

We Forge the Conditions of Love

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This essay is not about what love is. It is about what self-ascriptions of love do. People typically self-ascribe romantic love when a nexus of feelings, beliefs, attitudes, values, commitments, experiences, and personal histories matches their conception of romantic love. But what shapes this conception? And (how) can we adjudicate amongst conflicting conceptions?

Self-ascriptions of love do not merely describe the underlying nexus of attitudes and beliefs. They also change it. This essay describes how conceptions of love affect romantic experience. I limn distinctions between love and obsessive infatuation and explore ways language can cultivate queer romantic preferences. Since conceptions of love are shaped, often implicitly, by terms available in one's linguistic community, the resulting nexus of concepts and conceptions manifests linguistic luck. I suggest ways we might sculpt the language of love to better understand—and change—ourselves. Love can help us flourish and so can our “love” language.

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1. Love or Confusion?

Terry is a fan of Sam Seder, host of the political analysis show *The Majority Report*. Terry has listened for years. He finds Seder charming, funny, astute, and handsome. Terry admires Seder's sense of style, moral judgement, and interpersonal conduct. He is sexually aroused by Seder. But, more than that, watching the show makes Terry deeply happy. He feels Seder is on his wavelength. Terry has never met Seder, nor attended a live show.

“I'm in love with Sam Seder”, Terry tells his friend Laura. “Don't be silly”, Laura replies. “You can't be in love with someone you've never met. You just have a celebrity crush. You're enamoured, maybe infatuated. But you can't be in love with him.” “No”, Terry insists, “Celebrity crushes are superficial. This isn't a mere crush. I've watched the show for years. I know him well and my feelings run deep. I'm in love with him.”

Terry and Laura have different conceptions of romantic love. One's conception of love is one's personal implicit theory about what love is. Laura's conception precludes Terry's attachment from qualifying. She has a nexus of ideas, thoughts, assumptions, experiences, and linguistic interpretations

that—to some degree—mutually cohere and allow her to communicate, describe reality, navigate social spaces, and make sense of her experiences. This nexus includes (or entails) that love requires bilateral communication. Terry has a similar network of ideas and experiences. It helps him navigate the social world, describe reality, and so on. But Terry’s conception allows that one can be in love despite unidirectional communication.

Relationships with unidirectional communication are increasingly common in media, elite sport, and celebrity culture. They are characteristic of hierarchical occupations, including politics, research, and the arts.¹ We also have a kind of unidirectional relationship with deceased public figures, including dead authors, actors, and musicians. We receive their assertions, but they cannot receive ours. Given that relationships of unidirectional communication are commonplace, Laura’s more restrictive conception excludes far more potential objects of love.²

Section two avers that, despite their disagreement, it is possible that neither Terry nor Laura is wrong.³ There is no fact of the matter about whose conception is correct because the reference of “love” in “in love with” is not fully determinate. The term’s reference has permissive flexibility. Section three illustrates how a person’s idiosyncratic conception of romantic love can—in some cases—shape underlying feelings, values, beliefs, relationships, and experiences in feedback loops that lead to maker’s knowledge. Section four extends this to conceptions of sexuality. Section five argues that—since conceptions can be incomplete, mutable, and confused—the ability to inhabit rival conceptual schemas is a valuable cognitive skill.

The looping effects of self-ascriptions raise questions about language-based cultural engineering. By manipulating language, conceptions can be steered to promote individual and collective flourishing. Sections six and seven illustrate by showing how language can help cultivate a more queer society.⁴

Sections eight and nine explain why differences in conception manifests linguistic luck. Small, contingent quirks of linguistic environment can lead to large, stable, consequential effects. Finally, section twelve posits transformative conceptual shifts, in which acquiring or revising conceptions in the neighbourhood of love profoundly shapes one’s conception of—and experiences with—love. I illustrate this by examining how conceptions of limerence affect conceptions of love.

Some preliminary clarifications: Firstly, I follow the convention of using SMALL CAPS for concepts and quotation marks for words. Secondly, throughout this essay, by “love” I refer to romantic love, focusing on the idea of *being in love with*. I largely set aside other kinds of interpersonal love and attraction such as *philia*, the platonic love amongst some friends and kin. I focus on contemporary

¹ Such communication can be starkly asymmetrical, but not strictly unidirectional. Celebrities and social media influencers contact fans.

² Terry’s conception might be more restrictive in other ways. Perhaps Terry’s, but not Laura’s, includes that romantic love requires sexual attraction, for example.

³ This claim is stronger than that their disagreement is reasonable. In reasonable disagreements, at least one party’s belief is false.

⁴ Jenkins (2017, 2018, 2020) also notes that conceptions of love are influenced by, and influence, society. Recognising same-gender attachments as romantic love buttresses those relationships, for example. Jenkins motivates ameliorative conceptual engineering towards non-monogamic conceptions of LOVE. Many theorists claim the meaning of “love” exhibits permissive flexibility and—under various guises—motivate love-focused conceptual engineering. See, for instance, Lee (1973), Neto (1993), Hooks (2000), Armstrong (2002), Murdoch (2003), and Earp and Savulescu (2020: 50).

conceptions of romantic love in English-speaking cultures. Secondly, I contend that ROMANTIC LOVE is itself best understood as a cluster of distinct interlocking subcategories that are often conflated owing, in part, to impoverished linguistic resources. The English language would be improved by including more distinct terms. This contention supports section five's claims that conceptions of love are mutable, incomplete, sub-optimal, confused, and sometimes inapt: Given that English speakers cannot avoid using the term "love", this linguistic inadequacy undergirds the term's permissive flexibility. But I largely set this contention aside.

This essay isn't about the nature of love. It's about how conceptions of love affect self-ascriptions of love, which in turn affects the underlying clusters of attitudes, emotions, dispositions, beliefs, intentions, attention, values, relationships, and commitments that those self-ascriptions aim to describe. Wherever possible, this essay is agnostic about the nature, limits, and metaphysics of love. For this reason, whether any specific example exemplifies love or the word's permissive flexibility is relatively unimportant. If you find my examples unconvincing, amend the example. Suppose you think Terry is clearly wrong, for example: He cannot be in love with someone he has never met. You can adjust the example so that Terry has met Seder a few times. Or if Laura's conception seems implausibly demanding, imagine instead Terry's affections are further from paradigmatic romantic love, such as towards a historical or fictional character.

2. Permissive Flexibility

"Love" is messy.⁵ People disagree about which nexus of feelings, values, beliefs, commitments, intentions, experiences, relationships, and personal histories fall under the extension of "love". Some of these disagreements concern matters of degree, such as how intense, enduring, or arresting feelings must be to qualify as love. These differences in conception resemble differing thresholds for how loud a crowd must be to qualify as rowdy; individual thresholds differ. (These thresholds are often vague, but vagueness doesn't always eradicate disagreement.)

But for fraught, mysterious, complex phenomena—like love—some disagreements in conception are not merely a matter of degree. And these differences can concern relatively central features of love. Divergences include whether love is consistent with disliking the person or finding them repulsive, dull, or morally abhorrent. Is love consistent with abusing the person or not caring about their interests? Is it possible to be in love at first sight or without reciprocation? Can a prepubescent person be in love? Can an adult be in love with a child, animal, group, place, or cartoon character?

For some such disagreements, one disputant is simply wrong. A person cannot be in love with a number or a rock; one can be in love with someone of the same gender. If a person's conception of love says otherwise, they are confused or mistaken. But for some disputes, the term "love" exhibits permissive flexibility. The boundaries aren't determinate. There are no biological, psychological, or social forces—especially authoritative or dispositive forces—that chisel the meaning of "love" to determine a unique communal answer. This differs from terms like "adult" or "number", for which fiat, social pressure, or metaphysical natures carve sharper boundaries.

The permissive flexibility of LOVE subsumes relatively central, consequential features. Disagreements about whether love requires liking the person, for instance, are central to love's nature. Whether Terry

⁵ So, I'm told, is love.

can love Seder despite never meeting him is peripheral in one sense: If it is romantic love, it isn't prototypical. But attachment to public figures can be a central aspect of one's life. Perhaps Terry never feels such affinity towards acquaintances, but feels ardent towards celebrities. Given that romantic self-ascriptions affect underlying attachments, these differences in conception can have profound effects.⁶

Adjudicating between Terry and Laura—if it can be done—does not depend on facts about love or a public meaning of the term “love”. Instead whether one conception is better can depend on whether either conception clashes with the individual's various beliefs, experiences, or other concepts, or proves more apt for communicating or understanding the world. This means that if either conception is superior, this can stem from contingent, shifting features of one's community and which *other* concepts the individual has.

We each have an idiosyncratic network of concepts and conceptions. If Laura's overall network stymies her understanding of intense affection for celebrities, or if Terry's lacks any way to mark differences between his attitudes towards Seder and those arising in reciprocal, committed relationships, these inabilities might count against their respective conceptions of love. But these hermeneutical inabilities aren't objections to conceptions of love without consideration of a broader network of concepts. This generates “deep coherentism” about whether beliefs and perspectives are epistemically good; coherence affects whether *what the person's thoughts mean* is epistemically good. Terry's belief that he loves Seder might be epistemically impaired if he lacks the concept ROLE MODEL, for example, even if Seder isn't his role model.

