Does Romantic Love Make Sense? Some Puzzles Underlying Romantic Love

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ABSTRACT Romantic love, our most complex emotion, includes various puzzles that impede the achievement of enduring, profound love. These related puzzles involve two opposing poles on a given continuum, yet both seem necessary for enduring, profound love. I discuss here a few of the major opposing poles, which I gather into three main groups: (a) *Temporality*: change—familiarity; consummation—perpetuation; (b) *Freedom*: freedom—bondage; belonging—possessing; (c) *The good-fortune of the partner*: jealousy—compersion. Coping with these conflicts requires several conceptual distinctions; the key ones discussed here are the distinction between romantic intensity and romantic profundity and the distinction between extrinsically and intrinsically valuable activities. While admitting the presence of the opposing poles, I argue that in profound love, these poles can coexist. Such coexistence has significant consequences for the nature of romantic relationships, for instance, admitting the presence of romantic ambivalence and indifference and acknowledging the value of brief, casual sexual encounters.

INTRODUCTION

I have admired Ronald De Sousa's academic work since I began writing on emotions, about thirty years ago. I first read his seminal book, *The Rationality of Emotions* (1987), which had, and continues to have, a tremendous impact on my thinking. I continued reading his work on other issues and was invariably impressed by his broad and clear intellectual writings. His writings are profound, interesting and often amusing, making you think about it again and again. We met soon afterwards and have become friends. While I admire De Sousa's philosophical insights on emotions and romantic love, I nevertheless have some disagreements regarding certain specific issues. In this sense, my attitude toward De Sousa's view can be compared to the attitude of a lover toward his beloved: global adoration combined with specific criticism (Neff and Karney, 2005). My adoration of De Sousa's work is expressed throughout my writings on emotions. Indeed, in my major book on emotions, *The Subtlety of Emotions* (2000), I mention his work more than twenty times. This article has also been influenced by De Sousa's profound insights.

A main concern of romantic love is that the interaction between two partners is extremely complex and generates various puzzles, as De Sousa (2015) rightly shows.

A major task of this article is to clarify these puzzles while describing their impact on the nature of romantic relationships.

I begin the article by describing two conceptual distinctions, which are most useful for explaining the coexistence of some opposing poles of profound love. Then I will examine several major puzzles of romantic love, some of which are discussed by De Sousa in his marvelous book, *Love: A very short introduction* (2015) and in other places. I divide these related puzzles into three major areas and each involves one or two continua with opposing poles: (a) *Temporality*: change—familiarity; consummation—perpetuation; (b) *Freedom*: freedom—bondage; belonging—possessing; (c) *The good-fortune of the partner*: jealousy—compersion. After presenting these puzzles, I will examine the nature of the romantic environment in light of these puzzles and discuss manners of coping with them. I believe that in profound love the opposing poles can coexist, while conceding the presence of ambivalence and (moderate) indifference and sometimes accepting the value of brief, casual sexual encounters.

I. TWO CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS

Before discussing the various puzzles associated with romantic love, I will briefly describe two conceptual distinctions that are crucial for coping with these puzzles: the distinction between romantic intensity and romantic profundity, and the distinction between extrinsically and intrinsically valuable activities.

Romantic intensity and romantic profundity

A vital distinction in explaining the enduring aspect of romantic love is that between romantic intensity and romantic profundity. Romantic intensity is a snapshot of a momentary peak of passionate, often sexual desire. Romantic profundity goes beyond mere romantic intensity and responds to the lover's broader and more enduring attitudes. External, novel changes are highly significant in generating romantic intensity; in romantic depth, familiarity, stability, and development are tremendously important. While romantic novelty is useful in *preventing* boredom, romantic familiarity is valuable in *promoting* flourishing. The profundity of a romantic experience differs from the intensity with which it is felt; profundity involves certain types of activities that take place over time. In moving from momentary romantic intensity to romantic profundity, it is not only the time spent together that matters, but also the time spent on shared activities during which the partners flourish together (Ben-Ze'ev 2019).

Following the intensity-profundity distinction, we can differentiate between fleeting pleasure and lasting satisfaction. Superficial pleasure is an immediately rewarding, relatively short-lived experience requiring very few complex human capacities. Superficial experiences affect only the surface and are often limited in their scope and impact—though their impact can become rather negative if we engage in them excessively. Profound satisfaction involves optimal functioning, using and developing one's main capacities and attitudes. Part of profound satisfaction is the ability to overcome difficulties and make progress. Gorging ourselves on consumer goods can give us short-term pleasure, but it is unlikely to make us substantially happier people having meaningful life.

Short-term sexual intensity is more likely to be part of brief, sexual interactions. In order to make it perpetuating, a greater depth, involving further shared activities over time, should be added. The brief intense consummating interactions should be part of wider experiences, which will not eliminate romantic intensity, though often decreases it. This combination is present in enduring romantic relationships.

