
Discussions of love, like discussions of so many other topics in philosophy, have tended to swerve from austere rationalist accounts to ones more friendly to the work of the passions. Broadly rationalist views like Plato’s and those of the more recent neo-Kantians emphasize the reasons that lovers respond to, and usually find something universal in love, like the rational ascent from particulars to universal forms in the *Symposium*, or David Velleman’s view of love as a response to the general capacity for a rational will. Writers like Harry Frankfurt, on the other hand, tend to resist seeing lovers as responding to reasons “out there,” and have built up a contrasting picture that resembles Hume’s view of morality, in which love projects value onto the bare objects, gilding them with sentiment, in Hume’s metaphor. In *Love’s Vision*, Troy Jollimore charts a middle-course, seeking to present a moderate rationalism about love that captures key advantages of this tradition, like explaining the fact that we find ourselves attracted to people because of various traits they have, while acknowledging some of the core features of the anti-rationalist tradition, such as its insistence on emotional engagement. The result is an insightful and stimulating overview of the philosophy of love that it’s easy to recommend.

Jollimore begins (ch. 1) by reviewing some of the major problems love generates, particularly those facing a rationalist view that love for people is grounded in reasons arising from properties they possess:

(1) No set of properties PQR ever generates an obligation to love someone. Your having reasons for loving X, grounded in PQR, doesn’t make it unreasonable of me not to love X.
(2) Loving someone for properties PQR doesn’t mean you must love just anyone with those properties.
(3) Loving someone for PQR doesn’t mean you must “upgrade” to someone else who possesses PQR to an even greater degree or has additional valuable traits.
(4) Loving someone for PQR doesn’t mean you must abandon your love if they lose some or all of these properties.

The response to these problems is complex and spread across the whole book, but the central theme, alluded to in the title, is the way that love alters how we see those around us, systematically accentuating certain people and features of those people, and obscuring others. On Jollimore’s account we are responding to valuable features people possess—he rejects the Frankfurterian view that our more or less arbitrary love for them makes them valuable—but we aren’t thereby committed to the paradoxes listed above once we free ourselves from certain misconceptions about practical reasoning he seeks to identify.

Let me delve into some details to give the flavor. One crucial move is to appeal to recent work on reasons by particularists and virtue theorists (pp. 34-45, 95-122). According to views often associated with figures like John McDowell and Jonathan
Dancy, the fact that something generates a moral reason in circumstances ABC doesn’t entail that it will generate a reason in circumstances DEF. That something would be a lie is reason not to say it in many circumstances, but not when playing certain games. In fact, according to this sort of holism about moral reasons, circumstances may even silence, in McDowell’s phrase, what would otherwise be powerful grounds for action, so that they are not merely outweighed or defeated, but have no force at all. Thus, the fact that having sex with someone would give one great pleasure is often a reason for that act, but in the context of rape, that pleasure generates no reason at all. (The virtuous agent doesn’t have a standing reason to commit rape, on this view, that is merely outweighed by the harm to the victim.) One of Jollimore’s central insights is that these points about moral reasoning can be fruitfully applied in considering love:

What love demands, then, is that the pleasure of infidelity be measured not relative to the lover herself but relative to the special entity that she and her beloved together make ... And from this standpoint the pleasure will indeed be found to possess no value whatsoever. Love transforms the agent’s conception of her own self-interest ... (p. 40)

This kind of view enables Jollimore to deal with some of the problems listed above, since he can acknowledge the existence of reasons to love other people, say, while denying that they get a grip on him for reasons akin to the silencing neo-Aristotelians appeal to in the moral context.

Sometimes Jollimore pursues this thought via related notions of engagement or relevance (pp. 102-108). There’s a difference, he points out, between merely acknowledging the value of something and actively engaging that value, in seeing it as relevant to one’s own actions and commitments. Being in love, he says, means that we have “determined those values [the attractions of a stranger, say] to be irrelevant” (pp. 104-5). This frees us from the comparative perspective which dictates that if we respond to our beloved for reasons PQR, we must attend to additional or more impressive versions of those features in others; that no more follows, says Jollimore, than the claim that the neophyte must value Rothko as much as the expert. The neophyte may take the expert at his word, but that only results in acknowledging the paintings’ value, without in any sense engaging it until he reaches the point at which he can dig into the relevant features. I coolly judge that my neighbor’s wife is lovely, but that fact, so to speak, bounces right off me if I am fully in love with my own. There is much more in this vein than I can indicate, taking on comparative and maximizing views of reasoning so as to block (1) - (4), but this should convey a rough sense of the terrain. The examples and arguments are interesting and imaginative throughout, and the writing, it’s worth mentioning, is first-rate.

Not all of these claims are fully persuasive, however. One problem is that the examples in the domain of love tend to be themselves moralized (e.g., infidelity). There’s the worry that these analogies from morality are more than analogies. Consider, for instance, a clearly non-moral case. Instead of infidelity, make it a matter of wanting to spend lots of time with a close friend. Doing so drives my wife