

# Hating the One You Love

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**Abstract** Many testimonies, as well as fictional works, describe situations in which people find themselves hating the person that they love. This might initially appear to be contradiction, as how can one love and hate the same person at the same time? A discussion of this problem requires making a distinction between logical consistency and psychologically compatibility. Hating the one you love may be a consistent experience, but it raises difficulties concerning its psychological compatibility.

**Keywords** Romantic love · Hate · Consistency · Psychologically compatibility · Emotional ambivalence

## Are Love and Hate Opposites?

Consistency and compatibility can be distinguished in the following manner. Two states are compatible if it is possible for both to exist together; they are consistent if their content does not contradict each other.<sup>1</sup> Saying that “I love you and I do not love you at the same time and in terms of the same aspect” seems to involve a contradiction and hence it is inconsistent. Saying that “I love you and hate you at the same time and in terms of the same aspect” is not necessarily inconsistent if love and hate are not diametrically opposed. Nevertheless, even if these emotions are consistent, it is questionable whether they are compatible for an extended period of time. In order to clarify these claims, we need to discuss whether love and hate are opposing attitudes.

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<sup>1</sup>De Sousa 2007.

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Love is often described as opposed to hate. Indeed, the two emotions seem to be similar, except that one involves a general positive evaluation and the other a negative one. Likewise, whereas hate typically involves a profound wish to eliminate the object, love entails the opposite wish: a refusal to exist in a world from which the beloved is absent. Love usually (but not always) involves a pleasant feeling, whereas the feeling involved in hate is typically (but not always) disagreeable.

If indeed love and hate are diametrically opposed, then it is impossible to speak about hating the one we love without engaging in a logical contradiction. Since I reject the claim that love and hate are diametrically opposed, I will argue that whereas hating the beloved does not involve inconsistency (as it does not involve logical contradiction), it does entail psychological incompatibility, which makes it difficult for the two emotions to coexist for a prolonged period. Before doing so, I will explain why love and hate are not diametrically opposed attitudes.

The claim that love and hate are diametrically opposed is problematic in light of various considerations. One such consideration refers to the fact that love is more comprehensive than hate, as it refers to more features of the object. While in hate the object is considered to be basically a *bad* agent, in romantic love the object is perceived to be both *good* and *attractive*. Accordingly, moral considerations play a crucial role – sometimes almost an exclusive one – in the generation of hate, or at least in its justification. The generation of love, however, depends on much broader considerations, including aesthetic, economic, and physical aspects. We are unlikely to say “He is morally perfect, but I still hate him.” However, we often say “He is morally perfect, but I still do not love him.” In romantic love, attractiveness is often more important than moral concerns; in hate, the emphasis is on the harmful consequences of the object’s character. The lesser weight of moral considerations in love is evidenced by the fact that we may love a vicious person. However, we usually suggest various excuses for the beloved’s immoral behavior, such as a tough childhood or current difficult circumstances. Such excuses indicate that unfortunate external circumstances have pushed the person – who is essentially decent, or at least not inherently vicious – to behave immorally.

Another consideration that casts doubt on the claim that love and hate are diametrically opposed arises from the fact that there are many kinds of each emotion, and each kind cannot be the exact opposite of all kinds of the other emotion. In addition, there are more kinds of love than of hate, and love and hate are perhaps the only pair of correlated emotions in whose case the positive emotion is more differentiated than the negative one. This is due to the more essential role of the different kinds of love, all of which are important for maintaining the various types of attachments and relations in our social life. Love satisfies our need for human companionship, emotional support, and the survival of those related to us, especially our offspring. Hate is less important in this respect and is easier to avoid. Indeed, there are many people who report having never, or hardly ever, experienced intense hate, but very few, if any, claim to have never experienced intense love.<sup>2</sup>

Love and hate are therefore complex attitudes that do not form a unitary continuum at whose furthest edges are two diametrically opposed experiences. Love

<sup>2</sup> Ben-Ze’ev 2000: 414, 426–427; Ellsworth and Smith 1988; Fredrickson 1998.

and hate are distinct rather than opposed experiences: They are similar in certain aspects and dissimilar in others. In light of the complex nature of love and hate, it is plausible that when people describe their relationship as a love–hate relationship, they may be referring to different features of each experience.

### Profound and Comprehensive Attitudes

Emotional ambivalence entails our ability to refer to the same object from different perspectives; some of these may be conflicting, as occurs, for instance, in the case of partial and global perspectives, short and long-term perspectives, hedonist and moral perspectives, and perspectives focusing on the subject's value and the object's value. All these perspectives and their related conflicts are evident in romantic love. In sexual desire, which is more concerned with the immediate situation, ambivalence is less central. The ambivalence here is more typical of our attitude toward this urge or desire. The morning-after effect expresses a significant change in attitude changes from the night to the morning.

