



The Relationship Theory & Finally Valuable Relationships:

A Discussion on Love and its Reasons

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Abstract: *Niko Kolodny offers a theory of love called The Relationship Theory. This theory says that familial relationships are always finally valuable and thus provide reasons for love. I argue that there are some familial relationships – solely-primary familial relationships – which are not finally valuable. While these relationships do not provide reasons for love, they do provide reasons for allowing relational exploration.*

When we hear of a spouse who loves her abusive partner, we judge her love to be inappropriate; we judge the presence of love to be unfitting for the relationship. The Relationship Theory (RT) proposed by Niko Kolodny gives an account of what makes love appropriate and what makes it inappropriate while being consistent with the constraints on what a plausible account of love looks like. The RT proposes that our finally¹ valuable relationships provide us with reasons for love. If the finally valuable relationship truly exists, then the presence of love is deemed appropriate; if this relationship doesn't exist, the presence of love is deemed inappropriate.² We might then ask, what is a finally valuable relationship (FVR)?

Kolodny focuses on three paradigm cases: friendship, romantic relationships, and familial relationships. He calls the first two cases attitude-dependent relationships. In contrast, familial relationships are attitude-*independent*: a family member is in a relationship that gives her reasons for love apart from any of her attitudes. According to Kolodny, my attitude towards my brother is irrelevant to the fact that he is my brother; this relationship depends on “a biological tie, or a fact about our upbringing.”³ While Kolodny is correct in separating attitude-dependent relationships from attitude-independent relationships, he is incorrect when he claims that attitude-independent familial relationships are FVRs. Rather, I argue that attitude-independent familial relationships⁴ provides reasons for *allowing for further exploration of the relationship*

¹ Kolodny, “Love as Valuing a Relationship” 150. While Kolodny distinguishes between final value and intrinsic value on p. 150, it is sufficient to understand final value as noninstrumental value for this paper.

² *Ibid.*, 150-1, 163-4.

³ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴ I later call these relationships as solely-primary familial relationships.

(hereafter, *allowing relational exploration*). From this I conclude that only attitude-dependent relationships are FVRs and so provide reasons for love.

It is important that one not confuse the RT's claim that there are normative reasons for love with the claim that reason commands love. Intuitively, whom we love is not fully within our control. But just because love may be nonvoluntary, "it does not follow that there cannot be normative reasons for love."⁵ Consider the following observations which suggest that there are reasons for love. First, the lover often has a belief about whether or not her emotions and motivations of love make sense; whether they seem appropriate. Second, it is common for people to judge the love (or lack thereof) in a given relationship as inappropriate. For example, we deem abusive relationships to be inappropriate because, other things being equal, abusive treatment is typically incompatible with love. Third, we observe that while emotional responses are nonvoluntary, there can be reasons for these responses, and, as Kolodny suggests, normative reasons for love can exist in the same way.⁶ Suppose Art is studying in the library when Joy pulls out a turquoise laptop from her backpack. Art begins to cry uncontrollably – he is turquoise-phobic. While he may will that he not cry in front of Joy, he cannot help but cry. His tears are a nonvoluntary response to the situation and his phobia is irrational. Similarly, we might say it is inappropriate for a spouse to love her abusive partner, but we think neither phobics nor lovers should be blamed for having phobias and loves.⁷ These observations suggest that while love may be nonvoluntary, there can still be normative reasons for love.

Section I introduces two criteria, which I believe any adequate conception of love must satisfy. Section II briefly presents Kolodny's RT as a concept of love that meets these criteria. In

⁵ Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship" 138. The possibility that love is voluntary is inconsequential to the RT.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁷ Note that Kolodny's use of 'inappropriate' does not reflect its colloquial meaning. The charge of inappropriateness deems a response as intuitively unfitting; it does not amount to blame.

section III, I introduce the notion of allowing relational exploration and use this notion to argue against Kolodny as I claim that solely-primary familial relationships are not FVRs. From this, I argue that all FVRs are attitude-dependent. I respond to objections in section IV and conclude in section V.

