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There is a long-standing philosophical discussion about the relationship between love and choice. The most simplistic versions (in the case of romantic love and friendship between adults) see love as something one “falls” into, without any choice at all; or (in the case of family love) as something that one grows up with and grows into, again without choice. I certainly do not want to deny this important passive element. A more sophisticated account of love would accommodate some degree of *indirect* choice. For example, I can feel an initial interest in a person, and choose to seek her out more, thereby improving the chances that love will develop. I can also choose to create and sustain the conditions that support love, e.g. by avoiding infidelity and long commutes. However, indirect choices as exemplified above are relatively discrete, or time-limited. In contrast, I want to explore a more temporally extended kind of choice, which starts when I *take responsibility*. I will argue that one essential component of longer-term adult romantic and friendly love requires the lover to take prospective responsibility – as a kind of attitude – for meeting the beloved's (friend's) unpredictable and possibly onerous needs in the future. This kind of attitude is sometimes described as sensitivity or a kind of attention, but I do not believe these concepts are robust enough to capture the phenomenon.

1. The Little Prince

My starting point is a book ostensibly for children, but also a perennial favorite among adults: St. Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (2001 / 1943). The Prince is visiting earth from his home planet, and meets a fox. The Prince is lonely, and wants to play. “I can't play with you. I'm not tamed,” says the fox. “What does ‘tame’ mean?” asks the Prince. Taming means to “establish ties,” says the fox, and continues:

To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like 100,000 other little boys.
And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like 100,000 other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other.
To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world.

Later on, the Prince talks to a rose, and compares the earthly rose to his own rose back on his home planet.

You are beautiful, but you are empty. [...] To be sure, an ordinary passer-by would think that my rose looked just like you – the rose that belongs to me. But in herself alone she is more important than all the hundreds of you other roses: because it is she that I have watered;

because it is she that I have put under the glass globe; because it is she that I have sheltered behind the screen; [...] Because she is *my* rose.

He eventually returns to the fox to say goodbye, and the fox tells him: “you become responsible, for ever, for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose.”

I have to address a translation issue right away. The verb and adjective ‘tame’ has unfortunate connotations in English, which would seem to make the word inappropriate in any discussion of mature, mutually-respectful adult love. After all, the *Taming of the Shrew* has always been problematic in this respect. But the etymology of the French word *apprivoiser* is revealing: it comes from the Latin “to make private.” This is much richer than merely taming or domesticating the wild animal, let alone the wild woman. Making private means bringing another person into the privacy of one’s own *life*. Understood this way, taming can be symmetrical and non-oppressive. It could refer not only to the adaptations and compromises necessary to share a household (and a bed) with another person, but also to the mutual attunement, to the partial sharing of ends and projects, and to the attenuation of interpersonal barriers to the point of developing the first-person plural pronoun; at that point you and the other person have a joint privacy, and can confront the world as a ‘we’. And as the fox points out, once you lovingly bring a person into your private lifeworld, you have taken responsibility for them. This central role for responsibility is what I want to explore.

2. Responsibility

Unfortunately I am defining one polyvalent term, ‘love’, in terms of an equally polyvalent term, ‘responsibility’! So I need to make distinctions. Perhaps the most obvious form of responsibility is *retrospective*, and has to do with answerability for past actions. “Who is responsible for this mess?” probably means two things: (i) who is causally responsible, i.e. “who did it (or failed to prevent it)?” and (ii) who is morally responsible, in the sense of “who is an appropriate target for blame?” This kind of responsibility is most forcefully on display in the criminal justice system. But it is not my main concern here.

A second meaning of responsibility is *prospective*. I am responsible for something into the future. There are two versions of this, which I will call ‘closed’ and ‘open’. The *closed* form of prospective responsibility concerns a specific duty attached to a role. A job description typically comprises a list of responsibilities. “Who’s responsible for after-sales support?” “Oh, that’s Smith.” Customers will have certain *typical* needs or complaints after sale, and Smith is ready – into the future, so long as she continues to fill the role – to carry out certain procedures (e.g. warranty-backed refunds) to meet these needs and resolve these complaints, in accordance with her employment contract, with company

policies, and with business and legal norms. The cost and the risks of after-sales support are built into the business plan and the original purchase price.

