

Dissertation Overview

Loving Gracie: An Account of Human-Animal Love

Claudia Hogg-Blake

The possibility of loving a non-human animal, and dogs in particular, is well documented. And yet, it is the dominant view in the contemporary philosophy of love that human-animal love is not possible. This denial of the experience and testimony of vast amounts of people is, as I explain in Chapter 1 (“Loving Dogs: A Puzzle for the Philosophy of Love”), puzzling. In response to this puzzle, I develop – drawing heavily on my own relationship with my dog, Gracie – a novel account of love that not only acknowledges the possibility of loving a non-human animal, but argues, further, that understanding this possibility is in fact crucial to a proper understanding of the nature of love.

The claim that one cannot love a non-human animal such as a dog follows from the influential view (e.g., David Velleman, Bennett Helm, Niko Kolodny) that love should be understood as occurring, distinctively, between “persons”, where to be a “person” is to possess the rational capacity for evaluative self-reflection – a capacity which is meant to set us apart from the other animals. Such “person-focused” accounts of love would in fact deny the possibility not only of loving non-human animals but also – an implication that is not often made explicit – infants and some severely cognitively disabled humans. In Chapter 2 (“Love and Rational Nature: A Critique of Some Prominent Views”), I argue that these uncomfortable conclusions about love’s possible objects point to a deeper problem with person-focused accounts: their impoverished account of *who* we can love owes to an impoverished account of *how* we love. I argue that we do not in fact love other people solely *qua persons*, as creatures who can either succeed or fail at living in accordance with their reflectively held values, but also *qua animals*, as subject to various forms of physical and emotional thriving and suffering – many of which bear no direct relation to their personhood. Such love takes as its object what I call a “somebody”. This notion of a somebody, broader than that of a “person”, demarcates a distinctive kind of love, of central importance in our lives, that differs from any attitude we might have toward a mere *thing* (contra e.g., Harry Frankfurt and Susan Wolf).

A “somebody” can be distinguished as a possible object of this distinctive kind of love in virtue of two defining features. First, to be somebody is to be a locus of subjective experience, and thus to have a sake of one’s own, making one a possible object of a distinctive kind of care. Second, in all but the most marginal cases, to be a somebody is to be capable of intersubjective interaction with another somebody. In Chapter 3 (“Between Hearts: Love and Relationships”), I argue that love should be understood as a feature of a relationship marked by a history of interaction – that this kind of love is unintelligible outside of such a relationship. More specifically, the relevant kinds of relationships are marked by a history of “togetherness” – moments of interaction marked not only by a mutual recognition of each other as a somebody but also by a mutual openness, receptivity and attunement to one another as such. Such relationships are also marked by the relatively stabled attitudes of the participants to one another – and indeed, as such an attitude, love can be understood as a feature of such a relationship. Importantly, neither the interactions nor the attitudes of such a relationship need be symmetrical in order for the relationship to be of the relevant kind. I demonstrate this with respect to, for example, my interactions with my (much younger) little sister.

In Chapter 4 (“Love as Caring Attachment”), I further characterize such relationships as *affectional bonds*, in which the participants experience mutual enjoyment and affection in one another’s presence, seek at least some frequency of togetherness with one another, miss one another during times of

separation, delight in reunion, and would experience a form of grief in the face of permanent loss or separation. We might refer to the attitudes of each individual toward the other, within such a relationship, as *attachment*, understood as a felt need to be together with the other. Love, I argue, is a form of attachment. More specifically, it should be understood as “caring attachment.” Love involves having a felt need to be together with the beloved while also caring for the beloved for her own sake and experiencing her as a limit to one’s own will. In characterizing love as *caring attachment*, I mean to point out two things. First, that within the notion of attachment itself, as I am here using it, there is already implicit some notion of care for the beloved for her own sake – a kind of immediate, in-the-moment care that might be expressed in various forms of affection, and that, insofar as there is genuine togetherness, is sensitive and responsive to the other as an independent being and a limit to one’s will. Second, insofar as one (is the kind of being who) has also a more reflective orientation toward one’s beloved, such care will also take the form of, for example, taking her interests into account, reflectively, in one’s deliberations, and reflectively thinking of her as an end in herself, as precious and irreplaceable, etc.

The possibility of loving a non-human animal might be explained, then, by our having something – something very central to our experience of love – deeply in common. That is, the need and capacity for affectional bonding. In Chapter 5 (“Loving Gracie”), I give a detailed description of the affectional bond between me and my dog, Gracie, within the framework provided by chapters 3 and 4. Having defined love as caring attachment, and having allowed for asymmetries in affectional bonds, I leave it an open question whether Gracie’s attachment to me constitutes love. I suggest that it can be understood as a genuinely caring attachment – though somewhat different in kind to mine – but that the possibility of my loving her does not hang on this. However exactly we choose to characterize her side of the affectional bond, what I get back from her is enough to make sense of my love for her.