

Love and the Anatomy of Needing Another

In *How We Love*, renowned anthropologist Helen Fisher writes, "...romantic love is a need, a craving. We need food. We need water. We need warmth. And the lover feels he/she *needs* the beloved" (2004, p. 75, her emphasis). In the relevant chapter, Fisher focuses on how fairly recent advances in neuroscience can aid our understanding of love, but as she acknowledges, the idea that we need our beloveds has a rich and longstanding history.

Fisher, for example, cites a passage from Plato's *Symposium* in which Diotima imparts to Socrates, "[The God of Love] always lives in a state of need" (1999, 203d). We can add to this myriad references from classical literature and pop culture. Consider that in counting the ways, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1850) famously wrote, "I love thee to the level of every day's/ Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight." Or again, think of love songs, from the Beatles' (1965) "I Need You" to Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell's (1968) "You're All I Need to Get By."

Yet on little reflection, the idea that one needs one's beloved is as puzzling as it is familiar. In what, if any sense, do we really need our beloveds? And insofar as we do need them, is this feature of love something to be celebrated or lamented? In the relevant philosophical literature, there are various ways of understanding the type(s) of psychological need internal to love and whether and how the necessity in question contributes to love's value. In this chapter, I survey and critically analyze several accounts of felt necessity in love and advocate for a philosophically neglected perspective on the nature and value of needing our beloveds.

1. Loving and Needing

Roughly, to say that one needs something is to say that the individual in question would be harmed without it (Wiggins, 1998; Frankfurt, 1999b).¹ We often want things that we don't actually need. For example, I might want that stylish, overpriced jacket in the storefront window, while acknowledging that I don't really need it – perhaps the jacket that I already own is perfectly adequate. At least sometimes, we also need things without wanting them. Suppose, for example, that I have unknowingly contracted a serious, but treatable illness. In such a case, I might need but not actively want medication.

As the examples above illustrate, unlike desire, need doesn't necessarily depend on any particular mental state. Sometimes, however, when we talk about needing something or other, we are concerned with the psychological orientation that is marked by experiencing something (or someone) as a need. Call this phenomenon felt necessity. Intuitively, people often feel as though, perhaps in some elusive sense, that they need their beloveds.

How we specify the type(s) of felt necessity internal to love will depend on how we characterize the nature of love. There are myriad views of love on offer. Love has been characterized variously (and roughly) as: (1) a distinctive kind of concern, (2) the formation of or desire to form a shared identity, (3) a special mode of perception, evaluation, or valuing engagement, and/or (4) an emotion or complex of emotional phenomena (Badhwar 2003; Helm 2017). As certain representatives of the first two broad categories foreground the notion of felt necessity, I discuss them in the following section. For now, however, it will suffice to highlight a

¹ Whether an agent is harmed in virtue of going without something will depend on how we understand the notion of well-being. While both philosophers of love and well-being theorists often acknowledge love's potential to enhance well-being, the relationship between the nature of love and theoretical approaches to well-being has been somewhat neglected. A developed view of the role of felt necessity in love might provide a promising route to bridging this theoretical gap. Thanks to Valerie Tiberius for prompting me to highlight this point here.

few (frequently ascribed) general features of the need for one's beloved. Let's start with a contrastive example. Suppose that a person – let's call him Idris – needs a topical antihistamine on account of an itchy, but otherwise innocuous, insect bite. Idris's need lacks at least three widely (though not universally) accepted features of the need for one's beloved.

First, the need for one's beloved is generally considered very important, and as evidenced by typical reactions to the prospects of losing a beloved, frequently marked by a sense of urgency. Idris's need for an antihistamine is not like this. His itchiness, while uncomfortable, is not very serious. Failure to satisfy this need would cause him no grave injury. Thus, we wouldn't expect Idris to experience his need to obtain (or to remain in possession of) an antihistamine as particularly pressing or significant.

Second, romantic love is often thought to attach to a non-substitutable particular. Note that Idris's need can be satisfied by one of any number of different antihistamines, so he doesn't require any particular medication (let alone any particular dollop of the medication he so chooses) to relieve his itch. But while it might make sense for Idris to remain relatively indifferent with regard to which antihistamine he uses, we would not expect him to see his beloved as similarly substitutable. Unsurprisingly, love theorists often argue that the irreplaceability of the beloved is a constitutive feature of at least some kinds of love.²

Finally, the import and irreplaceability of one's beloved helps to mark out another feature of the type(s) of need internal to love. The felt need for one's beloved is often thought to reflect the depth of one's *connectedness* to that individual. While recurrent thoughts of, and desires for, antihistamine are likely to play some minor and short-lived role in Idris's mental life, his felt need for the medication does not constitute a particularly rich psychological tie to the object. On

² See, for example, Brown (1987), Nozick (1991), and Frankfurt (1999b & 2004).

the contrary, the felt need for a beloved is often considered part of the fabric that binds oneself to another in the meaningful sense that typifies love.

