The Problem with “We”: Rethinking Joint Identity in Romantic Love

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A common claim about romantic love is that it entails developing a joint identity (also called a we, union, fusion, and shared identity).¹ In this paper I argue that we ought to avoid thinking of love in terms of a joining of identities. Before I turn to consider the accounts of joint identity that have been developed by contemporary philosophers, I point to a few historical accounts of joint identity in ancient philosophy, literature, and psychology in order to shed some light on the more recent accounts of joint identity. I identify three ways to construe the joint identity that is posited by these philosophers and consider the tenability of each interpretation. With respect to each of these ways of understanding joint identity, I argue that there is reason to resist an understanding of romantic love as involving joint identity.

1. Joint Identity

The notion of a joint identity in romantic love has a long history, going back as far as the ancient Greeks, where Aristophanes, in his speech recounted by Plato, argues that love is essentially the process of seeking our missing half. Aristophanes tells the story of the birth of love. Originally, human beings had four legs, four arms, two sets of sexual organs, and two faces. There were three types of these quadrapeds: the male kind, with two sets of male sexual organs; the female kind, with two sets of female sexual organs; and the androgynous kind, with a set of each. These original humans angered the gods and so, as punishment, the gods cut the humans in half. It was as a result of this punishment of splitting the humans into two that love was born:

This, then, is the source of our desire to love each other. Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves or our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature.²

The telos of love, then, is to unite with our other half and become one again. Although we cannot fully unite to the point of physical fusion, in love we seek to become as united as possible in our present state.

Similar accounts of the nature of love can be found in literature, psychology, and contemporary philosophy. In Wuthering Heights, Catherine describes her love for Heathcliff: “I am Heathcliff—he’s always, always in my mind—not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself—
but, as my own being.” Here Catherine claims that Heathcliff is to her as she is to herself: identical. The psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, sounding very much like Aristophanes, claims that erotic love “is the craving for complete fusion, for union with one other person.” In the recent philosophical literature, this notion that, in love, two individuals fuse can be found in the work of Robert Nozick. In romantic love, he says,

it feels to the two people that they have united to form and constitute a new entity in the world, what might be called a we. . . . The desire to form a we with that other person is not simply something that goes along with romantic love, something that contingently happens when love does. That desire is intrinsic to the nature of love, I think; it is an important part of what love intends.

According to this view, the practice of referring to one’s romantic partner as “my other half” is to be taken quite seriously.

While, as Aristophanes noted, total fusion is frustrated by the lovers’ physical separateness, several philosophers have identified the sense in which two individuals in love become fused as a fusion of identity. Nozick explains the development of a joint identity in the following way:

To be part of a we involves having a new identity, an additional one. This does not mean that you no longer have any individual identity or that your sole identity is as part of the we. However, the individual identity you did have will become altered. To have this new identity is to enter a certain psychological stance; and each party in the we has this stance toward the other. Each becomes psychologically part of the other’s identity.

According to Nozick, in love, one retains an individual identity, but that identity is now bound up with the identity of the loved one, so that the boundaries between the two are no longer as distinct as they were before joining. He explains:

If we picture the individual self as a closed figure whose boundaries are continuous and solid, dividing what is inside from what is outside, then we might diagram the we as two figures with the boundary line between them erased where they come together.

Thus, he claims the two individual identities are joined so that the individual identities are different than they were before joining. He asserts, however, that although the original individual identities are present within the we, both individuals share this one enlarged identity: “In a we, the people share an identity and do not simply each have identities that are enlarged.” Thus, both individuals in the love relationship share this joint identity, or the we.

Robert Solomon develops a notion of shared identity similar to Nozick’s. He, too, endorses the blurring of the boundaries between the two lovers:
It is often said that to love is to give in to another person’s needs, indeed, to make them more important than one’s own. But to love is rather to take the other’s desires and needs as one’s own. This is much more than a merely grammatical point. It is a redefinition of the self itself, as a shared self, as a self in which my personal desires no longer command a distinctive voice.10

According to Solomon’s account of shared identity, the desires that a lover former took as his or her own become, within the shared identity, desires that are not clearly distinct from the desires of the beloved.11 On Solomon’s account, it appears that the lovers pool all their desires into one new identity and, indeed, Solomon claims, “a shared self, like an individual self, might be inconsistent or schizoid.”12 But while we may worry that the new shared self may have conflicting desires, Solomon wants to claim that this is no more a problem than the conflicting desires within individual nonshared selves.

