

I am Carrie Jenkins, writer and philosopher based in Vancouver, BC. AMA anything about philosophy, including metaphysics, epistemology and the philosophy of love!

carriejenkins<sup>1</sup> and r/Science AMAs<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Affiliation not available

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### Abstract

Thanks so much everyone for your questions! I'm out of time now. I'm Carrie Jenkins, a writer and philosopher based in Vancouver, BC. I am a Canada Research Chair in Philosophy at the University of British Columbia, the Principal Investigator on the SSHRC funded project The Nature of Love, and a Co-Investigator on the John Templeton Foundation funded project Knowledge Beyond Natural Science. I'm the author of a new book releasing on January 24, 2017 on the philosophy of love, What Love Is And What It Could Be, available for pre-order now. I studied philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge, and since then have worked at the University of St Andrews, the Australian National University, the University of Michigan, the University of Nottingham, and the University of Aberdeen. From 2011 to 2016, I was one of three principal editors of the award-winning philosophy journal Thought. I recently won an American Philosophical Association Public Philosophy Op Ed Contest award. This year I am also a student again, working towards an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia. My philosophical interests have stubbornly refused to be pinned down over the years. Broadly speaking they include epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of logic and language, and philosophy of love. But I'm basically interested in everything. My first book was on a priori arithmetical knowledge, and my second is on the nature of romantic love. I have written papers on knowledge, explanation, realism, flirting, epistemic normativity, modality, concepts, dispositions, naturalism, paradoxes, intuitions, and verbal disputes . . . among other things! A lot of my recent work is about love, because in addition to its intrinsic interest I see some urgency to the need for more and better critical thinking about this topic. My proof has been verified with the mods of /r/philosophy. Some Links of Interest Amazon link to new book What Love Is And What It Could Be, available for pre-order now, releasing January 24, 2017 NPR 13.7 Interview - Exploring the Metaphysics of Love Globe and Mail article - What's Love Got to do With Sex? Maybe Everything, winner, APA Public Philosophy Op Ed Contest 2016 Elle Canada - New Ideas on Love CBC podcast interview on love and sex ed Review of new book What Love Is and What It Could Be

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## Some Links of Interest

Amazon link to new book *What Love Is And What It Could Be*, available for [pre-order now](#), releasing January 24, 2017

[NPR 13.7 Interview - Exploring the Metaphysics of Love](#)

[Globe and Mail article - What's Love Got to do With Sex? Maybe Everything](#), winner, APA Public Philosophy Op Ed Contest 2016

[Elle Canada - New Ideas on Love](#)

[CBC podcast interview on love and sex ed](#)

[Review of new book \*What Love Is and What It Could Be\*](#)

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Philosophers have been thinking about love for a long time. It has always been, for obvious reasons, an important part of Christian thought --- but even before that, Plato discusses it at great length in his *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. What are some of the most important insights (at least, important *for your own work*) from the long history of thinking philosophically about love?

[voltimand](#)

I've thought about this a lot! I'll pull out a few ideas from the bundle.

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First, I'm intrigued by differences between Enlightenment and Romantic ideals of love, and how these seem to track different conceptions of human "nature." (Kant, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Schlegel are important sources for this.) And it ties back to a metaphilosophical question about current trends in the analytic philosophy of love: might the current focus on issues of rationality and reason illustrative of an Enlightenment-like conception of human nature at work in philosophy today?

Then there are things like the ancient poet Sappho's emphasis on physical symptoms of desire: a foreshadowing, perhaps, of the four humours theory's association of "amorousness" with an excess of blood, Schopenhauer's biological-sexual reductionism, and the contemporary naturalistic trend to identify romantic love with a biological drive and/or with brain chemistry.

Then there's Nietzsche's idea that love is fundamentally different for women and men, and de Beauvoir's critical reframing thereof. This forms part of an exploration of the connections between love and gender, and constructionist approaches to each. (Rousseau thought the "moral" part of love-- which he distinguished from the "physical" part--was an artificial device invented by women to "make dominant the sex that ought to obey." True facts.)

