

Love and Meaning
Blackheath Forum

1. Love in common sense, art, and philosophy

Thanks Peter for having me here, and thank you all so much for coming.

{Slide 2}

Today I will flout conventional TED-talk generation wisdom and try to say a lot about many different topics, all connected to love and the perception of meaning in life. I want to say something about whether we can love non-existent objects (like the dead, on one conception), something about whether there could be a pill that makes us love someone (and if so, whether we should ever want to take it), and something about whether love involves choice and whether it involves rationality. I will wind my way around to these topics via a circuitous route: by offering some thoughts on the role of philosophy, by discussing different methods of approaching seemingly intractable intellectual conundrums, and by sketching some basic features of my own views about the psychological characteristics of love. Hopefully there will be a little something for everyone.

I want to begin with a philosophical challenge, and a warning (or word to the wise).

The challenge first:

Can philosophy say anything interesting about topics like this one? Why should we think that philosophers have any special knowledge when it comes to issues that concern everyone?

Well, philosophers definitely cannot claim to have any monopoly on insight. More than in other areas of philosophy, when we come to discuss the topic of love we are drawing on the collective wisdom of mankind, as expressed in common sense, and also in art—especially, I think, in literature. We owe many of the greatest conceptualisations of love to literary artists. (I think this says something about literature’s special potential as a medium, but that is another huge topic!)

Consider **{Slide 3}** the sublime Dorothea Brook in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, and how her mature love for Will Ladislaw contrasts with Edward Casuabon’s so-called “love” for her. [If C counts as loving her, it is certainly a perverted form—he is attached to her as a mere means to his scholarly pursuits, he regards her as a subservient being...as indeed, intriguingly, he may be attached to himself...]

Or consider **{Slide 4}** the remarkable view of love that we encounter in Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*: a dark and challenging conception of love as inseparable from the desire to control, possess, keep as prisoner—a vision in which love’s natural expression is not benevolence but jealousy.

Or think **{Slide 5}** of how Cervantes presents the love of *Don Quixote* for Dulcinea del Toboso—a love characterised by delusions, loss of control, and a vivid sojourn in a Cave of unreason.

We have so much to learn from these examples. What can philosophy—the less beautiful, drier, less sexy stuff—really add?

Well, it may not surprise you to hear that all of these examples can be related to the views expressed by Plato, the fountainhead of western philosophy, in his dramatic masterpiece the *Symposium*. **{Slide 6}**

It is in part Plato's Allegory of the Cave that inspires Cervantes to write the stunning scene in which the Knight of the Mournful Countenance descends into his own cave (Montesinos) and experiences his private vision (a vision which even his loving friend Sancho cannot believe to be veridical).

It is also in the *Symposium* that we find expressly articulated the roots of Marcel's seemingly pathological attachment to Albertine: as the priestess Diotima, teacher of Socrates in the art of love, tells us: love is *the desire to possess the beloved forever*.

Finally, it is in the *Symposium* that we find most vividly depicted the scholarly dream at the heart of Edward Casaubon's strange idea of marital bliss: it is appropriate (!), Plato thinks, for love to journey up the Ladder of Eros, from individuals to abstract entities like the Forms of Beauty and the Good.

That Plato grappled with the same issues as Cervantes, Proust, and Eliot does not mean that the latter are less interesting. But when we do philosophy in the Platonic tradition, I think we do something distinctive and important. We ask questions and we try to formulate answers. Many of you will recognize this as the Socratic project, the project of the gadfly of Athens. And we need it, especially when we get to thinking about topics like love. Why? Because these topics are *confusing*. For example:

In what sense was Casaubon a bad lover? Wait—since most of us think he was terrible, does this mean that there are right and wrong ways to love? Can we be required to love, or to love in certain ways? If so, what would ground this requirement? A marital commitment?—but what is that, and isn't it a strangely contractual basis for love? And hold on...how could you promise to love—isn't love an emotion, and aren't emotions beyond our control?

Or: is Marcel's desire to possess Albertine pathological, or merely a vivid illustration of the psychological essence of love? Is love doomed to frustration, as it would be if it involved a desire to possess, and to do so eternally? Or is Proust exaggerating, perhaps as a result of his experiences as a gay man in an intolerant environment?

