

Love's Possessiveness

Is love possessive? That of course depends on what we mean by love being “possessive.” Love may be possessive in some way yet not in others. If love is possessive in some way but not others, then in what way is it possessive, and in what ways is it not? In this paper I shall answer these questions by arguing that love is possessive in the way that loyalty is possessive, but it is not possessive in the ways that property-owners are possessive of their mere property, abusers are possessive of their partners, jealousy is possessive of the object it fears losing, or obsession is possessive of its object. By doing so I hope to shed light on the nature of love as not only possessive, but as loyal and thus as possessive in a loyal way rather than in other ways that might be confused with love.

1. Conflicting Philosophical Precedent

Not surprisingly, philosophers give conflicting answers to the question of whether love is possessive. That love *is* possessive is found at least as early as Plato's *Symposium*, where he says, through Diotima's conversation with Socrates, that love is the desire to have the good forever (206a). Here love is understood as a conative phenomenon—it is a desire—and its object turns out to be endless possession of the good. Love turns out to be possessive, then, in the sense that it is single-mindedly possession-oriented: it only wants to possess the good—that is all there is to it.

The idea that love is possessive appears to be given a different expression in Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*. In the supplement to book 4 he says:

...whenever two people fall in love...nature's sole intention is the procreation of an individual with specific qualities. This is conformed first and foremost by the fact that the essential element is not, as we might expect, reciprocal love, but possession, that is, physical enjoyment.

Here “possession” seems to be understood as physical or sexual enjoyment of another's body, and it sounds like Schopenhauer sees such possession as essential to romantic love between people. Love turns out to be possessive, then, in the sense that it must involve sexual enjoyment of another's body.

In what appears to be a rather dramatic yet oddly Platonic expression of the idea that love is possessive, Friedrich Nietzsche says the following in *The Gay Science*, aphorism 14:

...our love of our neighbor—is that not a lust for new *possessions*?...Our pleasure in ourselves tries to maintain itself again and again changing something new *into ourselves*; that's what possession means...Sexual love betrays itself most clearly as a lust for possession: the lover desires unconditional and sole possession of the person for whom he longs; he desires equally unconditional power over the soul and over the body of the beloved; he alone wants to be loved and desires to live and rule in the other soul as supreme and supremely desirable...this love has furnished the concept of love as the opposite of egoism while it actually may be the most ingenuous expression of egoism.

Here Nietzsche appears to conceive of love in a strikingly similar way to Plato: as a desire for possession of something (or perhaps as a collection of desires that includes this one). But while Plato thought of love as a desire to possess the good, Nietzsche appears to have thought of it as (or at least as including) an egoistic desire to possess another person in the sense of having absolute dominion over them as one would over a piece of property. To put it starkly: Nietzsche offers a conative theory of love just as Plato does, but unlike Plato, Nietzsche seems to understand love as (or at least as including) the selfish desire to possess another person as a willing slave. As such a possessor of another, one surely can enjoy “possession” over the other’s body in the Schopenhauerian sense of enjoying sexual pleasure from their bodies.

In contrast to these ways of expressing the idea that love is possessive, Harry Frankfurt suggests that love is not possessive in certain ways when he says in *The Reasons of Love* that “It is important to avoid confusing love...with infatuation, lust, obsession, possessiveness, and dependency in their various forms” (2004: 43). Here Frankfurt points to various forms of possessiveness that might be confused with love, which means that they are different from love and should be kept separate from love, and thus that love is not possessive in those ways.

Although the specific ideas of love’s possessiveness offered by Plato, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche are not very attractive expressions of the basic idea that love is possessive, I think that there is something right to this basic idea. After all, the things that we love are *our* beloveds: we see and treat them as *ours*; they “belong to us” in some unobjectionable sense. This does not mean that love is the mere desire to possess the good or another person; in fact, these conative analyses of love from Plato and Nietzsche strike me as very impoverished accounts of love: not only do they construe love as a merely conative phenomenon rather than a more complex psychological state composed of attitudes and dispositions, but they make the *possession of things*, rather than those things themselves, into the objects of love by making love a desire for such possession. It also seems false, in light of the existence of asexual individuals who are still interested in romantic love, that romantic love requires sexual enjoyment of the other’s body, as Schopenhauer appears to maintain, even if such enjoyment is surely a characteristic part of what we would more appropriately call “romantic partnerships.”¹

At any rate, while I think that we should reject these specific interpretations of the idea that love is possessive, it seems clear enough that love is possessive in that lovers, as such, see their beloveds as belonging to them in some unobjectionable sense. At the same time, however, Frankfurt is surely right that there are forms of possessiveness that are different from love and should be kept separate from love, and thus that love is not possessive in those ways. It therefore looks like love is possessive in some way but not in others, which brings us to our motivating question: in what way is love possessive, and in what ways is it not?

