

“Mama, Do You Love Me?” A Defense of Unloving Parents

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Mama, Do You Love Me? is the title of a poignant children’s book, in which an Inuit mother reassures her daughter that she will always love her (Joosse 1991). Mother and child are portrayed in increasingly more challenging and surreal circumstances: the child drops eggs, or goes to live with a pack of wolves, or transmutes into a bear that chases the mother. But her mother, even if angry, sad or scared, keeps loving her and tell the daughter that she will love her “forever and for always”. The comforting moral for young readers is that no matter how naughtily they behave, or how hard they push the boundaries, their mommy will always love them. The book is charming for various aesthetic reasons: gorgeous illustrations, poetic language, magical plot, not to mention the fascinating depiction of Inuit customs (although I worry about cultural appropriation). It also teaches children that their mother’s negative emotional responses should not be confused with lack of love. But when I read the book the first time I reacted with anguish and anxiety. For I was not sure that I could become such a mother, and I resented not having felt like such a daughter.

The book is exemplary of a fundamental, maybe even foundational, contemporary Western ideal: unconditional maternal love. Entire libraries could be filled with the stories, songs and lullabies that instill this ideal into our minds.

Like with any cultural narrative, there are counternarratives or complications: for every fairy tale's ending of happy children reuniting with their angelic (birth)mother, there is a dark fable's beginning of miserable children abused by their evil (step)mother; for every Dr. Sears promoting the joys of motherhood, there is a Dr. Freud inquiring into the troubles and pains hiding underneath. For every Cornelia, a Medea. And yet, the predominant portrait of parental love in analytic philosophy often seems oblivious of these complexities, and does not challenge the notion of a parental, especially maternal, love as absolute, unconditional, self-effacing, and eternal: "forever and for always".

Not only can parental love sometimes be partial, conditional, or selfish; sometimes it fails to arise at all. This chapter is an embryonic exploration of how and why parents fail to meet the ideal illustrated in *Mama, Do You Love Me?* While what I say applies to parents of all genders, I will focus on mothers, since my aim is not only to defend a philosophical thesis, but also provide support for a change in the psychology and sociology of motherhood.

In the first section, I draw some preliminary distinctions and clarify the scope and limitations of my inquiry. In the second section, I argue that unloving mothers exist, and are not psychologically abnormal. In the third section, I go further and suggest that lack of maternal love can be fitting and even morally permissible. In the fourth section, I sketch some implications that lack of maternal love and unrequited filial love have for the debate on reasons for love. I conclude with avenues for future research.

1. The Many Faces of Love

That love comes in different forms is something we experience on an everyday basis. We talk about loving our partners, children, parents, siblings, friends, co-workers, fellow human beings, animals, God(s), and objects--both concrete (this painting) and abstract (art). Some languages, like ancient Greek, have different terms to refer to these wildly different forms of "love". English is one of the languages with fewer such distinctions. Therefore, philosophers of love writing in English sometimes use Greek terms such as *eros* (passionate love); *philia* (companionate, friendly and familial love); *agape* (love for humanity).ⁱ

There are two forms of love that are experienced in the parent-child relationship—filial and parental—and they are analogous in many ways: they stem from the same relation and are one a response to the other; the beloved is not a peer, unlike most other forms of personal love; they are directed toward an unchosen object of love,ⁱⁱ unlike friendship and (in most contemporary cultures) romantic love; they are generally sustained over a lifetime and are central to self-identity and flourishing.

There are, however, significant differences between parental and filial love. One such difference is the obvious disparity of autonomy and power between parents and children, which is bound to affect the way they love each other. Such a difference steadily decreases as the children grow older, and for most of the children's life this difference is absent or tenuous. Another difference originates from social expectations and duties: for instance, one could say that parental love is more unconditional and altruistic, and requires a self-abnegation that is not paralleled in filial love. Such a characterization, however, is culturally dependent: in some traditions, as for instance in

the Confucian one, it is filial piety that is expected to be unconditional and self-abnegating.ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between the social duties that come with the parent-child bond, and love itself.^{iv} The two can and do come apart: parents can fulfill their duties toward their children, but not love them, and vice versa.^v This difference is not just fairly commonsensical, but ratified by the law: parents, even loving ones, who neglect their duties are charged with abuse, but unloving parents who do not neglect their duties are not.

