

# How Will I Know If He Really Loves Me? Toward an Epistemology of Love

## Abstract

This paper attempts to fill an epistemological gap in our theorizing about love with a sketch of an epistemology of love that unfolds by addressing Whitney Houston's famous epistemological questions pertaining to how we can know whether another loves us. After arguing for three possible sources of the knowledge of love, it offers initial answers to how the knowledge of the presence or absence of another's love can be acquired from the relevant possible sources previously established. These initial answers, though, are unsatisfying because they invite more difficult questions that are then addressed, such as those pertaining to the kinds of things that constitute love's expressions along with how to detect these expressions given the possibility of false positives. Addressing these questions ultimately leads to a sharpened, Aristotle-inspired account of how to acquire the knowledge of the presence or absence of another's love by inferring it, respectively, from the successful or failed detection of love's expressions.

## 1. Introduction

How will I know if he really loves me? Or if he loves me not? Whitney Houston posed these epistemological questions to the world back in 1985, and as far as I can tell, we philosophers of love have neglected them. This is probably because, in large part at least, we are hung up on Howard Jones' metaphysical question: What is love, anyway? I have certainly been quite focused on this difficult philosophical question, which is one that we must address to some extent before we can make progress on answering Houston's epistemological questions. Another reason for our neglect of Houston's questions is surely that many of us are hung up—appropriately so, I think—on normative questions about whether there are normative reasons for or against love, the value of love, whether love is a bestower or an appraiser of value, and what love's normative significance—both rational and moral—happens to be. Perhaps another reason is that those theorists who venture into epistemological territory are interested in how love is an epistemological influence (Jollimore 2011) or in the relations between love and knowledge (Chappell 2017) rather than in love as an object of knowledge. But even though these topics are interesting and important, we should still engage with Houston's questions in order to plug the epistemological gap in our theorizing about love. As I hope to show in this paper, such engagement will uncover important, basic epistemological truths pertaining to the possible sources of the knowledge of love that will then indicate a two-pronged answer to Houston's questions consisting of even more epistemological truths about love—namely, those that effectively describe, in the most basic terms, how the knowledge of the presence or the absence of another's love can be acquired from the relevant possible sources. Furthermore, once we reach this initial, two-pronged answer to Houston's questions, many new questions will arise, where further engagement with *them* will bear even more epistemological fruit, including a sharpened, Aristotelian account of how to acquire the inferential knowledge of another's love from the detection of love's expressions.

Of course, some may be skeptical that addressing Houston's questions is a worthwhile philosophical project.<sup>1</sup> Some people, for instance, may think that the answer to these questions is patently obvious: we gain the knowledge of another's love—or their lack of love—through what they say and do. More specifically, we acquire this knowledge *by detecting expressions of their love or by failing to detect them in certain conditions*. And since this answer is so obvious, there is no need for philosophy. Moreover, even if the answer was not so obvious, the question of how we can know whether others love us may seem to be just a specific instance of the more general question as to how we can know whether others are experiencing certain emotions, as well as a specific instance of the even more general question of how we can know what is going on in the psyches of other people, so why think that there is any important, philosophical work to be done here regarding the knowledge of love?

Well, for one thing, that patently obvious answer—that the knowledge of another's love or the lack of it comes from successful or failed expression-detection—is ambiguous and must be qualified to be correct. If interpreted to mean that expression-detection is the only route to the knowledge of another's love or lack of love, then it is false because it is possible to acquire this knowledge via testimony from others. To be a correct answer, then, we must interpret it as claiming that expression-detection is just one way of acquiring the relevant knowledge. But even though this is obviously true, it merely invites many new epistemological questions that call for attention, some of which are very difficult to answer. How does one detect love's expressions? Or correctly conclude that they have detected no such expressions? What kinds of things constitute such expressions to begin with? We must know what kinds of things these expressions are, which will require first that we have some idea of what constitutes love, before we can detect its expressions, or correctly conclude that we have failed to do so, and then infer the knowledge of love's presence or absence in another.

Furthermore, even if we know what kinds of things constitute love's expressions and therefore what we should be looking for when trying to figure out if another is in love, detecting these kinds of things as such expressions is very difficult given the possibility of false positives, or merely apparent expressions of love that stem from something other than love even though they are the kinds of things that can constitute genuine expressions of love. Take, for instance, behavioral patterns of caring for another, such as by consistently meeting their basic needs. Though these are genuine expressions of love in many cases, they are quite often expressions of caring about others that are not loved, and they could even be expressions of hate, so these kinds of things could be mistaken for genuine expressions of love.<sup>2</sup> How then do we avoid these false positives? Or as someone in Houston's position might ask: how will I know when I have really found genuine expressions of love rather than false positives? In order to detect love's expressions and acquire the knowledge of another's love from them, we need to know the kinds of things that constitute these expressions as well as how to tell when they are genuine expressions of love instead of expressions of something other than love that can nevertheless engender the same kinds of expressions, and so that patently obvious answer from above, even when qualified and rendered accurate, does not come close to sufficiently answering Houston's questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to anonymous reviewers for pressing me to address the following points.

<sup>2</sup> To briefly illustrate, consider these examples. Many farmers care for their chickens, which they do not love, by regularly meeting their basic needs, but this is only to prepare those chickens for human consumption, and it would be a clear mistake to interpret such caring behavior toward those chickens as expressions of love for them. Next imagine someone, S, that has locked up their mortal enemy, M, which they hate, in order to torture them for as long as possible. And to make this happen, S regularly meets M's basic needs. It would be a clear mistake to interpret such caring behavior as an expression of love since, in this rare instance, it is an expression of hate.

It also rather dubious—if not downright false—that love is an emotion, and so we cannot treat the inquiry into how we can know whether others love us as a clear instance of the more general inquiry into how we can know whether others are experiencing certain emotions. Although love is typically treated as an emotion, it is more plausible to treat it, as some philosophers do and as I will here, as a psychological *syndrome* that is constituted by a complex of attitudes and dispositions (Hurka 2017; Kolodny 2003; Stringer 2021), where these dispositions include ones to experience certain emotions.<sup>3</sup>

Being such a syndrome, however, does not make love different in kind from other psychological conditions or realities that can be similarly construed as syndromes, and so love may not be subject to unique epistemological inquiry as a psychological syndrome. Even so, though, there are multiple reasons to engage in epistemological inquiry into the knowledge of love in particular. Besides the epistemological truths about love in particular that such inquiry is supposed to unearth, figuring out how love in particular can be known could be used to build epistemological theories pertaining to how psychological conditions in general can be known or used to test such theories that have already been crafted. So, if one is interested in theorizing about how we can know about psychological conditions in general, they will have to motivate their theory with examples of how we can know about particular psychological conditions, where love is such a condition that could be used and that would work just as well as any other that would work (none of which must be so used). Or, if one has already crafted a theory of how we can know about psychological conditions in general using examples other than love to motivate the theory, they can then test this theory against the case of love if they know, independently of the theory, how we can know about love. Epistemological inquiry into the knowledge of love in particular, then, promises to be useful for psychological epistemology more generally on top of uncovering epistemological truths pertaining to love in particular.

Moreover, I think that epistemological inquiry into the knowledge of love in particular can be illuminating for psychological epistemology more generally. More specifically, such inquiry can illuminate how complex psychological conditions that can express themselves in the same ways that other psychological realities can express themselves can be known by inferring them from their expressions, which is fraught with difficulty given the possibility of false positives that results from that “overlap” of expressions.<sup>4</sup> As explained above, the kinds of things that can constitute love’s expressions, such as behavioral patterns of caring for another, can also stem from psychological realities other than love, and so we cannot know about love in another simply by inferring it from the detection of such patterns. Taken alone, such patterns do not guarantee love, and so any inference from the detection of them to love’s presence would be invalid and, at best, lucky in a way that seems to preclude the possibility of genuinely knowing about love by inferring it from its expressions. To truly infer the knowledge of love in another from its expressions, it seems, we must recognize expressions of love in particular rather than expressions of something else, which we do not accomplish by simply recognizing certain kinds of behaviors or emotional reactions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent defense of the idea that love is best thought of as a syndrome rather than an emotion, see Pismenny and Prinz (2017). For an older criticism of the popular idea that love is an emotion, see Green (1997).

