

7 Three Stages of Love, Narrative, and Self-Understanding

Pilar Lopez-Cantero

The idea that love changes who we are is widely shared and has been mostly explored from a stance in the middle stage of love (i.e., when people already love each other). But how do we get there? And what happens when love ends? In this chapter, I explore how self-understanding may be shaped in different ways at different stages of love through the notions of narrative and existential feeling. As I will argue, love gains narrative momentum at the beginning, which is maintained during the middle and ultimately extinguished at the end. This momentum is triggered and later sustained by the existential feeling that ‘things make sense’, which keeps the lovers oriented toward each other.

7.1 Prologue: Preliminary Distinctions

Love, and specifically the chosen, reciprocal love characteristic of romantic relationships and friendships, is a paradigmatic scenario for the relational shaping of self-understanding.¹ From Plato’s conception of love as a merging of identities to current views on the phenomena, the idea that love shapes who we are is a foundational principle in the philosophy of love.

Here, I generally subscribe to the view on love offered by Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett (1998). Cocking and Kennett argue that love changes self-understanding, and that openness to these changes is a necessary condition for a relationship to be a loving one. Love changes the lover through what they call “interpretation” and “direction”. According to Cocking and Kennett (1998, 524), the people we love reveal to us new beliefs about our actions and characters that we eventually interiorize—that is the ‘interpretation’ aspect. Also, loving someone ‘directs’ us toward certain actions which end shaping our self-concept (Cocking and Kennett 1998, 503–504). Thus, love not only affects self-understanding directly by providing us with (beliefs conducive to) self-knowledge, but also indirectly by influencing what we do (which, in turn influences what we think about ourselves).

With respect to narrative, I will use Peter Goldie’s definition (2012, 2), a narrative is the representation of a succession of events that unfold

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over time, which results from the selection and interpretation of certain features of those events and that has emotional import. Narratives may be told to others or thought through; they do not need to be explicit, and they can be either about the past, the present or the future. There is a long-standing discussion in contemporary philosophy on the role of narratives for self-understanding; from the strong view of requiring coherent narratives about one's overarching life story to the complete rejection of the contribution of narratives to self-understanding. I subscribe here to Goldie's account of narrativity, which I see as an intermediate position that avoids both extremes, as well as having empirical backing (McAdams 1995; Dunlop 2015). Namely, according to this moderate position, creating narratives about ourselves is *a* (not *the only*) route to self-understanding. In other words, people may not formulate an overarching life story, but often have *a number of* narratives (besides from other sources) that may be crucial for their self-understanding.

These self-narratives are formulated through what Goldie calls *narrative thinking*. For example, a person may recollect her gender transition: her childhood feelings about gender, working on getting family support, the first visit to the gender clinic, the euphoria at seeing herself as she always wanted. Goldie refers to this as 'narrative thinking about one's past'. One can also formulate narratives about what may happen next. Goldie describes this latter projection as 'narrative thinking about one's future' through the formulation of branching possibilities; "narrative representations of possible ways in which events might come to pass" (2012, 77).

Another feature of narrative thinking is that of 'dramatic irony'. According to Goldie, in narrativizing about our own past and future we are able to inhabit both the perspective of the protagonist of the narrative ("internal perspective") and the perspective of the narrator ("external perspective") (Goldie 2012, 26–30). This means that we are able to formulate how we felt or will feel about certain events, actions, or emotional experiences as the person who experiences them while acknowledging how we feel about those events as an observer. The external narrator is not an *impartial* observer: felt experiences are a fundamental component of narrative thinking, given the emotional import of narratives. Thus, the recollection of past narratives is influenced by how the person feels about them in the present: "[a person]'s memories and thoughts about his past can be colored by [the person]'s reactive attitude towards his past" (Goldie 2012, 134). The same can be said about projections into the future.²

The notions of narrative and narrative thinking are very useful for the analysis of love and its effects on self-understanding, given that love belongs to a category of emotional phenomena that, like grief (Goldie 2012) or resentment (Oatley 2009),, unfold over time. Bennett Helm (2010), who sees love as a pattern of emotional commitments, and other philosophers of emotion who see love as a syndrome (de Sousa 2015;

Pismenny and Prinz 2017) or a disposition (Naar 2013) also endorse this conception of love as a temporal continuum implicitly or explicitly. In recent times, several authors have drawn specific links between narrative and love. Karen Jones argues that an individual can only be taken to be in love at a given moment if that event is embedded in a love narrative—in her words, an “interpretation-sensitive trajectory” (2008, 274). This point is also raised by Troy Jollimore (2022), who points out that romantic relationships are a distinctive narrative genre.

Most notably, Marya Schechtman (2021) identifies three shared features between romantic relationships and narratives. Firstly, according to Schechtman, narratives and romantic relationships are limited wholes with a beginning, a middle, and an end (2021, 28). Thus, it makes sense to talk about ‘love narratives’. Secondly, relationships and narratives are characterized by what she calls “diachronic holism” (2021, 31): there is a sense in which the present is experienced with relation to the past and the future (Jollimore 2022, 93–104 also discusses this). Thirdly, when experiencing love in a romantic relationship and when going through a narrative, we inhabit several perspectives at the same time: Schechtman (2021, 34) calls this “mental time travel” between the future, past, and present; this time travelling occurs both in romantic relationships and in narratives. Thus, Schechtman incorporates the ability to inhabit multiple perspectives identified by Goldie and shows that this ability is exercised during a romantic relationship. Her focus is on the element of temporality that both narratives and love have. Not only Schechtman but also Jollimore and Jones are mainly interested in the *shape* of love and how acknowledging its structure (in this case, its narrative shape) can offer new insights into the definition of love. Here, my aim is not to defend the narrative structure love has, or to determine the similarities and differences between love narratives and fictional narratives, for example. Instead, I take this structure for granted to explore how reciprocated love narratives with a beginning, middle, and end may affect self-understanding in specific way in each of these stages, drawing from insights on philosophy of emotion and narrative theory.

