



# Rethinking Kolodny's Relationship Theory of Love

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## Abstract

What reasons do we have and why do we have these reasons when we love? Niko Kolodny in his 2003 essay argues that one's reason for loving a person is contingent on one's relationship with the beloved. Although he demonstrated a prima facie reason to think that love is a valuation of a relationship from the perspective of the subject and non-instrumental valuation of one's beloved, Kolodny is inconsistent between saying that relationships provide reasons for love, and that valuing a relationship constitutes love—a problem that could have been avoided if he concentrated more on arguing what reasons for love are, rather than attempting to understand what love consists in. Kolodny's thesis clearly has genuine “bootstrapping” problems as a theory of what constitutes love. I propose a more nuanced approach to Kolodny's account with the claim that love is an emotional attitude. Because a comprehensive account of relationship theory of love is best understood not as a claim about the subject's beliefs, but as a claim about the function of love.

## Subject Areas

Philosophy

## Keywords

Romantic and Familial Love, Emotional Attitude, Attentional, Kolodny, Relationship, Mutual Appreciation

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## 1. Introduction

Discussion on the “reasons” for love has been a recurrent theme in the contemporary philosophical discourse of love for people. For example, see Bennett Helm (2009) [1] and Niko Kolodny (2003) [2]. These reasons have often been construed as features that render such personal love appropriate or fitting in

some cases. This is different from what Harry Frankfurt has in mind in *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) [3]. There, Frankfurt's concern is not the considerations that render love appropriate, but rather the reasons for action that an agent has once she loves someone. These are reasons "of" love and not reasons "for" love. Niko Kolodny (2003) [2] recently developed a relationship theory of love, which centers on the claim that love is justified and sustained by the personal relationship between the subject and his/her beloved. Kolodny sees love as a way of valuing the relationship one has with the beloved. As such, he offered a persuasive account according to which relationships are such reasons for love. For example, on Kolodny's perspective, a person's spousal relationship is what renders her love for her spouse appropriate. Unlike Kolodny, I argue that the relationship claim is best understood, not as a claim about the subject's beliefs, but as a claim about the function of love. In other words, love is an emotional attitude, the function of which is to foster an intense personal relationship between the subject and the beloved.

As I shall explain, Kolodny's relationship theory suffers some implausible consequences. My ambition in this work is to propose an alternative version of the relationship theory—one that not only escapes these difficulties but also provides a more nuanced approach towards a comprehensive account of love. Key to my argument is the idea that love is best understood—as I shall call—an emotional attitude: once we adopt this view, I shall argue, we can develop a more successful version of the relationship theory. In what follows, I shall be focused only with personal love: for instance, romantic or parental love. I shall base my assumptions on paradigm cases of personal love: that is, cases in which one person loves another for an extended period of time.

## 2. Three Assumptions

I shall begin by identifying three assumptions. None of these assumptions are unusual: they are shared by Kolodny and by many other theorists too. How might we best develop a relationship theory of love? First, I shall assume that love characteristically implies certain kinds of motivation or concern. I shall assume that the lover characteristically:

- 1) Harbors a concern for the welfare of the beloved;
- 2) Wants to spend time with their beloved, to share activities and experiences, exchange affection, and so on;
- 3) Wants their love to be reciprocated [4].

Secondly, I shall assume that love is not just a set of concerns: it also involves an evaluation of the beloved or of one's relationship with them. As Kolodny ([2], p. 145) points out, we can imagine cases in which these two things come apart. Suppose, for example, that Alex harbors loving concerns for his neighbor Susan, but that he experiences these concerns as inexplicable urges or whims: he does not think of Susan as special to him in any way. As well as being puzzling, this does not look like a case of love. Love requires that Alex value Susan, that he re-

gards her as precious or important in some sense. As we shall see, however, there is room for dispute about the nature of this evaluation.

My third assumption is that love answers to reasons or grounds. This is a particularly controversial claim, and some theorists have developed “no reasons” theories of love ([2], pp. 142-146). However, the claim that love never answers to reasons is open to question. Certainly, there seem to be cases in which love is properly described as unjustified or groundless: for example, cases in which someone loves a partner who is abusive or charmless. Of course, this does not by itself establish that love always require justification, as I shall assume here. However, I believe that my account provides some of the materials that might be needed to defend this assumption. In particular, some possible counterexamples to this claim disappear once we recognize the diversity of considerations that can constitute grounds for love.