<sup>4</sup> I also think that a more comprehensive inquiry into the knowledge of love than that undertaken here—one that, in particular, explores the first-person-only-direct-access route to such knowledge—will shed light on how immensely complex conditions that resemble other psychological conditions can be known given the very live possibility of confusing the former conditions with the latter ones that resemble them (e.g., confusing one’s mere stalker obsession with someone as genuine love for them).

<sup>5</sup> If what seems to be so here is actually true, then it is questionable just how much people in the real world really *know* whether others love by inferring it from what they say and do. In order to infer genuine knowledge from this, people

At any rate, while there may be no deep philosophical problem here to solve about love in particular, I think that engagement with Houston's questions will be philosophically interesting and epistemologically fruitful, and so my central aim in this paper is to make progress on filling the rather large epistemological lacuna in our theorizing about love by addressing Houston's questions. The plan for the rest of this paper is as follows. In the next section, I will explain why any epistemological progress to be made here depends on the metaphysics of love. Then I will argue for a qualified version of that obvious answer from earlier that, while perhaps common-sensical, is nevertheless important to nail down as a basic epistemological truth pertaining to the possible sources of the knowledge of another's love. The discussion here will then lead us, in the third section, to three foundational epistemological truths—including the qualified version of that obvious answer—pertaining to the possible sources of the knowledge of love that, in turn, indicate a two-pronged answer to Houston's epistemological questions that embodies even more epistemological truth pertaining to how the knowledge of love's presence or absence can be acquired from the relevant possible sources. This initial answer to Houston's questions, however, is not very satisfying because it invites a substantial number of new, daunting questions that we must answer to establish the relevant background knowledge and ultimately have a better understanding of how to acquire the knowledge of the presence or absence of another's love from the relevant possible sources, such as questions about the kinds of things that constitute love's expressions as well as how to recognize when these things are genuine expressions of love given the possibility of false positives. Answering these important questions requires delving deeper into the metaphysics of love, and so, in the fourth section, I will do this by locating constituents of love that are particularly relevant here, where these constituents will then lead us to the kinds of things that constitute expressions of love. Finally, in the fifth section, I will tackle the difficult issue of how to recognize genuine expressions of love given the possibility of false positives, where I will draw a little inspiration from Aristotle.

## 2. Correcting the Obvious Answer

Let's start by returning to that obvious answer from above—that we acquire the knowledge of whether another is in love *by detecting expressions of their love or by failing to detect them in certain conditions*. Such knowledge could not stem from such successful or failed expression-detection under a behavioral conception of love that understands love in terms of performing certain behaviors. For if loving something was just a matter of behaving toward them in specific ways, then love would be something that we do or perform rather than something internal to our psyches that we could express through behavior, and so coming to know about its presence or absence in others would be a rather straightforward matter of recognizing them performing or not performing certain, love-constituting actions. It is only when love is some kind of internal condition that can express itself in behaviors or emotions that knowledge of its presence or absence in others can be found in its expressions or the failure to detect them. Clearly, then, we must adopt a conception of what kind of thing love is before we can understand how we can acquire the knowledge of love in others. Epistemological progress is thus dependent on one's metaphysics of what kind of a thing love happens to be, and so, since the obvious answer is at least on the right track, such progress must be ultimately grounded in a conception of love as an internal psychological condition that expresses itself.

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cannot make lucky inferences, but instead must recognize what others say and do *as expressions of love rather than something else* and then infer the knowledge of love from that.

But this is precisely what is delivered by understanding love, as I do here, as a psychological syndrome that is constituted by a complex of attitudes and dispositions that expresses itself in certain behavioral and emotional symptoms. In fact, this syndrome understanding of love provides a very nice metaphysical framework for an epistemology of love that includes expressions of love as a possible source of the knowledge of love, and when combined with our epistemic position, this syndrome conception seems to provide grounds for the obvious answer. For, on the one hand, this syndrome conception forces us to distinguish between (1) the internal psychological condition that is love and (2) love's behavioral and emotional expressions that can indicate love's presence.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, there is our epistemic position: we do not have direct epistemic access to the love in others as we might have to the love in us; we at most have such access to the behavioral or emotional expressions of another's love, such as affectionate behaviors, acts of care, or emotional reactions to the beloved's welfare states (e.g., happiness in response to the beloved's happiness) that spring from such love. So, since love is an internal psychological condition that we cannot directly detect in others due to lacking direct epistemic access to it in others but can, at most, only detect indirectly by detecting its expressions, the only way to know whether someone else loves us (or someone else), it then seems, is by detecting expressions of this love.

Although one way of knowing about love in others is by detecting its expressions, the conclusion that this is the *only* way is false because it overlooks the possibility of testimonial knowledge of another's love. Such knowledge of another's love, which one acquires when one comes to believe in that love because someone who already possesses the knowledge of it honestly utters it so to them, is at least logically or theoretically possible and must ultimately come from someone's non-testimonial knowledge—infinite regresses of testimonial knowledge are surely empirically false and metaphysically dubious. Acquiring knowledge of another's love via testimony, then, must ultimately stem from some epistemic agent, E, who originally acquired this knowledge in a non-testimonial way.<sup>7</sup> It is also epistemologically significant who E might be. On the one hand, E might be someone other than the known subject of love, S. If E is not S, then E did not acquire their knowledge of S's love from direct epistemic access to that love, nor could they have acquired it via testimony. They must have acquired it, then, from detecting expressions of S's love. On the other hand, E could be identical to S, and then there could be two ways in which E acquired knowledge of S's love. One is the same way in which E would have acquired this knowledge if they had not been identical to the known subject of love: by detecting expressions of that love. Alternatively, perhaps E could know about their own love via direct epistemic access in the same way that we have such access to many of our own psychological states. Given this possibility, then, we end up with two epistemologically significant possibilities of indirectly knowing, via testimony, about someone else's love, L, and therefore with three overall possibilities for acquiring knowledge of it instead of only one: besides (a) the original method of directly detecting expressions of L, one could acquire knowledge of L from someone else's testimony, where this knowledge of L ultimately

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<sup>6</sup> Although these expressions or symptoms of love will occur unless the circumstances are very unusual, they are not themselves constituents of love, such that love is necessarily absent if there are no expressions of it. Even if love is an internal psychological condition that always expresses itself in our world, it is metaphysically possible for love to never engender any expressions of it (e.g., a case where Zeus sends down a lethal lightning bolt that ends the lover the moment after their love forms and before it can express itself).

<sup>7</sup> This claim that the testimonial knowledge of another's love must have its origins in the non-testimonial knowledge of that love follows from the general idea, suggested by C. A. J. Coady's claim that testimony needs an epistemic origin other than itself, that testimonial knowledge requires an origin in non-testimonial knowledge. See Coady (1992, p. 146).

stems from either (b) someone else directly detecting expressions of L or (c) the subject of love's direct access to L.<sup>8</sup>

We can now correct the first part of the obvious answer by factoring in the possibility of testimonial knowledge of another's love. Given this possibility, it follows that we can acquire the knowledge of another's love by detecting its expressions *or* via testimony from those who have already acquired this knowledge, and so it is only when, for whatever reason, there is no testimonial knowledge that can be acquired that the obvious answer is correct. Accordingly, the first part of the obvious answer must be modified into the claim that *barring the possibility of testimonial knowledge, the only way to know that someone else loves you (or someone else) is by detecting expressions of that love.*

### 3. Acquiring Knowledge of Love

My argumentation thus far suggests the following conclusions pertaining to the possible sources of the knowledge of love:

(K1). The knowledge of love can come from three possible sources—from detecting its expressions, from the subject-of-love's direct, privileged epistemic access to their love,<sup>9</sup> and from the testimony of others where the knowledge acquired via testimony ultimately stems from someone acquiring it via one of the other two sources.