7.2 The Beginning

The beginning of love, popularly known as ‘falling in love’, has often been misrepresented by philosophers, who have considered it an irrational and/or unjustified process that should be overcome. I have disputed this view of falling in love elsewhere and argued that this approach mistakenly identifies irrationality (‘head in the clouds’, being unable to do anything else) as a feature of the process of falling in love, instead of acknowledging that this is just a popular assumption that does not stand up to philosophical scrutiny (Lopez-Cantero 2022). For my purposes here, it suffices to say that falling in love can take many forms other than

the ‘head in the clouds’ exaggerated caricature portrayed by some of these philosophers. Although it is an emotionally significant period and focused attention is directed toward the loved person, this heightening of emotion and focusing of attention need not be excessive or irrational.

What interests me here is the change in self-understanding at the beginning of love. We may accept that love changes the lovers’ self-understandings; but how do we get there? There are three possible answers to this question. The first option would be to see the beginning of love as a radical, sudden change to one’s self-understanding. Mary Jean Walker has an illuminating description of such change:

Take a case in which a person undergoes a sudden religious conversion. This occasions significant alterations to her traits, goals, plans of action, moral orientation, and self-conception. The conversion precipitates changes in the convert’s characteristics, and the relations she takes up toward them. These effect alterations in her approach to the world and how she organizes her experience. She re-interprets her past, and her expectations for her future, developing a ‘new narrative’ about herself. Different features of her experience become salient to her, and her behavior alters in ways that reflect this. As she enacts her new self-understanding, she constitutes herself as a different person in the characterization sense, from the point of conversion onwards.

(Walker 2018, 5)

This could be an accurate description of what has traditionally been called ‘love at first sight’. Whether we can call this experience a genuine example of love has been disputed (Maurer 2014). Determining whether love at first sight is or not genuine love is not relevant here.³ What is important is that this experience is simply not generalizable. As I said above, it is important to not confuse tropes about falling in love with actually universalizable features of the phenomenon. Many (probably most) people do not fall in love at first sight, and they do not experience overnight changes in their self-understanding. Instead, they develop these changes throughout the relationship, through a pattern of emotions, actions, and beliefs that are shared in interaction and mutually shape the lovers. This means that we may understand the beginning of love not as a sudden change of one’s self-concept, but as the trigger for the change that begins to be built over time.

A second option would be to explain falling in love through self-ascription, i.e., as the result of the formulation of the belief that one is falling, or has fallen, in love. The claim that interpreting one’s own emotional states may determine the nature of the state itself has some traction in several strands of philosophy (Moran 1988) and is a common view for feminist philosophers and others discussing politics and

emotion (Scheman 1980; Colombetti 2009; Furtak 2018). With regard to love, Robert Solomon states that people “sometimes ‘discover’ that they are in love, but the critical point is that their love is fully realized only once they *recognize* that they are in love” (2007, 227, emphasis mine). Anna Bortolan (2020, 218) makes a direct connection between self-ascription, narrative, and the determination of our emotional experiences: “by thinking or telling a story about our emotions, we take a reflective stance toward our experience, and this enables us to exert an influence on its development”. This is thanks to the interpretative and emotional components of narrative, given that by reflecting on one’s emotional experiences one can interpret whether they are and feel good, appropriate, or fitting. The realization that an emotional experience is of a certain kind or feels a certain way gives rise to a tendency to act in ways that reinforce that judgment. Like Jones says, “conceptualizing one’s experience under the description ‘love’ and believing that response to be warranted is likely to bring about that one’s experience in fact has the kind of shape needed to count as love” (2008, 274).

In other words, we may say that through self-ascription a love narrative acquires what Doug McConnell (2016a) calls *narrative momentum*: a dramatic force that keeps a narrative going. As long as a narrative has momentum, McConnell says, “some futures make more sense than others, and we are inclined to enact our self-narratives so that they make sense” (2016a, 308). McConnell’s discussion focuses on people in recovery from drug addiction, with the aim to explain how sufferers can use re-interpretations of their self-concepts in order to overcome the momentum of their present self-ascribed narrative of ‘being an addict’. For example, a sufferer from drug addiction can look at her past history and re-interpret her current and past usage as a way to overcome a painful loss, and not as part of a narrative of “self-indulgent disgrace” (McConnell 2016a, 316). While his example is past-directed, we can also apply momentum to a future-directed scenario that may be localized in an episode, or part of a process of narrative recognition of one’s own experience. For example, think of someone who signs up to do a PhD in philosophy: this decision gives momentum to the self-narrative of ‘having an academic career in philosophy’. This narrative keeps its momentum when the person defends their thesis, applies to academic jobs, gets a research grant, etcetera.⁴ We could also think further back to the moment where the person realizes that they want to be an academic philosopher. They may notice how thrilling their philosophy classes are, how bored they are when talking with people about other topics, the annoyance they are creating by using the Socratic method at dinners, etcetera. By reflecting on these experiences, they may come to the realization: ‘philosophy is what I want to do’.

The tentative claim here could then be that the self-ascription ‘I am falling/have fallen in love’ triggers the change of self-understanding that

love entails by giving momentum to a love narrative. However, this gives rise to the worry that we may have gone a little too far from the folk conception of what falling in love is. In the effort to temper the tropes of the beginning of love as a period of irrationality and obsession, we may have given too much control to the person falling in love, who is seemingly able to bring about their own love narrative through observation and self-reflection. More importantly, if we limit ourselves to the tentative claim, we would be missing a very important aspect of the period of falling in love: its emotional intensity. This does not mean that we need to give up the tentative claim; only that we need to fill in the emotional dimension of the experience.

