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The ‘Reasons of Love’ Debate in Analytic Philosophy: Reasons, Narratives, and Biology*

I. INTRODUCTION

In English-language philosophy of the past decades, discussions of the “reasons of love” have revolved around a perceived theoretical dilemma. Do we love persons for (some of) their properties – and have reason to love any another person who also possesses those qualities, or, even better, “upgrade” to someone who possesses them to a greater degree? Alternatively, do we love people without reasons, purely “for themselves” – whatever that means, those “selves” being hard to characterize without recourse to properties. To complement the question of reasons/no reasons, more recently, an historical dimension has been added to the debate: other than relating to a person or her properties in a synchronic way, the joint history of the two partners also plays a role in their mutual attitudes.

In this paper, I will take a step back to look at some of the assumptions behind the debate itself and present a more complex picture, based on distinctions between different forms of romantic love.¹ Concerning the discourse itself, I’ll propose, first, that the “reasons-based”/“no-reason” views do not constitute a genuine theoretical dilemma: we do not love persons for either abstract properties that several individuals can share, or for some elusive “ipseity”. Second, the debate is saddled with a kind of descriptive/normative ambiguity, between why persons love or why they *should* love. Third, many discussions equivocate on the different meanings of ‘love’. Making the relevant distinctions – which are to a significant extent based in biology – advances matters a great deal, as ‘reasons’ apply to different forms of (romantic or quasi-romantic) love in different ways.

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¹ In using Helen Fisher’s work in addressing the reasons of love, I am following Ronald de Sousa (2016), who, to my knowledge, has been the first to explicitly suggest that different forms of (romantic) love relate to reasons in different ways.

The most interesting (and perhaps familiar) cases are those in which different types of factors (personal properties of the beloved as reason-giving, joint history, and bio-psychology) are at odds with each other (e.g., history vs. properties as reasons, history vs. biology, properties as reasons and history vs. biology). Towards the end of the paper, some such possibilities will be explored.

II. LOVE AS AN EMOTION

The kind of love in the focus of the debate addressed here is *romantic* love. Many of the claims made about this apply to other forms of love as well – primarily, to love of friends. Parts of the similarities are due to the relatively small number of targets, in both cases “chosen” rather than given. In biological or family relations, the reasons of love problem do not arise in the way it does in romance or friendship. Being a child or a parent is normally considered sufficient reason for love, and – barring special circumstances, like severe post-partum depression or parental abuse – failing to love a child or a parent occasions moral censure.

Before attempting to settle the issue of whether love has reasons, we need to say something – however vague and approximative – about reasons. According to Thomas Scanlon’s well-known understanding, reasons are considerations that “count in favour of” an action or attitude (Scanlon 1998). If your wallet is being stolen in front of our eyes, you have a reason to try to get it back (action) and a simultaneous reason to become angry (attitude). Reasons, as opposed to mere causes, not only explain actions or attitudes, but also justify them. Having had too much coffee and too little sleep may explain an outburst of anger, but it certainly doesn’t justify it. Emotions and manifestations of emotions *can*, at least sometimes, be justified, though, as the practice of asking people to account for their affects and attempts to provide such justifications suggest (Smuts 2014, 507). Is this the case with love as well? Do we expect and provide justification for loving someone?

The answer in part depends on whether we consider love an emotion. While it may seem obvious that we should, there are legitimate contrary considerations (de Sousa 2015). Our position will naturally also depend on how we understand emotions. For Paul Ekman, one of the most influential affect psychologists, paradigmatic emotions such as fear, disgust, and anger, are universal, short-term responses associated with characteristic facial and other physical manifestations, feelings, and behavior. If we think of emotions as short-lived biological responses, love, which typically lasts longer than a few minutes, and involves no distinctive phenomenology and no typical facial expressions for much of its duration, hardly fits the bill.

Another fact that speaks against regarding love as a (paradigmatic) emotion is the difficulty of finding a so-called ‘formal object’ for it. The formal object of an

emotion is a property of the target (*viz.*, whatever the attitude is directed at) that is present in all cases in which the affective response is apt. The formal object of fear is *the dangerous*, so in every case in which fear is an appropriate reaction, it is a reaction to the dangerousness of its object. In principle, the number of formal objects corresponds to that of emotion types, that is, every kind has its own formal object. Now what sort of property would love respond to in its target? The candidate most often discussed is 'lovability' – an obviously vacuous and weak one, for whether we love someone or not has little to do with their being 'lovable.'