(K2). The knowledge of *another's* love can only come from two of the three possible sources from above: from detecting its expressions or via testimony from others.<sup>10</sup>

(K3). Barring the possibility of testimonial knowledge, we can only acquire the knowledge of another's love by detecting expressions of this love.

And these epistemological truths—in particular, K2—suggest the following, two-pronged answer to Houston's questions. On the one hand, she will know if her potential lover, P, really loves her if she detects expressions of his love and then infers this love from its expressions, whereas she will know

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<sup>8</sup> I am operating from within a naturalistic worldview and thus am assuming that there are no deities, psychics, or the like that have supernatural, spiritual, or mystical epistemic access to others' love.

<sup>9</sup> My claim here is only the rather modest one that such direct, privileged access to one's own love is a possible source of the knowledge of one's own love. I am not claiming that this is always how lovers (i.e., loving subjects) come to know about their love for others or that such direct access to one's own psychology leads to infallible judgments about it. Although lovers might often come to know about their own love via such direct epistemic access to it, they might sometimes come to know about it by detecting its expressions or even from someone else's testimony, and our direct epistemic access to our own psychology may lead us to falsely judge that we are in love (perhaps one is an obsessed stalker and, though in direct epistemic contact with their mere obsession, is confusing it with genuine love).

<sup>10</sup> This restriction of the knowledge of another's love to these two possible sources does not imply that these two sources are not available to the loving subject when it comes to knowing about their own love. Rather, this self-knowledge can come from *any* of the three possible sources. For even if people detect their own love for others via direct epistemic access to it, they at least can, in theory, learn about their own love by detecting expressions of it or via testimony from someone else who knows about it. In fact, I would wager that, at most, people only *tend* to detect their own love for others via direct access and that sometimes—perhaps very occasionally—people learn about their love for others after recognizing expressions of it flowing from them or even hearing it via testimony from someone else who knows. This makes me think of a comical scene from the television show *Will and Grace* where Will is exhibiting signs of romantic love for someone, and Grace is the one who informs him—much to his surprise—that he “likes” the guy based on the fact that Will has shown several of the signs that he shows only when he “likes” other guys.

if he does not love her if (1) the situation is one where there would be detectable expressions if he really loved her, (2) she has conducted a proper investigation that would reveal at least some of these expressions to her, but (3) she detects no such expressions and so (4) infers that there is no love to express itself. On the other hand, she will likewise know if P really loves her, or if he loves her not, if she simply finds and defers to someone who has knowledge of the matter and honestly testifies to her about it.

Unfortunately, this initial answer, although a good start, is not very satisfying because it invites more difficult questions. We could imagine Houston responding by saying, “Okay, I see: to acquire the knowledge I am seeking, I need to be on the lookout for expressions of love or, alternatively, for reliable sources of testimony on the matter. But what kinds of things, pray tell, count as expressions of love in the first place? What should I be trying to detect? And even if I knew what kinds of things to look for, given the possibility of false positives—or of things that are the kinds of things that can constitute expressions of love but nevertheless flow from something other than love—how will I know if I have detected genuine expressions of love rather than merely apparent ones? And even if I knew these things: what constitutes a ‘proper investigation’ of love’s expressions? And how do I determine if the situation is one where there would be detectable expressions of love if love were really present? Or, if I pursue the other, seemingly easier, testimonial route: how will I know when I have really found someone with the knowledge I am after and who will honestly share it with me? How can I figure out who has the knowledge I am after, and how can I trust anybody’s testimony on the matter?” These are daunting questions, yet we must make progress on answering at least some of them to better understand how to acquire the knowledge of love’s presence or absence. Tackling all of these questions, however, is much too great of a task for a single paper. So, to keep things manageable, I will just focus on the first few questions pertaining to expressions of love, especially since this potential source of knowledge, unlike testimony, is epistemologically basic and can reveal the presence of another’s love or even our own (testimony can reveal either, but it is not basic—it is, as I argued above, ultimately dependent on one of the other two possible sources). Accordingly, I will now try to supplement my initial answer to Houston’s questions with (a) an account of what kinds of things constitute love’s expressions along with (b) an account of how to recognize genuine expressions of love given the possibility of false positives. For once we have a better understanding of both, we can sharpen this initial answer and thus will have a better understanding of how to acquire the relevant knowledge.

#### **4. Constituents of Love and Their Corresponding Expressions**

I shall begin with the first and more fundamental question: what kinds of things constitute love’s expressions? Possessing this background knowledge is crucial for being able to detect the presence or absence of love’s expressions and thus for inferring any knowledge of love’s presence or absence. Fortunately, we can answer this new question by metaphysically unraveling love: if love is a psychological syndrome constituted by certain attitudes and dispositions, then expressions of love will be expressions of those constituents. This is where Howard Jones’ metaphysical question of what love is again becomes relevant to epistemological theorizing about love. We need not, however, figure out what love is *in its entirety* to have a good idea about the kinds of things that constitute expressions of love. Instead, we only need to locate some constituents of love and their corresponding expressions. What are these constituents, then, and their corresponding expressions?

Along with other commentators, I think that love is affectionate (Hoffman 1980, p. 115; Brown 1987, p. 32; Noller 1996, p. 100; Abramson & Leite 2011, p. 677; Jollimore 2011, p. xiii;

Shpall 2018, p. 91, 114; and Stringer 2021, p. 489). More specifically, I contend that a core, essential constituent of love is a disposition to feel affection for the beloved.<sup>11</sup> Feeling affection *per se* is not such a constituent of love because, if it was such a constituent, then love would come and go as feelings of affection do, but our love for others does not come and go like that. Furthermore, we do not always feel affection for those that we love, which would not be possible if those feelings of affection were essential parts of love. Sometimes, for example, we feel no affection for them because we are very angry with them (or deeply disappointed, or resentful, or...), but we still love them. It is not actual feelings of affection for something, then, that partly constitute loving it. Instead, it is something that does not come and go, but that still accounts for the feelings of affection that are typically associated with loving something and often confused with loving something, which is *the disposition* to feel affection for the beloved, where this disposition, barring very unusual circumstances, will manifest itself to some degree.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, manifestations of this dispositional feature of love are expressions of love. In fact, these expressions can take two different forms: the feelings of affection that the lover is disposed to and often does feel, along with the behavioral expressions of these feelings, such as affectionate embraces, shoulder jabs, or facial expressions.

Besides this affective disposition, another essential feature of love is care or concern for the beloved (Brown 1987, pp. 28-29; Soble 1990, p. 172, 263; Giles 1994, p. 345; LaFollette 1996, p. 19; Noller 1996, pp. 100-101; Brink 1999, pp. 252-253, 272; Frankfurt 2001, p. 5; White 2001, p. 4, 6; Kolodny 2003, p. 136; Frankfurt 2004, p. 42, 59, 79; Helm 2010, p. 2; Jolliore 2011, p. 29; Smuts 2014a, p. 510; Smuts 2014b, p. 522; Franklin-Hall and Jaworska 2017, p. 23; Wonderly 2017, p. 236; Shpall 2018, p. 112, and Stringer 2021, p. 487). More specifically, part of loving someone is having *special concern for their welfare*: the lover is both non-instrumentally and partially concerned about the beloved's welfare. Instead of being merely instrumentally concerned about the beloved's welfare—that is, concerned about it only as something useful for her own ends, or only because of the benefits she gets from her beloved faring well—the lover cares about her beloved's welfare for its own sake, or as a final end. Also, compared to any non-instrumental concern for the welfare of non-loved objects, the lover is especially concerned about her beloved's welfare, which the lover will

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<sup>11</sup> Having a disposition to feel affection for something is, according to Sam Shpall (2018), a way of liking it, and so those who wish to distinguish love from liking can do so by understanding the latter as the disposition to feel affection for something and the former as constituted by such an affective disposition plus, among other things, the ensuing constituents of love. Although the nature of liking is no clearer than that of love and indeed calls for more treatment than that given here, Shpall's suggested way of understanding it is a plausible one that squares nicely with the fact that love is, on the one hand, a different phenomenon from liking and yet is still, on the other hand, a similar one that is easily confused with mere liking.

