

Is Monogamy Part of ‘Who We Are’? Romantic Norms, Defensiveness, and Collective Identity

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Abstract

I discuss a certain kind of emotionally charged negative reaction to defences of non-monogamous love, which I call *collective-identity* reactions. Expanding on work by Audrey Yap and Jonathan Ichikawa, who consider defensive reactions grounded in individual identity, I argue that collective-identity reactions are characteristically associated with claims about *who we are*, and motivated by a sense that the relevant *we* is in some way under threat. Looking into which *we* might be threatened by defences of non-monogamy, and why, reveals that this apparently personal subject matter is in fact entangled with global political issues like capitalism and American cultural imperialism. I conclude with some thoughts about ameliorative strategies for situations structurally similar to this one.

1. Introduction

Philosophers routinely defend views that are challenging to conventional wisdom or common sense. In certain arenas, such challenges

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are liable to prompt emotionally² charged negative reactions. My work in the philosophy of love has involved discussions of the possibility and the moral permissibility of non-monogamous romantic love,³ and this has garnered such reactions.

Some of these charged reactions might be chalked up to simple *misunderstandings* of what I have been arguing for – if, for instance, I am interpreted as claiming that monogamous relationships are impermissible, then an angry defense of monogamy would be predictable. Others might be (what I shall here describe as) *self-centred* reactions. For example, if one were – consciously or unconsciously – worried that wider acceptance of non-monogamy could make it so popular that it would become statistically challenging to secure a willing partner for monogamy, this could provoke an emotional reaction due to anxiety about the prospects of being able to satisfy one's own preferences in the future. (This would be structurally similar to a man reacting emotionally to feminist arguments on account of their causing him anxiety about being able to secure a submissive wife.) A similar kind of self-centred reaction might be due to the concern that, if non-monogamy were accepted as a permissible option, one's own existing partner might prefer that option, which could be similarly detrimental to the prospects for satisfying one's own preferences in the future.

In this paper, I set aside misunderstandings and self-centred reactions. My goal here is to consider a different kind of explanation for (at least some) of the defensive reactions provoked by the claim that non-monogamy is morally permissible (and by nearby claims, e.g., that one is non-monogamous and one's life is going well). By contrast with *misunderstandings* and *self-centred* reactions, this third kind of explanation involves (what I shall here describe as) *collective-identity* reactions. These are often characteristically associated with claims about *who we are*.

Understanding how this third kind of explanation works is, I contend, both philosophically and politically illuminating. Moreover, it may suggest ameliorative strategies for facilitating more productive discussions in the future. The insights gleaned may also

² In this paper, I do not use the word 'emotion' in the technical sense deployed in some areas of philosophical literature, whereby an emotion is to be distinguished from a *mood* insofar as the former has an intentional object and the latter does not. My use of 'emotion' is closer to pre-theoretic usage, capturing a diverse (and, I assume, highly indeterminate) range of affective states.

³ See, e.g., Jenkins (2015, 2017, 2022, 2023).

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be applicable to a range of other situations characterized by similar philosophical and political features; discourse concerning non-monogamous love might then be understood as a kind of case study.

In section 2, I shall present and contextualize one kind of discourse that, to my mind, calls for explanation in terms of collective-identity reactions. In section 3, I draw on work by Audrey Yap and Jonathan Ichikawa (forthcoming) to explicate the machinery of defensive reactions, before applying these thoughts to the case at hand in sections 4–6. I conclude, in section 7, by considering generalizable morals for other structurally similar situations, as well as prospects for ameliorative strategies in such cases.

2. Bertrand Russell and Me

In 1940, the City College of New York hired Bertrand Russell to a teaching position. Or rather, they tried to. Russell was, by this point in his career, a renowned scholar and public intellectual. Indeed, he was positively *famous* both within and beyond academic circles. Among philosophers and logicians, he was highly respected for such ground-breaking work as his discovery of Russell’s paradox – which exploded the contemporary foundations of mathematics with the idea of a *set of all sets which are not members of themselves* – and for his theory of definite descriptions, a game-changing breakthrough in the philosophy of language attained through a rigorous application of first-order predicate calculus.⁴ In fact Russell was – and still is – so influential within academic philosophy that his views on what philosophy is and how it should be pursued – an approach he described as ‘analytic’, which centrally involved the application of logical clarity to philosophical problems – shaped what has since become the dominant orientation in most Anglophone philosophy departments worldwide.⁵

I mention all of this to make clear what a hiring coup it might have been for a relatively small New York college to get him on the books. One would think such a person might be a shoo-in for the job. But it was not to be. Russell was also well known beyond academic philosophy for his popular writing, including such challenging texts as ‘Why I Am Not a Christian’ (Russell, 1927) and *Marriage and Morals*

⁴ See Russell and Whitehead (1903) and Russell (1905) respectively.

⁵ That said, the label ‘analytic philosophy’, now used largely as a marker of distinction from ‘continental philosophy’, is becoming more controversial and complicated over time. So is the associated methodological principle – also due in large part to Russell’s influence – that philosophy is, at its core, an a priori discipline. I say more about this in Jenkins (forthcoming).

(Russell, 1929). He had a long-standing reputation for speaking, writing, and acting in the name of controversial causes such as pacifism, atheism, and women's suffrage. He was no stranger to the practical difficulties this could create in his own life, having been imprisoned (and having lost his lectureship at Trinity College, Cambridge⁶) over his outspoken opposition to World War I. A decade later, in 1950, Russell would be awarded a Nobel Prize for literature, and the Award Ceremony speech would note that '[m]uch in Russell's writings excites protest,' and that '[u]nlike many other philosophers, he regards this as one of the natural and urgent tasks of an author' (Österling, 1950).

But the 1940 job offer brought a public outcry in its wake. Russell had written in *Marriage and Morals* that Victorian sexual mores were repressive and outdated, blaming the influence of Christianity for such ills as the lack of adequate sex education for young people. The book also advocated for sexually open romantic relationships, and moreover Russell practiced what he preached, at least in this regard.⁷ As can be seen in a cartoon published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* at the time,⁸ concern clearly centred around the possibility that Russell would teach, in addition to the philosophy of mathematics and logic, such subjects as left-wing politics and non-monogamy. In the cartoon, a childlike figure labelled 'impressionable youth' looks up at a towering Russell, who smilingly presents a book labelled 'math and logic'. Concealed behind this book are two others labelled 'wonders of communism' and 'free love'. Russell is hiding a large stick behind his back, labelled 'academic freedom'.

This kind of thing was clearly too much for Jean Kay, the concerned mother of a young woman (not a student at CCNY). Kay brought a lawsuit against the college on the grounds that Russell might have a corrupting influence on her daughter's morality *should* she later enroll in Russell's classes at CCNY (which she would, in fact, have been ineligible to do at that time on account of her gender). Kay won, and the Mayor of New York withheld funding for the job that would have been Russell's. The legal

⁶ See Delany (1986) for some of the details of this affair.