Both considerations against love being an emotion are grounded in assumptions that are far from uncontentious. The conception of emotions as biologically based affect programs can be considered too narrow, ignoring the more complicated and often more "cerebral" ones like relief, *Schadenfreude*, or perhaps love itself. And lack of a formal object is only relevant to those who subscribe to the idea that emotions grasp some sort of evaluative properties. Several emotion theorists would be quite comfortable with the idea that many affective states cannot be associated with an identifiable kind of characteristic in their targets (e.g. those philosophers who believe in a plethora of "nameless emotions," like Peter Kivy (2014) or Sue Campbell (1998)). Not having to share the underlying assumptions, let's adhere to the traditional understanding of love, according to which it is an emotion, to assess the merits and demerits of the "reason-based" and "no-reason" views.

III. THE "REASON-BASED" AND "NO-REASON" VIEWS OF LOVE

At first blush, love has a lot to do with the characteristics of the loved one. From the potential lover's perspective, the target has to be attractive, a determinable property constituted by different determinates for different persons (physical attractiveness (further determinable), intelligence, kindness, etc.). Since the relevant properties may vastly differ (intelligence is attractive for sapiosexuals but might be repulsive for some others), the reasons for attitudes provided by those properties of the target are not universal. Also, since no checklist of properties can secure love, those reasons are only *pro tanto*. Still, it is quite intuitively a requirement to be able to name certain qualities of the beloved that drew the lover's attention to them and which are perhaps considered necessary by the lover to maintain the attitude of love.

According to the alternative, "no reason" view, we don't love persons for their properties but "for themselves." The best-known advocate of this position is Harry Frankfurt. In Frankfurt's view love does not respond to value properties, but itself bestows value on the beloved (Frankfurt 2004). While this position, it tends to be pointed out, resolves some undeniable difficulties of the "rea-

son-based” view, it is unfortunately hard to even make sense of it. What is the self abstracted from its properties and how do we have access to it? What is that unchangeable core that is not subject to time and perspective? Rather than trying to grasp this “pure ipseity,” let’s see the arguments against each position. Interestingly, the same arguments, based on commonly held attributes of love, tend to be cited against both. These attributes are the following: (1) Exclusivity: the lover is supposed to focus his attentions on a single person. Failing to do so makes the character of the emotion doubtful. (2) Irreplaceability: switching between or “upgrading” targets again questions the kind of emotion we are dealing with. (3) Non-arbitrary grounds: the beloved person would “object to” being loved “arbitrarily”. (4) Permanence: love is not supposed to last only a short while; it allegedly “alters not when alteration finds.” Can the rival views accommodate these characteristics?²

As it has already been noted, the “reason-based” view seems to be incompatible with (1) and (2): If we love persons for particular properties constituting reasons, those very same reasons may induce us to love others too, or to switch to others who have the same qualities to a greater degree. (There is always someone wittier, more muscular, or with eyes of a deeper blue.) As to (3), non-arbitrary grounds: Why should it be exactly those properties selected by the lover for which we are loved? Do those properties have sufficient relation to the characteristics we cherish most or find most essential to ourselves? (Are we comfortable with being loved for our tiny ears or that peculiar way of pronouncing ‘r’-s?) (4) also seems jeopardized by the “reason-based” view: if those particular reasons for loving someone cease to hold, why would the attitude continue to be present? (Persons may lose not only their wit and muscle, but significant parts of their personalities as well, turning disillusioned and sour, demented, etc.)

Concerning the “no reason” view, if we don’t love a person for any particular reasons, the attitude does not seem to admit of any account; loving someone “for themselves” is merely a “just so” explanation. As far as reasons go, loving and not loving that person are on a par: contrary to (3), loving that person is, in this sense, arbitrary. If so, as against (1) and (2), the lover may as well switch to another target. Similarly, unaccountable love may come and go, threatening (4), the permanence of the attitude.

Thus, both accounts seem to fail to accommodate some basic characteristics attributed to love. This might be read as a criticism of these attributions. (Indeed, when we come to the biologically-based psychological differences between different forms of love, holding love as a generic category up to the strict standards of exclusivity, irreplaceability and permanence will prove to be somewhat illusory.) It may also be the case that neither account is adequate. I will

² Especially the exclusivity and permanence criteria may be called to doubt; I am not going to address such doubts here.

argue for this conclusion and present a different 'reason-based' view, one that better preserves the characteristics assigned to love, with the limitations that will be noted when coming to its different forms.