In contrast, *open* prospective responsibility involves a readiness to deal with someone else's future needs and wants that are much less predictable than those of the customer. And they may be unpredictable not only in terms of the precise content, but also in terms of their onerousness *on me* (and their incompatibility with my other future, partly-unknown commitments). When I am prospectively responsible in this more open sense, I might not be able to confidently imagine much about my future interactions with the other. And yet despite the risks and uncertainty, this is the sort of responsibility that the fox is talking about. Insofar as the fox is my friend, and I love it, then I make myself available to the fox into the future – I take responsibility for it.¹

The word 'responsibility' obviously comes from the concept of 'response'. In the retrospective sense, holding someone morally responsible means I am asking them to respond appropriately to the damage they have caused, e.g. with apology or compensation. In the prospective sense, taking responsibility for after-sales support means a commitment to respond to the customer's predictable future needs insofar as such needs relate to their legitimate purchase of our company's products or services.

However, responding appropriately to the unpredictable future needs of a beloved or a friend is much riskier. It's all very well for me to tell my friend sincerely: "whatever you need, just give me a call;" but when that friend starts to need me *too much*, then it will strain the friendship. With the after-sales service, there might come a point where the demanding customer can be dismissed or ignored: "we have helped them as much as could reasonably be expected, and we have no further legal or moral obligation." Alternatively, if I find the job of after-sales support simply too onerous, I can always quit my job without reproaching either myself or my employer. I can say to myself: "I did not understand the responsibilities I was signing up for, now I do, and it's just not for me."

But such a 'graceful exit' is much more difficult when a friendship is tested by unexpected asymmetrical needs. Some friendships are deepened by such testing; others fall apart, and often it will be a matter of luck whether a particular friendship is tested in a constructive or destructive way. (i) If my friend's future needs had been a little more predictable, or a little more typical, then I might have been able to make a more informed decision about the degree of friendship I wanted to offer at the start; (ii) if the needs had been a little lesser, or if my competing commitments had been a little lesser, or if others had been able to help, then I would have been able to help him.

¹ Although not that in the original French, the fox is *le renard*, in other words masculine. English relegates most animals to 'it', and this already hinders the possibility of friendship. To take responsibility for an 'it' is quite different from taking responsibility for a 'him'.

Some breakdowns can be a matter of sadness without bitterness, especially when there is evidence of a non-culpable change of personality, interest or circumstances. However, my inability or unwillingness to respond to the other's unexpected needs can lead to a bitterness in her that hardens into a sense of betrayal, perhaps to the point of retrospective redefinition: "I guess you were never really a friend at all," she tells me. And I have to acknowledge that she might be entitled to think this, just as I have to acknowledge the lameness of my self-consoling thought that my past commitment had been sincere. I will return to the issue of retrospective redefinition erelong.

Throughout, I may see myself as lacking choice, in accordance with the simplistic passive model of love. This person and I happened to feel affection for one another when we met, we became friends, and we took responsibility for one another. But later, when she presented her unpredictable and burdensome needs on me, I discovered (passively) that my affection was not up to the task. I blame bad luck. However, if it really were only a question of mere bad luck and passivity, then I would not be left with such a bad feeling about it. There has to be more room for my agency.

3. Taking responsibility

I have already hinted at *two* kinds of responsibility-taking, which I can now distinguish explicitly as 'easy' and 'hard'. When I first meet the person, and we like each other and become friends, then part of what it means to become a friend is to take open prospective responsibility for her unpredictable future needs. Acting on affection, it is relatively easy to say "whatever you need, give me a call". Later, when we have been friends for a while, my friend develops a need which is surprising and onerous. At this stage I can take 'hard' responsibility by making larger adjustments to my life in order to meet her need, and steeling myself for future needs (which may now be more predictable, but may not). In so doing, our friendship has been tested, and, if I am able, I can choose to deepen it. Actually, it would be better to speak of the comparative – 'harder' rather than 'hard' – since I maybe tested even more in the future. At any rate, it is the hard responsibility-taking that interests me, the one that makes or breaks the friendship.