Christianity's conceptions of romantic love are fascinatingly varied and changing. Contemporary conceptions of love are impacted by influential Christian philosophers like Aquinas and Augustine, but also—if in less familiar ways—by strands within Christian mysticism which emphasize agape and/or caritas. Mysticism has also, intriguingly, created space for the inclusion of women's voices in philosophical discussions of love during periods when this was really unusual (for example in 14th century anchoress Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*). Critical perspectives on Christianity also track across different historical periods (and philosophers like Friedrich Engels and Bertrand Russell are important on this).

And last but not least, there are many ways our past might serve as a predictor of our future. For example, some people are interested in developing new drug treatments for controlling love (either enhancing or eliminating it), via a better understanding of the brain chemistry of love and its similarities to such phenomena as addiction and mental illness. It is important here to engage in philosophical reflection on the history of attempts to "cure" love (and more generally, to medicalize it). "Lovesickness" has been regarded as a serious illness in many eras—perhaps most notably in Elizabethan medicine—and love itself has been consistently represented as a form of mental illness by everyone from Plato to Shakespeare. But when we start unpacking the history of these ideas, one philosophical perspective that becomes salient is that attempts to "cure" love and romantic attraction—past and present—are often motivated by deep ideological and conceptual confusions as to what love actually is. As we move towards developing any future drug "treatments" for love, we ignore this history at our peril.

Thanks for joining us Professor Jenkins - great to have you here.

I was hoping you could give us a little preview of the topic of your SSHRC project and book on the metaphysics of love.

I think many people intuitively see the various problems you might encounter in investigating the ethics or value theory of love, e.g. what duties we have to those we love (esp. in opposition to duties we have to neutral others) or the ethics of polyamory. But I think the distinctly *metaphysical* questions are a bit harder for me at least to see. Could you talk a bit about what those metaphysical issues may be?

As a sort of follow-up, I was wondering what drew you to work on the metaphysics of love specifically (instead of e.g. the ethical questions). Is it just extending previous work of yours in metaphysics to this new area? Or was there separate, additional motivation?

Thanks a ton! Looking forward to having you here, and thanks for agreeing to join us today.

[A Definite Description](#)

A central metaphysical question is the good ol' "Haddaway" question: what is love? This isn't an ethical question (though answering it will likely have ethical implications); it's a straight-up "what is X" metaphysical question. It's also an ancient question: Plato was trying to address it thousands of years ago, and he wasn't at all scared to bring heavyweight metaphysics (such as his Theory of Forms) to this fight! But love hasn't been very fashionable lately in analytic metaphysics. I'm not entirely sure why, since it poses some of the most fascinating and urgent challenges to contemporary metaphysics that I know of. Thinking of love as a metaphysical topic does perhaps require a shift away from the tendency to think of (at least analytic) metaphysics as somewhat removed from "everyday" concerns, and as an "apolitical" enterprise. (It's hard to study love while ignoring its personal and political dimensions--and I wouldn't recommend doing so!) But I don't think metaphysics was ever really apolitical. And it always had implications for the "everyday."

Concerning epistemology, how do you answer the problem of skepticism as put forth by Pyrrho? More specifically, how do you answer the problem of the brain in a vat?

[Notsung](#)

I don't, to be honest. I am kind of a sceptic. (But I'm the contextualist kind, so I sometimes talk about what we "know" in an undemanding sense.)

Good afternoon. Can you speak to how one can write about philosophy in an engaging way? I have trouble writing about philosophy without getting bogged down in the definitions and the nitty gritty. Your thoughts would be greatly appreciated.

