

Book review

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Almost There: Lauer's glimpses of Intimacy

DOI 10.1515/pipjp-2017-0003

1. The purpose of Christopher Lauer's *Intimacy, A Dialectical Study* (2016) is twofold: first, he wants to discuss the concept of intimacy, and wants to undertake this task by suspending judgements on what intimacy is. Second, he intends to do this using a dialectical approach and through it review various hypothesised forms of intimacy. Lauer, whose previous work *The Suspension of Reason in Hegel and Schelling*, conceived this book as a first part in a proposed trio on recognition: intimacy, value, and solidarity. A review of the literature on intimacy and dialectics indicates that relatively little has been written on the connection between the two. Although friendship has been covered extensively, dating back to Plato's *Lysis*, intimacy has been somewhat left aside. According to the author, defying cultural limits is always easier in fantasy than reality, and as William Gass says, 'for the voyeur, fiction is what's called going all the way'¹. Hence intimacy has traditionally been easier to interrogate through literature.

Showing the continued relevance of the dialectical approach Lauer draws mostly on Georg Wilhelm Hegel and Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling but also refers to Georges Bataille for his unabashed glorification of eroticism and Simone de Beauvoir who understands well what we might call the dialectic of transgression. The introduction takes us on a swift tour through the history of dialectics from Plato to Hegel before looking at the ways we attempt to establish intimacy 'If intimate means what is most inside then a full analysis of it calls for a study not only of various levels of insideness but of the very striving for more insideness'².

Giving a rough overview, the book can be summarised as follows: *Intimacy, A Dialectical Study* analyses ten major ways that we aim to get intimate with the other. This non-exhaustive list begins the first chapter with gift giving, which for Lauer provides an occasion for the giver and recipient to come together. However its failure to leave behind a lasting remainder neatly leads to the following chapter, *Touching*. Each chapter ends in collapse guiding Lauer to explore other options in search of a more stable form of intimacy. The following chapters *The Heartbeat*, *The Between*, *The Fetish*, *Embedding*, *Conflict*, *The Mêlée*, *the Future and Mourning* all attempt to bring about a 'closeness beyond closeness'³. By exploring the myths and minutiae of courtship and relationships, Lauer is able to chart intimacy's course from the first flowering of attraction as outlined in the *Gift*, to complete breakdown in the last chapter on *Mourning*.

There is something to be said for the view that life involves a continual struggle to achieve intimacy. It seems that what we seek from others is recognition, trust, and connection, sometimes quite an unachievable triumvirate. As each person's desire and capacity for intimacy varies widely, it would be imprudent to suggest intimacy as a panacea. Lauer by not making any assumptions about intimacy's power for transformation, is free to look openly at how intimacy aims at fulfillment 'the dialectician should not aim to hurry toward the end of the mission but should hang back and explore the territory's range of possibilities'⁴. According to the author, using dialectics assumes every thought or action can be suspended. But such a suspension does not mean that reason becomes inactive or is without force⁵. What is suspended conserves its vigour, but is just not allowed to put its force into effect. As we work through Lauer's arguments, it is useful to be aware that 'suspend' also has a spatial meaning signifying allowing and encouraging something to persist in its

1 (Gass, p.82)

2 Lauer (p.9)

3 (Lauer, p.136)

4 Lauer (p.6)

5 Lauer (p.6)

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already raised state. This promotes Hegel's methodical charge to present discrepancies as they first arise in reason by allowing their meaning to be kept even as the thinking grows increasingly abstract.

Lauer's attempts at a 'closeness beyond closeness'⁶ come across a nest of problems: namely, why intimacy is so hard to find, so hard to achieve and, especially, so hard to maintain. Even talking about it tends to dilute it and lead to the opposite, a distancing, and a retreat further into our own private world, "[asking about the status will provoke immediate backtracking from one or both partners⁷". Though there have been many books in popular culture about the general anxiety around the decline of intimate relationships as a result of technology, such as Shelly Turkle's *Alone Together or Reclaiming Conversation*, Lauer's intuition is that this anxiety arises not from any structural changes or lessening of constraints in the modern world but from intimacy's inherently contradictory nature. Of course, intimacy is experienced in various ways in different cultural contexts but the differences should not prevent us from discussing the ubiquitous ways we cultivate it. Even if one agrees with the poststructuralists, that each generation comes up with their own version of what intimacy is, it is important to analyse the common ways we tend to go about creating closeness with each other.

