

Irrational Love: Taking Romeo and Juliet Seriously

Abstract:

This paper argues that there are important irrational elements to love. In the philosophical literature, we typically find that love is either thought of as *rational* or *arational* and that any irrational elements are thought to be defective, or extraneous to love itself. We argue, on the contrary, that irrationality is in part connected to what we find valuable about love.

We focus on 3 basic elements of love:

- 1) Whom you love
- 2) How much you love them
- 3) How much of a role love plays in your life

And in each case, we argue that love can be irrational and valuable.

Irrational Love: Taking Romeo and Juliet Seriously

Romeo and Juliet barely know each other, fall head over heels in love, and then die for this.¹ We think there are irrational elements to their love, and to love in general.² In itself, this might not sound particularly controversial – after all, who thinks Romeo and Juliet are exemplars of rational agency! But our distinctive claim in this paper is that some of the irrational elements of love are important, and deserve to be taken seriously, as they add to the value of love.

This paper takes the following structure. We begin with an outline of some of the literature on the philosophy of love (§1). Typically, we find that love is either thought of as rational or arational. We propose that both rationalist and arationalist accounts of love overlook something, namely the irrational elements of love.

Here, we turn to lay out some of the aspects of love that appear to be irrational (§2), arguing that there are irrational elements to whom you love, how much you love them, and how important love is in your life. After this, we consider some objections to our characterization of love as partly irrational (§3). We consider: the thought that irrational love is foolish and merely defective love; whether irrational love can be plausibly re-described in terms of rational or arational love; and finally, whether endorsing irrational love makes it rational. We argue that these objections can, at least in part, be overcome, and conclude not only that there are irrational elements to love, but that some of these add to the distinctive value of love.

Our claim is not that love is completely irrational, but rather that accounts of love should acknowledge its capacity to lead us to behave irrationally, and that love can be caused by irrational beliefs and attitudes. The irrational elements of love have been overlooked and undervalued by philosophers of love, perhaps because they are thought to be defective elements of love, or even extraneous to love itself. We argue on the contrary, that irrationality is connected, in part, to what we find valuable about love and that if we really want to value love, we ought to value some of its irrational elements.³

¹ We would like to thank audiences at the University of Leeds and Munich for helpful discussion of this paper. We also would like to thank Bob Stern and several anonymous referees, including one at IJPS for helpful comments on the paper.

² In this paper, we use the term ‘love’ to refer to romantic love. We suspect that some of what we say also applies to other kinds of love, such as familial or friendship love, but we leave this aside here.

³ As Annette Baier puts it: “[...] in love, it may be impossible to separate the good from the ill.” (Baier 1991, 448)

In this, we side with Troy Jollimore when he suggests that:

What is needed [...] is an account that makes love rational in just the right ways while allowing it to be arational, perhaps even to some degree irrational, where *that* is appropriate (Jollimore 2011, 18).

The contributions of this paper are thus two-fold. We offer an account of three ways in which love is irrational and also defend the claim that some of the irrational elements to love are important.

1. Rational/ Arational / Irrational Love

What does it mean to think of love as rational, arational, or irrational? Ronald de Sousa argues that there are, broadly speaking, two different types of rationality of emotions. First, emotions can be *cognitively* rational, which depends on how well the emotions fit their objects. Second, emotions can be *strategically* rational, depending on how well they promote the agent's interests (De Sousa 1987; 2011; De Sousa and Scarantino 2018). There is some debate over whether love can be properly considered an emotion (Green 1997; Pismenny and Prinz 2017). We will sidestep this debate here. Leaving aside whether or not love is an emotion,⁴ we want to argue, along with de Sousa, that love can be both *cognitively* and *strategically* irrational.⁵

Love as cognitively rational

One simple way of breaking this down is as follows: for something to be rational is for it to be fitting; for something to be irrational is for it to be unfitting; and for something to be arational is for something to be neither fitting nor unfitting. There are two different ways love can be fitting or unfitting. First, the love might be a fitting or unfitting response to the person themselves, their qualities,⁶ or to one's relationship with them. Second, the love might be a fitting or unfitting response to the *beliefs* one has about the beloved or one's relationship with them. These beliefs might then be fitting or unfitting. For example, if Juliet loves Romeo because Romeo is kind, funny and intelligent, and Romeo *actually is* kind, funny and intelligent, then her love is a fitting response to Romeo himself. If Juliet loves Romeo because she believes him to be kind, funny and intelligent, but he is actually

⁴ For what it is worth, we are inclined to agree with Smuts, that love is "something akin to a disposition to a range of emotions" (Smuts 2014, 511)

⁵ For something to be strategically *arational* would mean that it neither contributes nor detracts from your interests, but it is hard to see how this could be the case with love.

⁶ There is a question of whether any particular qualities warrant love as a fitting response. One might think that being kind warrants gratitude, and being funny warrants amusement, rather than these things warranting the general response of love. See Keller (2000), for an account of the kinds of qualities that we should be loved for.

mean, boring, and stupid, her love is fitting to *her beliefs, but not to Romeo*. Finally, if Juliet believes Romeo to be mean, boring and stupid, but loves him anyway, then her beliefs are fitting, but her love is unfitting. If it were the case that love did not track Juliet's beliefs about Romeo or her relationship with him at all, such that it could not be construed as fitting or unfitting, then love would be arational.

