

Editorial: On Love

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What is love? Is it an uncontrollable emotion? Is it, instead, socially shaped, both an emotion and a social practice? Can the bonds of care and affection between humans and non-human animals be said to be on a par with parent-child relationships between humans? Do parents owe love to their children – and do mothers and fathers, respectively, owe it to different degrees? Do subversive weddings challenge normative ideals about love? What is the significance of love for the value of close personal or family relationships? All these questions and more are discussed in the articles included in this special issue. The contributors draw from a variety of disciplines including philosophy, sociology, political science, religious studies, and history, as well as from empirical work that they have undertaken in Canada, Belgium, Portugal, or Romania. From these different perspectives and experiences, each contribution addresses important questions about love and its relation to sexuality, monogamy, friendship, the family, parenthood, or society in general.

The theme

From the balance between moral agency and uptake of responsibility for love's beginning and its ending (Ciurria 2018), to ambivalence in the face of innovations in ways of looking for love (Pozsar et al 2018), this special issue explores love and its challenges in the contemporary world. Several of the contributions address the way in which love has been used to keep women's interests subsumed to those of their male partners (Uiorean 2018, Sadler 2018) or those of their children (Jacobs & Hens 2018, Green 2018). This has often been accomplished with the support of the expectation that (heterosexual) romantic love is essential for women's fulfillment. By placing the nuclear family, created by romantic love, in the center of our adult lives, all other loves are moved to the sides. Against this background, the authors of the articles included in this special issue contribute to 'rehabilitating' other instantiations of love that are either non-romantic (Gheaus

2018, Piazzesi et al 2018), non-monogamous (Brake 2018, Clardy 2018), non-heterosexual (Santos 2018), or altogether cross-species (Stewart 2018).

The belief that a heterosexual romantic relationship is essential for human flourishing has a name, ‘amatonormativity’, coined by philosopher Elizabeth Brake. The term denotes

the assumption that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in the sense that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types. The assumption that valuable relationships must be marital or amorous devalues friendships and other caring relationships. (Brake 2012: 88-89).

Research on friendship between adults confirms the surrender to the social script of the primacy of the family over friendship that takes place in many adults’ lives. For example, a recent study of friendship between men in Sweden found that although they valued their friendships greatly, they felt they had to negotiate partial withdrawals from them once they embarked on a serious (heterosexual) romantic relationship (Goedecke 2018). Even as it has become socially acceptable that one will have several romantic partners in one’s lifetime, these are still one’s “other halves”, “significant others”, or “soulmates” – at least until proven otherwise. Friends, on the other hand, are not – at least not as adults, and even when one has had one enduring close friend for life and multiple, serial romantic “other halves”.

If the form of elective family that is the romantic relationship has dissolved, the relationship is said to have “failed” and we were simply mistaken to have started it in the first place: our other half was not our other half after all. Friendship, on the other hand, tends to lack both this requirement of exclusivity and the all or nothing approach in relation to its temporality: someone may no longer be a close friend today, but that in itself need not mean anything about whether the relationship was “real” friendship when it was ongoing. Romantic love and the family could be enriched in this way by being *more like friendship* – as Gheaus suggests in this special issue – instead of cutting our intimate relationships to size and emptying them of meaning as soon as they no longer fit the narrative of the successful romantic relationship.

In a paper published almost three decades ago, psychologist Esther Rothblum invited her readers to imagine an alternative scenario of a society in which the expectations surrounding friendship and romantic love are switched (Rothblum 1999). One is only allowed to have one friend. Friendship is celebrated in Friendship Commitment Ceremonies where the happy couple invites all their close ones, including lovers and family. While one may have multiple lovers, care

is warranted to avoid becoming more than “just lovers”. Friendship with others, when you already have a friend, amounts to cheating and is frowned upon. Fiction and music are sources of countless examples of happy friendships that all are encouraged to aspire to. Declaring one’s friendship status is a requirement on a host of official documents. The end of a friendship is a life-changing event that everyone acknowledges as such.

Rothblum does not suggest that such a scenario be enacted. Instead, she uses it to question what she calls “the culture of sex” of the Western world, established conventions of what counts as sex, and current definitions of friendship, especially in relation to coupledness. She calls for a “friendship revolution”, a reorganization of the way we structure close personal relationships, which would displace sexual intimacy from center stage, and replace it with friendship. For Rothblum, this would be particularly beneficial for women, by shattering the expectation that they should invest in their sexual attractiveness, and instead encouraging them to invest in other ways of relating – such as friendship.