Mark Fisher develops the notion of a fused self along lines similar to Nozick and Solomon. He argues that the development of a “single fused individual”13 is the ideal of love, although because of facts about our physicality and psychology, “the fusion is partial and precarious.”14 Fisher describes what becomes shared in the fusion of love: “I will tend to absorb not only your desires but your concepts, beliefs, attitudes, conceptions, emotions and sentiments.”15 In the process of fusion, the lover takes, as his or her own, not only the desires of the beloved, but also a whole host of other mental states. The degree to which the lovers become fused is determined by

the number of ways in which, and the extent to which, we come to perceive, feel and act as a single person, so that the perception, feeling or act does not exist unless both persons participate in it, and neither can say which of the two has originated it.16

At the point at which perception, feeling, and action are all shared, and at which the origin of such perception, feeling, and action is no longer felt to have come from a distinct individual in the couple, the fullest kind of fusion has been reached.

2. Three Interpretations of Joint Identity

I see at least three interpretations of joint identity available that appear compatible with both Nozick’s and Solomon’s explanation of the concept. First, a joint identity could be taken in its most literal sense, to denote an identity that replaces the individual identities of each of the lovers. Second, a joint identity could be understood as a third entity that is an identity in addition to the individual identities of the lovers. Finally, a joint identity could be a part of each individual identity that becomes incorporated in the process of love. I will consider each of these interpretations and argue that, under each interpretation, there is reason to reject an understanding of romantic love as involving joint identity.
Identity Replacement

The first interpretation of joint identity is that in which the individual identities of the lovers are each replaced with a joint identity. Nozick claims that within a we, “the people share an identity and do not simply each have identities that are enlarged.” Here he comes the closest to endorsing what sounds like an understanding of joint identity as identity replacement. Because of the physical and mental separateness of two lovers, a joint identity cannot be a literal shared identity, where each lover has exactly the same identity as the other. Fisher seems to suggest that something like this is possible when he claims that two lovers may get to the point at which neither of them is sure where a certain perception, feeling, or act originated. Assuming it is possible that lovers may not always be aware of the origination of perceptions, feelings, or acts, this certainly does not entail that there is not actually a definite origin in one lover, or the other, or both simultaneously. The most extreme account of a joint identity, in which lovers share perceptions, feelings, and acts, is untenable simply because of our physical and mental separateness.

While recognizing that a strictly literal joint identity in terms of Aristophanic fusion is not possible, all the proponents of the joint identity view emphasize the most striking feature of a joint identity as a sharing of ends and desires. Thus, a better account of this first interpretation of joint identity as identity replacement is one that posits the actual sharing of ends. On this view, we can make some sense of the claims by Nozick and Solomon that the lovers retain some distinctive identity—the one that necessarily we have as physically distinct beings—while claiming that they share an identity in this important sense of sharing goals and desires.

Lovers can share goals and desires if each lover takes on the ends of the other, so that their goals and desires come into line with one another. Solomon claims that love is not the compromising of one’s own ends to accommodate the ends of the other, but “rather to take the other’s desires and needs as one’s own.” At some points he seems to mean this quite literally, in the sense that within a shared self “personal desires no longer command a distinctive voice.” However, for the same reason that complete physical union is frustrated by our physical separateness, so too is the unqualified joining of ends. Taking on the ends of another cannot mean that they literally become your own ends. On this view, if my lover adopts the end of viewing Kurosawa films, then it also becomes my end to watch Kurosawa films. Surely the understanding of shared ends cannot be this literal, or else lovers would have to end up pursuing exactly the same goals as each other instead of simply supporting one another’s goals. This kind of literal sharing of ends does not seem to be what Solomon has in mind when he claims that “in love one may come to identify oneself wholly in terms of the relationship, but it does not follow that individual roles and differences are submerged.” There must, in the sharing of ends, be reference to the fact that some shared ends in joint identity are ends that are indexed to only one of the lovers.