Love as strategically rational

Another way in which the terms 'rational' and 'irrational' are used is to refer to the promotion of one's own interest.⁷ So conceived, love is rational if it promotes your own interest, and irrational if it harms your own interest. On this account, Juliet's love for Romeo is irrational. For even though he is kind, funny and intelligent, he is a Montague, and so loving him will lead to her downfall. And for love to be strategically arational, it would have to neither promote nor harm one's own interests.⁸

In what follows, we will lay out two positions that we find prevalent in the literature, beginning with the thought that love is rational, followed by the thought that it is arational. We are not going to interrogate these two views in great detail here. Our aim is to sketch the basic contours of the literature.

Rational Love

What does it mean to call love rational? Smuts discerns five standards which can be used to determine whether an emotion is rational: "1) reasonableness, (2) aptness, (3) proportionality, (4) self-interest, and (5) intelligibility." (Smuts 2014, 512). To briefly elaborate: 1) we might ask whether, given the evidence at hand, the emotion is reasonable. For example, suppose a person feels fear of a spider in the room. We could ask whether they have enough evidence that a spider is really in the room (they might, for instance, just suppose that one is because they are in an old house). 2) We could question whether the emotion is appropriate to the situation; fear of (non-harmful) spiders might seem generally to be inappropriate as they can't harm humans. 3) We can ask whether the emotion proportional to its object. Even if we granted that some fear of (non-harmful) spiders was appropriate, due to their strange looking bodies and the fact that other spiders can harm humans, a person screaming with fear at the sight of a tiny spider might still seem disproportionate. 4) We can ask if an emotion is in someone's self-interest to have. If someone is very afraid of spiders, it might be irrational for them to

⁷ Of course, even on this narrow strategic conception of rationality, one's own interest can include the interests of others. Juliet's father, for instance, seems to really care not just about himself, but also about what happens to Juliet.

⁸ One might wonder whether it makes sense to think of love as strategically arational, since even if love neither promotes nor harms your own interest, it could still be rational or irrational to embrace the love, depending on what else was at stake.

not accept help to deal with this fear, for example, since their fear impinges on their quality of life. 5) We might question whether we can understand someone's emotion. For example, I might have no fear of spiders, yet my friend's fear of spiders is intelligible to me, because they once got bitten by a poisonous spider and almost died.

Love can be rational/ irrational on each of these dimensions. Perhaps the most important in terms of *justifying* love is (2) whether the love is an appropriate response to the object of love (Smuts 2014, 512). For love to be appropriate, it must be fitting to the object. But what does *that* mean? One prominent thought, as described above, is that love is a fitting response to the qualities (or properties) of someone. You see that someone is kind and funny, for instance, and love is a fitting response. So conceived, love is a fitting response to the qualities of the beloved, and as such, is rational.

The rationalist account of love can be traced back to Plato. In the *Symposium*, Socrates recounts Diotima's speech, where love is roughly conceived as love of beauty or love of the good. On this account, there is a hierarchy of love based on the beauty or goodness of the object in question (Plato 2008, l. 211 c-d). Therefore, love can be justified or unjustified depending on how beautiful or good the beloved is.

Simon Keller provides a more recent rationalist account of love. He argues that the kinds of properties that are especially significant are those that make the beloved a good romantic partner to the lover. Rather than there being a single property, such as 'the good' towards which all love aims, the properties of a person which make it rational to love her will depend on the lover. Furthermore, some of these properties will be relational, such as "knowing how to treat the lover when she is in a bad mood" (Keller 2000, 166).

Another way to conceive of such accounts is to think about love in terms of *appraisal* (Singer 2009). The lover appraises the beloved and love is a rational response to a positive appraisal. In Plato's account, the lover loves the beloved because her appraisal of him has shown him to be an instance of 'the good'. In Keller's account, the lover's appraisal of the beloved deems her to be an ideal romantic partner for him; thus, he loves her.

Unfortunately, there are some drawbacks to these views.⁹ For one, they have difficulty explaining the tenacity of romantic love – as it often persists despite changes in the properties of the beloved. In addition, as Niko Kolodny observes, there is a problem of how to explain different ‘modes’ of love. As he puts it: “Heather’s mother and Heather’s teenage friend may both love her, but they love her, or at least they ought to love her, in different ways. [...] How is the quality theorist to explain this?” (Zangwill 2013, 139).

Quality views also suffer from what is known as the trading up objection (Nozick 1995; Zangwill 2013, 303–4). If I love Adam because he’s kind and funny, then what happens when James comes along, who is kinder and funnier? So long Adam!¹⁰

One other way in which love is often thought to be rational focuses less on the qualities of the individuals involved, and instead on the loving relationship.¹¹ So conceived, love can be rational, insofar as it is a fitting response to a relationship with someone. Kolodny, for instance, views love *as valuing a relationship* (Kolodny 2003). This view avoids some of the problems associated with the view that we love people for their properties, such as the trading up objection: I don’t trade Adam for James, because I value my relationship with Adam more than my relationship with James. But this view comes with problems of its own. For one, it seems that one can value a relationship with someone without loving them; and one can also love someone whilst not valuing a relationship with them (Protasi 2016).

Accounts of love as rational do seem to capture some of our intuitions about love. We often look for certain qualities in potential partners, and value relationships with them. These accounts also make love non-arbitrary, in that we love people for reasons. And while this might sound robotic, it need not – all it means is that love is a fitting response to certain qualities and/or relationships, and

⁹ For an excellent statement of the problems with such views, see Jollimore (2011, 13-18). Another objection, which we don’t discuss here, concerns the worry that if we love someone for their properties, we are not focusing on the proper object of love. For we are loving properties, and not the individual. For further discussion of this problem, see Vlastos (1981), Clausen (2019), and Saunders and Stern (draft).

