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## Love and Its Place in Moral Discourse

*Philip Pettit*

When people develop a relationship as partners in love, one aspect of what happens is that each becomes aware not just of loving, but of being loved, and not just of loving and being loved, but of this being itself a matter registered by both of them. In short, the fact that the partners are in love becomes a matter of shared awareness.

But this awareness of love is not awareness of a natural phenomenon that wears its nature on its face. What it is to be in love is something available only in terms of the discourse of love that the local culture and society provide. The symptoms of love, the expectations that lovers should have of one another, the demands that other people may require lovers to meet: these are all matters that are codified, at least in outline, in the local discourse of love. They are matters of conventional--conventional though not necessarily arbitrary--construction.

The culturally articulated character of the loving relationship means, in a phrase, that being in love is as much an institutional fact as a natural fact. There is an institution of love, as there is an institution of kinship and friendship and mateship.

One feature of the institution of love in our society is that we are allowed to explain and justify our treatment of a certain person, both to ourselves and to one another, by reference to the fact of loving that person. It is quite intelligible under received norms that a lover should favour a beloved, for example, displaying a partiality of attitude; or that a lover should be utterly self-sacrificing towards the beloved. And not only is that intelligible, the norms also ensure that such behaviour on the part of a lover is, at least in most contexts, justifiable: it is behaviour, at the least, which others are not in an effective position to fault. Thus, partiality on the part of lovers is cast as loyalty, self-sacrifice as devotion, and each is presented as a comprehensible and commendable phenomenon.

I want to focus in this essay on two questions which this aspect of the institution of love raises. The first question is whether the dual role of love, as both an explainer and justifier, means that love is cast as a sort of virtuous motiva-

tion, on a par with other virtuous motives that both explain and justify certain behaviour: motives like kindness or fairness, for example. I shall argue that the explanatory-justificatory role of love does not mean this: that love is not virtuous in the way in which kindness and fairness may be. The second question I raise, then, is whether the dual role of love means that love is at least something desirable by our common lights: whether it is a universal value. Here I shall argue for a positive answer. To state the lesson of the paper in a rather flat way, love is not a virtue; but it is a value.

### 1. Is Love a Virtue?

There is no difficulty about how we can invoke something's being a fair way of behaving both to explain and to justify a person's doing it. The fact that an option is fair will serve to justify the choice of it, to the extent that fairness is a value. And the fact that someone believes that the option is fair will serve to explain the choice, to the extent that we think the person is fair and we expect fair people to be moved by that sort of belief.

Things are a little more complicated, but not excessively so, in other cases. The fact that an option is kind will justify its choice, since kindness is a value by our shared lights. So far the case is like that of fairness. But it will not be the fact that someone believes that the option is kind which explains the choice in the case of someone we take to be kind. For we expect kind people to be moved, at least in most cases, not by the belief that this or that option is kind --that is too reflexive for comfort--but rather by the belief it has those features that happen--and the agent need not be aware of this--to ensure that it is kind. We justify the choice by the fact that it is kind. We explain it by the fact that we think the agent is kind and that we expect kind agents to be moved, not necessarily or typically by the belief that an option is kind, but by the belief that it has such features as serve in the context--so it happens--to make it a kind choice.

A comment, in passing. The more complicated story that is exemplified by kindness may also be the more general one. In fact, it may be that this story is the appropriate one for many cases of people's being moved by fairness. An agent could be moved by fairness, and could act in a way that was justified by its fairness, without actually having a word for fairness. And in such a case it would have to be the more complicated story that applied.

In both the simple and the complicated cases, we find a straightforward structure. That a certain value is realised by an option justifies the choice. And that the agent has a certain corresponding belief explains the choice: the agent believes that the value is realised in the option chosen, or believes of certain properties which happen to realise the value that they--however the agent sees them--are realised in that option. No doubt further qualifications may be

needed but this account of the structure displayed by kindness and fairness seems to be on the right track. We can think of it as a structure associated with virtue.

The dual role of love as an explainer-justifier would be immediately intelligible if love displayed the same structure as we find in the case of fairness and kindness. If it did display that structure, then we might well think of love as a virtue on a par with fairness and kindness. Love is sufficiently like kindness and fairness in other respects to be regarded as a virtue of the same kind, so far as it displays the same explaining-justifying structure.

But love does not display the same structure. The fact that I love someone may serve to justify my treating her in a certain, say, partial or self-sacrificing way. But it is doubtful whether I could claim to be properly a lover, if it was my recognition of the fact of loving her—or my recognition of a realiser of that fact—which explained my action: if all that needed to be said in explaining how I behaved was that I saw I loved her or saw I bore a relation to her which, as it happens, means that I loved her.

