

## A Slice of Philosophically Baked Bread

A Companion One-Sheet to the “Philosophy Bakes Bread” Podcast

[Episode 60: Existentialism and Romantic Love](#) with Dr. Skye Cleary

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# Happily Ever After? Existentialism and Romantic Love

## Part I: Love in Real-Life

“The everyday understanding of romantic love is that we fall in love, or we find ‘the one’ and we fall in love, and live happily ever after. The problem is it’s rarely one person, it’s rarely always happy, and it’s rarely ever after...It’s the Disney problem.”

“We’re kind of stuck with this language of merging and ‘the one’ and soulmate, but it’s a crazy myth, and so it’s very misleading. Existentialism comes out and points out that love is amazing but it’s also really awful. It’s horrible to be in love and it’s plagued with anxiety. We’ll never really know if the other person loves us back or how long they’re going to love us. If we’re free to fall in love, then we’re also free to leave. Marriage isn’t gonna make love stay. But this kind of narrative, this love story, tells us that once we fall in love, it’s all smooth sailing from there. But it’s not.”

“Marriage is a commitment to be with someone even when you don’t love them, because you’re committing to love them forever...[Nietzsche] says we can’t promise the feeling of love, so we should promise the actions of love...We need to realize that that sort of crazy passionate phase might not last forever. And there are maybe ways that we can get it back, like going on adventures together and doing new things. But, it may not be the same as it was in the early phases.”

“One of the key points of existentialism is that love is a choice. Yes, it can be intoxicating and overwhelming, but it can also be dangerous when we become slaves to love or we end up very hedonistic [focused on pleasure]. So, we may not be able to choose who we’re attracted to, but we can choose whether to act upon it. And this is the existential thing, where we’re not feral [wild] animals; we’re responsible for our actions.”

- Dr. Skye Cleary on “Philosophy Bakes Bread,” [Episode 60: Existentialism and Romantic Love](#)

## Part II: Investigation Questions

- 1) What role does free choice play in romantic love? And what does it mean to live freely or authentically in matters of love?
- 2) Dr. Cleary’s Question: “How should we love? Or to think about it another way, what shouldn’t we do for love?”
- 3) When should romantic love influence someone’s major life decisions, and when shouldn’t it? How much sacrifice for love is *too* much?
- 4) Is romantic love awful? Why or why not?
- 5) Why have *any* social expectations about romantic love if it is such a deeply personal matter?
- 6) Could someone have romantic love without living “happily ever after”? Why or why not?
- 7) Could someone live “happily ever after” without romantic love? Why or why not?



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**SOPHIA is grateful to the Kentucky Humanities Council for a generous grant that supported the creation of this One-Sheet document.**

## Part III: Bread Breaking Questions

### 1) “Open” relationships

*The Guardian* (2/8/19) recently published an anonymous article by a man whose wife of 12 years caught him having an affair with a business colleague. He confessed to her that sex with her had become less interesting. What followed is not what you might expect:

“...she revealed that she’d had revenge sex with a colleague after learning of my affair. I found her account very erotic, and soon we were sharing stories of other flings, kisses and flirtations that had occurred during our 12-year relationship. We had sex often during this time...Now we sleep with other people, both alone and together. We tell each other everything about these encounters, and enjoy hearing about the other’s adventures. There’s still pain, still fights about the past – who hurt whom – but now there’s something else: fun and excitement...Our marriage isn’t perfect, but we like it, the tension and relaxation. It’s based on who we really are, not who we were pretending to be.”

(<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/feb/08/my-life-in-sex-we-tell-each-other-everything-about-our-sex-with-other-people>)

*Questions:* What does sex have to do with romantic love? Why is the typical romantic relationship sexually monogamous, rather than “open” or polyamorous? What might be the pros and cons of non-monogamous relationships compared to monogamous relationships?

### 2) Marriage and Happiness

In an article in *Psychology Today* (2/14/2018) several social scientists are quoted remarking on the positive correlation between marriage and happiness:

- ❖ “Of married adults 40 percent call themselves very happy, while only 23 percent of never-marrieds do. This is true of every ethnic group studied, and it is true across the seventeen nations that psychologists have surveyed.” - Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*
- ❖ “We know that the best predictor of happiness is human relationships and the amount of time that people spend with family and friends. We know that it’s significantly more important than money and somewhat more important than health.” - Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling Into Happiness*
- ❖ “There are few stronger predictions of happiness than a close, nurturing, equitable, intimate, lifelong companionship with one’s best friend.” - David Myers, Professor of Psychology

The article adds, “It’s not just marriage itself that brings the benefit. It must be a harmonious, loving relationship to derive maximum value. The opinions of all those studying happiness are consistent; a good marriage is a direct path to well-being.” (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/stronger-the-broken-places/201802/marriage-and-happiness>)

*Questions:* How might we explain the positive correlation between marriage and happiness? Does it mean we should all strive to find the right person and get married? Why or why not? How are romantic relationships and close friendships similar, and how are they different? Why not just be “friends with benefits” instead of a “couple”? Some religious believers think that couples and intimacy are for raising families, but what should such beliefs suggest about couples in older age, who find each other after each has been widowed?



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