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Mini-review

The Importance of Tenderness in Personal Relationships

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Abstract

This article explores the significance of tenderness in human relationships and psychology through the contributions of key thinkers in philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy. Drawing on the work of Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, Maurice Nedoncelle, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and Juan Rof Carballo, tenderness can be presented as a transformative force in human interactions, rooted in the recognition of the other's dignity and the cultivation of mutual respect and love. Marcel's "I-Thou" relationship, Maritain's Christian humanism, and Nedoncelle's emphasis on reciprocity frame tenderness as a profound way of being that enables authentic connections. From a psychological perspective, Erich Fromm and Rof Carballo highlight tenderness as essential for emotional well-being and societal healing, offering a counterbalance to the alienation and violence of modern life. Additionally, in education, as illustrated by Joaquín Benito and Alejandro Cussánovich, tenderness emerges as an indispensable element for fostering empathy, emotional growth, and spiritual development. This article argues that tenderness is not a fleeting sentiment but a vital, transformative practice, integral to personal fulfillment and societal cohesion. By embedding tenderness into human relations and education, we can cultivate deeper, more compassionate connections that contribute to individual and collective well-being.

Introduction

In the contemporary world, tenderness is often perceived as an expression of vulnerability or even weakness. However, various thinkers in philosophy, psychology, and theology have made it possible to approach this concept as a fundamental force in human relationships [2]. Tenderness, understood as the ability to be open to others, show compassion and care, and create deep and authentic bonds, is essential for the integral development of the human person. This article explores the relevance of tenderness in personal relationships through the perspective of authors such as Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, Maurice Nédoncel, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Erich Fromm, Juan Rof Carballo, Jaime Rodríguez, and especially Carlo Rocchetta [3-6], who has developed a theology of tenderness based on these influential ideas.

Furthermore, it is crucial to revisit the insights of earlier thinkers and acknowledge the intellectual foundations they laid, which continue to inform contemporary discussions on tenderness. As thought evolves and adapts to new contexts, we propose that tenderness remains a vital concept, strengthened by the reflections of those who have come before us. By engaging with their contributions, we can deepen our understanding of tenderness and its transformative potential in human relationships, as it helps reshape how we connect with others and fosters a more compassionate, empathetic world. The central question guiding this analysis is: why is tenderness fundamental in human relationships, and how can it transform the way we relate to others?

Tenderness from the Perspectives of Philosophy and Anthropology

The concept of tenderness, while not explicitly developed into a comprehensive philosophy by thinkers such as Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, and Maurice Nedoncelle, forms the foundation for Carlo Rocchetta's theology of tenderness. Drawing heavily on their existential and Christian humanist reflections, Rocchetta frames tenderness as a central aspect of human identity and the key to fostering authentic relationships. Gabriel Marcel's notion of "being or having" [7] plays a pivotal role in Rocchetta's understanding. Rocchetta expands on this, emphasizing the abandonment of "having" relationships—those based on possession and control—and instead advocating for "being" relationships, which are marked by openness and authentic encounter. In Rocchetta's view, tenderness dissolves the self in the presence of the other, affirming love as a mutual connection grounded in the recognition of human dignity, mirroring Marcel's existential availability.

Jacques Maritain's Christian humanism [8] also significantly informs Rocchetta's theology. Maritain's understanding of the human person as fundamentally relational influences Rocchetta's theology of tenderness. Maritain argues that humans are inherently connected to others and to God, and this relational nature shapes how we engage with the world. This resonates with Rocchetta's view that tenderness is not merely a fleeting emotion, but a lasting commitment that arises from recognizing the divine in the other and fostering deep respect for their humanity. In Maritain's words, To love someone in God and for God is not to reduce them to a means or a mere occasion to love God. Rather, it is to love that person as an end in themselves, recognizing that they deserve love because their dignity and worth flow from the supreme Love and Beauty of God. This explains the paradox that, in the end, the saint embraces all that is temporal, all weakness—a love incomparably freer, more tender, and more joyful than the possessive love of the sensual or the miserly—, and all beauty with a universal love of friendship and mercy [8]. Love is positioned as the center and focus of all relationships [9]. Building on this concept, Rocchetta expands it by introducing the notion of tenderness, which he regards as a profound expression of love made visible. In this view, Maritain's idea of relationships, grounded in love, gains a new dimension through the openness to experience tenderness as a tangible form of love [10]—one that manifests in new ways of expressing and demonstrating affection towards others—.

