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Love: what's sex got to do with it?

1. Introduction

There is a dearth in the philosophical literature on the relationship between love and sex. Most of what does exist either moralises sex, arguing that one ought morally to have sex only within a loving relationship (for example: Scruton, 2001; Punzo, 1969), or within a marriage (for example: Finnis 2008; Geach, 2008); or argues that sex without love can be perfectly moral (for example: Primoratz, 1999) or that sex without love has a distinct value (for example: Vannoy, 1980; Elliston, 1998). However, there is little addressing the question of what value, if any, sex adds to a romantic relationship. One of the reasons this topic has been so neglected is, presumably, because, although sex without love is now widely accepted, we still take it for granted that romantic love is sexual.

The question of why sex is an important feature of romantic love is rarely asked. Many people just take it for granted that there exists a certain kind of love, which is sexual amongst other features. Furthermore, the dominance of the norm of sexual exclusivity makes it seem obvious that there is a relationship between love and sex, for it would not make sense to restrict sex to relationships of love otherwise. However, there is not a necessary link between love and sex: it is conceptually possible for there to be relationships that are the same as those that we call 'romantic' now, but just do not include sex. Indeed, people do have non-sexual romantic relationships, and for those people love and sex are decoupled. We could imagine a world in which people had romantic relationships which were of the same type as the ones we have now, but included sex only sometimes or not at all, like the way that friendships here, today, sometimes include sex, but usually do not. Therefore, it is interesting to consider why, instead, we live in a world where sex is almost a requirement of romantic love.

In this paper I will consider whether there is something intelligible in finding value in having or aspiring to a certain kind of relationship which includes sex as a central feature. I argue that a scientific explanation can tell us only about the mechanics of sex, not what it feels like or means to us. Thus, we need to consider the meaning and significance of sex in relation to what we typically value about romantic love. This question is important: the answer to it will not only help us to understand ourselves and our motivations better, it will also feed into the debate about whether monogamy ought to be as important as we assume it to be.

This paper will proceed as follows. In Part 2, I set the scene by making some observations about the ways that we typically think about sex and love and the questions that are raised as a result. In Part 3 I oppose the argument that a purely scientific explanation can provide a fully satisfying account of

the relationship between sex and love, because it cannot justify the strength of the meaning we give to sex. In Part 4, I present my own account of the relationship between sex and love, arguing that sex is partly constitutive of the central goods of romantic relationships, and can be an important vehicle for romantic love in two ways. It can express romantic love and it can 'make love', creating and intensifying it. This is because four of the central goods that we want from romantic love: (1) pleasure, (2) union, (3) intimacy, and (4) vulnerability and care, can all be found in sex. Because of this, we seek romantic partners to whom we are sexually attracted and we are sexually attracted to people, in part, because they would make a good romantic partner to us. Nonetheless, this does not imply that a romantic relationship becomes less valuable the less sex it includes. At the beginning of a relationship it might be more important to cement the romantic nature of your relationship and, as sex can be a particularly intense expression and constituent of these goods, it might be felt to be a very important aspect of the relationship at this stage. However, as the relationship progresses, the couple might be more interested in other aspects of the relationship, and so sex might become a less significant part of it. Finally, in Part 5, I consider some of the implications for this account, arguing that, although there are good reasons to link sex and romantic love, there is nothing necessary about romantic love being sexual, or involving sexual exclusivity. Therefore, people ought to give more thought to their reasons for holding or not holding sex to be significant in their romantic relationships and to their reasons for practising or not practising sexual exclusivity.

2. What is a romantic relationship and why is it valuable?

Before discussing how sex relates to romantic love it is important to clarify what I mean by romantic love and why it is valuable. These are big questions, which I cannot answer substantially here, since they would really require papers of their own. Therefore, I offer no more than a set of fairly uncontroversial features that I think make up a rough conception of romantic love and some observations about what might make it valuable. First, romantic love is *selective:* it is not possible to love everyone in this way and furthermore, it is usually aimed at one person only. Second, it is *conditional and can end*: the beloved will not be loved under all circumstances (for example if they totally change personality) and romantic love does not always last forever. Third, it is *tenacious:* although it is conditional, it can withstand changes in the personalities and situations of the lover and the beloved. Fourth, romantic love often *feels out of our control*; we 'fall in love' and feel that we cannot just end our love at will. Fifth, it involves a desire for *physical and emotional intimacy*. Sixth, romantic love involves *a desire to share one's life and identity,* to form some degree of *union* with one's beloved. Seventh, a romantic relationship is, ideally, a *mutual, reciprocal relationship between equals.*

Romantic love is particularly valuable to us, and the loss of it is often devastating, typically much more so than the loss of a friendship. It can feel as though we have lost part of ourselves and like our whole world has shifted out of joint. This is because a romantic relationship is usually more intimate, more intense and a greater part of one's life than a friendship. It involves giving and receiving a great deal of attention to one another and this attention can make us feel that our lives matter in some way. As Troy Jollimore writes, 'to be valued in this way, to be installed at the centre of the lover's universe, is to have one's reality and individuality truly and fully acknowledged. Only the lover, after all, looks closely, carefully, and generously enough to truly recognize the beloved in all her individuality' (Jollimore, 2011: 89). Furthermore, the way that we share our lives with our romantic partner usually differs to the way that we share our lives with family and friends. Being in a romantic relationship involves an implicit commitment to involving your partner in your key life decisions and to letting them know what is happening in your life. Having someone else so heavily involved in your life can provide a sense of security. A shared identity provides us with a 'buffer' against the world; we are no longer one person, but a team facing problems together. As Robert Nozick puts it: 'love places a floor under your well-being; it provides insurance in the face of fate's blows' (Nozick, 1995: 232). In addition, romantic love usually involves a higher degree of exclusivity than friendship. This can be valuable if it increases the intimacy and security of the relationship.

