What Is Love? An Incomplete Map of the Metaphysics

ABSTRACT: *The paper begins by surveying a range of possible views on the metaphysics of romantic love, organizing them as responses to a single question. It then outlines a position, constructionist functionalism, according to which romantic love is characterized by a functional role that is at least partly constituted by social matters (social institutions, traditions, and practices), although this role may be realized by states that are not socially constructed.*

KEYWORDS: romantic love, metaphysics, social constructionism, functionalism

1. The Project

As things currently stand in analytic philosophy, metaphysicians aren't studying romantic love, and philosophers of love aren't identifying as metaphysicians.[1] Contemporary metaphysics is deeply and thoroughly engaged in all sorts of questions concerning the *reality* and *nature* and *naturalness* of things, but it has yet to bring its distinctive investigative tools and conceptual resources for addressing these questions to bear thoroughly on the topic of romantic love.

Meanwhile, romantic love occupies the entire careers of scholars working in other subdisciplines of philosophy and the entire careers of scholars from across a wide range of other disciplines. It is also of great concern to the general public and to artists in all genres. And yet despite all this attention, romantic love remains a source of perennial puzzlement and confusion. Pressing questions persist concerning the reality and nature and naturalness of love.

I contend that topics of great human concern that are also sources of perennial puzzlement and confusion are where philosophers are most called upon to contribute. Moreover, when the questions at issue concern the reality, nature, and naturalness of something, they are just the kinds of questions that *metaphysicians* specifically are equipped and trained to address (clarify, expand upon, debate, suggest answers to, etc.). And analytic metaphysics of the kind I admire is receptive

1 These are intentionally generic claims; they admit of exceptions. I am one!

to, and where appropriate informed by, insights and results from a very broad range of other disciplines as well as extra-academic sources. This kind of metaphysics, I think, has something of distinctive value to offer to contemporary theorizing about romantic love.

A principal aim of this paper is to help set up the analytic metaphysics of romantic love as a going concern. This involves first doing some conceptual ground-clearing work; the ground is not presently well-trodden. I will try to create a map of (some of) the options for a metaphysician of love. Populating the map with views will often proceed by way of exporting approaches and concepts already at work in other areas of metaphysics and/or locating extant theories about love that are not (currently) generally discussed in terms of their relationship to this metaphysical landscape.

This initial segment of the paper (sections 2 and 3) may appeal to those philosophers who prefer to enter a new field by contemplating a range of options in this field. I will then proceed to advance a substantive thesis in section 4, so philosophers who prefer to enter a field via engagement with a particular view will have an opportunity to do that.

To save time, in what follows I'll just say 'love' to mean *romantic love*. I should also perhaps note right away that I don't start out by assuming the existence of any necessary connections between love and sex, between love and marriage, or between love and the existence of (anything recognizable as a) romantic relationship. Taking the ancient distinction between *agape*, *philia*, and *eros* as a starting point for investigation, associating romantic love with *eros*, would require me to make at least a *prima facie* assumption about connections between love and sex. So I'm not going to start there.

My map of the metaphysics of love will be incomplete in at least two important respects: it won't include all the available metaphysical options, and it won't discuss the options besides constructionist functionalism in detail. But my aim is not to *complete* the analytic metaphysics of love. That is not a viable aim for a lifetime, never mind an article. The aim is to offer motivations and points of reference that can prompt further work in this area of metaphysics.

2. Preliminaries

The metaphysical options I'll be presenting can be understood as ways of responding to a single question (although not all these responses are exactly *answers* to that question, as I shall explain). First, therefore, I will try to state as clearly as possible what that question is. *What is love?* is a fine first pass, but there is more to say about what exactly I intend by that for current purposes.

To begin with, I want to discuss some similarities and differences between the following four sentence schemas:

     1. *x* loves *y*
     2. *x* is in love with *y*
     3. *x* and *y* are in love (i.e., with each other)
     4. *x* is in love

I am going to assume, at least for current purposes, that (1) and (2) can be regarded as equivalent: (1) is merely more explicitly about romantic love in that it employs the 'in love with' locution (which is typically not used in connection with other kinds of love). I am also going to assume that unrequited love is possible, and hence that (3) is not equivalent to, or even entailed by, (2).

Somewhat more controversially, I suggest that (3) has two readings: a distributive reading, on which in effect it amounts to nothing more than the conjunction of (2) with:

> 2′. y is in love with x

and a collective reading, on which it can be understood as saying something different, or something more, than it does on its distributive reading. Exactly what (3) says on its collective reading is not, I think, a straightforward matter. But at a first pass, it might be understood as saying that x and y participate jointly in a *single* token relation of mutual love, whereas on its distributive reading (3) might be understood as saying that each of x and y bears a *distinct* token relation of love toward the other.