Maurice Nedoncelle is considered a master of intersubjectivity. Early on, he realized that the self emerges from within and creates reality. His research led him to propose the idea of the reciprocity of consciousness. According to him, a person exists through reciprocity, which goes beyond mere relationships and becomes a fundamental principle of personal existence. For Nedoncelle, the person is a being open to love, which serves as a bond between the self and the other. In his book *The Reciprocity of Consciousness*, Nedoncelle presents reciprocity as the most radical and privileged element of personalism. Reciprocity is not simply about relationships; for Nedoncelle, the person transcends their relational nature and becomes a being of reciprocity. This means that the human person exists through receiving from the other. For Nedoncelle,



reciprocity begins with knowing the other. In knowing the other, one comes to know oneself better. He asserts, “The other is not a limit to the self, but a source for the self”. It is in love where this communion for knowing is found. Only in communion does one discover the consciousness of the other as someone different, yet at the same time, a source for oneself [11].

Nedoncelle’s concept of reciprocity has been adopted by Rocchetta to illustrate how tenderness is integral to the relational nature of the person, and how it also serves as a love capable of revealing the being of God. Tenderness, from the perspective of reciprocity, is the love that reveals the being of the other as an image of God and shows us that being within ourselves. In the richness of the encounter, tenderness allows us to discover that we are beloved children of God. This love is personal and grows as we love and allow ourselves to be loved by the other.

Maurice Nedoncelle’s focus on reciprocity in relationships further enriches Rocchetta’s understanding of tenderness. Nedoncelle’s belief that true self-understanding arises only in relation to others aligns with Rocchetta’s view of tenderness as a dynamic exchange. For Rocchetta, tenderness is a reciprocal openness, where vulnerability and fragility allow for growth and mutual discovery, transforming both individuals involved. Thus, Rocchetta integrates the insights of Marcel, Maritain, and Nedoncelle into a theology of tenderness, presenting it as a profound expression of love and reciprocity. He argues that tenderness is essential for human flourishing, enabling authentic relationships rooted in mutual recognition and transformation.

Tenderness as an Affective Bond: Von Hildebrand and Rof Carballo

Von Hildebrand, a convert to Catholicism, can be situated within the same line of Christian personalism as Maritain and Nedoncelle. In 1965, he wrote a highly significant work related to the theme of tenderness: *The Heart: An Analysis of Human and Divine Affectivity*. In this book, Hildebrand reflects on the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the importance that emotions, affections, and passions hold in the life of a Christian. He carefully analyzes emotions, “claiming for some of them their spiritual nature”. Like Rocchetta, Hildebrand asserts that the emotional sphere of the human person is intrinsically connected to God, who is the source and perfection of all affections and passions. At the beginning of the book, Hildebrand poses fundamental questions: “Does Christianity have anything to do with the human heart? With the human or divine heart?” He answers these questions affirmatively, arguing that the heart has often been relegated to an irrational aspect of the person. Hildebrand explains that: “The heart has often been doubted, and even denied, by prominent Christian thinkers who agree with Aristotle that man differs from animals by his understanding and will, and that all of his ‘feelings’ are realities he shares with animals” [12].

For Hildebrand, it is crucial to study human affectivity to distinguish between true and false emotions, as well as to avoid two extremes he calls the “hypertrophy of the heart” and the “tyranny of the heart”. These extremes must be avoided so that the true action of the heart—one that is neither petrified nor irrational—can be revealed, as exemplified in the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Hildebrand, a deeply Christian author, emphasizes the bond between the human heart and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which he considers the true source of all authentically human love. Hildebrand’s exploration of the heart is relevant to what he sees as the needs of his time. The dryness and harshness of rationalism, along with the deep disregard for emotions, led him to argue—using Christ himself as a reference—that feelings, affections, and passions come from our being created in God’s image and likeness and that they find their true source and path in Him. This understanding of love as an affective bond resonates with Rocchetta’s perspective on tenderness. Rocchetta, like Hildebrand, sees tenderness as a divine and human reality that reflects the deepest expressions of love. For both, the affective dimension of love is not irrational but is rooted in God’s nature. Tenderness, therefore is a visible manifestation of this love, a bond that unites and reveals the image of God in the other. Through this affective connection, love and tenderness become paths for mutual discovery, transformation, and the revelation of the divine in human relationships.

In 1966, the physician Juan Rof Carballo, a pioneer in psychosomatic medicine, published his book *Violence and Tenderness* [13], which offers a compelling anthropological perspective on tenderness. In the book’s introduction, he explains the importance of his research and the reasons for linking violence and tenderness. For Rof Carballo, violence has shaped human history, and from his anthropological

studies, he identifies competitiveness and insecurity as the root causes of violence. As a counterbalance to violence, he proposes tenderness, which is rooted in love and security. For Rof Carballo, aggression is one of the most complex problems in society, closely tied to depression and the grim reality of suicide. Violence not only destroys the person’s surroundings but is also self-destructive. A violent person ends up attacking themselves through various self-destructive tactics. In response to this reality, the need to cultivate tenderness becomes imperative, requiring a change in the ways we relate to each other and to ourselves.