In Section 7.1, I referred to Goldie's notion of narrative thinking about the future, and how it consists of contemplating narrative representations of possible ways in which events might come to pass (2012, 77). We can imagine the person falling in love formulating some of these branching possibilities: 'they will say that they feel the same and we will move in together immediately', or 'they will try to get away but finally love will triumph', and so on. This will create a large amount of anticipation. Anticipation charges experiences emotionally (in the shape not only of hope, but also of fear and anxiety). David Velleman sees anticipation as a fundamental element of narratives. For Velleman, narratives have what he calls "emotional cadence" (2006, 198); which here we can understand as a sense anticipation for the payoff of the sort of life projects that correspond with certain narrative arcs--for example 'finding the love of your life', 'living a great love story', 'finally being happy' or 'not being alone anymore'.

Anticipation, however, does not capture the particularly intense and significant emotional dimension of the experience of falling in love. When one is falling in love, one experiences feelings of 'things making sense', or 'things being right' that are stronger than a mere sense of resolution. Feeling that 'things make sense' is to feel like the world of one's experience has acquired a new dimension that is meaningful. This is not an easy concept to understand, so let us go back to the notion of future possibilities. Branching out is something that we do all the time, both about transcendent and mundane experiences. For example, in a particularly dramatic moment of our career, we may think about the future, considering different narratives of how our lives may go if we make a specific decision. But also, coming back home in the underground after partying too hard, we may think about how badly the following day may go with hangover. In both of these scenarios (transcendent and mundane, respectively) we are considering future possibilities with respect to existent narratives in our lives. Falling in love is different from these, because the beginning of love in fact opens *a whole new branch* of possibilities; a whole new narrative. Before falling in love with a specific person, there was no branch of possibilities to imagine, no possible future narrative of loving that person. When Goldie talks about imagining branches of possibilities, they have

to do with circumstances that branch from a present that remains relatively consistent. But falling in love is a disruption of that present, precisely because it reveals a new branch of possibilities that was not there before. This new branch is existentially charged, that is, it feels like they give one's life a dimension that it did not have before.

This kind of emotional experience is what Matthew Ratcliffe has called 'existential feelings'. An existential feeling is "a phenomenologically distinctive group of feelings, which are not specifically focused and instead constitute an all-enveloping sense of reality and belonging" (Ratcliffe 2016, 170). Existential feelings have to do with openness to what is possible, and although they are emotional experiences, they are not feelings *about* something. That is, they are pre-intentional affective background orientations, and as such they shape our motivations, mental states, and actions.⁵

That description seems to capture well the emotional significance of the beginning of love. Ratcliffe counts as an existential feeling the self-report of when "things just don't feel right" (2008, 68). This is to be distinguished from a feeling of dissatisfaction or unhappiness: one may be unhappy momentarily or about a sphere in one's life, while the feeling that things are not fine entails a whole way of experiencing the world. I think it would not be unjustified to say that the feeling of 'things feel just right', or 'things just make perfect sense' is its counterpart—and thus also an existential feeling. The idea of some experiences entailing the emergence of a whole new branch of possibilities is also captured by Ratcliffe on a discussion of, precisely, religious conversion:

[A] world that is drained of life... can be shaken up to reveal a different and wider space of possibility, something more, something greater.

(Ratcliffe 2008, 74)

Ratcliffe also draws a connection between existential feelings and narrative, considering these different aspects of experience that cannot be disentangled from one another (2016, 170; 179). Thus, in cases where the feeling itself is not sufficient to individuate an experience, narrative can assist in formulating and establishing what that experience is. This is what I believe completes the tentative claim above, since now we have a direct connection between self-ascription and narrative momentum without neglecting the emotional component at the beginning of love. We arrive then at the final claim of this section that captures how love affects self-understanding in its initial phase: the beginning of love creates a whole new branch of future possibilities, and this (a) is experienced as the existential feeling that 'things make sense' (which from now in I call 'existential feeling of intelligibility') and (b) gives narrative momentum to the love narrative.

Once love acquires narrative momentum, it progressively establishes itself as an affective background orientation. Love is one of the spaces of the lovers' experiences where they feel 'at home', belonging and a sense of reality. Here it is useful to bring in Jussi Saarinen's (2014) distinction between two kinds of existential feeling in order to differentiate how we go from kick-starting the narrative momentum to the maintenance of narrative momentum during the middle stage of love. Saarinen is concerned with "oceanic feeling", or the emotional experience of the diffusion of the boundaries of the self in the face of the experience of oneness (2014, 198), which he considers a type of existential feeling (2014, 197). I do not apply here his definition of existential feeling, but his taxonomy only (i.e., I remain agnostic on whether love can be defined in terms of oneness and diffusion of the boundaries of the self). Saarinen distinguishes between episodic and permanent existential feeling. Episodic existential feeling consists in the experience of a shift in existential feeling. Ratcliffe's example of a religious conversion above is an example of the sort of shift Saarinen discusses. Then, permanent existential feelings are "stable existential orientations" (Saarinen 2014, 197) which are more akin to how existential feelings are mostly discussed, that is, in terms of an affective background orientation. If we take out the episodic factor, which I already explained cannot be universalized in the case of love (recall Walker's conversion case), we can understand the transitions from the beginning to the middle of love as the transition between the shift in existential feeling to the establishment an affective background orientation. Although more needs to be said on whether love itself is as an existential feeling, enabled or partly constituted by the existential feeling of intelligibility, it is hardly a controversial claim to say that love is a fundamental point of orientation in people's lives (Wolf 2015, 195; Ratcliffe 2013 602; Lopez-Cantero and Archer 2020, 522). Here I remain agnostic on that issue and simply claim that the existential feeling of intelligibility is a component of love that enables love's momentum, and hence the lovers' orientation toward each other.⁶ Let us then look at how narrative theory can help us understand how this orientation remains stable throughout the middle stage of love; or in other words, how momentum is maintained throughout the love narrative.