Extrinsically and intrinsically valuable activities

Aristotle—and many others—distinguished between extrinsically and intrinsically valuable activities (*Metaphysics* 1048b18ff., 1050a23ff.; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1174a14ff). An extrinsic (or instrumental) activity is a means to an external goal; its value lies in efficiently achieving that goal. We do not value these activities in themselves—in fact, we may even resent performing them. Nevertheless, we engage in such activities when their external goals are beneficial. With an intrinsically valuable activity, our interest is focused on the activity itself, not its results. Although such an activity has results, it is not performed in order to achieve them; rather, its value is in the activity itself. Reading (or writing) a book is an example of an intrinsically valuable activity. We read books because we value doing so and not because of a certain external goal; accordingly, we do not try to finish reading as quickly as possible. Most human activities have both intrinsic and instrumental value.

The combination of *intrinsically* and *profundity* enables an experience to endure. Thus, if someone considers painting as meaningful for her flourishing, she cannot 'be done with' painting. She can merely stop painting from time to time, or she can finish painting a particular picture. Similarly, if we consider intellectual thinking as an essential intrinsic activity for flourishing, we never 'finish' such activities; we can

only stop them (Ben-Ze'ev 2019).

Another related criterion for an intrinsically valuable activity, according to Aristotle, is that it is *complete,* as there is no external goal that it must achieve in order to be fulfilled. In this sense, it is an ongoing activity that does not have an inherent specific target: it is a never-ending process. External circumstances can get in the way of the performance of such activities—hence, their vulnerable nature; however, usually such circumstances cannot stop the activities or their completion (Nussbaum 1986, 326–27).

A profound intrinsic activity is complete in another aspect: while engaging in such activity, our attention is completely absorbed by it. Accordingly, we can, for example, continue the activity for many hours without feeling hungry. In such circumstances, people are sometimes unaware of themselves as separate from their activities (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 53). This is because such activities have great significance for the individual's self-identity.

One implication of the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction is the distinction between external change and intrinsic development. Change is frequently prescribed as a remedy for boredom. Should we then change our romantic partners in order to fan the romantic flames?

Change is commonly taken to mean becoming different, typically without permanently losing one's characteristics or essence. *Development* is a specific type of change that involves a temporal process of improving by expanding or refining. The external change underlying intense love is a one-time, simple external event. The growth underlying profound love is continuous; hence, it is associated with moderate intensity, with occasional abruption of an intense one. The process of romantic development leads people to attempt to improve themselves by, for example, increasing their connectedness. We can speak here about an 'upward spiral.' In romantic love, these circumstances generate the phenomenon of bringing out the best in each other, which is so crucial for enduring profound love (Armenta et al. 2017).

External changes and intrinsic development operate on different time scales—that of the first is quite short, and that of the second can take years. A significant development on the intrinsic scale could reduce the need for external changes. Whereas the impact of external change depends largely on good timing, intrinsic development is constituted by time. In the case of external change, the individual remains essentially the same, and change is needed to alleviate boredom; in the case of intrinsic, meaningful

development, one is continually developing. This means that relying too much on external causes for our romantic satisfaction can upset the balance between our profound and superficial values in a way that we really do not want. Development improves us in a direction that we consider valuable, and, objectively, it is indeed better for us.

External change has become the go-to stick for stoking the romantic fire. Think, for instance, of changing a partner, or at least taking an occasional walk on the wild side. Making changes within the couple's relationship, like exploring new places or new activities together, produces less intensity—and at first seems like a kind of pauper's joy. However, when we distinguish between romantic intensity and profundity, these joint interactions go from being a pauper's joy to a millionaire's dream—a powerful engine for the development and enhancement of love. Romantic profundity develops through a gradual ongoing process involving reciprocal intrinsic activities whose value increases with familiarity and use. External changes can increase the intensity of romantic flames, but the heart of the enduring romantic connection lies in its intrinsic development (Ben-Ze'ev 2019).

II. TEMPORALITY

The group of puzzles concerning romantic temporality includes two major related puzzles: change—familiarity, and consummation—perpetuation. The temporal aspect is crucial in understanding whether romantic love can endure for many years.

Change and Familiarity

People typically experience emotions when they perceive positive or negative significant changes in their personal situation—or in that of those related to them. This seems to work against the possibility of enduring romantic love. From an evolutionary point of view, it is advantageous to focus our attention on change rather than on static stimuli. Change indicates that our situation is unstable, and awareness of this may mean the difference between life and death. When we become accustomed to the change, mental activity decreases, as there is no need to waste our time and energy on something to which we have already adapted.

A change cannot persist for an extended period; after a while, we consider the change as normal, and it no longer stimulates us. Like burglar alarms going off when an intruder appears, emotions signal that something needs attention. When no attention

is required, the signaling system can be switched off. We respond to the unusual by attending to it. Accordingly, sexual response to a familiar partner is less intense than to a novel partner. Indeed, the frequency of sexual activity with one's partner declines steadily as the relationship lengthens, reaching roughly half the frequency after one year of marriage compared to the first month of marriage, and declining more gradually thereafter. Decline has also been found in cohabiting, heterosexual couples and in gay and lesbian couples (Buss 1994; Metts et al. 1998). While change tends to generate intense, short-term emotion, familiarity tends to produce a more moderate attitude, which can be long-lasting indeed (Ben-Ze'ev 2000; 2017).

