

Book Review | *Love's Vision*

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***Love's Vision*. Troy Jollimore. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011; 187 pages + references and index; \$35.00 hc.; ISBN 978-0-691-14872-4**

Love's Vision aims to vindicate love, morally and epistemically. Its central claim is that love is a kind of morally and epistemically respectable perception, of seeing the world (xi). Though Jollimore does not offer a definition of “love,” he focuses on romantic and friendship love. But, as I’ll point out, most of the discussion is better suited for romantic love, especially in its early euphoric stages (L1), not the stage when lovers settle in for the humdrum, albeit still loving, daily existence with one another (L2). The book contains interesting insights, but also implausible claims about love.

The book has three main tasks: to (1) show how the vision view is a rational view of love (according to which love responds to reasons or properties in the beloved) but avoids the usual problems that plague the latter; (2) defend the epistemic viability of love; and (3) defend the morality of love. (1) is successful to varying degrees, though at times unclear, (2) is interesting but weak, and (3) is unconvincing.

Jollimore defends the idea of love as illumination: “My view is ... that love itself *is*, in large part a way of seeing—a way of seeing one’s beloved, and also a way of seeing the world” (4). And: “To see with love’s vision is to see the world with the beloved at the center and to see his attributes in a certain generous light; but it is also to see the rest of the world, to some degree, through his eyes, to allow his values, judgments, and emotions to have an effect on *your* perceptions, similar, in important ways, to the effect they have on *his*” (25). (See pages 25-26 for the eight theses that constitute the core of the account.)

On this view, reasons do guide love: love is responsive to the properties of the beloved, but it is not solely a matter of reason. Jollimore tries to steer a middle course between a fully rational way of viewing love (that love can be justified or explained by reasons) and a fully anti-rational way (that there can be no justifying reasons for love [13]).

Rationalism implies problematic theses about love, such as the universality problem, which requires too many people to love the beloved (*Y*) (15), the promiscuity problem, which requires the lover (*X*) to love too many beloveds (16), the trading up problem, which requires *X* to abandon *Y* for *Z* if *Z* has all the desirable properties of *Y* and then some (17), and the inconstancy problem, which requires *X* to stop loving *Y* if *Y* loses *Y*'s properties (17). Given these problems, anti-rationalism is seductive. But it faces its own problems, such as making love arbitrary by not accepting reasons for it. So we need an account of love that is rational in just the right ways.

Jollimore claims that *X* must have some beliefs about *Y* that connect *X*'s love for *Y* to *Y* (e.g., that *Y* is a person, that *Y* is not conspiring against *X*, etc. [19-20]). The grounding properties of love are of two types: enablers and favorers. Enablers, such as *Y*'s being a subject or a person, are basic properties necessary for any human love. Favorers are more particular properties "that make [*Y*] stand out from the crowd *in his [X's] way of seeing*" (125; his emphasis). "The point is that there must be *something* that [the lover] can cite as a relevant consideration" (20). While no list of *Y*'s properties will get us to the point of making the love obligatory, there *are* reasons for love (21).

How does the vision view avoid problems that plague a rationalist view of love? Though the vision view centers on the idea that *X*'s loving *Y* is a way of appreciating *Y*'s properties as an object and identifying with *Y* as a subject, it does not require *X* to act as a comprehensive comparative valuer (see below) in comparing *Y*'s desirable properties with those of others in an as impartial a manner as possible (123). *X* might judge others to be beautiful and worthy of love but this does not require *X* to love them (124). This gets around the promiscuity problem.

Jollimore seems to address the issue of how properties justify love in two ways, but it is not clear which he accepts. He states that favorers do justify the love, but they do not go all the way in saying why *X* must love *Y*: "Justifying love is a matter of showing that one's reasons are strong enough... She need not show that her way of recognizing those values ... is mandatory for everyone" (125-6). Jollimore is trying to move between the two horns of a dilemma: either the reasons fully justify the love, in which case they make it mandatory for others to love *Y*, or they do not make it mandatory for others to love *Y*, in which case they do not justify the love. So Jollimore claims that the properties justify the love of *Y* for *X*.

