

LOVE AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

It will not be disputed that our sense of identity, of who we are, is, in part at least, constituted by the relationships we have with other individuals, and that our potential for happiness is a function of how those relationships fare. One aspect moreover that is crucial for people in their relationships, that is indeed the measure for the importance of other matters, is the way they actually feel towards each other, including their perception of the attitude the other has towards them.

In other words, to flourish, a personal relationship must be a community of affection.

Now there are two key concepts implied here: those of a degree of reciprocity and of a degree of love.

How much reciprocity, and, first, what exactly is involved in love?

AFFECTION, CARING AND ATTACHMENT

A first thought might be to equate love only with a variety of feeling. In some colloquial contexts, the words are indeed used almost interchangeably: to have feelings for someone is to harbour love, at least of a kind.

One problem with classifying love as a feeling is that feeling can be so very unreliable, while love, to count as love, requires a considerable persistence over time.

Further reflection soon shows that love is never a single, solitary feeling, but that a whole pattern of emotions is involved. Love may show itself, for example, in anxiety about someone or in missing them, as well as in the sentiment of affection. Nor are these feelings (or any

feelings) uninterruptedly present in the consciousness.ⁱ

More telling, though, than these somewhat introspective observations, is our objective assessment of the situation where someone else attests to feeling love. Sometimes we may take their word for it, but usually we will also have close regard to the way they act.

Might love be equated then solely with a pattern of action? No, because this supposition would make affection superfluous to the existence of love. Caring action on its own is not enough for us to say there is love, though it may often be an excellent indicator. Someone may for instance care, i.e. perform the actions of care, out of a sense of duty. Think of a nurse, or else of a dutiful husband who no longer feels anything for his wife.

In summary, love can be said neither to be simply a pattern of feeling, nor a pattern of action. A working metaphor is to see it as an undercurrent which sometimes manifests itself in feelings of various kinds, especially the sentiment of affection, and sometimes in actions.ⁱⁱ

For our next step, let me introduce a notion of what I shall call bonding, although the alternative terms “attachment” and “focus” would not be far off the mark; (there are subtle differences, which will become apparent by substituting in the following one or both of these words for “bond”).

Let us say that bonding is the way in which an individual's sense of self involves the thought of a person or persons to whom he or she relates. Now it is arguably the case that our sense of self is always associated with perceptions of others, and in their absence, with thoughts of others (including often thoughts of their perception of ourselves). This means that even the hermit will engage in some kind

of imagined dialogue with others, although these may be only remembered or else composite or fictional persons. Bonding goes beyond this minimal orientation on others through the fixity of the persons in mind. That is, we do not quickly or easily stop thinking periodically about the particular persons we are attached to, if only because we think of ourselves *via* those persons. They will change with time, but the change is *necessarily* gradual. The process of bonding, i.e. the process through which someone acquires this status for us, may also be assumed to be gradual.

Note that this concept of bonding does not yet involve mutuality or reciprocity. It is not necessarily the case that we play a similar role or a similarly important role for the persons we bond to.

The existence of a relationship, and therefore the existence of a bond, does not necessarily mean that there is love exactly. Conversely, the existence of individual love does not necessarily mean that there is a relationship, although there must be a bond in at least one direction; (think of cases of estrangement). This is because a relationship is necessarily mutual; it is observable and involves exchanges of various kinds and does not exist “only in the mind” whereas a bond might well exist “only in the mind” (though it must have a great deal more fixity than a figment of the imagination, a bond involving recurrent thought of the other individual concerned).

We said at the outset that, in order to flourish, a personal relationship must be a community of affection; and that this implied a degree of love, which we have just explored, and a degree of reciprocity. How much reciprocity?

CLAIMS, COMMITMENTS AND PRESUMPTIONS

One of the things someone might say within a close relationship is, “You are the most important person in my life, and I want to be the most important person in yours, too.”

Philosophically and ethically, this statement presents a number of issues. At first sight, it may seem to be a declaration of love, but note that it could equally well, in principle, be said within a relationship of enmity. On closer examination, the statement, assuming it is sincere, emerges as neither a sufficient condition for there to be love, nor a necessary condition, for you can surely love more than one other person.

It may nevertheless very well be an expression of love, but as an expression it is incomplete, or else the expression of an incomplete love.