⁷ There is reason to suspect he was quite hypocritical in other respects. His daughter, Katherine Tait, would later write: 'I don't think he really was ever a feminist, and, in fact, I think he treated women terribly. He was a theoretical feminist, but in practice he was one of your larger-sized male chauvinists' (Tait, 1978, p. 16).

⁸ A reproduction of the cartoon can be viewed at: <https://virtualny.ashp.cuny.edu/gutter/Images/largeImages/bertrand-russell-1.jpg>

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ruling declared that he was 'morally unfit' to teach at the college. As noted in *The University of Chicago Law Review* the following year (1941, p. 317, fn. 2):

the controversy attracted nation-wide attention. Prominent churchmen, and patriotic and fraternal organizations decried the appointment. Scientists, educators, writers and philosophers came to Russell's defense.

Of particular interest to me, for the purposes of this paper, is that it should have been considered *patriotic* for Americans to resist what Russell's appointment represented. The idea of Americanness clearly motivated some prominent opponents at the time. Paul Edwards (1957, pp. 213–14) writes:

Borough President George V. Harvey of Queens ... declared at a mass meeting that if Russell were not ousted, he would move to strike out the entire 1941 appropriation of \$7,500,000 for the upkeep of the municipal colleges. If he had it his way, he said, 'the colleges would either be godly colleges, American colleges, or they would be closed.' At the same protest meeting other eminent and dignified speakers were heard. Referring to Russell as a 'dog,' Councilman Charles Keegan remarked that 'if we had an adequate system of immigration, that bum could not land within a thousand miles.' But now that he had landed. Miss Martha Byrnes, the Registrar of New York County, told the audience what to do with the 'dog.' Russell, she shouted, should be 'tarred and feathered and driven out of the country.'

I shall return to these thoughts in what follows.

When it comes to philosophers saying challenging things about romantic relationships, it's salutary to reflect on how far the dial has moved since 1940. I am rather unlike Bertrand Russell in a lot of ways. However, we have both been associated with Trinity College, Cambridge (which is where I obtained my philosophy degrees), we both have philosophical interests in mathematics and the a priori (my first book, Jenkins, 2008, was about these topics, and they remain central to my interests), and we have both published controversial writings about love, including some arguments for the moral permissibility of non-monogamous relationships.

I have been fortunate enough to keep my job. But I have not been immune to other kinds of pushback and penalty. In the internet age, much of this comes in the form of hate mail and rage-filled online commentary. Much of it is both depressingly predictable and predictably depressing. However, I have found that it can also be a

mine of information as to the source and nature of the emotional outrage generated by what I have to say. As in Russell's case, the claim that I am unfit to educate young people has certainly been a theme. Of particular interest for current purposes, however, is the fact that 'American values' also often feature prominently. In a representative passage, one commentator, after asking me to choke myself, adds 'God bless America' before invoking 'Freedom' and 'second Amendment rights.' The crassness of the mode of expression should not distract us from the content of what is expressed here, which to my mind sounds an important echo of the hostility Russell faced from 'patriotic' Americans. The irony of directing such comments to a British scholar at a Canadian university is also worth noting; the relevance of this will become clear in §§5–6 below.

3. Defensive Reactions and What They Defend

As discussed in the Preface to my book *Sad Love* (Jenkins, 2022), the publicity surrounding the publication of my earlier book *What Love Is and What It Could Be* (Jenkins, 2017) brought me face to face, often in disturbing ways, with a fact that has subsequently become one of my subjects of philosophical study: that many people are dramatically, viscerally perturbed by any perceived challenge to conventional beliefs about romantic love and relationships. These beliefs seem to belong to a core set of deeply held and interconnected values that are not restricted to questions of love but much more general in scope, i.e., views about *what a good life consists in* and *what makes one a good person*. Questioning or resisting convention in these arenas is liable to provoke the same kinds of defensive behaviour as a personal attack.

As is persuasively argued by Audrey Yap and Jonathan Ichikawa (forthcoming), 'criticism can sometimes provoke defensive reactions, particularly when it implicates *identities* people hold dear' (p. 1, emphasis added). An *identity* in their sense is a property central to an individual's sense of self. Yap and Ichikawa focus on anti-oppressive identities, such as *feminist* or *anti-racist*, pointing out that challenges to these kinds of identities in particular tend to lead to emotionally charged defensive responses:

If you tell someone that what they just did or said is racist, you are likely to provoke a defensive reaction. They might become angry or upset and refuse to keep talking to you. (Yap and Ichikawa, forthcoming, p. 1)

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They analyse this defensiveness in terms of what they call *identity maintenance*. Maintaining a stable self-conception, and in particular conceiving of oneself as a (certain kind of) good person, may require one not to know certain things about oneself – namely those things that do not cohere with that positive self-image. A defensive reaction serves as a way to fend off evidence that one is not as feminist, anti-racist, or what have you as one thought. As they put it, ‘the characteristic aim of a defensive strategy is to protect someone’s own views or self-conception from perceived or genuine attack’ (p. 2).

Specific defensive strategies identified by Yap and Ichikawa include *exaggeration* of the purported attack and *assuming the role of victim*: for example, someone who has been called out for an instance of racist behaviour may position herself as the target of a cruel and unprovoked ‘witch hunt’ the goal of which is to end her career and lead to her financial ruin. They draw on Gaile Pohlhaus’s (2012) notion of *willful hermeneutical ignorance* to explicate the phenomenon of resistance to adopting the kinds of nuanced concepts and vocabulary that would dispel such exaggerations and misrepresentations.

Yap and Ichikawa are interested in the social epistemology of this kind of situation, but it is useful for current purposes to think about it from a psychological point of view as well. It is a relatively well-confirmed psychological feature of humans that we are subject to a range of *self-serving cognitive biases*, leading us to overestimate both our skills and competencies (see e.g., Hoorens, 1993; Zell *et al.*, 2020) and our moral standing (see e.g., Epley and Dunning, 2000). The phenomena noted by Ichikawa and Yap are consistent with this tendency, taken together with our similarly well-established *confirmation bias*: that is, our tendency to attend to and accept evidence that supports our existing beliefs, while ignoring or discrediting evidence that contradicts them (see e.g., Nickerson, 1998).

