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Free love? On the relation between belief in free will, determinism, and passionate love



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ABSTRACT

Is love possible if we are not free? Some philosophers consider that true love is necessarily free, while others think that the nature of love makes it incompatible with a certain type of freedom. Here, we explored the relationship between feelings of passionate love, belief in free will and determinism across three online studies. In Study 1 ($N = 257$), participants who believed strongly in free will (or determinism) expressed stronger passionate love. In Study 2 ($N = 305$), we again found a positive association between belief in free will (or determinism) and passionate love, although the passionate love-determinism relationship seems more conditional. Finally, Study 3 ($N = 309$) confirmed the relationship between belief in free will and passionate love but not between belief in determinism and passionate love. These findings, along with a meta-analysis, suggest that both beliefs in free will and determinism are compatible with passionate love.

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– *To enter in these bonds, is to be free.*

[John Donne, “Elegy XX: To his mistress going to bed”]

1. Introduction

The rapid progress in affective neuroscience and neurochemistry of human attachment have recently led philosophers and bioethicists interested in neuro-enhancement to ask the following question: Would it be morally appropriate to use “love drugs” to ensure the stability of our marriage or to love our children in the way they deserve to be? (Feinberg & Shafer-Landau, 2013; Liao, 2011; Naar, 2016; Nyholm, 2015; Savulescu & Sandberg, 2008). One concern that can be raised, however, is the possibility that love induced by drugs is not “ours” but the product of external influences and would thus not count as “authentic love”. This concern suggests that we might perceive an essential relationship between free will and love, as true love would require some degree of freedom to be considered valuable. But does this connection really exist?

Whether we have free will and are morally responsible for our behaviors and actions is one of the most central and long-lasting questions of philosophy, one that still raises substantial disagreement (Fischer, Kane, Pereboom, & Vargas, 2007).

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However, philosophers not only disagree about whether we have free will; they also disagree on what would happen and what we should do if the widespread belief in human free will ever turned out to be false. Pessimistic philosophers consider that, if philosophers and scientists discovered that we have no free will, this truth should be kept away from the public: undermining people's belief in free will would have catastrophic consequences, such as people no longer trying to exert control over their behavior and acting more immorally (Smilansky, 2000, 2002). Optimistic philosophers, on the contrary, consider that the disappearance of people's belief in free will would lead to overall positive results, with people abandoning their inadequate retribution-based morality and illusory belief in a just world (Caruso, 2014; Greene & Cohen, 2004; Nadelhoffer, 2011). Finally, a few remaining philosophers have argued for a middle ground according to which the effects of abandoning belief in free will would be insignificant (Nichols, 2007).

Such philosophical questions can without doubt benefit from a psychological perspective, in which the function and role of a certain class of beliefs are examined and assessed through the collection of empirical evidence. In the past decade, psychologists have begun investigating the cognitive and behavioral effects of belief in free will and moral responsibility, and their results seem to confirm the pessimists' bleak predictions (Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009; Vohs & Schooler, 2008). As far as behavior is concerned, undermining participants' belief in free will (by having them read scientific writings disparaging the existence of free will) has been shown to lead them to act less morally (Vohs & Schooler, 2008), more aggressively, and less pro-socially (Baumeister et al., 2009). This has been tied to the fact that diminishing participants' belief in free will reduced their self-control (Rigoni, Kühn, Gaudino, Sartori, & Brass, 2012). Furthermore, it has been shown that people with lower belief in free will tend to attribute less blame to criminals (Shariff et al., 2014) and people guilty of infidelity (Diehl, 2014), as well as inflict lesser punishments on them (Shariff et al., 2014). Overall, it seems that diminishing people's belief in free will lead them to perceive themselves and others as exerting less control over their actions, and thus to judge these actions more leniently and their authors less responsible for them.

This conclusion, though interesting, is far from surprising: after all, it is widely accepted that our notion of free will is intimately tied to questions of self-control and grounds attributions of moral responsibility (Vohs & Baumeister, 2009). However, more surprising predictions have been made: it has indeed been suggested by some philosophers that belief in free will is also essential for experiencing certain emotions such as resentment, gratitude, or guilt (Smilansky, 2000; Strawson, 1974). Since those emotions are typically conceived as *passive* phenomena beyond our voluntary control, it might seem unlikely at first glance that free will is somehow related to them. Still, recent studies have indeed shown that reducing belief in free will reduces gratitude (MacKenzie, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2014) and makes people less likely to learn from past errors based on guilt (Stillman & Baumeister, 2010).

Nevertheless, one of philosophers' predictions has so far never been put to test: that belief in free will is necessary for romantic love, and thus that reduced belief in free will would undermine romantic love for one's partner (Anglin, 1990; Strawson, 1974). Indeed, according to these philosophers, we would not think that we would really love someone if we had in fact been forced to by being administered "love pills", and this suggests that free will is a necessary condition for a certain kind of love (Kane, 1998). Hence, true love is free love, and experiencing love requires believing in free will. But is it really the case?

1.1. Free will and passionate love: The philosophical approach

Let us first note that love is a broad term that can be used to describe very different phenomena. For example, psychologists and philosophers typically distinguish romantic love from parental or compassionate love, and consider that they evolved from distinct evolutionary processes (Buss, 2005; Frankfurt, 2004; Hatfield, Bensman, & Rapson, 2012). However, when philosophers claim that love and belief in free will are closely intertwined, they do not speak about parental love, but about the kind of love that can be reciprocated by the one we love, in a relationship between any two human beings (Smilansky, 2008). The concept that shapes the best this multi-faceted phenomenon is based on one particular kind of romantic love, namely "passionate love", traditionally defined in the literature as "a state of intense longing for union with another" (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986, p. 383). Although passionate love can be considered a kind of romantic love, romantic love is not necessarily passionate (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2006).

Now, why think that lack of free will would undermine passionate love? To answer this question, it is important to note that this claim comes into flavor. In certain occasions, it means that true passionate love could not exist if we did not have free will. In others, it means that passionate love could still exist if we did not have free will, but would lose much of its value and significance for us. For example, Kane writes that:

There is a kind of love we desire from others—parents, children (when they are old enough), spouses, lovers and friends—whose significance is diminished . . . by the thought that they are determined to love us entirely by instinct or circumstances beyond their control or not entirely up to them. . . . To be loved by others in this desired sense requires that the ultimate source of others' love lies in their own wills.

[Kane, 1998, p. 88]

One argument for this view, which we already mentioned, is that we would not want people to love us only because they are forced or determined to. Thus, Anglin claims that:

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