In the "reasons of love" debate, properties are generally interpreted as abstract universals, instantiable in a number of objects. This interpretation gave rise to the problems of exclusivity and irreplaceability: if you love a person for their funniness and blue eyes, the instantiation of these properties in other persons will also constitute reasons to love those others. Properties can also be understood in a different way, however: as individual or particular, instantiated in a particular object or person (in ontological parlance, as "tropes").³ On this understanding, the reason for loving someone is not the fact of their instantiating the abstract properties 'being blue-eyed' and 'being funny,' but the particular blue-eyedness and funniness that exclusively belongs to them. While many individuals may share the same abstract property, they cannot have it in the particular way the beloved person does: I cannot have your blue-eyedness and funniness, and you cannot have mine.

What about non-arbitrary grounds and permanence? Persons would not want to be loved on a whim. For those subscribing to the reason-based view, this means that the lover should not draw a blank when asked about the reasons for her feelings for the beloved. Even if she cannot provide a full explanation, she should be able to say something close enough to the actual properties of the loved one. If she cannot come up with any such consideration, why think that she won't just switch to someone else on another impulse? Reference to properties as particulars, belonging to one person only, meets the requirement of providing justification for loving someone without that justification being capable of being extended to a number of other persons. (Correspondingly, the reasons these properties constitute will be non-universalizable, particular reasons.)⁴

For those supporting the alternative, "no-reason" view, non-arbitrariness amounts to the consideration that the beloved would want to be loved "for themselves." Reference to tropes also helps meet this requirement, underlying, but being distinct from, the "no reason" view. Those properties are instantiated in those particular ways and in those particular combinations in one person only. Thus, appreciating those properties does not imply loving the person for something other than themselves, as the particular set of individual properties is constitutive of the person. This way, persons are loved "for themselves" without being loved for 'no reason.'

³ Reference to 'tropes' may not be seen as a legitimate solution here by those who see the talk of tropes as a way of trying to evade the crucial distinction between the particular and specific. I owe this observation to Ronald de Sousa.

⁴ Concerning non-universalizable reasons, see Dancy 1983.

If persons are so special, their properties being particular rather than universal, why do we often switch to others who do not have those qualities manifested in those particular ways? We should note the bias towards a passive characterization of love in Plato's account of *eros* in the *Symposium*, which has become the cornerstone of replaceability/irreplaceability arguments and its contemporary relations. The "ladder of love," appreciation of the idea of beauty in a person or in many persons, is a variation of the "reasons-based" view. The properties of the beloved impose themselves on us, as it were, and we move on to the contemplation of beauty in its ever higher-level instantiations.

Falling in love is hardly primarily a matter of the properties of any potential object, however. Similarly, switching or upgrading is not primarily a matter of a superior instantiation of those properties in the one switched to. Rather, it is triggered by different needs, convictions, and properties of the lover herself, which make it possible for her to pay special attention to similar and non-similar qualities in persons other than the original beloved. The motivations to cheat and potentially fall in love with a person outside an official relationship would be too numerous to list: "Some seek attention. Some want autonomy. Some want to feel special, desired, more masculine or feminine, more attractive or better understood. Some want more communication, more intimacy, or just more sex. Some want to solve a sex problem. Others crave drama, excitement, or danger. A few seek revenge." (Fisher 2016. 71.)

Before moving on, observe the dubious expectation in connection with non-arbitrary grounds above that what persons would prefer or accept to be loved for be taken into consideration. The more general question here is whether the whole "reasons of love" debate is normative or descriptive (empirical). If it is about why we *should* love others, it is presupposed that love can be willfully given a direction, for morality cannot demand the impossible. But even if we accept the reason-giving character of certain facts about the beloved (that they *should* be loved because they are blue-eyed and funny), it is rather doubtful that the beloved's preferences should figure in those reasons. (Below, I will follow de Sousa's descriptive approach in taking over results from empirical psychology as determining the scope of normative demands that can be placed on the potential lover.)

The quality of permanence is the odd one out among the characteristics attributed to love in this discourse. When attributing permanence to love, we stand on more shaky grounds than with exclusivity, irreplaceability, and loving "for oneself" – for "limerence", viz., love as we ordinarily understand it, is, while exclusive and intensively focuses on one person, temporally rather limited. Limerence, together with its time frame, will be addressed below.

To sum up the results so far, we love others 'for' particular properties as reasons, but not as separable from those persons. Rather, a complex set of individual properties may draw our attention to a person in a way that triggers the different

biologically-based psychological processes that will be described in Section IV. At least one further component of a plausible account is still missing, however: the historical (and, relatedly, narrative) dimension of love.