Perhaps the sharing of ends means that the lovers in a joint identity take on the ends of one another with reference to which individual wishes to
achieve the goal. Thus, if my lover wants to see Kurosawa films, then I adopt the end that he sees Kurosawa films. And if I want to complete a doctorate in philosophy, then I take it as one of my ends that I complete a doctorate in philosophy. Within this interpretation of the sharing of ends, it is quite clear which of my ends are about what I hope to achieve and which of my ends are about what I hope my beloved achieves. However, under this interpretation, it is not clear how we share a qualitatively indistinguishable identity in the sense of sharing goals and desire. Even if both partners adopt all of each other’s ends, their goals and desires are distinct in being referenced to one party or both.

However, if we take heed of Solomon’s claim that personal desires lose a distinctive voice, then we can make sense of how we can reference individuals in explaining the achievement of ends, while at the same time ensuring that both individuals share the same ends. Both lovers will desire, for instance, that A view Kurosawa films, B plant a garden, A become a designer, B complete a doctorate, and A and B move to Tuscany, without attaching any personal priority among these ends based on whether one is A or B. Thus, the sharing of ends involves the placing of the beloved’s ends right alongside one’s own without prioritizing one’s own ends.

This view of the sharing of ends, however, seems to have a serious problem. Alan Soble rightly recognizes that by sharing ends in this way, all possibility of self-sacrifice is eliminated:

In love, I take it, x at least sometimes gives up some of his own good in order to preserve or enhance y’s good. The well-beings of the lovers not being joined together is logically necessary for x to exhibit this sacrificial concern for y. For x to sacrifice his good for the good of y requires that their interests are disjoint enough so that x’s good does not always fare as y’s fares, sometimes changing in the opposite direction.

If all of the lover’s desires and goals are adopted by the beloved, and vice versa, without privileged reference in the case of each individual, then pursuing an end of a partner is essentially pursuing an end of one’s own. Without the difference in identity between the two lovers, ends and desires cannot be prioritized in reference to whom they originate in but must be pursued as desires of the same entity: the joint identity. Thus, selflessness or self-sacrifice on behalf of one’s partner is impossible.

A related problem is that this view of the joint identity as replacing individual identities seems to ignore incompatibility between desires once they are pooled. Nozick argues that the existence of the we will not be constantly conflicted by different desires. Nozick claims that once within a joint identity, the development of certain ends will no longer be decided individually:

People who form a we pool not only their well-being but also their autonomy. They limit or curtail their own decision-making power and rights;
some decisions can no longer be made alone. . . . Each transfers some previous right to make certain decisions unilaterally into a joint pool; somehow, decisions will be made together about how to be together.  

Such a process of giving up unilateral decision making must be equally shared or else the relationship would be one of domination. Similarly, Solomon insists that a shared self does not entail that “one person becomes like the other, but rather that they define their differences—as well as their significant similarities—together.”

This sort of compromise, by pooling autonomy, may sound like the sort of self-sacrifice I claimed was lacking from a joint identity. However, this sort of compromise in the collective decision making of what ends to pursue can take place within a joint identity only if there are distinctive voices given to each partner, that is, if they each retain an identity that, to some degree, is importantly distinct from the other. On this first interpretation of joint identity, Nozick’s view of joint identity as a pooling of autonomy seems to make each person in a couple profoundly affected in his or her identity at the start of entering into a joint identity. However, this kind of compromise can never happen again, since each lover, from that point forward, takes all pooled ends of the joint identity to be equally his or her own. Without distinct voices, it appears that the partners must compromise at some beginning point and, after that, never again be able to see their own individual ends within an identity as being any more their own than their lover’s ends. Thus, Nozick’s account of pooling autonomy overlooks the compromise of individual ends that occurs throughout the life of a love relationship and not just at the beginning.