7.3 The Middle

The middle of love is the stage that dominates the debate on the nature of love. With a few exceptions, when philosophers ask 'what is love?', they are mostly looking at the period in which people already love each other, and not at the beginning or the end. When philosophers say that love changes our self-understanding, they also overwhelmingly refer to the middle stage. Even the ones I mentioned above who have highlighted the pattern-like or narrative structure of love are speaking from a stance

of people who love each other in the present (i.e., not people that are starting to love each other, or losing their love for each other). I will not offer here a summary of the different theories on the nature of love, or defend a specific view: as I say at the beginning, I side with the group of accounts that see love as entailing a change to self-understanding. I take Cocking and Kennett as model because I consider their view as largely compatible with most authors in that group.⁷

I briefly described Cocking and Kennett's view above, so let us expand it here with an example of what they mean by interpretation and direction by looking at an imaginary couple, Emma and Seb. In virtue of being in love with Seb, Seb's interests will *direct* Emma toward certain actions; for example, going hiking. Emma will go hiking with Seb in virtue of that being one of Seb's interests, and that may result in hiking becoming one of Emma's hobbies—which in turn may make its way into her self-concept. Seb may tell Emma that she is very funny, which is something that she was oblivious to, and Emma may acquire self-understanding through Seb's *interpretation*: not by incorporating something completely new in her life, like hiking, but by accessing a re-interpretation of what was already there. As I said before, Cocking and Kennett (1998, 506) believe that direction and interpretation are both constitutive and necessary elements of love: they (at least partly) define what love *is* and they provide for defeating conditions for any particular candidate as an instance of love (i.e., if there is no openness to be mutually directed and interpreted, there is no love). In other words, Seb and Emma doing this means they love each other, and they do it because they love each other. However, we do not know why they *continue* accepting each other's direction and interpretation, unless love provides justification for its own continuation. That love justifies itself is true in a sense, if we bring back the notions of narrative momentum and existential feeling. Recall that for McConnell and for Jones, having a certain self-narrative itself directs oneself toward actions, thoughts, and emotions that will ensure the persistence of such self-narrative; and that following Ratcliffe, Bortolan, and Saarinen, momentum is maintained by a (permanent) existential feeling that keeps the lovers oriented toward the branches of possibilities that continue love. Nevertheless, I think here narrative theory can help offering further justification for the persistence of love.

In Section 7.1 I said that one of my assumptions is that self-understanding is constituted by beliefs about ourselves, and that self-understanding is a constitutive aim of action, which in turn influences our beliefs about ourselves. Walker (2012) portrays this idea clearly when she says that the self-concept

encapsulates our reasons for action, since these reasons are related to our understanding of our selves and our pasts. Thus, it frames and guides our decisions about how to act. Our narrative self-conception

thus feeds into behavior [sic] ... There are thus causal connections in both directions between how one's life goes, and one's narrative self-understanding.

(Walker 2012, 65)

What Walker is saying here is that there is a feedback loop between our self-concept and our actions. Who we think we are influences how we see the world (including how we see ourselves). Our individual way of seeing the world (and seeing ourselves) influences what we do. What we do, in turn, influences what we think about the world and ourselves—it feeds into our self-concept. Moreover, our self-concept will partially determine how we see the world. According to Walker, “what gets counted as ‘an event’ will only be determinable within some interpretive context” (2012, 65). That is, the self-concept influences what kind of things are worth interpreting, i.e., what kind of things are *salient* to us. Thus, love becomes a trait of the self-concept, in the sense “pattern[s] of attention, thought, feeling, motivation and action [are] expressive of a certain trait” (Goldie 2012, 135). That is, a psychological phenomenon that is expressed in action and thus influences self-understanding and the other way around.⁸

In the middle stage of love, lovers have the belief that they are in love, feel in love, and act according to reasons motivated by love, for example to benefit each other by promoting each other's interests. These beliefs, emotions, and actions, fortified by momentum sustained by an existential feeling of intelligibility, influence each other's beliefs and actions in a feedback loop that in turn contributes to the sustainment of the momentum. Crucially, by becoming a trait of the self-concept, ‘being in love’ influences what we find salient.

It may seem that incorporating the feedback loop and salience to the discussion does not provide with any new insight that we did not have already in Cocking and Kennett's account, and also that narrative is not doing any work here besides the already explained narrative momentum sustained by the existential feeling of intelligibility. However, by considering love a trait of the self-concept, we obtain a justification of love that is outside of itself. This allows us to understand why people continue accepting each other's direction and interpretation: doing so is part of their self-conception. As I explain now by bringing back the main notions of Goldie's view from Section 7.1, it is the case that by modifying our patterns of salience love not only influences us with respect of who we are, but also in the sense of who we have been and who we will be.

Firstly, love not only influences our current self-understanding, but can influence our autobiographical narrative thinking about our past. We may share stories with our partners or close friends about our past: how we were bullied as children, how we were excellent students or how we used to party three days a week. We may tell them how they felt or feel now: they are memories of pain, pride or happiness. But our

partners' or close friends' interpretations may change how we see those stories completely: we may come to see our endurance of bullying as a sign of strength, for example. Re-interpretation need not always be beneficial, but I leave that aspect aside for the time being (I comment on the potential negative influence of re-interpretation below). The important thing is that love can change not only our present self-understanding, but also the understanding of our own past. This is not only enabled by the incorporation of the interpretation coming from a partner or close friends, but also by the changes in the lover brought about by love. Recall the concept of dramatic irony, where autobiographical narrative thinking allows us to occupy the perspective of the protagonist and the narrator. In the example of past bullying, the changes in the narrator in the present, which are brought by love, may influence their perception of the protagonist in the past, who goes from being a victim in pain to a strong and resilient individual. This may be achieved without the need for the loved person to explicitly re-interpret their past, but in virtue of them having become more optimistic, better at interpreting their emotions or more prone to delusion, for example (in Section 7.4 I briefly discuss the risks of delusion in narrative thinking).