The author examines the pervasive role of violence throughout history, suggesting that aggression has been a driving force in shaping human events. This is evident in the recurring themes of popular television shows and crime novels, which highlight modern society’s fascination with violence. In contrast, the author points to the growing importance of tenderness and the power of touch, noting that it has become a subject of increasing interest and study among philosophers, biologists, psychologists, and educators alike [14]. Rof Carballo’s work provides a historical analysis of human relationships, drawing from anthropological research on various cultures, which allows him to outline the defining characteristics of violence and the necessary contrast with tenderness. After presenting aggression as a characteristic of people who feel insecure and compelled to meet their needs—essentially, those who feel they must compete with others to surpass them—he explains the three instinctual forms of aggressive behavior: the need to defend territory, aggression related to sexuality, and what he calls “playful aggression” [15]. In each of these expressions, the other person is perceived as an enemy who must be conquered by force.

Tenderness, as studied by Carlo Rocchetta, emerges as a key element in understanding the affective bonds that unite individuals, reflecting the deepest expressions of love. Drawing from the work of Dietrich von Hildebrand, who focuses on the importance of the heart in Christian life, Rocchetta expands this understanding by linking the emotional sphere to the divine. For von Hildebrand, the heart—often misunderstood as irrational—plays a central role in the human relationship with God, particularly through the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which he considers the source of all authentic human love. Rocchetta builds on this foundation, presenting tenderness as a manifestation of that love, a visible and transformative bond that fosters mutual discovery and reveals the image of God in the other. In contrast, Juan Rof Carballo, in his anthropological study, highlights how violence, rooted in insecurity and competition, has shaped human history. He argues that tenderness, based on love and security, acts as the necessary counterbalance to aggression. For Rocchetta, tenderness is more than a response to violence; it is a dynamic, reciprocal force that allows individuals to connect deeply, heal, and experience the divine in their relationships, thus uniting the emotional insights of both von Hildebrand and Rof Carballo into a cohesive vision.

Tenderness from a Psychological and Pedagogical Perspective

Tenderness can also be examined from psychological and pedagogical perspectives, particularly through the works of Erich Fromm and Jaime Rodríguez. Erich Fromm, often regarded as the father of humanistic psychoanalysis, distinguishes between “having and being” [16], a central idea in his critique of modern society’s materialism. Fromm argues that human beings are moving toward a new consciousness that necessitates a shift from selfishness to altruism.

Rocchetta incorporates Fromm’s ideas into his theology of tenderness, arguing that moving away from possessive, ego-driven relationships toward authentic encounters based on “being” is essential for humanization. Rocchetta suggests that tenderness is key to this transformation, allowing for a more meaningful and fulfilling way of relating to others. Fromm’s critique of materialism and his call for a shift in consciousness align with Rocchetta’s vision of tenderness as a transformative force for individuals and society. In addition, Jaime Rodríguez, a psychiatrist and professor at the University of Seville, offers a complementary perspective on tenderness. In his book *El elogio de la ternura* (“In Praise of Tenderness”), Rodríguez presents tenderness as a deliberate and hopeful choice, not just an emotion. He asserts that tenderness has the power to fundamentally alter how individuals engage with one another, highlighting the importance of small gestures such as smiles and glances. For Rodríguez, tenderness offers a pathway to more meaningful human connections. By integrating Fromm’s and Rodríguez’s perspectives, Rocchetta underscores the transformative power of tenderness in reshaping human relationships, not only as an individual virtue but as a societal necessity.



Tenderness in Education: The Contributions of Benito and Cussiánovich

The relationship between tenderness and education is a critical aspect of fostering authentic human connections. Joaquín Benito, a professor at Alfa Estudio in Madrid, focuses on body expression, dance, and theater, exploring the role of physical contact in human interactions in his book *Educarnos para la ternura* (“Educating Ourselves for Tenderness”) [17]. Benito critiques the aggression and emotional suppression prevalent in modern social relationships and advocates for transforming these dynamics by softening the barriers between individuals through tenderness. He emphasizes that tenderness, though often blocked by societal conditioning, is an innate human capacity that must be nurtured to foster deeper emotional connections. Alejandro Cussiánovich, a Peruvian priest and pioneer of the pedagogy of tenderness, expands on these ideas by linking tenderness to education. He argues that one must experience love and tenderness to fully understand and express them, suggesting that tenderness mirrors one’s relationship with God. For Cussiánovich, education is a process of presence, where the way educators exist and interact conveys tenderness and shapes the learning environment. One of the most effective educational practices, according to Cussiánovich, is to love one’s students, fostering an atmosphere where tenderness can flourish.

Together, Benito and Cussiánovich view tenderness as transformative in both education and human relationships. Benito focuses on the need for tenderness to overcome harshness in social interactions, while Cussiánovich emphasizes tenderness as a lived experience that shapes education and spiritual growth. Both highlight the importance of tenderness as a key element in human development, urging for its integration into both interpersonal relationships and educational practices.