But there is a crucial and persisting difference between parental and filial love, one which is not culturally-relative: if and how parents love their children has a central role in the healthy development of the children. It has been shown conclusively that children need to be loved by their caregivers in order to thrive not only psychologically, but also physically.^{vi} Additionally, how much and how well a child is loved by their parent has a large impact on how much and how well a child will love their parents, and any other person later in life. This is another respect in which filial love and parental love are cross-culturally asymmetrical. It is a feature of the normal development of many animals that their attachment to their parents is strongly dependent on how the parents interact with them.

Such preeminence of parental love may in part explain why we have the cultural ideal that I described in the introduction: we realize how crucial it is, for our development as functional human beings, to be loved and nurtured by our parents, and therefore uphold the belief that anything short of unconditional parental love is psychologically abnormal and morally impermissible.

In what follows, I paint a more complicated picture of parental love, and argue that lack of parental love is not only psychologically possible and not symptomatic of a pathology, but may also be fitting and even morally permissible. I will discuss the psychological possibility in the next section.

2. Unloving Parents Are Not Psychologically Abnormal

The existence of unloving parents is a phenomenon well-known to psychologists, psychoanalysts and counselors. Psychological case studies thus provide evidence for the relatively uncontroversial claim that lack of parental love is metaphysically *possible*. However, a psychological approach perpetuates the idea that lack of parental love is necessarily *pathological*: parents fail to love their children in virtue of being abnormal in some way or other, for instance because they are mentally ill, or have been abused by their own parents. The latter explanation does persuasively account for many cases of parental abuse. But abuse, while often compatible with, or caused by, lack of love, should not be conflated with it.

I am going to present a case of lack of love that involves neither abuse, nor psychological abnormality. But, first, a word on the methodology. I will sketch vignettes that aim to induce certain cognitive and emotional responses in the reader. There is a fertile debate on the limitations and benefits of this methodology that cannot be rehashed here. I considered using literary examples, such as Anna Karenina (*War and Peace*) and Becky Sharp (*Vanity Fair*), since they allow for greater complexity than philosophical vignettes. However, such a complexity comes at a cost: either one has to describe the

examples in detail, or one needs to rely on a shared knowledge that cannot, and should not, be counted on. Furthermore, artistic works will undoubtedly engender multiple interpretations: does Anna Karenina stop loving her children when she leaves them? Is Becky's lack of love caused by an abnormal upbringing? Thought experiments have the advantage of being created precisely for the purpose of analyzing responses to only one salient feature.

So here it goes:

UNLOVING FATHER

Al is quite upset: he has found out that his girlfriend has decided to go ahead with the pregnancy, even though he has always been clear that he did not want to have a child, and even though he has always done his best to prevent a pregnancy. He breaks up with her, and reiterates that he does not want children. His former girlfriend hopes he will change his mind, but in fact he doesn't. As years go by, he provides financial support, but he never even meets his son and never develops any relationship with him. Al does not love his son, even though he acknowledges the biological connection and fulfills the consequent duties of material support.

UNLOVING FATHER is not a far-fetched case. Of course, many men do not even financially support their biological offspring, but I want to distinguish between love and fulfilling legally-recognized parental duties.

While many would think poorly of Al from an ethical point of view (couldn't he *try* to have a relationship with his son?), nobody would think that there is anything psychologically abnormal with him; nor would they think that he is secretly harboring repressed love that he cannot manifest, as they might think if he were a woman.

