Berit Brogaard
On Romantic Love: Simple Truths about a Complex Emotion
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Kim Atkins (University of Tasmania)

Kim Atkins is an adjunct associate professor of philosophy at the University of Tasmania. Her area of expertise is narrative models of selfhood, personal identity, and agency, with a focus on the work of Paul Ricoeur. She also has a strong interest in ethics, especially clinical ethics. Kim wears another hat as a consultant within the Department of Health and Human Services, where currently her particular interest is in developing resources to capture and report "public value."

http://www.utas.edu.au/profiles/staff/gender-studies/kim-atkins

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On Romantic Love is a lively little book that claims to provide some simple truths about love, for example, that it can be both rational and irrational; that the lover can be blind to what is obvious to the casual observer; and that our romantic attachments bear a deep connection to our earliest experiences of intimacy. Less directly it suggests that love can be adequately understood as a person's brain states and (consequent to this perspective) that love is not compatible with a moral point of view (see my comments later on Harry Frankfurt and Jan Bransen). Perhaps what will be most salient to a feminist reader, however, is the lack of acknowledgment that gender plays a role in romantic love: this book is a gender politics-free zone. For this reason it will be of limited interest to feminist readers.

Brogaard does not provide a definition of love that is specifically romantic; rather, she proffers a kind of real-life case study through an account of the experiences of her friend Zoe, and Zoe's on-off lover, Brandon. Brandon is a man who sweeps in and out of Zoe's life without warning, evoking at one time the wildest passions, at another, vile recriminations and self-loathing, in a relentless cycle of intimacy and abandonment. Brandon generally treats Zoe as a sexual utility, and Zoe, who realizes this, nevertheless falls for his advances every time. The story of Zoe and Brandon is a central plank of the book, providing vignettes that function as points of departure for Brogaard to foray into a range of theoretical domains, including neuroscience, psychology, psychoanalysis, personal identity, and moral philosophy. The unfolding story weaves together claims from these various domains to conclude that the problems of love are grounded in our early childhood, and are expressions of largely unconscious forces. Brogaard's advice, then, is that the best we can do is learn to control our emotional responses.

Brogaard develops her more general account after a brief consideration of some alternative accounts of love, most of which are said to suffer from the "connection problem." The connection problem concerns what Brogaard characterizes as "two-stage" accounts of love. These are accounts that claim a connection between the cognitive aspect of an emotion and the physical arousal associated with it, such that the emotion is the product of an interpretation of the physical arousal and directed toward something in the external world that we judge to be relevant to our well-being. Brogaard rejects this approach on the basis that, in any context where there is

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more than one likely object or candidate for my feelings, the theory cannot predict which object is giving rise to the specific arousal (65-66). In a similar way, the conjunctive approach cannot explain how I could have emotional responses to fictional entities--entities that have (according to Brogaard), no relevance to my actual well-being (68).

Both the problem of fiction and the connection problem are disposed of swiftly by removing the requirement that an emotion connect to an object in the external world. In short:

> love is an experience of your body and mind responding to your beloved's lovable qualities. I call this view the "perceived response theory." Your emotions are appearances of your body responding to the emotionally salient qualities of the object of your affection. (69)

Although it is not quite clear, an "appearance of the body" seems to refer to feelings--for example, excitement--for which there need not be any corresponding physiological state, such as altered heart rate or blood pressure. Because there is no necessary correspondence between such an "appearance" and your physiology, you can be completely mistaken about the cause of your feelings (emotions) and, therefore, mistaken about whether your beloved is the cause of your feelings of loving them.

It follows from this that love can be both rational and irrational. Love is rational to the extent that one's emotions "fit" the emotion-sustaining qualities of the beloved, and irrational to the extent that they do not (75). The general idea here is that we find ourselves attracted to people with specific attributes, and that attraction gives rise to experiences of emotional states that we call love. However, our love (our response to those attributes) may not be caused by those actual attributes. Love is rational when it is so caused and irrational when it is not. According to Brogaard, romantic love is ultimately the product of our early life experiences of attachment (or lack thereof).

