On The Nature of Romantic Love

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Introduction

Lately, philosophers have had a lot to say about the nature of romantic love.[1] Philosophical conversations about the nature of love always seem to address the nature of two kinds of love—agape and romantic.[2] The term *agapic* is derived from the Greek word *agape* which denotes, "the sort of love God has for us persons, as well as our love for God and, by extension, of our love for each other—a kind of brotherly love."[3] In this essay, I will focus strictly on romantic love. I will argue that romantic love is, at its base, an appraisal of value. By that I mean that we appraise, no matter how high or how low, the characteristics that another person has, and when we esteem these characteristics, we can love the other person romantically.

This thesis conflicts with certain other points of view concerning the nature of romantic love. I will address two of these other perspectives—namely, those of Eleonore Stump and Harry Frankfurt[4]—defending my theory against various objections that Stump and Frankfurt might raise, as well as some other objections.

[1] See especially, Harry Frankfurt, "Autonomy, Necessity, and Love" in *The Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 129–41; David Velleman, "Love as a Moral Emotion," *Ethics* 118, no. 2 (1999): 338–74; Eleonore Stump, "Love, By All Accounts," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 80, no. 2 (2006): 25–43; and the contemporary essays collected in Alan Soble, ed., *Eros, Agape, and Philia: Readings in the Philosophy of Love* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

[2] Although I realize that the nature of each of the two types of love may be equally important, I do not wish to address *agapic* love in this essay. My intention is to address strictly the concerns that surround the nature of romantic love. The love that I will address is that of an agent and other agents that are not related.

[3] *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Love" (by Bennett Helm), http://plato.stanford.edu.

[4] See especially, Stump, "Love, By All Accounts" and Frankfurt, "Autonomy, Necessity, and Love."

If my appraisal theory is correct, then romantic love is not as grand as we like to think. Accordingly, my view might seem inordinately deflationary; it might seem to give up too much—to opt out of the messiness of theorizing about love just to reach an easy solution to the problem of explaining what romantic love is. I submit, though, that if there is a danger of underestimating romantic love, the danger is at least as great that we will *over*estimate it. Starry-eyed views about love may turn out to be more harmful than helpful. Ultimately, it would be best to obtain an accurate view. So, if at the moment a deflationary perspective does more to account for the phenomena of love than the grander theories, then we will do well to favor the former—at least until some alternative proves to be workable.

There are certain questions that need to be addressed when discussing the nature of love. One of those questions seems to be, "How would any agent respond to their partner when asked 'Why do you love me?'" It seems that our response would have to refer to certain characteristics of the agent. Harry Frankfurt's theory of love implies that we love other people for no particular reason at all.[5] This seems problematic. If we love another person for no reason at all, we can not explain why we love that particular person instead of someone else.[6] Those in opposition to appraisal theories usually object to it in a similar fashion with the scope aimed at fungibility of some sort. The thought here is that if appraisal theories are correct, then we have no reason to remain with a particular person instead of replacing that person with someone else who has an equal or greater share of the desired traits.

In response to this concern, I will argue that the relationship or shared experiences between two particular people is enough to account for partiality. That is to say that the history

[5] See Niko Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship," *Philosophical Review* 112.2, no. 2 (2003): 135, 142–146.
[6] Ibid.

of the relationship will be one of the most important factors or "characteristics" once it has been established. I will also try to give a satisfactory account of how it is that we come to value certain characteristics rather than others. Once it has been shown that the nature of romantic love is essentially an appraisal of value, I will also offer an argument for how we ought to value certain characteristics.

There are other important questions that need to be addressed in this discussion—namely: "When we say we love Sally, who or what are we loving? In other words, who is Sally? What constitutes her?" Accounts of the nature of romantic love need to address these questions; they are inadequate if they do not. Arnold Ludwig offers a theory of personal identity that reflects some of the opinions of Blaise Pascal. Ludwig asserts that a person's identity is his or her particular set of qualities or characteristics.[7] I will explore this point of view focusing mainly on Pascal—connecting this theory of personal identity with my own theory about the nature of romantic love.

Attraction and Love

How do Other Accounts of Romantic Love Accommodate our Intuitions?

