Beyond Emotion: Love as an Encounter of Myth and Drive

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Abstract

Starting with a review of research on love as an emotion, with an emphasis on romantic love, it is argued that despite strong emotional correlates evidence is lacking to conclude that love would meet the criteria of basic emotions. Theoretical developments are proposed where love is conceived of as a combination of an objectless drive, a desire for love, and a mythical and scripted representation that offers the possibility of labeling the current core affect. I argue that the basic motive for love is not so much the partner’s personal attributes, but rather the benefits of the transformative power of being in love.

Keywords

core affect, drive for love, emotion, myth, romantic love

I say that this Love is extremely good, for adding unto us true assets, it perfects us in proportion. [...] And it is necessarily followed by joy, for it reveals to us the object of our love as a property that belongs to us.

René Descartes, Les passions de l’ame (Passions of the soul), 1649, Article 139.

The connection between love and emotion is a most confusing and equivocal field of study. The confusion would seem to be upheld by various issues that are intertwined, by assumptions taken as obvious, and due to the fact that authors don’t always refer to the same kind of love. Fehr and Russell (1984) introduced their prototype study of emotion by stating that “Everyone knows what an emotion is, until asked to give a definition” (Fehr & Russell, 1984, p. 464). Strikingly, the parallel can be made with the concept of love: everyone knows what love is, until asked to give a definition. Sternberg and Beall (1991, p. 257) stated that “many people believe they know what love is, but they would have trouble saying what it is,” whereas Berscheid (2010, p. 20) referred to “the impoverished vocabulary people have to describe their strong positive sentiments.” This difficulty, however, may be circumvented by asking participants to list features of love (Fehr, 1988) or to describe a typical love episode—or script (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O’Connor, 1987). Love has been found to be one of the most common answers when participants are asked to list items belonging to the category “Emotion,” and it ranks first as belonging to the general (superordinate) category “Emotion” when presented within a list of 20 emotion words (Fehr & Russell, 1984). In addition, participants asked for a prototypicality rating of 20 (Fehr & Russell, 1984) or 213 (Shaver et al., 1987) emotion words identified the word love as best example illustrating emotion. Among words pertaining to emotion, love is also perceived as having the highest emotional intensity just after the word “hate” (Strauss & Allen, 2008). Thus, it appears that folk knowledge refers to emotion to explain what love is, and uses love as the best example of emotion. So we are faced with two intertwined concepts, each one being unable to define the other.

Things are no better when specialists have to draw conclusions. Emotion researchers fail to agree about definitions of or functions endorsed by emotions (Izard, 2010). In parallel, there is no consensus on a definition of love (Berscheid, 2010) or even the subtypes of love, such as compassionate love (Fehr & Sprecher, 2009). Love itself has been considered as a set of love styles (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986), a multifaceted construct (Sternberg, 1988), an attitude (Noller, 1996; Rubin, 1970), a goal-directed motive (Rempel & Burris, 2005), a mate selection process (Buss, 1995), or a basic emotion (Shaver, Morgan, & Wu, 1996). Based on self-report measures, a psychometric approach of love has been developed (e.g., Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986; Rubin, 1970; Sternberg,
Love is a highly polysemous concept (Berscheid, 2010) with uncertain limits and related concepts such as attraction, seduction, attachment, or affection. The present article first seeks to advance a model of how love, emotion, and mood may be interrelated in the scope of love as a romantic relationship or “being in love,” that is, during dating or marital relationships, especially at their outset, when both partners have strong positive feelings. Further, I propose that an unconscious drive for love may exist, together with the social normative frame offered by the mythical and scripted representation of love. Within this model, the desire for love rests on partner’s qualities with the potential to transform the lover, whereas the motive for love is love for its own sake. The labeling of one’s current relationship as being “love” may remain despite the variability of emotional states one encounters or, in the case of dysfunctional relationships, despite the pre-eminence of negative affect. I later suggest that this speculative model may offer directions for future research.

Is Love a Basic Emotion?

Research in psychology offers a myriad of contradictory positions on this question. Scientists have concluded that love is a basic emotion (e.g., Ekman, 1992; Ekman & Cordonaro, 2011; Izard, 2007), or that no such thing as basic emotions exists (Barrett, 2006; Russell, 2003).

Ekman (1992, 1998; see Sabini & Silver, 2005, for a review) argues that love would not be a basic—that is, real—emotion, but rather an emotional attitude, an emotion complex, or an emotion plot. In a similar vein, Scherer (2005) differentiates emotions from affective phenomena such as liking or loving. Izard distinguishes basic emotions from emotion-related experiences—that is, associative networks of “feeling, images, appraisals, thoughts, and goals” (Izard, 1992, p. 564)—such as love. Love never satisfies all the criteria for basic emotion researchers, such as unique and universal facial expression, unique subjective feeling, unique physiological pattern, or brief duration. It’s been relegated to the paragraph “Special cases” (Ekman & Cordonaro, 2011) of phenomena which everyone considers as emotional in nature, without knowing where to classify them.

