaging investment such as that of love and, therefore, support the opening towards new balances and new perspectives. These are impossible loves, where the rigidity of the configuration does not allow one to live the experience of being loved disinterestedly, for example, or does not leave the freedom to access one's own love, perhaps for reasons of transgenerational loyalty (think of parents who, due to painful personal experiences, have transmitted the idea that a love relationship brings with it risks that one must keep away from). In cases like these, the very existence of the desire for love finds no room for expression: if the need to preserve the balance achieved prevails, mutual regulation will be privileged, with all due respect to desire. In our opinion, the strength of this interpretation is the fact that it relativizes the weight of external variables: regardless of individual history, what seems to be decisive is the state of current coherence, the degree of untouchability and rigidity. Impossible loves testify to the existence of desire and its irreconcilability with the balance of the system. In our work, however, we only encounter possible loves, for the very fact that, surprised by the crisis while they are grappling with their own becoming, the partners of the couple decide to ask for help, thus admitting the dynamism of the dual couple: possible love is the fruit of a process and gives rise to a process.

It is essential at this point to understand the characteristics of the relationship between the unity of the individual and the relationship of which he is part, the relationships between the I-Subject and the couple. It is obvi-

ous to everyone that the couple is composed of two individuals, but it tends to be conceived as an entity in its own right. For a more in-depth understanding, it is useful to keep in mind three dimensions of the functioning of the couple system, which we can summarize as real objectives, closures, and self-awareness.

On the level of real objectives in the couple, there is interaction: they work together for the joint realization of an optimal balance for both, made up of self and mutual regulation, and in continuous change/readjustment. On the objectives of genitality and self-realization, the partners interact with each other, propose themselves, and adapt to the other in a circular recursion. Then there are the closures of the system, in which there can be no interaction or co-construction; with closures, we refer to all the baggage of wounds that cannot be healed, of nuclei that have remained untouchable, of rooms where it is not prudent to venture, with which everyone faces everyday life. They are spaces that are proper to each individual but that the individual himself does not see and whose existence he does not even suspect, but that from the outside, especially in the dual of a couple, it is easy to grasp, even if in an intuitive and not explicit way, sensing their inaccessibility. These are historical solutions that present such a gradient of stability that they cannot be put into play or negotiated: they find in the couple the elective place of confirmation and the possibility of a functional correspondence. Beyond the fatigue and suffering that the members of the couple declare to experience with respect to their mutual closures, it is easy to grasp, from the observational vertex of the therapist, a function that founds the balance of the couple, which unites and creates an alliance.

In the relationship between P. and A., it is possible to intuit a fit between closures in conjunction with the emergence of the crisis: A. loves P. unconditionally, but deep down she expects something in return, the fact of being considered unique and special as she was not by her parents; P., at the same time, feels overwhelmed and crushed by this need for reassurance, obliged to take on care needs as he has already experienced with his mother's depression. Both declare that they cannot tolerate the other's attitude, but from an external point of view, the gradient of stability guaranteed by this dynamic is very clear.

This functionality on the respective closures – that Kaës calls an 'unconscious alliance' – generally does not last over time. Sooner or later, in the I-Subject, the discomfort for the unavailable spaces, for the paralyzing limitations, emerges. At this point, the possibility of the intervention of self-awareness emerges, which opens the possibility of a dialectical relationship.

In fact, we know, as specialists consulted precisely when suffering emerges, that dissatisfaction and discomfort can give rise to the need to take

care of oneself, the drive to search for meaning, and words never spoken before. The function of self-awareness is therefore offered as a tool to deal with suffering and therefore to notice the 'closed doors'; it opens a dialectical dimension in the couple that does not mean assigning wrongs and rights, distinguishing the true from the false, but rather giving oneself the inner space necessary for the relativization of one's personal criteria to build new ones that are enriched by the encounter with the other. In other words, reaching a synthesis that is different from one's thesis and the antithesis of the other because it transcends both.

Every story begins with falling in love, continues with the life of a couple, and is inhabited by crisis. The concept of crisis contains within itself the profound sense of change: without crisis, there would be no change and, therefore, no life. Today's mentality, however, tends to view the crisis as a failure, a setback, an unexpected deviation from expectations. It is very unlikely that a couple in crisis feels close to a positive and useful turning point for the growth of the individuals who compose it. This consideration is closely linked to the modern vision of the couple: in it, we expect to find the partner capable of satisfying us. This institution, founded on mutual and shared 'choice', naturally finds space for the personal evolution of individuals: it is life itself that places on each person the request to progress towards a greater definition of themselves, a progressive self-individuation. Our hypothesis regarding the birth of a crisis in a couple is that, once the phase of falling in love has been overcome, the need for a more 'individualized' time and space inevitably arises, which responds to the need, innate in the human being, to continue in one's personal becoming. And it is precisely the experience of loving and feeling loved that produces in each partner the effect of reinforcement and legitimacy to proceed on this path.