But Jollimore seems to also claim that the properties of *Y* never allow *X* to have a full answer for why *X* loves *Y* and not *Z*; there will always be “that’s just the way it is” as part of the answer (143). He thinks this is enough: “The object of his love possesses valuable, attractive properties of the sort that render love an appropriate emotional response, and since it is the nature of love to focus on particular individuals and not to try to spread itself around on as many appropriate objects as possible, this is all that is required for justification here” (143).

Another worry about the vision view is constancy: Can the vision view justify *X*’s love for *Y* even after *Y* loses the properties that formed the basis of the love? (135) Indeed, might the vision even view *require X* to stop loving *Y* after *Y* loses these properties?

Jollimore argues that there is no reason why *X* cannot love *Y* on the basis of properties that *Y* used to have (139-40). This is an interesting suggestion, though I’m not sure it works. On the one hand, one can claim that even though the reasons why *X* loved *Y* no longer exist, somehow, *X* continues to love *Y*. Such cases are certainly possible, maybe even common, but it is hard to see how, *conceptually*, they still adhere to the idea that love responds to the lost reasons. Indeed, the way Jollimore fleshes out this suggestion indicates confusion between conceptual and causal issues (e.g., “But if the initial attraction is to *develop* into full-fledged love, it must *generate* the sort of commitment ...” [141; my emphases]). On the other hand, one can claim that *X* loves *Y* not because of *Y*’s beauty (which no longer exists), but because of *Y*’s having-been-beautiful. This would make the love respond to existing properties, but the price is that it becomes unsatisfactory (morally, psychologically, etc.). Imagine being told by your lover that he or she loves you because of what you *were*.

In general, the discussion of rationalism is plagued by two pervasive ambiguities in Jollimore’s use of “reasons” and “rationalism.” First, though he claims that he uses “rationalism” to refer to justificatory reasons for love (13), he often reverts to reasons as explanatory. Second, there is ambiguity between weak and strong forms of justificatory rationalism: one makes it irrational for *X* to love *Y* given *Y*’s properties, another obligatory for *X* to do so, and yet another making it obligatory for *others* to love *Y*.

Jollimore develops an account of the psychology of love (in chapter 2, especially) according to which love often silences competing considerations. He uses the famous Bernard Williams case of the drowning wife as illustration. He agrees with Williams that many people would have a problem if the husband (whom Jollimore names “Sam”), in saving his wife (“Andrea”), has “one thought too many”—in Williams’s words, “that it was his wife and that in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one’s wife.” So what should Sam be thinking?

Jollimore relies on McDowell's conception of a virtuous agent who, instead of resisting the temptation to do wrong, feels no temptation at all (an implausible conception, by the way, as it makes virtuous agents border on the godly). Jollimore claims that even though Sam notices that Daniel (the drowning stranger) is in danger, this fact won't count for him as a reason to help him (herein lies, according to Jollimore, one form of love's blindness), because love "shapes one's [Sam's] deliberations" (35). Jollimore distinguishes between *X* valuing *A* and *X* judging *A* to be valuable (36), the idea being that while Sam recognizes the value of Daniel's life, he does not value it, but values Andrea's. Sam's love silences for him the fact that Daniel is in danger.

The discussion is somewhat confusing because although officially Jollimore is describing the *psychology* of love (which, if accurate, illustrates how far apart love and morality are), his use of McDowell's virtuous agent sounds as if he is offering a normative conception. Is the claim that the lover is a virtuous agent? Or is it simply that for the lover certain things are salient but not others? If the latter, why resort to McDowell's virtuous agent? (Adding to the confusion is Jollimore's claim, on pages 37-38, that McDowell's view is only an ideal.)