Rothblum is not the only one who has contrasted norms around friendship and romantic love to reveal contradictions in how we conceptualize love. For example, philosopher Maren Behrensen discusses the requirement that romantic love is necessarily exclusive by comparing it with expectations concerning friendship and parental love. Loving several friends or several children need not subtract from the love that we feel for each friend and each child. While there are limits to how many people we can love, as friends, lovers, or parents, it is only in the case of romantic love that the limit is expected to be “1” (Behrensen 2014).

More recently, philosopher Harry Chalmers imagines a couple in which partners have agreed to exclusivity not only in their romantic relationship, but also in friendship: they will be each other’s friend, and no one else’s. Violating this expectation, by befriending other people, may bring about the end of their relationship. This is problematic, argues Chalmers, because friendship is an important human good, and supporting our beloved in their pursuit of important human goods is part of what it means to love. However, romantic love is also an important human good. Like friendship, it contributes meaning to our lives, and connects us with others in intimate ways. Chalmers’ argument is that the requirement of monogamy in romantic love is morally impermissible, in the same way in which a requirement of monogamy in friendship is (Chalmers 2018).

Rothblum, Behrens, and Chalmers invite us to consider romantic love, and the norms that surround it, amidst other kinds of love, and the norms that surround *them*, and to reflect on the extent to which the norms of romantic love are justifiable. The “friendship revolution” that Rothblum envisioned is that of a dynamic between friendship, romantic love, and the family, that diverges from the amatonormative script. A “love revolution”, which renders all loves equal in value and frees love from the realm of social or personal expectation, seems to be one of the take-home reflections of this special issue. Love is not exclusive or species-bound, is not owed even where it is needed, and it does not need to be socially accepted in order to redeem itself.

In the following, I will briefly present the articles included in this special issue.

The articles

In her article, “Love as emotion *and* social practice”, Brook Sadler shows how society shapes our views about love in specific directions. The social practice of love and of the importance of ‘erotic affiliation’, Sadler claims, reveals underlying tensions regarding the place and the status of women in liberal democracies. Not all or any love is equally valued socially; not all or any love is supposed to overwhelm us. Romantic love is awarded a special status that pushes other kinds of love to the margins and relegates them to secondary status in comparison.

Romantic love is not just one of several kinds of love, alongside, for example, love between close friends. It is, as Sadler puts it, “the defining pursuit of adult life (...) central to individual identity”. By hiding this expectation behind the portrayal of romantic love as an uncontrollable emotion, we collectively prevent ourselves from taking responsibility for placing romantic love on such a high pedestal – and for accepting that it is thus elevated. We don’t simply perceive our emerging feelings directly as they are, but we interpret them with the tools that we have been given, we *translate* them using the social language, the shared beliefs, within which we lead our lives. In that way, love is not only an emotion, but also a social practice, and we share in responsibility for the ways in which we interpret it.

Justin Clardy looks at how the social meaning of a word (such as ‘player’) is dependent on the linguistic community in which it is used, in a way that influences its potential to praise or denigrate. For Carrie Jenkins, writing about the consequences of being labeled promiscuous, there

is no male equivalent to “slut” in potential to denigrate. ‘Player’ for Jenkins “sounds like somebody who has a lot of fun” (Jenkins 2017: 139). In African American English, however, “player” denotes a man who is dishonest and takes advantage of women. This is important in the context of polyamory - or consensual non-monogamy - because a polyamorous man may not cheat or take advantage of his partners, but still be labeled a ‘player’.

The label therefore forces a stereotype onto African American polyamorous men, regardless of whether they actually do display the characteristics imputed to them in this way (such as dishonesty and manipulation). This is further aggravated by the hyper-sexualization that black men have been subjected to historically. Because polyamorous men are not dishonest with their partners, they are not players. Therefore, concludes Clardy, against the background of amatonormativity, labeling African American polyamorous men as ‘players’ denigrates them and denies them respectability for their non-monogamous choices.

In Clardy’s paper, we see how amatonormativity can work with race and gender to raise challenges for African American polyamorous men. In the next paper of this special issue, Elizabeth Brake looks at whether polyamorous weddings (weddings between more than two lovers) succeed in challenging the ideals of amatonormativity. Are they even weddings at all? And if they are weddings, are they a step towards assimilation into the fixed roles of romantic love ideals, by giving in to a version of amatonormativity? Are they, on the contrary, a step towards the weakening of the grip that these ideals have upon lovers?

Subversive polyamorous weddings bring forth a challenge to widely socially embraced ideals of the necessary exclusivity and constancy of romantic love. The specific challenge that polyamorous weddings raise hits at the core of these ideals, by positing a version of romantic love that allows multiple parties. Romantic love is supposed to be exclusive between only two parties – but polyamorous weddings welcome more than two; the one lover is supposed to be one’s irreplaceable soulmate – but polyamorous weddings allow for more soulmates. Instead of symbolizing the uniqueness and irreplaceability that weddings do, polyamorous weddings celebrate openness to the possibility that one can love romantically more than one. They celebrate ongoing consent rather than promises that cannot be made: such as that the love one feels today will always be there, for the same recipient, and only for that person, come what may (see also Brake 2011, 2012).

