

Is Unconditional Love Possible?

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What is the highest aim of romantic love? I believe the answer to this question has important implications within our current, if not future, romantic relationships. Thanks to King Solomon, we read of romantic love in all of its shame and glory. In the mind of Sigmund Freud, the grand aim of romantic love was the physical union of the sexes while St. Augustine, the renowned theologian, would argue that Freud's conception of romantic love falls upon the grounds of lust, not love. And traditionally, philosophers have argued that romantic love in the unconditional sense is simply impossible.

Within the contents of this paper, I seek to examine the relationship between unconditional love and romantic relationships. I argue that unconditional love is possible within the context of romantic relationships. Using a paradigm case of Levin and Kitty's relationship from Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, I will illustrate how this is possible. While it may be appropriate to explore the aspect of unconditional love in regards to familial relationships, this is outside the scope of this paper, and I will solely focus on romantic relationships.

The paper is divided into nine sections. I begin by providing definitions of what I mean by unconditional love, romantic love, and

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romantic relationships. I then proceed to give an account of the quality theory and the possible problems it encounters. Next, I show how the development of romantic love can be explained through the quality theory. From there, I give an account of the relationship theory and show how it solves the problems of the quality theory. Once a romantic relationship is established, I will show how romantic love is better explained through the relationship theory, as it avoids the problems of the quality theory. Next, I will show that cultivating a joint identity is how a romantic relationship is sustained over time. Once I have established that both love and the relationship intend to be sustained over time, I will argue that a behavioral structure of love provides a framework to explain how unconditional love is not only possible but rational.

Key Definitions

- i. *Unconditional Love*: love that survives changes to the qualities in the beloved while the relationship remains (Christensen).¹
- ii. *Romantic Love* is defined in the terms partially attributed to Niko Kolodny: love as valuing non-relational qualities in the beloved and is sustained by sexual attraction (Kolodny 146).
- iii. *A Romantic Relationship*: an ongoing and historical relation between two particular people, who have committed themselves to the other partner in the relation and who aim to cultivate a joint identity.

The Quality theory

Niko Kolodny, who has written extensively on the quality theory, explains how the existence of love for someone or something can be justified by the quality theory. He claims, “According to the quality theory, the features that constitute reasons for loving a person are that person’s lovable qualities, such as beauty, wit, or vivacity . . . One is typically attracted to particular people as potential lovers in response to such qualities” (Kolodny 138). Qualities serve as reasons for loving a particular person. Thus, the quality theory is a responsive account of love because

¹I owe a debt of gratitude to Ryan Christensen, a professor of philosophy at Brigham Young University, who helped me form this definition.

love forms in response to the qualities of the other person. Understood this way, love develops in response to *non-relational* qualities in a particular partner. Although this theory provides a valid framework for how the development of love begins, I nevertheless find this theory to be incomplete in that it is unable to fully explain love in romantic relationships and poses a challenge for the possibility of unconditional love.

It is important to note that qualities are assumed to be non-relational under the quality theory. Non-relational qualities are qualities that are found in a particular person, such as beauty, sense of humor, or physical appearance. This composition of qualities are what make the particular person who they are. As the lover responds to the non-relational qualities in a particular person, romantic love is developed. Unlike non-relational qualities, relational qualities create an absurdity under the quality theory. A relationship is a relational quality because it shares a relation with a particular person. According to Kolodny, “relationships cannot be reasons for falling in love, because they do not exist until one has fallen in love” (169). Indeed, it would be frightening if someone, who has no relationship with you, said to you, “I love you because of our relationship.”

Levin and Kitty from *Anna Karenina* serve as a paradigm case of how romantic love develops before a romantic relationship is formed. Levin had known Kitty in his childhood and had been friends with Kitty’s late brother; however, Levin only began to respond to Kitty’s non-relational qualities one day while at the ice rink. While skating with Kitty, Levin thought:

She was more beautiful than he had imagined her . . . Her face combined with the slender beauty of her figure lay her special loveliness . . . but what was always striking in her, like something unexpected, was the look in her eyes—meek, calm and truthful—and especially her smile, which always transported Levin in a magic world. (Tolstoy 29)

At this point in the novel, Levin did not love Kitty because of a romantic relationship. Levin’s romantic love for Kitty developed in response to her qualities.