To sum up, like needing more broadly, to need one's beloved is to be such that one would be, in some sense, harmed without that person (or object). Unlike some other needs, individuals tend to experience the need for their beloveds as particularly important, non-substitutable, and partly constitutive of a deep form of psychological connectedness to its object.

With this preliminary picture of love and need in hand, we are now poised to examine and assess various views of how we experience felt needs in virtue of loving another.

2. Three Accounts of Felt Necessity in Love

In the extant literature, we find at least three overlapping views of the type(s) of felt need internal to love.³ The first view finds its home in a particular conception of caring about one's beloved. The second grows out of a theoretical approach to understanding love as a union or merger of the lover's and beloved's respective identities. Finally, the third view takes as its core a sense in which we become attached to our beloveds. Each view offers different articulations of both what is needed and the loss that the lover suffers when the relevant need goes unfulfilled.

2.1 Caring and Necessity

In a recent work, Susan Wolf imparts that she could only find one feature common to all loving relationships. She identifies the feature as follows: "Specifically, loving someone always involves caring about the person for his own sake. That is, when one loves someone, one wants

³ As this article is concerned with a specific aspect of love, I make no attempt to survey or delineate (what might be termed) the most prominent views of love. However, taxonomies of theories of love do tend to mention both "disinterested concern theories" and "union views" (among others), both of which are discussed here. For an extensive treatment of philosophical theories of love more broadly, see Badhwar 2003 and Helm 2017.

his good. One wants him to flourish, if flourishing is an option. Moreover, one wants this at least in part unselfishly...” (2015, p. 189). Wolf here expresses an important and familiar point about love. Unsurprisingly, nearly all love theorists afford *caring* a prominent role in their views, and on what are sometimes called “robust concern accounts,” the hallmark of love consists in a distinctive type of disinterested concern for the beloved’s flourishing.⁴

Harry Frankfurt offers one of the most developed and influential robust concern views of love, and what’s more, his account gives center stage to the notion of necessity. He writes, “...the well-being of what a person loves is for him an irreplaceable *necessity*. In other words, the fact that a person has come to love something entails that the satisfaction of his concern for the flourishing of that particular thing is something that he has come to *need*. If he comes to believe that his beloved is not flourishing, then it is unavoidable that this causes him harm” (1999b, p. 170, his emphasis).

According to Frankfurt, the relevant concern is disinterested, particular, volitionally constrained and marked by the lover’s identification with his beloved’s interests. The lover is concerned for the beloved’s well-being for the *beloved’s own sake* and not, for example, for the sake of some other advantage that the lover seeks. Frankfurt describes the concern as “selfless” (1999b, 167).⁵ Also, the concern is directed at the well-being of a non-substitutable particular. The lover is not, for example, concerned for the beloved as a fungible member of a valued class, nor for any of her properties that could be instantiated in another sufficiently similar being. He loves her, rather, in her “irreproducible concreteness” (1999b, 170). Next, love imposes volitional constraints or necessities on the lover. He experiences both his concern for his beloved

⁴ See, for example, Soble (1997), and for a detailed discussion on robust concern views, see Helm (2009b & 2017).

⁵ Frankfurt writes, “What is essential to the lover’s concern for his beloved is not only that it must be free of any self-regarding motive but that it must have no ulterior aim whatsoever. To characterize love as merely *selfless*, then, is not enough” (1999b, 167).

and certain ways of treating her as non-voluntary. Frankfurt explains, “It is characteristic of our experience of loving that when we love something, there are certain things that we feel we *must* do. Love demands of us that we support and advance the well-being of our beloved, as circumstances make it possible and appropriate for us to do so; and it forbids us to injure our beloved, or to neglect its interests” (1999b, p.170, his emphasis). These necessities find endorsement in the lover’s own will and so failing to meet them involves a kind of self-betrayal.⁶ Finally, the lover identifies his own well-being with that of his beloved. Her interests are his, and as she fares, so does he – if only in an “inexact and less than totally comprehensive” sense (1999b, 171; 2004, 62).

Not all robust concern theorists agree with every aspect of Frankfurt’s view, but they tend to converge on the lover’s disinterested investment in the beloved’s well-being. While Frankfurt emphasizes the volitional, as opposed to affective, natures of caring and love, others often describe the relevant investment in terms of *emotional vulnerability*. In fact, most views of caring foreground this feature. Insofar as I care about another, I will desire for her to fare well, and I will be disposed to feel joyous when she is thriving, fearful when she is threatened, sad or dismayed when she is doing poorly, and so forth.⁷ We might say, then, that minimally, we need for our beloveds to flourish and when this need goes unmet, we are subject to emotional pain.

The type of felt necessity associated with caring is doubtless an important aspect of love. Notice, though, that it does relatively little to elucidate the sense in which we need our beloveds themselves and not merely their flourishing. Oftentimes, when we love others, we need not just for them to be well, but we also feel as though we need *them* – as intimate companions, life-partners, kindred spirits, etc. Thus, while (what I will call) caring necessity may adequately

⁶ See Frankfurt (1999a, p. 139; 1999b, p. 174).