<sup>12</sup> An anonymous reviewer claims that this is too weak because, under the right conditions, any person, P, will have the disposition to feel affection for any object, O. More needs to be said, then, about these conditions and even about the nature of dispositions themselves. However, it is not clearly true that, for *any* person, no matter who they are, there are possible conditions under which they will be disposed to feel affection for *any* object. Some people may not be capable of having a disposition to feel affection for anything, although this might be extremely rare (or even just a metaphysical possibility). And even if all possible people are capable of having the disposition to feel affection for things, it is far from clear that they can have it toward anything. There might instead be some objects to which they could never be so disposed. Also, even though we do need to understand more about the nature of dispositions to fully understand this dispositional feature of love and thus love itself, this is not the place to go diving into these deep metaphysical waters. The nature of dispositions is instead the subject of an entirely different paper, if not an entire book, and so this topic is well beyond the scope of a paper on the epistemology of love. I do admit, though, that my above description of this dispositional feature might need some specification or precision to adequately capture this core, essential disposition of love. But even if this turns out to be true (and it is not clear that it is), given the fact that feelings of affection are, barring very unusual circumstances, going to be present whenever love is and yet are not themselves essential parts of love, there must be some sort of affective disposition that is such a part of love that accounts for those feelings of affection, and the way that I have described that disposition above is at least pretty close to being right.



generally prioritize and otherwise privilege in her deliberations and actions.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, expressions of love's special concern are expressions of love.

But we must look deeper into this concern to get a useful picture of its expressions. As I see it, this concern is itself a complex psychological condition that is both attitudinal and dispositional, and that is affective, cognitive, conative, and volitional. The elements of this concern that will be the most germane to our present inquiry, however, are the dispositional ones, particularly the affective and volitional dispositions. I will begin with the former. Along with several other commentators (Annis 1987, p. 349; Jeske 2008, p. 52; Smuts 2014a, p. 511; Franklin-Hall and Jaworska 2017, p. 22; Wonderly 2017, p. 243; Shpall 2018, p. 112; and Stringer 2021, p. 493), I maintain that special concern involves what Niko Kolodny (2003, p. 152) dubs "emotional vulnerability." This refers to the concerned subject's susceptibility to an array of welfare-focused emotional reactions (Nozick 1989: 68-69; White 2001: 7; Frankfurt 2004: 61; Helm 2010: 152; Franklin-Hall and Jaworska 2017: 22-23; Hurka 2017: 163; Smith 2017: 150-151; Wonderly 2017: 243; and Shpall 2018: 91, 112). So, for example, the beloved's happiness tends to make the lover happy, as do things that promote the beloved's happiness. By contrast, the lover tends to feel sympathy or compassion due to the beloved's unhappiness, and she tends to feel anger, indignation, or the like toward events that promote negative welfare states in the beloved. In general, the lover as such is disposed to experience positive emotional reactions to her beloved's positive welfare states and to things that promote them, as well as negative emotional reactions to her beloved's negative welfare states and to things that promote them. Having these affective dispositions toward others is part of what it means to have special concern for them, which is part of what it means to love them. The expressions of these dispositions—and thus of love—are then the lover's experiences of these emotions as well as the behaviors that flow from them.

Now we come to the volitional dispositions of this special concern. As Harry Frankfurt (2001, 2004) memorably maintains, to love someone is primarily to have a certain "configuration of the will"—namely, a practical, disinterested concern for their welfare constituted by certain volitional dispositions and constraints geared toward the non-instrumental promotion of their welfare.<sup>14</sup> The loving parent, for example, will have volitional dispositions not just to try to meet her children's needs and generally take care of them for their own sakes, but also to privilege her children's welfare in her deliberations and actions. There are things that the loving parent will not do—or will at least be extremely resistant to doing—if she thinks they will have, or are likely to have, or even could have, bad consequences for her child's welfare. The child's welfare constrains the loving parent's will by circumscribing the options that she can perform or is open to performing—those actions that she thinks will, or are likely to, or that even could, be bad for her child will be ones that she cannot do or ones that she will be resistant to doing. In addition to the affective dispositions that constitute love's emotional vulnerability, then, the lover's special concern for the beloved is partly constituted by volitional dispositions to try to non-instrumentally promote the beloved's welfare over other important things (such as the welfare of others that are not loved or even those not loved as much), and to be especially resistant to doing anything that they think will, or is likely to be, bad for the beloved. Expressions of these volitional dispositions, and therefore of love, will obviously consist in the lover performing—typically on a regular basis—actions intended

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<sup>13</sup> This general prioritization or privileging applies not just to cases of conflict, but to everyday life as well. For instance, a social worker who non-instrumentally cares about the welfare of their clients might leave work suddenly, before they can take care of a client's needs, in order to meet those of their children or their partner, but they may also meet the needs of their children, pets, or partner before those of their clients on a regular basis when there is no conflict.

<sup>14</sup> Noller (1996, p. 101) similarly maintains that love is not primarily about having one's own needs fulfilled; it is instead about caring for the other person.

to promote the beloved's welfare for the beloved's sake as well as those that privilege the promotion of the beloved's welfare over other important things. We can thus draw a similar conclusion to that drawn in the previous paragraph: the volitional dispositions to non-instrumentally promote and privilege the beloved's welfare that partly constitute love's core constituent of special concern for the beloved is itself a core constituent of love, and so the expressions of this feature—actions intended to promote the beloved's welfare for the beloved's sake or that clearly privilege the promotion of the beloved's welfare—count as expressions of love.

In addition to the disposition to feel affection for the beloved and the affective and volitional dispositions that partly constitute love's special concern for the beloved, I think that there is a cognitive-volitional combination of constituents that partly constitutes love and is perhaps especially valuable to focus on in the present context. In apparent agreement with many commentators (Ehman 1976, p. 99; McMurty 1982, p. 170; Brown 1987, p. 24; Kraut 1987, p. 425; Nozick 1989, p. 76; LaFollette 1996, p. 8; Lamb 1997, p. 43; Velleman 1999, p. 368; Frankfurt 2001, p. 6; White 2001, p. 4; Solomon 2002, p. 6; Kolodny 2003, pp. 140-141; Frankfurt 2004, p. 44, 79; Grau 2004, p. 113, 119, 127; Landrum 2009, p. 435; Helm 2010, p. 180, 205; Jollimore 2011, p. 127; Zangwill 2013, pp. 303-304, 308, 310; Smuts 2014b, p. 520; Wonderly 2017, p. 239, 243; and Stringer 2021, pp. 488-489), I maintain that love, which necessarily sees its object as special, necessarily regards its object as irreplaceable and is unwilling to accept substitutes for it.<sup>15</sup> Lovers, as such, must see the replacement of their beloveds as necessitating a feeling or experience of loss—they cannot see replacements that could fill their beloveds' slots by performing the same functions just as well or even better as things that could take the places of their beloveds without any loss whatsoever. Unlike the replacement of their mere commodities with other objects that could perform their functions just as well or better, which lovers will see as things that can be replaced without any loss, they must regard the replacement of their loved ones with other objects, including exact qualitative duplicates, as inevitably leading to loss. Lovers, then, must see their beloveds as “irreplaceable” in the sense that they cannot be replaced without the feeling or experience of loss. Furthermore, lovers do not treat their beloveds, which again are special objects, as mere commodities for which they are “in principle” willing to accept substitutes that could perform their functions just as well or better. Instead, as special objects, they are ones for which their lovers are unwilling to accept substitutes, at least in certain ways and in certain circumstances.<sup>16</sup> Additional expressions of love, then, are expressions of these constituents, which will be people expressing their belief in the beloved's irreplaceability or demonstrating their unwillingness to accept substitutes. These kinds of expressions might be hard to come by, but you are in contact with such expressions if there is no other reason, besides loving another, that could explain them.

