

Love, Fairness, and Sharing a Life*
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Abstract: According to a long philosophical tradition and a potent kernel of common sense, loving partnerships are governed by affection and care, and so not properly evaluated by standards of justice or fairness. In this paper I precisify and challenge this idea. I argue that love and fairness are unified in the sense that some partners are only able to perform particular act-types (loving and expressing love) if their actions are sensitive to considerations of fairness. When loving acts are aimed at “sharing a life”, we properly evaluate more-basic acts of sharing – where this concerns their adherence to standards of fairness – as a way of evaluating them as complex acts of loving. Life-sharing offers an attractive feminist ideal of love, immune to concerns about the alleged imposition of fairness-related considerations where they don’t belong.

Keywords: love, fairness, agency, feminist philosophy, oppression

When we love someone, we experience powerful emotions, center them in our lives, and afford them special moral concern. Some add to this list things we *don’t* do in loving partnerships – things that would render them unloving.¹ We don’t, some say, adhere to standards of fairness or justice *per se* in how we relate to our lovers. Love, it seems, is *fairness indifferent*.

The idea that we should regard claims to fair distribution in loving partnerships with skepticism has a long history in philosophical thought.² It’s also a familiar part of common sense: demands for fairness intuitively seem out of place in families or romantic partnerships. As one research subject explained his resistance to his wife’s request that he accept a greater share of domestic burdens, “‘fairness’ and respect seemed impersonal moral concepts, abstractions rudely imposed on love.”³ But a persistent strand of feminist thought counters this skepticism with optimism about the integration of love and fairness. Concern with fair distribution is necessary for love’s flourishing, some say, or at least compatible with love’s gentle, compassionate aspects. Furthermore, obscuring the unity of love and fairness allows many heterosexual partnerships to continue tolerating unfair distributions of benefits and

* I am grateful to Suzi Dovi, Andrea Westlund, Mark Timmons, Michael McKenna, Luke Golemon, Clara Lingle, Andrew Lichter, and Rosalind Chaplin for comments that improved this paper. Thanks, also, to audiences at the Midsouth Philosophy Conference (especially, comments from Joshua Seidman-Zager) and PPE Society Annual Meeting. Thanks to Dan Muñoz and Quinn White for helpful and stimulating conversations about these issues.

¹ For instance, hooks 2000 argues that abuse is incompatible with love. (Taking on board this idea, my discussion of benefits and burdens leaves out violence endured disproportionately by women in heterosexual partnerships.)

² See Okin 1989 chapter 2 on the history of this idea, going back to Rousseau and Hume. I focus on discussions from Hardwig 1984; Waldron 1988; Sandel 2012; Penrose 2000; Honneth 2007.

³ Hochschild 2003, 52

burdens along gendered lines. Research on household, emotional, and relationship maintenance labor finds women performing much more of this labor than men (taking on unfairly large burdens) and receiving less – and less restorative – leisure time, less sexual satisfaction, and less emotional support than men (enjoying unfairly limited benefits).⁴ Love’s alleged fairness indifference seems like a convenient way to avoid addressing this.

Disagreement between “non-integrationists” and “integrationists” (as I will call them) about love and fairness deliver us to a stalemate.⁵ At worst, these arguments seem stipulative or table-pounding: one side insists that fairness-related considerations just *don’t belong* while the other insists they *just do*. At best, they require us to adjudicate intuitions about what *seems* (un)loving. But the disagreement arises precisely because the non-integrationist and integrationist have different intuitions, so this is not likely to be convincing. After summarizing this stalemate (section 1), I offer a way out that favors the integrationist position. Because the non-integrationist and integrationist disagree about the *meaning of loving actions*, I narrow my focus to love’s active dimensions, and specifically to acts – loving, expressing love, betraying love, and so on – that amount to participation in a particular kind of relationship. I draw on a strand of action theoretic thought according to which act-types are primarily individuated by their adherence to *social practices*, much in the way game moves are individuated by their adherence to rules.⁶ This idea is of special interest to feminists concerned that oppressive practices might affect something like our very agency (section 2).⁷ And it allows us to precisify the skeptic’s position in action theoretic terms (section 3). With this framework in hand, we can see that acts of distribution indexed to standards of fairness count as acts of loving for partners who aim at *sharing a life*. For life-sharing lovers, evaluating the lovingness of acts involves

⁴ For overviews of gendered household labor, see Bianchi et al. 2012; Blair 2013; Schouten 2019, chapter 1. Uneven labor divisions persist (and are sometimes exacerbated by) women working outside the home, especially if they earn more money (see Syrda 2023, on the “gender deviance neutralization” theory). These divisions have endured through recent social changes; additional housework and childcare burdens arising from the COVID-19 pandemic were primarily allocated to women (Leap, Stalp, and Kelly 2023), who were also more likely to have their employment affected (Landivar et al. 2020). On cognitive labor, see Daminger 2019; Reich-Stiebert, Froehlich, and Voltmer 2023. On the deleterious effects of this “mental load”, see DeGroot and Vik 2020. On the “leisure gap”, see Yerkes, Roeters, and Baxter 2020; Gender Equity Policy Institute 2024. On the “orgasm gap” see Mahar, Mintz, and Akers 2020.

⁵ Thanks to Andrew Lichter for suggesting these terms.

⁶ Rawls 1955; Schapiro 2001. See Millgram 2020 for summary.

⁷ See, for instance, Frye 1983; Khader 2011; Calhoun 2015; Webster 2021; Hirji 2021; Hirji 2024; Ward 2025. See also feminist discussion of silencing and “discursive injustice” (Langton 1993; Kukla 2014; Tanesini 2020). Sally Haslanger develops the idea of social practices constraining and enabling our agency (Haslanger 2017; Haslanger 2018; Haslanger 2019).

evaluating their fairness, since this is what allows them to count as tokens of the act-type of *sharing* (sections 4–5).