For Eleonore Stump, romantic love involves robust concern. Stump proposes a theory that claims that *caritas* is the most perfect sense of love. By her account, love requires the fulfillment of two desires: the desire for the good of the beloved and the desire for union with the beloved.[8] In order for a situation to be called love, these two desires need to be fulfilled. [9]

[7] See Arnold M. Ludwig, "Other Versions of the Self," in *How Do We Know Who We Are?: A Biography of the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 233–48.

[8] See Stump, "Love by All Accounts."

Stump, however, makes a clear distinction that the fulfillment of these two desires does not mean that the desires are to cease. In fact, even after the desires have been fulfilled they *must* continue. It is not enough for Bob to desire the good of Jane and to desire union with her if it lacks continuity once it reaches its pinnacle.[10] This view seems to be problematic for reasons that I will attempt to point out.

Problems with this view arise when we ask the question, "What if our desire for the good of the beloved is misled?" Stump provides some response to this.[11] However, she makes the normative claim that our passion informs our intellect, or more simply put, passion is running the show. But if our passion is informing our intellect and we act based on our intellect, we could passionately desire something wrongly, and in turn, would act wrongly. In this scenario, although we *believe* that we love a person, we would have to say that we do not. Furthermore, we might find ourselves believing that we are certainly desiring what is good for the beloved. This, however, may or may not *actually* be the case. It is simply what we *believe* to be good for them. There is no way to access what is *actually* good for the beloved. Again, we would then have to say that we do not love that person. Finally, Stump does nothing to demonstrate how strong the desires need to be, or whether or not they need to be balanced. This is an important issue to address. If we find ourselves possessing a robust desire for the good of the beloved and only a minuscule desire for union with the beloved, is this still love? I think that we would be intuitively inclined to say that there needs to be some balance here. But what

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[9] The language here is intentionally vague. This is because Stump does not narrow her account to that of romantic love specifically. Her account tries to provide explanations for both *agapic* love as well as romantic love.

[10] It is important to note that this is a very brief treatment of Stump's argument. If you wish to read the argument in whole see, Stump, "Love by All Accounts."

[11] Stump, "Love by All Accounts," 28.

if we hold a minuscule desire for the good of the beloved along with a minuscule desire for union with the beloved? Would we call this love? Clearly, in this case, the two desires are balanced. There needs to be some sort of clarification here.

Stump's theory also contains a flaw of omission. Stump does nothing to show how we become attracted to the other person to begin with—in other words, how the beloved becomes the beloved. We need to know who it is we are supposed to desire union with and who we are supposed to desire the good for. Perhaps Stump intends for these desires to be applied to all of humanity. This would make the account more specific to *agapic* love. Thus, if this interpretation of her view is true, then it only speaks to the nature of love in the *agapic* sense. Even so, this theory would still have its problems unless she can elaborate on how one can desire union with *all* of humanity. These difficulties—along with others—contribute to the inadequacy of the view. A satisfactory theory of romantic love needs to account for why we choose a particular person: what attracts us to them? Stump's theory seems to run aground on this question.

Now, I will turn to Harry Frankfurt and what he supposes in regards to the nature of romantic love. Frankfurt makes a distinction between active love and passive love, focusing on the former. He claims that active love is when a lover values activity for its own sake.[12] Frankfurt offers the following argument:

1. The claims made upon a person by love show the authority of the essential nature of a person.

2. Our essential natures are constituted by what we can not help but care about.

3. The fact that we have these necessitated cares requires one to care about how we act in matters that concern it.

[12] See Frankfurt, "Autonomy, Necessity, and Love."

4. By caring about an object of love, one must care about her own conduct
5. .: Caring about the beloved is to care about one's self.

According to this view, one would be required to say, "I love you for my own sake." However, the problem with this lies in the second premise of the argument. This premise relies heavily on the assumption that there exists an essential nature of a person. Furthermore, it suggests that this essence is constituted by what we can not help but care about. There are two responses that can be made here. The first response is to simply deny that there is such an essence and require that existence is necessary prior to any sort of essence. The second is an appeal to intuitions. What can we not help but to care about? It seems that there is no answer to this question. If this is the case, then the essence that Frankfurt is referring to is constituted by nothing. We have a strong intuition that anything or anyone we come to care about is by a conscious choice. We decide whom to love. We choose how much to care about one person over another. Regardless of the reasoning or justification of these decisions, the fact remains that they are decisions. This goes to show that we could have done otherwise. The second premise of the argument is undoubtedly weak.