To our knowledge, no scientist has ever claimed that love would imply universal facial recognition, and love is de facto currently excluded from such research (see Nelson & Russell, 2013, for a review). One reason for this might be the existence of display rules (Ekman, Sorenson, & Friesen, 1969, based on Goffman, 1967) that allow people to strategically display or hide their attraction to potential mates. If we look at the neurochemistry of love, sex-attractant pheromones have been found to influence women’s self-reports of sociosexual behaviors such as petting, kissing, and other displays of affection (McCoy & Pitino, 2002; Rako & Friebery, 2004), but this alleged increase in women’s sexual attractiveness to men has been contested (Hayes, 2003). Neuroimaging studies of basic emotions remain contradictory and inconclusive (e.g., Barrett & Wager, 2006; Murphy, Nimmo-Smith, & Lawrence, 2003; Vytal & Hamann, 2010), and most of them exclude the concept of love from their scope, even along with other emotional concepts. However, a few neuroimaging studies have been conducted specifically on love. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) measures of brain activity (Bartels & Zeki, 2000, 2004) have indicated that both romantic and maternal love activate brain regions belonging to the dopamine reward system, and regions containing a high density of oxytocin or vasopressin receptors, considered to be attachment-mediating neurohormones. Both forms of love also appear to deactivate areas associated with negative emotion and critical assessment of other people. Xu et al. (2012) suggested that the activation of brain regions associated with reward, social evaluation, and emotional regulation may also be predictive of relationship stability and quality. Possible links have been proposed between dopamine and addictive behavior, between serotonin and obsessive behavior, or between cortisol and coping with stress (for a review see De Boer, van Buel, & Ter Horst, 2012), with all of these substances showing increased or decreased levels during the early stage of romantic love. Most of the neurobiological perspective on love, however, remains speculative due to the limited number of published studies, sample bias, or limited sample size. Moreover, it would appear that none of these studies has yet addressed the possibility of comparing love to other human emotional states. Therefore we have no indication that specific neural correlates of love would exist. In fact, most of the psychological processes that are relevant to these studies can be thought of as nonspecific, for example, pair-bonding can be found in friendship; rewards can be reached through one’s career, addiction can be found with cocaine. Savulescu and Sandberg (2008, p. 35) state that “the different aspects of love involve widely dispersed systems rather than any particular ‘love centers.’” Love would seem to be confined to a specific conjunction of nonspecific states.

Whether it’s about love or other emotional states, the boundaries between these concepts are rather fuzzy, and to consider them as “natural kinds” with distinct patterns of facial expression, neural signature, and behavior, is a risky bet (Barrett, 2006; Russell, 2003). Evidence is lacking to conclude that clear boundaries between specific emotions exist. The subjective experience shows that it can be quite difficult to know whether one feels rather sad, or angry; proud, or happy. Positive as well as negative discrete emotions show strong co-occurrences.
Is Love an Emotion?

Apart from research devoted to basic emotions, scientists usually consider love as an emotion, sometimes without any justification. For instance, Shiotu, Neufeld, Yeung, Moser, and Perea (Watson & Clark, 1992), and whatever the emotion, people have difficulty assessing and differentiating them (Posner, Russell, & Peterson, 2005).

Schachter and Singer’s (1962) “cognition–arousal” or “two-factor” theory of emotion was the first to propose that emotion is grounded on the combination of (a) physiological arousal, and (b) cognitive “labeling” of this arousal. In other words, arousal would seem to be interpreted as relevant to a specific emotion; it could also be misattributed to an irrelevant cause. In the classic Dutton and Aron study (1974), male tourists in a fear-eliciting context are said to have attributed their physiological arousal to the presence of an attractive female confederate, and therefore tended to feel attracted to her. Dimensional (Russell, 2003) or circumplex (Posner et al., 2005) models of emotions propose that each emotion is a cognitive interpretation of a core physiological state. The physiological state is defined as a combination of varying degrees of valence (positive/negative, or pleasant/unpleasant) and arousal (high/low). According to this conception, emotion categories would not be defined by nature or evolution, but are rather sociocultural constructions, and even artifacts. Within dimensional models of emotion, the question of love does not seem to have been discussed. Liking, however, may be explained (Russell, 2003) by the attribution of a change in core affect to the presence of an Object (e.g., person, physical object, event); when perceived as the cause of a change along the valence dimension (more pleasure), or along both dimensions of valence and arousal (more pleasure and higher arousal), the Object would be liked. If this reasoning stands with respect to love, a person would be loved when his/her presence would be immediately (in the case of love at first sight) or repeatedly linked with a change in core affect, such as a more positive valence and more intense arousal. More precisely, those who experience a good feeling together with high arousal would be led to label this experience: “love at first sight” or “passion,” whereas those who experience a good feeling and moderate to low arousal would be concerned by “attachment” or “companionate love.” The uncertainties of love seem compatible with this theoretical model where core affect is interpreted in light of additional cognitive information. Let’s take the case of John and Joan who meet at a friend’s party. They are both open to a new loving relationship. They have a good time at their friend’s place, the music is nice, the food is good, and they laugh a lot. Neither John nor Joan have a partner at their side, and both of them feel a strong physical attraction to each other. They could walk away with the idea that they have found love. Let’s imagine now the case where all the elements are similar, except for the fact that John is not single, loves his girlfriend, and wants to stay faithful. The label that he could put on the feelings he experienced that evening could be of the type “very exciting,” “a lot of fun,” “many nice people.” Joan, however, who was attracted by John but couldn’t overlook the existence of his girlfriend, will leave the party irritated, disappointed, and sullen, telling herself the well-known sentence: “All the good ones are already taken.” The difference in these two examples lies in the awareness that the typical setting of a love story is, or is not, applicable to the situation.