Tenderness in Theology. An insight into the Teachings of Pope Francis

In theological study, which seeks to understand God’s revelation and his interactions with humanity, tenderness emerges as a profound aspect of the divine character. Rooted in the teachings of the Catholic Church and particularly emphasized in Pope Francis’s pontificate, the notion of tenderness has gained renewed significance. Pope Francis calls on Catholics, Christians, and all people of goodwill to participate in a “revolution of tenderness”. This revolution signifies a shift from individualism and hardness of heart to an openness that mirrors the gentle yet profound love of God [18,19]. Francis frames tenderness not as an optional sentiment but as an essential call for humanity to reorient the structures of society towards justice, compassion [20], and the recognition of shared human dignity. This call challenges individuals to reflect God’s image—a God who is tender and close to His creation—by embodying love and mercy in daily interactions.

Pope Francis’s promotion of tenderness as a virtue, especially in his discourse [21,22] enriches the theological understanding of tenderness beyond mere sentiment. In his reflections, he highlights that tenderness is a “strong way of love” that finds its model in God’s love, particularly visible in the life and sacrifice of Christ. This idea challenges any superficial interpretation of tenderness as weak or passive; rather, it reveals a resilient, self-giving love that upholds others with compassion and respect. In Francis’s view, tenderness is not merely an individual disposition but a fundamental virtue that shapes how we encounter both God and neighbour. Theologically, it aligns closely with the incarnation and the cross, where Christ’s love for humanity reached its most profound expression in sacrifice. Tenderness, therefore, becomes a powerful embodiment of divine love—a force that heals, unites, and calls us to transform our own relationships by mirroring God’s love—.

Francis also reminds theologians that tenderness should be at the heart of their vocation. In calling for a *theologia della tenerezza*—a theology of tenderness—he emphasizes that theology itself must be an encounter with God, not merely an intellectual exercise [23]. This encounter involves engaging with the “Word of God,” allowing theologians to feel, experience, and transmit God’s love to others. To achieve this, theology must move closer to people’s lived experiences, making God’s love accessible and relatable. When theologians approach their work with tenderness, they reflect the *imago Dei*—humanity created in the image of God, capable of genuine tenderness—. This call for closeness is crucial because tenderness, as Francis asserts, is God’s “strong” way of love, one that transcends mere sentimentalism and touches the profound beauty of a love willing to suffer for the sake of the beloved. This theology of tenderness not only reveals the depths of God’s love but also equips humanity to become agents of God’s compassion, bridging the divine and human through the lived experience of love and encounter. Pope Francis draws on the long history of divine

tenderness seen in God’s relationship with His people, reminding believers that God’s actions in creation and throughout salvation history reveal His affectionate accompaniment. In a recent document released in October 2024 [24], he contemplates the heart of Jesus as the ultimate expression of God’s love, urging a renewed commitment to authentic, life-giving relationships within a “culture of encounter” [25]. This culture, grounded in theological tenderness, encourages Christians to embrace one another as brothers and sisters, fostering community and solidarity. Ultimately, from a theological perspective, tenderness is more than an emotion; it is an attribute of God and a reflection of divine love that invites humanity to mirror this love. By cultivating tenderness, individuals participate in a sacred transformation, aligning themselves with God’s loving plan and contributing to a world marked by compassion, respect, and genuine connection.

Conclusion: Tenderness as a Path to Human Fulfilment

Tenderness emerges as a critical element in both human relationships and psychology, offering a transformative approach to the way individuals connect with one another and navigate the complexities of modern society. Through the philosophical insights of thinkers like Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, Maurice Nedoncelle, and Dietrich von Hildebrand, tenderness is understood not as a fleeting emotion but as a profound way of being that fosters authentic connections rooted in mutual respect, love, and the recognition of the other’s dignity. From a psychological standpoint, as highlighted by Erich Fromm and Juan Rof Carballo, tenderness serves as a necessary antidote to the alienation, isolation, and aggression that characterize much of contemporary life. It plays an essential role in emotional well-being and stability, offering individuals and societies a path to healing and deeper human connection. In education, as illustrated by Joaquín Benito and Alejandro Cussiánovich, tenderness is not only fundamental in nurturing empathy and mutual understanding, but it also plays a vital role in personal growth and development. By integrating tenderness into pedagogical practices, educators can create environments where emotional and spiritual dimensions are acknowledged, helping individuals flourish as whole persons. Ultimately, the integration of tenderness into human relations and psychology is not merely an ethical imperative but a crucial tool for fostering more compassionate, balanced, and resilient individuals and communities. Tenderness, in its deepest form, invites us to transcend self-centeredness and embrace the fullness of human connection, paving the way for a more humane and loving society.

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