Love, Reason, and Irreplaceability (Draft, October 2023)  
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1. Introduction[[1]](#footnote-2)

It is not uncommon in discussions of love to find the beloved referred to as irreplaceable. Indeed it is something of a cliché. There’s a website of user-submitted poetry called “hellopoetry.com” that allows you to search by keyword. If you type in “irreplaceable” *hundreds* of painfully bad love poems are returned.

Philosophers have taken note of this common feature of our discourse, and they have differed in how they interpret such remarks. What does it actually mean to say a loved one is irreplaceable? And can such remarks be taken as sincere (and even *true)*, or are they among the many phrases uttered by lovers that we would do best to regard with some suspicion?

One possibility which some philosophers have found tempting: to say someone is irreplaceable is to assert that, as it happens, that person is not merely rare or scarce but actually one of a kind (and so unique). As a matter of fact there is no one else in the world quite like him or her. Let’s call this *matter-of-fact irreplaceability* (MFI) for short.

Now I don’t want to deny that this is what we *sometimes* mean (especially in the throes of infatuation), but this “matter of fact” irreplaceability isn’t the sense that I think most people, including most philosophers, are often *ultimately* gesturing at when they speak of irreplaceability, especially in the context of love. Harry Frankfurt emphasizes this point when discussing an example where he imagines encountering an exact duplicate of his daughter.[[2]](#footnote-3) He says he’s not sure what his response would be, but it certainly wouldn’t involve the conclusion that he had somehow been *wrong* to love her the way he did because he mistakenly supposed there was no one quite like her around. Qualitative uniqueness or numerical rareness might be valuable features of some objects, and even of some persons, but those features are distinct from the notion of irreplaceability Frankfurt has in mind when he talks about love (and that I want to focus on today).

So, if referring to the beloved as irreplaceable isn’t a claim about his or her matter-of-fact uniqueness, what is it? As I’ve suggested elsewhere, I take it to be a claim about *how* the individual is being valued: (this is a quote from “Irreplaceability and Unique Value”): “we value her in a way that embodies the attitude that she is an individual and thus unique, incomparable, and irreplaceable. This attitude is not based on any belief about uniqueness of qualities (in fact or in theory) that could turn out to be false— it is independent of that kind of consideration.”[[3]](#footnote-4) For lack of a better term, let’s call the sense I’m interested in *strong irreplaceability* (SI). Again, the kind of irreplaceability or individuality at issue here is *not* the sort of thing that could be dependent on a possible empirical discovery, as David Cockburn nicely brings out in his own writings on this topic:

There is a sense of ‘individuality’ which has been completely lost as soon as there is room for talk of the chances of finding a substitute; and the remoteness of the chances does nothing to change that. [….] If we understand the notion of irreplaceability in this way my thought of my son as an irreplaceable individual is a hostage to fortune.  
 -- David Cockburn, *Other Human Beings*, p. 151

As we saw in Frankfurt’s discussion of his daughter, it is helpful to pinpoint this sense of irreplaceability or individuality (and distinguish it from mere “matter of fact” uniqueness) by specifying that when one is taken to be *strongly* irreplaceable, even an *exact duplicate* would not count as a satisfactory replacement.[[4]](#footnote-5) (By “exact duplicate” I mean a duplicate with qualitatively identical intrinsic properties.[[5]](#footnote-6))

Now, if you think talk of such hypothetical duplication scenarios is unhelpful or incoherent or metaphysically extravagant, keep in mind this sort of doppleganger possibility is *exactly* the type of thought experiment which shows up in a wide range of philosophical discussions, ranging from debates about semantic meaning and reference (Davidson’s “Swampman”), arguments over physicalism (Van Invagen), explorations of the nature of authenticity in aesthetics (Dutton, Sagoff), and (as you might expect) discussions of personal identity (Parfit, Unger, Johnston, Shoemaker, McMahan, etc.). In the specific context of philosophy of love and friendship, such duplication cases have been discussed by Mark Bernstein, Aaron Smuts, Robert Kraut, Ronald de Sousa, Neil Delaney, Niko Kolodny, Peter Goldie, Berit Brogaard, Tony Milligan, Troy Jollimore, and many others.

This sort of thought experiment is also an enduringly popular feature of much speculative fiction and film. To take just a few examples: Soderbergh’s *Solaris* (2002), *The Sixth Day* (2000), and more recently the philosophically interesting but not entirely successful film *The One I Love* (2014).