⁷ See, for example, Shoemaker (2003), Jaworska (2007a, 2007b), Helm (2009a & 2009b), and Seidman (2008).

capture say, the love we have for our children – and indeed, this is what Frankfurt’s specific view intends – it falls notably short of capturing what we often find so captivating and special about romantic love.⁸

Even while Frankfurt does not focus on romantic love per se, he does discuss one respect in which we need our beloveds that seems applicable to romantic partnerships. On Frankfurt’s view, in addition to needing our beloved’s well-being, we also need to love and since love can only be satisfied by its object, we need our beloveds. This is not simply because love requires an object, but because the value of loving is “the value of being in a certain kind of relationship” (1999b, p. 176). Once we shift focus to the *relationship* constitutive of interpersonal love, it becomes easier to apprehend a sense in which we need our beloveds. We need our beloveds, in part, because they are essential members of the relationship that gives love its value.

Relatedly, theorists often suggest that love includes a care or concern not only for the flourishing of the beloved, but also for the flourishing of one’s relationship with the beloved.⁹ If we need for those relationships to flourish, then we must need our beloveds as well, as they are necessary constituents of those relationships. Thus, we have identified one route by which the phenomenon of caring can help us to understand a sense in which we need our beloveds.

While this is one way that we can talk about needing another, it seems to fall short of capturing the deep sense of connectedness that we often mean to convey when we confess that we need our beloveds. Oftentimes, the relevant need is best understood, not in terms of one’s need for love or for the flourishing of a relationship, but in terms of a more direct and intimate tie

⁸ Owing to their powerful (and potentially obfuscating) emotional and self-regarding elements, Frankfurt doubts that romantic relationships provide “especially authentic paradigms of love” and instead suggests that the “loving concern of parents for their infants or small children” comes closest to providing a pure instance of the phenomenon with which he is concerned (1999b, p. 166).

⁹ See, for example, White (2001), Kolodny (2003), and Franklin-Hall & Jaworska (2017).

to the beloved herself. What are sometimes called “union views” of love offer a more promising approach to clarifying the kind of need at issue.

2.2 Union and Necessity

Union views of love hold that love consists in or takes as its aim a merger of selves or a sharing of identities. We find one of the earliest illustrations of this idea in Plato’s *Symposium*, in which the character, Aristophanes, describes love as the pursuit of one’s missing half (189a-193d). According to what is now known as the “the myth of Aristophanes,” human beings originally had two faces, four arms, four legs, etc. – resembling what we would now consider two conjoined individuals. As punishment for their arrogance, the gods split humans into two, sadly making them half the beings they used to be. Love, Aristophanes explained, “...is the name for the desire and pursuit of wholeness” (192e).

While the myth of Aristophanes may strike some as merely a bit of fanciful storytelling, many have embraced what they see as its kernel of truth. In romantic love, one often feels as though one’s beloved makes one whole, is one’s “better half,” or is otherwise a part of who one is. Modern union accounts attempt to articulate and defend this idea in less metaphorical terms. If successful, they provide a helpful framework for identifying a direct and particularly intimate need for one’s beloved: one needs one’s beloved *as a part* of oneself or one’s identity.

In order to better understand and assess the type of need at issue, it will be helpful to examine how union theorists have characterized the nature of love. On Roger Scruton’s account, the distinguishing features of love include “a desire to ‘be with’ the other, taking comfort from his bodily presence, and the community of interests that erodes the distinction between [the lover’s and his beloved’s] interests” (2001, p. 231). While Frankfurt also emphasizes (partial)

identification with the other's interests as central to love, Scruton's account appears to incorporate a stronger sense of identification such that love seeks the overcoming of "all distinction" between the lover's interests and those of his beloved (2001, p. 230). Also, Scruton's focus on the lover's own comfort and his desire for companionship aren't obviously compatible with Frankfurt's requirement of disinterested, or selfless, concern.

Robert Nozick offers a view on which the desire to form a "we" is essential to love. On his account, in forming a "we," the lover and his beloved "pool" their well-beings and autonomy, creating a third shared identity while retaining their own individual identities. The third identity, or "we," consists in a "new web of relationships" and is partly undergirded by the lovers' perception of themselves (and desire to be perceived by others) as a "new and continuing unit" (1991, p. 418-19). Nozick intends for his view to respect the independence and autonomy of individual persons. However, he also emphasizes the acquisitive nature of the lovers' desire for merger. He writes, "Each person in a romantic *we* wants to possess the other completely... What you need and want is to possess the other as completely as you do your own identity. This is an expression of the fact that you *are* forming a new joint identity with him or her" (1991, p. 421 his emphasis). Since one can desire to form a "we" with someone who has no such desire herself, Nozick's view can accommodate unrequited love. Yet, the ideal of reciprocity is central to his view, as the lover necessarily wants the other to reciprocate (1991, p. 418).