Consummation and perpetuation

'Orgasms don't end my desire to my lover; on the contrary,
it enhances it, and I want him more.' A married woman

De Sousa argues that although lovers have many desires common to other relationships, such as intimacy, friendship, and companionship, romantic (or erotic, in his terms), love has two additional unique, powerful desires: *consummation* and *perpetuation*. These unique desires are conflicting since consummation is an ending, while perpetuation involves indefinite continuation. He further claims that what constitutes consummation is different in sex and love. In sex, consummation is orgasm, and 'in love, it is often assumed to be marriage, regarded as a form of *possession.* (And to consummate a marriage is to seal possession by sexual intercourse)' (De Sousa 2015, 13; 1991).

De Sousa's worries concerning the consummation-perpetuation puzzle are genuine. Thus, the French famously refer to orgasm as 'la petite morte,' or 'the little death.' Once orgasm is reached, it is, in a sense, the end of the experience preceding it, and hence, it is a little death. Along these lines, it has been claimed that 'All animals are sad after sex.' These ideas reflect the momentary nature of orgasm. However, this is true concerning one type of romantic desire and activities, and not of all of them. The central issue here is not whether romantic, and in particular sexual, desire decreases with time; everyday experience and empirical studies provide ample evidence for this. The central issue is rather whether there are cases in which this apparent paradox does not appear and we can speak about perpetuating romantic attitude and desire.

Empirical studies suggest that enduring loving relationships do not have to lack sexual or romantic intensity. Indeed, one study suggests that many long-term couples remain deeply in love. Daniel O'Leary and colleagues (2012) asked 274 married

individuals: 'How in love are you with your partner?' Among those in marriages of thirty years or more, 40 percent of wives and 35 percent of husbands reported very intense love for their partner. Moreover, Bianca Acevedo and colleagues (2012) showed ten women and seven men who had been married for an average of twenty-one years and reported being intensely in love with their spouses the facial images of their partners while scanning their brains with fMRI. The scans revealed a significant activation in key reward centers of the brain—much like the pattern found in people experiencing infatuation, but vastly different from those in companionate relationships. The above studies suggest that the difference between romantic consummation and romantic perpetuation is more complex than we might think.

III. FREEDOM

The puzzles in this group mainly concern the value of free behavior and the need to restrict this freedom for enhancing commitment to the romantic partner. The major puzzles in this group are freedom—bondage and flexibility—rigidity.

Freedom and bondage

Romantic love is often regarded as a prime example of freedom, as it is assumed that your heart freely chooses the one you love. However, another aspect of love is a certain commitment to your partner, which limits your absolute freedom.

De Sousa (2015) presents an important implication of this conflict: the celebration of freedom gained by surrender. He raises the question of how being enslaved can make you free, and rightly suggests that if 'you are free, then no one else makes your decisions for you. Your will is free providing that what determines it comes from inside you, not from some outside force or will. You are free when you do what you want. The catch is that you cannot just decide what to want.' De Sousa further argues that the consummation of love is often assumed to be marriage, which is regarded as a form of possession, and yet 'possession seems incompatible with the idea that the object of one's love is a subject, freely giving their own love' (2015: 12-13).

De Sousa is right: in dealing with romantic freedom we should take account of a few plausible assumptions: (a) freedom should come from 'inside', (b) freedom should be ascribed to both partners; and (c) romantic love involves a kind of surrender (enslaving, possession), which appears to be the opposite of freedom. I believe that unpacking these assumptions should be done by making some important distinctions.

Freedom should indeed come from 'inside'. As De Sousa indicates, 'your preferences originate in your genes and your upbringing.You had no control over the first, and little say about the second' (2015, 12). I agree. No matter the origin of your values and desires, they express who you are. Being free is not being able to act on a whim, rather acting in light of your values. Nevertheless, the greatest challenge of freedom is to establish a hierarchy of values in light of which we shall exercise our freedom.

In this sense, I disagree with the verse from the unforgettable song by Kris Kristofferson (sang by Janis Joplin), 'Me and Bobby Magee:' 'Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose'. When there is nothing left to lose, your actions are not determined by your own values, but rather by external forces that chaotically push you in various directions. Our autonomy is best expressed when there is no conflict between what we desire to do and what our values prescribe. In fact, it comes into play both when we behave according to our profound values, as well as when we follow transient desires that represent less entrenched values.

I also agree that freedom should be ascribed to both partners. This means that we should willingly pay close attention to the partner's needs and wants, the goal being to bring the best from each other. It often involves a listening and accepting of the partner's attitudes. When the mutual trust between the partners is profound, each lover may occasionally surrender to the other's best judgement. However, we should be careful not to describe these specific and restricted acts of trust as complete surrender, enslaving, or possession. While the opposition to complete surrender or enslavement is obviously right, the issue of possession is more complex.