¹⁰ In response to these sorts of worries, Abramson and Leite (2011, 687), Brogaard (2020, §4) and Jollimore (2011, 137-8) all argue that there is an important distinction between there being *reasons* to love someone and being *obligated* to love that person. With this distinction in mind, they can resist the claim that we *should* love James instead of Adam, but still seem stuck with the thought that it would be more *fitting* for us to love James rather than Adam.

¹¹ Another type of rationalist account, which we do not discuss here is Velleman’s (1999). On his account of love, love is vaguely Kantian, in that it is a fitting response to other rational agents, and in particular, their capacity for love (Velleman 1999).

this fits with at least some of our experience of love.¹² It also helps explain why being loved can boost our self-esteem. As Derek Edyvane observes:

[...] a large part of what we value about being the object of another's love is that we take it to imply an informed and positive (or at least not negative), objective evaluation of our character, we think of love as being more than the arbitrary expression of a subjective whim. We want to know that there exist reasons that can render this person's love for us intelligible to others. (Edyvane 2003, 72).¹³

However, in claiming that love is governed by rational norms, these accounts struggle to account for the aspects of love which, quite frankly are not.

Arational Love

Some people think of love as *arational*. And again, one might ask what this means. The basic thought is that love is best thought of as neither fitting nor unfitting.

Harry Frankfurt has a view of this sort.¹⁴ He argues against the thought that love is a response to qualities of the beloved. He claims that the beloved is valuable *because* they are loved, rather than – as some rationalist accounts would have it – they are loved *because* they are valuable. The value of the beloved to the lover “derives from and depends upon his love.” Rather than love being based on a positive *appraisal* of the beloved's value; value is *bestowed* onto the beloved by the lover (Frankfurt 2004, 39).

Frankfurt accepts that love might be stirred by the beloved's qualities, and concedes that love is sometimes a “response grounded in awareness of the inherent value of its object” (Frankfurt 2004,

¹² It is worth noting that there are also hybrid rational views, such as Abramson and Leite's (2011) position, where love is a fitting response to someone's qualities, which are evident in a loving relationship. Neil Delaney (1996) also takes a hybrid approach. He argues that only properties which are central to a person's self-conception are fitting reasons to love them, but that qualities are not sufficient grounds of love: the lover must also want to form a romantic attachment or ‘we’ with her beloved and be committed to them (Delaney 1996) The hybrid approach allows us to capture the intuition that *both* the properties of the beloved, and the relationship we share, can be reasons for love. However, it's not clear that either proposal avoids the above problems. For example, Sarah might very much appreciate Adam *and* want to form a romantic attachment to him, and be committed to that relationship, but she still might not *love* him.

¹³ Christopher Bennett also makes a similar point, that being chosen over everyone else “affirms and recognises your sense that the things that make you a particular individual are valuable because someone has chosen you *for* those things”, (2003, 297-98).

¹⁴ Though he does not take romantic love, containing ‘a number of vividly distracting elements’ to be paradigmatic of love as his account of love is of love in general, we should be able to apply it to cases of genuine romantic love. Frankfurt (2004, 43).

38) However, he claims that those qualities do not *justify* the love felt by the lover; to think that they do is to confuse the *causes* of love with the *reasons* for love.¹⁵ Why do I love Jane? Because of her eyes. But this is best thought of as a *cause* of my love rather than a *reason* for it.¹⁶

Appraisal, on this account, is not intrinsic to the nature of love. Frankfurt contends that loving is not the rationally determined outcome of even an implicit deliberative or evaluative process (Frankfurt 2006, 41). To be love, it cannot be the result of weighing up one's options and making a decision. Furthermore, love might be aroused without a positive appraisal of the beloved taking place; indeed, the lover might not appraise the beloved at all, or may even appraise her negatively. As Frankfurt notes:

It is entirely possible for a person to be caused to love something without noticing its value, or without being at all impressed by its value, or despite recognizing that there really is nothing especially valuable about it. It is even possible for a person to come to love something despite recognising that its inherent nature is actually and utterly bad (Frankfurt 2004, 38).¹⁷

One immediate advantage to this account is that it appears to circumvent the trading up objection. If we don't love people for their qualities, then we don't have to worry about trading up for more of the qualities we love. In addition, it seems to capture some of the phenomenology of love better than the rational account. Earlier, we noted that the rational account struggled to make sense of why we admire some people rather than loving them. The arational account faces no such difficulty. It just throws up its hands, and says "such is love". Reason cannot persuade us to love or to stop loving. As Ty Landrum argues:

[...] the compulsion to intimacy is not something that one can simply call up or discipline oneself to achieve [...] a normative demand to feel the compulsion of intimacy toward persons for whom one simply does not feel that compulsion is an absurd demand. (Landrum 2009, 420).

The flipside of this is that arational accounts find it harder to justify why we love some people and not others.¹⁸ They might be able to tell a causal story of why we love X rather than Y, but this is not the full picture – we ought to be able to provide some reasons, and not just causal explanations for

¹⁵ Zangwill (2013, 12-15) agrees on this. He argues that we do not love for reasons, but that we often just find ourselves in love.

¹⁶ Cf. McTaggart (1927, 151-2).

