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What Is It To Love Someone?

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We love our friends, our family, and our romantic partners. We love them in very different ways, though, so we might wonder what, if anything, makes all of them cases of the same thing, namely, love. What is it to love someone?^[1]

1. Desiring to care for and to be with someone

A natural thing to say is that to love someone is to desire to care for and to be with them.^[2]

However, desiring to care for and to be with someone doesn't seem *necessary* for loving them. It's possible to love a cranky grandfather or a smothering parent, even if you don't want to be in their company, caring for them.^[3]

Desiring to care for and to be with someone doesn't seem *sufficient* for loving them either. Suppose you witness someone getting injured in an accident. You might develop the desire to care for, and to be with, the injured stranger out of benevolence or moral duty. But this doesn't mean you *love* the stranger.^[4]

2. Taking someone's well-being as your own

Another idea is that to love someone is just to take their well-being as a *part* or an *extension* of your own well-being.^[5] On this view, loving someone involves finding no distinction between what is in your interest and what is in theirs—finding that to benefit them *just is* to benefit you, and to harm them *just is* to harm you.

An advantage of this account is that it helps us make sense of how we tend to speak about our loved ones. We often hear people say things like, “*If you're messing with someone I love, you're messing with me!*” and “*When my beloved died, I lost a part of myself.*”

Yet, it's reasonable to wonder whether this account is taking literally what people mean to say metaphorically.^[6] Also, this view seems to eliminate the possibility of genuine self-sacrifice for our loved ones. How could we make sacrifices for our loved ones, if promoting their interests is just another way of promoting *our own*?^[7]

3. Being disposed to be affected by someone

A weaker, and perhaps more plausible, version of this idea is that to love someone is just to be *disposed* to be affected by changes in their well-being.^[8] On this view, the well-being of a loved one is distinct from, but can causally impact, your own: e.g., if you were to witness your loved one suffering, that would cause you to suffer.

However, most of us would feel badly if we were to witness complete strangers suffering, and we don't love complete strangers. One might argue, in reply, that although we'd feel badly watching a stranger suffering, we wouldn't feel badly *enough* for that to count as “love.” But this reply raises the question of *how much* suffering would be enough for love. Is there a good answer to this question? Perhaps not.

4. Valuing someone

Another proposal is that to love someone is just to value them a great deal.

But how so? Your boss might value you a great deal as an employee; this wouldn't mean they *love* you. So, if this account is going to get off the ground, it has to tell us more about what makes love a distinct way of valuing someone.

4.1. Valuing someone for (certain) qualities

One might say that loving someone involves valuing them for displaying qualities from a more narrow list—a list that doesn't include qualities like “being a great employee,” but that does include qualities like “being charming,” “being witty,” “being brave,” and so on.^[9]

Yet, this view has counterintuitive implications. It implies, e.g., that if you were to somehow come across a perfect clone of one of your loved ones, except *slightly more* charming, witty, and brave, then you would have a reason to switch your love to the clone. But this might be too fickle; it seems incompatible with the deep personal commitment we have with our loved ones.^[10]

4.2. Valuing someone as a person

Some believe that every person deserves to be loved *simply because* they're a person. On this view, to love someone is to fully appreciate the value of their personhood.^[11] We *should* love everyone. We don't do that because we're psychologically limited: we can only appreciate so many people.

However, claiming to love someone "because they're a person" sounds strained at best.^[12] Moreover, this proposal seems to conflate love with respect—we don't have to *love* someone to appreciate their worth as a person; respecting them would suffice.^[13]

4.3. Valuing someone for being related to you

Another proposal is that loving someone involves valuing them for being *related* to you in some special way—for being, e.g., your mother, daughter, sister, friend, partner, etc.^[14]

But, if loving someone amounts to valuing them because they're related to you in a special way, then it should be impossible to love someone who *isn't* related to you in any special way.^[15] And yet, it *does* seem possible to love someone—someone who isn't (and doesn't want to be) your friend, relative, or romantic partner—unrequitedly.^[16]

4.4. Valuing someone by bestowing value onto them

Finally, one might argue that we don't value our loved ones because we *recognize* some way in which they are valuable *prior* to our love for them. Rather, we value them because our love *makes* them valuable to us. In other words, the suggestion is that to love someone is just to bestow or project value onto them.^[17]

