

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: LOVE AND OTHER EMOTIONS ACROSS TIME

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Doctor of Philosophy, 2025

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In *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis notes the typical arc of most long-term romantic relationships: “[F]or all pairs of lovers without exception, bereavement is a universal and integral part of our experience of love. It follows marriage as normally as marriage follows courtship or as autumn follows summer. It is not a truncation of the process but one of its phases; not the interruption of the dance, but the next figure” (Lewis, 1994, p. 50). This dissertation consists of three essays, each of which thematizes a general phase of romantic love over time: courtship, partnership, and bereavement. Upon close inspection, each phase is fraught with normative problems. What follows is a brief sketch of the problems and my proposed resolutions.

The first essay of my dissertation examines an aspect of romantic courtship. In “Ethical Seduction,” I take up the worry that seduction belongs in the category of sexual wrongdoing alongside coercion and rape. I claim that those with this worry tend to play down our ambivalence towards seduction. Despite our discomfort, we sometimes desire to be seduced. Many romantic clichés reflect this desire: we want other people to sweep us off our feet, carry us away, make us

fall in love with them, woo us. This tension makes clear that seduction has some appeal and implies that it is not a straightforward moral problem. I argue that seduction is not wholly bad and suggest that ethical seduction is possible. Though “ethical seduction” may sound like an oxymoron, I propose criteria to mark the good-making features of seduction, which include the indirect, non-rational engagement of people’s latent desires and interests in ways that (i) amplify any positive emotions with which people are not in tune, and/or (ii) deactivate the problematic inhibitions that lead people to resist what they freely desire.

The second essay, “Love and Evaluative Conflict,” concerns long-term romantic partnership. I take it as a fact that lovers often disagree. We may reject the specific goals our loved ones pursue or the broad values they hold. Some philosophers suggest that such evaluative conflict makes romantic love in its ideal form deficient. But I argue that this is mistaken. On the contrary, our ideal of love holds that we *can* love people for ‘who they are’ (as we say), even as we profoundly disagree with them. My argument draws on intuitive cases from screwball comedy about love amid conflict, love across political party lines, as well as ‘forbidden’ love across religions and cultures. At a deeper level, I sketch an ideal of love I call *intimate independence* and argue that this ideal is (i) fully compatible with any evaluative conflict, (ii) embedded in our ordinary attitudes towards mature love between equals, and (iii) an ideal worth achieving. As long as intimate independence is a compelling ideal, deep conflict will not seem like an obstacle to true love. The ideal reminds us that love can bring together people with radically different points of view, and that to insist on shared ends or values is thus to miss a part of the meaning and power of love.

Finally, if a couple doesn’t split over their disagreements, their partnership ends in death. This dissertation is no different. In the last chapter of this dissertation, “Grief Rekindles,” I

examine something often repeated in editorials, blogs, and popular books about the deaths of loved ones: grief is forever. I present a qualified defense of this folk insight. We don't feel the impact of loss maximally all the time. Rather, we continue to feel it for the rest of our lives, because grief doesn't simply diminish but rekindles like fire. As I put it, grief is an *intermittent emotion*, capable of going out of existence, then existing again as the same thing. I argue that this trajectory is fitting. Intermittent emotions have a rational status; their distinct temporal pattern gets something *right* about their objects. This proposal dissolves a recent philosophical worry that grief diminishes over a short time despite the persistence of its eliciting loss. Moreover, it provides a sophisticated sketch of the fittingness of emotions over time: intermittence is a norm to evaluate emotional fittingness alongside character and intensity.

LOVE AND OTHER EMOTIONS ACROSS TIME

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the

University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

2025

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Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!

—Henry James, “The Art of Fiction”

## Acknowledgments

Thanks to the punks who squatted in the warehouses on Daggett Street, to all the dirtbags, wingnuts, drunks, crusties, vegans, and weirdos hanging around The New Hawaii, The FDZ, The Handsome Woman, and Willimantic Records. For years and years you made Connecticut the most interesting place.

Thanks to PJ, Ryan, Meg, Sam, Morgan, Christina, Mike French, Wayne, Eddie, Miranda, GI Dave, Tyler, James, Mariam, Cayla, Joel, JC, Kyle, Rosa, Orlando, and Alex for the walks around Washington Square Park, the lavender lemonade at Caffè Reggio, ‘office hours’ in the basement of the Strand, the very late nights at Café Loup (and that seedy dive on University Place), for all the arguments about rule-following, whether numbers exist, the perplexing relation between philosophy and literature, and about what Nietzsche said versus what he meant.

Thanks to Alice Crary and Zed Adams for their support and advice about navigating graduate school as well as for the creativity and spiritedness with which they practice philosophy. And thanks to the late, great Richard J. Bernstein, who sipped strawberry smoothies and encouraged every New Schooler to “take the bloody way out.”

Thanks to the philosophers in College Park for the conversation and camaraderie, to Shen, Kiley, Aida, Fyfe, Michael Good, Sarah, Mike McCourt, Chris, Will, Ben, Hu, Xintong, Louise, Dan Blair, Jerry, Harjit, Paolo, Fabrizio. Thanks to Lia and Joe for their helpful feedback on an old draft of Chapter Three of this dissertation. Thanks to Caleb, the only person who ever laughed at my dumb joke that metaphysics was aesthetics for people with no artistic talent. Thanks to Kodie J. Lustig for the raucous debates and laughter in the office. Thanks to Cody Gomez for his friendship and his dedication to MAP Terps. For their curiosity, enthusiasm, and discussion, thanks

to my students in Love, Sex, and Ethical Life in Spring 2021 and those in the Philosophy of Negative Emotions in Spring 2024.

For their comments, feedback, and discussion about the ideas in this dissertation, I thank Alfred Archer, Ashley Atkins, Jamie Fritz, Rick Anthony Furtak, Patrica Greenspan, Pilar Lopez-Cantero, Sarah Protasi, and Troy Wellington Smith. Thanks to audiences at the American Philosophical Association, Central Division in 2023, especially to Anandita Mukherji for her commentary on Chapter Two of this dissertation, the European-American Online Workshop in the Philosophy of Emotion in 2023, and those at the American Philosophical Association, Central Division in 2024, especially to Amanda Loeffelholz for her commentary on Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Thanks to William Cohen, Samuel Kerstein, and Nicholas Laskowski for joining the dissertation committee at the last moment.

Thanks to Hallie Liberto for the seminar on coercion in Fall 2019. It exemplified the exciting work-in-progress and collaborative character of professional philosophy when done ‘live.’ I shook Chapter One of this dissertation out of my term paper for that seminar. I also thank her for the various odd jobs that kept me financially stable for a couple of summers. And I’m especially grateful for her feedback over the years on draft after draft of what became this dissertation.

Thanks to Rachel Singpurwalla for the walks around campus and the glimpse into what a peripatetic education was like, for the conversations about horror and our emotional responses to it, for understanding the importance of studying great minds, and for all the advice over the years about teaching and writing philosophy. In particular, I thank her for her feedback on the various drafts of this dissertation.



A special thanks to my advisor, Dan Moller, for the chats about Homer and Henry James, for playing me opera and country music on his impressive sound system with those ceiling-high speakers, for his feedback, guidance, and example. I'm especially grateful for an important talk about 'wordsmithing' at a crucial point in the Ph.D. program. Not everyone would chair and help develop a dissertation that criticizes their own views. But not everyone embraces the quirky and pursues philosophy in spirit of adventure like he does. His mark on these three essays is obvious.

Thanks to my aunt KK and to spore, Tom, and Terry, and to the rest of my family and friends who listen to me lecture and rant about my crank views.

Thanks to J. Hayes Hurley, my teacher, my mentor, my friend. "—Why, you can change a line without touching it." That's how this whole mess began fifteen years ago, right? With *The Recognitions*. See you on the First and Last Road Trip.

Thanks to Mom and Dad for their pure and unconditional love and faith in my development as a person even as I rebelled against their Harley Davidson ways, wrote novels, toured the east coast with the band, and wasted a decade of my life studying philosophy. Everything I know about love and grief my mother taught me. Again and again, I love you two so much.

For coming all this way with me on my never-ending journey, for her love, patience, encouragement, *and* the objections, and for all the things I can't say here, I thank Julia with all my heart. Love you always.

And lastly, thanks to Thistle. Good job, pup!

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# Ethical Seduction

## Abstract

Many of us worry that seduction belongs in the category of sexual wrongdoing alongside coercion and rape. But this worry plays down our ambivalence towards seduction. Despite our discomfort, we sometimes desire to be seduced: we want other people to sweep us off our feet and woo us. This tension makes clear that seduction has some appeal and implies that it is not a straightforward moral problem. In this paper, I argue that seduction is neither itself good nor bad and that ethical seduction is possible. Though “ethical seduction” may sound like an oxymoron, I propose criteria to mark the good-making features of seduction, which include the indirect, non-rational engagement of people’s latent desires and interests in ways that (i) amplify any positive emotions with which people are not in tune, and/or (ii) deactivate the problematic inhibitions that lead people to resist what they freely desire.

## 1

‘Ethical seduction’ sounds like an oxymoron. Many tend to think of it as sleazy, if not downright morally wrong. It is the game of playboys, rakes, and libertines. Some of the most infamous seducers, like Mozart’s Don Giovanni, are rapists.<sup>1</sup> Even the Latin etymology of the word implies there is something off about seduction: the act of leading aside. Not to mention that seduction was once considered a *crime against society*. In 1868 the New York Superior Court defined seduction as a fundamental moral problem: “In order to constitute seduction, the defendant must use insinuating arts to overcome the opposition of the seduced, and must by his wiles and persuasions,

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<sup>1</sup> On *Don Giovanni*, erotic desire, and seduction, see “The Immediate Erotic Stages” in Volume One of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, pp. 45–135.

without force, *debauch her*” (Haag, 1999, p. 33; italics added). Seduction, as popular consensus held, corrupted “public purity” and caused young women to stray from chastity and virtue and turn to the sexual immorality of prostitution (p. 3).<sup>2</sup> To the extent that people believe this legal story, seducers appear to meddle with the will of their victims and undermine their sense of agency for the purpose of sexual conquest.<sup>3</sup> It is no wonder that seduction strikes some as dark, an exertion of masculine control.

Nevertheless, seduction appears to have *some* appeal. A handful of philosophers maintain that seduction is a more positive form of influence than the narrow legal story admits. It places value on “mystery” and plays a role in early romantic courtship, which “is too fragile to withstand complete straightforwardness” (Barton, 2017, pp. 43–5; Buss, 2005, p. 221). Moreover, in the contemporary book market, Robert Greene’s *The Art of Seduction* is an odd albeit perennial bestseller. Its popularity suggests that readers are interested in Greene’s cast of mythological and historical seducers and in developing their own seduction styles.<sup>4</sup>

Even in the most sanguine defenses, though, seduction is spoken of in the same breath as normative terms with a negative charge like manipulation and deceit.<sup>5</sup> And the popularity of *The Art of Seduction* doesn’t erase that its “self-help virtues are rather oblique, as they lie in undoing the heartstrings of others.”<sup>6</sup> The reaction to seduction is thus mixed. Both critics and defenders

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<sup>2</sup> On the complex legal history of seduction from the violation of the Father/Masters’ Daughter/Servants’ purity to a broad crusade against sexual immorality, especially against sex work, see Knox (2020), especially p. 258, Whiteaker (1997), especially pp. 143–4, and VanderVelde (1996), especially p. 825. For a philosophical treatment of a fictional depiction of seduction in this period of history, see Baron (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Though this is not to the letter, it’s in the spirit of Sarah Conly’s (2004, pp. 112–116) critique of seduction, which I discuss in section 5.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Art-Seduction-Robert-Greene/dp/1861977697/>

<sup>5</sup> E.g., see Barton (2017), p. 38. Buss writes: “It is, of course, impossible to prove that *seductions* play an essential role in many good lives. But it does seem highly plausible that a certain amount of *deception*—about what one is up to, and about what sort of person one is, really—and a certain degree of *manipulation*—to the end of turning the beloved into one’s lover—is a necessary condition for the possibility of (at least most cases of) mutual romantic love” (p. 221; italics added).

<sup>6</sup> Colman (2003).

tend to play down our *ambivalence* towards seduction. We worry that it belongs in the same category of sexual wrongdoing as coercion and rape, but despite our discomfort, we desire to be swept off our feet and wooed.

In this paper, I have two aims. First, I thematize the ambivalence towards seduction. I argue that it reflects an old philosophical tension over rational self-control. We strive for full control over our desires, impulses, and emotions. We also take great pleasure in giving such control up. Seduction, I claim, involves yielding a degree of rational self-control to a seducer. This argument clarifies why it's reasonable to worry about seduction and at the same time why it's sometimes pleasurable. On the resulting picture, seduction isn't wholly bad. If it were, it would simply disturb us. We'd never feel ambivalent about it, never mind pleasure. My first argument thus builds towards my second one in favor of a directly ethical form of seduction.

To that end, I propose in the second part of the paper a reasonable set of criteria to determine whether a given case of seduction is ethical. The primary mark of ethical seduction, I claim, is the engagement of the target's latent desires and interests. Two auxiliary processes clarify this engagement: ethical seducers may (i) hype people up, amplifying any positive emotions with which they are not in tune, and/or (ii) deactivate any problematic inhibitions that lead people to resist what they freely desire. This short list does not exhaust all the possible aspects of ethical seduction, but it advances our understanding of why seduction sometimes pleases us.

We should take a closer look at seduction to better understand its role in the ethics of romance and sex. Philosophers often focus on sexual influence in terms of brute force and when they do discuss more subtle forms like seduction, not enough treat it as something besides a moral problem. But seduction has a broader interest worth mentioning. It's a socially acceptable form of

non-rational engagement. Even seducers and philosophers have more in common than they seem.<sup>7</sup> Remember, the first moral philosopher in the West was a seducer. Socrates did not excite his interlocutors with his rigorous, often obscure dialectic alone.<sup>8</sup> The contrast between philosophers and the seductive rhetoricians they've pitted themselves against since Athens is not absolute. Both draw on the power of persuasive examples. Plato had his myths. Today philosophers, despite or perhaps *because* of their obsession with logic-tight arguments, have their runaway trolleys, experience machines, swamp men, color scientists, violinists in desperate need of blood transfusions. These examples are vivid, memorable, and grab the attention in ways no cluster of numbered premises ever could. They don't bypass rationality, but they don't fully engage it either. There is thus something seductive about them. They don't coax their audience into agreement and so, they're unlike unsavory instances of seduction. Nevertheless, they reflect the oblique nature of the behavior more generally. They appeal to their audience, though not to their rationality specifically, and seek something from them, perhaps an intuition in support of a claim in an argument. With its qualified defense of seduction, this paper begins to clarify the good of such indirect communication.

## 2

What is seduction? Setting aside the mythology, tropes, and caricatures, this question is difficult to take straight on. It appears to admit a wide range of behavior. As Scott Anderson puts it,

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Kierkegaard saw seduction as much more than the troubling work of the intellectual pick-up artist he describes in "The Seducer's Diary" at the end of the first volume of *Either/Or*. He thought there was something *edifying* about it. Once he scribbled in his journal: "A man who cannot seduce men cannot save them either" (Bretall, 1973, p. 19). Along these lines, see Berthold (2011), pp. 64–84 for a reading of "The Seducer's Diary" on which Johannes's seduction of Cordelia reflects Kierkegaard's broader experimentation with indirection communication, a fundamentally ethical relationship between author and reader.

<sup>8</sup> After crashing the symposium, Alcibiades mentions the "extraordinary effect" Socrates has on him and says, "I swear to you, the moment he starts to speak, I am beside myself: my heart starts leaping in my chest, the tears come streaming down my face" (Plato, *Symposium*, 215d–216a).

“Seduction is not always a matter of charms, flatteries, and sparks; sometimes it is less like runaway passion and more like sexual assault” (Anderson, 2006, p. 349).

Sarah Conly calls seduction “weakness [of will] induced by another” (Conly, 2004, p. 112). For Eric Cave, it is someone’s purposeful attempt to get another person “to convert initial unwillingness to willingness to have sex based on sexual desire” (Cave, 2009, p. 237–8). However, we ought to understand seduction more broadly. First, seduction is a romantic as well as a sexual undertaking. For example, someone could meaningfully seduce an asexual person to fall in love with her (Barton, 2017, p. 36). As well, Sarah Buss observes, seduction is crucial to many *romantic* courtships, which “begin with a self-conscious side-glance and are helped along with feigned indifference, walks in the moonlight, carefully chosen music, carefully chosen poetry, and so forth” (Buss, 2005, p. 220). Second, resistance is not as central to seduction as these definitions claim. A person need not be unwilling and induced to weakness of will to be seduced. Adrien Barton is right that sometimes seducers simply *increase* people’s desires to have sex; though there is no conversion from unwillingness to willingness, the seducer impacts the psychology of the seduced by altering the strength of her desire (Barton, 2017, p. 37).

It is far from obvious, then, that seduction is “a single, unified type” of action (Cave, 2009, p. 236n2). Let us proceed elliptically and contrast seduction with other forms of social interaction that aim to change people’s minds and motivate action, namely persuasion and influence.

Persuasion differs from seduction. Persuasion changes minds and elicits action by engaging people’s rational faculties, by defending arguments, by trading reasons.<sup>9</sup> While persuasion may not be “purely rational,” as Conly acknowledges, often involving ideology and bias, it typically falls within rational parameters, like occurring between competent adults, capable of making

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<sup>9</sup> Both Conly (2005), pp. 116–119 and Cave (2009), p. 237 examine in depth the difference between persuasion and seduction.

decisions (Conly, 2004, p. 118). At the very least the explicit rather than indirect appeal to reason and beliefs is one paradigm of persuasion even if non-rational white noise exists within the overall movement. Seduction, on the other hand, bypasses rational faculties and attempts to change minds and goad action through indirect and non-rational tactics. It tends to play into people's emotions, desires, and impulses. Seducers strive to excite people, hype them up, and remove any emotional inhibitions preventing them from going along with the relevant suggestions.

One might worry, however, that desires, impulses, and especially emotions have cognitive content such that they are to an extent aspects of rationality.<sup>10</sup> If something like this view is correct, then seducers seem to appeal to reason as much as persuaders do. But this rationalist concern shouldn't bother us. Just because emotions have rational dimensions doesn't imply that the distinction between reason and, say, emotion fully collapses. Even if emotions reflect what matters to us and have normative constraints,<sup>11</sup> there is a clear difference, one physical as well as mental, between an explosion of anger and a principled explanation for why I found your antics at the office Christmas party to be inappropriate. Setting aside the literally ancient problem of the relation between emotion and reason, persuasion and seduction are quite different forms of behavior. When we persuade, we seek to move others more or less by argument; when we seduce, we seek to move them by much less explicit, much less rational means.