Oana Uiorean discusses Plato's *Symposium*, looking at how the sharp distinctions and hierarchies apparent in the speeches therein are reflected in contemporary gendered roles and expectations. Awkwardness in relation to women and women's roles in the reproduction of mankind seethes throughout the words of Plato's speakers – and especially those of Pausanias.

In the *Symposium*, love between men is elevated to no less than celestial realms – if performed properly. Love, and men, aim at higher levels of achievement, while women belong in the home and their energy is bound to the realm of the reproduction of society and its citizens. Uiorean shows how, while Plato's ideal of homoerotic love has been replaced with the ideal of heterosexual love, the latter perpetuates the same function of gendering the domestic sphere and disciplining women in well-defined roles.

Against the quintessentially contemporary background of neuroscience, Delphine Jacobs and Kristien Hens illustrate the expectations that women owe duties of love to their family members, by looking into the *scientific* claim that parents, and especially mothers, owe love to their children. This claim is informed by biology and neurology research according to which love is essential for children's adequate brain development. Responsibility for providing this love is placed on the parents, and especially on the mother.

Jacobs and Hens use their research on the diagnosis of autism to explore the road from blaming mothers for their children's non-typical neurological development, to lifting that blame, only to then blame them again. Even as it exculpates parents from the blame of not having parented well enough, the neurological diagnosis of a child compounds the pressure put on parents to love their children *in the right way*. In order for the endeavor to support children in their development to work, a less simplistic view of biology is required, Jacobs and Hens argue. Not least, a broader view of moral responsibility for children – as more than parental or maternal – as well as a less reductionist understanding of love, are also required.

Deidre Green emphasizes some of the contradictions of conceptualizing maternal love as something that children have a right to. Not only is love not the kind of response that can be claimed of someone, but the imposition of such a claim is a threat to women's very agency. While

children do have legitimate claims on their parents, which include a claim to a mother's care, responsibility, and respect, love itself is not one of them.

Instead, Green develops an account of maternal love as a gift. The gift framework, Green shows, avoids the subordination of women's interests and agency to those of their children. Moreover, it allows greater agency for both the mother and the child.

Michelle Ciurria contrasts our attitudes to falling in love and to romantic break-ups, respectively. While both experiences share essential properties, such as a lack of control and of psychological continuity, we are more inclined to take responsibility for, and to feel in control of, falling in love, than breaking-up. This is in line with an asymmetry in the perception of responsibility that is common in neurotypical people: we tend to feel more responsible for positive than for negative events (such as falling in love, and breaking up, respectively). This tendency for "self-serving bias", Ciurria shows, has benefits for human functioning.

Some of us, however, feel more responsible for negative events than for positive events. Depression, for example, tends to make us prone to take on *too much* responsibility for negative events, in a way that impairs our functioning. Others see themselves as the cause of only good things (such as positive romantic experiences) and fail to admit responsibility for negative events (such as romantic break-ups) to such a degree that they are unable to relate to others: they are narcissists. From the perspective of the moral enhancement theory of responsibility, which Ciurria employs in the article, we need to support each other to care and to take responsibility where it is due: but only to the extent that it allows us to maintain or improve our moral agency.

In "Love, not the family", Anca Gheaus makes the radical claim that what is most valuable in family relations is love. The family, however, has no monopoly on love. Throughout the Western world, it is expected that adults will privilege the family; that family brings obligations in private life that close personal relationships (such as friendship) do not. For example, children are born or brought into family relationships to which they cannot consent, either because they didn't exist, or because, in the case of adoption, they were too young to do so¹. Social expectations

¹ In a minority of cases, children are adopted at older ages and their consent is sought. The degree to which this consent is *free* is however doubtful, considering that the choice may be between having a home and a family and *not* having them. Even if older children are deemed to have capacity to consent, all the conditions of informed consent, especially those regarding the decision being free, are not met, because of the vulnerability presupposed by their very

or legal provisions that, as adults, they care for their parents, and the expectation that they show some degree of unconditional partiality towards other relatives, capture the assumption that they are bound for life to family relationships.

The high standard of commitment expected from family relationships may compromise moral integrity, argues Gheaus – especially when one is expected to *stay close* to family members, regardless of whether they are people we would otherwise want to be close with – and may be detrimental to human flourishing. Commitments that originate in love, however, such as those between close friends, derive from the relationship, rather than from external constraints. Rather than placing the family and its constraints in the center, Gheaus places love and friendship: it is loving friendship, rather than family, that should be at the core of our closest personal relationships, whether with friends or with family members.

