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*Draft:*

## *Vulnerability by Intimacy in Love*

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### **Overview**

*Claim to be analysed: Love makes the lover emotionally vulnerable.*

- **Love** between persons: a disinterested caring of the beloved as an irreplaceable individual, different from merely liking someone
- **Emotional vulnerability**: a disposition to experience painful / undesirable emotions – not necessarily the actual experience of painful / undesirable emotions

*Different kinds of emotional vulnerability:*

- Vulnerability by **sympathy** - not a distinctive feature of love
- Vulnerability by **caring** - a distinctive feature of love: love makes the lover vulnerable in that she is exposed to harm that could befall the beloved person and affect the lover indirectly, due to her caring about the well-being of the beloved person
- Vulnerability by **intimacy** - a distinctive feature of love: love makes the lover vulnerable in that she is exposed to harm that could be done to the lover by the beloved person as beloved person

*Aspects of vulnerability by intimacy:*

- intimacy in the sense of **intimate information**
- intimacy in the sense of **deep / profound emotions**

### *I. Introduction*

In contemporary philosophical discussions on love between persons, it is commonly accepted that love as well as relationships grounded on love are in some sense positive, beneficial or enriching for the lover. The philosopher Harry Frankfurt, for example, treats love as a source of values and as an important factor for personal flourishing in the sense that love is the basis for the lover's identity

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and her volitional unity, and even a source of practical rationality.<sup>2</sup> David Velleman treats love as an emotion that is a response to the beloved's value as a person and thus has great moral import.<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Blum speaks of friendship as a source of moral excellence, and Bennett Helm suggests that "our loving relationships with others may itself enhance our autonomy."<sup>4</sup>

In philosophy, more emphasis is generally put on these positive sides of love than on its potential negative sides. In turn, these latter seem very much the preferred aspect of love, especially romantic love, if it is an object of the arts. The same may hold for psychology, psychiatrists and for divorce attorneys. Indeed, it is the presence of love that makes some experiences so very painful. The death of a stranger does not touch us as deeply as the death of a beloved person, and being tricked by a seller on the market is never as devastating as being betrayed by a good friend. It appears that love also makes the lover in some sense vulnerable and thus creates room for negative experiences that are not possible without love. This idea is mentioned by some philosophers. David Velleman, for example, states that

"[Love] arrests our tendencies toward emotional self-protection from another person, tendencies to draw ourselves in and close ourselves off from being affected by him. Love disarms our emotional defenses; it makes us vulnerable to the other."<sup>5</sup>

And Harry Frankfurt writes that "[Loving] is risky. Lovers are vulnerable to profoundly distressing anxieties and sorrows when, in one way or another, things do not go well for their love."<sup>6</sup>

In my paper, I want to discuss some features of the idea that love makes the lover emotionally vulnerable. As a philosopher, I shall be mainly concerned with exploring aspects of the *concept* of vulnerability in love, which I hope will inspire discussions with other disciplines. After some preliminary remarks on the concepts of love and vulnerability, I will suggest a distinction between three

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<sup>2</sup> Harry Frankfurt: *The Reasons of Love*. Princeton University Press, 2004: e.g. pp. 55, 52, 59. Cf. also Harry Frankfurt: On the Necessity of Ideals. In: *Necessity, Volition, and Love*. Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 108 – 116: p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> David Velleman: Love as a Moral Emotion. In: *Ethics* (2/1999), pp. 338 – 374: p. 371.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Blum: Friendship as a Moral Phenomenon. In: *Friendship. A Philosophical Reader*. Cornell University Press, 1993, pp. 192 – 210: p. 193; Bennett Helm: Love, Identification, and the Emotions. In: *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1/2009), pp. 39 – 59.

<sup>5</sup> Velleman, Love as a Moral Emotion, p. 365.

<sup>6</sup> Harry Frankfurt: On Caring. In: *Necessity, Volition, and Love*. Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 155 - 180: p. 173.

forms of vulnerability, namely vulnerability by sympathy, caring and intimacy, and then focus my attention on vulnerability by intimacy in particular.