Some further clarifications: Firstly, not all disagreements about love are disagreements in conception. If one person says X loves Y and the other demurs, they can be disagreeing about, for example, the depth of X's feelings. Disagreement can also stem from, for example, what is psychologically possible, rather than the conditions delineating love. Perhaps Laura believes it isn't psychologically possible to develop the required levels of affection and commitment without acquaintance, for example. But many disagreements about love stem from differences in conception. Since “love” evokes a heady mess of concepts and conceptions, Laura and Terry cannot easily adjudicate which kind of disagreement they have, even if they comprehend the distinction between concepts, conceptions, and possibility conditions.

Secondly, some person-level changes—such as increased energy, smiling, and spending—can be seen as evidence for love and causally connected to love without appearing in a conception of love. Thirdly, conceptions are not wholly propositional and so, unlike beliefs, aren't the kinds of things that can be true or false. Conceptions—ways of thinking about what constitutes love—can instead be *confused* or lacking in other ways, such as by being inapt, unhelpful, damaging, or incomplete.

3. Maker's Knowledge: Interpretive Feedback Loops of Love

Differing conceptions of love—and their resulting categorisations and self-ascriptions—can affect one's underlying nexus of feelings, beliefs, values, and experiences.⁷

⁶ Setiya (2022) discusses whether love without acquaintance is possible. See also Harrington and Bielby (1995), Eaglehawk (2019), Tukachinsky (2021) on parasocial attachment to public figures.

⁷ See Barrett (2017) on constructed emotions and Hacking (1995) on looping effects generated by conforming to mental health diagnoses. Thanks to Jon Garthoff, Renee Jorgensen, and Will Fleisher for discussion.

This can happen over time. Let's stipulate that Terry's conception is not misguided. It is possible to be in love with someone you've never met: Either Laura's conception is too narrow or the borders of LOVE are silent on the matter and so both conceptions can be apt. (Whether the conceptions are in fact apt depends, in part, on their conceptions of neighbouring phenomena.) Terry's conception of himself as falling in love influences his interpretation of his own feelings, values, and dispositions. It can affect his intentions, commitments, and conduct. In some cases, Terry's interpretation of his underlying emotions changes his emotions in a feedback loop.

Consider a cluster of Terry's sensations, values, beliefs, and commitments. These might include gratitude for Seder's role in his life, appreciating Seder's nature, and believing him uniquely special. Note this underlying cluster of attitudes does not reduce to the most fundamental substratum conditions or neurochemical correlates of affection. If Terry is open to the idea of falling in love with Seder, this receptivity can itself nurture those underlying feelings and attitudes. He embraces the warmth, which kindles it. Feeling positively about his fealty towards the podcaster can itself bolster that commitment. Judging loving admiration as warranted strengthens that admiration. Self-ascriptions of love have an attentional draw, and attention fuels emotions. This cycle boosts Terry's attitudes, including those—like profound gratitude—that distinguish love from mere crushes.⁸ And so Terry's conception of love can, over time, help make it true that he loves Seder.

Applying his conceptual framework to himself, furthermore, helps corroborate the framework. Terry's conceptual scheme includes that one can love non-acquaintances. And self-ascribing love helps make sense of his experience; the framework seems to fit. Indeed, given the stipulation above, it does fit. Despite being partly self-fulfilling, Terry's experiences support his framework. Using the conceptual framework to make sense of reality both creates and fits that reality. We forge LOVE.

This is a kind of bootstrapping: Applying the conceptual schema itself provides reason to think it matches reality; applying a different conception might have supported a different schema. But, despite the spectre of circularity or speciousness, this process can nonetheless provide legitimate support because it is how some conceptions work. Social concepts and conceptions change behaviour, and so reality changes to fit conceptions. Acquiring the concept FUCK BUDDY can help cause those arrangements. One's conception of FUCK BUDDY can affect, for example, whether the amatory pals go on dates. Emotion concepts can be similar. Terry exemplifies how concepts and conceptual schemes can affect attention, interpretation, internal narratives, and self-explanations, and thus change the underlying nexus of values, attitudes and emotions.

Consider another person, Mark. His initial underlying cluster of attitudes towards Seder resemble Terry's but his conception of love, like Laura's, precludes his being in love with Seder. In some cases, as a result Mark doesn't implicitly nurture those feelings, beliefs, and values as loving ones and so they don't develop in that direction. By interpreting his experience as a mere celebrity crush, he thereby shifts his attitudes towards shallower ones. Mark develops and bolsters other conceptions in the neighbourhood of love to categorise relevantly similar feelings. This might include infatuation, celebrity crush, lifestyle lust, or being enamoured or smitten. Mark might see himself as simply an admiring fan or cast Seder as a role model. Mark categorises his feelings as non-love, which can itself

⁸ I stipulated above that romantic love without acquaintance is possible. This stipulation makes more plausible that features like gratitude distinguish love from crushes. This is because romantic love cannot be, given the stipulation, delineated by bilateral interpersonal features.

support his restrictive conception of love. Like Terry, Mark can aptly describe his experience and by doing so also steers that experience.

Maker's knowledge is distinctive insight about the way something is because the knower themselves makes it so. Typical examples include an artisan's knowledge of their products' intentionally created properties. It also includes, for example, knowing the coffee is sweetened after adding sugar. Maker's knowledge includes some self-fulfilling beliefs, such as a traditional couple's belief that the wife does the cooking.⁹

Knowledge of love, including self-ascriptions, can be maker's knowledge. But it exemplifies an unusual kind. In standard examples of propositional maker's knowledge, the relevant propositional content is determinate. The believer-maker changes the world to match particular propositional content. Conception-based maker's knowledge is different; the meaning of "I love" is also created. Two people start with small, diffident divergences in interpretation of terms in their linguistic environment. These differences grow and entrench as the people observe and create confirming instances. They thereby shape the world—including themselves—to conform to those evolving conceptions. Emotions and conceptions can (sometimes!) mutually adjust to make one's judgement true. Terry can make it true that he is falling in love; Mark that he is not. We make love.

It is worth emphasising that I merely claim self-fulfilling, cyclical self-ascriptions are possible and occur in at least some borderline cases. I don't claim that all self-ascriptions of love have significant or self-fulfilling effects. And, of course, self-ascriptions are often mistaken.

The Seder example raises questions. Terry's conceptual schema categorises his initial feelings as love, and Mark's categorises comparable initial feelings as not love. It's possible that neither is mistaken. Their overall conceptual schemas can both be apt, albeit different. Suppose Mark's conception of love changes over time. In 2020, Mark's conception entails he doesn't currently love Seder. Mark's later conception of love entails that back in 2020 he loved Seder. Is Mark wrong at one of those times? Perhaps not. Perhaps Mark's beliefs, though seemingly incompatible, were correct at both times, given what he meant by "love".

A child who calls every black bird a raven is simply confused about what "raven" means; "raven" isn't flexible. But judgements with conceptions that yield permissive flexibility are common. Suppose Clerk the birdwatcher has an expansive conception of CHARMING, such that many birds count as charming. This expansive categorisation—seeing more birds as charming—in turn helps him appreciate charming features of more birds. Clerk thus enjoys birdwatching more. Kristina's conception of charming is more restrictive; fewer behaviours count as charming. Must one of them be wrong? A serene monk categorises few behaviours as "grating". As a result, he is irked by fewer behaviours. Given the permissive flexibility of GRATING, the monk's categorisation can be apt. Given its effects, it might be prudent. So, what constrains the appropriateness of conceptual engineering of emotions? This question is vast, of course; I cannot hope to answer it here.¹⁰ I simply motivate that some conceptually engineering of emotions is feasible, valuable, and ineluctable.

⁹ Hintikka (1974: 80), Langton (2009), Flòridi (2018).

¹⁰ I lack space to argue this here, but moral reasons favouring one conceptual schema above another are not best understood as moral encroachment. Moral encroachment concerns the narrow question of whether particular propositional content is justified by a given body of evidence, not which interpretative schemas are better. Gardiner (ms) contrasts moral encroachment's specificity with epistemic normativity's breadth. Finocchiaro (2022) theorises the

4. The Constraints of Thinking Straight

The example of Terry and Mark is developmental. It happens over time. The reality-sculpting power of conceptions also happens synchronically. To see this, compare two college freshmen, Ali and Belle, who join the basketball team. They each develop a comparable cluster of attitudes and dispositions towards their coach, Pat Summit. They have the same slight degree of heightened arousal and nervousness around Pat. They both view Pat as charming, funny, and pretty. They want to impress Pat and enjoy her company. Ali sees herself as queer. Belle sees herself as straight. As a result, Ali interprets her attitudes as being—to some degree—romantic or sexual attraction to Pat. Belle doesn't. In *some* cases, this interpretation, which is grounded in their self-conceptions as either queer or straight, can be self-fulfilling. Ali is sexually or romantically attracted. Belle is not. In some cases, both are correct, and it is maker's knowledge.¹¹

Several forces underlie this. Firstly, attention is powerful. Belle may downplay or fail to notice her kernel of sexual arousal around Pat, and so it dies out. Secondly, some experiences of emotion include one's attitude to, and perspective on, those very experiences. Part of falling for someone, or being sexually aroused, can include relaxing into the sensation.¹² Thirdly, sensations are affected by one's perspectives on them. Belle may have internalised homophobia and so feel nauseated by any kernel of sexual arousal around Pat. If Pat makes Belle nauseated, it can be harder to detect or foster budding romantic or sexual attraction. Thus if Belle isn't receptive to romantic or sexual feeling, she may overlook those feelings or interpret them as platonic. Suppose Belle feels butterflies or is clumsier around Pat. Given Belle's self-conception as straight, she might interpret this as platonic admiration of Pat's basketball prowess or jitters about impressing her coach.