### 3. Some Issues about Love

Before considering how we might develop a relationship theory, I shall raise some questions about love. They are significant for two reasons. First, they are questions that a theory of love should be able to solve. Indeed, as we shall see, both Kolodny’s account and mine provide answers to these questions; and this, I take it, is a point in our favor. Secondly, as I shall explain, while both accounts answer these questions, they do so in different ways. Hence, focusing on these questions is a helpful way of understanding the differences between the two accounts.

1) A question about lovability. Suppose that Sammy is asked by a friend what she loves about Zach and that, in response, she comes up with the following list:

a) His sense of humor, b) His beards and moustache, c) His lop-sided grin, d) His panache on the tennis court, e) His passion for Roman mosaics, f) His aggressiveness and pride.

According to Sammy, then, this is a list of Zach’s lovable qualities—the qualities for which she loves Zach. Perhaps the most striking feature of Sammy’s list is its diversity: it concerns Zach’s appearance, his character, skills, habits, and interests. Some of the items on the list are relatively predictable; others are highly idiosyncratic. Indeed, looking at Sammy’s list, we might be tempted to conclude that someone can be loved for just about anything.

Nevertheless, as Gabriele Taylor points out there do seem to be some limitations on what we can love someone for in that it is hard to make sense of the idea that Sammy might love Zach for being deadly boring or unremittingly tiresome [5]. This poses a puzzle: why are some qualities intelligibly lovable, but not others? What is it that links the apparently disparate items on Sammy’s list?

We might start with the thought that Zach’s lovable attributes are his positive qualities. But this does not seem to be true of all the items on the list: pride does not seem to be a positive quality. Conversely, Zach may have positive qualities that do not belong on the list: perhaps Zach’s dedication to his career is a posi-

tive, but not a lovable quality. The point can be brought out more clearly if we contrast love with admiration: Sammy might admire Zach for his dedication to his career without loving him for it; she might love him for his aggressiveness without admiring him for it. What is the difference, then, between an admirable quality and a lovable one?

#### 4. A Question about Justification

To answer this question of lovability, a point of clarification is in order. We need to first address a prior question: what does it mean to say that Sammy loves Zach for his lovable qualities? The most obvious response is that Joey's lovable qualities constitute Sammy's reasons or grounds for loving him. But not many theorists accept this view. As we shall see, Kolodny thinks that love is hardly ever justified by the personal qualities of the beloved. Before we can resolve the question of lovability, then, we need to understand what kinds of consideration can constitute grounds for love. As we have just seen, we might start by assuming that Sammy's love for Zach is justified by his lovable qualities. Indeed, it might be suggested that this is true of all cases of love for love is always a response to the lovable qualities of the beloved [6]. However, as Kolodny ([2], p. 139) points out, there is an exception to this claim. Consider Joey's love for his newborn daughter, Camilla. Given Camilla's age, it is implausible that Joey's love depends on her personal qualities—Joey loves Camilla simply because she is his daughter. As such, a father's love requires no justification. Yet this seems odd: it is not as though Joey's love is just a matter of taste or personal predilection. Instead, his love for Camilla seems appropriate and justified. Plausibly, it is justified by the fact that Camilla is Joey's daughter. If this is correct, the conclusion to draw is not so much that love does not always require grounds, but that grounds for love are not confined to the personal qualities of the beloved: the existence of a familial relationship between the subject and the beloved can constitute grounds for love.<sup>1</sup> This raises some further questions, however. If a familial relationship can constitute grounds for love, might this be true of other kinds of relationship too? If so, what kinds of love might justify love, and why? Or is there just one kind of justification for love?

#### 5. Question about Love Concern

It may be suggested that we can answer these questions by considering the concerns that help to constitute love: grounds for love. *Prima facie*, this looks like a promising strategy. Nonetheless, the claim that love is partly constituted by these concerns produces a puzzle of its own. Why should love involve just these concerns? Why does love not motivate Sammy to appreciate Zach from a distance,

<sup>1</sup>As I have set it out, Camilla's age is crucial to the force of this case: given her age, it is difficult to see how Joe's love for Camilla could be justified, if not by the fact that he is her father. Whether other kinds of familial love can be sustained wholly by the existence of the familial relationship is more debatable. On Kolodny's view, as we shall see, the mutual care and concern shared by family members can also justify their love for each other; on my own view, familial love can be grounded in a variety of ways, and these may differ from case to case.

to imitate him, or simply to congratulate him? These are questions that a theory of love should be expected to answer.