There is also fairly robust empirical support for the ‘broader phenomenon’ that Yap and Ichikawa discuss on p. 14, whereby ‘anti-oppressive identities serve to mask one’s contributions to oppression.’ This is plausibly related to a psychological effect known as ‘moral licensing’ or ‘self-licensing’, which occurs when individuals who have recently explicitly attributed positive qualities to themselves proceed to behave *less* well along the relevant dimension than controls. Here is a description of the phenomenon from Merritt *et al.* (2010, p. 345):

Modern Americans generally wish to avoid feeling or appearing prejudiced, yet all the same can be tempted to express views that could be construed as prejudiced ... imagine yourself in a difficult situation: As chief of police in a small town, you must hire

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a new deputy. You know that the predominately White officers on the force have negative attitudes toward Blacks, and that hostile working conditions recently led a Black officer to resign. Someone asks you whether you think the job is better suited for a Black person, a White person, or equally well suited to people of both races ... What do you say? On the one hand, concern about the racially hostile work environment might make you feel that the job is better suited for Whites. On the other hand, concern that this preference could be or appear racist might inhibit you from expressing it, prompting you to choose the 'safer' answer and say that race should not be a factor. Self-licensing provides one way to resolve this dilemma. If you were able to establish that you were a nonracist person before expressing a preference, you could say that the job is better suited for a White deputy without worrying that you would feel or appear racist.

Monin and Miller (2001) let some participants demonstrate their lack of prejudice before presenting them with this police-force scenario by asking them to play the role of an employer choosing which candidate to hire for an unrelated consulting job. The best-qualified candidate happened to be African-American and the other four were White. Nearly everyone selected the African-American candidate, a choice that presumably made them feel that they had established themselves as nonracists as they went into the second part of the experiment. In the control group, all five candidates were White, so control participants did not get a chance to demonstrate a lack of prejudice. As predicted, participants who had been able to demonstrate their nonprejudiced attitudes in the first hiring decision said that the police job was better suited for a White person than people in the control condition. Analogous results were obtained in the domain of sexism: the opportunity to disagree with blatantly sexist statements or to pick a woman for a consulting job made participants more likely to describe a stereotypically masculine job as better suited for men than for women. It thus appears that the opportunity to obtain a moral license freed participants from the anxiety that goes along with making morally ambiguous decisions.

Presumably, people (typically) don't *intentionally* engage in moral self-licensing to help them stop worrying that they might be a little bit racist or sexist or what have you. Likewise, I assume people (typically) don't *intentionally* engage in defensive strategies for identity

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management of the kind identified by Yap and Ichikawa. Nevertheless, it is quite plausible that we unintentionally do behave as Yap and Ichikawa suggest, given how consonant this would be with other well-confirmed psychological tendencies. Cognitive dissonance is unsettling, particularly when it impacts beliefs one is strongly invested in, such as the belief that one is basically a good person. So we are constantly trying to minimize its unsettling effect in whatever ways we can, often without being aware that these kinds of processes are going on below the level of our conscious awareness. When others try to force us back into the uncomfortable dissonant state, we become upset or angry. We react as if we had been hurt; indeed, the discomfort caused by this kind of cognitive dissonance might be said to amount to a kind of pain, distinct from and additional to any pain caused straightforwardly by (what we take to be) an insult or by an injury to our pride.

I am interested in the hypothesis that many of the responses elicited by my discussions of non-monogamous love since the publication of *What Love Is and What It Could Be* can be fruitfully understood as defensive reactions somewhere in the vicinity of the phenomena identified by Yap and Ichikawa. Certainly, some of characteristic features of defensive reactions that they identify are also noticeable in this arena. *Exaggeration* of the purported attack occurs quite often (for example, McCain, 2017, claims that I, and other feminist authors, ‘hate men, ... hate marriage and motherhood, and ... even hate love’). Similarly, it is quite common to see heteronormative, monogamous people *assume the role of victims* in light of conversations about whether non-monogamy may also be a permissible option, especially when it is noted that making monogamy compulsory for everyone is a practice with patriarchal roots (McCain, 2017, is also quite a good example of this kind of posturing). *Willful hermeneutical ignorance* has plausibly been on display on the (sadly frequent) occasions when I have been accused of ‘being unfaithful’ despite having repeatedly explained the conceptual difference between cheating and consensual non-monogamy. This also presents as a plausible explanation for the (also sadly frequent) conversations where I have failed to secure any uptake for the concept of *polyamory*,⁹ because interlocutors persisted in reaching for concepts like *polygamy* or *promiscuity* which were more consonant with their pre-existing negative attitudes to the phenomenon under discussion.

⁹ *Polyamory* is a form of non-monogamy involving openness to participating in more than one romantic relationship at a time with the knowledge and agreement of all parties concerned.

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Applying Yap and Ichikawa's insights, we can plausibly understand such dialectical behaviours as defensive strategies aimed at protecting *something* from (perceived or genuine) threat. But what exactly is it that is being protected here? Not – at least, not in any direct or obvious way – the identities of the individuals exhibiting the defensive behaviours.

If we can pin down in a little more detail what exactly was construed as being threatening, that may help us specify what exactly was perceived as having been threatened. In a fairly representative (and certainly provocative) media appearance of the time, a feature article about me and my work appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, written by journalist and economist Moira Weigel. It was used as the cover story of the *Chronicle* magazine, and a photograph was taken for the cover of me posing with my then husband and my then boyfriend. The headline that appeared on the cover alongside the image was: 'Can Carrie Jenkins make polyamory respectable?'¹⁰ 'Respectable' is a double-edged word, and not necessarily one I would use in my own description of my aims. But I was advocating for *respect*. And in so doing, I was open about my own experience of being polyamorous. Advocating for respect, for myself and for my relationships, was apparently the provocative thing that led to the defensive reactions.

Of course, I could not make polyamory respectable, even if I wanted to. No one person can do something like that. This is the kind of thing that goes much deeper than what I or anyone else has to say on the matter individually. But through collective action, the norms around romantic relationships can and do change. In my lifetime, I've seen radical change around attitudes to queer relationships, for example. (To an extent, they *have* become respectable, on which more below.) My work involves talking about romantic love, in ways that some people find challenging, and that provokes defensive reactions. I continue to do this work, despite the consequences, because I think it is meaningful, which is, in turn, because I think change is possible. But I think there's more attached to this possibility for change than meets the eye. Unpacking what that 'more' amounts to will bring us back to just why certain challenges to the conventional wisdom about love can upset people so much.

4. The Heart of the Matter

What is threatened, then – what might be lost – if polyamory were to become a respected – or a *respectable* – life choice?

¹⁰ I did not write that headline. I doubt that Weigel wrote it either, as typically journalists don't get to write their own headlines.

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At issue is the claim that we¹¹ are wrong to disrespect and stigmatize¹² non-monogamous approaches to romantic love, because these approaches are not *per se* harmful, inferior, or morally wrong.¹³ What is threatened by this claim is what I have called *the ideology of romantic love*, according to which there is only one narrative for a good life, which is essentially the one contained in this playground rhyme: ‘first comes love then comes marriage, then comes baby in a baby carriage.’