1. Non-integrationism and integrationism about love and fairness

The non-integrationist is skeptical that familial and/or romantic love and fairness are unified or compatible in a thoroughgoing way. Susan Moller Okin tracks this view in thinkers like Rousseau and Hume, who insist that “the affection and unity of interests that prevail within families make standards of justice irrelevant to them”.⁸ Non-integrationists often say that love and fairness belong to different “moral orientations,” insisting that the loving orientation is one in which “care and devotion” replace moral concepts like rights and duties.⁹ Some put this in terms of motivation: loving acts are undertaken out of “benevolence, or fraternity, or [...] enlarged affections,” which is not what motivates us to respect someone’s rights or treat them fairly.¹⁰ Non-integrationists also argue that justice is simply not among the virtues by which a flourishing loving partnership should be evaluated.¹¹ Relatedly, when parties to a relationship evaluate that relationship in terms of justice, this reflects a love-related failure. To assert or “stand on” one’s rights is “to acknowledge that other warmer bonds of kinship, affection, and intimacy can no longer hold.”¹² Finally, because standards of justice are irrelevant to participation in loving partnerships, making justice-related improvements can risk diminishing the overall “moral balance” of loving relationships.¹³ If that is right, the idea of “building fairness into love” is a category mistake – and a risky one at that. (In this way, some non-integrationist thinkers are indeed *anti*-integrationist.) Of course, these non-integrationist positions need not all stand or fall together or even perfectly cohere. But they reflect a sensibility according to which there is a *way of relating* native to (and appropriate for) loving partnerships, and there’s something fishy about introducing considerations of fairness to this way of relating. We even find similar ideas in some strands of feminist theorizing: in early

⁸ Okin 1989, 27

⁹ Honneth 2007, chapter 7

¹⁰ Sandel 2012, 32. See also Hardwig 1984, 443. Penrose 2000, 196 calls this the question of whether the family should be “motivationally just.”

¹¹ Penrose 2000, 197 calls this the question of whether the family should be “evaluationally just.”

¹² Waldron 1988, 628

¹³ Sandel 2012, 32. See also Hardwig 1984, 444–45 and Honneth 2007, 159.

articulations of care ethics, care- and justice-based modes of moral engagement were seen as standing in tension with one another.¹⁴

On the other side of the debate are integrationists about the compatibility of love and fairness. Most are non-separatist feminists hopeful about reforming heterosexual arrangements to be more hospitable to women.¹⁵ These thinkers insist that concepts like fairness, justice, and rights are perfectly at home in loving contexts, and need not threaten love (or, as it is often put, marriage) between men and women. Jean Hampton, for instance, argues for the appropriateness of applying the “contract test” to assess the justness of private, intimate relationships, asking if both parties *could* accept their burden and benefit distribution *if* they were self-interested contractors.¹⁶ Pauline Kleingeld not only insists on the coherence of a notion of “just marriage”, but argues that it ought to become culturally dominant. This would mean that “couples would understand themselves not only as communities of love, but also as communities of free and interdependent equals who treat each other in accordance with principles of justice.”¹⁷ According to Kleingeld, when partners share a commitment to justice, this *reframes* fairness-related behaviors. The claim that “it’s my turn” need not be viewed as an abandonment of lovingness: “claims of justice can even be *welcomed* (‘I’m glad you mentioned it’).”¹⁸ Similarly, love- and justice-related moral orientations need not be viewed as conflicting. In just marriages, a justice-based orientation “no longer appear[s] as a rival, foreign principle that collides with [...] affection-based interaction.”¹⁹ We can imagine Hampton’s contract test having a similar reframing function.

These suggestions are compelling, but they leave deeper questions unaddressed. What *enables* partners to successfully reframe claims to one’s due as appropriate, loving actions rather than alien intrusions? What makes it *true* that just and loving orientations are integrated rather than conflicted? Or that applying the contract test is not a category error? If there is an instructive disagreement between skeptics and optimists, it is a disagreement about *what our actions mean* in loving contexts. As such, my arguments about love and fairness concern the *acts*

¹⁴ Most contemporary care theorists embrace some kind of integration of these values (see discussion of this issue in Held 1995; Bubeck 1995; Tronto 1993; Dillon 1992; Friedman 1993; Pettersen 2008, chapter 6). See also White 2025 on the integration of love and respect.

¹⁵ There are, of course, philosophically rich separatist responses to heterosexuality (see, for instance, Frye 1983; Hoagland 1988; Rich 2003), which I set aside here.

¹⁶ Hampton 2002, 351

¹⁷ Kleingeld 1998, 269

¹⁸ Kleingeld 1998, 272–73

¹⁹ Kleingeld 1998, 276

of love, rather than (say) love as a disposition or attitude. So I turn, first, to love's active dimensions, and to the action theoretic commitments underwriting my discussion. Once we have a clear way to adjudicate the meaning of loving actions, the dispute between non-integrationists and integrationists can move beyond brute insistence that fairness-related considerations just *don't* (or just *do*) belong in our loving relationships.

2. A framework for understanding loving acts

As several theorists point out, the relationship between love and agency raises challenging questions. On one hand, we speak of love as something uncontrollable, as simply happening to us. On another, loving seems to be something we can *do*, reflective of our most authentic selves.²⁰ I will leave aside many interesting questions about love's passive dimensions and their interaction with its active dimensions. I take for granted the existence of act-types partly constitutive of love (not just evidence of love) which can be intentionally – even volitionally – performed. While we might possess loving attitudes or even perform loving acts without being in a loving *relationship* (i.e., we might love someone, even unrequitedly) I am interested in the acts that take place within those relationships. These are, after all, the kinds of acts that non-integrationists and integrationists disagree about.