The thought evoked by discussions of love and replicas is usually that there is something *disturbing* about such a duplication and possible swap, but exactly what *that* amounts to has been harder to spell out. The claim is not, I think, that one *would* not love such a duplicate, as it is likely that it would be psychologically impossible for one’s feelings for the original to not either transfer or duplicate themselves (at least to some significant extent). It also isn’t right to simply say that one *should* not love the duplicate, though here really the details of the imaginary case become relevant. (Is the original still around? Who knows what about the duplication? Etc.) The issue could be better framed in terms of the *manner* of love that might or might not manifest.

The idea I have tried to defend in the past and that I want to focus on now is the thought that one can rightfully *reject* the claim that one oughtto love the duplicate *as though* he or she was the original. In other words, it is reasonable to recognize the distinction between the two individuals as normatively relevant and to think it can rightly affect one’s attitude in loving.[[6]](#footnote-7) (When the case involves the original being destroyed and replaced by a duplicate, the attitude I’m gesturing at here can take the form of a sense of *loss*. It need not always take this form, however. In the case of the original existing alongside the duplicate, it might take the form of *loyalty* to the original.) Here is a stab at a brief formulation of the idea:

Strong Irreplaceability Thesis (SIT): It is *reasonable* to value loved ones as strongly irreplaceable and thereby to resist the substitution of a loved one, even if that substitution were to involve replacement by an exact copy.[[7]](#footnote-8)

[Note what I’m *not* saying here: I’m not claiming it is *unreasonable* to view people as fungible. I think Derek Parfit (for example) has a consistent, coherent, and rational world view, but I do not think it is rationally *mandatory* and while I find it ethically problematic, I don’t think it can shown to be irrational. *My* claim is that another possible world view, in which individuals are recognized *as individuals* (and thereby often valued as irreplaceable), is also rationally permissible. ]

Why might one reject SIT and instead take loved ones to be fungible or replaceable? There are probably a wide variety of reasons motivating philosophers reluctant to embrace strong irreplaceability, but I think most of the time the reasons fall into one or more of the following camps.

Proustian Projectivist: On this cynical view, what we love is a fantasy anyway, so why worry about originals vs. duplicates? We can attribute this sort of philosophy at least to Marcel the narrator if not Marcel the author in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, and you can see versions of a projectionist view in select writings from both Freud and Jung as well.[[8]](#footnote-9)

Sensual Solipsist: On this view, the beloved matters only insofar as they deliver the goods of love, and the duplicate will deliver the goods. (“Solipsist” is being used here in a way similar to Rae Langton’s use[[9]](#footnote-10) when she speaks of “moral solipsist”. The sensual solipsist doesn’t deny that other people *exist*, but he denies that he needs to care about them as people.) I have heard this view in conversation, but you can also find it in print in various pieces by Alan Soble.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Metaphysical Mistakes: This skeptic worries that the defender of irreplaceability has an incoherent metaphysic: love can *only* sensibly be directed at qualities (not a mysterious bare locus or soul), so qualities *must* be what what we love. You can find an early version of this view in Pascal, though more recently Hugh LaFollette seems to offer this sort of argument, as does Raja Halwani.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Conflated Concerns: Another charge that has been made involves the accusation that the defender of irreplaceability has confused a concern over the *object* of love with a concern for *constancy*. (We transform a fear of love’s loss to a worry about identity.) Amelie Rorty made this point in “The Historicity of Psychological Attitudes: Love is Not Love Which Alters Not When It Alteration Finds” (1986)[[12]](#footnote-13)

Romantic Rationalist: This is I think the most common and most philosophically serious worry. The Romantic Rationalist insists that rationality requires *reasons* for love, and such reasons seem to bring with them at least the theoretical possibility that a loved one could be replaced. (After all, reasons by their very nature generalize, and it would appear that any such reasons for loving one person could, at least in principle, extend to another.) This line of thought shows up all over the place, but to name just a few philosophers who seem to embrace it: Ingmar Persson, Berit Brogaard, Raja Halwani, and Neera Badwhar.[[13]](#footnote-14)   
   
 Identity Irrelevant: This is one particularly influential version of romantic

rationalism. The idea being that whatever reasons one has for love *must* carry over to the duplicate, since the only distinction between the two individuals is one of numerical identity, and it is irrational to care about personal (numerical) identity. It is Derek Parfit’s position, and quite a few others (Shoemaker, Perry, Rovane, Whiting, Quinton) have accepted some version of this “identity is unimportant” view.