Contrasting two people indicates how one's interpretation, perspective, and conceptions can synchronically affect occurrent attitudes and feelings. The effect need not be developmental. A particular base cluster of values and attitudes can qualify as romantic or sexual attraction for one person, and not for another. Those classifications can affect the cluster in synchronic interpretive feedback loops. In *some* cases, through lifelong repetition, these forces make it true that Ali is queer and Belle is straight.¹³

The potency of interpretation isn't limited to same-gender attraction. Everyone experiences borderline cases of attraction. One can feel mildly sexually or romantically attracted to a person. In some such borderline cases, seeing one's own attitudes as either platonic or nonplatonic can be apt. And, through feedback loops, either judgement can be self-reinforcing.

related epistemic value of conceptual fidelity. But fidelity concerns "carving at the joints", which seems inadequate for assessing rival conceptions of love, given that "love" has permissive flexibility. Epistemology's normal battery of tests for evaluating epistemic value are inadequate for epistemically assessing rival conceptual schemas.

¹¹ Some such beliefs aren't knowledge. They can be false, poorly grounded, unreliably formed, evidence-resistant, insensitive, or unsafe. But permissive flexibility complicates these properties. How should we define safety, for example, when modally nearby sources of error are the person's developing a different conception, classificatory schema, or cluster of concepts.

¹² Not always. A person can become romantically attached whilst trying to not; and consider a teen with unwanted or inconveniently timed sexual arousal.

¹³ Perhaps gender identities can similarly be maker's knowledge. Perhaps in some cases, a cis person is cis partly owing to their conception of gender and resulting gender conformism, for instance, yet nonetheless they know they're cisgender.

These feedback loops don't rely on the conceptions' permissive flexibility. But permissive flexibility adds richness to the epistemology of self-fulfilling self-ascriptions. Epistemic assessment is not simply a matter of whether the concepts "carve at the joints"—sometimes there aren't determinative joints—or whether these judgements match reality. Judgements can steer reality. Neither is it simply a crude prudential matter of which conceptions have better practical outcomes.

Sometimes people are simply wrong, of course; self-ascriptions can be mistaken. Error stems from inapt conceptions, self-deceptive mental blocks, and failures to notice or properly interpret emotions. Indeed many people initially miscategorise themselves as straight and later realise they are not. Given this, it is particularly ironic that teenagers who "come out" as queer are frequently disbelieved or told they're mistaken. If anything, it is self-ascriptions of heterosexuality that should be treated with suspicion. When compared to non-heterosexuality, self-ascriptions of heterosexuality typically have less evidence and are susceptible to genealogical debunking. People are liable to assume they are straight—even when false and despite counterevidence—because of cultural heteronormative assumptions. Heterosexual ascriptions (for self and other) are more frequently wrong or recanted. This makes heterosexual ascriptions, including self-ascriptions, harder to know, even if true.

Ali and Belle illustrate how conceptions can affect an underlying nexus of attitudes and underwrite synchronically self-fulfilling self-ascriptions. Occurrent interpretative feedback loops also occur within one individual. To explain how, we turn to the nature of conceptions.

5. Conceptual Tourism and the Interpretive Traveller

Conceptions are psychological structures that aid one's ability to apply concepts to cases. They steer categorisations and help individuals adjudicate principles involving the concept.¹⁴ A person's conception of CHAIR allows them to sort chairs from non-chairs and adjudicate whether, for example, chairs can be impulsive. (They cannot. They are the wrong kind of thing.) But conceptions are not merely the thinnest, least information-heavy structures needed for these sorting and adjudicating capacities. Conceptions are implicit theories of what the thing consists in or what the concept is of. They "flavour the contents of conscious states and influence the direction of thinking".¹⁵

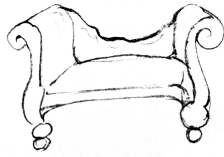
Conceptions are how ones conceives of what X is. This differs from, for example, their full set of beliefs about X. A person might know love's common physiological effects or believe nobody has fallen in love on Mars, but these don't feature in their conception of love. Conceptions also differ from the full set of associations with, attitudes to, or emotions about X. A widow might feel wistful whenever she thinks of love, for example, but this lies outside her conception. Conceptions also differ from concepts. Concepts are the bare feature of thought in virtue of which one is able to refer to Xs at all.¹⁶ Possessing a concept or conception doesn't require strict definitions or necessary and sufficient conditions.

¹⁴ Burge (2003: 383). Thanks to Jon Garthoff and Joseph Darteze for insights throughout this section.

¹⁵ Woodfield (1991: 550). See also Peacocke (1992; 1998), Rey (1985), Margolis and Laurence (2021), Isaac (2021).

¹⁶ Concepts and conceptions play different functional roles and might be different metaphysical kinds. The main functional role of concepts is enabling reference (i.e., getting onto the world). The main functional role of conceptions is explanation (i.e., understanding the world).

Conceptions can be personal and idiosyncratic. My conception of love is a different mental entity from yours and likely includes different content. Conceptions can be incomplete, internally inconsistent, confused, and—especially at the margins—wrong. They aren't always reflectively accessible. Consider an elegant Georgian sofa with formal embroidered upholstery and ornately carved, rolled armrests on either side.



The archetypal chaise lounge has only one armrest. A person's conception of chaise lounges might be silent or mistaken about whether this symmetrical furniture item can be a chaise lounge. She might never notice whether her conception entails, precludes, or is silent on this.

Conceptions evolve. They update in response to new experiences, insights, and beliefs. They also shift to make room for newly acquired concepts and to accommodate changes to other conceptions in the network. A child who acquires the concept LAKE might accordingly adjust their conception of ponds to exclude larger bodies of water. This more discerning conception of ponds makes room for the newly acquired LAKE concept to pick out a distinct thing; and shifting POND helps make sense of why there is a separate term "lake". Such shifts can refine overall understanding.

Suppose a child acquires the concept PUPPY LOVE and thinks of puppy love as superficial, fleeting, or morally facile. This concept acquisition can affect their conception of fully-fledged adult love. They might consequently conceive of adult love as more stable, enduring, or serious.

This process can be distorting. Suppose "puppy love" is a misleading categorisation. Perhaps youthful love is not different from adulthood love, for example, because they're equally fleeting, enduring, facile, or serious. Perhaps the term stems from envying dismissal of youth. If so, acquiring the concept PUPPY LOVE may degrade the child's overall conceptual schema, including their conception of love. Perhaps their subsequent conception of love wrongly excludes youthful attachments or incorporates properties, like durability, it ought not.

Conceptions' operative features can vary by context. A parent might categorise adolescent attachments as mere puppy love when considering their adolescent children's relationships, yet deem comparable underlying emotions as constituting "proper" love when remembering their own adolescent attachments.¹⁷

Given these features of conceptions, Terry might be able to tap into a conceptual schema according to which he qualifies as being in love and one in which he doesn't. In the second schema, love requires bidirectional communication. Belle might similarly be able to flick between interpretations according to which she is straight and not, and thereby experience her feelings as either platonic or not. Belle's

¹⁷ These features of conceptions are formidable challenges to developing artificial intelligence. See Camp (2017; 2019) on trying on different interpretative perspectives.

arousal might be platonic jitters or a romantic crush. If she can transition amongst interpretations then, through self-fulfilling interpretive feedback loops, maybe both can be true.¹⁸

People might lack this cognitive control. Perhaps the most one can do deliberately is gradually steer oneself between cognitive perspectives. But there is distinctive epistemic, moral, social, and prudential value in being able to try on and adopt different perspectives, especially for terms like “love” that exhibit permissive flexibility. One can inhabit Laura’s perspective, according to which Terry’s state cannot be love, and Terry’s, wherein it can. Adopting different conceptual schemas enhances understanding of ourselves and others. It helps us appreciate virtues and limits of rival conceptual schemas and so hone, adapt, and assess those schemas. Conceptual travelling—like geographical travelling—enriches perspectives and lives.

This epistemic value is not well theorised as gaining evidence or evidence-acquisition capacities. It is the cognitive capacity to switch amongst perspectives. Given the permissive flexibility surrounding romantic, sexual, and affective concepts, conceptual explorers need not adopt conceptions or beliefs they consider inapt. Ali and Belle need not believe claims about their sexuality they deem false, for example. They can instead question what “straight” and “queer” mean or what kinds and degrees of affection or excitation qualify as romantic. Conceptual explorers might also reasonably take up a flawed perspective for myriad epistemic reasons, such as gaining concepts and skills, seeing things anew, or better understanding other people.¹⁹

Ali and Belle can experimentally re-interpret ambiguous unease, or ease, they feel around their coach. This cognitive skill is empowering. Many young people are prone to mistakenly regard themselves as amorously attracted to coaches, bosses, and teachers because this is one natural interpretation of the nervous excitation educed by authority figures. This misinterpretation can be self-fulfilling. “Pick-up artists” use negging and similar tactics to leverage the common conflation of nervous energy, stress, and romantic attraction to manipulate “targets” into misattributing their reactions as attractions. Owing to the reality-shifting power of interpretation, targets can thereby become attracted to the pick-up artist.