Simpler cases are seen even more frequently. For instance, if John is told that the woman he felt attracted to is diagnosed with a severe illness, he might see his feelings go from attraction to a beautiful girl to deep sympathy towards such a courageous girl in this difficult situation. He switches from love to compassion. The meaning we give to our core affect is forever changing according to the information that we are given. But what remains to be explained is why the label love can be used consistently for the succession of states that can go from happiness to sadness and from excitement to boredom. A possible interpretation is that the initial feeling experienced during the first encounter was identified as love. The succeeding variations of the core affect will then not change anything. This initial labeling effect would be the reason for many people separating from a partner who they say still love. It would also likely explain unrequited love (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993; Sinclair & Frienze, 2005), that is, the case where a romantic relationship tends to be imposed on someone who has no desire for it. Society offers would-be lovers a script (Bratalsvay, Baumeister, & Sommer, 1998) and romantic beliefs (e.g., True love overcomes all obstacles) whereby love which remains constant will in the end be recognized and required. Rejection can then be interpreted as a stage during which the strength of the would-be lover’s feeling must be tested. In this case, the initial impression would combine with the script to create a dysfunctional relationship. Another slightly different situation arises when we begin to love someone while being conscious that our beloved or the future relationship might be deleterious to us. If the initial impression is ambivalent, why is it interpreted as love? If the core affect is intense and positive, due for example to sexual arousal, the individual might give priority to the information which is coherent with the core affect and thus put aside any other information. This process would be facilitated by the fact that the cultural script for love is made of ups and downs, conflict and reconciliation, joy and sorrow. Therefore, threatening aspects of a new relationship can be interpreted as inherent to a loving relationship, especially for those partners who hold growth beliefs regarding their relationships, that is, who believe that problems can be overcome (Knee & Bush, 2008; Knee & Petty, 2013). In addition, passionate lovers have been found recently (van Steenbergen, Langeslag, Band, & Hommel, 2014) to show reduced cognitive control. Together with thinking obsessively of the beloved (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Ratelle, Carbonneau, Vallerand, & Mageau, 2013), this would likely impair the capacity to deliberately appraise the costs and benefits of the relationship. And when long-term, dysfunctional relationships are maintained, it is possible that intimate partners, while being aware of the deleterious aspects of their relationship, keep holding the view that they have a unique and irreplaceable intimate relationship—which by most people is called love.
(2011) define two kinds of love as positive emotions. Attachment love “addresses the need for other’s nurturance and protection,” whereas nurturant love addresses “the need to care for the young” (Shiota et al., 2011, p. 1370). It would be difficult, however, to state that these two definitions refer to an emotion rather than an attitude, a decision, a need, or a motive. In a similar way, romantic love has been defined as “a motivational state associated with feelings of attachment and the inclination to seek commitment with one partner” (Gonzaga, Turner, Keltner, Campos, & Altemus, 2006, p. 163), and these authors propose that momentary surges of romantic love “could be thought of as emotional experiences” (Gonzaga et al., 2006, p. 164).

If love is an emotion, how can we explain that it may last for years or a lifetime, whereas emotions have been conceptualized as having a short duration (Moors, 2010; Scherer, 2005)? One possible answer is that love is twofold, with a long-standing, dispositional form being opposed to the more emotional, short-lived surge of love (Gonzaga et al., 2006; Shaver et al., 1996). In addition, time and routine would tend to erode the emotional counterparts of romantic relationships: “the partner’s facilitative behaviors are taken for granted and, because they no longer surprise, they no longer have the power to arouse strong positive emotion” (Berscheid, 2010, p. 15). From this point of view, what can last a lifetime is the possibility to label a relationship as being “love,” whereas emotion would be an episodic phenomenon not connected to love or confused—hastily—with love. Actually, these emotions linked to love are often other emotions. Lovers are often happy, but also anxious to know if their happiness will last, and if their partner will continue loving them. They are often jealous when they see their partner looking elsewhere; they are sad when they have to part, excited by the idea of meeting again.