## 6. Kolodny's Relationship Theory

The questions that I raised in the previous section are questions about why love takes the form that it does. To answer them, it seems, we need to know more about what love is—its nature or purpose. The relationship theory offers a way to fill this gap, because it begins from a claim about the nature of love:

R Love has to do with sustaining intense personal relationships.

A relationship theory, as I wish to use the term, is one that accords R (or some version of R) a fundamental role in explaining why love takes the form that it does. My task in this section is to explain how Kolodny sets out to address questions and assumptions about love. Kolodny's account centers on the claim that some kinds of personal relationship constitute reasons for love ([2], pp. 147-150). These are:

1) Familial relationships: that is, biological or social relationships, independent of the feelings of the people involved. (I shall refer to these as "F relationships")

2) Relationships that consist in a pattern of mutual appreciation and concern. (I refer to these as "M-relationships")

Although Kolodny ([2], pp. 171-173) denies that a pattern of friendly or intimate interactions can justify love, he does allow that friendly interactions often play a causal role in initiating and sustaining love. As we shall see, this claim plays a significant role in his account.

According to Kolodny ([2], p. 150), to say that Sammy loves Zach implies the following:

K.1 Sammy harbors a concern for Zach's welfare and for the health of the M relationship that she shares with Zach.

K.2 Sammy believes that these concerns, and the actions they produce, are justified by the fact that she shares a valuable F or M-relationship with Zach.

It seems obvious from the above that Kolodny, is committed to two versions of the relationship claim.

R1 Love has two foci: love's concerns are focused both on the beloved and on the subject's M-relationship with the beloved.

R2 There is just one kind of justification for love: the existence of a valuable F-or M-relationship between the subject and the beloved.

But how does this account resolve the puzzles that I set out in the previous section? Consider, first, the puzzle of lovability. Earlier, I mentioned that Kolodny denies that the personal qualities of the beloved constitute grounds for love. We can now see why: for as R2 makes clear, Kolodny holds that love is justified only by the value of the relationship that the subject shares with the beloved. How, then, should we understand the claim that Sammy loves Zach for his lovable personal qualities? Kolodny suggests ([2], pp. 171-172) that, in mak-

ing this claim, we are describing the qualities that Sammy appreciates in Zach. These qualities, according to Kolodny, are Joey's attractive qualities—the qualities that entice Sammy to spend time with him. Because the time she spends with Joey helps to foster their M-relationship, Sammy's love gives her a reason to value these attractive qualities. But although these qualities help to explain Sammy's continuing love for Zach, they do not help to justify it.

Kolodny's account can easily accommodate the case of familial love. According to Kolodny, Joey's love for his newborn daughter will be justified, straightforwardly, by the valuable F-relationship that he shares with her. The existence of this F-relationship justifies Joey's love; in that it justifies his concerns both for Camilla and for the M-relationship that they will go on to develop.

The account also offers a solution to the puzzle of love's concerns. According to Kolodny, Sammy's loving concerns stem from the value she puts on her M-relationship with Zach. The value of this relationship explains her concern for Zach's welfare. But it also explains why she wants to spend time with Zach: spending time with Zach helps to sustain their M-relationship. Again, it explains why she wants him to reciprocate her feelings: their M-relationship is partly constituted by Zach's loving feelings for her. She cares about these things, then, because she cares about the health of their M-relationship.

Kolodny's account suggests solutions to all these puzzles about love. Nevertheless, there are several objections that can be raised to his account. In the next section, I shall mention three.

## 7. Objections to Kolodny's Account

First, the account seems to over-intellectualize love. Kolodny takes love to involve a set of beliefs of a quite sophisticated kind. He claims that love implies, not only the belief that one shares a valuable relationship with the beloved, but also the belief that this relationship provides a non-instrumental reason to care about and to act in the interests of one's beloved and one's relationship with them ([2], pp. 150-151). On his account, then, love implies both self-awareness and a high degree of conceptual sophistication. The account seems to put love beyond the reach of young children. Moreover, it is far from clear that love, even among adults, is as cognitively sophisticated as Kolodny implies.

Secondly, it is not clear whether Kolodny has provided the right account of what it is to act out of love. According to Kolodny, Sammy can be said to act out of love for Zach provided she meets the following conditions: first, she is motivated to act by a concern either for Zach or for her M-relationship with Zach; and secondly, she believes that her concern is justified by the value of M-relationship that they share. This account, I shall suggest, is too liberal: it includes some actions that are not performed out of love.

Consider the following two scenarios:

1) Sammy and Zach have been going through a bad patch. Sammy is distressed at the thought of losing Zach and is desperate to win his affection back.