Culture influences the availability and salience of concepts, conceptions, and interpretative frames. Socio-linguistic practices thus steer conceptions to enhance (or hinder) flourishing. Through language, we conceptually engineer emotions. This raises questions about which concepts and conceptions are missing or suboptimal.

¹⁸ One way to understand this possibility is if apparently conflicting claims feature different concepts and so concern different propositional content. They aren’t inconsistent; it is akin to believing both “I’m attracted to S” and “I’m not very attracted to S”. Alternatively, the claims can feature the same concept, and so be incompatible, but tap into different conceptions. And thinking about each claim sufficiently changes the underlying attitudes, such that this thinking itself changes whether the person satisfies the content. It is similar to thinking “I have a headache” immediately causing a headache. Perhaps thinking “I am [not] enamoured” can similarly shift one’s state. Or one might deny compositionality.

¹⁹ Cf. Simion (2018), Podosky (2018) on conceptual engineering and “epistemic loss”.

6. Cunning Linguistics and the Gay Agenda

Suppose it is better if more people are queer. By “queer” I mean attracted to more than one gender; that is, neither exclusively homosexual nor heterosexual.²⁰ Call this value judgement BMQ. BMQ differs from the less controversial claim that it’s better if queer people aren’t closeted, repressed, or in denial. It is bolder: BMQ concerns the underlying prevalence of queerness in a culture. Given that sexual and romantic preferences are partially influenced by social forces, perhaps it is better if social conditions encourage queerness to prevail in more people. The relevant social conditions include economic and political conditions, queer acceptance, and education.²¹ These social conditions also include the terms in common use.

Society could evolve so that subsequent generations gradually incline towards queer preferences. Consider the declaration: “I am a soldier so my son can be a shop-keeper, so his son can be an artist.”²² A contemporary man might declare, “I will think of men as graceful, so my son can think of them as beautiful, so his son can fall in love with them.” Over generations, he aims to free cognition from the shackles of heteronormativity.

Ineluctably cultures embed assumptions, values, and schemas. (Consider the default heterosexuality embedded in most children’s TV shows.) Given this, one should interrogate what these values are and whether better ones are available. This differs from “conversion therapy”, which targets specific individuals. Gradual evolution need not aim to change the existing sexuality of any particular individual, especially after puberty. BMQ-motivated cultural interventions aim to expand the gender range one is potentially receptive to; conversion therapy, by contrast, hopes to stifle or contract it.²³ The claim that culture influences sexual preference does not entail, and is distant from, the claim that sexual preference is an individual choice. Cultural contexts shape sexuality over the course of generations, even if sexuality is not voluntary.

I sketch three categories of motivation for BMQ. Firstly, moral reasoning about human nature. Secondly, benefits accruing to individuals. Thirdly, interests of groups, communities, or cultures. The applicability of some arguments for BMQ depend on sexuality, gender, and social context.²⁴ Given space constraints, these are truncated summaries of arguments. I am sympathetic to BMQ, but the arguments below are over-simplified.

²⁰ Historically “queer” is pejorative in many cultures but has been largely reclaimed. My (mildly stipulative) definition excludes homosexuality, which appears to match an emerging meaning of “queer”. But this emerging linguistic trend is hard to measure, because—owing to increased genderqueer visibility and decreased biphobia in LGBT spaces—people who formerly would have identified as homosexual might now self-ascribe abosexuality or another continuum preference, and thus fall under this emerging conception of “queer”. Thanks to Alex Fitzgerald for discussion.

²¹ One might endorse BMQ but deny that social forces influence sexual preferences. (Consider the comic trope of the lonely gay man bemoaning the prevalence of heterosexuality.) But, in response, effects of social context on operative sexuality are evidenced by, for example, cross-cultural differences in prevalence of queer activity and attraction (Baumeister, 2004); Rupp, 2006; Potki et al., 2017). For similar reasons, many LGBT rights advocates object to grounding LGBT acceptance in “born this way” rhetoric (Bindel, 2014; Walters 2014, Grzanka, Zeiders, and Miles, 2016). Sexual preferences are fluid and differ from sexual behaviour and self-ascriptions, making them hard to measure (Albury, 2015); Ghaziani and Brim, 2018); Compton, Meadow and Schilt, 2018; Finocchiaro, 2021). Thanks to Patrick Grzanka for helpful insight.

²² This expression evolved from John Quincy Adams’s, “I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy.”

²³ Compare also lesbian separatism.

²⁴ Thanks to Ray Briggs for discussion.

Firstly, exclusive heterosexuality or homosexuality might encode inappropriate or morally inferior ways of viewing people. Perhaps, like many racialised sexual preferences, it responds to the wrong features of a person. Or perhaps gender-based *tendencies* are morally copacetic, but flatly excluding individuals from romantic or sexual consideration based on gender—especially before meeting them—is prejudiced.

Perhaps it is better to be attracted to wit, intelligence, grace, or moral character, rather than appearance. Plausibly these characterological features are closer to the core of what matters about a person and responding to these features “gets it right” or manifests better values. Character-based preferences might be more inclusive of people, such as burn victims, who depart from social norms about physical appearance. Similarly, they might nurture better, healthier, and more concordant relationships, especially as people age or physiologically change. Character-dominated preferences plausibly cultivates character virtue—in the judge, judged, and third-parties.

Attraction-relevant physical features are probably more gender dimorphic than attraction-relevant character traits. Breasts are more gender dimorphic than creativity, for example. And so perhaps dispositions of attraction that respond to a person’s “core” features (such as characterological features, rather than body shape), will tend towards all genders, not just one. To see this, consider friendship: Friendships are typically built more on character traits than body shape. Accordingly, people have friends of various genders. It seems “off”—perhaps sexist—to exclusively have friends of one gender, especially if that gender exclusivity is decreed before meeting new potential friends. Maybe romantic and sexual liaisons are similar.

As noted above, this reasoning is overly simplified owing to space constraints. For one thing, character traits can also be gendered; and queer attraction also responds to gender dimorphic body shape.²⁵

I turn now to benefits accruing to individuals. Perhaps if society has a higher prevalence of queer people, finding simpatico lovers is easier. To illustrate, suppose men prefer casual sex and women prefer romantic dating.²⁶ These preferences are more easily satisfied if many people are queer. Or consider a young man with marginalised, stigmatised hobbies in a small town. These interests shape his life and values and are the basis for wonderful friendships. But few women participate. Consider, for example, stereotypes about games like Warhammer. Openness to romantic relationships with men could engender a more fulfilled life. These (over-simple) examples motivate evolution towards less gendered social structures, including relationship structures.²⁷

Benefits arise from experiencing diverse ways of relating. Suppose relationships with men differ from relationships with other genders, for example, or some sexual activities are gendered. Experiential diversity is valuable. Consider the value of travel, a broad education, trying new things, exposure to ideas, and wide-ranging friendships with diverse people, including across age gaps. This variety might have intrinsic value; and additionally one thereby acquires new perspectives, skills, and ways to communicate, bond, and relate. This doesn’t entail having many lovers is better than few. But variety

²⁵ Thanks to Richard Eldridge and Kevin Ryan for discussion.

²⁶ Open non-monogamy is most common in gay-male partnerships (Coontz, 2020). Consider also heteropessimism—disillusionment about one’s own heterosexuality based on feeling that men and women are incompatible (Seresin, 2019).

²⁷ Cultivating queer proclivities might help avoid unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmissible health conditions.

has value, at least for many people. It can enhance virtue, understanding, and flourishing, and strengthen future relationships.

Society benefits from a higher prevalence of queer people. There is value in epistemic diversity. Queer people help others understand aspects of sexual, romantic, or social flourishing that are occluded by heterosexual norms. Hermeneutical progress occurs in online queer spaces, for example, that benefits heterosexual people.²⁸

A higher prevalence of queer people would improve norms for signalling romantic interest. Many heteronormative societies rely on systems like assuming members of the same gender are not interested and being more judicious or guarded around members of the so-called “opposite” gender, including especially similarly-aged single people. This system could be improved.

This ends the brief survey of motivations for BMQ, the claim that it is better if more people are queer. To forestall two concerns: Firstly, BMQ doesn’t imply people are unethical for being exclusively heterosexual or homosexual. To compare: Suppose it’s better if people work less, partly because working less manifests and cultivates virtue. This doesn’t mean individuals are unethical for overworking or workaholicism. Given socio-economic conditions, some people have no choice; and work attitudes are culturally shaped. Gradual shifts towards working less can be valuable even if no individual is morally wrong for overworking.

Secondly, detractors might claim that romantic desires are immutable. In response: Firstly, desire is shaped by forces like advertising. Consider recent trends of revulsion towards women’s body hair, for instance. Consumerism encourages people to treat one’s own current preferences as fixed and to change the external world to match their preferences, typically through purchasing. It is often wiser to steer one’s own preferences instead. The capacity to appreciate things—like artworks or exercise—is often a cultivatable skill; attention is a powerful force for this. Perhaps romantic desires are, to some degree, similarly mutable: The media manipulates sexual attraction. Arguably such preferences, including racialised and slenderness-based sexual preferences, can be unlearned. Steering one’s own preferences is empowering. Secondly, recall that BMQ-inspired evolutions are multi-generational and so need not change any individual’s existing sexuality.