Imagine a moment how the world would be if this were the only form that love could take.ⁱⁱⁱ Only in a world that was miraculously ordered would each and every person have such a love. It would, necessarily, be a world full of couples (though not necessarily sexually intimate couples; the sexual component is a separate matter). In a world not miraculously ordered, it might conceivably be possible for everyone to belong to such a couple, but it would not be possible for that relationship to be always either freely chosen or one of a meeting of minds.

There are two components to our phrase. First there is a statement about how the speaker feels towards (or relates to) the person being addressed. (Or is it a vow?) Then there is the expression of a wish, though it may sound more like a demand, a demand that seems to follow from the

initial declaration. But it does not follow. A child may be the most important person in her father's life, but, if he is a good father, he will not wish to be the most important in hers.

This counter-example is of a relationship which by its nature is asymmetrical, and radically so. Perhaps we must focus instead on basically symmetrical relationships, between adults who are equals. Is the demand (for supreme importance in the life of the other) now justified on the grounds that the other is for me, the speaker, the most important individual in my life?

It is, surely, as a demand, presumptuous.

Part of the problem comes from the superlatives involved. Note how the situation is transformed as these are qualified or withdrawn: "You are the most important (or: a most important) person in my life, and I want to be important for you, too." Or, going further, "You count for me, and I want to count for you, too."

The request which before was presumptuous now seems modest, so much so that it would seem heartless to reject it out of hand. The wish (or plea) comes closer to being a declaration of love to the extent that it has moderated and renounced the stronger claim for exclusive possession. Indeed, the nature of love is such, surely, that it does not pose, properly, any conditions. A declaration of love is not a contractual undertaking to the effect "I will love this other person if (and only if) she loves me". That would be an offer of commitment, which is not to be scorned, may indeed in various practical ways be more attractive, but is different. (The declaration of love includes a statement of commitment, and so is more than an offer of commitment.

It says, “You can call on me. I will make time and effort and attentiveness available for you.”)

The commitment implied in a declaration of love may of course be exploited. The person loving must have faith that the other will not exploit their feelings, at least not in certain ways, and they can be mistaken in this conviction, as they can be mistaken in their perception of the other in a more general sense. The person who loves becomes vulnerable, necessarily.

Let us return for a moment to the totalitarian tone of the original utterance. The exclusive implication (“most important”) opens up the way for a near-total vulnerability. Where love is more diffuse, the variety of commitments may itself provide fuel for conflict (including or especially ethical conflict), but the other commitments can also provide a check and a balance.

There is a topical question about how diffuse or how focussed love should ideally be. Our real range of personal choice in this respect is doubtless somewhat limited. We cannot readily command our feelings (or the commitment in our hearts). And even where the psychological capacity for a more focussed — or alternatively a more diffuse love — is present, social pressures can be restrictive. Others must go along with our choice, and they will often fail to do so, especially if it means going against prevailing norms, for example in the area of sexual intimacy.

This said, and notwithstanding how little room we may, psychologically or socially speaking, have as individuals to focus or spread our love, there is choice at another level. Thus you might choose to put your young child in a play-group all day or alternatively sacrifice career and prosperity

to spend much more time with her. The evidence seems to show that, accordingly, the child will relate to others in a more diffuse or a more focussed way. (Whether the total capacity for love will be different is another matter, and one fraught with conceptual and normative difficulties.)

There is embedded in the original declaration (“and I want to be the most important person in your life, too”) a desire for total reciprocity. I have suggested that, as a claim, this is presumptuous, which means that it is not legitimate. The argument for this was that love (and we have assumed the declaration to be one of love) does not properly set conditions. Now this is true, but it does not mean that love does not *have* conditions. Assuming love is a certain pattern equally of feeling and action, it needs for its realisation the presence of its object, i.e. in order to perform the actions of love. Even in the case of separation, love may express itself in the efforts made to overcome that absence, i.e. to create presence. As a feeling (and as a readiness to act accordingly) love may long persist, but it is of course then a frustrated, an unhappy love. So the proper statement of the situation is that love does not set conditions in the sense of adopting a bargaining position — of, say, threatening withdrawal if the other fails to respond in kind. Such withdrawal would be unthinkable, i.e. conceptually inappropriate, always assuming the attitude involved is indeed one of love (though it would be conceptually appropriate in the case of commitment, which in some — especially Christian — quarters is often confused with love.) (The situation is surely similar to — albeit much more serious than — that involved in liking; to stop liking someone just because they fail to like you back is not only

childish, but inappropriate.) But although love does not set conditions, it does have need of circumstances in which it can flourish;^{iv} (the exact constellation of those circumstances is another matter).