Understanding the meaning of loving acts requires attending to an often-neglected dimension of agency: namely, its connection with practices that give actions their meanings. The central question in action theory concerns the difference between action and “mere behavior.”²¹ In answering this question, theorists focus on what sort of contributions properly initiate and guide a being's bodily (or mental) behaviors, such that we describe them as exercises of agency. On this approach, it makes sense to primarily individuate act-types by appealing to the character of their sources (belief and desire, intention, a guiding plan). It is because of the nature of one's mental states and how they govern her movements that we describe her as *waving* as opposed to experiencing spasms, and indeed as *waving* rather than *jumping* or *calculating the area of a triangle*. When and because she succeeds *by her own lights* at waving, she waves.

²⁰ See Martin 2015; Ebels-Duggan 2018; Cowley 2021 for explorations of this tension. Relatedly, philosophers ask whether we love for reasons, and whether one's love is an apt target for calls to normative justification (for an overview, see Smuts 2014a; Smuts 2014b).

²¹ This is sometimes called the “problem of action” (Frankfurt 1978; Donagan 1981).

But, as an important strand of feminist theorizing brings out, our ability to perform tokens of many act-types depends not only on the source of our bodily movement, but also on its *meaning*. Sally Haslanger distinguishes these two approaches:

The contrast between mere behavior and intentional action depends, it seems, on the state of mind of the agent (allowing that the state of mind may be dispositional).

However, another distinction worth drawing is between meaningful and meaningless behavior. The way I swing, or raise, or extend my arms, may or may not have meaning in a particular context.²²

Individuating act-types on the basis of their public meaning (rather than their source) allows us to explain how the expressive content of my movements depends on the social environment in which it takes place. Of course, the sources of agency (intentions, etc.) are very often relevant to the meaning of our action: whether I act out of benevolence or cold self-interest certainly affects what my act means. But this view says that which action I perform is not settled by whether I carry out my intentions or other mental states in the way suggested by traditional approaches alone. Successful action is the product of both my agential contributions and the way others make sense of them. It is one thing to distinguish *waving* from a spasm, and another to distinguish *meaningful* waving – where others can understand and treat what I’m doing as a greeting – from mere, meaningless waving.²³

Call this the “practice view of act-types.”²⁴ On such a view, we perform actions not merely by meeting standards we set for ourselves, but by meeting (or, making reference to) standards internal to practices in which they take place. So, widely-shared social practices constrain and enable our agency by setting up their success conditions, conditions we must navigate if we are

²² Haslanger 2018, 235

²³ This is not to say that one can only *greet* by perfectly complying with practice standards (i.e., waving her hand back-and-forth). She can, of course, play off, re-interpret, and deliberately disrupt those conventions – as when one *greet*s by performing an elaborate secret handshake known only to two friends. But it does mean that departing from practice standards essentially *makes reference to them*. A secret handshake becomes meaningful as an alternative to waving hands back-and-forth, precisely because the parties can navigate the existing practices so proficiently that they can knowingly re-shape and disrupt them. Thanks to Michael McKenna for pressing me to clarify this.

²⁴ See Millgram 2020 on the “practice view of action” (a term I borrow and slightly amend here) for a summary of this view. See also Rawls 1955, and Schapiro 2001; Schapiro 2003, who extends Rawls’ discussion to a more general view about the structure of all actions. Feminist work on the relationship between oppression and agency often takes up some version of this view – see footnote 7.

to perform certain actions.²⁵ This raises interesting questions about how many acts are governed by practice-dependent standards. I will largely set them aside, however, since we are concerned here specifically with the success conditions for acts like *loving*. And acts of loving, in the sense I have in mind here, are easy cases for the practice view of act-types.

Here is why. I take it to be obvious that act-types governed by game rules succeed only when they meet practice-dependent standards. John Rawls draws on the example of baseball-specific act-types like *getting a base hit* in an early articulation of the idea that practices set up standards for actions.²⁶ We can't *get a base hit* unless we are participants in the socially robust context of a sports game. We just don't perform this act when we're at home by ourselves making the same movements as we would on the field, or even when we run onto the field unsanctioned and make those movements. To perform the relevant type of act, one must make these movements as a participant and not an imitator, nor an intruding spectator. My focus is not participation in games, but rather participation in particular sorts of *relationships*. And in both contexts, whether one is *in* or *out* has an important authority over one's agential possibilities. Indeed, it is essential to some act-types that they take place within (and count as participation in) a relationship, in much the same way this is true of games. Call these "relationally participatory act-types." Some act-types only become possible for us once we are situated in certain kinds of relationships. One can only *betray* someone with whom she shares a previous history of trust.²⁷ One can only *grade* her students' work if she is their teacher. Trying to grade a stranger's homework is much like trying to get a base hit by swinging a bat after running onto the field. Absent the right history with the game (or the relationship), one can only manage to imitate, or to be an intruding spectator.

Furthermore, once one is a participant in a relationship, continuing to perform certain act-types is sometimes necessary to continue to *count* as being a participant. Consider the cliché of the "teacher becoming the student." If my student comes to possess all the epistemic goods I do and more, making it impossible for me to perform the act of *teaching* them, we cease to stand in the teacher-student relationship we once did (perhaps our roles reverse!). Relatedly, some

²⁵ I take the practice view of act-types to be compatible with various ways of cashing out the sources of agency, and with them playing an important role in settling what we do.