Romantic belonging

I believe that the term 'belonging' is more suitable in the romantic realm than the term 'possession' (used by De Sousa). Belonging is indeed a major feature of the romantic connection. Despite its political incorrectness, lovers still commonly inform one another, 'You belong to me.' Of course, each of us is autonomous, and no one can actually belong to another person. But belonging in a psychological sense is very real. The term 'belonging' has to do with 'possession' and 'being a natural part.' Belonging in its literal sense of *possession* is inappropriate in any relationship, including a romantic one—possessing your partner implies ownership and control. However, in the sense of being *accepted as a natural part,* it makes sense. Belongingness here expresses

the creation of something from nothing, as it is the result of this unique romantic bond. This belongingness is even felt strongly at the cutting of the connection, sometimes to the extent of an actual feeling of an amputated arm (Ben-Ze'ev 2019).

Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995) argue that the need to belong stems from the fundamental human need to form and maintain a minimum number of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships. Satisfying this need requires (a) frequent, positive interactions with the same individuals and (b) engaging in these interactions within a framework of long-term stable care and concern.

The imperative for stable, caring interactions with a limited number of people can even override the excitement of changing romantic partners. For Baumeister and Leary, people are 'naturally driven toward establishing and sustaining belongingness.' Hence, 'people should generally be at least as reluctant to break social bonds as they are eager to form them in the first place.' They further argue that we are even hesitant to dissolve destructive relationships. The need to belong goes beyond the need for superficial social ties or sexual interactions; it is a drive for meaningful, profound bonding. Our very well-being seems to hinge on a sense of belongingness. Without it, we are less healthy and happy. People who lack belongingness suffer higher levels of mental and physical illness and are more prone to a broad range of behavioral problems, ranging from traffic accidents to criminality to suicide (Baumeister & Leary 1995; Lambert et al. 2013).

It is not wrong for a lover to feel that the beloved belongs to her, so long as the belonging is limited to the psychological sphere and the sense of belongingness is mutual. Social life and romantic love come with a built-in need to belong, leaving room for jealousy to materialize. Doubts can arise, not about the importance of mutual belonging, but about how it should work itself out in reality. There is no romantic life without a sense of meaningful belonging, but such belonging comes with a price: it limits the number of romantic partners we can have—after all, belongingness involves commitments and the allocation of scarce resources. Profound lovers, however, tend to take this limitation in stride.

IV. JEALOUSY AND COMPERSION

‘He that is not jealous, is not in love.’ Saint Augustine

Romantic jealousy involves the fear of losing an exclusive, or at least unique, relationship with another person. ‘Compersion,‘ a recently coined term, describes joy in response to your partner’s happiness with another lover. Both emotions belong to a group of emotions directed toward what one perceives as the good fortune (or wellbeing) of another (Ben-Ze’ev 2010; 2022).

De Sousa severely criticizes jealousy, while praising compersion (2015; 2017). He argues that recent attempts to rehabilitate jealousy are misplaced and we should rather adopt compersion, which is the pleasure taken in the thought of one’s lover enjoying love or sex with another. He further maintains that jealousy typically comes with a feeling of entitlement, which is associated with control one has over the partner’s emotional reactions. De Sousa contends that instead of possession and control, one might find the core of love in the other’s difference, in the wonder of their autonomous subjectivity. Making our partner happy is, after all, what underlies profound love. Seen in this light, the situation that prompted jealousy is a reason for joy.

Though I am sympathetic to some parts of De Sousa’s view on jealousy and compersion, I would like to pour some cold water over the celebration concerning the replacement of jealousy with compersion. I have examined jealousy and compersion elsewhere, in some depth, (Ben-Ze’ev 2022); here I would like to focus on issues that are most relevant to this article, such as freedom, consummation and belonging. In the following section, I argue that jealousy and compersion are not the only factors to consider; two other attitudes that concern the good fortune of the partner can be emotional neutrality and emotional ambivalence.

Freedom and polyamory

Personal freedom seems to be the jewel in the crown of polyamory, as polyamorous people can freely choose adding another partner(s) to enlarge and spice their dull romantic life. This freedom, however, comes with a price tag: limiting our freedom in managing our primary and secondary relationships, which are now part of a greater net that has its own restrictions. Such restrictions mainly concern taking account of the secondary partners, which were not chosen by you. Similarly, when you live in a commune, the commune determines some aspects of your life. The tradeoff here is between greater romantic freedom and lesser freedom in running your life, which

becomes less private. When the romantic connection is of lesser depth, for example, when it is limited to the sexual domain, as is the case of open sexual marriages, the restrictions on one personal life hardly exist.