Secondly, love influences how we see our present. Because love alters our patterns of salience, love influences our general outlook toward ourselves and the world. In the words of Rick Anthony Furtak, love “determines what comes to light as significant, out of the entirety of everything that is in principle available for our attention (much of which escapes our notice altogether)” (2018, 127). Love, Furtak adds, “comprehensively organizes our world of experience that what we are able to *know* depends on our affective disposition or attunement [sic], our way of caring” (2018, 128; emphasis in original). I adopt here a qualified version of that statement, meaning that love *at least partly* determines what we come to know about the world and about ourselves.

Again, a narrative is the representation of a succession of events that unfold over time, which results from the *selection* and interpretation of certain features of those events and that has emotional import. Different people living the same situation may pick up on completely different aspects to the situation, to the point that they will be in fact interpreting different events altogether. Let us imagine a person, Ziggy, who is walking across a street at the same moment that a car crashes into a billboard. If Ziggy is prompted to explain the accident, he might quote different causes: the tire, the drunk driver, etcetera. But here, we are already singling out the car crash itself as an event when asking Ziggy. Remember that salience determines what gets counted as an event. Imagine that Ziggy's friend, Billy, was also there with him, so they are in the same situation, at the same time. They both see the crash scene unfold and Ziggy exclaims: “Billy, do you see that?!”; and Billy replies: “Yes, I can't believe IKEA has a 50% discount in all stock!”. Although they are both in the

situation and they are both witnessing the accident, the accident is not salient at all for Billy. He is, instead, oblivious of the unfolding tragedy, his attention focused on the IKEA billboard above. Ziggy is perplexed: “But Billy, those people in the car!”; to what Billy replies: “Yeah I’ve seen it, but you just have no idea how long I’ve waited to be able to afford a new futon”. In this case, we have two different interpretations of a situation as *two distinct events*: Ziggy’s witnessing of a horrible car accident versus Billy’s joyful realization that he will, at last, be able to afford a new futon. This example demonstrates the magnitude of the effect that love can have on us by changing our patterns of salience.

By influencing our patterns of salience, love not only influences how we interpret events, but also what counts as events when we look at the world. This influences how we see the world, but also how *others* see us: if we are a Billy, others will see us as callously self-centered, which in turn may end making its way into our self-concept through close relationships. It also influences how we see our own lives: if love makes us more self-confident, for example, we may stop finding scathing reviewers’ comments as part of our recollection of how our day went, given that we will be unscathed by those comments and, in the same way Billy is oblivious to the accident, not even register it as an event.

Finally, love influences our future. Narrative thinking about our future entails considering branching possibilities. Some possibilities will appear and others not. Let us look at a fictional example: Sonia, who does not and has never wanted to have children and simply does not think about that at all. For them, when narrative thinking about their future, the possibility of having children just does not appear at all. Sonia falls in love and starts a long-term relationship with Carlos, who wants to have children. A negotiation ensues where Sonia needs to envision the possibility of being a parent, which did not feature in her narrative thinking. Other times, a certain possibility may feature in our narrative thinking, but may feel more or less like belonging to a future that we see as ours. Let us think of a different person, Lena, who does not and has never wanted to have children, but sometimes ponders it. Bringing dramatic irony to the discussion again, Lena’s self-concept as the external narrator in the present influences how she feels as the protagonist of the future narrative. Since she feels uneasy about parenthood, while narrative thinking about her future and considering the possibility where she feels happy as a parent versus the possibility where she feels anxious as a parent, the second possibility will feel more like belonging to *her*. However, Lena falls in love and starts a long-term relationship with Daya, and as a result, the first possibility (being a parent) starts feeling more as belonging to *her*. This does not mean that Lena will definitely change her mind, but it is a common scenario helpful to prove my point here: love can influence which possibilities feature at all in our future projections and also how these possibilities feel.

Briefly, it should be mentioned here that given the influence that love can have in our self-understanding, love makes us extremely vulnerable, and can thus be a risky endeavor. Usually, vulnerability within love is understood in terms of well-being: if the loved person's interests are harmed, I am harmed. But given what I have discussed above, vulnerability is more acute than that. Direction may lead a lover to take up a self-destructive habit like alcohol addiction, and interpretation may lead her to believe that she is not deserving of her high-earning job, for example. Love may lead people to feel unwarrantedly ashamed about their past; to not select episodes of abuse as salient events; or to have a range of future possibilities that surrender to what the loved person wants for their own life. From the mundane to life-changing decisions and perspectives (having children, getting a vaccine in the midst of a pandemic, having a specific ideology) love has a huge potential of disruption for the worse: "though love can be the making of lives, it can also be their unmaking" (Harcourt 2016, 39).

I do not have the space to fully unpack the dangers of vulnerability, but it should be noted that it should not be portrayed as a feature of bad love only. It is just a feature of being in love that can be good as long as there is what McConnell (2016b, 40) calls "balanced co-authoring", which involves, among other measures, "supporting the authorial skill of others, carefully judging when they are appropriate co-authors, and judging which content will be helpful". This is easier said than done, given that for a start, it is difficult to discern without equivocation whether co-authoring is balanced or not (see Tsai 2016 on "relationship exploitation"). Also, certain power relations (for example, with respect to gender or race) may further complicate, if not completely make impossible, the possibility of balanced co-authoring. This opens the debate on the value of love itself and the embedding of our love practices in wider societal narratives, which takes us away from the topic of this chapter. It is time, then, to look into the next stage: the end of love.