Those are, I think, the major sources of skepticism that strong irreplaceability can be adequately defended. What about the voices on the other side of the debate? As I see it, there are three main camps:

Irrationalist:

Love is irrational to begin with, so why is it surprising or problematic that we also irrationally view the beloved as irreplaceable? Roger Scruton presents this view of romantic love in his book *Sexual Desire*, claiming that “We regard each other as irreplaceable in arousal, just as we do in love, and individualising thoughts are in each case central to our endeavor. As I have argued, those thoughts have a large illusory component. […] Individualising thoughts are, in one sense, mystifications. But it is by such mystifications that we live. They are the necessary salve to the pain of incarnation…”[[14]](#footnote-15)

Arationalist:

Our attachment to others as irreplaceable individuals is neither rational nor irrational, but a fundamental non-rational feature of our lives that need not be revised out of fears of irrationality. This position, broadly Wittgensteinian in nature, was first argued for by Kenneth Henley in his paper “The Value of Individuals” back in 1977, but you can find other versions in David Cockburn’s *Other Human Beings*, and my paper “Love and History”.

Rationalist:

There have been a number of notable attempts to defend strong irreplaceability while at the same time claiming such an attachment is compatible with justificatory (normative) reasons for loving one individual over another.

Niko Kolodny has argued that the *historical relationship* between lovers can justify irreplaceability. [[15]](#footnote-16) David Velleman has claimed that love can be justified by the individual’s *rationality* in such a way that irreplaceability remains intact. [[16]](#footnote-17) Christopher Gowans has attempted to justify irreplaceability in terms of the beloved’s capacity for responsible *agency*. [[17]](#footnote-18) And Linda Zagzebski has explored the position that it is the individual’s *subjectivity* which can ground attachment to another as irreplaceable.[[18]](#footnote-19)

Though I think there is much that is right and true in all these accounts, I also think they uniformly fail to dissolve the tension inherent between accepting strong irreplaceability and clinging to a conception of love for a particular individual as justified by reasons. I do not have time to do justice to any of these positions here, but the objections are not difficult to sketch briefly: those accounts which try to ground irreplaceability in a feature (be it rationality, agency, or subjectivity) shared by others (and in particular shared by an exact duplicate) attempt in vain to explain why the feature justifies attachment in the case of the original but *not* a duplicate. If the argument is, for example, that the duplicate doesn’t have the original’s history of responsible agency (though it might have its own exactly similar history), this just pushes the problem back: why shouldn’t an exactly similar history of agency (or exactly similar rationality, or capacity for subjectivity) suffice in justifying love and attachment? The difficulty was put succinctly by Kenneth Henley well before any of these accounts were developed:

To value an individual as an individual, the valuer must rule out the possibility of giving reasons for the valuing which are sufficient to pick out what is valued from all other things. Since reasons must always have at least possible application outside of the particular case, there can be no reason for valuing an individual as an individual. (345)[[19]](#footnote-20)

There are of course other objections to each of these accounts as well: Kolodny seems to get the relation between the beloved and the love relationship back to front: we care about the relationship primarily because it involves the beloved, not vice-versa. (He must also deny the possibility unrequited love.) Velleman’s assertion that what we *really* love is a person’s rational core seems to strongly over-intellectualize love.[[20]](#footnote-21) Gowans’s account cannot accommodate valuing non-agents (e.g. an infant) as irreplaceable, while Zagzebski’s account cannot accommodate valuing non-subjects (e.g. a tree, an artwork, or a person in a coma) as strongly irreplaceable.

Other Rationalistic Options:

As I mentioned, I think these rationalistic attempts to accommodate strong irreplaceability all fall short. I also think it is revealing that several other recent accounts *claim* to be doing justice to irreplaceability, but on closer inspection they end up avoiding the key issue. Here I have in mind in particular two essays, both of which appeared in *Ethics:* Erich Hatala Matthes, “History, Value, and Irreplaceability” (2013) and Ben Bagley’s “Loving Someone in Particular” (2015).