Furthermore, parts of the discussion are implausible, such as Jollimore's claims about fidelity: he argues that an *X* who is not even tempted to cheat is better than one who is but resists, because the first *X* sees no value in the pleasure of cheating, which reflects *X*'s commitment to *Y*. (But can't one who resists cheating also see no value in it?) The felt temptation is problematic because "it shows that the lover is not fully occupying the perspective of love, that there are deep and serious gaps separating her from her beloved" (41). Jollimore adds that, if *X* "is truly in love, [*X*'s] mind will be too full of thoughts centering on or relating to [*X*'s] beloved to admit such thoughts as these" (41). But these claims ignore the crucial differences between sexual desire and love, unless they are solely about L1, not L2, in which case they would not characterize a general view about love. Jollimore's discussion would benefit from some basic clarifications and distinctions: whether it is about the psychology of love, whether it is about love or sexual desire, and whether it is about L1 or L2.

Jollimore claims that a second sort of blindness is found in love's tendency to contain elements of imagination, idealization, and "even falsification and delusion" (47). A lover must be somewhat blind to the beloved's faults (especially since they might stand in the way of love) (48), a list of which Jollimore offers (49-51). These faults epistemically threaten the vision view in two ways. They threaten the idea that love involves paying *Y* a special degree of attention that allows *X* to see *Y* as *Y* truly is (51), and the idea that *X* responds to real value in *Y* (52). But Jollimore thinks that these epistemic dangers are exaggerated and do not reflect the true nature of love as we experience it and at its best.

Love offers its own epistemic approach. Jollimore interestingly argues that instead of seeing love as biased towards friends and beloveds, we can see it as an ideal that should apply to everyone: we should approach everyone with the sympathy and attention they require, though, given practical limitations, we cannot (58). Indeed, “It might well be ... that it is our practices with respect to evaluating and judging strangers that are remiss” (61). Viewing everybody in a more favorable light should be the rule, were it not for its practical impossibility. Thus, “being biased in favor of one’s friends—where this includes making a special effort of imagination to see the world the way they see it, being particularly open to the accounts and interpretations they provide, and being willing to accept their testimony over the testimony of others—can be a perfectly legitimate and justifiable approach to belief formation, even when judged in purely epistemic terms” (65-6). Love generates its own epistemic standards: close attention, empathy, and generosity of vision, which conflict with others: neutrality and detachment (66).

Jollimore’s arguments are interesting but do not clinch the case. There are two issues that Jollimore conflates. The first is what model we should adopt in regards to approaching people. One option is the dispassionate, disinterested model, which views love and friendship with suspicion. Another is the sympathetic, attentive one, which has no such implication for love. The second issue is whether the judgments in love and friendship are to be trusted. A positive answer to this question does not follow simply from adopting the second model (an inference that Jollimore seems to make). First, a sympathetic approach is fully compatible with the claim that the judgments of love are not to be generally trusted. Second, love (especially L1) often goes beyond a sympathetic and attentive approach to being almost obsessive, which is epistemically dangerous. We have all witnessed the spectacle—often silly, often scary—of people treating and viewing their beloveds in ways that any external observer can tell are fully biased. Ironically, many of Jollimore’s examples, such as the narrator from a John Banville novel (149-50), which Jollimore uses approvingly, nicely illustrate these epistemic dangers. (Note here how friendship and romantic love require separate treatment as far as this issue is concerned, something that Jollimore does not do.)

Jollimore also argues that love makes *X* determined to find value in *Y* and to appreciate those that are there (68). This is the lover’s commitment to see the beloved in a positive and generous light (thankfully, the lover is not, according to Jollimore, blind to *all* the faults or sees *only* virtues [69]). We are thus seeing our beloveds accurately; “if anything, we may be seeing them more accurately than anyone else” (71). And: “According to the vision view, what love does is precisely to put a person in the position where he is more able than anyone else to appreciate those valuable qualities: qualities that are genuinely valuable but are muted, subtle, or difficult to discern” (71).