(Again I emphasize the onerousness. If the friend's need is surprising but not onerous, then I can meet it easily, under the scope of the original open prospective relationship-taking; our friendship has not really been tested, and I have faced no difficult choice.)²

² My account also allows that my partner might be *mistaken* about her needs. Even if I am able to meet her needs, I might not do so if I judge that it is not in her interest that I do so. This should not be a matter of my judgement and my decision, but part of an on-going conversation between two concerned equals.

In most discussions of responsibility, *taking* is reducible to *being*. If I am retrospectively responsible for spilling the milk, then I ought to take responsibility for it now by cleaning it up. Alternatively, I might refuse to take responsibility because I do not see myself as being responsible, and we may argue about the basis for my alleged responsibility – but I will still agree that if I were responsible, then I ought to take responsibility.

There is also a more interesting form of taking retrospective responsibility, described by Susan Wolf as a “nameless virtue,” something akin to generosity. Her discussion is entirely about retrospective responsibility, but the basic idea will be useful for my discussion of prospective responsibility as well.

It involves living with an expectation and a willingness to be held responsible for what one does, understanding the scope of “what one does,” particularly when costs are involved, in an expansive rather than a narrow way. It is the virtue that would lead one to pay for the vase that one broke even if one’s fault in the incident was uncertain; the virtue that would lead one to apologize, rather than get defensive, if one had unwittingly offended someone or hurt her. (Wolf p. 121)

Wolf’s point is that we have to acknowledge the “messiness and the irrational contingencies of the world” (p. 122). In seeking to calculate blameworthiness too precisely, we might withdraw from “the only ground on which it is possible for beings like ourselves to meet” (ibid.). In short, when there are certain kinds of doubt about whether I *am* retrospectively responsible, it is virtuous to *take* responsibility.³

Wolf recognizes the obvious risk of exploitation: a woman in an abusive marriage who is *too* inclined to “apologize, rather than get defensive;” the office ‘mug’ who takes responsibility for the broken vase because of a misguided gratitude for being hired. For the moment, if we limit the discussion to non-exploitative relationships between social equals, then Wolf has pin-pointed an important virtue not only relevant between strangers but especially between loving friends. To put it another way, an on-going friendship requires trust; when I realize that I have offended the friend, then my friendship appropriately inclines me to trust that she has good reason to be offended, even if I cannot (yet) see what I have done wrong – and so I take responsibility and apologize.⁴

³ It is interesting that Wolf argues in terms of a *virtue* rather than a *choice*; it suggests that the person *already* possesses the virtue, and therefore does not have to make a difficult choice, since her virtuous disposition will make it easy.

⁴ This would relate to Kolodny’s influential conception of love as being based on “relational reasons”. Kolodny was rejecting the prominent ‘reasons-conception’ of love. According to this conception, in order to be intelligible, love has to be based on reasons generated by the beloved’s properties: X loves Y because of Y’s properties A, B, C. Two prominent weaknesses of this conception are that (i) it cannot accommodate love that

What would it mean to take *prospective* responsibility in Wolf's quasi-generous sense? At first glance, this might mean no more than volunteering for after-sales customer care, as one of a range of extra tasks open for ambitious employees. More complexly, one can imagine something like vicarious liability in employment law: when my employee breaks something, then I as her employer become straightforwardly liable for the damages, even if I took all reasonable care in training and supervising the employee, and even if there was no reasonable way that I could have anticipated or prevented the breakage (i.e. I was not legally negligent).

But friendship is philosophically fascinating because of the absence of formal structures. There is a strong sense that – within broad limits of intelligibility about whether it is a friendship at all – it is *up to us* what happens to *our* friendship, whatever third parties might admire or criticize in us. And what you and I have made of our friendship up to now will limit the options available to me for the future, including the decision to take or not to take responsibility for your unexpected and onerous needs when they present themselves.

I spoke earlier about retrospective redefinition, where one friend's abandonment of another is taken as revealing not only the *present* state of the friendship, but of the whole friendship, *all along*. This process can also work in the opposite direction: one friend taking responsibility for another's unexpected onerous needs does not so much *deepen* the pre-existing friendship, but reveals the depth that the friendship had all along. The actual contained the hitherto unknown potential to collapse or to deepen. Even when there are stages in the history of a friendship, it has an irreducible narrative wholeness that remains vulnerable to future developments. Even if this invites a deterministic reading, some of the past meaning still lies within my present choice.