These restrictions make it harder for the secondary relationship to develop romantic profundity and intimacy. One may say that even with these restrictions, polyamorous people get more freedom than what most monogamous people get. This may be true, but the insistence on such restrictions indicates the ongoing tension, insecurity, and jealousy that are present also in polyamorous relationships.

Love indeed involves freedom, but it is not indiscriminate freedom, which disrupts our normative order of priorities, where those closer to us have greater value. Without such focus and prioritization, romantic sensitivity can become toxic. The ideal of lacking hierarchy is compatible with the emphasis on polyamorous ideology that values romantic freedom. For example, Masha Halevi, a polyamorous therapist, wrote a book on polyamory, with the title 'The Freedom to Choose' (2021). In her view, freedom is vital to polyamorous relationships. However, total freedom associated with lack of any type of hierarchy is obviously erroneous. We are limited creatures, bound by barriers such as the length of our life and our inability to fulfill all our wishes and values. Polyamory may increase romantic freedom, but also increases various boundaries and rules associated with the complex polyamorous way of living.

Taking into account the above discussion on belonging, we may say that a feeling of belonging, which is a most natural and common desire, is not necessarily about possession and controlling; nevertheless, jealousy is natural when the connection is violated. No doubt, jealousy has shortcomings. For example, a lover might know that giving his partner more freedom would enhance the quality of their relationship, but jealousy stops him from doing so. It seems that moderate jealousy combined with compersion, or at least emotional ambivalence, may in many cases be the most realistic ideal. It seems that both jealousy and compersion are here to stay.

Is jealousy a more natural emotion?

Emotional experiences are a package deal that includes both positive and negative emotions. We should not wage war against jealousy—when jealousy is moderate, it can contribute to romantic relations. Similarly, while compersion is not a miracle cure, it is also not a poison. In some (more limited) circumstances, compersion can be a valuable emotion.

I believe that the wish to replace jealousy with compersion is not only unrealistic, but improper as well. In the same way that we cannot have an indiscriminate freedom, we cannot be indiscriminately happy about everything our partner does.

There are various factors determining whether a certain emotion is more or less natural. Two such major factors concern the linguistic (and cultural) and developmental realms. The linguistic factor is clear: many languages do not have a specific term for sympathetic joy, while all languages have terms for jealousy. Sympathetic joy in the romantic realm is also nameless—and the recent need to invent a word for it, namely, 'compersion,' testifies for such a void. Indeed, cultures in various periods and places frequently great deal with jealousy, while compersion is less discussed—though in recent years it has received much media attention, one reason being its unique nature. Similarly, children's behavior and experiences are also relevant in determining the natural aspect of jealousy and compersion. Indeed, there is ample evidence for the presence of jealousy, even in infancy (Hart and Carrington 2002). However, the experience of compersion must be developed, sometimes through hard work.

Empirical research indicates that although sexual or emotional relationships with others are not prohibited within consensual nonmonogamous relationships, individuals may still experience jealousy, restrict their partner's extradyadic behaviors, or otherwise engage in mate guarding, i.e., behaviors that thwart partner defection (Mogilski et al. 2019). Another interesting finding is that monogamous individuals reported greater emotional jealousy and distress toward a partner's imagined extradyadic involvement, whereas consensually nonmonogamous individuals reported thinking about their partner's extra-pair relationships more frequently (Mogilski et al. 2019).

These findings imply that jealousy among monogamous individuals is more intense and distressing, while consensually nonmonogamous individuals are more frequently concerned with circumstances associated with jealousy. The lower intensity and lower impact of jealousy in consensually nonmonogamous individuals may be due to the possibility that such relationships are better suited for people who are naturally less jealous. It may also be due to the influence of nonmonogamous ideology (Ben-Ze'ev 2022).

V. THE NATURE OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Acknowledging the value of the above puzzles has significant consequences for romantic relationships. In this section, I discuss some of these consequences concerning flexibility and diversity, romantic ambivalence, romantic indifference and the value of casual sex.

Flexibility and diversity

'Better bend than break.' Scottish proverb

The discussion so far, and De Sousa's recent writings on love, jealousy and compersion, have shown that flexibility and diversity are at the core of our current romantic behavior.

Flexibility, which is the quality of bending without breaking, is the ability to make changes in a situation that is changing. Stability is highly valuable in romantic relations and in particular in achieving profundity. Interestingly, in our diverse and dynamic environment, it is through flexibility that our enduring romantic relationships remain stable. To understand this point, let us first consider the value of psychological flexibility in healthy life.

Todd Kashdan and Jonathan Rottenberg (2010) discuss the importance of psychological flexibility (and stability) for health. This flexibility spans a wide range of human abilities, such as adapting to situational demands, shifting behavioral priorities when needed, maintaining balance among important life areas, and being open and committed to behaviors that fit with deeply held values. These abilities capture the dynamic, fluctuating, and context-specific behaviors of people navigating the challenges of daily life. Rigidity, which indicates a lack of sensitivity to one's context, often points to psychopathology. Kashdan and Rottenberg claim that healthy people can manage themselves in the uncertain, unpredictable world around them, where novelty and change are the norm rather than the exception. With psychological flexibility, we can find ways to shape our automatic processes in better directions.