If, for an initial period, accommodation, dialogue, concertation have indeed prevailed, a moment later arrives when self-affirmation breaks in, often in a vindictive form: intolerance grows for always having to take into account the other's point of view, the sense of crushing of never being able to do one's own thing. Added to this is the fact that falling in love stops hiding the other's otherness. The data of reality from which the crisis seems to come to life, in fact, are only occasions or pretexts: the crisis depends precisely on the discovery of the reality of the other, a discovery that works for a long time inside us and that requires many confirmations before it can emerge into consciousness. There are different ways of dealing with the irruption of the reality of the other: most of the time, we try to distort the image of the other in an attempt to adapt it to our own needs; in other cases, otherness is associated with a persecutory meaning, as if simply being other represents a danger. The profound meaning of the crisis precisely involves the possibility of combining being authentically oneself and loving the other as other from oneself. It is a propositive meaning, a possibility of

development, but it can only pass through a depressive moment, in which an elaboration of one's own 'orphaned' position of the confirming presence of the other is needed, and the stronger the 'delegation' was, the more tiring this moment will be.

The first years of the couple are described by P. and A. as a place of harmony, complicity, fulfilling intimacy, and stability.

The families of origin of A. and P. push to hasten the marriage, which takes place about a year and a half before the arrival in therapy, in compliance with family traditions. From that moment, P. experiences a pervasive malaise that manifests as insistent rumination, confused thoughts, doubts, and uncertainties, accompanied by a sense of estrangement, feelings of guilt, and anguish. He is the spokesman of the crisis, the one who most evidently begins to no longer tolerate the balance previously achieved. In that period, P. meets M., a young Italian musician, who breaks the staticity and insinuates doubts about the couple's planning. P. sees with her the possibility of a relationship free of duties and expectations, made of lightness and harmony. A. feels lost, scared, she feels P. moving away, suddenly disinterested in her care and unconditional love.

"You can't tell me that you don't know if you love me anymore", A. says desperately, realizing her young husband's new attraction, almost fearing she can't exist without P.'s love, suddenly feeling a shocking and profound void that only the investment of the other seems to be able to fill.

"You can't expect me to give you answers that I don't have, and then you have to detach yourself, do your things, your life, even without me", P. explains in the session, as if he couldn't stand being the answer to such a basic need of A.'s, to exist. But is P. really capable of 'existing' without feeling loved and validated unconditionally by A.?

How much does A. really struggle to accept P.'s affirmation, or rather, how much is it P. who can't find consistency in his evolutionary path?

Self-affirmation is not easy. No longer functioning, as it has been for a long time, in relation to parents, culture, and society, to instead consider one's own desires and start from them is a reversal of perspective, a change that requires courage. More spontaneous and therefore more automatic is to delegate authorization to one's partner: perhaps for P., love is also a tool to alleviate the effort of authorizing oneself to grow. Yet being oneself, taking control of one's life, becoming consistent cannot find fulfillment through delegating to the other.

P. often needs to talk to A. about his discomfort, seeks nocturnal dialogues full of interpretations; sometimes he seems to want to argue to have confirmation of his own affirmation/existence, seeks the other's consent and

approval of his point of view.

"As soon as the song went gold, I printed the label and went to my parents' house to hang it up, I wanted to make my father proud", P. reports. "I needed to hear them say, 'well done, so yours is a real job, so you're really worth it', like when, as a child, I turned to them to please them with my traditional values, and I turned to my friends to show my being Italian".

So the argument comes as a desperate cry to be accepted.

A. seems to be less involved in the need to argue, yet to argue it takes two. What do A.'s silences hide? In A. and P.'s culture of origin, it is taken for granted that being a 'good' wife also means being a mother to the husband. An ideal mother who always says yes and who is always available to respond to other people's wishes, perhaps without showing it, with a smile on her lips, with the conviction that this is the only possible way to be in a relationship. For a long time, A. wore a traditional dress, responding to P.'s need to be loved; for a long time, A. welcomed and satisfied the request for unconditional love that P. would have wanted from his parents.

To what extent is it possible for her to 'become herself' today? To what extent do some of A.'s passive and complacent attitudes hide her difficulty in existing if her unconditional love is no longer desired by P.? How much fear of loss is 'controlled' with A.'s silences? After all, being able to argue also means overcoming the fear of losing the love of the other. In fact, it is a risk: what if the cord of love really broke? What if the argument were to demonstrate that there is no more love?