²⁶ Rawls 1955

²⁷ See Stroud 2024 for defense and discussion of this idea using the example of betrayal. I am grateful to her for helpful discussion about the relationship between relationships and our agential possibilities.

relational contexts require that we continue to perform acts of valuing. One continues to stand in a relation of care or love by continuing to engage in caring or loving modes of valuation.²⁸

I will refer to the complex set of standards we must navigate to perform act-types that amount to participation in a certain kind of relationship in a given cultural context a “relational paradigm.”²⁹ Some relational paradigms offer explicit, rule-governed standards (the legal procedures for becoming someone’s spouse), while others rely on fluid standards (the social norms for becoming someone’s partner). I am interested in relational paradigms that, like games, have an important authority over the agential possibilities of their participants. And relationally participatory acts have the potential to directly impact where one stands with respect to a particular relational arrangement. They are “moves” that allow us to maneuver into, within, and out of these paradigms. When I refer to expressing love or loving, I refer to these as relationally participatory acts, where their success conditions depend importantly on the relational paradigm in which they take place. And I allow explicitly for these acts to succeed because of their role in existing practices – not only because they meet standards set by the agents themselves. This is not to say that such acts exhaust all there is to understand about love. But it allows us to give the active, participatory, and interpersonally meaningful aspects of love their due. After all, this is where concerns about fairness loom large.

3. A non-integrationist position on the applicability of fairness to loving acts

With this framework in place, we can now precisely articulate a non-integrationist position about the meaning of loving acts. There is a theoretical version of the claim, which concerns all possible loving relational paradigms. And there is a corresponding claim about *actual* loving relational paradigms. The theoretical claim is as follows.

²⁸ Anderson 1993; Kolodny 2003; Martin 2021, 127

²⁹ I am not committed to the claim that participation in *all* relationships is practice-governed. Perhaps, for instance, there is a thin relationship of moral participant which exists prior to any practice (see Thompson 2004; Wallace 2019 for discussion).

NO NECESSARILY FAIR LOVE: For all relationally participatory act-types of existing or possible relational paradigms of love (loving, expressing love, betraying love, etc.), there is no necessary connection between their success conditions and standards of fairness.³⁰

This allows for contingent or indirect connections between acts of love and fairness. For instance, maybe persistent unfairness is likely to lead to dissatisfaction, which often motivates one to perform acts that amount to betraying or giving up on love. But, according to this view, a full description of the success conditions for relationally participatory act-types *themselves* excludes any reference to fairness. If true, NO NECESSARILY FAIR LOVE would make good sense of many of the ideas expressed by non-integrationists suspicious of “rudely” imposing fairness- and justice-related considerations where they do not belong. Fairness is important (such non-integrationists might say) but simply does not figure in descriptions of the actions through which we love one another. Relatedly, when we are trying to love one another well, it’s confused to understand the success of our actions in terms of standards of fairness. Our acts are not meaningful in those terms.

This claim has intuitive appeal. But I don’t think it fully explains why so many philosophers and laypeople are drawn to the non-integrationist position. We are not drawn to this position from contemplation on the abstract relationship between fairness and all possible loving paradigms (an impressive exercise of imagination!), but because we observe how love is practiced within the existing suite of relational paradigms. (At least, we observe how love is practiced in contemporary Western contexts, the contexts in which the debate between non-integrationists and integrationists proceeds.) I will offer two relational paradigms which plausibly influence how we think about acts of love.

Consider, first, that the gendered trends identified above are so pervasive and normalized that heterosexual partners may express love as a way of participating in an *essentially unfair* relational paradigm. Here is why this might be so. Loving is a nonbasic act. Acts of loving depend on various more-basic actions like *speaking, embracing, cooking a meal, typing a text message*. And these, in turn, depend on even more basic actions (*moving one’s mouth, wrapping*

³⁰ I won’t speculate on what features a relational paradigm must have for it to be a relational paradigm *of love*. While I think it is important not to overly idealize love, and to acknowledge the existence of morally imperfect relational paradigms that nonetheless still qualify as loving, this will, for instance, write out the abusive relationships that hooks discusses (see footnote 1), as well as relations that are simply not mistakable for love (employer-employee relations, for instance). While skeptics are often concerned with concepts like rights and justice, I focus specifically on fairness for the purposes of articulating this revised and precisified skeptical position.

one's arms...³¹ But there are many routes to performing nonbasic actions via these more-basic actions. And whether our practices treat someone as having performed these nonbasic act-types by performing some more-basic action depends on subtle facts about *what loving is like* and *how it's done* in a social environment.

Many feminist theorists who adopt a practice view of act-types assume that these practice-dependent standards can vary based on social identities like gender, race, disability status, and so on. This makes sense given that social practices – including those that set the standards for successful action – are not only influenced by ideology, but often constitute aspects of ideology.³² The success conditions for some nonbasic acts – including a specification of the more-basic actions on which they depend – may, in turn, systematically depend on facts about the agent's identity.³³ Consider, for instance, Elizabeth Anderson's observation that Western societies offer men and women distinct "normative vehicles for expressing heterosexual affection": a man "may express his affection by wrapping his arm around his lover, or by leading her on the dance floor", whereas women express affection with physical submission.³⁴ Men (at least sometimes) *simply cannot* express affection by demurring, whereas women *simply can*; vice versa for leading one's partner on the dance floor. This suggests distinct sets of standards for the performance of nonbasic actions for people of different genders.

Let us assume for the moment this is possible. Perhaps, then, a "traditional heterosexual love paradigm" assigns different standards to men and women to perform the nonbasic act of loving in just the same way. Perhaps women express love by performing the more-basic actions of cooking, cleaning, and lavishing their partners with emotional support. Men, on the other hand, express love by performing the more-basic actions of (say) making difficult decisions for the partnership or working outside the home. If this turns out to saddle women with disproportionate burdens, this is regrettable. But if this *just is* the relational paradigm to which heterosexual partners have access, this gives us reason to be pessimistic about building fairness into love. It may only be possible for heterosexual partners to love one another meaningfully – to participate in this paradigm at all – if they accept unfair distributions.

³¹ I assume the existence of *more-basic* and *nonbasic* actions, though I don't take a stance here about the existence of genuinely basic actions. Nor does what I say hang on any particular view about the relationship between more and less basic actions; nonbasic actions might be constituted by more-basic ones, caused by them, or depend on them in some other way.