In her distress, she buys a gift for him, as a peace offering. Were she to reflect on her feelings, she would regard her distress as appropriate, given the value of her M-relationship with Zach. On this occasion, though, she does not pause to reflect.

2) Sammy and Zach have been going through a bad patch. Sammy is too annoyed with him, or perhaps too exhausted by the situation, to feel much distress at the thought of losing him.<sup>2</sup> Talking to friends, however, she is reminded of the important role their M-relationship plays in both their lives. After some reflection on this, she buys him a gift as a peace-offering. She does so with the conscious goal of putting their M-relationship on a better footing.

On Kolodny's account, then, both actions can be said to be done out of love. Indeed, on the first scenario, it does seem natural to say that Sammy acted out of love. Her urgent desire to keep Zach close and her distress at the thought of losing him is part and parcel of her love for him. On the second scenario, however, this does not seem to be the case. It seems more natural to say that she buys the gift, not out of love, but rather because she values her relationship with Zach.

Now, I am not denying that loving actions can be thoughtful and reflective, or that, in acting lovingly, Sammy might be acting with a profound appreciation of all that she shares with Zach. Indeed, Sammy's love for Zach may itself lead her to reflect on the importance of their relationship. On this occasion, however, Sammy's reflection is not triggered by love, but by the urging of her friends; its effect is not to spark her feelings for Zach, but to elicit a wholly intellectual recognition of the value of their relationship. Intuitively, her action is too considered, too dispassionate, to be explained by saying that she acted out of love. This second objection, then, is closely related to the first: just as Kolodny's account over-intellectualizes the evaluation that sustains love, it fails to make a sufficiently clear distinction between acting out of love and acting from a wholly intellectual appreciation of the value of one's relationship.

My third objection concerns the content of the belief that Kolodny takes to be required for love. According to Kolodny, as we have seen, the subject must believe that he or she shares a valuable relationship with the beloved. This might prompt us to ask whether Kolodny's account leaves sufficient scope for unrequited love. Suppose, for example, that Hannah nurses feelings for her neighbor Gregory. She thinks that he is wonderful, has a profound concern for his welfare, and longs for a relationship with him. Sadly for Hannah, her feelings are not reciprocated. On the face of it, this looks like a paradigm example of unrequited love. But on Kolodny's account, this is not a case of love at all: for Hannah does not believe that she shares an F- or a M-relationship with Gregory. The most we can say is that Hannah harbors loving concerns for him.

On Kolodny's account, unrequited love can occur in only a few cases: where

<sup>2</sup>It might be objected that my description implies that Addie no longer loves Joe. But this seems too strong: love can be numbed by exhaustion, or masked by anger, without disappearing. Nothing in my description of the situation implies that Addie has lost the concerns that help to constitute her love for Joe: we can assume, for example, that if she saw him in serious danger, she would rush to help him; if she saw him packing his bag, she would be distraught.



there is an F-relationship; or where the lover falsely believes that an F- or M-relationship exists. This seems to be an implausible consequence of the account. Still, even if Kolodny is wrong about what is required for love, he might still be right about what constitutes grounds for love: perhaps we should say that Hannah loves Gregory, but that her love is groundless. But even this seems problematic. Admittedly, the fact that Gregory does not return her feelings might be a reason for Hannah to try to cure herself of love. Nevertheless, if Gregory is kind and charming, we might think that Hannah has some grounds to love him—better grounds, at least, than if he is mean and tiresome. If so, it looks as if Kolodny has gone too far in insisting that love can never be justified by the personal qualities of the beloved.

I have identified three objections to Kolodny's relationship theory:

- 1) It over-intellectualizes love;
- 2) It does not make a sufficiently clear distinction between acting out of love for someone and acting from a considered desire to maintain one's M-relationship with them;
- 3) It does not allow enough room for unrequited love;

These look like serious objections. We might conclude that the relationship claim is implausible, and that we should look elsewhere for a solution to our three puzzles. Instead, however, I shall try to develop an alternative version of the relationship theory—a version that escapes these problems. The key difference between Kolodny's account and mine is that I am going to discard the assumption that love is sustained by a belief. Instead, I shall suggest that love is best viewed as an "emotional attitude". An emotional attitude, as I understand it, is a complex psychological state that does not depend on a belief. My task, then, is to explain the claim that love is an emotional attitude. In doing this, I am going to take a certain view of emotional phenomena.