This may seem too quick. Perhaps I am moved in love, as I am moved in kindness, by a recognition that the acts I choose have features, whether or not I see them in this way, that make them loving acts. Perhaps love and kindness show their similarity at the level of acts: kindness involves a sensitivity to features that make acts kind, love a sensitivity to features that make acts loving.

But a little reflection reveals a fatal weakness in this suggestion. Someone may be sensitive to features that make acts loving in relation to someone, not because of being truly in love, but rather because of being committed to behaving in a loving way: not because of a lover's commitment, as we might put it, but rather because of a commitment to love. It cannot be sufficient for love, therefore, that a person displays the sensitivity in question. Love must explain the actions of a lover in a different manner.

The characteristic explanation of a lover's behaviour towards a beloved is not the recognition of the fact of loving her, nor the recognition of the presence of any related features, but rather the fact of loving itself. Thus my loving someone will be naturally invoked to explain my keeping note of her birthday, my giving readily of my time to help her, and perhaps my sharing all that I have with her. The idea is that loving the person makes those responses easy and even compelling: that it leads me to identify with her, as we say, and to make her good my good, her bad my bad.

Suppose that my behaviour was not to be explained in this characteristic way but rather in the manner of a virtue like fairness or kindness. Suppose, for example, that I tried to keep note of the person's birthday, that I gave freely of my time to help her, and so on, because of registering in each case that this was someone I loved: because of registering this and not, as we would say, because I loved her. In that case, I might be praised for my moral determination to honour the relationship but I could not be said, without qualification, to be

acting out of love. To act out of love, as we might put it, is to be moved by love and not by the recognition of being in love.

Consider the person who acts out of friendship. As Michael Stocker<sup>1</sup> has made us all aware, the friend who comes to see me in hospital because of seeing herself as a friend, and because of wanting to do the right thing as a friend, is not acting out of friendship. She is behaving as a good moral agent, doing the right thing because it is the right thing. But she is not doing enough--in a way, she is doing too much--to count as someone who is manifesting friendship.

When I do the loving thing by someone, but only because of my recognition that this is someone I love, then it can equally be said that I am not manifesting love. I am going through the motions of love, for sure, but not out of the motives that would mark me off as a lover. I am displaying a commitment to love rather than a lover's commitment.

While the commitment to love does have the same structure as that displayed by virtues like kindness and fairness, the lover's commitment does not. Someone committed to love will take account of the fact of being a would-be lover--or of some related fact--and this will explain what they do in the way in which the fair person's taking account of the fairness of an option will explain what the fair person does; the justifier of the choice--that the agent loves the person benefited--will figure in the same manner in its explanation. A lover in the proper sense will have no need for such reflective thoughts in order to be motivated to pursue the beloved's good. And this, despite the fact that the lover's behaviour may be justified by the fact that they love the person favoured.

In holding that the lover's commitment is distinct from the commitment to love, I do not mean to dismiss the latter as unimportant. Aristotelian continence is a substitute for virtue in the sense that it involves behaving as the virtuous agent would behave, but out of something other than the normal mental set of the virtuous person.<sup>2</sup> Continence is something less than virtue, in this sense, but something that can serve as an important standby for virtue: something that can take the place of virtue, for example, on the bad day that comes to most of us. As continence stands to virtue, so a commitment to love stands to a lover's commitment. It is something less than a lover's commitment but it is an attitude that may stand a lover in good stead, if his or her love ever fails, as fail it is sometimes bound to do.

We need to discuss one further issue before moving on to the second question I raised. I said that the characteristic or canonical way in which love figures in the explanation of loving behaviour need not involve the agent in delibera-

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1. Stocker, Michael, 'The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories', *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 73 (1976), pp. 453-66.

2. Cf. Pettit, Philip and Michael Smith, 'Practical Unreason', *Mind*, Vol 102, pp. 53-80.

tively reflecting, however implicitly, on facts like the fact of loving the person in question. But what sort of reason do we imagine having an influence on the lover's mind? After all, it is not as if loving someone produces behaviour in a blind, reason-free gush of passion or in an unthinking exercise of habit.