## *II. The notions of love and vulnerability*

Some preliminary remarks on the concept of love are apposite. I will use it in the broad sense of love between *persons*, covering for example parental love, romantic love and love between friends. Furthermore, I shall use it as distinct from *relationships* that are grounded on love, such as the relationship between two romantic lovers or friendship. I will also take some rather commonly accepted, yet not undisputed features of love for granted, without much arguing for this. To begin with, loving someone is distinct from merely *liking* someone. To give an account of this difference, for example in terms of depth or intimacy, is part of the task of the philosophy of love. Next, without claiming this to be the only core feature of love, I shall assume with Frankfurt and others that loving someone involves a special kind of *concern* or caring about the beloved person in the sense of “more or less stable motivational structures that shapes [the lover’s] preferences and that guide and limit his conduct.”<sup>7</sup> Loving also involves, under certain circumstances, *taking care* of the beloved person. Next, love is rather generally accepted to be *disinterested*, i.e. not analysable in purely egoistic terms. A further characteristic trait of personal love is that the beloved person cannot simply be replaced by similar persons – she becomes in some sense *irreplaceable* for the lover, who in general enjoys and desires to be with her beloved ones.

Next, as to the concept of vulnerability in a very broad understanding, I suggest to use it in the sense of the agent’s disposition to undergo some kind of harm. I am thus focusing on the vulnerability of the lover rather than the vulnerability of love. Note that being vulnerable does not involve the *actual* experience of harm. Yet, we can be more or less vulnerable and take precautions against being actually harmed. As human beings, we are physically vulnerable, we are vulnerable in our rights, and we are *emotionally* vulnerable, which is the kind

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Harry Frankfurt: *Autonomy, Necessity, and Love*. In: *Necessity, Volition, and Love*. Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 129 - 141: p. 129. Cf. also the helpful discussion of Frankfurt’s view in Bennett Helm: *Love*. In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2009 Ed.)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/love/>>.

of vulnerability that is of interest in the context of love. Emotional vulnerability is best understood in the sense of a disposition to experience painful, disturbing or in some sense undesired emotions, feelings or sentiments (for example grief, sorrow, anger, jealousy etc.), and to develop undesired or painful emotional dispositions (such as hard-heartedness, emotional frigidity, or depression). In what follows, I shall briefly mention two different concepts of vulnerability, vulnerability by sympathy and vulnerability by caring, and then analyse a third one in greater detail, vulnerability by intimacy.

### *III. Vulnerability by sympathy and vulnerability by caring*

#### a) Vulnerability by sympathy

In some sense, we are emotionally vulnerable with respect to persons we do not love, maybe not even like. We may feel pity with someone we do not know at all, and horror in view of the accident that happened to someone we dislike. We may strongly fear that some stranger falls off the balcony and be shocked when she actually does. Adam Smith explains this with a mechanism of sympathy, or of the imagination of oneself in the other's situation. In allusion to this, I shall speak of "vulnerability by sympathy", as far as our sympathising brings about in some sense negative or undesirable emotions. The intensity of our sympathetic reaction certainly depends on different factors, for example on our relation to the person involved and on the proximity of the observed events, but it seems a psychological fact that we are disposed to be emotionally touched not only by misfortunes happening to persons we love, but also by misfortunes happening to persons we do not love nor even have any other close or even distant personal relationships with. Thus, vulnerability by sympathy is not a feature that seems an exclusive feature of love and loving relationships.

#### b) Vulnerability by caring

This is different with what is best called vulnerability by caring. I have mentioned that I take love to involve a special kind of concern or caring, which differs from just being sympathetically affected in view of what happens to others, i.e. rejoicing or suffering with them and occasionally acting in their favour. Persons

we love are more important for us than persons we do not love, for example our business partners. Some philosophers try to provide an account of this point by claiming that our beloved ones become, in some sense, part of ourselves, or that we identify with their interests. For sure, our caring for the ones we love is much more stable than our sympathetic affection to strangers, and we care about our beloved ones as irreplaceable individuals. The possible loss of them as beloved ones not only makes our sympathetic reaction often more intense, but also of a different quality, since it is part of our identity that is at stake. As lovers, we care about the ones we love and become vulnerable in the sense that we are exposed to potential emotional harm because, in virtue of our caring, we are jointly exposed to potential harm befalling the beloved.