Robert Solomon also offers a view in which the notions of shared identity, reciprocity, and importantly the *need* for another play central roles. On Solomon's account, lovers share an identity in the sense that each "redefines" her personal identity in terms of the other (1994, p. 193). While lovers don't lose their own identities, one who loves "views the world in terms of a single intimacy and sees one's self – no matter how successful and otherwise fulfilled – as

something incomplete, in need of the lover who is similarly incomplete and needful” (1994, p. 194). The relevant need is not only a need for the beloved, but also a need for the beloved to love, and so to *need*, the lover in return. On this view, love demands reciprocity. Solomon explains, “... it might not be going too far to say that to love is to want to be *indispensable* to the person who is already indispensable to you (1994, 42, his emphasis).

While this brief discussion of union accounts is far from exhaustive, it should position us to discern both their appeal and some of their potential shortcomings.¹⁰ Union views offer a particularly rich way of understanding the need of one’s beloved. We need our beloveds as parts of our selves or our identities. When this need goes unmet, we feel somehow incomplete or broken. Such views seem well-equipped to capture the depth and (many aspects of) the phenomenology of romantic love. Sharing one’s self or one’s identity with another reflects an especially intimate connection. And lovers often report feeling as though their identities are somehow “enlarged” in virtue of being with their beloveds and diminished when permanently separated from them.

Union views, however, also face certain challenges. It is not immediately clear how to understand the notion of a “shared identity.” Theorists who posit that in virtue of loving, we create a new *entity* must undertake the burden of describing just what type of entity comes into being, how it functions, and importantly, the relation in which we, as pre-existing individuals, stand to it. If, for example, love’s *we* is a complete merger of interests, then it is not clear how our original identities remain safe from what Jennifer Whiting describes as “objectionable colonization” (1991, p. 10). As many have argued, preserving ample distance between one’s own identity and that of the beloved is necessary for genuine reciprocity, the possibility of self-

¹⁰ For other union views, see Fisher (1990), Delaney (1996), Friedman (1998), and Westlund 2008.

sacrifice, unselfish regard for the other, and proper respect for both parties' autonomy.¹¹ Thus, union views are often criticized for misrepresenting love as intrusive and selfish.

There are, of course, a variety of union views, and they attempt to meet these challenges in different ways. Some offer less (metaphysically and psychologically) demanding accounts of the type of union involved in love. One might, for example, think of the relevant “we” in terms of a “federation of selves” – or again construe love’s union in terms of a “shared practical perspective.”¹² Yet, one might worry that characterizing love in these ways, while apt in some respects, objectionably puts love on a par with (something akin to) business partnerships and fails to do justice to the emotional connectedness internal to love’s bond. Importantly, union views all face the delicate and difficult task of articulating a notion of “shared identity,” that avoids the worries above while still capturing love’s intimacy.¹³ For these reasons – and others which will become apparent in the following section – it will be useful to consider one last, relatively under-explored respect in which people often need their beloveds.

2.3 Attachment and Necessity

Philosophers of love frequently use the term “attachment” in articulating their accounts – often to indicate love’s particularity, or again, the lover’s positive emotional and/or evaluative orientation toward her beloved. Yet, we find little in the way of detailed analyses of attachment as such – or its relationship to love – in the philosophical literature.¹⁴ In previous work, drawing

¹¹ For these and other critiques of various union views, see Soble (1997), Westlund (2008), and Helm (2009a; 2009b; 2017).

¹² See Delaney (1996) and Friedman (1998) for “federation of selves” models, and Westlund (2008) for a “shared practical perspective” view of love’s union.

¹³ See Helm (2009a; 2009b) for an illuminating account of love as “evaluative identification,” that attempts to capture the virtues of both union accounts and robust concern accounts while avoiding the aforementioned objections.

¹⁴ One exception is Edward Harcourt who utilizes an attachment-theoretical framework to account for good and bad varieties of love, while still allowing for love’s generality and the import of autonomy (forthcoming). Also, Patricia

on a conception of attachment found within developmental and clinical psychology, I offered an account on which (a particular kind of) attachment represents a felt security-based need of its object that is partly constitutive of at least some kinds of love (Wonderly, 2017). This need will serve as a useful contrast and complement to the varieties of necessity articulated above.