Not only does love develop in response to a person’s non-relational qualities, but if the lover is not responsive to qualities in a particular person, then the lover has no reason to develop a romantic love for that person. As defined earlier, romantic love is valuing non-relational qualities in the beloved and is sustained by sexual attraction. Valuing non-relational qualities, such as physical characteristics, brings about sexual attraction, which is a natural aspect of such a relationship. A romantic relationship with a particular person cannot exist when one does not value their

partner's non-relational qualities. After all, why create a romantic relationship if there is no sexual attraction? If there is no sexual attraction, the relationship is merely a friendship.

Romantic relationships

Love develops in response to non-relational qualities in a particular person, but one of the aims of love is to cultivate a romantic relationship. As noted above, a romantic relationship is an *ongoing* and *historical* relationship between two particular people who have committed themselves to the other partner in the relationship and who aim to cultivate a joint identity. "Ongoing" meaning that the relationship persists over time, and "historical" meaning that the two particular people involved in the relationship share a past history together (Kolodny 148). I acknowledge that ambiguity may exist concerning the exact point in time when a romantic relationship is formed. In order to avoid this ambiguity, I have added the concept of commitment to the relationship in the definition of a romantic relationship. By committed, I mean that each partner commits to direct their romantic love to the other partner in the relationship and to no one else. Thus, a romantic relationship is considered to be established once a commitment to the other partner in the relationship has been made.

We can see this kind of romantic relationship forming between Kitty and Levin. Before Levin and Kitty's romantic relationship had been established, there existed a historical and ongoing relationship between them. With regard to Kitty, we read:

When she thought about the past, she paused with pleasure, with tenderness, over memories of her relations with Levin. Memories of childhood and memories of Levin with her dead brother lent her relations with him a special poetic charm. His love for her, which she was certain of, was flattering and joyful for her. (Tolstoy 46-47)

Despite their historical and ongoing relationship, Kitty rejected Levin's first marriage proposal because she was torn between committing to him or to the handsome officer Count Alexei Vronsky. Up until this point, Kitty's love had been more responsive to Vronsky's qualities—particularly his charming, seductive personality. Eventually, Levin proposes a second time and Kitty accepts his offer. This is the beginning of Levin and Kitty's commitment towards one another; it was the establishment of their romantic relationship. Before this establishment of their romantic relationship, Levin and Kitty had no commitment towards one another

and were simply developing romantic love for one another as their love responded to the qualities in one another.

More importantly, the actual point in which two particular partners become committed to one another varies across cultures and has varied across time. Levin and Kitty committed to each other at a time of official “engagement,” while these days most partners commit before an actual engagement—like when they declare they are “official” to one another. Partners are “official” in the sense they constitute a romantic relationship.

Kolodny argues that romantic relationships usually involve certain activities such as “living together and expressing, in one way or another, sexual drives” (149). As a result, when a romantic relationship ends, it usually ends because the two particular partners in the relationship stop participating in these activities together (Kolodny 149). We can see the kind of ending which Kolodny describes in Tolstoy’s portrayal of Anna Karenina and her husband Alexei Karenin. Anna and Alexei’s romantic relationship ended because Anna stopped engaging in these activities with Alexei. Anna had been directing her romantic love to Vronsky. Consequently, she was unable to live in two romantic relationships. Thus, we see that romantic love often, if not always, is directed towards one person and cannot be shared within two different relationships. For Anna at least, it was impossible to live within two romantic relationships.