2. Forms of Possessiveness

As a first step toward answering this question, we must discuss different forms of possessiveness. Let’s begin with what is probably the most common form of possessiveness: the kind that we have toward our mere property. We own things that we see and treat as merely our belongings that are properly under our control and that are there for our use, and we find them important to us only to the extent that they are useful to us or serve our own ends. Here the common element of all

¹ Perhaps these problems indicate not impoverished accounts of love, but rather accounts of other things that people have called “love,” such as sexual desire, that should be kept separate from genuine love.

possessiveness—seeing and treating the object as a belonging—is part of a larger, purely instrumental orientation toward these objects where they are (1) seen and otherwise treated as instances of a particular kind of belonging—one that is properly under our control and there for our use—and (2) regarded as important only to the extent that they are useful. Another very important part of this purely instrumental orientation to our property to highlight in the present context is how we see and treat it in terms of its fungibility: we see these mere belongings to be autonomously controlled, treated, or used as means for achieving our ends as things that can be replaced without loss by other things that can serve as equally or more effective means to those same ends, and so we are open to the possibility of accepting substitutes for them and will definitely accept substitutes for them in certain circumstances. Let's call this kind of possessiveness *property possessiveness*.

An important form of property possessiveness—or a form of possessiveness that is disturbingly similar to property possessiveness—is that which domestic abusers might exhibit toward their partners. Such abusers are characteristically controlling and seem to think that they can treat their partners however they wish without limitation, which suggests that they see their partners in the same way that they see mere property: as their things to control and use for their own benefit, and that are only important insofar as they are personally beneficial. Surely some abusers see their partners as living, replaceable property, and so they have a morally repugnant property possessiveness toward people, which are inappropriate objects of such possessiveness. To say that all abusive possessiveness nicely fits this terrible mold of property possessiveness, however, may not do justice to the complex reality of abuse. Abuse might stem from seeing another as mere property, but it might stem from other psychological realities such as anger and resentment, or perhaps even obsessiveness which, as I shall argue shortly, is a different form of possessiveness from property possessiveness. At any rate, even if abusive possessiveness is not always a form of property possessiveness, it still resembles such possessiveness insofar as it involves seeing the object as something to control and treat in any way desired without limitation.

Another form of possessiveness that is important to discuss here is what appears to be found in jealousy, which we can call *jealous possessiveness*. The model for this kind of possessiveness is the jealous boyfriend or husband who, out of fear that someone will take away *his* woman, shows hostility toward potential male thieves and might do things from interrogating the woman about other men to trying to isolate the woman from other men. We also see this kind of possessiveness in small children who, out of fear that a new sibling will take away *their* mother, show distress when the new sibling has a share of the motherly attention. Although this type of possessiveness is a far cry from property possessiveness, it seems to share the element of seeing its object as a belonging to protect from thievery. Unlike property possessiveness, however, the object of jealous possessiveness does not appear to be a fungible belonging that can be replaced or substituted without a sense of loss.

In contrast to these aforementioned forms of possessiveness is that which seems to be found in obsession, which we can call *obsessive possessiveness*. The disturbing model for this kind of possessiveness is the stalker who sees the object, O, of their obsession as their belonging that no one else should or can have. O consumes the stalker's thinking; the stalker tracks and may even follow O; the stalker is not deterred from O's distress caused by their O-directed behavior or swayed by direct commands to stop unwanted attention and behavior; they might even become aggressive toward O's romantic partners or O itself. It is perhaps best thought of as a different form of abusive possessiveness than that which takes the form of property possessiveness, and just like the object of jealous possessiveness, the object of obsession appears to be non-fungible.

The final kind of possessiveness of which I am aware is that found in loyalty, which we can call *loyal possessiveness*. Andrew Oldenquist (1982: 175) notes the interesting character of loyalty when he points out that the subject of loyalty sees its object as a belonging, yet one that is of ultimate,

non-instrumental importance. It is not a mere belonging that only has instrumental importance or value as a mere means; rather, it has importance or value in its own right or as a final end. Furthermore, the object of loyalty is a special one: it is a special, non-fungible belonging that is especially important in its own right—it is more important to the loyal subject compared to other things that are non-instrumentally important but are not objects of loyalty, such as other people in general.