There are many other reasons than love for experiencing these emotions, and therefore it could be argued that none of these emotional states is specific to love. On the other hand there is a long-lasting feeling, which finally is close to two states Scherer (2005) formally distinguished from the concept of emotion: preferences and attitudes. Love can be conceived of as a preference. Love is to choose, to pick a partner out of a few possible partners. Furthermore, Scherer suggests “treating love as an interpersonal attitude with a very strong positive affect component rather than an emotion” (Scherer, 2005, p. 703). If love is a case of attitude, a steady disposition, or a decision, then it can hardly be defined as an emotion; except if it is conceived of as a core affect, interpreted as love, affection, or the need for another person’s presence: “Core affect is part of the information used to estimate affective quality and thus is implicated in incidental acquisition of preferences and attitudes” (Russell, 2003, p. 149).

If John has a very positive feeling each time he meets Joan, he will probably conclude that they “feel good together,” and that this is what is called love. John’s current core affect is attributed to Joan’s perceived affective quality.

Is Love a Positive Emotion?

Ever since Fredrickson (1998, 2001) proposed her influential “broaden-and-build” model of positive emotions, love has often been regarded as a positive emotion (e.g., Campos, Shiota, Keltner, Gonzaga, & Goetz, 2013), which is nevertheless far from obvious when one has in mind the many negative emotions to which it happens to be connected in contexts such as infidelity, violence, or unrequited love (Bratslavsky et al., 1998; Spitzberg, 2010; Tsapelas, Fisher, & Aron, 2010). Moreover, by opposing classes of positive and negative emotions, this may lead to confusion with positive and negative moods (e.g., Vanlessen, Rossi, De Raedt, & Pourtois, 2013).

Love affairs are often emotionally painful or involve a “dark side” (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998), and are nevertheless nearly unanimously classified among positive emotions, by both scientists and laypersons. Participants asked to list features of love or to describe a love event (Fehr, 1988; Shaver et al., 1987) appear to mention almost exclusively positive outcomes such as caring, happiness, understanding, honesty, or exceptionally good communication; a notable but marginal exception being the reference to dependency and uncertainty. It may be argued that the social construction of the thematic of love prevails over its emotional realities. If we have been taught that love is the most positive experience we can encounter (see Galician, 2004), either what we are missing in the relationship or our partner’s strange behavior will take a back seat, and our eyes will know how to see “virtues in faults” (Murray & Holmes, 1993). In turn, a positive view of one’s current relationship would actually be associated with marital satisfaction. Among newlyweds who had been asked for a narrative describing the progression of their relationship, those who told positive but nonromantic stories tended to experience more relational well-being 2 years later than those who had more dramatic, emotional, or romantic storytelling styles (Custer, Holmberg, Blair, & Orbuch, 2008). Thus, an emotional “coconstruction of reality” might be more deleterious to an ongoing relationship than a positively biased, blander, more pragmatic one. If love is an emotion, emotional stories would only reflect the reality and would probably not be harmful to the relationship—unless negative emotions prevail, in contrast to the positively valenced social construction of love; and unless the prevalence of affect would be functional only at the beginning of a relationship.

Is Love a Single or Multiple Emotion?

Studying subtypes of love (e.g., passionate, companionate, compassionate) may appear as an answer to the deeply polysynonymous meaning of love (Berscheid, 2010). There are many kinds of love in people’s mind (Fehr & Russell, 1991), and without knowing the general classification of love we can hope to unequivocally define at least one of these kinds of love. When Sabini and Silver (2005) propose that love may be considered as a basic emotion, they limit the scope of their argumentation to parental love. When Levenson (2011) mentions love as a possible candidate for basic emotion status, he refers to it as “love (attachment)” (Levenson, 2011, p. 379). In the same way, Shaver et al. (1996) contrast “surge love” to a more dispositional form of love, and admit that surge love could be split into other subtypes such as “maternal/tender, romantic/erotic” (Shaver et al., 1996, p. 88).
When love is not divided into subclasses, other authors admit that it refers to a temporal sequence of disparate emotional states. Ekman and Cordaro (2011) state that “many different emotions can be felt when one is in love” (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011, p. 366); Fredrickson (2001) conceives of love as an amalgam of distinct positive emotions: “love experiences are made up of many positive emotions, each including interest, joy and contentment” (Fredrickson, 1998, p. 306). Unlike this statement, other authors (e.g., Aron et al., 2008; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986) do not treat love as bound to positive emotions; it would rather consist of a constellation of emotions (Aron et al., 2008) where the emotion at stake actually conveys the destiny of the relationship: “Reciprocated love (union with the other) is associated with fulfillment and ecstasy. Unrequited love (separation) with emptiness; with anxiety or despair” (Hatfield & Walster, 1978, p. 9).

How Would Love Be Emotional?

No one takes issue that love entails at least an emotional dimension. Researchers who question the fact that love would, or would not be a basic emotion, proceed by comparison with the criteria that supposedly define the notion of basic emotion. I shall propose an alternative to this reasoning, by asking how love would be emotional rather than asking if love is an emotion. There are many ways to fall in love, and it can be hypothesized that love is intrinsically emotional as if the process through which people fall in love is itself intrinsically emotional. This process has been widely studied (e.g., Aron et al., 2008; Miller, 2011).