After a romantic relationship has been established, romantic love can no longer be explained through the quality theory, as it faces two significant problems. Kolodny describes these as the problem of constancy and the problem of non-substitutability (140–41). We can see these problems playing out in Tolstoy’s novel. First, the problem of constancy: if Levin justifies his love for Kitty based on Kitty’s qualities, then that justification vanishes once Kitty loses her qualities, such as her youthful beauty. Because love is responsive to qualities under the quality theory, as qualities alter, so too does the love for that particular person. Second, the problem of non-substitutability is that if the reasons that Levin loves Kitty are based on her qualities, then Levin’s reasons justify him in loving someone else with the same or even better qualities. Under the quality theory, “I have just as much reason to love a type-identical stranger, whether as a replacement or an alternative, as I have to love my wife of many years” (Kolodny 141). Clearly, then, the quality theory alone is insufficient to explain romantic love once a relationship has been established. Fortunately, the solution to these problems can be found in the relationship theory.

The Relationship theory

According to Kolodny's account of the relationship theory, valuing the relationship itself is one's reason for love (146). The relationship theory assumes that romantic relationships are *historical* and *ongoing* between particular people (148). Additionally, love does not alter when qualities in the beloved alter because the reason for love lies in valuing the relationship (146).

The two problems of the quality theory are solved under the relationship theory, as Kolodny argues. First, the constancy problem is solved because the lover finds the reason to continue in love through valuing the relationship. Even as qualities in the beloved change, love does not alter because the reason for love is based on valuing the relationship. Thus, "the relationship remains, even as qualities change" (Kolodny 147). Second, the non-substitutability problem is solved, because one is not justified in loving someone with similar qualities as the beloved since there is no historical and ongoing relationship to value. All in all, as Kolodny shows, the problems pertaining to the quality theory are solved by the relationship theory.

However, an objection could be made against the relationship theory: the focus of love is wrong because valuing the person should be the focus of love rather than valuing the relationship. Kolodny believes this objection arises from:

confusing the ground of valuation with its focus. The ground of valuation is the reason for the associated emotional vulnerability and actions. The focus of valuation is that to which one is emotionally vulnerable and that which one acts to serve, protect, and so on . . . The distinction between focus and ground is no ad hoc . . . We often value things nonfinally: that is, we often value X as a focus, while taking another thing Y to be the ground of valuing X in that way. (154)

I agree with Kolodny that valuing a relationship implicitly implies valuing the beloved because without valuing the non-relational qualities in the beloved, a romantic relationship cannot be established. Additionally, I appeal to the definition of romantic love: valuing the non-relational qualities in the beloved. If Levin values his relationship with Kitty, then Levin values Kitty. It is impossible to value the relationship if you do not value the beloved in the relationship. Thus, the relationship theory can explain how romantic love can be sustained even through changes in the qualities of the beloved. In the end, valuing the beloved is a necessary condition for valuing a relationship. While the relationship theory explains

how romantic *love* can be sustained over time, how is it that a romantic *relationship* sustained over time? I argue that it can be sustained over time by cultivating a joint identity.

Joint Identity

Once the romantic relationship has been established, the aim of the relationship is to cultivate a joint identity. Robert Nozick describes what it means to cultivate a joint identity, saying, “In a *we*, the people *share* an identity. The desire to share not only our life but our very identity with another marks our fullest openness” (428). According to Nozick, marriage marks a full realization of the *we* (430). I agree with Nozick’s account of a joint identity and would add to Nozick’s work that this concept establishes a level of commitment that is essential for unconditional love to exist within a relationship as I will explain later. Particularly, marriage is a symbol of the *we*, and it is reasonable to suggest that the intent of marriage is to endure throughout a lifetime. Because of this intention, marriage is a commitment to each partner—a legally-binding commitment.

We can see this *we* at work in *Anna Karenina*. Tolstoy gives us a glimpse into the event when Levin and Kitty began to form a joint identity—the moment they were pronounced husband and wife. As the choirs at the marriage ceremony sing, Tolstoy puts to pen Levin’s thoughts, “Who hast brought into unity those who were sundered, and hast ordained for them an indissoluble bond of love?” (452). Here, Levin understands that marriage has created a joint identity between him and Kitty.

When determining the best conception of a joint identity, I thought it was more appropriate and accurate to describe the full realization of a joint identity in terms of marriage rather than through a sexual relationship. My justification for this decision lies in the fact that just because two people have sex does not entail commitment to one another nor to continuing a life together. For instance, although Anna and Vronsky were not married, they certainly had sexual experiences together. In the end, however, Anna and Vronsky did not constitute an enduring *we*. Levin and Kitty, on the other hand, cultivated a joint relationship through marriage, which proved to be an enduring *we*.

