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## Arbitrary Love: A Dialogue

Shishir Budha

*This is a dialogue between two old friends June and May who are in their early thirties. June is a freelance writer and May is a graduate student. May went with June to see June's romantic partner, Summer, in Strasbourg. Now the friends are on a plane flying back to New York. Endnotes in this dialogue are used for philosophical exposition.*

**June:** I miss Summer already.

**May:** I know.

**June:** Ever since I met her I've always wondered, "Why her? Why not someone else?"

**May:** You mean about why you miss *her* and not someone else?

**June:** Yes.

**May:** Then perhaps you need to answer why you *love* her first.

**June:** She's just wonderful.

**May:** You're saying you love her because *she* is "wonderful"? Or because you think of *her* as being wonderful?

**June:** Both.

**May:** But wouldn't everyone in the world love her if she were wonderful *in herself*?

**June:** Yes.

**May:** Do you think everybody in the world loves her?

**June:** Obviously, no.

**May:** So wouldn't it be better if you say that *you think* that she is wonderful?

**June:** Yeah, but when you put it that way it seems like my thinking about her might not be true—she might not *really* be wonderful only that *I think* she is. You know what I mean?

**May:** You mean that if it was the case that *only you* thought that she is wonderful and others didn't, you might be delusional or something?

**June:** Yeah kinda.

**May:** But that's fine though. I'm not suggesting that you should feel that way. You would be talking about how she appears to you and how you make her appear to yourself, but not about how she is in herself.<sup>1</sup> We cannot know anything-in-itself.

**June:** I'm not disagreeing. I cannot claim to know things from within or things in *themselves*. I think I remember in college when we read Kant, right?

**May:** Oh yeah, he talked about the implausibility of thing in itself, the *noumenal* world, and that we can only experience it *phenomenally* as the thing appears to us.<sup>2</sup>

**June:** I remember! But (*pause*) how does this relate to why I love Summer and not someone else?

**May:** Yeah, okay. Do you think other people out there *are* wonderful too?

**June:** I guess. I don't know.

**May:** Would you say that not everybody has appeared to you as 'wonderful' as she because if so, you would love everybody who is *like* her in terms of manners, pursuits, and hobbies?

**June:** But everybody is not like her.

**May:** And she's not like everybody else.

**June:** Yes.

**May:** But you don't know everybody the way you know her.

**June:** Yes.

**May:** Why do you think that's the case?

**June:** Because I haven't *met* everybody.

**May:** But you met her.

**June:** Yes.

**May:** Where did you meet her again?

**June:** Glasgow.

**May:** Oh right. Could it have been had you met someone else, you would have loved them instead?

**June:** I guess but that's the talk about a different reality and I don't find that very consoling.

**May:** Do you think the fact that you love her and not someone else is *arbitrary*?

**June:** No.

**May:** Why?

**June:** I can't just go start loving everybody according to my will.

**May:** Exactly.

**June:** What do you mean 'exactly'? Doesn't that undermine what you

said?

**May:** What I meant by arbitrary was not that you can simply decide to love anybody, but precisely that you can't.<sup>3</sup>

**June:** I'm having a hard time following you.

**May:** I'm sorry. Do you remember Ferdinand de Saussure?

**June:** I don't think so.

**May:** He was a linguist. He was the one to say: "the linguistic sign is arbitrary."<sup>4</sup>

**June:** What does that mean?

**May:** The sign is the whole of the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the *sound-image* like "cat" and the signified is the *concept* of a cat.

**June:** Okay ... So it's like the name "cat" means a cat?

**May:** Not really. The sign is not the whole of the "name" and the "thing."<sup>5</sup> It is the whole of a "sound-image" and a "concept." The sign doesn't stand for what is outside ourselves.

**June:** So you're saying it's all in our heads?

**May:** Haha. Pretty much.

**June:** But that's kinda "crazy talk" to me. Don't you think it's quite outlandish to say that?

**May:** You're not wrong. But remember when we were talking about Kant on how we can't say much about things-in-themselves?

**June:** Yeah ...

**May:** Saussure is saying something similar. The sign only links "thoughts" and "sounds," not "names" and "things."<sup>6</sup>

**June:** Okay, alright. So when I say "cat," there is no cat *out there* but only my thought of a cat and the sound of my voice.

**May:** Right. And there the most important thing is that the link between the thought and the sound is arbitrary. The thought of a cat and what one *calls* that thought is arbitrary.

**June:** I understand. But why did you bring this up? I mean what does linguistics have to do with love?

**May:** I can't help but think that love can be informed in terms of Saussure's understanding of language. Remember when you said that you can't simply start loving everybody when I asked you if your love for her was arbitrary?

**June:** But according to Saussure the signifier is replaceable, right?

**May:** Yes.

**June:** But she is not replaceable.

**May:** Yes, and you can't simply make yourself love anyone else because love is an affective state and it is not subject to voluntary willing. Do you agree?