3. Sex and love: some observations

It is undeniable that we associate romantic love with sex; indeed the kind of love, which I call 'romantic love' in this paper is often referred to as 'erotic love' or 'sexual love'. For some people, sex is *the* distinguishing feature of a romantic relationship; the difference between loving somebody as a friend and 'being in love' with them is often taken to be the presence of sexual desire. Furthermore, all other things being equal, regular sex is seen as a sign of a good relationship and it is not unusual for people to worry about their relationships, or even to end them, if they are no longer having sex or having sex only very irregularly (Sprecher, 2002: 193).

Sex is not related to love in general though. It is not a component of familial love; indeed, it is fervently discouraged between family members to the point of being illegal and causing reactions of abhorrence and disgust. Although friends do sometimes have sex, it is viewed very differently to sex in a romantic relationship. It is not an essential part of friendship and regular sex is not a marker of a good friendship. Indeed, it would be inappropriate for someone to expect their friend to have sex with them merely because they were friends. It is a common assumption that sex might complicate a pre-existing friendship or lead to one of the friends developing unreciprocated feelings of romantic love for the other (Bisson and Levine, 2007: 69). Conversely, it is the default setting for a romantic

relationship to include sex, and it seems reasonable to expect your romantic partner to have sex with you at least occasionally, and to feel hurt if they don't want to. Rather than complicating a romantic relationship, we assume that sex will improve and intensify it. Indeed, it seems justifiable to end a romantic relationship if your partner will not ever have sex with you, though it would be completely unreasonable to end a friendship because your friend refused to sleep with you. Therefore, our tendency to view sex as related to romantic love must be at least partly to do with what is distinct about *romantic* love – its features that mark it out from other kinds of love and relationship, rather than to do with the features of love in general.

On the other hand, sex does not seem to be the most important feature of romantic love and it is not essential to it. Sex might be a significant part of a relationship for only a relatively short period of it. A couple might have sex with each other only because they believe they should or because they cannot have sex with anyone else, as they have decided to be sexually exclusive. Therefore, romantic love does not always involve an overwhelming passionate desire to have sex with one's partner. Moreover, there are people who consider themselves to be in romantic relationships though these relationships have never included sex. However, in these cases, we expect there to be some reason for them not having sex, which means they cannot or don't want to have sex in general, such as that one or both of them is asexual or physically unable to have sex. If it was possible for two sexually active people to have a romantic relationship but just not desire or have sex *with each other* then it would be possible for two heterosexual men who are not attracted to each other, even brothers, to have a romantic relationship. This seems odd and certainly does not fit into our conceptual scheme of relationships; we would describe their relationship as an intimate friendship or sibling relationship.

In addition, non-sexual romantic relationships often include other kinds of physical intimacy (which sexual romantic relationships also include), such as: kissing, cuddling, stroking, sharing a bed, holding hands, or snuggling up together on the sofa. If a couple never engaged in *any* kind of physical intimacy, despite being physically and psychologically able to, we would question whether the relationship was romantic by nature. Thus, it seems that it is necessary, barring impediments, for romantic love to be expressed or represented physically, and that where sex is possible between lovers, this will be one form of physical intimacy in which they will engage.

To sum up this section: in our culture, there are (at least) two major assumptions about the role of sex in a romantic relationship. The first is that we see regular sex as *ceteris paribus,* a marker of a good relationship. The second is that for a relationship which involves no sexual intimacy at all to count as romantic, we assume that either the relationship used to be sexual, or one or both of the

partners does not want to or cannot have sex in general. These observations lead to an interesting question, and the focus of this paper: why does the archetypal romantic relationship include sex and why do we see (regular) sex as a marker of a good relationship?

4. Giving a Scientific Account of the Relationship between Love and Sex

A fairly common way of responding to the question about the relationship between love and sex is to provide a biological/evolutionary explanation. This kind of account claims that our tendency to associate sex and love is due to our biology and psychology, which have evolved through natural selection. The evolutionary story goes something like this: it is in the interest of humans to pass on their genes, and it is usually true that children are more likely to flourish if both parents stick around and invest in them. Therefore, romantic love is a helpful adaptation, a sort of 'commitment device' (Frank, 1988) binding us to those with whom we have sex in order to give our offspring the best chance of survival. Although a man will have more chance of making babies the more women he has sex with, if he wants his children to survive long enough to pass on his genes to the next generation, it is in his interest to stick around and support them. This is because humans take a comparatively long time to become independent and because human child-rearing requires a relatively high amount of effort. It is also in the woman's interests to stay with the father of her child so that he can support her and her child. If the couple love each other then they are more likely to stay together. As Robert Frank puts it: 'if your wife married you merely because you offered the most favourable exchange possibilities, she would quickly leave you if Tom Selleck [he was writing in 1988!] bought the house next door and announced his availability…But if she married you because she loved you, there would be at least a reasonable chance she would remain' (Frank, 1988: 196). Love is thus an adaptive mechanism to ensure we don't just hop from person to person.