[mistermarco](#)

I've found it incredibly challenging to learn to write about philosophy in way that avoids academic jargon and suchlike. I trained and practiced for seventeen years to write pretty much just monographs and journal articles, so my academic writing habits were *really* entrenched! I eventually found a few tricks that have helped me. One is to write in a cafe: listening to real people talking in normal non-academic ways helped keep me from slipping into the jargon and definitions. Another is having people who don't have philosophical training read my drafts and tell me what they think. (This requires being prepared to scrap a lot of my drafts!) When I was writing my book, my editor helped me enormously with this. I'm now studying for an MFA in the Creative Writing program at UBC to try and hone my non-academic writing. It's a different skill set, but it's one that can be learned.

Thanks for giving some of your time to do this AMA!

My question involves the philosophy of love.

What are some ideas or thoughts on the philosophy of SELF love?

[bjl128](#)

So far I've only been working on the philosophy of romantic love (not because other kinds of love aren't important--they absolutely are). But I have thought a bit about the question of whether romantic love for oneself is possible. I think of love as dual-natured: having both a biological and a socially constructed aspect. One person could fulfil some (though not all) of the social scripts associated with "romance" without involving anyone else. I am less sure whether the sorts of biological and chemical responses to a loved partner can be had to oneself. (I don't know of any empirical research on this.)

Hi Dr. Jenkins, What's your view on the concept [love]? Can it be given necessary and sufficient conditions? Is it a loose grouping of vaguely similar things with nothing each member has in common with each other member? Relatedly, does feeling love towards x represent a judgment that x is lovable? This could bear on the kind of concept [love] is, and the proper analysis of it. (Am a PhD student; this is one of my interests.)

[apolliana](#)

I don't attempt a conceptual analysis of love (and I'm not sure it would be the most promising way to approach the topic), but I do have some thoughts about the possibility of using the word "love" (or more specifically, the phrase "romantic love") to express different concepts, leading to verbal disputes. I have a paper in progress on this topic, here:

<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/2480139/All%20Hearts%20In%20Love.pdf> in which I try to find a compromise between Carnapianism and Quineanism on how to deploy concepts and non-conceptual investigations to find out about the world (including love).

Although I don't have a conceptual analysis, I do have a theoretical approach which I call "constructionist functionalism," developed in this paper:

<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/2480139/WhatIsLove%20Final.pdf> I don't try to offer necessary and sufficient conditions, but a broad sense of what kind of thing (metaphysically speaking) romantic love is.

Dear Prof Jenkins

Thank you for taking the time for this AMA. Concerning your work on 'Knowledge Beyond Natural Science', I have two short questions:

1) I see you've written both on a priori knowledge and on emotional engagement. Is knowledge about these things what you take to be the type of thing that counts as knowledge beyond natural science? What are other examples?

2) Is your view that the types of knowledge you learn through ways other than the natural sciences are different in kind to the types of knowledge you get through the natural sciences? Or is it instead that the types of knowledge are the same in kind, but it's the ways you learn them that are different?

[irontide](#)

1) I see you've written both on a priori knowledge and on emotional engagement. Is knowledge about these things what you take to be the type of thing that counts as knowledge beyond natural science?

Not straightforwardly; I think the science of love is important for understanding the metaphysics of love (and my philosophical work on love draws heavily on results in biological science and psychology, among other areas). And I take mathematics to be a largely a priori discipline but heavily implicated in all of the natural sciences (even setting aside the question of whether it is one itself)! But there are certainly large swathes of both a priori enquiry and enquiry about love that go beyond what we might glean from the natural sciences.

What are other examples?

Questions that in some sense go "beyond" natural science might include questions about the epistemology of science itself (and the ideological baggage that scientific enquiry may carry with it). Many of the big traditional philosophical questions, such as questions about what knowledge is, or

what love is, seem to me to require more than just information from the natural sciences to address in satisfying ways.

Dear Prof. Jenkins,

Thank you for taking the time to do this AMA.