¹⁷ Cf. (McTaggart 1927, 150)

¹⁸ See Han (2019) for a recent attempt to overcome this problem. Han argues that there are *no* reasons for love, instead offering a desire-based account of love, which they think helps explain how (non-familial) love is selective (Han 2019).

love. Robert Solomon argues that the qualities of the beloved must have some role in explaining the reasons for love. He asks:

[...] what is “the person,” apart from all of his or her properties? A naked soul? Can one in any erotic (as opposed to agapic) sense love an ontologically naked, property-less soul? Such a soul is difficult to imagine, and probably even harder to love. If the love is not based on any properties of the beloved, then it seems that the lover could love the beloved without knowing anything about them, or indeed whilst knowing false information about them. (Solomon 2002, 7).

Nicholas Dixon further remarks that unless romantic love is based on the qualities of the beloved it is not love at all: “I do not love *you* if my love will continue no matter what you do and no matter how your qualities change, unless we are prepared to identify you with an immaterial Cartesian essence” (Dixon 2007, 383). To be told that one will be loved romantically whatever one becomes, seems, as Troy Jollimore puts it, “as impersonal and alienating as ‘I would love anyone who had your name and social security number’” (Jollimore 2011, 142). Furthermore, if you are not loved for your properties at all, then what is to stop your lover from trading *sideways* for someone with very different properties to you. The arational account, therefore, might resist the trading-up objection, but succumb to a similar problem of its own. (Foster 2008, 243)

Though the arational account seems to capture the experience of familial love quite well (we love our family without needing to appraise them), it does not capture the experience of romantic love very well. There are two aspects of love that it misses. The first is that, although romantic love can sometimes feel arational – we experience ourselves as *falling* in love, for example – we are usually able to offer some justification for why we love one person and not another. The second is that some of the aspects of romantic love which can feel arational, could be better accounted for as *irrational*. In short, if we conceive of love as entirely arational, we understate both how rational and irrational love can be

We do not pretend to have offered a full evaluation of accounts of love as rational or arational here. Our aim has just been to lay out the basics of these accounts, before highlighting some of love’s overlooked valuable irrational elements. John Shand observes that people tend to want contradictory things from love, but ignore the contradiction (Shand 2011, 11). He points out that “we want love to be both a non-rational occurrence beyond reason and something normative such that the indications

of reasons are relevant to determining and assessing it” (Shand 2011, 4). We suggest that we also do and should want love to be a somewhat irrational occurrence, against reason as well as outside of it.

Again, we think Jollimore is spot on when he writes that:

What is needed [...] is an account that makes love rational in just the right ways while allowing it to be arational, perhaps even to some degree irrational, where *that* is appropriate (Jollimore 2011, 18)

However, Jollimore goes on to claim that:

[...] despite its various potentials in certain contexts to encourage illusion and inspire unreasonable behaviour, love is fundamentally a reason-guided phenomenon (Jollimore 2011, 25)

Here, we have to disagree. Jollimore makes the case that:

What we want is an account of love that can capture its various and to some degree conflicting aspects [...] in a way that matches our fundamental pretheoretical intuitions about the nature of love. (Jollimore 2011, 27)

We agree, but think that if we are serious about matching *our fundamental pretheoretical intuitions* about the nature of love, we also have to take the irrational elements of love seriously.

2. Irrational Love

Let us return to Romeo and Juliet. They *barely* know each other, but die for their love. And what do we do, as an audience over centuries? A great many of us hold them up as a beautiful love story; typically, we don’t leave the theatre thinking “what idiots!”, but instead “what a tragedy!” Indeed, people think of Romeo and Juliet as one of the greatest love stories ever told. And that is interesting. Our attitude towards these doomed young lovers deserves further thought.

Our contention is that Romeo and Juliet’s love is, at least in part, irrational. Of course, theirs is quite an extreme and adolescent case of love. But we think it does capture some broader truths about love, that apply not only to such extreme cases. For we suspect that there are various irrational elements to love in general, and that some of these irrational elements contribute to its value.

What does it mean for love to be irrational?

There are various ways that love can be irrational. We broadly categorize these as follows:

1) Cognitive irrationality: Having unfitting beliefs/ attitudes

It is irrational to be afraid of ladybirds, because ladybirds are not fitting objects of fear. It is irrational to believe that a ladybird might harm you because the belief does not fit the threat posed by a ladybird; ladybirds are not going to harm you. Similarly, it is irrational to love a person who has properties which you find unlovable, or which are objectively unlovable (unless they have other properties or a relationship with you which compensates for this). Therefore, if you find aggression abhorrent, it would be irrational for you to love an aggressive person (with no other redeeming reasons). And it would be irrational for you, out of love, to believe that this person was not *really* aggressive, despite them having a long history of aggressive behaviour. It would also be irrational for you to love someone because they are very good at drowning cats just to be cruel, since cruelty is objectively an unlovable quality. Four of Smuts' five standards of emotional rationality come under this heading: (1) reasonableness, (2) aptness, (3) proportionality, and (5) intelligibility (Smuts 2014, 512).

2) Strategic irrationality: Going against one's best interest

The fifth of Smuts' standards of rationality is self-interest (Smuts 2014, 512). Love can lead people to do things which go against their best interests. I might decide that I love my partner more than anything in the world and therefore reason that I should sacrifice everything else I value to be with them. I, therefore, leave my family, my job, my friends, and my hometown in order to run away with them. This might be in my best interests, but it also might not; and in this second case, the decision is irrational.

How does irrationality manifest in love?