3. How Love is Possessive and How It is Not

With these forms of possessiveness now described, we can answer our motivating question, beginning with the ways in which love is *not* possessive. It should be clear right away that love is not possessive in the way that we are possessive of our mere property. For unlike the objects of love, which are regarded and treated as special, non-fungible belongings that are especially important in their own right, our mere belongings are fungible ones with only instrumental importance. Now this is not to say that we cannot genuinely love pieces of property; indeed, I think that we *can* love such things, but when we do, we do not regard them as *mere* property and thus do not have what I have been calling “property possessiveness” toward them. Instead, we have a very complex orientation toward them, where part of this orientation resembles property possessiveness in that it involves seeing and treating the objects as ours that are properly under our control and there for our use, but they are not mere pieces of property that are fungible and only of instrumental importance, and so we do not have property possessiveness toward them. Though they are seen and treated as such objects, they are simultaneously, qua objects of love, seen and treated as special, non-fungible, non-instrumentally important objects.

Next, we have the possessiveness of abusers toward their partners, and I suggested earlier that this possessiveness may be a morally repugnant form of property possessiveness. If so, then the same argument from above applies here. And even if we cannot quite assimilate such possessiveness to property possessiveness, we can still conclude that it is not love’s possessiveness because it, like property possessiveness, involves seeing and treating its object as something to control and treat in any way desired without limitation, yet this is not how true lovers see their beloved romantic partners. As objects of romantic love, these partners are special, non-instrumentally important objects that are non-instrumentally cared about and served rather than controlled and treated in any way desired without limitation.

This brings us to jealous possessiveness, which is compatible with love but is still not the way that love is possessive. Although the object of jealous possessiveness, like the object of love, is non-fungible, love is not possessive in this way because love can and often does exist without jealous possessiveness. It may be precisely on account of the lover’s love for the beloved that they become jealous of others that they perceive as threatening thieves, but this need not happen—lovers can feel that their beloved is securely theirs and that there is nothing to worry about, and so jealous possessiveness cannot be an essential part of love’s nature.

Then we have obsessive possessiveness, which is not compatible with love and thus is not the way that love is possessive. Though the object of obsession, just like the object of love, is non-fungible, it is not an object of love as well because it is not non-instrumentally cared about and served, as evidenced by the fact that the obsessed subject is completely undeterred by the distress that they cause their object or by their object’s direct commands to stop.

Since love is not possessiveness in any of the ways considered thus far, there is only one way left in which it could be possessive: the same way that loyalty is possessive. And it seems quite clear

that love's possessiveness is indeed loyal possessiveness. For recall how the loyal subject sees its object as a special, non-fungible belonging that is non-instrumentally and especially important, which is exactly how the lover sees their beloved object. Now this is not to say that love can be reduced to loyalty; indeed, love is still something different—or rather, something *more*—than mere loyalty. According to a few recent, plausible accounts of love (Shpall 2018; Stringer 2021), for instance, while love is partly constituted by loyalty or devotion to the beloved, it is more than this: besides such loyalty or devotion, love is also partly constituted by liking the beloved or, as I prefer to say, by having a disposition to feel affection for the beloved. Under these accounts, love is not reduced to loyalty, but it encompasses or includes loyalty and thus loyal possessiveness, and this vindicates the idea that love is essentially possessive in an attractive, unobjectionable way.

4. Conclusion

This paper has addressed the questions of whether love is possessive and, if so, in what way it is possessive and in what ways it is not. After agreeing with Harry Frankfurt's suggestion that love is not possessive in certain ways while nevertheless maintaining that love is possessive in some unobjectionable sense, I described various forms of possessiveness—namely, property possessiveness, abusive possessiveness, jealous possessiveness, obsessive possessiveness, and loyal possessiveness. Then I argued that love is not possessive in the first four ways, yet it is possessive in the way that loyalty is possessive, which means that love's possessiveness is just loyal possessiveness. This does justice to Frankfurt's suggestion that love is not possessive in certain ways while attractively and unobjectionably substantiating the idea, suggested by the likes of Plato, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, that love is possessive. If my argumentation here is on the mark, then it tells us something important about the nature of love—namely, that it is not just possessive and loyal, but possessive in a loyal way.

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