I propose to focus on (2) rather than (3) in this paper. There is something appealing about focusing on (2) initially, at least to the extent that (2) appears to express something metaphysically more basic than (3)- on its distributive reading, where what (3) describes is simply a conjunction of states of affairs described by claims that have the form of (2). Plausibly, states of affairs expressed by (2) at least partly (and maybe fully) metaphysically ground the state of affairs expressed by (3) on its distributive reading.

That said, on the collective reading of (3) (assuming there is such a thing), matters are not so simple. Maybe there are some cases of romantic love for which the collective reading of (3) also expresses a state of affairs that is at least partly grounded in states of affairs of the kind expressed by claims of the form of (2) (perhaps with additional requirements), but I do not assume that is invariably the case. That is to say, I want to allow for the possibility of irreducibly collective relations of romantic love.[2]

Be that as it may, focusing on (2) is a promising entry point for now. At a minimum, the state of affairs (if any) expressed by (2) is *one* of the things in the vicinity that warrants metaphysical investigation, and there is reason to think that understanding (2) can help us understand (3) on at least some of its readings. I leave it open that the collective reading of (3) may also warrant further or separate metaphysical investigation.

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2 One kind of reason for resisting this assumption is perhaps best understood by considering cases of nonmonogamous love. It is not obvious that the love of a romantic triad, for example, is metaphysically grounded in the love of each individual member for each one of the others and/or in the love of each member for the other two considered as a unit. The mutual love of the triad may be better construed as organic or holistic in a way that cannot be broken down into, and is not grounded in, some number of *distinct* love relations obtaining between smaller groups within the triad. (And if irreducibly collective love is possible for triads, I don't know what would prevent its also being possible for couples, quads, and other groups.)

If it is possible to be in love without being in love *with* anyone, then (4) differs in important ways from all of (1) through (3). Is this in fact possible? I can envisage one kind of argument that might be offered in favor of its being so:

A. Fictional characters do not exist.
B. It is possible to be in love with a fictional character.
C. Therefore, it is possible to be in love without being in love with anyone.

Both premises have some (at least *prima facie*) plausibility, although both are also certainly challengeable. However, the conclusion that most directly follows from them is not (C) but rather:

C′. Therefore, it is possible to be in love without being in love with anyone who exists.

It could be further argued that (C′) *entails* (C), but if that is the case then being in love with *y* entails that *y* exists, in which case one of the two premises must be mistaken. In either case, there is no sound argument for (C) to be found here.

I am going to take it that (4) in fact requires the truth of some claim of the form of (2), leaving open the possibility that claims of the form of (2) can be true even when the beloved *y* is nonexistent. Of course, there is much more to be said about the question of whether it is possible to fall in love with fictional characters, and/or with other putative nonexistents such as hallucinations, figments of the imagination, online personae who bear no resemblance to their creators, etc. These are deep and interesting issues. Although they are not ones I can hope to settle here, they connect up with other extant work in various ways, and do not need to be tackled from scratch. To give just a couple of examples, some relevant background on the phenomenon of people apparently feeling love for actors (sometimes in character) may be found in Horton and Wohl (1956), and the possibility of *fearing* fictional characters is heavily discussed in Walton (1978) and subsequent literature. I will say a little more about the relevance of such matters in section 3 below.

So far, then, (2) is my entry point for enquiry. I can therefore now refine my question from *What is love?* to *What relation between x and y is expressed in (2)?* But there are a few more preliminary points to address in order to sharpen the target question even further. First: it is so far an open possibility that there is *no* relation of the kind that (2) appears (on a face-value reading) to attribute. For what remains of this section, I shall bracket this issue and talk as if there is one, but the point will be taken up again at the start of the section 3.

Second: what do the *x* and *y* in (2) stand for? That is to say, what are the relata of the target relation? A first pass is to say that they stand for *agents*. Indeed, some sort of *full* agency requirement on the relata of the love relation might promise to help explain why romantic love is an adult phenomenon of necessity (not just when ethically pursued) and/or why there is something not just strange but impossible-sounding about the idea of romantic love for a nonsentient

object like the Eiffel Tower. And it may help account for puzzlement about what is happening in the movie *Her*, where a computer operating system appears to fall in love with a human (and vice versa): there are correspondingly puzzling questions about whether (according to the fiction) the OS is genuinely an agent.