Put another way, seducers *influence* rather than persuade people.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, seduction is not simply influence. That term demarcates a range of interaction. Our families, teachers, and peers influence our attitudes and ways of seeing the world without direct explanation or

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<sup>10</sup> Proponents of such cognitivist views of emotion include Nussbaum (2001), see, e.g., pp. 1–3.

<sup>11</sup> For why emotions track what matters to us, see Helm (2009). For 'fittingness,' or the broad normative constraints of emotions, see D'Arms and Jacobson (2000).

<sup>12</sup> For the similarities and differences among seduction and other so-called "non-reason tracking influences" like manipulation, see Barton (2017), pp. 38–9.



argument.<sup>13</sup> We conform to the latest trends simply because everyone else is doing it. The mere presence of a distinguished person causes us to stiffen and speak more formally than we usually do with our pals at the bar. Influence can be passive or active. Compare the way your friend influences you with how a presidential candidate influences you. Your friend does not tempt you on purpose to watch the four-hour Taiwanese New Wave film. Nevertheless, her praise prompts you to seek it out. The presidential candidate, however, intends to project leadership and secure your vote. Influence is thus a broad category and various non-rational ways of changing minds and prompting action belong in it.

Seduction is a specific kind of influence. It is usually active and purposeful. It is not obvious that someone can seduce another person without intending to do so.<sup>14</sup> Seducers are more like the presidential candidate than your cinephile friend. They tend to be sly, adroit, and clever when they engage people. There are better and worse ways of seducing someone, some subtle, others obvious and clumsy. As we say, there is an *art* of seduction. Influence, though, does not always demand dexterity. As in the cinephile case, we are simply susceptible to kinds of influence, given circumstantial considerations like social bonds, tastes, and personal histories. Unlike seduction, these influences do not involve a pursuit of any kind.

When someone is seduced, something happens that doesn't always happen whenever someone is influenced. Whether directly or indirectly, seduction involves the temptation to cede rational self-control. The seducer entices the seduced to be carried away from reason and give into, say, sexual desire. It is as though the seduced abandons whatever restraint she had and does whatever the seducer wants. Abandonment may be communicated verbally; a (corny) seducer may whisper in the ear of the seduced to forget all about her two o'clock appointment and to stay with

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<sup>13</sup> Dover (2023), especially pp. 17–19, examines the moral significance of influence.

<sup>14</sup> On the purposiveness of seduction, see Cave (2009), p. 236.

him. Or abandonment may be indirect and simply happen. The abandonment of rational self-control is the most apparent in the sexual paradigm of seduction, but it occurs in the romantic one, too. Though we sometimes lose our heads over people independently of seduction, such excessive infatuation can be the result of romantic seduction, especially if others don't see what we see in the new object of our obsession or the person's ends and values make no sense when compared with ours.<sup>15</sup>

The abandonment of rational self-control helps to distinguish seduction from other forms of influence with a negative normative charge. Like seducers, manipulators use cunning and tricks to play on their victims such that the victims in a sense give up rational control over themselves and do what the manipulators want.

No doubt some seducers use manipulative tactics, like charm or more problematic ones like guilt tripping and gaslighting, to seduce people. However, there is something covert and deceitful about manipulation such that the 'success' of manipulation rides on the victim's ignorance of what the manipulator is doing.<sup>16</sup> But seduction doesn't require duplicity. For some the awareness that someone is trying to seduce them is exciting and increases their desire for romance or sex as well as their willingness to lose control over themselves. Second, to anticipate my later argument for ethical seduction, manipulators seek to control their victims to their own advantages. But as I will soon show, it's possible to seduce someone in ways that equally consider their well-being.

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<sup>15</sup> On such conflict romantic relationships, see Tillman (2024) or Chapter Two of this dissertation.

<sup>16</sup> For my purposes, not much depends on clarifying what manipulation is. However, some see manipulation as a form of covert influence. See Strudler (2005), especially p. 459. Others see it as a hybrid of deception and coercion. See Greenspan (2003), p. 157. For alternative accounts of manipulation and seduction, see Cave (2014) and Buss (2005), esp. pp. 208–217.

With this rough sketch of seduction in place, we can ask a question many philosophers neglect: is it *desirable* to be seduced? In what follows I aim to show that the idea of rational self-control plays an important role in answering this question.

### 3

Both critics and defenders usually play down our *ambivalence* towards seduction.<sup>17</sup> Critics tend to focus on the act's sleaziness and moral wrongfulness. They don't consider how it might feel *to be* seduced. This is an oversight. Defenders, on the other hand, understand that we do not always view being pursued for the sake of love or sex as straightforwardly bad. But both camps typically ignore that many of us are torn between two conflicting attitudes. It is true that we do not want others to force us into romance or sex. We do fear that the legal story is correct, and that seduction in fact belongs to the category of sexual wrongdoing alongside the violation of consent, coercion, and rape. Yet we desire to be seduced on some level despite our discomfort.

There are many romantic ways we talk about this desire. We want other people to sweep us off our feet, carry us away, make us fall in love with them, woo us. People appear uninterested if they do not try to gain our affection. Without the pursuit interactions tend to lack a spark. Trysts should thrill. There should be something electrifying about prospective lovers. Those who simply trade in reasons to have sex or form a romantic relationship are utterly boring. They approach matters of the heart as though they and their beloveds were simply roommates divvying up house chores, reasoning who should take out the trash and who should scrub the toilet. These dullards misunderstand the realms of romance and sex, where non-rational enticement is not simply permissible but *expected*.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For an account of the broad philosophical importance of ambivalence, see Coates (2022).

<sup>18</sup> Buss (2005), pp. 220–1 makes a similar case against “the ideal of straightforwardness” in courtship.

It's worth exploring the ambivalence towards seduction in this section. Doing so clarifies why we worry about seduction and at the same time desire to be seduced. Moreover, this account aims to show why seduction isn't a complete moral problem. To that end, I propose that our ambivalence can be explained in terms of two broad normative ideals concerning rational self-control, the ability to exercise reasoned restraint over desires, impulses, and emotions.

The first ideal goes as far back as Plato. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates likens the structure of the human soul to a charioteer driving two horses. The charioteer is like the rational element of the soul, guiding it towards the realm of the Forms, where all true knowledge lies (e.g., 247a–d). The two horses represent the non-rational elements of the soul. The good horse serves reason and is vulnerable to shame and honor. It *loves* self-control (253d). The bad, crooked horse tends to disobey reason and pursues pleasure to excess (253d–e). Socrates distinguishes the souls of humans and gods by the extent to which they control their horses. The charioteers of the gods fully control them and thus reach the Forms with no problem. Humans are not as lucky. Most of the time their horses violently pull the charioteer in different directions.

Here is one lesson we inherit from this discussion: we are most like gods when we exhibit complete self-control over our non-rational parts.<sup>19</sup> We stray from the straight path of rationality when we skip deliberation and chase after any alluring impulse, desire, or emotion. Such thoughtless surrender is wrong on this picture. Impulses, desires, and emotions fluctuate; there is rarely anything stable about them.<sup>20</sup> As well they often play into the base instincts of our nature, goading us to eat and copulate. A life of utter indulgence would alienate us from our humanity,

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<sup>19</sup> This lesson is by no means the final word on *Plato's* view on the relation between self-control and madness in the *Phaedrus*. His view is more complex. E.g., in an earlier palinode in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates praises the divine madness of *erōs*. See 241b–d, 244a–d, 245a–c, 249d–e.

<sup>20</sup> For more discussion about the trajectory of emotions across time, see Chapter Three of this dissertation, especially pp. 80–88.

from what distinguishes us from other sentient creatures, especially those obsessed with eating and copulating, namely our ability to consider and act on reasons for action. Of course this Platonic ideal does not forbid us from pursuing our impulses, desires, and emotions. The pursuit must result from an autonomous decision. Nothing should carry us away unless we reflect, then decide and allow the relevant feeling to do so. But this deliberative step cancels out the sense of being *taken* by the desire. In such instances we ultimately govern ourselves.

However, it is hard to deny that there is something attractive about giving up rational control. It is not obvious that we really want full control *all the time*. For starters, it is difficult to maintain complete self-control. Most of us repeat patterns of unconscious action every day. I scratch my chin without endorsement, for example. I stand up from my desk and wander into the kitchen and rummage through the cabinets, looking for a snack, because I am hungry. These involuntary behaviors come to us naturally. But they are insignificant, one might say. Nothing of value is lost by adhering to the Platonic ideal.

On the contrary, various amusing activities speak against complete control. Consider intoxication. Lack of restraint is part of the appeal of drinking alcohol and doing drugs. It may count as a reason to avoid them for some people. (Perhaps they read their Plato too seriously.) Nevertheless, when we are drunk or high, we simply do not care as much about control as we do when we are sober.<sup>21</sup> It is significant that we often choose to be in these uninhibited states. Music has a similar allure. We like to give ourselves over to a good beat and jump on the dancefloor and move like a fool. It is *fun* to get pushed around in a mosh pit at a rock show. Again, we opt into

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<sup>21</sup> Intoxication tends to impact what matters. Moller (2016) generalizes the point: “changes in what we care about are often the product of changes in our affective state, and these changes can be radical, sudden, and entirely endogenous” (p. 322).

these activities. By doing so, we yield a degree of self-control. The Platonic ideal of full control does not tell the whole story about the value of control because we often seek to give it up.

The history of Western philosophy is replete with responses to the Platonic ideal. For example, Nietzsche would likely denounce it as a byproduct of what he calls “Apollonian culture” in *The Birth of Tragedy* (p. 41). The Greeks aspired towards an aesthetic ideal in the plastic arts, like sculpture, based on Apollo, the sun god of reason and moderation. They strove to be like the Olympian gods, even seeing their own human image as mirroring the gods (p. 43–4).

For all the Greeks’ preoccupation with self-control and rationality, the Apollonian is part of a “duality,” the other half of which is another aesthetic ideal, this one concerning music and, as Nietzsche argues, tragedy, called the Dionysian (p. 33). It tracks the kind of considerations that challenge the Platonic ideal of full self-control. The Dionysian, Nietzsche claims, “is brought home to us most intimately by the analogy of intoxication” and is reflected in the manic dances of the German Middle Ages, like those during the Feast of Saint Vitus (p. 36). A feeling of “self-forgetfulness” and “mystical self-abnegation” accompanies this state of intoxication (p. 36, 38). We lose all sense of oneself as an individual when we experience the ecstasy of the ideal. The Dionysian is a reality of drunkenness and frenzy, which “does not heed the single unit, but even seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystical feeling of oneness” (p. 38). It carries us away from ourselves and fuses us with “primal being” (p. 65). In this fever we no longer have a self to control.

From the perspective of the seduced, seduction is a form of abandonment like drunkenness and dance. Like we are at a drinking party or a rock show, we welcome excitement, even the overwhelming.<sup>22</sup> Yet, we want to decide for ourselves what we do with ourselves. We do not give

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<sup>22</sup> In the same spirit, Yao (2023) writes, “One may simply want to lose control, to be moved about in the world by forces that seem outside of oneself, to come to understand oneself in relation to another particular person (or other

the reins of our chariot horses to another person so readily. But this is what seducers tempt us to do. So we tend to hesitate. I have identified in this section an old philosophical tension between complete, rational control over oneself and Dionysian frenzy. This tension drives our ambivalence towards seduction. At the same time it makes clear that seduction has at least some appeal.

#### 4

Ambivalence teaches us an important lesson about seduction: from the vantage of the seduced, it is neither wholly good nor bad. In this section, I take a step back from this point of view and supplement the argument just made. I proceed by way of analogy and present two non-sexual, non-romantic situations that share structural similarities with seduction in the sexual and romantic arenas: salesmanship and politics. On their own these cases do not provide a full argument for *ethical* seduction. (We will discuss that later.) Rather, they continue to make the case that despite its pejorative connotation in popular culture, seduction is not a complete moral problem. As we analyze the ethics of seduction we must demarcate when it is more and less benign. These cases take us a step closer towards that goal.

In commerce we encounter a paradigm of non-romantic, non-sexual interaction analogous to what we do when we pursue romantic and sexual partners. First consider the following scenario.

*The Scrupulous Salesman.* You are perusing expensive audio equipment in an electronics store. Today you are simply window-shopping, though you have been in the market for an upgrade. A salesman approaches you, asking gravely whether you can really afford the deluxe turntable, amplifier, and speakers. He questions whether it is in fact good for you to buy the equipment. He informs you of the interest rate on the store credit card, should

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object of erotic or passionate attachment), to be unsure of where one ends and begins, to be unable to find rational justification for why one wants to do what one wants to do” (p. 15).

you need to sign up for it. He asks if you can fit everything in your car and notes that delivery is an additional fee. As a result of his painstaking sobriety, you are not in the least bit excited to buy anything, never mind expensive audio equipment. The scrupulous salesman has made your shopping experience disappointing.

Now consider a parallel case.

*The Seductive Salesman.* The salesman notices you poking around the audio equipment. When you turn around, he compliments you on your Electric Wizard T-shirt. He's a fan of the band, too, it turns out, and asks whether you'd like to make a purchase. At once you decline and mutter something about forthcoming models making everything on display obsolete. Rather than leaving it there, the salesman tries to sell you the equipment. He entices you by playing a few records on the turntable, cranking up the volume on the speakers, explaining the subtle technology of the amplifier. He even puts on the platter the recent vinyl reissue of *Dopethrone*, by far the band's best album. He's right, you begin to think. The record does sound absolutely brutal, and the system would upgrade the one at home. At this point, he's hyped you up and your shopping experience excites you. In turn you exit the store pushing a carriage full of brand-new audio equipment.

Salesmanship is not completely morally wrong. As Conly observes, salesmen don't usually go beyond their moral rights nor do they coerce their customers into buying their wares (Conly, 2004, p. 113). Rather, they do something like what romantic and sexual seducers do. They try to 'win over' the customer and even for a moment, bring her to the point of giving rational control of herself over to the salesman. She does what the salesman wants her to do: she buys the product. As these twin cases make clear, though, salesmanship can go poorly or well. At first the salesman's scrupulousness is a turn-off. It depletes your enthusiasm, even weakening your confidence in your



own interests. This scrupulous salesman doesn't do anything *morally* bad, but unlike his seductive counterpart, he does not do much good. Perhaps there is something worrisome about the salesman in the second case. After all, he ignores your concern about obsolescence. Nevertheless, it is implausible to cry moral wrongdoing. For there are thoughtful elements of the salesman's 'seduction.' He learns your interests quickly and engages them. You won't ruin his day if you turn him down, but he's not uncaring either. It pleases him to help someone with similar niche tastes in occult-inspired doom metal. There is also something entertaining about his enthusiasm and demonstration; his pitch is akin to a performance.<sup>23</sup> It would be a mistake to generalize seduction based on the specific character of either situation.

Someone might deny the analogy to commerce and reject *The Seductive Salesman* as a form of seduction. The salesman makes no difference to your motivation because you are open to buying the audio equipment. On some level you *already want* it.<sup>24</sup> Neither are you led aside nor acting against your will.

However, there are two reasons to treat the case and seduction as analogous. First, you enter the electronics store undecided about purchasing any specific equipment. You are noncommittal before you interact with the salesman, then committed to a particular system after you talk to him. It is obvious that he influenced you to act in one way over others. Put differently, he led you aside. Second, assume that you do broadly desire audio equipment. Even so the salesman exerts an influence on you akin to seduction. Our desires are often muddled. We ask ourselves, should I get a dog? How about a new job? I want to change my life, I tell myself, but it

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<sup>23</sup> As Barton (2017) puts it, "To some extent, the [seduction] situation is similar to a magic show: we are amazed by a magic trick, but we often do not know what are the means used by the prestidigitator, and we may value this ignorance; for many people, a magic trick loses a part of its value when explained" (p. 45).

<sup>24</sup> See Cave (2009), p. 240 claims that salesmanship is not an example of what he calls "unsavory" seduction because it does not compromise people's autonomous control over their own motives.

is also comfortable and all I know. Desires exist on a scale; they can be strengthened or weakened. In the seductive case, the salesman *strengthens* your desire for the equipment, as though he were cranking the volume knob on the speaker. You thus act on the desire and make the purchase. This is due in large part to his influence, not entirely to your will. Seducers do not always lead us aside simply by introducing new desires to our motivation. They may influence the strength of existing desires as well.

With an attempt to dismantle the analogy off the table, we have the following argument: If salesmanship is analogous to seduction, and salesmanship isn't wholly unethical, then we have reason to say the same about seduction.

Let's continue with another deeply unsexy paradigm of seduction: politics. Consider again the presidential candidate.

*The Candidate.* For almost two hours the presidential candidate gives a fiery speech at the political rally. They harangue on their message of complete social transformation. Like the director of a choir, they lead chants of their campaign slogans. The crowd screams and applauds.

We do not have to squint to see the resemblance between this case and seduction. We want politicians to sweep us off our feet, as though we will only vote for them once seduced. This desire requires politicians, like seducers, to play into our latent interests and hype us up. Politicians thus do and say whatever they can to 'win over' the electorate and in a sense entice voters to cast their ballot for them. Another way to put the point is in terms of rational self-control. Politicians get us to do what they want us to do: vote for them. Entire presidential campaigns have sunk because candidates failed to embrace this basic desire to be seduced. In 1988 Michael Dukakis lost the election for the President of the United States in part because the voting public viewed him as dull

and dispassionate.<sup>25</sup> Political rallies excite and feed the desire to be carried away. People do not usually attend them to deliberate whether to vote for the candidate. Their minds are made up. These rallies are good for the sake of people's desire to be enthralled.

However, *The Candidate* is neither straightforwardly good nor bad. We are likely to have an ambivalent reaction to the case. On the one hand, the rally could celebrate positive democratic ideals like Hope, Change, and Progress, and the candidate could lead a benign political movement. On the other hand, there may be something unpalatable about the case. The rally could simply be the occasion to air grievances. It could devolve into a mob or worse. Nevertheless, we need not dismiss the case as completely bad. That move is too quick. We must carve out the features that make it benign and the features that make it less so. If this case is indeed analogous to seduction, then we have a reason to treat seduction the same way. Like politicians, seducers may turn out to be ethical or unethical. Yet, it is a mistake to characterize seduction itself one way or the other.

For the sake of argument, suppose that the proposed analogy to politics is on to something.<sup>26</sup> But does it demonstrate that seduction is not completely morally bad? Consider one more non-romantic, non-sexual analogy to seduction.

*Advertisement.* The banner on the side of a city bus proclaims that a new skin cream will change your life. It depicts an attractive, fair skinned, smiling woman. Many of us would find this advertisement somewhat reprehensible. It blatantly plays into the insecurities and social biases of consumers and promises something patently false.<sup>27</sup> It is like an

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<sup>25</sup> One unforgiving newspaper headline in the *Orlando Sentinel* from that year read: "In the Politics of Personality, Michael Dukakis Looks Like a Born Loser."