In fact, many fathers are absent from their children's lives and seem to not love them, even when they recognize them legally as their children. Again, even if we might judge them negatively from a moral perspective, we find this entirely believable. This different assessment of women and men is mostly due to sexist expectations and stereotypes, but there could also be reasons having to do with biological parenthood. For some women, bearing the fetus helps them to develop a bond with their future child, and this connection is not available to biological fathers and adoptive parents.^{vii} Of course, as we will see, carrying the fetus is far from guaranteeing a love bond, and many women, anecdotally, report being disappointed that they did not experience such a connection.

At any rate, in order to simplify the discussion and facilitate comparisons between cases, I will from now on use only vignettes featuring mothers—the analogous fatherly cases should be persuasive *a fortiori*. I refer to male children to keep pronouns straight.

The equivalent case to Unloving Father is easy to conjure:

UNLOVING MOTHER 1

Ali finds herself pregnant against her will, and cannot get an abortion. She wants to give the baby up for adoption, but her family prevents her from doing so. They reassure her she will love her child at first sight. At the moment, she hates her state and does not feel any connection with the fetus, which she thinks of as an alien, invasive creature. She hopes this will change when the baby is born. However, after birth the baby looks ugly to her, and she has a hard time breastfeeding him. She lacks adequate medical and familial support, and is left alone dealing with this still-alien-looking creature who cries all the time and who does not seem to like her at all. Ali is exhausted and resentful, dreaming of the life she could have had without him. After a few weeks, she leaves him outside an ER,

well-covered, wearing bright colors, and in plain sight. She cuts ties with her previous life, and never comes to regret her deed.

Ali does not love her child and feels alienated from him to the point of abandoning him. We could appeal to various explanations as to why she does not love him, but the point here is that she is not psychologically abnormal, just like Unloving Father.

Note that I do not take abandonment to be a *symptom* of lack of love: there are many mothers who abandon or give up their children for adoption while still loving their children. But I construed my story so as to exclude such a possibility: Ali does not love her child and *thus* abandons him.

As in the previous case, a natural reaction would be to concede that the parent does not love her child, but to find it normatively wrong. This response might be quite resilient even if we change the example so as to exclude abandonment. Imagine the following variation:

UNLOVING MOTHER 2

Bo's story starts like Ali's. However, her conscience does not allow her to give up her baby, so she continues to raise him, but she is filled with resentment toward him. For her baby, she had to give up a fulfilling career, and now she is struggling financially. She also finds herself estranged from her religious community because the child was conceived out of wedlock, and from her friends, who are leading a different lifestyle. Bo keeps fulfilling her basic duties, but she is full of resentment and finds herself unable to love her child.

This case, too, is meant to illustrate that an unloving mother is psychologically normal. Bo shows no signs of mental illness, and is neurotypical. She simply cannot love her

child. Notice that I am not claiming that Bo's outcome is unavoidable or even statistically typical: it might be the case that the majority of women who do not desire a child but end up having one nonetheless do love their children. Whether that is the case should be investigated empirically (albeit it might quite hard to do so, as I discuss below).

At this point one could argue that neither Ali nor Bo, nor the many biological fathers who reject their role as fathers, are "real" parents: to count as an unloving *parent*, one needs to occupy a certain social or moral role.^{viii} After all, even with all the biases in favor of biological motherhood, many of us do not find it difficult to imagine that a surrogate mother does not love the fetus she carries, precisely because she has set up herself not to.

However, I submit that even when a woman occupies the relevant social or moral role, she might find it hard to love her child, as in the following case:

UNLOVING MOTHER 3

Catherine is looking forward to becoming a mother. She dreams of blissful family scenes likes the ones she has seen in movies. She caresses her pregnant belly, and talks to the baby inside her. However, when the baby is born, things are much different from what she expected. She thought she would be filled with instant love for her baby, but she only feels the desire to love him, not love itself. Even though she does not dare to say it, she does not think the baby is as cute as everybody else claims, with his bulging eyes, cone-shaped head, and thick dark hair that covers his whole body. She is ashamed to find him boring and uninteresting. A few weeks after he is born, the baby dies of SIDS. She is devastated, but for reasons that she won't confess: she has never got a chance to love her baby. Regret, guilt and shame are all that she can feel.

