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Entangled: Romantic Love and Philosophy

Sydney Thorp

An Honors Thesis
Submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with honors in Philosophy
from Hamline University

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“The paradoxes of language and love emulate each other; each is founded on commonality, yet each is haunted by a repressed alterity. This might hint that love is not amenable to a purely rational, philosophical analysis. Rather love eludes interrogation emerging only through the discourses of love. Düttmann suggests that 'there is no strict boundary between love and the love story.' 'Love,' he says, 'itself generates its own fiction and is nothing other than its story.'”

- Linnell Secomb,

Philosophy and Love: From Plato to Popular Culture

On Philosophy

Ava¹ shivered slightly as she crossed the threshold of her favorite coffee shop, moving from the blistering heat of late August into the arctic temperatures created by the air conditioning. She really needed to get started on the reading for her master's program, and the coffee shop was her favorite place to work when it was either too hot or too cold to be outside. She smiled to herself as she saw her favorite table in the corner unoccupied, and wandered up to the counter to order. She had arrived right at the mid-afternoon lull, and there was no one in line ahead of her. She smiled when she saw Will behind the counter. She had first seen him at the coffee shop toward the end of the last academic year, and since she was a regular, they had struck up a sort of friendship; they would chat amicably while she ordered and waited for her drink, or on his breaks, but not much beyond that. *Not that you'd say no to something beyond that*, a voice in the back of her mind whispered. Ava shook her head, and felt her mouth curve into a smile when she saw the grin on Will's face when he looked up.

“The usual, right?” he asked, sliding an iced tea across the counter.

“Am I really that predictable?” she asked in mock horror, then chuckled at his momentary look of apprehension. “I do usually come here at this time on Wednesdays, don't I? I shouldn't be surprised that others notice the pattern.”

He laughed, a little shakily, and she passed him exact change – she really did go there a lot. She took her tea and went over to her favorite table, and after sitting down, pulled out her book and notebook and set herself to her task.

When she finally looked up from her book, the light coming through the windows was dimmer and warmer, and the other customers were completely different and fewer in number than when she sat down. She stretched, arching her back over the top of her chair. She really should have gotten up and walked around sooner, she thought ruefully as she stretched out her neck.

“So, what are you reading this week?”

She jumped slightly at Will's voice, and turned to see him standing next to her, peering down at her book. “Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. You know, just a little light reading,” she said dryly, flipping the book closed to show him the cover. He stared down at it thoughtfully.

“You know, I had to read some Kant in undergrad,” he paused. “Wasn't my favorite, honestly.”

She laughed this time. “I think most people would agree with you there! Kant is not the easiest of reads. This is my second time going through this book and it's still difficult.”

“Second time?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes. Once in undergrad, then I had the foolish idea to pursue philosophy as a master's degree.” She grinned. “And here I am again.”

“Why'd you decide on a master's?”

She laughed again. “That's a good question. How much time do you have?” She had been teasing, so was a little startled when he sat down in the chair next to her.

“I've got some time.” He leaned back in the chair, watching her with interest. Suddenly, she became very aware of how quiet the coffee shop had become, and how late it must be, and how close he actually was at the moment with no counter between them.

“Well—” she started, not entirely sure where to begin. He waited quietly for her to arrange her thoughts. Finally, staring a little over his shoulder at the counter without really looking at it, she spoke. “I've always liked stories. My whole life I've loved to read, watch movies and plays, write. For a time I thought I would be an author. As I grew up that love stayed, but also developed, turned into a love of ideas and theories. I like thinking,” she chuckled. “My favorite part of non-philosophy courses in undergrad was the theory, the underlying stories and ideas, and connecting them all together. So philosophy seemed like a natural fit. And philosophy isn't just interesting as philosophy – it is also fascinating as a history, seeing how all the different traditions and styles fed off, or reacted to, each

other over time. And,” she paused, “I like how – especially in earlier philosophy – philosophy was about how to live a good and happy life, and about life in general.” She finally looked back at him, smiling. “I guess I decided to go after my master's because there was still more to learn. Although there will always be more to learn beyond formal education, I suppose.”

He nodded thoughtfully, tapping his fingers on his chin. “That's what I have been struggling with, personally. Is it worth it going to grad school, when I can just learn whatever I want on my own? I have access to the university's library, so lots of resources there. Plus, then I'm not confined to a specific project or idea for an extended period of time. But I'm curious,” he said abruptly. “You said that there are different styles and traditions, and that philosophy used to be more about how to live a good life. That implies that either now, or at one point, it wasn't.”

She was a little taken aback by his last statement, but eager to explain. “Yes, there are countless philosophical styles and objectives. And a lot of the time they are related to the era they belong to. There are philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, and most of the ancient Greeks, who wrote about what it meant to be human, what the soul is, what the cosmos is and how it is formed and works, how social relations do and should work, and what the ultimate goals of human life are. Then, as an extreme counterpoint, there are the logical positivists of the twentieth century, who thought that philosophy should be strictly the study of language and language structures, and that all philosophy was meant to do was to help logically clarify science, totally ignoring anything metaphysical. And there are spin-offs and reactions to both of these styles, and many styles and ideas that are totally unrelated.

“Which is another thing I love about philosophy. Basically, as long as you are talking about human ideas, about knowledge, metaphysics, ethics, or whatever, there is going to be precedent to talk about it however you want.” She started speaking faster, getting carried away with the topic. “You want to write in dialogue? There is Plato and Berkeley. Prose fiction? Sartre and Beauvoir are your people. You want to describe the universe and human behavior in the form of logical proofs? Spinoza

is your guy. If you want to deliver biting little phrases, look to Nietzsche. Do you prefer a flowy, lyrical style? You align more with the Continental approach, compared to the more Anglo-American analytic tradition. You want to have a clear, defined thesis and provide countless reasons to support it? Great. You want to just explore ideas, and in the end have had an interesting conversation but no clear or actual conclusion or answer, also fine. Look at the *Theaetetus* by Plato. He certainly doesn't have an overarching thesis that he ends the book by proving. Instead, he investigates a number of different possibilities, without worrying about having an answer. So you see, you can pretty much do anything, as long as you are making an interesting point and can be understood.” She glanced up from the book to Will, and was surprised to see the smile on his face. Suddenly she realized how much she had been talking – *rambling*, she corrected herself – and was slightly embarrassed. “What? Remember, you asked!”

It was his turn to chuckle. “Don't worry, I know I asked! It's just a lot to process, and you get really animated and excited talking about it. When you get like that, you could probably make watching paint dry seem interesting.” He laughed again as she blushed. He leaned further back in his chair, considering. “So, out of all those styles and goals, what do you like most? I'm assuming as a grad student you are writing original work. How do you write philosophy?”

She stared at him. He looked at her questioningly. “What?”

She spoke slowly. “You're actually interested, aren't you?”

“Yes, that's why I asked...” he said slowly.

She smiled sadly. “I'm just not used to anyone besides my family and professors – and some of my classmates – being interested in all this. It's nice. Anyway, how do I write? I like the approach Plato takes in the *Theaetetus*. Philosophy is a conversation, to see which ideas are fruitful and which aren't, without a hyper-specific focus or thesis that needs a definite answer. There's a metaphor I heard several times in undergrad. Usually it was in the context of a liberal arts education,² but I think it applies even

better to philosophy. Philosophy is like arriving to a dinner party that is in full swing. People have been talking about various topics for a while now. When you first get there you have no idea what is happening. You don't really know or understand the topic, everyone is referencing things that have already been said, recounting what others who have already left contributed, bouncing between several topics. So for a while you try to figure out what is going on. Sometimes someone will realize you are there and clear up a reference or topic for you. Other times you just have to figure it out. And eventually you know what is going on, who loves or loathes each other, who think they disagree but also seem to be arguing a similar, or even the same point, and you are no longer uninformed and can help explain things to newcomers.

“Then you start to participate in the conversation, making your own alliances and animosities, changing the flow of the conversation and bringing up new ideas or resurrecting old ones. And eventually you leave the conversation, and the whole thing continues with other new participants, except this time you're one of the people being referenced. An important point that goes along with this is that it makes philosophy something that is done with other people. You don't just isolate yourself and try to think things up on your own. You bring your questions to other people in the world, and see if they are also interested in your questions, or if they have an idea about what the answer could be. It's an activity.³ And I really like that idea, that philosophy is really just a centuries-long conversation between thousands of people.

“And just as in a normal conversation, there isn't really a strict thesis being followed. People play around with ideas, seeing what connects with other ideas and what seems to makes sense. It's about examining ideas and stories to see if and how they work, not so much about proving that one way of looking at things is the right or only way. Yes, you still come up with your perspective, but that's exactly what it is: yours. It is bound in time and place, in your history, which means that it can't be a human universal that stretches across time and culture⁴. I think this last part gets forgotten a lot in

philosophy. And here I am rambling again! I guess a short answer to your question is that I see philosophy as a conversation, as the examination and exploration of ideas, and while having a stance or a thesis is important, it is secondary to that exploration of ideas.”

“And what's the current climate like in philosophy? Is that the usual approach these days?”

She laughed, a full-throated laugh this time. “No, it really isn't. Today's philosophical work, at least in the United States, is much more analytic, based on creating a thesis and finding evidence or arguments to support it. Most would probably not characterize philosophy as an exploration of ideas without a definite argument and answer. They think there has to be a *reason* for doing philosophy, some end goal or objective. To them, philosophy for the sake of philosophy isn't enough.” She shrugged. “Maybe it's just me, but I have always been a process-oriented kind of person, rather than a product-oriented one.” She paused, then continued slowly, “Maybe one way to look at why we do philosophy is to liken it to a friendship. Well, that depends on your definition of friendship, I suppose. Oakeshott, for example, talks about how friendship isn't about utility. We don't have friends to get something from them, but because we enjoy being with them. We are friends with people because they make us happy, they make us think and use our imaginations.”⁵

“And philosophy does this for me. I enjoy thinking, reading, and talking about philosophy, and I enjoy learning from it, but I wouldn't say I expect it to provide me with some ultimate completion. I do philosophy for its own sake, for the act of doing philosophy, not necessarily what I get from it in the end – whatever 'the end' may be. The way I like to do philosophy is to look at what has been done before, examine and compare and connect previous ideas, see what might be missing, and then figure out what I think about those ideas, without necessarily *proving* anything. What I really want to do with philosophy is see if what has already been written fits with how I experience the world. And if it doesn't, I want to write something that does, because maybe there are other people out there who also don't agree with what has already been written, and might agree with me. I want to change the direction

of the conversation, pointing out things that might have been forgotten or ignored by previous thinkers. From what I've seen of contemporary philosophy, that is not the standard form.”

“And since when did you conform to the standard?” Will asked, his eyes holding hers.

Ava narrowed her eyes slightly and tilted her head, contemplating his question. “True. I typically don't. But most people don't pick up on that...”

“They might more than you think. Or maybe it's just my intuition about you.” He paused. “Did that come off as creepy? I definitely didn't mean for it to be.”