In keeping with the preceding discussion, we can allow nonexistent agents in the y position. We don't, however, yet have any particular reason to admit them in the x position; different views on the nature of truth in fiction will deliver different results on whether they should be so admitted. But further questions complicate the adoption of any straightforward agency requirement. One is whether y actually needs to *be* an agent, or whether it is sufficient if x *regards* y as an agent or as agent-like (in relevant respects; cf. Jenkins [2006], where it is argued that the analog of the latter is correct for *flirtation*). If we want to allow for the possibility of being in love with fictional characters, we might lean toward the latter. But then we may also have to acknowledge possible cases of genuine love for non-agents like the Eiffel Tower by people who regard them as agent-like (in relevant respects). I won't attempt to settle this issue here, however, as it doesn't directly impact my attempts to isolate a target question.

An issue that *does* impact those attempts concerns the formal properties of the relation described in (2). It is the issue of whether or not the relation is *binary*, with one place for the lover and one place for the beloved, as its expression in (2) suggests. This is not the same question as whether love is always monogamous (i.e., only ever obtains exclusively and between two people; for further discussion of that issue, see Jenkins, forthcoming), as the relation can be thought of as binary even if we allow for the possibility of plural occupancy of its two places, recasting (2) as:

>   2″. *xx* are in love with *yy*.

I will assume here that the relevant relation at least *sometimes* has two places, although my best guess is that it is eventually best to construe it as multigrade (see Jenkins, forthcoming, note 17). In order to get started somewhere, however, we can begin with consideration of the two-place case, leaving open the possibility of plural occupancy (of one or both places). For the sake of easy reading, I shall continue to use (2) as originally formulated, but stipulate that the x and y in (2) are to be understood as neutral between singular and plural occupancy (and that the 'is' in (2) is correspondingly number-neutral). (As an aside: if plural occupancy is a genuine possibility then it can't quite be right to say it is a requirement on the relata that they be agents, though it may be that all we need do is shift to saying that they must be agents *or pluralities of agents*. The issue of whether it is sufficient for *xx* to *regard* beloveds *yy* as relevantly agential remains open, however.)

Some questions about the relation's formal properties are relatively easy to settle; for example, even limiting attention to the simplest two-place instances the relation fails to exhibit *symmetry*. Others are more interesting and substantive. What, for example, shall we say about *irreflexivity*? Situations—analogous those discussed in Perry ([1979])—where the subject of an attitude does not realize she is also its object

may be of particular interest in this connection. However, while such questions are fascinating, they are not my concern here as I now have enough preliminaries in place to state the target question around which I will organize my map of the metaphysics of love:

> *What is the metaphysical nature of the relation between x and y (if any) that gets expressed in sentences of the form 'x is in love with y', interpreted in the manner described in this section?*

3. Mapping Metaphysical Options

We can begin mapping the terrain of responses to this question by focusing on the parenthetical 'if any' in the target question. One metaphysical option is to reject the question's presupposition of existence and deny that there is any such relation. This need not imply that talk about being 'in love with' is *incomprehensible* or *nonsense*; many discussions of things that do not exist are perfectly comprehensible and sensible.

In keeping with terminology in other areas of metaphysics we can use the label *eliminativism* for the view that there is no relation of romantic love. We might also use the label *fictionalism* for the more specific view that although we talk as if there were such a relation, this talk is (in relevant respects) like a kind of fiction, because really there is no such thing. The fiction of love may be useful for certain purposes, says a fictionalist, but the claims expressed by sentences of the form of (2) are not literally true.[3] Maybe they are false, or maybe they fail to be truth-apt.

A naïve fictionalist about love might try to claim an easy victory for her metaphysical position by noting that the *etymology* of 'romantic' is tied to the name given to a certain tradition in medieval fictional literature. But such an argument would be far too quick; many of the things described in fictions are real phenomena, and for all the etymology tells us, romantic love may be one of them. Moreover, etymology is sometimes a poor guide to a word's current meaning.

What I'll call *nihilism* about love should, at least initially, be kept separate from eliminativism. Nihilism is the view that whether or not the relation of being in love exists, nothing *instantiates* that relation. One interesting form of nihilism is *impossibilist nihilism*: the view that it is *impossible* for anything to stand in the love relation. This view appears to be entailed by the central thesis of Shand (2011) although he does not there couch it in the kind of metaphysical vocabulary I am deploying in this paper nor present it under the aegis of metaphysics. Whether nihilism (or impossibilist nihilism) about love entails eliminativism about love will depend on one's views concerning the metaphysics of uninstantiated relations.

