

# Love and Irreplaceability

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## I. Love and Irreplaceability

Ordinarily, when we speak of love between human beings, we speak of persons loving each other. The point I wish to emphasize is that the object of love is ordinarily understood to be a *person*, not the characteristics or *properties* of a person. While the beloved may have many attractive, fascinating, desirable or otherwise valuable attributes, one loves the beloved, not a set of attributes. This conception of love seems to commit one to the view that that the beloved is properly regarded as irreplaceable in a philosophically interesting sense:

valuing an individual “for [her] own sake” seems to presuppose a recognition that no substitute will do: the beloved is not so valued if she is regarded as fungible. After all, a willingness to accept a substitute suggests that what is valued is not the particular individual after all, but some cluster of qualities that the individual happens to manifest. And if it turns out that what one is valuing is an abstract collection of qualities rather than a concrete individual, it is difficult to see how one could plausibly be said to value the beloved for [*her*] own sake (Grau, “L’amour”).<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the lover takes the beloved to be *irreplaceable*. Being irreplaceable, in the relevant sense, does not rest on any supposed qualitative uniqueness of the beloved. That is not the sort of nonfungibility at issue. Rather, the beloved is

irreplaceable in the sense that one would reject or regret the substitution, for the beloved, of a numerically distinct, but qualitatively identical, substitute.<sup>2, 3</sup>

To help keep this point clearly in mind, we can use a Twin Earth thought experiment. Suppose that I love Jane. Suppose also that there is a Twin Earth that is qualitatively identical to Earth with respect to all intrinsic properties.<sup>4</sup> On Twin Earth, Rob\* loves Jane\*. Regardless of the fact that Jane and Jane\* are identical in terms of their intrinsic properties, I would regard a proposed swap of Jane\* for Jane as unacceptable.<sup>5</sup>

The claim that love presupposes the irreplaceability of the beloved will strike many as both a plausible descriptive claim in moral psychology and as specifying an important aspect of the normatively appropriate regard of the lover for the beloved. However, the operative kind of irreplaceability gives rise to an apparent paradox to the extent that one values a particular (actual or possible) existent as such. It seems to put one in the peculiar position of claiming that one “value[s] a thing other than solely on account of the amount and type of value that resides in the thing” (Cohen 148).<sup>6</sup> Were it otherwise, it would be replaceable by a qualitative duplicate (We will call this “the Surplus Value Problem.”). Faced with this result, some may conclude that this conception of love and its object is irrational, regardless of whether “folk conceptions” of love embody or entail an irreplaceable beloved.<sup>7</sup> The challenge confronted by this paper is to provide a rational justification for the irreplaceability of the beloved in light of the Surplus Value Problem.

## II. Prior Justificatory Strategies

To begin, we must clarify the situation by making a distinction between the basis and the object of love (Grau, “Love and History” 259-260). According to Grau, “[t]he qualities of a person that draw me to them, that is, the ground or basis of my love, need not be identical to the actual object of love. I love the *person*, not simply some of the qualities the person manifests (emphasis in original, “Love and History” 260). In this instance, we are focusing on a specific feature of love, i.e. the kind or aspect of valuing that it involves which takes the beloved to be irreplaceable. What we seek to ground our justificatory account is the basis for taking the beloved to be irreplaceable.

From what has already been said, it seems hopeless to attempt a justificatory account that takes the *basis* of the irreplaceability of the beloved to be some of her properties, for a qualitative duplicate would have all such properties. Of course, it is hopeless to try to solve the problem by adopting the absurd position that the object of love must be some sort of featureless soul or substrate that is the bearer of such properties. For such a featureless substrate is not the object of love, neither can its featurelessness be an intelligible basis for loving either it or the person with whom it is associated.