I. Two Criteria for any Adequate Conception of Love

While there are many pretheoretical intuitions on how love ought to be, I will only address two which traditionally have been problematic for love theorists. The first intuition is that love is nonfungible; the object of love is not “replaceable by another relevantly similar object without any loss of value.”⁸ Imagine that Art is in an established romantic relationship with Joy. We ask him why he loves Joy and he responds, “Because she’s kind and intelligent.” Then suppose Art meets Felicity who is kinder and more intelligent. If specific qualities justify our reasons to love, fungibility would suggest that if someone other than our beloved better personifies the qualities that give us reasons for love, then we should trade-up whenever possible. This hardly seems like genuine love. If Art and Joy are truly in love, one would think that Art should continue to love Joy. As a result, any adequate conception of love cannot appeal to the *nonrelational*⁹ qualities of the beloved as justification for love.

The second intuition is that love should reflect *constancy*¹⁰ or that it should not be fickle. Suppose a malicious animal attacks Joy and her arm must be amputated. If, as a result, Art stopped loving Joy, we would judge the absence of love to be *inappropriate* – a term I discuss in the following section. Constancy is the idea that love is not flickering; rather, love exhibits longevity in its resilience to adversity. Any adequate conception of love must be able to accommodate the intuitions of nonfungibility and constancy.

⁸ Helm, “Love.” Kolodny uses *nonsubstitutability* instead of nonfungible (“Love as Valuing a Relationship” 140).

⁹ *Nonrelational* is the absence of specifying or indicating some person-to-person relationship (e.g. Mother and son).

¹⁰ Kolodny, “Love as Valuing a Relationship” 140.

II. The Relationship Theory (RT)

The short explanation of the RT is that relationships give us reasons for love. For example, a mother loves her son because he is her son. Regardless of how well he does in school or how he performs on the soccer team, she still ought to love him in ordinary circumstances because of their established mother-son relationship. Other things being equal, if she does not love her son, many people would judge her lack of love to be inappropriate. To understand these judgments and what they mean, we must dig deeper into the RT.

The RT is twofold. First, it provides criteria for what it is to love someone: a lover must believe his relationship is finally valuable, and that it provides him with reasons to care¹¹ and have concern for both his relationship and his beloved.¹² Second, the RT also gives us a way to recognize appropriate and inappropriate accounts of love. Love is appropriate when the lover's belief in the FVR is justified and inappropriate when the belief is not justified – the lover must have the proper belief and what he believes must be true.

By making the FVR provide reasons for love, Kolodny accommodates the nonfungibility and constancy intuitions.¹³ With respect to the former, a qualitatively superior Felicity who lacks a FVR with Art does not provide Art with reasons for love. According to the RT, Art does not have an appropriate reason to love Felicity instead of Joy because he does not have any preexisting relationship with Felicity. With respect to constancy, we find that the history of a relationship remains even as other aspects of the relationship change. Insofar as love is

¹¹ For person X to care for person or relationship Y is for X to act and have the standing intention to act in Y's interest in ways that are fitting to the relationship (Kolodny "Love as Valuing a Relationship" 151-2).

¹² Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship" 150-1. I've omitted Kolodny's sixth criterion which roughly says that the lover's reasons and beliefs are universalizable in the Kantian sense. These criteria can be found on pages 150-1 in "Love as Valuing a Relationship."

¹³ *Ibid.*, 140-1, 7.

responsive to its reasons, Art's reasons to love Joy remain even when she has lost an arm because they have an established relationship.

Responding to a foreseen objection, the RT does not lead to the conclusion that Art has reasons to love Joy regardless of her qualitative changes.¹⁴ We would not judge it inappropriate for Art to fall out of love with Joy if she changes in a way that causes continuous harm to the relationship. For example, she might suddenly become a neo-Nazi even though she knows Art is strongly opposed to Nazism. As long as she remains a neo-Nazi, this change continues to harm the relationship and Art may begin to question her attitude of concern, which in turn may bring the final value of the relationship into question. To be clear, an attitude of concern is a psychological state where for person X to have concern for person Y¹⁵ is for X to have favorable emotions in response to X's belief that Y "has fared or will fare well," and unfavorable emotional responses to X's belief that Y "has fared or will fare poorly."¹⁶ In more relatable terms, if Art loves Joy, we generally expect that Joy's happiness, for example, will cause Art happiness and that Joy's sadness will cause Art sadness. If Art perceives that Joy suddenly lacks this attitude of concern and deduces that their relationship is no longer finally valuable, then he no longer believes he has reasons to love her. If the relationship is in fact no longer finally valuable, then Art's beliefs are correct and Art's falling out of love is appropriate. The question again becomes, what are FVRs?