Reasons vary in a number of dimensions. They may be agent-neutral, in the sense that the content of the reason--say, 'this will increase human happiness', 'this will benefit Australia'--is intelligible without knowing who is the agent for whom it is a reason. Or they may be agent-relative, in the sense that there is no understanding what exactly is the moving consideration, there is no understanding what it involves, without knowing who is the agent in question. Examples of agent-relative reasons would be: 'this will increase my happiness', 'this will increase my family's happiness', 'this will benefit my country'.<sup>3</sup>

If a reason is agent-neutral, then it may be purely universal, in the sense that it does not mention any person, place or other individual. Or, mentioning such a person or place or whatever, it may be particular in nature. 'This will increase human happiness' is universal or, if the reference to the human species particularises it, 'This will increase happiness' is certainly universal. 'This will benefit Australia' or 'This will benefit the least densely populated of the advanced countries', on the other hand, is a purely particular reason.

The reference to Australia as the least densely populated of the advanced countries is non-rigid, in the sense that as we envisage changed scenarios the expression may refer to different countries. The reference to Australia by name is rigid, on the other hand, in the sense that the expression locks onto that very country, no matter what possibilities are countenanced. Either way of referring to a particular entity will make an agent-neutral reason particular rather than universal. But the rigid way of referring to Australia means that the reason essentially involves that country, whereas the non-rigid way of referring to it does not. The one sort of particular reason is rigidly particularised or individualised, as we may put it--rigidly individualised in favour of Australia--the other is not.

If a reason is agent-relative, then of necessity it is a particular rather than a universal reason: it will explicitly or implicitly refer back to the agent; indeed it will refer rigidly to that agent, since the reference will be via an indexical like 'I' or 'me' or 'my' or whatever. But agent-relative reasons often refer also to other entities or persons; they will do so, for example, when they are reasons of patriotism or loyalty or friendship or love. And so there is a distinction to be

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3. On these matters, see: Parfit, Derek, 'Prudence, Morality and the Prisoner's Dilemma', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol 65 (1979); Nagel, Thomas, 'The Limits of Objectivity', in *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Vol 1 (1980), ed. S. M. McMurrin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 75-139; Sen, Amartya, 'Rights and Agency', in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol 11 (1982), pp. 3-39.

drawn among such agent-relative reasons that parallels the distinction between non-rigidly particularised and rigidly particularised agent-neutral reasons: a distinction that parallels the distinction between the sort of agent-neutral reason that refers to the least densely populated of the developed countries and the sort that refers to Australia.<sup>4</sup>

'There is a friend of mine in need' is of the first, non-rigidly particularised kind. The identity of the person it would lead the agent to benefit is not essentially involved in the consideration, since the consideration may apply in this scenario to one individual, in that scenario to another. 'This, my friend, is in need' is of the second, rigidly individualised variety. There is no way of knowing exactly what the content of the consideration is--no way of understanding it fully--without grasping who the particular friend is. The reference to that friend is rigid in virtue of involving the demonstrative 'This' and the reason is rigidly particularised in favour of that person.

The considerations that move a loving person when they act out of love towards someone may be agent-neutral or agent-relative: the lover may be moved by a thought that refers to the beloved by name, for example, so that the consideration is agent-neutral; or the thought which moves the lover may identify the beloved by reference back to the lover, as in 'my beloved' or whatever. But it seems clear that in either case the consideration must be rigidly individualised in favour of the beloved. Moreover, this individualisation of the reason, be the reason agent-neutral or agent-relative, must be relevant to the reason's capturing the attention, and stoking the motivation, of the agent. The reason that moves the lover must essentially involve the identity of the beloved in the very thought that motivates the lover's response.

Why so? Well, consider the situation where the identity of the beloved is not involved essentially in the thought which moves the agent. Consider the situation where the lover or would-be lover favours the beloved on the neutral ground that this will testify to the value of love, or on the neutral ground that this will help the most attractive person in the area, or on the agent-relative ground that it will help someone that they happen to love. In each of these cases, the favour that the beloved enjoys is enjoyed as the result of an accident. The beloved is not favoured for their own sake, as we might put it, but only because of happening to be the one in a position to gain from the lover's project of testifying to the value of love, or of helping the most attractive person around, or of helping anyone they happen to love: only because of happening to fall under the trajectory marked out by the lover's beneficent but more or less impersonal schemes.

I conclude, then, that when love is manifested in the canonical way, when

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4. Pettit, Philip, 'The Paradox of Loyalty', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol 25 (1988), pp. 163-71.

an agent displays a commitment to a beloved by acting out of love, then the reason that moves the agent has to be rigidly individualised in favour of the beloved. It has to be a reason in which the beloved figures as an essential component, whether by courtesy of a name or demonstrative or whatever. And it has to be a reason that moves the lover, at least in part, by virtue of involving the beloved in that way.<sup>5</sup>

The need for a rigidly individualised reason connects with the fact that to act out of a commitment to love--to act out of a recognition of the consideration that justifies the action: that this is someone I love--is not to act out of a lover's commitment: a commitment to the beloved. For justification always abstracts away from particularity and when I say that I love someone in justifying what I did, the identity of the particular individual in question is not relevant; all that is essential to the justification is that it is an act of love. To act out of a recognition of that justifying consideration, then, would not be to act on the basis of a reason that is rigidly individualised in favour of the beloved. It would be to fail to register the sort of thing that is part and parcel of thinking as a lover.