The conclusion these considerations provide is that, although the *claim* or *demand* “I want to be the *most* important person in your life” is indeed presumptuous, the *desire* to be *an* important person in the life of the other remains of course entirely legitimate. The desire for a degree of reciprocity is indeed, since love has acute need of circumstances in which it can flourish, necessary.

What is it exactly that is to be reciprocated? The argument so far has spoken generally of love. It sounds then as if there has to be a degree of reciprocation, but that it is not legitimate to expect or demand that this be in equal measure, i.e. that the extent or intensity of the love be equal in both directions. Now there are circumstances in which it makes reasonable sense to speak in such terms, where a rough comparative measure of the intensity of love is possible. But talk of love and of its role in relationships usually requires more subtle concepts. When we ask precisely what is reciprocated, we become aware of the asymmetry in relationships. (It is pertinent that the word relationship conjures up most readily the image of a close companionship between members of the opposite sex. Quite apart from the aspect of sexual attraction and intimacies, this image is of a relationship between importantly different persons, such that close symmetry is difficult or impossible.)

To get a hold on the dynamics of love and relationships, we have other concepts, those of compatibility and

complementarity.

Compatibility may exist in the somewhat negative sense that serious conflict does not arise. We usually go a step further, especially when reflecting on a close relationship, and ask for complementarity, which implies that the one person supplies what the other lacks.^v

The notion of complementarity, i.e. the ideal balance of give and take, is open to two interpretations. It may be that at one moment one thing is given, from Anne to Bert, and at the next another thing is given, this time from Bert to Anne. Another, more subtle scenario is that what from Anne's point of view is being given to her is from Bert's point of view being given to him. Anne wants to tell a story, and Bert wants to listen (to a story). (It may also occur that Bert wants to be told a story by Anne, and that Anne wants to tell a story to Bert, which is different and much more complex. The *depth*, the resonance, the aura of meaningfulness, that exchange can take on surely has to do with the recursive possibilities of such situations.)

Complementarity rarely comes of its own and even in propitious circumstances has to be worked at. There is here the idea of attending to a relationship, tending the relationship, seeing that the relationship as such thrives.

This conception seems to involve an essential shift away from concentration on the person loved; the specialness of the other may now appear to be a matter of secondary importance, and the pursuit of the *relationship* — or of a relationship — moves to centre-stage. It is possibly the relationship itself that is appreciated, rather than the person who is related to. A moment's reflection on the social and hence psychological importance of

“relationships” in determining the sense of social worth and social identity, i.e. of relationships which typically take the “most important person” form, shows how easily a preoccupation with the relationship itself may degenerate. A way out of the difficulty is to insist that tending to the relationship necessarily involves attending to the person (as a person, and in their specialness), or to say that both are equally important. These reflections are not as abstruse as they may seem. If you attend to a relationship alone, you may fall into scheming, and become preoccupied with, for example, how the other perceives you (as the other pole in the relationship) rather than, say, communicating how *you* really are or feel towards the other. Quickly, cosmetics come to the fore. You come to “manage” the relationship, even manage it well, rather than live it.

A focus is needed, which is neither just the benevolence of the person loving, nor the relationship within which that person stands, although both of these must be implicated, since without them it is not clear who is doing the loving where. (Love must not be reduced to well-wishing; least of all general well-wishing.)

One such focus would be the happiness of the person loved. Love might then be the will for the happiness of the person loved; such that the person loving wishes not only the happiness of the person they love, but also themselves to be a source of this happiness.

This would mean that there is a presumption at the heart of love. The person who loves assumes and insists that they themselves are capable of so contributing to the other's happiness. This presumption betrays a fundamental faith in oneself, a faith which we will generally want to say is a

good and necessary thing.^{vi}

Note now how the presumption can turn tyrannical when the subject concerned endeavours to be not one source, but the sole source of the happiness of the other.

