

# PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE ETHICS OF LOVE

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*Phenomenologists have long viewed love as a central form of intersubjective engagement. I show here that it is also of concern to phenomenological ethics. After establishing the relation of phenomenology to ethics, I show that both classical and existential phenomenology view love as an act of valuing the loved one. I argue that a second act of valuing is latent in phenomenology: valuing the relationship. These values are evident in the phenomenological distinction between true love, which generates a “perspective in difference,” and false love, which seeks union with the beloved manifesting in devotion and/or jealousy. Because culturally dominant heteronormative scripts incline individuals toward false love, lovers should create their own pacts for ethical relationships. I consider consensually non-monogamous relationships as an example.*

*Les phénoménologues ont longtemps considéré l'amour comme l'une des formes centrales de l'engagement intersubjectif. Je démontre ici qu'il est également objet d'intérêt pour une éthique phénoménologique. Après avoir établi la relation de la phénoménologie à l'éthique, je démontre qu'à la fois les phénoménologies classique et existentielle considèrent l'amour comme un acte de valorisation de la personne aimée. Je soutiens qu'un second acte de valorisation est latent au sein de la phénoménologie : celui de la valorisation de la relation en tant que telle. Ces valeurs sont patentes dans la distinction qu'opère la phénoménologie entre l'amour vrai, qui génère une « perspective de différence », et l'amour faux, où l'union convoitée est manifeste de dévotion et/ou de jalousie. Parce que les scénarios hétéronormatifs qui dominent culturellement prédisposent à l'amour faux, les amants et amantes devraient chercher à créer leurs propres pactes pour l'établissement de relations éthiques. Je considère les relations non-monogames consensuelles comme exemple.*

It seems to me that the privileged role of love does not depend on this or that superficial structure of society. A much more fundamental explanation may be found in the ambiguity of human nature.

—Simone de Beauvoir, “It’s About Time Women Put a New Face on Love”

Love plays an important role in phenomenology. Indeed, classical, existential, and contemporary phenomenologists have treated it as central to human existence. While many share an interest in love, however, it is less clear that phenomenologists have anything to contribute to the *ethics* of love. Phenomenology’s focus on description rather than prescription might make ethical concerns appear separate from phenomenological ones. Phenomenologists tend not to propose specific norms that subjects should follow in loving relationships with others. Nonetheless, their analyses of love have profound ethical implications. Phenomenological accounts suggest that love is an ongoing act of valuing that may be disclosed in better and worse ways; they distinguish true from false love on the grounds that true love values the freedom of the other; and they highlight love’s incompatibility with oppression.

Phenomenologists take love to be a uniquely revelatory site of interpersonal relations. Edmund Husserl increasingly focuses on love’s centrality to ethics in his late work.<sup>1</sup> His student Max Scheler goes further, treating love as the foundation both of ethics and of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Other early phenomenologists, including Gerda Walther and Dietrich von Hildebrand, develop robust conceptions of the unique “we” that love establishes.<sup>3</sup> Love also plays a significant role

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<sup>1</sup> Sophie Loidolt, “Value, Freedom, Responsibility: Central Themes in Phenomenological Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Phenomenology*, (ed.) D. Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 701; Ullrich Melle, “Edmund Husserl: From Reason to Love,” in *Phenomenological Approaches to Moral Philosophy*, (ed.) J. J. Drummond and L. Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002): 229–48, here 238.

<sup>2</sup> Max Scheler, “Liebe und Erkenntnis, Schriften zur Soziologie und Weltanschauungslehre,” in *Gesammelte Werke VI*, (ed.) M. Scheler (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1963): 77–98, here 87.

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Calcagno, “Gerda Walther and the Possibility of a Non-intentional We of Community,” in *Gerda Walther’s Phenomenology of Sociality, Psychology, and Religion*, (ed.) A. Calcagno (Cham: Springer, 2018): 57–70; Alessandro Salice, “Love and Other Social Stances in Early Phenomenology,” in *The Phenomenology of Sociality: Discovering the “We”*, (ed.) T. Szanto and D. Moran (London: Routledge, 2015): 234–47.

in French phenomenological ethics. Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jean-Luc Marion treat erotic love as the original relation to the other; Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty likewise indicate love's privileged place among embodied interpersonal relations. Beauvoir suggests that love is unique because it engages individuals most fully in their condition of ambiguity, offering "the most powerful aid" for its recognition.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I trace the understanding of love broadly shared by phenomenologists, focusing especially on classical and existential phenomenology, and unpack their ethical implications. While phenomenological approaches to love are by no means homogeneous, they share a number of premises that constitute a unique approach to the ethics of love. First, they agree that love is a feeling that intends the value of the loved one. Second, because phenomenologists take feelings to be acts, they posit that love is disclosed in an ongoing fashion within one's embodied environment. While not explicitly theorized as such within classical and existential phenomenology, I will argue here that this second point indicates that phenomenologists consider love to be a way of valuing a relationship. Combining these two phenomenological premises, one may say that love involves two primary values: the loved one and the relationship.<sup>5</sup> Highlighting these two values in turn illuminates the distinction between true and false love and signals the ethical promise of non-traditional commitments, such as consensual non-monogamy.

While the account I offer here draws on a range of phenomenologists and is broadly compatible with phenomenological methods, I primarily engage Simone de Beauvoir. Her suggestion that ethics proposes methods rather than recipes is a useful formulation for the phenomenological ethics of love. In addition, while all of the phenomenologists I consider distinguish true from false love, Beauvoir offers by far the most fully developed version of this distinction. Her feminist account of love traces how the heterosexist mythology of love leads individuals into inauthentic loving relationships, proving especially harmful for women. Thus, one conclusion of a phenomenological ethic of love is that traditional romantic commitments tend to

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<sup>4</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, "It's About Time Women Put a New Face on Love," in *Feminist Writings*, (ed.) M. A. Simons and M. Timmerman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 77.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Analytic philosopher Niko Kolodny for this distinction. Niko Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship," *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 112, no. 2 (2003): 135–89.

be inauthentic, and that partners should craft unique forms of commitment over time.

## 1. Phenomenological Ethics

Before turning to love specifically, I will address the relation of ethics to phenomenology. Initially, it might seem that phenomenology would be limited to describing our moral experiences rather than normatively evaluating them. After all, phenomenology is first and foremost a method of description of conscious, situated experience—the way things *show up* in the first-person. As such, phenomenology might be taken to provide a ground for ethics through its reflections on “everyday moral experience,” but not to make normative claims on its own terms.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, phenomenology’s supposed neutrality has been a distinctive characteristic of its methods and one of its most decisive contributions to philosophy.

Yet the idea that this supposed neutrality puts phenomenology at a remove from ethical concerns has, in recent decades, been questioned on two main fronts. First, scholarship within phenomenology, especially its early classical forms, has increasingly shown that phenomenologists have made ethically normative claims from the beginning. Both the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, and a number of his students, including Max Scheler, Gerda Walther, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and Edith Stein, developed phenomenological ethics based on intentional feeling-acts oriented toward objects of value.<sup>7</sup> Increasing attention to these figures, and to previously unpublished and/or untranslated manuscripts by Husserl, has, since the 1990s, revealed the centrality of ethical concerns to classical phenomenology.<sup>8</sup> Second, the burgeoning subfield of critical phenomenology has, within just the past few years, brought together insights from feminist phenomenology, phenomenology of race, and phenomenology of disability in order to question the neutrality of the perceiver and emphasize instead the radical situatedness of the

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<sup>6</sup> J. J. Drummond and L. Embree (eds.), *Phenomenological Approaches to Moral Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 5.