Consider a personal example. Several years ago, my partner and I visited an animal shelter on her birthday, and we fell in love with a little gray kitten.<sup>17</sup> We decided to adopt her, and we named

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<sup>15</sup> For a dissenting voice, see Soble (1990, pp. 290-297). I also think that both parts of this cognitive-volitional composite are a bit more complicated, and indeed require some specification to be correct, but space does not permit me to specify them both appropriately, which would require its own paper.

<sup>16</sup> I readily acknowledge that these cryptic remarks about the lover's unwillingness here are unsatisfactory and definitely in need of clarification, but once again, space does not permit me to clarify them here—that would require a separate paper.

<sup>17</sup> One may be tempted to think that this is a questionable example of love because the object of our professed love is a cat rather than a person, but any such skepticism here is unwarranted because it stems from what Sam Shpall (2017) calls “humanism” with respect to love's objects, which assumes—without justification or sensitivity to the experiences of pet lovers across the globe—that love can only be had for persons. For many of us, our love for our pets is just as clear to us as the love we have for other people, and so to be skeptical of our love for our pets is no more warranted than being skeptical of our love for other people or even skeptical of all love, period.

her “Medea” after the character from Greek Tragedy. I came back days later to pick Medea up and take her to her new home with us, but they could not put her in our care just yet because they had to keep her and treat her for Coccidia. Perhaps seeing my disappointment (we had been anticipating this day since we first decided to adopt her), they said that I could take another cat instead. I promptly declined such an off-putting offer with no commentary other than something to the effect that “we want that cat,” and there is no other explanation for my refusal to accept a substitute for Medea other than that I loved her. She was not like that special singing frog from old cartoons that would make me millions if only I could get it to sing in front of other people, and other cats would have delivered the benefits of living with and caring for cats, so my unwillingness could not have been based in any personal benefits that I would specifically accrue from bringing her into my life and under my care. Had I been unwilling to accept a substitute for Medea only because of Bethany’s love for her (or rather, because of my love for Bethany), then I would not have been visibly off put by the offer and would have instead muttered something about not being able to accept their generous offer because Bethany had to have her. Had I been unwilling to accept a substitute for Medea because she was the one that reminded me of some previous beloved cat of mine, then I once again would not have been visibly off-put by the offer, and I would have explained that I had to have her specifically because she was the one that reminded me of a previous beloved cat.<sup>18</sup> I could not have been unwilling to accept a substitute for Medea because of the unmatched personal benefits she could provide or because Bethany had to have her or because she reminded me of a different beloved cat, so I must have been unwilling to do so because I loved her.<sup>19</sup> In any event, I can assure you that my love for her is why I did not accept a substitute for Medea, and I maintain that my unwillingness to accept a substitute for her was a rather clear expression of my love for her that, if detected, could lead to inferential knowledge of my love for her.<sup>20</sup>

Thus far I have located constituents of love in any of its forms and their corresponding expressions that constitute expressions of love, but we can find more of love’s expressions by locating constituents of specific forms of love. Houston, for example, is probably wondering if P really loves her romantically, and as Robert Nozick (1989, p. 70) memorably maintains, romantic love is partly a desire for a “we”, or for a romantic relationship. Accordingly, expressions of this constituent of romantic love, such as initiating romantic dates or intimate activities, or other behavior in pursuit of a romantic relationship with the beloved, constitute more expressions of love.

No doubt we could continue looking for more constituents of love as further sources of love’s expressions, but we have done enough to unearth the kinds of behaviors and emotional experiences to seek when trying to figure out whether someone else loves us or another (or even whether we love someone else).<sup>21</sup> We can therefore turn to the difficult question of how to tell when we have really found expressions of love rather than things that merely resemble them.

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<sup>18</sup> It is quite interesting to note that this reaction to the offer would have been an expression of love, yet one for another cat rather than Medea.

<sup>19</sup> It is of course possible that I have not exhausted the plausible options here for what, other than my love for Medea, might explain my unwillingness to accept a substitute for her, but I have not been able to come up with any other plausible explanation besides the personal benefits that I might accrue from bringing her under my care, my loving desires to give my beloved partner Bethany what she wants and would deeply enjoy, or my sentimental desire for a cat that reminded me of a different beloved cat.

<sup>20</sup> Although I am suggesting that this inferential route to the knowledge of my love for Medea was available, I did not acquire the relevant knowledge that way; instead, I acquired it via privileged, direct epistemic access to it.

<sup>21</sup> It might be unusual, but loving subjects can exhibit their love through its expressions even if they are not aware of their love or the fact that they are expressing it. In fact, they can exhibit their love for something even if they actively disbelieve that they love it. Perhaps they understand any detectable expressions of love as expressions of something else, such as mere care or respect.

## 5. Recognizing Expressions of Love

To see how this vexing question arises, consider the actual data that someone in Houston's position—let us call her H—really has at her disposal. H wants to know if P really loves her, but the only data to which H has access are P's behaviors or expressions of emotion that might or might not spring from love. P might be displaying affectionate behaviors, such as hugging or kissing H, but how can H be sure that this behavior flows from love? Such behavior could be merely strategic and undertaken only as effective means to P's purely selfish ends, or it could be expressions of genuine affection that nevertheless does not come from a true, full-blown love. Similarly, P might intentionally promote or even privilege H's welfare or experience positive emotional reactions to H's positive welfare states and negative emotional reactions to H's negative welfare states, but how can H be sure that these things flow from love rather than a purely self-interested concern for H's welfare or, more optimistically, from a disinterested concern that is not part of the larger whole of love? P is probably asking H out on dates and wants to have consensual sex with her, but does this stem from the loving desire for a romantic relationship, or from something else besides love, such as a fear of loneliness or the selfish desire for sexual gratification or social achievement?

The general difficulty that emerges here, then, is the following. We only have access to the behaviors and emotional expressions of others that may flow from their love, which are the things we should be seeking if we wish to figure out whether others are in love yet have no reliable sources of testimony on the matter. Unfortunately, the types of behaviors and emotional experiences discussed in the previous section that characteristically flow from love need not always stem from love; they can rather flow from pure self-interest or psychological realities that obtain without being part of a larger whole of love (e.g., a disposition to feel affection for another that is merely liked and not loved). So how, then, can we tell when these types of behavior or emotional expressions characteristic of love flow from love rather than something else? How, in other words, can we tell when the types of behavior or emotional expressions characteristic of love are genuine expressions of love rather than merely apparent ones?

Here is where we should look to Aristotle for inspiration. Aristotle drew a distinction between (1) doing what the virtuous person would characteristically do versus (2) doing what the virtuous person would characteristically do *in the way they would characteristically do it*. And, by doing so, Aristotle provided us with an idea of what constitutes a genuine expression of virtue and thus of what indicates virtue. It is not just doing what the virtuous person would characteristically do, which can stem from virtue but may just as easily stem from something else, that constitutes a genuine expression of virtue and therefore indicates virtue. Instead, it is doing what the virtuous person would do in the way that the virtuous person would characteristically do it that indicates the presence of virtue, provided, of course, that motives to deceive or fake virtue have been ruled out.