Matthes’s essay offers an exploration of the relationship between irreplaceability and historical value. While his focus is primarily on artifacts, he begins by explaining what he means by irreplaceability through citations to discussions in the philosophy of love concerning the irreplaceability of the beloved. I think his essay contains much of value, indeed it seems to me to be breaking important new ground for thinking about historical value and the value of history. However, it is my contention that his core argument involves something of a “bait and switch”.[[21]](#footnote-22) Matthes suggests that he is defending a novel and surprising thesis regarding the *separation* of historical value from irreplaceability, but the degree of separation he argues for ends up appearing plausible in large part because he adopts a different notion of irreplaceability than is usually employed. Matthes’s thesis regarding separation appears in various forms. Here’s one version from p.40:

There are nonhistorical ways that an object can satisfy IR [irreplaceability] without acquiring the special character of objects that we value for their histories, and historically significant objects do not always satisfy IR in the way we might expect them to: hence irreplaceability can be neither necessary nor sufficient for securing historical value.

This can sound quite surprising at first, given that many discussions of irreplaceability have taken historical properties to be doing essential work in helping us understand the phenomenon though their capacity for individuating the relevant object (be it a loved one, artwork, historical artifact, etc.). A tight connection between irreplaceability and history is usually presumed, even if it has not always been explicitly explored by those previously writing on the topic.

Matthes’s separation thesis turns out to be far from controversial, however, because the notion of irreplaceability that he adopts for the purposes of the paper is very broad. At first it is hard to see this, since the phrasing is fairly vague:

Irreplaceability (IR): An object is meaningfully irreplaceable if and only if all candidate substitutes would fail to be valuable in the same way as the original (p. 38)

How broad this conception actually is comes out later, perhaps most explicitly on pp. 59-60:

Return to our trusty, instrumentally valuable umbrella. If there were only one umbrella left in the world and no more could be produced, that umbrella would be an exemplar of irreplaceability: it would be the only thing valuable in precisely the same instrumental way that umbrellas are. It satisfies MR [Maximal Resistance to Replacement], assuming that the instrumental value of the umbrella is indeed our maximally differentiable assessment of its value, and, because no suitable substitute can exist, it would also satisfy IR.

Now, if *that* is the sort of irreplaceability under consideration, then it is indeed quite obvious that “there are non historical ways that an object can satisfy IR without acquiring the special character of objects that we value for their histories.” The umbrella is simply instrumentally valuable and its value is completely ahistorical. It is also irreplaceable *only* in the sense that, as it happens, no others are around or available. However, as I’ve discussed, this broad conception of “matter of fact” irreplaceability or rareness is pretty clearly *not* the correct one to focus on, especially given that Matthes’s essay begins with a discussion of the way in which irreplaceability manifests in our thoughts about personal relationships. In the end, Matthes’s analysis ends up conflating matter-of-fact irreplaceability with strong irreplaceability -- he’s basically changed the topic. So, despite the many important insights in his terrific paper, his approach will not (in the end) help us understand or justify the irreplaceability of a loved one.

Regarding Ben Bagley’s essay I’m also impressed by the creativity and insight he offers in his rich discussion of the importance of *improvisation* in love, and I’m in sympathy with the vast majority of what he says, but once again I have concerns regarding whether his approach can do justice to our intuitions regarding irreplaceability. Bagley approvingly cites Frankfurt’s description of the importance of irreplaceability in love and in particular the relevance of the beloved’s *identity*, but goes on to conclude that “Frankfurt’s theory accounts for the beloved’s irreplaceability, but at an unpalatably high cost.” (6) The high cost derives, according to Bagley, from Frankfurt’s abandonment of justifying reasons for love. Bagley argues that we can do better: we can account for irreplaceability while maintaining that we love others for what they “are like”. (11) In particular, he argues that we love others “for values they share” with us, with those values being fundamentally improvisational and collaborative in nature. (15) Bagley suggests that this allows a framework in which irreplaceability can be explained and justified, primarily because “If you had a different partner, you’d have different standards: there’s no common basis of comparison.” (28) But I’m not so sure he’s managed to make his case.

Consider, for example, Parfit’s discussion of irreplaceability and the love of Mary Smith\* (an exactly duplicate of one's beloved Mary Smith). Parfit argues that there are no good reasons to not love the duplicate as though she was the original, and on Bagley’s account it appears he too would be compelled to admit that Mary is replaceable with Mary\*. This is because the “historical” features he highlights (i.e., the ones that matter for deep improvisation) are all present in Mary\*: she would be just as good a continuing improv partner as Mary, for she has the same values, quasi-memories, etc. In justifying love by virtue of qualities possessed by the individual, Bagley’s account seems to commit him to agreeing with Parfit that the beloved is (at least theoretically) replaceable, so despite the fact that he begins his paper by approvingly citing Frankfurt on the irreplaceability of the beloved, he isn’t actually accommodating the sort of insight Frankfurt expressed. He avoids this issue in his essay by only discussing potential replacements that are not completely similar, but as usual it is the exact duplicate thought experiment that is the relevant test case.