<sup>26</sup> See Anderson (2006) for skepticism about non-sexual analogies to seduction. Pressuring someone into buying something cannot be a helpful analogy to pressuring someone into having sex, because "treating pressure to have sex like any other sort of interpersonal pressure obscures the role such sexual pressure might play in supporting gender hierarchy" (p. 349).

<sup>27</sup> As well Marxists would claim that such advertisements have little to do with the well-being of individual consumers and simply function to circulate capital. See Arriaga (1984).

instance of direct manipulation, something morally good people do not do. Ad men, say, *aim* to meddle with consumers' psychology and it doesn't matter whether consumers are aware of it. The advertisement is designed simply to entice people to buy the cream. Eric Cave has said that subliminal advertising is morally problematic because it "attempts to create demand for a product by altering the motives of consumers through means that severely hamper exercise of their capacities to evaluate the alterations" (Cave, 2014, p. 177).<sup>28</sup> One could say seducers are like advertisements: they charm their victims to satisfy their own ends. They impose themselves on us to get something *they* want from us. They tamper with our motivation for their sakes, not ours. If this sort of imposition is objectionable in advertisement, and it's a central feature of seduction, then there is something morally objectionable about seduction as well.

I concede that advertisements like the one in the example are vulgar, perhaps even morally objectionable. However, the case does not prove that seduction belongs on the same plane of iniquity as crass advertisements. Recall the case of the seductive salesman. Because he works to strengthen your desire for audio equipment, he in a sense seduces you. Moreover, he interacts with you as someone with a similar taste in music. Despite the fact that he gets paid to sell the equipment, his help is genuine. Not only does he see you as an individual with specific interests, but he also relates to those interests. It's thus implausible to claim that he's indifferent to the harms you might suffer in light of his 'seduction.' We can't say the same about the sleazy ad men. They most likely don't seek to actively harm consumers. (After all, no consumer, no consumption, no profit.) Nevertheless, they are indifferent to the general welfare of consumers. That indifference and the absence of any engagement with individual persons are significant structural differences

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<sup>28</sup> For more discussion on this point, see Cave (2014), pp. 177–8. See also Cave (2011), pp. 505–6 for brief discussion about whether advertisements might compromise personal autonomy.

between *Advertisement* and *The Seductive Salesman*. Those differences begin to break down the possible similarity between advertisement and seduction more generally.

When seduction goes well, it's closer to the ethical than when it's bungled. Acts of seduction may turn out to be more often unethical than ethical. That is an empirical matter. Seduction in principle, I have argued in this section, is a moral blank. We mischaracterize it when we portray it as simply sleazy or a serious moral wrong. If it were completely morally problematic, we would never feel ambivalent about it. It would only disturb us. But as I have shown, this is not true.

## 5

At this stage of my overall argument, I have only hinted at the possibility of ethical seduction. More must be said about distinguishing the good-making features of seduction from the bad.

Let me now propose a reasonable set of criteria to determine whether a given case of seduction is ethical. Seduction is ethical, I argue, when the seducer engages the latent desires and interests of the seduced. Two auxiliary processes clarify this engagement: ethical seducers may (i) hype people up, amplifying any positive emotions with which they are not in tune, and/or (ii) deactivate any problematic inhibitions that lead them to resist what they freely desire. Satisfying (i) or (ii) or both is enough to explain why the seducer in question does something morally good to the seduced. There may be other considerations that make a given case of seduction ethical, and a patently ethical case may have neither criterion. Still, these two conditions make clear the good of seduction and advance our understanding of why seduction sometimes pleases us.

Our latent desires and interests are central to ethical seduction. All I have in mind are the things people already want and take to be important for their well-being prior to the seduction.

Some want to appreciate their vinyl records in Hi-Fi; others want to appear funny and feel as though people generally like them. The desires and interests relevant to the ethics of seduction will vary by case. Nevertheless, pre-existing desires and interests play a general role in demarcating ethical seduction. Consider their role in flattery. What makes flattery successful? The flatterer taps into what already interests the flattered; he relates to what she already wants. (It matters little to the point whether self-interest motivates him. The effect on her is the same: she's pleased.) Flattery appears hollow when the flatterer makes no real connection with the flattered. If he doesn't play into what she already desires, his praise will come off as a random compliment or a vain attempt to curry favor. Of course obsequiousness is not a serious moral wrong. But it's not good. (The colorful term 'brown-noser' implies as much.) One reason why it's not good is that it does not engage with the recipient's autonomous motivation, the desires she formed on her own. If someone does that, they do something genuine and good, perhaps even ethical.

We are now in the position to begin distinguishing ethical seduction from cases that are less so. The more seducers neglect the features of people's latent motivation, the less ethical they tend to appear. A seducer may possibly spark a new desire in the seduced's mind, gain a foothold, and create further new desires. However, enticing prospective romantic and sexual partners with new desires, like vendors hawking newspapers at passersby, has prudent and moral risks. Thousands of romantic comedies have depicted the scene. The seducer bombs if he does all the talking while his date sits there praying the check arrives soon. It's safe to say: no second date for him. Worse, seducers cajole prospective partners into sex, e.g., when the partners had not entertained the thought previously. The morally wrong-making feature of these kinds of seduction is the neglect of the partners' own desires and interests and the total absence of any reciprocity

between the seducer and the seduced. Without an openness to what the seduced wants, it's not at all obvious whether the seducer in fact cares about the well-being of the seduced.

Seduction should be a complex dance between two people, in which they discover, step by step, whether the prospect of romance or sex is within their mutual interest. Seducers are off to an ethical start when unlike rapacious libertines, they entice people by engaging what they freely want. The engagement should in some way be reciprocal. The seducer should observe what the prospective partner does and listen to what he says about himself *and then* perform a seductive gesture, like playing his favorite music, reading aloud his favorite poetry, etc., *and then* wait and see how he responds. If his response is positive and he encourages you to continue with a caress or a sultry expression, then some kind of indirect back-and-forth has been established by morally permissible means. From the vantage of the seduced, this conscientious engagement emphasizes what he likes as well as gives him time and space to affirm his feelings.<sup>29</sup> Affirmation most likely won't take the form of a decision procedure but a pleasurable loss of rational self-control. The loss is pleasurable because the seducer entices him with what he freely desires.

Though I've thus far spoken of the engagement of the seduced's desires and interests in general terms, it is complex. We can say it involves at least two distinct, though related processes, both of which are worth explaining in detail. Another way to put the point, the following processes are two specific ways ethical seducers engage people's desires and interests.

Let's call the first process *hype*. Seducers aim to elicit their targets' excitement to have sex and fall in love. However strange it may sound, seducers are not unlike movie trailers. A good trailer grabs our attention, piques our curiosity, and builds anticipation for what is to come. Though there is not much that is rational about this process, it nevertheless gives viewers pleasure. When

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<sup>29</sup> Conly (2004), p. 113 suggests the importance of having time and space to consider temptations. E.g., when describing her case of a seductive salesman, she mentions that "most of all, whatever he says, he doesn't let you think."

seducers hype us up, we sometimes experience similar joys. We become intrigued by the prospects they present and find the mounting anticipation exhilarating.

Any seducer who is not a mere bungler will try hyping people up. However, *ethical* seducers seek to enliven people's experiences based on their own interests. For example, these types of seducers could amplify features of people's emotional lives worth amplifying. Some people may not be attuned to their emotions. A customer may be interested in purchasing a particular sound system but may feel lukewarm about doing so when they have the chance. They might have social anxiety or feel uncomfortable under the blazing department store fluorescents. The salesman acts ethically if he gets the customer excited about the system and connects the customer's emotions to their latent interest. There is something pleasing about such states of attunement, especially if a person is not in the position to achieve it themselves.

Call the second process of engagement *deactivation*. Seducers may play into our freely chosen interests and desires by deactivating or removing any psychological conflict, states of mind—typically feelings, emotions, attitudes—that pull us in different directions and prevent us from yielding to seducers though they touch on what we freely want. This process is morally complex as well. Not all inhibitions are good for us. They range from the reasonable to the problematic. Sound financial plans are strong, healthy inhibitions against dropping thousands of dollars on audio equipment. Not wanting to have sex with someone whom one doesn't love is a sensible inhibition against seduction. Inhibitions like these keep us prudent and safe. But questioning the general value of music or sex is a neutral inhibition. It neither helps nor hinders to ask ourselves, "How great is music (or sex), really?" And then there are inhibitions that are less helpful, even immoral. Worry about the possible forthcoming models of a particular sound system is an unreasonable inhibition against buying the one in front of you because, without definite



information, market trends are hard to predict. As well not wanting to have sex with someone because of their ethnicity or skin color is a racist inhibition.

Seduction is ethical when it focuses on the seduced's interests and desires and deactivates any neutral or problematic inhibitions against sex or romance and removes the psychological conflict in the seduced's mind. Consider this example.

*Stuart.* You are planning a dinner for the office and want to invite your aloof cubicle mate, Stuart. He loves telling wry jokes and always says that he should come out for drinks sometime, but he never does because he is notoriously standoffish. As expected, Stuart considers your invitation for half a second and declines. He worries that he will sit alone, and no one will talk to him, proving his worst fear true: everyone in the office dislikes him. Despite his refusal, you leave on his cubicle desk a copy of the restaurant menu as well as a flyer for the comedy club next to the restaurant. When you see that Stuart has thrown them in the trash, you put them back on his desk. This back-and-forth goes on throughout the week. At the dinner Stuart makes a surprise appearance and tells the funniest jokes you've ever heard. Later in the night he pulls you aside and thanks you for luring him out of his shell.

Your behavior maintains the distinction between seduction and more rational processes like persuasion. You did not give him direct reasons for why he should attend the dinner. Nor did you deceive him.<sup>30</sup> Rather, he inferred from your behavior alone that his coworkers liked him and that nothing was in fact stopping him from attending the dinner. You got him over the hump, so to speak. You removed his problematic inhibition indirectly. Most importantly for our purposes, you

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<sup>30</sup> If seducers intentionally deceive their targets, the ethical flavor of the seduction changes completely to unethical. See, for example, Dougherty (2013), especially pp. 727–739.

did so by appealing to his own interests in comedy and in socializing. This feature makes your deactivation of Stuart's inhibition ethical.

However, the process of removing another person's inhibitions, especially those against sex, can go awry. Not every instance of deactivation is ethical. Someone may come to feel after purchasing a new sound system that the salesman bamboozled him. As though a fog clears, he returns to his rational senses and sees that he has been duped. The salesman tricked him into dropping one of the inhibitions he valued, namely his inhibition against throwing away thousands of dollars on audio equipment. This is morally wrong because the inhibition was good for him rather than neutral or detrimental. Even if he came to desire the sound system in the store, his withdrawal of endorsement after the fact registers the pressure the salesman inflicted on him, the wheedling and weakening of his resistance to the temptation. Likewise, someone may have been tempted into sex though she had the inhibition to have sex only with people she loved. If love was important to her and a seducer brought her to forget about it, the seducer wronged her. The deactivation of someone's good inhibitions reflects a selfish attitude that is seriously vulnerable to moral criticism. It implies that the seducer does not care about the seduced. Such seducers act purely for the sake of their own ends in an arena where each person's interests should be considered equally.

Moreover, there appears to be a problem of identification. No doubt inhibitions are difficult to categorize. From the first-person perspective their values can be opaque. Sometimes we're personally unsure what our own inhibitions even are. From the point of view of the seducer, people don't readily disclose their inhibitions against sex and romance so easily in courtships. (Perhaps Buss would call inhibitions an example of the straightforwardness early courtship can't sustain.)

It's unclear how either the seducer or even the seduced know which of the seduced's inhibitions against seduction the seducer may permissibly deactivate.

The problem of identification can be tackled from the two relevant perspectives of seduction. Take the seducer's point of view first. From this angle identification is a matter of circumspection. It's true that we rarely have full transparency when it comes to enticing others into sex and love. For that reason seducers should take great care when they interact with people. By likening seduction to a kind of dance, I emphasize the importance of conscientious engagement with the seduced, which involves learning what she wants and doesn't want. How exactly this learning takes place varies by case.

Consider the problem from the first-person perspective. Though we tend to lack full transparency of our own minds, there are practical steps we can take to recognize our own psychological conflicts like cognitive behavioral therapy and discussing our hesitations with our loved ones. Once identified, we can gauge the value of our inhibitions by asking ourselves whether they are reasonable. If the relevant inhibitions cannot withstand rational scrutiny, there is something flawed about them. For example, a person could reasonably explain why it is important for him to have sex only with someone he loves. But it is far from obvious that he could reasonably explain why it is important for him to avoid sex with people of a specific race. There are plausible reasons for the first but not the second inhibition. Of course indirect, non-rational interaction constitutes seduction, not the exchange of reasons. Nevertheless, the rationality of the inhibitions themselves matters when it comes to categorizing the inhibitions seducers may morally deactivate. Being seduced is pleasurable in part because the seduced do not remove their own irrational inhibitions like fears and prejudices. Not everyone is in the position to do that hard work. Seducers do it for them.

I have argued in this section that the processes of *hype* and *deactivation* are sufficient criteria to call a case of seduction ethical. Yet, one might object that they're more problematic than I let on. After all, it's not obvious that anyone has a right to hype someone up nor a right to deactivate someone's inhibition even if the inhibition makes his life worse. Someone might remind us that we don't force alcoholics to seek addiction treatment against their will. Doing so violates their autonomy. Nevertheless, we do sometimes stage interventions for the people we love who struggle with addiction and narrow their options more or less against their will. This is morally permissible because our end is not to humiliate them in front of their family and friends, but rather to help them recover from their disorder. Likewise, the end a person has in mind when she seduces someone matters for the morality of her *hype* and *deactivation*. If she does these things simply to get someone to have sex with her, there is indeed something morally wrong with her seduction. As I have argued, what's wrong is her disregard of what the seduced freely wants. If a seducer hypes someone up or deactivates a neutral or problematic inhibition with that end in mind, that is enough to understand the seduction as ethical.

## 6

No doubt some will object to the very idea of *ethical* seduction. For all the pleasure they induce, ethical seducers, one could say, do not deserve the name. Their behavior still has a fundamental moral problem: it bypasses, undercuts, subverts, and tampers with people's rationality, their decision-making processes, their will, their motivation. Whatever language one chooses, the point is the same: there is something morally dubious about meddling with people's psychology.

Conly poses a version of the challenge. A seducer, she claims, does not contribute to another person's rational decision-making process "but rather *undercuts* it" (Conly, 2004, p. 112;

italics added). This may take at least two forms: a seducer could pressure someone to cave either to a pre-existing desire or to a desire to avoid negative sanctions, like fear or emotional pain, enforced by the seducer (p. 112). Seducers of the first type aim to increase the salience of someone's desire to yield to the relevant temptation and dispose her of the reasons to resist. The friend who waves a plate of fresh bread under your nose and implores you to try it, saying, "just one bite couldn't hurt," chips away at your rational motivational structure (p. 113–4). He does not allow you the time to collect yourself and reflect on what you want to do all-things-considered. Likewise, the lovable cousin who finagles money from you by suggesting that your relationship will never be the same if you snub him does something similar: he "subvert[s] your thinking process and get[s] you to do what [he] want[s]" (p. 114).<sup>31</sup> These types of seduction have obvious parallels in the realm of sex.

Though Conly recognizes that seduction is not an egregious moral wrong,<sup>32</sup> its very nature is "bad" (p. 113). As Conly puts it, "while weakness is no doubt morally problematic in terms of each person's assessment of his or her character, neither has anything to blame the other for...The problem arises when one feels that one's weakness has somehow been induced by another" (p. 111–2). Conly worries whether it is ever "proper" to induce weakness in someone and undercut her rational motivation (p. 116). By her own definition, that is simply what seduction involves. As she claims, seduction is "weakness induced by another" (p. 112). Her implicit argument, then, is that undercutting someone's rationality is morally problematic, and seducers undercut the rationality of the seduced; therefore, seduction has an essential moral problem.

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<sup>31</sup> For a critical discussion of Conly's two types of seduction, see Liberto (2022), pp. 252–55.

<sup>32</sup> She elucidates the conceptual differences among seduction, rape, and coercion, and persuasively shows that seduction does not always invalidate consent and may even be appropriate (p. 116). Seducers do not overstep their moral rights (p. 115).

However, this conclusion is false. I have argued that there are reasons to understand seduction more broadly.<sup>33</sup> Conly's implicit argument relies on a mistaken assumption: it is false that undercutting someone's rationality is morally problematic. Seducers do something *morally good* when they connect people to their freely chosen desires and interests through careful processes like *hype* and *deactivation*. Suppose that I don't want to buy any audio equipment because I'm concerned that everything I see will be outdated by the forthcoming models. I'm in the market for a new system, but my desire to pass is stronger than my desire to purchase, all things considered. The seductive salesman observes my hesitation and tries to sell me a piece of equipment anyway. He plays a record on the turntable, and once I hear the crisp quality of the sound, I'm impressed, drop my inhibition, and buy the equipment. The salesman clearly interfered with my general motivational structure, but in an unobjectionable way. Conly's view precludes this possibility.<sup>34</sup> Though there is something to Conly's worry, she overgeneralizes.

Unlike Conly, Cave recognizes that seduction is a broad category, ranging from innocuous courtship to sexual coercion (Cave, 2009, p. 237). Along the spectrum, he claims, is a form of sexual seduction not as egregious as coercion or rape but nevertheless morally problematic. Like Conly, Cave characterizes the moral problem in terms of subversion: "unsavory seduction," as he labels the form, "is one person's purposeful attempt to get another to engage in sex by *bypassing* her concerns to induce changes in her motives sufficient to *convert* initial sexual unwillingness to willingness to have sex based on sexual desire" (pp. 237–8; italics added). Cave holds that autonomous control over our personal sets of motives has great moral importance. We must be able to manage our own motives and consider their implications and which ones to keep and drop

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<sup>33</sup> See Barton (2017), p. 37 for different version of this general criticism.

<sup>34</sup> One might question whether ethical seduction in fact undercuts the target's motivation in Conly's sense. Connecting people to what they want already does not sound like much of a subversion. But Conly bases a paradigm of seduction on the inflation of pre-existing desires. See, e.g., pp. 113–14.

(p. 240). But unsavory seducers foist changes on us in ways that prevent us from satisfying this condition of autonomy. Unsavory seduction, then, compromises our capacity to manage our own motives freely (p. 240). According to Cave, the consequences of such tampering, like the enhanced ability to manage one's motives more freely, do not make much of a moral difference (p. 242). The unsavory seducer at bottom disrespects a person's capacity to reflect on her motives during the seduction. This violation explains its unsavoriness.