Love as an Appraisal of Value

Intuitions and Agency

Oftentimes people say, "He just wasn't my type," when referring to someone else with whom they found themselves incompatible. The comment suggests two things. The first thing is that the person who made the comment has a "type" in the first place. The second thing is that the particular person being referred to does not align with the preconceived notions held by the

person that made the comment. Upon reception of such statements, one might be inclined to ask, "Well what is your type?" As I mentioned earlier, it seems that the person would then respond with a set of characteristics that may look as follows: "I like someone who is funny, charming, intelligent, attractive, *et cetera*." The person would then be claiming that their "type" of person or the person they aspire to become romantically involved with would have such characteristics. Consider also that people sometimes ask their partners to make subtle or substantial changes to themselves over the course of a relationship. It seems that these sorts of situations arise because their partner does not completely mesh with the characteristics prematurely conceived by them. This is often the result of the desired characteristics being longed for prior to the two people becoming romantically involved, or at least it seems so.

One must also pay attention to the response to the questions posed by any given person—namely, "Why do you love me?" or "What do you love about me?" Once again, it seems like we would have to respond in such a way that points us to qualities or characteristics. We might find it extremely odd to respond to such questions with, "For no real reason at all," or "Because I appreciate the way that your atoms are arranged," or even, "Because of the way your neurons fire in the patterns that they do while making their way through the complex piece of grey matter beneath your skull." We respond in the way that we do—although it may seem that we do so unconsciously—because this is *really* what we love about them.

Earlier I mentioned that we have some grander intuitions about the nature of romantic love. We tend to want to believe that love is long lasting, unconditional, and deeper than the depths of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans combined, *et cetera*. Perhaps these intuitions are derived from what we *want* love to be. But the nature of romantic love has never been

contingent upon what we want it to be. We cannot ignore perhaps the strongest intuition that we hold about the nature of romantic love—that it is objective. If the *nature* of romantic love is contingent upon what we want it to be, it becomes completely subjective. It is possible, however, to capture some of these intuitions without necessarily assigning them to the *nature* of romantic love.

Blaise Pascal on Personal Identity

Blaise Pascal offers a thought in regards to personal identity in his piece "What is the Self?" It reads as follows:

> What is the self, the *me*?
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> A man who puts himself at the window to see the passers-by: if I pass by there, can I say that he has put himself there to see me? No; for he doesn't think of me in particular. But that person who loves someone on account of her beauty, does he love her? No; for smallpox, which will kill the beauty without killing the person, will make him not love her anymore.
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> And if one loves me for my judgment, for my memory, does one love me, *me*? No; for I can lose these qualities without losing myself. Where then is the *me*, if it isn't in the body nor in the soul? And how to love the body or the soul, if not for these qualities, which are not at all what makes the *me*, because they are perishable? For would one love the substance of the soul of a person, abstractly, and whatever qualities were there? That is not possible, and would be unjust. One does not then love any person, but only certain qualities.
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> One does not then mock those who make themselves honored for commissions and offices, for one loves no person except for certain borrowed qualities.[13]

Here, Pascal recognizes the "self" or the "me" as a different thing than the set of "borrowed qualities." If this is true, then it has tremendous implications in regards to the nature of romantic love, most of which are pretty apparent. It would also provide us with some justifications for that love.

[13] See Soble, *Eros, Agape, and Philia*, 295.

Value, Characteristics, and Qualities

Now that we have seen some rival theories fail to satisfy our intuitions, I propose that the nature of romantic love has to do with the characteristics and/or the qualities of a person and the value we place on them. That is to say that unless Pascal's view is false, then we do not love people—we love qualities. Insofar as any person matches those qualities, they maintain the possibility of becoming the object of our romantic love.

Every person has a set of qualities that are readily accessible—to some degree—to other people. If we see someone engaging in a kind act, such as helping an elderly woman across a busy street, we would recognize that person as having kindness. Just the same, if we were to see a person engaging in a courageous action, such as when a fireman runs back into a burning building to save a helpless child, we recognize that person as having courage. It is things like these that give us insight into what someone is like. Based upon the kind of person someone is, we decide to like or dislike him or her. For instance, based upon the kind of person we take Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to have been—which is derived from what his actions portrayed—we decide to like him. Contrarily, based upon the kind of person that we take Adolf Hitler to have been—which is also derived from what his actions portrayed)—we choose to dislike him. Love is like this too. This is how we operate: We recognize other people as having the capacity to possess qualities.