A first possibility is that love and sexual desire are closely linked. Incipient love could be influenced by the positive, negative, or ambivalent emotions (Koukounas & McCabe, 2001; Peterson & Janssen, 2007) linked with sexual arousal. Neuroimaging studies of love and sexual desire have found these experiences to be related both to distinct and overlapping patterns of brain activation (see Diamond & Dickenson, 2012, for a review). These results may remain inconclusive, however. As pointed out by Diamond and Dickenson (2012), studies of love (e.g., Acevedo, Aron, Fisher, & Brown, 2012; Bartels & Zeki, 2000; Ortigue, Bianchi-Demicheli, Hamilton, & Grafton, 2007; Xu et al., 2012) have used pictures or names of romantic partners as primes, whereas studies of sexual desire (e.g., Gillath & Canterberry, 2012; Redouté et al., 2000; Walter et al., 2008) have used erotic visual stimuli depicting strangers, such as photographs or films. Thus it is possible that patterns of brain activation would overlap when passionate love is at stake, that is, high relevance of sexual activity with an intimate partner. But they may differ when sexual arousal is induced via an image of a stranger rather than a potential intimate partner. They may also differ when platonic, nonsexual love is experienced for a close other. Fehr and Russell’s (1991) study found that sexual love ranked second for its frequency when types of love were asked for; but it ranked only 16th when participants were asked to what degree this and other kinds of love are “good examples” of love, that is, how prototypical they are. Nevertheless, falling in love usually implies physical attraction. Sexual attraction and sexual arousal are part of the Passionate Love Scale (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986), the Eros love style (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986), and the passion component of love (Sternberg, 1988). Moreover, people almost always mention they have sexual desire for those they are “in love” with (Meyers & Berscheid, 1997). This finding, however, may be interpreted in light of a cultural script that tells us that passion and sex must go together. Despite possibilities of platonic love or infatuation, and possibilities of sexual intercourse without love, love, or at least being in love or feeling passionate love, appears to be closely intertwined with sexual attraction. The sex-specific emotion (Everaerd, 1988; Stevenson et al., 2011) or the emotional component of sexual arousal would thus be likely to spread to this experience of love.

Among other criteria for falling in love, beauty is one of those constantly mentioned for choosing a partner, especially of the female kind (Buss, 2003). Encountering beauty or prettiness has been found to give rise to emotional reactions, the “high arousal, pleasant emotion of beauty” being close to attraction and passion, whereas “the fluent processing of pretty stimuli signals familiarity, lowering arousal and leading to a calm pleasure” (Armstrong & Detweiler-Bedell, 2008, p. 322). As pointed out by William Shakespeare in his famous Romeo and Juliet (1597/2007), the longing for beauty might be a matter of comparison, and one encounter may be enough for the label “love” to pass from one relationship to another:

Compare her face with some that I shall show,
And I will make thee think thy swan a crow[…]
You saw her fair, none else being by,
Herself poised with herself in either eye

Love may also involve an idealization process among engaged or married partners, from the very beginning of the relationship and later on (Fowers, Veingrad, & Dominicus, 2002; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Each partner perceives the other as having higher qualities than the typical man or woman, and each one attributes higher qualities to their partner than this partner himself believes he has. Idealization may a priori appear to operate at a cognitive, rather than emotional level. It is nevertheless more deeply moving to meet a person endowed with rare qualities, than someone mediocre and trivial. This simple process, however, can be devastating because many break-ups occur when the initial, real or idealized qualities of a partner end up being identified as the main reason for which people decide to break up (Felmlee, 1998). Keltner and Haidt (2003) refer to awe as an emotion with two components of perceived vastness and accommodation, vastness referring “to anything that is experienced as being much larger than the self, or the self’s ordinary level of experience or frame of reference” (Keltner & Haidt, 2003, p. 303). They consider the possible link between love and awe but do not address it. They indicate the dimension of admiration and wonder characteristic of awe, and the possibility that “celebrities who are exceptionally attractive may
cause feelings of awe tinged with sexual desire as well” (Keltner & Haidt, 2003, p. 309). Love is probably not far when we are impressed and attracted to someone whose qualities transcend ours and give us the hope of elevating ourselves by “including” the other into our self (Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013).

Similarity is also a basic correlate of romantic attraction (e.g., Aron et al., 2008; Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007; Klohnen & Luo, 2003). Yet there is nothing especially emotional—except feeling emotionally secure—in choosing a partner who belongs to the same social group, who has the same job, who lives in the same area, who has the same religion, or plays the same sport, who is fond of the same artists, and who votes for the same party. Over the last decade, however, computer-mediated communication has begun to pose the question of the rules of mate selection. The proportion of dating relationships that begin online has grown steadily and quickly. Cacioppo, Gonzaga, Ogburn, and VanderWiele (2013) have found that 35% of people who married in the United States between 2005 and 2012 had met their spouse online. In addition, meeting one’s spouse online was associated with slightly higher marital satisfaction and lower rates of marital break-up than meeting one’s spouse off-line (Cacioppo et al., 2013). The possibility of quickly accessing a potentially overwhelming set of hundreds or thousands of personal profiles would allow detection of which partners are most appealing (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012), together with more selective choices among these many potential mates (Cacioppo et al., 2013). Future research, however, should investigate the possibility that online dating provides more emotional arousal than offline dating. Comparing multiple profiles online or having a face-to-face encounter with one partner while exploring the profiles of more attractive available alternatives may appear closer to rationality and consumer behavior than to the love at first sight principle. But simultaneously, browsing among numerous attractive profiles may be highly emotional, which, in the context of a dating website, would facilitate the identification of one’s subjective feeling as being love.