Cave's Kantian argument suggests that any seducer who tampers with people's motivation does something morally unsavory. By his lights the seducers I've called ethical are no different. The work of those seducers—hyping people up and deactivating neutral or problematic inhibitions—amounts to motivational tampering. It violates the principle that we must always be able to manage our own motives.

Yet, there is a distinction to be drawn. It's one thing to bypass a person's motivation completely and foist upon him a new sexual desire to have sex. Cave rightly implies that a seducer who wheedles her victim into doing something he did not already want does wrong. But it's another thing to tamper with someone's motivation if three conditions are met. Motivational tampering is not clearly wrong if (i) the seducer does so with reciprocity in mind; she leaves it open for her and the seduced to discover whether sex is in their mutual interests; (ii) what the seduced desires is freely chosen; his existing motivation reflects his autonomy; and (iii) the seducer's end is morally permissible and regards the well-being of the seduced, e.g., by removing bad inhibitions and connecting him to his emotions and desires. We thus shouldn't scrap the category of unsavory seduction, since it does explain the problem with the distasteful cases. Rather, the more subtle point is that not all forms of motivational tampering are objectionable. There is no

denying that seducers—even the ethical ones—tamper with people’s motivation to a degree. But when they meet conditions (i)–(iii), their behavior is morally permissible.

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It's worth taking another look at the role of seduction in the ethics of love and sex because it avoids direct rational engagement. This feature of seduction has a broader import for how we communicate with other people. For instance, despite their emphasis on rational argument, philosophers and seducers have something in common. Philosophers often use somewhat non-rational tactics in defense of their arguments. Vivid vignettes about trolleys and violinists in need of a blood transfusion don't fully engage the reader's rationality; nevertheless, they're designed to extract intuitions from the reader in support of the relevant argument. Philosophers don't cajole their readers into agreement, but like seducers, they seek something from them by somewhat non-rational means. Moreover, as I've argued is true about seducers, philosophers can use and abuse this strategy of communication. A philosopher will come off as a sophist if he tries persuading people with cheap rhetorical tricks like *ad hominem*s and other fallacies. Good philosophers, on the other hand, make us feel the force of their arguments with exciting examples. Of course philosophy and seduction aren't completely analogous. (At the end of the day, philosophy is still a rational endeavor unlike seduction.) But a traditional philosophical strategy gives us some insight into the complexity of indirect, non-rational communication. The lesson is that it's not always a bad thing to eschew rationality. In the right context, many of us welcome it.

Throughout this essay I've presented a battery of images, analogies, and examples to argue that seduction has a similarly complex role in the ethics of romance and sex. I've claimed that we're often ambivalent about seduction. Though we fear coercion, sometimes it pleases us to be



wooed. Our conflicted attitude reflects a broader psychological conflict regarding rational self-control. Nevertheless, it implies that being seduced has some appeal. From this appeal, it's reasonable to claim that good as well as cringeworthy instances of seduction are possible. This possibility allows for the idea of ethical seduction. Seduction is ethical, I've proposed, when seducers play into people's latent desires and interests, hyping them up or deactivating problematic inhibitions. These processes are the steps in the dance in which the loss of control becomes a pleasure.

# Love and Evaluative Conflict

## Abstract

Lovers often disagree. We may reject the specific goals our loved ones pursue or the broad values they hold. Some philosophers suggest that such evaluative conflict makes romantic love in its ideal form deficient. I argue that this is mistaken. On the contrary, our ideal of love holds that we *can* love people for ‘who they are’ (as we say), even as we profoundly disagree with them. My argument draws on intuitive cases from screwball comedy about love amid conflict, love across political party lines, as well as ‘forbidden’ love across religions and cultures. At a deeper level, I sketch an ideal of love I call *intimate independence* and argue that this ideal is (i) fully compatible with any evaluative conflict, (ii) embedded in our ordinary attitudes towards mature love between equals, and (iii) an ideal worth achieving. As long as intimate independence is a compelling ideal, deep conflict will not seem like an obstacle to true love. The ideal reminds us that love can bring together people with radically different points of view, and that to insist on shared ends or values is thus to miss a part of the meaning and power of love.

## 1. Introduction

Evaluative conflict between romantic partners is a common theme in classic screwball comedy. Consider the plot of *Adam's Rib*.<sup>35</sup> Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy play Amanda and Adam Bonner, married lawyers who take opposing sides on a case in which a wife attempted to shoot her philandering husband. Adam aims to prosecute the wife, believing that no one has the

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<sup>35</sup> For a classic reading of this film, see Stanley Cavell (1981), pp. 191–228, who claims that it belongs to the genre of ‘remarriage’ comedy.

right to break the law. But Amanda aims to defend her, viewing the case as the opportunity to highlight the emotional harms the philanderer caused his wife to suffer. Their clash of ends in the courtroom is more than a superficial professional dispute. It is not as if Adam and Amanda participate in a baseball game but play on opposing teams, something which would not threaten their love. Rather, their conflict endangers their marriage. Adam tells Amanda that a marriage is “a contract, it’s the law,” implying that she will tarnish their loving relationship if she tarnishes the sanctity of the law by undermining his ends in court. The Bonners’ conflict, then, is not only significant as it concerns their careers as lawyers. Adam treats his broad end as moral at bottom. He views himself as obligated to hold people strictly accountable for flouting the law. Yet, Amanda, too, sees her broad aim as fundamentally moral. She seeks to acknowledge and validate the pains which women (especially in the 1940s when the film takes place) experience when unfairly regulated to the role of ‘housewife.’ However, the couple celebrates their love at the end of the film, cheering “hooray for the difference” between them. The film implies that there is something inspiring about romantic love which endures deep evaluative conflict.

Next consider “forbidden” love. In these cases, love crosses cultural boundaries and for that reason lovers confront profound differences. Suppose that Saba is a devout Muslim whose religious faith is a fundamental source of value in her life. She faces a problem when she falls in love with the atheist Philip. For instance, her spiritual community at her mosque is centrally important to her, but Philip finds the community deluded. Saba and Philip’s ways of seeing the world essentially clash, given their deep religious differences. Yet, imagine that these lovers find a way to make their relationship work. It may seem implausible that lovers with a pervasive conflict between their central values can in fact have an ideal loving relationship. Nevertheless, a real-world example indicates that love can persist through such deep conflicts of value without

appearing sub-optimal. James Carville and Mary Matalin's longtime marriage is famous in American politics. Carville is a staunch supporter of and consultant for the Democratic Party, while Matalin is a conservative consultant for the Republican Party. Carville and Matalin often speak of one another as the most intelligent people they know despite disagreeing about their core values.<sup>36</sup> As in the case of *Adam's Rib*, there might be something admirable about the way the lovers in these examples sustain such a trenchant clash of values.

Both types of cases involve evaluative conflict, albeit at different levels of generality. *Adam's Rib* is an example of a clash between the lovers' specific ends, even if it occasionally touches on more significant differences. Forbidden love concerns broad disagreement over the values that organize the lovers' lives. The lovers in these examples clearly share quite a bit. But sharing things does not address the extent to which their love can survive conflict. Both scenarios thus raise the same question about how we should view love in light of such disagreement: does evaluative conflict compromise love, rendering it deficient or less than ideal? Put differently, why don't lovers in these situations view their deep conflict as a reason to end their relationship and conclude that love between them, at least in its ideal form, is impossible?<sup>37</sup> In this article, I am interested in whether love can retain its status as an ideal worth striving for despite any evaluative conflict. Thus, let us label this issue *the problem of evaluative conflict*. This problem deserves more sustained attention in the philosophical literature on love.<sup>38</sup> Without investigating it, the full

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<sup>36</sup> See Carville and Matalin's co-written memoir on their marriage, *Love & War: Twenty Years, Two Presidents, Two Daughters, and One Louisiana Home*.

<sup>37</sup> In response to this question, a qualities theorist would argue that my beloved's qualities like his humor, intelligence, and kindness, constitute reasons for loving him, despite our evaluative differences. However, if those qualities justify my love for my beloved, then I am no longer justified in loving him once he loses them. See Niko Kolodny (2003), pp. 135–40. Moreover, it is superficial to take my beloved's qualities as the primary reasons for loving him, since doing so seems to value his qualities over and above the person to whom the qualities belong. See Troy Jollimore (2011), pp. 126 ff. Given that the qualities theory is beset with these standard objections, I don't address it here.

<sup>38</sup> One philosopher who addresses directly conflicted love is Rorty (2016), pp. 347–50. But she focuses on the conflicts among one's personal and professional loves, not the deep *evaluative* conflicts between lovers. See p. 349.

significance of love between those who acknowledge the full independence of their beloved cannot be adequately understood.

Some philosophers suggest that love worthy of the name is impossible in light of large-scale disagreement.<sup>39</sup> Consider two general strategies to explain why the preceding cases might cause us discomfort. Defenders of *the shared-ends view* hold that lovers should treat their beloved's ends as well chosen and take themselves to have reason to adopt those ends as their own. These presumptions can be overridden, allowing for limited end-conflict in ideal love. However, conflict concerning lovers' most central ends is likely to cause practical difficulties in the relationship. According to this strategy, lovers share *ends* with *determinate* content. But according to a version of the *shared-values view*, lovers are to share *values* whose content may be *indeterminate*. On this second strategy, ideal love calls for lovers to determine jointly the content of the values which they both treat one another as pursuing inchoately. It's not obvious that the lovers in the problem cases view each other in this way. According to both strategies, there is something deficient about deeply conflicted love.<sup>40</sup>

Against these strategies, I shall characterize an ideal of love, argue that it is fully compatible with lovers holding any conflicting ends and values, and conclude that it is a mistake to imply that such love is flawed on the grounds of evaluative conflict. According to the ideal of *intimate independence*, evaluative conflict forces us to appreciate how our loved ones exist as individuals independently of ourselves.<sup>41</sup> The ideal holds that lovers should not do so with

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<sup>39</sup> Of course, these philosophers can admit that inferior varieties of love remain possible like juvenile crushes and love affairs.

<sup>40</sup> While I discuss love in terms of deficient or ideal, I don't discuss the broad issue of whether there are normative reasons for love, that is, whether love is the kind of affective attitude that can be considered fitting, appropriate, or as making sense considering some states of affairs. Key figures in this debate include Harry Frankfurt (1999a, 1999b, 2004), who argues that there are no reasons for love, J. David Velleman (1999), and Kolodny (2003), both of whom generally argue that there are reasons for love.

<sup>41</sup> The ideal challenges union theories of love, according to which love consists in the formation of a 'We,' the content of which varies by theory. For historical accounts, see Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium* (189a–194e) and

contempt or cold detachment, but with the affective attitudes associated with intimacy, namely with felt closeness and connection. Intimate independence is neither foreign to our experience of love nor revisionary. It is a recognizable feature of our existing attitudes toward mature romantic love. Thus, it cannot be easily brushed aside. I don't propose my sketch of intimate independence to be an exhaustive account of the valuable features of love. But as long as it is recognizable as a compelling ideal, any clashing ends or values, however central to the lovers, will not seem like an obstacle to true love. The ideal of intimate independence is evidence that love can bring together people with radically different points of view, and that to insist on shared ends or values is thus to miss a part of the meaning and power of love.

## **2. The shared-ends view**

A natural worry about evaluative conflict is that love beset by such disagreements is tainted or diminished in some way. The shared-ends view, best formulated by Kyla Ebels-Duggan (2008), offers an account of love which appears to dissolve this worry.<sup>42</sup> On this view, limited evaluative conflict between lovers is perfectly compatible with the ideal of love. However, I argue in this section that ideal love allows for *any* evaluative conflict once we draw a qualitative distinction between the sorts of ends lovers may share. With the distinction, it should be clear why love fraught with large-scale end-conflict need not fall short of ideal love.

According to the shared-ends view, lovers are to be guided by two norms for acknowledging one another's authority in the relationship: (1) the norm of selection authority holds

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Hegel's (1971) fragment on love. For a more recent version, see Robert Nozick (1991). Although union views are like sharing theories, they are not identical, since union views hold much stronger metaphysical claims than sharing theories, e.g., that lovers form a merged identity in light of their love. For the distinction between union and sharing views, see Nozick 1991, pp. 428–9. I focus on sharing rather than union theories because they present more of a challenge to my own picture, given that they allow moderate conflict.

<sup>42</sup> For an alternative shared-ends view, see Melissa Fahmy (2016), who draws the distinction between sharing an end with another and sharing in another's end.

that “by choosing from among the set of permissible projects, [your beloved] gives you reason to pursue the chosen ends with her rather than concentrate your efforts on some other worthwhile pursuits”; and (2) the norm of judgment authority holds that you should “treat [your beloved’s] choice of an end as if it were evidence that the end is worthwhile” (Ebels-Duggan, 2008, p. 156, pp. 158–9).<sup>43</sup>

Consider first how selection authority is compatible with moderate evaluative disagreement between lovers. If your partner chooses the end of moving across the country to start a new career, the norm holds that you should take yourself to have a reason to move with her. For you share ends if you acknowledge your partner’s authority to generate reasons for you to do things based on her ends. But Ebels-Duggan is clear that the nature of these reasons is defeasible. She emphasizes this point when discussing cases where one’s beloved pursues impermissible ends: “We might say that even here love gives you some reason to accommodate and promote [the end] but that the reason that you have not to participate in impermissible projects always overrides this” (p. 161). Moreover, the norm of judgment authority allows for moderate conflict, as well. As Ebels-Duggan states:

I think that love requires us to operate under the presumption that our partner is choosing well. But I also believe that the presumption can be defeated, and love doesn’t in this case require that we ignore the disagreement. That is, I want to claim that we’re off from the ideal of loving relationships if we aren’t each presuming that the other is making good choices. But I’m not committed to thinking that there is something wrong with the

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<sup>43</sup> Ebels-Duggan proposes the shared-ends view as an alternative to the benefactor view, as described by Frankfurt (1999a, 1999b, 2004). She persuasively argues that Frankfurt’s parent-child model is the wrong model for understanding *adult romantic* relationships.

relationship if, despite the presumption, we think each other wrong in given cases. (pp. 160–1)

The presumption that our loved ones are choosing well may be defeated for good reasons just like selection authority may be defeated for good reasons. The shared-ends view thus doesn't condemn conflicted love as flawed in *all* cases.

However, Ebels-Duggan is explicit that end-conflict can be a problem. Suppose that you are indifferent to birdwatching but fall in love with a birdwatcher (p. 160). If your beloved is a dilettante, your indifference may not be a problem. But assume that she is a professional birdwatcher. Now your indifference is objectionable because the relevant ends are central to her life plan. Ebels-Duggan argues that even if you conscientiously try but fail to appreciate her ends, “you risk condescension toward your partner,” because your involvement in her life plan amounts to ‘humoring’ her, treating her like you would a child in a game (pp. 160; 158).

Here Ebels-Duggan implies that evaluative clashes between lovers’ *central* ends make their love less than ideal *qua* loving relationship because they create practical difficulties in the relationship. Ebels-Duggan emphasizes this point by writing: “it’s worth noting that [in cases of deep end-conflict], your refusal to share in your partner’s ends will have a tendency to disrupt—and perhaps undermine—the relationship. That’s because in practice, relationships largely consist in carrying out our shared ends together” (p. 162). The loving relationship would be qualitatively better without the difficulty created by the conflict. You’re less prone to hurt your beloved or to treat her in a condescending manner if you presume that her ends are worthwhile. Small-scale end-conflict is not a problem. As Ebels-Duggan writes, disvaluing your beloved’s ends can be “acceptable with respect to *some* of your partner’s *less significant* projects” (p. 158; emphasis added). But conflict becomes unmanageable in a practical sense when lovers show little regard for



each other's central ends and are completely unmoved by their beloveds' reasons. In these extreme cases, "a relationship in which each regards *all* of the other's pursuits this way falls short of the ideal of love" (p. 158; emphasis added).

Contrary to Ebels-Duggan, I contend that one mature adult can engage in a non-defective loving relationship with another mature adult while disvaluing much of what the other person pursues, and while presuming that the person is rarely making good choices. Forbidden love and *Adam's Rib* are cases in point. The atheist Philip does not see Saba's spiritual ends to be all that important. He presumes that Saba is mistaken to devote so much of her time to worship at the mosque. It is nevertheless still possible for Philip and Saba to have a non-defective loving relationship if they appreciate the fact that they hold distinct ends but remain committed to the flourishing of their relationship and other ends internal to their love like loyalty to one another. I will address directly below how this kind of love is in fact non-defective. What is important to see now about this kind of case is that these forbidden lovers do not disagree about the value of their ends despite presuming judgment authority. Ebels-Duggan would welcome that approach. Rather, they reject the other's central projects *without* making the presumption. The same applies to the Bonners in *Adam's Rib*. Adam and Amanda think that the other's handling of the court case is deeply wrong. Nevertheless, their love is far from sub-optimal because it includes praiseworthy features like the appreciation for the individuality of the beloved, as depicted at the end of the film. But in their non-defective loving relationship, the Bonners do not assume the norm of judgment authority. They instead disvalue the other's central life project before considering its value.

The loving relationships in these examples are thus defective on the shared-ends view because the lovers "aren't each presuming that the other is making good choices" (pp. 160–1). In other words, they fail to meet judgment authority. Therefore, Ebels-Duggan must treat these cases

as “off from the ideal of loving relationships” (p. 160). If a loving relationship fails to meet at least one of the norms that constitutes the shared-ends view, then it fails to meet the view generally, given that both norms must be met for the relationship to fit the view.

Yet, Ebels-Duggan is right that “you need your beloved’s cooperation to create [your] relationship” (p. 167). Lovers are to share at least *something* for their relationship to function. But the shared-ends view misdiagnoses the issue. For there is a qualitative distinction to be drawn concerning ends in a loving relationship. There is a difference between ends that are *internal* to the relationship and those that are *external* to it. Ends internal to the relationship allow it to function. They are features of the relationship which enable lovers to cooperate with one another. Most lovers share these kinds of ends with their beloveds by virtue of being in a relationship. They include the end of being committed to the relationship and the end of loving the beloved. But ends external to the relationship are different. Lovers pursue these ends regardless of whether they are in a loving relationship. These ends reflect lovers’ deep personal commitments and are often the source of evaluative conflict in relationships. They include the end of practicing a particular religion and the end of supporting a specific political party. Loving relationships must be practicable, but that does not mean that lovers must share ends which are external to the relationship. Any conflict among external ends need not impair love if lovers share internal ends which allow their relationship to function.

To be clear, I’m not committed to the radical claim that lovers need not share *anything at all* for their love to be ideal. I have only argued against Ebels-Duggan that if lovers share specific features of their relationship, then the ideal of love can allow any evaluative conflict among their personal ends. My qualitative distinction about internal and external ends demonstrates how the problem cases can be wracked with evaluative conflict but nonetheless be ideal love. The Bonners

and the forbidden lovers all share an internal end insofar as they seek to maintain their relationships despite bickering about their personal views. I will reexamine these cases as ideal forms of love in section five. But for now, consider an example of a kind of love which is worth achieving because it abides by my distinction.

