

## Love's Commitments and Epistemic Ambivalence

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### Abstract

Can one reasonably doubt that one is voluntarily making a commitment, even when one *is* doing so? Given that one voluntarily makes a commitment if and only if one (personally) *knows* that one is doing so, the answer appears to be “No.” After all, knowing implies justifiably believing, and it seems impossible that one could (synchronically and from a single personal perspective) *reasonably* doubt what one *justifiably* believes. Indeed, assuming that one reasonably doubts that *P* only if one has sufficient evidence to believe that not-*P*, traditional epistemologists may hold that such “epistemic ambivalence” entails one’s believing a contradiction, while some Bayesians should hold that it entails violating “probabilism” (the norm that credences must conform to the axioms of probability). However, I argue that in at least some cases of *romantic* commitment-making, such ambivalence may not only be epistemically permissible, but even required, and perhaps best dealt with pragmatically.

“Do you love me?” Anyone who has asked (or been asked) that question in a romantic context knows how fraught it can be. Sometimes the response will be impulsive or flippant; other times – particularly in a long term relationship – it will be defensive or accusatory (“How could you even ask me such a thing?”). Rarely will it elicit the sort of careful consideration it deserves. After all, no matter what the response might be, it can radically alter both parties’ lives. Usually the inquirer expects an immediate answer, since they assume that the respondent should directly know not only what they are feeling, but also whether they are making the sorts of *commitment* required by romantic love.<sup>1</sup> At least among philosophers, this assumption may be underwritten by a view of privileged access to one’s own mental states. On some such views, if it reflectively *seems* to a rational person that they are committing themselves to some course of behavior, then, absent the satisfaction of any defeating conditions, they are justified in believing that they *are* so

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<sup>1</sup> I assume that romantic commitments are similar to, but weaker than, marital ones. My view of love here is similar to psychologist R. J. Sternberg’s (1986, 1997) “triangular theory”, which holds that types of love should be distinguished by certain combinations of passions, emotions, and commitments. However, what I call ‘romantic love’ Sternberg calls ‘consummate love’ (high degrees of all three components), and what he calls ‘romantic love’ I call ‘sexual friendship’ (passion and emotional intimacy without commitment). All references to love in this paper are to romantic love as I use those terms.

committing themselves. I accept such “fallibilistic foundationalism” regarding both reflective beliefs about one’s commitments and introspective beliefs about the types of one’s feelings.<sup>2</sup> Here I focus mainly on the former because, due to the nature of commitment-making, one’s beliefs about one’s commitments raise epistemic issues not raised by one’s beliefs about one’s feelings.<sup>3</sup> The question I explore here is whether an epistemically rational and logically capable person can *reasonably* doubt that they are making a commitment, even when they *know* that they are doing so. I argue that, at least in cases of romantic love, the answer is clearly ‘yes’, and when a lover experiences such “epistemic ambivalence”, it can indicate their epistemic rationality rather than irrationality.

To be somewhat more precise, the proposition I wish to defend is this:

RD (“reasonable doubt”): *One can reasonably doubt that one is voluntarily making romantic love’s commitments even when one is making them.*

RD immediately faces a problem that similar propositions about other sorts of mental state do not: it at least *seems* inconsistent with a conceptual truth “C” about commitment-making:

C: *One voluntarily makes a commitment if and only if one knows that one is doing so.*<sup>4</sup>

In (2021), I pointed out that, as a conceptual truth, C is useless in helping one determine whether one’s belief that one is making a commitment is true, since the belief could have been produced by some process other than commitment-making (such as by wishful thinking or self-deception). However, in that article I failed to note an initially troubling implication (“TI”) that follows from the conjunction of RD and C-

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<sup>2</sup> See Audi (2002) for a defense of such foundationalism.

<sup>3</sup> See Herzberg (2021) for epistemic issues raised by one’s beliefs about one’s emotional feelings.

<sup>4</sup> Proving C is trivial on highly plausible epistemological and semantic assumptions. For one cannot *voluntarily* do *anything* unless one knows what one is doing, and it follows from necessary conditions of knowledge that if one *knows* that one is Xing, then it is *true* that one is Xing and one *justifiably believes* that one is Xing.