IV. HISTORICITY AND NARRATIVITY

The most conspicuous blindspot of the above theories is love's temporal character. Even if we love individuals on the basis of their qualities, they would seem to become sufficiently special to us not to be traded for others (with similar or different positive particular characteristics) during the course of a common history.

Nico Kolodny offered the following thought experiment to bring out the advantages of a history-based approach over a properties/reasons-based one. Why would a person lose his love for his wife due to amnesia? Is it because he has lost (grasp on) the reasons for loving her or because he has lost their common history? Imagine a non-fiction writer producing the biography of an admirable political activist based on thorough research, without personal acquaintance with his heroine. Years later they meet, fall in love, and get married. The biographer finds his wife to possess the very same qualities he had attributed to her without knowing her personally. Ten years later, he loses his later memories due to a medical condition, but he does remember the time he wrote the book. Will he continue loving his wife? Kolodny's view is that he will not, which allegedly demonstrates that it was not her qualities that made him love her in the first place (having perceived those qualities as exactly the same before and after meeting her) but their common history.

How plausible is this conclusion? Was the writer indeed dealing with the same properties or reasons in the two periods? On the basis of our conclusions above, the answer should be negative. The biographer could not have known those properties that made his future wife attractive to him at the time of writing the book. He was aware of certain properties *in abstracto*, but not in the way they were present in the individual. Personal acquaintance and history subsequently added concreteness to those qualities.

The connection between history and individual, non-abstract properties can also be approached from the perspective of the way in which the former shapes the latter. As Amelie Rorty remarks, love emerges on the basis of interactions between, and narratives involving, the subject and the object of love. In a love relationship that merits the name, both individuals, their attitudes and actions, are profoundly altered, at least temporarily. Thus, the properties of individuals, in addition to being concrete and trope-like in character, are further individualized as indexed to a particular relationship: one assumes particular qualities that other relationships would not be capable of providing in just that way.

Relationship histories are arranged into narratives by their subjects, individually and jointly, influenced by the sociocultural environment in which the relationship is formed. Part of the function of this narrative is to smooth over the potential rifts caused by the changes in persons' properties and events challenging the relationship. What de Sousa labels "founding lies" (self-hype, as it were) of a relationship may carry it over the rough patches. Thus, narratives provide a certain continuity. At the same time, they also individualize. The different narratives embedded in a relationship influence each other: elements of self-narratives feed into the joint relationship narratives, and self-narratives are also shaped by joint narratives, while both are under the impact of the paradigmatic narratives of the given culture accessed through channels like literature, movies, and social media. But what is the relationship between reasons and narratives?

V. REASONS, NARRATIVITY/HISTORICITY, AND BIOLOGY

Narratives may be constituted by (perceived) reasons. The content of some narratives are reason-giving properties, past or present, rather than events (e.g. 'I chose your mother because she was the prettiest girl in town'). Conversely, common history and narratives (e.g., the fact of, and narratives based on memories about, having spent 20 years together) may provide reasons to maintain a relationship and also perhaps to continue loving the other person.⁵ In such cases, reasons and history/narratives are in line with each other. In multiple types of instances, this fails to be case. To be in a position to categorize those, and see the differences in the ways reasons may relate to the attitude of love, I'll use Helen Fisher's distinctions.

Helen Fisher, based on brain scan experiments performed on people in love, identified "three primary brain systems that guide mating and reproduction:" sexual drive; romantic attraction or "limerence;" and the feelings of deep attachment (Fisher 2016. 75; cf. Fisher 1998). For our purposes, the latter two are relevant, being focused on a single person. The second is what tends to be meant by romantic love: the condition characterized by focus on one person, the special significance of all that is attached them, intense sexual attraction, intrusive thoughts and vivid affective phenomenology (elation, hopes, anxiety, etc.). This condition, which might deplete resources and reduce functioning in other areas, typically lasts no more than 1.5-3 years according to brain studies: that is when dopamine and related neurochemicals start to decline.⁶ At the same time,

⁵ This may also be seen as a reason to *change*, rather than to stay in the relationship.

⁶ This does not hold of a relatively small percentage of couples, as fMRI results and self-reports equally indicate. In these fortunate cases, intensity and sexual drive are maintained, the reward system is activated by the thought of the beloved even after decades of relationship,

attachment emerges, relying on oxytocin rather than dopamine, but also “emanat[ing] from the most primitive regions of the brain, near those that orchestrate thirst and hunger” (ibid, xii.) Attachment is associated with feelings of security, closeness, and reduced anxiety in the company of the partner.