Suppose that Puck has organized political protests for years, but that his beloved Sasha refuses to participate in them. She is even reluctant to drive him to the protests because she views them as wastes of time. To her, Puck has committed himself to a silly project. He's devoted his life to his political passion, but it doesn't seem to her that he has made much of an impact on the world. His 'protests' rarely amount to more than a few of his friends shouting outside city hall. Sasha believes that their lives together would be qualitatively better if they both focused on making money quickly. Imagine, then, that Sasha pursues her own project which she treats as integral to her life: to make money as a professional poker player. She spends her time analyzing poker online and participating in poker tournaments. Puck, however, does not play along with Sasha's ambition. He thinks that her end perpetuates systemic class problems. Her pursuit of poker doesn't compel him to accompany her to the tournaments. Puck thinks that their lives together would be morally better if Sasha focused on calling attention to significant political issues rather than on acquiring fast money.

One might complain that two such people could not possibly be in love, given how little regard they have for one another. But these lovers do not have little regard for each other *qua* individual people. They in fact love one another enough to wish for better lives together. Rather, they only disvalue what each individual person *does*. Despite their conflict, they could thus be committed to their relationship for its valuable internal features. Such features could be unfazed by their personal disagreement. Suppose, then, that Sasha and Puck's *independence* is a significant

internal end of their relationship. Sasha and Puck's love is valuable because it allows each of them to pursue freely and securely their own projects without risking what they have together. Puck believes that he can only pursue his passion in this relationship with Sasha and vice versa. Moreover, their love would not improve if Puck abandoned his political commitments and joined Sasha at the poker table, or if Sasha gave up poker and joined Puck in the picket line. If they acted on one of these options, the relationship would become asymmetrical. Their love would diminish because one of them would have to abandon their passion. (The same could be said if they both gave up their personal ends.) Love sometimes calls for immense compromise, but it need not in this case. Here the lovers attend to the specific reality of their beloved. Sasha and Puck understand the roles of their passions in their personal lives. They thus opt for being independent together rather than demanding one of them to give up their life project.

I don't see why this relationship is vulnerable to being undermined by its deep conflict, as Ebels-Duggan suggests would likely happen. These lovers refuse to share in their partner's personal ends, but their shared internal end of independence guides the negotiation of their fundamental disagreement. What is involved in negotiating such conflicts will probably vary by relationship. My aim here isn't to explicate fully how to negotiate these difficult clashes. I have only called attention to how evaluative conflict has no bounds in ideal love when it comes to our personal ends. Our powerful intuition about shared ends leads us to overlook this point.

### **3. The shared-values view**

An account in which lovers share deeply held *values*, rather than *ends*, may seem to fare better at explaining the extent to which evaluative conflict is a problem for the best kind of love. Benjamin Bagley (2015, 2019) has recently defended a version of a shared-values view, according

to which lovers are to share broad, identity-constituting values for their love to be ideal.<sup>44</sup> In this section, I will pose a similar objection to Bagley as I did to Ebels-Duggan. His shared-values view recognizes that limited value-conflict is compatible with the ideal of love. But it cannot by its own lights accommodate the way ideal love does not limit such conflict.

On Bagley's picture, the fundamental values according to which we organize our lives constitute our identities as agents. Thus, to love someone for who they are is to love them for the values with which they identify (Bagley, 2019, p. 461; 2015, p. 490). Bagley's shared-values view is *dynamic* because our dearest held values are not static or determinately fixed. Rather, they are "things that are essentially in the process of being determined, through a kind of ongoing improvisation" (2015, p. 491). To support this claim, Bagley introduces a novel conception of agency as a kind of evaluative improvisation (2015, pp. 491–6; cf. 2019, p. 461). Put roughly, agents typically strive for the values they take to be expressive of who they are, although they may not have the content of the values fully in view. Yet, agents fill in the content as they strive for those values. This idea lends itself to a musical analogy about love: ideal love consists in valuing the beloved as a partner in an evaluative improvisation that is structurally like musical improvisation (2019, p. 461). In both cases, people jointly determine the content of what they share. For Bagley, love "consists in valuing the beloved as improvisationally pursuing the same values as oneself, and therefore in attributing the same significance to the beloved's responses in determining one's values one attributes to one's own" (p. 461). For instance, your beloved's enthusiasm for ballet should be "infectious" because you should treat his interest in it as somehow related to the values which you are inchoately pursuing yourself, given that you judge him to be an evaluative fellow traveler based on his responses to stimuli (p. 461).

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<sup>44</sup> See Martha Nussbaum (1990) for additional discussion of the shared-values view, with reference to its roots in ancient Greek philosophy. See also Bennett Helm (2010) and Bagley (2019), especially pp. 457–8.

This shared-values view aims to incorporate a commonsensical degree of conflict in loving relationships, despite its insistence on shared values. Bagley recognizes that “Beloveds whose evaluations perfectly mirror yours are boring, and lovers who expect your evaluations to perfectly mirror theirs are suffocating. Both things seem essentially inimical to love. Unanticipated divergences from your own evaluations should seem interesting, exciting, to be welcomed” (p. 461). Evaluative conflict fits Bagley’s ideal of love when loving relationships involve what he calls a “unity within diversity” (2015, p. 506). In these cases of disagreement, lovers “share certain fundamental concerns with their partners...but embody these concerns very differently from them” (p. 506). For example, you don’t like ballet like your beloved does; you instead appreciate poetry, which your beloved finds incomprehensible. These values clash on one level. But in another sense, they both express a broad value, namely the pursuit of beauty through art. Put differently, love could sustain conflicting “nonglobal” values if lovers share some “global” value (pp. 504n44, 502). Lovers could embrace conflict in another way. Bagley writes: “partnership in deep improvisation can also be global...But it need not be. I love my grad school officemate for much of what he sees in philosophy, but not all of it, and while we have a very satisfying friendship, we each think the other’s political views are pretty awful” (pp. 501–2). This example aims to show that love could even sustain conflict among global values if lovers share nonglobal ones, like certain philosophical views. This shared-values view thus doesn’t imply that *any* value-conflict makes love sub-optimal.

These examples establish at most that moderate evaluative conflict is compatible with Bagley’s ideal of love. They do not, however, demonstrate that any fundamental value-conflict is compatible with it. Bagley contrasts the officemate example with examples of shared global values. He thus suggests that he and his officemate do not share a broad value like the same political orientation, but instead ‘nonglobal’ values like the importance of particular philosophical

ideas. But these friends surely share much more than what Bagley builds into the example. By virtue of their situation, they likely share global values like the importance of philosophy as a discipline and why pursuing a graduate degree in it matters. At first glance, this example might seem to imply that Bagley's picture of love allows for quite deep value-clashes. But the friends' shared significant concerns play down the severity of their disagreement. The same could be said of Bagley's "unity within diversity" examples. These situations appear to make room for ample disagreement in ideal loving relationships. But in fact, there is not much room for fundamental value-conflict in them. In the examples, lovers disagree about the details, but their disagreements are ultimately agreements. For Bagley states that their divergences embody the same fundamental values. Bagley therefore restricts the degree to which worthwhile love can be conflicted.

This is a problem because lovers need not share personal values for their love to be great. Reconsider the example of Sasha and Puck. Clearly this couple doesn't share personal values. Sasha's enthusiasm for poker doesn't infect Puck, nor does his political fervor infect Sasha. This is because they do not view each other as pursuing the same values they individually sense themselves to be seeking. For this reason, Bagley must treat Sasha and Puck's deeply conflicted love as falling short of his standard. Their conflict is deeper than the moderate degree which Bagley implies is appropriate. But in their relationship, Sasha and Puck love one another despite their conflict because they share values like independence which are internal to the relationship.

More generally, and in terms of maturity, Bagley's theory better captures romantic infatuation than it does securer periods of romantic love. During infatuation, your beloved seems mysteriously committed to the same values you take yourself to have. Their interests often become your own. Mature love, however, usually transitions out of this period. Longtime lovers typically view their beloveds as unmysterious sources of value. They do not feel the pull of an interest

simply because their beloved has it. Rather, it's common for them to treat their differences as the other's quirks. They sometimes view these differences with a sense of humor, suggesting that personal differences are irrelevant to what the lovers share in the relationship. In relationships like Sasha and Puck's, lovers accept who their loved one is as an individual who exists outside of themselves.

I have not denied that Sasha and Puck share values. Their love isn't an extreme case in which lovers share nothing. A shared-values theorist might agree that the best kind of love accommodates large-scale conflict but stops short of the extreme case. But Bagley's theory isn't a generic shared-values view, according to which lovers are to share at least one shared value. Rather, it's a *dynamic* view, in which lovers share an "evaluative perspective," as Bagley writes, when they pursue their fluctuating values (p. 502). By this term, Bagley means that lovers must treat one another as pursuing the same values as oneself. You understand to treat your beloved as pursuing the same evaluative path as yourself based on his responses. Yet, sharing values that are internal to the relationship does not create a robust evaluative perspective concerning lovers' personal values external to the relationship. Sasha and Puck may have such a perspective when it comes to the features of their relationship. But they do not view each other as pursuing the same inchoate *personal* values. In terms of external values, they view one another as hiking different paths, so to speak. Their love thus challenges Bagley's picture of love even if they share something.

However, one might object that one cannot disvalue the identity-constituting values of one's beloved without disvaluing the beloved himself. The beloved's values define 'who he is' and therefore, it is impossible to love him as a particular person but reject his values, as I have



argued is possible.<sup>45</sup> This point is a central element of Bagley's theory as well as other shared-values views.

It's worth focusing briefly on Bennett Helm's (2010) shared-values view to dislodge the objection. Helm defends an idea he calls "intimate identification," which characterizes love as "having a concern for [the beloved's] identity, understood in terms of the sharing of his cares and values for his sake, that is analogous to, but not identical with, your concern for your own identity" (Helm, 2010, p. 172). For Helm, a person cares about his own identity, which is defined by the values he chooses and affirms in his life. Loving a person as the individual person he is, then, means sharing his values for his sake, which is also to care about his well-being. Moreover, Helm argues that love involves feeling "person-focused emotions," like pride and shame, which treat the beloved as the center of import. When I love someone, I commit myself to feeling the rational pattern of emotions he feels about his own values. For instance, if my beloved values his acting career, I will also value his career. And I will feel proud of him for landing a role in a movie and feel disappointed with him when the movie is panned. My beloved's evaluative identity comes to constitute my own identity because "my sense of the kind of life I ought to live" comes to depend on my responses to his values (p. 162). An implication of intimate identification is thus that "to love someone is normally to *trust* her to have such an impact on one's own identity; as a part of the rational pattern constitutive of love, such trust is something we owe to our beloveds insofar as we love them" (p. 162).

I agree with Helm that we owe our loved ones trust, but not the kind that he claims we do. We do not always owe our beloveds the trust to shape our personal evaluative identities. Deep conflict-generating values prevent us from sharing identities. Further, insistence upon sharing our

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<sup>45</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer at the *European Journal of Philosophy* for this objection.

loved ones' values despite our own rejection of them risks disrespecting the people we claim to care most about. The trust we owe to our loved ones is the trust that their values express their present conception of what is most important to them. However, this trust in expression does not imply that we must accept personally repugnant values to love someone as they are. For it is metaphysically contentious to claim that our values primarily constitute our personal identities. I cannot defend a view about what does in fact constitute identity here. But lovers in long-term, decades-long relationships know that people's values tend to change over the course of their lives. The bohemian poet with whom you fell in love in your early twenties could become the sales manager whom you love in your forties. Yet, you owe your beloved the trust that he is expressing what matters to him in each phase of his life. It is the task of long-term relationships to continue to love our loved ones despite their changes. But we better appreciate their present individuality by granting them this kind of trust. It is thus possible, and even good, to distinguish between the people we love and their values. Our values may be wholly separable from who we are as particular people. Shared-values views generally tend to neglect considerations of this sort.

#### **4. Intimate independence**

In the preceding sections, I criticized two general approaches to the problem of evaluative conflict. The approaches neglect in different ways that love can be ideal in light of any evaluative conflict between lovers' fundamental ends and values. Against these approaches, I will now introduce an ideal of love. By introducing an ideal, my goal is to clarify the meaning and power of love. Generally speaking, an ideal of love aims to be a standard that reflects the enriching experience which we expect love to embody. For this reason, it aims to be a model to strive for. But ideals of love are not always sentimental and saccharine. They may be latent in seemingly

unglamorous kinds of love.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the ideal I will now defend is a familiar one which allows for any evaluative conflict among lovers' central ends and values. More specifically, I argue in this section that the ideal of *intimate independence* solves the problem of evaluative conflict. According to it, evaluative conflict can be an effective way to force lovers to recognize the distinctness of their beloved and foster an intimate connection with them. Since intimate independence is fully compatible with any evaluative conflict, we must conclude that it is a mistake to deny that deeply conflicted love can ever be ideal. Theories of love that rule out trenchant evaluative conflict miss a crucial feature of love. At its core, love involves achieving intimacy with people who are fully independent of us, and that accepting independence means accepting the possibility of deep evaluative conflict.<sup>47</sup>

The ideal I defend is not foreign to our experience of love. It is not at odds with our contemporary Western attitudes toward romance, unlike, say, the ideal of medieval courtly love. The ideal concerns the truth of the clichés that love conquers all and that we ought to love our fellow humans: love can bring together into communion people with radically different points of view.<sup>48</sup> In other words, the proposed ideal is not revisionary. It does not significantly alter our attitudes toward love nor imply that our attitudes are misguided. On the contrary, the ideal is evidence that our attitudes get something right about what loving another person means. The ideal is thus embedded in our ordinary understanding of mature romantic love between equals. It is so

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<sup>46</sup> On ideals embedded in unglamorous love, see Sara Protasi (2016), who defends unrequited love and writes: "when trying to figure out how love works, it seems misguided to start with an idealized version. Most loves that we experience and witness are not ideal: they are messy, painful, and imperfect" (Protasi, 2016, p. 215).

<sup>47</sup> My ideal thus agrees with the spirit (but not the letter) of Velleman's (1999) remark that "In my opinion, the foregoing quotations express a sentimental fantasy—an idealized vision of living happily ever after. In this fantasy, love necessarily entails a desire to 'care and share,' or 'to benefit and be with.' But, surely, it is easy enough to love someone whom one cannot stand to be with" (Velleman, 1999, p. 353).

<sup>48</sup> See the Christian, agapeic conception of love in, e.g., Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. See also Kieran Setiya (2014), who argues that another's humanity is sufficient reason to love them, and Velleman (1999), who argues that love is an appraisal of the value of another's Kantian personhood.

normal, I will claim later, that romantic comedies like *Adam's Rib* often depict it. I do not propose the ideal as the only ideal worth pursuing. Other societies besides modern Western ones likely hold other romantic ideals.<sup>49</sup> But the familiarity of my ideal makes it difficult to reject.

Let's first consider what it means to view our loved ones as *independent* of ourselves. It's worth turning briefly to Iris Murdoch's essay "The Sublime and the Good."<sup>50</sup> The significance of the beloved's independence is made explicit in this essay, and I focus on it for that reason.<sup>51</sup> Here Murdoch famously writes: "Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real (Murdoch, 1959, p. 51).<sup>52</sup> Murdoch warns us that we fail to accept our beloveds' full independence when "we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from the outside, not grasping their reality and *independence*, making them into dream objects of our own" (p. 52; emphasis added). Murdoch additionally claims that there is an analogy between our loved ones and works of art: a work of art "is an *independence* and uniqueness which is essentially the same as that conferred upon, or rather discovered in, another human being whom we love" (pp. 54–55; emphasis added). As in art appreciation, we strive (with extreme difficulty) to imaginatively understand who our

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<sup>49</sup> However, the anthropologist Allison Alexy (2020) argues that there is the Western-inspired romantic ideal of *connected independence* in contemporary Japanese societies.

<sup>50</sup> This essay was republished in Murdoch (1999), pp. 205–220. Some recent philosophical appeals to Murdoch on the topic of love include Setiya (2014), Susan Wolf (2015), and Vida Yao (2020). See Velleman (1999), and Elijah Millgram (2004) for criticism of Velleman's attempt to square Murdoch's and Kant's insights. See Mark Hopwood (2017) for a useful survey of Murdoch's recent philosophical reception.

<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere Murdoch famously suggests that love challenges us to attend to our loved ones as exist outside our own "fat relentless ego[s]" (1971, p. 51). That kind of loving attention involves seeing the beloved 'as she is,' acknowledging her faults as well as her strengths, and loving her nonetheless. See Wolf (2015), p. 172, who also discusses a classic screwball comedy (*The Philadelphia Story*) to argue for a Murdoch-inspired view of love. I don't focus on Murdoch's conception of loving attention because the salience of the beloved's distinctness from or independence of the lover is inherent in the idea of loving attention. As Murdoch writes, "the direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from the self" (1971, p. 65). Accepting the reality of your beloved as distinct is a way to get outside your egoistic point of view of her.

<sup>52</sup> Likewise, C.S. Lewis remarks in *A Grief Observed*: "The most precious gift that marriage gave me was this constant impact of something very close and intimate yet all the time unmistakably other, resistant—in a word, real" (Lewis, 1994, pp. 18–19).

loved ones are as people distinct from ourselves and in turn, treat their whole person as the proper object of our love. We thus embrace our loved ones as independent by observing the fact that they need not share many of our own personal needs, projects, and values. We struggle to understand their distinctness, namely their specific combination of projects and values, their motivations, and the personal history that bear on their evaluative composition.<sup>53</sup> Murdoch's view is key to solving the problem of evaluative conflict because it provides us with this conception of independence.<sup>54</sup>

To clarify when independence is loving, we should distinguish between two kinds of independence. In the first case, suppose that Ian and Isa are in a loving relationship for several years, during which they come to understand each other's personal history, core values, and motivations for pursuing their projects. But after forming a strong sense of who Isa is independently of himself, suppose that Ian thinks, "Isa can go on doing the things she wants to do. I don't care. None of that has anything to do with me." Here Ian displays an attitude inimical to love, although he recognizes Isa's distinctness. His 'love' is problematic because he does not *embrace* or *appreciate* who Isa is in light of recognizing her distinctness. By 'embrace' and 'appreciate,' I don't intend that he should endorse her commitments. Rather, I mean that he should grasp their significance for their roles in Isa's life and in the development of the person he claims to love. This attitude is compatible with Ian finding many of her personal ends and values utterly repugnant. He may wish that she would change in certain respects.<sup>55</sup> In this case, Ian would exhibit

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<sup>53</sup> Embracing a person's distinctness in these terms isn't merely to value him for his individual, discrete qualities. One's distinctness is more than one's values or qualities; it is their amalgamation, in addition to historical and psychological features. See Protasi (2016), pp. 225–6, and Ulrika Carlsson (2018), pp. 1402–1406, both of whom suggest in different ways a view along these lines. Specifically, they argue that the beloved's qualities should not be perceived in isolation and that we tend to view individuals in terms of being unique wholes. This kind of view is easily compatible with Murdoch's idea of independence.