In a joint identity, there needs to be some room for recognizing that the two individuals do have different ends, while at the same time recognizing that love may alter our ends and our prioritizing of ends. It is false that what happens to lovers is that they pool their ends together without any distinction between what ends ultimately originated in the one and what ends ultimately originated in the other, as this claim denies the existence of real self-sacrifice that occurs within romantic love. Thus, under the identity replacement interpretation of joint identity, it is implausible to claim that love involves joint identity.

Third-Entity Identity

At various points, both Nozick and Solomon insist that the lovers do not cease to possess individual identities. A second way of understanding joint identity is one in which the lovers retain their individual identities but share a joint identity as a third entity. Thus, the two individual identities of the lovers might constitute a joint identity in much the same way that individual citizens constitute a political party, or individual trees constitute a forest. Solomon explains a metaphor for such a model based on the way atoms form molecules: “The atoms retain their identity as atoms of a certain element but, at the same time, they together form a new substance with quite different properties.” Similarly, two individuals with their individual identities come to form something new—a joint identity—when they love.
While this second interpretation looks promising, ultimately it does not seem to do the work it needs to do to show how the joint identity alters the individuals within it. Not only does a tenable account of joint identity have to explain how ends become shared, it also needs to explain how the joint identity alters the lovers. Both Nozick and Solomon make a point of stressing that the individual identity is profoundly altered in love. This account of joint identity as a third entity, however, does nothing to explain why someone would be altered in love, except by becoming a member of a joint identity. Just as an individual tree is not obviously changed by becoming a member of a forest, or an individual person obviously changed by becoming a member of a political party, becoming half of a joint identity does not explain, in itself, how this importantly alters the individual. Why not become half of another identity, another forest, or another political party? This account might explain the ontology of a shared identity, but not the way in which participation in joint identity is supposed to profoundly impact the lovers. On this interpretation of shared additional identity, there is no explanation for why the lovers would care about having an additional identity with any particular person, since their initial identity is meant to remain unchanged (except for being part of this additional identity). Thus, in order to explain how the person is changed by becoming a member of a joint identity, there needs to be further explanation of how the individual self is affected other than simply being part of a third entity.

Identity Alteration

The last interpretation of joint identity is, then, a retention of individual identities with the joint identity forming an important part of the lovers’ individual identities. Nozick claims that having a we “does not mean that you no longer have any individual identity or that your sole identity is as part of the we.” Solomon also notes, “Love is the dialectical tension between individual independence and autonomy on the one hand and the ideal of shared identity on the other.” Neil Delaney seems to capture these sentiments of Nozick and Solomon while avoiding an account of joint identity in which there is an “unqualified merging of interests.” Delaney thinks that a balance must be struck between taking on one’s lovers ends and retaining the distinctness of one’s own ends:

Insofar as you can rightly regard your lover as taking her well-being to be directly connected with yours, while at the same time appreciating the distinctively personal dimensions to your achievements, the relationship looks to be maximally fulfilling.

Delaney believes that lovers must go beyond merely wanting each other to achieve certain ends to having their well-being affected by how the other fares with respect to his or her ends. However, unlike those whose view of joint identity posits the pooling of ends into one identity, Delaney believes that it is very important for each partner to recognize the difference between his or her own ends and his or her beloved’s ends.
I think that Delaney’s view captures a tenable understanding of what Nozick and Solomon had in mind when considering the concept of a joint identity. However, I am hesitant to call it such. Perhaps the most alarming consequence of positing the existence of a joint identity in romantic love is that such a view puts too much distance between individual identities and joint identities. Part of what Solomon seems to be getting at in positing a shared identity is that one’s individual identity is not ultimately distinct from the joint identity. Love itself helps to shape and alter one’s own identity: “love involves a mutual, as well as reciprocal, definition of selves.” Solomon’s notion of a dialectical identity is apparent when he notes, “In fact love is a struggle, albeit sometimes a delightful and always essential struggle, for mutual self-identity and a sense of independence at the same time.”

Within this dialectic, however, it is not the case that there is the stark difference between the individual identity and the joint identity. The relationship of love profoundly alters and helps to define the individual identity in virtue of the participation in a joint identity, but not because there are two types of identities and they can affect each other. Rather, the change in individual identity that occurs in love as a result of the impact the lovers have on each other is what is meant by having a joint identity.