The sort of scientific account I am describing can be split into the evolutionary aspect, which provides us with 'ultimate causes' for our actions: those to do with the way we are made up as a result of natural selection; and the biological/psychological aspect, which provides us with the 'proximate causes' or more immediate causes or our behaviour, such as sex hormones triggering physical sexual arousal (Giles, 2008: 47). Proponents of this account tend to point to what goes on in the body when sexual desire/feelings of romantic love are experienced,[1] and tell a story about how these bodily functions would have helped our ancestors to survive and reproduce, and/or they point to the behaviour and biology of animals and draw inferences based on our common ancestral

[1] For example: Fisher et al. (2006) put people into MRI scanners when they were experiencing sexual desire and romantic love and noted that, although the brain systems for the sex drive and romantic love are separate systems, they interact regularly.

heritage about the function of human behavioural tendencies and biological mechanisms.[2] The account is attractive because it seems to provide a set of objective reasons for why we do things, thus seemingly justifying and explaining our behaviour, and the scope of things it can explain is massive. Furthermore, as James Giles points out, 'it underlines the essential connection between sexuality and the body. And plainly, a crucial element in sexual desire is the body' (Giles, 2008: 63). Because sex is a physical act, it makes sense that an explanation of sexual desire should be focussed on the body.

I will not discuss the strength of the evidence for this account of the relationship between love and sex, because even if it was conclusive, and if we could explain all of our sexual behaviour through hormonal changes and natural selection, it would be beside the point for the question of this paper. This is for two reasons: 1) it does not take into account the agency of the subject; 2) it does not give us the kind of explanation we want.

4.1) Human agency

Any causal explanation of human behaviour needs to take into account the beliefs, interests and preferences of the agent. For example, even if it is true that hormonal changes in breast-feeding women make them more likely to lose interest in sexual intercourse, a full explanation of any individual woman's behaviour will need to consider her interests and beliefs. A woman who mistakenly believes that breast-feeding makes her more fertile and is terrified of having another child is going to have less interest in sex than a woman who believes it is important to maintain a good sexual relationship with her partner, even if she does not feel like sex that much. We can override what our body is calling us to do: if my boss is making advances on me, no matter how much my body is aroused, I can resist their advances because I believe that problems at work will result from having sex with them. The causal direction of behaviour thus goes in two ways: my desires and actions are influenced by my biology, but my biology is also influenced by my agency. My physical arousal might make me sexually desire the person I am with, but similarly if my body is showing no signs of sexual arousal for someone, I can make a conscious effort to change my beliefs about them and, in doing so, make myself aroused.

Thus, a full explanation of much human behaviour, including sexual behaviour, needs to take into consideration both the bodily influences on a person, and their individual nature. As Seiriol Morgan argues: 'it is not possible to understand many of the "bodily" elements of our nature in abstraction

[2] For example: Insel speculates that the release of oxytocin and vasopressin during sex might facilitate the human pair bond, as it does with prairie voles. 1997, p730

from our mentality, nor many of our "mental" elements in abstraction from our embodiment.' Many experiences form continua between the mental and the physical, in the sense that they are not entirely physical or entirely mental; sex is one such experience. (Morgan, 2003: 6). At most, the biological/evolutionary account shows that we are biologically *predisposed* to falling in love with our sexual partners, and perhaps to desiring sex with our beloveds, not how likely we are to follow these inclinations.

One could respond by arguing that *all* of my desires, beliefs, interests etc. can be reduced down to my biology. Thus, what I have described as 'agency' can also be explained by biology and evolution. Therefore, though feeling free, my decision not to have sex with my boss might, in fact, be laden with evolutionary influence. This is a big issue, and one that I am not going to dwell on here because there is a more significant reason why a purely biological/evolutionary account of sexual behaviour is unsatisfying: it cannot give me the kind of explanation for the relationship between love and sex that I want.

4.2) Sex and meaning

I want to know how we explain and justify the relationship between love and sex to ourselves, *what it means to us*, not what biological forces are acting upon us. To compare: when I ask, 'what is that object in front of me?' I don't want you tell me about its atomic structure; I want you to tell me that it's a rose, and maybe that it's a rose that you have bought for me to express your love for me. I want to know what the object *means* in a human way. Similarly, when I ask 'why did you do that?' one way of responding would be to tell me about the causal chain of events that led to the action, how one thing triggered another thing and led to the final action. However, this isn't really what I want to know, which is how you make sense of what you did. I don't want to know about the proximate or ultimate causes of your action, I want to be able to understand what it *meant* to you, so that I may find your action intelligible. I want to confront you as an agent with whom I can identify, not as a mechanical structure. Charles Taylor writes that, 'the background to explanation in ordinary life is a picture of the agent as the subject of goals, desires, inclinations, susceptibilities of certain kinds' (Taylor, 1995: 165). This kind of everyday explanation for actions calls for an understanding of the intentions of the subject. Taylor gives the example of someone who seems to obviously be turning off the light but then tells you he actually wanted to align the switches for aesthetic reasons. In such a case you would re-describe his action; it would have a different meaning (Taylor, 1995: 120). With regards to sex and love, I want to know why people find the idea that there is a relationship between sex and love intelligible and meaningful. I want to know why sex is important to us, what the relation of sex is to our desires, purposes and emotions in a romantic