Next I want to draw attention to a large and important cluster of views that can be grouped together as *identity theories*. These hold that the love relation is

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3 This is a form of *hermeneutic fictionalism*; that is, it is a claim about how 'love'-talk actually works, not of *revolutionary fictionalism*, which is a claim about how we *ought* to use such talk (see Stanley 2001 for the distinction).

identical to a relation describable in other terms. One might call some of these views *reductionist*, but this terminology has additional connotations that should be handled with care if it is employed. Among other things, 'reductionism' suggests an asymmetry—perhaps an asymmetry of metaphysical grounding—whereas 'identity theory' does not.

Many extant views about love are, in my sense, identity theories. As with Shand's nihilism, however, while I think it can be useful to think of these extant positions as metaphysical theses and classify them as identity theories, their extant defenders do not on the whole standardly classify what they are doing as metaphysics nor describe their views as identity theories. However, I am inclined to diagnose historical accident as at least partly explanatory of many of the divisions of subdisciplinary labor in philosophy and am not particularly concerned about them except insofar as it is important to be *aware* that it is not currently standard to present philosophical theorizing about love as something that can fall within the remit of analytic metaphysics. Once we are aware of this fact about the status quo, we can challenge it.

Prominent identity theories of love—either romantic love specifically or personal love more generally with romantic love included as a subtype—include the view that what it is for x to be in love with y is for x to feel certain *emotions* (or sentiments) concerning y. (An emotion view is defended in Hamlyn 1989.) Another kind of identity theory holds that the obtaining of the love relation is a matter of x forming, or desiring to form, *a union* of the right kind with y. (A union view is defended in Nozick 1989.) Yet others hold that it is a matter of x having the right kind of concern for y (a concern view is defended in Frankfurt 1999) or *valuing y* in the right kind of way (a valuing view is defended in Velleman 1999). One kind of identity theory suggested by some of the writings of Schopenhauer would hold that what it is for x to be in love with y is simply for x to feel sexual desire for y. For example, Schopenhauer writes that 'all amorousness is rooted in the sexual impulse alone, *is in fact* absolutely only a more closely determined, specialized, and indeed, in the strictest sense, individualized sexual impulse, however ethereally it may deport itself' (1818: 533, emphasis added).

There is a wide range of identity theories in existence (and far more are available positions in logical space); I have only mentioned a selection. But one point I'd like to draw attention to briefly before moving on is that what we end up saying about the possibility of being in love with nonexistents (be they fictional characters, hallucinations, figments of the imagination, online personae, etc.) could bear quite directly on which (if any) identity theory is to be accepted. For example, if one finds it deeply mistaken to say that it is possible to be in love without being in love with an *existing* beloved, one may correspondingly be drawn toward theories that by design place substantive requirements on the beloved's metaphysical status. Nozick's view of love, for example, includes the constraint that 'love is historical, attaching to persons … and not to characteristics' (1974: 168).

It is also worth getting clear about the difference between identity theories and eliminativism. If we say *love is just sexual desire*, we have an identity theory. If we say *there's no such thing as love and all that really exists is sexual desire*, we are eliminativists (or, perhaps, nihilists who are not quite expressing

themselves accurately). But while identity theories and eliminativism are distinct, an eliminativist might be motivated by thought processes similar to those motivating an identity theorist and merely make a different final step in her reasoning. An identity theorist and a eliminativist might agree that (say) a certain kind of concern is the interesting phenomenon in the vicinity of love, but the eliminativist, instead of identifying love with that kind of concern, could argue that it is the thing that has been *mistaken* for love. There is a significant difference between analyzing *what something is* and analyzing that thing *away*, but the two processes can easily overlap up to a certain point.

It is also possible to combine more than one identity theory to construct a *pluralist* view. A pluralist would hold that romantic love comes in more than one form and that different identity theories are true for the different forms of love. For example, a pluralist might say that in some cases love is a matter of feeling a certain emotion, while in others it is a matter of having a certain kind of robust concern. Pluralism is among the responses to the target question that might not be well described as an *answer* to it; it might be better understood as rejecting the question's presupposition of uniqueness.

As in the case of identity theories, motivations for pluralism can sometimes overlap with motivations for eliminativism. For example, one viable kind of eliminativism, which may be labeled *simplificatory eliminativism*,[4] holds that talking as if there were a single relation, *love*, is a simplifying maneuver used as a work-around for the complexity generated by the fact that there are various different things (e.g., emotions, robust concern, etc.) in the vicinity of romantic love that are important to us. On this kind of view, we need some sort of simplifying language in order to describe complicated situations quickly and efficiently, and it doesn't matter for these purposes that the vocabulary we end up using appears to attribute a relation that doesn't in fact exist. Like the pluralist, the simplificatory eliminativist thinks there are lots of different things that can be going on in cases of (so-called) love. But where the pluralist deems *all* of these things are genuinely forms of love, the simplificatory eliminativist holds that *none* of them is.