In Jenkins 2022, I challenge this romantic ideology explicitly, targeting in particular its core posit of happiness (especially a romantic ‘happy ever after’) as a life goal. This project of Jenkins 2022 picks up strands from Jenkins 2017 and elsewhere in my work, diving deeper ‘under the hood’ to illuminate and critique the mechanisms through which that romantic ideology is imposed, as well as the purposes it ultimately serves. During a 2022 interview for Vox’s *Grey Area* podcast, the host Sean Illing commented that my critique of romantic love was ‘deeper than it might appear’: that its exploration of the connections between the dominant romantic ideology of love and capitalism meant that it was ‘really a critique of our whole political and economic paradigm, and how that has shaped our inner lives to the point that it has touched and coloured our understanding of love.’ I replied, sounding considerably more nonchalant than I remember feeling at the time, ‘It is. Thanks for noticing that.’¹⁴ It was actually very significant for me to have an opportunity to discuss this issue in a popular forum, because it gets to the core of what I consider to be my life’s work, yet is typically overlooked by media outlets who prefer to focus on more superficial questions about what it’s like to be in non-monogamous relationships.

¹¹ The first person plural here refers to the social group – to which I belong – that has created and now maintains the globally dominant culture characteristic of what is often misleadingly labelled ‘Western’ society.

¹² Empirical investigations of such stigma include Conley *et al.* (2013), Thompson *et al.* (2018), and Mahar *et al.* (2024).

¹³ Of course, they can be pursued in harmful and/or unethical ways, just as monogamy can. The phrase ‘ethical non-monogamy’ is often used as umbrella label for approaches such as polyamory, open relationships, and swinging, in order to distinguish them from cheating (which is classified as unethical non-monogamy). But this terminology has recently received scrutiny on the grounds that there is no guarantee that any relationship belonging to one of these non-monogamous categories is, by that token, an ethical relationship.

¹⁴ Illing and Jenkins (2022). This exchange occurs at 55:10 onwards.

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I'll give just a brief summary of the 2022 critique here. It begins with the identification of various elements of 'received wisdom' that may strike one as innocuous or banal, but which (or so I argue) are in fact both substantive and problematic. These include:

1. A good life is one full of love and happiness. A bad life is one with neither of those things.
2. The best things in life, i.e., love and happiness, are free (with the corollary that anyone can achieve them if they try hard enough, regardless of socioeconomic status).
3. To live a good life, you should *pursue* love and happiness, instead of pursuing crass things like wealth, power, or fame.

A fourth piece of received wisdom, less often spoken out loud but very often implied in our actions and assumptions, is:

4. Romantic love is the most important kind of love – it is the one that leads to 'happy ever after' and is hence a crucial element in a good life (i.e., one full of love and happiness).

4 is a form of what Elizabeth Brake (2012, p. 88) has termed *amatormativity*: a 'disproportionate focus on marital and amorous love relationships as special sites of value, and the assumption that romantic love is a universal goal.' Amatonormativity is on display when people default to assuming that romantic partners do or should take precedence over family, friendships, and other kinds of connections, and when it is assumed that people who don't have a romantic relationship are looking for one, or that there is something missing from a life without a romantic partner. (Indeed, one of the differences between me and Bertrand Russell is that he subscribed to a fairly extreme version of this latter view,¹⁵ whereas I reject it.)

In my discussion of the first three propositions above, which sound more straightforwardly platitudinous, I call attention to the way in which they cast love and happiness as *twin goals* that define the good life. Love and happiness are so closely connected, in this system of values, they are often more or less conflated. For this reason, I argue, it's no coincidence that we tend to end fairy tale romantic stories with '... and they lived happily ever after'. Happiness, we are conditioned to believe, is achieved by following the romantic life script ('first comes love, then comes marriage ...'). This lesson is internalised at a very young age, typically before our critical

¹⁵ See Russell (1929, p. 123), and Jenkins (2017, p. 65).

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thinking abilities are fully online. The romantic *ideal* then stays with us for the rest of our lives, constantly reinforced in everything from high literature to romcoms. Even if we challenge it later, or become aware that there are other ways to live, its power as an ideal remains. We may acknowledge that it is not realistic, yet it still serves as a standard against which we can compare ourselves and others (and by whose lights we inevitably fall short).

Meanwhile, sadness in love is depicted across popular culture and high art as a tragic failure condition: explosive, intense, overwhelming, violent, and (often literally) deadly. Sad love is *Romeo and Juliet*, *Wuthering Heights*, *La Traviata*, *Anna Karenina*. It's 'I can't live if living is without you,' 'I died a hundred times,' 'to carry on living doesn't make no sense.' From the mass of all these depictions, romantic love emerges¹⁶ as something that comes in two flavours: either the best thing ever, or your worst nightmare. It either 'goes right' (total bliss) or 'goes wrong' (abject misery and despair). My work then calls attention to the question: what role does all this play in shaping our lives?

By way of an answer, I have sometimes used the metaphor of a bowling alley (first proposed in Jenkins, 2017, p. 142). Imagine yourself standing at one end of the alley with your ball in your hand. The ball is your life. You can see the pins at the far end. There are two gutters on either side; if your ball rolls too far in one direction or the other, it will end up there. The gutters represent failure conditions, while the pins represent success. On the one hand, your social conditioning warns you, you mustn't have *more* than one romantic partner; that's too many! You will end up abjectly miserable (i.e., in the gutter). On the other hand, you mustn't have *fewer* than one romantic partner; that's not enough! You will be lonely, loveless, and, again, abjectly miserable (back in the gutter). So you must have *exactly one* romantic partner, and you must follow the life trajectory defined by that state to its intended conclusion, which is the happy nuclear family (the last step of the rhyme: 'then comes baby in a baby carriage').

We shape each other's lives by *warning* each other about the gutters and their associations with misery, which we do largely by means of selective storytelling. How often have I been told that non-monogamy makes people miserable, or that so-and-so 'tried that once and it was a disaster'? How often has literature warned me that becoming a 'spinster' means becoming a Miss Havisham, a Miss Gulch, a Lily

¹⁶ I argue in Jenkins 2017 that the accumulation of images is in fact a key aspect of the *social construction* of romantic love.

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Bart, or a Sister Carrie? We don't tell each other many stories about how great it can be to live with two romantic partners or with none. The 'happy ending' story, whether manifesting in fairy tales, romcoms, or narratives about our own lives, is almost inevitably a story about monogamous – and generally heterosexual¹⁷ – romantic love.