Catherine wants to be a mother and wants to love her baby, but she does not have the time to. Loving is often a gradual process, even though most mothers expect to fall in love with their babies at first sight (and some of them do).

One way to think of what happens to Catherine is that the mere existence of the parental commitment does not suffice to bring about her love. That is, the causal process that usually takes place when a mother gives birth or receives her adoptive child goes awry, even though Catherine wants to love her baby and has *reasons* to love him.

There are many ways in which parents may find themselves incapable of developing a loving attitude toward their children, even though they want to. Other emotions might come in the way, as it might happen to a stepparent in the grip of intense jealousy for the former partner of their spouse who is the biological parent of their children.

This section was aimed to persuade the reader that lack of parental love is not only *possible*, but also psychologically *normal*; that is, it need not be the outcome of previous neglect or abuse, or stem from some kind of psychological pathology.

But the very notion of psychological normality is a thorny one. On the one hand, it heavily relies on statistical typicality: how normal a behavior is depends at least partially on how widespread it is. However, it is extremely difficult to empirically study how frequently mothers lack love. Think of the stigma against women who confess to either not want children, or to regret having had children, *even when they claim they love their children*.^{ix} Furthermore, women who fail to love their children also face internalized guilt and shame that are likely to inhibit truthfulness even to themselves. Emotional suppression and self-deception make studying this phenomenon extremely difficult.

On the other hand, what counts as normal, psychologically or otherwise, is also always enmeshed with values. Feminist epistemology has long demonstrated that the myth of scientific neutrality is just that (Anderson 2017). Normative considerations are particularly important when it comes to empirically investigating parental love, which is a crucial component of our value system, as the strength and resilience of stereotypical understanding of motherhood demonstrates.

My separation into psychological and normative considerations is thus somewhat artificial. While I build my scenarios as having increasing normative strength, in a sort of foundational crescendo, my argument might be best interpreted in a coherentist light, where intuitions brought about later might reinforce verdicts defended earlier on. At the same time, a natural response of some readers is to accept that unloving mothers do exist, but reject that their lack of love is ever fitting or morally permissible. The next section aims to push back against this ingrained way of thinking.

3. Unloving Parents Are Not Always Moral Monsters

Here is a vignette aimed to show that lack of parental love may be fitting:

UNLOVING MOTHER 4

Diana's son Kevin has always been very selfish. She has always loved him anyway, and hoped that by showering him with care and by modeling an empathetic behavior, she could change him. But Kevin kept being focused only on his own interests. Diana could feel her love getting increasingly strained by witnessing his cruel behavior toward his partners and his manipulative attitude towards others in general. One day, watching the

news, she discovers that Kevin, now CEO of a big pharmaceutical company, has obtained the manufacturing license for a drug that is crucial for the treatment of parasites in children in developing countries, and has raised its price by a factor of 56. Suddenly, Diana is filled with rage and hatred. The last remnants of love she felt in her heart seem to melt, and she refuses to have any relationship with him.^x

Diana's story may be uncommon: even when a child acts in a way that manifests deep moral flaws, parents may not stop loving their children, either because they themselves do not have a moral compass, or because they find ways of excusing their child against all evidence, or because they condemn their acts while still loving them.^{xi}

Nevertheless, Diana's reaction seems *fitting*. While we admire a mother who is capable of loving her son and at the same time condemning his actions, we do not think that ceasing to love a moral monster is inappropriate.

Such a propriety judgment may be easier to defend when the immoral actions are directed *against* the parents themselves: even though it is less talked about than child abuse, children abuse their parents too. Consider the novel *Father Goriot*, by Honoré de Balzac, where the eponymous character is portrayed as endlessly providing for his ungrateful and unloving daughters. It seems to me that we should think of children abusing parents as analogous to parents abusing children, at least when it comes to the question of whether parents should emotionally detach themselves from their abusers.

