

How Many Ways to Understand a Lover's Love?

By E. García

Review of *LOVE: A Very Short Introduction* by Ronald de Sousa

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The Oxford University Press publishes a series called Very Short Introductions. Twenty years ago they began with *The Bible*, and their 400-plus titles now include such a range as *Literary Theory* (1997), *Film Music* (2010), *Radioactivity* (2012), and *Causation* (2014) itself. These impressive titles stand out against plain covers on pocket-sized books. They're just the thing to brandish on the subway, where it could be either a dilettante's dip into academia or an academic's chance to be a dilettante. (In fact, most of these Introductions are written to function at either extreme.)

One of the latest editions is candy-heart pink, and its title is *Love: A Very Short Introduction*. For such a grand topic, OUP chose the analytic philosopher Ronald de Sousa, professor at the University of Toronto and author of, most notably, the classic *The Rationality of Emotion* (1987) and the recent *Emotional Truth* (2011).

This book's title is *Love*, but, as the reader discovers on the second page, it would better have been titled *A Lover's Love*—or *Eros*. For instead of “canvassing all our uses of the word ‘love’” (2), de Sousa immediately narrows his topic to the kind of love “typically associated with intense sexual attraction”; he finds this kind closest to love as it “commonly understood” (3). While there surely would've been ways to address other loves rather than simply “canvassing” them, Professor de Sousa clearly finds *eros* the most relevant and interesting kind of love, and perhaps the root from which other forms of love can be explained.

So by the third page our gaze has been narrowed, and by the fourth page we have our best hint of the type of thinking and discourse that is to come: de Sousa defines love as “a syndrome: not a kind of feeling, but an intricate pattern” of thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. What a tidy approach this is for a philosopher writing about *eros*—for, as he says, “Philosophy loves puzzles, and love provides a welter of puzzles” (4).

Out of this carefully specified approach, de Sousa produces a fascinating array of concepts, questions, and answers, which he proceeds to describe and demonstrate with clarity and dry humor. De Sousa conceives of his six chapters as an argument, but they're most appealing as a set of questions and concepts organized by *eros*.

The first, “Puzzles,” sets up many of the questions to be addressed: How subjective is love? Do we love for reasons? Is love freedom or bondage? The next chapter, “Perspectives,”

produces some of the most common conceptions of *eros*, organized around Plato's *Symposium*. The third chapter, "Desire," introduces more technical terms, appealing to students of almost any discipline as well as anyone who's been in love: target, aim, vice, cause and reason, reason-based and reason-free. The next chapter, "Reasons," is perhaps the most technically dense of the six, and asks this: "Love desires an object. . . . What is an object, and why just this object and not another?" (51). Here we encounter a whole barrage of useful terms, satisfyingly applied to the examples and problems de Sousa had raised prior, and even organized into a little chart. Next, "Science" asks not just what science says about *eros*, but why is it exciting or frightening to listen to what it says. Finally, "Utopia" (re)turns to address ideology and *eros*'s context: monogamy, "nature," and cultural norms. Unsurprisingly, de Sousa ends with a wistful gesture to a world where polygamy and "the multifarious forms of life and love" are respected (116).

But such a bare summary can't explain the ease and strength of de Sousa's style. Perhaps I can explain it partly by saying that a reader encounters Shakespeare's plays and sonnets used as evidence just as much as she encounters contemporary philosophers; opera and love-story clichés are sprinkled throughout along with sociologic anecdotes. And de Sousa has a similar way of presenting a rich field of concepts and disciplinary approaches simultaneously.

The best example is in how a subsection will often move, in a very short space, away from its first topic and through several others—as in "A Political Dimension" in the fourth chapter (66-67). De Sousa opens by describing and undermining the concept of "vividly apprehending" one's beloved, before bringing up the commonly constricting nature of women's (constructed) gender roles, and through this returning us to the question of who is an "authority" on the beloved's "authentic self," the lover or the beloved—or neither? And this discussion includes an explanation of Mozart's ability to comprehend a symphony, Romeo's ability to see Juliet, and the implication of "you, Dear Reader," in the power of stereotypes. This broad movement is possible because of de Sousa's simple transitions and clearly stated questions. In one and a half pocket-sized pages, de Sousa has pulled out multiple concepts, turned them to show their facets, and laid them out to show their connections.