Having your well-being importantly affected by the way your loved one fares certainly creates a change in identity from what it was before the relationship, but it is not clear that it is worth denoting “joint identity.” Calling the alteration in identity a joint identity makes it sound as if all romantically single people have identities that are somehow tightly shut off from others, in which their ends are formed completely autonomously with no other identities impinging on their own, whereas couples have identities that are shared. It seems to insinuate that such strong identity change is limited to romantic love. Yet it seems more likely that there is no strong individual identity left when all the “joint identities” from lovers, friends, family members, coworkers, and institutions are stripped away.

The sort of alteration to ends and sharing of ends that occurs in romantic love is not different, in kind, than what happens in numerous other interpersonal and social relationships. Whether or not it is different in degree may depend on the individual relationship, but I think an intensity of degree here is still not sufficient to deem this a special kind of identity that differs from other identities. If all that is meant by “joint identity” is a difference in degree of the change to the self, then I have no problem with the particular locution. However, as I have shown, the notion of joint identity that has been suggested by philosophers like Nozick and Solomon seems to rely heavily on a distinction between individual identities (those not involved in love) and joint identities (those that result from love). It seems correct to notice that, in love, we retain a sense of our own ends, while having our well-being affected by how our beloved fares with respect to her ends. Additionally, there is a sense in which we come to alter our ends and share certain ends: I may care as much about my beloved’s fulfilling his own ends as I care about the fulfillment of my own ends. Nonetheless, this kind of effect on identity is no different in kind than the effect on identity from numerous other personal relationships and social interactions, even if it usually tends to be greater in degree.
I think we can gain some insight from the discussion of joint identity expounded by Nozick, Solomon, and Fisher in the way that it points out the importance of identity change in romantic love. We are connected to our lovers in virtue of having our identities developed partially in relation to them. Nonetheless, we should not denote this change as a joining, uniting, fusing, or sharing of identities. The extent to which our identities are altered and the significance of this relative to identity alteration in other aspects of our lives ought not to be exaggerated by claiming this identity alteration is a unique joining of identities that, in the absence of love, remain solitary.

Notes


5 Nozick, “Love’s Bond,” 70.

6 Ibid., 71–72.

7 Ibid., 73.

8 Ibid., 82.

9 There seems to be a contradiction here between Nozick’s claim that the lovers have an individual identity and his claim that they both share an identity, unless the claim that they retain individual identities is a rather vacuous claim (in the sense that the individual identities are retained insofar as the entire joint identity comprised of both individual identities is now shared). This will become apparent in my discussion later in this section, when I identify three possible interpretations of his account of joint identity.


11 I will be using the terms “love” and “beloved” to denote “the one loving” and “the one loved,” respectively. However, no asymmetry in the love relationship ought to be assumed by the use of these terms, as what I say about the lover and the beloved applies equally to both individuals in the love relationship.


14 Ibid., 31.

15 Ibid., 27.

16 Ibid., 28.


18 Alan Soble remarks that such lack of awareness of the origination of perceptions, acts, and feelings “could be explained better as the effect of aging, or merely inadequate, memory; or as a result of inattentiveness to detail; or perhaps such confusions reflect merely an indifference on the part of the lovers as to whose great idea it was” (“Union, Autonomy, and Concern,” 72).


20 Ibid.


So too is selfishness towards one’s partner. Pursuing only half of the ends of one’s joint identity might indicate *akrasia*, but certainly would not count as selfishness. Nozick, “Love’s Bond,” 71.


This view need not be seen as ruling out a certain kind of third-entity view. What would be added under this third interpretation is further change in the individual beyond simply being part of a joint identity.


Ibid., 342.


Ibid., 150.

I do not need to claim here that there is no identity left without interpersonal and social interactions to make my point and make no claims about what is left behind if all external forces are lifted away (whatever that would mean). My main point here is that whatever an individual identity is without external forces, it certainly is not enough to be called what we usually refer to as an identity.