relationship. Indeed, my two objections to the purely scientific account of love and sex are related. It is precisely because we are agents that this type of explanation is unsatisfying. We are not just animals, but rational animals, and thereby we don't just want a biological explanation of our practices, we also want a rational justification of them. The biological/evolutionary account provides an explanation for the more 'animalistic' or mechanical side of us; philosophy at least attempts to provide us with the rational justification for our actions, desires, needs etc.

5. Accounting for the importance of sex within a romantic relationship

We live in a world that is full of symbolic meaning and interaction, and sex, in most cultures, is a very symbolic and significant action. As Paul Gregory observes, the meaning we tend to attribute to sex is highly disproportionate to its physiological pleasure and 'the sexual act is perhaps the one action which remains on occasion supremely a symbol' (Gregory, 1988: 344). Sexual pleasure is intense, but it may be short-lived, and is sometimes unsatisfactory. In any case, there are many other comparable pleasures to which we do not give as much attention or meaning. Looked at from a purely physical perspective, it does not seem to warrant all the attention we give it and it does seem irrational to connect it with love. But it is not just a physically pleasurable act to most people; it is something we care about and find important, and to understand the relationship between love and sex, we need to get a hold of why this is.

In this section I will discuss some of the meanings that sex has in our culture, arguing that sex is both constitutive of and an important vehicle for the goods of a romantic relationship. I use the term, 'vehicle' to have two meanings: (1) sex as a means of expressing love and (2) sex as a means of moving love forward or building love. Thus sex does almost literally 'make love', as well as being a means of communicating love already felt. The goods of romantic love of which sex constitutes and is a vehicle are: i) pleasure, (ii) union/physical closeness, (iii) intimacy and (iv) vulnerability and care. All of these are inter-related but I will discuss each of them separately for clarity.

5.1) Pleasure

Although as I have just mentioned, sex is not merely a physically pleasurable act, a discussion of sex that did not mention its pleasure would be seriously incomplete. The desire for pleasure is not always at the forefront of a person's mind when they have sex, but often it is, and it is usually there somewhere. Indeed, Alan Goldman argues that sexual desire should be understood as being, simply, the 'desire for contact with another person's body and for the pleasure which such contact produces' (Goldman, 1977: 268) and Igor Primoratz proposes that sexual desire is 'sufficiently

defined as the desire for certain bodily pleasures, period' (Primoratz, 1999: 46). Indeed, it seems that sex offers the possibility not only of physical pleasure, but certain sorts of cognitive pleasure too. For example, one might feel a sense of achievement from giving another person intense pleasure, and there are darker pleasures too, such as feeling vengeful satisfaction from having adulterous sex after one's spouse has treated one badly. The extent to which pleasure defines a desire or an act as sexual is not relevant for my discussion, but it is worth considering whether the pleasure of sex gives us reason to consider it an important feature of romantic love.

Romantic love is distinct from familial love in that you select your romantic partner and the relationship tends to be conditional on you enjoying the relationship and finding it valuable (though this needs to be balanced with a degree of commitment). We expect romantic love to be joyful, exciting and add value to our lives; we want it to be, among other things, a pleasure. Sex can thus partly constitute the pleasure of a romantic relationship as well as being a vehicle for it, expressing and building it. Sex can be fun: it can be silly, relaxing and of course, physically pleasurable. Moreover, in the best cases, its pleasure is very intense and (aside from masturbation) depends upon the co-operation of both parties; sex, like a conversation, is, ideally, a mutual act in which you are intensely aware of the other person, their actions and feelings. As Morgan puts it, 'one experiences *you both* as feeling pleasure at your dynamic bodily interaction, and so your pleasure is taken in an act experienced as being pleasurable for both of you' (Morgan, 2003: 380). Sex is usually better when both partners care about the pleasure of the other, as well as their own. Therefore, within a loving relationship, sex is a vehicle not only for the closeness of the couple, but also for the pleasure and fun that the relationship brings them. If done well, sex can benefit the relationship by giving partners a space in which their main priority is to attend to and please each other. We think that a relationship that includes frequent sex is a good relationship in part, just because it involves sexual pleasure, which is considered inherently good, but also because we assume that the partners probably know how to sexually please one another and want to make each other feel good. One of the reasons that we worry when we are not having regular sex with our partners is because we take it as a sign that we no longer please them or that they no longer want to please us.