**Love as a Hidden Drive**

The concept of drive has been widely used in psychology research. The initial meaning, from Freud’s research (1920/1961), consists of an opposition between Eros and Thanatos, that is, between: (a) a drive for life, or sexual drive, or libido, and (b) a death drive.

The concept of drive mostly entails two meanings, instinctual drive and motivational drive. Some authors use the word drive as a synonym for instinct or a root of human behavior, that is, an impulse aimed at the survival of an individual (hunger, drive to survive) or the species (sexuality). The second meaning is that of a motivation or a desire, for instance when stating that drive would be one with more intense or more frequent desires, or both, for sex. (Baumeister, Catanease, & Vohs, 2001, p. 244)

Thus authors have described a variety of drives such as the drive for muscularity, the drive for thinness, the drive for power or dominance, the reward drive, the variety-seeking drive, or the altruistic drive.

In Jason Brown’s (2012) theory of emotions, love is thought of as being rooted in instinctual drives, but it reaches the consciousness as a desire. There is a transition from need to want, desire, and imaginative choice; from unconscious to conscious; from the urge to discharge, to intentional feeling; from energy to feeling. When conscious, love is believed to stem from the partner’s qualities and virtues, which would only be “justifications or explanations” (Brown, 2012, p. 67). The only true reason for love is that it satisfies unconscious needs. The initial drive from which love arises is objectless, whereas the wish or desire aims towards an object (i.e., a partner). Later on, objectification would recede in favor of an idea or ideal; “the other is no longer another object in the world but a concept in the imagination,” therefore “feeling is linked to the concept, not the actual person” (Brown, 2012, p. 7). Thus, the closer love is to imagination and idealization, the deeper and more enduring it would be: “love has to be unreal to be true,” and should be interpreted “as an intra-psychic ideal rather than an inter-personal bond” (Brown, 2012, p. 52).

Brown admits that initial attraction is often based on sexual drive, but argues that love limited to sexuality remains superficial and mechanical. If drives are based on needs and if the sexual impulse is only a facet of romantic relationships, what would the need specific to love be? I propose that love relies on a need for change and self-improvement. The impulse for love is aimed at escaping the despair of being only what we are; this is the reason why love goes together with idealization. Love can reach its goal only if the person for whom we feel an intense longing for union (Hatfield & Walster, 1978) has the potential to inspire us and elevate us. Merging with someone just like us is closer to attachment and companionship than to love. Love is usually strongest in the beginning of a relationship (Huston, 2009), when we are still hoping this relationship will improve our life and increase its meaning. Everything inside us that would never have changed now has the possibility to change thanks to the power of accommodation, the capacity to accommodate others. Love might be defined as a consented and desired influence.

Arthur Aron’s self-expansion model of love proposes that “participants in a close relationship include each other in their selves in the sense that other’s perspectives, resources, and identities are to some extent one’s own” (Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001, p. 490). But I argue that the goal for love is not only inter-subjectivity or forming a double-being, or enriching or expanding one’s self. Love would aim not only at adding something new to our personality, but also to transform who we currently are.

“Love is a great master; it teaches us to be what we never were,” stated Molière (L’école des femmes, 1663/2010). However, the motivation to expand one’s self, enhance one’s
personal efficacy, and increase resources (Aron et al., 2013) may remain selfish if “costs” and “benefits” are the only guides for behavior, without any real concern for others. The paradox that confers love its particular nature is possibly the fact that it enables one to become richer without taking anything away from others, and to give without impoverishing oneself.

At another level, when love reaches the consciousness as a feeling or a desire, the drive for love would no longer appear to be the expression of a need, but rather of a desire or a motive. Feeling and desire constitute the emotional part of love, and emotion has been defined frequently as a motivational state or goal-oriented behavior (e.g., Buck, 1999; Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Shure, 1989; Miron, Parkinson, & Brehm, 2007; Sabini & Silver, 2005). At this level again, love can be expected to function as a hidden drive, because those who are directly involved in love are not aware of the true reasons they love. People usually claim they were attracted due to the other person’s physical attractiveness, or success, or sense of humor, but such attributes are also, typically, those that the same people would later invoke to justify a break-up (Felmlee, 1998): “She’s only preoccupied with her appearance”; “He’s only preoccupied with his career”; “He’s always joking, we can never have a serious conversation.” I propose that the desire for love entails the search for personal attributes (e.g., good-humored, caring, responsible, gorgeous), whereas the motive for love remains largely hidden; and that this motive may be linked to the search for love for love’s sake. The true motive for love is not to take advantage of the other person—otherwise it would be a matter of interest—but to get close without fear, to give oneself over while being convinced that we shall never be disappointed; to give of our best while assuming we won’t be betrayed or abused. To love is to escape from the law of the most powerful; it is to look for the person—or even the dog, cat, or goldfish—who will neither hurt nor forget us. To love is to overcome the past and to decide to be confident once more. It is to rest from the turmoil of calculations and confronted selfishness. To love is to dream of love so long as the other person does not prove that we are wrong.