She grinned. “No, it wasn't! Just unexpected.” She glanced at her watch, and let out a little noise of surprise. “Oh, it's that late? Shouldn't we have been kicked out by now? Shouldn't you have been working?” Her voice became a bit higher and more worried. “Have I totally distracted you from work? Are you going to be in trouble?”

It was his turn to laugh a full laugh, and she felt herself calm down slightly at the sound. “Yes, it is that late. No, Adelaide – the owner – let us stay as long as I locked up when we were done. She gestured to me while you were talking. And technically, I was done with my shift before I sat down, so no, I won't be in trouble. Was that all of your questions?”

She grinned at him. “Yes, I think so.” She started to put her book and notebook away, then glanced up with slight chagrin. “I'm sorry I just babbled the whole time. I should have followed social niceties and asked you about you and your life instead of going on and on about philosophy.”

He was at the counter, leaning over it to grab his own bag. He turned and smiled. “Don't worry about it. It was very educational.”

She groaned. “Oh great, exactly what every girl wants to hear, that listening to her is educational.” He laughed that deep laugh again, and she felt her insides warm. He had a nice laugh.

“All right, fascinating. Is that better than educational?”

“Yes, much better.”

They walked to the front door, and she held it open for him. The temperature outside had dropped from sweltering to pleasantly warm, and she closed her eyes and breathed in the scent of summer evening.

“I love this smell,” she said absentmindedly. She felt him come to stand next to her, and heard him inhale. He murmured his agreement. They stood in silence for a moment, listening to the trees rustling above them, the sounds of cars rumbling from streets nearby, and the occasional whoop from a group of university students wandering the neighborhood. Ava glanced up at Will, and saw that his eyes were still closed. She smiled a little, then quickly averted her gaze as he looked down at her.

“Well,” she said haltingly. “I’m going this way.” She gestured to the left.

“And I’m going that way,” he said, pointing to the right.

They both hesitated. Finally, she blurted out, “Thank you.”

He looked surprised. “For what?”

“For listening. For actually listening and being interested. You’d be surprised how rare it is to find people who actually listen.”

He smiled. “Any time.”

They stared at each other for another moment, before she turned to leave. She had only taken a few steps before she turned back around. He had also started walking in the opposite direction, but stopped and turned when she called out.

“There is going to be a philosophy lecture on campus next week. You know, if you were interested. In going. With me,” she added uncertainly, shifting her weight from foot to foot. He grinned, the shadows deepening his features.

“Yeah, definitely. I think I saw fliers for it around.”

She let out the breath she hadn’t realized she had been holding. “Cool,” she paused a beat.

“Want to meet here before, and walk over together?”

He smiled again, and she wasn't really sure how to describe it. "Yeah. Sounds like a plan. Night, Ava."

She smiled back. "Night, Will." And they both turned and walked in opposite directions, while their minds tumbled along a similar path.

On Women

Ava was quiet as they left the lecture, and Will was content to let her think. They walked in silence, meandering around the campus in the summer sun. Eventually they reached one of the small gardens that pocketed the university grounds, and Ava sat with a slight huff on one of the benches. Will sat next to her. He waited a beat, but she still refused to speak, even though he could practically hear her brain whirring and clicking.

“So,” he began slowly. “What did you think of the lecture?” She glanced over at him, and the energy in her eyes startled him.

“I think I am sick of men talking about rules and laws and universality and abstraction and rationality while only referencing other men.” She sighed, and immediately continued. “That came out more violently than I meant it to. Sometimes I just get so fed up. Even with all the different ideas and arguments and methods of philosophy developed over thousands of years, until very recently, they almost all circled around those ideas and those people. And I can't quite figure it out.” She fell silent again, staring at a tree across from them.

“If you stare at that tree any harder it's going to catch fire. And what can't you quite figure out?”

She chuckled at his comment about the tree, and seemed to relax a bit. She leaned back on the bench, and spoke:

“I am trying to figure out why certain things in philosophy are – historically at least – not taken very seriously. Namely, women, and emotions and passions. And even some topics that have a huge impact on human life, like romantic love, are ignored or dismissed by a large chunk of that history. I can understand why women weren't taken seriously. For thousands of years in human history women have been oppressed and were often prevented from actively engaging in anything like politics or philosophy. And for a lot of that history, women were seen as *unable* to exercise the rational or logical

thinking required for things like politics or philosophy. Thankfully, that it mostly behind us today. But still, until very recently philosophy has generally neglected the emotions and topics pertaining to interpersonal relationships. These associations – like between women and emotions – have lingered, and keep things like emotions from being serious philosophical topics. It's like how teachers and child-care workers are under-appreciated and under-paid in our society, since those jobs still have an association with women's work, even if we don't actively think of them as women's jobs anymore. And it is hard to talk about women and things like emotions or care without seeming to conflate them.” She shrugged. “It's an ongoing struggle in philosophy, trying to tease all of this apart. And it's something that I still struggle with sometimes. It always gives me a head ache when I try to think about it for too long. But, like I said, there are examples of things like child-care workers and relationships that have an historical association with women still being ignored or looked down on.”

“Hang on,” Will said, “Not all philosophers ignore relationships, though. Don't a lot of philosophers write about friendship, and how important it is? Even all the way back to what, Aristotle?”

She looked surprised. “Yes, they have. The problem is, the friendship that all those philosophers championed, starting with Aristotle, is deep friendship between equals, which until very recently meant between men. Aristotle was very specific that deep friendship had to be between equals, and he was also specific in saying that women and men weren't equals.⁶ Nietzsche wrote about friendship too, and even though he thought meaningful friendships between men and women were possible, he thought them to be extremely rare, because for the most part women were unable to participate in the kind of thinking that made them equal to men.⁷ It's important to mention here a difference between Aristotle and Nietzsche. Aristotle thought that women were metaphysically inferior to men, whereas Nietzsche thought that women had been trained by society to not think critically or about important issues and to submit themselves to men. The problem persists, though, that relationships between men and women have been neglected by philosophy. Although,” she paused, “I suppose that if by 'relationships between

men and women' we mean more than just friendship, but romantic relationships, we can't actually say that. Using that phrase to connote romantic love is extremely heteronormative, and excludes love that is anywhere else on the spectrum. It would be more inclusive and accurate to say that historically, philosophy discussed only friendships between presumably-straight men.”

“Huh,” he said, leaning back onto the bench as well and digesting what she had said. “So,” he finally continued, “why do you think philosophy has neglected the emotions and ideas like romantic love?”

“Well,” she replied. “I can think of several reasons.”

“Which are?” he prompted.

She smiled. “Well, the first is that romantic love as we know it hasn't been around for a very long time, at least not in the scope of Western history. Romantic love wasn't really a concept until the Middle Ages. And even then, it still wasn't the same idea that we have now. So part of it is that it literally wasn't something people were thinking about. But that doesn't excuse the neglect after romantic love became an idea similar to that we have now. Another reason that I think romantic love may have been neglected is because it is so often connected to emotion and passion, something that so many philosophers have tried to smother with reason over the years. Descartes actually thought that everyone – I suppose including women, based on the way he phrased it – was able to train their soul or mind so as to have complete control over the passions, and by extension over the body.⁸ He actually compared it to training behaviors in dogs.⁹

“And I understand the inclination to hold reason over the passions. If philosophers associated acting on our emotions with acting on our whims without conscious thought, then they'd think the world would be utter chaos and our society as we know it would never have been able to develop. At the same time, though, if we completely ignore or suppress that part of ourselves, we are missing out on a lot of philosophical fodder, and a lot of what makes us human.” She laughed unexpectedly. “I've

lived more than two decades as a human being, and one thing that I have learned over and over again is that as nice as it would be to be fully rational and logical machines, our emotions and passions always show up and make their presence known, throwing off our perfectly modeled world.

“I think part of the reason philosophy has tried to move beyond the passions and plant everything firmly in reason is because the emotional part of our lives is so messy, and philosophy – as we know it in the Western tradition – has almost always been about creating order and evenness and rules and laws, because of that messiness and the uncertainty of the world around us. Which just doesn't really work when it comes to emotions. It's like having a page full of random squiggles and lines, and placing a grid over it and proclaiming, 'There, now it all makes sense!' even if it really doesn't. Does that image make sense? I've been thinking about it for a while, and it's the best I could come up with.”

He nodded slowly. “I think it get it. Does this connect in any way to our discussion of women earlier, though?”

“Yes, it does actually! I think another part of the reason that emotions and passions have been neglected is because they were often associated with women. There was a pretty obvious dichotomy set up where men were rational and women were emotional, and therefore emotions weren't important to philosophy. And not only was there a dichotomy between emotion and reason, but there was also one between the public and the private.¹⁰ Men were allowed to work and live in the public sphere and the private sphere for pretty much all of human history, whereas women were mostly confined to the private sphere, the home, for most of that time. So, when that was the case, most of the emotions or actions we associate with romantic love were confined to the private sphere with women. For example, the physical aspect of romantic love, sex, is fully entrenched in the private sphere.

“Of course,” she mused, “that is a vast oversimplification. The private and public spheres are more like a social metaphor than they are or were a social reality. But for my purposes, the metaphor

works. After all, philosophy usually has more to do with oughts than reality anyway. If the separation wasn't as neat in real life as political or social leaders wanted, it was still the ideal. Even today, there are people in the United States who think that women belong in the home, even though so many women are in the workforce – including women who should be 'at home' by their or their group's standards. The same goes for sex being kept in the private sphere. The standard that society sets is that romantic sex is kept private, even though there are situations where sex takes place in the public sphere. But when it does take place in the public sphere, it is usually vilified or seen as taboo more than private sex is. So, even though things like the public and private spheres didn't really exist in reality, it was still an ideal that most people maintained.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “That was a weird tangent. Anyway, my last theory about why romantic love has been neglected is a fairly simple, and honestly sad, theory. Romantic love might have been ignored by philosophy because it was – and maybe still is – usually connected to women. There is a long, long history in our culture of declaring women's work or interests as being less important or complicated than men's. My favorite example,” she chuckled dryly, “if I can say favorite, is computer coding. When computer coding was first getting started, it was actually work that women did, and was seen as practically secretarial or menial, because all they were supposedly doing was plugging in equations and it didn't take too much thought. But once men started getting into the field, it started gaining more prestige as a job, and now we have the coding bros of Silicon Valley raking in unseemly amounts of money for doing work that a few decades ago was deemed as grunt work to be shunted off on women.”¹¹

She sighed. “Connecting anything to women or emotions usually means it is easy for philosophers to dismiss whatever it is, and I think this is what happened with romantic love.”

“Wait, why do you say it's easy to dismiss? Maybe you are being a bit extreme there, and dismissing the arguments that could come up from other philosophers, especially recent ones.”