To understand the relevant need, it will be helpful to start with a brief discussion of what psychologists refer to as “attachment theory.” According to attachment theory, between 6 and 24 months of age, infants develop a special bond with their primary caregivers. This bond is characterized in terms of a set of evolutionarily adaptive behaviors that serve to provide the infant with a sense of security. The attached infant attempts to remain in close proximity to her primary caregiver, treats her as a “secure base” from which to safely explore unfamiliar surroundings, seeks her out for protection as a “safe haven” when threatened, and protests separation from her via clinging, crying, or other displays of distress (Bowlby, 1969). Notably, theorists have observed that long-term adult romantic partnerships have these features as well. Adults seek proximity to their romantic partners and protest long-term separation from them. Our romantic partners also function both as secure bases and safe havens for us. When they are nearby, we feel more competent to explore unfamiliar surroundings and face new challenges. We also tend to turn to them for comfort and support when we are distressed.¹⁵

My view draws on and expands on the aforementioned notion of attachment to include attachments to objects and ideas, a broadened sense of security, and an emphasis on the affects and desires that underlie attachment behaviors (Wonderly 2016). On this view, the attached party

Greenspan (1998) and Robert C. Roberts (2003) each devote some discussion to attachment in their respective remarks on love. Greenspan describes attachment-love as involving “at least ambivalent *comfort* directed towards a positive view of the love-object as a basis for the desire for closeness – and a possible basis for its acceptance *by* the object” (1998, 55, her emphases). Roberts characterizes attachment as both “a disposition to a range of emotions” and as a “construal” that “constitutes its object as good (special) to the subject” (2003, pp. 288-289).

¹⁵ See, for example, Hazan & Shaver 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver 2016, p. 17; and Collins et al 2006 pp. 156-158.

has a relatively enduring desire for engagement with a non-substitutable particular and is disposed to suffer a reduced sense of security upon prolonged separation from the object (2016, p. 232). Importantly, the sense of security at issue is not merely that of safety or comfort. Rather, security represents a kind of confidence in one's well-being and one's agential competence. In colloquial terms, without our attachment objects, we tend to feel as though we have "lost our bearings," are on unstable ground, no longer "all of a piece," and so forth. Conversely, engagement with our attachment figures helps us to feel "more together" and empowered to take on life's challenges (2016, 231).¹⁶

Romantic lovers often have type this type of orientation toward their beloveds. They need engagement with their beloveds – e.g., sexual contact, play, or other forms of communication (even if only from afar). When deprived of this engagement for prolonged periods of time, they tend to feel as though they are, often in some elusive sense, unwell and unable to get along in the world quite as well as they normally can. This helps to account for why permanent separation from one's beloved is often experienced as not only saddening, but disorienting and debilitating.

Unlike the type of necessity associated with caring, (what I will call) attachment necessity is not in the first instance about the *well-being* of its object. Of course, we typically want those to whom we are attached to fare well. Importantly, though, one can imagine cases in which what will best serve a beloved's well-being requires suspending, or even altogether eliminating, engagement with her. Suppose, for example, that though an individual plays a positive role in her beloved's life, her beloved's well-being would be *better* served by extended separation while she pursues a longed-for life of solitary religious devotion or personal growth.

¹⁶ I discuss this notion of security at length in *Wonderly* (2016). This conception of security is consonant with many views of security on offer in the psychological literature. See, for examples, Maslow (1942, pp. 334–335), Blatz (1966, p. 13), and Ainsworth (1988, p. 1).

In such cases, the attached lover will not necessarily advocate for continued engagement *over* the beloved's well-being, but she will experience permanent or prolonged separation from her beloved as a significant cost to herself. Thus, while caring and the relevant form of attachment are compatible, they can sometimes pull in opposite directions. Nonetheless, as I have argued – and will discuss further in the following section – both concern for the other's well-being for her own sake and the more self-regarding attachment orientation can be valuable aspects of romantic love (Wonderly, 2017).

Notice that attachment necessity also differs from the type of need associated with union views of love, since the former needn't require, or aim at, a shared identity. An attachment view of love's necessity enjoys several advantages of union accounts while avoiding some of their more difficult challenges. Attachment necessity represents an intimate respect in which we need our beloveds themselves and not only for them to flourish. It also captures central elements of love's phenomenology. Engagement with our beloveds often helps us feel not only joyous but empowered, while losing them can make us feel disoriented and adrift. Accounting for these features in terms of attachment, as opposed to a merger of selves or a shared identity, sidesteps the metaphysical challenges – and at least mitigates the intrusiveness challenges – that plague union views.¹⁷

Some, however, will still find the idea of being attached (in the relevant respect) to one's beloved objectionable, or at best, orthogonal to love. Those to whom we are attached in this way can deeply and directly impact our senses of security. This may strike some as a problematic form of dependence. Children need others for felt security, but this type of orientation between adults might well seem puerile and selfish. One worry, then, is that attachment necessity is ill-

¹⁷ See also Wonderly (2017, p. 245).

equipped to play a central role in genuine love and may even be inimical to it. An adequate defense of an attachment view of love's necessity must address these concerns.

To sum up, I have identified and described three views of love's felt necessity that we find in the philosophical literature. Notice that while these views represent different types of felt necessity, it remains possible that the relevant needs can all co-exist harmoniously in the same loving relationship. In other words, an individual might feel as though she needs for her beloved to flourish, needs her beloved as a part of her identity, and needs to engage with her as an attachment figure – where each felt need is integral to the love in question. It is a further question, however, whether and how the relevant needs contribute to, or detract from, love's value. I turn to this topic in the following section.