One might even be inclined to take responsibility for a presently estranged ex-friend, precisely in order to preserve the *original* friendship – in a spirit of “for old times' sake” – without any desire to resume the friendship. It is the original friendship that creates a life-long obligation, regardless of whether we have drifted apart culpably or non-culpably in the meantime, and regardless of whether I do not like or respect what my ex-friend has turned into. Again, in the words of the fox: “you become responsible, for ever, for what you have tamed.”

continues despite Y's loss of some of the relevant properties; and (ii) it cannot accommodate Y's individuality, since in principle Y could be replaced by Z who has the same properties, or even improved versions of such properties, and X would be rationally committed to diverting his love to Z. Kolodny's account deal with both problems by arguing that there are such things as reasons for love, but that they lie in one's prior relationship with X, i.e. that she is already my romantic partner or my friend, and *that fact* gives me some non-overriding reasons to continue loving her.

In arguing for this conception of choice within friendship, I am drawing on a debate between different conceptions of well-being. One conception is sequential: I live through a series of moments, in each of which my well-being is based on some time-indexed objective state of affairs. If I am happy at time t_1 , nothing can change the value of the discrete fact of my happiness at that moment, even if my subsequent access to it at t_2 (when I am unhappy) is only through more-or-less reliable memory.⁵ The contrasting view, instantiated by the Ancient Greek concept of eudaemonia, is holistic rather than sequential. Only an entire life can have an objective determinate value, and that value can only be fully apprehended at the end. Even if I seem to be happy during an episode, the full value of that episodic happiness will depend on the place of that episode in the story of my life, including among unknown future events. For example, when I successfully land a permanent academic job, my life seems to acquire objective wellbeing. When I learn that a much more deserving and needy applicant was rejected for the same job, my overall wellbeing is undermined.

4. The marital vow

Earlier I drew the distinction between ‘easy’ and ‘hard’ prospective responsibility-taking. At the start of a relationship it is easy (or easier) to take responsibility for the other’s unpredictable onerous needs. Because friendship is so amorphous, it will help to consider an institution with a certain traditional definition, launched by a formal expression of early prospective responsibility-taking: the sincere marital vow. (Sincerity is not enough, of course, if the protagonists are too young and ignorant. So I shall be assuming two people who have known each other for a while, and who are old enough – maybe 25? – to know something of the world, and something about themselves e.g. about what they want and what they’ll settle for.) I stress that it is the formality of the marital vow that interests me; I do not consider marital love to be so distinct from friendly love when it comes to the central phenomenon of taking responsibility. Most of what I say below could apply to friendship.

One form of the unconditional commitment might be to “love, honor and cherish” the other “as long as you both shall live.” But the precise words are less important than the unconditionality. Although statistically, in some parts of the world, there might be as much as a 50-50 chance that this couple will collapse or divorce, this couple sincerely and seriously believes that (i) their union will not (the statistics concern other people), and (ii) are they are determined to make it work, whatever it takes. What makes this possible is a clear sense of shared identity that launches the relationship. When something bad happens to her, or when she does something bad, there is a clear sense that it happens

⁵ In Gershwins and Gershwins’ song “They can’t take that away from me,” originally written for the 1937 Fred Astaire movie *Shall We Dance*, the narrator speaks of his beloved’s attractive and distinctive properties (e.g. “the way you wear your hat”). Even if cruel fate can take *her* away from me, they cannot take away my memories of her, nor can they devalue the quality of my remembered happiness with her.

to me, or that I have done it. Even when we do not entirely share the same ends, projects and interests, the fact that they are *her* ends, projects and interests makes them *mine* as well.⁶

This notion of “whatever it takes” is interesting, because the two partners almost certainly do not know, at the time of making the unconditional vow, what it will in fact take to keep them together. When I make the unconditional vow to this person, I take responsibility not only for this person and her unpredictable needs next week or next year, but also for the *person she will become*, together with the unpredictable needs that she will acquire, in ten or twenty years. In addition, the ‘I’ who is taking the responsibility at the altar will also change more or less predictably, more or less subject to my choices, in ten or twenty years, and this will affect the onerousness (on me) of my spouse’s unpredictable needs. So the marital vow also involves something called ‘second-order’ responsibility-taking: I am taking responsibility for her future needs, *as well as* taking responsibility for becoming the future person who will be placed in the situation of having to meet her future needs. This then attenuates my distinction between ‘easy’ and ‘hard’ prospective responsibility-taking; instead, love requires an on-going *re*-taking of the responsibility.