³² Haslanger 2017. I focus on ideology in the pejorative sense here.

³³ This just one way to precisify a mechanism through which oppressive social environments affect agency; see other discussions cited in footnote 7.

³⁴ Anderson 1993, 18

I will not rest my argument on the idea that oppressive practices constrain our agency in this identity-discerning way, or that heterosexual love is the only paradigm to which we have access. Not all lovers are heterosexual,³⁵ and even heterosexual lovers have alternative frameworks for understanding their loving acts. A more charitable defense of non-integrationism would appeal to the dominance of more attractive (and less ideological) loving paradigms. So consider a familiar loving paradigm in which acts of love are undertaken as part of a stable motivational structure to benefit the loved one *full stop*. On this view, acts of love are individuated by their expression of purely other-guided concern for the wellbeing or flourishing of a lover. As Harry Frankfurt writes in his well-known articulation of such a view, “What is essential to the lover’s concern for his beloved is not only that it must be free of any *self*-regarding motive but that it must have no ulterior aim whatsoever.”³⁶ While this describes an individual motivational structure, we can imagine a corresponding relational paradigm, in which parties to the relationship participate by exhibiting single-minded concern for the other. Call this the “selfless love paradigm”. Because one only participates in this paradigm by reliably pursuing a lover’s flourishing, there is no necessary connection between acting lovingly and considerations of fairness. The selfless lover cares about relating to their lover fairly only insofar as, and to the extent that, it promotes the latter’s flourishing. They would just as soon abandon standards of fairness if it benefitted their lover. If we think this sort of love is among the central paradigms through which we understand love in contemporary Western contexts, this reinforces the plausibility of NO NECESSARILY FAIR LOVE. And it offers a fairness-indifferent paradigm even to those who reject (or doubt the existence of) a heterosexual love paradigm.

This offers an additional diagnosis for non-integrationism. Not only is there no necessary connection between the relationally participatory acts of love and standards of fairness; there is, in societies that adopt the selfless love paradigm and/or the heterosexual love paradigm as dominant, a contingent but deep connection between love and disregard for fairness. Whether we bemoan or celebrate this, we nonetheless find our agency constrained. As the products of our society, we love with indifference to fairness. And if we want love in our lives, we may

³⁵ Because of my focus on threats to fairness primarily experienced in heterosexual partnerships, I will not discuss queer challenges to the dominance of the heterosexual love paradigm. But it is worth acknowledging the rich history of queer partnerships exploring and developing alternative ways of loving meaningfully, sometimes (though not always) as a political response to the unfairness of heterosexual love; see footnote 1.5.

³⁶ Frankfurt 1998, 167 (*italics original*)

accept this.³⁷ But just one counterexample to NO NECESSARILY FAIR LOVE threatens the idea that acts of love *necessarily* lack success conditions that reference fairness. We will see that there is good reason to reject the theoretical claim, and to reject the idea that fairness-indifferent love is our only option.

4. Life-sharing love: a counterexample to non-integrationism

In this section I argue for the existence of a loving relational paradigm with a necessary connection between the success conditions for relationally participatory loving acts and fairness: life-sharing love. After advancing the positive view and explaining how it offers a desirable, distinct alternative to both the heterosexual and selfless love paradigms, I return to how this directly addresses the concerns of non-integrationists as historically articulated.

The key idea is that expressions of love involve consideration for fairness when undertaken as part of a project of sharing a life. Here I draw from the popular idea that being in a loving relationship, while not a matter of outright sharing an *identity*, does essentially involve sharing *some* important and valuable aspects of one's life with a partner. Many contemporary discussions of love take for granted that "union" views of love (at least, on a crude interpretation) risk amalgamating the identities of lovers in pathological ways, but nonetheless aim to recover the insight in the idea that lovers "form and constitute a new entity in the world, what might be called a *we*."³⁸ Lovers do not *themselves* collapse into one, these theorists insist, but they do contribute to some shared project, perspective, or experience.³⁹ This allows us to preserve their separateness while explaining their profound connection. And, while discussions of love tend not to focus on acts constitutive of loving relationships, the idea that *sharing* something important is a characteristically loving act comports with this kernel of insight.

What many discussions of love elide, however, is the love-related significance of sharing in the highly *material* sense. By way of substantiating the relevant notion of sharing, I turn to the familiar cultural practice whereby acts of sharing benefits and burdens – combining living

³⁷ See Haslanger 2019 for related discussion of navigating agency-constraining practices.

³⁸ Nozick 1991, 418. For criticisms of union views, see Soble 1997; Friedman 1998; Westlund 2008; Wonderly 2017.

³⁹ I have in mind views of love that emphasize the importance of engaging in shared deliberation and/or adopting shared ends (Westlund 2005; Westlund 2008; Ebels-Duggan 2008); shared proximity and experiences (see especially Wonderly 2017 on an attachment-based view); shared "federations" (Delaney 1996; Friedman 1998); or shared relationship histories (Kolodny 2003).

arrangements, pooling financial resources, reciprocating burdensome chores, taking on joint responsibilities for pets or children – are paradigmatic romantic “steps”. Once a sizable portion of contributions to partners’ important activities, decisions, and relationships are shared as steps toward increased welcome closeness, we often say that these partners have come to share a life. And whether partners are moving toward this arrangement helps us understand their actions. Orienting a relationship toward life-sharing in this sense involves opting into a particular romantic paradigm.⁴⁰ Once I am *in*, my actions can thereby count as a life-sharing “move” – as either a contribution to or betrayal of this project. Because of the relational context in which they take place, the more-basic action of (say) splitting the bill *just does* amount to the nonbasic relationally-participatory act of life-sharing when I do it with my partner. It just doesn’t have the same meaning when I do it with a colleague.