And finally, we are led naturally into some *Don Quixote* questions: is love necessarily irrational? If so, is this because it just happens, like a thunderbolt, perhaps as a result of reading the wrong kinds of books? Or does love have reasons in addition to causes? Is it subject to norms of rationality, appropriateness, morality, and so on?

I hope you will agree that these are philosophical questions. We cannot just appeal to the authority of George Eliot—though she may well suggest some attractive ideas, I don't think *Middlemarch* really answers many of these questions on its own. We have to think through the questions for ourselves, and develop a philosophy of love that responds to them directly.

I said I'd begin with a challenge and a warning. I've responded to the challenge. Here's the warning: if you hoped that by the end of this talk you would know about the "true nature" of love, you are likely to be disappointed. I will indeed gesture at a vision of love that I find attractive, and that I think begins to explicate the deep intuitive connection between love and meaning. But I won't do much to convince you that this is the only important vision of love, and I'm not very interested in doing that sort of thing.

Anyway, I hope I've said enough to help you see why I'm at least mildly optimistic about the role of philosophy in thinking about these fundamental issues; and hopefully you appreciate the sense in which my remarks are going to be aimed at conceptualising one central sense that we could give to the concept of love, and not really aimed at showing that all other senses are illegitimate.

2. Method/Two Approaches

How do we start thinking about such a massive topic? This is itself a tremendously difficult question in the methodology of philosophy. I want to briefly contrast two approaches, and say something about why I favour the latter.

One way to begin thinking about love is to try to generalize from paradigm cases. We imagine these cases vividly, and we try to say as much as we can about what unifies them. This is a classic philosophical method, and in many circumstances an indispensable one. However, in the current context I think that it is a bad or at least incomplete method. It has led many philosophers to say many implausible things.

What do I mean? Well, when you heard there was going to be a talk about love, I bet many of you immediately thought about a certain vision of *romantic* or *erotic* love. You probably thought about love for *one* other person, you likely thought about a person of the opposite sex...and you may not *even have noticed* that my three literary examples were of this form. Why would you have noticed? This form of love is constantly depicted in art and literature and television and advertising. It is a collective obsession **{Slide 7}** —and I say this as someone with very liberal views about sexuality.

How might thinking of such cases be intellectually dangerous? Well, think of how many things we've not yet mentioned, which many of us take, at least upon reflection, to be important cases of love:

Most obviously **{Slide 8}**:

Familial love: parents for children and children for parents, grandparents, siblings

Friendship, totally central in many of our lives

But also, love for non-persons:

Infants and other human beings who are not agents/autonomous

Non-human animals (pets)

Nature (e.g. a particular national park)

Activities (fishing, cooking, philosophy)

Ideals (reform of Australia's offshore detention regime)

God?

Though I will not catalogue this here today, I will just ask you to take my word for it that many accounts of love offered by philosophers are hopelessly incapable of applying to many of these examples.

In fact, even if we just wanted to conceptualize romantic love on its own, it would be worth reminding ourselves that our views about the paradigm cases of *that* might also be untrustworthy. After all, many of us view prevailing attitudes about romantic love to be distressingly permeated by hetero-normative, mono-normative, and patriarchal assumptions. In other words, when we reflect adequately, we notice that some of our assumptions about what romantic love is are generated from a distressingly narrow-minded set of supposedly paradigm examples.

The general point is this: many of our ideas about love are formed behind the veil of consciousness, where some extraordinarily powerful cultural narratives exert themselves in ways we seldom observe. Thinking more systematically about the many varieties of love may help us to interrogate the influence of these narratives. Let me give you one specific example before outlining an alternative method.

In my opening comments I alluded to one narrative strand that I think has big intellectual and personal ramifications. Many people have the strong intuition that *love is not under our voluntary control*. When asked to defend this intuition, we typically cite the phenomenology of *falling in love*. Falling in love can certainly feel like something that happens, rather than something we do. So the popularity of this view is not surprising.

But we should note that this popular dogma about the passivity of romantic love is not an idle curiosity...it is really the intellectual foundation of an ideology of romantic love that exerts great power today on individual psychologies. It also has a fascinating cultural history, which we rarely interrogate. **{Slide 9}**

In fact, I think that the exercise of agency in romantic love is significantly more nuanced than popular narratives suggest. For now I will just offer a pregnant remark on this score: we should distinguish “falling in love” from being in love, say that we exercise a great degree of control in the latter, and focus on the latter as the far more important case, both in its connection to the perception of meaning and the value of human lives.

