



(QUEER) LOVE. A QUEST FOR DEFINITION

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This paper examines the notion of love as a two-dimensional entity: the creative direction of lovers toward each other and the restrained love defined by social norms. Firstly, I present the theoretical background of my work — *Queer Phenomenology* by Sara Ahmed. By following the definition of queer as disorientation and spatial abnormality, I introduce the reader to Ahmed’s understanding of (queer) sexuality. For each person, sexual orientation is deeply personal, yet Ahmed argues that sexual desire is not free from the force of the heteronormative background in which we are born and where we take a prescribed place. Despite the pressure of heteronormativity, queer desire is shaped by contact with others, in which a queer person finds a new sense of direction and community. I proceed by dividing Ahmed’s argument into two theses: (a) queer love and straight love are definitively different, and (b) love can be understood as a duplex phenomenon. Unlike Ahmed, I stress argument (b) and disagree with statement (a). I present the first dimension of love through the love letters of famous thinkers. Love as happiness, possibility, openness, and longing, both general and personal, connects all lovers through the universality of their feelings. Yet the intimate orientation of lovers is subjected to social normativity which disrupts love’s agency and “straightens” it. By highlighting the difference in love’s dimensions, I argue that queer and heterosexual love are not separated and have the same starting point — people in love.

I. INTRODUCTION

What is your first thought when you hear the word *love*? Perhaps, your definition comes from bookish love tropes or song lyrics. I should ask if you think of heteronormative relationships or more diverse groups. There are many ways in which one can define love, through commonsensical notions and pop culture references, or by explaining the chemistry behind the brain’s reaction. However, in this text, I turn to the philosophical understanding of love, specifically queer love. As my main inspiration and theoretical background, I consult *Queer Phenomenology* by Sara Ahmed and highlight her approach. By discussing the spatiality and embodiment of sexual orientation, I explain the concept of queer love through Ahmed’s

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phenomenology. Furthermore, I argue that the framework created by Ahmed does not fully capture the complexity of love. For this, I present my concept of love as a two-dimensional entity, focusing on what it means for queer love to be two-dimensional. I use Ahmed's insights for describing the first level of love: embodied direction of lovers toward each other. Yet, I demonstrate why her phenomenology misses the specificity of queer love as it varies from heterosexual love solely in the second dimension — a meta-realm of love that is restricted and stigmatized by the social setting.

II. WHAT IS 'QUEER'?

Let us begin by defining the most important term in this work: queer. The queer and queer theory stands outside the sphere of normativity and challenges heteronormative binaries. Queerness aims to dismantle established notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality, striving for equality, acceptance, and freedom of expression. Be it in academia, activism, or politics, the term 'queer' spreads widely.

In *Queer Phenomenology*, 'queer' becomes "an 'umbrella' term used for all non-straight and non-normative sexualities."² She takes a step back to understand what queerness can mean and how it has been seen in the phenomenological tradition. Ahmed adopts the meaning of queer from Merleau-Ponty. For him, queer moments happen when "a subject does not see straight,"³ when things appear "out of line."⁴ His queerness captures the orientation of the subject to space. He does not yet see 'queer' as a sexual term, but rather as an expression of bodily spatiality. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty presents sexuality as the continuation of the bodily experience. Like other domains of the body, sexual orientation defines what objects are reachable, how the body inhabits space, and how such existence shapes the subject itself. Merleau-Ponty is interested in the subject's bodily extension in space, in her orientation towards the normative, straight line of life. While also arguing that sexuality is an essential domain of the bodily experience, Ahmed adds an aspect of sexual orientation to Merleau-Ponty's notion of queer.⁵ The spatiality and corporeality of queerness, queer sexual orientation, and queer desire, are essential for understanding how (queer) love shapes the interaction between lovers and extends beyond the subjects. Therefore, despite the variety of its uses, 'queer' captures the deconstruction of 'normal,' the disruption of subject-world relations and heteronormative reality, for example through sexuality, gender identity, or bodily orientation. This is the definition of queer I will refer to in my work.

III. AHMED'S QUEER PHENOMENOLOGY

The spatiality of queerness, inspired by Merleau-Ponty, travels in Ahmed's reflections throughout the entirety of the chapter "Sexual Orientation." Her understand-

2. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 68.