Cautionary tales of misery serve to help keep us on the straight and narrow path towards the normative nuclear family (or, at least, to feel like something is wrong insofar as we deviate from it). Bearing this in mind, one of the principal goals of my 2022 and my 2023 is to call attention to the fact that *a society organised into nuclear families is a society that is amenable to capitalism*. Under capitalism, an individual is conceptualized as a 'consumer': something whose value is a matter of, and measured by, how much they can afford to purchase. This is *not* broadcast as a piece of the 'received wisdom'; it functions more like a dirty (if relatively open) secret, one that we constantly direct attention away from by papering over it with the much more palatable received wisdom contained in 1–3. But for my purposes, the key thing is that under capitalism a nuclear family can be conceptualized as a *slightly larger consuming unit*: a slightly larger entity than an individual, but one still tidily bound within the (metaphorical or sometimes literal) white picket fence, and still one whose value is a matter of, and measured by, how much it can afford to purchase.

Humans (almost?) all need some kind of collaboration and connection with others, but many ways of arranging such collaboration and connection are challenging and destabilizing to capitalism: a *community* could be a threat; a *social support network* could be a threat; a *labour union* or *collective anti-oppressive action* – the kinds of things that happen when community and social support networks are thriving – are absolutely a threat. But a nuclear family is very manageable. This form of *slightly larger consuming unit* is no challenge to the capitalistic social order that we¹⁸ have normalized over the last few hundred years. It is in large part for this reason – or so I contend – that the same social order that exalts capitalism is also very concerned with keeping 'traditional family values' the way they are.

And this, in turn, is why critiquing the assumptions that underpin those 'family values' – including, centrally, critiquing their attendant norms of romantic love – can be challenging at a much deeper level, and on a much grander scale, than it might at first blush appear to be.

¹⁷ Both the 'hetero' and the 'sexual' are significant here: both queer love and asexual love are excluded from the standard narrative.

¹⁸ See footnote 11 above.

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This is an area where the personal is *intensely political*, albeit in ways that tend to fly below the radar of popular awareness (a fact which only serves to protect them from scrutiny and criticism, facilitating their continued uncritical acceptance).

There is a much bigger – and more difficult – question lurking here about why we¹⁹ are invested in the capitalistic social order. I can’t begin to answer this question in this paper, but the kinds of answers I find promising call attention to a tendency to a certain kind of selfish fantasy. One description of American society often attributed to John Steinbeck is that it is a place where ‘the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires’.²⁰ Fantasies of wealth and power might give rise to a sense of *identification* with the ultra-rich (with the 1%, to deploy the rhetoric of the Occupy movement), leading to voting and other behaviours that serve the interest of that tiny minority, and disregard of the realities facing everyone else.

In any case, I am now in a position to return to the issue of why challenges to the norms of romantic love might be expected to provoke defensive reactions. Recall that Yap and Ichikawa characterize defensiveness as a means of ‘identity maintenance’: it is a way to avoid looking certain uncomfortable truths in the face, namely those truths which suggest one is in some way *not as good a person as one had thought*. They write (p. 9, emphasis added):

many of our paradigm cases of defensiveness are situations in which people face the idea that they are contributing to racism, sexism, or other forms of oppression. For many of us, it’s quite important to see ourselves as *basically good people* ...

To develop these thoughts, they draw on work by Charles Mills (2007), José Medina (2013), and others concerning *active ignorance*. Active ignorance is, in Mills’s famous phrase, ‘ignorance that fights back’: by contrast with the mere passive absence of knowledge, active ignorance is proactively maintained by a variety of social, structural, and individual (intra-personal) mechanisms. This occurs when

¹⁹ See footnote 11 above.

²⁰ This phrasing is in fact due to Ronald Wright, who attributes this view to Steinbeck (but not as a direct quote) in his 2004 (p. 154). Steinbeck did write (in a 1960 *Esquire* article called ‘A Primer on the Thirties’): ‘I guess the trouble was that we didn’t have any self-admitted proletarians. Everyone was a temporarily embarrassed capitalist.’ The text of this article, reprinted in 1973, can be viewed at: <https://classic.esquire.com/article/1973/10/1/a-primer-on-the-thirties>.

truths in some domain – truths about, say, the experiences of racialized people in contemporary America, or Canada’s treatment of Indigenous people²¹ – are inconsistent with the comfortable maintenance of the status quo, making it in a certain sense *necessary* (i.e., necessary to avoid significant social change or the destabilization of existing power structures) that a large section of the population remain ignorant of these truths.

Yap and Ichikawa say that the kind of active ignorance needed to maintain one’s positive self-image in light of discrepant behaviours (say, to maintain one’s self-conception as a good feminist while acting in un-feminist ways) is ‘analogous to the kind of work that needs to be done to maintain an image of a settler colonial state as peaceable and legitimate’ (p. 8). Their particular interest lies in arguing that active ignorance can be motivated by maintenance of an individual’s self-image, in a similar way to how it can be motivated by broader political aims or values. But I want to develop the parallel further.

First, I want to suggest that the defensive *reactions* Yap and Ichikawa identify at the level of individual identity maintenance are analogous to defensive reactions that protect, not (in the first instance) an individual’s self-image, but a *group* identity. Ichikawa and Yap gesture towards this extension of their analogy by calling attention to the phenomenon of ‘people who say “this is not *who we are*” after the discovery of yet another colonial atrocity’ (p. 8, emphasis added). My contention here is that this language is highly suggestive, and in fact reveals that defensive reactions might well be motivated by the maintenance of a positive *collective* self-image – the image of a *we*, rather than an *I* – in light of discrepant evidence.

A *we* – the kind of thing that could have a collective self-image in the sense at issue here – need not be a full-fledged plural agent in the sense of, e.g., Helm (2008). My talk of such an entity’s ‘having a positive self-image’ need not be interpreted as the literal attribution of self-referential mental states to collective minds; it may be more a matter of how the various individuals who identify with the collective entity perceive and represent that entity as being. These entities could be nation states, as suggested by the language used in Yap and Ichikawa’s example. Or they could be soccer teams, or universities, or corporate businesses. They could also be less clearly structured and more decentralised entities, such as academic philosophy or antifa. Moves to reassert a positive collective self-image in light of

²¹ See Cook (2018) for discussion of the role of active ignorance in the maintenance of the Canadian settler state.

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apparently contradictory evidence – ‘that’s not *who we are*’ – can show up in all of these cases. (Consider, for instance, how unsurprising it is to hear ‘that’s not *who we are*’ after a protest turns violent, or in the wake of a campus sexual assault.)

As in the case of colonial atrocities, there is often reason to suspect either that such utterances are alethically dubious – they may smack of the ‘no true Scotsman’ fallacy – or at least that they are more aspirational than they are descriptive. In some cases, there may be a genuine struggle taking place over the nature or future of the relevant collective identity. In 2015, American president Barack Obama said of Donald Trump’s plan to create a ‘deportation force’ that it would look bad in the eyes of the world, and that it was unrealistic. ‘But more importantly,’ he added, ‘that’s not who we are as Americans.’²² Perhaps so, but Trump became president in January 2017. He has since continued to deploy horrific anti-immigration rhetoric; to cite just one recent example, he wrote in December 2023: ‘illegal immigration is poisoning the blood of our nation. They’re coming from prisons, from mental institutions — from all over the world.’²³ And as of March 2024, Trump is the presumptive Republican candidate for president.²⁴ Whether his xenophobic rhetoric accurately reflects *who we are as Americans* may be a metaphysically indeterminate matter, until the collective entity settles its future direction.