7.4 The End

Philosophers have recently turned their attention to the end of love, with recent research on break-ups (Lopez-Cantero 2018), divorce (Card 2007; Cowley 2020; Betzler 2022), falling out of love (Lopez-Cantero and Archer 2020; Cowley 2021), and love after death (Solomon 2004; Higgins 2013; Norlock 2017; Millar and Lopez-Cantero 2022). But like these works acknowledge or argue, neither break-ups nor death result necessarily in the end of love. One may break up with someone due to external reasons while still loving them, and one may still love one's friend after they pass away, for example. The question of what the end of love entails for self-understanding is acknowledged, but not systematically addressed in the current literature. Here, I sketch an answer to

that question. To keep the discussion on topic, I will leave aside the questions on justification (why love ends) and appropriateness (whether love should end and/or when), and simply focus on the question of what *is* for love to end in the terms of what I have argued so far. I will also leave aside cases where one of the lovers dies, since as I have said, that may not bring about the end of love anyway.

Here I am going to distinguish between volitional and non-volitional end of love. In both cases, love can be experienced as a painful loss, but it may not. As we will see, my use of the term ‘volitional’ has to be taken in a qualified sense and not as entailing complete causal control: it serves to distinguish falling out of love without conscious intervention (non-volitional) and falling out of love as a result of purposefully bringing about the circumstances so that one may achieve that state (volitional). Love ends non-volitionally when people fall out of love or friendship without pursuing it. The paradigmatic example here could be a person in a romantic relationship who one day, after much thinking and evaluating her emotions, thoughts, and actions, comes to the realization that she is not in love with her partner anymore. This does not mean that the ending of love is brought about by self-ascription, i.e., the formulation of the belief ‘I am not in love’ (in the same sense I said that self-ascription is not enough by itself to bring about the beginning of love). It is instead the realization that one’s mental states and dispositions have changed. Volitional love endings, on the other hand, are a pursued end: the person wants and tries to fall out of love. The paradigmatic cases here are non-chosen break-ups, where the other party has fallen out of love in the first place. When one does not choose to end a relationship, one may choose to try and fall out of love with the person who ended the relationship in order to be able to move on. It could also be the case that the person has initiated the break-up for external reasons (for example, having careers in different countries, wanting to exit an abusive relationship, or disagreement about having children) and then tries to fall out of love, not wanting to continue longing for a relationship they have decided to exit. Once the distinction is clear, let us look at how the account I have set up in this chapter helps explain how the end of love affects self-understanding.

When someone has undergone non-volitional falling out of love, the love narrative has lost its momentum. Recall that momentum facilitates one’s actions, thoughts, and feelings to be in accordance with actions, thoughts, and feelings that ensure the continuation of the narrative. This narrative momentum has been extinguished when one arrives at the point of falling out of love: that is what the end of love *is*. One may even wish that this was not the case, but one’s thoughts, feelings, and reasons for action simply do not match thoughts, feelings, and actions that contribute to the continuation of the narrative. On the other side, we have people for whom the love narrative still has momentum, but who want this momentum to get disrupted and aim at this disruption—to

eventually get to the same place where the non-volitional counterpart is. How can one willingly disrupt the momentum of a narrative that is fundamental for one's self-understanding, such as a love narrative? Again, the answer to that question requires a look into the phenomenological character of the process.

In both volitional and non-volitional cases, the end of love can be experienced as a loss. Although literature, cinema, and popular culture pay more attention to the person who someone has fallen out of love with (usually portrayed as a 'victim' of heartbreak, so to speak), falling out love non-volitionally can also be an emotionally distressing process. One may not want to fall out of love; or may be mortified by the prospect of hurting someone one cares deeply about (since love and care may come apart; see Wonderly and Jaworska 2020); or may simply dread the future outside the love narrative for different reasons. In previous work (Lopez-Cantero and Archer 2020) I have highlighted how disorienting the process of falling out of love can be. Here I look at another emotional dimension of the end of love: the fact that it can be experienced as a *grieving* process. As I show next, the existent literature on the connection between narrative and existential feeling with grief can illuminate the study of the end of love. It should be noted that I am not claiming that the end of love is analogous to grief, but that like grief, the end of love may be experienced as a loss, so they have some common features with those. Specifically, grief entails a loss of future possibilities (Ratcliffe, Richardson and Millar forthcoming); so does the end of love even in cases where there is no bereavement (i.e., none of the lovers has died).

As seen in Section 7.3, when one is in the middle stage of the love narrative one's future possibilities are entrenched in the love narrative. The future is where *we* will go on holiday, how *we* will face our children leaving the nest, where in the world will *we* live. Recall that love affects one's life in this way, and that one's thoughts, feelings, and actions motivated by this outlook on one's life are fundamental elements of one's self-understanding. This is captured by Ratcliffe, Richardson, and Millar when discussing grief:

One's projects, commitments, and expectations were oriented towards those possibilities, one's sense of the future shaped by them. As it becomes clear that they cannot be actualized, there is a temporally extended process of recognition and reorientation. Expectations in which one was heavily invested over a long period, and which shaped one's life, are experienced as dashed.

(Ratcliffe, Richardson and Millar forthcoming, 11)

For people who have fallen out of love non-volitionally, their projects, commitments, and expectations, are not shaped by the love narrative anymore. This is because there has been a shift in existential feeling:

these people have lost their background affective orientation of being in love, so future possibilities within the love narrative do not make sense anymore, or do not feel right. For someone who is still in love, however, the future still very much makes sense *only* within the love narrative. Their problem, however, is that the love narrative cannot exist anymore (for whichever reason), so they are, in Goldie's words, "locked into the past" (2012, 70). When narrative thinking about their future, they can only see what things would have been had the love narrative continued. But this is not the case anymore. Unlike the person who has fallen out of love, in their case there has not been a shift in existential feeling: their sense of reality is still bound to the love narrative. Because this brings both emotional distress and disruption of self-understanding (think of the trope 'I don't know who I am without you'), there is a motivation to bring about their falling out of love volitionally.

