

bell hooks: Abuse and Imperfect Love

Aidan Zhou

Abstract: What does it mean to love? I might respond one way, you might respond another, and bell hooks might respond that the asymmetry in our answers is exactly why we, as a society, have become so bad at loving. Love, despite its prevalence in both religious and secular conceptions of ideal societies, is surprisingly oft-neglected by many scholars in diagnosing the key issues afflicting contemporary society. Thus, in *All About Love: New Visions*, bell hooks urges us to consider love, or more so lovelessness (our inability to understand and practice love for one another), as what lies behind the widespread misunderstanding, conflict, and alienation we observe in modern society. hooks proposes a radical conception of love as defined by action rather than emotion, and as part of this redefinition of love, hooks suggests that love and mistreatment (what she labels abuse) can never coexist. In this essay, I argue that this particular claim about the coexistence of love and abuse does more harm than good for hooks' conception of love. I show that love does not *always* have to be perfect, and then I hope to show that at least some cases of abuse or mistreatment must be thought of as simply imperfect love. For love to preclude serious cases of abuse in the way she hopes for, hooks must rethink her definitions of love and abuse. Importantly, I do not hope to argue against love as a fundamental, relevant idea in ethics. Rather, by challenging hooks, and others, to critically re-examine the boundaries of loving action, I hope to resurface the idea of love as a practical ethic central to many of the most relevant contemporary issues that ethics is concerned with.

bell hooks begins *All About Love: New Visions* with a surprising premise: a majority of the world does not know how to love. Despite focusing significant cultural attention on the idea and practice of love, hooks argues that modern society suffers from the problem of lovelessness—we are raised in households absent of love, we are taught improper definitions of what love is, and as a result, we never learn how to properly love others.¹ To overcome this problem, hooks proposes that we adopt a 'love ethic,' a moral framework in which genuine love serves as an ethical standard for society. At the foundation of her love ethic, hooks presents a radically demanding conception of love, one in which "love and abuse cannot coexist."² In this essay, I reconstruct hooks' argument against the coexistence of love and abuse before showing that hooks must either accept that there are situations where love is

1 bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 19.

2 hooks, *All About Love*, 6.

entirely impossible or make room in her definition of love for imperfect love: a form of love where one or more dimensions of love is absent. I then argue that many situations of abuse are structurally similar to imperfect love, and without a principled way of differentiating between them, hooks cannot claim that love and abuse can never coexist.

The primary feature of lovelessness, as hooks argues, is that we do not know what love means. We cannot begin to recognize, learn, and practice love in our everyday lives if we do not even have an understanding of what it *is*. Thus, borrowing from Scott Peck, hooks begins her argument by defining love: love is "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth."³ Here, there are two key features to note about hooks' definition. First, love for her is an *effective* will, one that disregards intention or feeling: "love is as love does."⁴ Love consists entirely of actions alone. Second, love must be aimed at some form of personal or shared growth; this growth can only be achieved if love contains certain constitutive dimensions: care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect.⁵ hooks emphasizes that, for an action to be loving, it must contain *all* of these dimensions.⁶ After all, a major source of lovelessness is that love-like actions, actions containing some of these dimensions but lacking others, are often confused for love itself.⁷

It is worth noting briefly that this is a radical departure from traditional literature on love—Murdoch, Dover, Nehamas, and others all agree that love contains, on some level, an affective dimension; you feel love. hooks, however, chooses to define love as purely an action and independent of emotion, in part to encourage extreme responsibility over our behaviors.⁸ In such a way, we must view hooks' approach to love as part of a larger, ameliorative—not descriptive—project: hooks is concerned with love inasmuch as it informs our response to the problem of lovelessness. This will be important framing for later discussion.

hooks then goes on to argue that love and abuse can never co-exist; the presence of any form of abuse immediately precludes the possibility of love.⁹ Note that hooks is concerned with abuse because it can often appear love-like, that certain abusive actions can cause harm while still being delivered with care or genuine intent. Regardless, hooks believes these actions are still abusive and actively contribute to the problem of lovelessness—they trick us into thinking that harmful actions are loving. More specifically, hooks can be read as making one of two claims: the stronger claim that love and abuse cannot exist in a relationship or the weaker claim that love and abuse cannot exist in the same action. In this paper, I focus on the weaker claim about singular actions, for if I can show that love and abuse can coexist in a singular action, then I have also shown they can coexist in a relationship.

Before reconstructing the rest of hooks' argument, I will also clarify what exactly hooks is referring to when she talks about abuse. Abuse, for hooks, can be thought of as any *action* that involves domination, power, or control over another.¹⁰ This is an expansive, non-traditional conception of abuse. Nevertheless, hooks adopts this definition because it en-

3 hooks, *All About Love*, 4.

4 hooks, *All About Love*, 4.