#### *IV. Vulnerability by intimacy*

More could be said about vulnerability by sympathy and vulnerability by caring, but I shall now turn to the main focus of my paper, which is vulnerability by intimacy. I want to put forward the idea that love makes the lover emotionally vulnerable not only in that she cares about the well-being of the beloved person in a very stable way, but also because she cares about her own well-being and about her relationship with the beloved. This is not to say that we love the other *for our own sake*, or that our love for the other would be *interested* or egoistic, aiming at some personal benefit. Rather, it is to say that when loving someone, our person and our relationship with the beloved are to some extent at stake because of the intimacy of the relationship.

I suggested before that in vulnerability by caring the emotional harm that the lover is potentially exposed to is harm that could befall the beloved person and affect the lover indirectly due to her caring about the well-being of the beloved person. In vulnerability by intimacy, however, it is emotional harm that could be done to the lover by the beloved person *as beloved person*. It is because the beloved person is being loved, because there is emotional responsiveness and emotional attachment from the side of the lover that the beloved is in a position to harm the lover in a way that those who are not loved cannot. It is not emotional

harm that anyone could cause, but emotional harm that only beloved persons can cause, and they can do so only because they are being loved.

Velleman claims that love disarms our emotional self-defence. For the present context, I want to suggest that this means that there is an increased level of intimacy. The lover at least passively admits and at best actively endorses an increased level of intimacy and depth without insisting on the “personal distance” she has with respect to persons she does not love. This is not the same as caring about the well-being of the beloved - rather it is admitting a beloved agent in what one might call one’s intimate space. In an intimate loving relationship, the lover accepts to emotionally open herself to her beloved. Yet, what is it to admit an increased level of intimacy? In the context of vulnerability, I want to highlight two aspects of intimacy that seem of great importance, namely intimacy in the sense of shared intimate information, and in the sense of deep emotions.

#### a) Intimate information

Often, lovers know, or at least have an interest in knowing each other better than persons they do not love. A paradigmatic example for illustrating this point is the loving relationship in companion friendship, i.e. a form of friendship that is based on choice, absence of hierarchy in authority and mutual trust. Laurence Thomas claims the following about the role of intimacy in such friendships:

“The bond of trust between deep friends is cemented by the equal [reciprocal] self-disclosure of intimate information. [...] In a relationship that both parties are interested in maintaining, there is usually reciprocity with respect to self-disclosure.”<sup>8</sup>

Intimate information, then, is “guarded information about our lives, that is, information the dissemination of which matters considerably to us.”<sup>9</sup> Friends typically share intimate information, which extends to information about where the loving friend is vulnerable to others, including the beloved friend herself. Consider for example information about embarrassing episodes of the lover’s life, information about emotionally difficult events that the lover does not want others to know about, especially not her enemies, and information about characteristics that the lover herself considers shameful etc. In sharing this kind of intimate

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<sup>8</sup> Laurence Thomas: *Friendships and Other Loves*. In: *Friendship. A Philosophical Reader*. Ed. N. Badhwar. Cornell University Press: 1993, pp. 48 – 64: pp. 55, 57.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

information, and in mutually confirming the trust they have in each other (to put it in Thomas' terms) the lovers accept to make themselves emotionally vulnerable, and they accept this in view of their relationship. If the beloved friend does not keep the intimate information secret, she betrays the lover's trust, which is one of the bases for the intimacy in their relationship.

