**Physical Beauty, Imagination, and Romantic Love**

Glenn Parsons

[This is a pre-copy edited draft of a chapter that was published by Oxford University Press in *Desire, Love & Identity: Philosophy of Sex and Love*, edited by Gary Foster, (2017), pp. 207-215.]

Abstract: Romantic lovers notoriously overestimate the physical attractiveness of their own partners. This phenomenon is typically described as a kind of delusion or 'madness', and ascribed to the irrationality of love. I argue, on the contrary, that it does not involve distortion, error, or irrationality, but rather is an intelligible result of the particular kind of relationship that romantic love involves. In my explanation, I emphasize the critical role of the imagination in lovers' perception of beauty.

The Lover’s Paradox

It doesn’t take a philosopher to see that physical beauty and romantic love go hand in hand. We fall in love with people for their wonderful and attractive qualities, and physical qualities are among these. Nonetheless, this is not something that we are always comfortable acknowledging. This is, perhaps, due to two facts about physical beauty: first, its close connection with sex, and second the fact that, recently, the very idea of physical beauty has itself attracted much criticism.[[1]](#endnote-1) However, although physical beauty is importantly related to sexual attractiveness, it cannot be understood solely in those terms. We admire and value certain bodily features, for various reasons, and while some of these reasons pertain to sexual attractiveness, not all do.[[2]](#endnote-2) Furthermore, and more importantly, although physical beauty raises many difficulties about how people are treated and how they regard themselves, it is indisputable that, as a matter of fact, lovers are drawn to each other, in part, by physical beauty. To deny this is to reject a central feature of the experience of romantic love as most know and experience it.

In any event, in this essay I will not question the role of physical beauty in romantic love: rather, my goal is to understand it. For upon reflection, there seems something paradoxical about this supposed connection between physical beauty and romantic love. While it seems that physical beauty is, in part, what draws the lover to his beloved, it also appears that the lover is strangely blind to this very quality. For to the lover, the beloved is, apparently, always beautiful, whatever that person actually looks like. The strangeness of this is reinforced by the observation that “beautiful” is, if not a superlative term, something close: we do not naturally talk, for instance, about people being “a little bit beautiful”, or “sort of beautiful”. To declare someone beautiful is to boldly assert that they realize an ideal—that they achieve a kind of bodily perfection.[[3]](#endnote-3) From the outsider’s perspective, these enthusiastic declarations of the lover seem overwrought: the beloved, we see, is imperfect. And yet, from the lover’s perspective, the more sober expressions of praise that *we* might think merited—“You are fairly attractive!”—would be laughably inadequate.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Confronted by this odd ‘beauty blindness’, one first doubts that that the lover is sincere, and supposes that his declarations are so much deliberate exaggeration, meant to secure the beloved’s affection. But such calculating flatterers are not in love, and the flatterer’s clear and cynical perception of reality is far from the lover’s perspective. Another possibility is that the lover refers, in his declarations, not to the physical beauty of the beloved, but to his or her ‘inner beauty’, to the wonderful qualities of her character or personality. However, while lovers are certainly drawn to inner beauty as well, “What matters is that you’re beautiful on the inside” is the sort of thing we say to friends, not to lovers.

There is, however, an obvious explanation of the lover’s patently false declarations that recognizes both their sincerity and the fact that they are directed at physical appearance: the lover is beset by some kind of madness whereby his perception of the beloved’s appearance is distorted by feverish feelings of love, sexual attraction, or both. As Shakespeare put it, “the lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact”.[[5]](#endnote-5) On this view—call it the *delusion explanation* of the lover’s declarations of beauty—the beauty the lover sees is a kind of illusion, something akin to the madman’s hallucinations.

The delusion explanation is a familiar notion—indeed its central idea of love as benign madness is a cultural trope. Also, the explanation can be filled out, and made more plausible, by viewing the lover’s delusion as an adaptive psychological mechanism for strengthening romantic attachments. On this line of thought, lovers who exaggerate qualities such as their lovers’ beauty will be more likely to stick with them in the face of obstacles to the relationship, which could be beneficial from a psychological or perhaps even reproductive standpoint.[[6]](#endnote-6) Thus the madness of the lover seems, from the larger psychological perspective, to be an affliction with a kind of purpose.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Nonetheless, I think that the delusion explanation fails to do full justice to the role of beauty in romantic love. While it seems adequate from the ‘third person perspective’, it does little or nothing to illuminate the experience of romantic love “from the inside”. I doubt that many of us would be heartened to learn that our lover’s praise is merely deluded babbling, even if it is, in some sense, ‘good for the relationship’. Moreover, to say that the lover is merely deluded does not shed much light on his experience; from the lovers’ point of view, his declarations *seem true*, and we would like some account of how this can be the case. It may be that we can make no sense of this, and we have to ultimately settle for the conclusion that the lover is just irrational, but that should be our last resort. In any case, in this essay I seek an alternative explanation in terms of the imagination. To begin, I examine one such explanation suggested by the writings of Irving Singer.

