The Moral Psychology of Love (or How to Think About Love)

Introduction

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> Love is a misunderstanding between two fools.
>
> —Oscar Wilde

> Love has nothing to do with what you are expecting to get—only with what you are expecting to give—which is everything.
>
> —Katherine Hepburn

> True love comes quietly, without banners or flashing lights. If you hear bells, get your ears checked.
>
> —Erich Segal

The cliché "if you haven't loved, you haven't lived" conjures up about 512 million Google search results. The cliché's popularity attests to the importance and diversity of roles that love plays in our lives. Love is thought to be a fulfilling experience not only because it is often pleasant (when it isn't excruciatingly painful) but also because it aims to forge connections with others, brings meaning to our lives, and often feels like an indispensable ingredient of happiness. At the same time, love is hemmed with imperatives and taboos that imbue it with numerous often-contradictory social meanings: "love is blind" versus "love is seeing clearly," "all is fair in love and war" versus "love is kindness," "if you love them, never let them go" versus "if you love them, set them free." These different love-narratives create a complex set of normative constraints reflected in cultural attitudes toward love. These attitudes are embedded in the minds of individuals and guide their experiences and practices of love. These love-narratives specify the appropriate circumstances, objects, ways of feeling, expressing, and acting in love. Due to their widely accepted status and normative force, the resulting attitudes

and expectations are often felt as commands. And these commands are often rendered as moral imperatives.

This suggests several questions: To what extent are moral concerns a part of love itself? What makes love good or bad? What makes love morally praiseworthy—if or when it is? What role can and should moral considerations play in love? We might ask similar questions about practical or prudential concerns: When is love good or bad for us, our life goals, people and things we care about, the society at large? The answers to prudential questions might conflict with the answers to moral ones.[1]

To find our way in the maze of love and norms, we cannot avoid confronting the question of the relative importance of rules and conventions and biological constraints, as these seem reflected in the diversity as well as in whatever seems to be universal in human love. But we intend to avoid the old nature-nurture debate. This dichotomy rests on the false dilemma that one or the other must be the primary determinant of love. The rise of epigenetics has exposed the extent to which development and genetics are interdependent, making it impossible to single out phenomena whose origin is dominated by one or the other (Powledge 2011). That fact and the sheer complexity of the phenomena of love call for interdisciplinary cooperation.

Moral psychology approaches the questions we have raised in just such a spirit. It is a multidisciplinary field of study concerned with human reasoning, motivation, and behavior in moral contexts. Despite the tendency toward armchair speculation often imputed to analytic philosophers, historically moral philosophers have not shied away from making empirical claims the truth of which directly bears on their theories. Drawing on the empirical sciences for evidence helps warrant the premises of philosophical arguments and the factual import of philosophical theories. Empirical scientists, in turn, have been drawing on philosophy in constructing rigorous theoretical frameworks (Tiberius 2015; Alfano 2016). As Mark Alfano aptly puts it, "[M]oral philosophy without psychological content is empty, whereas psychological investigation without philosophical insight is blind" (2016, 1). Thus, the field of moral psychology has emerged as a collaborative effort between philosophers and empirical scientists (mainly psychologists and neuroscientists) to investigate the psychological aspects of moral agents.

This volume is dedicated to the moral psychology of love. It investigates the ways in which the various normative dimensions of love interact with moral and other norms. Insofar as love is or gives rise to one or more affective states, it has intrinsic normativity since affective states are necessarily evaluative. What sort of state is it? The series to which this volume belongs suggests that it is an emotion. Indeed, Berit Brogaard defends an account of love as an emotion (2015). Other views characterize love as a sentiment, or what psychologists call an "emotion trait" (Frijda 1994; Bartels and Zeki

2000; Revelle and Scherer 2009; Deonna and Teroni 2012), as a syndrome (de Sousa 2015; Pismenny and Prinz 2017; Pismenny 2018), as a drive (Fisher 2006), and as a desire (Plato 1989) to name a few. Describing love as one of these kinds of state highlights some of its core aspects. For instance, on all these accounts (with the possible exception of Fisher's), love is an intentional state as it is always directed at someone or something. It is a kind of assessment of the object at which it is directed. In particular, it is a positive evaluation of its object. While the term "love" is used loosely in everyday parlance to indicate a strong preference or liking for seemingly any kind of object ("Salem loves raspberries," "Darra loves to travel," "Jelani loves their new guitar"), in this volume we are primarily concerned with love as it exists in intimate relationships, love that takes as its objects individuals in such relationships, such as family members, romantic partners, and friends.