<sup>54</sup> Although I've drawn on Murdoch to motivate intimate independence, her view differs from my own. Murdoch claims that we relate lovingly to others through the Good, to which humans are naturally drawn. To relate to others through the Good is achieved by attending to them as guided by the Good. See, e.g., Murdoch (1971), p. 100.

<sup>55</sup> Frankfurt's remark (1999) that "it [is not] essential that a person like what he loves. He may even find it distasteful" fits the attitude I describe here (Frankfurt, 2004, p. 42). For further discussion of not liking what one loves, see

an attitude which explains love for flawed people. A tough case in point is your white supremacist brother. You love your brother, but you also wish that he wasn't a racist. This example of familial love is of course distinct from romantic love. But like in some cases of romantic love, you love your brother in the sense that you broadly appreciate—although do not condone—who he is as someone distinct from yourself despite wishing he would change.<sup>56</sup>

Next suppose that in the second case, Ian considers Isa's independence and embraces 'who she is.' Now Ian thinks, "Although Isa values and does things that are not for me, I understand her enough to see why she pursues them. And I've made it known to her why I don't join her in these pursuits. But these things are important in her life. Something would be wrong if she had to give up these things for the sake of our love." This time Ian attends to Isa from the stance of appreciation. He grasps the significance of Isa's deep commitments and projects for *her* life, not for his own. His understanding of Isa's individuality helps him to cultivate strong affection for her and to feel emotionally connected to her, since he believes that he clearly grasps 'who she is.' Most of us would find it hard to reject this sort of love, given how recognizable it is as an aspect of mature interpersonal love. Ian's attitude is admirable because it allows one person to fully disclose herself to another and be loved despite any fundamental disagreement between them. We should describe Ian's love for Isa in this second example as exhibiting *intimate independence*, which is categorically distinct from the detached independence in the first example.

We are now in the position to see how the ideal of intimate independence solves the problem of evaluative conflict. A plausible solution to the problem should explain how love can

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Velleman (1999), p. 353 and Yao (2020), pp. 9 ff. Note that Frankfurt also claims that unresolved conflicts among the things we love can rupture one's psychic integrity and "put us at odds with ourselves" (50). According to Frankfurt, we love projects as well as persons. Thus, Frankfurt might argue that evaluative conflict makes love deficient because promoting one's project conflicts with promoting the well-being of one's beloved (who pursues opposing values). Yet, given Frankfurt's insistence on loving people we find distasteful, I set aside this Frankfurt-style objection.

<sup>56</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for discussion on this example.

be worth having in light of even the deepest disagreements. Intimate independence meets this requirement. Lovers achieve the ideal when they recognize the ways in which their loved ones are independent through the lens of appreciation rather than indifference or contempt. To do so, they must feel emotionally involved with and close to those distinct from themselves. Put differently, there must be intimacy between lovers, by which I mean the related affective attitudes of felt closeness and connection.<sup>57</sup> Deep evaluative differences between lovers, then, need not sour love if they properly appreciate their distinctness from one another and if this attitude contributes to a compelling romantic relationship.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, we must conclude that it is a mistake to view love as deficient based on any evaluative conflict.

No doubt some will remain unconvinced by my sketch of intimate independence. Lovers may fail to share, e.g., values and achieve an ideal loving relationship. But one might object that lovers who *oppose* their beloveds' values cannot in fact have ideal loving relationships. For such lovers do not and cannot *respect* one another in a way sufficient for ideal love. Respect is often lauded as a requirement for the best kind of love.<sup>59</sup> A lover seriously disrespects her beloved if she considers his core values as 'silly' or his central life projects as 'pointless.' Even if such lovers were able to embrace their differences in accordance with intimate independence, the lover still disrespects her beloved in a way inappropriate to ideal love by conceiving of his values and projects in these contemptuous ways. However, the ideal of respect is not at odds with the ideal of

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<sup>57</sup> Brief discussions of intimacy in the philosophical literature include Frankfurt (2004), who rejects "intimate connection" as distracting and "not essential" to love (Frankfurt, 2004, p. 42), Helm (2009, 2010), who sees a role for intimacy in love but views it as a form of caring, and Yao (2020), who claims that "connection, communion, and *intimacy*" are some of love's "internal ideals" (Yao, 2020, p. 3; emphasis added).

<sup>58</sup> Intimate independence differs from attachment love, which has recently been said to be based on felt security: the lover *needs* the beloved, rendering the relationship a haven for the lover with the beloved. See Monique Wonderly (2017), especially, p. 242. See also Patricia Greenspan (1988), pp. 55–60, for an account of attachment love in which love is an emotion based on the desire for closeness to the love-object. Intimate independence is not premised on the specific ideas of felt security or as justified by a *desire* for closeness, as attachment love is. But it is likely that a lover will feel secure with her beloved if she feels intimate independence with him and will desire to maintain that state.

<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., Helm (2010), pp. 158–9.

intimate independence. The proper object of respect must be clarified. Intimate independence is motivated by the intuition that we love other people as they individually are rather than what they do or value. It is thus appropriate for lovers to refuse to adopt their loved ones' values and ends and even to oppose them. A lover broadly treats his beloved with respect when he appreciates the significance of the values he opposes in his beloved's life. For he respects his beloved as a valuer or a pursuer of ends and seeks to place what he opposes as meaningful parts of his beloved's life plan. Those who disrespect their beloveds as particular people do not seek this comprehensive level of understanding and should be morally criticized. Intimate independence precludes such disrespect for one's beloved.

Even if we accept the ideal, we might still wonder why we usually agree with our romantic partners about what matters. We seem to be psychologically inclined to love people with the same personal values and projects as us, making it unlikely that we will end up with people with whom we *completely* and *fundamentally* disagree. There is, then, a grain of truth to sharing theories, namely the folk view that 'like attracts like.'

However, my account of intimate independence does not deny that we share values and ends with our loved ones. First, the ideal is not a radical one according to which people love one another despite not sharing *any* significant values or ends. Rather, it allows for any evaluative conflict among lovers' personal ends and values which are external to the relationship. Moreover, we should not confuse psychological inclination with ideal love. My ideal primarily clarifies what is *possible* of love. Intensely conflicted love appears flawed, but intimate independence suggests that it could in fact be ideal. A stronger reply to the objection is to contest the descriptive claim it assumes. The claim holds that we typically avoid evaluative conflict with our loved ones. Overall, romantic relationships are harmonious, not conflicted. But this narrowly focuses on what we share



with our loved ones. Realistic relationships are messier than this description acknowledges. Romantic love is an evaluative mix: we are as likely to disagree about central values and ends as we are to share them. Lastly, we might infer from our psychological inclination that we should strive to achieve harmony and avoid conflict with our loved ones. For we often assume that successful relationships are built on shared personal ends and values. But this inference is mistaken. We need not shy away from the messiness of everyday romantic love. Intimate independence shows us that there is something meaningful about conflicted love, namely that it cultivates appreciation for our beloved as separate from ourselves. I don't deny that there may be other ways to attend to a beloved's distinctness. But evaluative conflict does so quite forcefully, which is a feature worth praising. If my ideal is compelling, there is something oddly imperfect about completely harmonious relationships (if they exist). They shun conflict and thereby ignore a significant way of fostering intimacy with our loved ones.

## **5. Celebrating difference**

The discussion of intimate independence sheds light on the earlier cases of conflicted love. Let's revisit those cases in this section to consider how they exemplify my ideal. First, recall the forbidden lovers Saba and Philip. Saba is a devout Muslim grappling with her love for Philip the atheist. They can meaningfully love one another despite their clashing values according to the ideal of intimate independence. Saba and Philip's religious conflict is the opportunity for them to appreciate that their beloved is separate from themselves and that they have their own set of personal projects and values, which are external to their love. Saba and Philip's love meets my ideal if they view their personal religious values as informing their understanding of one another as individual people. But to understand another in this sense is not to approve of what one

disvalues. They may still have reservations about each other's values. But the forbidden lovers achieve a special kind of intimacy when they appreciate and see clearly who their beloved is as their own person with ends and values external to their love.

For the remainder of this section, let's return to the squabbling married lawyers from *Adam's Rib* to see how their love meets my ideal. At first, *Adam's Rib* appears to endorse a sharing view of love, given that its characters discuss equality and mutual respect between lovers. For example, Amanda wonders whether what makes a marriage perfect is "balance, equality, and mutual everything...*sharing*." To be sure, the couple shares certain ends and values. Their case is not the extreme one in which the lovers share nothing significant. The film makes clear that they share ends that are internal to their marriage, but their deep conflict stems from their ends which are external to the marriage, namely their moral ends which their opposing positions in court exemplify. It is thus plausible to view independence as a central internal end of the Bonners' loving relationship. In the beginning of the film, we learn, for instance, that Amanda calls Adam by the nickname "Pinky," while Adam calls Amanda "Pinkie." Their pet names indicate that the lovers feel close and strongly connected to each other but not to the point of complete identification. They recognize that there is a difference between who they are as individual people.

The end of the film best illustrates intimate independence. Amanda wins the case, and the couple are on the verge of divorce. They meet with their tax accountant and are reminded that their Connecticut farm is fully paid off. Adam, seemingly prompted by memories with Amanda, begins sobbing, asking if they can return to the farm. Amanda is deeply moved by his emotional vulnerability. As a result, she realizes that he is more important to her than their conflicting personal ends. Amanda realizes that she does not want to "win the case and lose [her] husband."

She then whisks Adam out of the accountant's office and to the farm. But once there, he reveals to her that his tears in the office were in fact crocodile tears. He faked them to win her back.

It is with an irony that is characteristic of screwball comedy that Adam's crocodile tears demonstrate his and Amanda's intimate independence. He presumed that he and Amanda were strongly emotionally connected such that she would feel genuinely moved upon seeing him distraught over the prospect of losing her, despite their rival legal and moral ends. This emotional connection prompts the Bonners to return to their farm—affectionately referred to as 'Bonner Hill.' Here Adam honestly acknowledges that Amanda defended the case well. After his concession, he tells Amanda that he was asked to run as the republican candidate for county court judge. Amanda slyly replies by asking if there is a democratic candidate yet. Rather than arguing, the two playfully discuss possibly running against each other for the office. The film ends by suggesting that the Bonners have not merely accepted the ways in which they are different people, but that they appreciate the fact. Amanda generalizes, "Men, women, the same...well, maybe there is a difference, but it's a little difference." Adam replies, "Viva la difference...Hooray for the difference!" These are the final words of the film. They leave us with the sense that the Bonners ultimately achieve an emotional closeness and appreciation for each other's individuality. This is a special kind of intimacy that makes their conflicted love worth praising. In short, they meet the ideal of intimate independence.

## **6. Conclusion**

I have been arguing that severely conflicted love may be attractive, but that the possibility has been wrongly denied by some recent theories of love. If shared ends or values constitute ideal love, and only limited conflict is appropriate, then very deeply conflicted love will surely appear

far from ideal. That sort of conflict seems to have no place in ideal love, imply these theories. On the contrary, I have argued that the ideal of intimate independence shows us that a kind of love that we ordinarily consider great is fully compatible with any evaluative conflict. Lovers are intimately independent when they fully disclose who they each are to one another and, whether their personal values and ends align, they appreciate and feel close to one another. If intimate independence is a recognizable feature of our understanding of love, and that feature is compatible with deep evaluative conflict, then love cannot be deficient merely because it is deeply conflicted.

# Grief Rekindles

## Abstract

For many of us grief is forever. Or so goes a folk view. In this paper I present a qualified defense of this insight. We don't feel the impact of loss maximally all the time. Rather, we continue to feel it for the rest of our lives, because grief doesn't simply diminish but rekindles like fire. As I put it, grief is an *intermittent emotion*, capable of going out of existence, then existing again as the same thing. I argue that this trajectory is fitting. Intermittent emotions have a rational status; their distinct temporal pattern gets something *right* about their objects. This proposal dissolves a recent philosophical worry that grief diminishes over a short time despite the persistence of its eliciting loss. Moreover, it provides a sophisticated sketch of the fittingness of emotions over time: intermittence is a norm to evaluate emotional fittingness alongside character and intensity.

## 1. Introduction

For many of us grief is forever. Or so goes a folk view. Editorials opine, “grief is a forever thing” (Bialosky, 2022).<sup>60</sup> Popular books on grief assure us that “you will grieve forever. You will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it... You will heal again, but you will never be the same” (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, p. 171).<sup>61</sup> Of course we can't literally grieve forever. Nevertheless, many believe that grief lasts for a very long time. Despite this bit of common sense

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<sup>60</sup> Another headline in *The Washington Post* declares, “No, you don't have to ‘move on.’ It's okay to grieve forever.” See Krupka, 2014.

<sup>61</sup> The folk view appears in literary art as well. In a short story, Amy Hempel writes, “Lose that sense of loss—you have gone and lost something else. But the body moves toward health. The mind, too, in steps. One step at a time. Ask a mother who has just lost a child, How many children do you have? ‘Four,’ she will say, ‘—three,’ and years later, ‘Three,’ she will say, ‘—four’” (Hempel, 2007, p. 52).

there is a tendency in Western culture to classify prolonged grief as a mental illness. Sources like the *DSM-5* and the WHO's *International Classification of Diseases* imply that people require serious psychiatric help if they experience intense, pervasive grief *for the rest of their lives*.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, I believe that the folk view gets something right about the nature of grief over time. It's reasonable to feel the impact of our greatest losses—the deaths of parents, children, spouses, and friends—long after they happened, and it makes sense for grief to persist. The question is how to register this folk insight.

Philosophers have neglected this question because they have by and large attacked the folk view.<sup>63</sup> Their attack takes the form of a puzzle about the rationality of grief over time. The three key assumptions of the puzzle are: (i) Grief is a rational response to a great loss like the fact that a loved one died; (ii) That fact doesn't change over time; (iii) grief spikes in reaction to the loss, then rapidly diminishes over time. Therefore, grief typically fails to reflect the full significance of loss. Its duration and its eliciting conditions are rationally inconsistent. With this informal puzzle, the folk view sounds like a distraught exaggeration.

In this paper I defend the folk view against the attack. My defense rides on a challenge to assumption (iii) of the puzzle. I argue that it's false to claim that grief *simply* diminishes because it's within grief's nature to come and go throughout one's life. Grief is a plausible *intermittent emotion*. Philosophers underappreciate this category of emotional experience, but it's a compelling

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<sup>62</sup> The *DSM-5* states: "The symptoms of prolonged grief disorder must result in clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning in the bereaved individual...The nature, duration, and severity of the bereavement reaction must clearly exceed expected social, cultural, or religious norms for the individual's culture and context" (*DSM-5 Tr*). The *ICD-11* states: "[Prolonged grief disorder] has persisted for an atypically long period of time following the loss (more than 6 months at a minimum) and clearly exceeds expected social, cultural or religious norms for the individual's culture and context" (*ICD-11*). I set aside the question of whether normal grief is a mental disorder. See Wilkinson (2000), especially pp. 291–2.

<sup>63</sup> For example, Moller (2007, p. 302) explicitly frames the empirical research on grief, which motivates his approach, as "contrary" to this folk view. Though he doesn't outright characterize the folk view in terms of life-long or forever grief, he describes it as the "widely held view in our culture that the loss of a partner or spouse is invariably or at least usually an agonizing blow with *long-lasting and significant impact*" (302; emphasis added).

reason to reject (iii). And without (iii), there's no puzzle. My criticism lends itself to my overall positive argument: if grief unfolds in patterns of intermittence, and such patterns are reasonable, then it's reasonable for grief to be intermittent. This argument vindicates the common sense that grief is forever but with a qualification. We don't feel the impact of our greatest losses maximally all the time. Rather, we feel it for as long as we live in rational patterns of intermittence.

It will sound strange to some ears to question a claim supported by empirical psychology. I aim to show that the relevant empirical claims carry philosophical assumptions. The promise of this paper is to articulate what's so surprising about the premise that grief simply disappears after a short time and return us to what makes the most sense.

This paper has two phases, one negative, the other positive. Section 2 begins the negative phase. There I explain the puzzle in more detail, framing it as an attack on the folk view. In section 3, I motivate a picture of grief on which the attack fails. I introduce an analogy: like fire grief can *rekindle* after diminishing. The comparison suggests that grief recurs rather than fades away as (iii) holds. In section 4, I build my case against (iii) by making good on the analogy. I argue that the metaphysical concept of intermittence is the best way to explain the sense in which grief rekindles. I claim that some emotions can go out of existence, then exist again as the very same emotion. (iii) doesn't work if the category of intermittent emotions is available to describe grief.

Section five begins the positive phase. One might object on normative grounds that my descriptive argument is insufficient to dissolve the puzzle. Even if grief is intermittent, there still appears to be something *irrational* about it: it occasionally diminishes despite its fixed eliciting facts, thus ignoring its reasons to persist. I respond by arguing that there is in fact something *right* about feeling intermittent emotions. They have a rational dimension because intermittence is a general norm to evaluate emotions like character and intensity. With this discussion, we have the

master argument of this paper and a new strategy to understand the folk view: grief unfolds in patterns of intermittence, and such patterns are reasonable; therefore, it's reasonable for grief to come in and out of our lives long after we suffered the loss.

However, the argument doesn't explain why grief specifically is intermittent. I conclude the paper in section 6 by offering a speculative account. I propose a *perspectival view*, on which it's rational for grief to come and go because we alternate our perspectives on the meaning of loss, sometimes focusing on its more subjective evaluative features, at other times picking up on its more objective ones.

## 2. A puzzle about grief

Three claims and a conclusion create a puzzle about grief:<sup>64</sup>

- (i) Grief is a rational response to a great loss like the fact that a loved one died. (ii) That fact doesn't change over time.
- (iii) Grief spikes in reaction to the loss, then rapidly diminishes over time.
- (C) Grief's duration and its eliciting facts are rationally inconsistent. The short duration isn't a reasonable response to the deep significance of the loss.