TI: *One can reasonably doubt that which one knows (and hence justifiably believes) to be true.*<sup>5</sup>

For reasons I discuss below, TI may strike both traditional epistemologists and certain Bayesians as clearly false,<sup>6</sup> but I will argue that TI and RD are both true, that RD is consistent with C, and that the sort of epistemic ambivalence TI describes can be neither epistemically nor practically vicious.<sup>7</sup>

Let's begin by distinguishing between two sorts of reasonable doubt. *Conclusively reasonable doubt* requires one to have contextually sufficient evidence of *P*'s falsity. Such doubt is the mirror image of justified belief, which requires one to have sufficient evidence of *P*'s truth. By contrast, *inconclusively reasonable doubt* requires only that one justifiably believe that *P*'s grounds are unsound or uncogent or defeated by more convincing evidence.<sup>8</sup> In criminal trials in the United States, this is all that is legally needed to find the defendant "not guilty." Since TI is most troubling when the reasonable doubt is conclusive, all references to reasonable doubt in what follows will be to the conclusive variety.

I can now explain why traditional epistemologists should hold TI to be troubling. Since reasonably doubting that *P* (here, 'I am making a commitment') is epistemically equivalent to justifiably believing that not-*P* ('I am not making a commitment'), reasonably doubting while justifiably believing that *P* seems to entail one's believing a contradiction, which any logically capable person knows *a priori* must be false. So, traditional epistemologists may conclude, an

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Evan Williams for bringing this troubling implication to my attention.

<sup>6</sup> For present purposes, "traditional" epistemologists are simply those who do not rely on the notion of *degree of belief* or *level of confidence* or *credence* to the same extent as do at least subjectivistic Bayesians.

<sup>7</sup> Note that "epistemic ambivalence" is not epistemic *akrasia*, a state in which one believes that *P* despite also believing (perhaps at a different level of cognition) that there is insufficient evidence for believing that *P*. See Owens (2002) for an argument that such *akrasia* (when analyzed in a particular way) is impossible. In our case, one believes that there is sufficient evidence for believing that *P* and that there is sufficient evidence for believing not-*P* (or for doubting that *P*).

<sup>8</sup> Where one has *insufficient* evidence of *P*'s *truth* or *falsity*, it is rational to suspend both belief and doubt in favor of merely *entertaining* that *P*. But, as I will argue, that is not the case here.

epistemically rational and logically capable person finding themselves in this embarrassing situation should immediately suspend both their doubt *and* their belief.

Bayesian epistemologists should hold TI to be troubling for additional reasons as well, based on their assumptions about how beliefs, credences (confidence levels), and subjectively assigned probabilities are related to each other. On these assumptions, *justifiably believing* that  $P$  requires one to have access to evidence of  $P$ 's truth sufficient to support one's believing that  $P$  with a credence  $>.5$ , while *reasonably doubting* that  $P$  requires one to have access to evidence of  $P$ 's falsity sufficient to support one's believing that not- $P$  with a credence  $>.5$ . It follows that reasonably doubting while justifiably believing that  $P$  places one in a credence state  $> 1$  relative to  $P$  and its negation, violating the Bayesian norm that one's credences in contradictory propositions must not exceed 1 (since credences must conform to the axioms of probability – a view known as “probabilism”).<sup>9</sup>

To address these concerns, we need to examine both the *reasonableness* of the lover's doubt and the *justification* of their belief. In the case I discussed in (2021), the lover's doubt is grounded in their knowledge of their previous failed attempts at commitment-makings (perhaps as evidenced by their immediate failures to *keep* the relevant commitments).<sup>10</sup> More importantly, their doubt is additionally grounded in their plausible view that their strong sexual attraction to their beloved, as well as their strong standing desire to be loved by someone they love, probably bias their reflective judgment that they are making love's commitments. Recognizing one's own

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<sup>9</sup> According to probabilism, if one believes that  $P$  with a credence = .51, the maximum credence one may assign to not- $P$  is .49. Otherwise, according to “dutch book” arguments, one is liable to make bets that will lead to losses. However, strong versions of probabilism are plagued by the “problem of idealization” (see, e.g., Foley 1990); most of us are unable to non-arbitrarily assign precise probabilities to the contents of most of our beliefs. It is also controversial that epistemic rationality should be constrained by the practical consequences on which dutch book arguments rely (see Lin 2022, Section 1.6).

<sup>10</sup> I recognize of course that *making* a commitment is distinct from *keeping* that commitment, and hence that failure to act in accord with a commitment is only an indication (and not a criterion) that one has failed to make it.

biases is surely a key constituent of epistemic rationality, as is admitting that one can be liable to self-deception in cases where one's passions run strong.<sup>11</sup> So, where *P* is the proposition 'I am now making romantic love's commitments' (which is a necessary and intended implication of the statement 'I love you' when it is sincerely stated in a romantic context), these factors provide our lover with evidence of *P*'s falsity sufficient to support believing that not-*P* with a credence > .5. For traditional epistemologists, they provide the lover with sufficient evidence that 'I love you' is false (even though in our case it is actually true).