In place of the promotion of happiness, which is a somewhat grandiose term, perhaps inappropriate for characterising all but the most ambitious relationships of love, we might speak equally of the furtherance of the well-being or the flourishing of the other. Or else simply of the good for them.

The latter formulation provides at once an explanation of the sense in which love may be said to be a force for good and the way in which it may nevertheless come into conflict with morality. The good for one person, who is loved, may well clash with that of another, who is not loved. Moreover, there may be error as to what is good for another, or else an error in the perceived complementarity. You could genuinely be mistaken in believing that your company will benefit the other; equally she could be mistaken that her company would not be for your good, or yours for her good.

We might discover that the person we are attached to (and feel for, and care for) is different from how we perceived them. What happens to love in such a case, and what should happen to it? Is such a change in perception a justification for giving notice to the relationship? Must the attachment transfer to the new person, or be abandoned? Here there is, surely, a distinct role for an ethical stance, which insists on commitments being honoured up to a point, even if they have been made in error. An attachment or an affection may wane, and may not be forced, but

neither can felt love (or its absence) be the sole guide in such circumstances. There is, at the least, a need for gentleness and well-intentioned support, if only for a time, and perhaps a long time. Love implies commitment, and some of the obligation generated by the commitment remains even when love has vanished.

Prior to love, then, there is a virtue in being critical and attentive in our perceptions of others. Though precisely these strengths, in excess, can be destructive of the generous impulse to love someone, which involves trusting them to be something like we believe and hope them to be. Indeed, we may only be able to come to know someone by first investing our feelings and generating an attachment. Note that this also involves a faith that the other will be responsive, even rising above themselves to meet our expectations. Consideration of what it is to know a person, and of the possibility of being mistaken in one's perceptions of another (quite apart from the possibilities of being rejected or oneself misperceived) reveals the very real precariousness involved in love, at least at the outset.

“At the outset” — relationships, and the love that informs them or else is lacking, have histories, as too do those who enter into relationships. This is not an incidental aspect, but essential. Attachments grow from a sequence of encounters and exchanges. This is why it is sometimes puzzling to an outsider that some couples are so attached to each other when objectively they seem so far apart. Whether what is involved is love exactly, and the extent to which the relationship is mutually beneficial, is a separate matter. Familiarity is not the same as love.

NOTES

- i. There is a parallel situation in epistemology, or rather, in the theory of perception. Our perceptions even of an everyday object are varied and discontinuous.
- ii. Consider here also the double-edged nature of words like concern and caring. Concern is an emotional response, but the word implies that the subject feeling concern is anxious to act on their concern insofar as this is possible. Care straddles the divide between action and feeling even more ambiguously, denoting – according to context and intonation – sometimes action, sometimes feeling, and often both.
- iii. This thought experiment is of course that proposed by Kant to provide a criterion of whether a category of action is compliant with the moral law.
- iv. When an offer of love is rejected, the person loving is popularly consoled – or cajoled – with statements such as “If you really loved her, you would accept her decision and leave her alone.” But whatever independent force an injunction to accept the rejection may have, it is unconnected with love.
- v. There is a philosophical tradition going back to Plato of interpreting love in terms of a lack or deficiency on the part of the person loving. But a more appealing view of love is to see it as expressing an abundance, as a need to give rather than to take. This is interestingly explored in the work of Georges Bataille, who takes his cue from Nietzsche.
- vi. Such faith is one clear meaning that might be attributed to the otherwise obscure but popular notion of self-love or love of self. In psychological and

theological writing, reference is often made to a “good” self-love, which is contrasted starkly with egoism. One writer who makes a serious attempt to elucidate the distinction is Denis de Rougemont, in his “*Les mythes de l’amour*”. But I remain unconvinced that the notion of self-love can be made genuinely fruitful for normative and philosophical discourse. In the final analysis, it always runs up against the imponderable nature of the self, and so ends by explaining neither love nor self nor anything else.

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The published version contains misprints and omits some stylistically significant paragraph breaks. On review in August 2013, the author made two or three very minor changes.

An unpublished German-language version of this essay is available elsewhere on this or a linked website under the title *Liebe und Gegenseitigkeit*.