Some might object that there are couples who are not married who perhaps can be considered “a joint identity.” I respond by stating that a romantic relationship, without the level of commitment found in marriage, does not necessarily entail the continuation and endurance of a relationship over time. The aim of a romantic relationship is to cultivate a joint identity, and the purpose of a joint identity is to continue and endure throughout a

lifetime, so we find the culmination of a romantic relationship within the commitment of marriage. Defining marriage specifically as a joint identity, rather than any romantic relationship, is more appropriate because the intent of marriage and the purpose of a joint identity is both to endure. For instance, a typical Christian marriage vow says:

In the name of God, I, ____, take you, ____, to be my (husband/wife), to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. (Dickman)

Thus, marriage, which intends to continue *until* death do them part, marks a full realization of a joint identity. For a romantic relationship to be able to cultivate a joint identity to the extent that marriage does, the relationship would need an equivalent level of commitment as marriage. It is reasonable to suggest that a non-marital, romantic relationship can be equivalent to a marital relationship, but I believe that a formal commitment is essential for the continuation of that relationship throughout a lifetime.

With regards to marital vows, Lisa Neff and Benjamin Karney—both contemporary marital research scholars—say:

Couples publicly announce before their friends, family members, and authority figures that they will spend a lifetime loving their partner for better or for worse. Research on newlyweds confirms that most couples do enter marriage with the intent to fulfill this promise. Studies on newlywed couples reveal that these spouses profess a deep love for their partner, describe their partner in extremely positive and glowing terms, and report being highly committed to the relationship. (Karney and Neff 201)

This research suggests that those who enter into matrimony *intend* for their relationship to continue till death. Intending for a relationship to continue and endure will be vital for Frankfurt's conception of the disposition of love, which we will discuss soon. It could be objected that a non-married, romantic couple, perhaps, has the same relationship quality as a married couple, even without the same formal commitment and long term intent. However, it is fallacious to assume that quality is equivalent with intent to continue. The couple would have to, in addition, have a sufficient level of established commitment, which may only be present in the formal bond of marriage. Marriage shows both partners intend to continue their relationship through hard times and easy times even though the quality of the relationship can fluctuate.

Conflict in a Joint Identity

Ultimately, as the intent of a joint identity is to endure throughout a lifetime, it is assumed that the two partners within the marriage will conduct their behavior in such a way that allows the marriage to remain throughout their lifetime even when qualities in the beloved change for better or for worse. For instance, a partner can begin to possess the quality of selfishness or greed that negatively affects the relationship. With the assumption that conflict arises from the qualities in the beloved, both partners have to resolve conflict in one way or another to sustain the relationship. Conflict is an inescapable part of marriage because qualities in the beloved change as time passes. For example, after Levin and Kitty's marriage, Tolstoy writes:

Levin saw that to arrange all those trifles [the qualities in Kitty] was by no means as easy as it had seemed to him before . . . he had, like all men, involuntarily pictured it to himself only as the enjoyment of love, which nothing should hinder. (480)

Furthermore, there are qualities that change in the beloved that can threaten the existence of a marriage. For example, Kitty became flirtatious with another man—Vasenska Veslovksy—who came to visit Levin and Kitty's estate. Kitty's unfamiliar flirtatious quality threatened Levin and Kitty's marriage. Vasenska was much like the young handsome officer—Vronsky. During a dinner conversation between Kitty and Vasenska, Levin noticed Kitty blushing at Vasenska. Of course, Levin felt threatened by that and saw Vasenska as a threat to his marriage with Kitty. Later, Levin confronts Kitty about the issue. "In Levin's eyes she was to blame for having permitted such relations" (573). Fortunately, Kitty never does anything physically with Vasenska that would harm her relationship with Levin. Levin and Kitty talked about what happened and made amends. Their love survived. They forgave and lived on to create a stronger relationship. Additionally, we read about other quarrels and confrontations that Levin and Kitty had with one another. Tolstoy writes:

Their quarrels were another disenchantment and enchantment. Levin never imagined that there could be any other relations between himself and his wife than tender, respectful, and loving ones, and suddenly, in their very first days, they quarreled. (482)

However, as their love survived, it was made stronger. "They made peace . . . She [Kitty] became more tender towards him, and experienced a new, redoubled happiness in their love" (482). From changes to personal

qualities, conflict ensued. However, they created a stronger relationship from conflict. Conflict is an inevitable part of a marital relationship and can have the potential to destroy a relationship and the love that exists. However, within a joint identity, both partners intend to overcome conflict because they have shown their intention to have their relationship continue until death from their marital vows. Accordingly, their love is able to endure as they are committed to resolving conflict despite changes in the qualities of the beloved. On the other hand, Anna and Alexei's marital relationship was ravished from Anna's infidelity. Their relationship became weaker and weaker because Anna's behavior seemed to go against the nature of love. Thus, some changes in the qualities of the beloved can provide reasons for the relationship to end, as recently mentioned. However, Levin and Kitty's case shows that love can continue even through conflict, suggesting that it is not conditional as it can withstand shifts in certain qualities. Conditional love meaning that an action or quality is sufficient for love, contingent upon the qualities and actions manifested by the beloved. Love is necessary when certain actions or qualities are shown by the beloved. Thus, Levin and Kitty's joint identity no longer demands conditions for love to exist.

Set Standard of Behavior

Finally, I proceed to Harry Frankfurt's motivational structure of love, which I argue provides a framework for unconditional love to exist within joint identities. Frankfurt argues that love offers a stable motivational structure "that shapes preferences and that guides and limits conduct" (Frankfurt 129). Frankfurt's motivational structure is not a list of do's and don'ts. Rather, Frankfurt describes this motivational structure of love as a "complex volition that bears upon how a person is *disposed to act* and upon how he is *disposed to manage* the motivations and interests by which he is loved" (165). This motivational structure arises from valuing the marital relationship and provides permanency for the marriage even as qualities in the partner change.

While conflicts are inevitable in every marital relationship, Frankfurt's motivational structure of love aligns our behavior in such a way that potentially destructive conflicts never arise. A marital relationship contains not only an intention and commitment to overcome conflict but also a motivational structure that prevents destructive conflicts from arising. It is love that provides motivation to structure our behavior. Frankfurt argues that if one values the marital relationship, then one is *disposed to act* and *manage* the motivations and interests by which one is

loved (165). As partners adhere to the motivational structure that love offers their marriage, marital permanency is inevitable. Because of love's motivational structure, love can survive changes to qualities in the beloved because a partner will be motivated to act in a way that indicates they value the relationship. Thus, unconditional love is made possible by adhering to the motivational structure. "[Love] will be unconditional to the extent that no further condition need be satisfied to go on loving them" as Simon May claimed in his book *Love: A History* (May 244). Moreover, as noted from examples in Levin and Kitty's marriage, within love's motivational structure, there is room for negative qualities to create negative outcomes and for love to still exist. However, Anna Karenina, for instance, acted outside of love's motivational structure, and it destroyed her marital relationship. Thus, if one values the marital relationship, then one will adhere to the motivational structure of love to create a stable relationship that endures and in which unconditional love exists.

In addition to providing a stable ground for unconditional love, love's motivational structure makes each partner vulnerable to the feelings of the other. For instance, Levin came home late one evening from working in the field nearby. Kitty was offended that he had arrived home late. Tolstoy writes:

[Levin] understood clearly for the first time what he had not understood when he led her out of the church after the wedding . . . He understood it by the painful feeling of being split which he experienced at that moment. He was offended at first, but in that same instant he felt that he could not be offended by her, that she was him. (482)

Here, Levin realized that he could not let himself be offended because he was part of a joint identity, and as such he was "disposed to manage the motivations and interests by which he is loved" (Frankfurt 165). He was motivated by the value he placed on his relationship with Kitty to behave in appropriate ways. While this may be a simple trifle, the point is that being part of a joint identity makes a partner vulnerable to the actions of the other; it gives them reasons to act in certain ways. Thus, from a joint identity, a motivational structure of behavior arises for the relationship.