One may object that this description of the case fails to take into account that sincerely stating 'I love you' in a romantic context (understanding the commitments such love requires) *just is* to make the commitments. However, I reject such a *performative* view of commitment-making in favor of a *volitional* view on which commitment-making requires an *act of will* in which the commitment-maker forms an *intention to keep* the commitments.<sup>12</sup> When successful, this act produces a stable psychological disposition to behave in ways that are in accord with the commitments.<sup>13</sup> Note that this volitional view does *not* imply that one is *not* morally obligated to act in accord with one's mere *statements* of commitment (regardless of whether they are sincere or not). If one tells another "I hereby promise to X", then one *does* obligate oneself to X. But this fact about moral obligation has no bearing on the psychodynamics of commitment making *per se*.

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<sup>11</sup> Note that the possibility of self-deception grounds a proposition that is less controversial than RD, namely FB (for "false belief"): *one can falsely believe that one is making a commitment when one is not making it*. Unlike RD, FB is clearly and obviously consistent with C. But one's recognition of FB provides one with a ground for RD.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this sort of volitional view, see Davenport (2007).

<sup>13</sup> One can *be committed* without *making* the commitment if one independently has such a disposition to behave in accord with it.

Counterbalancing the epistemically ambivalent lover's reasonable doubt is their (true) belief that they *are* making love's commitments, just as, on reflection, they seem to be doing. Fallibilistic foundationalism about reflection provides this belief's default justification, but this *a priori* entitlement may often be supplemented *a posteriori* by the lover's present awareness of a "feeling of resolve" that they justifiably believe to have accompanied previous commitment-makings in non-romantic cases, which they had, and continue to have, no good reason to doubt. Since our lover presumably accepts fallibilistic foundationalism about introspection in addition to reflection, they justifiably treat this feeling of resolve as a reliable indicator that they are indeed making the relevant commitments.

Now, do the lover's grounds for doubt defeat their grounds for belief, or vice versa? Not as far as I can see. The lover's knowledge of their problematic history and of the likely biasing influence of their passions is surely consistent with their evidence that they are currently making a commitment. Similarly, the lover's grounds for believing that they are making a commitment do not defeat their grounds for doubt; rather, their fallibilistic foundationalism about reflection and introspection is just as useful in grounding their doubt as it is in justifying their belief, and their belief that they are experiencing a feeling of resolve rests on the same *a posteriori* ground as their belief that they are strongly sexually attracted to their beloved.<sup>14</sup> The two subsets of evidence are clearly consistent with each other. Nor, as far as I can see, is there any explanatory incoherence here, assuming a psychology of motivation sophisticated enough to allow for self-deception.

So do these considerations vindicate TI – the initially troubling proposition that one can *reasonably* doubt that which one *knows* and hence *justifiably believes* to be true? From the point

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, the lover's belief that they are sexually attracted to their beloved may have other grounds as well, such as the lover's observations of their own physiological responses to their beloved.

of view of traditional epistemology, doesn't such ambivalence require the lover to impermissibly believe a contradiction? I think not. The lover justifiably believes 'I am making a commitment' on one subset of evidence, and they justifiably believe 'I am not making a commitment' on an independent subset of evidence, but they need not further believe 'I both am and am not making a commitment'.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the epistemically rational and logically capable believer knows *a priori* that *one* of their justified beliefs *must* be false; the problem is that they presently have no way of determining which one. Note that it is on *epistemically rational* grounds that they believe that *P* and *independently* believe that not-*P*, while it is on *logical* grounds that they refuse to believe the contradiction. But there is no purely logical ground for refusing to believe that *P*, nor for refusing to believe that not-*P*. Continuing to believe that *P* on one set of evidential grounds and to believe that not-*P* on an independent set of evidential grounds, while refusing to believe that *P* and not-*P* on logical grounds, seems to me to be precisely what an optimally rational agent in this situation should do. Of course, they should certainly recognize the inter-normative conflict (between logic and epistemic rationality) here, along with the obvious fact that at least one of their beliefs must be false, but beyond that they should recognize and (for the time being) *endorse* their epistemic ambivalence, even if they should also start to search for a way to resolve it.