3. The Value of Needing Another

Recall from section 1 that the key mark of needing something or someone is being such that one is, in some way, harmed without that object or person. To need our beloveds (or their flourishing) is thus to be disposed to suffer. It is to be in some sense *dependent* upon the other for some aspect of one's own well-being – be it one's emotional equanimity, the integrity of one's identity, or one's sense of security. Experiencing one's beloved in this way diminishes one's self-control and risks encouraging a kind of self-focus that may be inimical to love. This is because felt needs often give rise to felt “musts” to act in certain ways in order to preserve, or to obtain, what one needs for oneself. Thus, if we need our beloveds in any or all of the senses canvassed above, there may be reason to think that the relevant needs represent onerous conditions that detract from love's value. After all, we often consider vulnerability, dependence, diminished self-control, and selfishness regrettable, even if ubiquitous, features of human life.

3.1 Need, Risk, and Value

How might one rescue the need(s) internal to love from the aforementioned worries? Robust concern theorists have a ready response. Experiencing a need for one's beloved to flourish is a way of registering the *import* of that individual's well-being. This seems like a virtuous orientation to have toward another, one's susceptibility to harm and partial dependence on the other, notwithstanding. Furthermore, what Frankfurt describes as love's constraints are endorsed by the lover, to some extent self-imposed, and thus a source of expression, rather than oppression, of one's own will and autonomy. Finally, far from being overly self-regarding, the type of need associated with caring focuses on the other person. As Frankfurt explains, even while one knows that the other's welfare is good for oneself, the lover only experiences the benefits of love because in loving, "she forgets herself" (1999b, p. 174). On this account, the selfless, volitionally endorsed investment in the other's well-being is part of what gives love its immeasurable value.

This explanation of the value of love's necessity, however, is crucially tied both to its object being the welfare of the other and to the orientation being disinterested. The senses of felt necessity associated with union and attachment seem more self-regarding than that of caring and render one dependent on one's beloved for one's identity and sense of security, respectively. These features may strike one as constituting unhealthy forms of dependence that exacerbate the potential for harm and diminished self-control while lacking the virtue of selflessness. What, then, can be said for needing one's beloved in these ways?

First, it is important to note that vulnerability to, and dependence, on another can have value even when they are not selflessly focused on the other's well-being. Theorists have

suggested that appreciating one's own vulnerability and dependence can, and often does, facilitate moral community with, and respect for, other persons. Erinn Gilson, for example, argues that experiential knowledge of one's own vulnerability is a requisite starting point for ethical responses to vulnerabilities in others.¹⁸ Recognizing vulnerability and dependence as central features of our own lives allows us to see others' vulnerabilities as evidence of a shared condition between us. Taking up this shared condition is thought to be key to motivating caring attitudes and behaviors toward those who require aid.¹⁹ Needing another as a part of one's identity or as a non-substitutable attachment figure represents a deep vulnerability to that person. But importantly, it also positions us to better appreciate the vulnerabilities of others more generally. Thus, even while not solely focused on the other's well-being, union and attachment are not necessarily silent with respect to positive other-regarding attitudes and behaviors.

What's more, the aspects of union and attachment that are self-regarding may contribute to love's value by facilitating a unique and important brand of closeness that one cannot access via disinterested concern for the other's well-being alone. To see this, return to the point in the previous section about how attachment necessity and caring necessity can come apart. Consider a case in which one learns that one's beloved has an opportunity to do something that will be to her overall benefit but doing so will require the pair to part and cease all engagement for a period of several years. The lover who selflessly responds to the news with a joyous, "Great! Let me help you pack! Your well-being is all that matters to me!" might understandably elicit disappointment rather than (merely) gratitude from his beloved.²⁰ This is because sometimes, we not only want our beloveds to register the import of our well-beings, but we want them to

¹⁸ Gilson (2014, p. 179)

¹⁹ See Gilson (2014, p. 179), Sarah Clark Miller (2012, p. 8), and Alasdair MacIntyre (1999).

²⁰ I discuss this scenario in greater detail in Wonderly (2017, esp. pp. 240-241).

register the import that our presence and engagement in their lives has *for them* – for how they view themselves and how they lead their lives. We want them, in other words, not to forget themselves, but to love us with themselves (and our impacts on them) in full view. This orientation, though somewhat self-regarding, affords the relationship a kind of intimacy it would otherwise lack.

The point, then, is that we often value being needed in ways that are not wholly centered on our own well-beings. When someone needs you in the sense associated with union or attachment, it means that you matter for that person in a very significant respect. You alone can fulfill that person’s particular need.²¹ In this way, you are singularly, or uniquely, valuable to the other. Being needed in these ways, especially by someone whom we desire to benefit, can imbue our lives with a rich sense of purpose. And when reciprocated, it can deepen and enhance a relationship by fostering intimacy, trust, and a mutual appreciation for one another as uniquely valuable agents.²² Such relationships can be good for both parties. Thus, needing someone in these ways can be valuable insofar as it gives another the opportunity to be needed in this meaningful sense and facilitates a distinctive type of intimacy.