Of course, some things we share with partners in loving ways are not themselves material. A shared perspective, treasured memory, or motivational disposition are all plausibly part of the love we share. But here we are concerned with love’s active dimensions, and it’s clear that the *acts* of cognitive, emotional, and physical labor through which these shared entities are formed and sustained is necessarily material. The acts through which one builds and maintains a perspective, memory, or disposition together amount to contributions to a shared life in the relevant sense. And these contributions are necessarily *distributed* between partners.

We need more than this to conclude that acts of sharing on which acts of loving depend are evaluable by standards of fairness, however. Even if we think that acts of distribution can contribute to love, we might not think that they need to be fair in order to do this.⁴¹ Who among us really distributes in a perfectly fair way, after all? My claim is not that acts of distribution must perfectly adhere to objectively correct standards of fairness to serve as life-sharing. Rather, the claim is that there is a necessary connection between the success conditions for the act-type of *sharing* and fairness. This guarantees a counterexample to NO NECESSARILY FAIR LOVE.

To see this, notice, first, that sharing has a familiar use as a thickly positive virtue term. As a recent trade book on the concept of sharing puts it, “you cannot share non-nicely”; it is taken to imply “equality, mutuality, a relationship freely entered into.”⁴² Distributions utterly

⁴⁰ I refer to life-sharing love as a *romantic* ideal because these are the contexts in which gendered threats to fairness arise, but there is no reason why life-sharing cannot serve as a guiding ideal for non-romantic partners as well.

⁴¹ Thanks to Clara Lingle for encouraging me to address this and for helpful discussion.

⁴² John 2017, xii, xxv

divorced from considerations of fairness cease to be instances of sharing in this sense, since they cease to be fittingly described as having the positive evaluation inherent to this thick use of the term. If a dictator unilaterally determines how to distribute resources to his subjects in accordance with his whims, he is not sharing with them. As this dictator begins to take fairness into account, we can accurately describe him as sharing (and less accurately describe him as a dictator). To take a less dramatic example, if we discover that the person with whom we've agreed to share a snack has surreptitiously allocated themselves a much larger portion, we might complain, "hey, I thought we were going to share!" Revealing that one's actions are not indexed to standards of fairness reveals their inability to be meaningful as a token of the act-type of sharing.

Another datum to support the idea that these success conditions refer to fairness comes from the observation that a debate about the objectively correct standards of fairness can help us settle whether someone's actions count as sharing at all. We might disagree about whether outcomes *per se* are relevant to the fairness of our distribution schemes, or whether procedures are more important, and settling this disagreement might, in turn, determine whether we can appropriately describe someone *as sharing*. I will not endorse a particular view about the correct standards of fairness here. The point is simply that the practice-dependent success conditions for performing the act of *sharing* reference fairness, such that changing ideas about what is actually fair correspond to changes in our judgments about whether one is sharing. Returning to the snack example, we can discuss whether it's fair to split the snack 50-50, or whether it's fair for one of us (maybe the person who bought it) to get a bigger portion. If we agree that the latter is fair, we might also agree that the purchaser *is*, after all, sharing their snack, despite their allocating themselves a much larger piece. There is something about distributing with sensitivity to fairness-related constraints that allows distribution to count as sharing in the first place, as opposed to mere (thin, non-evaluatively-laden) distributing or dividing. And performing *this* act is what can move us toward a shared life.

Tying these pieces together, shared-life love is a relational paradigm that offers its participants opportunities to perform the nonbasic act-types of loving and expressing love *via* more-basic acts of *fairly distributing* benefits and burdens. If this is right, life-sharing love is a counterexample to NO NECESSARILY FAIR LOVE. The more-basic acts of sharing on which the nonbasic acts of *loving* depend are necessarily undertaken with a sensitivity to standards of fairness. So, in assuming that one acts *either* lovingly *or* justly, non-integrationists overlook

how complex the meaning of our actions can be in rich relational contexts. They underestimate our ability to construct practices in which multiple values are at stake, and multiple virtues realizable, via the same actions. This vindicates integrationists like Okin, who wonder why we should “suppose that harmonious affection, indeed deep and long-lasting love, cannot co-exist with ongoing standards of justice”.⁴³ When we attend to the gestures we undertake to share our lives with others, we see that these virtues do not merely coexist as independently-significant features of these relations, but also as important ways of describing *the very same relationally participatory acts*.

4.1. Life-sharing love and the heterosexual love paradigm

While I have not insisted that the reader embrace the possibility of the unfair heterosexual love paradigm, it is worth flagging how this paradigm stacks up against life-sharing. In addition to being *substantively* fair (because the fairness of acts of sharing is relevant to their lovingness), life-sharing love is also *structurally* fair. Unlike heterosexual love, it allows lovers to make the same relational “moves” regardless of gender. This is not to say we can entirely avoid the influence of oppressive ideology in interpreting one another’s actions simply by adopting the life-sharing paradigm.⁴⁴ But, when acting in accordance with this practice, it becomes conceivable and therefore possible for a man to show his love via contributions to household labor (within the heterosexual love paradigm, an emasculating failure), and possible for him to harm his love for failing to contribute (otherwise identified as rightful entitlement). It becomes conceivable and therefore possible for a woman to show her love by ameliorating an unfair distribution of emotional support (otherwise identified as petty nagging), and possible to harm her love by silently accepting the burden of emotional work (otherwise identified as appropriate martyrdom). With this framework in hand, the scope of available actions looks more similar for both parties than it would within the traditional heterosexual love paradigm. This means those who stand outside both paradigms have strong fairness-related reasons to opt into life-sharing

⁴³ Okin 1989, 32

⁴⁴ One reason for doubting this is that our conception of what’s fair might be influenced by gender ideology. For instance, we might think it’s unfair to ask men to perform emotional labor insofar as they are fundamentally less equipped to do this, and fair to ask women because they are “naturally” nurturing. In cases like this, oppression can work within the paradigm to reproduce gendered dynamics.

love. When structurally unfair love is not the only game in town, the choice to play is harder to justify.