5. Happiness and Who We Are as Americans

In my bowling alley metaphor, the threat of ending up in the gutter – the threat of being made miserable – is effective insofar as *the gutters are scary*: given the received wisdom of proposition 1, misery is positioned as a failure condition for life. This too is a state of affairs that can be examined through a critical lens. Doing so, I hope, will enable me to bring the previous section’s remarks about defensiveness and collective self-image into clearer focus.

²² See, e.g., <https://www.cnn.com/2015/11/12/politics/barack-obama-donald-trump-immigration/index.html>.

²³ See, e.g., <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/trump-says-immigrants-are-poisoning-blood-country-biden-campaign-likencna130141>.

²⁴ Thanks to Jonathan Ichikawa for discussion of this case, and for the suggestion that in such cases statements like ‘This is not who we are’ may belong to a different category of speech acts than (purely) descriptive utterances.

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Happiness has come to stand in for one's life going well, with the consequence that if one is sad (or for that matter angry, or afraid, or experiencing other 'negative' emotions inconsistent with happiness), then one is liable to perceive oneself – and to be perceived by others – as *failing*: failing at life in general, and failing at love in particular, because love is supposed to be the way to secure happiness. If we want to ask if someone's relationship is going well, we ask: are you happy with this person? Are you happy together? And even more pointedly: does this person *make* you happy? These may feel like innocuous and superficial questions, but they are evidence about what we take to be valuable in relationships. But from where, exactly, has this 'wisdom' been received?

Ideas about happiness are baked into America's collective self-conception, by way of its Declaration of Independence, which famously states:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

This document has come to serve as a kind of origin story for the collective entity (the *we*) that is the USA. Regardless of how fictional or truthful a story it might be (particularly as regards the colonial nature of the nation's claims to legitimate land occupancy), it stands as a central – and strongly positive – aspect of America's collective self-image. Moreover, the value system elucidated within this origin story, especially as summarized in the above passage, is a – perhaps even *the* – core constitutive element of that positive self-image: it looms large in structuring a sense of *who we are*.

Within this story, *happiness* is placed on a level footing with *life* and *liberty*, making its place in that value system – and hence within the collective self-image – as clear as could be. I'm not the first person to remark on the association of happiness with Americanness. Another is Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist, therapist, and concentration camp survivor, who said in his 1946 (p. 162):

To the European, it is a characteristic of the American culture, that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to "be happy." But happiness cannot be pursued, it must ensue.

Frankl goes on to argue persuasively that what makes a life valuable to the one living it actually has more to do with *meaning* than with happiness. (More on this in a moment.)

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In 1946, Frankl might have been right that most Europeans would find such a focus on happiness distinctively American. But the more American culture has dominated the world, the more we have all been brought under the influence of the assumption that each of us should be pursuing our own happiness all the time, that our desire to do so is the natural order of things, and that pursuing happiness is of such great importance that it is *appropriate to found an entire nation state and attendant cultural identity on our God-given right to do it*.

Frankl’s idea that happiness cannot be pursued, but must *ensue* – i.e., emerge from the pursuit of other things – echoes John Stuart Mill’s observation, in his 1873 (Chapter V) that:

[t]hose only are happy ... who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way.

Statements of related principles can be found in the work of Henry Sidgwick, who argued that ‘the impulse towards pleasure, if too predominant, defeats its own aim’ (1874, Book I, Chapter IV) – a problem he termed ‘the paradox of Hedonism’ – and in that of empirical psychologists such as Mauss *et al.* (2011, p. 5), whose studies suggested that ‘[v]aluing happiness was associated with lower hedonic balance, lower psychological well-being, less satisfaction with life, and higher levels of depression symptoms.’

This kind of ‘paradox’ is just one of the issues that becomes extremely pressing when we²⁵ treat happiness as the goal of a good life. Another is that we risk what has recently come to be known as *toxic positivity*. This is the attitude – often unthinkingly conveyed in such innocuous-looking phrases as ‘good vibes only’ – that it’s unacceptable and undesirable to experience or express negative emotions such as sadness or anger. Toxic positivity targets ‘complainers’:²⁶ such ‘negative’ people are told they must cultivate gratitude and grit (*again and again, one is commanded and ordered to ‘be happy’*), or even informed that they really have nothing to complain about – after all, as 2 says, the best things in life, love and happiness, are ‘free’, and hence available to anyone at any time. It follows that anyone *not* currently accessing those things has only themselves to blame.

²⁵ See footnote 11 above.

²⁶ See, e.g., Norlock (2017) and Ahmed (2021) for more on the significance of complaint.

There are many things wrong with this, not least that telling people who have good cause to complain that they actually have nothing to complain about is a form of gaslighting. Most saliently for my current purposes, however, the focus on individuals' responsibility for their own suffering is also a very convenient way to avoid ever considering structural inequalities or oppression, which is consonant with a politically conservative agenda. Telling complainers to put a sock in it is also a conservative thing to do insofar as complainers are precisely the people who are likely to create change. (You can't base a revolution on 'good vibes only'.) In this way, centering happiness can become toxic, not merely to individuals, but also at a larger societal level, by stifling complaint and repressing resistance to the kinds of structural and political factors – racism, misogyny, colonialism, classism, and ableism, for example – that may tend to give rise to such 'negative' emotions as sadness and anger.

Zooming out a little, then, we can understand the received wisdom summarized as 1–4 in §3 above as an ideological package deal that promotes capitalism and conservatism. This, to my mind, explains quite well why it would find itself right at the heart of a (once-but-no-longer-distinctively) American value system, which is defined to support a social order centrally shaped by those two features. Capitalism and conservatism are (currently, and contingently, but nevertheless importantly) central to the dominant American collective self-conception of *who we are*. Communism and radicalism, by contrast, are definitely *not who we are*.

6. Negative Emotions are Good, Actually

The foregoing suggests that we may be able to fruitfully deploy the notion of *collective identity maintenance* to better understand why certain philosophical discussions, and in particular critiques of romantic norms, are liable to engender such intensely emotionally charged defensive reactions as they do in certain – particularly American – contexts.