In addition to pure pluralism, a *functionalist* option is available according to which the different forms of love are best thought of as different realizers of a single functional role. (Indeed, one of the early-stage benefits of applying the characteristic tools and strategies of analytic metaphysics to the topic of love is that it becomes clear that positions like pluralism and functionalism are available as options here.) For example, a functionalist could hold that love is defined by a characteristic functional role to be characterized in terms of, for example, prompting significant family-like bonds outside one's family of origin and could also maintain that different things can realize this role in different people (for example, some might find that a particular *emotion* is what prompts such bonds, while others might find that a particular kind of *concern* is what does this). One can also be a functionalist without being a pluralist if one thinks that the functional role of love has just one realizer. It is also possible to be a pluralist at the level of roles; that is, one can

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4 I am indebted to Octavian Ion for suggesting the label 'simplificatory' and for suggesting I discuss this kind of view.

maintain that there is more than one functional role the realizing of which suffices for being love. However, as I shall explain below, my own reasons for finding functionalism attractive have to do with its ability to accommodate pluralism within a unified account of the phenomenon. This feature is not preserved by versions of functionalism that are pluralist with respect to love's roles.

Those less impressed by any attempts to find a compelling identity theory of love might be tempted by what I will call *primitivism*: the view that love is metaphysically primitive in the sense that, while the love relation *exists*, no (nontrivial) identity theory of it is true. According to the primitivist, love should be treated as a starting point in metaphysical enquiry: it can't be reduced to anything or informatively identified with anything.

Others, unswayed by any of the suggestions on offer so far, might prefer *quietism*. Quietism states that we should not attempt to address metaphysical questions about love. It can be motivated in various ways: for example, on the grounds that we are obviously not in a position to find any answers, or by the thought that it is pragmatically unwise to consider the nature of love lest we thereby render ourselves bad at loving.[5] For one reason or another, the quietist believes we would do better to stay quiet. Quietism is a metametaphysical position in that it consists in a claim about the metaphysics of love (as opposed to a metaphysical claim about love). It is also plausibly best described as a response (not an answer) to the target question: it consists in a recommendation that we *stop trying to answer* that question.

Another view that has consequences for how we should approach the metaphysics of love, although it is not itself a metaphysical view (and hence also not straightforwardly an *answer* to the target question), is *projectivism* about love. Projectivism is, strictly speaking, a view about our thought and talk; it holds that sentences of the form '*x* is in love with *y*' do not (solely) serve the purpose of describing facts about the world, but rather serve (at least in part) to express attitudes of the speaker. Certain kinds of projectivism can relieve the metaphysician of love of the task of giving an account of the nature of the love relation (just as certain kinds of *ethical* projectivism can relieve the metaphysician of morality of the task of giving an account of the nature of *goodness*).

An example of a projectivist view about love is the view that '*x* is in love with *y*' expresses a certain kind of pro-attitude toward a certain kind of relationship (actual or putative) between *x* and *y*. This kind of projectivism might be motivated by claiming that 'love'-talk has normative force: that in ascribing love, one is evaluating something. Of course, the thought that 'love'-talk has normative force does not *entail* projectivism; it is also compatible with many other views about the semantics of 'love'.

Another point of clarification: projectivism does not entail fictionalism as characterized above. Recall that according to the fictionalist there is no relation of romantic love, and although we talk as if there were, such talk is not literally true. According to the projectivist, we do not even *talk as if there were* such a thing as love. When we say '*x* is in love with *y*', this doesn't express a claim about the

world that is literally false or that fails to be truth-apt (as the fictionalist thinks), because it does not express a claim about the world at all. Projectivism does not by itself entail eliminativism either although extreme forms of projectivism (according to which *all* a sentence like '*x* is in love with *y*' does is express an attitude) will be hard to reconcile with any substantive metaphysical claims about the existence of a love relation. (I say 'hard' rather than 'impossible'; some kinds of quasi-realist projectivists about love might attempt to defend this combination.)

I shall finish this section by adding two last options to my map. These two are not exactly identity theories in that they don't identify the love relation with anything in particular, but they do specify significant metaphysical features of the love relation and thus constrain the *kinds* of identity theories that would be compatible with them. They may be understood as characterizing one of the important dimensions along which identity theories of love can vary.