But children need not be abusive to cause their parents to stop loving them. C. S. Lewis has an intriguing discussion of unrequited familial love in general. He laments “those treacly tunes and saccharine poems in which popular art expresses Affection. They

are odious because of their falsity. They represent as a ready-made recipe for bliss (and even for goodness) what is in fact only an opportunity” (Lewis 1960: 62).

Lewis talks of unrequited familial love as widespread phenomenon that “happens every day” (63), and which is caused by the fact that sometimes we are, simply, “intolerable” (64). Of course, being intolerable is a subjective judgment: how often do we see parents and children (or siblings, or other relatives, for that matter) who cannot stand each other even though, to an external observer, they are both perfectly nice and acceptable people who just cannot get along? The unchosen nature of family associations makes it unavoidable that some of them be dysfunctional, and sometimes the suffering involved suffocates the love. This is particularly likely to happen when the parties are forced to live together because of external circumstances.

However, even when their children are perfectly tolerable and even likeable and worthy of love, parents may stop loving them. Consider this case:

UNLOVING MOTHER 5

Eva is deeply unhappy. She has a young child, Malik, whom she loves, but her relationship with the father of the child, Tom, is very dysfunctional and they fight constantly. Her constant unhappiness makes her a bad mother: she treats Malik poorly and feels deeply guilty about that. To escape her current unhappiness, she starts having affairs until she falls in love with a woman, Laneka. She believes her happiness depends on her ability to live with Laneka, but knows that she would never be able to get custody of her son given that her country’s laws prohibit homosexual relations. She also thinks Malik will be better off with Tom, who is an affectionate father, and who will be able to give him a much more comfortable life. Eva leaves, and after a while Tom remarries. Eva

knows from third parties that her son is much happier. Tom does not allow for any interaction with him, but Eva thinks that's best for all. She moves to another country and adopts a little girl with Laneka. She goes back to college and finds a fulfilling career path. After decades, she sometimes thinks of her son, but both her grief and love gradually fade until they are extinguished. Malik never attempts to reestablish a bond with his birth mother and considers his stepmother his "real" mother.

The topic of conflicts between reasons provided by love and other kinds of reasons for action (such as moral and prudential reasons) has been explored at length by philosophers.^{xii} However, the focus has generally been on conflicts between love's reasons and moral reasons, rather than on internal conflicts within reasons of love themselves.

It seems to me that what Eva does may be considered morally permissible. More importantly, even those who disagree should acknowledge that Eva is not a moral monster. Women who escape unhappy marriages and lives and leave their children behind are crucified by popular press and fictional representations alike, but their decision may be the right one, even morally speaking, if their unhappiness prevented them to love their children as children ought to be loved.

Furthermore, a conflict between different loving relationships is not the only source of pressure on parental love: others are professional obligations, artistic pursuits, or religious ideals, to mention the most obvious. Think of the fictional Gauguin that Williams imagines in his *Moral Luck*: a man who reneges on his familial obligations in order to pursue his worthy artistic aspiration (Williams 1981). Or imagine a spiritual or political leader who needs to forego family obligations in order to advance a cause

perceived as more important. Again, using examples of fathers is helpful in that even when we criticize them morally we do not think of them as monsters, but as conflicted men who may have taken the wrong decision.

The extent to which these other normative sources undermine not just love's duties, but its constitutive feelings, expressions, and behaviors may depend on one's conception of love, but it is reasonable to suppose that at least in some cases love is lost altogether.

I want to conclude this section by briefly analyzing three possible responses to Eva's case. One is to suggest that Eva's action is not morally impermissible, but is bad nonetheless, an instance of the *suberogatory* (Driver 1992).^{xiii} I am sympathetic to this line of thought, and to the particularistic or pluralistic approach to the deontic that goes along with it, but I cannot develop its implications here.