FVRs satisfy the three following conditions and provide us reasons for love. First, relationships persist over time. "Second, relationships obtain between *particular* people over

¹⁴ For brevity sake, I only address one of the ways Kolodny offers for appropriately falling out of love. The others can be found on pages 164-7 in "Love as Valuing a Relationship."

¹⁵ This is modified definition of Kolodny's *concern*. Notably, Y can also represent X's relationship with another person. "Love as Valuing a Relationship" 151-2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

time” and are unique to this pair.¹⁷ Third, relationships are historical: whether there is a relationship between certain people at a given moment depends on perceived facts about their past.¹⁸ Kolodny adds that not all relationships that satisfy these three conditions are FVRs. Instead of offering a sufficient set of conditions for FVRs, Kolodny simply focuses on friendship, romantic relationships, and familial relationships as paradigmatic cases.

Within this narrowed focus, Kolodny identifies familial relationships as being attitude-independent. He explains this in terms of a *primary* and *secondary* understanding of ‘relationship.’ At least in one sense of the word, a sister remains in a sister-brother familial relationship because of their biological tie or some fact about their upbringing, even if she resents her brother. Kolodny calls this the primary sense of ‘relationship.’ From this, he concludes, “Any plausible account of familial love must view its grounds as being independent of one’s caring.”¹⁹ The secondary sense of ‘relationship’ refers to an attitude of concern that the lover holds for the beloved. Some relationships, such as friendship and romantic relationships, exist only in this secondary sense. Kolodny explains that these relationships are attitude-dependent; they are “just an ongoing pattern of concern.”²⁰ For the sake of simplicity, I will hereafter refer to the primary sense of ‘relationship’ as *primary relationships* and the secondary sense of ‘relationship’ as *secondary relationships*. Because there are primary familial relationships that are not also secondary relationships, Kolodny deduces that not all FVRs require an attitude of concern. I will discuss other possible motivations for this claim in the following section. For now, this implies that familial relationships which exist solely in the primary sense (hereafter, *solely-primary*) of ‘relationship’ are FVRs. While I agree that familial

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Kolodny, “Love as Valuing a Relationship” 149.

²⁰ *Ibid.* A *pattern of concern* consists of repeated instances of *attitude of concern*.

relationships, in the primary sense of the word, are attitude-independent, I disagree that these relationships are necessarily FVRs. And if they are not FVRs, then they do not provide reasons for love.

III. When are Familial Relationships Finally Valuable?

I argue that solely-primary familial relationships are not FVRs and that familial relationships must exhibit an attitude of concern in order to provide reasons for love; in other words, solely-primary familial relationships do not provide reasons for love. If solely-primary familial relationships are not FVRs, then the relational features that are attitude-independent (i.e. biological tie or upbringing) have no bearing on final value. This means that familial FVRs are secondary relationships and thus attitude-dependent. From this I conclude that an appropriate attitude of concern is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for FVRs, at least in the scope of our paradigmatic cases. Nonetheless, Kolodny's theory correctly brings our attention to a fundamental difference regarding attitude-(in)dependence in relationships. But what Kolodny sees in solely-primary familial relationships as reasons for love is actually, as I will argue, reasons for allowing relational exploration. This means that one has reasons to be in a psychological state where one willingly entertains the possibility of a FVR with the other person in the relationship and, subsequently, where one does not act in a way that actively prevents the development of this relationship. If all of this is correct, then the only FVRs among friendships, romantic relationships, and familial relationships are attitude-dependent.