We assign which qualities are important to us and which are not. Then, we evaluate individuals based on their compatibility with the qualities we have deemed to be important and/or unimportant. I will call this value assignment.

Initially, however, we may lack knowledge of an agent's prior actions, thus prohibiting one from gaining insight as to what kind of a person he or she is. So what, then, is responsible for the initial attraction? It seems that the value assignment process is applied to the physical make up of individuals as well. We have certain preferences as far as what appeals to us physically. This varies from person to person. Whereas one person may prefer tall and slender women, another person may prefer shorter women with long hair. The initial attraction allows us to be put in a position to access the rest of an agent's quality set, or at the very least, it puts us in a position to want to inquire about their quality sets further.

We as individuals have the capacity to mold our quality sets as we may. We can practice toughness. We can practice generosity. We can alleviate selfishness. We can avoid rudeness. It is for this reason that the response to the question, "Why do you love me?" is more meaningful than it may seem *prima facie*. When we tell our lover that we love them because they are kind, generous, or patient, we are, in turn, thanking them for having exercised these qualities. We appreciate them for that. We appreciate them because we recognize that they could have done otherwise. They could have chosen to be unkind, stingy, or impatient. Thus, any response to this question is one of appreciation.

The realization of human's lack of perfection is inevitable. When selecting a partner we wish to become romantically involved with, we ought not to seek an individual that is perfect, for such a person does not exist. Rather, it does make sense to seek out the individual that is "perfect for me." We should be encouraged to realize that there *may* be an individual with the direct alignment of appraised values. If it is not the case that an individual aligns perfectly with

the things you have come to place heavy value on, then one ought to find the person that matches with those qualities *as best as possible*.

To help illustrate these claims, I find it fitting to turn to an example. Let us say that Bob is very fond of patience, understanding, loyalty, honesty, and a sense of humor. Bob meets both Sally and Jane. Suppose further that Bob is physically fond of both of them insofar as they have both met his physical appearance value criteria. Bob begins to converse with both of the ladies regularly, and he gains some insight in regards to the qualities that they have. Bob takes Sally to be sweet, intelligent, considerate, and funny. On the other hand, he takes Jane to be intelligent (although not as smart as Sally), funny, patient, and understanding. Based on the hierarchy of the qualities that Bob values, it would be reasonable for Bob to pursue a romantic relationship with Jane, because she fits the criteria in a more complete way than Sally does.

You may agree with my point and have the questions, "What if a person is compatible with a large amount of qualities that Bob values, but they are only compatible with those qualities to a very low degree? Furthermore, what if a person is only compatible with only two or three of the qualities that Bob values, but they are qualities that Bob places a tremendous amount value on? How is Bob to act then?" In response to the former, Bob may pursue that relationship if he so chooses. However, it might be more reasonable to assume that there may be someone who is more compatible with his criteria than the person in question. In response to the latter, Bob may also pursue this relationship if he so chooses. It may be reasonable, in light of the fact that the person possesses qualities that Bob is extremely fond of, to assume that the agent may acquire the rest of the criteria over the course of a relationship. Or, perhaps, she may already possess them but it may be the case that Bob has not accessed them yet. Suffice to say,

both situations would be, to some extent, reasonable for Bob to pursue. However, there are more specific instances when one course of action would be clearly more reasonable than its counterpart.

We must also take into account how Bob would act in matters of equipollence. What if both Sally and Jane satisfy Bob's criteria to the same degree? In this case, Bob can not lose either way. The consequences for Bob pursuing a romantic relationship with either Sally or Jane would be the same. Thus, he would be reasonable in deciding either way.