**June:** Say more.

**May:** Would you say love is an affective state?<sup>7</sup>

**June:** Okay, yeah.

**May:** If there is a conflict in the affective state, would you still comfortably say that you love her?

**June:** No.

**May:** But if there is a harmony in your affective state, you would comfortably say that you love her?

**June:** Yes.

**May:** In that case, would you say that the agencies that are acting within your affective state are in harmony?

**June:** I guess so.

**May:** Saussure thought that the linguistic agents need to be in agreement or in harmony within the linguistic community to establish or retain a "sign."<sup>8</sup> What the sign signifies is not subject to individual volition. You can't simply decide to say "bat" and expect others to understand that you meant "cat."

**June:** Hmm. So even though it is arbitrary, the sign is governed by harmonizing agencies.

**May:** Right. Saussure also said that the sign is "arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified."<sup>9</sup>

**June:** I love my mother because I have a natural connection to her.

**May:** But if you were raised and cared for by someone else, other than your biological mother since birth, you would still *feel* that you have a 'natural connection' with that person, right?

**June:** I get it. Now, I can't just decide that I want to feel about your mother the same way I feel about my mother. The arbitrariness of my situation is that it is contingent, that I grew up with my mother and not yours.

**May:** Yes, it is contingent. It's the same way with language. We are always already in language. We are always already hurled upon this

world.

**June:** Yeah.

**May:** Yeah.

**June:** I agree with you and all, but all this talk about arbitrariness and contingency feels very disorienting and uncomfortable. I wonder if this way of thinking diminishes any value of love or any process of signifying.

**May:** Yeah, let's talk about that. Do you think you could ever stop loving Summer?

**June:** I hope I don't, but I can't speak for the future.

**May:** If it were out of 'necessity,' wouldn't you always love her?

**June:** Of course.

**May:** But one cannot be so sure, right? I think language and love are such that we can never them in our grasp. Never master them. Because to master would be to necessitate the process of signifying.<sup>10</sup> What if we lived in a world where it was *necessary* to have one particular name and to love one particular person or a thing?

**June:** I wouldn't want to live in that world.

**May:** Me neither. So I don't think the arbitrariness and contingency diminish anything. I think they free us. They let us play.<sup>11</sup>

**June:** That's wonderful. How about I put it this way: in language and in love we are simply passengers in a *vessel* of contingency.<sup>12</sup>

**May:** Nicely put. Haha.

**June:** Haha. You know... I need some fresh air.

**May:** (*laughs*) June, we're on a plane. Wait until it lands.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1. Cf. Kant's comments in Part II: "Transcendental Logic" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 508. Kant talks about how we can only report the truth "in-itself" as *appearances* but not know the "truth" as *in itself*. Our experience of the appearances makes us *phenomenal* beings.

2. *Ibid.*, 508-9.

3. As Ferdinand de Saussure notes, "the word arbitrary means not that individual speakers can just make language up, but precisely that they can't; the sign is a convention that has to be learned and is not subject to individual will," in "From *Course in General Linguistics*," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 958.

4. *Ibid.*, 964. Since June doesn't already know who "Saussure" is supposed to signify, May could have told her that it *signified* a lady in Venice or a scholar from Mongolia. This shows how the link between the signifier and the signified is *arbitrary* and that the only reason one understands of Saussure as a linguist is a purely contingent.

5. *Ibid.*, 963. Saussure notes, "the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image."

6. *Ibid.*, 967. Saussure thinks that "... the role of language with respect to thought is not to create a material phonic means for expressing ideas but to serve as a *link* between thought and sound."

7. The *affective* state, which has concerned with the Subject's "emotions/feelings," is to be distinguished from the *cognitive* state that involves process of thought concerned with knowledge.

8. Saussure, 965.

9. Saussure thinks that the signifying process of linking the signifier and the signified has no intrinsic necessity. Therefore, there is no natural connection between them. But one might not say the same about symbols because they are more like metaphors and metaphors (as signifiers) seem to bear semblance with the signified. One can think of the balancing scales as the *symbol* for justice. But the "symbol" of peace as a dove with an olive branch is primarily a sign, not a symbol. How signs become symbols would be an interesting discussion but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

10. If one seeks to *necessitate* the processes that are supposed to be formed naturally, the language becomes dictatorial and demands conformity to it without the willingness of the rest of the *Kultur*.

11. Kant talked about the “aesthetic experience” as a *free play* of the “imagination and understanding” which does not happen because of *necessity* but of *contingency* in *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 62. In an aesthetic experience while looking at works of art the Subject’s imagination and understanding engage in a free play by *attending* to the form and temporality of object and finding “purposiveness,” but not “purpose,” within that experience. We have aesthetic experiences not because of necessity that implies “purpose” but because of contingency that implies “purposiveness” (64). The *play* in language and love is similar to that of aesthetic experiences.

12. One can think of the vessel as metaphor of a confined space in which the “task of reading” remains always “*protected*” and never “*opened*,” as Jacques Derrida famously stated: “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 158. In the reading of a text we are confined by the signifiers and yet are able to find countless *significations* within it. One should not think of the text, or the language and love in context of my writing, as limited; it should be freeing.

13. There is no ‘fresh air’ inside a plane. Trying to get a fresh air outside the plane will prove fatal. This is metaphorical of how language might limit our experience of the world. Mallarmé described language by using the metaphor of a rain streaked window to convey that language can only *allude* to our impressions of the world but cannot *grasp* the world itself in *Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle*. (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 227-34. He was critical of the dominant theories of the nineteenth century like realism and Romanticism.



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