## 2. Is Love a Value?

In the last section we focussed on the explanatory role of love, and in particular on the fact that it figures in explanation in a manner that does not pair off nicely with how it figures in justification. In acting as a lover, the fact that I love someone may justify what I do; but it is not my recognition of that fact which explains, but rather my recognition of a rigidly individualised fact: my recognition that Mary needs help, that Mary would like those flowers, or whatever.

We change the focus now to the justifying role of love. The fact that I can justify my behaviour, other things being equal, by claiming to have acted out of love seems to say something important about love. But what exactly does it say? In particular, does it mean that we should all recognise love as a value--a universal value--and that I justify my behaviour by showing that it instantiates or promotes that value: by showing that it relates to that value in a suitably respectful way, as the deontologist will have it; or in a suitably maximising

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5. The point here is different, it should be noticed, from the point made by John Perry in 'The Problem of the Essential Indexical' [*Nous*, Vol 13 (1979), pp. 3-21]. He shows that there has to be an indexical, and therefore particular, element somewhere in the beliefs that lead any agent to act. I argue that there must be a particular element in the motivating belief, as we might call it, of the loving agent--that is, roughly, in the belief which identifies the agent's goal or ground in acting--and not just in beliefs bearing on a means or opportunity for realising that goal or satisfying that ground.



fashion, as the consequentialist will require?<sup>6</sup> Or can the justifying role of love be made intelligible in some other, less straightforward way?

I favour the straightforward way of making the justifying role of love intelligible. I think of love as a value that we should all recognise, though I say nothing here on whether the appropriate claim of the value is to be understood in the deontological or consequentialist manner: that issue is orthogonal to my concerns.

But there is an alternative view of how love comes to play a justifying role and I need to consider this and provide an argument against it.<sup>7</sup> The alternative view is that love is not a universal value, not something that we all have reason to favour, but rather that it offers a universal schema for framing the particular value that this lover places on this beloved, that lover places on that beloved, and so on. None of us has to value love, just because we invoke it to justify certain behaviour. Each of us values or cherishes those whom we love--you cherish Fred, I cherish Mary--but that does not mean that there is something we should value in common.

How then does the appeal to love justify? How do I justify to you the way I behave towards Mary by pointing out that I love her, when it is not given that you have to value love and not given, of course, that you have to value Mary? The answer, on this approach, is that I justify my behaviour to you, not by showing that it stems from anything that we should value in common, but rather by showing that it stems from a valuing that is of a kind with a valuing that you would approve in your own case: it stems from a valuing of Mary that is of a kind, say, with your valuing of Fred.

This approach builds on an important insight. The insight is that I may justify what I do by your lights, not just through showing that it is grounded in a value that you also should countenance, but through showing that it is grounded in a value that is isomorphic to a value that you do or would approve in your own case. You cannot complain if you are shown that my action is grounded in a value that you ought to recognise. But equally you cannot complain if you are shown that my action is grounded in a value that stands to me as something that you recognise as a value--an actual or potential value--stands to you. As the approach has it, you cannot complain if you are shown that my act of favouring Mary is grounded in the value that I qua lover invest in Mary, when you yourself qua lover invest a similar value in Fred: or, if there is no Fred about, when you would approve in your own case of being a lover and of investing other people with such value.

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6. Pettit, Philip, 'Consequentialism', in Peter Singer, ed., *A Companion to Ethics*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 230-40.

7. I am greatly indebted to conversations with Frank Jackson and Michael Smith on related matters.

The difference between the standard account of the justificatory appeal to love and this alternative account comes out in different ways in which the lover may respond to the demand that they universalise the justifying consideration offered in a remark such as 'This is someone I love'. I mentioned earlier that justification always abstracts away from particularity and it is interesting to see the different ways in which the two approaches achieve such abstraction: the different ways in which they try to show that the justifier in a remark like 'This is someone I love' is implicitly universal and does not hold just for the agent in question.