<sup>7</sup> See John J. Drummond, “Husserl’s Middle Period and the Development of his Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Phenomenology*, (ed.) D. Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 135–54; Zhang Wei, “The Foundation of Phenomenological Ethics: Intentional Feelings,” (tr.) Y. Xin and Z. Wei, *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2009): 130–42; Salice, “Love and Other Social Stances.”

<sup>8</sup> Drummond and Embree, *Phenomenological Approaches to Moral Philosophy*, 5.

human subject.<sup>9</sup> Aiming to take greater account of irreducible differences in perspectives, critical phenomenology has rejected the notion of neutrality (and often, along with it, transcendental aims) and put ethical, social, and political concerns front and centre within phenomenological inquiry.

Sophie Loidolt has recently shown that ethics has been “an important theme in the history of phenomenology” by schematizing three main ethical approaches within the movement.<sup>10</sup> Loidolt associates early phenomenology with the personalistic ethics developed by Scheler and Husserl; next, an existential ethics of authenticity emerges with Heidegger, Sartre, and Beauvoir; and finally, the Levinasian ethics of responsibility arises with an emphasis on alterity. What ties these three approaches together as distinctly phenomenological is, Loidolt argues, a shared investment in three major themes: subjectivity, experience, and intentionality. For phenomenologists, the affective, embodied, and environmental character of the ethical agent must be foregrounded through a focus on situated subjectivity. Situatedness is the condition for the possibility of ethics. Thus, phenomenologists tend not to prescribe courses of action or even offer justifications of them, but rather to “focus on the question as to how it is possible in the first place that the ethical becomes meaningful in relation to the subject.”<sup>11</sup> Ethics involves embodied, interdependent particulars.

Although Loidolt’s schema is remarkably useful, she underplays the role of Beauvoir in existential ethics and suggests that Merleau-Ponty does not make an ethical contribution. Both of these thinkers importantly highlight the ethical distinction between authentic and inauthentic love. For Beauvoir especially, the dynamic tension between individual freedom and intersubjective relations to others is the site of an “existential-phenomenological ethics.”<sup>12</sup> In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir rejects consequentialism and deontology in favour of a situational ethic of engagement. She claims that ethics proffers methods but should not be expected to establish recipes, comparing the ethicist to the hypothesizing scientist and creating

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<sup>9</sup> G. Weiss, A. V. Murphy, G. Salamon, eds., *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020); Gayle Salamon, “What’s Critical about Critical Phenomenology?” *Puncta*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2018): 8–17.

<sup>10</sup> Loidolt, “Value, Freedom, Responsibility,” 697.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 699.

<sup>12</sup> Gail Weiss, “Simone de Beauvoir: An Existential-Phenomenological Ethics,” in *Phenomenological Approaches to Moral Philosophy*, (eds.) J. J. Drummond and L. Embree, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002): 107–18, here 107.

artist.<sup>13</sup> Given that consciousness cannot “adopt the universal’s point of view,” ethical methods are localized and subject to change.<sup>14</sup> Thus, as Merleau-Ponty argues, “morality does not consist in following exterior rules or in respecting objective values.”<sup>15</sup> In ethical decision-making, individuals must struggle to choose from within their situation. From this vantage point, the aims of deontology and consequentialism are inadequate. Both *a priori* reasoning and cost-benefit calculations overlook the radically unforeseen nature of the future, Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty suggest, as well as freedom’s role in inventing this future (MN, 40).

If ethics can propose methods but not provide recipes, one might ask which methods it should propose. Although no single systematic method can be given, Beauvoir argues that any ethical method must begin and end with the human condition of ambiguity (EA, 8). Ambiguity denotes the condition of being both situated and free. Humans are both objects immanent in the world and subjects that transcend the given (PC, 111). The problem with most ethical approaches, Beauvoir contends, is that they have reduced humans to a single aspect of this ambiguity. Most often, ethical systems deny the aspect of human freedom. They opt to treat humans as objects: as fixed givens in the world with determinate sets of interests and characteristics. For Beauvoir, on the other hand, we must “treat the other...as a freedom so that his end may be freedom” (EA, 154). Beauvoir emphasizes that this injunction to treat the other as a freedom is the basis of an ethical method, not a precept or maxim.<sup>16</sup> She also recognizes that ethical choices sometimes require diminishing the freedom of one party in favour of another (*ibid.*, 105). Beauvoir’s imperative legislates no particular actions, given that the ethical domain involves the coexistence and conflicts of many freedoms. Human freedom is situated and co-constituted with the freedom of others. Thus, Beauvoir considers any method that does not recognize human ambiguity as grounded in bad faith. Ethics must account for both the

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<sup>13</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, (tr.) B. Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 2015), 144–45. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as EA.

<sup>14</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” (tr.) M. Timmerman, in *Philosophical Writings*, (ed.) M. A. Simons (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 112. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PC.

<sup>15</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Metaphysics and the Novel,” in *Sense and Non-Sense*, (tr.) H. L. Dreyfus and P. A. Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 40. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as MN.

<sup>16</sup> This is what distinguishes Beauvoir’s approach from deontology, despite some similarity to Kant’s categorical imperative.

freedom and the situation of the agents involved, even as it is up to the agents to take stock of moral particulars.

## 2. The Phenomenological View of Love

### 2.1 Love as a Feeling and Intentional Act

Although their views of love are diverse, phenomenologists share some premises by virtue of their common commitments. Phenomenology considers love to be a feeling directed toward an object (the loved one). As such, love is an intentional act, where *intentional* is used in the phenomenological sense of aiming at an object of consciousness, rather than designating a deliberate activity of will. Intentional acts are conscious but may be pre-reflective; they are embedded in the habitual, embodied experience of persons within environments. Loving is a feeling that intends the beloved.<sup>17</sup> Husserl and Scheler take feelings to be experiences of valuing, putting love squarely in this category (for Scheler, it is the centre). Emotions here are apprehensions of value, a line of reasoning that Anthony J. Steinbock has recently developed by articulating love as a moral emotion.<sup>18</sup> Existential phenomenologists take for granted that love is a feeling, with Sartre, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty all enlisting love as an example of feelings in their work. In existential phenomenology, the idea that love is an intentional feeling-act persists, but with language that more clearly designates the relational, situated features of its activity. Beauvoir and Sartre, for instance, describe love as a dyadic, “concrete relation” to others.<sup>19</sup> Hence, to say that love is a feeling is not to say that it exists in a private sphere apart from concrete relationships. Phenomenologists insist that feelings, as intentional acts, are bound up with our interactions with others within a given situation. Here, I am specifically interested in the phenomenon of loving another person, on which most phenomenologists focus.