A second one is to insist that Eva's behavior is immoral because it harmed Malik. But I stipulated that that is not the case. While it might be rare that children are not damaged by lack of maternal love, in large part that harm depends on the very ideal I am suggesting we should dismantle: if Eva were a man, we would readily admit Malik is better off without him. Why is it any different with a mother?

The final, related, response is to deny that the story is psychologically plausible: how can Eva stop loving her son? But, again, why do we find so hard to believe that a mother stop loving a grown child? We stop loving friends, romantic partners, siblings, and parents. Why are children any different? In the absence of decisive countervailing empirical evidence, the burden of proof seems to rest with my opponent.

As I stated earlier, my aim in this essay is double: to put pressure on a philosophical framework, on the one hand, and to support a sociological change, on the other. I am not under the illusion of having *conclusively* proven that lack of parental love may be fitting or morally permissible. In fact, I myself oscillate when thinking about Eva. How could she not love her son?! But then I remind myself how different I am from her or the other unloving mothers I described. My children have been deeply desired; they are young and adorable, and I cannot fathom them committing any heinous crime; I am in a happy relationship with my partner; I have the education and financial means that allow me to look for childcare, counseling and other forms of support; I live in an extremely privileged context that provides me with multiple opportunities for thriving. It is easy for me, and many of us philosophically dissecting love, to look down upon those who fail to love their children, to think of them as defective, either psychologically or morally. But thought experiments are not just about testing affect-free intuitions: they are, or should be, also about counterfactual emotional engagement: a form of imaginative projection that may require significant adjustment to our individual moral psychology and our collective sociological understanding of motherhood. That much I hope to have invited the reader to do.

4. Reasons for Loving or Not Loving One's Children

In the philosophy of love there are three, partially overlapping, debates: a metaphysical discussion on the nature of love; a debate on normative reasons that stem *from* love; and a

debate on whether there are normative reasons *for* love.^{xiv} Thinking about lack of parental love can be fruitful for all three of them.

For instance, I have suggested earlier that whether a certain case counts as one of unloving parent may depend on one's conception of love. The opposite holds too: whether or not a theory accounts for this phenomenon may be a desideratum of the theory itself. Furthermore, thinking of parents who stop loving their children in virtue of normative reasons could provide original insights for the second debate, where it is often still taken for granted that parents who do not love their children are "ethically flawed" and even "irrational" (Setiya 2014, 259). In this section, however, I will focus on the implications for the topic of reasons *for* love.

Excellent reviews of the debate are already provided in this volume and elsewhere, so I will just reiterate the fundamental notions. The logical space is usually divided as follows: there are those who believe that love has no justificatory reasons and those who believe it does. The most famous proponent of the first kind of view is Harry Frankfurt, who argues that love is a volitional commitment that bestows value, but is not responsive to it.

People find this theory either very intuitive or very puzzling, depending on which features or experiences of love are most salient and important to them. Those who find it puzzling think of love as responsive to reason. Philosophers in this Rationalist camp think of love as involving an appraisal of the beloved. This idea is often spelled out in terms of characteristics, qualities or properties of the beloved, which range from prosaic intrinsic traits such as being beautiful and smart, to moral qualities, to relational and historical

properties such as “being the person I proposed to in Paris,” to much more abstract ones such as rationality or simple humanity.^{xv}

Appraisal views share the advantage, to differing degrees, of accounting for commonsensical intuitions and ways of speaking about our beloveds, especially in romantic and friendly contexts, and for our need to be appreciated by our lovers for our qualities. However, many of these views are vulnerable to various objections: what happens if the beloved changes, or loses their qualities, or someone else with the same or better qualities comes along? Proponents of these views have answers for these questions, but such answers tend to be more persuasive for nonfamilial love. In familial contexts, it seems that our love for our children makes us aware of their value, rather than vice versa.

A popular alternative to views that think of love as a response to the value of an individual is to think of love as a response to the value of a *relationship* (Kolodny 2003). My reason to love my daughter is precisely that she is my daughter, my reason to love my spouse is that she is my spouse, and so forth for all types of loving relationships. This approach has many advantages. It retains the talk of reasons, while avoiding traditional objections, and it presents a unified picture of different kinds of personal love.