Some people intuit that it is appropriate to have automatic love – a sudden love that seems to evade reasons for love shared in friendship and romantic relationships. These intuitions suggest that solely-primary familial relationships provide us reasons for love while being attitude-independent. For example, the observation that parents can have an appropriate

automatic love for their newborns suggests that solely-primary familial relationships are FVRs. In the following paragraphs, I argue that when we look at such scenarios, the relationship either consist of a historical attitude of concern or provide reasons not for love, but for allowing relational exploration. First, I will show how typical parents already have a historical attitude of concern for their newborn prior to its birth. Then I will show that there are situations where it is not intuitive that the parent ought to love their newborn. To further my argument of allowing relational exploration, I will present a scenario where it is not intuitively inappropriate for one to not automatically love their siblings. Ultimately, this allows me to reach the conclusion that all paradigmatic FVRs are attitude-dependent.

To address a parent's automatic love for their newborn, imagine a pregnant mother. If this mother loves her child when it is born, I assume that this mother would not have intentionally done anything that will negatively affect the child during the pregnancy like consuming large amounts of alcohol. Likewise, we expect her life partner, if she has one, to share this attitude of concern for the unborn baby. In a parallel scenario, suppose that during the delivery process, the doctor reports that the unborn baby must be aborted in order to save the mother's life. I imagine that the loss of the baby will cause the parents to experience negative emotions, suggesting that they had a preexisting attitude of concern for the unborn baby. Notably, this attitude of concern is not sufficient to be a FVR.

In order to deny that Parents have an *automatic* love for their newborn, I must further explain how their relationship is historical. We observe that parents typically engage with their baby while it is still enwombed. This relationship is with a particular physical being and I take this to be a sufficient account of relational history. Notably, those who do not physically engage with the unborn baby (e.g. geographically distant relatives) do not have this history and therefore

cannot possess an appropriate love for the baby. The ground of their love is their relationship with the baby as a predicate and not the actual being. For example, the distant relatives' reasons for love are derived from the idea 'my aunt's baby' – not from a relationship with the child as a particular being. By revealing how historical attitudes of concern and relational history acquire during pregnancy, we find that parents' so called automatic love for their child fails to be an example of solely-primary familial FVRs.

The next case reveals how it may not be inappropriate for a parent to not love their newborn, which shows that not all solely-primary familial relationships are FVRs. Suppose Lucifer, an immoral doctor, rapes Rose and forces her against her will to carry the pregnancy. Nine months later, Lucifer delivers the baby and leaves the child with Rose. Although Rose may love the child, I do not intuit that she normatively must love the child. Unless she holds an attitude of concern for her baby, their relationship is solely-primary. Because Kolodny does not say that familial relationships provide *decisive* reasons for love, he is not committed to saying that Rose ought to love her newborn; rather, he says she has some reasons to love her newborn simply because they are family.

However, by presenting a case where it is not inappropriate for Art to not automatically love his siblings, I argue that what Kolodny sees as reasons for love in solely-primary familial relationships are merely reasons for allowing relational exploration. Suppose Art has a coworker for whom he doesn't hold any special attitude at his workplace. While they've been introduced, they never interact at a personal level. One day their grandparents reveal that they are long lost brothers. According to Kolodny, the brothers have reasons to love one another and, other things being equal, they ought to automatically love each other regardless of their attitudes. This is not obviously wrong because the fact that they are siblings – that they are in a solely-primary

familial relationship – does provide them with reasons for a certain psychological state. However, it is more intuitive that their newly realized relationship provides them reasons for allowing relational exploration, not love. I would not find it inappropriate if they did not automatically love one another after discovering that they are brothers. Instead, we might expect that they make a greater effort to get to know each other which may lead to love. While solely-primary familial relationships may lead to loving relationships, the absence of love is not inappropriate; they are not FVRs in themselves.

Finally, by denying that solely-primary familial relationships are FVRs, we can reach the conclusion that all FVRs – at least within friendship, romantic relationships, and familial relationships – are attitude-dependent. The argument is:

- 1) As the RT suggests, familial relationships are either solely-primary or both primary and secondary.²¹
- 2) It is intuitive that at least some familial relationships are FVRs.
- 3) Section III leads us to the conclusion that solely-primary familial relationships are not FVRs.
- 4) Therefore, any familial FVR is both primary and secondary.
- 5) The RT admits that friendship and romantic relationships consist of an attitude of concern.²²
- 6) It follows from steps (4) and (5) that all FVRs, at least within friendship, romantic relationships, and familial relationships, necessarily consist of an attitude of concern.
- 7) Relationships that necessarily consist of an attitude of concern are definitionally attitude-dependent relationships.
- 8) Therefore, all FVRs, at least within friendship, romantic relationships, and familial relationships, are attitude-dependent.