The first is *social constructionism*. Social constructionists say that romantic love is, at least in part, a social construct. That is to say that love is, at least in part, *metaphysically constituted* by certain social institutions, traditions, and/or practices (as opposed to, say, merely *causally affected* by such things). An example of a social constructionist metaphysics of love is the view that romantic love is constituted by some amalgam of the social practice of monogamous heterosexual pairing and the social institution of marriage, that it was created in order to regulate sexual reproduction and to coordinate the inheritance of property between generations, and that it is best understood by studying sociology and anthropology. Social constructionism is not a kind of eliminativism: to say that love is socially constructed is not to deny that love is *real*.

In polar opposition to social constructionism is what I will call *natural realism*. The natural realist holds that love is a wholly natural (for example, biological or neurochemical) phenomenon, not constituted by social practices or anything else 'artificial'. An example of a natural realist metaphysics of love is the view that love is a mating drive universal to our species and best understood by studying biology and evolutionary psychology (see Fisher 2004).

There are many more metaphysical questions about love to be asked, and there are many more answers to be considered even to the one question I have been working with here. My incomplete map is incomplete. But I hope it helps convey a sense of what *kinds* of work might be done under the rubric of *the metaphysics of love* and perhaps also a sense of why some of us might want to do work of that kind. In any event, I'll finish up this paper by doing some of this work.

4. Constructionist Functionalism

Although I have described social constructionism and natural realism as if they were polar opposites, I believe there is a view that will let us accommodate much of what is appealing about both. In this section I shall advance this view. I call it *constructionist functionalism* or *CF*. I am not (yet) fully convinced that CF is the correct approach, but I do want to put it on the table and (philosophically speaking) go in to bat for it. I think there is a lot to be said for CF. Perhaps even

more significantly, I think the *kinds* of things that can be said in favor of CF raise important issues for consideration regardless of whether CF is ultimately accepted.

According to CF, what we are doing when we utter sentences of the form of (2) is attributing a love relation between x and y that admits of a metaphysically illuminating characterization in terms of the *functional role* that the relation plays. This is what makes CF a functionalist view, and makes it a view according to which the adage 'love is as love does' is on to something (though perhaps not quite the thing it is usually intended to convey).[6]

One kind of motivation for going functionalist about romantic love is that it can accommodate pluralist intuitions (and I for one find it compelling at the outset of enquiry that love is, in some sense, *not the same thing* for everyone who experiences it) without giving up on the idea of a unified account. While I do not mean to suggest that giving up on a unified account is beyond the pale, I am the kind of philosopher who is willing to treat the fact that the phrase 'romantic love'[7] and the corresponding concept are deployed in a way suggestive of unity as at least defeasible evidence in favor of a unified metaphysics. I want to explore the options for a unified view first.

It is my contention that once one is a functionalist about love, one has reason to be a constructionist too. Because when we think about what characterizes the role of romantic love in our lives—if, for example, we Ramsify over the platitudes about love, as a good Canberra planner would—the prominent place of things that are (uncontroversially) social in the role of love is easy to observe. To illustrate, consider the collection of platitudes evinced in this rhyme, learned and recited by children:

> [Name 1] and [Name 2] sitting in a tree,
> K-I-S-S-I-N-G.
> First comes love, then comes marriage,
> Then comes baby in a baby carriage.

This rhyme efficiently illustrates various deeply ingrained associations between romantic love and other things. (The earlier people learn these associations, the more deeply ingrained we may expect them to be.) For example, right on the surface are the associations with physical displays of affection, with marriage, and with child-rearing. Only marginally less obvious are the associations with dyadicity and (when, as is typical, the two names chosen refer to children of different genders) heteroromanticism. Love is platitudinously portrayed as that which occupies a particular nexus in a social structure: a connecting piece linking certain physical displays of affection with (later) marriage and (still later) child-rearing.

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6 This phrase can be traced to Scott Peck (1978), and is influential in the contemporary theory of love via its influence on bell hooks (see hooks 2000).

7 I am not here suggesting that every language has a phrase translatable as equivalent to 'romantic love', only that some do. (Correspondingly, I am not going to claim, at least not in any straightforward fashion, that romantic love is a universal human phenomenon. More on this shortly.)