The Relationship View and the No Reasons View superficially resemble each other. When asked: “why do you love me?” the lover in both cases responds “because you are my daughter.” In one case, however, “because” refers to a normative reason, while in another it refers simply to a causal explanation: like anything else, the psychological state that we call love is caused by something, but that need not involve a reason. I am hungry because I skipped lunch—but my skipping lunch is not a normative reason that justifies my hunger, or renders it a fitting response.

Finally, in more recent years, hybrid views have emerged. Such views tend to approach the problem in a more pluralistic spirit: because love comprises both normative and non-normative elements, it may or may not be responsive to reasons. This idea is cashed out in different ways depending on the author (Martin 2015, Hurka 2017).

But why are unloving parents relevant to this debate? First, it seems to me that reflecting on this phenomenon brings us to lean in favor of a Rationalist approach. In almost all of the cases discussed above a live and important question is whether the unloving parent has adequate normative reasons for not loving their child. The response that an advocate of a No Reasons view must give—that this question presupposes some kind of category mistake—is not persuasive.

Moreover, when Frankfurt talks about the groundlessness of love, parental love is his paradigmatic example, but he never considers the possibility of unloving parents. For instance, in *The Reasons of Love* he writes: “If my children turn out to be ferociously wicked, or if it should become apparent that loving them somehow threatened my hope of leading a decent life, I might perhaps recognize that my love for them was regrettable. But I suspect that after coming finally to acknowledge this, I would continue to love them anyhow” (Frankfurt 2004: 39-40). This might well be a truthful statement about Harry Frankfurt’s love for his children, and it might be true for most parents, but we have no evidence that it is a universal truth, and we have some evidence that it is not. Once we consider the possibility of non-pathological unloving parents, the No Reasons View appears less compelling even for parental love.

Among the Rationalist views, the existence of unloving parents (and their counterpart, not discussed here, of unloving children) bears the most worrisome

implications for the Relationship View. While the view faces significant objections within the context of romantic love,^{xvi} it seems much more plausible in the case of familial love, and especially with love for small children. If asked: “what is the reason you love your baby?”, my immediate natural response is: “because she is *my* baby.” And I see that as a good, justificatory, fitting reason.

The Relationship View *essentially* relies on the fact that love proper is always reciprocated: the lover’s love is grounded normatively in the existence of a loving relationship with the beloved. Thus, unrequited romantic love is explained away as not worthy of consideration because not proper love, but “futile pining” (Kolodny 20013: 171), while the possibility of lack of reciprocation within familial bonds is not even considered. But we can think of most of the cases above as cases of *unrequited filial love*: as far as we know, children of unloving parents love their parents. This is precisely what makes the cases heartbreaking, what makes us prone to indignation and anger toward those mothers: how can they not love their innocent children, how can they deprive them of this immense good that maternal love is?

But then, if mama does not love me, and yet I do love her, what grounds my love? We do *not* have a loving relationship in place. And even if mama used to love me, but I become an evil pharma bro who harms people out of greed, what justifies her ceasing to love me? The loving relationship clearly cannot.

A possible response on Kolodny’s behalf is that these are views of reasons for loving, not for *not* loving. In other words, one could deny that falling in and out of love, so to speak, are symmetrical. Perhaps, in the spirit of the hybrid views mentioned above, one could think that we stop loving because our beloved loses or never acquires certain

lovable properties, but we begin to love our small children for no reason, and continue loving them in virtue of the established relationship we have with them, until finally qualities become normatively relevant (and thus love can end). David Wong has defended a similar pluralistic approach (Wong 2014).

Thinking about unrequited love and lack of parental love, together with other realistic portraits of love, thus enrich the discussion of all forms of love and encourages the development of more sophisticated approaches.