At the basis of romantic love there is a profound positive evaluation of one or a few of the beloved's characteristics. This evaluation is typically associated with a comprehensive evaluation that extends the positive evaluation to other characteristics. In this case, love is based primarily not upon the value of the specific characteristic, but upon its association with the characteristic we profoundly love. By giving a significant weight to various characteristics of their beloved, lovers do not necessarily distort reality and are not completely blind to the beloved's faults – they just do not consider such faults to be significant and sometimes they even perceive them to be charming. As Blackburn nicely puts it, “Perhaps we prefer Cupid to have dim sight rather than to be totally blind, but it is also just as well that he is not totally clear sighted.”<sup>3</sup> The psychological mechanism underlying love and hate does not merely evaluate the object's characteristics as being good or bad, but also gives each characteristic a relative weight. This relative weight expresses the profoundness of each characteristic and accordingly establishes the nature of the emotional experience. Hence, a woman may say that she perceives her partner to be as handsome as she did when she first fell in love with him, but this no longer matters to her since the weight of his other (negative) characteristics has become so great that she no longer loves him and may even hate him.

There are psychological findings supporting the above conceptualization of love. Lisa Neff and Benjamin Karney proposed a model of global adoration and specific accuracy in love, whereby spouses demonstrate a positive bias in global perception of their partners, such as being “wonderful,” yet are able to display greater accuracy in their perception of their partners' specific attributes, such as being punctual.<sup>4</sup> In this model, spousal love may be conceived as hierarchically organized experience giving different relative weight to the global characteristic in comparison with the specific ones. Spouses appear to rate their positive perceptions as more important for

<sup>3</sup> Blackburn 2004: 101.

<sup>4</sup> Neff and Karney 2002, 2003, 2005.

the relationship than their negative perceptions. In this manner, an accurate perception of a partner's specific traits and abilities would not interfere with the global belief that one's partner is a wonderful person.<sup>5</sup> Since importance is a matter of degree, the impact of specific negative perceptions upon the positive global one depends upon many personal and contextual features.

As in love, the profoundness of the negative evaluation in hate is typically associated with an overall negative attitude; nevertheless, this attitude allows for a positive evaluation of some partial aspects of the hated person. Shame functions in a similar manner: it is concerned with an in-depth evaluation of one or a few characteristics or actions of ours; the emotion attached to these particular characteristics is broadened by association to encompass our whole character, rather than isolated to the case of these few – and perhaps negligible – characteristics. Accordingly, we may be proud and ashamed of ourselves simultaneously, as these two emotions are not related to the same characteristic.<sup>6</sup> We can be ashamed of crossing some normative boundaries, but proud of being independent enough to challenge those boundaries.

I do not deny cases in which the revelation of negative characteristics in the beloved decreases the intensity of the lover's love. In such cases there is some common ground upon which to compare the various evaluations and to form a unitary evaluation. This would be easy and obvious if love and hate were diametrically opposed characteristics existing on the same commensurable continuum. My claim that this is not the case is compatible with the claim that positive and negative evaluations do not cancel each other out.

### Explaining Love-hate Relationship

Once it has been recognized that love and hate are not diametrically opposed attitudes and that love and hate are based upon a profound, rather than a comprehensive, evaluation, explaining the phenomenon of hating the one we love becomes easier. Profound evaluations can be directed at different aspects of the person and hence they are not contradictory. Although profound evaluations in love and hate are usually associated with a comprehensive evaluation, the evaluations that lead to this phenomenon are not.

The difficulty that arises as a result of feeling hatred toward the beloved, not merely at the same time as loving him or her, but also over an extended period, is not a problem of logic but rather a psychological problem: that is, the difficulty of coping with profound emotional dissonance (or incompatibility). Although the presence of mixed emotions is not necessarily puzzling, the presence of profound and comprehensive different attitudes such as love and hate toward the same person seem to be psychologically incompatible. Although the problem is more severe when these emotions are present at the same time, it is also not easy to experience such profound and comprehensive attitudes toward the same person fluctuate

<sup>5</sup> Neff and Karney 2003, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> For a different view, see Neu 2000.

recurrently over an extended period of time. Such intermittent fluctuation is more familiar and easier to understand when it comes to more focused emotions, such as sexual desire and anger; nevertheless, it also exists in more profound and comprehensive emotions such as love and hate.

By admitting the logical possibility (or consistency) of profound evaluations that occur simultaneously yet are different, I am not making an empirical claim concerning the question of whether the two attitudes can exist within the same second or whether they alternate during several fractions of a second. Since an emotional episode takes place over an extended period of time, the exact duration of the simultaneous presence of love and hate is less relevant to our discussion. The presence of profound emotional dissonance explains why deep hatred toward the beloved is infrequent. Coping with this dissonance is even more difficult if we remember that profound love tends to decrease the weight of the beloved's faults and increase the weight of the beloved's virtues in the beholder's eyes. In cases of love, it is more usual for the profound positive evaluation underlying love to be accompanied by emotions that are more moderate than hate, such as dislike, resentment, or anger.