If we shift now to the Bayesian viewpoint, these considerations help to explain how RD can be consistent with C. Given the lover's reasonable doubt that they are making a commitment, it would be irrational for them to be *certain* that they are doing so. But C requires only that one *knows* that one is making a commitment whenever one is doing so; it does not require one to adopt an attitude of *certainty* towards that knowledge, nor does it even require one to assign a

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<sup>15</sup> Can this claim be supported by the fact that belief ascriptions are intensional contexts? I think not, for the present case has nothing to do with the believer not recognizing the co-referentiality of any terms.

particular level of credence to it (other than that it must be greater than .5, perhaps).<sup>16</sup> Even if the lover's knowledge that their two subsets of evidence imply contradictory conclusions should lead them to assign to both their doubt and their belief levels of confidence lower than they would assign to either one in isolation, I see no reason why those levels *must* be  $\leq .5$  (absent a dogmatic adherence to strong probabilism).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, assigning such a low level of confidence to either the doubt or the belief could fail to properly recognize the strength of the evidence supporting each. So this is a case in which epistemic ambivalence should be viewed not only as epistemically permissible, but even as *prescribed*.<sup>18</sup>

Support for this view can be drawn from Amaya's (2021) argument that, at least in legal contexts, a decision-maker's epistemic ambivalence can indicate their epistemic *virtuosity*. Of the five types of ambivalence she discusses, "dual-cognition ambivalence" (in which one believes that *P* and synchronically believes that *not-P*) most closely matches the sort of ambivalence we have been discussing.<sup>19</sup> Amaya characterizes such ambivalence as typically stemming from a conflict between *explicit* (consciously held) and *implicit* (unconsciously held but behaviorally evident) beliefs, while in the case that concerns us both the belief and the doubt

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<sup>16</sup> Lam and Sherman (2020, 98) may disagree, since they assume that "...if you know that *P*, the matter of whether *P* is epistemically settled", and that "When the evidence is deemed sufficient, the question is taken to be settled." If I am right, whenever one's confidence level in one's knowledge falls short of certainty, one rationally may consider "the question" to be *open* and *unsettled* despite one's willingness to affirm one's knowledge *per se*. Indeed, it seems to me that one's being open to the possibility that what one takes to be knowledge may not be knowledge (even when it *is* knowledge) is epistemically virtuous. In any case, I simply do not *define* 'epistemically open question' and 'epistemically unsettled' in such a way as to exclude propositions that one *knows*.

<sup>17</sup> See footnote 9 above.

<sup>18</sup> Note that I have made no reference here to *externalism* about justification or knowledge, which would allow the lover to know that they are making a commitment while not *personally* knowing that they know this. While such externalism would offer a relatively easy way of understanding the lover's epistemic ambivalence, it would violate at least the spirit of C, which clearly presupposes internalism about justification and knowledge. It is what the agent personally knows that is crucial to their actual commitment-making, not whether their belief that they are making a commitment satisfies some impersonal conditions of knowledge (unbeknownst to them).

<sup>19</sup> The other four types of epistemic ambivalence Amaya discusses stem from other sorts of ambivalence-creating influence: "normative-driven ambivalence", where one interprets a normative term (like 'abuse') from differing cultural perspectives, as well as "multiple-identities ambivalence", "group-based ambivalence" and the closely related "role-based ambivalence".



are explicitly held within a single personal perspective. However, I see no reason why she would need to rule out such fully explicit cases.

Amaya argues that while epistemic ambivalence can create anguish for decision-makers, it also has been associated with cognitive benefits. Citing a few empirical studies,<sup>20</sup> she writes-

Ambivalence is associated with more elaborate processing of relevant information, increased receptivity to alternatives, and more balanced and accurate judgment and decision-making. When properly identified, it triggers deliberation of relevant contextual information, increased receptivity to alternatives, and more balanced and accurate judgment and decision-making. There is also a negative relationship between a disposition to be ambivalent and attribution biases in person perception, specifically, correspondence bias and self-serving bias. (Amaya 2021, 12)

So, in the right sorts of circumstance, epistemic ambivalence apparently indicates a virtuous epistemic character. Amaya also suggests several ways of trying to *resolve* such ambivalence, by drawing on other intellectual virtues. For example, if one can “buy time” without procrastinating, one may be able to engage in what she calls “unbiased systematic processing”. In our case, the lover may be able to weaken their initially reasonable doubt by considering possible disanalogies between their past and current circumstances. For example, they may come to recognize that although they succumbed to the biasing influence of their passions in the past, they are now more mature, have a less intense sex drive, have found a more suitable romantic partner, and so on.<sup>21</sup>

