Philosophical interest in love dates at least as far back as the Presocratic philosopher Empedocles, though it is only with Plato and Aristotle that the rationality of love begins to be explored. Ever since, philosophers have sought to categorize, evaluate, question, and explain the various forms of love experienced by human beings and other animals. From Lucretius’ skeptical suggestion that romantic love is an unhealthy delusion to Harry Frankfurt’s striking claim that without it we would not have any reason to do anything, the relation between love and reasons has reliably proved to be as deceptively simple as that between chicken and egg.

The ancient Greeks had four words for love: στοργή (affection), φιλία (friendship), ἔρως (passion), and ἀγάπη (true love). Some Christians, most famously C.S. Lewis, take the last of these to triumph over the rest. Others question the sharpness of such divisions, some further maintaining that no kinds of love are better than others, to quote a Lou Reed lyric. The contributors to this special issue of Essays in Philosophy focus primarily on the relation of reasons to romance and affection, though other aspects of love are also reflected upon, and the boundaries between apparent varieties do not go unchallenged.

The volume opens with John Shand's essay “Love As If” which draws a dipolar theory about the concept of love by contrasting two contradictory ways in which love appears to be connected to normativity and reasonableness. On Shand’s view we alternate, subject to circumstance, between adopting a rationalist stance towards love, acting as if it is under our rational control, and a naturalist stance, according to which we treat it as if it may come and go - or indeed be here to stay - like the weather (albeit subject to complex psychological constraints). These opposed modes of presentation can themselves influence (as well as be influenced by) the course of love. Our dipolar treatment of it, enables love to function on our lives without our having to resolve the two irreconcilable opposing views of its nature into one.

The clash between reason and passion also informs Eric Silverman’s essay “Is the Passion of Erotic Love a Virtue that is Independent of Rationality?” Silverman focuses
on the central role played by the passions in Robert Solomon’s rejection of the Aristotelian view that virtues are dispositions of character developed according to rational principles. Offering erotic love as a counter-example, Solomon argues that the virtue of love is not based upon rationality. In response, Silverman defends the Aristotelian vision by arguing that Solomon relies upon an implausible view of the passions and, consequently, employs poor resources when conducting his examination of love.

There follow four critical papers focusing on Harry Frankfurt’s account of love’s connection to normative reasons. First, Jussi Suikkanen considers “The Possibility of Love Independent Reasons,” criticizing Frankfurt’s suggestion that no agent could have practical reasons that would be independent of the objects that she happened to love. Suikkanen maintains that, contra Frankfurt, the standards for assessing the significance of life-changes imply that the reasons an agent has cannot be a direct function of what she already loves. A fortiori, moral obligations cannot be bootstrapped into existence through love.

Next, Alan Soble presents some “Analytic Problems in Frankfurt’s Account of Love,” with a special emphasis on self-love. Soble asks whether the conditions for love posited by Frankfurt as necessary are (a) adequately defined (b) plausible and (c) consistent with each other. He also questions what, if anything, might have to be added to Frankfurt’s conditions to render them sufficient. Soble’s investigations collectively lead to the conclusion that Frankfurt’s central metaethical thesis viz. that caring about $x$ logically precedes valuing it and that we, consequently, cannot have value-based reasons for love, is itself ungrounded.

The theme of self-love continues in Thomas Smith’s “Romantic Love” which compares Frankfurt’s account of love with Nozick’s characterization of eros, arguing that the two accounts complement each other. Accordingly, Smith favors a synthesis according to which (i) each romantic partner has loving concern for a plural object viz. the two of them, and (ii) romantic partners are, in addition, beloved of a plural subject, viz. the two of them. A corollary of Smith’s resulting view is that Frankfurt is wrong to think that contra self-love romantic love is an impure form of love, for romantic love is but a plural form of self-love.

In another comparative paper, Paul Voice argues for “The Authority of Love as Sentimental Contract.” Voice contrasts his constructivist approach to the sources of authority set out by Frankfurt and David Velleman, arguing that it is better equipped to make sense of those cases where when the demands of love appear to conflict with those of morality.

A different criticism of the Frankfurtian suggestion of love as reason-giving is provided by Roger Fjellström in his “Love and Equal Value.” Given that love is generally
understood to have “an inescapable reference to a relation between unique individuals” Fjellström objects that it cannot be the ground of any values that are universal. To the extent that we conceive of ethical values as such (and Fjellström argues that even moral particularists are committed to this), then, they cannot be grounded by love. Natural as it might therefore seem that love gives us reasons for action, its reasons are prima facie non-ethical.

The volume ends with Kyle Hubbard’s essay “The Unity of Eros and Agape,” in which he evaluates Jean-Luc Marion’s suggestion that eros and agape are “two names selected among an infinity of others in order to think and to say the one love.” Hubbard defends Marion’s attempt to unite the two concepts against Jacques Derrida’s claim that we must love without any desire for reciprocity. He maintains, however, that in maintaining that we always love for reasons inherent in the beloved Marion does not sufficiently acknowledge the role of reciprocity in love.

I would like to dedicate this special issue to the loveable Gabriele Taylor, my first philosophy tutor and, by coincidence, also the first philosopher whose work I ever read. The summer before I went up to St. Anne’s College I purchased a copy of Ted Honderich’s Philosophy As It Is from a little bookshop in Nicosia, Cyprus where I had just completed my A levels. As luck would have it, it happened to include my future tutor’s Aristotelian Society paper on love, written long before the sorts of questions she was asking about reasons would become mainstream in so-called analytic philosophy. I read it some days later on the beach in Ayia Napa, and it served as my introduction to the discipline, setting the quality benchmark very high indeed. The work surprised me most not in virtue of its claims but with its logical formalizations, always preceded by the clearest of ordinary language paraphrases. “What on earth has love to do with logic?” my teenage self wondered under the Mediterranean sun. Anybody interested in this question would do well to read Gabriele Taylor’s extraordinary piece. Nearly two decades later, it is a great pleasure to be returning to these puzzles of love through which I was effectively introduced to contemporary philosophy. I am very grateful to all the contributors for making this possible by submitting their superb work, and to Dave Boersema for cheerfully helping out, even when the work fell well beyond the call of editorial duty. Finally, I would also like to thank all those who sent in papers that were not accepted for publication, demonstrating that the philosophy of love has a great future ahead of it.