With this in mind, we can then make progress on our above conundrum of how to tell when behavior or emotional experiences characteristic of love actually spring from love and thus constitute genuine expressions of love. First, we take the virtuous person out of Aristotle's above distinction and replace it with the lover. Then we distinguish between (1') doing what the lover would characteristically do, which may or may not stem from love and thus may or may not constitute genuine expressions of love, and (2') doing what the lover would characteristically do *in the way that they would characteristically do it*, which either flows from love or, perhaps, from the desire to deceive or fake love for reasons unrelated to love, such as financial ones. Accordingly, it is not simply doing what the lover would characteristically do that constitutes expressions of love, since this can flow from something other than love. Instead, it is doing what the lover would

characteristically do in the way that the lover would characteristically do it, where the desire to deceive by faking love has been ruled out, that constitute genuine expressions of love and thus indicate love's presence. People such as Houston who want to figure out whether another loves them or someone else, then, should look for what-the-lover-would-characteristically-do-in-the-way-that-the-lover-would-characteristically-do-it, and if they find instances of a potential lover acting in this way, they should examine the situation to see if they can rule out the possibility that the potential lover is faking love. If this can be ruled out, then they have located genuine expressions of love and so can infer the knowledge of love from them.

As an illustration, let's return to my earlier example of me being unwilling to accept a substitute for my beloved cat, Medea, when I went to the shelter to bring her home for the first time. My refusal to accept a substitute when offered one is a type of behavior that is characteristic of love, but such behavior did not have to stem from love (even though it in fact did). If Medea had somehow been very lucrative compared to the other cats at the shelter, then my refusal could have stemmed from the motive of monetary gain rather than love. If she had been off the charts in terms of living-with-cat virtues, or if she had reminded me of a different beloved cat of mine, then my refusal could have stemmed from the motive of maximizing my own personal gain from owning cats or of having a new cat that reminded me of an older beloved cat. If only Bethany had loved Medea and had to have her, then my love for Bethany, rather than Medea, would have been the reason for my refusal. But the way in which I refused the offer is the way the lover would have refused it; I did not refuse it in a way that would have betrayed a motive other than love for her. I did not casually refuse the offer and then explain how she was going to make me a fortune, or that no other cat could deliver the same benefits, or that she was the one that reminded me of a previous beloved cat. I also did not refuse the offer yet comment on how I would have accepted their generous offer if it were not for my beloved partner who would settle for nothing else. I was visibly offended by the very suggestion, and I straightforwardly rejected it without thought or any commentary other than something to the effect that "we want that cat." Finally, my doing what the lover would characteristically do in these circumstances in the way that the lover would characteristically do it was not a deliberate attempt to deceive the shelter workers or to fake love for Medea. What reason could I have had for faking love for one among many shelter cats? Deception or faking on my part in these circumstances, which I would have had to choose unplanned and on the spot, would have made no sense. There was no monetary or financial incentive to deceive or fake; the only thing that deception or faking would accomplish would be depriving my beloved partner and me of having a new cat at that very moment, which we both really wanted, just so that I could make yet another trip to the shelter to pick up a cat that I did not really love. The possibility that I was faking love for Medea, then, would amount to me depriving my beloved partner and me, on the spur of the moment, of something that we both wanted for no benefit or gain that would then force me to make another trip to pick up a cat that I did not really love. This possibility, given its absurdity, could have been ruled out, and so my doing what the lover would characteristically do in the way that they would characteristically do it could have been recognized as a genuine expression of love. At any rate, the suggestion here is that we can detect expressions of another's love—and from there infer the knowledge of that love—by detecting characteristic behaviors of lovers done in ways that lovers would characteristically do them and then ruling out the possibility that they are faking love.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Some anonymous reviewers have taken issue with my example here. One reviewer has rightfully pointed out that deception or faking cannot necessarily be ruled out in interpersonal contexts as it can in my personal example of my love for my cat. Some possible motivations for faking that are not live options in my personal example, such as a self-interested desire for sexual satisfaction or monetary gain, will need to be ruled out in certain interpersonal contexts because they are live options in those contexts. However, my personal example was not meant to indicate that every

Of course, it may be difficult to say exactly how lovers would characteristically do things, and sometimes love's expressions may not be done in the way that lovers would characteristically do them. The Aristotelian suggestion of trying to detect genuine expressions of love by ruling out motives to fake after detecting what the lover would characteristically do in the way that the lover would characteristically do it, then, may not always pan out. Instead, it may lead to getting stuck at the early stage of merely detecting behaviors or emotional experiences characteristic of love without being able to determine whether they have been characteristically done or expressed. Alternatively, it may lead to false negatives, or to falsely judging that we do not have genuine expressions of love just because the detected behaviors or emotional experiences characteristic of love were not done or expressed as the lover would characteristically do or express them. However, this only means, respectively, that this Aristotelian route to knowledge, in particular, is closed off, or that we must be careful not to jump to hasty conclusions if we have reached this epistemological point of having detected behaviors or emotional experiences characteristic of love that have been done or expressed uncharacteristically. After all, even though I have suggested that love's expressions can be detected by ruling out motives to fake after detecting behaviors or emotional experiences characteristic of love done or expressed in the way the lover characteristically would do or express them, I have not claimed or otherwise suggested that this is the *only* way to detect them or that love's expressions are *only* found in characteristic things done in characteristic ways that do not stem from motives to fake. The Aristotelian ideas that I have floated here are rather ones about epistemic sufficiency rather than necessity, and so even if they will not pan out sometimes and may even lead to false negatives, this does not point to any problem with *them*.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, my proposed Aristotelian route to the inferential knowledge of love from the detection of its expression is really just a streamlined version of a more involved epistemological process of (1) detecting behaviors or emotions characteristic of love and then (2) ruling out all other plausible sources of them besides love. Accordingly, even if the Aristotelian route is not available because (a) we cannot tell whether the characteristic behaviors or emotions have been characteristically done or expressed or (b) we can tell that they have *not* been so done or expressed, there is still a possible route to the inferential knowledge of love from the detection of its

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epistemological situation will be like that in my example, and nothing that I have said implies that interpersonal contexts are epistemologically on a par with my example. Instead, my example is just meant to illustrate the idea that we can detect expressions of another's love, and from there acquire the inferential knowledge of that love, by detecting characteristic behaviors of lovers done in ways that lovers would characteristically do them provided that faking love has been ruled out as a possibility, which is consistent with thinking that this possibility cannot be ruled out in the same way in every case. Also, a reviewer has suggested that my example here is not as fitting as it could be given that it is presented from my perspective as the loving subject rather than an example presented from the beloved's perspective. But even though my example is indeed not one presented from the beloved's perspective, there is no advantage in presenting such an example rather than the one that I have been using, which is actually a particularly useful personal example here that is, again, meant to illustrate my point that we can detect expressions of another's love, and from there infer the knowledge of another's love, by detecting characteristic behaviors of lovers done in the ways that loving subjects would characteristically do them and ruling out the possibility that they are faking their love. Although I used Whitney Houston's song, which portrays a human being who wants to know whether another person loves her in particular, as a fun jumping off point for sketching an epistemology of love, the main focus here has not been the narrower one of how an individual human can know when another particular human loves them in particular. Instead, the main focus here has been the wider one of how we humans can know whether others are in love, where this is part of an even wider focus on how we humans can know about love in general, whether it is love in others or in ourselves.

