

Is there a special kind of love that we can have only toward a person?

In this paper, I argue that it is possible to have the same kind of love towards a non-person as towards a person, where love and personhood are defined by Velleman. Specifically, although the love we usually experience towards persons may appear special in *reality*, it is not impossible to experience such love for a non-person in *principle*. Our response to a beloved's value that they have by virtue of being a person is not necessarily distinct from our response to some other value shared by persons and non-persons; thus, even if our love for a non-person seems distinct from our love towards a person, the distinction is *quantitative* rather than *qualitative*. I formulate my argument by first providing an account of Velleman's views of love and personhood, focusing on interpreting Velleman's analysis of a rational will, and why he thinks it defines personhood and is essential for love. Then, I discuss Kennett's views, showing how she points out tensions in Velleman's argument—specifically his argument for the rational self being the true self. I then build my argument for the quantitative difference by focusing on our relationship with dogs and drawing on Smuts' experience and analysis of levels of relationship as evidence.

Velleman defines loves as “an arresting awareness of a value inhering in its object” (360 LME). It is arresting, because it arrests our natural tendencies for “emotional self-protection” (361) and removes our defences, making us “vulnerable to the other” (361). For love to persons, “value” refers to the value the beloved has by virtue of being a person, which is an instance of the “rationalized will”. This is because the rational will constitutes the beloved's “true and proper self” as it is “ideal” (344). The rational will acts as a person's “self-governing legal authority” which manifests by guiding the empirical self's actions and decisions. Hence, the rational will is at the “heart of personhood” (348), and love is a response to the actions and traits of the beloved which reveal this rational will that should be seen as a self-existent end. Love can also be seen as an exercise in “*really* looking” at a person, and responding emotionally in a way that reflects our ability to *see* them (361). We note that the beloved's rational nature need not be *actually* ideal. She must simply have “the capacity to be actuated by reasons” which is the “capacity to have a good will” (365). Hence, rational nature is not just the intellect, but a person's capacity for reflective concern and appreciating others. Indeed, “what we respond to...is their capacity to love” their capacity to truly see, value, and appreciate *us* as self-existent ends (365).

Velleman further argues that this rational will gives us the “dignity” (rather than “features”) forbids comparison to others (360). This “dignity” is the “bare individuality” of a person. Meanwhile, features will always assign us a “price”. This “price” means that it is possible to find others with the same trait. The rarer the “feature” the higher the “price” it fetches, in the end, the traits of a person can always be found in others (369). On the other hand, dignity is what commands appreciation “for it as it is in itself” (369). We appreciate “dignity” through “features” (BP 49).

Kennett responds to Velleman by agreeing that “love of is mode an appreciation of the value of the beloved” (214) but disagrees love can only respond to symbols of the rational will. She argues that Velleman's definition of the value of persons is too narrow to include all central instances of love, suggesting that “other capacities and qualities, which may precede or outlast or sometimes even undermine our rational will, may be part of the true and proper self of a person” and thus these qualities—not just the rational will—is what love responds to (214). While describing three instances of feeling strong love for her son as he grows from a child to a teen to a young adult, she reflects that her love responds to his “emotional and reverential response to beauty”. This emotional and aesthetic responsiveness were not “signs and symbols of his rational will” but her son *qua* valuer (223). Thus, for Kennett, love is a response to another's capacity to value; or to their responsiveness to the world around them.

It should be noted that “valuer” as used by Kennett does not necessarily point to self-awareness and reflection: she writes we should “resist a move to reduce all valuing to an

exercise of self-aware autonomous agency” (224). She considers creativity as a form of valuing since our creations or performs must always somewhat reflect our values. What she means by “valuing” can also be seen in her argument that infants are proper objects of love. Kennett correctly observes that “amusement too is plausibly a spontaneous evaluative response, seen even in very young children” (225). Despite amusement being not an expression of autonomous agency or rational will, it is completely disarming. Similarly, she argues that even if valuing is “cognitively simple” in infants, “the love they experience for their parents is surely at least a proto moral emotion and itself morally valuable” and since infants have this moral emotion, the love that parents have towards infants can be exactly “the moral emotion that Velleman is talking about” (221). The arresting awareness of another’s value and the emotional disarmament that follows can happen with those whose “agency is undeveloped or diminished” (222).