7. Curious or Queer?

Recall that conceptions sometimes affect self-ascriptions, which affects interpretation of occurrent emotional states which, in turn, affects those states.²⁹ The concepts and conceptions suggested—and made salient—by one’s linguistic community can thus influence sexual preferences.³⁰ Given this, are some linguistic patterns better?

²⁸ See Crimp (1987), Berlant and Warner (1998), Andler (2022), Coontz (2020), and Ward (2020) on importing queer insights into heterosexual contexts. Consider LGBT-driven innovations about consent and kink, and disabled people’s insights about sexual flourishing, such as co-masturbation techniques, which others benefit from.

²⁹ Studies suggest exposure to conceptions of sexuality as fluid or gradable increases queer self-ascriptions (Morandini, Dacosta, and Dar-Nimrod, 2021).

³⁰ I focus on sexuality. Dembroff (2020) posits gender identities that depend on conceptions, such as conceptualising the gender binary as “to be resisted”.

Compare the terms “bi-curious” and “queer”. The term “bi-curious” suggests a centre of gravity towards, or default of, straightness. In widespread conceptions a “bi-curious” person is straight or almost entirely straight. Many dictionaries define “bi-curious” as a subset of heterosexual behaviour.³¹ Wikipedia’s entry for “bi-curious” begins “Bi-curious is a term for a person, usually someone who is a *heterosexual*, who is curious or open about engaging in *sexual activity*...” (emphasis added).

Being “bi-curious” is commonly contrasted with bisexuality. The term “bi-curious”, unlike “bisexual”, implies a temporary phase of activity, rather than a stable orientation or preference.³² The exploration is usually seen as purely sexual, rather than relationship-forging emotional intimacy. The term culturally evokes “straight girls kissing” at parties and “petting” rather than “full” sex. Sociologists document how:

[S]traight college students today can make out with women and call themselves “bi-curious” without challenge to their heterosexual identity... Straight women can be... “bi-curious”... but too much physical attraction or emotional investment crosses over the line of heterosexuality. (Rupp and Taylor, 2010)

The emergence of terms such as heteroflexible and bi-curious... possibly signalled a shift ... among *straight* people who have same-sex desires... [B]y not adopting the label ‘bisexual’ those youths also signalled that their sexual interest in both women and men need not transfer them out of the *heterosexual category*. (Carrillo and Hoffman, 2018: 93, emphasis added)

The term “bi-curious” is associated with the idea that one needs relevant sexual experience to qualify as bisexual.³³

The term “queer”, by contrast, suggests a non-straight centre of gravity. It is not a way of being straight. “Queer” isn’t associated with mere activity. It is instead associated with romantic attachment, emotional investment, and relationship-building.

In English-speaking cultures, the term “bi-curious” was relatively common during formative years of Gen X and Millennials. It since receded, and terms like “queer” are increasingly popular. Recall Ali and Belle, who each felt ambiguous admiration of, and arousal around, their coach. A young Gen X or Millennial with a kernel of potential sexual or romantic feeling might, owing to terms prevalent in her linguistic community, categorise herself as bi-curious and so see herself as fundamentally straight. Given that self-ascriptions affect one’s experience of underlying emotions, these conceptions can be self-fulfilling. Heteronormative concepts can be a cognitive straitjacket. A Gen Z youth with comparable initial underlying emotional dispositions, by contrast, might instead characterise herself as queer and thereby implicitly nurture that kernel of desire towards women. She interprets her feelings as emotionally-invested, enduring, and manifesting her stable sexuality, rather than as a temporary exploratory stage. This too can be self-fulfilling.

Comparing “bi-curious” and “queer” is just one illustration, but it is suggestive of avenues for linguistically sculpting concepts and conceptions. Alterous attraction is desire for emotional closeness, which is neither wholly platonic nor non-platonic, quoiromanticism is not experiencing strong

³¹ Examples include the Collins, Macmillan, and Oxford dictionaries, Holleb (2019: 43), and [Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias](#). See also Wilson and Rahman (2008).

³² Sexualities can be fluid throughout one’s life, but this differs from heteronormative “just a phase” associations of the term “bi-curious”.

³³ See [Bi-Curious](#) in [Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias](#); Smith (2019). See also Essig (2000) and Thomas (2019) on the term “bi-curious” contributing to bi-erasure and bi-phobia.

distinctions between romantic and non-romantic attraction, greysexuality is experiencing sexual attraction rarely or with low intensity, abrosexuality is characterised by long-term shifts in sexual and romantic dispositions, whilst sexual fluidity is situation-dependent flexibility. Possessing these concepts can affect self-ascriptions, which can affect underlying emotions and relationships.³⁴

Concepts are not necessarily apt, useful, or good, of course, and some conditions of concept acquisition impede flourishing. Consider contexts of concept acquisition that encourage ascribing demon possession, wandering womb, or multiple personality disorder, for instance. Perhaps some self-ascriptions of quoiromanticism stem from inept introspection, for example, and for some people possessing the concept impedes self-understanding.

8. Linguistic Luck: The Happenstances of “Love”

A person’s conceptions affect whether they categorise underlying feelings, experiences, values, fealty, commitments, and shared histories as love or else something, such as platonic devotion. These categorisations, in turn, affect those underlying conditions. Practices of self-ascription, concept use, and interpersonal communication shape—by affirming, challenging, or honing—those conceptual schemas.

These feedback loops are infused with linguistic luck. Two hallmarks of luck are—firstly—small, fluky differences in initial conditions lead to large downstream effects. Things could easily have been different. A person is lucky to spot a hawk, because by chance they looked up as it flew past. With small changes in initial conditions, they would have missed it.³⁵ Secondly, typically outcomes are good or bad, rather than neutral. Although we might call correctly guessing a card from a deck when nothing is at stake “lucky”, typically the term “luck” implies valanced outcomes.

The linguistic contingencies that shape conceptions of love exhibit these characteristic features of luck. Compare three children. The first, A, reaches eighteen without hearing the term “puppy love”. The second, B, hears it once on TV at nine years old. The third, C, hears it often. Their parents are dismissive of teenagers and use the term to denigrate teenage relationships. As a result of this linguistic exposure, Child C is prone to develop a conception of puppy love as immature and distinct from adult love. They might well interpret their own feelings, relationships, and potential through this conceptual lens, which can be self-fulfilling. They might treat their early romantic affections and relationships less seriously, for example, which limits their potential. Child A doesn’t form a conception of puppy love—his linguistic environment doesn’t seed it—and so he interprets his youthful affections as full-blown love. This too can be self-fulfilling. Child B fleetingly hears the term. He might ignore it or not incorporate it into his conceptual lexicon. If Child B takes it up, the contours of his conception are notably underdetermined by the linguistic stimulus. He might embed PUPPY LOVE in a conceptual framework according to which puppy love is a species of “proper” romantic love, for example, or one in which they are mutually exclusive kinds.³⁶

³⁴ Thanks to Ray Briggs, Héctor Carrillo, Patrick Grzanka, Nate Parsons, and Delia McDevitt for discussions that greatly improved this section.

³⁵ Pritchard (2005). The term “luck” sometimes refers to good (or bad) circumstances, even if they are modally secure. The Duke of Westminster, Hugh Grosvenor, is “lucky” to be wealthy, for example, but given his multiple lines of extreme inherited wealth, not easily could he be otherwise. Plausibly these uses of “lucky” pick out a different concept, such as BEING FORTUNATE. Thanks to Steve Grover for the example.

³⁶ Other options are available. Perhaps only some instances of puppy love are “proper” love, for example.

These initial contingent differences can be small, fluky, and easily reversed. Child B's conception of puppy love might hinge on minutiae like the actor's intonation. But over time his conception embeds in a broader rational framework. Once ensconced, it is harder to upend. This illustrates another aspect of linguistic luck: One's nexus of concepts and conceptions could have been configured in other ways. One could have never received the concept or interpreted it differently. But once embedded, intransigence develops; established meanings are hard to adjust or remove. They become rationally anchored to other concepts and beliefs. Accordingly, rational assessment of conceptions is initially relatively limited. Acquisition can be chancy and rationally underdetermined. As Dolores Durkin (1976) notes, "Language is as much caught as it is taught." Entrenched conceptions are more rationally assessable. We might ask whether a conception is properly situated within the broader conceptual nexus, for example, and whether appropriate inferential links have been forged.³⁷

Conceptions, misconceptions, and conceptual lacunas are consequential. Suppose Holly meets Manny on holiday. They romantically and sexually liaise that week. Holly possesses the concept HOLIDAY ROMANCE.³⁸ Her implicit conception includes that holiday romances are brief, even if the rapport feels precious. The term "holiday romance" offers a social script: Interactions are romantic, not merely carnal, and the timeframe is circumscribed. Holly categorises their relationship as a holiday romance. She is accordingly more prone to understand her feelings as largely arising from situational features, including especially its evanescence: The relationship was less likely to develop if they lived near each other because they likely would have been more cautious about rapidly expressing romantic interest. Aided by her conception of holiday romances, Holly is less inclined to centre Manny's unique traits in her implicit understanding of their interactions or view Manny as irreplaceable or a potential long-term romantic partner.