6. Conclusion: On Loving Less Or Badly.

There are some important issues that I have to leave for future inquiry. I have throughout talked as if parents either love their children or they don't. But when we think about lack of love in romantic relationships, for instance, it is often the case that one is loved *less* or *differently* than the other, or *inadequately* or *inappropriately*. Similarly, parents may love their children a little, but not enough, or love them a lot but in a selfish way, or love one child of theirs more than their siblings, and so forth.

Many of the cases discussed in the paper could be usefully reformulated and analyzed with this caveat in mind. That love comes in degree of intensity and with all sorts of deficiencies is important when thinking about parental love precisely because of the overtly idealized or even saccharine picture that is often utilized.

One context in which loving less may come up often is a discussion of parental love and sibling rivalry. Parents often reassure their children that they are loved the same. At most, they will admit (in private) of *liking* one more than the other, or, less crudely, to get along with one more than the other. But third-party observers beg to disagree, and

frankly it would be surprising if no parent ever loved some of their children a little more than others (correspondingly, I suspect some children do love their parents in different measures and ways).

Of course, without specifying a definition of love, it is hard to discuss rigorously what counts as loving less, or less well. But it seems to me that, again, such a discussion is worth having, even though it might be an uncomfortable discussion.

However, I want to end on a positive and reassuring note. Thinking about the flaws of parental love is not only compatible with acknowledging its primary role in our lives, but can provide further reasons to celebrate its many successful wholesome and virtuous instances. Love between a parent and a child is really like no other, especially when it starts blossoming—when we realize for the first time how much we love our child, and when our child loves us back. It is comparatively unconditional, that is, most impervious to faults, flaws and betrayals and least dependent on attractiveness and reciprocation. It is most enduring, that is, least accepting of substitutions and upgrades, even if sometimes people estranged from their children or parents do need to adopt, officially or not, someone else who can fill the void left. Finally, it is the most altruistic, that is, most concerned with the beloved's interests, most self-effacing and prone to sacrifice (this is especially true in the love for small children, no doubt like evolution selected it).

Even when imperfect (that is, always), familial love may be, to quote C.S. Lewis, “Love Himself, working in our hearts,” and, when your mama tells you that she loves you, that will be the most special moment of all.^{xvii}

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ⁱ For a review, see Helm 2013.

ⁱⁱ With the exception of adoptions where parents choose a specific individual.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Wong 2014, whose title I borrow here.

^{iv} Thanks to Simon Keller for bringing my attention to this distinction.

^v While the two come apart conceptually, one could argue that amongst parental duties is the duty to love one’s children, as defended by Matthew Liao in Liao 2015.

^{vi} See Liao 2015, ch. 3 for a review of such evidence. See also the chapters by Monique Wonderly and by Berit Brogaard in this volume.

^{vii} For a defense of the view that the intimate bond between gestational mother and baby usually develops during pregnancy, see Gheaus 2012.

^{viii} Thanks to Anca Gheaus and Adrienne Martin for raising this worry.

^{ix} See for instance: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/may/09/love-regret-mothers-wish-never-had-children-motherhood>. I thank Katrien Schaubroeck for this reference

^x This vignette is inspired by the notorious “pharma bro” story and by *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Shriver 2003).

^{xi} As in Susan Wolf’s case of the mother who hides her child from the police (Wolf 2015, ch.10).

^{xii} See chapter by Katrien Schaubroeck in this volume.

^{xiii} I am grateful to Trip Glazer for this suggestion.

^{xiv} See the section on “Reasons and Rationality” of this volume.

^{xv} Cf. Keller 2000, Delaney 1996, Velleman 1999, Setiya 2014.

^{xvi} Many of these objections are discussed by Esther Kroeker in this volume. I object to the view from the perspective of unrequited love in Protasi 2016.

^{xvii} Thank you to Anca Gheaus, Trip Glazer, Simon Keller, Adrienne Martin, Katrien Schaubroeck, Sam Shpall for detailed and insightful feedback.

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