In what follows, we will focus upon 3 basic elements of love:

- 1) Whom you love
- 2) How much you love them
- 3) How much of a role love plays in your life

We suspect that all three often include elements of irrationality, and Romeo and Juliet provide a nice case here. Concerning (1) *whom* they love, they barely know each other, even by the end of the story. Their love is not based upon a careful assessment of the other's properties or character, or their relationship, as they only just about have one. With regard to (2) *how much* they love each other, they love each other much more than is appropriate given the amount of time they have known each other. And finally, in terms of (3) *how much of a role love plays in their lives*, they are both willing to – and do – give up everything, and die for love. We think that on all three accounts, Romeo and Juliet's love is, at least in part, irrational. Again, theirs is an extreme case, but we do think that these three elements apply more broadly.

Let us consider each of them in turn.

Whom you love

Very many people will have found themselves, at some stage in their lives, in love with someone they did not have good reason to love. Indeed, people often don't really understand why they love their beloved and love can be an unfitting response to a person.¹⁹ For example, it is not unheard of to love someone, despite also believing them to have some very unlovable qualities. And sometimes this goes even further, and one finds oneself in love with someone one has good reason *not* to be in love with. People fall in love with liars and crooks, but more importantly, they fall in love with people despite believing those people to be unworthy of their love. They might be unable to explain why they love their beloved, because they do not find their beloved's qualities lovable, yet they love them nonetheless. People remain in love with partners who treat them badly. People also act against their better judgment and allow themselves to fall in love with people they have important reasons not to love: their managers, their students, their best friend's partners, Montagues fall in love with Capulets. Furthermore, this happens despite people's best efforts not to be in love.

On the flip side of this, often we don't love those whom we have good reason to love. The lecturer who leaves her kind, intelligent husband for her chaotic, selfish student could be irrational both for loving the student *and* for not loving her husband.²⁰

¹⁹ We are focussing on *romantic* love in this paper; however, people also often find themselves to be friends with morally bad people. For an excellent recent discussion of this, see (Isserow 2018).

²⁰ This points to another sense in which whom you love can be irrational, in that it can be against one's own self-interest to love particular people. Of course, this raises the issue of the connection between love and self-interest, which is too complicated for us to address here. For some discussion of this connection, see (Brogaard 2015, 74; 232–33) who seems to make out the value of love in terms of how love can contribute to one's well-being.

We think that both the rational and arational conceptions of love overlook this. In some cases, we love the *wrong* person, and we know it; we experience our love as unfitting. This is at odds with the Properties View and the Relationship View which both describe love as a kind of fitting response. Furthermore, this love is not simply arational. We sometimes do take ourselves as having reasons for whom we love, it is just that the reasons can be unfitting. Furthermore, even if the initial attraction, or ‘chemistry’ is arational, the response to it is often irrational. Perhaps the lecturer just can’t help but fall for her student, but her allowing these feelings to take hold of her, and her subsequent behavior remains irrational, and she might experience it as such.

At this point, one might object that such love is merely defective. And we think that in some of the above cases it is. But not all instances of irrational love are merely defective. We will return to say something about this in the final section of the paper, when we turn to consider objections to our claim, but for now, we want to continue to outline the basic ways in which we think love can be irrational.

How much you love them

The amount we love someone can be disproportionate to their qualities and we can conceive of them as being more beautiful/interesting/kind/funny than they actually are.²¹ Thus, the love is unfitting in its degree. Indeed, love seems to almost *require* at least some over-valuing of the beloved, and perhaps thus requires some irrationality. Indeed, research by Murray et al showed that couples were happier with their relationships when they idealized each other. Consequently, Murray et al argued that a level of illusion may be critical for love to be fully satisfying (Murray, Holmes, and Griffin 1996).²² While we can imagine love that is proportional to its beloved, truly proportional love is rare. Furthermore, if a person was constantly assessing their beloved’s value in comparison to others, and trying to work out whether, given this value, sacrifices or gifts for their beloved were warranted, we might question whether they were really in love.

²¹ Though this is an irrational way of viewing the beloved, it could also be that it is necessary for love. Jollimore (2011) suggests that loving someone requires seeing them through ‘love’s vision’, which is a way of seeing the beloved that involves ‘looking for value’ (2011, 68) and ‘appreciating the properties she bears as an *object* and identifying with her as a *subject*.’ Love’s vision thus entails making an effort to value the qualities of the beloved, as well as understanding and identifying with her as an ever-changing individual. It is ‘to see the world with the beloved at the centre and to see his attributes in a certain generous light’ (2011, 123); it is ‘the sort of close, generous, and imaginative attention that allows valuable features of this sort fully to reveal themselves.’ (2011, 25)

²² See also: (Bortolotti 2018, 526–27)

This disproportionate love can lead to life decisions we might come to regret, such as to leave a spouse, move city, or give up a job. This disproportionality and irrationality might be particularly apparent to people outside of the relationship, and can become clearer to us once we have stopped loving someone; with ex-partners we might sometimes feel that the love we felt for them was unjustified and struggle to understand what made us love them so much or make such significant life choices based on that love. And it is not just *after* a relationship has ended that we realise the disproportionality of our love. While we are in love, sometimes we know, on one level, that what we feel about our beloved is not rational. We know that they are not really the most beautiful person in the world, even that it is unlikely they are the person with whom we would be happiest, but allow ourselves to feel like they are.