Attraction and attachment, it seems to me, display different normative features. Attraction is based on properties such as “symmetry, the display of resources, the display of fertility, and/or other biological and behavioural factors that stimulate to whom one becomes attracted” (Fisher 1998. 30). It would not occur to us to censure someone for not being attracted to another person based on such properties. Also, justifying attraction only amounts to offering a subjective perspective on another person, without any commending value. There is no room for rational dispute in why a particular display of fertility by a certain person is more appealing to someone than another’s. That particular display (“trope,” as it was referred to above) is at the base-line of the explanation for the mating choice.

Love in the second, attachment sense, is most often associated with voluntarily imposed commitments, arising in the course of a long-term relationship. While it would seem much more sensible to cite reasons in this case than in that of limerence, commendation and censure by appeal to reasons are not so much about lack of the appropriate attitude as about the commitments and behavior associated with a long-term relationship (“Would you throw a 20-year relationship out the window?”). Inasmuch as maintaining an attachment, in the affective sense, can be achieved or supported by conscious effort, reasons can figure in the emotional side as well, however. Prolonged attachment can be helped by certain practices (Brubacher and Johnson 2017). When the long-term partner fails to exercise those practices that would sustain the attachment, persons could be held responsible for their own emotional distancing.

With the passing of time, keeping the relationship and attachment going may prove to be an uphill task. No doubt, the changing properties of the beloved, or new perspectives on those properties, can also have a role here. Having fallen in love with someone with a full head of hair, hourglass figure, or special sense of humour, it might be off-putting to find the hair or the figure go, or the humour turn out to be shared by four more persons in the same year in college. However, as the original attachment was not simply a matter of the hourglass figure or the sense of humour (many people having the same qualities in their own ways), falling out of love or switching will also be causally complex.

Here, the different factors described might work in tandem or be at odds with each other. The former case is less interesting (and perhaps more rare): the beloved’s properties, common history, and bio-psychological factors may carry the

while the anxiety of new love is much diminished (cf. Avcedo, Aron, Fisher, and Brown 2011).

attachment through the inevitable downturns. Let us turn to those cases where the three factors pull in different directions.

- (1) History vs. properties as reasons. People's external and psychological features, attitudes and behavior can change over time, sometimes drastically. New potential targets may beat old ones by a mile. Attachment hormones (and practical considerations) may only go so far to sustain the old relationship against the onslaught of such motives and considerations as the need for attention, novelty, etc., in combination with reason-giving properties of potential new partners.
- (2) History vs. biology. Limerence usually runs its course in 1.5–3 years. By that time, attachment, relationship, and mutual investment into that relationship solidify. Very crudely, dopamine and testosterone levels work against the relationship, oxytocin levels work in favour of it (Fisher and Thomson 2006). Here, personality types (dopamine vs. serotonin or oxytocin-driven) as well as attachment styles may play a role: those more dominated by oxytocin and having a secure attachment style are more likely to keep up a stable attachment.⁷
- (3) Reason-giving properties and history vs. biology. Partners against whom violence has been perpetrated often choose to remain in the abusive relationship. Apart from (social or economic) pressures, the reason tends to be found in bio-psychological factors, such as attachment and co-dependence, which may outweigh reasons emerging from the history of the relationship, personality traits and behavior of the aggressive partner.
- (4) Reason-giving properties vs. narratives. With plenty of reasons for abandoning a failed attached relationship, one might be held captive by its "founding lies." (Such narratives may also complement the bio-psychological factors in maintaining an abusive relationship.) Illusions of a special union and the super-power of overcoming any hardships together may trump sombre realities.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued against the prevalent framing of the "reasons of love" problem in terms of the "reason-based" and "no-reason" views, even when complemented by an historical dimension. Observing the non-exhaustive character of these two theoretical possibilities and the ambiguity between descriptive and normative formulations, we have noted the tendency, already present in Plato and also shaping the present debate, of conceiving properties as potentially imposing themselves on the would-be lover, without their agency, psychological

⁷ For a description of different attachment styles, see Brennan and Shaver 1995.

makeup and biological circumstances assigned a more substantive role. Here, an attempt has been made to acknowledge some of the intricacies related to these factors, and their interplay, in the emergence of the attitude of romantic love.

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