Seemingly, the only remaining possible basis for taking the beloved to be irreplaceable is her bare existence. In fact, G.A. Cohen has offered an account of how the value of a particular valuable thing or person “does not reduce to endorsing the purposes that the [thing] serve[s], or the principles that [it] exemplify[ies]” (Cohen 152). In what Cohen calls “particular valuing,” the particular is valued (over and above the value of its valuable properties) because it is a particular existing thing (Cohen 148, 152-53). Cohen describes this as a “bias ... in favor of existing value,” (Cohen 148, 152-53) or as valuing “an embodiment of value, as such” (Cohen 160).<sup>8</sup> While Cohen raises many important issues, the kinds of replacement cases which he addresses are those in which an existing particular is destroyed and replaced by another particular. Having a bias toward, or specially valuing, existing valuable particulars does nothing to explain the rejection of replacement in cases like that of Jane/Jane\*, where there is no issue of an existing embodiment of value being destroyed in order to effect the replacement.<sup>9</sup>

Grau argues, in effect, that we can solve the Surplus Value Problem by finding a basis for the irreplaceability of the beloved in the *extrinsic* or *relational* properties of the beloved. In particular, he focuses on those relational properties constituted by the historical interactions and connections between the lover and the beloved (Grau, “Irreplaceably Unique Value” 125-127). These “extrinsic historical properties” ground a kind of final (i.e. non-instrumental) value that Grau calls the “Unique Value” of the beloved ( “Irreplaceable Unique Value” 125-127, capitalization added).<sup>10</sup> By grounding unique value in relational properties, rather than intrinsic properties, Grau takes it that the beloved is irreplaceable because those relational properties are necessarily unique to her. Even Jane and Jane\* will have different relational properties.

Unfortunately, Grau’s account of unique value cannot solve the Surplus Value Problem. To begin, we must take care, once again, to distinguish between the basis and the object of love. Grau often invokes history and relational properties as a means of individuating the beloved as a numerically distinct person (“Love and History”). However, our concern is not the basis for the individuation of the beloved as a numerically distinct individual. We are concerned to find the basis for taking that unique individual to be irreplaceable in the relevant normative sense. We can assume that the object of love is a person, and that all persons are numerically distinct from one another, without yet making any headway in finding a basis for irreplaceability that resolves the Surplus Value Problem.<sup>11</sup>

How, then, is history supposed to help? It cannot simply be that the beloved is the kind of entity with a history or that is essentially a historical entity, for these are general characteristics and, like intrinsic properties, are universals that cannot serve as a basis for irreplaceability. Nor can it be just that the beloved has *some particular history or other*, for this is also a general characteristic, and is as true of Jane\* as of Jane. Unique value must, then, be specially determined by each

numerically distinct history of each numerically distinct person. There could be, so to speak, a limitless number of unique modes of Unique Value. But then we must ask: Why should we be unwilling to replace one person, with her *sui generis* Unique Value, with another person, i.e. a duplicate, with her equally *sui generis* Unique Value? It is hard to see how Unique Value, whatever it may be, could, on its own, make this refusal intelligible.

One could argue that any two instances of Unique Value are incommensurable or incomparable in a way that rationally grounds irreplaceability. However, if one person has no more Unique Value than any other, some further argument is required to show why it would be irrational to countenance such a replacement. After all, we are often required to choose between incommensurable goods, such as health and career advancement, so such choices are possible. Moreover, in this case, both instances of Unique Value are specifically the kind of value that attaches to persons as such. In some sense, the two Unique Values are the same kind of value. Thus, it is hard to see how invoking Unique Value grounds or explains irreplaceability.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, one could take it as definitionally true that Unique Value just is a valuable property which, when present, grounds irreplaceability. But, of course, such a stipulation is no explanation at all, and merely posits the presence of a metaphysically unique entity or property to do whatever is needed to fill the explanatory gap. Indeed, there seem to be no independent criteria for what is to count as Unique Value apart from its ability to ground irreplaceability. For, as Grau indicates, there are cases where an entity has final value based on relational properties, but the entity is, nonetheless replaceable (“Irreplaceably Unique Value” 125).<sup>13</sup> Thus, if Unique Value were simply a name for final value based upon relational properties, it could not support irreplaceability. Hence, some other explanation as to the nature of Unique Value, or at least some independent criteria for making true claims about its presence or absence in a particular case, are needed. Yet, the very possibility of such an account seems ruled out in advance. For if we are pushed to specify which such historical connections generative of final value give rise to Unique Value and which do not, it seems that we have no recourse but to general features of such connections. If it is these general features that matter, then Unique Value turns out to be fungible after all.