4.2. Live-sharing love and the selfless love paradigm

These remarks may convince someone of the desirability of participating in life-sharing love over the traditional heterosexual love paradigm. But they may not convince readers who are sympathetic to thinking about selfless love as the primary or only paradigm through which we understand the meaning of our loving actions. Why think that it would ever make sense to opt into life-sharing love over selfless love?

An objector could press this as a dilemma. Either life-sharing lovers act out of self-concern or they don't. If they act out of self-concern, they are motivated in ways that are *problematic* for the lovingness of a relationship. In concerning herself with the fairness of distributions shared with her partner – rather than concerning herself exclusively with her partner's wellbeing – the life-sharing lover exhibits unloving motivations. On this horn, we have no reason to opt into life-sharing love over selfless love; the latter is superior. But if the life-sharing lover does *not* act out of self-concern, this must be because they are motivated to promote the wellbeing of their lover *full stop*. But if that's right, it suggests that the acts of life-sharing *collapse into* acts of selfless love, failing to motivate a distinct paradigm. On this horn, there really is no life-sharing love, and so no counterexample to NO NECESSARILY FAIR LOVE.

Let's take the first horn of the dilemma: the charge that life-sharing lovers exhibit problematic self-concern in caring about fairness. Indeed, there is something strange about characterizing self-interested interventions aimed at securing one's fair share as paradigmatic loving acts. But this assumes an overly narrow view of what it takes to prioritize fairness and the role that self-interested concern plays in doing so. This objector assumes that prioritizing fairness always involves intervening *on one's own behalf* to ensure that distribution schemes are fair. However, in relationships of trust, life-sharing lovers are more likely to intervene *on their partner's behalf* to ensure that *their partner* is getting their fair share.⁴⁵ Such interventions involve the kind of beneficent concern that attracts the defender of selfless love. As Monique Wonderly points out in her discussion of self-interestedness in love, "it matters whether one's concern for another's well-being is wholly, or only partially, self-regarding" and "the nature of

⁴⁵ Thanks to Rosalind Chaplin for helpful discussion about the issues in this section and for suggesting this reply.

the self-regarding considerations that constitute one's concern for another also matter."⁴⁶ Partially self-concerned interventions that strive to ensure my partner receives their fair share plausibly reflect the right kind of self-concern.

This brings us to the second horn. Is intervening lovingly on my partner's behalf just a matter of exhibiting utterly self-disinterested concern for their wellbeing, collapsing these acts into those of selfless love? No, because such an intervention is not *purely* self-disinterested.⁴⁷ The life-sharing lover's acts are unified by a concern with *fair relating per se* in addition to a concern with their lover's wellbeing. And caring about treating my lover fairly involves caring about myself, *how I treat* my partner. A concern with treating one's partner fairly is precisely the sort of self- and other-regarding concern that reflects well on someone *qua* lover. In worrying that I might be extracting more than my partner's fair share in our joint project, I demonstrate a loving concern with how I am treating them, given the relationship between our respective contributions. So, acts of life-sharing love do not collapse into purely selfless acts. Indeed, this is something we admire about them.

So, we can avoid the dilemma suggested by the defender of selfless love. Still, they might insist on another problem with securing the paradigm of life-sharing love pride of place alongside selfless love. The selfless love paradigm apparently offers an explanatory benefit over life-sharing love: it allows us to explain why we consider acts of self-sacrifice as among the most paradigmatically loving acts. If these acts are appropriately lauded, we should want an account of love to explain this.

It's worth examining what sort of relational context allows acts of self-sacrifice to secure their admirable status. These acts arguably strike us as exceptional when they represent departures from a norm. When we imagine the admirably self-sacrificing lover, we imagine someone whose partner is not systematically or habitually benefitting from their self-sacrificing disposition, a partner who's reluctant to accept their sacrifice, and *who would do the same* if their situations were reversed. In other words, we imagine a partnership characterized by the balanced, mutual concern for burden distribution present in life-sharing. Adopting life-sharing love as a practice does not preclude the possibility that occasionally contributing *more than* one's fair share – even at great personal cost – can be a deeply loving act. As John Tomasi points out, supererogatory actions gain their special moral status only against the background

⁴⁶ Wonderly 2017, 240

⁴⁷ Thanks to Andrew Lichter for conversations that informed my thinking about this issue.

understanding that the generous agent has withheld a right they would be entitled to claim. *Withholding* a right is importantly agential in the way *not asserting it at all* is not. So, rights must be operative in a relationship in order for one of the parties to be admirably responsible for withholding one.⁴⁸ In the same spirit, the life-sharing lover's habit of tracking what's fair provides a baseline against which generous sacrifices may be understood as such. Just as "[r]ights and duties must first exist so that acts of supererogation have something to supererogate from",⁴⁹ a scheme of fairness must first exist so that acts of profound generosity have a baseline against which they can count as generous. On a reasonable way of thinking, acts of self-sacrifice are profoundly loving acts only against a baseline concern for fair treatment. Not only can we explain the lovingness of self-sacrificial acts on the life-sharing framework; this framework may be what allows us to explain their lovingness. This defeats selfless love's *prima facie* explanatory benefit over life-sharing love.

I will not insist that we cannot understand acts of supreme self-sacrifice as loving absent a relational infrastructure of fair treatment, however. My aim is simply to defend the idea that life-sharing love is a real and valuable loving paradigm, offering a counterexample to NO NECESSARILY FAIR LOVE. Pluralism about relational ideals of love allows us to embrace both life-sharing and selfless love as ideals and even to make sense of cases in which we are torn between them. Importantly, I have shown that life-sharing love avoids collapsing into selfless love insofar as it requires partially self-interested concern. This secures the existence of *some* love properly evaluable by standards of fairness.