IV. Objections

There are endless stories to be told where an automatic love may seem appropriate. I will address two more variations below along with the concern of bootstrapping. After considering these cases, I hope I have provided a sufficient understanding to respond to other untold stories.

²¹ Kolodny, “Love as Valuing a Relationship” 149.

²² *Ibid.*, 161.

My opponents might retell the case of the unknown sibling to erect the intuition that automatic love is appropriate. Suppose one day Pascal arrives at Art's door and reveals that they are long lost biological siblings. Many people intuit that Art and Pascal can experience an *appropriate* automatic love because they are biological siblings. This intuition supports Kolodny's claim that all familial relationships – including solely-primary relationships – are FVRs. My defense is not that these solely-primary familial relationships are not FVRs because they lack an appropriate attitude of concern, but rather because they lack sufficient history. While Kolodny believes that biological ties either constitute as or overcome a lack of relational history,²³ Pascal's biological code is an accident of his being – he happens to have one set of biological characteristics as opposed to another set of biological characteristics. If this is right, then having biological ties seem to act similarly to having perceived attractive qualities: they both provide the potential lover reasons for allowing relational exploration (or allowing the possibility of a relationship), but they do not provide reasons for love in themselves. It follows that it is not inappropriate for Art to not automatically love Pascal.

Next, my opponents might offer a case of unplanned pregnancy where we might think it is inappropriate for the father not to love his daughter; that he ought to have an automatic love for the daughter. Suppose that Art and Rose were college lovers. After college, Rose ends the relationship and they stop seeing each other. One day, Rose arrives at Art's door with a baby in her hands and reminds Art of that one time the condom broke – Art is the biological father. I intuit that one ought to know that condoms are not 100% effective and can break. While Art may not have willed to have a child, engaging in intercourse was neither forced nor against his will. Not only does Art have reasons for allowing relational exploration because of their familial

²³ Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship" 148.

relationship, but Art also has duties²⁴ to Rose that stems from their previous relationship. These duties might include supporting Violet, their daughter. Other things being equal, it certainly would be inappropriate for Art to slam the door on Rose and ignore their existence altogether. Rather, Art has many reasons to not harm or even to care for Violet and his relationship with Violet. While these reasons may lead to love, they are not immediate reasons for love. We expect a certain attitude from Art, but not automatic love.

Finally, beyond the cases of automatic love, a critic might accuse me of bootstrapping by implicitly nesting attitudes of concern within automatic love – that the latter is essentially the former. If one stipulates that a certain appropriate attitude is nested within love, then it seems obvious that love is necessarily attitude-dependent. However, the accusation of bootstrapping demands that the attitude in question is a sufficient condition of love. When we consider the necessary criteria of a FVR, we find that an attitude of concern is not sufficient to make a FVR. As discussed in section II, a FVR must also necessarily persist over time, be between particular people, and be historical.²⁵ Therefore, nesting appropriate attitudes of concern within automatic love is not bootstrapping.

V. Conclusion

I started this paper by providing two criteria for an adequate conception of love. I then showed that Kolodny's RT meets these criteria by way of FVRs. I depart from Kolodny when he claims that solely-primary familial relationships provide us with reasons for love. As I have argued, solely-primary familial relationships provide us with reasons for allowing relational exploration, which might then lead to love, but are not immediate reasons for love. From this I

²⁴ While I assume these duties exist and that they are intuitive, the discussion of duties and what they specifically entail is beyond the scope of my paper.

²⁵ First, recall this is not a sufficient list for FVRs. Second, note that Kolodny uses a similar defense against bootstrapping ("Love as Valuing a Relationship" 161-2).

argue that all paradigmatic FVRs are attitude-dependent. Interestingly, this means there is a common foundation for every appropriate account of love across friendship, romantic relationships, and familial relationships.

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