Singer on Imaginative Love

In his book *The Nature of Love*, Singer attempts to characterize the particular sort of valuing that is involved in romantic love. In doing so, Singer frequently emphasizes its creative and imaginative dimensions. In loving another, Singer writes, “the lover creates something”—“his love is a creative means of *making* [the beloved] more worthy—in the sense that he invests her with greater value.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Picking up on Shakespeare’s comparison of the lover with the poet, Singer intriguingly connects this creativity inherent in love with the “imaginative play” that is typical in the arts: just as the artist does not necessarily paint the world ‘as it really is’, “the lover re-creates another person. By deploying his imagination in the art of bestowing value…the lover adds a new dimension to the beloved.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

The lover, however, is not only ‘artist’, in this scenario, but ‘audience’ as well, and here too the analogy with art is instructive. In watching a play, one knows that the person on the stage is not in danger, but responds to his situation imaginatively, *as if* he is. That is, one feels fear for him, despite an understanding that, in some sense, this response is not really appropriate or warranted, given that the events being observed are fictional. Just so, Singer’s account suggests, the lover feels an admiration in response to the beauty—the perfection—of his beloved, despite understanding that she is not actually perfect.

This last point is made clear in Singer’s account by his statement that for the lover, “his superlatives are expressive and metaphoric…[and are] far from being terms of literal praise.” Such terms, “beauty” among them, are “scarcely capable of describing excellence”—rather, they serve only to express the lover’s affection. “The lover”, he writes, “calls perfect whatever he accepts”.[[10]](#endnote-10) Nonetheless, the perfection of the beloved, though ‘only imaginary’, still genuinely moves him.

Singer’s account can be nicely applied to explain the puzzling declarations of the lover: they are not the product of mere delusion, nor are they insincere flattery: rather, they are somewhere in between, the more sober but yet genuine products of an imaginative response, in the same way that the tears we shed in the theatre are not expressions of madness, nor insincere fakery, but the sincere product of an imaginative engagement. Let’s call this the *imagination explanation* of the lover’s declarations.

I think that the imagination explanation is an improvement on the delusion explanation: it provides a richer account of the way in which the lover perceives the beauty of the beloved. However, developed in the particular way that Singer develops it, the imagination explanation suffers from a serious flaw, which is that it does not do justice to the *sincerity* of the lover’s declarations. This can be seen in Singer’s claim that, in the lover’s mouth, words such as “beautiful” and “perfect” do not have their usual meaning: just as the audience member who watches a character ‘die’ onstage and then says “Alas, he is dead!” doesn’t *really* assert that anyone has died, so the lover who says “You are beautiful!”, doesn’t *really* assert that anyone is. However, as we observed earlier on, if it turns out that lovers do not really mean such things, this calls into question the very idea that they are in love.

One way to defend Singer’s view here would be to point out that, although the lover does not sincerely *believe* that his lover is beautiful (that is, perfect) it is still the case that he *responds* to her as if she is, and that the sincerity of *this response* is all that matters. This point could again be reinforced by appealing to the analogy of our imaginative experience in the arts. In the theatre, we don’t *believe* that the person before us has died, yet we *respond* as if he has, with genuine, tears and grief. In the same way, perhaps the lover doesn’t believe that his beloved is beautiful, but genuinely responds as if she were. In other words, although the lover’s words, in a sense, are not sincere, his feeling is.

However, this defence of Singer’s view ultimately fails. To see this, consider the general principle that if a feeling response is to be considered genuine or sincere, it must be directed toward the right kind of object. If someone said that he was feeling sorry for someone who just won the lottery, for example, we would suspect he was being insincere, using the word ‘sorry’ in a deviant way, or, failing these, behaving in a deeply irrational way. This is an application of the principle stated above: you cannot genuinely and rationally feel sorry for someone that is not, in your estimation, a misfortunate person.[[11]](#endnote-11) This principle poses a problem for the genuineness of our responses to the arts, for, as noted, when we watch a play and see a character die, we do not believe that the man on the stage is in peril: we believe that he is just an actor. And yet, we supposedly shed real tears for him. How can this be?[[12]](#endnote-12)

This problem can be resolved by noting that, in the theatre, we respond to the fates of *fictional characters* in fictional situations, and it is the fact that they are ‘the right kind of object’ that allows our responses to them to be sincere or genuine.[[13]](#endnote-13) So, it is because a character in a fictional narrative suffers ill fortune that we can pity them. In other words, the sincerity of our response is a function of the fiction with which we are engaging, and in particular of the way that fictional narratives create characters of the type appropriate for our emotional responses.