Also, even while identity-unions and attachments may seem onerous insofar as they diminish self-control in certain respects, they also enhance autonomy in others. Recall Nozick’s point that lovers “pool autonomy” in forming a “we.” This, of course, places constraints on what one feels free to do since decision-making power is now shared by both members of the “we.” But it also allows for greater resources to exercise (joint) autonomy. Each party will have access

²¹ When you are attached to someone, only *that* person can contribute to your sense of security or well-being in the way that she does. While you might be attached to several persons or objects, each plays a unique role in the type of fulfillment that it provides. In psychologist Mary Ainsworth’s words, “...an attachment figure is never wholly interchangeable with or replaceable by another...” (1991, p. 38).

²² Psychological research on adult attachment suggests that by serving as mutual attachment figures for another, romantic partners can foster trust and closeness in their relationship (Collins et al 2006).

to a broader range of perspectives and abilities with which to reason and to act. Security-based attachments are also thought to bolster autonomy and perhaps surprisingly, self-reliance. The psychological literature on attachment suggests that our attachment figures are able to help us regulate our emotions and shape our construals of ourselves (and others) *in virtue of* our vulnerability to, and partial dependence on, those persons for felt security. Healthy attachments interactions facilitate greater emotional equanimity and help us to develop working models of the self as worthy of care and “self-reliant” (Bowlby, 1973; Ainsworth et al, 1978; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).²³ One’s vulnerability and dependence does not only render one susceptible to harm and diminished self-control, but in optimal cases, those very conditions can also facilitate *increased* well-being and autonomy.

Thus, while needing particular, non-substitutable others in the aforementioned senses invariably exposes us to certain risks, it also positions us to experience significant value. While being tied, or connected, to the wrong person in any or all of these ways can ruin a life, needing (and being needed by) the “right” person can deeply enrich a life and perhaps make an otherwise impoverished one worth living.

3.2 Skepticism about the Need for One’s Beloved

Before concluding, I’d like to consider one last potential problem concerning the value of needing our beloveds – a problem that finds its foothold in what I will call Dan Moller’s “resilience worry.” I have argued that needing another can have immense value in large part because of the lover’s vulnerability to the beloved and relatedly, the beloved’s irreplaceability. As Moller points out, however, research suggests that even our most intimate relationships may

²³ I say more about this in Wonderly 2019.

not have these features to the extent that we typically think. Research suggests that we suffer less and recover faster from the deaths of our closest loved ones than we would tend to predict.²⁴

Moller laments these findings, writing, “We like to believe that we are *needed* by our husband or wife and that consequently losing us should have a profound and lasting effect on them, just as the sudden injury of a key baseball player should have a disruptive and debilitating effect on the team....Most of us tend to think that our deaths would make a deep impact on [our beloveds’] ability to continue to lead happy worthwhile lives. The fact that our beliefs about these matters are false and that our loved ones are resilient to the loss of us seems to show that we do not have the significance that we thought we did” (2007, p. 309). Moller adduces research suggesting that the deaths of our spouses tend to cause only minor and very temporary disruptions before we move on and effectively replace them with new partners.

Fortunately, an attachment-theoretical understanding of love will help address this worry and further clarify the value of attachment necessity. First, recall that being another’s attachment figure facilitates a kind of direct access to an important aspect of that person’s sense of self: her sense of well-being and how she is able to get on in the world. In virtue of their abilities to aid emotional regulation and to encourage working models of the self as competent and self-reliant, attachment figures are also uniquely positioned to help us effectively self-soothe and tackle obstacles, even when they are not physically present. Research suggests that activating mental representations of supportive attachment figures enhances one’s abilities to undertake challenges and cope with threats (Mikulincer & Shaver 2016; Sroufe et al 2000).

²⁴ Moeller cites a variety of research findings from studies in clinical psychology, personality psychology, and the psychology of aging in order to support this view. In particular, he draws heavily on clinical psychologist George Bonanno’s renowned work on resilience to loss and trauma (see for example Bonanno 2005).

We find a possible illustration of this phenomenon in Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. Here, Frankl recounts how contemplating the image of his beloved wife helped to sustain him while being marched to forced labor in a Nazi concentration camp. In a passage worth quoting at length, he writes,

“My mind still clung to the image of my wife. A thought crossed my mind: I didn't even know if she were still alive, and I had no means of finding out ...but at that moment it ceased to matter. There was no need to know; nothing could touch the strength of my love, and the thoughts of my beloved. Had I known then that my wife was dead, I think that I still would have given myself, undisturbed by that knowledge, to the contemplation of that image, and that my mental conversation with her would have been just as vivid and just as satisfying...” (Frankl 1984, p. 58).