Psychological flexibility, which is essential to a flourishing life, is also crucial in the romantic realm. In no small measure, this is so because romantic flourishing presupposes general flourishing. And romantic flexibility echoes psychological flexibility: adapting to situational demands, shifting priorities, and maintaining a delicate balance between life, love, and sexual needs. Regarding romantic stability as well, flexibility, which involves bending some rigid rules, can prevent romantic

relationships from breaking (Ben-Ze'ev 2019).

Our romantic life is made more complicated by the many alternatives available to us. One widespread state in these circumstances can be described as "not together, but not completely broken up"; it reflects the presence of dynamic trajectories involving "a heterogeneous and multidirectional array of transitions" (Binstock and Thornton 2003). Since ex-lovers have a privileged place in our heart, and as it has become simpler to find them, their contribution to the flexible nature of our romantic environment is significant. Extreme romantic flexibility, in which we try every such alternative, is contrary to the values relating to who we are. However, extreme rigidity is likely to break us. Bending, which is a kind of compromise, is the flexibility that enables what is less than ideal to be maintained and enhanced for a long time. People who refuse to compromise their ideals often end up abandoning them. It is indeed better to bend than to break. But too much bending can break us as well (Ben-Ze'ev 2019).

The significant flexibility and diversity in the current romantic circumstances should impact our romantic decision making. In this regard, I would like to examine two central relevant issues: romantic ambivalence and romantic indifference.

Emotional ambivalence

'Ambivalence is a wonderful tune to dance to. It has a rhythm all its own.' Erica Jong

'I'm not indecisive. I get excited too quickly and therefore make mistakes. I had no hesitation in marrying my two husbands from whom I happily divorced.' A divorcee

In ideal love – the fairy tale – we choose our partner with no indecision, doubts, or second thoughts. Therefore, it may be surprising to learn that to develop a flourishing romantic bond, combining decisiveness with some hesitance can be valuable.

Emotional ambivalence underlies indecision. Conflicting values make it difficult to take quick, decisive action. However, this is not necessarily a wholly bad thing. If we hold multiple perspectives, including conflicting values, we are more likely to have a rich personal life with deeper views of reality. It seems that those with a high propensity for ambivalent perception are less prone to prejudice and see more complexity and diversity in the world. Moderate hesitation leads to a more rational decision-making process, while great hesitation is associated with tension, worries, procrastination, and a constant feeling of discomfort. Nevertheless, an inability to decide due to chronic hesitation is rightly perceived as a mental disorder (Schneider

et al. 2021). A related state of distress is that of intolerance of uncertainty which is highly associated with pathological worrying and common mental health problems (Boswell et al. 2013).

Our romantic environment is ambivalent when choosing a partner: we have a choice of many people who may suit us in various degrees, with a vast range of positive and negative traits. Two primary manners of romantic choice are love at first sight and a checklist (a grocery list).

Love at first sight is considered ideal when choosing a partner: from the very first meeting, we feel strong infatuation. The intense physical attraction strikes us like lightning and leads us decisively and without hesitation to that chosen partner. Such love, which is primarily based on superficial qualities, can serve as a basis for enduring profound love, provided that the characteristics (that will be discovered later) are not contrary to those we attribute to the person when we first meet them. In love at first sight, the decisive choice when experiencing love is of great initial value, but since it is based on minimal information, the choice may often be wrong. Moreover, not all people fall in love at first sight.

We often use a checklist in order to choose a partner. This list can be very long (often up to a hundred items), including the desired and unwanted characteristics of our ideal partner, which we use to compare each potential candidate. The list's central role is to filter out unsuitable candidates. This may appear a natural, appropriate method of finding a partner in an environment abundant with romantic possibilities. However, with a list so full, it is impossible to discern a genuine order of priorities.

In 1758, Benjamin Franklin counseled his nephew to use certain tactics to find a wife. One should proceed like a bookkeeper, he advised—list all the pros and cons, weigh up everything for two or three days, and then make a decision. Gerd Gigerenzer (2007) shows that computer-based versions of Franklin's rational bookkeeping manner—a program that weighed eighteen different cues—proved less accurate than following the rule of thumb "get one good reason and ignore the rest of the information." Gigerenzer's claim is even more obvious when we speak about a longer checklist that may have up to a hundred different expectations. This would make such a checklist mechanical and superficial without an ability to present a genuine order of priority. A more profound system focuses on several positive traits ("deal-makers) and negative traits (deal-breakers) to which we give great weight (Ben-Ze'ev 2019).

An optimal choice should combine a strong decision that takes into account

complexity and uncertainty. An optimal selection should focus on a small number of significant positive and negative traits to which we give great weight. Significant positive traits such as kindness, wisdom, and sensitivity are "deal-makers," promoting enduring romantic thriving and stability. Significant negative traits, like stinginess, stupidity, egoism, and laziness, are often "deal-breakers" and represent profound unsuitability for which we may dearly pay.