Giving a provocative account of why our emotional adventures end so often in *chagrin d'amour* or disappointment, Lauer views intimacy as being equally open to destructive or beneficial possibilities. However, by understanding that for greater self-knowledge it is healthy and necessary to document discontent and discomfort Lauer fleshes out most of the common problems that arise in intimate relationships. Delving into these vulnerabilities highlights what Rollo May would call the 'I am' experience⁸. In intimate encounters one is freed of the burden to perform any type of role or adhere to particular demands and judgements of others. One has access to exist more fully in an intimate space in the sense that there is no need to postpone existence to an ever-receding future⁹. Life seems easier when you are in this realm of intimacy and time apart harder.

An adequate analysis of a subjective experience like intimacy must begin with an approach to experiencing that tries to take feelings at face value, divorced from any causal hypothesis. Deconstruction has shown it impossible to ever completely eradicate misinterpretation when describing subjective experiences so in this instance, Lauer's dialectical project is a welcome change. Though the theoretical importance of the concept of the space of intimacy is pronounced in Lauer's analysis, and he is interested in interpersonal relationships that involve physical or emotional reciprocity characterised by romantic love and sexual activity, it would have been beneficial for him to describe as accurately as possible the way it works at the concrete level and what prerequisites are necessary before the flourishing of intimacy can even begin to emerge. This is especially important in light of the tendency to confuse intimacy with a mere juxtaposition of ordinary friendship and sexual attraction. Though he does say his definition does not include intimate feelings induced by drugs such as MDMA nor the phenomenon of limerence, however more detail into trying to pin down conditions for optimal intimacy and why it does tend to happen in certain instances more than others. For example, the motivation of an existential readiness for intimacy generally comes from a desire to escape from emotional lethargy and stagnation of a previous condition, ie: the person must have been starved of some facet of intimate connection that has now become an essential need usurping any previous emotional indifference. It is only when certain conditions are met such as this 'existential readiness for Eros' that the sentimental and sexual fetishisation of the other can come into effect. This fetishisation causes each person to positively value every detail of his or her intimate encounter and to feel privileged and fortunate that he or she is willing to expose such vulnerabilities. It is in this shared space of availability where a continued intimacy can develop. Thus if two people in the condition of emotional readiness meet and share a certain affinity of lifestyle dispositions and emotional style there will be a strong tendency for such an intimacy to develop.

Whether an attempt at intimacy is pursued through gifting, fetishes, or fighting, intimacy, whether

⁶ Lauer (p.136)

⁷ Lauer (p.15)

⁸ May (1983)

⁹ Ellis (1996, p.69)

successful or unsuccessful, often hinges on the idea of how accessible the other person is or should be. It follows that the tendency for people to fall into a continued intimate situation calls for reciprocation. The reciprocal requirement can be attributed to the fact that one person's condition of emotional readiness would not be able to flourish without the partner allowing this to occur in a shared space of empathy. One would not generally be motivated to exposure vulnerabilities unless their partner fell into this same tempo. This mismatch in readiness, seems to be the thing that blights contemporary western relationships, everything is both hurried and takes too long, conditions right for one, wrong for the other (and also known that at some other point they would have matched up perfectly). Another condition that must be met in establishing a space of intimacy requires alone time. The intimate partners must be alone together even though this aloneness may occur in public. The alone time in this sense means that the authentically motivated direction of their attention progression cannot be blocked or deflected either by each other or by others who are present. However this alone-ness part is intruded upon relentlessly, social media, work and general societal atmospheric confusion. And in the midst of this is the struggle for the atemporal. Almost like the couple have to find moments out of time to discover that cocoon.

To the extent that one-person fetishises every aspect of the other's being in this way the other can correspondingly trust that they will not judge or condemn any feeling that is expressed. This fetishisation of the other tends to lend intimacy its atemporal quality. To experience intimacy is akin to being taken out of the everyday realm. In conjunction with this sense of time standing still in such instances there often may be almost a feeling of unreality as time and space appear warped. An hour encounter can be enough to transport the partner to an elevated state for a few days. And space becomes warped as the intimate other is often seen in tunnel vision. These examples illustrate the way the space of intimacy creates a sense of immediate presence and for this reason being in the others proximity induces a 'high'.