5 hooks, *All About Love*, 7-8.

6 hooks, *All About Love*, 6-8.

7 hooks, *All About Love*, 5.

8 hooks, *All About Love*, 5.

9 hooks, *All About Love*, 6.

10 hooks, *All About Love*, 6, 41-42.

compasses certain non-paradigmatic forms of abuse like dishonesty, neglect, and betrayal that she is concerned with.¹¹ Lying, for example, is a form of abuse for hooks because it undermines the honesty necessary for loving relationships and results in harmful power dynamics.¹²

Importantly, however, hooks' *exact* positive conception of abuse is not essential to her argument against the coexistence of love and abuse. Rather, what matters is that, given a general conception of abuse, abuse is defined as never containing *all* of love's constitutive dimensions. Whether thought of as domination, power, or control, abuse will necessarily lack at least one of the core dimensions of love. Lying occurs in the absence of honesty, unkindness in the absence of affection, betrayal in the absence of commitment, and humiliation in the absence of care.¹³ We can intuit situations of abuse where only one dimension is missing—a compulsively dishonest parent whose actions are otherwise deeply love-like—or others where many dimensions are missing, as in the case of serious physical and verbal harm, but we cannot describe an abusive action that contains all of love's constitutive dimensions. Thus, hooks' argument hinges on defining abuse by this weaker, *negative* characteristic: in abuse, at least one of the core dimensions of love will be missing. For the rest of this paper, I will use "abuse" in this negative sense.

With this in mind, we can quickly synthesize hooks' argument that love and abuse are incompatible: love necessitates all of its core dimensions, and abuse lacks at least one of these dimensions. One action cannot be both love and abuse. While this might appear tautological, note that hooks is not arguing that abuse is *defined* by a lack of loving dimensions; rather, she only observes that abuse, as she defines it, always lacks at least one of these dimensions. In other words, hooks does not claim any non-loving action to be abuse, only that all abusive actions are non-loving. In premise-conclusion form, hooks' argument can be restated as such:

P1: Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.

P2: This will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth manifests through actions that must contain certain constitutive dimensions: care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect.

P3: If an action does not contain all of these dimensions, then it cannot be love.

P4: Abuse does not contain at least one of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, or respect.

C: Abuse cannot be love.

In the next section of this paper, I object to hooks' formulation of love and argue that she has not adequately shown why love and abuse cannot coexist. I show that P3 is overly demanding and fails to account for general situations of *dimension-conflict*: when two or more dimensions of love are mutually exclusive. I then argue that if hooks accommodates love in general situations of dimension-conflict, which I believe she should, then she must also accommodate love in abuse.

To start, imagine that your friend Andrew asks if you enjoyed the gift he got you. You did not particularly enjoy it at all, but you also know for a fact that Andrew is a deeply

11 hooks, *All About Love*, 6, 42.

12 hooks, *All About Love*, 41.

13 hooks, *All About Love*, 6, 42.

sensitive person and that, no matter how caringly or gently you approach it, Andrew *will* be hurt if he finds out you did not enjoy the gift. On one hand, you might respond truthfully and inform Andrew that you did not enjoy the gift. By choosing to be truthful, however, you will be acting in violation of the knowledge that this will necessarily hurt him. On the other hand, you might act on your prior knowledge about Andrew's psyche and reply that you did, in fact, enjoy the gift. In this case, knowledge requires you to violate his trust through a dishonest response. While potentially trivial, and certainly non-abusive, I propose this scenario to illustrate the general possibility of situations where any possible action will lack a dimension of love. In the case of Andrew, you cannot act trustworthily without violating knowledge, and you cannot act with knowledge without violating trust. In situations like these, no possible action can contain all the dimensions of love, so it appears that no possible action can be loving.

To be consistent with her definition of love as requiring all of its dimensions, hooks would have to accept that, in situations like these, love is *impossible*; I argue, however, that hooks should not accept the impossibility of love. After all, love for hooks serves as the foundation of her love ethic, an ethical ideal she wishes to inform our actions. For love to function properly as an ethical principle, it should be informative, *especially* in these complicated situations of dimension-conflict. After all, an ethics that can only inform our actions in straightforward situations does not seem like a particularly salient kind of ethics at all. Additionally, while hooks could respond that love can still inform our actions inasmuch as we act in a way that best approximates love, this too feels counterproductive given our understanding of love as an ameliorative project: guiding us to perform more love-like actions would be unhelpful for hooks as she begins by claiming that love-like actions are a cause of lovelessness in the first place. Rather, if love is to serve as the ethical ideal that hooks intends, then she should want for love itself to always be possible.

hooks must then revise her definition of love to allow for love to be possible in all situations. In doing so, she would necessarily accept the possibility of *imperfect love*—love, which does not contain all of its constitutive dimensions. This is because if it is possible to be able to act lovingly in all situations, then it must be possible to act lovingly even in general situations of dimension-conflict. In these situations, love, whatever action it ends up being, will lack at least one of the key dimensions of love. Love in these cases will be imperfect, but it will still be love. Thus, P3 as stated cannot be true because love clearly does not *always* have to contain all of its dimensions.