5. Sharing as a practice and responding to the original non-integrationist

I have defended life-sharing love as a counterexample to NO NECESSARILY FAIR LOVE. But, admittedly, this thesis was my own articulation of the non-integrationist position, and I'd like to say something directly responsive to non-integrationism as it has historically been put. I'll do this by emphasizing that life-sharing love is *practice*-governed.

Non-integrationists imagine a partnership in which the "alien" concepts of fairness, justice, or rights are "uncomfortably" introduced, "imposed" where they are felt not to belong. This

⁴⁸ Tomasi 1991

⁴⁹ Tomasi 1991, 524

description presupposes that the relevant partners' practices are already divorced from the practice of life-sharing. After all, lovers enmeshed in a life-sharing practice treat considerations of fairness as, so to speak, just part of the rules of the game. They may not even need to consciously think of themselves as playing by rules, since internalization of this practice makes this unnecessary. Participation in practices can involve strategic and thoughtful navigation of standards that we consciously apprehend, but is just as often unthinking, automatic, and habitual.⁵⁰ Operating within a practice is often (to that extent) a more comfortable option than deviating from it. This adds substance to other integrationist arguments against the skeptic. As Virginia Held writes, mothers and fathers fulfilling their equal obligations to parenting responsibilities must operate with "a *starting presumption* that *all* the tasks connected with supporting and bringing up children should each be divided *equally*."⁵¹ Given this presumption, communication about fairness is a continuation of norms, not a surprising departure from them. Similarly, it makes sense of Kleingeld and Joel Anderson's claim that members of a "justice-oriented loving family" "would no longer regard the moral requirement of just domestic arrangements as a *demand imposed from outside the family*", but as "flowing from their joint commitment."⁵² For life-sharing lovers, consideration for fairness is already internal to their practices.

Non-integrationists also worry about fairness being attentionally front and center for lovers. But, for life-sharing partners, sharing is just *what's done*. This means one is often engaging in fairness-driven distributions *without* needing to consciously deliberate about fairness at each turn. As Held puts it, "when respect and equality become habitual, calculation becomes unnecessary."⁵³ If life-sharing is a practice, we would expect partners to treat fair distribution as simply what's done in the way traditional partnerships treat unjust labor distributions as similarly automatic. We would expect them to be metaphorically communicating in a language in which they are both fluent – not (as the non-integrationist imagines) effortfully deliberating about grammar each time they speak.

Another relevant feature of practices is what we might call their "purportedly normative" character. While we can always question whether one *really should* participate in any given practice, it is also true that practices are regularities we *treat as* what one should do in a

⁵⁰ See, for instance, Haslanger 2018, 235.

⁵¹ Held 1979, 237 (italics added)

⁵² Kleingeld and Anderson 2014, 326–27 (italics added).

⁵³ Held 1979, 235

particular context.⁵⁴ This is why we often accept an appeal to “what’s done around here” as sufficient for explaining and even weakly justifying one’s behavior.⁵⁵ Life-sharing lovers might reply to questions about their behavior by appeal to the practice *itself*— “that’s how we do things.” This may assuage the non-integrationist’s concerns about excessive book-keeping or fairness dominating the attentional landscape at the expense of affection.

Of course, the stickiness of practices, and our tendency to treat even some of the most unjust regularities as normative, introduces problems and it is precisely the stickiness of our unjust practices governing heterosexual love that motivates me here. We can and should be able to justify our practices to one another. But these concerns do not (and likely cannot) lead us to give up on practices altogether. Rather, they recommend replacing oppressive practices with just ones. The existence and proliferation of just practices like life-sharing makes it more likely that those unwilling or unable to subject practices in which they participate to critical scrutiny will nonetheless automatically treat one another fairly.

Since we cannot avoid the influence of sexist ideology entirely, it is unlikely that partnerships gravitate toward the life-sharing love paradigm without discussion. Indeed, research continues to find heterosexual partners moving toward traditional labor distributions, even when they both purport to possess gender egalitarian attitudes, in the absence of explicit discussions about their divisions.⁵⁶ My point here has not been to dismiss the important role of appeals to fairness in establishing distribution schemes. But once those schemes are established, the following two claims are perfectly compatible: (1) many acts of distribution are not undertaken with a primary or attentionally-salient motivation of promoting fairness, and (2) those acts constitute tokens of *sharing*, where this is the more-basic act on which the nonbasic act of *loving* depends. The practice view of act-types, after all, allows for the performance of actions with *meanings* outstripping what can be captured by their *source*. Lovers can succeed in a practice without that standard for success featuring in their mental states. This can sometimes represent a troubling form of runaway agency, but other times we should welcome the result that our actions, when appropriately contextualized, are meaningful in ways we may not intend at the time – that a partner’s unthinking making of the bed or habitual splitting of the bill can express love.

⁵⁴ Haslanger 2018, 237 refers to “the *descriptive normativity* that makes a regularity a practice.”

⁵⁵ ...Especially if combined with some relatively weak theses about value conservatism (see Quigley 2024 for a recent discussion and defense).

⁵⁶ Wiesmann et al. 2008; Daminger 2020

Some partners, though, consciously view contributions to a shared life as such, and the simultaneous realization of complex, intertwined values is precisely what we treasure about our partnerships. A happy feature of my account is its ability to explain why doing things with or for a loved one sometimes inspires us to see the most mundane or dirty jobs as bearable and even pleasurable. I may not enjoy contributing to rent or folding the laundry *per se*, but when these activities are understood as burdens that I share with a partner and as expressions of my love for them, they take on new meaning. It is not merely the pleasure of doing things for a partner, but of sharing things fairly with them, that many of us enjoy when we contribute to our shared lives. If this is right, fairness is not only compatible with loving but often part of its joyful expression.

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