If you follow the standard line, then you will say that the justifier is universalisable, because you recognise that for any X and any Y, if they are lovers, then it is a good and valuable thing that one should favour the other: it is valuable that X should favour Y, and Y favour X. If you cleave to the alternative approach, you will say that the justifier is universalisable, because you recognise that for any X and any Y, if they are lovers, then the good of each is a value for the other: It is valuable so far as X is concerned that Y should enjoy favour, valuable so far as Y is concerned that X should enjoy favour; for short it is X-valuable that Y be favoured, Y-valuable that X be favoured.

The standard approach, as I have been describing it, sees a commitment to the universal value of love as implicit in the way lovers invoke their love to justify their actions. The alternative approach sees a commitment to a universal schema that is displayed by particular lovings, not to any universal value, in this practice of justification. So how does the standard approach fare in competition with the alternative? Is love itself a value or does it represent just a schema for valuing?

What may certainly be granted to those attracted by the alternative approach is that it could have been the case that love had the role of a valuing schema, not a common value. There is a possible world, as we might put it, where this is so. In that world, each person finds that they become attached to one or more others in a fashion that they cannot justify by reference to any commonly compelling value: any value in becoming so attached. Called upon to justify this attachment, and the way in which it leads them to behave, they are each at first, as we might imagine, in a situation of some embarrassment. They each recognise that there is nothing about the people to whom they are attached that merits the favour they give them, by any common lights; it is just a brute fact about them, as it were, that the attachment has occurred. But the embarrassment lifts as each recognises that they are not unusual in becoming attached in this way to particular others; it transpires that this sort of attachment occurs all over the place. Each now recognises that without justifying their favour on any common basis, they can at least justify it on the basis of its conforming to a common pattern.

There is no pretence on anyone's part in this world that other lovers share a common commitment with them. Imagine a situation where X can favour X's beloved only at a cost to how Y favours Y's, and vice versa. There is no

suggestion that, love's justifications notwithstanding, this is anything less than outright war. It is a situation where, for all the justifications that love supplies, each is justified in doing all they can to undermine the other's efforts and further their particular end: the benefiting of those that they own as theirs, the favouring of those with whom they happen to have formed a liaison. The pairs which consist of mutual lovers are like self-help gangs of two. Their members work to one another's special benefit but need not share any value in common with the members of other such gangs. If they manage to provide cross-gang justifications of how they each favour the other in their gang, the justification has an *ad hominem* aspect: each is justified by the lights of every other because no other is in a position to throw stones; no other is entirely uncontaminated by gang-membership.

The actual world, as projected in the discourse of love, may give love the role only of a schema for valuing; it may resemble the possible world just discussed. But I doubt it. It is part of the discourse of love that being in love, and living up to the expectations of love, is a good thing. In the possible world imagined, people are stuck within their own perspectives, so far as their actual valuing goes. They value their own favourites, but do not value the love that binds them, as it binds others, to those they favour. In the actual world, people transcend those perspectives and recognise that love is something of value, regardless of who the lover and the beloved are.

That this is so comes out in the fact, precisely, that we distinguish in the actual world between the situation where someone is a favourite--a favourite in the sense in which a teacher's pet is a favourite--and the situation where someone is acknowledged as a beloved. Teachers might justify among themselves the special treatment they give their favourites by pointing out that the pattern of having favourites is a common one and that no other teacher can throw stones. But this sort of justification is quite different from that which lovers offer when they present their treatment of another as a manifestation of the love which they bear them. The teachers certainly silence complaints about their behaviour; they excuse it, as we might say, but do not justify it. The lovers invite a positive celebration of what they feel and do.

Love is a value, if this is right, not just a schema for valuing. Love justifies, because love is and ought to be a common object of value, not because loving is a common way of valuing. The considerations I have raised may not definitively close the issue between the two sides of the debate. But they do seem to favour the standard side quite strongly.

One last query. Might love serve to justify in both of these ways at once? Might it represent both a common value and a common schema for valuing? I do not think so. There is quite a tension between the justification advanced when someone claims to be acting on the basis of a value that others ought to share and the justification put forward when they claim to be acting out of a mode of valuing that others are not in a position to fault: the justification that

looks more like an excuse than a justification proper. It is hard to imagine that people might be proposing such mutually uncongenial forms of justification at one and the same time, and in one and the same utterance. The mind-sets of the justifications are just too different. The discourse of love is complex but I doubt if the complexity runs to such an extreme.<sup>8</sup>

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This paper does not cover all of the ground in my paper, 'The Paradox of Loyalty' [*American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol 25 (1988), pp. 163-71] but, where it does, it supercedes the earlier piece; it does this mainly through introducing further, important distinctions that I had neglected before.

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8. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Roger Lamb for his painstaking and penetrating comments on an earlier draft.