Some will say, in an existentialist vein, that it is *irresponsible* to make the unconditional vow in the first place, precisely because of all this ignorance about future situations, needs and selves. Far better to take one day, week or year at a time, governed not by a past vow made in ignorance, but by an enduring policy of absolute honesty to other and to self. If we drift apart, so be it. On the other hand, some would be inclined to say that such ‘existentialist’ love is not love; I’m not going to take a view on that, and will accept deep and serious love is possible without long-term commitment. Generally I am reluctant to compare intimate relationships (“this one is more loving than that one”) because of the multiple forms and layers of sheer particularity in each. What I do want to reject is the existentialist’s claim that making the unconditional vow is *necessarily* irresponsible. Taking responsibility for the unpredictable and onerous future needs of one’s beloved is risky, certainly; but it need not be reckless. There is a role here for luck, of course; if things go badly I might come to judge that we *had been* reckless in making our vows, however informed our commitment and good our prospects seemed at the time. In such cases Wolf’s quasi-generosity might be relevant as a form of self-forgiveness in the face of ambiguous evidence to resist inappropriately destabilizing redefinition.

At the simplest level, taking responsibility at least means that one can, as Solomon puts it, “promise to abstain from activities that will endanger love. One can more positively promise to nurture conditions that are conducive to love. One can even promise to adopt or strive for attitudes and perspectives

⁶ David Enoch (2012) argues that identity-conferring commitments ground a sense of ‘penumbral’ agency, which makes it possible to take partial responsibility for the other’s actions and doings as an extension of one’s own’s actions and doings.

which are constitutive of love,” (Solomon 2002 p. 26). This is what I meant at the beginning by ‘indirect’ choice being required for love. But I would extend Solomon’s last sentence further in two ways. First, it is not only a matter of adopting attitudes and perspectives, for such adoption can be temporary, and such attitudes can remain “tacked on” in a spirit of expedience in dealing with a crisis. What is more important is not adoption but gradual transformation into a person whose perception is naturally informed by the attitudes constitutive of love, and naturally resistant to the centrifugal forces that can threaten any marriage. Second, it is not just *any* love constituted by the attitudes I am adopting, it is love *for this particular person*, and that requires a deep openness to the reality of the other. And I argue that these two ‘extended’ aspects of Solomon’s account are more accurately called ‘taking responsibility for my spouse’, and that this is essential to marital love.

It might be tempting to say that taking responsibility in the above sense is supererogatory: that is, that it is admirable when someone does it, but not blameworthy when a couple stumbles through a crisis without being able to meet one another’s needs, or when the couple collapses. Such heroism will be particularly apparent in cases of radical asymmetry of needs, as when one partner has long-term health problems that require sustained attention and effort from the other. Surely if anything is supererogatory, long-term loving care is. And yet I would deny that this is heroic, based on the subjective *experience* of the loving partner. From the outside we might speak of admirable love, loyalty and devotion; from the inside, the loving partner merely does what she feels she “has to do”. This leads to a paradox: I am calling ‘taking responsibility’ a choice, and I am saying that it is essential to love. And yet the loving partner, once she has *taken* responsibility, finds herself in a position without choice, where she *has to* respond to the needs of the other partner. And it is this lack of choice, I contend, that undermines any attempt by third parties to label it heroic. Or rather, a third party might still call it heroic, but the person will not understand that as applying to *him*.⁷

5. Responsibility or duty?

A lot of philosophical discussion has focused on the relationship between love and *duty*. Insofar as one takes ‘responsibility’ as a mere synonym for duty, then the concept will add nothing new to that discussion. But I think there are important differences between responsibility and duty, and that teasing out the differences in this final section can tell us something useful about taking responsibility. Recall the example of the one spouse who decides to look after the other spouse with a long-term illness; we might be inclined to call him heroic, but he would describe himself as doing what “has to

⁷ I stress that I am discussing this felt necessity within the context of a mutually respectful adult relationship. If a wife suffers systematic abuse at the hands of her husband, but nevertheless declares that she “has to” take responsibility for him, I would not take this, by itself, as an expression of love, and I would seek some larger description that allows for problematic insecurity and dependence.

be done” – And I would call that taking responsibility. Could this not also be called “acting on a sense of *duty*”? And does it matter?