A person lacking the concept might (mis)take the same underlying nexus of feelings and experiences as indicating a deep connection to Manny, owing to Manny's unique traits, and see potential for enduring connection. They subsequently—owing to cognitive feedback loops—feel those underlying emotions differently. These differing interpretations, which are steered by differences in conceptual framework, affect expectations and conduct. The latter person might pine for Manny or lament their geographical distance. Holly might, by contrast, underestimate their long-term romantic potential. Indeed, since one shouldn't pursue or lament every potential good long-term romantic partner, the concept HOLIDAY ROMANCE may have prudential value in encouraging this underestimation.

Holly illustrates how *which* concepts a person possesses can matter. The contours of conceptions and the configuration of concepts within an interpretive schema are also significant. Suppose Terry conceives of love as being stable. On Terry's conception, once love roots, it takes substantial force or time to dislodge. This contour may partly stem from contrasting LOVE with PUPPY LOVE. Terry's affections for Sam Seder might thereby endure longer, in virtue of Terry's conceptual scheme according to which love is durable and he qualifies as being in love.

³⁷ Cf. irrelevant influences on beliefs (Vavova, 2018). But the factors discussed here influence which conceptual frameworks, including interpretive taxonomies, one has, rather than which propositions one endorses.

³⁸ Consider also HOLIDAY FLING, HOLIDAY ROMANCE, and SUMMER FLING. Contrast with "comet lover" and "holibae", for which the time periods are brief, but recurrent.

9. In the Neighbourhood of Love

The terms “puppy love” and “holiday romance” may seem like unconvincing examples of linguistic luck because they are common in English-speaking cultures. One might think that if Child B didn’t hear “puppy love”, or misunderstood it, on that occasion it would later be rectified. So it isn’t a matter of luck that their conceptual scheme includes PUPPY LOVE; not easily could it have been otherwise. In response, firstly plausibly it’s indeterminate whether puppy love is a species of “proper” love. If so, his conception cannot be “corrected”; it wasn’t wrong. It can merely be changed. And even if Child B’s possessing the concept is not chancy, the conception’s contours are. Slight variations in acquisition conditions can shape conceptions in path-dependent ways. The actor’s slightly condescending tone can have substantial downstream effects on Child B’s conception, for example.

Secondly, my illustrations used familiar concepts within Western culture. But real-life linguistic luck arises for arcane concepts in the neighbourhood of romantic love.³⁹ Consider less well-known ideas such as companionate love, which is intimate, non-passionate, long-term committed attachment. Long-term commitment distinguishes companionate love from typical close friendship.⁴⁰ Romantic friendships are intense intimate friendships. Squishes are platonic crushes, typically characterised by yearning to be closer friends.⁴¹ A “work spouse”, “work husband”, or “work wife” is a colleague with whom you have “a special, platonic friendship... characterised by a close emotional bond and high levels of disclosure and support.”⁴² A comet relationship is an intense, intimate romantic relationship with someone who passes through your life intermittently. The term “eintagsleibe”—based on the German for “mayfly”—translates as “one day’s love” and refers to an intense, brief loving relationship.⁴³ “Carrying a torch” is undisclosed, unrequited long-term romantic fondness, typically towards a former partner. In my conception, the attachment is mild but entrenched. Limerence is obsessive infatuation characterised by intrusive thoughts about, and overestimation of, another person.⁴⁴ Yandere is a Japanese archetype in which intense lovesick devotion leads to violent, controlling, and possessive conduct. Trauma bonds are intense positive attachments an abused person feels for their abuser. Stockholm syndrome is a (disputed) phenomenon in which kidnapping victims develop strong attachments to their kidnappers.⁴⁵

Some of these phenomena are subcategories of romantic love. Some are compatible with romantic love. Others might be incompatible. Their presence in one’s conceptual schema can stem from linguistic luck. It can be lucky (or unlucky) that a person’s linguistic community or subculture has a term for the idea. And it can be a matter of chance that one encounters the term.⁴⁶ Section twelve illustrates how acquiring these concepts affects conceptions of love.

³⁹ Thanks to Jef Delvaux, Blake Stannard, and Alida Liberman for examples. Special thanks to Ray Briggs for many insights.

⁴⁰ See also “holibae”, “zucchiniis” in “queerplatonic relationships”, and varieties of erotic friendships (Kearney, 2015).

⁴¹ See also alterous attraction.

⁴² Quoting the [Wikipedia entry](#).

⁴³ Prest and Kaboli (2015).

⁴⁴ Cf. Maslow’s (1954) distinction between D-love (deficiency-love) and B-love (being-love). The former is grasping, possessive, dependent love.

⁴⁵ Dutton and Painter (1993).

⁴⁶ Some communities, such as queer online forums, create and feature a wider variety of such terms. See section six on epistemic benefits of queer communities.

10. Limning Limerence

Luck does not end with concept possession. These concepts are fraught, complex, and difficult to calibrate interpersonally. People's conceptions vary considerably.

Recall limerence—infatuation characterised by intrusive thoughts. There is scant academic research on limerence, but it is enthusiastically discussed in internet forums, podcasts, blogs, and popular media.⁴⁷ Call the collection of scholarly research, media, and forums the “limerence discourse”.

There is broad agreement on how limerence characteristically sets in.⁴⁸ An initial spark, known as a “glimmer”, of perceived reciprocal romantic interest is closely followed by confusion or doubt about the relationship's nature or future. This doubt is typically caused by perceived “mixed signals”. The flirtation-confusion sequence is accompanied by an attentional magnet. This attentional magnet is often a situational feature that means pursuing the relationship would be particularly consequential.⁴⁹ Perhaps it would constitute an adulterous, first, workplace, student-teacher, boss-employee, or May-September relationship, for example, or a relationship between flatmates or close friends. The relationship might challenge one's perceived sexuality, religious convictions, or social status. Perceiving someone as “damsel-in-distress” is an attentional magnet for many limerents.

According to the limerence discourse, the early onset of confusion or doubt leads to mentally replaying past interactions. Since that activity is enjoyable—it happens early, during the glimmer—thinking about the person causes a dopamine hit. The attentional magnet and dopamine hit reinforce this thought pattern. If repeated often in a short timeframe, the limerent becomes cognitively conditioned towards thinking of the person. At its most extreme, this process disrupts normal dopamine regulation and becomes a debilitating addiction to thinking about the person.⁵⁰

Abnormally high levels of mentally replaying early flirtatious interactions—the first step towards limerence—can also stem from anxiety, loneliness, or escapism. Stress, midlife, introversion, and adversity are risk factors for limerence because they amplify the allure of reverie. The uncertainty endemic to ambiguous, text-based, online communication engenders limerence. Limerence research pioneer Dorothy Tennov notes that emotionally intimate discussions, particularly during psychotherapy, can seed limerence.⁵¹ I return to this.

Scholars and laypeople debate relationships between limerence and love, including whether limerence is a species of love, a precursor to love, or incompatible with it.⁵² Some claim that early stages of limerence and falling in love are close cousins that evolve differently. Some researchers claim few people experience limerence; others claim limerence is widespread but miscategorised as love. I won't summarise these debates. This essay is relatively agnostic about what, if anything, constitutes

⁴⁷ Wolf (2017); Wakin and Vo (2008). The word “limerence” is sometimes used for ordinary affective states of falling in love. This (arguably mistaken) usage departs from Tennov's neologistic definition and the subsequent limerence discourse.

⁴⁸ Tennov (1979: 201); L (2020). Cf. Ortega (1957: 53); Stendhal (1975); Armstrong (2003: 71f).

⁴⁹ Reconsider Romeo and Juliet, for instance.

⁵⁰ L (2020: Chapter 3, “The neuroscience of limerence”).

⁵¹ Tennov (1979: 203).

⁵² See, for example, Nguyen (2021), Wakin and Vo (2008), Sack (2012), Willmott and Bentley (2015). Almost no philosophers distinguish love and limerence, perhaps because limerence is obscure. Lopez-Cantero (2022) is an exception. See also Velleman on “blind, romantic love” (1998, 351) and Ortega (1957) on falling in love.

limerence. I instead focus on how people *conceive* of them. For this reason, I describe ways the limerence discourse differs from mainstream conceptions of love.

Firstly, limerence discourse focuses on pragmatic strategies for “coping with” and “recovery from” limerence. It describes “deprogramming” through Pavlov-inspired deconditioning strategies. Authors advise imagining limerence as a monster inside your mind, known as the “limerbeast”. This differs from typical discourse about romantic love.

The admired person is called the limerent object, usually rendered “LO”. This term is largely viewed as appropriate because the limerent attends to an idealised, constructed version of the person. During a phase of “crystallisation” the limerent perceives their limerent object as literally flawless. This idealisation is, limerence theorists claim, a kind of objectification.⁵³

The addiction described by the discourse is not to interacting with the person. It is to *thinking* about them. Tennov (1979: 18) explains “Limerence is, above all else, mental activity. It is an interpretation of events, rather than the events themselves.” Limerence is thus viewed as a maladaptive attentional habit. Two features of this mental activity are emphasised: Incessance—the thoughts are constant—and lack of cognitive control. Therapeutic manuals bluntly deny limerents can intentionally stop thinking about the limerent object. Tennov writes “In summary, limerent fantasy is, most of all, intrusive and inescapable. It seems not to be something you do, but something *that happens*.” (40, emphasis in original.)