Rational Egoism as Compatible with the Nature of Romantic Love

How should we come to value the various qualities and characteristics of an individual? Rational egoism is the theory that an action must maximize one's self-interest in order for it to be considered rational.[14] Thus, it would be rational to appraise qualities in another person that would capitalize on our own desires. If we are to value those qualities that augment our self interests, then we would want to appraise virtues or those qualities that resemble virtues. Some qualities that we might want to consider are as follows:

Benevolence	Fairness	Patience
Civility	Friendliness	Prudence
Compassion	Generosity	Reasonableness
Conscientiousness	Honesty	Self-Discipline
Cooperativeness	Industriousness	Self-Reliance
Courage	Justice	Tactfulness
Courteousness	Loyalty	Thoughtfulness
Dependability	Moderation	Tolerance[15]

This list could be expanded of course. We would come to value these qualities, because it is these sorts of qualities that would promote our self interest. We would value honesty, because it

[14] See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Egoism" (by Robert Shaver), http://plato.stanford.edu.
[15] See James and Stuart Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 161.

is in our best interest not to be lied to. We would value cooperativeness, because it is in our best interests to be cooperated with by our partner. In the same way that we come to value qualities in our partner, we ought to come to value similar qualities in ourselves, because it is in our best interest to do so. It is in our best interests to be benevolent and friendly so that we might get generosity in return; as a result of this behavior, we can ensure that we are the best people that we can be for our partner.

Is the Appraisal View Shallow?

There is a concern that this appraisal theory does not meet our starry-eyed expectations. Perhaps this is true. However, it is not because the view itself is faulty; rather, there may be something wrong with our expectations. The nature of romantic love simply is what it is. The worry here is not that we are setting the bar too low, but perhaps that we have set it too high—so high, in fact, that it has become unrealistic. It may be the case that the nature of romantic love *is* shallow. However, this does not prove to be a very devastating blow. Actually, we do more justice to our intuitions concerning love by adhering to the theory I have proposed than we would otherwise.

Is the Nature of Romantic Love Relative?

There is a concern about the nature of romantic love being relative. The thought here is as follows:

1. If the nature of romantic love is an appraisal of value and we all appraise differently, then the nature of romantic love is relative and varies from person to person.

2. We do appraise differently.

3. .: The nature of romantic love is relative and varies from person to person.

The thought here is misled. From the fact that we all appraise differently, it does not follow that the *nature* of romantic love is relative. It only proves that we have different *objects* of our romantic love. This is not a ground breaking find. Different people like different things. Thus, naturally, we are going to like different people which entails that we will have different objects of our love. It is not the nature of romantic love that changes at all. Rather, it is only the objects of that love that vary.

The Nature of Romantic Love and Fungibility

This is the concern that people think brings about the most problems. The thought here is that according to my point of view, nothing would stop an individual from trading the person he or she is currently with for a substitute of some sorts. In other words, what would prevent us from "trading up" for a person with a superior quality set than our current partner? Niko Kolodny offers a theory in which "one's reasons for loving a person is one's relationship to her: the ongoing history that one shares with her."[16] He goes further to say that, "the fact that Jane is one's daughter is a reason for loving her, but not a reason for loving a substitute with identical nonrelational features."[17]

I will not go as far as Kolodny; however, I will borrow his point that the relationship is something that needs to be taken into account in the valuing process. The relationship and/or the shared experiences become a quality of the beloved in and of itself; in huge part it solves the problem of fungibility. The reason we would not leave the person we are currently involved

[16] See Kolodny, Love as Valuing a Relationship," 136.
[17] Ibid.

with for a person with a superior quality set is because the shared relationship would be a quality in the current beloved—a quality that the potential agent would not have. For example, let us say that Bob and Jane have been dating for 6 months. Bob then meets Sally. Sally has a superior physical appearance set than Jane. Bob and Sally talk for a short time and exchange contact information. Bob finds that Sally has a more superior quality set than Jane. The reason Bob will stay with Jane (given the relationship is running smoothly)[18] is because of the relationship that he and Jane share.

Conclusion

We have deliberated about the nature of romantic love, and I have offered a position in which the nature of romantic love is an appraisal of value. Furthermore, I have addressed how we come to value and how we ought to value other people. We looked at objections, however brief, all of which fail to deliver devastating blows to my theory. It is my hope that I was able to show that this theory is salvageable and actually does more good to our intuitions concerning love than harm. The nature of romantic love does not lose its gloss and luster. It actually becomes more of an appealing idea to us given its more realistic nature. If any devastation may lie in wait for my theory behind a corner, let it show its face with bold posture. Until then, it is so much the better for the nature of romantic love.

[18] The reason I make this distinction is that it would be reasonable to assume that if the relationship was on bad terms then Bob would be looking for a way out anyway. He would be justified in doing so. If we find ourselves in a relationship in constant peril then, given rational egoism, it would not be maximizing our self-interest and so we would be rational, and thus, justified in abandoning the relationship.