I now turn to the tensions in Velleman’s argument pointed out by Kennett through their discussion of love for dogs. Velleman provides his relationship with his poodle as an example that “awareness of value is, more specifically, an awareness of personhood” (BP 50). He describes how “if he’s the right dog and we have the right rapport” we may start mistaking “instinctual affection” as “love” and “habitual obedience” as “respect” (50). Here, Velleman emphasises that the dog’s lack of autonomy makes his responses mechanical and thus not true emotional responses. Thus, Velleman claims, “Looking into his eyes, we seem to see *someone there*, someone who can reciprocate these interpersonal emotions” (50) but in “clearheaded moments” he knows the dog is only a “lost toy” (51). But strangely, he recognizes that the key characteristic of the “*someone*” is “someone who can reciprocate these interpersonal emotions”. Thus, Velleman implicitly agrees with Kennett’s view that emotional responsiveness is what we love in others. This example then appears to prove the opposite of what Velleman set out to prove, showing that personhood is in fact, not necessary for recognizing value. But for Velleman, since he believes things such as personality traits and responses are symbols through which we observe and recognize the rational will, and that dogs lack such rational will, he assumes that his poodle’s emotional response is merely a biological mechanism and thus his recognition of the poodle’s value is illusory.

I now argue against Velleman’s rejection of a dog’s emotional response as mere biology, using Kennett’s argument. As Kennett writes, a person’s love for a dog is not necessarily misguided, and Velleman thinks it is misguided because “restricted” account of to which love responds (219). She argues that when we, for example, play ‘boxing’ with a dog and he respond by ‘boxing’ back, this ‘boxing’ is not purely mechanical like an inanimate (220). I would add that it is also not a purely instinctual response, as one might suddenly recoil without thought upon accidentally touching something hot. Rather, when we play with a dog, the dog can grasp and apprehend our intentions, recognizing that “my human wants to play!” and acts accordingly (220). Hence, dogs have both the capacity to respond to us and make us feel “psychologically visible” and understood (220). It is hence possible to respond and love a dog as a *someone*, even if this *someone* is a non-person. Indeed, it seems that all that is required of a *someone* is their ability to value.

A potential response from Velleman could be to deny the dog’s response as responding to *us*. Even if dogs appear to show understanding, we cannot prove that they actually *understand*—their emotional responsiveness could be just our projections onto a biological mechanism. To this, I have two objections. First, consider the Problem of Other Minds. It is impossible to ‘prove’ the existence of emotions in anyone, including other humans, all we can be sure of are their responses. But we do not live our lives doubting whether other people can feel emotions or have an internal life. Second, there is evidence that dogs not only have an internal, emotional life, but are also able to sense the emotions of

humans and other dogs¹. The relationship between dog and owner has been shown to affect a dog's attachment style and stress coping mechanisms². Thus, it is implausible to say when we look into a dog's eyes there is *no one* in there: not only is there *someone*, but that *someone* is able to understand our emotions and be shaped by them.

But a puzzle of Kennett's paper is that she seems to believe we can love infants and cognitively disabled/ impaired humans as persons, but not non-human animals. She writes that we can love infants just, even if the capacities necessary to love—"attention to the other, appreciation of his value as another self, and the resulting emotional disarmament"—are not fully present in them and says we can love infants in Velleman's definition of love for persons (221). Yet, simultaneously, she agrees with Velleman that a person's love for dogs is "qualitatively distinct from love of a person - closer to benevolent affection than it is to the fierceness of love of a person" (220). But how can our love for dogs be qualitatively distinct from our love for infants if they show the same level of emotional responsiveness and ability to value? It seems strange that the responsiveness of an infant in playing the 'mimicking game' or displaying proto love for their parents makes them lovable as persons are, yet not dogs who show similar responsiveness in play 'boxing' and displaying affection to its owner. must exclude infants from lovable objects or include dogs as well.

To solve the above contradiction, I argue for an expansion of Kennett's view on love to include dogs (and other non-persons). More specifically, that a person's love for a dog is as compared to a person is distinction better thought of as quantitative than qualitative. Indeed, as Kennett says, our love for dogs "does not, after all, usually expose us to the range of emotions that love of a person does". However, while she argues this difference is because "persons have a value different to and greater than that of dogs [...] for Velleman, that value reside in the rational autonomous aspect of persons" (220), I believe the reason is simpler: dogs lead a vastly different life. Dogs do not share many important life experiences (going to school, getting a first job, marrying), they do not care about money nor politics and so on. While we sympathize and feel anxious for a partner going through work-related stress, dogs don't experience stress from work, so we would never experience this brand for sympathy for dogs. However, while all of this means that our love for dogs might expose us to a smaller range of emotions with arguably less intensity, it does not necessitate that our love for dogs is fundamentally, qualitatively different from love for a person, or in any way less engaging.