Again, this is not to say that a relationship which includes sex is necessarily more joyful or pleasurable than one that does not. It might be argued that if a person does not want to experience sexual pleasure with their partner, and indeed give their partner sexual pleasure then there is something missing in the relationship. However, this will depend, in part, on how much the partners enjoy sex generally. Thus, if someone just doesn't like sex in general then their relationship might actually be less pleasurable if it included a lot of sex. In addition, a relationship that was once very

sexual but is no longer, is not necessarily a less happy relationship; the couple might just find pleasure elsewhere in the relationship, and sexual pleasure outside of the relationship, if they still desire it. Nonetheless, pleasure will only get us so far in understanding the relationship between love and sex. Pleasure in itself cannot justify the significance we give to sex in a romantic relationship. An individual might find surfing more pleasurable, in general, than sex, but not find it important that he surfs with his partner. A person might not find sex with their partner very pleasurable, but still think it is an important and valuable part of their relationship regardless. Therefore, we need to consider some of the other features of sex and how they relate to romantic love.

5.2) Sex and union

Perhaps the most central and distinctive good of romantic love is the way in which the lovers share their lives and identity. They want to form a unit, or a 'we' (Nozick, 1995) and they tend to represent this through various kinds of interaction, which are at least partly symbolic, such as holding hands, sending joint birthday cards, and arriving at social events together. These kinds of symbolic interactions not only show the outside world that they see themselves as part of a 'we', they also help to create it and are thus partly constitutive of the 'we'. Sex fits into this category of interaction, (though it of course has other functions) but it is usually more powerful, and is usually private; thus it doesn't tend to be a way in which lovers represent their shared identity to the outside world (apart from, perhaps, when couples engage in overt public displays of affection) but it is still a kind of affirmation or celebration of the togetherness of the lovers.

An undeniable feature of sex is that sexual partners are just about as physically close as they can be; Nozick's diagram of lovers 'as two figures with the boundary line between them erased where they come together' (Nozick, 1995: 233) readily applies to lovers while they are having sex. Physical closeness is hugely significant and symbolic in Western society at least, as we put a high value on personal space and there is a taboo on touching people and looking intently at them. As Gregory notes, 'failure to observe the physical separateness of the other is largely perceived either as violent or sexual' (Gregory, 1988: 339). If a stranger sits close to you on the bus and starts stroking your arm you are likely to feel afraid, angry, aroused, or perhaps some combination. In any case, you will not simply feel indifferent. We purposefully get physically close to people in order to show certain feelings, attitudes and desires, such as hugging someone to express comfort or sitting very close to them to express sexual desire. Therefore, allowing someone to be as physically close to you as they are in sex can be expressive of a feeling of union and emotional closeness, and it can also help to create this feeling.

It is interesting to note that when we do not want sex to symbolise emotional closeness we often engage in behaviours which show this. For example, as Julia Robert's character in the 1990 film *Pretty Woman* does, prostitutes might refuse to kiss punters on the lips in order to try and deal with the cognitive dissonance that comes with engaging in an act that seems to represent physical closeness with someone with whom they do not want to be emotionally close. We might compare this to our behaviour in other situations where we're physically close to people, such as in a crowded train, but engage in behaviours to make the physical closeness non-intimate, for example avoiding eye contact and not touching. It seems that we have to engage in these kinds of behaviours because physical closeness is so readily an expression of emotional closeness.

Because of the extreme physical closeness involved in sex, as well as the fact that we typically value personal space, sex can be one of the most powerful expressions and creators of emotional closeness and unity. The first time a couple have sex is often significant to them, which might be partly because sex is seen as a physical, and thus tangible, indication of the beginning of their shared life together. The sex life of romantic lovers is thus an important part of their shared world and so sex is both constitutive and an expression of the shared identity of the lovers. As Nozick writes: 'the unitive aspects of sexual experience, two persons flowing together and intensely merging, mirror and aid the formation of the *we*' (Nozick, 1995: 233). Indeed, one reason sexual intercourse tends to be elevated above other kinds of sexual activity might be because it involves a literal conjoining of bodies and so very effectively symbolises a conjoining of identities.

Sex might be generally considered to be more important at the beginning of a relationship because, as well as being constitutive and expressive of the 'we', sex can also drive its formation. Indeed, this is one of the connotations of the term 'making love'. This is partly just because repeatedly engaging in a pleasurable activity with someone, who is partly responsible for your pleasure, is likely to forge a bond between you. Indeed, the frequent sharing of any kind of unusual and intense experience with someone often creates a bond. However, there is more to it than this: part of the value of their shared life to the lovers comes from the type of recognition and attention they get from it. In romantic love we feel that the trivialities of our life, both mental and physical, gain significance because they are important to someone else whose life we also care about and find important. Good sex requires a high level of attention to the responses of one's lover, as sexual communication is typically not explicit. The good sex partner interprets the meanings of their partner's non-verbal cues in order to make them feel comfortable and to give them pleasure. Thus, sex can help us to develop the kind of attentiveness that is required to be a good romantic lover. It is also simply another way of attending to and appreciating one's partner, through caring about the detail and

idiosyncrasies of their bodies, desires and emotions. It is this kind of loving attention that explains the phenomenon of coming to love body parts of one's beloved that one would not notice on anyone else, such as their ear-lobes or tummy-button, just because *they are theirs.*