I suspect the deeper problem with Bagley’s approach is that he ultimately discusses love as involving an attachment to the beloved’s “identity”, but this is understood by him in terms of *character* or personality when, as I’ve been emphasizing in this essay, what we actually attach to is the *beloved* (not just his/her character) so the sense of identity that is ultimately relevant is more basic — it is personal (numerical) identity.[[22]](#footnote-23) (A duplicate can have my character, but he can’t have my numerical identity.)

Despite being valuable contributions to the literature on love and historical value, both Bagley and Matthes end up evading the difficult issues which arise when one attempts to make sense of strong irreplaceability within a rationalistic context. I think it is not really *surprising* that we are seeing these evasions – it is a testament to just how badly many philosophers want to both retain a robust rationalism about love and at the same time acknowledge the irreplaceability of the beloved.

Given the history of rationalistic evasions and failures to accommodate strong irreplaceability within a pro-“reasons for love” position, what is the lesson to draw? Are all such attempts to bring *reasons* for love together strong irreplaceability inevitably doomed? Well, as usual, it depends what you mean by a *reason* (and it probably also depends on what you mean by “doomed”...) If you are working with a narrow but standard notion of what it is to be a (justificatory, as opposed to explanatory) reason, I think you are kidding yourself if you think you can argue that there are justificatory reasons which warrant you loving one individual X over an exact duplicate Y. (The earlier quote from Henley made clear why.) If, on the other hand, you *broaden* your conception of reasons and rationality, then a certain sort of rationalism can legitimately embrace irreplaceability. Of the current players in the rapidly growing field, I think Troy Jollimore’s account probably manages this best, primarily by *making room* for irreplaceability through his incorporation of John McDowell’s notion of reasons being *silenced*.

Since the reason-giving considerations that would otherwise motivate such actions are, for her, silenced, the true lover will not feel their motivational pull: she will not even be tempted to perform them. […]Since Beatrice’s appreciation of Benedick’s attractive qualities will silence those qualities as they are manifested in others, reason does not require her to respond to them as she does to him. She can recognize that others have the same sorts of valuable qualities, but she will not feel their motivational pull. Loving Benedick in virtue of his cleverness, then, does not commit her to loving any clever person, nor to exchanging Benedick for a more clever partner should one become available. And by the same token, I can accept that Benedick’s cleverness is a good reason for Beatrice to love him, without thereby committing to loving him myself. (Troy Jollimore, “The Vision View”)

This strikes me as a smart and helpful application of McDowell’s ideas to the context of love. However, note that this move does not actually *explain* or *justify* irreplaceability, it just *allows* it – you might say it creates a “safe space” for irreplaceability within a moderately rationalistic framework. But I think for many of the rationalist persuasion Jollimore’s approach is going to inevitably seem too “soft” to count as an adequate defense of reasons for love. One worry is likely to be over when and how “silencing” can be justified. (One can imagine cases where a similar mechanism is in place but clearly irrational or immoral. For example, a mother for whom reasons pointing to the guilt of her murderer son are “silenced”.) Someone really in the grip of a rationalistic impulse to justify love is unlikely to accept that silencing is actually rational (as opposed to an unfortunate bias we perhaps inevitably engage in).

Moving Forward?

I’m not sure there’s anything I could say which could convince a hardcore rationalist to make peace with strong irreplaceability. (We are talking about fundamentally different philosophical sensibilities here, and as I’ve argued elsewhere I have skepticism that even very good arguments can bring about convergence with such deep disputes.[[23]](#footnote-24)) I think there is more to say to those who might be on the fence, however. It can help to disperse the feeling of puzzlement surrounding talk of irreplaceability to recognize that the impulse behind our attachment is much more common than one might first think. [[24]](#footnote-25) Our natural tendency to attach to a loved one such that he or she becomes irreplaceable is far from anomalous: it is clearly related to our general tendency to value certain natural entities (e.g. a redwood forest), artifacts (like artworks), animals, and ourselves as strongly irreplaceable.