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<sup>17</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy, I: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, (tr.) D. O. Dahlstrom (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014), 162.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony J. Steinbock, *Moral Emotions: Reclaiming the Evidence of the Heart* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as ME.

<sup>19</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, “An Eye for an Eye,” (tr.) K. Arp, in *Philosophical Writings*, (ed.) M. A. Simons (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 251. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, (tr.) H. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 471.

Already, it is worth noting that the phenomenological approach to love suggests that love is both a feeling and an act, since feelings are acts. This is distinct from much of the philosophy of love, where feelings are most often figured as something with respect to which the subject is passive. On the latter view, love is taken to be outside of one's control, characterized by fleeting whims—a prevalent view commonly found as far back as Ancient Greek philosophy. By taking the emotion of love to be an intentional act of consciousness, while also granting that intentional acts need not be reflective or volitional, phenomenology offers a novel approach. Its upshot is the ability to consider love as a feeling while also recognizing that there are ethical and unethical ways of loving. For some non-phenomenological philosophers, feelings are not relevant for ethical concerns—or, even if they are, they are not ethical guides in and of themselves, but rather are subject to the dictates of reason. Free actions among individuals are, however, unquestionably sites of ethical norms. Hence, by calling love a feeling but taking feelings to be intentional acts that concretely engage freedom, phenomenology puts ethical concerns at the heart of love. For Husserl, love is the feeling that discloses the *absolute ought*.<sup>20</sup> As I will demonstrate below, Beauvoir enriches this perspective through her theory of the distinction between authentic and inauthentic love.

## 2.2 Love as Valuing the Beloved

Love is an act of valuing that discloses value—namely, the value of the beloved. As such, love responds to the perceived value of the loved one. For Scheler, love is a “movement toward another as bearer of value,” but where the other is not a fixed thing with attributes (ME, 225). Valuing is not about recognizing another person as a valuable object, or even as *having* value. Instead, the “bearer of value” is a site of freedom. For Scheler and Husserl, this is the *person*. Love involves valuing another person in and of themselves, apprehending them as a unique individual.<sup>21</sup> Love is an “opening to the person *as given in his or her uniqueness*” rather than a mode of effortful striving (*ibid.*, 227). As Steinbock notes in this vein, “loving is experiencing the other in the uniqueness of who she *is* and becoming, and not what I *want* her to be. She is not my ‘project’” (*ibid.*, 228). Love

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<sup>20</sup> Anthony J. Steinbock, *Limit-Phenomena and Phenomenology in Husserl* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), particularly Chapter 6.

<sup>21</sup> See Peter Hadreas, *A Phenomenology of Love and Hate* (New York: Routledge, 2016).



recognizes the other as an irreplaceable perspective on the world—or, in existential terms, as a freedom. Because love is the kind of relationship that most wholly engages individual persons, it enlists the recognition of individuals *as* individuals.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps paradoxically, this is also a recognition that one is not marked by a set of personality traits or personal history (though that, too, is important), but rather by their freedom. As Heidegger claims in the “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” loving involves favouring another person by leaving them free to “unfold” as an other.<sup>23</sup> Love refrains from placing conditions on the way that their personal projects unfold.

There is some disagreement among phenomenologists about the status of the value disclosed, however. Is it intrinsic to the beloved, which would mean that loving *recognizes* a value in the other? Or is it relational, such that loving *invents* the other as valuable? Sara Heinämaa points out that both of these positions may be found within phenomenology, dubbing the former “value-realist” and the latter “value-idealist.”<sup>24</sup> Given the loaded metaphysical weight of realism and idealism, especially as they are debated within phenomenology, I prefer the terms “valuer-independent” and “valuer-dependent.” We find the valuer-independent position in transcendental phenomenology: here, value is objective. Even when a person values one object over another, the valuer is responding to a non-subjective property of that object. Husserl holds such an objective view of value; versions of it may also be found in Scheler and Steinbock, among others. Such valuer-independence is frequently found among phenomenologists with a theological bent, where God is both the ultimate value and the source of values.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, we find in existential phenomenology the notion that value is relative to a subject. This valuer-dependent position is generally held by French existential phenomenologists. Sartre

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<sup>22</sup> Iain Thomson calls this an “ontological” form of love, and spells out how it emerges in the love letters between Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt. Iain Thomson, “Thinking Love: Heidegger and Arendt,” *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 50, no. 4 (2017): 453–78.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” (tr.) F. A. Capuzzi, in *Pathmarks*, (ed.) W. McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239–76.

<sup>24</sup> Sara Heinämaa, “Love and Admiration (Wonder): Fundamentals of the Self-Other Relations,” in *Emotional Experiences: Ethical and Social Significance*, (ed.) J. Drummond and S. Rinofner-Kreidl (London: Rowan and Littlefield International, 2018): 155–74.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Max Scheler, “*Ordo Amoris*,” in *Selected Philosophical Essays*, (tr.) D. R. Lachterman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973): 98–135, here 114.

suggests that nothing is intrinsically valuable: freedom is the source of all values.<sup>26</sup> Beauvoir argues that value is created through the act of valuing (EA, 115). Yet this is not to say that value is granted in an arbitrary fashion. Rather, value develops within relations in the environment of a conscious, embodied actor. Love transforms the other from being one person among others to becoming irreplaceably valuable, which happens over time and through repeated actions in an embodied, relational situation with the other.

Whether valuer-independent or valuer-dependent, phenomenologists concur that love is an act of valuing the loved one. Even valuer-independent phenomenologists, such as Husserl and Scheler, recognize that love overlays the intrinsic value of the loved one with a subjectively projected value. Indeed, Husserl identifies this overlay with “authentic love,” in contrast with an irrational love. In authentic love, one not only accepts the given value of the beloved, but decides to lovingly value the other, such that “what is loved takes on a new value-character originating from the relevant ego,” even though this value-character (in contrast with existential phenomenology) is a response to the other’s objective value.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Husserl increasingly distinguishes objective value from the values of love in his late work.<sup>28</sup> And Scheler draws attention to how love establishes values of the “good-in-itself-for-me” (ME, 226). Thus, phenomenology asserts that love centrally involves the unique value of the loved one to the lover.

### 2.3 Love as Valuing the Relationship

Now, I would like to suggest that implicit within phenomenology is a second major value of love: the value of the relationship.<sup>29</sup> The value of the relationship one shares with the beloved is in principle distinct from the value of the beloved: whereas one loves the beloved in and of themselves, the intimacy one builds with the other through a relationship constructs a shared world that, too, comes to be valued in and for itself. While these two values are distinct in principle, they

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<sup>26</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 76.

<sup>27</sup> This passage from Husserl is cited in Drummond, “Husserl’s Middle Period,” 141.

<sup>28</sup> Melle, “Edmund Husserl,” 244.

<sup>29</sup> Possible exceptions here are Levinas and Sartre, who in my view do not adequately account for the reciprocal aspects of love. For a gloss of issues with this in Levinas, see Ellie Anderson, “From Existential Alterity to Ethical Reciprocity: Beauvoir’s Alternative to Levinas,” *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2019): 171–89.

often overlap in practice. A loving relationship involves making a commitment to both, even as they sometimes conflict. Love is manifested by repeated actions that demonstrate commitment to both of these values.