“You want another example of how women and romantic love are easily dismissed?” Ava asked, frustrated. “Two words: romance novels. Even though the romance novel industry is an enormous, billion-dollar-a-year industry, almost entirely dominated by women – female authors, editors, publishers, et cetera – no one takes romance novels seriously as a genre of fiction.¹² And why? Most likely, because it is connected with women.”

He laughed at this. “Okay, but really? Romance novels? They are just so unrealistic, so often poorly written, and basically just a vehicle for unrealistic sex and fantasies.”

“And science fiction novels aren't?” she countered. “Why is science fiction taken more seriously as a genre than romance novels? You can't argue that all science fiction novels are well written, and you certainly can't argue that they are realistic. So what's the difference? The only one that I can clearly see is that science fiction typically – and I am speaking very generally, and about how it is marketed – is considered a male genre, whereas romance novels are seen almost exclusively as a female genre.¹³ So yes, I think it is possible for philosophers, not just regular people, to reject certain ideas just because they are associated with women.”

Will took some time to digest that. He had to admit that her comparison of romance novels and science fiction was fairly persuasive. “I'll grant you that romance novels aren't taken seriously because they are associated with women. But how do you know the same holds true of philosophy?”

She sighed. “I don't, not fully. To figure out exactly how philosophy-” she sighed. “I should specify Western philosophy, since I haven't really read anything outside of that tradition. There is so much more out there, but I've decided to limit myself to Western philosophy. I think that at this stage of my academic work, it will be better overall if I focus on what I know, rather than trying to pull together several different traditions, traditions that I might misinterpret or not fully understand due to lack of familiarity. I know it's a hole, but a hole that I am willing to accept. So, to simplify things, when I say philosophy I mean Western philosophy. Anyway, to fully understand how philosophy has treated ideas

like romantic love would take a comprehensive survey of all philosophical work since Plato – or even before Plato – and even if someone dedicated their life to that, they probably wouldn't be able to have a full answer. But philosophers are only human, after all, and are prey to the same societal assumptions and interpretations as everyone else, so it wouldn't be surprising if romantic love is ignored because of its association with women.”

They sat quietly for a while, considering the problem before them. Will broke the silence.

“Even if romantic love-” he cut himself off. “Can we just say love? It'll make things a lot easier.”

“Agreed. If we want to talk about a different kind of love, then we'll specify.” She smiled.

“Right. Then, even if love has been neglected historically, it still must have been mentioned.

And I bet within the last few decades or so there must have been work on love in philosophy. So what does all of that look like?”

“You're right. There has been a lot of work on love. There are philosophers that argue about if the goal of love is to become one being, or to remain two individuals in partnership. There are discussions on the distinction and ranking of *eros* and *agape*. Philosophers write about how we love, if it is through the bestowal or appraisal of virtues, a combination, or neither. Some write about how love is ontological rootedness, that love is what gives our lives meaning and a foundation, whereas others say love is just an illusion to get us to procreate. And probably more that I haven't read yet. But even with all of that,” she mused, “I still haven't really found any philosophical work that resonates fully with what I think love is.”

“Which is?” he prompted.

“Well, I'm not entirely sure yet. My first instinct, though, without thinking it completely through, is to say that love is a combination of desire for, and attraction to, a person, which at this point I am not sure can be justified, paired with a desire to create a lasting relationship and future with them, in the hopes of making each other better people. And also that love is a process, something that we do,

not just a feeling or a state of being. But again,” she laughed a little, “that's without a ton of thought. I still need to work through all of it to see if it makes sense on closer examination.”

He laughed, glad that her mood had lightened. He glanced down at his watch, and realized that he needed to be at work in fifteen minutes.

“I actually have to run. But you know what,” he said, deciding to take a gamble, “give me your phone.”

“Why?” she asked, as she pulled it out of her pocket and unlocked it, though he had the feeling she already knew why.

“Because,” he said, adding his name and phone number to her contact list, “I want you to send me the titles of any particularly interesting books or essays you've read. Because now you have me curious.” He handed her phone back to her. She looked surprised, and maybe a little pleased, and as much as he would have liked to stay and watch her expressions change, he really did have to go.

“I'll talk to you later, okay?” he said, and left her sitting on the bench.

Later that night, as he was sweeping the floors after closing, his phone buzzed. He paused, and pulled it out of his pocket. He had a text from an unknown number. His heart lurched a tiny bit as he opened it.

“You asked me for articles and book titles. I think you'll probably regret that choice,” it read, followed by a link. He smiled a bit, and went to open the link. But before he could, another text came in. “And smooth way of getting my phone number.” His grin deepened, and he opened the link eagerly, sweeping forgotten.

On Justification

Ava rolled over onto her stomach, pulling her notebook closer. She loved reading outside. For her, it was the only place to really read philosophy. The August humidity had given way to September crispness, and she was determined to read outside as much as possible before winter came and she'd have to retreat indoors. She pushed her sunglasses further up her nose, so the brilliant white pages of her book didn't blind her. Her phone buzzed next to her elbow. She knew she should ignore it. When she had gotten her phone out before she started reading, her finger had hovered over the sound button, but she hadn't silenced it. She had a lot of reading to do, she really shouldn't be checking her phone. She continued reading, but after a few lines she realized she had no idea what was going on. With a huff and a twinge of apprehension, she grabbed her phone and unlocked it, trying to ignore the thrill that went through her as she saw the "message received" alert. She grinned. It was Will.

"What are you doing?"

"Reading outside. Perfect weather for it. You?" She tried to breathe normally while she waited for his response. She tapped her fingers on the back of her phone.

"Wandering around campus trying to figure out where you are reading. South garden?"

"I really am predictable, aren't I...?"

"Be right there."

Her grin broadened. She tried to read a bit more while she waited, but her mind couldn't focus. She kept reading the same sentence over and over without understanding it. She finally heard footsteps, and sat up.

"Hey," Will said as he sat down next to her.

"Hey," she replied, instantly wishing she had come up with something more creative. He didn't seem to notice.

“So, because I knew you'd be reading, and probably need to actually be reading, I brought my own book. That way I am not totally distracting you from your work.” He pulled a paperback book out of his back pocket and showed it to her. A woman in a ballgown surrounded by flowers and curling script graced the cover.

“You're kidding.” She stared at the book in disbelief.

He laughed, his full, deep laugh. “Nope. I thought I'd try it out. You did send me this title.”

“I did, but I didn't think you'd actually read it!” She was distracted by the book in his hands, and didn't see the grin on his face as he stared at hers.

“Well, I am. It just got to a suspenseful part, too, so I'll let you get back to your reading.” He opened the book to a dog-eared page, and began to read. He completely ignored her as she continued to stare, focusing intently on the book. Finally, she tried going back to her reading. After she recovered from her shock, and refocused, she could pay fairly good attention to her reading, even as Will sat stretched out next to her with a romance novel in his hands.

They read quietly for an hour, before Will put his book down. Ava glanced up from where she had laid down again.

“Did you finish it already?”

“No,” he said, a little absentmindedly. She watched him as he thought, waiting for him to elaborate. “I just don't understand why they fall in love. She seems so smart, but he's kind of an ass. And fine, it's a romance novel and probably I'm reading too much into it, but how can she justify loving him when he acts the way he does?”

Ava didn't answer right away. She rolled over, staring up at the sky. “I don't think you can justify who you love or why you love them. I mean sure, you can come up with reasons: they are smart, and funny, and attractive, et cetera. But you can say that about other people without being or falling in love with them. If you have a list of all the things you value in a prospective romantic partner, someone

might have all those qualities but if there isn't a spark, an attraction, you don't fall in love with them. So the qualities themselves can't be why we love people. It reminds me of this whole battle going on in contemporary philosophy about how we love that's based on valuing. On the one side there are philosophers like Velleman who say we value and love people because of their good qualities. This view is called appraisal. On the other side are philosophers like Singer who say that a person becomes valuable to the one who loves them because they love them. This is the bestowal version. And of course, there is another side that says we can combine them."¹⁴ She paused. "I don't really like any of them, to be honest."

"Really? Why not?"

"It seems to me like they are trying to create reasons and structure on top of chaos. It might be a neat theory, but how does it actually work? Philosophers like Velleman and Singer claim that they are explaining how we love. They think that love is a mode of valuing someone. Some critics argue that the bestowal and appraisal philosophers cannot address the issue of justification, of justifying why we love certain people. I think Velleman and Singer are still trying to justify something, even though they claim their work supposedly describes how we love."¹⁵ These theories are still discussing the qualities of the people we love, which I see as just a short hop from claiming those reasons are why we love. Although, I suppose that is more the case with appraisal than bestowal. With appraisal love, you love someone because of their qualities, whereas bestowal isn't really based on their qualities." She paused. "Like I said, I don't like either theory. Their idea of love being a mode of valuing seem too much like a transaction, too economic. And it is decidedly one-sided. It isn't about partnership, but about what one person thinks of the other, not about how they relate to each other. On top of that, they are making love something static, based on some quality or state of mind, not something dynamic, not something that is done or lived."

She paused for a moment, thinking. "You know, I think that is what bothers me the most about

the philosophy of love I've read so far. Pretty much every account talks about love as a state of being, or as a feeling or emotion, not as something that you *do*, not a practice. Spinoza thinks that love is pleasure that comes with the idea of something external to the self, and that love is wanting to be with the external thing.¹⁶ Hume thinks that love is just a combination of the factors of beauty, lust, and kindness.¹⁷ He also goes on and on about the 'object' of love. While that may be the technical, philosophical term for the person we love, it is also a fraught term in our time, because of the history of objectifying women, of actually treating them like objects, not people. May argues that love is ontological rootedness, what gives our lives meaning and is mostly in our own heads.¹⁸ And there are philosophers like Solomon who think that love is the desire to be one entity, one being, which is an argument for love being a state of being.¹⁹ None of these philosophers write about love as something that people do. To me, that seems like a gaping hole, and is more important than trying to justify who we love.”

Will chuckled. “Ouf, that was a lot of names in quick succession! It is interesting that philosophers seem to ignore action, though. And what do you mean by practice, exactly? I feel like that could be a slippery concept, somehow.”

Ava frowned slightly. “You know, I hadn't really thought about it. I just kind of threw that word out there. I think you are right, though, and there are various definitions of practice. If I am remembering this right, Aristotle's version of practice is closest to what I am talking about. He thinks there are five virtues of thought, one of them being *technê*, which is usually translated as craft or art. Aristotle then distinguishes between activity and making within *technê*, where the former is done for itself, and the latter is done for the product. The first kind, activity, is more closely connected or similar to virtue, where the value of an activity is in doing the activity itself.²⁰ I think that fits well with love. Love is an activity whose end is the activity itself. And it is an activity, something we do, rather than just something that we feel, or the state we are in. Aristotle also distinguishes *technê* from *epistêmê*,

because *technê* deals with things that change, the day-to-day stuff, and *epistêmê* is about eternal and truth and falsity.²¹ Love is something we do, and love, like life, is something that changes.” She laughed wryly. “It's almost startling how few philosophers think of love in this way.”