An optimal choice of romantic partner should combine the above selection methods. We should allocate a considerable weight to deal-maker and deal-breaker properties. Then, we should give importance to our initial attraction and give even less consideration to our checklist's various, arbitrary properties. This kind of choice combines the determination we want to see in love with the uncertainty and hesitation characterizing the complex, ambivalent romantic environment. Determination is expressed in the great emphasis on a few essential qualities that we want to be present or absent in our spouse and the weight of attraction. Uncertainty and hesitation are demonstrated because there are many other qualities whose value depends on personal traits and external circumstances.

Romantic life is certainly not a fairy tale; some even say that there is no happy love. However, without realizing the complex ambivalence of the romantic environment, our romantic choices are likely to be problematic and painful.

In love and indifference

'We also often add to our pain and suffering by being overly sensitive, over-reacting to minor things, and sometimes taking things too personally.' Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama

It is often assumed that sensitivity is a pillar of romantic relationships, and for good reason; however, too much romantic sensitivity can overburden a relationship. A limited degree of indifference can be quite valuable. Romantic sensitivity is valuable only when it is balanced. In the same way that we cannot love everybody, we cannot be sensitive to all our lover's behavior in the same manner. Romantic sensitivity should focus on the more meaningful aspects that contribute to romantic flourishing. When there is no focus and priority order, it endangers the value of sensitivity and it can even become poisonous.

Romantic sensitivity can be expressed toward one's partner and toward other possible romantic partners. Over-sensitivity within a romantic relationship can often generate jealousy, envy, frustration, anger, hostility and mistrust. High sensitivity toward other possible partners can lead the lover to constantly search for "better" romantic options. Such searching is counterproductive since it prevents us from being happy with our own lot and consequently impedes the development of long-term robust love. Coping with these difficulties should require a kind of limited indifference.

The prevailing view criticizes indifference within romantic relationships and considers it as the opposite of love. This view is natural in light of the importance of sensitive behavior within romantic relationships. Indifference usually constitutes a lessened interest in the other. The partner of the indifferent lover feels that they are not paid attention and after several failed attempts, usually becomes less interested themselves.

When bridging the gap between indifference and sensitivity, an optimal attitude is adopting a limited (restricted, moderate) romantic indifference involving coolness, self-control, respect of the partner's values and acceptance of some of their minor negative traits and behavior. In profound love, this limited indifference concerns marginal traits, such as being disorganized, and not essential traits, such as being inconsiderate and unkind.

Romantic relationships require an order of priority. Limited indifference is a rational behavior that maintains an order of priority while assuming that since we cannot change everything, we should be less sensitive to our partner's difficult and challenging behavior. This does not mean that we should be blind to our partner's flaws but that we should be less sensitive to them by attaching less importance to some of their negative traits. Limited indifference can stem from both positive and negative viewpoints — the former attitude where we respect our partner and the latter where we don't care about them.

Research suggests that profound lovers do develop such restricted indifference. Garth Fletcher and colleagues (2015) argue that people in highly committed relationships tend to perceive attractive individuals as less appealing than those who are not committed or are single. To defuse the threat of a romantic alternative, individuals in more committed relationships downplay the attractiveness of other potential partners. The authors conclude that certain cognitive biases operate as

effective strategies that suppress mate-search processes and strengthen established relationship bonds.

Profound romantic love decreases the wish to search for other romantic partners. Closing open romantic doors, which requires some kind of limited indifference, is difficult but necessary in a world of limited resources and conflicting values. Trying to enjoy all possible options runs the risk of losing the relationship you are presently in. Love requires great investment; being sensitive to all romantic options can spread the said required investment too thin.

Love involves sensitivity toward our partner, but too much of it and non-discriminative sensitivity can ruin love in that it may ruin our normative order of priority. Adapting such order requires not merely sensitivity, but also restricted indifference, underlying the virtues of tolerance and forgiveness (Ben-Ze'ev 2019).

VI. THE (LIMITED) VALUE OF CASUAL SEX

'I need more sex, OK? Before I die I wanna taste everyone in the world.' Angelina Jolie

'My marriage is pretty great. But I think about other guys all the time.' A married woman

The discussion so far enables us to compare the value of two major poles of the romantic continuum: casual sex and enduring profound love.

The value of enduring, profound love is obviously positive, while casual sex is often severely criticized. However, recent studies imply that superficial romantic encounters are important as well. One study has argued that variety, spontaneity and a change of perspective are crucial in enriching our lives, essential for living a good life (Oishi and Westgate 2021). A second study suggests that superficial contact with strangers increases our well-being (Van Lange and Columbus 2021). And a third study has found that people view their casual sexual encounters more positively than negatively (Wesche et al. 2021). Do these studies imply the advantage of casual sex over enduring love?