Phenomenologists speak of love as inaugurating a “shared world.”<sup>30</sup> “To love,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “is inevitably to enter into an undivided situation with another.”<sup>31</sup> This undivided situation is the relationship one has with the loved one, involving both a shared history and a shared desire for a future. Loving relationships differ from other kinds of relationships by setting up an intimate shared world unique to the individuals involved. They permit a degree of unfolding of each individual’s life history not present in other kinds of relationships: love reveals individuals in their complexity and continual metamorphosis. Love is thus the deepest form of relationship, as well as the form of relationship that most clearly reveals individuals as temporal beings—namely, oriented toward a future which engages their freedoms, and also shaped by a densely sedimented past. As Steinbock puts it, loving “opens up dimensions of value in the other in the direction of a deeper enhancement” (ME, 228).

Love begins with perception: one faces another being and begins to see them as uniquely valuable. Their traits, behaviours, and appearance grow endearing; moreover, their very presence takes on a special intensity. The process Stendhal famously calls “crystallization” begins, in which another person takes on a magical aspect, endowed with a luster that sets them apart from others in one’s world. Yet this alteration in perception is still not quite love. One might also feel a heightened sense of perception when returning to a cherished home or tasting a *madeleine*. Rather, falling in love involves a much more transformative alteration of perception: love brings about a perspective of difference, or what Alain Badiou calls a “Two scene.”<sup>32</sup> Love strangely doubles perception.

How does this work? Growing close to another person unveils their sedimented layers of personal history, conscious and unconscious patterns of behaviour, deeply-held values, and more—but it

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<sup>30</sup> Kym Maclaren, “Intimacy as Transgression and the Problem of Freedom,” *Puncta*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2018): 18–40, here 30.

<sup>31</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations with Others,” (tr.) W. Cobb, in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, (ed.) J. M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 154.

<sup>32</sup> Alain Badiou, with Nicolas Truong, *In Praise of Love*, (tr.) P. Bush (New York: The New Press, 2012), 29.

also reveals that the other has a unique perspective that one cannot grasp. One can never get around to the other side and experience the world through the other's eyes. While this is in principle true of any other person, seeking a loving relationship with someone reveals this in a particularly salient (and at times painful) fashion. This is due to the intimate nature of love and the expectation that this kind of relationship engage the person in their entirety, rather than in one or more impersonal roles.<sup>33</sup> Falling in love puts the parties involved in a paradoxical position: the more one gets to know another, the more one realizes one can never know them completely. It is here that the unique experience of love comes on the scene: love puts pressure on what Merleau-Ponty calls our "lived solipsism" and inaugurates a perspective of difference.<sup>34</sup> In love, "the perspectives remain separate—and yet they overlap."<sup>35</sup>

We will see below that there are plenty of supposedly loving relationships that do not achieve this perspective in difference. False or inauthentic loving relationships are exceedingly common. When individuals do not take up the call of assuming ambiguity in this strange perspective of difference, they find themselves painfully oscillating between denials of their own freedom and that of the other. But when the perspective in difference is recognized as such, an authentically loving relationship is established.

Phenomenologists often draw attention to sexual encounters as an enabling site of this perspective in difference. In sexual experiences, the character of embodiment may be particularly salient: the physical dimension of intimate erotic touch discloses the body as a "third genre of being between the pure subject and the object."<sup>36</sup> For Beauvoir, the sexual encounter reveals the simultaneity of my subjectivity and my status as an object for the other in an embodied reciprocity between lovers. In this experience, each lover feels their own pleasure as their own, but as "having its source in the other."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, each lover simultaneously experiences themselves as both subject and object, as the seat of their own consciousness and also as the source of pleasure for another consciousness. Sex draws partners

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<sup>33</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, (tr.) J. Gaines and D. L. Jones (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 13.

<sup>34</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (tr.) D. A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 374.

<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," 154.

<sup>36</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 366.

<sup>37</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (tr.) C. Borde and S. Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011), 415. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as SS.

together while also disclosing their difference. As feminist phenomenologist Ann Cahill writes, “Embodiment is precisely the site of the possibility and necessity of difference; as such, it constitutes both that which is most shared by subjects qua subjects and that which differentiates subjects from each other.”<sup>38</sup> The ambiguous, tactile dimension of the erotic encounter establishes a doubled perception. And this perception dynamically unfolds over time, bringing about a “synesthetic realignment” in sexual encounters.<sup>39</sup>

This is not, of course, to say that sex necessarily accompanies love, let alone that love necessarily accompanies sex. Beauvoir suggests that sexual attraction may be the most common way that lovers reveal themselves to each other in their uniqueness, but that “this revelation may operate in more than one way”; hence, “love may be platonic as well as sexual.”<sup>40</sup> The sexual component often found in loving relationships is one way of engaging with the loved one in the uniqueness of their physical presence, and of experiencing self and other as different yet intertwined. Yet it is far from the only one; nor do all sexual encounters offer this perspective in difference. They only do so when the parties genuinely assume their ambiguity and recognize that of the other. This situation generally develops over time with increasing intimacy, but is by no means guaranteed by familiarity.<sup>41</sup>

The shared world enabled by the perspective in difference is always in the process of being shaped, due to the processual nature of subjectivity. Phenomenologists recognize that selves are not fixed, individual *things*, but rather are unfinished projects in processes of becoming. And intimate relationships with other people shape these processes of becoming on every level. Not only am I always changing, but the beloved is in the process of changing as well: changes in myself take shape in relation to changes in them, and *vice versa*. Hildebrand emphasizes that the reciprocated feeling of love establishes a social group.<sup>42</sup> Summarizing Hildebrand’s view, Alessandro Salice states, “[T]he mental states of the two lovers generate a bond that is itself not a mental state and that could be described as a social relation binding both individuals and making them a community of a

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<sup>38</sup> Ann J. Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 113.

<sup>39</sup> Hadreas, *A Phenomenology of Love and Hate*, 46.

<sup>40</sup> Beauvoir, “It’s About Time,” 78.

<sup>41</sup> For a more extensive treatment of the phenomenology of sexual encounters, see Cahill, *Rethinking Rape*.

<sup>42</sup> Salice, “Love and Other Social Stances,” 235.

given kind.”<sup>43</sup> This bond—which I have argued above is inaugurated by a perspective in difference—becomes stronger over time as lovers build a world together. In the terminology of Gerda Walther, the loving relationship constitutes a “non-intentional ‘we,’” where the relationship (1) has no object outside of itself, and (2) need not necessarily manifest in any objectivated form in communal social reality.<sup>44</sup>

An additional component of the felt experience of the relationship as valuable is its futural orientation. As Beauvoir writes, “To live a love is to throw oneself through that love toward new goals: a home, a job, a common future” (PC, 98). Sartre argues that love does not merely have a future; rather, “the future makes a part of the organized form of the flow of ‘love,’ for love is given its meaning as love by its being in the future.”<sup>45</sup> For Scheler, the desire for a relationship to endure is entailed by valuing not only the loved one, but also the very act of love. No matter how long a relationship lasts in real time, love necessarily promises an indefinite endurance into the future: to put a time limit on how long love will last is antithetical to the very bond of love.<sup>46</sup>

The futural orientation of love is what generates a commitment to the relationship. Beauvoir especially emphasizes that lovers should invent their own rules of commitment that work for them personally, rather than adopting ready-made values from the world. (As I will demonstrate in the following section, she takes these ready-made values to be a recipe for inauthentic love.) In *La force de l'âge*, Beauvoir offers her well-known account of her pact with Sartre to enter into an open relationship. She suggests that there is no universal recipe for love; rather, each couple must come up with their own. “It is up to the interested parties to decide what type of agreement they wish to reach,” she states, as lovers “have neither rights nor duties *a priori*.”<sup>47</sup> One cannot take for granted what the other wants and what one can expect of them: an intimate relationship engages partners in their very freedoms, whereas social scripts exist for impersonal relations where individuals act out expected parts.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Calcagno, “Gerda Walther and the Possibility of a Non-intentional We of Community,” 58.