Philosophers have been debating whether love, like paradigmatic emotions such as fear and anger, has correctness conditions, that is, whether love is the kind of phenomenon that can correctly or incorrectly identify its target as lovable. If it is, that raises the question of what makes someone or something lovable. Is someone lovable because they possess some properties that ground the value of lovability or simply because they are loved? The former suggests that love can fail to correctly identify the lovable, whereas the latter suggests that love can neither fail nor succeed at any such task. The former view entails that love can be justified and hence that there are reasons for love, whereas the latter entails that we can only ever get at its cause, never its reason, as love has no reason.[2]

If love is a response to properties, one can ask further what it is about these properties that makes their possessor lovable. Is someone lovable because they have positive character traits? If so, must these character traits necessarily be moral traits? Or is a person lovable because their character traits and perhaps some other characteristics are compatible in some relevant way with the lover's? One aim of the moral psychology of love is to address the question of what kind of valuing love entails.

This evaluative aspect of the intrinsic normativity of love is complemented by love's motivational component. Indeed, Harry Frankfurt construes love as a volitional state (1998, 2004).[3] What does love move us to think and do? If the heart has its reasons, what sort of reasons might they be? Frankfurt argues that they are *sui generis*, whereas others have tried to show that they are moral reasons (Sadler 2006; Schaubroeck 2019). If reasons of love are *sui generis*, we might further ask whether they are morally justifiable. Whether or not reasons of love are necessarily moral in nature depends in part on the definition of "love." If love is defined as promoting only moral reasons, then whenever a reason fails to be a moral one, it must be rejected as a reason of love. But why should we accept this as a conceptual constraint on love? Claims of the

kind "if you loved me, you would (not) do X" sometimes amount to a demand that the beloved commit an immoral action. Such a demand is intelligible on the common view of love as unconditional and selfless. Similarly, "I did it because I love you" is often offered as an excuse for some morally condemnable action against the beloved (Ben-Ze'ev and Goussinsky 2008; Pismenny 2021). Another aim of the moral psychology of love is to elucidate the kinds of motivation love elicits.

Love and loving relationships are involved in or presupposed by numerous social structures, such as family units, nuclear or extended, romantic partnerships, and friendships. These social structures in turn steer love relationships in socially acceptable directions. In the West, dominant social institutions such as monogamous marriages and nuclear families promote sexual and emotional exclusivity among romantic partners. Most people consider monogamy the only morally acceptable relationship style. The prominence of this norm is what provides it with its normative weight (Brake 2017). Furthermore, many have advocated the view that romantic love, but not familial love or love of friends, must be emotionally exclusive to qualify as "true" love (e.g., Nozick 1990). We must ask, however, whether the "true" qualifier is meant to dismiss all nonexclusive cases as cases of something other than love, or it is meant to characterize nonexclusive cases as defective, yet instances of love, nonetheless. Here, once again, we are faced with the question of how to define "love." Since numerous individuals engage in extradyadic romantic affairs in their lifetime despite their explicit monogamous commitments, and since polyamorous individuals attest to the possibility of loving multiple partners at once (Jenkins 2017), it appears that defining "true" love as necessarily exclusive is an inept piece of conceptual engineering.

If romantic love can be nonexclusive, the "true" qualifier might be understood as marking the moral superiority of exclusive monogamous love. Indeed, moral reasons are often cited in support both of monogamy and of heteronormativity. Discussing such reasons with care is beyond the scope of this Introduction (but see Brake 2017; de Sousa 2017; Brunning 2016, 2020). Clearly, however, the facts mentioned set a clear agenda for the moral psychology of love: to explain the origin of widely held (though far from universal) beliefs in the superiority—moral or practical—of certain forms of love. To do so, we must unpack the complex biological, social, and psychological factors that underlie culture- and time-specific attitudes toward romantic love, driving people to convictions that are as resistant to change as they are hard to justify.

The contributors to the present volume do not pretend to answer all the questions raised by the moral psychology of love. But their essays jointly illustrate the variety of those questions and the diversity of perspectives that can be adopted to address them.

The volume is divided into three sections. The chapters in section I showcase the diversity of approaches to the study of love, key findings in the psychology and neuroscience of love, and meta questions about how love and valuing should be conceptualized. Chapters in section II raise questions about the social norms grounding mono-normativity, polyamory, and sexual and gender identities in romantic relationships. The chapters in section III explore connections between love, morality, and some of the conflicts to which they give rise.

In his chapter, "Don't Ask If Love Is Moral," Ronald de Sousa argues that the question of whether love is a moral emotion should not even be asked. He begins by calling attention to the lack of consensus among philosophers about the nature of love, its moral status, and the very notion of a moral emotion. On that basis, he aims to show that attempts to decide whether love is a moral emotion are bound to degenerate into question-begging disputes about the definitions of the terms involved and that these terms in any case are devoid of any practical import beyond the promotion of harmful prejudices. He concludes that difficulties presented by the question of whether love is a moral emotion stem in part from the fact that any debate about morality will lure us into fruitless and insoluble disagreements about foundational issues, and in part from the fact that moral discourse does little but encourage moralistic guilt and blame.