Brogaard maintains that romantic love entails a kind of irrational emotional roller-coaster ride because a lover's brain states are similar to those of a crack cocaine addict or someone with an injured prefrontal cortex. Readers who naively imagine that romantic love is all kisses and sweetness and light may find Zoe's relationship with Brandon something of a shocker and more akin to emotional abuse. Brogaard clearly recognizes that Zoe's relationship with Brandon is a dysfunctional attachment, and describes a relationship punctuated by short-lived thrills followed by long dark days of loneliness and regret. The misery this creates for Zoe is the device that Brogaard uses to lead the reader to her conclusion. Brogaard's explanation of Zoe's willingness to keep falling for Brandon is that it has nothing to do with him; it is all about Zoe. Her "love" of Brandon is not caused by him. Her attachments, like all romantic attachments, are a set of responses driven by early childhood experiences of attachment. Subsequently, Brogaard's advice to lovers is simple: learn to control your emotions.

This is undoubtedly good advice, but as an analysis of a type of human relationship, it is unsatisfactory insofar as it sidesteps any questions of moral culpability. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Brogaard's account lacks any reference to the gendered social and political context in which a person's sense of self is shaped and expectations are modeled. As feminists have argued since

John Bowlby made attachment theory popular in the 1970s, attachment is a function of heavily gendered cultural practices of child-rearing, mediated through a range of social meanings, norms, and sanctions through which women, men, and their children learn--or fail to learn--how to relate to one another (Birns 1999).

For a feminist reader, Zoe's experiences serve to prove, rather than deny, to Zoe that her value lies in her sexual availability and that she is, ultimately, disposable. The "remedy" for this situation cannot simply lie in Zoe's emotional control, but rather, in addressing the social construction of female subjectivity and its origins in the conflation of femininity with a specifically sexualized version of the female body. Genevieve Lloyd's excellent book, *The Man of Reason*, is a go-to text in this regard (Lloyd 1984).

Although Brogaard, wisely, connects Zoe's experiences to her early life experiences, her case involves such extremes of emotions and behavior that it is difficult to believe that this is representative of the majority of cases of romantic love. The extreme nature of the relationship, although it may serve to highlight certain possibilities inherent in intimate, sexual relationships, lacks the subtlety required to convey the diversity of experiences of romantic love, especially those of people other than the mainstream young, heterosexual, and liberal.

The extreme nature of the book's premise also characterizes its general discursive style, for example, in the choice of language and examples, and in its imagery; some of the claims are just bizarre. For example, Brogaard claims that love is "something for which we will give up eternal life" (42); that "85% of people who die from snakebite . . . die from the fear that they might die from the snakebite" (30); and this mind-bender: "Fifty per cent of normal people's choices are bad choices. But normal people learn from their mistakes and make better choices in the future" (36).

It is difficult to discern the intended audience for the book. Brogaard seems to have a foot in at least two distinct camps. On the one hand, the book is presented as a piece of academic research; on the other, it appeals to an implied reader with distinctly nonrefined tastes. It refers to works of such luminaries as Aristotle, Nietzsche, Freud, Frankfurt, and Nussbaum, yet in a superficially analytical way, and with a writing style littered with coarse colloquialisms ("arsehole" and the implicitly gendered insult "douche bag" seem to be her favorites), presumably to appeal to an iconoclastic reader for whom profanities, edgy passions, and sexual promiscuity are the norm, in contrast to the sensibilities of the "bourgeois." Brogaard claims, for example, that:

> in a long term monogamous bourgeois relationship, love doesn't continue to grow. It continues to ripen until it falls off the tree and rots on the ground. When love ripens, it doesn't feel the same; most of the time it doesn't feel like anything at all. (182)

And

> Refusing to embrace the mendacity of a bourgeois lifestyle, some simply drop the standard of monogamy altogether. (182)

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But this anti-establishment attitude is undone by Brogaard's own numerous juvenile and bourgeois examples, such as feeling jealous when you see "your new crush kiss your best friend" (49), being concerned about looking overweight, and becoming jealous when you "imagine your hubby having mind-blowing sex with some skinny blond Botox chick with bleached teeth" (68) or "having sex with their assistant on the office desk" (11). Indeed, Brogaard's resistance to the claims of morality, her preoccupation with personal melodrama and the sexually salacious, and the primacy she places on individualism are the very calling cards of the bourgeoisie.
Brogaard would do well to take time to consider more closely some of the accounts that she dismisses a little too swiftly. For example, she claims that J. David Velleman's Kantian approach to love expects us to love violent rapist murderers just as we do babes in cradles (90). However, Velleman is clear that Kantian respect is a *negative* condition, that is, something against which we should never act. The reason for this is that persons are fundamentally value-endowing, and to ignore that would be to undermine the condition of one's own valuing: respect is demanded by the fact that we cannot seriously value anything unless we first seriously value ourselves as valuers. Once we recognize ourselves as value-endowing, we are also compelled to respect other instances of value-endowing, however feeble the instance of that capacity (Velleman 2006, 101). Recognizing a person as value-endowing immediately constrains what we can legitimately do to him (even if he is a violent rapist), but this is not yet love.