Disentangling one's sense of reality from the love narrative is incredibly difficult and is compounded by the fact that profound emotional distress may restrict one's narrative abilities by disrupting one's openness to future possibilities. This is what Ratcliffe (2016) and Bortolan (2017, 2021) have claimed that happens in experiences of depression. However, in principle it is not impossible for people to regain this ability by engaging in narrative thinking about one's past and one's future. This engagement needs to engage the will (i.e., one has to purposefully do this thinking), and that is why I call this other type of love endings volitional. There are two aspects of volitional love endings that can be illuminated by narrative theory.

First, by revisiting and possibly *revising* her past through explicit autobiographical narrative thinking, one may question facts about the past love narrative. What parts of one's self-understanding were acquired or lost during the love narrative? Are new traits, habits, and preferences one acquired in a love narrative worth preserving? A person may notice new aspects of the relationship or re-interpret some events in a way that favors bringing about her falling out of love. She may realize that her partner did not pay her as much attention as they should have, or that what she saw as demonstrations of affection were just ruses to get her to do something that was convenient for them. This activity is done both through introspection and in interaction with others, which can be particularly helpful when emotional distress disrupts clarity and self-trust. As Kevin Harrelson notes, "your therapist (or your friends) can assist you in uncovering episodes that your self-narratives exclude" (2016, 172). By looking at her past, she may be able to achieve a new perspective on the relationship that may contribute to changing her feelings, thoughts, and actions. I am aware that the idea of revision may give rise to worries about delusion and truth, and I give a brief response to these worries in Section 7.4—for now, I continue with the other aspect of volitional love endings.

One of McConnell's case studies, we may recall, is a person suffering from drug addiction who re-interprets her own past and thus "set[s] the

foundation for a projection of recovery” (2016a, 316). This projection requires explicit autobiographical thinking about one’s future: in the case of love, seeing oneself starting new projects, imagining not missing the other person, and so on. In other ways, finding a new branch of possibilities that feel like they correspond to who she wants to be. Bortolan (2021) has argued that narrative projection may enable a shift in existential feeling. By imagining oneself having an emotional experience, one may actually have that emotional experience in the present (2021, 486). That is, the external narrator may come to experience the same emotions as the protagonist of the future narrative, even if the content of the narrative does not still feel like a possibility that feels *hers* in the present. Bortolan adds that even if the emotions may not be exactly of the same type, the external narrator may feel similarly valenced emotions to the ones the protagonist feels in her imagined scenario (for example, the protagonist feels elation, and the narrator feels the urge to smile [2021, 486]). A pattern of repeating projections over time can, after “a complex and lengthy process”, result in a shift in existential feeling (Bortolan 2021, 490).

That shift in existential feeling can enable people’s openness to new possibilities. Again, this should further clarify why I call this case ‘volitional’, since it requires a conscious exercise of one’s will—even if there is no guarantee that this narrative work will indeed result in the desired shift. Eventually, the aim is to arrive at the point where people who fall out of love without conscious intervention (that is, people experiencing non-volitional love endings) are. In non-volitional cases, the person may conceive of a future with the other, but this future simply does not make sense anymore. That is, the person in a non-volitional ending experiences the counterpart of the existential feeling at the beginning of love. While for the person falling in love ‘things make sense’, for the person falling out of love ‘things do not make sense anymore’: the future within the love narrative has lost intelligibility. Thus, in a non-volitional ending, there is a shift in existential feeling: one’s sense of reality is not bound to the love narrative anymore. This shift, which has come upon oneself and may even be unwelcome, obliterates the momentum of the love narrative. However, falling out of love in this way may still require ‘recognition and reorientation’ and may still be emotionally distressing due to not having *a new set* possibilities that are intelligible; so some people experiencing non-volitional love endings may also have to engage their narrative abilities in the sense described. In essence, then, the combination of the exercise of narrative thinking backward and forward may both allow people to restore their openness to new possibilities and to give content to these possibilities.

Now, two questions may arise here. The first question is whether all non-volitional endings are experienced as losses; the answer to that question is no, they are not. Recall Walker’s example of a sudden

conversion, that is, of an overnight shift in existential feeling and immediate re-orientation toward the new permanent existential feeling, with instant momentum given to the narrative of ‘being a convert’. I said that in the context of love, this could not be universalized but could apply to cases of love at first sight. Equally, it is not implausible that one can fall out of love suddenly. A betrayal or a discovering that the other person has done something abhorrent, for example, may cause someone to experience the shift in existential feeling and the disruption of narrative momentum fast. Immediately falling in love with someone new (what is known as a ‘re-bounce’) or even an exciting new career may come with its new future possibilities attached, removing the need to do the work to find these out. Arguably, it could be said that falling out of love is, more often than not, less painful than being the one someone falls out of love with—less emotional distress may also entail lesser disruption of one’s narrative abilities.

The second question is whether all people others fall out of love with (all ‘victims of heartbreak’) do eventually fall out of love volitionally. The answer, again, is no. Some people who find themselves at the end of a love narrative without having fallen out of love do not make any attempt to get over it. Being in unrequited love may be their new narrative, and this may perdure for the rest of a person’s life. They may simply fall out of love over time without doing anything, just by following new habits and living through other events filling the gaps of how the future will look, by giving momentum to new narratives. Still, the distinction is useful to differentiate between the two main cases involving narrative capacities in a way that gives closure to the process of narrative momentum with existential feeling I have described in this chapter, from the beginning to the end of love.

7.5 Epilogue: Further Considerations

To conclude, I briefly respond to two potential worries with my account. The first one is that I may be endorsing an account of love that, in virtue of focusing on *self*-understanding, is too egoistic and/or individualistic. This is an objection that Helm (2010, 10–20) directs to multiple accounts of love, and particularly to Cocking and Kennett’s which I employ as my model here. Specifically, Helm’s concern is that the lovers are simply recipients of the other’s interpretation and direction (2010, 259). It is not to be understood from my discussion that I see love as passive. First, because the direction and interpretation are mutual and a result of interaction over time; second, because concurrent to their self-narratives the lovers are creating joint narratives that also make their way to their respective self-concepts (I remain agnostic to whether this amounts to the achievement of a ‘single evaluative perspective’, which Helm argues for).