It is not feasible to offer a complete list of the relevant social matters for characterizing the social role of love here (or perhaps anywhere); there is in any case probably a good deal of indeterminacy as to just what belongs on the list. And insofar as indeterminacy is part of the target phenomenon, a good metaphysical account will account for that indeterminacy (rather than attempt to get rid of it, as if it were some sort of flaw): I find it plausible that love is an untidy phenomenon and correspondingly am inclined to think that tidy accounts of love are less likely to be correct than messy ones. But the role specification will plausibly reference such things as:

1. social practices and traditions of courtship and dating,
2. experiencing affection, care, openness, trust, etc.,
3. traditions related to romantic expression (heart-shaped letters, roses, love songs, hand-holding, etc.),
4. valuing a beloved very highly, and/or treating their interests as (or on a par with) one's own,
5. the social practice of forming new familial bonds and/or units beyond one's family of origin (which may include raising children),
6. the social institution(s) of marriage[8] and marriage-like bonding,
7. romantic commitment,[9]

and much more.

CF holds that the role of love is: *to prompt x, to a sufficient degree, to engage in sufficiently many of the things on this list with respect to y*. But I think any attractive form of CF will leave it pretty vague what counts as a 'sufficient' degree, and how many things count as 'sufficiently' many. There are also substantive questions to be asked about whether the list is lexically ordered, but these must await another occasion. It is important to emphasize that CF is not per se committed to saying that any item or combination of items on the list gives rise to a necessary or sufficient condition for being in romantic love. I also leave open here exactly what it is to *prompt* something; this might ultimately best understood in terms of dispositions.[10]

It is also important to note that being a social constructionist (in the sense employed in this paper) does not entail thinking that *everything* about the target phenomenon is social. The claim of a social constructionist about X is that X is *at least partly* socially constructed. One version of CF that I find appealing holds that certain elements of the romantic love role—perhaps things like items 2 and 4 on the above list—are what determine that romantic love is a kind of *love*, while others—such as items 1, 3, and 5 to 7—are what determine that it is *romantic*.[11] The

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8 As marriage is not the same thing everywhere or throughout history, it's worth adding that I mean marriage *as practiced at the time and place I'm writing from*. The place is Vancouver, Canada, and the time is the year 2014.

9 See Chang [2013] for a proposal as to the nature of such commitment.

10 Thanks to Christina van Dyke and David Manley for helping me think about this issue. For an argument that love should be construed as a disposition of some kind, see Naar (2013).

11 I am grateful to Carla Merino and Shamik Dasgupta for helping me get clear on this point.

defender of CF is then at liberty to argue that it is (primarily or solely) the things that make love *romantic* that involve social institutions, traditions, and practices.

In any event, the CF proposal is that romantic love is *that which plays the romantic love role*, and part of the romantic love role is *to prompt engagement in particular social institutions, traditions, and practices*. This is what makes CF a form of social constructionism.

It is also plausibly the case that the grouping together of the various things on the list to characterize a single role (and attaching a role concept to that grouping) is a process of social construction. Certainly a defender of CF should be open to the idea that the construction of the love role and the corresponding role concept is something that is done by a social group and is in that sense artificial. However, it is worth being clear that this by itself wouldn't be enough to entail constructionism regarding love as I envisage it. It would at most tell us that the *love* concept does not attach to a particularly natural kind. By analogy, one can believe that the concept *small or square* fails to attach to a particularly natural kind, and that this grouping is in that sense artificial, without thinking that the property of being small-or-square is even partly metaphysically constituted by social institutions, traditions, or practices, that is, without being a constructionist about small-or-square-ness.

The metaphysical work facing a defender of CF does not end with the constructionist account of the *role* of love. There is also the question of what *plays* or *realizes* the love role. What is it that prompts people to date, care, write heart-shaped letters, form new family units and marriage-like bonds, and so on?

The versions of CF that I am interested in defending will embed *pluralism* at this point, allowing for multiple answers (for different subjects or for the same subject across different times, and even allowing that sometimes a variety of things all contribute to prompting a particular response at the same time in the same subject). I think the realizers of the love role could plausibly include such things as:

1. mental states best understood by studying psychology or cognitive science,
2. brain states and processes best understood by studying neurophysiology,
3. a drive best understood by studying our biology and/or evolutionary history,

and so on.

As this list suggests, although CF is a social constructionist view as described above, it can nevertheless embed a fairly robust kind of natural realism concerning the realizers of the love role.