Furthermore, although we are not always consciously aware of why we are sexually attracted to people, we are often attracted to people with whom we could 'see ourselves', people with whom we can imagine getting on and sharing a life. We are attracted to people who share similar ideas, values and beliefs to us, who possess qualities that we lack but would like to have, and who have future plans that we find appealing. This is why finding out more about someone can affect the amount of sexual attraction you feel for them. For example, suppose a woman meets someone in a bar, to whom she feels very attracted. They talk for a couple of hours mostly about work and travel and she assumes that he is someone with whom she shares many values. However, when she goes back to his house she sees copies of a right-wing newspaper and men's magazines that she finds sexist lying about, and DVDs for films and TV programmes that she finds stupid and boring. Her attraction to him immediately dissipates, because this is no longer a man with whom she could imagine her life being intertwined (although she might not consciously have this thought). Of course, this does not always happen; sometimes people want sex just for the sake of sex, and they don't care about the values or morals of their sexual partner. It will depend on the context within which the sexual attraction occurs, and what the people involved want to get out of the sexual encounter, as well as what their sexual values are. Further, sometimes we are sexually attracted to others precisely because they are *bad* for us, or totally unlike anyone to whom we would normally be attracted. In these cases though, we are excited about the prospect of our life being different, or by the way that we are subverting norms of attraction, and our attraction is usually short-lived. In any case, there is very often a link between sexual attraction and 'romantic attraction', the desire to be in a romantic relationship with someone, which includes, among other things, embarking on a joint endeavour to share a life. 'Losing the spark' in a relationship is often taken to entail a loss of sexual attraction, but it might also be a realisation that your shared life has not brought you what you had hoped it would and so a lack of excitement for your emotional and mental togetherness can cause a lack of desire for physical togetherness.

This is not to say that we can just summon up sexual attraction by deciding we want to share a life with someone. Suppose a man, John, has a best friend, Max, who has told him that he is in love with him. John cares for and gets on with Max very much, sharing many of the same interests and values, and in many ways John would find him the ideal life partner. However, if he has no sexual interest for Max this will override everything. A lack of sexual desire would mean either having unwanted sex

or having no sex with Max. Either way, sex would not be a vehicle or constituent of their relationship and John would know that he would wonder if he could find a better relationship elsewhere which included what he had with Max, *and* sex. He might also think that he and Max will never have the kind of closeness he wants from a romantic relationship if their relationship is not sexual. Indeed, it may be that he is not attracted to Max because he does not want that kind of closeness in any case.

Nonetheless, a lack of sex in a relationship does not always indicate a lack of emotional closeness or union. If one or both of the partners cannot or does not want to have sex in general, then their lack of sex does not mean that they are not fully sharing their lives, because sex is not part of their individual lives either. Furthermore, a couple might have created a very secure and stable shared life together and not feel the need or desire to express this sexually anymore. Again, this does not seem problematic. On the other hand, because sex is such a powerful way of embodying, building and expressing the shared identity of the lovers, if lovers who enjoy and are capable of having sex never want sex with each other, this could indicate a lack of emotional closeness.

5.3) Sex and intimacy

Perhaps the second most important good of romantic love is the high level of emotional intimacy involved with it. Intimacy is closely related to the shared identity of the lovers but, as intimacy can be experienced apart from a shared identity, and the shared identity of romantic lovers involves more than intimacy, I will discuss it separately. Sex is intimate, in part, just because of its inherent nature: allowing someone direct access to your body, and, in particular, to the most sensitive and private parts of your body, is intimate. However, this is not all there is to it; intimacy requires a degree of privacy and the sharing of information or experiences that you don't share with (many) others. In other words, it requires a degree of exclusivity: you can't be intimate with everyone. Sex is usually a private act; it is illegal to do it in public and the desire to have sex whilst being observed is considered a fetish. People want to have sex whilst being watched, in part, because it deviates from the standard way to have sex. Furthermore, we don't, in general, talk about sex as openly as we discuss other things. Although some people discuss sex openly with their friends, we also feel that it is within our rights to request our lover not to discuss our sex life with anyone in order to preserve its intimacy. It would seem unreasonable, on the other hand, to request your lover not to tell anyone about the food that you ate together, because eating food is not generally intimate.[3]

[3] Of course, one reason why we don't talk about sex is because it is taboo. However, this does not seem to be all there is to it; excrement is taboo but not usually intimate, and we would react differently to someone who discussed their excrement in great detail compared with someone who discussed the sexual activity of them and their partner in great detail.

Nudity adds to the intimacy of sex and sex while naked is *ceteris paribus,* usually more intimate than sex while clothed. As Giles points out, nakedness is 'the physical equivalent of self-disclosure' and self-disclosure creates intimacy through sharing information about oneself that is private. He suggests that, 'an important aspect of clothing is that it allows us to maintain a measure of control over another's perception of us.....when we are clothed we are, to some extent, disguised and unrevealed' (Giles, 1995: 349). This has particular significance in a society where clothes are used as a medium to convey various public personas of yourself and to help you conform to social roles. Without your clothes you show yourself in a different light, a more private light, and you may find it harder to play your regular social role. This is partly why nakedness is considered degrading: the person is not only stripped of their clothes, but also their public identity. Thus, *choosing* to be naked with someone can show that you want to share information with them that most people don't see – the way you look without clothes on, and the way you are away from your public persona. The sexual parts of our bodies are particularly intimate because they are the most private parts and are often considered shameful, regardless of whether we 'ought' to see them in this way or not. To allow someone to see and touch these parts of your body then, can show that you trust them. Indeed, in English we often refer to them as 'the private parts,' whereas the French call them '*les parties honteuses',* which literally translates as 'the shameful parts'.