<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note that this also seems to apply to genuine expressions of virtue as well: though they can be found or detected in characteristic expressions of virtue (e.g., just actions) expressed in the way that the virtuous person would characteristically express them (e.g., with pleasure), they may not be in some cases either because they are not characteristic expressions of virtue or they have not been expressed in the way that the virtuous person would characteristically express them.

expressions. In this case, we would need to ignore how things have been done or expressed and focus instead on trying to rule out all other plausible sources besides love, including the motive to fake it. If we can (1) recognize characteristic behaviors or emotional experiences of love and then (2) rule out the other plausible sources besides love, then once again, we can recognize these as genuine expressions of love and infer the knowledge of love from them. Of course, even this may not always pan out because we may not always be able to eliminate every other plausible source besides love, but my example of being unwilling to accept a substitute for Medea suggests that we sometimes can, and in such circumstances, we can recognize behavior or emotional experiences characteristic of love as expressions of love and from there infer the knowledge of this love.<sup>24</sup>

Thus far my discussion has focused on a particular behavior characteristic of love—the refusal to accept substitutes when given the chance—as one that is particularly good to look for and examine when trying to detect expressions of another’s love. And this is because this behavior of love can effectively be examined in isolation of other potential expressions of love: we can examine it all by itself and try to eliminate all other plausible sources besides love. Other—and indeed more commonly expressed—behaviors characteristic of love, however, will not be amenable to this kind of isolated examination. Consider, for instance, behavioral expressions of affection toward something or a pattern of non-instrumentally promoting that thing’s welfare. It does not seem possible to tell whether the former behaviors, when examined alone, spring from full-blown love or from a mere liking for something, or whether the latter pattern of behavior springs from full-blown love or a mere non-instrumental concern for something. But even though these characteristic behaviors of love cannot be determined to be expressions of love by examining them alone, *they can be examined in bundles*: if we have someone exhibiting different behavioral patterns or emotional reactions toward another that are characteristic of love, then we can examine them together to see if they could stem from other psychological realities other than love. If we have examined all plausible alternatives to love and can eliminate them all as the source of the behavioral patterns or emotional reactions exhibited, then they must come from love and thus must be genuine expressions of love.

Let us return yet again to my beloved cat, Medea, and let’s consider the following behaviors and emotional reactions characteristic of love that I express toward her. On a regular basis, I feel affection for her that I behaviorally demonstrate by smiling at her, petting her, and kissing her on the head, and when she hops up on my lap, I add hugging her to the affectionate mix. I also care for her on a regular basis: every day I give her medication, fresh water, and fresh food, and I reliably regulate how much kibble she can eat so that she will not gorge herself and vomit it up. And when she needs to go to the vet, I take her and shell out whatever it costs for the health care she needs. While I am taking her to the vet, and while we are at the vet, I am distressed because I know that *she* is distressed, and I try to do what I can to minimize her distress. When I finally bring her home, I am very relieved because I know that she is no longer distressed. And when she looks happy at home, or when she is playing, or when she is eating her food or drinking water, or when she is sleeping peacefully and comfortably, I experience great enjoyment from these simple realities.

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<sup>24</sup> There is nothing viciously circular going on here: I am *not* arguing that we can acquire the knowledge of another’s love by detecting behaviors or emotional expressions characteristic of love that spring from love, where detecting such expressions of love presupposes or requires that we already know that the person loves. Rather, I am suggesting that we can acquire the knowledge of another’s love by detecting or recognizing its expressions, which we can do by eliminating the other plausible sources besides love as the source of the behaviors or emotional expressions characteristic of love that we initially recognize. Going the other direction: we start with recognizing or detecting behaviors or emotional expressions characteristic of love, and if we can then eliminate all plausible non-love sources, which leaves love as the only remaining source, then we can conclude that the behaviors or emotional expressions characteristic of love are indeed expressions of love and thus that the being who exhibited them is in love.

Now, taken together, these patterns of emotional experiences and behaviors cannot stem from me merely liking Medea or merely caring about her non-instrumentally. Instead, they must flow from the combination of having a disposition to feel affection for her along with caring about her non-instrumentally. But since I am spending my time, energy, and other resources to try to non-instrumentally promote her well-being rather than that of other needy cats, that of needy humans, and even my own, I am clearly privileging her needs above those of others, including my own. Therefore, the behavioral patterns of non-instrumentally promoting her welfare along with the emotional vulnerability that I show to her welfare states betray not just my non-instrumental concern for her, but my *special* concern for her, and so it is difficult to see how my emotional experiences and behaviors toward her could stem from anything other than my love for her. And if we bring back into the mix my unwillingness to accept a substitute for her back at the animal shelter all those years ago, then it is even more evident that love must be behind these behaviors and emotional reactions characteristic of love. For what other plausible alternatives, besides my love for her, could be their source?

It cannot be my own self-interest. There are no monetary benefits to be accrued from any of these behaviors or emotional reactions, so they do not stem from the prospect of monetary gain. What about the personal enjoyment that I get from seeing happy cats that are playing, eating, drinking, or peacefully sleeping—could this personal enjoyment be the source of my behaviors toward Medea? No, because any of the needy cats would have been enjoyable to watch play, eat, drink, or sleep, and so I would have seen Medea as replaceable and would have accepted a substitute for her if feelings of personal enjoyment was the only thing motivating my adoption and subsequent care of her. In fact, if such enjoyment was the only aim that I had in dealing with shelter cats, then I would not adopt one in the first place given how costly this is in terms of time, energy, sleep, and money. Instead, I would go to a shelter and get my enjoyment on the cheap just by visiting the cats that live there. Could my behaviors and emotional reactions spring from the desire for the personal meaning, fulfillment, or enjoyment of simply being charitable toward a cat that needed a good home rather than a cold metal cage? No, because again I would have seen Medea as replaceable and would have accepted a substitute for her when I went to bring her home from the shelter, as any of the cats that needed a home would have filled the charity slot just as well as any other.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, the source of my behaviors and emotional reactions toward Medea cannot be my love for my beloved partner, Bethany, because if I had refused to accept a substitute for Medea and were only taking special care of her out of love for Bethany, then I would not show Medea spontaneous and gentle affection on a regular basis regardless of whether Bethany is there to witness it, nor would I experience the emotional vulnerability to Medea's welfare states that I regularly experience (instead, this vulnerability would ultimately be toward *Bethany's* actual or potential welfare states as they relate to Medea's welfare states). And finally, my behaviors and emotional reactions toward Medea cannot come from a desire for a cat that resembles a previous beloved cat of mine that she reminds me of, as there is no such cat—Medea has no beloved feline forerunners that she resembles.

In the end, then, it is not my own self-interest, or my love for Bethany, or my love for a previous cat that Medea resembles, or a mere liking for Medea, or merely caring about her welfare for her own sake that could be the source of my behavior and emotional reactions toward her.

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<sup>25</sup> While I most definitely do get a sense of meaning or fulfillment along with some enjoyment from taking special care of Medea and my other cats, these personal benefits are not what drives me to care for them. Instead, it is my love that drives me and that makes possible these benefits that I get as fortunate by-products. The lover here is analogous to the virtuous person that personally benefits as a fortunate by-product of being driven by virtue, rather than self-interest, to do the virtuous thing.



Instead, these behaviors and emotional reactions must spring from a psychological condition toward Medea that is at least constituted by (1) a disposition to feel affection for her, (2) special concern for her or her welfare, and (3) regarding her as irreplaceable and being unwilling to accept substitutes for her. And even if love is not quite exhausted by these psychological constituents—even if there is more to love than these things—it is, nevertheless, very difficult to see what else this condition toward Medea could be other than love for her.