Will nodded. “When you lay it out that way – with most philosophers arguing that love is feeling or a state of being, and with Aristotle's version of *technê* – it is weird that no one really connected love to action or practice.” He picked up the book again, pensively examining the cover. He flipped it open to the second cover, where the woman's dress was much more disheveled, and she was leaning against a man in tight breeches and an open shirt.²² “I do want to go back to the justification thing, though. So, what, we just love people by random? Or because of sexual attraction? You really don't think there is any coherent reason why we love who we love?”

She grimaced at the couple on the cover. “I don't think it is just sexual attraction. I can be physically attracted to people I don't know, or people I don't really like, without that being love. There are philosophers like Schopenhauer who argue that love was just an illusion to get people to reproduce.²³ I don't agree with that, for the simplest reason that it excludes any kind of love that is not heterosexual. But even if it were true, it doesn't explain our choices or particular attractions, and is just a really pessimistic view of the world. No, it's not just sexual attraction. But it's not sexual attraction plus the virtues or qualities of a person, either. Someone could be attractive, and have all the qualities I admire in a prospective romantic partner, but if there isn't a spark or connection... Then there isn't going to be love. It's not just their physical characteristics that cause the spark. There has to be something about their mind, too, that you are attracted to. When you find someone who you could possibly fall in love with, there are physiological indicators, like increased heart rate and a weird feeling in your chest. You think about them more than you should, they infiltrate your thoughts and you jump every time your phone goes off hoping it's them. And there is no way to justify why this happens with some people and not others. How do you justify why you are attracted to one person over another?”

Sure, you can list their qualities, but in the end, that tug, that attraction, what it is that draws you in, can't be justified. It is just there.”

Ava glanced over at Will, to see him still staring broodingly at the book in his hands. He finally looked up.

“I still feel like justification has it's place. You need to be able to give reasons for why you do things, and the choices you make. And that includes who you love. You need to be able to explain that to people. And, if you are looking at this philosophically, don't you need a better reason than just, 'I feel this way, so it's fine'?”

She sat up, and took off her sunglasses. “Can you really justify why you like certain things though? Look at music. Sure, you can come up with all sorts of reasons why you like a certain genre of music over another, but someone else could probably use your same list of reasons to talk about their favorite genre. What you feel, what you connect with, doesn't need to be justified. Not only does it not need to be justified, but it really can't be.” She chuckled. “I feel like a broken record. At least in my experience, I feel a deep pull or affinity for certain things, like certain types of art, or weather, or places or people. Why do I react this way to these things, but not others? Why do I get a full-but-hollow feeling of longing and relief in my chest when I walk outside on a misty fall evening, or when I look at a Renoir painting, but don't get the same feeling from midday sunlight in August or looking at a Warhol?” she shrugged. “That's the kind of feeling that I am describing, or trying to. And I can't justify it. I can describe it, try to explain it, come up for reasons why I might like one thing more than another, but I could very easily meet someone who disagrees with my reasoning for liking the thing, or agrees with it but doesn't have the same physiological response.

“To bring it back to philosophy, there are philosophers who say somewhat similar things. Chisholm writes that knowledge of feelings is self-justified, or neither justified nor unjustified – he uses the phrases interchangeably. He argues that when you say, 'I know I love this person,' your

justification for thinking that you love them is simply that you feel that way. There is no deeper reasoning.²⁴ He doesn't offer a deeper analysis of what it means to have a feeling, though. Most likely because it wasn't really the point of that particular piece of philosophical work, but maybe – and I am probably projecting here – he didn't explain feelings more because they are just there, part of the human experience. And there are some philosophers like Noddings who question the need for philosophy, or at least ethics, to deal with justification at all. Noddings writes that the only time we actually need to justify our ethical choices are when we act against our own ideal ethical standard, and when we act as ones-not-caring. She argues that we shouldn't define ethics as the study of justified action, and if philosophers insist on doing so, then she is fine calling what she does something other than ethics.²⁵ I think philosophy needs to realize and accept that it can't come up with all the answers, and can't actually be conclusive on everything. Some things we feel, and can't justify.”

“So there isn't a philosophical reason why we love who we love. It's just based on feeling, or some mysterious x-factor? I don't really see how that is different from physical attraction.”

“Well, physical attraction is a part of it. Instinct is more influential than we give it credit for – we are still animals, after all. A lot of people would try to blame Descartes and his dualism, the split between the mind and the body, on why we value the former over the latter, but that distinction and ranking has been around since the Greeks. The mind has pretty much always been valued over the body. And I think that is a mistake. We can't separate our minds from our bodies, especially when it comes to love. They are always influencing each other.”

He didn't seem satisfied with that answer. “Fine, what's your reasoning for that then?”

“Well, I have felt strong physical and emotional attraction to someone before. It permeates everything. You can feel it in your body as much as in your mind. Why is that not enough evidence?”

He groaned, running his fingers through his hair. “Okay, fine. It is just feeling. But what about when you need to justify why you love someone who does something morally wrong. What then? Don't

you need justification then, to understand your own moral perspective?”

She thought for a moment. “I think that how you react to what someone you love does is not based on why you love them. How you react is based on your other moral convictions. For example, some people choose to stay with partners who have cheated on them, because they are still in love and choose to give them another chance. Other people, however, no matter how much they might love someone, might not be able to stay with them after they were unfaithful. Why we love isn't fully responsible for how we react to situations like this. We need to rely on our other moral convictions or perspectives to help us figure out what we should or will do.”

He didn't like that answer. “How is that supposed to be a philosophical answer, that you just feel stuff and experience certain emotions? That love has nothing to do with morality?”

“Maybe it's not supposed to be a philosophical answer! Or maybe, more accurately, it's not supposed to be a philosophical question. The logical positivists rejected questions about metaphysics not just as unimportant or uninteresting, but as meaningless, as gibberish, as not belonging to the realm of philosophy at all. So, as Noddings – and to a lesser extent Chisholm – seem to prompt, does the question of justifying who or why we love belong to philosophy at all? How we react to things the people we love do doesn't have to do with why we love them, but with our other moral stances. I don't think justification has anything to do with who or why we love.”

They sat in silence for a while. There was a tension in the air that Ava didn't like. “It took me a long time to be comfortable with this idea. I still struggle with it sometimes. Philosophy, especially in the Western, English-speaking tradition, is so focused on having reasons for everything. And saying that there might not be a reason for something is really uncomfortable, and makes you question if what you are doing is even philosophy anymore. You get so bogged down in your tradition that breaking from it feels like you are ripping away all of your credibility, just because you are doing something different or arguing something differently. Focusing on the human experience, and drawing

philosophical conclusions from that, conclusions that might not be universal but may be particular, doesn't fit in with traditional philosophy, which makes it feel like it isn't philosophy at all.²⁶ And I've come to accept that, for the most part. Can you?"

Again, silence. She was almost afraid to look at him. What was he thinking? Did he think her totally insane? Finally, she glanced over at him. She was startled at the expression on his face. It was a combination of confusion, frustration, and something else, something more positive that she couldn't identify. "What? What is that look?"

He took a moment to reply. "I never know what to expect from you, and yet even knowing that, I am always surprised. You really have thought about this for a long time, haven't you? Not just about love, but about the tensions in philosophy as a discipline."

She laughed a little. "It's the way I've always been."

He shook his head slowly. "I'm going to need more time to process all of that... At the moment, I think you may be right, but I have to think about it more."

She nodded, relieved that he seemed to be seriously considering what she had said. She reached out for her book, but froze when his hand lightly touched her shoulder. She looked up slowly. His expression had changed again, and this time she had no idea what it meant.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what?" she managed to choke out, her heart racing.

"For being you. For your mind, and for giving me a glimpse inside." They sat like that for one heartbeat, two, three. The wind rustled in the trees above them.

"You're welcome," she said quietly. He smiled, and took his hand back, reaching down for the discarded novel. She took up her own book, and they both tried to read, while their hearts tried to steady themselves.

On Passion and Reason

“How important do you think sex is to a healthy romantic relationship?”

Will looked up at Ava, startled. It had been quiet at their table in the coffee shop. They had sat in silence apart from the murmurs of customers around them, the quiet rustle of turning pages, and the plinking of rain against the window. Until her unusual outburst. Her question had dragged him abruptly from his book, and he wasn't sure how to answer her.

She laughed. “I'm sorry, that was completely out of nowhere for you! I have been thinking about it all day, with these readings for my class. It's just that so many philosophers – or at least the ones who get read – spend a lot of time focusing on the distinction between feelings and passions, and reason. And usually they favor the latter. Which I understand, because if we really were just ruled by our passions we probably wouldn't live in the complicated, diverse society that we do. But at the same time, so many philosophers practically dismiss the passions, at least historically, or subjugate them or rank them as less meaningful than reason. I don't think that is great way to go about it, seeing as how the passions are just as much a part of us as reason is, and a lot of the time the passions overrule reason. What?” She stopped abruptly as he started to laugh.

“No, I'm sorry, it's just that was a really abrupt and attention-grabbing opening line, and I am trying to catch up. So, philosophy favors reason over the passions, as a general trend, right? How does this relate to sex?”

She flushed slightly. “The connection is that philosophers took this pattern of distinction, and the favoring of reason over passion, and applied it to love. They split it into *eros* and *agape*. *Eros* being-”

“Sex. I remember that much from Greek mythology,” he interjected.

“Yes, *eros* being sex and physical attraction, but also strong desire for something in general,”

she agreed, “and *agape* being a purer, more spiritual or intellectual love that is pure and uncontaminated by the physical or emotional, which I sometimes connect in my head – correctly or not – with reason. I think I connect them because, like reason, *agape* is typically disembodied, and seen as superior to *eros* because of that. *Agape* actually comes more from the Christian tradition, and usually relates to love from God to people: unconditional, eternal, serving, et cetera. Another distinction between the two is that most philosophers see *eros* as pertaining to specific people, for specific reasons, and *agape* as unconditional, requiring love for the whole that doesn't change. Even if that love isn't possible, because we are only human after all, we should strive for its perfection. And, of course, since philosophy is all about reason and pure thought and moving away from passions and particulars...”²⁷

“Most philosophers favor *agape* over *eros*,” he completed for her.

“Exactly,” she grimaced, looking down at the book as though it was personally offending her.

His lips curved into a quick smile at the sight.

Ava looked out the window, watching the rain slide down the glass. “Even before the idea of *agape* came around, philosophers were favoring that type of love over *eros*. Plato's *Symposium* – which almost everyone says you have to read when you are discussing love and philosophy – has Socrates retelling a conversation he had with a woman named Diotima, and her argument is that love is about conception, whether of actually living bodies or of ideas.” She chuckled ruefully. “Which do you think they deemed more important?”

“I'm guessing ideas,” he answered dryly.

“Of course. Anyway, once it's been established that the production of ideas is nobler and more important than creating other living beings, Socrates-slash-Diotima – I am just going to say 'they' – argue that love progresses on a ladder-like structure, moving from the simple passions to loving beauty as an idea.”