In this constant flow of ideas, de Sousa's syntax and tone are pleasantly varied, as in this introduction to another philosopher's theory: "[his] purified notion of love refers to an enhanced attitude of respect . . . It targets the rational core common to every human. That's a pretty sophisticated attitude" (68). Shortly after, this same philosopher's idea is dismissed as "intellectually heroic, but comically absurd," and de Sousa sidles over to say, "(Just between you and me, Dear Reader, that is often the case with clever philosophers' ideas)" (69). This wry tone is part of what allows de Sousa to entertain such a range of ideas and play them out in concert.

Unfortunately this rich array of thinking requires a frustrating buy-in from the reader. De Sousa's style is frequently described in reviews as being "witty" and "urbane"—I would add to this, "arch." His writing gives very little suggestion that he, de Sousa, is a single person making an observation or argument; there is little room for dissent. So in order to benefit from de Sousa's thought, the reader must submit himself to de Sousa's words without

skepticism. (This was a familiar sensation, very much like listening patiently to a sermon where bold claims are made without the suggestion of doubt or questions.)

Perhaps I noticed this because I'm more accustomed to literary and critical theory, and non-systematic theology; the best authors in these disciplines admit in some way to wearing the blinders of their finite human states (whether they use words like "Western" and "modern," or "sinner" and "creaturely"). These authors signpost their conceptual or textual frameworks (as far as they understand them), and cite each of their sources—even if in miniscule Greek in an enigmatic endnote. De Sousa doesn't seem extremely careful about either. While other Very Short Introductions also lack numbered footnotes or endnotes—replaced by each chapter's bibliography at the end of the book—de Sousa frequently leaves out any citation of the poems or plays he discusses. In one case, he leaves us with an unidentified translation of an unidentified Baudelaire poem (97). De Sousa also presents himself as taking the widest view possible, repeating that "other perspectives are needed" (78), and coolly considering social norms from what he believes to be a distance. However, de Sousa—like any author—makes *many* choices in what is presented and what isn't. The most obvious is his decision to narrow "love" to "*eros*," for which he explained only that it's found more in art and is what most people think of as "love." Couldn't he have also mentioned that drawing such a distinction is a common move in philosophy, but not in other disciplines? Throughout this book, de Sousa opts for a wry rhetoric that elides his role, rather than showing the reader what it is to think philosophically about *eros*. And so he leaves us with a sense that "the argument" has driven him to his conclusions, and that he hasn't done much at all (79-80).

If de Sousa were more transparent about his thought, it would be easier to excuse the almost exclusively Western voices and the dismissive mentions of non-Western and/or religious thought. For example: the inclusion (without description or in-text citation) of two images from *The Art of Tantra* (10, 106); one sentence about "some versions of the tantric tradition" (20); half a sentence on "the pain of love" in "the Buddhist tradition" (39); the oft-cited sensational paragraph and statue of St. Teresa (20-21); and of course a quick quote from Paul's letter to the Corinthians on *agape* (2-3). These brief aides, combined with his arch and omniscient tone, suggest that such approaches have no place in a real discussion about passionate love.

Perhaps that's not at all what Professor de Sousa intended to convey; but it does seem odd that a book which contains so much Shakespeare and Plato can find no place for, say, St. Augustine or Kalidasa—authors with equally influential things to say about the strange experience of *eros*, limerence, and lust.

However, if the reader can lower her hackles and set aside her objections, she will find a tidy path through an otherwise swampy set of concepts. And—even more rare—this neat conceptual approach appeals just as much to the reader who is in love and the reader who is studying it. Professor de Sousa provides both with a new set of tools—to consider their beloved, or their love, or their understanding of it.

E. GARCÍA studied at Princeton and is currently a Postulant for Holy Orders in the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. She is a student at Berkeley Seminary and Yale Divinity School. Follow her on Twitter: @GarciaWhat