3. Ahmed, 65.

4. Ahmed, 10.

5. Ahmed, 67.

ing of heteronormativity, sexuality, family, self-identity, community, friendships, desire, and love: all inherit the importance of homosexuality as bodily orientation along or against certain lines of being. In the subchapters “Becoming Straight” and “Contingent Lesbians,” Ahmed reflects on the origin of sexuality. These fragments mirror each other as Ahmed asks us: Why does one person identify as queer and the other as straight? To reflect the spatiality and the embodiment of sexual orientation, we can rephrase the question: Why are we attracted to these objects but not others? As Ahmed notes, the common answer states that it is a matter of choice or nature.⁶ However, she argues against the simplification of the distinction. On the one hand, ‘choice’ presents sexuality as something arbitrary and dependent exclusively on the subject. The biological paradigm, on the other hand, sees sexual orientation to be fixed, unchangeable, and determined. Ahmed takes a separate stance. Sexual orientation is a unique experience: it is a result of choice yet experienced as part of us that cannot be imagined differently.

In her work, Ahmed disagrees that sexuality is something necessary or inevitable. For her, no human body has a natural orientation. Sexuality is socially constructed: it is enforced by society through continuous work. Although the effort taken by heterosexuality to become normative is hidden in its familiarity, it is not stagnant. All people are subjected to a certain orientation, toward a non-voluntaristic becoming. Sexuality is experienced as if it is something coming from within. Yet Ahmed notices that it is socially created through repetition and contact with other bodies. Subjects accept the dominating orientation “as a social requirement for intelligible subjectivity,”⁷ familial and social love. We do not choose how our desire and body are shaped under compulsory heteronormativity. We take a prescribed place that aligns us to a straight line and determines our ways of inhabiting the space and relating to others. Straight norms exercise pressure on bodies, excluding certain paths from their sight. Through constant alignment, we experience our sexuality as intrinsic, even though it is a rather external, unnatural restriction. Moreover, heterosexuality is not a property of the individual nor of objects of desire. It is a background, a field with the transformative force to undermine our acts. The background does not stay behind us, it is endlessly reinforced. In summary, through socialization, we, the ones who initially lack any orientation, are subjected to the line of normativity. By its forces, heterosexuality aligns subjects with the lines of ‘proper’ love and desire. It forces them to experience heterosexuality as something necessary.

IV. FOCUSING ON “CONTINGENT LESBIANS”

In the subchapter “Contingent Lesbians,” Ahmed highlights that all sexual orientations reflect the process of becoming rather than being. In other words, both straight and queer are contingent, not stagnant. Our desire exists under heteronormative social pressure and is shaped and endlessly re-shaped by an external force to fit the desirable line of sexuality. Nevertheless, this does not mean that queerness is

6. Ahmed, 79.

7. Ahmed, 85.

temporal, imaginary, or a sign of misfortune. It is neither pathology nor perversion. However, as Ahmed argues, when queer people turn from the straight line, they are seen as mere replicas of the heterosexual couple. ‘Queer’ is challenged and re-read by heterosexuality as a possible threat. Norms straighten queerness by aligning it to certain familiar lines: *e.g.*, to the line of a family (“they are sisters, they are alike”) or to the heterosexual couple (“one is a husband”). Society reinvents the relation as confirming the “masculine and heteronormative ideal.” However, it is an independent phenomenon, a space for human connection. Lesbians, like straight people, are shaped by the contact, by the pull objects of desire exercise upon us. Queerness is a unique disorientation that shapes bodies, influences “patterns of relating to others,”⁸ and changes one’s manner of inhabiting the world. Reflecting on the specificity of lesbianism, Ahmed unravels the experience of desiring someone or something off the line.

Although unique and special, Ahmed argues that gay breaking points of the straight line do not stand equal to normative love. The queer extension is limited and hindered. Compulsion “reads the expression of such [queer] desire as social and family injury . . . as the misdirection of grief and loss.”⁹ The public hides and estranges the queer person if it is unable to direct her. While straight people experience and inhabit space without hesitation, queer people face difficulties. They are deprived of the benefits of the heterosexual world. However, Ahmed notices that moving away from the norm is not a sign of failure: “We become lesbians [but] such becoming is not lonely.”¹⁰ According to Ahmed, being queer is a chance to find others who go astray from the normative paths, and with whom one can share their “misery.”¹¹ The queer finds new sociality in deviating from the straight line. The lesbian deals with the straightening perception of others, yet queerness is a new possibility and a “gift.”¹²

V. SEXUALITY AND LOVE

In the chapter “Sexual Orientation,” Ahmed elaborates on the queer subject by inquiring into who is queer, how one becomes queer, and what it is like to be queer in the heteronormative world. She develops the notion of sexuality, focusing on the orientation and embodied spatiality of desire. At the same time, the notion of love, to which Ahmed often refers, is left untouched. The author does not elaborate on what it means to love queerly and if we can apply phenomenology to the study of romantic love. She only mentions love reflecting on desire and attraction, and as a result, the notion of love is detached from the discussion of sexuality. Complementing the framework, I would like to bridge the gap and use Ahmed’s interpretation of sexual orientation to define love.