You've written before about the importance of considering 'non-traditional' forms of love---e.g. queer love or polyamorous love---when thinking about the metaphysics of love. But philosophers, presumably, follow the general trend of society in being mostly straight, cisgender, and monogamous and thus don't have first-hand experience with these kinds of love. More, there is still a lot of stigma surrounding these types of love. (Even though some have become more accepted by society, that is by no means universal.) Relatedly, there is a trend to 'straight-wash' queer love (for example, consider a lot of the rhetoric surrounding same-gender marriage). As such, it seems like it would be easy for a would-be philosopher of love to end up with a narrow view on what is possible or to wrongly to assume that the traditional monogamous heterosexual relationship is a template on which all forms of love are based.

How do you think these biases can be countered? Are there any concrete steps you think can be taken by philosophers, especially straight/monogamous/etc. philosophers, to avoid these missteps?

[completely-ineffable](#)

Great question. I think one important first step is to appreciate that good, relevant, contemporary research on the metaphysics of love will require us to do more than just read and talk to other philosophers. I've found that working with input from across a wide range of academic disciplines, and reading and talking with all kinds of writers and thinkers from outside the academy, has been hugely valuable in steering me away from limited conceptions of what love is and could be. As a polyamorous and bi (/pan) philosopher, I also have a perspective on love and romance that is informed by non-normative personal experience as well as by my research, and in some ways this alone is helpful (it certainly makes it hard for me to ignore the potential philosophical significance of non-normative love)! Of course, I don't recommend this method to every philosopher of love. :) But I certainly do recommend they talk to and/or read work by people in non-normative relationships, and people with non-normative romantic identities.

Professor Jenkins, thank you for taking the time to do something like this. I'm by no means an expert on your writings, but have been an admirer for a little while now.

My question is quite general: A lot of people, for a number of reasons, are saying that we need to put the study of Philosophy back front-and-centre of our education systems in order to help rectify many problems in society. Do you think this is a helpful approach, and if so how do you think this would be best achieved?

[RuinerOfThings](#)

I think teaching philosophical skills (especially critical thinking and comprehension skills) is extremely important as a way of empowering people to think for themselves. One is powerless without these skills: at the mercy of fake news and propaganda, unable to advocate for oneself. Children are very good at philosophical and critical thinking, and typically very enthusiastic about it until grown ups tell them to stop asking "silly" questions. I leave it to people more expert in childhood education than I am to say how teaching critical thinking skills would be best implemented, but I do think it is something all children urgently need, now more than ever.

Hello! Fellow Vancouverite (and UBC student) here! I had heard from other female philosophy profs that it is a male-dominated field. Do you ever feel a need to assert yourself, speak in a different manner, or adjust yourself in other ways because of this?

Also, just a personal question of mine, I'm thinking of applying for grad school in the philosophy dept even though I am currently an Animal Biology major. My only hesitation is uncertainty regarding career prospects. It seems to have turned out to be a very successful path for you, do you have any advice on what the field is like out there?

Thank you!

[AnonymousBallpoint](#)

Thinking about how I act in professional settings is complicated, partly because I've been doing it for over ten years now and so much has become habitual. Like a lot of women in philosophy, I do notice that I am often talked over, that my questions have been ignored until re-asked by a man, etc. (Being a young and junior woman in philosophy was definitely worse in these regards than being middle-aged and senior, but it's still noticeable.) I've been called gendered names for being too assertive in conversations, which doesn't seem to happen to my male colleagues, and I seem to get more hate mail and vicious feedback for talking about controversial topics than they do. The field is tough by any standards; the job market is certainly a lot tougher than it was in my day (which, in turn, was a lot harder than it had been ten years earlier). Add to this the gender dynamics (about which I wasn't warned as a student!) and I'm genuinely not sure whether, knowing what I do, I'd choose the same path now. But there are some amazing feminist philosophers out there working to make philosophy a better place for women: people like Sally Haslanger, Jennifer Saul, Elizabeth Barnes, and Kathryn Pogin. They are achieving great things, and although progress of this kind always comes with backlash, they give me hope.