## 8. Love as an Emotional Attitude

Love, I would suggest, is best understood as an emotional attitude. Certainly, Sammy's love for Zach has much in common with her indignant attitude. Love is characteristically an enduring state. It involves both an evaluation and a set of concerns. Moreover, as has often been pointed out, love also seems to imply an active propensity to pay attention to the beloved. Indeed, in loving Zach, Sammy can be expected to pay attention to him in many ways: by dwelling on his lovable qualities; by noticing how he is; by taking an interest in what he thinks and does; by taking account of him in making plans. Hence, her loving concerns for Zach are active concerns, which play a prominent role in her life. This attentional element ties love to (other) emotional attitudes and to emotional phenomena more broadly.

Again, there are reasons to deny that the evaluation that sustains love is a belief. First, people sometimes seem to love against their better judgment: they go on loving someone despite believing that they are abusive and unfaithful, or that



their relationship is damaging or futile. In these cases, there seems to be a gap between what the subject feels and what the subject believes. Furthermore, while biographical research might lead me to believe that someone whom I have never met is a very lovable person, or that I share a significant familial relationship with them, this kind of second-hand knowledge does not seem sufficient for love. Love characteristically requires personal acquaintance and interaction with the beloved. In this respect, too, love is similar to (other) emotional responses such as fear or distress. There are good reasons, then, to classify love as an emotional attitude.

## 9. A New Relationship Theory of Love

If love is an emotional attitude, what difference does it make? Earlier, I suggested that understanding the function of an emotional response could help us to understand why it takes the form that it does. The availability of this kind of explanation is crucial in what follows. It is crucial because it suggests a new way of understanding the relationship claim. We can understand it as a claim about the function or purpose of love:

R3 Love is an emotional attitude, the function of which is to foster an intense personal relationship between the subject and the beloved.

But how does R3 differ from Kolodny's R1 and R2? The first point to note is that R3 makes no distinction between different kinds of relationship. As we have seen, this distinction plays a significant role in Kolodny's theory: in particular, Kolodny denies that friendly interaction can constitute grounds for love; and he insists that it is mutual concern, not friendly interaction, that is the focus of love's concerns. Yet he does not make it altogether clear why this should be. In contrast, I shall understand the term "personal relationship" to refer to a complex reciprocal relationship, which might include not only mutual interest, appreciation and concern, but also friendly and intimate interaction. Some personal relationships are characteristically intense, in the sense that they involve strong mutual concern and interest and regular and intimate interaction. Parent/child relationships, romantic partnerships and close friendships are examples of intense personal relationships. If R3 is correct, the function of love is to foster an intense personal relationship of this kind.

Secondly, R3 does not presuppose that a personal relationship already exists between the subject and the beloved: fostering a relationship might be a matter of establishing a new relationship, or restoring one that has died. Indeed, the claim that a loving attitude has the function to foster an intense personal relationship leaves it open that, in some cases, love fails to fulfill this function. Thirdly, R3 is not a claim about what the subject believes. For, as we have seen, an emotional attitude need not depend on the subject's beliefs.

In loving Zach, Sammy evaluates him as a lovable person. R3 implies that this will be appropriate, provided that Zach is someone with whom it would be fitting for Sammy to pursue a close personal relationship. This should not be taken

to imply that, in loving Zach, Sammy believes that Zach is such a person. If I were to claim this, my account would be open to the charge of over intellectualization that I leveled at Kolodny. My claim is not about what Sammy must believe, but only about the circumstances under which it is appropriate for Sammy to respond to Zach as lovable, that is, to care about his welfare, to seek his company, and so on.

This version of the relationship theory, then, licenses a relatively liberal interpretation of what might constitute grounds for love. In part, this is because R3 assumes a relatively inclusive conception of a personal relationship. But it is also because it does not presuppose that love must be founded on a relationship that already exists. Rather, it claims that love functions to foster a relationship in the future. Hence, although it allows that there are cases (say, familial love) in which love is grounded on an existing relationship, it can also allow that there are cases (unrequited love) in which there is, as yet, no relationship at all.

## 10. Conclusion

I have argued that the relationship claim is best understood, not as a claim about the subject's beliefs, but as a claim about the function of love. The function of love, I have suggested, is to foster an intense personal relationship between the subject and the beloved. By adopting this version of the relationship claim, we can explain love's concerns, while maintaining a distinction between acting out of love and acting from an intellectual appreciation of the value of one's relationship with them. And we can explain how love is justified, while recognizing the diversity of possible grounds for love. Underpinning this version of the relationship theory is a conception of love as a complex emotional attitude, irreducible to the subject's beliefs and desires.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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