Or, to express this perspective in perhaps more evocative terms: You might not have chosen to meet your husband on that fateful night at the Opera House—but you did probably choose to see him again, just as you may have chosen together to bring a child into the world, and just as you may have chosen together to bring a puppy back home from the pound. It is true that certain sets of choices make it all but inevitable that we will love in certain ways. Similarly, choosing to drink six martinis makes it all but inevitable that we will walk (or stumble) in certain ways. In the latter case most of us think that we have agency sufficient for responsibility, and that this makes our choices the kind of thing that can be rationally assessed. Why, then, are so many of us so hesitant to attribute responsibility for loving, and so reluctant to blame lovers when they do seemingly imprudent or immoral things out of love?

By the way, we are not alone in making these intriguing judgments about love, and I am not alone in pointing out that they are intriguing: **{Slide 10}**

Plato: “Suppose, for example, that in order to secure money, or a public post, or any other practical benefit from another person, a man were willing to do what lovers do for the ones they love. Imagine that...he went to his knees in public view and begged in the most humiliating way, that he swore all sorts of vows (etc.)...his enemies would **jeer at his fawning servility**, while his friends, ashamed on his behalf, would **try everything to bring him back to his senses**...But let a lover act in any of these ways...and everyone will immediately say **what a charming man he is!** No **blame** attaches to his behavior: custom treats it as **noble through and through.**”

Anyway, that’s a taste of why I’m worried about the methodology of “paradigm case” analysis. First, I have seen too many philosophical accounts of love and its value that do not even aspire to give us insights into many of the cases of love that I find most interesting. Second, I worry that our views about what count as paradigms are highly variable, and themselves informed by contentious assumptions about value. And, finally, I think that we sometimes get confused in thinking about the supposedly paradigm cases, and that abstracting away from them may be a healthy antidote.

So here’s an alternative method. Let’s try to describe the most basic features of love as a psychological condition—by which I mean: let’s try to say what love *does* that is most characteristic, that most distinguishes it from other psychological conditions (desire, pleasure, attachment, hate, respect, appreciation, etc.). We might be able do this without making any contentious

assumptions about which cases are the purest or most important, and without saying much that is controversial at all.

3. Love's Psychological Role

I will now continue pontificating about the nature of love by identifying one "platitude" about the role that love plays in human psychology. (By platitude, I mean that this has the status of something that is virtually undeniable.) I'll then suggest that this motivates a view about the different parts of love's psychological composition (a tripartite theory), which I will only have time to sketch, but which you may find interesting. Then I'll try to respond to some of the provocative questions that I mentioned at the outset.

The Platitude {Slide 11}

Love is the most robustly meaning-generating psychological condition

Notes:

Meaning=look back, "that was meaningful, that meant something."

Not obviously the same as objective value.

Other conditions can also generate meaning.

The key claim is the "most robust" one.

Of course, love can also make you miserable; of course, love is not always enough.

Still, the claim strikes me as obviously true, and indeed a deep truth about love. I am not alone (see Wolf "get out of bed in the morning", "roots us motivationally").

But am very curious if people are sceptical.

If you're with me on the platitude, then we have a start. Because we can now ask: what more can we say about the psychological condition that plays this distinctive meaning-generating role?

Well, I'll just cut to the chase here, and say that I think we need a complex of affective and volitional states, which I call *liking*, *vulnerability*, and *devotion*.

Most of the particular details of this view are not important for our purposes. What is important is this: if you think that love involves something like devotion, and also something like vulnerability or liking, then you have the materials to begin providing some interesting answers to many classic questions. Why? Well, here's a hint: *devotion is a direct expression of agency* in a way that the other elements are not.

I don't have time to defend this conception of love. Nor do I have airtight arguments for it. Today I offer it in the spirit of invitation. These kinds of arguments are just as important as the samurai/jiu jitsu ones. I will say just two brief things about devotion to give you a sense of why I think of it as a key ingredient in love and meaning.