<sup>45</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 230.

<sup>46</sup> Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values*, (tr.) M. S. Frings and R. L. Funk (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 91.

<sup>47</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l'âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 36; my translation. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as FA.

In the case of Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre, a key component of their pact was to refrain from lying or hiding anything from each other (FA, 33–34). They committed to a maximum of transparency. Beauvoir is clear to warn her reader, however, that this is not a universally beneficial choice for lovers. She specifies that there are many circumstances in which telling each other everything may actually lead to misunderstanding and unnecessary hurt (*ibid.*, 35). This approach echoes Beauvoir's general view, as discussed above, that ethics involves methods rather than recipes, and that different relationships will involve inventing different commitments.

While the value of the relationship is affirmed, at least for Beauvoir, in pacts that require negotiation by the individuals involved, recall that the value of the loved one must also be honoured. This means that the difference between self and other must be respected in intimate relationships. Beauvoir points out that her pact with Sartre rejected a complete merging of identities: while they had a profound understanding, and their senses of self were ambiguously bound up with one another's, they remained irreducibly different. One difference that remained was that they did not share all the same values. Beauvoir states that the pursuit of happiness has always been one of her supreme values, whereas it never much interested Sartre (*ibid.*, 39).

Here, I have suggested that phenomenological accounts of love implicitly affirm the value of the relationship, which is distinct from, yet related to, the value of the beloved. While phenomenology tends to focus explicitly on the value of the beloved alone, attention to accounts of love from this tradition—especially in existential phenomenology—reveal that the relationship is also a key value. I have focused here on how valuing a relationship is evident in the way that lovers establish a shared world or “we” that affirms a perspective in difference; the futural orientation of loving relationships; and the importance of developing shared expectations for the relationship in pacts specific to the individuals involved. Loving is an intentional feeling-act of valuing the beloved, yet it also values the relationship *with* the beloved.

### 3. Inauthentic Love

#### 3.1 Inauthentic Love and the Ideal of Union

I have thus far focused on the nature of love. This phenomenological account already has ethical valences by virtue of its emphasis on valuing the loved one and the relationship. But the distinction be-

tween ethical love and unethical love emerges more clearly in phenomenologists' accounts of true and false love. I will follow Beauvoir in calling these "authentic" and "inauthentic" love, while recognizing that the concept of authenticity is specifically identified with existential phenomenology. Terminology aside, the distinction between authentic and inauthentic love runs through phenomenological work on love, from Husserl and Scheler to Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, where inauthentic love is generally deemed possessive in some sense. Inauthentic love fails to account for the human condition—in particular, the condition of freedom. In doing so, inauthentic love fails to value properly the beloved and the relationship, the key features of love described above.

Inauthentic love manifests what Beauvoir and Sartre call "bad faith." Beauvoir's crucial insight in this context is that the temptation toward inauthentic love is highly gendered in societies where women are offered little chance of fulfillment outside of their relations with men. Beauvoir's account of inauthentic love in *The Second Sex* as well as in her ethical writings and fiction is well known, but she also develops it in a number of short articles. For Beauvoir, patriarchal social scripts corrupt authentic love relations by promulgating impossible romantic ideals. Women are socialized from a young age to prize the romantic attention of a man above just about everything else, seeking justification of their very existence in love. Men, on the other hand, are socialized to treat love as just one aspect of their lives, albeit an important one. And all parties are taught that lifelong sexual and romantic monogamy is the ethical norm for relationships, even as society implicitly recognizes that promises of fidelity are often broken. Beauvoir states, "Until now our civilization has never known a love that was not founded on inequality."<sup>48</sup> This poses significant issues for the phenomenological ethics of love: for how can an ethical relationship be achieved in an such an oppressive situation? In short, it cannot: as Beauvoir suggests in *The Second Sex*, in lovers' quarrels under patriarchy "it is useless to allocate excuses and criticism: justice can never be created within injustice" (SS, 759).

Other phenomenologists may lack Beauvoir's sense of the gendered character of inauthentic love as practised within heterosexual patriarchy, but they, too, worry about false love. Generally speaking, phenomenology takes any model of love that aims for complete fusion with the beloved to be an inauthentic mode of loving. From Husserl on, phenomenologists concur that union with the loved one is not only ontologically impossible, but also an ethical violation of

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<sup>48</sup> Beauvoir, "It's About Time," 76.



the beloved's freedom.<sup>49</sup> Striving to merge with the beloved amounts to striving to control them, treating the beloved as an object over which one has a possessive claim. All cases of inauthentic love thus have in common a denial of freedom, either one's own and/or the other's. Inauthentic loving relationships commonly oscillate between these.<sup>50</sup> And existential phenomenology in particular suggests that inauthentic love is a permanent temptation, just as bad faith is a permanent temptation for consciousness. Authentically taking up the condition of ambiguity, rather than fleeing it, is a continual project.

The attempt to merge with the beloved is contrary to phenomenological principles regarding consciousness, situation, and freedom. When one finds descriptions of love as offering union, these must either be taken as metaphorical renderings of the shared construction of the world described above, or as descriptions of inauthentic love. Yet such descriptions are among the most common ways that love is described. Romantic mythology and its precursors, including Aristophanes's myth of the circle-people in Plato's *Symposium* and the story of Tristan and Isolde, uphold the notion that dissolving the boundaries between self and other is love's ultimate goal. Scheler describes this as "mutual coalescence," contrasting it with a genuine form of "us" grounded in each individual's self-awareness.<sup>51</sup> The model of coalescence ignores the irreducible separation between self and other. Scheler describes this as infatuation rather than love.<sup>52</sup> Merleau-Ponty, too, identifies false love with a sense of union, wherein the loved one becomes "the mediator of my relations with the world."<sup>53</sup> Because phenomenology foregrounds the embodied first-person perspective, it disavows merging with the beloved as the goal of love. In addition, the phenomenological accounts of valuing as described in Section 2 are at odds with an ideal of merging. Valuing the beloved and valuing the relationship—whether taken on their own or together—involve honouring difference. Inauthentic love's

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<sup>49</sup> See Drummond, "Husserl's Middle Period," 141.

<sup>50</sup> For a detailed account of this, see Kathryn Pauly Morgan, "Romantic Love, Altruism, and Self-Respect: An Analysis of Simone de Beauvoir," *Hypatia*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1986): 117–48.