If we carry this line of thought over to the case of the lover, however, we can see that the sincerity and rationality of the lover’s response to the beloved would depend upon whether the beloved is the appropriate sort of object for that response. So if the lover’s feeling is a sincere and rational response to perfection, rather than something deeply irrational, then it is a response to something perfect. But we know, and the lover himself, on this account, also knows, that the beloved is not perfect. The object of the lover’s response, then, cannot be the beloved at all but can only be a fictionalized character, embellished to perfection in the imagination of the lover. Doubtless it is true that some people fall in love, not with real people, but only with a fictionalized character that exists only in their imaginations.[[14]](#endnote-14) But this behavior seems pathological, rather than typical of romantic love. Lovers do not need to invent imaginary people that are beautiful—to them, *the beloved* is beautiful.[[15]](#endnote-15) The question is: can we understand how this could be?

Imagination reconsidered

The Imagination explanation is as an attempt to show that, through imaginative experience, the lover can have a sincere *response* (an admiration of the beloved’s beauty) without the corresponding *belief* about the object (this person is perfect). This would yield an account of the lover’s declarations that avoids both insincerity and madness. However, as we have seen, the way that Singer develops the imagination explanation, by way of analogy with our emotional responses to fiction, does not quite succeed in the context of romantic love. It seems that, in order to secure sincerity of feeling *in that context*, the corresponding belief about the object (the actual beloved, in this case) must be present. But how can we attribute this belief to the lover without slipping once more into the model of delusion or madness? Perhaps what is required here is just a different way of understanding the operation of the imagination.

We can start by examining more closely the belief that, we have determined, we must attribute to the lover. It is simply this: the beloved is physically perfect, or, in other words, she could not be any better than she is. What exactly is involved in believing this? One answer to this question is the following: one has in mind a certain ideal, a set of features or qualities, say, and holds the beloved to measure up to that ideal. This is the straightforward way in which we might believe that, for example, a certain setting of the dinner table is perfect: one has a ‘checklist’ of features (silverware in certain positions, napkins folded this way, and so on) and inspects the table to make sure that all of these are present. In terms of fulfilling all the features on the list, there is no room for improvement: they are all ‘ticked off’.

However, there is also another, and perhaps more common, way to find something perfect, or to believe that it could not be better than it is: to simply fail to be capable of imagining anything better, or more ideal. In this case, one does not run through a mental checklist of ‘ideal features’ and then inspect the object for those features. Indeed, in this sort of case one may not even have any very definite ideal in mind. Rather, one is simply struck by the unimprovability of the object: one cannot imagine any way in which it could be improved. I think that this way of judging things perfect has a particular importance when it comes to judgements of beauty in the context of romantic love.

This account of what it is to believe that the beloved is perfect helps to explain how the lover could have the belief required for his response to be a sincere one, without resorting to madness or delirium. It is not that the lover would see his beloved as ranking higher than others on the various features that make up the ideal of beauty. Rather, it is that the lover experiences a kind of ‘imaginative failure’ when in the presence of the beloved: those ideal features fade from view.

This way of conceiving of the imagination’s operation makes for a stark contrast with Singer’s conception. The lover is not engaged in a fantasy, embellishing the beloved so that she meets an ideal. The lover’s imagination is not running amok; indeed, it is just the opposite. The lover’s imagination is stultified as the beloved fills his mind, pushing out whatever ideals or standards of beauty may have dwelled there, and in that cleared space, shines in perfection.

A dual role for the imagination?

Our modified version of the imagination explanation helps us to understand how lovers can believe that the beloved is perfect, for, in their experience, that is how things appear to them. But our explanation as it stands won’t quite do. For we must ask: Why this peculiar failure of the imagination? Why should this particular person—the beloved—cause the lover’s imagination to operate this way? In the case of people other than the beloved, this failure does not occur: we are quite able to hold the appearances of others up against our ideals or standards of physical perfection. Until we have an answer to this question, it might be argued, the declarations of the lover remain mysterious. Of course we could always say that, in the presence of the beloved, the lover suddenly loses his normal capacity to exercise imagination, but this only takes us back to the model of madness or delusion.