Accordingly, at the end of *Anna Karenina*, Levin speaks with an innkeeper who points out to him that some men just live for their own needs. For some reason, this idea takes great hold of Levin. From this, Tolstoy writes how a joyful feeling came over Levin, "It was as if a host of vague but important thoughts burst from some locked-up place . . . all rushing towards the same goal" (794). Immediately, Levin dropped his sheath and ran home to Kitty. On his way home, Tolstoy describes Levin's rush of thoughts:

[The Innkeeper] said one should not live for one's needs—that is, one should not live for what we understand, for what we understand . . . no one can either comprehend nor define . . . Millions of people who lived ages ago and are living now . . . the wise men have thought and written about it. (795)

Ultimately, he understands that love provides a motivational structure, which has created an incomprehensible love—an unconditional love for Kitty and their relationship.

In summary, I explained how romantic love develops through the quality theory. Once a romantic relationship is established, the quality theory is unable to explain the love that exists within the romantic relationship because of the constancy and non-substitutability problems. Therefore, a new theory was needed to explain love in a romantic relationship. According to the relationship theory, love is valuing the relationship, not the qualities in the beloved. The relationship theory explains how romantic love is sustained over time. I proposed that cultivating a joint identity is how a romantic relationship can be sustained over time. Once both love and the relationship are intended to be sustained over time, I argued that the motivational structure of love explains how unconditional love is possible. Once both partners in a marriage adhere to the motivational structure of love, only then is love able to survive the changes to qualities in the beloved as the relationship remains.

Objection

Steven Hales rejects the idea that unconditional love is possible or even rational. He claims that unconditional love is impossible in any type of relationship because if you strip a person of all possible qualities, the relationship still remains (317). Therefore, love is conditioned because there is at least one conditional on which love centers within any type of relationship. The only type of unconditional love that Hales is willing to accept, however, is “love that won't vanish no matter what happens, or no matter what the actions—or changes in—the beloved. This sort of love is possible” (318). I would object in that this idea of unconditional love is irrational. Similarly, as Derek Edyvane responds, Hales's notion of unconditional love “is necessarily an impoverished mode of caring because it directly rules out any appeal to reasons” (68).

While I acknowledge that unconditional love within a romantic relationship is rare and difficult to achieve, I agree with Edyvane that it would be purely irrational to love someone no matter what. It is irrational to love someone who abuses you. Love should not consist of abuse. Take for

example an abusive partner scenario: for instance, a woman who is abused by her partner. There is no love there, only lustful violence. It is simply irrational for her to continue loving someone who constantly hurts her. In this scenario, we cannot say that she loves her partner no matter what he does to her. Contrary to the old saying, love is simply not blind, at least not love in the rational sense. It is irrational to value an abusive relationship or even an abusive partner. Any kind of love or attachment in such a case is irrational, but while some forms of love can be irrational, I argue that unconditional love in its truest sense, is rational because there are reasons to love a partner in a marriage unconditionally. As Harry Frankfurt explained, "Love . . . creates the reasons by which acts of loving devotion are inspired" (Frankfurt 3). In essence, my definition and argument for unconditional love is rational while Hales's idea of unconditional love is irrational. In a similar way, because there must be reasons to love a partner in a marriage unconditionally, when these reasons are not met, it is rational to *not* love a partner unconditionally. Fundamentally, love is rational.

Conclusion

This article explored the possibility of unconditional love within romantic relationships. Because personal qualities are fungible, valuing a relationship as the reason for love (and not just the qualities) is an essential element for unconditional love to exist. Additionally, marital relationships are necessary for unconditional love because they give rise to a motivational structure of behavior, which provides a framework for the existence of unconditional love in a romantic relationship. If these conditions are met, I argue that unconditional love is not only possible, but rational. Thus, in its origins, love is conditional, yet in its aim, love is unconditional.

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