And I should emphasize here that it is not a commitment of CF as I envisage it that the role of love is to be treated as privileged (either metaphysically or pragmatically) over the realizers. A defender of CF might allow that love's social role can change over time and proceed to argue that we should *aim* to change it in ways that are responsive to our ever-improving scientific understanding of the nature of its realizers. If, for instance, we learn that the distinctive cognitive

and psychological states of a person who is in love with a same-sex partner are demonstrably similar to those of someone in love with an opposite-sex partner, we can use this fact to put pressure on attempts to restrict the social role of love so that it includes only opposite-sex partnerships. If one can point to something we already recognize as a realizer of the love role in cases of opposite-sex love that is also present in cases of same-sex love, one might use this to argue that the love role should make room for both kinds of case. Such an argument *pragmatically* prioritizes the realizer over the role, and *metaphysically* speaking it at least refuses to treat the role as the only thing worth taking seriously. An argument along these lines is one of many things that might be gestured at by the phrase 'love is love'.

In fact, according to the versions of CF I find most attractive, a (type or token) realizer of the love role may be truly described as *what love is*, or at least as what *some* love is. However, it is an important commitment of CF that an account of love that consists in a mere list (or disjunction) of the realizers wouldn't be nearly as metaphysically illuminating as CF itself. Such a list would be missing something crucial, in just the same way that a metaphysician of dance would be missing something crucial if she just listed the physical motions involved in a traditional Irish dance without attending to the complex traditions and social contexts that, in an important sense, make the dance *what it is*.

It is partly for this reason that CF has a complex relationship to the kind of debunking project sometimes associated with some other forms of social constructionism (about race and gender, for example).[12] The claim that there is a socially constructed aspect to the metaphysics of romantic love may seem *relatively* unsurprising and uncontroversial, but it is nontrivial in a contemporary context where a significant portion of popular science texts present romantic love through a purely natural realist lens. An overemphasis on those aspects of love for which a natural realist attitude is appropriate can create the impression that romantic love is in all respects a universal, unchanging, and unchangeable phenomenon and one that is (wholly) discovered rather than created. This carries with it the risk of stifling critique of romantic love that focuses on its social aspects, making such critique appear irrelevant and/or necessarily ineffectual. Such critical work has long been part of feminist philosophy's remit; see for example de Beauvoir (1949: vol. 2, ch. 12 ['The Woman in Love']). If we overlook the relevance of social matters to a full account of the metaphysics of love, we are correspondingly liable to overlook relevant possibilities of social change. Any tendency toward such overenthusiastic natural realism about love can certainly be challenged and potentially debunked by a defender of CF.

Meanwhile, an overemphasis on the social nature of love to the exclusion of the naturalistic study of its realizers puts us at risk of overlooking important information and insights that are of value, both for their intrinsic (including metaphysical) interest and potentially as additional source of motivation for critique and/or change. A defender of CF is well-placed to accommodate the metaphysical (and practical and ethical) significance of love's natural realizers, as well as that of its social role.

One might wonder if CF, being a form of social constructionism, entails that love is a relatively recent or localized human invention. Is it the case that, for example, according to CF romantic love cannot predate the social institutions, traditions, and practices (such as marriage) that contribute to characterizing the love role?

Any such claim should be handled with extreme caution by defenders of CF. For one thing, such a claim would risk misleadingly concealing the fact that *realizers* of the love role need not be taken to be products of social construction, and as such they may predate—and be entirely metaphysically independent of—the love role. For another thing, a defender of CF can allow that the love role changes over time: perhaps the role existed before it included the particular associations with (say) marriage that go into characterizing it as it is *now*.[13]

Moreover, defenders of CF may hold views about how 'love'-attributions work that will problematize their saying things like 'Love is a recent invention', or 'Nobody was in love until the social role of love was constructed'.

For example, defenders of CF may hold that '*x* was in love with *y*', as uttered by *S*, is true iff x stands in a relation to y that is a realizer for the love role as it is constructed in S's social context (which need not be the same as x's or y's). I am not here claiming that this is what a defender of CF *should* say about 'love', only pointing out that this question is complicated and interacts with the question of what to say on the issue of how recent a recent a phenomenon love is. I have provided only an outline of CF here; many important questions remain to be addressed. But I hope the sketch has sufficed to allow me to explain why I find CF to be an appealing view. CF takes seriously the appeal of social constructionism, harnessing it to an account of the functional role of love. At the same time, it takes seriously the appeal of natural realism, harnessing it to the description of the realizers of the love role. CF is in this way specifically designed to incorporate results and information about love from a wide range of different fields of academic enquiry and beyond. It offers a way to recast what might have appeared to be a forced choice between naturalistic respect for the findings of science and a critical humanistic awareness of love's social function as complimentary moving parts in the motivation for a complex but consistent metaphysical picture.

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13 One version of this view might hold that the romantic love role originally developed to accommodate the phenomenon of (extramarital) 'courtly' love, but it then metamorphosed to include its current associations with marriage (which had previously been a primarily economic institution).

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