This does not fit squarely with rational accounts of love, which claim that love should be a *fitting* response. But it also does not fit squarely with the arational account. According to this account, it doesn't make sense to speak of love as either a fitting or unfitting response to someone. It, therefore, doesn't make sense to say that love can be disproportionate. And this doesn't seem quite right. There are cases where we love someone *more* than is fitting; Romeo and Juliet's love for each other being a classic example.²³

How important love is in our lives

A further way in which love is irrational is how much importance it has in our lives. As Susan Wolf puts it, "a life without love seems sad, empty, missing an important, possibly essential ingredient (for a good life) no matter what else it contains" (Wolf 2015, 186). Furthermore, people often feel that their life is incomplete without specifically *romantic* love, despite having close family and numerous strong friendships. Countless songs, novels, poems, plays and films are about the search for romantic love, and its importance to us. We move country for it, give up our jobs, our friendships, our families for love, *even if* we have more reasons not to move or give these up. Marriage, when looked at in one way, might be seen to involve an irrational amount of sacrifice. It can involve renouncing, not only your freedom to have sex with and love other people, but also to have full autonomy over your own life.²⁴ However, at least in Western society, it is seen as normal and often right, to prioritise our

²³ The arationalist could just claim that this is just bestowal at work: Romeo arationally loves Juliet and this love makes him bestow value onto her. But even if this is true, he still bestows an *irrational* amount of value onto her.

²⁴ For a defence of the thought that marriage does promote autonomy, see Bennett (2003).

romantic relationship over very many other things, and we often celebrate love – as we do in Romeo and Juliet – that seems to take over people to the extent that they are willing to sacrifice everything for it. Indeed, if a person does not celebrate romantic love in this way, people might see them as cold, or overly cynical, and if they do not prioritise a romantic relationship, people might see them as immature and selfish (particularly if they want to decouple sex from love or relationships). Elizabeth Brake argues that this is because our society is *amatonomous*, that is, we prioritise romantic love over other caring relationships, leading us to sacrifice other relationships for it and devalue solitudinousness (Brake 2012, 88–89).

It could be argued that this is all a fair approach to love – love is, after all, a good thing. But it is *one* of many good things that can be part of a good human life. With all due respect to The Beatles, love is not all you need. And, moreover, love is not always good; our thought in this section is that by giving love such elevated importance and priority in our lives, we seem to irrationally denigrate other important goods, and overlook the ways in which love can be bad, with sometimes detrimental impact.

3. Objections

Moving on, we want to consider some objections to our characterization of love as containing important irrational elements. The first major objection grants that love can be irrational, but insists that irrational love is merely defective. The second objection claims that the irrational elements of love are best thought of as either rational or arational. Here, we also consider whether approving of irrational love makes it fitting, and thereby rational. We think that these objections can be mitigated, and through our responses to them we show, not only that love has irrational elements, but that some of these deserve to be taken seriously.

Love Fools!

One could grant us that a lot of love is irrational, but dispute the significance of this. Perhaps Romeo and Juliet are irrational, and perhaps we have identified some irrational elements of love in general. But, so the objection goes, Romeo and Juliet are adolescent fools and irrational love is just love gone wrong. One might argue by analogy here: plenty of philosophy is irrational, but that doesn't reveal anything, it's just bad philosophy!

However, our claim is not that love is sometimes irrational, it is that there are valuable irrational elements to love. Sometimes these elements will be bad, and sometimes they will cause us to make mistakes, but other times, they will be part of what makes love so extraordinary. Here, we put forward two ways in which irrationality might be valuable in love. The first is that irrationality might enable us to commit to another in the way that love requires. The second is that some irrationality can contribute to love's excitement, exhilaration and power.

i) Commitment

Love involves commitment. This need not be lifelong, or as far-reaching as marriage requires, but typically there needs to be some degree of commitment to count as love at all. To say 'I love you right in this moment, but I have no intention of trying or wanting to love you after this moment' does not seem to be an instance of authentic love. But what does commitment in love amount to? At its most basic level, it involves sticking around, not dumping one's partner at the first sign of trouble, or as soon as someone better comes along. To do this is easier if you convince yourself that your partner is the best partner for you. This can involve some irrationality – you view your partner in a more positive light than is appropriate, and often we know we are doing this, but it doesn't bother us. As noted earlier, such a positive illusion seems to be beneficial for love.²⁵ Furthermore, people in love often make quite strong commitments – they might commit, for example, to staying together come what may, or to sticking by each other no matter what the other does. Such commitments are valuable and loving, and also slightly irrational. I commit to valuing my partner's qualities in a potentially unfitting way, to being loyal to them even if they do not always deserve my loyalty, and to staying with them even when this goes against my best interests.

Of course, commitment is not always good: commitment to an abusive partner is not valuable, and does not make one's life go better. And there are certain attitudes and behaviours that can creep into loving relationships, such as possessiveness or over-protectiveness, which might make commitment to a relationship more likely (especially if both partners are possessive and over-protective of each other), but are nonetheless signs of a dysfunctional relationship. We accept this and certainly do not want to endorse or glorify abusive or dysfunctional relationships. Our point is merely that irrationality can add to the value of love. In a relationship in which both partners make each other happy, then some form of idealizing each other, or over-prioritizing the relationship, for example, could deepen their love.

²⁵ See Murray, Holmes, and Griffin 1996.