One might resist the foregoing attempt to rule out the possibility of independent criteria of Unique Value in advance by arguing that it is not the generally specifiable features alone that ground irreplaceability, but, rather, these in conjunction with the actual occurrence of causal connections of the type that give rise to Unique Value. These actual historical-causal connections between myself and my beloved are numerically unique and these are required to create the Unique Value that my beloved has *for me*.

Yet, in due course, I would come to have actual causal connections with Jane\* after the replacement had occurred. These, too, would be actual causal

connections. Past causal connections are not destroyed by the swap since they remain safely tucked away in the past. Ongoing patterns of causal interaction would continue just the same as before, even if the substitution is made, without missing a beat.<sup>14</sup> Future causal interactions of the same kind will occur whether the swap transpires or not. Hence, it remains unclear why a substitution would involve a loss in value. It is not clear why it would be important, in terms of creating value, that these causal connections be with the same person—unless it is the numerical distinctness of the persons involved, rather than the numerical distinctness of the causal connections, that makes a difference. But our whole take has been to explain why the numerical distinctness of persons matters in such a way so as to underwrite irreplaceability. Hence, we cannot use this numerical distinctness alone to explain irreplaceability (Nonetheless, in what follows, I shall argue that it does figure intelligibly in the context of a different kind of explanation of irreplaceability that does not involve the kind of ontologizing instincts that underwrites strategies that posit such things as Unique Value).

Perhaps one last move is open. We might argue that certain kinds of causal connections do give rise to our unwillingness to countenance the kind of replacement we have been considering. Here we move from rational justification to causal explanation. But then our justificatory project has failed. Surd causation alone cannot serve as a reason. We have departed from what Sellars calls “the space of reasons.”

In the end, this seems to be where Grau winds up. For he also says that the kind of valuing that goes on in loving another person, wherein we consider the beloved to be irreplaceable, is so fundamental to our moral lives or our lives as persons, that it cannot, in some ultimate sense, be rationally grounded in something deeper. This is not because such valuing is irrational, but because it is arational—it neither has, nor stands in further need of a yet deeper, normative or justificatory foundation (“Love and History” 263-270).

While we might not be able to rule this move out entirely, we must keep in mind that the causal connections must be taken as surd in their operations. I think that Grau’s no-justification-needed approach loses whatever plausibility it may, initially, seem to have, when we remain clear about the fact that there is no feature of these connections that rationally grounds them as the appropriate kinds of connections that serve as a reason for taking the beloved to be irreplaceable. Strictly speaking, having one kind of history, rather than another, cannot make a rational difference in grounding irreplaceability—if it is, indeed, actual causal connections that matter, and not their characteristics. If bumping into Jane on two consecutive Tuesdays caused me to take her to be irreplaceable, then there would be no rational-normative avenue for arguing that this is not the right kind of basis for my taking her to be irreplaceable.

### III. Love, Commitment, and *De Jure* Irreplaceability

I think that all the preceding efforts have gone astray in presuming that we must ground the irreplaceability of the beloved in *something about the beloved*. I propose that we explain the unique value of the particular, specifically, of the beloved, as being expressed in terms of a kind of *de jure* irreplaceability. This is because the explanation of irreplaceability lies in a commitment, on the part of the beloved, *to regard the beloved as irreplaceable*.<sup>15</sup> Irreplaceability is at bottom *de jure*, not *de facto* (i.e. where the latter ultimately rests on some characteristic of the beloved).