In their chapter "The Neurobiology of Love," Donatella Marazziti and Alessandra Della Vecchia provide an account of the neural underpinnings of the early stages of romantic love—a state of being *in* love, sometimes called infatuation. They adopt the dominant theory in evolutionary psychology, according to which romantic love has evolved to serve as a link between lust and attachment—two other systems that help facilitate human reproduction. The brain chemistry as well as the psychological symptoms of a person in love are strikingly similar to those experienced by individuals with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) or addiction. They hypothesize that the obsessive intrusive thoughts, cravings, and feelings of euphoria experienced by people in love might help one to focus their sexual and romantic energies on one other person, thereby facilitating the attachment and pair-bonding between two individuals required for them to jointly raise offspring.

In "The Good and Bad of Love and Hate," Katherine Aumer and Michael A. Erickson present their research on the values of love and hate. They use signal detection theory to explain the difficulty of gauging the costs and benefits of engaging in a love relationship or of adopting the attitude of hate. They point out that although it is often assumed that love is unequivocally good and hate is unequivocally bad, there can be advantages to hate and disadvantages to love. While love can contribute to our happiness, comfort, and well-being, it can also be painful when it is unrequited or it compels us to

stay in an abusive relationship. Hatred directed at individuals or groups can be destructive and harmful. Yet it can play a positive role as a motivational factor to eliminate or otherwise curtail the odious object. It can also help unite people against the hated target, reinforcing social bonds. Aumer and Erickson attribute the dearth of research on hatred to the prevalence of a negative moralistic attitude toward it, which they urge us to drop so we can get to the core of both the good and the bad of this emotion.

Robert Sternberg's "The Role of Ideals in Intimate Relationships" discusses the clash between our love ideals—our conception of what a perfect romantic partner is—and our actual romantic partners. Using his triangular theory, which posits three dimensions of love—intimacy, passion, and commitment—Sternberg examines two sets of ideal love triangles. The first represents how one wants to feel about one's partner, the second, how one wishes to be regarded by them. Sternberg has found that relationship satisfaction is high when the discrepancy between ideal and actual relationships is low. Flexibility and openness to modify one's romantic ideals is also likely to increase relationship satisfaction.

The second section of this volume is concerned with romantic relationships and the social norms that guide them. The chapters address questions about the social norms underpinning prevalent relationship structures such as monogamous relationships as they stem from mono- and heteronormativity. The advantages and disadvantages of polyamorous relationship structures are discussed, as are the effects of transitioning on the gender and sexual identities of romantic partners and their relationships.

In her "Romantic Love and Altruism in Pair-bonds," Bianca Acevedo investigates the moral aspects of pair-bonds in connection with monogamy and fairness. She points out that although monogamy is the most common relationship style in many cultures, where its rule of exclusivity is enforced with uneven strictness, monogamy is extremely rare in nature. Many species practice "social monogamy," that is, the rearing of offspring, regardless of whether one has contributed one's genetic material to the offspring. Studies of different species suggest that a genetic factor may be driving the widespread preference for sexual exclusivity. Acevedo concludes that the potential genetic underpinning of sexual exclusivity or non-exclusivity, together with the finding that the altruistic behavior involved in romantic relationships may take different forms in different cultures, may explain why monogamy works for some while others opt for consensual nonmonogamy (CNM).

In his chapter, "'I Am Glad That My Partner Is Happy with Her Lover': On Jealousy, and Compersion," Aaron Ben-Ze'ev analyzes the roles that jealousy and compersion play in monogamous and polyamorous love relationships. Compersion is a joyful emotion in response to the pleasure a romantic partner experiences with another lover. Compersion is most likely to be experienced

in polyamorous relationships since polyamory typically is committed to emotional and sexual non-exclusivity. Monogamy, on the other hand, is committed to sexual and emotional exclusivity. Hence, a lover's extradyadic involvement typically arouses jealousy. Jealousy construes non-exclusivity as a threat, and the external lover as a rival. Ben-Ze'ev argues that polyamorous relationships are more difficult to sustain because of their practical limitations such as spreading love too thinly among partners, difficulties managing time and other resources, and bouts of jealousy despite the polyamorous commitment to non-exclusivity.