First: I think that the perception of meaning in life is deeply connected to the exercise of rational agency. When I think about the main sources of meaning for people, I come up with intimate relationships (friendships, family relations, pets), valued projects (studying the history of Rome, designing a building, fighting racism), and cherished activities (appreciating great films, playing chess)—which are all characterized by intense and extended patterns of activity.

Second: consider what underwrites our scepticism about bogus love claims. Deadbeat dad: “I really do love my daughter.” Well, why have you never taken an interest in her? We take the fact that you have never paid child support, never expressed concern about her education, to license the verdict that you don’t really love her. In other words, you *aren’t really devoted to your daughter*, so your claim that you love her is bogus.

A lot more would be needed to defend this picture. I won’t do that today.

4. Some Hard Questions about Love and Agency

What I will do is conclude by considering two sets of questions that I previewed at the beginning. I hope that talking through them will both be interesting/puzzling/provocative in itself, and a way of suggesting in an indirect way some of the basic features of my views about love and meaning. I should emphasize that I do not have settled views here; I am eager to hear your thoughts.

1. Can we love non-existent things?
2. Could there be a love pill? (And, if so, (when) should we take it?)

Can we love non-existent things? I have two cases in mind. The first is love for God (assuming that, though we can’t have knowledge here, God does not exist). The second is love for people who have died (assuming we do not believe in the afterlife). You do not need to buy these assumptions to think they are *possibly true*. So these questions should interest everyone.

If love were a private, internal emotional experience, then there would be no question—we could obviously love these things. On my view, however, love (the meaning generating thing) is not wholly internal, and not wholly emotional. It involves devotion, which is a kind of striving or activity. So the questions are hard.

Can we be devoted to God even if She does not exist? In fact, there are interesting theological problems about how we could be devoted to an *existing* God, if devotion is in part about seeking to promote well being. [God is perfectly good, so how could we promote her well being!?] But I think those can be answered—so set them to the side. Suppose God does not exist, but we think she does. Can we be devoted to her? Can this devotion make our lives seem meaningful?

I'm tempted to say that we can, mostly because I see the striving of pious people, both external and internal striving, and I think it is the kind of thing that (combined with the more affective components I've mentioned) does indeed make lives seem meaningful.

I am also tempted to endorse this view because I think that we *often* love on the basis of deep illusions. Imagine that after a year of dating someone you envisioned to be a warm-hearted altruist, you gradually discover your partner to be a selfish narcissist, who merely acts the part of the humanitarian. You have been in love, but the actual features of your beloved are so different than the ones that you loved him for that it seems to me possible that you never loved a real person.

If this sounds crazy, consider the words **{Slide 12}** of the radical feminist Shulamith Firestone: "...falling in love" is no more than the process of alteration of male vision—through idealization, mystification, glorification—that renders void the woman's class inferiority." In other words, men, because of their class superiority, are incapable of loving without distorted vision, without projecting impossible qualities—she's so beautiful that she transcends her subjugated status—on to their beloved.

Or imagine **{Slide 13}** a mixture of *The Truman Show* and *Ex Machina*: I'm an evil super scientist who manipulates from afar a robot that you can't distinguish from a person...you fall in love with this robot...but eventually I reveal the truth to you, and you realize that what you've taken for kindness, wisdom, etc. are really just malevolently designed appearances. Again, I'm tempted to say that you have loved, but that what you come to discover is that the object of your love does not exist.

Ok, now let's consider my second example: can we love the dead? There is an important difference between the two cases. I was imagining, in the first case, a religious believer who happens to be wrong about the existence of God. Now I want to imagine someone who *does not believe in the afterlife*. If I do not believe in the afterlife, can I be devoted to my grandmother Muriel, who passed away years ago? Can I love her?

My reaction to this case is different, and more complicated. Aristotle believed that individual well-being was not bound by birth and death. He thought that our lives could go worse when bad things happened to our descendants—and so we couldn't say that "Muriel had a flourishing life" until generations after she died. If you have this kind of view, then many important parts of a person (her values, her preferences) survive the death of her body. Maybe we can be devoted to a person whose body has died, then, by remaining devoted to the surviving parts of them...

Well, I am sympathetic to some aspects of Aristotle's thinking. Still, I want to distinguish between a person and her values/preferences. It may be that my values are more important than I am. So maybe it would be good for me, in some

important way, for you to be *devoted to my values* after I die. Nonetheless, I'm inclined to say that devotion to my values is not the same as devotion to me.