Claim (i) asserts that grief is rational unlike indigestion. It may sound wrong to characterize it as *rational* because passivity in part typifies emotional experience. It's not obviously under my voluntary control whether I tremble with fear at the sight of the approaching enemy army. We don't usually deliberate whether to feel emotions by weighing practical reasons. However, there are several ways to put the point that grief is rational without them. We could say that grief is apt,

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<sup>64</sup> Philosophers tend to emphasize different features of the general puzzle. Moller (2007, 2018) discusses the fundamental inconsistency between grief's duration and eliciting conditions. Marušić (2018, 2022) focuses on the puzzling reasonableness of accommodation. Howard (2022, p. 1) frames the insight of the puzzle as an argument that grief is forever fitting.



appropriate, or fitting *in light of* established facts. Let's stick with fittingness. The concept is complex and touches on the fundamental nature of value.<sup>65</sup> But let's assume the standard conception of fitting emotions as presented by Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson:

Emotions present things to us as having certain evaluative features. When we ask whether an emotion is fitting, in the sense relevant to whether its object is  $\Phi$ , we are asking about the correctness of these presentations. The relevant considerations, then, are just those that count as evidence for the evaluations an emotion presents to us. (D'Arms and Jacobson, 2000, p. 72)

A match between emotions and the objects to which they are directed grounds the evaluation of emotions. We could criticize Tim for being angry at Thistle the friendly dog if all she did was lick his hand.<sup>66</sup> There's nothing wrong with a friendly lick (from a dog). His anger is inappropriate because it incorrectly presents its innocuous object as offensive. Tim may have been involuntarily angry at Thistle, but his reaction is nevertheless constrained by correctness conditions.

Grief is thus fitting because it presents its object to the griever as having specific evaluative features. It makes sense for me to respond to my father's death with acute pain and anguish because I loved him. My grief accurately represents that love. My emotional response to the loss would be a normative failure if it didn't strike me in the very heart. If grief is a fitting response to loss, there appears to be a reason to grieve forever. Grief is fitting in light of a fact, the fact that my loved one died. Per claim (ii), this fact is permanent. It will always be true that I lost my father for the rest of my life. Put differently, the eliciting conditions of my grief remain. Grief should thus persist when its eliciting conditions persist if it is rational. If losing my father is as immense as I treat it, my emotional response to that fact should match its immensity.

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<sup>65</sup> See, e.g., Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004) and McHugh and Way (2016).

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Deonna and Teroni (2012), p. 6.

However, claim (iii) holds that this isn't true. Grief is typically a transient experience. Most of us feel intense grief after suffering a horrific loss, but it simmers down as we accommodate it. Philosophers tend to support (iii) by appealing to the empirical psychology of bereavement, which says that we don't in fact grieve for as long as we live.<sup>67</sup> Psychologists hold that *resilience* explains the standard trajectory of grief for most people. It's human nature to cope with loss quickly because we're evolutionarily hardwired to overcome adversity for the sake of survival. George Bonanno writes: "Even the most resilient seem to hold onto at least a bit of wistful sadness. But we are able to keep on living our lives and loving those still present around us" (Bonanno, *Sadness*, 9–10). Bonanno assumes that "a bit of wistful sadness" doesn't constitute grief. It isn't empirically true that grief persists for much longer than a few months no matter the magnitude of the loss. As he asserts, "usually when grief has come and gone, that's it" (30; cf. 27).

Claims (i)–(iii) suggest a normative conclusion about grief over time. As Dan Moller puts it, grief is "inapt in the same way that feeling panic at a clown is inapt" (Moller, 2018, p. 7).<sup>68</sup> An unchanging loss elicits grief. But we have adaptive mechanisms to handle it; "the standard trajectory" for most people is to feel intense grief, then return to their regular emotional baseline after a few months (p. 5). There thus appears to be a powerful discrepancy between grief's reasons and its duration. Moller motivates this conclusion with a thought experiment. Consider two alien species, the Super and Sub-resilient. Of the Super-resilient Moller writes: "When their spouses drop dead in front of them, they shrug their shoulders and check what is on television. They remarry as soon as they are able to find another mate, often within weeks" (2007, p. 313). The Super-resilient cared about their spouses when they were alive, but they have adapted mechanisms

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<sup>67</sup> See, e.g., Bonanno et al. (2002), Bonanno (2009). See Gilbert (1998) for research on the tendency to overestimate the duration of emotional responses to negative events.

<sup>68</sup> For responses to Moller's puzzle, see Cholbi (2019; cf. 2022, pp. 96–99), Marušić (2018), p. 10–11, (2022), pp. 61–68, Preston-Roeder and Preston-Roeder (2017), Schönherr (2021), p. 242–4, and Smuts (2016).

to alleviate grief immediately. On the other hand, the Sub-resilient “are like us except that they *never* cease caring as deeply for their spouses as at the moment of death; the loss of that relationship is as deeply felt at half a century as it is as at half an hour” (2007, p. 314). The Super and Sub-resilient are two extremes of a continuum. Human beings are closer to the Super rather than to the Sub-resilient, which Moller finds regrettable.<sup>69</sup> This story aims to clarify the fittingness conditions for grief. As Moller says, “*any* deviation from the Sub-resilient raises difficult and painful questions” (2007, p. 315). By his lights, grief is only fitting when it *endures* for as long as its eliciting facts endure and is as *intense* as the loss is significant.

A deep insight of the puzzle is that we should continue to grieve for our greatest losses for as long as we live if they are in fact as great as we say. The puzzle and the folk view converge on this point. The folk view holds that we grieve for the rest of our lives and reflect the profundity of loss as best we can. However, philosophers like Moller disagree. Grief’s diminution is a normative problem because it’s too muted and quick relative to the magnitude of the loss, ignoring its persisting eliciting conditions. The puzzle can thus be understood as an attack on the folk view that we grieve forever. If it is correct, the folk view is a psychological fantasy, a pat on the back that we are as emotionally deep as we think we are.

### **3. Emotional rekindling**

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<sup>69</sup> For Moller, resilience suggests that we are to a degree *replaceable* if our loved ones will quickly recover and move on from their loss (2007, p. 309–10). Resilience also prevents us from fully taking in the significance of our losses (p. 310). It’s a blindness to the meaning of our losses (p. 312).

An alternative picture of grief over time is available. I will introduce an analogy to motivate it. I don't pretend that the sketch in this section fully dissolves the puzzle. Its modest aim is to suggest a plausible way to see grief as less affected by resilience than one might believe.<sup>70</sup>

It's instructive to think of grief as an emotion that *rekindles*.<sup>71</sup> Fires often reignite after a sharp decrease in intensity. The roaring blaze in the fireplace wanes but rekindles when we throw on more wood. This pattern may repeat. Like fire, it is within the nature of grief to rekindle after diminishing. The comparison to fire primes us to see that grief can have a specific temporal character. It can intensify, diminish, and rekindle just like fires sometimes do. There are many dissimilarities between the metaphysics of grief and fire.<sup>72</sup> The analogy only purports one structural similarity: the temporal patterns of grief and fire are broadly alike insofar as they each sometimes vacillate.

What's it like when grief rekindles? Imagine that your father died when you were a teenager. The acute pain and sadness with which you reacted to his death diminished a long time ago. But sometimes you feel melancholy on the anniversary of his death. Sometimes you feel

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<sup>70</sup> Smuts offers another strategy to dislodge (iii): "Now, I must note that I simply don't believe much of the empirical work on this topic (or much else from empirical psychology). The simplistic survey methodology adopted by most of the studies likely reveals very little. People continue to be active and respond to surveys saying that they are happy. Sure. But the researchers fail to see that someone might be grieving without being hopelessly depressed" (Smuts, 2016, p. 174). I'm sympathetic, but I grant the data. Even if it's true, we still plausibly grieve forever.

<sup>71</sup> In an excellent paper, from which I've learned much, Na'aman uses the analogy between emotions and fire to argue that emotions rationally diminish (e.g., Na'aman, 2021, p. 251). I wish to defend a form of the exact opposite claim, namely that emotions rationally persist. For now, I introduce Na'aman's view and examine it further in section five.

<sup>72</sup> This analogy raises deep questions about the metaphysics of identity and persistence that I cannot fully address. A roaring blaze dies down but burns again once I put another log in the fireplace. In its rekindled form, the fire does not burn as strongly as it did when it roared. It only flickers. Why, then, are the blaze and the flame numerically identical? Why say that the blaze and the flame are one thing and not two things? Perhaps the blaze and the flame are different phases of the same fire. But what is then required for the past blaze and the future embers to be identical with the present flame? Persistence can be explained in terms of *endurance* or *perdurantism* (Lewis, 1986, pp. 202–3). Material objects endure if they have no parts stretched across time, but only spatial ones, which are wholly present at different times (Cf. Hofweber and Velleman, 2011, p. 3). Yet material objects perdure if they persist by having parts which exist at different times and are distinguished by the times at which they persist. These objects extend through time by having a part at one time, and another later. The perdurantist view would explain the alteration of the fire.

wistful when you hear one of his favorite songs on the radio. And sometimes you feel a pang of sadness when you stumble upon an old picture of him when you're cleaning out the basement.

Emotional rekindling is an aspect of life after loss. Most of us are at least faintly pained by the sense that our deceased loved ones are missing during the holidays or events like vacations, graduations, and weddings. These emotions should be recognized as continuations of grief. They aren't merely situational. They don't occur in complete isolation like my road rage or fear of the bear in my backyard. Those episodes don't rely directly on a specific emotional history (though they could). Treating your melancholy, wistfulness, and sadness in the same way obscures their distinct history. They originated from a sense of loss. You wouldn't have experienced them had your father lived. They are intelligible as residual or holdover emotions concerning your loss. Because they are about the loss, and it elicited grief, these emotions manifest grief.

There could be phenomenological differences between your initial and rekindled grief. Now you might feel grief weakly in comparison to your first powerful experience. This may not always be the case; grief could rekindle with an acuteness akin to its initial intensity. We could quibble over the semantics of these later emotions, arguing that they aren't instances of grief but different emotions. Relatedly, we could concede that these later emotions relate to grief but hold that early and later grief are too phenomenologically different to be forms of the same experience. I'm going to set aside these objections because a phenomenological difference doesn't alone make for a difference in kind.

When we treat grief as capable of emotional rekindling, we glimpse how we could reexperience the impact of our greatest losses. Grief doesn't fade away entirely but can recur after dissipating. This is a plausible interpretation of the folk view that we grieve forever. Recall that

claim (iii) of the puzzle assumes that grief merely fades away. If these residual feelings are susceptible to rekindling, this descriptive premise is misleading.

#### 4. Grief is an intermittent emotion

Let's make good on the analogy. We can allow for significant dissimilarities between grief and fire if they don't undo the structural feature making the analogy. Suppose, then, that grief rekindles in a way that fire doesn't despite sometimes sharing the same trajectory of intensifying, diminishing, and rekindling. Of course, grief is an emotion, not a state of combustion. One way to explain the rekindling point is to argue that grief comes back after going out of existence. Grief rekindles because it's an *intermittent* emotion.<sup>73</sup> Things have intermittent or 'gappy' existences when they go out of existence, then exist again later as the very same thing.<sup>74</sup> Claim (iii) of the puzzle doesn't work if it makes sense to describe grief as an intermittent emotion. And without (iii), there's no puzzle. With this metaphysical idea, we can explain the sense in which grief rekindles, the key to dissolving the puzzle.

Consider the plausibility of intermittence on intuitive grounds. There's a category of thing capable of an intermittent existence and a category of thing incapable of it. Here's a quick example of something in the second category. A single persisting sound cannot exist intermittently. I strum a G-chord on my guitar, pause, then strum another G-chord. The two chords aren't numerically

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<sup>73</sup> Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* inspires my appeal to intermittence, a central theme throughout the novel, especially concerning grief. In the section "The Intermittencies of the Heart" in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, the narrator describes "the anachronism which so often prevents the calendar of facts from corresponding to the calendar of feelings" (Proust, 1992, p. 211).

<sup>74</sup> The idea of intermittence is as old as the problem of the ship of Theseus, though it's underappreciated in contemporary metaphysics. Most philosophers follow Locke's anti-intermittence view: "That, therefore, that had one beginning, is the same thing; and that which had a different beginning in time and place from that, is not the same, but diverse" (1975, p. 440). See, e.g., Wiggins (2001), p. 92. Cf. Van Inwagen (1990), pp. 134–5. Defenses of intermittence include Burke (1980), Simons (1987), and Sattig (2015). See also a for-and-against-style discussion on intermittence between Prior and Penelhum (1957).

identical, though they are tokens of the same type of sound. A single sound cannot survive temporal gaps in its history.

Many artefacts belong in the first category. A watch goes out of existence when disassembled across the jeweler's worktable for repair and comes back into existence upon reassembly. If a flowerpot falls to the floor, breaks into thirty pieces, which travel along thirty different routes to the same destination, and are glued back together, the flowerpot goes out and comes back into existence.<sup>75</sup> Works of art sometimes belong in this category as well.<sup>76</sup> Suppose that an installation like Allan Kaprow's *Yard* consists in exactly arranged piles of ten specific car tires from Queens. The installation would be numerically identical to its early iterations if it were reassembled after sitting in the basement of the Guggenheim for thirty years. Higher-order things also belong in this category. Suppose that we held a meeting, the building's fire alarm goes off, and we resume the meeting after waiting outside the building for an hour. Our meeting is interrupted, but the reconvened meeting is not a new one; it's the same token of the same meeting type. Intermittent natural kinds are rare but not impossible. Scientists at the Safar Center for Resuscitation Research at the University of Pittsburgh claim to have brought clinically dead dogs back to life using a suspended animation technique. The furry Lazaruses seemed to go and come back into existence.<sup>77</sup>

For my purposes we don't need sophisticated metaphysical explanations for intermittence. All we require is the sense that there's in fact a category of intermittent things.

Some emotions belong in this category. Consider two examples of amusement. Suppose that I'm amused by a joke told by a stranger at a party. After a chortle, my amusement quickly

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<sup>75</sup> See Burke (1980), p. 391.

<sup>76</sup> See Margolis (1958) for the stronger claim that works of art exist in a general mode of intermittence.

<sup>77</sup> I borrow this example from Sattig (2015), p. 129. See Safar et al. (1996) for background of the experiment. For a similar example, see the role of intermittence in the literature on the possibility of resurrection, e.g., Hershenov (2003).

dissipates. Now suppose that my friend did something hilarious when we were teenagers which amuses me whenever I remember it years later. In the first case, my amusement ends. It doesn't in the second case. Here my amusement comes and goes. Sometimes I laugh hysterically whenever I recall it; sometimes I smile or chuckle to myself. If asked about what caused my amusement, I wouldn't say that I'm amused by the *memory* of my friend's antic. Rather, I'm amused by the antic itself all these years later. Sometimes our attitudes towards the past change. But suppose my emotional response to my friend's antic is consistent. I don't look back and cringe. It doesn't sadden me. There's a very easy explanation for the consistency, it appears. Over time I experience many tokens of the same type of emotion: amusement.

Just because this explanation is easy doesn't mean it's satisfying. It implies that the tokens of amusement are unified simply in terms of *type*. However, type is not the only relevant unity. On the easy explanation, my episodes of amusement are mere blips, transient instances of a broad kind of experience. But my amusement isn't as random as this explanation suggests. It's significant that I remember my friend's antic here and there years after it happened. (Of course not everything we remember is worth remembering. I remember what I had for breakfast that morning, but it elicits from me no emotion.) The fact that my friend's antic stuck with me and continues—albeit in a discontinuous way—to amuse me implies that it impacted me. The easy explanation, with its emphasis on type unity, sheds little light on the antic's impact.

The tokens of my amusement aren't only unified in terms of type but also *in time*. We supposed that my response to my friend's antic doesn't much vary; my amusement over the years is consistent. Then the tokens are no longer simply tokens of a type. Rather, they're episodes in a sequence. There's a temporal relation among them not captured by the easy explanation. Episode after similar episode, it becomes hard to deny that something singular *goes on*. It's thus worth



breaking away from the easy explanation and going with an alternative: rather than there being many tokens of an emotion type, there is a single emotion token uniting its episodes over time. Moreover, my friend's antic simply made me laugh; it didn't shock me into comatose. Nevertheless, it impacted me enough for the amusement to return now and again. We have reason to call it an intermittent emotion.

Contrast this category with Martha Nussbaum's "background emotions" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 71). As a background emotion, grief isn't purely dispositional and episodic, though we're disposed to feel it episodically. It persists across time, receding into the background, and prompted by specific incidents. Intermittent and background emotions follow the same trajectory: they diminish and recur. However, they differ. Intermittent emotions go out of existence, while background emotions remain embedded in our emotional lives given that the relevant judgments persist. For Nussbaum claims that "these judgments...*are* background emotions" in light of her Stoic theory, according to which emotions are fundamentally cognitive judgments (70; emphasis added). Some broader theory of emotion is required to develop the sense that emotions are latent or subconscious. In comparison, my proposed category involves a more minimal commitment: some emotions can be intermittent.

But if intermittent emotions go out of existence, why aren't their later instances simply new episodes rather than continuations? How can emotions *persist* in part by ceasing to exist? Sometimes defenders of intermittence aim to solve the problem by appealing to numerical identity: whether the parts of the physical object are arranged in the same order as its original instance matter.<sup>78</sup> However, emotions are not fully physical in the same sense as most artefacts, and the arrangement of their parts is obscure. Another strategy appeals to the qualitative identity between

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<sup>78</sup> Burke (1980), p. 403.

the original and later instances of the relevant object. At once this strategy may also seem like a nonstarter. Rekindled grief appears not to be qualitatively identical to its intense, acutely painful original. But rekindled emotions aren't always weak. They may rival the intensity of their first instances. In such cases quality is indeed sufficient to establish the identity of an emotion among its interstices. And it's sufficient for attenuated emotions, too. Some features of an artefact are insufficient to deny its identity to its earlier counterpart. Cracks in the terracotta and dry blots of glue aren't enough to deny that the flowerpot is the one that shattered.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, the faintness of an emotion isn't enough to deny the identity between its acute instance and its rekindling, all else equal.

Not every emotion has the capacity to exist intermittently. Consider surprise. Suppose that I'm reading in my office when you suddenly burst through the door, shouting "Boo!" I am startled, but my surprise quickly runs its course. It doesn't sustain a gap in time. If you surprised me again a week later, my surprise is a new token of the emotion. I'm surprised by your later interruption, not the first one. The tokens of surprise aren't numerically identical due to the temporal gap. Surprise is like a sound, metaphysically speaking. But can't some surprises exist intermittently? Take profound surprises like acceptance to your dream college. This emotion isn't a case of surprise, however. When compared with the jolt of my surprise when you burst into my office, it's better characterized as awe or amazement. Surprise characteristically involves a thin physiological response to a stimulus. Awe and amazement, on the other hand, are richer emotions, drawing on narratives about a person's life. Tokens of any one type of emotion cannot be numerically identical across gaps in time.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. Also see Sattig (2015), p.p. 127–8 on two principles of sortal invariance and determination.

Grief is unlike surprise. It appears to be a plausible example of an intermittent emotion. We tend to resist intermittence because we think that grief is a transient experience, and the empirical data supports our sense that it fades over time. But my argument is importantly compatible with the data. I agree that grief simmers down after a few months. However, diminution doesn't imply cessation.