“How does that work? I don't think I ever read the *Symposium*.”

“Well,” she began, “they argue that we have to move through different levels of love, before we can actually get to the highest form of love, which is loving beauty as a concept. A person has to start with loving a particular physical body, one that is beautiful. Plato technically writes he – because of course it's a he that begets ideas, not a she, who is limited to babies – but I am going to use 'they,' because it's the twenty-first century and I am going to be inclusive. After that, they recognize that all bodies are beautiful in some way, and to limit themselves to loving one body over bodies in general is foolish, if they are to pursue beauty and love. Then, they have to realize that the beauty of the soul is more important than the beauty of the body. And because things like social customs and laws are the product of the human soul, they learn to love them too.

“I'd also like to point out that after they ascend each step, they end up thinking that the previous one was foolish and inferior to the one they are currently on. Anyway, after learning to love customs, they turn to loving knowledge, to loving theories and ideas and wisdom. And after this, they finally reach the last step, the platform they had been striving for. They learn to love beauty as beauty, in itself, as itself, as an Idea, in the Platonic sense. That's the goal of love, for Plato.”²⁸

“How did you remember all of that?”

She laughed in surprise, turning back to face him. “That's your question? How I remembered all that? Not why Plato – or Socrates or Diotima or whomever was speaking – thought love of beauty as an abstract concept was more important than loving the people around them?”

“I'm sorry, clearly that is the more important point.” He grinned. “So, what do you make of all that?”

“Well,” she said slowly. “In all honesty, I think this is where the philosophy of love took it's first wrong turn. I don't think that love should be some abstract idea that we strive for, and that once we get there we think that love for the individual, or passionate love, is foolish and useless except for having gotten us to where we are. I think love is more important on the human, messy level than it is on

the Idea level. Love helps us be happy, helps us improve ourselves, and helps us engage in the world around us in a productive way. But that's a different conversation.” She stared broodingly out the window again. Will shifted his weight in his chair. He wanted to say something, but he didn't know what, and he didn't want to interrupt her thought process.

Eventually, she continued. “He's not the only one to favor a higher version of love, or to have love ascend some kind of ladder from base passions to intellectual love. Kierkegaard created a similar process in his philosophical work. He thought that there were three levels of love, and again, that we moved through the first two to reach the third.²⁹ The first level he calls the aesthetic, which is basically passionate or erotic love. He thinks there is some value here, like when we produce art, but not much beyond that.³⁰ The next step is ethical love, which he associates with marriage. Love here is no longer passionate or erotic, but comfortable. Love here has less emotion, and is more about procreation and having a stable family and life.³¹ And then there is the third level, which is love of God, and of course is the highest form of love, and requires a leap of faith.³² Kierkegaard is a little less problematic, in that I agree with him that love progresses from a more wildly erotic state to a calmer state of companionship, but the bit about God I can do without, and I also don't think that we should consider the love found in marriage to be better than erotic love, which is what I think Kierkegaard is saying.

“I don't think they should be regarded as better or worse, but simply different. Erotic love is where you start, the initial attraction and sweeping emotions. But I do think that love does or should solidify into a more stable state, where people can count on each other and find support and care and comfort. But not at the expense of the erotic, or as a replacement for the erotic. Love should be able to adapt. After all, people change, and to expect love – a clearly human feeling or concept – to stay the same and not change seems foolish.”

“So you don't think love should or can be unconditional?”

She snorted. “Nothing people do is unconditional. People are inconsistent, flaky, and

hypocritical creatures, and mortal to boot. We change. How could we expect love to remain the same when we ourselves don't? I think the key here, is that the way love lasts is that we find people who will change with us, or whose changes match our own. When you are with the right person, in the right situation, your changes match, and so love can remain, without having to be unconditional or eternal.” She paused. “I guess that if love is unconditional, that means that it can be challenged, and should even be expected to be challenged. But that's not necessarily a bad thing. Nietzsche talked about how sometimes friends have to act as enemies, to really help each other develop and better themselves.³³ If love was really unconditional, and unchallenged, then nothing would change, no one would grow.”

They sat quietly again, considering the ideas before them.

“I think,” she started slowly, “that love needs to be both passionate and thoughtful, full of emotion but partnered with reason. I think creating such a definite split between *eros* and *agape* was a mistake. While they may be different parts of love, they have become too separated from each other. To have a healthy, meaningful, loving relationship, you need both. And they have to be equals, just like the people who are experiencing them. One is not better than the other, they are just different parts of a whole experience, different parts that are both needed. How can we love someone when we have no passion for them, no reason to care, or desire, or longing for them? And how can we love someone if we can't keep our heads, can't love them for their brains or spirits, can't love them because they make our world feel safer and more understandable and comfortable? How can we love someone if we can't think rationally about the world, about their needs and ours, and work together to fulfill them? This is why I think it was a mistake to split the two so completely, and to prize *agape* – or reason, if you don't equate the two – over *eros*. We can't ignore parts of the human experience, of human life, just because they are messy or don't conform to reason or patterns. Life is messy, and we need to embrace that messiness, even as we try to make sense of it.”

“Wow...” he murmured.

“Yeah.”

The silence at their table was eventually broken by a musical jingling coming from Ava's purse. Her brow furrowed as she dug through it and pulled out her phone, then her eyebrows shot up and she muttered what Will thought was a curse. “I was supposed to meet my sister for lunch! I'm late!” She hurriedly gathered her things, muttering more to herself than Will. “I always lose track of time when I'm talking to you. Or about philosophy. I guess she should be used to this by now.” She sighed heavily, and stood, swinging her bag onto her shoulder. Then she stopped, looking down at Will, who was trying to hide his disappointment at her sudden departure. “I'm sorry this was so abrupt. I wish we could keep talking, but...” she shrugged.

“Don't worry about it. She's your sister, I understand,” he said, smiling up at her. She smiled back, and as she walked past him, she touched his shoulder.

“Thanks, Will,” she said quietly, giving his shoulder a quick squeeze, before heading to the door and dashing into the rain outside. Will was torn. He was crestfallen at her abrupt exit, but somehow warmed as well – she had never touched him before as she said good bye.

On Longing

Ava hummed to herself as she walked across campus. It was rock ballad, a song from the 1980s that she just couldn't place.³⁴ It was a mournful song, full of longing. It matched the chilling weather around her. She could tell from the smell of the air that it would snow soon. She shivered slightly and pulled her coat a littler tighter around her body. She turned suddenly as she heard someone call her name.

“Ava!” It was Will, hurrying to catch up with her. She smiled, and waited for him to reach her. “Hey,” he panted, his breath visible in the air between them. “I called your name a couple times but you didn't hear me.”

“I'm sorry!” She couldn't tell if her cheeks were reddening from the chill or embarrassment. “Sometimes I get stuck in my own head and don't pay enough attention to what's happening around me. How are you?”

“Good,” he grinned. “And you?”

She hesitated before answering. “I'm... good.”

He noticed her hesitation. He cocked his head, eyebrows drawing together. “You sure?”

She let out a huff of laughter. “Yeah. It's just this weather. As much as I love it, it sometimes makes me a little melancholy. Wistful? I'm not sure what the word is.”

He paused for a moment, thinking. “Longing for something, maybe? Is that what you're looking for?”

She looked up at him, her eyes somber even as her lips curved into a faint smile. “That seems about right. Longing...” The word lingered in the air along with their breath. Ava tugged at her coat again, more for something to do than anything. Will noticed the gesture.

“I'm sorry! I'm keeping you, from where you were going and out in the cold. I just saw you and

wanted to say hi. I'll let you go." He started to turn away.

"No!" she said, a little more forcefully than she meant. He looked surprised as he turned back. "I mean, you weren't keeping me from anything. I was just heading home, but I'd like company." She glanced around where they stood, trying to come up with something. Her eyes landed on the campus art museum. "Want to go there? It's close, and warm, and I've been wanting to see their new exhibit. Unless," she realized, "you're busy and have to go. Never mind, forget I said anything..."

"I'm not doing anything. Except going to the museum with you, apparently." He grinned, and she suddenly felt much warmer. They walked the short distance to the museum doors in silence, both trying to come up with something to say. Once inside, they peeled off their coats, and began to wander the gallery, commenting every once in a while on the artwork. As they stood in front of one piece, Ava glanced up at Will's face, wondering what to say.

Will spoke before she did. "What do you feel when you look at this painting?" he asked her, eyes still trained on the canvas in front of them. She quickly looked away from his face, focusing on the art. She considered it a moment before answering.

"I feel motion, and a sense of peace and harmony. Why? What do you feel?"

"I feel the motion, too, but it seems more chaotic and energetic to me." He paused. "Why is it that we feel different things, do you think?"

"I'm not sure. Do you think it's beautiful?"

"I do. Do you?"

She nodded her agreement, then realized he wasn't looking at her. "Yes, I do."

"And what does that say, that we disagree on what we see, but still think it's beautiful?"³⁵ You know," he continued. "I've been thinking about our conversation on passion versus reason and all that. You were talking about how in love we need both, in some combination, and that the ratio between them changes over time. But who determines what that ratio is? What if people never feel the giddiness

you talked about? Or they only feel that? Do you discount that as love then?"

She thought a moment before answering, continuing to look at the painting. "I've been thinking off-and-on about that too. What I don't want to do is have some definitive rule about what love is. Because if someone's experience doesn't match what I describe, then it could be argued that I am denying that what they feel is love. And that isn't my intention. Maybe it's like this painting," she gestured to it slightly. "Maybe love is something that most people could say is beautiful, but they don't necessarily agree as to why."

"But," Will countered, glancing down at her, "that means that everyone thinks love is beautiful. There are probably people who don't think love is a beautiful thing."

"True," she sighed, walking over to the bench in front of the painting and sinking down onto it. "But then where does that leave our conversation? How can we talk about something if it has so many different interpretations and meanings, and impacts different people in different ways?"

He sat down next to her. "I don't know," he said this time. They continued to look at the painting, eyes roving over its surface. "Maybe..." he started. She glanced over at him, to see him still looking toward, but not really at, the painting. He paused so long she finally had to prompt him.

"Maybe what?" She nudged his shoulder gently with hers. He glanced down at the point of contact, then up at her, his gaze focusing.

"Maybe love is just whatever we want it to be. But the reason I took a while to answer is because I was trying to remember that term in philosophy, when one theory is just as good as another, and that most philosophers seem to hate."

"Relativism? That's kind of an oversimplified definition, but what I think you are getting at."

"That's the one. So if love is just what we want it to be, doesn't that make your argument relativistic, which is something philosophers usually try to avoid?"

"It's true that a lot of philosophers try to avoid relativism, but there are also many who think that

relativism is the way the world actually is, and that we need to accept that. And I understand your point. It's like whenever we talk about love, we try to create an idealization." She paused, struck by an idea. "Idealization. That makes sense..."