[Aside: I discuss this elsewhere, but it is worth repeating that strong irreplaceability is a feature most people have *no trouble* accepting when thinking about *self-concern* or *self-love.* Aside from the notable exception of Parfit and those in his camp, the rest of us tend to find it *bizarre* to imagine that one ought *not* to resist the possible substitution of oneself with an exact duplicate. If you find valuing yourself as irreplaceable to be unproblematic, but you nonetheless think it is illegitimate to value others this way, my view is that the burden is on you to adequately explain this asymmetry in your norms.]

And I think in turn it is worth remembering that this general tendency to value something as irreplaceable is connected to an even more general tendency to care about individuals *simply as the individuals they are*. Such a concern cannot be divorced from consideration of the *identity* of individuals. (In the sense described by philosophers as *numerical* or *quantitative* identity as opposed to qualitative identity.) This need to track identity of course varies depending on context. Often we don’t need to worry about the identity of something – anything which can get the job done is fine (e.g. any decent hammer will do when I’m repairing a fence). And there are clear cases where it looks like a preoccupation with the identity of something can be a kind of irrational fetishism (e.g., “No, I must use that hammer, not the exactly similar hammer next to it…). Further, our tendencies in this regard probably vary significantly across individuals. People surely differ in the extent to which they see the world as made up of entities which warrant cherishing. The general practice, however, seems far from suspect, as Thomas Hill explains in his discussion of the importance of cherishing nature:

When a person takes joy in something, it is a common (and perhaps natural) response to come to cherish it. To cherish something is not simply to be happy with it at the moment, but to care for it for its own sake. This is not to say that one necessarily sees it as having feelings and so wants it to feel good; nor does it imply that one judges the thing to have Moore’s intrinsic value. One simply wants the thing to survive and (when appropriate) to thrive, and not simply for its utility. We see this attitude repeatedly regarding mementos. They are not simply valued as a means to remind us of happy occasions; they come to be valued for their own sake. Thus, if someone really took joy in the natural environment, but was prepared to blow it up as soon as sentient life ended, he would lack this common human tendency to cherish what enriches our lives. While this response is not itself a moral virtue, it may be a natural basis of the virtue we call “gratitude.”⁠[[25]](#footnote-26)

For most of us our tendency to cherish at least some things, animals, and people is a pervasive and important part of our lives. It is not just in the context of love that we just *do* care about things as individuals, and once the depth and breadth of this attitude is appreciated, it doesn’t look quite so puzzling that we take those we *love* to be singular irreplaceable individuals.

In order to better appreciate the extent to which we care about identity, philosophers are in a position to benefit significantly from psychologists and their work on the topic. For my own part, I’ve done some research with my colleague at Clemson, the psychologist Cynthia L. Pury, on both our tendencies to value things as irreplaceable and the possible connection between such attitudes and our attitudes regarding linguistic reference. We discovered a statistically significant tendency of those individuals with Kripkean linguistic intuitions regarding reference to be more averse to replacement scenarios than those with Descriptivist linguistic intuitions.[[26]](#footnote-27) (For Kripkeans words refer in virtue of a particular causal history. For Descriptivists a cluster of properties attributed to the name determine the referent.) We suspect there’s a further connection here with essentialist tendencies of the sort that have been studied by Paul Bloom, Susan A. Gelman, and others. Are individuals who are particularly bothered by replacement scenarios also more likely to be essentialists? We suspect they are, and we are congenial to Gelman’s hypothesis that essentialist thinking has as its source several more basic cognitive tendencies, including a more fundamental domain-general capacity involving attention to causal history in tracking the identity of objects.[[27]](#footnote-28) Gelman has also offered a related suggestion with which we are in sympathy:

There may be a link between tracking individual identity and kind essentialism in another way as well. That is, the sorts of objects for which we prefer to track individual identity (e.g. people, not paper clips) seem by and large to be the same sorts of objects we tend to essentialize. Perhaps the value placed on certain entities initiates a process of individual identity-tracking, which then leads to hypothesizing that this sort of thing has unique and essential qualities. (319)[[28]](#footnote-29)

Empirical psychological support for the clustering of such tendencies raises many interesting philosophical questions. If those attracted to strong irreplaceability turn out to be guided by deeper and more general psychological tendencies which result in essentialist thinking, is that a *bad* thing? While in many circles of academia essentialism is something of a dirty word, we shouldn’t forget that a basic impulse to *look deeper*, beyond the surface, is surely a tendency that has served human beings well in many contexts (e.g. as it turns out, water is H2O). Now, I should emphasize that a limited defense of the impulses which seem to fuel essentialism is entirely compatible with recognizing the *damage* that essentialist thinking can do when it is *unjustified*, such as when it has been disastrously applied to matters of gender or race. With that disclaimer in mind, though I won’t try to defend the view here, it is my current opinion that some of the natural psychological drives which result in our essentialist impulses may actually be *morally praiseworthy* to the degree that they provide the basis for a conceptual scheme in which individuals can come to be loved and cherished as irreplaceable.