In my understanding of Ahmed’s philosophy, love is an orientation of bodies toward each other. Love has similar spatial nature as sexuality, thus creating the

8. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 101.

9. Ahmed, 102.

10. Ahmed, 103.

11. Ahmed, 104.

12. Ahmed, 82.

horizon of possible acts and shaping the individuals themselves. Here I take love as a romantic relationship between two individuals that can also be felt in solitude. Analogous to Ahmed's queer sexuality, queer and heterosexual love are different and their uniqueness should not be neglected. Like queer sexual orientation, 'dis-oriented' love is a source of 'danger' for the heteronormative tradition. It is seen as the abruption of the straight line, maybe even more than queer desire since love challenges the institution of the family.¹³ If love is experienced as a meeting point of two directionalities, the queer version is slantwise, weaker than that of straight lovers. Considering queerness is the opening of certain possibilities and closure of others, the practice of loving depends on its subjects. Queer love both flees from straight relationships and is shaped by them (by the heteronormativity and opposition to it). It is distinguished from straight feelings not only because of the subjects' sexuality, but also because gay love produces a distinctive type of background.

Although homosexual and heterosexual love share some aspects, I argue love is shaped by the sexuality and gender identity of its lovers. In Ahmed's account of desire applied to love, one can discern two points: (a) queer love and straight love are definitively different and (b) love can be understood as a duplex phenomenon. Regarding notion (a), the love of queer subjects is not only unique because it happens between queer people. For Ahmed, the relationship between subjects, with their families and society, is abrupted by queer loving. Persons who do not love following normative fashion risk being excluded from the world as they know it. The deed of loving in a queer manner is a deed for which courage is needed. Queer love comes with shame and self-hatred. It is a 'burden' for which one is expected to apologize. It exists outside or beyond any categorization: "by pushing and disrupting established boundaries and binaries,"¹⁴ it enters the state of unknowability.¹⁵ Therefore, according to Ahmed's interpretation, queer love cannot be simplified to a *queered* copy of straight love.

As for statement (b), Ahmed muddles two layers of love without explicitly distinguishing them. The first layer encompasses queer love as an intimate connection between lovers. The love originates from the subjects' intentions and desires and follows them. However, the feelings evolve and become something separate. Love is still emanating from individuals, yet it acquires its transformative force. For Ahmed, this force is expressed in terms of sexuality as a background capable of exercising pressure on individuals. Seeing this duality of love, I propose to divide it into two distinct, yet corresponding dimensions. I will argue that the distinction between straight and gay love is eligible only in its second dimension.

13. Here, I mainly refer to Foucault: "I think that's what makes homosexuality "disturbing": the homosexual way of life, much more than the sexual act itself. Imagining a sexual act that doesn't accord with law or nature, that's not what upsets people. But that some individuals might start to love one another ... — there's the problem" (Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth — Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Rubert Hurley [The New Press, 1997], 135–140).

14. Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Queer", 2017.

15. David M. Halperin, "Queer Love," *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 2 (2019): 406.

VI. WHAT IS LOVE?

Imagine two gardeners who work together to plant a beautiful flower. They begin by preparing the soil and planting the seed. Imagine that these gardeners cherish the flower, helping it grow. After some time, the flower blossoms in the garden. Although it is a result of the joint effort of the gardeners, one does not think of them when seeing the plant. One enjoys its beauty without noticing the efforts put into its creation and growth. The flower becomes an independent entity transcending the gardeners' collaboration. Homosexual and heterosexual love can be understood through this metaphor. On its primary level, love is the result of two lovers directing themselves toward one another. It is an intimate connection of two embodied souls which is cherished by them exclusively. In the metaphor, it is all the work that is 'behind the scenes' of the flower's blossoming. However, love does not exist independently of the social context — the flower in the garden is surrounded by other plants alike (and not alike). As love emerges, grows, and develops, it becomes estranged and separated from its authors. Now, the flower is seen in connection to other plants around it. Like the flower whose beauty is not associated with the gardeners, love is an independent entity embedded in social conditions. Love in its second dimension transcends the intimate. It loses its sacredness yet gathers a transformative power. The metaphor of gardeners and flowers demonstrates how love can be two-dimensional.