Velleman connects Kantian respect to love through the mediating concept of "appreciation." Appreciation is a kind of valuing that involves close attention to a particular person such that we find our valuing reciprocated and, consequently, our emotional defenses fall away and we find ourselves in love with them. In this moment we come to regard the person as irreplaceable in the sense that we are not prepared to substitute another person for them in this relationship. As Velleman puts it, love "singles" you out, but this singularity is not unique to you, "it is a value that entitles you to be appreciated singularly, in yourself" (Velleman 2006, 105).

This provides a keen insight into Zoe's situation. The problem is not that her brain is on crack; it is that she is alienated.[1] Zoe's relationship with Brandon serves repeatedly to convey to her that her value lies in being accepted by a male, and that she will always fail to secure such acceptability. As long as Zoe believes this piece of fiction, she cannot form a conception of herself as fundamentally value-endowing, nor develop moral autonomy. The measure of her own worthiness will remain external to her and contingent upon her instrumental value. To that extent she will also lack the kind of self-responsibility required for personal autonomy (Benson 2000). Another way to put this might be to say, with Stephen Darwall, that Zoe lacks "second-personal competence" (Darwall 2009). Second-personal competence entails the ability to measure one's own worthiness of respect against standards to which one holds others worthy of respect. Zoe clearly lacks the kind of standards for respect that would keep her from entanglements with people like Brandon.

But Brogaard has no advice for Zoe in her alienation. Brogaard's analysis presumes a simplistic conception of liberal individualism, where one's experiences are the outcomes of choices, albeit choices that need to be well-informed. Feminist theory, however, has shown that one's sense of

1. Female alienation has been a central concern of feminist theorists at least since Simone de Beauvoir (Beauvoir 1953). See, for example, Bartky 1990 and Gunnarsson 2011; 2014.

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self (and self-respect) is an achievement earned or lost across many relational fronts: family, work, friends and lovers, neighbors, one's various associations and cultural institutions. From this perspective, considerations of choice come at the end, not the beginning, of analysis: one always chooses from within a socially and interpersonally mediated perspective, and any serious analysis can get going only at this level.

Brogaard's treatment of Frankfurt is equally impatient. She counters Frankfurt's argument that ambivalence is an obstacle to the wholeheartedness required for genuine love by claiming that you can wholeheartedly embrace your ambivalence. Rather than this kind of psychological bootstrapping, Brogaard could benefit from considering Jan Bransen's essay "Selfless Self-Love" (Bransen 2006). There, Bransen carefully draws out what is unrecognized in Frankfurt's account: that love is both a function of the loving subject's psychology and a response to objective features of the beloved. This is consistent with Brogaard's own view that "love is an experience of your body and mind responding to your beloved's lovable qualities" (69).

For Bransen, the moral point of view assumes that the world has normatively significant features and that a moral agent cares about being attuned to her circumstances in such a way that she wants to reduce any discrepancies between the state she is in and the state that she should be in. Such efforts establish a relation of attunement with the world. In the context of personal relationships, love comes within the moral point of view when the lover is open to the normatively significant features of the beloved.

In distinguishing the normatively significant features of the beloved from mere self-interest, Bransen argues that the intrinsic value of the beloved and the loving projection of the subject are sides of the same coin because each is a necessary part of a relation of real attunement between self and world (Bransen 2006, 14). There is symmetry between the necessities of love (my volitional state) and the value of the beloved because the beloved's value plays a role in determining the strength and direction of the reasons of love. Love for the beloved tells me only to pursue their flourishing, while the beloved's concrete features tell me what in particular I need to do to make them flourish. In such an attunement, it is reasonable to say, a value-endowing person with second-personal competence is struck by the irreducible lovableness of the beloved; this valuing is reciprocated, emotional defenses fall away, and the lovers find themselves singled out for the kind of mutual appreciation in which they are valued for their own irreducible sakes.

Brogaard's book may be of interest as an introductory text, but it does not stand up to any kind of feminist analysis. The discussion of attachment and psychoanalysis in the latter part of the book is good, and that should have been a natural point at which to acknowledge the gendered social context in which attachment takes place. Brogaard's lack of acknowledgment of the gendered dimension, not only of interpersonal relationships, but of the broader cultural context in which relationships occur, makes the book of limited interest to feminist readers.

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