Irrational commitments are part of what makes love so powerful and important to us – that it prevails despite our better judgements. As Solomon puts it, “it is that passion, that excitement in the face of uncertainty, the acceptance of that lack of control, that constitutes love’s virtue” (Robert Solomon 1998, 96). As with sex, in love we are vulnerable to the other, and part of this vulnerability comes from the uncertainty of love and the need to commit to the other, beyond what is straightforwardly fitting. Solomon uses Kierkegaard’s notion of openness to love being a “leap of faith” and a “commitment in the face of objective uncertainty” to describe what we do in love (Robert Solomon 1998, 108). We embrace irrationality in love because love that is irrational (cognitively or strategically) can be more powerful love.

ii) The Power of Love: Excitement, Inspiration, Exhilaration, and Intensity

We also embrace irrationality because it can add to the power of love, making it more exciting, inspiring, exhilarating, and intense. As Solomon remarks, “the exhilaration and inspiration of love are themselves its greatest virtue, a virtue that is often ignored in the age-old over appreciation for philosophical *apatheia* [passionlessness]”. He continues, “romantic love is a virtue *because* it is exciting, and the best of loves remains so for decades” (Solomon 2004, 186). Love can cause us to feel a way that we don’t feel very often, to escape the mundanity of life, to experience something transcendent.²⁶

On this, it will help to say more about two key issues. Firstly, we want to suggest that the excitement and intensity we have in mind is related, at least in part, to the irrational elements of love. Secondly, we attempt to explain how these features of irrational love add value to life.

It can be exciting to love the wrong person, to love someone too much, and to have love play too much of a role in one’s life. The excitement and intensity of irrational love is one of the reasons we find accounts of it so gripping. Returning to our main example, we often celebrate Romeo and Juliet’s love. And of course, this is not just confined to Romeo and Juliet. There are plenty of other fictional examples of irrational love in novels (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *the Neapolitan Novels*), film (*Paris Texas* provides a beautiful account of the power of irrational love²⁷), and music (here, Elvis’ *Too Much*, and the Four Top’s – and Orange Juice’s – *I Can’t Help Myself* spring to mind).

²⁶ One could object to our claim, thinking that love is exciting and intense for good reasons, because of the value one finds in another person, or because loving someone necessitates making big and meaningful decisions about the place of the person in one’s life. What can we say in response to this? We want to be pluralistic about love, and are happy to accept that these rational features can cause excitement and make it more intense. But we also think that irrational considerations can cause a distinctive form of excitement and intensity.

²⁷ For excellent discussion of *Paris, Texas*, see (Bennett 2021)

How does the excitement and intensity of irrational love add value to life? Excitement in a relationship could come from features of one's partner – such as emotional volatility – that might be bad for one's well-being and relationship. Thus, it is not always valuable. Indeed, we don't think that excitement is necessarily conducive to well-being. But we do think it can make life more meaningful, or at the very least more exciting!²⁸ Wolf argues that lives are meaningful when they involve “active engagement in projects of worth”. To be *actively engaged* means to be “gripped, excited, involved by” something or someone. As Wolf notes, active engagement is “not always pleasant” and may come with negative emotions and experiences. Nonetheless, it is good to be actively engaged because “one feels (typically without thinking about it) especially alive” (Wolf 2015, 109–10). Insofar as loving someone is a “project of worth”, to do so with active engagement, which might involve irrationality, could make that love more meaningful. And love, for many people, will be the most important project of worth in their lives.

So perhaps the irrational elements of love are not all foolish. Indeed, we might miss something if love were entirely rational. Imagine someone concocted a rational-love-potion,²⁹ which could get rid of all the irrational parts of our love. If we took it, we would love the right person at the right time, exactly the right amount, and love would have the role in our lives that it was rational for it to have. Now there would be some advantages to this state of affairs, but it does seem like something important would be lacking.

To draw this out, let's consider the following passage from *Love and Limerence*:³⁰

Yes I knew he gambled, I knew he sometimes drank too much, and I knew he didn't read a book from one year to the next.

[...] I dwelt on his wavy hair, the way he looked at me, the thought of his driving to work in the morning, his charm [...] the feeling I had when we were in close physical contact, the way he mixed a martini, his laugh, the hair on the back of his hand.

Okay! I know it's crazy, that my list of “positives” sounds silly, but those are the things I think of, remember, and yes, want back again! (Tennov 1979, 31–32)

²⁸ Otherwise expressed, we think that excitement, inspiration, exhilaration, and intensity are important values in and of themselves.

²⁹ For a rich recent discussion of the ways in which love, and our relationships, could be enhanced by drugs (and potions), see (Earp and Savulescu 2020).

³⁰ One issue here is that these are putative examples of limerence, rather than love. Yet, we think this distinction is not water-tight, and that such things can creep into our love, and not always for the worse.

Some of these things seem silly, even irrational – “the thought of his driving to work in the morning”, “the hair on the back of his hand” – but they are “the things I think of, remember, and yes, want back again!” Hopefully this resonates. In romantic love, we love for good reasons, no reasons and bad reasons. And all of these can add something to our love.

Another way of coming at this is through first-order and second-order desires. On the first-order level, we seem to have some irrational desires and passions. This all looms large in *Romeo and Juliet*. But then when we as an audience celebrate Romeo and Juliet’s love, this could be a second-order endorsement of these passions. And if that’s the case, then maybe *Romeo and Juliet* are not just adolescent fools. Maybe we are happy about this irrational element to our existence, and rather than just wanting to distance ourselves from it, we want to affirm parts of it, as an important aspect of human life.

We find a powerful articulation of a similar point in Jollimore’s discussion of *Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind*. Cutting a long story short, the film ends with Joel and Clementine decide to give their love another try.³¹ Happy ever after? Not quite. They do so in full knowledge that things are not going to be easy. Jollimore captures this as follows:

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind is surely one of the most romantic movies ever made [...] One cannot doubt that Joel and Clementine are true lovers. Knowing how badly things will turn out – that they will live not happily, but miserably ever after – they nonetheless pledge themselves to each other. It is, indeed, “the very mark of Eros” whose stamp we are witnessing. (Jollimore 2009, 58–59).