My work involves critiquing various aspects of 1–4, and has focused in particular on challenges to the mechanisms by which 4 *interacts* with 1–3, as characterized by the bowling alley metaphor: I challenge the way promises of happiness and threats of sadness are used – as sticks and carrots respectively – to corral individuals into conventional romantic relationships, and thus to structure our society into nuclear family units. But it is not necessary to go into that kind of theoretical detail in order to present a challenge to the

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relevant value system. Rather, my theory about how these mechanisms work reveals why, in fact, *much less is required* to present such a challenge: if we so much as tell a story of happy non-monogamous love, or of happy single life, we thereby, to some small extent, weaken the force of the sticks and carrots. For this reason, what is, on its surface, a purely personal claim and not a challenge to anybody else’s way of life – something as simple as ‘I am non-monogamous and I am happy’ – turns out to be quite a lot more threatening than it looks.²⁷ An entire system of values depends on claims like that *not being true*.

Such stories, if indeed they are true, would mean that *our*²⁸ value system is off. As such they are, I now hypothesize, liable to be understood (whether consciously or unconsciously) as critiques of a collective entity – a *we* – that has a strongly positive self-image. This collective entity is what I might, only somewhat tongue-in-cheek, call ‘Greater America’ or ‘Western civilization’. It is the globally dominant sociocultural group that is united by virtue of its members all buying into (again, whether consciously or unconsciously, and whether *de dicto* or *de re*) a set of (once-but-no-longer-distinctively) American values.²⁹ Identification with this collective entity generates feelings of collective identity – *who we are* feelings – of the right kind to prompt defensive reactions similar to those seen in the case of a (perceived or actual) personal attack. I postulate that, just as defensive reactions may come to the aid of one’s individual self-image as a *good person*, they may come to the aid of the collective self-image of a larger entity with which one feels identified – an

²⁷ The same goes for ‘I am single and I am happy’. However, the (stereo)typical emotional reaction engendered by this kind of statement is different, tending more towards pity rather than towards anger. I suspect there is interesting further work to be done exploring the relationship between defensive anger and pity: if the former enables one’s psyche to *fight back* against a (perceived) threat, the latter positions the target as pathetic and thus enables one to *dismiss* them as a threat. Both responses could serve to promote active ignorance, since they are both ways of avoiding paying close attention to the realities of the evidential situation. A good contemporary examination of the pity response, and more generally the pressures single people face to become part of a couple, can be found in DePaulo (2023).

²⁸ See footnote 11 above.

²⁹ In a structurally similar way, it is threatening to America when we tell the true story of its colonial origins, and not the sanitized origin story contained the Declaration of Independence. Of course, there are also many important differences between these two situations.

entity which needs to perceive itself as *a good nation*, or a good football team, university, political movement, global civilization, or whatever the case may be. When this positive image can only be protected through ignorance (including active ignorance) of discrepant evidence, defensive strategies such as exaggeration, playing the victim, and willful hermeneutical ignorance can help us evade demands to pay attention to that evidence.

A salient piece of the large-scale background to this phenomenon is that the *we* associated with capitalist, conservative America perceives itself as being under constant attack, and as having been so since the ‘good old days’ – a hypothetical golden age to which the ‘again’ in ‘Make America Great Again’ gestures. As such, a pattern of similar defensive reactions may be charted through the course of other changes to American society pertaining to Black civil rights, the liberalization of divorce, same-sex marriage, abortion, trans rights, and so on.

It is also worth bearing in mind here that the required sense of *belonging* to a collective entity may be quite a complicated matter: for example, a soccer team’s members in the most direct sense are the athletes who play for the team, but soccer fans will often use a first-personal ‘we’ to refer to the team they support (and perhaps more generally to the team together with its supporters). When a Liverpool fan says, ‘We just beat Manchester United,’ that means Liverpool just beat Manchester United. This extended sense of belonging is sufficient to give rise to a sense of collective identity: one can easily imagine the same Liverpool fan saying ‘That’s not *who we are*’ after an on-pitch skirmish between a Liverpool player and a referee. And thus it may be sufficient to provoke the kind of defensive reactions I have been describing in this paper: the same fan may quickly become angry or aggressive when a Manchester United fan criticizes Liverpool on account of that player’s behaviour. This notion of extended membership may help explain why a *we* that is ultimately unified by adherence to American values could provoke collective-identity defensive reactions from people more or less anywhere in the world, as well as helping to explain why defensive reactions grounded in American values are projected far beyond the borders of the actual nation state. (America’s global cultural imperialism is also, presumably, part of the explanation.)

If defensive reactions do indeed come to the aid of that particular collective entity’s positive self-image when discrepant evidence arises, then it is perhaps not too surprising that discussing the acceptability of non-monogamous relationships is still raising many of the same hackles today as it did 84 years ago, in 1940. Continued

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ignorance of the problems with compulsory monogamy and amatonormativity would be an unfortunate but predictable consequence of the tendency for discussions of this subject to provoke collective-identity defensive reactions.

This does not mean the situation is beyond hope, however. Ichikawa and Yap note that there may be strategies for avoiding some of the epistemic costs of defensiveness (p. 18):

There is no simple or guaranteed way to avoid triggering defensive responses in others or to ensure that we are only defending ourselves in ways that are warranted, but being aware of the costs of defensiveness can perhaps lead us to be attentive to the argumentative tactics we use and the interlocutors with whom we choose to engage.

This strikes me as correct as far as it goes, and I think it applies to both individual and collective-identity cases. However, much remains to be said as to how exactly we can improve matters in situations where active ignorance is being sustained by persistent defensiveness.

Nevertheless I hope that, as we work to develop a clearer understanding of how defensive reactions work, this may point the way towards ameliorative strategies even in these kinds of case. As regards the situation of particular concern to me in this paper, I would contend that discussions of non-monogamy have tended to generate particularly intractable defensive collective-identity reactions as compared to, say, discussions of queer rights, on which the dial has moved very substantively (if insufficiently and in a fragile manner) since 1940. The lag in discourse surrounding non-monogamy may be due to the fact that, as I have argued elsewhere,³⁰ non-monogamy poses challenges to the individualistic nuclear family structure that are more direct and more obvious than those posed by same-sex marriage (which is, after all, capable of conforming itself to that structure). Our sense of *who we are* need not be deeply challenged by the existence of a particular social subgroup if we can understand that subgroup’s members as actually being, despite initial appearances, *just like us*. In certain lights, then, apparent progress on queer rights can thus be interpreted as a deradicalization of queer love – a process of making it *respectable* – rather than the kind of substantive social change that could have accommodated its radical potential.

Hope may nevertheless be warranted in light of the fact that there is more than one way to weaken the power of those carrots and sticks

³⁰ See Jenkins (2017, p. 140).

mentioned above: that is, more than one way to defang the promises of ‘happy ever after’ that accompany the fairy tales and the dire warnings about how miserable any other kind of life will be. As mentioned above, we weaken them when we tell stories that challenge the standard assumptions about how to find happiness. (Indeed, it would be a good start if we could just stop actively *erasing* stories of non-monogamous happiness.³¹) But we can also apply pressure at a different point, by questioning the appropriateness of happiness as a life goal in the first place.