But, if our loved ones have value for us *because* we love them, then we can't appeal to someone's value to *justify* loving them. This means that the question, "Why am I worthy of love?" has no answer—some are uncomfortable with this implication.^[18] Nor can we appeal to the fact that someone's a genocidal maniac as a justification for *not* loving them—and this seems obviously false.^[19]

5. Conclusion

If none of these views are satisfactory, that might be a reason to reject the assumption that there is something which all cases of love have in common. Perhaps love is undefinable.^[20] Lots of things are hard (or impossible) to define, and that doesn't mean they aren't real or important. So we'll continue to

love, even if we don't know exactly what we are doing or how to define it.^[21]

Notes

[1] It is important to note two things about this essay. First, this essay is concerned with what it is to love *someone*, i.e., what it is to love a particular *person*. It may be interesting, however, to think about whether there is anything in common between the way we love people and the way we love things other than persons (e.g., sports teams, mementos, etc.).

Second, this essay is *not* concerned with whether love is a biological phenomenon, a socially constructed phenomenon, or some sort of mixture of both. For readers interested in that question, see Jenkins (2017).

[2] Several contemporary philosophers subscribe to some version of this view. E.g., Gabriele Taylor writes, "if *x* loves *y* then *x* wants to benefit and be with *y*" (1976: 157). Alan Soble argues that "a common feature" of cases where some person *x* loves some other person *y* is that "*x* desires for *y* that which is good for *y*, *x* desires this for *y*'s own sake, and *x* pursues *y*'s good for *y*'s benefit and not for *x*'s" (1997: 67). Harry Frankfurt also defends the claim that, "loving something ... is not merely a matter of liking it a great deal or of finding it deeply satisfying" but is rather a species of "disinterested concern for the well-being or flourishing of a beloved object." (1998, chs. 11 and 14).

[3] Velleman (1999: 353). See also Matthes (2016) for a fascinating discussion about loving people *in spite of* their character defects.

[4] Helm (2009). It may be interesting to think about whether it is possible to avoid this objection by specifying the *way* in which one desires to care for and be with loved ones. A promising suggestion along these lines comes from Sophie Grace Chappell, who argues that love is distinct from impartial forms of benevolence because, unlike mere benevolence, love entails the desire to make a *first-personal* contribution to a person's well-being. "Loving someone," she writes, "means wanting to be constitutively involved in his well-being: it means wanting to be, myself, part of what makes life go well for him. ... To straightforward benevolence towards *X*, it cannot matter whether it is *me* who brings about *X*'s well-being. The concern is merely that someone

should. To love, by contrast, it typically does matter that it should be me” (2014: 86; her italics).

[5] Robert Solomon writes, “It is often said that to love is to give in to another person’s needs, indeed, to make them more important than one’s own. But to love is rather to take the other’s desires and needs *as one’s own*. This is much more than a merely grammatical point. It is a redefinition of the self itself, as a shared self” (1981: 150; his italics). Along similar lines, Roger Scruton argues that two people love each other “just so soon as reciprocity becomes community: that is, just so soon as all distinction between my interests and your interests is overcome” (2006: 230).

Many major figures in the history of philosophy have, at one point or another, suggested that to love someone is just to foster (or to desire to foster) a significant kind of union with them. One way of cashing out this “significant kind of union” is in terms of treating one’s well-being and the well-being of the loved one as two parts of the same whole, of a single unity. It is important to note, however, that philosophers have cashed out this “significant kind of union” in a variety of other ways. See, e.g. Plato’s Aristophanes (*Symposium*: 189c-193e), Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*: IX, 9, 1170b1), Augustine (*Confessions*: IV, 6), and Montaigne (*Essays*: I, 28). Contemporary proponents of the union account of love include: Nozick (1989, ch. 8), Solomon (1981 and (1994), Delaney (1996), Baxter (2005), Scruton (2006, ch. 8), Westlund (2008), and Gilbert (2013, ch. 11).

[6] Several philosophers have noted that, if we take reports like “*I lost a part of myself when my beloved died*” and “*If you’re messing with them, then you’re messing with me!*” to be literally true, then we run the risk of suggesting, implausibly, that you and your loved ones are one and the same person. Also, we would risk putting love in direct tension with individual autonomy. If there is no distinction between your interests and those of your loved one’s, then whenever you make a decision about your interests, you’re also making a decision about *their* interests *for them*. Many philosophers find this result morally unpalatable. For further discussion, see Lugones (1987), Singer (1994, ch. 6), Soble (1997), Friedman (1998), and Whiting (2016: 46-8).