This resolves the Surplus Value Problem in that we can explain how the beloved can be appropriately valued beyond that valuation which is responsive to “the amount and type of value that resides in the [person].”<sup>16</sup>

Taking things a bit further, we can see that, for the relevant kind of regard to be a constitutive element of love, it must be stable over time and it must involve a *commitment* to persist in such regard. First, it must be stable because, if it is to qualify as love, the relevant regard for the beloved must be ongoing over a significant and continuous period of time. Second, duration alone is not enough if it is merely, so to speak, accidental. If the lover regards the beloved as irreplaceable until and unless a more appealing candidate happens to come upon the scene and bring about a “change of heart” in the lover, such that his regard for the beloved as irreplaceable simply lapses, this would not seem to be love, or, if it is love, it is a rather impoverished form of it. Such is, in effect, to regard the beloved as irreplaceable—except in the actual event that a good replacement happens along and the lover, so to speak, gets an upgrade in his love object. Even if both lover and beloved knew in advance that no such duplicate (or other potential substitute) would become available for such a switch at any time in the future, this would not be enough for love in the fullest sense, for the right sort of commitment is lacking. One imagines the beloved would not be satisfied with a supposed lover whose fidelity in love ultimately rested on luck, where “love” was a hostage to fortune.

None of this implies that such a commitment cannot be overridden, or, better, revoked. If the beloved, for example, begins to physically abuse or aggressively and repeatedly demean the lover, the lover may naturally and rightly break off the relationship. In so doing, he may revoke or abandon any commitment of fidelity to the beloved that is premised upon a loving relationship, including the kind of fidelity of thought and emotion involved in regarding the beloved as irreplaceable.<sup>17</sup> However, it is one thing to effect a principled abandonment of the commitments that are partially constitutive of love, after which the beloved is no longer regarded as irreplaceable. It rather something different affect a commitment to the beloved until and unless a “better model” happens upon the scene.<sup>18</sup>

We should also keep in mind that the commitment to regard the beloved as irreplaceable need not be an overtly articulated commitment. It need not be, for

instance, a vow or any other speech act. Rather, it may be implicit in the stance one takes toward the beloved. Fully defending this claim would take more space than is available here. However, we can at least note that there is nothing especially mysterious about the concept of an implicit commitment. For example, an intention to act seems to involve a kind of commitment to action, but rarely does such commitment get expressed in the form of an articulated vow or resolution (Bratman 1-13). There is another instructive analogy with intentions to act. Once one has formed such an intention, reconsideration of other options ceases, at least within certain practical limits (Bratman 60-75). This is akin to ceasing to consider alternative actual and possible objects of affection to replace the beloved once one has committed to regarding her as irreplaceable (again, subject to certain limitations).<sup>19</sup> Consistent with the commitment involved in *de jure* irreplaceability, merely entertaining these possibilities for replacement is already a kind of betrayal.

Thus far, I believe that I have gone some way to show that an account of irreplaceability in terms of a commitment to regard the beloved as being such is both plausible and provides an explanatory justificatory depth beyond the point where Grau's account seems to bottom out in a sort of surd human responsive to the historical particularity of the beloved. I think the present account offers the further advantage of explaining the sense of betrayal that the beloved would feel were the supposed lover to regard her as replaceable. This sense of betrayal can be explained in terms of the mere pretense of a commitment being revealed as such, or of an actual commitment being revoked, abandoned, or transgressed on inappropriate grounds. The normativity of the grounding commitment involved in irreplaceability explains these phenomena better than does the supposition of a mere surd responsiveness to the historical particularity of the beloved. My approach is more ontologically parsimonious in that it doesn't require us to posit special, metaphysically unique properties, such a Unique Value, in order to construct the account. Such an ontological posit is especially suspect where, as in Grau's account of Unique Value, it has no identity criteria independent of the role it is called on to play in the theory—for it was tailor made to fill an explanatory gap in the account. Finally, as we have seen, even if we posit Unique Value, it remains unclear *how* it would be able to rationally ground irreplaceability given that all persons would have Unique Value.

## Notes

1. The gender of the lover and the beloved has no intrinsic significance in my analysis. However, for convenience I will use a single gender rather than always referencing both genders. Given that I will often be alternating between speaking in the first and the third person, I find it most convenient, and least artificial, to use the masculine pronoun for the lover and the feminine pronoun for the beloved.