Contrary to what may seem an idealistic vision of love, the many failures of love (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1993; Cupach & Spitzberg, 1998; Sinclair & Frieze, 2005) remind us that even when love is initially sincere, consummated love can often give way to cruelty, and unrequited love can give rise to hate. Should we consider that love is nevertheless present? Physical attraction towards someone we hate or fear may well persist. We may appreciate that an intimate partner still brings us a certain social status, or reminds us of the happier days we spent together. It could be stated, however, that this love remains as long as idealization is maintained. Research has found that individuals tend to overestimate their intimate partners’ qualities (Murray et al., 1996) or the extent to which their relationship has improved recently (Karney & Frye, 2002), whereas they underestimate the chances of their marriage failing (Fowers, Lyons, Montel, & Shaked, 2001). The global adoration of the partner, however, is not contradictory with accuracy regarding specific traits, and both are critical for relationship maintenance (Neff & Karney, 2005).

Love has been defined as a motive based on valuing the other and promoting the other’s well-being (Rempel & Burriss, 2005). Romantic love, however, still needs two persons with the same motive. If one of the lovers is used, badly treated, humiliated, or harassed by the other, the idealization process might well be insufficient to preserve the illusion of shared love, or unable to face sharply contradictory information. And apart from this dream of sharing love in a couple, it is possible that there are only attempts to come close to love, or memories of love.

**Love as a Myth**

I propose that love is first and foremost a story before being a concept; the concept originates in a story, a mythical or an everyday story. Love swings between these two references: the gods or legendary lovers, and the script for love that describes how a romantic relationship should normally unfold. Love stories, for example, love as a war, love as a game, love as an addiction (Sternberg, Hojitat, & Barnes, 2001) may also embed conceptions or models of love, and these implicit theories of relationships and romantic beliefs (e.g., true love can overcome any obstacle; those who really love each other should always know what the other is thinking without asking) have been found to be helpful or detrimental to relationships (Knee & Bush, 2008; Knee & Petty, 2013). Within Sternberg’s taxonomy of love stories, the Theatre story (“Love is scripted, with predictable acts, scenes, and lines”; Sternberg et al., 2001, p. 201) might best approach what the conception of love as a story might be. Within this perspective, I would assume that people implicitly think of love as a succession of events of key importance, such as a sudden encounter, first glances, doubts (Is it him/her?), quarrels, declarations of love, honeymoon, striving to maintain love despite the erosion of time.

From a mythical point of view, one of the major sources is Plato’s Symposium (1940). Plato explains that mortals once attempted to attack the gods and tried to climb to the sky to fight them. Zeus, to punish them for their presumption, decided to weaken them by cutting them in two. Human beings were thus separated from their second half, and aspired ever since to find their other half again: “We used to be whole: the desire and the search for this whole is called love” (Plato, Symposium). The original story involves either gods, actual legendary figures (e.g., Héloïse and Abélard during the 13th century) or imaginary ones (e.g., Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet [1597/2007]). One of the most determining myths in inventing the idea of romantic love in the Christian West is that of Tristan and Isolde. This story, the first versions of which date back to the 12th century, is based on the idea of an irressible, absolute, and eternal love between two young people who mistakenly drank the love philter which was not intended for them. Their love is unfortunately contrary to social norms because they were not destined for one another. They therefore have to hide and run away, live a miserable life and only by death be freed of their love. This story marks, according to Denis de Rougemont (1939), the emergence of courteous love, as opposed to matrimonial unions where, until up to the end of the 19th century,
strategic alliances and family interests prevailed. The novel (in French, roman) *Tristan et Iseult*, the inspiration for the word *romanticism*, would hide under the incoherencies of the story the *search of love for love*. Tristan and Iseult are not in love with one another, but in quest of an absolute, abstract love, which is incompatible with the matrimonial ties and the erosion of sexual relationships; for the *entire possession of the Lady* is a crime against courteous love. According to de Rougemont, this original myth progressively fragmented and lost its dimension of spiritual quest, and led to today’s stereotypical scripts for movies, TV series, and airport novels.

Other authors (Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992; Shaver et al., 1996), however, stress the fact that the myth of love is present in most cultures and civilizations. Romantic love would not appear to be limited to the European culture but would rather seem to be a human universal. Besides, it is worth noting that the concept of love in a particular country at a given period is in synchrony with the culture at the time: the myth of love is not constant but it instead adapts to the prevailing way of thinking. One cannot fail to notice that when Plato discourses on love, he mostly refers to love between a man and a “handsome boy.” The successive authors of the novel *Tristan et Iseult*, in the very Christian West of the 12th and 13th centuries, have built their story on the avoidance of sexual relations, which were considered as a profanation of a quasimystical love. In contrast, the materialistic 20th century plunges the romanticized display of love into a systematic enjoyment of sexual pleasure.