This sounds nice. But Jollimore has a rosy-eyed view of humanity (more on this below) that neglects the fact that being accurate does not only mean seeing things that others do not see, but also providing these things with the *appropriate* value. Maybe others do not see them because, though they exist, there's not much to appreciate. (Is it a rational requirement that every person *must* have not only valuable properties but also ones that can justify love? No to both, it seems to me.)

Jollimore also argues that evaluative reasoning, to be adequate, “need not always display” the features required by the comprehensive comparative survey (CCS) view (76), according to which evaluative reasoning is always comparative: one goes after what is better, and one does the evaluation from a detached point of view. (The CCS is an archetype-like view that Jollimore cobbles from recent philosophical thinking about value.) Jollimore claims that certain values are not best approached using CCS. Comparisons between different modes of life cannot be made from a detached and neutral standpoint but from positions in which certain values “have been accepted and endorsed in preference to others” (82). Indeed, some goods demand to be appreciated in a non-comparative and non-maximizing way (e.g., works of art and architecture). This connects nicely with the idea that love often silences competing considerations for the lover.

This is true of people, because they are like “sublime landscapes or great works of art”: they call for respect, reverence, and awe (88). People also have something extraordinary: a self, an interior life. Thus, each person occupies a perspective on the world—“a world that is unique and metaphysically distinct from all the various worlds that exist for other people” (89). Love is valuable because it acknowledges *Y*'s reality and individuality, and because each person “deserves to be especially valued” (91). In this sense, an unloved person almost “does not exist” (89). Love is then a non-comparative response to the beloved's value: “we refuse to compare our beloveds with others, that we allow our appreciation of our beloveds to silence other values, and that we regard our beloveds with a sympathetic, generous attention, rather than from a detached, coldly impersonal perspective” (93).

Jollimore is right that the CCS model is not apt when it comes to the valuation of many things. But his claims about the value of love are controversial because they rely on a rosy-eyed, potentially false view of human beings. I, for one, doubt that human beings are “sublime landscapes” or “great works of art.” A taxi driver in Beirut who spits phlegm on the street out of his car window, and a Chicago Cubs fan who drunkenly pisses on the sidewalk, are hardly sublime landscapes. (We don't have to claim that most human beings are not worthy of much respect—in virtue of our humanity, not in virtue of our accomplishments—to see that they are not such landscapes or works of art.) Moreover, though it is true that each of us has an interior life, many people's inner lives exhibit no

interesting uniqueness and are riven with anxieties, worries, fears, and dark thoughts and desires. Thus, it is at best controversial to claim that each person deserves to be valued (even though this claim is commonly found in philosophical views) and at worst plain false. If we tether the value of love to such a view, we endanger it. It might be more truthful to claim that love is valuable because human beings are its recipients despite the mangled creatures that they are. On this view of humanity, love is a precious gift indeed.

This brings us to love and morality. Jollimore wants to defend the view that love is a moral emotion. Just as love has its own epistemic standards, it is also a genuine moral phenomenon (146-7). Jollimore acknowledges the obvious fact that love has moral dangers, especially on two fronts: it is biased (towards the loved ones), so it runs afoul of impartial moral views, and it can be wild and hard to control, so it runs afoul of moral views that control our urges, emotions, and inclinations.

Why then defend love morally? One reason is that it carries its own moral obligations: “Love can demand significant, at times tremendous, sacrifices. Most significant, love relationships take us out of ourselves, freeing ourselves from excessive self-concern and narcissism” (149). Indeed, love’s anti-egoism seems to be Jollimore’s main defense of its morality: “Love helps us grasp the full force of the obvious but elusive fact that the world is larger than ourselves ...” (149), though I’m not sure that anyone other than a die hard solipsist finds this fact elusive (not to mention how Jollimore would reconcile such self-absorption with the idea that we are “sublime landscapes”). And: “Like morality, love calls the agent out of herself and demands that she focus her attention on the needs, interests, desires, and well-being of other people, rather than on her self-interest” (150; Jollimore cheats in using “other people” because love usually focuses on one person). The attention involved in love is “profoundly” moral insofar as “it both enables and takes as its goal the full, unrestricted recognition of a human individual” (150). With respect to strangers, we can usually morally attend to them by leaving them alone, but love requires many sacrifices (151). Indeed, we cannot empathize with strangers because they are, well, strangers (151).