b) Profound emotions and the identity of the person

However, intimacy in a loving relationship is not only and, I think, not necessarily constituted by the mere sharing of intimate information on the basis of mutual trust. Intimacy in a loving relationship does especially involve admitting and endorsing *deep* or *profound emotions*. David Pugmire provides an inspiring account of depth or profoundness of emotions in his book *Sound Sentiments* (OUP, 2005)<sup>10</sup>, and I want to draw on some relevant features. To begin with, deep emotions are not necessarily *intensely felt*, yet they necessarily have import to the person who feels them. A frankfurtian version of this point would be to say that the person identifies with deep emotions, takes them to be constitutive of who she is and does not see them as something that determines her against her will. The most intensely felt craving for a cigarette of the smoker who wants to quit, then, is not a deep emotion. Next, as far as there are *judgements* involved in deep emotions, then it matters a lot to the person who experiences the emotion that they are correct. Revisions of her judgments will have a considerable impact on the emotion. Furthermore, deep emotions are not merely episodic emotional occurrences, but they are stably *embedded* in the identity of the person and may include something like a dispositional profile to experience further sorts of emotions. They have a substantial influence on the person and occupy an important place in her history. It might be added that *desires* that are part of a deep emotion do typically not just disappear without notice. Rather, they are reinforced by the agent, and their frustration has a rather deep impact on the agent.

Love is a paradigmatically deep emotion in this sense. The love for a friend, for example, is not necessarily always intensely felt, and still it has great import for the lover. The lover does typically not feel heteronomously determined by her love and the desires that it involves. The love for her friend is not episodic, but

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<sup>10</sup> David Pugmire: *Sound Sentiments. Integrity in the Emotions*. Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 30 – 77.

embedded in her volitional structure. Also, it includes dispositions to feel other sorts of emotions as well as dispositions to act. If the integrity of a beloved one is questioned, for example, the lover tends to defend her. The frustration of desires involved in the emotion of love will have a comparatively deep impact on the lover.

The intimacy that is tied to the deep emotion of love makes the lover vulnerable to the beloved. Changes in deep emotions, which can be caused for example by the frustration of the desires that are part of deep emotions, by changes in the relevant beliefs, or by a far-reaching re-evaluation of the object of one's love, will have a deep impact on the lover and are likely to cause emotional harm. Because a deep emotion like love for a person is, to a certain extent, influenced by the beloved, her actions, her features and her attitudes, the lover is vulnerable with respect to her beloved. Love has a deep impact on the lover, and a change in the emotion is likely to cause substantial change in the lover.

Increased intimacy in both senses of sharing intimate information and of admitting deep emotions goes hand in hand with increased vulnerability. The more intimate a loving relationship, the more emotional harm could be caused. Imagine, for example, the feelings of the lover who discovers that she is loved back for reasons that are unacceptable for her, or who discovers that she is *not loved back* at all. Imagine the lover who discovers that she is loved for *selfish reasons*, or who finds herself a *replaceable object* of love. Imagine the lover who discovers that her beloved did not keep shared intimate information to herself. Or think of the lover who grieves about the death of someone who was close to her and finds her beloved incapable of understanding her feelings and of treating her respectfully. What seems in a way understandable, forgivable, maybe even acceptable in the case of a stranger's inability to understand her grief, gets a different dimension in the case of her beloved. The intimacy of their relationship involves different expectations with respect to the beloved's attitudes to the lover, and the intimacy of their relationship creates new possibilities to be harmed. In the cases listed above, the lover is emotionally harmed by the beloved's attitudes, emotions, or actions, and the emotional harm caused for the lover is only possible because she loves the other person.

### *V. Conclusion*

I have argued that love makes us vulnerable in different ways, and I have suggested two kinds of vulnerability that I take to be distinctive for love. Concerning vulnerability by intimacy, or the lover's exposure to potential emotional harm caused by the beloved *as beloved person*, we might ask furthermore whether we can *avoid* becoming vulnerable in this sense. The answer is negative, I think: Intimacy is a necessary feature of love, and it seems that the only secure means of preventing vulnerability by intimacy is not to love at all. We may certainly try to avoid the experience of actual emotional harm by trying to be careful in picking the ones we love and by taking care of our relationships, yet relationships based on love. And if these relationships are desirable because they are a part of the good life, then it seems that vulnerability is not something that should be avoided, since it goes hand in hand with intimacy and depth. Ultimately, emotional *invulnerability* would make the attachment and depth impossible that are characteristic of loving relationships.

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