I propose that love belongs to every epoch and every nation, for it dwells in the heart of every man in the form of a universal drive for love to which a myth of love always responds in return. Every human being has a need and a motive for love, and the myth of love expresses and justifies them—it is good to love when it’s worthwhile. I assume that the drive for love is basically identical to the myth of love, that is, to love for the sake of love, to love because love transforms and transcends us.

**In the Mood for Love**

Romantic beliefs include the view that to love is to choose the right person, the “one-and-only” or “predestined soul-mate” (Holmes, 2007). But a complementary argument would be that love requires one to be well disposed towards it, to be inclined to it, to be in the mood for it. A willingness, a need, or a readiness (Aron, Dutton, Aron, & Iverson, 1989; Sprecher et al., 1994) for falling in love would be required, thereby making the choice of a partner secondary insofar as it roughly coincides with the prototypical script for love. Far from social psychological literature, Marcel Proust illustrated this reasoning when mentioning that “What matters in life is not what you love, […] what does matter is loving” (Proust, *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, 1918).

The need for love and the idea of love are objectless, but when we fall in love our desire is focused on an object. The desire implies making a choice between eligible partners. It implies a selection process. The partner, however, can always be removed if the need is unsatisfied and the idea of love vanishes from our life. Being in the mood for love would imply: (a) the myth of love has previously been cognitively processed, (b) when reaching one’s consciousness, the unconscious drive for love sets in motion a free-floating, objectless desire for love. If “core affect is a feeling inside oneself” (Russell, 2003, p. 157), that is, if it is objectless, it can be thought of as a mood. Once a situation is recognized as a prototypical emotional episode of love, the current core affect will be attributed to a partner.

The true nature of love might never be reached by an analysis of folk definitions, due to the blindness the feelings generate. If the feeling of love “grows and dies in the imagination” (Brown, 2012, p. 39), this virtual reality may in turn have an influence on core affect (Russell, 2005). We are not aware of the transformative power of love because we typically conceive of love as a feeling or an emotion, which tends to obscure and to hide all that belongs to a different category.

**Concluding Remarks**

The model of love I propose remains mostly speculative. In this model, romantic love is accompanied by emotions. Positive emotional states (e.g., happiness, excitement) are expected on a conscious level, and negative emotional states (e.g., jealousy, disappointment) are known and accepted as possibly forming part of the script for love in general. But if pronouncing the words “I love you” is one of the most significant moments in a romantic relationship, we can then consider great happiness to be the most characteristic emotional correlate of romantic love. If we need to love, being in love is one means to achieve this goal. Thus the objectless need for love will focus on a specific partner whose image coincides with our script for love. The feelings we experience in a loving relationship are diverse, mixed, and ever-changing, but nevertheless love always implies an emotional experience. A state of strong arousal and positive affect might be labeled as “love.” We might also be deeply, emotionally moved when we encounter the possibility to experience the mythical feeling we heard about so often.

Further research would need to clarify the possibility that a norm for love exists. The fact that a vague feeling of love permeates our life as hopes, dreams, illusions, or norms, may be reason for our disappointment that love has been found lacking: that our loved ones don’t return our love, that our friends quarrel, that a war opposes two nations, that a man kicks his dog, or that Kitty Genovese was assassinated while no one intervened (see Manning, Levine, & Collins, 2007, for a review of evidence on this case). Love would appear to be the norm because a drive for love colors our vision of things. If we did not need to love, we would be indifferent to the absence of love around us. In this sense, love is not a feeling but rather the awareness of a state of harmony between things and beings that are part of our environment. Romantic love might be an attempt to experience this feeling of harmony with at least one person, for want of being able to create it, most of the time, with the whole of our environment. Romantic love can be thought of as the junction between the need, mood, and desire for love, and the recognition that the
other person is compatible with the script for love ever present in our memory.

Proving the existence of a drive for love might appear as the case for an endless debate, as it happened to be concerning the existence of a truly altruistic motivation (for reviews, see Batson, 2010; Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006). But future research could clarify this point by testing the effects of priming related to love (Lamy, 2011). For example, if the semantic activation of the idea of love has an inhibitory effect on such clues as an intention to break up or addictive-dysfunctional forms of love, it could be argued that people are primarily in search of love and secondarily in search of the “right person.” The best partner would be in fact the one who best succeeds in reactivating the concept of love in his partner’s mind. It follows that merely testing the degree to which the concepts of love and partner are overlapping in lovers’ mind could be fruitful with regard to marital satisfaction and other relational outcomes. Finally, an assumption for future research could be that tracing the variations in the degree of activation of the concept of love in a couple amounts to tracing the destiny of the relationship.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
None declared.

References