In general, the circumstances in which people describe their relationship as a love–hate relationship are those where their focus of attention changes under different conditions; hence the change in the emotional attitudes. When the lover focuses his attention on his partner's virtuous characteristics and the pleasure she has brought him, he loves her dearly. When he thinks about the humiliation and the suffering she brings upon him, he hates her guts. Such a case can be explained in light of the fact that emotional experiences are dynamic and different external and personal circumstances may often change our emotional attitude toward the same person.

A related common situation is that in which love becomes a fertile ground for the emergence of hate. When the intensity and intimacy of love turns sour, hate may be generated. In these circumstances, hate serves as a channel of communication when other paths are blocked, and it functions to preserve the powerful closeness of the relationship, in which both connection and separation are impossible.

It is interesting to note that whereas love can easily turn into hate, hate rarely turns into love. The reason is that whereas love requires closeness, hate involves the wish to avoid the other person. Following our close acquaintance with our partner, the attitude of love may change; in hate the change in the attitude is less likely to occur, as we tend to avoid any engagement with the other person and so we have scant opportunity in which to generate new information about them or alter our attitude toward them. There are, however, cases in which initially negative attitudes such as hostility may turn into love, especially when one person sets out to win the heart of the other person. Another case in which this can occur is when one party is in deep distress or trauma, and their human need for love and identification becomes stronger than their initial hatred. This can be illustrated in the Stockholm Syndrome, where hostages begin to develop loyalty and even love toward the people who abducted them. There are other cases in which love is generated after people are forced to be together in a way that enables them to get to know each other better and they are able to reconsider their initial evaluations.

The claim that love and hate exist simultaneously is a more difficult case to explain; here we need to understand how two such divergent attitudes can be

directed at the same person at the same time. A woman may say that she dearly loves her partner in general but hates him because of a certain vicious characteristic or action that profoundly hurt her – for example, his dishonesty or the fact that he deserted her after everything that she had done for him. In this kind of attitude the profound positive and negative evaluations are directed at different aspects of the person. In a similar vein, a married person's lover might love him deeply, while also hating him for preferring his wife or for constantly breaking his promise to marry her. Likewise, she might love him when she focuses on immediate considerations, but may hate him when she dwells on the fact that a long-term relationship with this man is likely to destroy her. Another common case is that in which we hate someone *because* we love him and are unable to free ourselves of our love for him or because this love is not reciprocated. In these circumstances, the lover simultaneously has diverging perspectives on her beloved.

The above cases would be difficult to explain if we were to assume that love and hate are diametrically opposed and that both are necessarily comprehensive attitudes. As Aristotle indicated, you cannot, at the same time, have contradictory evaluations of the same aspect in the same sense. I have suggested that we can explain these cases if we reject such assumptions and accept the presence of emotional dissonances.

## Implications

The perception that romantic love is based upon assigning a significant weight to one or to very few characteristics raises several important implications for our understanding of love.

One such implication is that it becomes easier to understand why in some cases romantic love can last for an extended period of time. The lover, even if madly in love, cannot ignore the reality of the beloved's actual characteristics for a lengthy period of time. Assigning a specific weight to one particular attribute of the beloved is not a cognitive task that is true or false; rather, it is an evaluative task that refers, among other aspects, to the lover's wishes and needs; as such, this task is less sensitive to being repudiated by reality. If my beloved perceives, for example, my strength or my kindness as my most significant characteristic for her, then she will love me madly and her love will not be diminished when she discovers that I am not so smart.

The fact that love is based upon very few characteristics, many of which are accorded considerable and possibly inordinate weight, can also explain the opposite phenomenon which underlies the increase in romantic separation: Love rests upon very unstable legs, which can be shaken when the lover begins to assign less weight to one of these legs. If more characteristics were evaluated in a positive manner, based upon their own merits, separation would probably occur only in cases of drastic changes in these characteristics or in their functional values.

The above account of love can also provide a plausible explanation of the phenomenon of love at first sight in which people supposedly fall madly in love with each other despite having very limited information about the other person. In order for such love to occur, you do not need information about the whole person – limited information about one or a few characteristics can be sufficient. Needless to say,

such limited information may lead the lover to hold false beliefs about the beloved and once these are discovered to be false, the whole relationship might collapse.

This account of love can also explain the possibility of non-exclusive love (or polyamory). If romantic love is based upon a few significant characteristics of the beloved, then another loving attitude toward another person can be based upon other characteristics, without either love contradicting the other. As in cases of “hating the beloved,” non-exclusive love does not involve logical contradiction (or inconsistency), but it may cause emotional dissonance (incompatibility) for those who have been culturized into notions of monogamy.

It is interesting to note that our desire for exclusivity arises in romantic love but not in hate. On the contrary, in hate we want to see our negative attitude shared by others. It seems natural that we want to share our negative fortune with others while wanting to keep the positive part merely to ourselves. In positive emotions, when we are happy, we are more open to being attentive to other people, but we guard the source of our happiness more.

To sum up: hating the one we love is possible from a logical point of view as it does not necessarily involve contradiction. This phenomenon, however, entails profound emotional dissonance, which in turn reduces the number of instances of such cases.

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