Another prospect of a realignment between friendship and romantic love is presented in the next article. Chiara Piazzesi, Martin Blais, Julia Lavigne and Catherine Lavoie Mongrain analyse the interplay between “love semantics”, or the narrative of love, and changing social norms. They do so by focusing on the tribulations of four fictional women as they are depicted in a North-American TV series, *La Galère*. This case study does not lend itself smoothly to the dichotomies “traditional vs modern” and “romantic vs partnership” – as one might expect, in line with literature on contemporary love paradigms. Instead, it reveals an integration between all these elements, as the four protagonists of the series navigate societal norms and expectations in relation to women and their experience of love, intimacy, gender identity, and power relationships.

The women disrupt the romantic script (for example, by sharing a home together rather than with their male partners), while they seek certain parts of it (for example, passionate love). Faced with the difficulties of sharing mundane household tasks while keeping the relationship passionate, they rearrange their intimate relationships in a way more likely to allow them both equality in the home, and passion in their romantic connections. This disconnects household-related expectations from the romantic relationship, relegates the home to friendship, and from this altered starting point re-opens negotiation within the romantic relationship. *La Galère*, the authors suggest,

circumstances. The consent that adults give to entering or remaining in an intimate relationship with other adults can likewise be vitiated by a lack of freedom, caused for example by poverty or social pressure.

illustrates both women' reflexivity in facing the challenges of romantic love, and the supportive potential of friendship between women.

Access to assisted reproductive technologies by same-sex female couples and single women is far from guaranteed throughout Europe. In France and Italy, for example, only heterosexual couples are allowed to avail themselves of such treatments. In Romania, access by single women is frowned upon, and not included in state funded programs. Where funding exists, it is reserved for heterosexual couples. Parenting by same-sex partners is not recognized in Romanian law. In theory, what explains these restrictions is the way in which infertility is defined in most legislatures, as the failure of a heterosexual couple to produce children via sexual intercourse. In this way, same-sex couples and single individuals are *defined away* at the outset as not suffering from the disease of infertility, and are thus excluded by default.

In Portugal, same-sex female couples have had access to reproductive technologies since 2016, and Ana Santos illustrates some of the outcomes and pitfalls of these legislative changes. She does so against the background of “the motherhood regime”, the expectation that women become mothers and perform motherhood in a socially sanctioned way. For the women she interviewed, this has opened up not only possibilities to seek support in becoming mothers, but also to experience societal expectations of what good motherhood is. Santos shows how, upon the removal of barriers to reproductive technologies, the effects of the insidious social expectation that sexuality is redeemed by reproduction contribute to render same-sex female couples acceptable *because* they become mothers. At the same time, by embarking on this journey, they cannot but disrupt norms about parenthood. For Santos, this disruption is a call for “decolonizing motherhood” by queering reproduction and parental love.

There is a growing amount of research into the use of mobile dating apps. However, most of this research is undertaken in a Western context. Maria Pozsar, Alina Dumitrescu, Denisa Piticas and Sorana Constantinescu investigate the perceptions of Romanian young women having used such apps. Romanian youth tend to be more conservative than their Western counterparts – and sometimes than their own parents – and ambivalent as to the appropriateness of online dating.

This ambivalence is apparent throughout the study. The authors explored the disruptive potential of these apps in relation to traditional forms of dating. They found that the users of the

apps tended to be both less conservative than the general population in their age group, and conflicted between their adherence to conservative values and their own negative perception of the very use of such apps.

The last article of the special issue goes beyond love between humans, to investigate the nature of the relationships between humans and their non-human companions – specifically cats and dogs. Although human knowledge of non-human lives has made tremendous progress in recent years, in ways that have influenced how one is permitted to treat animals, Heather Stewart claims that the revision of human-animal relationships has not gone far enough. Her argument is that the relation between the human caregiver and their ‘pet’ shares many of the essential properties of parent-child relationships, to such an extent that we should reconceptualize them as parental rather than proprietary in nature.

Indeed, the status quo is that human caregivers are their pets’ “owners”. In Romanian, they are their pets’ “masters” (*stăpâni*). This is at odds with the increasing social and legal recognition of animals’ moral status. Stewart’s proposal departs from this status quo. It invites the readers to reflect on the meaning and reasoning behind kinds of recognition of inter-species caring relationships, and to consider the benefits for both human carers and non-human companions of recognizing their relationship as a form of parenthood.

The above is only a brief review of the contributions included in this special issue on *Analyzing Love*. I hope to have provided enough of a glimpse into the work of the authors to stimulate the readers to look more closely at the articles themselves. The breath of the approaches represented in this special issue will have something to offer to any reader who is interested in reflecting on how love *works* in our societies.

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