<sup>51</sup> Dan Zahavi, "Intersubjectivity, Sociality, Community: The Contribution of the Early Phenomenologists," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Phenomenology*, (ed.) D. Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 734–52, here 739.

<sup>52</sup> Scheler, "*Ordo Amoris*," 114–16.

<sup>53</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 397. For a helpful account of Merleau-Ponty's distinction between true and false love, see Megan M. Burke, "Love as a Hollow: Merleau-Ponty's Promise of Queer Love," *Hypatia*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2017): 54–68.

failure to honour difference commonly manifests in devotion and in jealousy.

### 3.2 Devotion

Inauthentic love often takes the form of devotion, or a passionate self-sacrifice on behalf of the other. Devotion purports to value the beloved, but fails to do so by aiming to act in their place. In the chapter of *The Second Sex* entitled “The Woman in Love,” Beauvoir describes ordinary conceptions of love among women of her milieu as idolatrous devotion to a privileged other. Rather than embracing the anguish of being a consciousness seeking to achieve concrete objectives in the world, the devoted lover tries to assimilate their identity to the loved one, because doing so feels like a form of achievement—especially when the loved one is accomplished in some way (SS, 684). The social structures propping up male dominance encourage women to develop this kind of love for men, which ends up being destructive for all parties involved. Because women are taught from a young age to value men absolutely, and because women have fewer avenues for self-realization than men, the conditions of women in patriarchal societies uniquely set them up for this temptation of inauthentic love. Women are led to believe they are taking up their freedom by devoting it to their male lover.

This kind of love oscillates between denying one’s own freedom and that of the other. First, the lover denies their own freedom by treating the beloved as an absolute value. Abdicating one’s freedom by positing the loved one as an absolute, the devoted lover fails to recognize that she is actively taking part in the establishment of her values. The devoted lover also fails to acknowledge that the loved one is a free source of their own values: as Sartre describes, in love, one seeks to be the foundation of the loved one’s values.<sup>54</sup> Fusing with the beloved through devotion permits the lover to abdicate responsibility, which Beauvoir considers very tempting. Merleau-Ponty describes false love as an attempt “to live another’s experience [*vivre autrui*],” such as by sacrificing myself for them.<sup>55</sup> Even Scheler, whose view of love is valuer-independent, takes issue with the way that inauthentic love sets up an absolute, delusionally thinking it has attained “absolutely final fulfillment and satisfaction” in the other.<sup>56</sup> Beauvoir develops a similar line of thinking, describing how “it

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<sup>54</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 481.

<sup>55</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 373.

<sup>56</sup> Scheler, “*Ordo Amoris*,” 114.

seems to [women] that the other's consciousness, and particularly that of their lover, reveals them in their truth": while genuinely concerned with their own value, these women are unable to receive a sense of their value except through the other (SS, 257). For Beauvoir, this is a failure to recognize one's own freedom, which is characteristic of bad faith. But devotion ends up denying the freedom of the other, because it treats the other as an object (see PC, 117–26). To devote oneself to another is to presume one knows what is best for the other, which involves treating their values and selfhood as fixed. Thus, it fails to honour the beloved as beloved. In addition, devotion often tyrannically demands proof of the other's love; for Merleau-Ponty, immature love "constantly insist[s] upon new proofs of absolute attachment," unable to accept the other's freedom.<sup>57</sup> Inauthentic love imagines it can grasp the other fully, but this requires objectification.

### 3.3 Jealousy

Second, inauthentic love denies the freedom of the other in that it authorizes jealousy. Inauthentic love takes the shared world one constructs with the beloved to be the beloved's *only* world, seeking to deny any life the beloved has outside of the relationship. The inauthentic lover cannot recognize the beloved as a freedom with values and activities that are outside of the lover's control, and so the existence of these must be denied. Merleau-Ponty describes jealousy as the psychological face of a metaphysical problem: the problem of difference (MN, 32). Jealousy rears its head when the lover gets a glimmer of the existence of the beloved's life outside of the relationship (*ibid.*, 33). For Beauvoir, the threat of jealousy is endemic to relationships given the structure of intersubjective recognition.<sup>58</sup> Yet inauthentic love takes jealousy as justified, licensing action to control the beloved and hence reduce the existence of a world outside of the relationship. Since valuing the relationship involves recognizing a perspective in difference, inauthentic love fails to value the relationship by imagining that it is a closed world over which one is in complete control. Jealousy appears when the notion of "mutual absorption" is threatened, and the lover responds by seeking to re-establish

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<sup>57</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Man and Adversity," in *Signs*, (tr.) R. C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 228.

<sup>58</sup> See Ellie Anderson, "The Other (Woman): Limits of Knowledge in Beauvoir's Ethics of Reciprocity," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2014): 380–88.

this absorption in the world they share with the beloved. Much of Beauvoir's fiction grapples with the feelings of jealousy brought on by this situation.<sup>59</sup> Jealousy stems from bad faith, originating in believing oneself sovereign over the beloved. Such a belief fails to value not only the beloved, but also the shared world of the relationship (as the site of a perspective in difference).

The phenomenological perspective thus reveals that the fusion model of love is unethical. It leads to devotion and jealousy, involving a false conception of the human condition and a naïve notion of intersubjectivity. And, while this devotional love starts out by taking the beloved as a free transcendence superior to oneself, it cannot help but reverse this dynamic, treating the beloved as a mere object (PC, 122). Failing to recognize the freedom of the beloved, it attempts to act on behalf of them. Beauvoir likens the devoted lover to a "tyrant," because the lover makes judgments about what is in the beloved's best interest based on the lover's own self-interest (*ibid.*, 120). In this way, inauthentic love fails to recognize the human condition of freedom lived by the beloved; it is also an attempt to escape one's own freedom.

Yet individuals are constantly driven toward inauthentic love because romantic mythology takes fusion to be the ultimate form of love. Society promotes inauthentic love as authentic love, especially for women. The discourse around romantic love is thus extremely dangerous: Kathryn Pauly Morgan suggests that, for Beauvoir, romantic love is "morally wrong," and that Beauvoir "is committed to exposing romantic love as an existential fraud."<sup>60</sup> Manon Garcia has also recently suggested the centrality of romantic love's oppressive structure in Beauvoir's more general argument about the oppression of women: romantic love is the central site of women's oppression as articulated in *The Second Sex*.<sup>61</sup> And indeed, one issue with heterosexual love under patriarchal expectations is that it provides no room for ethical considerations. If this kind of love is in principle inauthentic, unable to value the beloved or the relationship properly, then parsing blameworthy actions from praiseworthy ones within these relationships is futile.

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<sup>59</sup> While various novels and short stories by Beauvoir investigate this theme, the most pertinent is Simone de Beauvoir, *She Came to Stay*, (tr.) Y. Moyses and R. Senhouse (New York: Norton, 1999).

<sup>60</sup> Morgan, "Romantic Love, Altruism, and Self-Respect," 136 and 131.

<sup>61</sup> Manon Garcia, "De l'oppression à l'indépendance. La philosophie de l'amour dans *Le deuxième Sexe*," *Philosophie*, vol. 144, no. 1 (2020): 48–63, here 49–50.