For example, consider the love that one might have for a grandma one sees only a few times a year for a brief visit. This love might expose us to an even smaller range of emotions than love for a dog, and we may find it similarly impossible to have more than surface level conversations or share life experiences due to the generational gap. Furthermore, one might have a terrible perception of who one's grandma *really* is—a terrible grasp of the grandma's true and proper self. Our conception of grandma is likely entirely different from and less accurate than grandpa's conception. Yet it cannot be denied that we love her, and it would be implausible to claim that this love is a somehow qualitatively different love. Indeed, as Velleman says, all that is necessary for love is "that it disarms our emotional self-defences toward an object" (365 LME) where we see the object of love as a self-existent end, which our love grandma and for non-persons do satisfy.

On the other hand, if we do consider the range of emotions, ability to share experiences or deep conversations as determinants of the *quality* of love, we would have to make distinctions between love for family, for partners, and for different kinds of friends. Physical attraction is a large part of romantic love, but not others. We might share certain life experiences with some friends and other with others. We might only be able to have deep

¹ Kujala, Miiamaaria V. (2017) [Canine emotions as seen through human social cognition](#). *Animal Sentience* 14(1)

² Somppi et al. (2022) [Dog-Owner Relationship, Owner Interpretations and Dog Personality Are Connected with the Emotional Reactivity of Dogs](#). *Animals* 12(11)

conversations and share everything with a few people. But while that might make love deeper or fiercer, it does not make it qualitatively special. Furthermore, different individuals might have different habits of sharing the things mentioned above. Indeed, if we want to differentiate love based on these factors, we will have as many kinds of love as relationships that exist in the world, based on the extent of shared experiences, emotions, and conversations. Every kind of love would be a ‘special’ kind, which cannot be the case and would require us to rework all existing theories of love. We can see love as a spectrum with different relationships spanning across different regions, our love for dogs might occupy less locations on the spectrum, but it does not change the fact that it is overall the same spectrum.

Now, I argue that it is not even *necessarily* true that love for dogs or other non-persons always occupy less locations on this spectrum, although this seems to be assumed by Velleman and Kennett. Indeed, Kennett writes that “emotional and aesthetic responses” is “not shared, so far as we know, by other animals” (224) despite previously mentioning that a dog shows the ability for amusement and play. Perhaps this is because while Kennett writes that dogs display “a certain responsiveness to us, a capacity to engage with us”, she still does not believe that dogs and other non-human animals are able to value things independently of its owner’s commands (219). She might think that even if a dog finds joy in nature, it is a response to the owner’s joy rather than the dog his self.

Perhaps because of Smuts’ occupation, she is able to form an extremely meaningful and “ever-deepening” relationship with her dog Safi (302). Safi shows understanding of verbal requests, understands appropriate behaviour under different circumstances, shares delight in common activities, and practices shared rituals (303-304). But beyond that, she shows an overwhelming ability to empathize and understand her owner. When Smuts felt very sad and took Safi to play fetch in hopes of taking her mind off things, Safi soon recognized the problem and refused chase the stick, despite continuous enticements from Smuts (305). She simply stood there for a while and then lay down while looking at Smuts. “Her penetrating gaze caught my attention...she held her body completely still and continued to hold my gaze...Her face became the whole world, and I seemed to fall into her being” (305). Safi was able to resist any urge to play or fetch the stick (if she even felt any) and show care towards Smuts’—this is the opposite of any instinctual obedience that Velleman and Kennett observe. Indeed, Smuts writes that she feels “as if Safi’s being and mine merge” (305) and “Safi seems to sense the spirit within me, perhaps more complete than anyone else has ever done” (306). Smuts and Safi’s love is what Velleman defines as love, where both *truly* see each other, value and appreciate the other as self-existent ends.

Smuts’ experiences reveal that perhaps we should re-think our approach to relationships with animals. In her fieldwork with the Gombe baboons, she notices how they see her as “a self like us” (214) by sharing joy, shelter, journeys and, and how baboons are “highly idiosyncratic individuals (299). Beyond revealing how little we know about the ‘more-than-human’ world (301), Smuts’ continued success with forming deep relationships with animals may point to our own inadequacy in communicating with them. If her knowledge, curiosity towards and open heart towards the baboons and Safi enable her to bond with them, perhaps our closedness and refusal to *see* them do the opposite. If we approach a dog thinking that he is a toy, we risk participating in a self-fulfilling prophecy that limits us from being able to fully love. Smuts show us that our inability to love dogs is likely due to a mismatch in personality³, our own failure to communicate, rather than some intrinsic impossibility. But if we approach non-humans as Smuts does—as a person—we may be rewarded with a relationship so loving and rich that it is hard to find even among humans.

³ We usually meet hundreds of humans and perhaps select only a few to love. We put time in this process called “dating” or “grabbing lunch” to probe to know if we should love them. Perhaps we should not expect to love just ‘any’ non-person if they are shown to each have idiosyncrasies as well.