In objecting to P3 and hooks' stringent requirement that love always contain all of its dimensions, I have also now objected to hooks' argument that love and abuse cannot coexist. For if imperfect love can still be love without all of its dimensions present, then hooks can no longer also claim that love and abuse cannot coexist solely on the basis of it lacking a dimension of love; love, as shown by imperfect love, does not always need all of its dimensions. In response, hooks must either find a way to differentiate between imperfect love and abuse, and explain why imperfect love is acceptable but abuse is not, or she must provide an entirely different argument as to why love and abuse cannot coexist—one that does not depend on the absence of love's dimensions.

In the final part of this paper, I will briefly consider a couple of ways in which hooks might attempt to differentiate between the absence of dimensions of love in abuse and the absence of dimensions of love in imperfect love. hooks might first claim that abuse is contextually different from the imperfect love allowed in general situations of dimension-conflict. After all, in situations of dimension-conflict like the case of Andrew and his gift, there exists

a tragic conflict between particular dimensions of love. A dimension of love must *necessarily* be absent in any resulting action. hooks could claim that abuse, however, is different from imperfect love because abuse doesn't contain a logical necessity for the absence of one of love's dimensions. Abusers make the *choice* to abuse when they could have acted perfectly lovingly otherwise. Thus, while abuse might carry the same structure as imperfect love, that of an action missing one of love's dimensions, the contexts in which these actions occur are drastically different. hooks might claim that what she really meant in P3 was that love must contain all of its constitutive dimensions, *whenever possible*. Such an amendment allows hooks to accept imperfect love only in situations where perfect love is impossible.

hooks is concerned with what can and often does arise from situations of tragic dimension-conflict where perfect love is impossible. Consider a father who is worried about his daughter's drug addiction. It has been a few months since she completed rehab, and he knows that any relapse would cause her severe physical and mental harm. In the past, attempts at reasoning or other supportive interventions have been unsuccessful. Knowing it is the *only option* to protect his daughter, he decides to closely monitor her every action: he reads her diary, checks her messages, and goes through her browser history. He tells her he does this out of love, but she finds his actions deeply controlling and abusive. At first glance, this appears to be abuse of the kind that hooks is concerned with—abuse that is complicated, somewhat love-like, and aimed at the well-being of the abused.¹⁴

This scenario involves, however, a structurally similar tragic conflict between two dimensions of love: the father cannot act in a way that honors his responsibility for his daughter without violating her trust, and he cannot honor his daughter's trust without sacrificing his responsibility for her well-being. He must choose between acting abusively and acting unlovingly. Note that the father is not *forced* to act abusively—he could, for example, choose to communicate honestly and openly with his daughter in a way that does not involve domination, power, or control. Rather, the tragic conflict arises because he does not have the option to act perfectly lovingly, to act in a way that contains all of love's dimensions. Because of this, hooks cannot use tragic conflict alone to differentiate abuse from imperfect love: both can come from contexts where perfect love is impossible.

Alternatively, hooks could claim that it is not context but rather the *extent* to which the dimensions of love are missing in abuse and imperfect love that differentiates them. I will not explore this possibility in great depth, but I note that for hooks to respond in this way would not be an easy task. The differences between imperfect love and abuse are often unclear in the real world, and it would be up to hooks to propose a way to principledly differentiate between the extents to which dimensions are lacking in imperfect love and abuse. In some examples, this difference might be obvious—an omission to a stranger versus physical violence against your child—but in others, especially containing abuse of the kind hooks cares deeply about, the differing extents to which the dimensions of love are absent might not be as straightforward. What she refers to as abuse, I might label imperfect love. If hooks really wants to argue that no form of abuse and love can coexist, and if she wants her argument to stay focused on abuse's lack of one or more dimensions of love, then the burden is on her to show exactly how such a lack of love's dimensions in abuse is principledly different from that of imperfect love.

Again, hooks could always choose to bite the bullet and accept that love is sometimes impossible. It might be easier to maintain that imperfect love cannot exist than to differentiate it from abuse. I have argued in this paper, however, that she should aspire to a more forceful

conception of love, one that can guide our actions even in complicated situations. In doing so, hooks would have to accept the existence of imperfect love and show us exactly how it differs from abuse; otherwise, hooks is wrong to proclaim that love and abuse cannot coexist.

Works Cited

hooks, bell. *All About Love: New Visions*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1999.

14 hooks, *All About Love*, 7.