"How so?"

"Well, when we think about love, we think about what we want, typically. Or if we are disillusioned about love – we didn't get what we wanted in the past, or think we never will get what we want in the future – then we create some other theory that disregards what we wanted or what is typically wanted so we can feel better about not having it. And I can see that in my own thinking – the former, not the latter. What I've been saying about love is what I want love to be, what I want to be true. And maybe what I want from love isn't what other people want from it. Maybe what I think is romantic doesn't match with other people's ideas of what is romantic. And maybe the only way to account for that is some kind of relativism." She frowned slightly. "This idea of idealization is interesting, though. I can kind of see it applying to philosophy in general, not just about love."

"How so?" he asked, watching her expression. She ignored his gaze, staring-at-but-not-seeing the painting before them.

"Well, why do we do philosophy? Because we want to understand our world, ourselves. And what we want is some kind of order. So we create systems, ways that the world works. And these systems can be seen as idealizations. We want the world to match the philosophy we come up with, even though it might not. Kant wanted to save both Lutheran Christianity – or just ethics in general – and Newtonian physics, so he created a system that supported both: 'I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith.'³⁶ Nussbaum created a system of basic capabilities, that she thought should be applied to all of humanity, to create a more just world.³⁷ These are theories about what the world should be like. They are ideals. So maybe philosophy doesn't describe how the world is, but how we want the world to be."

Her gaze flicked from the painting to Will's face. He seemed to be considering what she had said. She continued to speak. "So, my ideas about what I want from love inform my philosophical work on the topic. And what other people want from love informs their ideals or philosophical answer to the question, 'What is love?' Maybe this is why love has been such a hard topic for philosophers to pin down, because we are all creating philosophy based on what we want, and what we want isn't all the same, in any situation, but with love it could be even trickier, because it seems to be such a personal experience that defies easy universalization or definition."

"And this saves you from other people claiming that your philosophical conclusions about love don't match their experiences. That you are just proposing one idea for what love is, your idea, and not what love for everyone is."

She nodded, trying to refocus her eyes. "What I don't want to do with my philosophical work is discredit or exclude other experiences of love. Even if I don't agree with someone about their definition of love – I don't think the kind of love that is in an abusive relationship is healthy or good – I can't deny that it is love, if someone in that relationship earnestly and sincerely thinks it is. I can and could try to convince them it isn't, but I shouldn't claim that it's not – I don't know their experiences, their emotions. I want to be able to say that abuse is wrong. I think there is stable enough ethical work to claim that. But if someone feels love in that situation... how can I deny that?"

She sighed, stretching out her neck, then chuckled dryly. "Isn't this a cheerful subject?" She started twisting her hands together, as though trying to warm them. "This changes how I think about things. When I think about philosophy of love, I'm not just thinking about it as abstract rules about everyone anymore. I'm taking what I want – a balance of passion and emotion with calm reason, a relationship that is based on partnership and respect, that is going to be stable and long-term and that involves action, doing things – and creating a philosophy that supports it. Does that then invalidate my philosophy? Does that spiral us down into relativism? Is it bad if it does? Does the awareness of what is

happening itself grant any lenience? Would any philosopher agree with me? I just don't know..." She fell silent, thinking.

Will didn't know what to say either. He desperately searched for words, wanting to give her a solid answer, solve her problem, but he just didn't know how. Instead, he tentatively reached out and took one of her hands in his. Her hands still, then she slowly held his in return. After a minute or so, she spoke again.

"I keep coming back to Rorty's explanation of relativism and irrationalism. Rorty says that for the pragmatists, the point of conversation is the conversation itself. There is no end, no greater goal to strive for. At the end of the conversation we won't have a solid, stable answer that explains everything, because the conversation never ends. The conversation, the process, is itself the goal or point.³⁸ And I know some people worry that if we don't have an end point to work toward, how do we keep people engaged in the conversation? If there isn't an end goal, why converse at all? I think maybe our outlook, possibly based in how our society works, is that the end, the result, is more important than the process it takes to get there. Look at schools, right, the goal is typically – as wrong as it seems to me – to get a good grade, not to learn. Or the point of getting a specific job is the financial benefits that come from it, not that the work is necessarily enjoyable and beneficial. Even with smaller things like art or crafting, the goal is often seen as the finished object, not the process of making the object.

"And I can see how thinking of philosophy as ideals and not reality could be scary for some people. If people turn to philosophy, or even science, or religion, to find answers about how the world *is*, this doesn't help them at all. So if I say that philosophy isn't actually about how the world is, but how we want the world to be – that it is more about ideality than reality – this destroys their whole reason for doing philosophy in the first place. But there are also people that can accept the fact that there might not be an end goal. There are people who care more about the process than the product, who see that we really are creating what we want rather than describing what is." She shrugged. "It's

like I said before – this isn't really a comfortable answer, even for me. I mean, I have no problem with seeing the world and our actions in it as being a conversation, and that the goal is the conversation itself with no end achievement to unlock. What is uncomfortable is that this doesn't always feel like philosophy to me anymore. I have to keep reminding myself that philosophy is or can be about how people actually live, that there isn't always an answer, that this way of doing philosophy is actually still philosophy.” She glanced down at their hands before looking up at his face. “Thank you again, for listening to me ramble and try to make sense of all this. Any time you need someone to listen like this, let me know.”

Will looked down, a smile warming his face. “I will. Although I can't guarantee that my rambles will be as deep or intellectually stimulating as yours.” He laughed as she elbowed him lightly.

They sat that way in the quiet gallery for some time before they roused themselves. Their earlier conversation still echoed in their minds, but they put the issue aside, and enjoyed their time together instead. They walked through the rest of the exhibit, speaking about the other pieces they saw, laughing and teasing each other.

On Friendship

Ava stared longingly out the window of the library. Snow was swirling down from the sky, adding to the thick blanket that already lay upon the ground. Her longing was mixed. She missed the warm weather when she could read outside for hours and hours, but she also wanted to pull on her snowpants and romp around in the snow like she did as a child. Her phone buzzed gently on the table next to her elbow. She glanced down, then snatched it up when she saw Will's name.

“What are you up to?”

“Trying to read in the library. Emphasis on trying. You?”

“Hoping you aren't too busy to spend some time together.”

She snorted in laughter. “Do you always have to be so cheesy?”

“Yes. Always. It's what I do.” Then a moment later, “So are you?”

“Too busy? No, please save me from my work.”

“Want to go look at books?”

“Seriously? Is that a question?”

“Meet you in 10, at that little shop by campus.”

Ava grinned as she packed away her work. She and Will had been spending more and more time together during the last few months, and she found herself becoming more and more accustomed to having him in her life. When she had a new idea about her work, or good news, or was bored, he was the one she called. And yet she still felt giddy whenever the phone rang, or she saw his smile.

She was learning more and more about him, too. She had been surprised when he told her that he co-owed the coffee shop with his cousin, and she had whacked him playfully on the arm for letting her think he would be in trouble during their first long talk. He had only laughed, darting away from her swinging arms. They talked about his projects, too. He was an amateur historian, working on a

large project about letters sent home from soldiers and highlighting their commonalities and differences between wars. They had discovered a small used bookshop near campus, and spent hours exploring it. That bookshop was where she was headed now, and she grinned to herself as she tugged on her hat, and trudged out into the snow.

She arrived at the bookshop a few minutes after Will did. They started wandering the aisles, chatting and laughing about the books they discovered. Ava picked up a battered copy of *Romeo and Juliet*, and considered it thoughtfully.

“You know, I never understood why people think this is romantic. It's just two kids who are infatuated with each other, make bad choices, and a lot of people die because of it, including them.”

He peered over her shoulder, examining the book as well. “Well, I think a lot of people find the idea of being so in love or so consumed by someone that you'll do anything for them the ultimate kind of romance.”

She snorted. “I'll never understand the whole, 'Oh, they would die for me, they must love me so much' thing. If someone I loved died for me, I would be utterly heartbroken, and they would have just caused more suffering for the one they love. But because they are dead, they don't know or care. Better to challenge people to live for each other. That's much harder.” She paused, flipping through the book.

“I also don't really get the appeal of the idea of someone being your 'other half,' like you aren't complete on your own. Or, as some philosophers actually argue, that love is the desire to merge into one being, a 'we.' And that's still a fairly contemporary idea. I guess I am too headstrong and individualistic for that idea, and maybe too much of a feminist. Women have spent enough time being seen as worth less than men unless they are attached to one in some way.”³⁹

“Okay,” he said, glancing from the tattered book in her hand to her face, “so if love isn't about merging into one being, then what is it? What is the goal, or what does it look like?”

She laughed, shaking her head slightly. “Should have known that question was coming.” She considered the shelves before them, ruminating on her answer. “I’ve always liked Aristotle’s discussion of friendship. Of course, it has its faults. Aristotle thinks that only male Greek citizens can actually be friends, but if you take that and the sexism, classism, racism and slavery out, I think it can be a pretty good framework for romantic relationships. Oh, and if you take out the language and structure of ‘lover’ and ‘beloved.’”

“I get the -isms, but why not ‘lover’ and ‘beloved?’” he asked, tilting his head a little.

“It actually gets back to one of the -isms, in a way. In the lover/beloved paradigm, the lover is active and the beloved is passive. And even though originally the lover and beloved were both men, the language and idea carried through to heterosexual relationships, and all too easily aligns with the sexist idea that men are active and women are passive, that men should pursue women and women should just accept their advances, which people and philosophers have argued is the case. It also sets up a hierarchy in the relationship. It takes more effort to be the lover, so that is seen as a better or more noble pursuit than being the beloved. And again, if you accept the men-are-active, women-are-passive distinction, then you are arguing that men who love are nobler or put more effort into love than women. Plus, then there is a weird power trip, where the lover, because they are active and superior, has more power than the beloved, and they are not in an equal relationship.”

“Have you thought about this before? Because that was a pretty well-formed argument for a spur-of-the-moment thing.”

She laughed quietly. “Yeah, I have thought about this before. It’s something that bothers me about early philosophical work on love. But anyway, we were talking about Aristotle’s idea of friendship.”

Will nodded, grinning. “We were.”

She nudged him playfully in the shoulder. “Hey, you asked the question! But, Aristotle. He

separated friendship into three kinds, depending on the reason or objective of being friends. He argued that we make friends for utility, for pleasure, and for the sake of the other person as an individual.⁴⁰

You can guess which he thinks is most valuable.”

“Friendship for the sake of the other?”