1. Versions of this talk have been given at the Centre for Ethics as Study in Human Value (University of Pardubice), Bates College, the International Society for Research on Emotions (ISRE) conference at the University of Geneva, and Clemson University. I have received valuable feedback (much of which has unfortunately not been adequately incorporated into this draft) from audience members at these events as well as from Ben Bagley, Daniel Callcut, Michael Campbell, Niklas Forsberg, Nora Kreft, Erich Hatala Matthes,

   Todd May, Hichem Naar, Arina Pismenny, Cynthia Pury, Paul Schofield, and Aaron Smuts. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. “Imagine that one day a young woman turns up of whom I discover that she is, and always has been, indistinguishable in every discernable physical, psychical, and behavioral respect from one of my beloved daughters. I would find that bewildering, and it would certainly distress and inhibit me in various ways. But however confusing and disruptive the circumstances might be, they would surely not lead me to conclude that I had all along been somehow wrong to love my daughter because I had erroneously supposed that there was no one quite like her.” [Harry Frankfurt, “On Caring”, p.169] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Grau, “Irreplaceability and Unique Value” in *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 32, nos. 1 & 2, 111-29, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Cf. Frankfurt, “The lover cannot coherently consider some other individual to be an adequate substitute for his beloved, regardless of how similar that individual may be to the one he loves. The person who is loved is loved for himself or for herself as such, and not as an instance of a type.” (Frankfurt, 2004, pp. 79–80) See also Frankfurt, “On Caring”, p.159; and Frankfurt, “Necessity, Volition, Love”, p.170. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Here I’m working with a fairly intuitive and standard notion of what counts as “intrinsic properties” – they just are the one’s that would reappear in an exact duplicate. I realize some philosophers define intrinsic properties differently. For more on this topic see “Defining Intrinsic”, Rae Langton and David Lewis, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LVIII, No.2. June 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. There are variations possible here: one could imagine the duplicate being intentionally created, a spontaneously-created statistical miracle “swampman”-style duplicate, a duplicate who has (until now) been living a duplicate life on Twin Earth, etc. The details of the case will be relevant if one holds certain criteria for personal identity (e.g. a Parfitian wide psychological criterion or a Nozick-style “closest continuer” criterion). In general, I’m assuming we are imagining duplicate cases in which the duplicate clearly does not count as numerically identical with the original. That’s why I’m calling it a duplicate. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. For more on projection (and Proust), see “Projected Love” by Rae Langton in *Understanding Love*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. “Sex and Solipsism”, Rae Langton. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Soble 1997a: 357 (“Irreplaceability”) (cited by Badwhar in “Love”). Also *The Structure of Love,* 1990: “the ordinary intuition [of irreplaceability] is merely an ordinary intuition, a bit of ideology about love. (298) Soble concludes “how could a rational beloved feel irreplaceable, or how could a rational love consider the beloved permanently irreplaceable? They do not.” (290). This dismissal of the reasonableness of irreplaceability by Soble is somewhat puzzling since he himself helps provide resources for making sense of valuing someone as unique without engaging in metaphysical illusions (see his earlier discussion on p.67). Simon Keller also seems to hold something like this view in “How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Properties” (APQ, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. LaFollette 1996, 49, Halwani 2010 79-81. I address LaFollette’s version of this complaint in “Love and History”. I discuss Pascal in “Irreplaceability and Unique Value”. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. I respond to Rorty’s claim in “Love and History” (*The Southern Journal of Philosophy,* vol. 48, no. 3,