So I find it hard to think that devotion to the dead is possible (though again, devotion to their values surely is). This leads me to the conclusion that we cannot love the dead (at least if we do not believe in the afterlife). This is not a philosophical thesis that wins you admirers. But I find it plausible, and I think it may help us to understand part of what is going on when we *grieve*—in mourning the loss of a loved one, we are recognizing not just that they are gone, but also that a big part of our own volitional universe has disappeared as well.

To put it another way, one reason that mourning can be such an intense experience is that it can involve the recognition that a large part of *our own personhood* has been eroded. Persons are not mere things that are operated on by nature, but agents who must act, and who (if our lives are to seem meaningful) must act in non-haphazard ways that express a continuity of will over time. When someone (or something) close to us dies, we are forced to reconstitute our will and our personhood. It isn't surprising, on my view, that *taking up new forms of devotion*—new projects, commitments, friends, pets, lovers—is one of the most psychologically productive responses to the loss of a loved one.

I've already said a lot of provocative stuff in this section. So let's turn to **{Slide 14}** my questions about the love pill, which will allow me to say more!

My answer to the initial question is simple. Of course there could be a love pill (or better: a romantic love pill, a friendship pill, a motherly love pill, etc.). I think that all mental states are produced by brain states. Love is a complex of mental states (LVD). A sufficiently accomplished neuroscientist could produce it.

But the normative questions are much more interesting. Imagine that the pill exists. Should we take it?

5. Love Pills and the Normativity of Love

There are some situations in which it would be rational and virtuous to take a love pill.

Imagine that I have a young child, and no matter what I do I cannot find love for the child in my heart, and this coldness causes me to shirk my obligations and to treat the child with a removed disdain. A doctor offers me a pill that will cause me to feel fatherly love, and to act in the characteristically loving fatherly ways. In such a case, you bet I should take the pill!

So when should I not take a love pill?

Well, imagine dating a physically attractive but boring and morally dubious person. You could take a love pill, and live happily ever after (if they begin to

waver, they can take one too). But you shouldn't. In explaining why, I will reveal to you many of the most essential normative features of the vision of love I have been beginning to articulate.

A good reason not to take the pill in such a case is that you would be selling yourself short. Odds are that eventually you'll find a loving relationship with a more virtuous person. And that would be a better relationship, one in which your own virtues were better cultivated and exercised.

One thing this suggests to me is that there is a gap between the *perception of meaning in one's life* and the *value of that life*. (After all, we could stipulate that the love pill would cause you to find your relationship with the boring and suspect person to be just as meaningful as your non-love pill-induced relationship with the stimulating and virtuous person.) It suggests to me that we should, to the extent possible, try to find meaning in things that are actually valuable, and not in evaluative illusions. Since I believe that we have substantial control over who, what, and how we love, what I'm suggesting is that we should *not* think of love as being insulated from responsibility, insulated from rational and moral assessment. We should instead think of love as one of the most important expressions of our rational agency.

Here's another possible result. If appropriate loving is directed at things of value, and if we exercise some control in loving, then perhaps we should cultivate love *for a variety of valuable things*. Romantic love is great, but not everything. Personal love is great, but not everything. People change and die. If we want to have meaningful lives, maybe we should save some of our love for more permanent things.

You may now see why I began as I did. What I've just revealed is that I'm a Platonist of sorts (though hopefully not of the dry and dusty Edward Casaubon variety). I don't think that love for literature (or the environment, or fighting gender inequality) should replace love for your kids. But I do think it should be a big part of your life.

Some people hear these ideas and think that I must be living on another planet—perhaps a planet where rationalistic philosophers display “love” for one another by methodically proofreading meaningless articles. Others think that that I must be a cold-hearted curmudgeon with a checkered past. Others think that what I'm saying is romantic in its non-judgmentalism, or inspiring in connecting love to freedom and rational autonomy. Still others think that everything I've said is obvious and uninteresting. Well, here we have a proof of at least one thing: *philosophy is cool*. It reveals the deep fissures underlying everyday thought, brings them to the surface, and gives us some self-knowledge, if nothing else.

I very much look forward to hearing all of your thoughts on these fascinating topics. Thanks for listening.