While I think it is true that there are many possible routes to happiness, and while I consider it important to advance this message by sharing stories of happy non-normative love, I also think that critiquing *the very idea of individual happiness as the ultimate life goal* can prompt an even deeper examination of the entire ideological bundle 1–4. Moreover – and more saliently for the purposes of this section – doing this may be less liable to provoke defensive reactions than statements like ‘I am non-monogamous and I am happy’, thus potentially offering a more tractable way into critical discussions in this general arena. Exactly *why* critiques of happiness as a life goal should be less defensiveness-inducing is a question for future work, but I suspect it has something to do with their apparent abstractness: such issues may appear somewhat distant from both familiar political polarizations and the immediacies of ‘real life’. These appearances are, I suspect, illusory – indeed, much apparently abstract and apolitical philosophical debate is in fact quite political and quite personal – but in this case, the illusion may be strategically helpful.³²

Dethroning happiness from its inflated position as the measure of a good life is in any case crucial for the proper appreciation of those meaningful projects and activities that are not liable to induce happiness. This is a lesson that might sound a familiar note to those with experience of parenthood, given that there is quite robust statistical evidence that having children generally does not – *contra* the myth of the ‘happy ever after’ nuclear family – make people happy. As Hansen (2012, p. 45) puts it, there is a ‘discrepancy between (i) folk

³¹ See Jenkins (2023) for discussion of this phenomenon.

³² My own critique of capitalism as the underpinning for our obsession with individual happiness is, of course, explicitly political. But there is a lot of leeway for discussions of happiness as a life goal that simply allow for open-ended reflection on the possible reasons for its status as such, when the circumstances do not lend themselves to productive discussion of the explicitly political kind.

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theories predicting great emotional benefits of having children and (ii) empirical evidence typically finding that people are better off without having children.’ Hansen goes on to posit that the rewards of parenthood may not come in the form of positive emotional states, but something else altogether: specifically, he suggests, ‘parenthood may be a poor strategy for finding happiness, but an excellent one for achieving a meaningful life.’

It may be tempting here to reach for a distinction between ‘*feeling* happy’ and ‘*being* happy (with one’s life)’ where the latter refers to a kind of satisfaction or evaluation that is distinct from positive affective states. However, I am inclined to interpret this tendency as itself part of the problem: as both emanating from (and in turn reinforcing) a prior conviction that ‘happiness’ has to be the right word for any sense of value or meaning in life. This tendency to extend the meaning of ‘happiness’ language serves to blur important distinctions. Imagine a friend who is going through long-term depression, is sad most of the time, and does not experience joy often if ever, but is doing meaningful and ethically valuable work. Does it sound right to describe your friend as a happy person? What about the *pursuit* of happiness – is that an enterprise in which they have succeeded? The situation here is, I contend, somewhat analogous to the use of ‘guys’ to refer to people of all genders, or the (now thankfully rather outmoded) use of ‘he’ as the default third-person singular pronoun in formal prose. Such extended use of male-coded language is due to, and reinforces, the idea that maleness is the norm for humanity in general. As such, we do better not to uncritically accept and proliferate this usage, commonplace though it is. Similarly, I want to argue, we do better to acknowledge that value and meaning can come apart from happiness, rather than accept and replicate the commonplace tendency to extend ‘happiness’ language to refer to any sense of value or meaning.

While it may be relatively acceptable to acknowledge a separation between happiness and meaningfulness in parenthood, there is often more resistance to carrying the lesson across to other situations, especially romantic relationships. The account of *eudaimonic love* I proposed in Jenkins 2022 was designed as a way of assessing love (including, centrally, love in romantic relationships) in terms of meaningfulness and related concepts, rather than in terms of happiness. Making room for the compatibility of sadness with love of course does not mean that anyone ought to stay in relationships that are abusive or damaging: such relationships also fail to be sources of collaboration, creativity, and support in one’s meaningful projects, which (I argue) are markers of eudaimonic love.

But because eudaimonic love is not characterized by happiness, nor indeed by any emotion, it has room to accommodate the full range of human emotions. This is important, not only because some so-called ‘negative’ emotions are the unavoidable costs of meaningful life projects, but also because many such emotions are valuable in their own right. (I am not the first person to say so, of course, although these points are sufficiently underappreciated to make it reasonable for a Yale psychology professor to have published an entire book about such things just three years ago.³³) There is often wisdom in the negative emotions: sometimes they are trying to keep us safe, or suggesting that things need to change. Understanding the wisdom in anger, for example, requires us to understand how anger alerts us to injustice and prompts us to take corrective action.³⁴ We often do well to pay attention to what our negative emotions are doing, and make space for them to do their work, rather than just trying to make them go away as soon as possible or shaming each other for experiencing them under the misapprehension that succeeding at life means being happy.

7. Concluding Remarks

We can extract (at least) two general morals from the preceding discussion. Firstly, and most obviously, there is potential for collective-identity defensive reactions to arise whenever a *we* with a positive self-image is perceived by one of its (self-identified) members as being under attack. This could help explain why it is so challenging to generate productive public discourse in other arenas. For example, when the issue of sexual violence at fraternity houses is raised, those who feel that they belong to a *we* constituted by fraternity members might exhibit collective-identity defensive reactions to those conversations.³⁵ Or in critical conversations about the hostile climate of academic philosophy, those who feel identified with the *we* of academic philosophy may exhibit such reactions. In both cases, we might expect to see emotionally charged reactions comparable to those elicited by a personal attack. Indeed, if the phenomenon identified in this paper is a real thing, then examples of it are probably ubiquitous.

³³ Bloom (2021).

³⁴ For more on the value and importance of anger, see Myisha Cherry’s *The Case for Rage* (2021).

³⁵ For one recent example of the kind of situation I have in mind here, see: <https://www.ubyssey.ca/news/professors-critiques-frats-remembrance/>.

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Secondly, there is a generalizable strategic moral. Where progress in discourse is being blocked by defensive reactions, there may be value in identifying alternate (or, preferably, *additional*) ways to address the issue which are (perceived to be) more abstract and distant from politics and/or ‘real life’, and hence do not provoke such reactions. But this moral should be applied with caution: in order for such strategies to be genuinely ameliorating (and not merely bypassing) the original situation, there must be reason to believe the issues are genuinely connected in an appropriate way. Questioning the value of happiness as an ultimate life goal has a deep connection to weakening certain inappropriate normative pressures surrounding romantic love, or so my theory predicts. Hence discussing the latter is not simply a diversionary tactic or a change of topic. This one example provides no general recipe or instruction manual for locating the right kind of ‘other way in’ to a topic where progress has been blocked by defensive reactions. Nevertheless, reflection on how it works enables us to describe one kind of opportunity to be on the lookout for.

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