I cannot overstate these two features of the discourse. Forum posts continually cast suicide as the only escape. Accordingly, perhaps the starkest testament to the thematic dominance of incessance and inescapability is the album title *Post-suicide Limerence*. Truly, then, ineluctable.⁵⁴

Explanations for the attachment, even those offered by limerents themselves, decentre the LO’s traits. Explanations instead emphasise situational features, neurochemicals, the limerent’s character and “pathologies”, or clinical psychological theories, like attachment theory. The terms “limerent brain” and “limerbrain” are commonplace in the discourse. The non-centrality of the limerent object’s traits can be so pronounced that people claim limerence for strangers, fictional characters, and acquaintances they dislike. In the rare cases where the LO’s traits or conduct feature in causal explanations, they often impute ill will or manipulative behaviour to the LO. This differs starkly from discourse about love, where causal explanations typically recount the beloved’s admired qualities.

Researchers claim limerence is characteristically undermined by better familiarity, and fuelled by lack of contact, because limerence is a “completely unilateral relationship to the idea of someone else.”⁵⁵ With its emphasis on fantasy, rather than reality, limerence is described as a way of *avoiding* becoming close to people. Love, by contrast, is characterised as bringing people closer. Some writers claim that

⁵³ L (2020: 33).

⁵⁴ L (2020: 33). The limerent addiction is to thought patterns, not a person. This explains why limerence is particularly hard to control or intentionally end. It is possible—albeit difficult—to wholly break from (or externally restrict) extrasomatic entities like drugs, gambling, food, and social media. One strategy is displacement—doing other things in other places. But if the addictive activity is thought itself, then cessation and displacement won’t work. Thinking is constant. And thought is associative; it connects topics. In extreme cases, sufferers think of all topics *by* thinking about the limerent object (Tennov 1979: 34-5), and so limerent thinking cannot be displaced.

⁵⁵ Molotkow (2018). See also Arabi (2022).

limerents do not truly care about their limerent object's interests. For these reasons limerence, but not love, is often characterised as solipsistic or narcissistic.

For limerence, but not love, researchers clinically describe average durations and factors that exacerbate duration. Unlike love, limerence seldom exceeds a few years and—absent suicide—is almost never lifelong. Again, this differs from love.

Many forum contributors claim to have platonic, alterous, and non-sexual limerence.⁵⁶ Alterous attraction, recall, is desire for emotional closeness itself, which is neither strictly romantic nor platonic attraction. Indeed the Wikipedia entry on limerence begins “Limerence is a state of mind which results from romantic *or non-romantic* feelings for another person...” (emphasis added). Many forum contributors describe their limerence as contiguous with, or identical to, non-romantic obsessive thoughts about persons, such as self-ascribed obsessive need for approval from authority figures or platonic fixation on teachers. A common platonic theme is yearning to discuss deep emotional topics and personal histories with the person. Section twelve returns to these themes.

Following Tenno's seminal work, two rival academic views developed. Focusing on negative features, Wakin and Vo (2008) aim to categorise limerence as a mental disorder. They write,

Love and limerence are not interchangeable terms or concepts... Neither is a subset of the other... Limerence is an involuntary condition that is necessarily negative, problematic, and impairing, with clinical implications. ... The profile of limerence seems to resemble that of OCD and substance dependence... Most importantly [future research] should concentrate on diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment interventions.

Willmot and Bentley (2012; 2015) posit positive roles for limerence, including precipitating building a self-narrative that re-integrates one's past and present, and helping the person create or find meaning. I return to this.

11. Seeding Conceptions

The above summary synthesises my interpretation of scholarly research, self-help resources, and forum posts. Given the term's obscurity, there is a good chance many readers hadn't heard of limerence before reading this essay. My description has shaped your conception.

I could have centred different themes from the discourse. Neurochemical descriptions foreground the limbic system's flight or fight response, which differs from the neurochemical correlates of love. Psychological explanations centre on introversion and attachment styles, which I mentioned only fleetingly. Emotional facets include mood swings, fear of rejection, and acute longing for reciprocation. More extreme emotional themes include profound confusion, psychic collapse, and a sense of disintegration of the self. Not seeing the person's flaws and vastly overestimating reciprocated romantic interest are striking epistemic features. Another common theme is erratic conduct, stalking, violence, self-destructive behaviour, and imprudence. Foregrounding these features instead would steer your newly seeded conception, which could influence your experiences differently.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ See also Tenno (1979), Willmott and Bentley (2015).

⁵⁷ These themes are ubiquitous, but see especially Tenno (1979), Reynolds (1983), Sack (2012), Eaglehawk (2019), L (2020), and Delacruz (2021).

Were I developing a philosophical analysis of limerence, I would centre attentional addiction and the epistemic error of idealisation. People claim to have limerence without various other common features, but these two features seem to be core features.⁵⁸

I could have instead offered a skeptical, debunking appraisal of limerence discourse: Firstly, the broad, multifarious “risk factors” collectively describe most life stages and social contexts. The so-called “pathway to limerence” describes almost all flux flirting. That is, flirtation with a trajectory. (By contrast, “fleeting flirting” involves fugacious interactions amongst strangers and “fixture flirtation” involves reliable, un-changing, script-like interactions amongst firmly platonic acquaintances.) If the putative “explanation” for limerence describes most romantic attraction, it cannot explain a distinctive phenomenon. Secondly, people are susceptible to speciously self-ascribing psychological conditions. Purported symptoms for multiple personality disorder are feelings that many people have to some degree, leading to vast overdiagnosis, especially for self-ascriptions.⁵⁹ The concept LIMERENCE seem similarly risky. Thirdly, academic research is scarce. And so limerence forum contributors—typically people at the height of infatuation—and self-anointed limerence experts—who sell limerence self-help products and therapy—dominate the discourse. These groups may overstate the phenomenon. Emphasising debunking explanations could steer readers towards viewing limerence as simply a crush or “New Relationship Energy” (NRE).

Possessing different concepts and conceptions in the neighbourhood of love can affect an individual’s perceptions of their own attachments, which can—owing to interpretative feedback loops—affect those attachments. Do you see your own infatuation as rooted in your character, situational features, and/or the beloved’s perceived traits? Should you understand your enthrallment as escapism or a coping mechanism, rather than as a profound valuing of another?

Recall that limerence discourse emphasises situational risk factors, such as stress, adversity, and student-teacher relations. Without an unusual attentional magnet or perceived immediate need to resolve confusion or doubt, flirtatious ambiguous “glimmers” don’t tend to cause disproportionate early replaying. Thoughts about the person evolve—growing or dissipating—at a more ordinary rate, which deflects limerence. Notice the similarity to HOLIDAY ROMANCE: Both ideas downplay the other person’s character traits and instead emphasise contextual features. Studies indicate that some people are more susceptible to limerence than others. But the same applies to holiday romances: Some people are predisposed towards or against holiday romances. Yet contextual features are nonetheless central explanations for occurrences of limerence and holiday romances.

The limerence discourse, unlike “holiday romance”, is not a linguistic term. It is a diffuse, variegated discourse conveying a package of ideas, associations, theories, and advice. The word “limerence” is largely unknown. But ideas about limerence *could* be conveyed by everyday terms, like the ideas conveyed by terms like “puppy love”, “celebrity crush”, “old flame”, “high school sweetheart”, and “frenemy”. This exhibits linguistic contingency: Just as “holiday romance” conveys ideas about the causes, expectations, and conditions of holiday romances, a language could feature terms embedding purported features of limerence. Echoing Attentional Deficit Disorder (“ADD”), Vare (2011; 2012) dubs her love addiction “Affection Deficit Disorder”. And recall the portmanteaus “limerbeast” and “limerbrain”. Other potential neologisms include “cress” for a crush that arises from, or distracts

⁵⁸ Lopez-Cantero (2022) defines infatuation, but not limerence, as “unreasonable”. I disagree.

⁵⁹ Hacking (1995).

from, stress and “Limerent Attentional Limbic Affliction” (LALA) for love-lost daydreaming in la-la-land. Perhaps such terms would help people understand, or even steer, their affections.

Researchers claim that learning of limerence can pre-empt limerence-induced confusion and reduce dangerous effects, like stalking, violence, and suicide.⁶⁰ But caution is needed. Recall that acquiring inapt concepts, like MULTIPLE PERSONALITY DISORDER, can have costs.⁶¹ Acquiring the concept LIMERENCE might cause people to speciously self-ascribe limerence, see themselves as mentally ill, or behave in destructive limerence-congruent ways.

12. Transformative Conceptual Shifts

Recall that conceptions shift in response to acquiring or adjusting nodes in one’s conceptual schema. Acquiring the concept LAKE can affect how a child conceives of ponds; acquiring LIMERENCE can affect LOVE. These shifts can be transformative.⁶²

A transformative experience changes one’s point of view and core values. And the only way to know what it is like is to undergo the experience yourself.⁶³ A transformative conceptual shift transforms how you interpret the world, including how you interpret your own thoughts and feelings. This too can shift your values. And given the richness of conceptual interpretive webs—and how they frame thinking of other topics—arguably the only way to fully appreciate a conceptual schema is inhabiting it.

This section provides three illustrations of transformative conceptual shifts about love and limerence. They exemplify how conceptual transformations can occur; I do not claim they are apposite.

i. Attention and Polyamory

Discourse about love emphasises its attentional qualities. Ortega y Gasset (1957: 48-50) wrote vividly—and disparagingly—about how falling in love captivates attention:

“Falling in love”, initially, is no more than this: attention abnormally fastened upon another person... Consciousness contracts and is occupied by only one object. The attention remains paralyzed: it does not advance from one thing to another. It is fixed and rigid, the captive of one person alone.