We might try to explain the ‘imaginative failure’ of the lover in terms of the *intimacy* of the relationship between the lover and the beloved. Lovers spend great amounts of time (as much as they can) in each other’s presence, and can come to know each other in deeply personal ways, ways in which they do not know even their best friends. We might suggest then, that it is this particular closeness to the beloved that results in the lover’s failure of imagination. However, this explanation founders on the fact that we spend much time with people other than lovers, and know some of them in deeply personal ways (consider family members, for example). Yet this imaginative failure does not take place with respect to those persons. Moreover, we may be deeply in love with people with whom we have spent little time, and about whom we know almost nothing.

I want to suggest a different explanation: that, perhaps ironically, the failure of lover’s imagination is brought about by an exercise of that very same faculty. What I have in mind is the kind of relentless fantasizing about the beloved in which lovers instinctively engage. This need not be sexual in nature (though some of it typically is): it includes all of those pleasurable imaginings in which the lover visualizes the beloved in his presence, doing all of the wonderful things that, when they are together, will become possible. It is important to note that this exercise of imagination is not the kind of fictionalizing idealization of the beloved that we discussed with respect to Singer’s views: it is simply a relentless filling of one’s mind with images and thoughts of the beloved. This repeated exposure, I suggest, gives the idea of the beloved a kind of potency that brings about the imaginative failure described above: any standards or ideals against which it could be measured and found wanting are displaced.[[16]](#endnote-16)

This account explains why we experience the imaginative failure we have described for those with whom we are in love, but not for others. For even when other people fill our thoughts, we do not imaginatively project them into pleasurable futures in this same way. For example, we might think a lot about our friends and family members—we may worry about their well-being, or replay images of things they did to us, or fret about how we feel toward them. But we do not spend large stretches of time dreaming about happily being in their presence, as we do with lovers.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Even if this account is accepted, however, it may still be objected that we have failed, ultimately, to avoid the model of delusion or madness. For, it could be argued, the lover’s belief in the beauty of the beloved ultimately rests on a kind of idle, unconstrained daydreaming. The lover indulges in airy, baseless dreams of a wonderful future, and has his imagination paralyzed as a result. If this is not quite madness, it certainly looks like some sort of breakdown of rationality.

However, this is too cynical a view of the lover’s daydreams. A central part of romantic love is committing yourself to a shared future with another person, a shared future that will ultimately have a great impact upon who you are.[[18]](#endnote-18) From the lover’s perspective, then, it makes perfect sense for him to envision his future with the beloved, in all of the minute detail that lovers do. In doing so, the lover weaves the beloved and her excellent qualities into the fabric of his own life and self. When this happens, this positive exercise of the imagination leads to an inhibition of that same faculty, making the beloved—and not merely some fictionalized version of her—beautiful in his eyes.

To conclude, let us return to the paradox with which we began: lovers are drawn to beauty yet not seem unable to perceive it rightly, as we do. The standard explanation is that that the lover sees only an illusion of beauty. I have argued, on the contrary, that the lover does see beauty aright, given the particular kind of imaginative relation that he, as a lover, has, and must have, to the beloved. From the outside, what the lover sees may appear only an illusion. But from the inside, the lover merely sees what is truly there for him, as a lover, to see: the beauty of the beloved herself.

**Bibliography**

Campbell, C. (1987) *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Guyer, P . “18th Century German Aesthetics”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*(Spring 2014 Edition), E. Zalta (ed.), URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/aesthetics-18th-german/.

Keller, S. (2000) “How do I love thee? Let me count the properties”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37: 163-173.

Marwick, A. (2004) *It: A History of Human Beauty*. London: Hambledon and London.

Murray, S. and Holmes, J. (1997) “A Leap of Faith? Positive Illusions in Romantic Relationships” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23: 586-604.

Neil, A. (1993) “Fiction and the Emotions”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30: 1-13.

----------. (2003) “Art and Emotion”, in J. Levinson (ed), The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Parsons,G. (forthcoming) “The Merrickites” in *Body Aesthetics*, S. Irvin (ed) Oxford University Press.

----------. (2010) “A Face Only a Mother Could Love: On Maternal Assessments of Infant Beauty”, in *Motherhood - Philosophy for Everyone: The Birth of Wisdom,* S. Lintott (ed) Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.

Radford,C. (1975) “How Can we be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 49: 67-80.

Reid, T. (1785) *On the Intellectual Powers of Man.* Edinburgh: John Bell.