Although my understanding resembles Ahmed's definition of love as the orientation of bodies and the background of lovers' existence, I argue against thesis (a) — that queer and straight love are definitively different — and stress thesis (b) — that love can be understood as a duplex phenomenon — by emphasizing the double nature of love. I follow the concept of love as a two-dimensional phenomenon and believe that queer love is not fully different from the love of a straight couple.

VII. TWO DIMENSIONS OF LOVE

To define love's first dimension, I will partially refer to Ahmed's theory of spatiality. Such love is indeed an orientation of lovers toward each other. Yet it is freed from the socially constructed concepts of gender and sexual orientation. It is an orientation of bodies that follows the line leading to the lover. There is no coordinate system to claim this direction as slantwise or straight. Love on this level is an expression of the intimate connection and longing for the lover. There is no answer to how partners experience their relationship. The only agreement is that love is ambiguous.¹⁶ However, the point that matters for my inquiry is: love in its first dimension is experienced by heterosexual and homosexual lovers in the same manner precisely because here they are simply lovers.

Considering the phenomenological tradition, I refer to the collection of private letters written by people in love. I believe that defining love is inadequate for understanding it. Rather, an analysis (at least a brief one) of personal experiences is

16. Hugh Breaky, "Friday Essay: 3 Ways Philosophy Can Help Us Understand Love," *The Conversation*, May 2021,

needed. The great help is love letters: I turn to extracts presented in *The Greatest LGBT Love Letters of All Time*.¹⁷ The authors masterfully capture their insights, transcending love through time, yet gathering its universal character. No matter what description, metaphor, or analogy is chosen, the experience of love, firstly particular and private, becomes relatable. They write: love is painful and powerful. It exceeds the boundaries of rationalization. Real love speaks in the language of need and immediacy. One surrenders to its powers, yet simultaneously finds freedom and autonomy. The loss of love is experienced as the greatest loss. Love stands next to death as one of the only notions worthy of endless reflection: it is eternal, immortal, and all-encompassing. Love inspires and moves the heart of the lover to discoveries. It changes the individual ruining her life or making it worth living. Unbearable happiness, source of salvation and strength, a “strange blend of electrifying ardor and paralyzing pride”¹⁸ — it is all about love.

How is a movement that “cannot be defined but only experienced”¹⁹ intelligible beyond the lovers? Love is researched, depicted, and discussed as something detached from the ones who feel it. One does not vote for the gay marriage of A and B but for the legal opportunity in the present and future. When one questions what love is, her thoughts dwell on a phenomenon that is both general and personal. How can love, “a quest with no end, an opening ... of which a creative existence springs,”²⁰ be a constraint and prohibition of freedom? As Beauvoir claims, love can “damage” the existence of women and become their enslavement.²¹ I believe that the conflict in how love is seen can be explained by the concept of love as a *social* phenomenon. As the flower becomes independent of its gardeners, it emerges in the field of plants around it. The flower is compared and judged based on what is around it. One yellow tulip is lovely, yet the yellow tulip in the field of red papavers stands out *queerly*. Like the flower, love that existed outside the gender binaries is pulled toward the social lines. It is at this moment when straight love gains its dominance as a trophy for fitting the mold best.

Love in its first dimension is an “openness,” a creation of “space and time for play or variation.”²² The lovers engage in a free manner, their relationship is dynamic. It is “a hollow in us” that inspires us to look around. The first layer of love is revolutionary, imaginary, and future-oriented, “it arouses possibility”²³ of new experiences. However, humans are social creatures, and their connections are necessarily social. Love is subjected to the “standard romantic narratives, family structures, relational modes, erotic vocabularies, sexual identities, even linguistic denotation.”²⁴ Here the second dimension of love emerges. Now Ahmed’s theory

17. Maria Popova, “The Greatest LGBT Love Letters of All Time,” *The Marginalian*, February 2014, 18. Popova.

19. Helmut Maafßen, “Max Scheler on Love and Hate: A Phenomenological Approach,” ed. Michel Weber and Pierfrancesco Basile, 2006, 338.