In the last few months something has changed: P. seems tired of feeling his own value only through being loved by the other, and A. seems tired of feeling important only by loving the other unconditionally, yet they are still looking for their own consistency in the other, while it should be up to each of them to face the fantasies of betrayal, death, loneliness, and emptiness.

The security and repetitiveness linked to delegation are lost and are replaced by openness and possibility, the implementation of a subjective search beyond the right or wrong previously dictated by the parents, and access to the complexity of life and how to live one's own life. We think that the couple can make this 'becoming' more accessible: perhaps the couple, going through the crisis, or rather precisely thanks to the crisis, is aimed at mutual becoming.

The central question of our work is, how can we manage to read the crisis in an evolutionary sense? How can we allow ourselves to grasp the crisis as an invitation to go beyond? How can we dare to venture towards a new way of love?

In our world, governed by an individualistic culture, desire is absolutized as the only criterion of evaluation and behavior: in a culture where what one feels is law, it becomes difficult to see the crisis as relative to the relationship.

It becomes easier to read the crisis as threatening to desire, as P. asks himself, "I'm unhappy, how can I stay with A. if I feel unhappy?"

For almost a year, P. thinks he cannot leave A. because their families would not accept it, and he would lose the love of his parents; he obsessively desired a light life with M., free from responsibilities, routine, and expectations. On the one hand, he felt "a bad person, a traitor", far from the values received from his parents; on the other hand, he was oppressed and suffocated by choices he did not want to make (getting married).

When P. comes to the realization that he could have left A. if he had wanted to, taking that choice as his own, he feels lost without those catastrophic consequences that protected him from doing so. P. feels he doesn't want to do it because A. had nothing to do with his unhappiness.

The couple turns to a specialist when historical solutions appear indispensable for survival but, at the same time, are no longer suitable for dealing with that specific existential moment. During a relationship, not all crises 'make the news'; some, however, generate such a dose of suffering that they need to ask for help.

When a couple comes to therapy, they often assume a delegating and deresponsibilizing posture, both towards each other – "You make me feel bad" – and towards the therapist – "You have to make me feel good". For this reason, the engagement in couple therapy, understood as a return to oneself, almost always does not coincide with the beginning. The couple proposes 'contents' to work on (betrayal, sexuality, communication, parenting, family management...), while the therapist will have to encourage a transition to an analytic point of view.

Supporting the couple in placing themselves in a processual perspective means helping the members of the couple to get in touch with themselves, accompanying them in understanding the strategies that the I-Subject implements to maintain a certain balance; the engagement is therefore to make the two I-Subjects discover their specific ways of being in the world according to their initial configuration and the movements aimed at maintaining their own balance. This inevitably leads to the delegation withdrawing to the Other, returning to themselves despite the couple presenting as bearers of an externalizing style. Initially, the I-subject has the tendency to shift its suffering onto the other or the couple relationship as if the couple were an entity other than itself; for this reason, the starting point in couple therapy is to accept that 'the couple does not exist'. The I-Subject within the couple relationship can reclaim its suffering, moving from passively enduring the other and life to a dialogical relationship with the world, abandoning the vindictive position in which there is the expectation of compensation or repair from the other and from the therapist.

In conclusion, a brief reflection on the ethics of the therapist in working with the couple seems useful.

Clinical practice is combined with the ethical sense of care when it is based on the recognition of human symmetry with the patient, bearer of an 'other' subjectivity that must be respected. This respect is not achieved if, strong in our role, we set ourselves up as holders of the right and impose our knowledge on the other or the couple, driven by the need for reassuring confirmation and, therefore, by the search for objectivity at all costs. Nor does it happen if we cancel ourselves and identify totally with the couple or with the partner, because in this way we lose the possibility of providing our specific contribution, which cannot consist in the search for a truth that assigns wrongs and rights, nor in the repair of the narcissistic wounds of the single individual, nor in the search for what should be the optimal balance between the two partners. On the contrary, the therapeutic process intercepts the life process, it does not impose it and does not regulate it: it supports it, putting the subject at the center, helping him to recognize himself in his process of self- and eco-organization, showing that it is possible to recognize oneself in what one is, that it is possible to situate oneself within what one lives.

By doing so, we can accompany the couple towards the possibility of taking on, in turn, their own process of being present to themselves, in contact with what is theirs, recognizing themselves in the events they are creating, and also discovering themselves in the possibility of intervening and modifying them.

Ethics means getting hands-on with specific issues, bringing different and perhaps new points of view, participating in the density of decisions that the couple is taking or has already taken, always with a view that is not normative or 'orthopedic' but that pursues, while respecting the timing of the individual process, the goal of 'different minds at work'. In this perspective, consistency and patience are required of the therapist, the ability to linger in despair and pain, in a countercultural, existential, and non-interventionist view.

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