In reply to the objection that love can motivate deeply immoral actions, Jollimore uses the same tactic as with epistemic justification, claiming that just as there are multiple reasonable epistemic standpoints, in morality there are multiple reasonable moral standpoints; indeed, in morality’s case, it is rare that there is a single right answer (156). While our desire to have a world with no moral conflict is understandable, given the nature of morality and its many puzzles, we should not expect such simplicity in our moral world (157). Even if an impartial outlook on others is morally permissible, a personal outlook, one that focuses on particular individuals and whose core is love, is also permissible. Even if

love can blind us to the needs of others, “it is precisely this commitment to a particular individual that leads the lover to neglect or harm someone else” (168).

I find these claims unconvincing. First, the idea that when it comes to strangers leaving them be is usually morally sufficient is false. While true in some cases, in many others it falls far short of what decent moral treatment requires. Strangers have moral demands on us that go beyond being left alone. Indeed, leaving them alone is often the wrong thing to do (this is where moral apathy begins). Second, it is simply false that, as Jollimore claims, we cannot empathize with strangers. Clearly we often can: seeing a father mourn his son who died from starvation somewhere thousands of miles away does the trick. Third, empathy, an emotion that Jollimore makes much of (160), is a double-edged sword: it involves the agent in such emotional closeness with the moral patient that it can obfuscate the former’s moral decision. Fourth, even if it were true that there are many moral standpoints (and surely there aren’t *that* many), it is hard to see how this is an adequate reply to the objection that love can morally lead us astray. This is because for the objection to have any force we need to assume (as does Jollimore) that it *does* go awry in some cases, and being told that there are many moral standpoints does nothing to fix this. (Perhaps Jollimore thinks that cases of love going awry comprise one of these many moral standpoints, but this makes such cases not ones of love going awry, which makes the objection no longer an objection.)

Finally, the idea that what makes love a moral emotion is its anti-egoism is shaky. First, love makes us absorbed in another person. This does not, as such, make it moral. It simply shifts the focus of attention from the agent to someone else. While many such cases of attention on a single other are morally in the clear (attending to one’s elderly mother or sick friend, for example), why love should be one of them needs to be argued for, given that *Y* is not in special need of such singular attention. Second, and especially in cases of L1, there is the suspicion that *X*’s reasons for focusing on *Y* are ultimately self-interested or selfish. If so, we cannot glibly claim that in its focus on *Y* love is a moral emotion. Indeed, given how self-absorbed lovers tend to be, especially in L1, it is hard to avoid the observation that love is basically a case of the selfish-leading-the-selfish. From this angle, love is an anti-moral emotion. (Note, also, how much of this discussion is utterly misplaced when applied to friendship love.)

Ultimately, Jollimore’s attempt to rescue love from criticisms of epistemic and moral unreliability is uncertain. The arguments are interesting but weak, partly because they are too ambitious. For instance, claiming that love, as such, is a moral emotion is hard to believe simply because its morality can exhibit itself, and go awry, in many ways (this is surely connected to the idea that there are different ways of being moral). Strangely enough, despite his commitment to the idea that there are many moral standpoints, Jollimore does

not explore the different ways that love and morality are connected, making his discussion of the issue a bit anemic.

Furthermore, the book can stand to be enriched by distinctions to which Jollimore should have paid more attention. These include the distinction between sex and love, the two different forms of romantic love (L1 and L2), the differences between romantic love and friendship love, the distinction between a psychological and a normative account of love, and conceptual vs. causal claims.