Richness in a good life

Happiness and meaningfulness are frequently discussed when characterizing a good life. Shgehiro Oishi and Erin Westgate (2021) persuasively suggest the addition of another dimension: richness. They claim that whereas a happy life is characterized by

comfort, joy, and stability, and a meaningful life involving purpose, significance, and coherence, a psychologically rich life is portrayed by variety, interesting experiences, and change in perspective. Oishi and Westgate argue that stable relationships, time, money and positive mindsets facilitate a happy life; strong moral principles and religiosity facilitate a meaningful life; and curiosity, spontaneity, and energy facilitate a psychologically rich life.

Oishi and Westgate further claim that since openness to new experiences and curiosity encourage individuals to pursue and appreciate novel, complex, challenging, potentially perspective-changing experiences, and willingness to defy traditional attitudes, they constitute dispositional factors that facilitate the psychologically rich life.

How do these dimensions of the good life relate to the romantic realm? It is apparent that meaningfulness is centrally present in enduring profound love. The major features of meaningfulness, that is, significance, coherence and purpose are indeed more dominant in enduring, profound love. In addition, happiness, characterized by comfort, joy and stability, is more typical in profound love, though short term intense joys can be found more in casual sex.

Developing richness in the romantic realm is more complex. A psychologically rich life involves variety, interesting experiences, a change in perspective, curiosity, an openness to experience, and a willingness to defy systems and so seems closer to casual sex than to enduring profound love. No doubt, enduring love can be psychologically rich, for it includes a wide variety of experiences and a change in perspective— such as taking into account one's partner's perspective. However, the degree of richness in casual sex is greater.

Social contact with strangers

In his book, *The Power of Strangers*, Joe Keohane (2021), argues that coping with unfamiliar outsiders not only civilizes us, but that it might be the key to our survival and thriving. Similarly, Paul Van Lange and Simon Columbus (2021) claim that our well-being is not merely served by the quality of close relationships, but also through social contact with people who we know less well, even strangers. They show that most strangers are benign, and most interactions with them are positive and enhance our well-being. Van Lange and Columbus further claim that situations with strangers often represent a low conflict of interest and that in interactions with strangers, most people

exhibit minimal efforts, and if the need is urgent, more effort is available (Van Lange and Columbus 2021).

If we are to apply these claims to the romantic realm, it seems that casual sexual relationships, rather than enduring profound love, have the above advantages that strangers can provide.

Subjective evaluations of casual sexual encounters

'Give me chastity and continence, but not yet!'

Saint Augustine

Rose Wesche and colleagues (2021) found that people evaluate their casual sexual encounters more positively than negatively. These encounters have often been associated with short-term declines in emotional health, though there is little evidence that they are detrimental in the long-term. They further found that women and individuals with less permissive attitudes toward casual sex experienced worse emotional outcomes as a result. Most people realize that casual sex can be sexually pleasurable but is seldom emotionally intimate. Those familiar with their casual sex partner generally have more positive emotional outcomes. Having a 'Friends-with benefits' relationship can be a good and healthy solution for some. If the encounter involved penetrative contact, it was more likely to be a negative experience (Wesche et al. 2021).

The view presented here concerning the (limited) value of casual sex is enhanced by De Sousa who argues that 'a certain sort of sexual encounter, self-consciously limited to the present moment and without commitment to any subsequent relationship of any particular form, is a civilized successor to the old notion of romantic love' (1991, 478). This value of casual sexual encounters does not eliminate the value of enduring profound love.

To sum up, the fact that we wish to thrive over time does not mean that we cannot enjoy the moment. After all, we live in the present moment and it is typically worthwhile to make each moment as pleasurable and meaningful as possible. But to give priority to the moment over lasting flourishing is to neglect other key dimensions in the good life. We do not merely live in the present but are shaped by the past and dream about the future. These different temporal dimensions imbue our lives with meaning and ongoing happiness.

The advantages of casual relationships do not diminish the great value of enduring profound love, which is clearly expressed, for example, in happy marriages. Indeed, a robust literature links being happily married to better physical and mental health outcomes (e.g., Huntington, et al. 2021).

The above studies imply that causal sexual relationships may, in some circumstances, create antigens that are a kind of booster to the good life. The Knot 2020 study of dating apps further supports this idea by claiming that although Tinder has a reputation for generating mainly casual sex relationships, in 2020 it was responsible for pairing nearly a quarter of newlyweds who met online, making it the most successful dating app for lasting relationships.

In our society, where diversity and flexibility are becoming more dominant in the romantic realm, a major task is how to integrate the partner's resources, typically expressed in enduring, profound relationships, with romantic outsourcing, expressed, for example, in polyamory, open marriages and casual experiences, in a way that they will complement each other.

There is no one rigid school solution for this vital issue—the nature and depth of the given enduring relationship is most important in this regard. The romantic show can go on, as long as we remember that there is an after party and the morning after, in which we do not merely want to thrive romantically, but also to live and breathe in a healthy manner.*

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