    246-71), arguing that no such confusion need be present for someone to care about strong irreplaceability. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Persson, Ingmar. 2005. *The retreat of reason*. New York: Oxford University Press.  Brogaard, *On Romantic Love* (and her blog post), Halwani *Philosophy of Love, Sex, and Marriage*, and Neera Badwhar, “Friends as Ends in themselves” and the more recent essay “Love”. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Scruton, *Sexual Desire,* 136-137. He goes on to claim: “In so far as we could give an explanatory account of what one person gains from another in love and desire, it is clear that he might have gained that benefit equally from someone other than the person to whom he directs his attentions. But it is imperative that we do not think of this. If we do so, our enterprise is jeopardised. By such thoughts we threaten the possibility of any lasting human attachment. “ (Cited by Soble in “Irreplaceability”). It is unclear whether Ronald de Sousa holds this view or something closer to the arational position. He concludes his discussion of reasons for love with “love does not derive from reason, virtue, or Kantian core rationality. It is largely the offspring of chance, proximity, order of acquaintance, pheromone compatibility, genetic influences, and accidents of taste, transference, and habit. And it is none the worse for that.” (p.75) Elsewhere de Sousa refers to irreplaceability as a possibly delusive “ideology” (de Sousa, “Self Deceptive Emotions”, 695) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Kolodny, Niko. 2003. Love as valuing a relationship. *Philosophical Review* 112: 135–89. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Velleman, David. 1999. Love as a moral emotion. *Ethics* 109: 338–74  [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Gowans, Christopher. 1996. Intimacy, freedom, and unique value: A “Kantian” account

    of the irreplaceable and incomparable value of persons. *American Philosophical Quarterly*

    33: 75–89.   [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. As Linda Zagzebski puts the position in “The Uniqueness of Persons”, “Persons have irreplaceable value because of their incommunicable subjectivity.” (418) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Henley, Kenneth. 1977.“The Value of Individuals” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 37:345-352. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Millgram, Elijah. 2004. Kantian crystallization. *Ethics* 114: 511–13. See also Callcut, Daniel. 2005. Tough love. *Florida Philosophical Review* 5: 35–45  [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. These comments are derived from my invited response to Matthes’ essay on the blog PEA Soup. You can read my complete remarks and Matthes’ response to them there:  
    http://peasoup.typepad.com/peasoup/2013/11/ethics-discussions-at-pea-soup-erich-hatala-matthes-history-value-and-irreplaceability-with-précis-b.html [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. At one point on p.14 he is quite upfront about this, saying “I assume that she is referring to his identity or character (terms I’ll use interchangeably)…” This is surprising given that Frankfurt is clearly *not* taking the two notions to be synonymous. In correspondence Bagley has further clarified his position as follow: “One implication I’d want to embrace here—and which I push in my paper more generally--is that the concerns about irreplaceability Frankfurt expresses aren’t best understood as concerns about numerical identity in a metaphysical sense. They’re rather concerns about \*individuality\*, in an ethical or humanistic sense—about what it is to appreciate a person as ineluctably particular.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. “A Sensible Speciesism?” in *Philosophical Inquiries* (“Focus: The Legacy of Bernard Williams’ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*”), vol. 4, no. 1, 49-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. In “Love and History” I tried to convince skeptics by pointing to the *depth* of the attitude behind Strong Irreplaceability. (265-267) Here’s I’m focusing on the *breadth* of such attachments and their root in a more basic concern with individuals. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Thomas E. Hill, Jr. 1983. “Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments.” *Environmental Ethics*, 5: 211-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. “Attitudes Towards Reference and Replaceability” (with Cynthia Pury) in *The Review of Philosophy and Psychology.* vol. 5, no. 2, 155-168. See also "Love and Power: Grau and Pury (2014) as a Case Study in the Challenges of X-Phi Replication" (with Edouard Machery and Cynthia L. Pury) in *The Review of Philosophy and Psychology,* vol. 11, no. 4, 995-1011. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. This point is made in Gelman, Susan A. (2004). *The Essential Child*. New York: Oxford University Press.

    but extended and elaborated in Gelman, Susan A. (2013). Artifacts and essentialism. *Review of Philosophy and*

    *Psychology*. doi: 10.1007/s13164-013-0142-7 As she puts it in 2013: “I suggest that attention to object history is a domain-general capacity that serves as one of the foundations for psychological essentialism of animal kinds as well as concepts of individual artifacts.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. We see our results as providing further (indirect) support for Gelman’s claim, as such a domain-general capacity for tracking identity would help explain why Kripkeans tend to place importance on causal history in both the domain of linguistic reference and in emotional attachment to objects, animals, and persons as strongly irreplaceable. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)