Thus, sex is partly constitutive of the intimacy that is one of the primary goods of romantic love, and it also helps to create, build and express emotional intimacy. Physical intimacy is frequently taken to indicate emotional intimacy, and this is one of the reasons why people feel hurt when they have sex with someone who does not call them afterwards. Because of the perceived connection between love and sex, some people assume that physical intimacy is expressive of emotional intimacy and so can feel deceived and used when they find out that it was 'just sex'. Furthermore, romantic love (combined with sexual/romantic attraction) often causes a desire for physical intimacy. A study published in 2007, which analysed the sexual activities of 6,400 18-26 year olds, found that couples who reported that they loved each other a lot were more likely to engage in oral sex and anal sex, acts which are typically perceived as being very intimate (Kaestle and Halpem, 2007: 137). Although there are undoubtedly a variety of factors influencing people's decisions about which sexual activities they engage in, such as wanting to impress or please a sexual partner, it is reasonable to assume that emotional intimacy is sometimes both a cause and a consequence of physical intimacy.

Therefore, one of the reasons sex is important in a romantic relationship is because it increases and expresses the intimacy of the relationship and because part of the value of a romantic relationship comes from the emotional intimacy of it. Barring impediments, a romantic relationship that never

includes sex will be, *ceteris paribus,* a less intimate relationship. However, a couple who cannot or don't want to have sex, in general, will not necessarily feel that their relationship would be more intimate if it was sexual, because sexual intimacy just is not part of their lives. Furthermore, a couple who no longer have sex may still be very intimate with each other in non-sexual ways, some of which might be quasi-sexual physical intimacies, such as kissing and cuddling, but they might be more mentally and emotionally intimate too. Sex might be more important at the beginning of a relationship because the couple are building intimacy and sex is, in one sense, a 'fast-track' to intimacy.

5.4) Vulnerability and care

Vulnerability and care are closely related to some of the other goods of a romantic relationship. In particular, they are closely related to intimacy. They are considered together here because they are two sides of the same coin. Giles argues that romantic love involves 'a complex of intense desires involving the desire to be vulnerable before another person in order that one may be nurtured or cared for by that person, and, at the same time, the desire to have the other person vulnerable before oneself that one may nurture or care for that person.' He uses the term 'vulnerability' here to mean, 'psychologically or emotionally in need' rather than its alternative meaning - 'susceptible to injury' (Giles, 1995: 344). We are vulnerable in romantic love because we are intimate with our partner and we desire that our love is reciprocated; they thus have the capacity to hurt us but also to care for us. Giles suggests that sex is another way of expressing the desire for mutual vulnerability and care because sex involves 'a mutual baring of and caressing of and by among the most erogenously sensitive and thus, in one sense, most vulnerable areas of the body' (Giles, 1995: 344). In sex we make ourselves physically vulnerable, in the hope of being physically nurtured, as in love we make ourselves emotionally vulnerable, in the hope of being emotionally nurtured, and so, in Giles' words, 'sexual desire is but one more way of wanting what love wants' (Giles, 1995: 352).

This is an important and interesting observation regarding romantic love. Although care is a feature of all kinds of love, there is a kind of vulnerability which is essential to romantic love, but not to other kinds of love and subsequently, there is a type of care that only a romantic lover can give. Indeed, vulnerability is sometimes discouraged within certain loving relationships. For example, a mother might hide her emotional vulnerability from her children because their relationship makes displays of vulnerability inappropriate. By contrast, a romantic lover might reasonably think that his romantic lover does not love him romantically if she does not allow herself to be vulnerable with him, or if she does not appear to care for him or want him to be vulnerable. Thus, if Matilda never displays any weakness to Jason, he may feel that there is something wrong with their relationship,

perhaps that she does not trust him. Similarly, if she requests him not to ever show her any weakness, and does not respond kindly him when he does, there would seem to be something amiss in their relationship. As Giles points out, this is because certain basic features of romantic love, such as trust, intimacy and self-disclosure, all require vulnerability (Giles, 1995: 345). For example, in order for Matilda to show that she trusts Jason not to hurt her she has to make herself vulnerable to the possibility of him hurting her. And in order to be intimate with him she has to share things with him that she shares with no-one else, or with only very few people. This makes her vulnerable to him because if he disclosed her private information to other people it could compromise her other relationships and/or public status. We might add to Giles' list that shared identities also require vulnerability because sharing anything of value makes you vulnerable as the other sharer might at any time decide they want the shared object all to themselves. When the shared object is a life or an identity, the stakes are obviously very high and so the vulnerability in romantic love is greater than Giles acknowledges.

Perhaps not all sex involves vulnerability and care, but a lot of sex, and particularly what we think of as loving and intimate sex, does. Indeed, one way in which we might distinguish loving sex from non-loving sex is by the amount of mutual vulnerability and care that are present in the encounter. For example, sex between two people who are fully clothed, inexpressive, and do not kiss or caress each other would usually be described as non-loving sex; it is also sex which involves little vulnerability or care. As evidence for the view that sex involves vulnerability and care, Giles points to the kind of behaviour we adopt during sex which seems to mirror the behaviour we adopt when caring for someone who is vulnerable. He observes that:

> 'many of the acts which are typically involved in sexual pleasuring are, in other contexts, used to comfort and to show concern and care to someone who might be vulnerable. Thus hugging, holding, and stroking, in addition to being forms of sexual pleasuring, are also used to comfort or reassure someone who is sad, frightened, or has been hurt. Similarly, kissing, sucking, or nuzzling, which are often part of love-making, are also frequently used to show care and concern' (Giles, 1995: 350-351).