One of the most common arenas we enter in the thematics of intimacy is conflict and Lauer devotes an entire chapter to it, outlining how closeness does not depend on unwavering consent and can thrive even when there is dissent. In fact, it would be the exception rather than the rule to find a couple that never fights or one that would call their relationship into question based on an argument. The chapter on Conflict starts with *The Dismissal* and proceeds to the following subchapters: *Dispute*, *Violence*, *Withdrawal*, ending with *The Debate*. Though Lauer is not advocating any therapeutic consequences that result from the above sequence, he does show how periodic rejection in relationships *can* bring people closer together. Barthes famous musings in *A Lover's Discourse* are brought to contribution here where he tells how there is no point to withdrawing if the other party is not aware of it: "The hiding must be seen, I want you to know that I am hiding something from you, that is the active paradox I must resolve".

Although each chapter starts with the promise of achieving intimacy, all ultimately disintegrate under their own ambiguities. The existential despair of *chagrin d'amour* is also plausibly explained, when intimacy dies, our very project of authenticity also falls apart, leaving us clinging to the past in the hope of finding either reconnection or a replacement. When one has exposure to continued intimacy, the painful absence of this accompanying *feeling of being connected* to another person is immense. However, when one is involved in intimacy one is also tortured by its potential demise. Whether we are involved in intimate affairs or not, we are social beings and are therefore inevitably disposed to a constant striving towards intimate connections. The book then is a rich reservoir that will be a highly useful resource for conceptual distinctions and new arguments that can be employed in many contemporary philosophical debates that involve the idea of intimacy.

Lauer seems to reject biochemical reductionism but offers no clear alternative. I am highly suspicious of the idea that we will ever find an answer for the formula for intimacy in literal biochemistry - it can't just be the release of oxytocin, for instance - but I also do not believe it is purely a phenomenological question. The feeling of intimacy could hardly be facilitated merely by the action of sexual hormones; rather, it is facilitated by the attitude of being in a place, which is bounded and protected. The intimate space becomes a cocoon sheltering the lovers from the troubles of life. Even things like 'The Melee' become trivialised and do not disturb the continuing tranquility of the overall situation. Instead such hiccups are treated as deviations, the goal to recalibrate as quickly as possible.

It is always awkward to try and express the impossibility of what justifies the massive value you place

on the object of your feelings. It may well turn out to be the case that we only spend a lot of effort pursuing intimacy with those we share 'chemistry,' but I do not think we have to assume that to understand how the dialectic of intimacy works. It is enough merely to ride the wave while trying to make sense of it and suspending this need to make sense of it. As Lauer explains 'indeed, our lives are richer when we learn to suspend reason even as we reserve a central place for it in our lives.¹⁰' So perhaps there are some things in life we shouldn't question too much such as the deep metaphysics of interpersonal - chemistry.

Lauer keeps as many balls in the air as possible whilst still remaining reasonably responsive to the differences between the projects of the many thinkers he engages with. He never tries to live within a single theoretical framework out of some ill-defined sense of philosophical loyalty and fluidly moves across contexts resulting in a call to action for readers to think about intimacy for themselves. The book culminates by reiterating that its task was never to provide a distinct perspective on intimacy, but rather to develop a dialectical project on it by documenting its various meltdowns. Though Lauer soberly acknowledges the many ways intimacy can cave in despair, *Intimacy, A Dialectical Study* still paints a fairly attractive picture of how we cultivate it.

A niggling worry I got from reading this book is that by intellectualising intimacy, I may also look at it in a more systematic detached way. However for anyone interested in love, intimacy, and its understanding, Lauer's dialectics help uncover contradictions that we all have but rarely consider. It adds wisdom to a field where the irrational often reigns, and it undoubtedly adds a very relevant chapter to the total sum of literature about intimacy. Even if the text cannot, as the author admits, completely provide adequate and accurate answers to the question of intimacy, the result is not a sense of disenchantment, but rather an account of intimacy in its inner mystery.

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¹⁰ Enright, (2015)