The second worry has to do with the idea that reconstructing our past or re-imagining our future may lead us to lie to ourselves to the point of delusion, particularly at the end of the love narrative. One may, for example, look back and re-interpret minor frictions as episodes of abuse, or come to believe that what she thought were episodes of love were in fact just episodes of emotional dependence. We may want to know that it is possible for some people to get this wrong, particularly given that memory is unreliable and that we are highly incentivized to re-interpret our past in a way that feels better due to the self-regulatory powers of narrative (Ratcliffe 2016; Bortolan 2021). This discussion on the dangers of revision should indeed be addressed in more detail, but I offer here a tentative response from Goldie's work. Goldie recognizes that in situations that we cannot comprehend ('how could he possibly fall out of love when we were so happy?', a heartbroken lover may ask) it may be tempting to make up a fitting story. However, he explains that narratives can be verifiable in some ways (Goldie 2012, 154), for example, by asking other people who were there. One can even 'check oneself' and have "an external perspective of an audience on my external perspective as a narrator" (Goldie 2012, 159). For example, the heartbroken lover may already know about herself that she tends to blame others for her own shortcomings. When recollecting a particular argument with her former friend and formulating the belief as an external narrator that the event was another example of her friend always attacking her, she can still now question whether this interpretation is, in fact, an example of her tendency of foregoing blame. So, the fact that we revise our past should not be understood as a free pass to re-invent ourselves completely. On that note, however, I should add that I also agree with Goldie in that "the past ought to be permanently open to re-assessment" (2012, 160). In fact, I am not opposed to what Roman Altshuler calls "retroactive self-constitution": narrating our past may change not only our interpretations about the past, but also what in fact those events were (2014, 115). Maybe the latter claim is too strong, and we can only change our interpretations; or maybe not. In any case, we shall leave the door open to the possibility of coming out of a relationship and truthfully being able to say 'I never really loved you', regardless of whether we actually went through all the stages of a love narrative.

It is worth noting that any attempt to discuss love raises at least as many questions as it answers: on rationality, on shared agency, on the possibility of true self-knowledge, on the influence of structural factors. I am aware that more needs to be discussed on the changes in love throughout time with respect to these and other issues, but here I have offered a thread on two concepts—narrative momentum and intelligibility—which hopefully paves the way for further analyses and reveals how the experience of love is an excellent case to achieve a more complex and nuanced concept of what self-understanding itself is.

Notes

1. I assume here that self-understanding is shaped relationally, at least in part. I do not differentiate between romantic love and friendship since I do not find the distinction of love into ‘types’ useful or accurate—see Helm (2010, 4) and Harcourt (2016, 39–40) for further backing on this position; and Jollimore (2022, 90–93) for an argument in favor of differentiating romantic love from friendship.
2. For a skeptical view of the connection between self-knowledge and our projections into the future, see Uku Tooming and Kengo Miyazono’s chapter in this volume.
3. Like Jollimore (2022, 122–124), I think that in some case it may be possible to determine, *a posteriori*, that one fell in love at first sight in the past.
4. One may say that what keeps the person in the PhD is not the momentum of the narrative of doing a PhD, but the fact that one has made a long-term commitment: “One who has decided to do something is thereby committed to do that thing... If one is subject to a commitment, reason requires one to act in accordance with that commitment” (Gilbert 2014, 31). I have stated that narrative is only *one* dimension of self-understanding or experience, so the notion of narrative momentum is not incompatible with the notion of commitments (in fact, it may be that they are related, and the momentum is preserved insofar one has reasons, or that reasons are provided by the existence of momentum, for example).
5. For a more detailed summary of the notion of existential feeling, see Anna Bortolan’s chapter in this volume.
6. My claims here may give rise to a question and a worry. The question is why using the notion of existential feeling and not other like mood or sentiment; and the worry is that love clearly having an object means that it cannot be an existential feeling, given that existential feelings are non-intentional. Regarding the former, I acknowledge that any view of mood as a background affective orientation with an existential component may be compatible with my account here. With respect to the worry about intentionality, I do think that love is intentional, i.e., there is *something* or *someone* that we (fall in) love, and it would not make sense to say simply “I love” as a state one is in in the same way it may make sense to say “I am depressed”. On that note, I only claim here that the existential feeling of intelligibility is a component of love that first triggers and then maintains the momentum of love. One can feel that “things make sense” without that feeling being about anything in particular, and it is this feeling that triggers and keeps the momentum of the love narrative. In any case, it would be worth having a discussion on whether love is itself an existential feeling, and how that relates to the claim I am making here and to the common assumption that love has intentionality.
7. This is even the case for authors who have explicitly criticized Cocking and Kennett’s view, specifically Helm (2010, 259). Although Helm considers Cocking and Kennett’s view insufficient to explain what love is, I consider that interpreting each other’s character and directing each other’s actions is a component of what Helm considers love is: a pattern of emotions that has the other as a focus and results in the shaping of a single evaluative perspective (2010, 260). If love is based in shared agency, it would be difficult to argue that such shared agency does not incorporate these elements. Cocking and Kennett’s view can be seen then as the basic foundation for a more complex view of love, such as one that incorporates shared agency as a higher order constitutive elements of love.
8. Here ‘trait’ is not to be interpreted as ‘character trait’, which comes with unnecessary baggage. The notion of trait I use is compatible with the pos-

sibility of love being a mutual pattern of concern or a disposition, and very close to the concept of practical identity: “descriptions[s] under which you value yourself and find your life worth living and your actions worth undertaking” (Korsgaard 1996, 101). Jones (2008, 271) sees ‘being in love’ as a “practical-identity property” of persons that is embedded in a narrative; I am very sympathetic to her view but here I use ‘trait’ with the aim of using the most possibly neutral term.

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