To be sure, Frankl's point is that *love* sustained him through his adversity. But it also seems plausible that his mental interaction with his beloved wife had the impact that it did, at least partly in virtue of his deep attachment bond with her.

Construed from this perspective, our relative resilience to losing our beloved is often an indication of attachment's triumph, rather than its weakness. While completely muted responses to the loss of our beloveds would be problematic, we do tend to grieve for them, even while we do not inevitably fall apart. And since it is often *because of them* that we are able to withstand their loss, our resilience *reflects* rather than diminishes their import.

But what of our beloveds' apparent substitutability? Surely, we must acknowledge that at one broad level of description, they (and we) are replaceable. Just as another can fulfill the role of pitcher on a baseball team, another can fulfill the role of wife, lover, or even “attachment

figure” for us. That is, she can do the same sorts of activities with us, or for us, that are constitutive of the role: co-manage a household, have sex, serve as a safe haven, etc.

One might think that the kind of irreplaceability that we seek in love is better captured by the idea that we cannot be replaced without *a sense of loss*. Love theorists have often described the non-substitutability of love’s object in just this way.²⁵ And I suspect that attachment psychologists generally mean something like this when they point to the “irreplaceability” of an attachment figure as well.²⁶ Importantly, though, the import of one’s attachment figure does not merely consist in her filling some role – but resides in the particular way that she does and only she can, leaving her own unique and indelible mark on one’s agential identity.

A strong attachment can facilitate both the attached party’s resilience to losing her attachment figure and the attached party’s acceptance of a new attachment figure. But when this occurs, the original attachment figure is not necessarily forgotten or “replaced” in any regrettable sense, but rather it is in virtue of that person’s unique contribution to one’s sense of self that one is able to thrive in her absence. Her supportive contact, memory, and affectional labors helped lay the foundation for the healthy senses of agency and well-being that conduce to recovery and moving forward.²⁷ Taken this way, the attachment figure’s irreplaceability is not cast into doubt so much as thrown into bright relief. The attached party experiences the attachment figure’s unique value both in grieving her loss and in rebuilding a life, the construction of which bears the attachment figure’s fingerprints alongside the attached party’s own.

²⁵ See, for example, Helm 2009b.

²⁶ Both Ainsworth (1991) and Robert Weiss (1991), for example, remark on the non-substitutability of attachment figures while acknowledging that in practice, we often eventually accept another in the role of primary attachment figure.

²⁷ See Preston-Roedder & Preston-Roedder (2017) for an insightful treatment of Moller’s worry on similar grounds.

As I have argued, the fact that we tend to suffer relatively less and to recover relatively more quickly from losing our beloveds than we might have thought – eventually accepting new attachment figures – often reflects our beloveds’ unique positive contributions to our well-being, self-sufficiency, and emotional equanimity. In this way, those responses may exemplify, rather than speak against, the need for our beloveds. We need them and consequently tend to suffer a non-trivial measure of harm without them, but in virtue of various ways *in which* we need them, our beloveds can imbue our lives with immense value – and can sometimes continue to do so, even in their permanent absence.

4. Conclusion

While the idea that we, in some sense, need our beloveds plays a familiar and powerful role in the psychology of human relationships, the nature of the relevant felt necessity is notoriously difficult to specify. We might wonder both *what we need* from (or with) our beloveds and *how we are harmed* when that need goes unmet. Certain views expressed in the philosophical literature help to illuminate these aspects of felt necessity in love. On some views, we need for our beloveds (and or for our relationships with them) to flourish, and when that need goes unmet, we are subject to emotional pain and/or other diminishments to our own well-beings. Other views emphasize our need for our beloveds as parts of our own identities: without them, we feel as though a part of who we are is somehow damaged or missing. Some theorists highlight our need for engagement with our beloveds, without which our sense of security – a crucial aspect of how we feel about ourselves and how we are able to get on in the world – is undermined. Each underscores a central respect in which we are deeply connected to our beloveds.

Since need is associated with vulnerability and dependence, one might worry that a felt need for one's beloved is, on the whole, a negative aspect of love. On the other hand, one might worry that our relative resilience to losing loved ones suggests that we do not really need our beloveds much at all. As I have argued, an attachment-theoretical perspective on love's felt necessity, though perhaps the least explored approach in the philosophical literature, is particularly well-positioned to assuage both worries. Though (some measure of) vulnerability and dependence make love a risky affair, it is that very risk that tends to facilitate closeness and trust in mutual loving relationships – qualities that make our bonds with our beloveds so meaningful. What some identify as our “resilience” to losing loved ones shows not that we do not need our beloveds, but rather throws into stark relief the sense in which they, and our need of them, can enhance us. It is in virtue of needing our beloveds that we allow them access to deep aspects of ourselves, forging a tie that renders us not only susceptible to harm but also significantly more empowered and indeed in many cases, capable of taking on even the most difficult of life's challenges.

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