Professor thank you in advance for answering questions! :)

I've studied epistemology for a few years & I'd love your opinion or recommendation on meta-mathematics! My question is about mathematical platonism via naturalized epistemology. More specifically I'm curious how epistemic contact can be made with abstract, mind-independent & objective truths of arithmetic. If you could point me to modern papers or summarize your view that would be great. Thanks again!

[MaximumPesto](#)

The most developed version of my thoughts on this topic are in my first book, *Grounding Concepts*. The short version: I am interested in a holistic account of how concepts are grounded in experience, such that experience renders them accurate and trustworthy guides to the structure of reality (including e.g. its logical and arithmetical structure--not just the parts you can see, bump into, etc.). We can then rely on these grounded concepts in a priori investigation to know arithmetical truths.

Dr Jenkins, philosophy in the West has and still very much is dominated by white men. Do you believe this homogeneity has contributed to a less fulfilling, limited philosophical discourse?

[GetOffRedditASAP](#)

Yes, all kinds of homogeneity and limitation to specific groups of people are disadvantageous to philosophy's core goals. For philosophy to thrive it needs to be bringing as many voices, ideas,

perspectives, and experiences to the table as possible, and providing an environment in which they can all be heard and debated. If we don't have that, philosophy is liable to become an echo-chamber, and that's a sad place to be a philosopher.

Professor Jenkins,

Thank you for doing this AMA. I've always drawn a dichotomy between love and sexual attraction, mainly because of a first reading of the Symposium during my early teenage years, but lately, I have come to reconsider this hard separation, and would rather consider those two concepts and feelings as distinct ideas that are subject to blending with each other. That is - of course, a naive view, as I mostly work on other things.

However, I am now confronted daily do what I actually consider love, and those last months, I have been thinking that it might be a family resemblance concept, under which we subsume different subforms of attraction, but also respect and acceptance.

Do you think it is sound to consider love a family resemblance concept, or should I abandon such an inquiry ?

Thank you for your time. I apologize for my mediocre english, as I am not a native english speaker.

[Necroleptique](#)

I think this sounds like a promising line of thought to explore. It makes me think of bell hooks's theory of love in her book /All About Love/, which provides a sort of list of "ingredients" for love (including care, trust, openness, and so on--she isn't just talking about romantic love, but all kinds of love). I think her theory is that all of the ingredients must be present for love to count as such. But I think it could be interesting to develop an alternative theory on which there was a longer list of ingredients--perhaps including sexual attraction--and where the requirement wasn't that you instantiated all the ingredients, but merely sufficiently many for a family resemblance.

Hiya Carrie. I usually avoid AMA's because of the odds of getting my question answered. I'd love to hear your thoughts on some head canon I have.

When it comes to love and the idea of a 'soul mate', if you take out the superstitious aspect of a 'soul mate' and think purely logically, is there not a pyramid of ideal mates, where there is always someone better? Surely, you'd be happy with nearly any mate on the pyramid, but for one reason or another, there will always be someone objectively better irregardless of your sentimentality to the person you're with.

For the sake of clarity, I'm not looking for evidence to cheat or leave my significant other, I'm quite happy. But this is the itch in my brain that makes me question how happy of a life I could lead, or my SO for that matter.

My TLDR question is, in your opinion or philosophy, is it better to stay with a person for the sake of love when you know for a "fact" that there is someone out there that would make you happier? Vice versa, if you know someone else can make your SO happier?

[JamesDask](#)

I don't think this is the kind of question that has a general answer; everything would depend on the specifics of one's situation. But here are some questions I might ask to clarify things. Is happiness the only consideration when deciding what to do? Is there (for you, or in general) a kind of value to a long-term relationship that is distinctive (and so couldn't be achieved by a series of shorter term

relationships? Is it realistic to think of a pyramid with a single "height" dimension, as opposed to a multiplicity of ways in which a potential partner could be a better or worse fit?