2. Moreover, it is typically the case that one would reject such a substitution even if

the possible replacement exceeds the original in terms of her valuable properties (at least up to some significant threshold).

3. To say that a beloved is not fungible is not to say that one may have only one beloved. A father, for instance, may love each of his three children and take each to be irreplaceable in the relevant sense.

4. See also note 10 and accompanying text regarding internal and external properties.

5. To exclude extraneous considerations, we can assume that neither Jane, Jane\*, nor Rob\* would know that the switch had occurred and that, were I to agree to the switch, I would immediately thereafter have slight retrograde amnesia such that, post-switch, I would not be aware that the switch had occurred.

6. The literature often discusses, in tandem, the valuing of a particular person, a particular object, and a particular institution or other entity as raising the same problems concerning the special value of a numerically distinct particular as such (Cohen; “Irreplaceably Unique Value”; “Love and History”). Thus, one *loves* a particular person, *cherishes* a particular object, or *reveres* a particular entity, organization, normative ordering, or being. These modes of valuation are taken to involve valuing numerically distinct particulars in a way potentially raises issues of irreplaceability. I will suggest, without elaborating, that the operative factors in these different kinds of valuing might be different from one another.

7. Grau states that Plato, Pascal (“Irreplaceably Unique Value” 114-18), and Parfit (“Love and History” 251) hold that rational reflection shows that the proper object of love is the beloved’s valuable properties *as such*, though they may come to our focus as instantiated in a particular person. With respect to objects (*see supra* note 6), Aries claims that, in the Middle Ages, objects were valued as unique concrete particulars, but that the move toward modernity involves conceiving them more as mere abstract repositories of value (128-139). Given recent discussion of valuing particular things, this is clearly too sweeping a generalization.

8. I suggest that the latter is a better formulation.

9. Cohen also discusses what he calls “personal valuing,” wherein a particular thing has value for a person “because of the special relation of the thing to that person” (Cohen 148). This seems to be much the same thing that Grau has in mind.

10. Grau identifies two orthogonal distinctions in values. The first is that between intrinsic value and extrinsic value. Intrinsic value is based on a thing’s intrinsic or internal properties, while extrinsic value is based on the thing’s external or relational properties. The other contrast is between instrumental value and the non-instrumental value that a thing can have such that we value it for its own sake. In the latter case, we say the thing has “final value” (“Irreplaceably Unique Value” 122-124).

11. Moreover, the individuation of persons is a general philosophical problem. It remains to be seen whether we need to accept any particular account in order to facilitate a solution to the Surplus Value Problem.

12. I acknowledge that the issues of incommensurability and incomparability warrant a more detailed treatment than I am able to give here.

13. “Consider the set of guitars owned by Jimi Hendrix. ... One might ... value the entire set of guitars he played, and freely accept the substitute of one guitar for another. (This is a case where *history* matters, but several objects share the relevant history.)”



(“Irreplaceably Unique Value” 125).

14. Keep in mind, there will be no *experience* of a loss of love or connection after the switch.

15. Clearly, such commitment makes sense only in the context where the lover takes the beloved to at least pass some minimal threshold in having desirable qualities. A specific theory as to the relationship between the valued qualities of the beloved and the commitment to regard the beloved as irreplaceable is beyond the scope of this paper.

16. Of course, once the beloved is regarded as irreplaceable, is held in that kind of regard, new possibilities arise as to the kinds of interactions, projects, and experiences the lovers can share, particularly if this love is mutual.

17. Obviously, the former beloved might remain forever irreplaceable in the sense of having been involved in a qualitatively unique way in the life of the lover.

18. Between the extremes addressed in this paragraph lie innumerable many and complex kinds of cases. To properly address them, we would have to develop an account of the normative principles governing the revocation of the relevant commitment, what we might reasonably expect in terms of capabilities and limitations of human efforts and motivations, and various other kinds of factors. Such an account is well beyond the limited scope of this paper.

19. See *supra* note 18.

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