At any rate, my argumentation in this paper ultimately suggests the following update to the first prong of my initial answer to Houston's questions. On the one hand, she will know that her potential lover, P, really loves her if she infers this love from the detection of its expressions, where such detection can occur by either (a) detecting behaviors or emotional reactions characteristic of love expressed in the way that the lover would characteristically express them and ruling out motives to deceive or fake love, or otherwise (b) detecting behaviors or emotional reactions characteristic of love and ruling out all other plausible sources besides love as that responsible for them. Put differently: detecting love's expressions can occur by detecting behaviors or emotional reactions characteristic of love and ruling out all other plausible sources besides love as that responsible for them, where such detection can sometimes occur by detecting behaviors or emotional reactions characteristic of love expressed in the way that the lover would characteristically express them and ruling out motives to deceive or fake love. On the other hand, she will know that P does not love her if she infers it from the failure to detect expressions of love in a situation where she would have detected such expressions if P really loved her, which is a situation where (1) there would be detectable expressions if he really loved her and (2) she has conducted a proper investigation that would reveal at least some of these expressions to her. And in order to acquire the knowledge either way, she must have certain kinds of background knowledge in place, such as knowing about the kinds of behaviors and emotional reactions that spring from love that were discussed above in the previous section, how lovers characteristically express them, how to rule out psychological sources other than love, such as those to deceive or fake it, how to properly search for love's expressions, and how to determine whether the situation is one where there would be detectable expressions of love if love were indeed present.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to make progress on plugging the epistemological gap in our theorizing about love by engaging with Whitney Houston's famous epistemological questions pertaining to how she will know whether someone else loves her. After explaining why epistemological progress is dependent on the metaphysics of love and adopting a syndrome conception of love that construes it as a psychological complex of attitudes and dispositions, I argued for three basic epistemological truths pertaining to the possible sources of the knowledge of love, including a qualified version of the obvious answer maintaining that, barring the possibility of testimonial knowledge, we can only acquire the knowledge of another's love by detecting expressions of this love. Then, based on the two of these truths pertaining to how we might acquire the knowledge of *another's* love, I offered an initial, two-pronged answer to Houston's questions—namely, that she will know whether another really loves her if (1) she finds and defers to someone who knows the truth of the matter and honestly shares it with her, or if (2) she infers the presence of love from detected expressions of it or infers the absence of love from the failure to detect its expressions after conducting a proper search, in conditions where love would engender detectable expressions of it, that would reveal them.

At this point, though, it was recognized that these answers are not very satisfying because they invite a whole host of new epistemological questions, including those about (a) what kinds of things constitute love's expressions in the first place and (b) how we can recognize genuine expressions of love given the possibility of false positives. To make progress on uncovering some of this crucial background knowledge and to sharpen the first prong of my initial answer to Houston's questions, I located some constituents of love and their corresponding expressions, which then brought me to the difficult issue of how to recognize genuine expressions of love, where I suggested that we look to Aristotle for inspiration. We can echo Aristotle and draw an important distinction between *doing-what-the-lover-would-characteristically-do* and *doing-that-in-the-way-that-the-lover-would-characteristically-do-it*, where genuine expressions of love will not merely consist in doing what the lover would characteristically do, which can stem from other psychological sources besides love. Instead, these expressions (can) consist in *doing-what-the-lover-would-characteristically-do-in-the-way-that-the-lover-would-characteristically-do-it* so long as this is not done to deceive or fake love. If this is on the mark, then we can modestly sharpen the expression prong of our initial answer to Houston's questions into something along the following lines. On the one hand, we can infer the absence of another's love from our failure to detect its expressions provided that the situation is one where there would be detectable expressions of love if love were present and our search for love's expressions was a proper one that would reveal at least some of those detectable expressions. On the other hand, we can know that someone else loves when we have detected them doing things that the lover would characteristically do in the way that the lover would characteristically do them and have ruled out the possibility of deception or faking on the potential lover's part. In such a situation, we have detected genuine expressions of love and thus can infer the presence of love.

However, this Aristotelian, inferential route to the knowledge of love's presence, which has received the most attention here, is not an easy one to successfully travel (nor is it guaranteed to be open for travel in every case). In order to detect genuine expressions of love, we need to know the kinds of things that constitute characteristic expressions of love, but even if we know these kinds of things as well as how they are characteristically expressed by genuine lovers, this is not enough. Since love is a complex psychological condition whose expressions "overlap" with those of other psychological realities in the sense that the kinds of things that can constitute love's expressions can stem from psychological realities other than love, such as the desire to fake it, we must rule out these other plausible sources before we can recognize genuine expressions of love and then infer the knowledge of love. And as my discussion above suggests, some characteristic expressions of love, such as the unwillingness to accept a replacement when given the chance, can be examined in isolation from others, whereas some characteristic expressions must be examined in bundles instead. If so, then this not only sheds light on how love can be known from the detection of its expressions; it also illuminates how other complex psychological conditions whose expressions overlap with others can be known.

As should be evident, my discussion here has taken controversial things for granted. More specifically, it has been shaped by a non-skeptical, naturalistic stance toward acquiring knowledge of the presence or absence of love, which may make it unsatisfactory to those who reject the possibility of genuine knowledge or to those who believe in supernatural, spiritual, or mystical ways of acquiring the relevant knowledge. If, however, it turns out that epistemological skeptics are correct and genuine knowledge is impossible, then while my discussion here would rest on a false non-skeptical stance, my discussion could be translated into one about mere justified or rational belief rather than knowledge, and so knowledge-skeptics are free to understand any progress made here in terms of such belief. Furthermore, if it turns out that there are supernatural, spiritual, mystical, or other non-natural ways of knowing that I have excluded throughout, then even though this means that my discussion rests on a false naturalistic stance, this does not mean that nothing valuable has

been accomplished here. Quite the contrary: even if we must accommodate other ways of knowing about love beyond the naturalistic ones affirmed and very modestly explored here, this would only require that we expand my discussion accordingly rather than throw it out altogether.

Additionally, and very importantly, my discussion has made, at best, only very modest progress on plugging the epistemological gap in our theorizing about love. While I have tried to establish the three possible sources of the knowledge of love—inferential knowledge from detecting love's expressions, testimonial knowledge, and first-person-only-direct-access knowledge—my discussion has focused almost entirely on exploring the first source to the neglect of the other two. I have left unaddressed the interesting issue of when our direct epistemic access to our own psychological states provides genuine knowledge of our love for things instead of false positives, and so this fallible route to knowledge of our own love remains completely ripe for the theorizing. Also, while the second, testimonial prong of my initial answer to Houston's questions maintained that the knowledge of whether another loves can come from deferring to the testimony of others who know and will honestly pass their knowledge along, this brought up further questions pertaining to how to know when we have found these reliable testimonial sources of the relevant knowledge, where we must answer these new epistemological questions, which will supply us with crucial background knowledge, in order to have a better understanding of how to (intentionally) acquire the testimonial knowledge of love from these sources. Nailing down this crucial background knowledge by answering these questions, then, is yet another theoretical task that remains undone. And finally, although I have sketched an account, inspired by Aristotle, of how to acquire the inferential knowledge of love's presence or absence from, respectively, the successful or failed detection of its expressions and have tried to locate some of the requisite background knowledge, there are still some important questions—especially those pertaining to the inferential knowledge of love's absence from the failure to detect love's expressions—that I have left unaddressed. There is, then, still more work to be done even when it comes to the first, expression prong of my answer to Houston's questions that has received the most attention here.

But even though there is clearly much more epistemological work to be done, hopefully this paper is steering us in the right epistemological direction with its metaphysically-loaded, Aristotle-inspired account of the possible sources of the knowledge of love and, especially, of the inferential route to the knowledge of the presence or absence of love from, respectively, the successful or failed detection of love's expressions. According to this Aristotelian account, those who want to know if somebody else, E, is in love—either with them or someone else—should look for E doing what the lover would characteristically do in the way that the lover would characteristically do it. Then, if such things are found, they should try to eliminate the motive to deceive or fake love. If this can be done, then they can recognize these as genuine expressions of E's love and then infer the knowledge of E's love from them. If, however, no genuine expressions of love are detected after conducting a proper search for them, then they should assess the situation to determine if it is one where there would be detectable expressions if E was really in love, as they can infer that E is not in love from the failure to detect expressions of love provided that (1) E's love, if present, would engender detectable expressions of it and (2) they have conducted a proper search that would reveal these expressions to them. Now there is certainly no guarantee attached to this method—it may not deliver the knowledge of whether others are in love—but it is, nevertheless, a potential way to acquire the relevant knowledge that is worth attempting, especially in the absence of reliable testimonial sources on the matter.

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