#### 4. Consensual Non-Monogamy and the Ethics of Love

If dominant cultural portrayals of romantic love generally depict inauthentic love, then authentic love may look quite different. It will be incumbent upon lovers to craft relational commitments that at least put traditional norms into question. Megan M. Burke has recently argued that Merleau-Ponty offers a queer philosophy of love due to his rejection of established scripts.<sup>62</sup> Following this reasoning, it is not far-fetched to suggest that phenomenology offers a “queer institution” of love, since its conception of value resists broadly heteronormative and monogamous scripts of love.<sup>63</sup> Pursuing this line of thinking, I consider one form of queer love in this section that Beauvoir both theorized and practised: consensual non-monogamy. The phenomenological ethics of love suggests that non-monogamous relationships not only can be authentically loving relationships, but also may have a greater chance at authenticity than monogamous ones—because their non-traditional character renders them less inclined to encourage inauthentic attitudes and commitments.<sup>64</sup>

Consensual non-monogamy (CNM) permits participants to pursue multiple intimate relationships at a time. While the philosophy of love has historically tended to take monogamy for granted, scholars are increasingly questioning this assumption and addressing forms of CNM within the philosophy of love.<sup>65</sup> CNM takes many forms; one common form is an open relationship. Open relationships are dyadic, often hierarchical relations between primary partners who allow each other to conduct one or more additional relationships if desired. Partners agree upon rules for the boundaries of these additional relationships in advance. Another form of CNM is polyamory, which is generally non-dyadic and often non-hierarchical. A polyamorous

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<sup>62</sup> Burke, “Love as a Hollow,” 64.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Queer theory generally rejects the terminology of “authenticity” in favour of more fluid conceptions of becoming. I think, however, that the existential-phenomenological meaning of authenticity here—as assumption of human ambiguity—is compatible with queer theory’s insights.

<sup>65</sup> See, for instance, Carrie Jenkins, *What Love Is: And What It Could Be* (New York: Basic Books, 2017); Justin Leonard Clardy, “Monogamies, Non-Monogamies, and the Moral Impermissibility of Intimacy Confining Constraints,” *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2019): 17–36; Harry Chalmers, “Is Monogamy Morally Permissible?” *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2019): 225–41; Kyle York, “Why Monogamy is Morally Permissible: A Defense of Some Common Justifications for Monogamy,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, vol. 54, no. 4 (2020): 539–52.

individual may conduct relationships with multiple people at one time, sometimes in configurations of more than two individuals per relationship: a throuple or triad is a three-person polyamorous relationship; relationships of more than three may be referred to as a pod or constellation. There are also many other versions of CNM which I do not have space to address. Practitioners of CNM generally valorize open discussions about the level of disclosure they desire from their partners. Some choose to tell each other everything about other relationships, while others prefer not to discuss their other relationships at all; still others choose something in between. As discussed earlier, Beauvoir and Sartre agreed to tell each other everything.

Beauvoir describes her pact with Sartre as stemming from a desire for each to experience the wide range of feelings that might be experienced outside of their relationship. She states that she and Sartre shared an understanding that they could not “deliberately consent to be ignorant to the array of surprises, regrets, nostalgias, and pleasures that we were also capable of feeling” (FA, 32).<sup>66</sup> Their pact was a traditional open relationship: hierarchical and dyadic in form, Sartre and Beauvoir were each other’s primary (“necessary”) partners. While committed to each other, they were free to carry on non-primary relationships. As Sartre stated, “What we have is a necessary love; but it is a good idea for us also to experience contingent loves” (*ibid.*). They agreed to an initial two-year period of monogamy, after which they would be free to pursue additional relationships. Their fidelity was to the necessity of their love, and to the idea that it was not threatened by contingent loves. While it is unclear whether Beauvoir considered her relationship with Sartre to achieve authenticity, her pact is a concrete example of the suggestion that lovers seek to invent their own rules for relationships. No relationship should be taken as a recipe, but the aim of Beauvoir and Sartre’s pact was to uphold the freedom central to their existential ethics. With this example and the account of love developed above, three major questions arise relating to CNM:

(1) Does CNM uphold the value of the loved one? Recall that both valuer-independent and valuer-dependent phenomenologists affirm the coexistence of multiple values. Thus, it is at least plausible that

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<sup>66</sup> Kate Kirkpatrick’s recent biography of Beauvoir lays to rest the formerly dominant view that Beauvoir’s agreement to an open relationship was a compromise Beauvoir made in order to be with Sartre, rather than emerging from a genuine desire for non-monogamy on her part. See Kate Kirkpatrick, *Becoming Beauvoir: A Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

one could value more than one person at the same time. One might grant this, but object that one can only value one person at a time in a *loving* way. Perhaps something about the loving mode of valuing implies loving only one other person. After all, phenomenologists take love to be the most intimate kind of relationship, granting individuals a lived sense of their ambiguity. Phenomenology does not indicate that this necessitates monogamy, however. Instead, it suggests that loving involves valuing the loved one in the singular uniqueness of their freedom: and there is nothing about this valuation that demands loving only one other person. Because each person is singularly unique, one can conceivably love multiple persons in this way. And one might recognize one's own ambiguity in relationships with more than one person.

(2) Does CNM uphold the value of the relationship? This might appear less viable. Loving relationships create a shared world by establishing a perspective in difference, which at minimum requires a substantial amount of time and energy. Non-monogamous relationships involve messy negotiations in these domains; indeed, the difficulty of sharing one's life with multiple partners is often a challenge for practitioners of CNM. These negotiations, however, need not in principle rule out CNM. While valuing the relationship might make CNM difficult, constraints of time and energy do not necessarily make it impossible. Choosing from within one's situation always presents particular challenges. Moreover, one might counter that CNM improves relationships—say, by not putting undue pressure on a single, dyadic relationship to meet all of the lovers' needs. Maximum time and energy devoted to one relationship may have detrimental effects on it. Moreover, phenomenologists recognize that loving relationships are not totalizing: the private shared world that the lovers construct is co-extensive with the other aspects of their lives, including all sorts of other relationships. One could conceivably develop the “perspective in difference” inaugurated by love with more than one person (despite Badiou's terminology of the “Two scene”). Finally, the futural orientation of loving relationships need not be found only within monogamous relationships. While the shared world that love establishes is future-oriented, there is nothing intrinsically monogamous about this. Rather, mononormative conventions overlay this futural orientation, most often couching it in heteronormative terms of starting a family.

(3) Can CNM be an authentic mode of loving? Recall that inauthentic love denies freedom by seeking fusion. By contrast, authentic love recognizes the limits of one's knowledge of the other and recognizes the freedom of the loved one. Leaving the other free to pursue

other relationships seems like a clear possibility for authentic love within this context. This is even more evident considering that Beauvoir's account of inauthentic love centres on romantic culture, to which monogamy is central. In fact, Beauvoir associates monogamy with inauthentic love.<sup>67</sup> She finds the norm of monogamy possessive, not to mention being historically rooted in the domination of women. As such, Beauvoir turns the question of whether CNM can be ethical on its head, asking instead: can monogamy be ethical? Or does it rather intrinsically constitute a constraint upon one's freedom?