Now perhaps Jollimore slightly overstates things here.³² After all, there is a chance that things do work out better between them this time around – people can change and grow. But Jollimore’s central point remains: There is something powerful to the idea that Joel and Clementine would decide to love each other again, in the full knowledge that it likely won’t work. It’s hard to conceive of that as a rational love, but it does seem to be an important love nonetheless.

³¹ Of the many important details we are skipping, perhaps the most crucial is that Joel and Clementine have been in love before, and it did not work out. They had their memories removed, but found themselves drawn to each other again. They then learn about the previous relationship, warts and all, and decide to try it again. Jollimore draws out the similarities between this affirmation and endorsement, and Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence (Jollimore 2009, 54–55).

³² We are grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

Before we move on, let us address two further objections. The first is simply that irrational love can be bad. Irrational love can make people stay in abusive relationships, and can cause great unhappiness. We agree and in no way want to minimize this or glorify abusive relationships. However, one can acknowledge that some irrational love is bad, without claiming that all irrationality in love is bad. We think that some of the irrational elements to love are good. As Solomon puts it

[...] Objectively, love may be contrary to everything that philosophical ethics likes to emphasize—objectivity, impersonality, disinterestedness, universality, respect for evidence and arguments, and so on. And yet, it seems to me that such “irrationality” constitutes some of our most important and charming *moral* features. We care about each other prior to any evidence or arguments that we ought to. We find each other beautiful, charming, and desirable, seemingly without reference to common standards [...] We even think it admirable, even if also foolish, to continue to love someone who has proven him – or herself utterly undeserving of that love. (Solomon 1998, 105)

The second objection concerns our claim that we endorse certain irrational aspects of love, and that this is evidence for these being good. The objection is that the mere fact we might endorse something does not make it good. For there are alternative possible explanations of our endorsement of irrational love. It could, for instance, be a mere outgrowth of the fact that our society is amatonormative, as Elizabeth Brake has suggested.³³ There is surely some truth to this. But the fact is that there is some widespread celebration of the irrational elements of love, throughout art and culture does provide us with some reason to take this element of love seriously. And this is what we hope to achieve in this paper. We want to highlight some of seemingly important irrational elements to love, and argue that these deserve serious consideration.

Isn't this all just Rational/ Arational

Another objection is that one could re-describe the seemingly irrational features of love as rational or arational. While this might be the case, the important issue is how ad-hoc this re-description is. Our main worry is that it doesn't seem to do justice to the phenomena. Romeo and Juliet are clearly irrational. Elvis is upfront that he loves her *too* much. This objection seems to display a commitment to making out good things in terms of reasons, rather than a commitment to taking the phenomena

³³ We are grateful to an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

of love seriously. And in this paper, we opt for the latter. If we are serious about matching *our fundamental pretheoretical intuitions* about the nature of love, we have to take the irrational elements seriously.

Recall, for instance, the previous passage from Tennov:

Yes I knew he gambled, I knew he sometimes drank too much, and I knew he didn't read a book from one year to the next.

[...] I dwelt on his wavy hair, the way he looked at me, the thought of his driving to work in the morning, his charm [...] the feeling I had when we were in close physical contact, the way he mixed a martini, his laugh, the hair on the back of his hand.

Okay! I know it's crazy, that my list of "positives" sounds silly, but those are the things I think of, remember, and yes, want back again!

On the face of it, some of these things are silly and irrational – “the thought of his driving to work in the morning”, “the hair on the back of his hand”. Of course, one could look to re-describe this in terms of reasons, (“the hair on the back of his hand” reminding her of him touching her, for example), but that doesn't seem to match the phenomena. The experience of love is sometimes that it is irrational, that it can be unfitting, disproportionate, it can go against our better judgment, yet we seem to like it that way.

Finally, one could accept everything we've said so far about there being irrational elements to love, and about endorsing some of them, but object that this makes these elements of love rational, rather than irrational. The basic thought is as follows. Following Jollimore, we want an account of love that is “irrational, where *that* is appropriate” (Jollimore 2011, 18). However, we also characterised rational love as *fitting*. Therefore, if irrational love is appropriate, it is also, in some sense, fitting, and thus, rational.

There is something to this thought. We want to endorse some of the irrational elements of love, but don't think that this thereby makes these elements straightforwardly rational. We think that these elements remain irrational, but that this is not problematic. Endorsing them does, of course, make them appropriate in one sense, but it is also important to remember that at another level they are

inappropriate.³⁴ They are appropriate in the sense that they give love value, but they are still inappropriate because they make the love unfitting. There is an important sense in which, even if it adds to the value of his love, it is still unfitting for to love *too much*, because his love is a disproportionate response to his beloved.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted two things. Firstly, we wanted to draw attention to some important elements of love that appear to be irrational, because these are typically overlooked in discussions about the reasons for, and value, of love. We have claimed that there can be irrational elements to whom you love, how much you love them, and the role that love plays in your life. Secondly, we have also suggested that there can be something valuable to these irrational elements to love, and that love that was less irrational would not be more valuable *as love* merely because it was more rational.

³⁴ Indeed, if we took this objection too far, we could not even ask our question, namely whether there are any important irrational elements to love? For if they were important, they would then be rational. And it seems wrong-headed to block a substantial question about whether love could have important irrational elements due a conceptual puzzle.

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