Grief can be inconclusive and unpredictable.<sup>80</sup> It's a fact that people sometimes experience overwhelming feelings of grief years after their acute reaction to loss subsided. Here's how the writer Jill Bialosky describes the painful reality of her grief over her sister's suicide:

[Grief] returns in different waves of intensity, but it never fully goes away...That isn't to say that the acuteness doesn't return. I can become suddenly devastated again and angry that the extremity of her despair and her suicidal impulses went unnoticed...An intense bout of sadness may arise after hearing or reading about a suicide...I am seized with reliving the kind of pain my sister may have suffered, the hopelessness and futility she may have felt in the days, weeks, months leading to death. (Bialosky 2022)

It's implausible to deny that Bialosky describes anything other than a profound, life-long experience of grief. She doesn't describe her episodes as new and discrete experiences. For her grief "returns" as well as its acuteness. The experience is familiar enough for her to generalize: she knows that she can become suddenly devastated and seized with pain. It would be an egregious misunderstanding to treat her description as independent of grief simply because these episodes

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<sup>80</sup> Some mothers never fully recover from the loss of their perinatal children (Peppers and Knapp, 1980). They "experienced [their grief] as a dull ache in the background, but ready to surface from time to time" (Archer, 1999, p. 112). Moreover, prolonged grief has several possible causes, including a sudden, traumatic death, the death of a child, overwhelming feelings at the time of the loss, and undergoing multiple losses simultaneously (p. 112; Worden, 2018, p. 140).

occur after her initial reaction diminished. She continues to feel the impact of her loss, albeit in a discontinuous way. It's thus false to assume per (iii) that grief simply diminishes over time.

I have been arguing that intermittence is the best way to understand the persistence of grief. No doubt some will object to this metaphysical strategy. For those sympathetic to the folk view, an obvious objection concerns disposition. One could argue that it's better to describe rekindled grief as a disposition rather than an intermittent emotion. A person's grief for her dead father is no different from Leonard's anger at Nina, to borrow an example from Julien Deonna and Fabrice Teroni. Leonard tends to feel angry at Nina in certain circumstances, like when they are in the same room, or when he thinks or is reminded of her (Deonna and Teroni, 2012, p. 8; cf. Quine, 1960, pp. 222–3). Such circumstances elicit his anger. Without these triggers his anger fades. But it would rekindle if he attended to them again. Grief is no different. Certain circumstances, like old pictures, favorite songs, and anniversaries elicit the person's grief and without them it fades, though it could rekindle if she attends to them again. This obvious objection avoids the unpalatable metaphysical aftertaste of intermittence.

I don't deny that grief is dispositional, but it can't be a simple disposition. Consider how frequently we encounter grief's triggers. We're reminded of our dead almost all the time. We tend to think about them every day. Many of us see their pictures on the shelves when we enter our living rooms. And yet grief doesn't always rekindle when we're faced with such triggers. Sometimes the gaps between occurrences go on for *years*. If grief were in fact like Leonard's anger at Nina, we would expect it to rekindle under the same condition: like Leonard, the griever would attend to the trigger and subsequently experience the emotion. But this doesn't happen. We don't grieve every time we enter our living rooms. The fact that we don't reexperience grief all the time despite the daily exposure to its possible triggers indicates that grief isn't a simple disposition.

However, one might reply that grief is a more complex disposition rather than an intermittent emotion. A cheerful mood could “mask” the disposition to grieve such that it fails to manifest though a person faces its typical conditions, like Grandma’s picture on the mantle (Johnston, 1992, p. 233). But this objection from complex rather than simple dispositions concedes too much to the role masking plays in the experience of grief. First, it implies that grief depends simply on, say, the mood a person is in, though grief sometimes interrupts moods. Moreover, the complex dispositionalist is committed to explaining any years-long gaps between grief experiences in terms of the relevant masks finally dropping off. But as I’ve argued in this section, episodes of grief over time aren’t as arbitrary as this explanation suggests. It’s possible to understand the episodes as more unified over time, though the sequence is discontinuous. I’ve proposed the category of intermittent emotions to call attention to this temporal aspect of grief.

## **5. Rationally intermittent emotions**

The descriptive argument in the preceding section concludes the negative phase of this paper. I criticized a key assumption of the puzzle about the rationality of grief over time. Claim (iii) supposes that grief simply diminishes. But this is mistaken because grief is an intermittent emotion. Without (iii), the stark inconsistency driving the puzzle disappears.

Or does it? One might object to my criticism on normative grounds. One could say that my descriptive argument leaves the puzzle in place rather than dismantles it. Even if we accept that grief is intermittent, the inconsistency remains: sometimes grief recurs, but there are still other times when it diminishes as its eliciting conditions persist. My argument has not provided a rational explanation for this gap.

Another objection denies that intermittent grief is at all rational. Berislav Marušić insists that “togglng,” “an unstable predicament,” “a restless shifting between perspectives” on grief, obscures more than reveals the significance of loss (Marušić, 2022, pp. 97–8). Instability prevents us from grasping the reasonableness of accommodation, the emotional state felt when grief subsides. Setting aside for now the specifics of Marušić’s theory, my argument thus far appears vulnerable to a similar objection about togglng. Accepting the existence of intermittent grief doesn’t entail accepting it as *rational*. One could complain that flipping back and forth between grieving and not grieving for as long as one lives is pathological.

These objections motivate the positive phase of this paper. I address them together because they question the rational status of intermittence. I argue in this section that intermittent emotions have a rational dimension because intermittence is a general norm to evaluate emotions. Philosophers tend to judge emotions according to their character or intensity; they rarely explore more sophisticated considerations like those concerning time. But it makes sense for an emotion to come and go as much as it does to feel acute fear when faced with a charging rhinoceros.

When discussing fitting emotions, we can specify *how* emotions present the evaluative features of their objects. D’Arms and Jacobson claim that emotions present their objects according to “norms of fit” like “shape” and “size” (pp. 73–4).<sup>81</sup> An emotion is unfitting based on shape when its *character* is to present its object as having certain evaluative features which it lacks. The negative evaluation implicit in your fear of flying doesn’t accurately track the safety of the plane, given that you’re statistically more likely to be involved in a car crash traveling to the airport than in a plane crash. An emotion is unfitting based on size when its *intensity* doesn’t match the evaluative features of its object. Overreactions and insufficient emotional responses are unfitting

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<sup>81</sup> D’Arms and Jacobson note that their discussion of the norms of fit is not exhaustive.

because of this norm. There's something wrong about someone who feels debilitating guilt because they merely stepped on someone's foot when boarding the subway. The emotion has the proper shape in response to its object; it's fitting to feel somewhat guilty because this person may have hurt another. However, intense guilt doesn't fit the nature of the mistake.

Like character and intensity, intermittence is another norm of fit. Suppose that your child has been kidnapped. You fear for his life. This situation demands your unwavering attention because your child is the most important person in the world. Of course, your fear slightly wavers. You go from fearfully wondering about your child's welfare to the phone when it rings or to the water boiling on the stove when you're making dinner. Your fear is not permanently fixed for as long as your child is gone. Rather, it ebbs and flows on a continuum of being more constant and more episodic. It follows from your child being so important that their kidnapping demands your fear to be *more constant* even if it cannot be psychologically permanent. A corollary is that your fear would be inappropriate if it were *more intermittent* or *episodic* in this situation. There would be something wrong if you responded to the kidnapping of your child with a deficit of attention. It'd be wrong for you to be distracted from the kidnapping by booking a vacation to Lisbon. The appropriate reply to the trip is "I can't be bothered with that now!" We would criticize your attitude for going from appropriately fearful to distracted to fearful and distracted again because this situation calls for your fear to avoid as many gaps as is psychologically feasible. Setting aside the inevitable breaks in your attention, your fear shouldn't be all that episodic. Our condemnation registers that intermittence is relevant to the evaluation of how emotions abide over time.

The fact that emotions are intermittent sometimes makes them fitting. Suppose that you are constantly nervous for a talk you must give in three months. You're nervous about it as you work during the day. Throughout the night you can't sleep because you're nervous about it. The talk is

important to your career; nervousness is the right kind of response to it. You're not overreacting because your nervousness isn't too intense. The issue is that you are *constantly* nervous for three months; constancy is the central consideration which renders the nervousness unfitting. In terms of a continuum, your worry cleaves to the side of being more constant than to the side of being more episodic. It would be fitting for the worry to be more episodic. The talk should not strongly captivate your focus for months because it's in the future and not so significant. Rather, your worry would be getting something right about the talk if it ebbed and flowed over the course of three months. An episode of nervousness every month or so would attend to the significance of the talk in a fitting way. This is a case where intermittence grounds the fittingness of an emotion.

Oded Na'aman writes: "Like fire, which can be the cause of its own expiration, it is part of the rational structure of certain attitudes that they consume themselves: the longer they endure the less fitting they become" (Na'aman, 2021, p. 251). It is fitting to feel emotions *less* depending on how long they have persisted. Self-consumption implies that diminution is perfectly reasonable. Despite also making an analogy to fire, Na'aman thus poses a challenge to my view.

Rationally self-consuming and rationally intermittent emotions have something in common: their fittingness depends on a key aspect of their temporal character. Na'aman identifies the length of time as the most relevant aspect. I disagree. For we can draw a distinction between how *long* emotions endure through time and *how* they have endured through time. There is more to the temporality of emotions than their length. How they move through time, so to speak, is also relevant.<sup>82</sup> For instance, the rational status of emotions sometimes depends on the extent to which there are gaps in between their occurrences. Na'aman presents grief as an example of a rationally

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<sup>82</sup> Na'aman's view develops one introduced by Goldie (2011), which denies that grief is only a singular feeling and instead holds that it is a kind of process, best explained as a narrative (Goldie, 2011, p. 119–122; cf. 2012, pp. 57–59). However, I am arguing that neither Goldie nor Na'aman consider how a singular feeling rather than a process could change *and* maintain its identity over time.



self-consuming emotion (p. 263). If my argument for rational intermittence applies to grief, then Na'aman is mistaken. It would be misleading to claim that grief consumes itself as a part of its *rational structure*.

With this discussion, we can put together my master argument: grief unfolds in patterns of intermittence, and such patterns are reasonable; it's therefore reasonable for grief to come in and out of our lives long after we suffered the loss. This argument defeats the two objections at the beginning of this section: it should now be obvious that gaps between grief are reasonable and that the temporal pattern of intermittent emotions gets something *right* about their objects.

The master argument vindicates the folk view that grief is forever, qualifying the sense in which we grieve for the rest of our lives. The moral is that our greatest losses reasonably continue to impact us although we don't feel them maximally all the time.

## **6. A perspectival view of grief**

Why does grief unfold in rational patterns of intermittence? Let me conclude the paper by offering a speculative answer to this question. I propose that rationally intermittent grief reflects the interplay between two perspectives, one subjective, the other objective, each attending to different dimensions of loss. Let's label the sketch a *perspectival view*, because it draws on a tradition in Western philosophy that explains phenomena in terms of opposing perspectives. Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere* is one example. There are two standpoints to take on the world and oneself, a more subjective one that concerns how a particular person inside of the world sees things, and a more objective one that "relies less on the specifics of the individual's makeup and position in the world" (Nagel, 1986, p. 5).

Berislav Marušić provides another example. He asks, how can diminution appear reasonable from the first-person perspective though the reasons to grieve persist? The question, he argues, eludes a solution (Marušić, 2018, p. 16). “Double vision” explains the aporia. Drawing on Sartre, Marušić claims that our existential ontology shapes our consciousness of grief. We can take a passive, theoretical perspective on it, treating it as a process we simply undergo (p. 17). Or we can ignore such facticity and see it through an agential perspective and take ourselves to have strong reasons to grieve. In light of this Sartrean constitution, we cannot reconcile these perspectives: “whenever we attend to one of them, the other is, as it were, blurry in the background” (p. 17).

The idea of conflicting perspectives reflects well a tension internal to grief. This is Marušić’s great insight. However, his perspectival view and the one I propose share little else in common. First, Marušić has no way to explain the rational status of rekindled grief given his defense of the puzzle of accommodation. By his lights, rekindled grief is normatively insignificant because it does not explain the discrepancy between diminution and grief’s eliciting conditions. But if the norm of intermittence gives such grief a rational dimension, this is false. Moreover, Marušić and I have antithetical purposes. He appeals to the idea of conflicting perspectives to explain why the diminution of grief and the accommodation to loss appear reasonable. Yet, such perspectives, so I will argue, can explain grief’s rational intermittence. Lastly, my perspectival view is not Sartrean. Marušić accepts that our self-consciousness is divided by facticity and freedom, and that bad faith is our ontological default. However, I will show that it’s possible to view the *object* of grief—loss—rather than *our selves* from conflicting standpoints.

Let’s compare two emotions: nervousness for an upcoming talk in three months and grief. One emotion looks forwards, the other backwards, but their objects both endure over time. You

are nervous about a talk that is (for now) in the future. You grieve for a loss in the past. Both objects afford different evaluative perspectives from which to understand their meaning, making rational intermittence possible.

From one perspective it makes sense to be nervous about the upcoming talk for three months. You must speak in public to give the talk, but public speaking induces your nerves. The eliciting condition for nervousness persists; public speaking is an intrinsic evaluative feature of the talk. It doesn't make sense for nervousness to diminish if its eliciting condition endures. As long as public speaking remains a feature of the talk, and the talk stays in the future, it appears fitting to be nervous about the talk until you give it. From this perspective *constant* nervousness seems like the rational response to the talk. This standpoint primarily concerns how the object of your emotion relates to yourself. It doesn't consider much else besides the fact that an aspect of the talk warrants nervousness. For this reason, it can be understood as a more subjective point of view on the object of your emotion.

However, it's possible to access a different perspective. From another standpoint it could be fitting for emotions to diminish on the grounds of other evaluative features of the object. The upcoming talk has features other than public speaking that are relevant to the evaluation of your emotional response to it, generating another set of fittingness conditions. Suppose that you have given similar talks and the upcoming one is neither for a job nor a presentation at a major conference. These features are reasons to not worry constantly about the talk. This perspective is more objective or detached than the one justifying constant nervousness. It accounts for broad considerations, like its familiarity and insignificance, aspects just as essential to what your upcoming talk is as the fact that it involves speaking in public. They're thus compelling reasons for why it's fitting for your nervousness to end.

The point of this case is that *intermittent* nervousness is the best response to the talk. It's fitting to feel nervous about it now and then. The rationality of nervousness is not fast and loose because there are coinciding reasons to be nervous and not nervous about the talk. Your nervousness is open to normative criticism if it only responds to *one* set of reasons. It is unfitting to constantly worry about the talk for three months, because there are other evaluative features of the talk like the fact that you've given such talks in the past. We need not appeal to prudential reasons—reasons of the wrong kind—to criticize constant nervousness. (It is irrelevant, though true, that your constant worry will annoy everyone around you.) The response is blinkered in the sense that it focuses on a single evaluative profile of its object when there are in fact others. Likewise, not at all worrying about the talk is unfitting. It makes sense to experience a jolt when specific cues highlight the relevant evaluative features, eliciting nervousness. You have a reason to be nervous when an esteemed colleague emails you to tell you that they'll be at your talk. Your feeling toward the talk is too detached if it ignores the significance of such cues.

However, we don't tend to occupy both the subjective and the objective perspectives at once. You forget that you've presented many talks in the past when you read your distinguished colleague's email. Likewise, the email recedes to the back of your mind when you reflect on the similarity between the upcoming talk and your previous ones. For most of us one perspective fades out when another fades in because our emotional attention shifts in light of specific cues. If it's reasonable for emotions to respond to both their objects' subjective and objective features, but we don't see the objects from both perspectives at once, then a pattern of intermittent emotion is reasonable. It makes sense for a dynamic to unfold over time, for an emotion to track an objective feature of its object at one time and track a subjective feature at another time.

Something similar occurs with grief. It unfolds in a rational pattern of intermittence because we alternate between seeing different evaluative features of loss, sometimes seeing it through a more subjective perspective, through which its personal features appear salient, sometimes seeing it through an objective perspective, through which its natural features engage us.

From the subjective perspective the significance of loss *for you* absorbs your full emotional attention. Your father whom you loved more than almost anyone else in the world dies. He raised, cared, and supported you for your whole life. And now he's gone. These features of the loss affect *you*. Others have similar relationships with their deceased fathers, but only *you* have lost *your* father. (Siblings may experience similar, although nuanced, losses when their parent dies. Nevertheless, the preceding considerations, filled with more detail, make the loss a personal one.) From this standpoint you appear to have a reason to grieve the death of your father forever. I don't have the same reasons as you to respond to your father's death if he was a stranger to me. Since you deeply loved him, and he cared for you, your grief over his death should be consistent with those facts. They never change, appearing to warrant constant grief entirely based on the personal significance of the loss.

However, from the objective perspective, another kind of consideration holds your attention. You appreciate the fact that a great loss like the death of your father is a part of the order of human life. You view loss in a broader context than its personal significance. You see that in death parents leave behind their children. This feature of loss reflects human mortality, the condition with which we all must live. There is a naturalness to loss. Not every loss is universal and inevitable like the death of a parent. For a parent the death of their child is *unnatural*. Yet we

come to take a detached attitude toward even such terrifying and heartbreaking losses.<sup>83</sup> Like in the case of the upcoming talk, these cosmic factors generate another set of fittingness conditions. It's reasonable to adopt the objective stance towards loss. We even aim to cultivate it. We teach children, for example, to view death as unavoidable and praise them as mature when they accept the death of the family pet. These more objective features of loss serve as reasons to accept loss and not grieve.

Like in the talk case, *intermittent* grief is the appropriate response to loss. Its personal and objective significance demand emotional attention and reflect two standpoints we tend not to occupy at once. We can now see why it is bizarre to make sense of grief from a single normative point of view. An appeal to the objective perspective explains why it appears wrong to grieve *constantly*: this response to loss latches onto its personal significance, neglecting its other aspects, like its universality. However, it appears as wrong to feel nothing because all fathers die. The idea of the subjective perspective explains why: the response focuses on the naturalness of loss, ignoring its meaning for the griever.

It is thus within the nature of grief to access different profiles of loss. For the most part we tend to view loss through the objective perspective. After the initial reaction fades it tends to dominate. The objective perspective may become our eventual default, but as long as we continue to shift between the subjective and objective perspectives over the course of our lives, our responses to loss are rational. The interval of time between the shifts has less rational significance than the fact that they occur over time.

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<sup>83</sup> We tend to detach once the loss *sinks in*. Matthew Ratcliffe presents a sophisticated account of sinking in (SI), which involves “reconciling, over time, the realities of one’s situation with an aspect of experience that eludes familiar distinctions between cognition and affect or belief and feeling.” (Ratcliffe, 2022, p. 3). SI reflects the “two-sidedness” of grief”; it “involves recognizing and responding to disturbances of one’s world” (Ratcliffe, 2023, p. 34, 39).

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