Rhode, D.(2010) *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schopenhauer, A. [1883] (1969) *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. Payne. New York, Dover.

Scruton, R. (2009) *Beauty.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Simpson, J., M., S.W. Gangestad, M. Lerma. (1990) “Perception of Physical Attractiveness: Mechanisms Involved in the maintenance of romantic relationships”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59: 1192-1201.

Singer, I. (1966) *The Nature of Love*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Soble, A. (1990) *The Structure of Love*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Solomon, R. (1999) *The Joy of Philosophy: Thinking Thin versus the Passionate Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stendhal. (1975) *Love*. Translated by G. & S. Sale, London: Penguin.

Wolfe, N. (1991) *The Beauty Myth.* Toronto: Vintage Books.

**Notes**

1. This criticism has several dimensions: while feminists have powerfully critiqued the way that women are viewed through the lens of physical attractiveness (Wolfe 1991), others have traced the unfairness of judging people by their physical appearance in the workplace and other parts of social life (Rhode 2010). All of this criticism of beauty has, of course, coexisted with an accelerating emphasis on bodily attractiveness in the media, something that the critics have often identified as a part of the problem. For a more systematic overview of these critiques, see Parsons, “The Merrickites” (2016). For an interesting counterpoint, see Marwick (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I explore some of these grounds for our judgements of bodily beauty in “The Merrickites”. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. My claim that “beautiful” is a superlative is at odds with the view, held for example by Roger Scruton (2009, 5), that it is “a platitude” that there can be degrees of beauty, or that, as he puts it, "one thing can be more beautiful than another". I grant that we use “beautiful” in ways that *suggest* this: we say "She's very beautiful", e.g. However, if “beautiful” really was a degree term, we would also say things like "She's a little bit beautiful", which we don’t (compare, for example, "It's very warm" and "It's a bit warm"). In the case of “beautiful”, words such as "very" function as intensifiers rather than as indications of degree (as in "That's very true", or "The victim is quite dead"). Historically important sources for the idea of beauty as a sort of perfection include Thomas Reid (1785), and the writings of seventeenth and eighteenth century German Rationalists, such as Leibniz, Wolff and Mendelssohn (Guyer, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For empirical study of these differences in perceptions of attractiveness between lovers and non-lovers, see Simpson et al (1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.1.7-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Murray and Hall (1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For more philosophical treatments of this theme, see Schopenhauer (1883) and Solomon (1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Singer (1966, 15). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Singer (1966, 16). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Singer (1966, 12). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Of course, one might believe that winning a lot of money is a kind of misfortune, and so pity a person for doing so, but this does not violate the principle stated. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. This is the philosophical puzzle posed so compellingly by Colin Radford in his well-known essay, “How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina?” (1975) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This solution is offered by Alex Neill (1993). For an overview of the other major responses to Radford’s problem, see Neill (2003). It is perhaps worth noting that these other responses are far less promising in terms of application to the case of the lover’s response (consider, for example, Kendall Walton’s claim that we do not experience real emotions in response to fiction at all, but only “quasi-feelings”). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. This conception of love is captured vividly by Stendhal (1975). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Singer might reply to this that romantic love involves not only bestowing value on the beloved, through the imagination, but also appraising the value of the beloved (1966, 9). The latter requires us to see the beloved objectively, rather than imaginatively, and ‘appraise’ him or her as such. If appraisal is also a part of romantic love, then we do not simply fall in love with a fictional persona that our imagination projects onto the beloved: we must also, at some point, engage with the actual person. However, although he insists that romantic love includes a dimension of appraisal, it is unclear how could be if, as Singer insists, the bestowal of value occurs “without calculation” (Soble 1990). More importantly, insisting that lovers *are* able to objectively ‘appraise’ the appearance of the beloved is tantamount to denying the very phenomenon at issue: the beauty blindness of lovers. The problem is that, pace Singer, the lover seems incapable of fairly appraising the beauty of his beloved. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. This account might also explain, perhaps, the well-known phenomenon of intellectuals falling in love with their own ideas. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The exception to this is the way that parents imaginatively project their own futures with their children. This lines up with the fact that the relationship a parent has to her child (but not vice versa) displays much of the intensity and ‘beauty blindness’ characteristic of romantic love (on parental perceptions of physical beauty see Parsons 2010). Interestingly, the sociologist Colin Campbell (1987) has identified a similar sort of pleasurable fantasizing about material objects as central to modern consumerism, suggesting that we might now add “shopper” to Shakespeare’s list. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. This often neglected, ‘future-oriented’ aspect of romantic love is nicely emphasized by Keller (2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)