Let me first summarize some of the issues between love and duty. One famous conception of the contrast comes from Michael Stocker (1976), who discusses a patient enduring a long recovery in a hospital. He is lonely, bored and restless. His friend comes to visit him. The patient thanks the friend, and the friend replies: “not at all, I’m just doing my duty.” After this, the patient gradually realizes to his horror that the friend is being perfectly sincere. Stocker’s larger point is that, according to modern ethical theories of both Kantian and utilitarian flavors, the visitor is behaving in an admirable way: he is sacrificing his own interests for the good of others, motivated by a sense of selfless duty. However, in so doing he is not being a very good friend, since the patient would reasonably hope that the visitor would be motivated by love rather than duty; duty is essentially impersonal, concludes Stocker, and merely seeks a contingent vehicle for the visitor to maximize the good.

A contrasting conception of the contrast between love and duty comes from Harry Frankfurt (1998). According to Frankfurt, love is essentially a configuration of the will. For Frankfurt, love is about the necessities that I encounter in my activities with the beloved: certain characteristic things I find I “cannot” do, and others I “must” do, and Frankfurt takes these locutions at face value. In terms of the agent’s moral psychology, concludes Frankfurt, the necessities of love are just as real as the necessities of duty. Sometimes this felt necessity will be surprising (pleasantly or unpleasantly) to the lover, and will reveal the quality of the love in the sense that I have been describing above.

My position differs from both Stocker’s and Frankfurt’s account, however. In response to Stocker, I would ask: what if it were very onerous for the visitor to visit the patient on that day? Of course the patient would be delighted if the visitor acted only out of affection, but circumstances might conspire against such a visit, and then I would say that the patient should be glad that the visitor comes, *even if out of duty*. Not only because it is better than him not coming at all; but also because his motivating duty is an expression of the respect with which he holds the patient. Okay, replies Stocker, but respect is not love; respect is compatible with affective distance and reluctance. We have to be careful here about definitions, but I think a compromise position would be to describe the reluctant visitor as acting out of a sense of *responsibility* rather than duty. Responsibility is more than duty since it comprises a *response* to that particular patient and his needs; it thus avoids the impersonality and stuffiness of duty that rightly concerns Stocker.

The problem with Frankfurt’s account, on the other hand, is that it is too *unilateral*. I can well accept the focus on felt necessity, but my worry is that there is no essential reference to the partner’s actual needs, which might first have to be ascertained with selfless attention. Frankfurt admits that his

account would allow for unrequited adult love. In contrast, I have been looking at established relationships of mutual love and respect, where the love is much more than an affectionate feeling, it is *shaped* by the response to the other and to her particular needs (or anticipated needs). Such a response is a matter of perception, deliberation, feeling and spontaneous action, and this is best captured in the concept of prospective responsibility rather than necessity.

6. Conclusion

The philosophical literature on romantic and friendly love between adults is quite sizeable by now. There are distinct accounts about different manifestations of love, the varying phenomenology of love, the criteria for a relationship to be deemed loving, the kind of self-understanding required of a person loving another. I have argued that all these accounts share a fundamental omission: while some speak of responsibility, it is never much more than a corollary or consequence of love. In contrast, I have argued that a robust notion of taking prospective responsibility belongs at the center of love. For only such responsibility is sufficient to allow room for the right kind of choice, and only such choice allows the love to be authentic to the lover. Without such responsibility-taking, there is a risk that any ‘love’ will be rooted too much in capricious feeling or comfortable habit. The Fox did not speak of love, and it is not clear that the Little Prince would have understood him if he had; instead the fox spoke of uniqueness, of taming, and of responsibility.⁸

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⁸ My thanks to Simon Cushing for comments on the first draft of this paper.