“Bingo. One thing that is important to note, though, is that he still thinks there is value in the other two kinds of friendship. He just thinks that friendship for the sake of the other is better or more stable than the other two. Anyway, friendship for the sake of the other-” she paused. “I am just going to call this '*philia*.' I don't know any other way of shortening 'friendship for the sake of the other' that doesn't have positive or negative implications. 'True' or 'real' friendship implies that the other kinds aren't actually friendship, which isn't the case. And while *philia* in Greek might not mean exactly what I want either, it is a better placeholder in our conversation now than any English alternatives. Anyway, *philia* revolves around helping the other achieve the good, or happiness, which for Aristotle is the goal of life. And of course, they do so by being virtuous people. He has a whole argument about why only virtuous people can have *philia*.⁴¹ To be in a *philia* relationship, people have to be good, have things in common with each other, delight in being in each other's company, and even live together. Aristotle thinks this kind of friendship is fairly uncommon, and takes time to fully develop.⁴²

“A lot of his work on friendship can apply to romantic relationships, too. Not just his structure, but he also writes about how both parties need to be on the same page, both need to have the same expectations and goals of the friendship for it to be long-lasting and fairly peaceful.”⁴³

“You keep saying that the structure he creates for friendship would work for romantic relationships, too. What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that his structure allows for the different types of romantic relationships people seem to have. For example, Aristotle writes about friendship for utility. This is when people are friends because they get something useful from each other.⁴⁴ And there are a lot of people out there who are constantly

in romantic relationships, and are never really single, because they feel like they need to have some person in their life to give it meaning, or they think they need to have a romantic partner to fulfill societal expectations. Then there is friendship for pleasure.⁴⁵ This is like couples who are together to have a good time, to have fun, and are together for this fun, not for the other person.

“Then there is *philia*. This is the type of relationship that I, for one, want. This is the relationship where the people involved love each other, cares about the other's well-being, their projects, their hopes and dreams, and they help the other be a better person. Beauvoir writes about this too, about how people need to have their own projects to work on, projects that aren't the other person.”⁴⁶ Ava wrinkled her nose. “Although I don't particularly like Beauvoir on the whole. She has a chapter in *The Second Sex* about women in love, and she spends pretty much all of it describing how a woman finds all sense of meaning and identity in the man she loves, how she deifies him and then is angry with him when he can't live up to her warped expectations, how she is extremely jealous of anything that takes his attention away from her, even sleep. And here's the kicker: she does all of this because she thinks it is too hard for her to actually live her own life and shape her own identity.”⁴⁷

Ava shuddered, then continued bitterly, “Beauvoir is critiquing the idea that this is what love is, but it's no wonder men didn't take women or romantic love seriously. If that was the common conception of love, it must have been so easy for philosophers to dismiss romantic love. She does spend a page toward the end of the chapter describing what 'genuine' love is. She thinks that love needs to be between people who are both striving for transcendence – basically to create their own lives and meaning – and that both need economic independence. But she also focuses on how this form of love is used to better understand the self through another.⁴⁸ Clearly, I don't think women – or people – love in the way Beauvoir describes and critiques as the common conception of her time, but I also don't agree with her conclusion about 'genuine' love. Love needs to be between people who are equals, who are friends or lovers or whatever because they genuinely care for and love to be around the other person,

not because they understand themselves through the other person, though I suppose that could be a side effect.” She paused, pondering this for a moment, before shaking her head, and started to wander down the aisle again.

“I didn't mean to rant about Beauvoir. I just hated reading that chapter so much. What were we talking about before that?”

Will backtracked over the conversation in his head, but before he could reach the point she was looking for, she spoke again:

“Okay, this isn't what we were talking about before, but I think it helps clarify what I was trying to get at with the whole *philia* thing. I think a big component of love is care. There is a branch of philosophy called care ethics, which argues that care is a hugely overlooked but important component to ethics.⁴⁹ Philosophers like Tronto argue that there are four elements to care. There is caring about, which is when you look around and see that someone or something needs help. It is about *seeing* others. Then there is taking care of, which is identifying the needs of another, figuring out what to do about it, and taking responsibility for their care. Next is care-giving, which is when you actually do something, act on the care needed. And finally, there is care-receiving, which isn't what it sounds like. Care-receiving is when the person who you are caring for responds to the care, letting you know that what you are doing does – or doesn't – help.⁵⁰ Something else that I think is interesting and important about care ethics, and Tronto's work in particular, is that care is a practice, not just as a disposition or emotion, like how I do with love.⁵¹ Tronto points out that care isn't really about the self. It is about the other person, not finding or affirming yourself in the other person.⁵² So many philosophers try to argue that love is trying to understand yourself through someone else, like Beauvoir argued. And sure, that is maybe part of love, or something that happens as a by-product, but I don't think it's the point. We care and love people for themselves.”

She paused. “There is one thing I am wary of in care ethics, though. Care ethicists – at least

what I have read of their work – never seem to explicitly say that the person who cares should expect someone else to care about them, too. It doesn't necessarily have to be the person they are directly caring for, using examples like nurses or other care workers, but the carer should have someone in their life who genuinely cares for them, too. It always unsettles me when I read care ethics and this isn't actually said. It seems all too easy for the carer they are describing to only give care, and never receive it. And this is where I link back to love and Aristotle. I think that in a *philia* relationship, in a love relationship, the people involved have to actively care for each other. It has to be mutual and supportive. They should be able to rely on each other to provide care when needed. I think if Aristotle were able to read some care ethics today, he'd probably agree that mutual care like I have described would be a component in *philia* relationships. The whole point of a *philia* relationship is that the people involved want to better each other, which means they would have to care enough about each other to want to help in the first place. And like I said in a different conversation, sometimes loving and caring actually comes through challenging, like Nietzsche wrote. Change and betterment isn't always a positive or easy experience.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, startling Will. “That was the other thing! I was going to talk about how it was important for Aristotle that people need to be on the same page, have the same expectations, about their relationship.⁵³ And the expectation of mutual care is a big one. There are so many relationships that end because people weren't up front and honest about what they wanted out of the relationship, and because of that it eventually fell apart when the truth came out.” She paused, then sighed slightly. “Whenever I read the sections of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that describe *philia*, I always think of it in terms of a romantic relationship, more than just friendship, and it always makes me wistful...”

Then she frowned. “But there are parts about Aristotle that I don't like, apart from the -isms and lover/beloved thing I mentioned earlier. I don't really like his focus on love and good and beauty. Aristotle argues that we love things because they are good, which makes them lovable, and that we

can't love anything that isn't lovable, meaning we can't love anything that isn't good.⁵⁴ That focus on things having to be good and lovable has always seemed off to me. I think it is because it describes love as being static, as being an object or a property of an object, rather than something dynamic, something that one does. Actually," she said, a new idea dawning on her, "that reminds me of a different theory about what love is. I read one book that argued that love was ontological rootedness. Basically, love is what gives our lives meaning and a sense of belonging in the world.⁵⁵

"The thing I don't like about ontological rootedness is that it allows for dangerous or unhealthy relationships. If someone finds their sense of belonging in the world with someone who abuses them – and maybe even because they abuse them – the theory of ontological rootedness would still consider that love. Which is the opposite of and more unsettling than Aristotle's insistence on only being able to love things that are good. And it goes against Aristotle's notion of *philia*. In an abusive relationship, the people involved aren't equals, they don't mutually care for the betterment of the other person – they don't mutually care for the other at all."

She let out a little huff that might have been a laugh. "After all my raging about how philosophy shouldn't try to universalize anything, and about how we need to respect other people's experiences and points of view, I am having a hard time not making the judgment that an abusive relationship isn't love. It clearly isn't based on what I think love is, but I want to say that is isn't love based on anyone's definition. Or maybe that it shouldn't be. Alcibiades in the *Symposium* thinks that he is in love with Socrates, and gives a long speech about it. He talks about how Socrates makes him feel deep shame about himself, about his projects and desires, makes him feel that he is never *good* enough, and isn't focused on what is really important, overcoming his shortcomings. He even talks about wanting to be dead because of how Socrates makes him feel."⁵⁶ She snorted. "I can't believe I am using a pederastic relationship from more than two thousand years ago to describe an abusive relationship. But it is what is it, and I don't think this should be an acceptable definition or experience of what love is. At the same

time, Alcibiades clearly thinks he is in love, so I am not sure what to make of that.”

She cocked her head to the side, thinking. “Maybe,” she continued, “Tronto can save me here.” Her face lit up as she thought it through. “Yeah, that works. If there is not the mutual care, described by Tronto, in a relationship, abusive or otherwise, then I don't think it can be a love relationship. There needs to be that base, an equality of doing the work of care, for a relationship to really be love. Ergo, abusive relationships aren't love.”

She glanced up at Will. “See, you should know better than to ask me philosophical questions. I just ramble on and on and you never get a chance to say anything.”

He laughed, and nudged her as she had nudged him earlier. “Hey, like you said, I asked. I like listening to you talk. It makes me happy.” The air around them seemed to crackle with a new energy. She blushed.

“Well, glad to hear that,” she murmured. They stood in silence for a moment. Finally, Ava broke the tension. “Well, there you have it. You asked what I propose love to look like if it isn't a futile attempt to become a single being? I think love best fits into the structure of friendship described by Aristotle.”

“Well,” he said slowly, “if that's the case, what is the difference between love and friendship then?”

She looked surprised. “That is a good question, actually. I think it goes back to attraction. You can be friends with someone, have a very deep and meaningful connection with them, and you could even love them, but if you aren't attracted to them, if the physical aspect isn't there, then it's not romantic love.”

He nodded, mulling it over. He idly picked up a book, and laughed when he saw the cover. “Check this out!” She looked down at the cover, and laughed in surprise. It was a copy of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. They spent the next several hours meandering through the bookstore, talking and

laughing, and showing each other their finds.

He walked her home, even though she insisted it wasn't necessary. They slowed as they reached the doorstep of her apartment building, then stopped, looking at each other.

“Well,” Will said, “I suppose this is it.”

“Yes,” she replied somberly.

He smiled. “Goodnight, Ava.”

“Goodnight, Will,” she said, and before she could lose her nerve, she reached up and kissed him, softly, briefly. She pulled away first, and without looking at him, turned to leave.

“Ava.”

She turned around, and took a step toward him. He moved forward as well, and they stood close together, the fog of their breath melding in the air. His eyes searched hers, hopeful. “Ava,” he said again, and his eyes flicked to her lips. She smiled, and they moved at the same time, their lips meeting. After what felt like a blissful eternity, they pulled back, the chill December air filling their lungs.

She blinked up at him. “You ruined my dramatic exit,” she said with a straight face. He threw his head back and laughed, the laugh that seemed to fill her heart and make her toes curl in pleasure. He still held her close, and when he looked back down their faces were inches from each other.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Maybe I can make it up to you.” He leaned forward and kissed her again. It was quite some time before they said their final farewells, and went their separate ways.

On Love

Ava sat cross-legged on her couch, romance novel in one hand and a mug of tea in the other. She was just starting the final chapter when her phone buzzed next to her. She picked it up, and smiled when she saw who was calling.

“Hi,” she said, her smile broadening.

“Hi,” Will replied, and she could hear the smile in his voice as well. “Do you want pizza?”

She laughed. “When have you ever known me to turn down pizza?”

“Good. Buzz me in then.”

“What?”

“Buzz me in. I'm outside.”