In his "Multiple Loves and Shaped Selves," by contrast, Luke Brunning concentrates on the virtues of polyamory. He explores the ways in which romantic partners can influence one another—a phenomenon he calls *fashioning*. This concept aims to capture the variety of ways in which partners can shape each other, for example, by developing their character or enhancing their self-perception, while avoiding a complete merger of their identities or selves. Brunning argues that within the context of polyamory, such fashioning can be particularly unique and beneficial because of the kinds of challenges polyamory presents.

Gen Eickers's "Being Trans, Being Loved: Clashing Identities and the Limits of Love" catalogs a variety of obstacles faced by trans people in their pursuit of romantic love. They analyze the ways in which culturally dominant romantic love-narratives tend to exclude trans identities. Trans persons are thus rendered undesirable, thereby significantly narrowing the dating pool available to them. They furthermore discuss how transitioning impacts the sexual identities of those transitioning as well as their partners. The centrality of one's sexual identity to one's self may prevent one from amending it in such a way as to accommodate the trans partner's gender identity. Transitioning within the context of a romantic relationship can thus result in heartbreak and the dissolution of the relationship.

The chapters in section III highlight some of the specific tensions that arise from attempts to assess love relationships in moral terms.

In "The Possibility of a Duty to Love," Lotte Spreeuwenberg outlines the ways in which a moral duty to love could be construed. It is typically objected that there cannot be a duty to love because love is not under our control, because love is particularly valuable when it is freely given, because love is not reason-responsive, and because motivation stemming from love is incompatible with acting from duty. Spreeuwenberg aims to show that each of these objections can be addressed by modifying our understanding of "moral duty."

Raja Halwani's "Love and Integrity" presents a puzzle of the conflict between love and integrity: this can occur when one's deeply held values clash with the values of one's romantic partner. Halwani examines cases in which such a conflict poses a threat to love because one lover cannot endorse

or adopt their beloved's values. When such conflicts arise, one might turn a blind eye, revise one's values, or terminate the relationship. Each option can incur a high cost, either to the lover's integrity, or to the love relation's viability. Such cases invite us to reexamine the ways in which the endorsement and adaptation of the beloved's values should be understood as a requirements of love.

In "Vices of Friendship," Pismenny and Brogaard argue that the neo-Aristotelian conception of friendships of character misrepresents true friendship. They question the view that friendship entails disinterested love of the beloved for their own sake, and they reject the requirement that friends should strive to enhance one another's moral virtues. They proceed by proposing a more modest alternative conception of friendship as involving closeness, intimacy, identity, and trust. However, they argue, even on this minimal construal, friendship can turn vicious when one of its characteristics becomes overpowering and thereby undermines the very goods for which the friendship was originally sought.

Caroline Lundquist's "Internal Bleeding: How Covert Misogyny within Loving Relationships Tears Us Apart" describes zozobra, that is, the feeling that something isn't right that so often is experienced by women in heterosexual romantic relationships, owing to the covert misogyny that is built into the conflicting narratives of gender and romantic love. Covert misogyny is manifested in behaviors that stem from beliefs about the inferiority of women, which are not explicitly endorsed but hidden deeply in the psyches of men and women. These love and gender narratives normalize and excuse covert misogyny and thereby encourage women to rationalize their choice to stay in abusive relationships. Lundquist argues that while covert misogyny need not make the love that obtains between the partners any less real, addressing the misogyny is not only to everyone's benefit, it is also everyone's responsibility.

In their "Interrogating the Immorality of Infidelity," Jennifer Piemonte, Staci Gusakova, Jennifer Rubin, and Terri Conley argue that distinguishing between opportunistic and planned infidelity can help us assess the moral status of unfaithfulness. Their studies have shown that infidelity occurs far more often when it results from an unexpected proposition than when it is deliberately planned. This suggests that infidelity is often opportunistic. Given the prevalence of cases in which opportunity plays a role in infidelity, Piemonte, Gusakova, Rubin, and Conley suggest that an opportunity to cheat is a more likely determinant of infidelity than a flawed moral character. For this reason, they argue, opportunistic cheating does not deserve the same moral condemnation as planned cheating.

Taken together, this volume's chapters explore questions in the moral psychology of love from a variety of research perspectives. We hope that the

diversity of perspectives represented here will spur further collaborative work between neuroscientists, psychologists, and philosophers on the descriptive and normative questions about love and intimate relationships.

NOTES

1. One might also ask a set of aesthetic questions: When is love beautiful or ugly? And one might want to distinguish between asking what love is good for, and asking what makes love good *qua* love.

2. For discussion, see Keller 2000; Abramson and Leite 2011; Zangwill 2013; Smuts 2014; Brogaard, 2015, 2019, 2020; Pismenny and Prinz 2017; Pismenny 2018; Pismenny 2021.

3. However, Frankfurt dismisses romantic love as a genuine form of love (e.g., Frankfurt, 1998, 2004).

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