Therefore, sex provides the lovers with a space to be vulnerable with one another and subsequently to care for each other, and this can impact on the rest of their relationship. As vulnerability and care are crucial for the intimacy and shared identity of the relationship, it is important that the lovers feel comfortable being vulnerable with each other and that they know how to care for one another. Sex can thus have instrumental value in a romantic relationship, making the lovers feel more comfortable, safe and trusting towards one another. It might also be a way that the lovers

communicate to each other that they want a relationship characterised by intimacy, trust, self-disclosure and mutual looking after each other. Thus, sex partly constitutes the vulnerability and care involved in a romantic relationship, and it can build and express the vulnerability and care that are crucial for the other goods of the relationship. Again though, sex is not the only way for a couple to be vulnerable or to care for one another and so a romantic relationship which is not sexual will not necessarily be missing something important.

6. The implications of this account

The first implication is that we should not consider the relationship between love and sex to be a necessary one: sex and love can be decoupled. Romantic love without sex might be somewhat impoverished, but this will depend on how the lovers think and feel about sex generally, and how they play out their relationship. If lovers do not consider sex to be expressive and/or constitutive of their love then they might care very little about whether they have sex with each other or, indeed, with anyone else. Furthermore, the four central goods that I discussed above (pleasure, union, intimacy, vulnerability and care) can all be expressed and created non-sexually. This is important, since it means that we ought not to take for granted that a romantic relationship must be sexual, but at the same time, we should be clear about why sex in a relationship does hold such significance to many people. It is not merely a product of our biology, but also of the social and cultural meanings we ascribe to sex.

The second implication is that we should not take for granted sexual exclusivity as a feature of romantic love. If sex and love can be decoupled, then so can love and sexual exclusivity, since it makes little sense to restrict sex to a relationship if sex bears no relation to love.[4] Similarly, it would seem unreasonable to restrict your partner from playing Scrabble with anyone but you because Scrabble does not have significance with relation to romantic love. Sex can have many different meanings, and although I have shown that it can have some quite salient meanings with relation to romantic love, it might also be simply a physically pleasurable activity. Lovers might, therefore, decide that it is an act of significance when they do it together, but not when they do it with others. Alternatively, they might adopt a 'half-way measure', by having rules, such as that they won't get fully naked with anyone but each other, or that they will have sex with others but won't sleep in the same bed as anyone else.

[4] I do not mean to imply here that it is only when sex and love are decoupled that one might have a loving but non-sexually-exclusive relationship.

On the other hand, the account of sex and love that I have described can give us a justification for sexual exclusivity: the more exclusive sex is, the more it will (ideally) be able to build, constitute and express the goods I described above. Thus, if the lovers commit to not experiencing sexual pleasure with anyone else, their sexual pleasure might be more special and enjoyable. Similarly, the sex might be more symbolic and expressive of union and intimacy if it is exclusive and the lovers may feel more vulnerable with and caring towards each other during sex. It is important that the exclusivity is decided and promised by the lovers though, rather than them sharing sex exclusively simply because they cannot find anyone else to have sex with. In the latter case, the exclusivity would not have the implications I described, because it could be reneged at any time without warning.

7. **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have examined why it is that we consider sex to be an important feature of romantic love, being particularly interested in the meanings sex can have. I began by observing that we tend to see sex as an almost essential feature of romantic love and that regular sex is seen as an indicator of a good relationship. I wanted an account of sex that could explain why we have these assumptions, and why they are so widely held and important to us. However, the account needed to take into consideration there being relationships which never include sex and that many relationships become less sexual as they progress but remain good romantic relationships.

I argued that no purely scientific explanation for the relationship between love and sex could be fully satisfying, because it only explains our behaviour at one level. We want an explanation of the meaning of sex, not the mechanics of it. Sex is an important part of romantic love because it is a way of getting what we want from a romantic relationship. It constitutes, expresses, and builds four of the central and important tenets of a good romantic relationship: pleasure, union, intimacy, and vulnerability and care. This account does not claim that there is any absolute or necessary relationship between love and sex though, and allows for a relationship that is not sexual to be romantic. This is because, although sex is an important vehicle and constituent of the four central goods of romantic relationships, it is not the only vehicle and constituent of them.

It should also be noted that this account does not moralise sex; it does not entail that there is anything wrong with having sex outside of a loving relationship or that loving sex is more moral than casual sex. Furthermore, it can explain why sexual intimacy sometimes leads to emotional intimacy and to the development of a romantic relationship, whilst acknowledging that this won't always happen. Rather than being based on morality, my account is based on value: the value of romantic love and the value of sex in relation to that. This account has important implications for the debate

on whether we can justify monogamy as a requirement of romantic love, because if we can uncouple sex and love, we can also uncouple love from sexual exclusivity.

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