[7] Soble (1997: 86).

[8] Robert Nozick has gestured towards this view. He writes that, “What is common to all love is this: Your own well-being is tied up with that of someone (or something) you love. When a bad thing happens to a friend, it happens to her and you feel sad for her; when something good happens, you feel happy for her” (1989: 68). It is worth noting, however, that Nozick at times seems sympathetic to the account described in section 2 of this essay. He goes on to say, for example, that “When something bad happens to one you love, [...] something bad also happens *to you*” (1989: 68; his italics).

[9] It may be interesting to think about whether it is possible to determine which qualities belong to this restricted set, and which ones do not, without being arbitrary. Simon Keller attempts to accomplish this in his article, “How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Properties” (2000: 165-166).

[10] See Grau (2004) for an excellent discussion about the relationship between loving someone and finding them irreplaceable. Grau plausibly cashes out the irreplaceability of our loved ones in terms of their historical properties.

Some might say that to love someone is just to value them for their historical properties—e.g., for being the person with whom you went on a date in October 2016. The trouble with that proposal is that the historical properties of our loved ones don’t seem to be valuable *prior* to our love for them, in the way the property of “being brave” is. It seems, rather, that the historical properties of our loved ones are valuable for us *because* we love these people. If that’s true, then this proposal is susceptible to the same objections raised against bestowal accounts of love, discussed in section 4.4 of this essay.

[11] David Velleman, e.g., argues that when we love someone, “we are responding to the value that he possesses by virtue of being a person or, as Kant would say, an instance of rational nature” (1999: 365).

[12] Kolodny (2003: 173-79); Millgram (2004); Bagley (2015: 483-86).

[13] Velleman accepts that love and respect are both responses to the same thing, namely, someone’s value as a person. He distinguishes love from respect in terms of their *effects*. According to him, respect prevents us from being self-interested, while love prevents us from being emotionally defensive—that is, loving someone makes us vulnerable to

experiencing emotions we wouldn't experience towards strangers (1999: 360-61).

However, if this is the only difference between love and respect, then love would lose much of its explanatory power. To illustrate the point, imagine one of your loved ones has just lost a race. Presumably, you would feel sad or disappointed. Are there *good reasons* for you to have that emotional response towards your loved one but not towards some stranger who has also lost the race? The intuitive answer is that what warrants that emotional response towards your loved one (but not the stranger) is *precisely* the fact that you love her (and not the stranger). But, as Bennett Helm rightly notes, "this answer is unavailable to Velleman, because he thinks that what makes my response to your dignity [as a person] be that of love rather than respect is precisely that I feel such emotions, and to appeal to my love in explaining the warrant of these emotions therefore would be viciously circular" (2010: 27).

[14] Niko Kolodny, e.g., argues that "love consists (a) in seeing a relationship in which one is involved as a reason for valuing both one's relationship and the person with whom one has that relationship, and (b) in valuing that relationship and person accordingly" (2003: 150).

[15] Stump (2006: 26-7).

[16] In most cases, when you love someone unrequitedly, they are acquainted with you. Thus, one might suggest that, in such cases, it's possible to value your loved one for being your acquaintance. See Protasi (2016) for an excellent discussion, and critique, of this sort of response.

[17] Irving Singer, e.g., writes, "In loving persons, ... people bestow value upon one another over and above their individual or objective value" (1984: 6). "Insofar as love is bestowal," he argues, "it creates a kind of value in the beloved that goes beyond appraisal. In loving another, in attending to and delighting in that person, we *make* him or her valuable in a way that would not otherwise exist" (1994: 2; his italics). Harry Frankfurt, along similar lines, has claimed that, "what we love necessarily *acquires* value for us *because* we love it. (2006: 39; his italics).

[18] See Keller (2000).

[19] Many proponents of the bestowal account of love are willing to accept that love isn't something that can (or need to) be justified. See, for instance, Singer

(1984), Frankfurt (2006: 39-40), or Smuts (2015: 101-3).

[20] Ronald de Sousa explicitly defends this view. In "Love Undigitized", he writes, "Particular loves link particular persons. There is no essence of love" (1997).

[21] See Helm (2010), Bagley (2015), and Protasi (2016), Pismenny and Prinz (2017), and Yao (2020) for some promising alternative accounts of love.

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