For all of these reasons, *doubting what one knows to be true* need not always entail some kind of epistemic irrationality; one can *reasonably* doubt what one knows to be true. Admittedly, the circumstances required for such reasonableness (like roughly equal and positive confidence

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<sup>20</sup> In Amaya’s article, each sentence of this excerpt includes a citation. For the first, van Harreveld, Nohlen and Schneider (2015), p. 19, and Rees et al. (2013). For the second, Guarana and Hernández (2016). For the third, Sheneider et al. (2021). The most relevant study for our purposes is Guarana and Hernández’s; the others focus primarily on emotional rather than cognitive ambivalence.

<sup>21</sup> On Amaya’s view, other epistemic virtues may also help one to deal with one’s ambivalence, including *open-mindedness* (which enables the ambivalence in the first place), *intellectual patience and perseverance* (so that one does not rush to judgment), and *intellectual vitality* (required to exercise the other virtues). It may be the case that reasonable doubt is consistent with knowledge only to the extent that one exercises these epistemic virtues.

levels in both one's knowledge and one's doubt) may occur only infrequently; how commonly they do occur is an open empirical question. However, I believe that they are more likely to occur in the context of romantic love than in other contexts, thanks to the potentially unstable structure of the romantic "triangle" of passion, emotion, and commitment. In particular, the passion component may provide much of the justification for one's doubting the satisfaction of the commitment requirement, even though both are needed for romantic love to exist.

Finally, assuming that our epistemically ambivalent lover *cannot* buy time sufficient to engage in "unbiased systematic processing", how should they respond to the question "Do you love me?" when it is posed to them by their beloved? Perhaps the most honest response would be to say something like, "Well, I have good reasons to think that I do, but I also have good reasons to think that I don't," and then to helplessly watch the likely love of their life walk away broken-hearted. But I will close by briefly considering a more pragmatic approach.

William James (1896) famously argued that when one is faced with a "genuine option" of choosing between two contradictory views that one's intellect cannot decide, one should allow one's passions to decide. He defined a *genuine* option as one that is *living*, in the sense that both views strike one as being *possibly true*; *forced*, in the sense that *not choosing* would have the same practical consequences as accepting one of the hypotheses; and *momentous* in the sense that one has a personal stake in the outcome (*trivial* options being those that usually concern scientists or philosophers when they try to decide between abstract views that lack personal importance). In our case, given that one strongly desires to love and to be loved, the decision is clearly *momentous*. It could also be *forced*, as long as one believes that the person asking the question is likely to react as negatively to one's expression of epistemic ambivalence as they are to one's expression of doubt. Finally, one's epistemic ambivalence by itself shows that one's

intellect cannot at the moment decide the issue on its own (although James may have wished to restrict this form of argument to metaphysical propositions for which he believed there could be no evidence of truth or falsity).

Allowing one's passions to determine one's actions in romantic cases like ours has its risks, of course. If one decides to act on one's justified belief that one is making a commitment when one is actually deceiving oneself, one may well be dooming any resulting relationship. And if one decides to act on one's reasonable doubt despite one's actually loving their beloved, one may be depriving both parties of a valuable relationship. These concerns may raise moral issues James did not have to deal with when he allowed his passions to dictate his decision to accept "the religious hypothesis" or the doctrine of indeterminism. But we will have to deal with those moral issues another day.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Existentialism offers another way of dealing with the situation, even given the moral issues. Jean-Paul Sartre (1946) famously discusses the case of a former student faced with the difficult choice of remaining with his mother to help her survive World War II, versus enlisting in the army to help his countrymen defeat the Nazis. The student has what seems to him to be equally strong grounds for each incompatible course of action. Perhaps his passions push him equally strongly in opposite directions as well (so that James' approach to settling the issue would result in a stalemate). Sartre argues that the anguish such ambivalence produces cannot be *avoided* without bad faith (e.g., by convincing oneself that one or the other choice is forced upon one). Sartre seems to be arguing that the only *authentic* choice in this sort of situation would be one that the student recognizes must be made on *no basis at all*. The *grounds* for either choice cancel out, and he must allow himself to make the choice freely and spontaneously, accepting his full responsibility. In our case, where one *is* committing oneself despite one's doubt, it seems that one's actual commitment might manifest itself through a perhaps impulsive sounding "Yes!".

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