I will leave this question open here, noting only that the phenomenology of love encourages questioning the norm of monogamy. While monogamy may or may not be a problem, the default expectation of it that is baked into many love relationships is part of inauthentic love, operating as a key component of romantic mythology. Even if not itself inauthentic, mononormativity may contribute to the inability to recognize the other's freedom that characterizes inauthentic love. At minimum, it is up to the those involved in a relationship to consent either to monogamy or to non-monogamy, and to negotiate this as part of their love for each other. Any relationship is potentially inauthentic from a phenomenological standpoint: its authenticity is a matter of how it is lived by the parties involved, which cannot adequately be judged from the outside (see MN, 35–36). At the very least, while consensually non-monogamous relationships are not necessarily authentic, they are not necessarily inauthentic, either. As Merleau-Ponty suggests in analyzing the non-monogamous triad relationship in Beauvoir's *She Came to Stay*, "The human couple is no more a *natural* reality than the trio" (*ibid.*, 35). Monogamy does not appear to be an essential feature of love from a phenomenological standpoint.

If authentic love leaves the other free to pursue other values outside the relationship, why should it not leave the other free to pursue other lovers inasmuch as they, too, are values? One frequently cited ethical reason for monogamy is the desire to protect the loved one from the pain of one's pursuits of others, including the pain of jealousy. While I have argued that CNM does not in principle detract from valuing the loved one or the relationship, it could be that acting on CNM through pursuing relationships with others has a detrimental effect on one or both of these values. This may be true in particular cases, but may be accommodated by the idea that CNM

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<sup>67</sup> See Ellie Anderson, "Erotic Love and Marriage in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*," in *Le deuxième Sexe Seventy Years On*, (ed.) J. Bullock and P. Henry-Tierney (forthcoming).



involves lovers' negotiations of their boundaries over time: CNM does not license pursuing any and all relationships in any and all contexts. Thus, love may in particular cases provide reason to be monogamous for some period, or the entire duration, of a relationship. As I pointed out above, Beauvoir and Sartre decided to conduct the first two years of their relationship monogamously. They thought it best to have a two-year period living "in as close an intimacy as possible" in Paris before they were to move to separate cities (FA, 33).

But it is also worth noting that the pain of one's pursuit of others on one's beloved may be mitigated in CNM, and may not have a detrimental effect on the relationship. This leads to a discussion of jealousy. I showed above that inauthentic love is commonly disclosed in devotion and jealousy. Arguably, non-monogamous relationships are less prone to devotion: because lovers are free to pursue other relationships, CNM may at least partially protect against the tendency toward devoting oneself completely to one's lover. Jealousy is more complicated in this context, and many skeptics of CNM focus on how easily CNM might give rise to this unpleasant emotion.

Defenders of CNM tend to emphasize that the non-monogamous relationship, however, is itself not usually the reason for jealousy.<sup>68</sup> If individuals feel jealous because their beloved is not adequately valuing them in a non-monogamous relationship, there may well be other reasons for this (as should be evident by the prevalence of jealousy within monogamous relationships). It may be that the non-monogamous relationship does not work for them; but it is also possible that the way they are experiencing their non-monogamous relationship does not work for them, or that the feeling of not being valued is unrelated to non-monogamy. Jealousy may arise because one's partner's relationship with—or even desire for—another person makes one feel out of control, and/or makes one feel like an object. In this case, one might feel preferred below another object in a hierarchical scale of value. Yet one might respond that this reaction, while common, is indicative of a generally inauthentic attitude toward love. I have shown that phenomenology recognizes the coexistence of multiple values, as well as the fact that no other person should be taken as an absolute value who organizes one's life. Feeling threatened by a lover's relationship with another person may be unavoidable at times, but could be taken as indicative of having fallen

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<sup>68</sup> Meg-John Barker, "Open Non-Monogamies: Drawing on Beauvoir and Sartre to Inform Existential Work with Romantic Relationships," in *Sexualities: Existential Perspectives*, (ed.) M. Milton (Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books, 2014).

into an inauthentic attitude toward love. This is an invitation to consider one's behaviours and the tenability of one's commitment, rather than to assume that the structure of non-monogamy is the issue.

Practitioners of CNM might also respond that jealousy is a product of monogamy that largely dissipates once lovers overcome mononormative habits of mind. Jessica Kean has recently drawn attention to the misunderstandings around jealousy and non-monogamy in Beauvoir's novel *She Came to Stay*, which depicts a disastrous relationship-triad. Kean suggests that the expectation that non-monogamous relationships are hotbeds of toxic jealousy has overdetermined commentators' understandings of Beauvoir's position in this novel—an argument I would extend to her philosophy of love, as well.<sup>69</sup> Sartre and Beauvoir both devoted many pages throughout their fictional, philosophical, and personal writings to the theme of jealousy, and it often reared its head in their own relationship. Consensually non-monogamous relationships accept the risk of jealousy within the relationship, rather than enforcing a narrow kind of fidelity that may or may not work for those involved. In a sense, then, CNM tests the phenomenologist by offering a glimpse of a non-possessive kind of love that accepts the alterity of the beloved. The perspective in difference between lovers emerges sharply in CNM, but does not essentially undermine the value of the relationship or the value of the loved one.

## 5. Conclusion

I have suggested that phenomenology offers important insight to the ethics of love. As a careful description of the diverse field of lived experience, phenomenology resists offering specific codes of conduct for lovers. Yet the theory of value undergirding it is normative, and has significant ethical implications for loving relationships. In this essay, I have explained that phenomenology, broadly speaking, views love as an intentional feeling-act of valuing, which is disclosed concretely in relationships. I have suggested that, while phenomenological accounts of valuing tend to focus on valuing the beloved, they also imply a second value-act: valuing the relationship. These acts of valuing are foreclosed in inauthentic love, which denies the freedom of oneself and/or the beloved. Devotion and jealousy, two common

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<sup>69</sup> Jessica Kean, "Misreading Nonmonogamy in Beauvoir's *She Came to Stay*," *Hypatia*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2018): 128–43, here 136–37.

modes of inauthentic loving, both fail to value the beloved and the relationship properly. Because romantic relationships are strongly coded by cultural scripts, which in a patriarchal society are oppressive, traditional forms of commitment are inclined to be inauthentic. It is up to individuals to engage reflectively with these scripts and to seek authentic commitments that unfold in relationships over time. These commitments may be consensually non-monogamous.

Many questions remain about the phenomenology of ethical loving relationships. One avenue of inquiry is how valuing the beloved may sometimes conflict with valuing the relationship. Another might explore the complex dynamics between one's commitment and one's relationship: can an authentic commitment, which recognizes the freedom of the other in principle, still manifest in an inauthentic relationship? I have shown that consensually non-monogamous relationships can be authentic: that is, expressive of valuing the beloved and the relationship in a way that recognizes the freedom of the partners. A question that may arise here, especially following Beauvoir's perspective, is how monogamous relationships can be authentic. These are just a few examples of the promising directions toward which the phenomenological ethics of love points. Phenomenology not only offers a compelling account of the lived experience of love, but also provides normative resources for evaluating loving relationships.

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