“Are you serious?” she asked, jumping up to look out her living room window, which was above the front entrance to her building. Will waved at her. “You are crazy!” She laughed, hanging up the phone and darting over to the intercom near her front door. She buzzed him in, and a few minutes later she was opening the door to him, wide grin on his face and a pizza box in his hands.

“What if I wasn't home?” she asked, as he stepped into her apartment.

“I would have sat broodingly on the stoop of the building, eating this whole pizza myself until I got yelled at for loitering.”

She kissed him lightly. “And getting frost-bitten. Your nose is freezing! It's the middle of February, you should be wearing a scarf.” She took the pizza box from him, and walked over to the kitchen, placing it gently on the table. He followed her, and they chattered jovially as they took out plates and drinks. They sat down, and just before Ava grabbed her first slice, Will spoke.

“You know, we've spent a lot of time talking about love, like why we love certain people, what love looks like in practice, and such, but we've never really talked about what love itself is. What do

you think it is, really?"

She laughed a little, then noticed his expression. "Oh, you're serious." She paused. "Do you mind if we eat first? You know how I get, if I start talking now, the pizza will be cold by the time I'm done! And it'll give me a little time to think."

"Very true. You can be unstoppable once you are on a roll." He laughed as she threw a napkin at him.

They ate heartily, and the pizza disappeared quickly. They filled the dishwasher, then went out to the living room and sat on the couch, arms around each other.

"So," she started. "You want to know what I think love is?"

He nodded solemnly.

She took a deep breath. "You're right, I've talked about why we love certain people, and how we love, but not what love actually is. And I think that's because love is a compilation of all those things. Love is a process, something that changes with time. It starts with that initial desire, that longing for someone. It's the phase where you feel giddy and nervous and elated when the one you love is around, or when you think about them – which, let's be honest, is more often than you might like to admit. But love can't just be this attraction, this feeling that you can't really justify. I think love is the added desire to have a *philia* relationship with that person, to be partners with them and help them become better and happier people while they do the same for you. At a minimum, there has to be this desire for a *philia* relationship for something to be love.⁵⁷

"But love still progresses from there. Love changes, as people change. Once people are in a loving relationship, that constant giddiness might fade, and changes into comfort and a sense of stability, a warmth that flows through you when they are around. You feel safe. And I think a lot of philosophers, like Kierkegaard, don't think this is the same as romantic love. I think they argue that love is the crazy emotional ride, and that settling down makes people lose love, because that feeling

diminishes. But I think that's the wrong way to look at it. Love is a lived thing, something that develops with people. Like I said before, love lasts when the changes in one lover match or are compatible with the changes in the other.

“In short, that's what I think love is. And I am going to stress that. This is what *I* think love is. Other people may be perfectly content with love based on utility or pleasure. I'm not denying that those relationships aren't romantic ones, they just aren't the kind of relationship that I want. I think love is attraction, mentally and physically, but not just that. My kind of love is the desire for a *philia* relationship, for a connection to another person that improves you and them. Love is something that you do with someone else, a practice, and love is fluid, changing with the people who love. There is your answer,” she said simply, as if explaining that one and one made two, and not one of the most complicated and sought-after things in the human experience.

“So, that's what you think love is?” He asked, after a few minutes silence.

“Yup,” she replied, looking up at him. “That's what I think.”

He hoped she didn't notice his heart thudding wildly in his chest as he opened his mouth to speak, but she surprised him as she continued to talk, in her distant philosophy voice:

“You know, philosophy could probably learn a lot from love. If love is a practice, something where people engage with each other, and love is based on care, then why not philosophy as well? So many of my critiques of philosophy stem, really, from a lack of care. Honestly, most critiques of anything people do could probably stem from a lack of care. But let's really look at philosophy. The way so many philosophers write is as if they are the only sane people in the world, as if their ideas are clearly the best and shouldn't be argued with, and so many of them don't actually listen to each other, or respect each other. There are letters between Hobbes and Descartes where they just keep talking past each other.⁵⁸ It's hard to have a productive, meaningful conversation with someone who doesn't want to listen, and who doesn't care about what you have to say. And if philosophy really is a conversation,

which is what I have been working with this whole time, then it makes sense that that conversation should have elements of care and love in it. And that doesn't mean that we just smile and nod along with everyone because of some notion of love being permissive or unconditional. I already said that love isn't unconditional, and should expect challenges. What that means for philosophy is that we have open – and yes, challenging – conversations with each other, but in the end we come up with better philosophy because of it.” She smiled. “All this time I was thinking about what philosophy could tell me about love, but not what love could tell me about philosophy.”

Will took a breath. “Can we go back to the love thing for a second?”

Ava looked up at him. “Yeah, why?”

He tried to figure out how to say what he wanted to say. The fact that she was watching him didn't help. “Well, if love is what you say it is – if love is being attracted to someone, and wanting to have a lasting, caring, *philia* relationship with them,” he paused, “then I love you, Ava.”

She smiled up at him. “I know.” She laughed at his beleaguered expression. “I'm sorry! How could you expect me to pass up such a perfect movie reference?⁵⁹ Plus, it seemed a bit cliché or disingenuous to echo your proclamation right away.”

“Meaning?” His heart pounded harder.

“Meaning I love you, too, of course,” Ava replied tenderly, and kissed him. In her opinion, it was the sweetest of all the kisses they had shared, though she knew there would be more to come that might surpass it yet.

Notes

1. Pronounced “AH-vah.” This pronunciation comes from a Germanic name element that possibly means “desire.”
2. Doug Brent, “Burke's 'Unending Conversation' Metaphor.” *Rhetorics of the Web*
3. Hannah Arendt, “The Answer to Socrates” and “The Two-in-One,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 402
4. In this paper, I do not describe what Ava and Will look like. This is partly due to my writing style, because I usually don't give a lot or any description of my characters. I also left their appearances out of this paper because I wanted the reader to be able to picture the characters however they wanted to. I wanted them to be able to be anybody. I know that by not describing them, I risk the predilection of our society to assume that if a character is undescribed, they are white, and most likely of a fairly high social class and education level. I also know that the different factors found in intersectionality (race, class, sexual identity and orientation, education level, age, ability, etc.) could have an impact on my work, but are impossible to cover well in the scope of this paper. Future work on this project could include these factors.
5. Michael Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative," in *Ideals and Ideologies: A Reader*. ed. Terence Ball and Richard Dagger (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2011), 150
6. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 1158b12
7. Linnell Secomb, *Philosophy and Love: From Plato to Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007), 34
8. René Descartes, “The Passions of the Soul,” in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 235
9. Descartes, 238
10. Della Zurick, personal communication with the author, February 10, 2017
11. Rose Eveleth, "Computer Programming Used To Be Women's Work." *Smithsonian Institution*, published October 7, 2013
12. "Romance Statistics." *Romance Writers of America*, accessed December 12, 2016
13. Further comparisons between romance novels and science fiction would be an interesting project on its own, and cannot be fully addressed here. I will make one note. This comes from the possible critique that there are science fiction authors who have received prestigious, non-genre or literary awards, and not many (if any) examples of the same happening with romance authors. The problem is that, in order to win such awards, the novel must contain literary themes, attitudes, and styles, as well as those of the genre. By this I mean the specific aspects of that novel that causes it to be classified as general “fiction” instead of as genre work, like “science fiction”. Unfortunately, I do not have the technical language to describe this phenomenon. But I think that the reason romance novels do not win non-genre awards is because in romance novels, the literary themes overpower the romance aspect, so that the novels are classified as “literature” or “fiction” instead of “romance”.
14. Bennett Helm, "Love." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
15. Helm
16. Baruch Spinoza, “Concerning the Origin and Nature of the Emotions,” in *The Ethics and Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley. Ed. Seymour Feldman (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), 143-144
17. David Hume, “Part II: Of love and hatred,” in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), 394, 329
18. Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2011), 240
19. Helm
20. Richard Parry, “*Episteme and Techne*.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
21. Parry
22. For a certain period of time (around the 2000s), romance novels had two covers, called step-back covers. The first was a simpler cover, usually focused on the female protagonist, and the second cover had the more traditional swooning woman and bare-chested man. This is not quite as common in books being published today.

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23. May, 178
 24. Roderick Chisholm, "The Myth of the Given," in *Epistemology: The Big Questions*, ed. Linda Martín Alcoff (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 178
 25. Nel Noddings, "An Ethic of Caring," in *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Morality*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 95
 26. Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy that does focus on the experiences of our lives, but most of my philosophical education has focused on other aspects of philosophy. This is why I say "traditional philosophy" in this section.
 27. Helm
 28. Plato, "Symposium." in *A Plato Reader: Eight Essential Dialogues*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff. Ed. C.D.C Reeve. (New York: Hackett, 2012), 210a
 29. Skye Cleary, *Existentialism and Romantic Love* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 48
 30. Cleary, 52
 31. Cleary, 58
 32. Cleary, 67
 33. Secomb, 31
 34. Heart *What About Love* 1985
 35. Della Zurick pointed out to me that this sounds very similar to Kant's aesthetics, which would be fascinating to include, but does not fit within the scope of this paper.
 36. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), Bxxx
 37. Martha Nussbaum, "The Central Capabilities," in *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2011), 19
 38. Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism," in *Epistemology: The Big Questions*, ed. Linda Martín Alcoff (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 346
 39. I was advised by Nancy Holland to include work by feminist philosophers who discussed the way marriage and relationships were used to control women, and possibly the arguments by the more extreme feminist philosophers that women should separate themselves from men and establish their own society. I decided not to include the extreme separatist philosophy, because it undermines my point of people pursuing love (or philosophy) as a practice with other people. As for the less extreme feminist philosophers, it didn't make sense to me to include them in this iteration of my paper, though I could see going back to them if I continue this work.
 40. Aristotle, 1156a10
 41. Aristotle, 1156b6
 42. Aristotle, 1156b25
 43. Aristotle, 1164a
 44. Aristotle, 1156a10
 45. Aristotle, 1156a12
 46. Cleary, 144
 47. Simone de Beauvoir, "The Woman in Love," in *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Random House, 1952), 736, 717, 730, 716
 48. Beauvoir, 741
 49. Joan Tronto, "Care" and "An Ethic of Care", in *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 101
 50. Tronto, 106-108
 51. Tronto, 108
 52. Tronto, 102
 53. Aristotle, 1164a
 54. Aristotle, 1155b17
 55. May, 240

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56. Plato, 215e-216d
57. This idea that at minimum there needs to be a desire for a *philia* relationship for something to be love is a remnant from when I was going to discuss unrequited love. While this may not fit with my overall argument anymore, namely that love is a practice involving more than one person, I wanted to keep it to at least acknowledge the idea of unrequited love.
58. René Descartes, “Third Set of Objections, by a famous English philosopher, with the Author's Replies,” in *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, trans. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 107, 109
59. *Star Wars: Episode V The Empire Strikes Back*, directed by Irvin Kershner (1980, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation)

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