And people morally owe romantic partners cognitive attention; neglecting to think of people can attentionally wrong them.⁶⁴

Suppose Marianne’s conception of love foregrounds attention. The attention must be of a particular kind, of course. Terror preoccupies but differs from love. And a parent can romantically love her

⁶⁰ Wakin and Vo (2008), Delacruz (2021).

⁶¹ Hacking (1995). Thanks to Jon Garthoff and Renee Jorgensen for discussion.

⁶² Conversational podcasts allow real-time observation of such shifts. During *Multiamory*’s episode on limerence, for example, acquiring LIMERENCE influences discussants’ understanding of love and “New Relationship Energy” (NRE).

⁶³ Paul (2014).

⁶⁴ Thanks to John Parker Epps for discussion. Gardiner (forthcoming; ms) discusses attentional demands of love and friendship. On love and attention, see also Murdoch (2003), Stendhal (1975), Brümmer (1993: 39f).

spouse but think of her children more often.⁶⁵ Attention is competitive: Thinking about one topic can crowd out others. On some conceptions of attentional dispositions, this suggests a monogamic conception of romantic love. If romantic love is partly characterised by an attentional hierarchy, and *if* only one person can occupy its summit at once, then a person can only romantically love one person at a time.⁶⁶ On this conception, loving more than one person simultaneously is precluded by love's attentional hierarchy. This differs from the weaker claims that romantic polyamory is rare, difficult, or psychologically unavailable to some individuals.

Suppose Marianne later learns of limerence. Attentional patterns are a core feature of limerence and, according to the discourse, limerence's attentional effects are extreme. Tennov writes, for instance,

[T]he perpetual presence of LO in your head defines all other experience in relationship to that presence. If a certain thought has no previous connection with LO, you immediately make one. (34-5)

In his limerence, Larry's preoccupation was almost 100 percent [...] It was near torture to wrench his mind free of Margaret in order to deal effectively with his work. (36)

Perhaps, then, limerence—not love—is a monomaniacal attentional phenomenon. And so *limerence* is monogamic: One can only be limerent for one person at once. (This claim is widely endorsed by limerence researchers.)

Learning of limerence could subsequently make space for Marianne to characterise love as constituted by different features, such as truly knowing the person, caring for their interests, and long-term commitment. These things, unlike attention, are not competitive. And so they are less apt to underwrite a monogamic conception of love. Thus learning about limerence, and seeing limerence as monogamic, could allow room in Marianne's conceptual schema for polyamorous romantic love.

ii. Is Love Good?

Suppose Daphnée had bad experiences with ardent admirers. Infatuated ex-boyfriends stalked and harassed her. She became cynical about love. Daphnée later reads about limerence in a magazine. The article associates limerence with violence, obsession, and mental prostration. As a result, Daphnée conceives of limerence as pathological, narcissistic, and inimical to flourishing or intimacy.⁶⁷ She views limerence (accurately) as an individual's state, not a shared bond. And she (perhaps implicitly) sees limerence as essentially different from love. (Daphnée might see limerence as incompatible with love or as simply not entailing it.) As a result, Daphnée might now recategorise obsessive infatuations from her past as limerence, rather than love. Lacking an alternative, she previously labelled them as love. Now she doesn't.

As a result, Daphnée's attitudes and associations about love become more positive. And her conception of love can also shift. She understands what love *is* differently. Her conception of love becomes more infused with positive assessment. It moves towards the *Corinthians* ideal: *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy...* The LIMERENCE category siphons away some destructive, obsessive

⁶⁵ Note that falling in love differs attentionally from established love. Thanks to Jon Garthoff for helpful discussion.

⁶⁶ Not all competitions have a unique first place, of course.

⁶⁷ Keller (2011).

emotional states, which creates room in Daphnée’s conceptual schema to understand love as a profound appreciation of a person; a valuable bond that both nurtures and constitutes flourishing.

Similarly, understanding limerence as involving unrealistic idealisation of the limerent object “makes room” for love to involve accurate appraisal and deep knowledge. In Daphnée’s subsequent schema, *limerence* is blind; love is not.

Put slightly differently, suppose Daphnée conceives of limerence as characterised by debilitating cognitive ruts and a distorted, idealised perception of the person. No matter how much these features are dialled up, the attachment does not thereby become love, on Daphnée’s conception, because love is characterised by different features.⁶⁸

Ortega y Gasset contemned falling in love because, he claimed, attention is monomaniacally focused on the beloved. He dismissed it as “a relative paralysis of the life of our consciousness”, “psychic angina”, and “an inferior state of mind, a form of transitory imbecility” (1957: 44, 49, 51). But perhaps if Ortega came across the idea of limerence, and viewed it as a distinct phenomenon, he would have viewed falling in love more positively.

iii. Addiction, Rumination, and the Unmet Need

Lastly a person’s whose conception of limerence is shaped by discourse that emphasises addiction science, neurochemical pathways, or behavioural conditioning might accordingly conceive of limerence as primarily an addiction. The addiction is to thought patterns, rather than external drugs or behaviours like cocaine or gambling. They might thus understand limerence as contiguous with non-romantic cognitive or attentional addictions, such as maladaptive daydreaming, compulsive rumination, cognitive styming, mental perseveration, and compulsive suicidal, violent, argumentative, or sexual ideation.⁶⁹ Consider also habitually thinking in the form of dialogue or social media posts or compulsively doing mental maths, art, or music.

Some of these mental habits—not all of which are deleterious—are ways of processing emotions, especially at times of distress or upheaval. Perhaps limerence can serve similar a cognitive role.

There are suggestive consilient links between limerence and reinterpreting one’s life experience into a new personal narrative. Tennov (1979) notes therapy is a situational risk factor. Limerent self-help manuals warn that deep introspective conversations precipitate and sustain limerence. Limerence is associated with periods of reassessing core values, such as mid-life crises. A reoccurring forum theme is alterous, non-sexualised attraction and the longing for emotional intimacy, including especially discussing personal histories. Research suggests the characteristic crux of limerent fantasies is emotional intimacy, not sexual activity, and sexual content is avoided because it “contaminates” limerent fantasy.⁷⁰ Most explicitly, Willmott and Bentley (2015) view the turmoil, confusion, and

⁶⁸ On some such conceptions, love and limerence are incompatible. Suppose they require accurate and inaccurate appraisal, respectively, for example. On others, a person with limerence might also be in love—they aren’t incompatible—but not in virtue of the same features constituting their limerence.

⁶⁹ Rumination is mentally imagining or replaying conversations. Perseveration is the continual involuntary repetition of a thought or behaviour.

⁷⁰ Willmott and Bentley (2015), Tennov (1979), and various forum posts.

rumination of limerence as a process for reintegrating life experiences into a more coherent self-narrative. And Eaglehawk (2021) writes,

limerents have a strong desire to collate their journey into a coherent story... a limerent focus can be any source of inspiration ruminatively analysed and, often obsessively, revisited... [We can] envisage limerence as ... a highly common emotional and cognitive state of active manifestation, motivation, inspiration and transformation. For with empowerment comes healing...

With this background exposure, someone might conceive of limerence primarily as obsessive rumination—running conversations in your head—as a tool for deep emotional processing. According to the discourse, establishing limerence requires an attentional magnet with an attendant dopamine hit. And for most people, amorous glimmers can provide this. But for some people, alterous or platonic attention is captivated by teachers, bosses, virtuosos, or celebrities. On this conception, sexual and romantic aspects recede into the background; limerence is at core platonic. It is a tool for understanding oneself.

Perhaps then limerence—like many addictions—ultimately arises from unmet needs. Perhaps three central clusters of unmet adulthood interpersonal needs feed a tripartite clustering of limerence kinds: The need for romantic companionship or to feel desirable, which corresponds to romantic limerence. The need for approval, especially from authority figures, which commonly underwrites limerence for teachers and bosses.⁷¹ And the need for emotional processing, leading to limerence for therapists and alterous limerence.

In the resulting conceptual nexus, perhaps love is—at least in its most ideal instantiations—a way to bond, connect, and structure a life. Limerence is a way to think. It is characterised by one-sided mental conversations, but always with the same “listening” persona. Limerence is often characterised as hellacious and destructive. Instead conceiving of one’s limerence as a valuable therapeutical tool for emotional processing could be self-fulfilling.

Thus acquiring and transforming conceptions in the neighbourhood of love can affect conceptions of love. Crucially, a transformative conceptual shift, unlike a transformative experience, does not require experience. A person might simply come to realise that their existing conceptions should—or did—shift. Perhaps there was an internal tension which is resolved by, for example, altering one’s conception of love.⁷² These shifts in conceptions can, in turn, affect feelings, values, commitments, affections, interpretative schemas, self-ascriptions, and relationships. This, ultimately, shapes flourishing, community, happiness, and the core of who we are.

13. So, What...? So What?

I have not said what I think love is. Nor limerence, infatuation, puppy love, bi-curiosity, or lust. I have only described what they could be and how conceptions can affect self-ascriptions. And how, in turn, those self-ascriptions affect the underlying nexus of values, emotions, commitments, and beliefs with which we build relationships. The contours of one’s conceptual schema matters, but usually the values, emotions, and relationships matter more.

⁷¹ Limerence for authority figures is a common forum theme.

⁷² Consider Kuhnian paradigm shifts.

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