20. Megan M. Burke, “Love as a Hollow: Merleau-Ponty’s Promise of Queer Love,” *Hypatia* 32, no. 1 (2017): 54.

21. Burke, 57.

22. Burke, 60.

23. Burke, 62.

24. Halperin, “Queer Love,” 419.

of compulsory sexuality and its spatiality is useful for uncovering the distinction between queer and heterosexual love. Social space pulls romantic love to the heterosexual lines that act as “straightening devices.”²⁵ Gender ideals are planted in individuals through socialization and their interaction with social institutions. Society fancies normality, repetitiveness, and convention, shattering any instability. Conformity dominates the flux of transformation.²⁶ People who strive for new horizons and freedom of sexual ‘disorientation’²⁷ are restrained.

In other words, the first dimension of love is artificially separated into queer and straight love. Society posits individuals into the coordinate system of gender identity and sexual orientation. Queer orientation becomes a burden: a perversion that should be apologized for and altered to fit straight love. Queer love exists as a minor social phenomenon following heteronormativity.

Moreover, love in its second dimension loses its agency: instead of an underlying flow, it is something which persons ‘possess.’ Love is simplified and loses its richness. Sexuality and love are treated merely as characteristics of someone’s life. By fitting love to these lines, society categorizes romantic feelings as mere objects. At the same time, the intimacy of lovers is detached from love. Love transforms into an independent entity, yet it is simpler and less profound than love’s hollow.²⁸ Such love is a mechanism used by social institutions to tame individuals and their relationships.²⁹ Something that brought joy and happiness becomes a source of oppression and misery. Social oppression infects the purity of love by stigmatizing and neglecting (queer) lovers. This force of love is consequently depicted by Beauvoir and Ahmed in their notions of love as gender subordination and a “straightening device.”³⁰ This is what the second dimension of love is: a flower detached from its gardeners and put into the constraints of social existence limiting its freedom by imposing the categories of homo- and heterosexuality. Therefore, love from a complex and positive phenomenon evolves into an ambiguous and crude entity that controls and threatens the intimacy of all lovers making possible the distinction between straight and gay love and discrimination against the latter.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In summary, love is a two-dimensional phenomenon: an intimate orientation of lovers beyond the categories of gender and sexuality and a social actualization of love. In this work, I presented Ahmed’s theory of sexuality from her book *Queer Phenomenology*. I focused on her understanding of why (and how) one becomes queer/straight. Furthermore, I applied Ahmed’s notion of sexuality to my theory of love. I argued that the strict distinction between gay and straight love oversimplifies what love is. I proposed to see love as a two-dimensional entity. For defining the first layer I inherited the spatial lens of Ahmed and argued that love, independent

25. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 23.

26. Burke, “Love as a Hollow: Merleau-Ponty’s Promise of Queer Love,” 54–68.

27. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 157–179.

28. Burke, “Love as a Hollow: Merleau-Ponty’s Promise of Queer Love,” 57.

29. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 81–83.

30. Ahmed, 23.

of social influence, transcends our differences. By referring to the selection of love letters, I attempted to conduct a phenomenological inquiry into love relations. Moreover, I proposed an explanation of how love evolves from the intimate orientation of subjects into the social layer of love. Finally, I specifically highlighted the change in queer love: from standing equal to heteronormative relationships to being oppressed, abandoned, and stereotyped under the straightening constraints of society.

POSTSCRIPT

The present paper was written earlier this year, and I had time to reflect on the arguments and the defined theory of love. The main goal I set for myself was to highlight queer love. As a philosophy student who only starts their intellectual journey, queerness is not a subject matter present in the academic curriculum. With this paper, I wished to share my thoughts on what it means to be queer and most importantly ponder on the definition of queer love. Being inspired by *Queer Phenomenology*, I felt as if Sara Ahmed had built a wall between queer and “normality” in her attempt to define queer sexuality. By giving queerness its well-deserved autonomy, Ahmed tore apart any connection left between different ways of loving. And while I agree with the importance of empowering the stigmatized existence, in my opinion, we cannot forget about the common points from which all human desire begins. We are oriented toward each other, no matter what lines of loving and being we follow. By stressing both the universality of love and the specificity of queerness, I wish to inspire you to think of your own definition of loving. Yet most importantly, I hope this paper encourages you, my dear reader, to respect the way other people love.

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