I. INTRODUCTION

You may find talk of loving nature to be syrupy, sentimental, or even confused. It is certainly not the language of the tough-minded philosopher. Yet outside of the academy such talk is common. In the trailer for the 2015 film, *Love Thy Nature*, Liam Neeson intones:

We’ve lost touch with nature. This disconnect hurts our health, dims our spirit, and threatens our future. *Love Thy Nature* is a cinematic journey through the beauty and intimacy of our vital relationship with the natural world. And it shows that a renewed connection with nature is key not only to our wellbeing, but also to solving our climate and environmental crises. (*Love Thy Nature*)

In this article I argue that nature is a proper object of love and that loving nature can be a powerful motivator for protecting it. I begin by reviewing some practical and philosophical reasons for supposing that love matters, then consider and blunt skepticism about love. Next I briefly discuss the relationship between love and aesthetics, and how love can be a powerful motivator for protecting nature. I conclude with some observations about what remains to be done.

II. WHY LOVE MATTERS

Maybe Iris Murdoch said it best: “[L]ove (properly understood) does make the world go round” (2015, 212). On the other hand you may think this is just the highbrow version of the lowbrow movie trailer to which I referred above. Love does not literally make the world go round; the laws of physics do that. What is Murdoch really saying here?

Clearly, she is pointing to the ubiquity of love, at least in our consciousness. Some may live without love but no one lives without thinking about love. Psychological theories and sociological edifices have been built on reflections about love. These theories may be wrong and these edifices badly constructed, but at least as a first approximation they seem to be constituted by the right stuff. An enormous amount of behavior that goes on around us and we ourselves engage in can seemingly be explained in ways that advert to the idea of love.

Love is the sinew that binds us to those with whom we share meals and homes. It is also what unites us with those who are far away or cruelly separated from us. Only the emotionally bereft could fail to grasp this in reading the words of the imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, directed to his wife:
Throughout all these years that I have lived without freedom, our love was full of bitterness imposed by outside circumstances, but as I savor its aftertaste, it remains boundless. I am serving my sentence in a tangible prison, while you wait in the intangible prison of the heart. Your love is the sunlight that leaps over high walls and penetrates the iron bars of my prison window, stroking every inch of my skin, warming every cell of my body, allowing me to always keep peace, openness, and brightness in my heart, and filling every minute of my time in prison with meaning . . . [M]y love is solid and sharp, capable of piercing through any obstacle. Even if I were crushed into powder, I would still use my ashes to embrace you.

(2014)

Love is important in our lives because of the way it structures our relations to existing others, but also because of how it relates us to the past and future. So much has changed so rapidly over the last few decades that the world of our grandparents (or great grandparents) is scarcely imaginable to us. Yet when we think about them we do not dwell on what is so different that it would make them almost unintelligible to us: all that smoking, the rigid differentiation of gender roles, the complete lack of anything digital, the dearth of out-of-season food, the clothes so precious that they are carefully washed and lovingly repaired. Instead, when we think of them, it is as those we loved, and who loved and sacrificed for us, that transports us into their lives and worlds. It is their temperament, character and emotions that are vivid to us, not the alien circumstances of their lives. Similarly, when it comes to the future, it is the love of children and young people that provides the thread. With each year, our own time horizon becomes shorter but the horizon of our caring does not recede in proportion. To a great extent our concern for what happens after we die is rooted in our love for those who will go on without us. Love is the foundation of the intertemporal community in which we live and find meaning. Without these projections in time, animated by love, human life as we know it would be scarcely recognizable.

We began this section wondering what Murdoch might mean when she says that love makes the world go round. Part of it is certainly this: love is a big part of what makes our lives both intelligible and worth living.

III. SKEPTICISM ABOUT LOVE

The skepticism about love with which I will be concerned is Eliminativism. Eliminativism takes two primary forms: Nihilistic Eliminativism (NE) and Pluralistic Eliminativism (PE). NE supposes that there is a coherent, unitary concept of love, but nothing that exists actually instantiates it. PE claims that our everyday concept of love is incoherent, thus nothing that exists could instantiate it.

NE is a view that is typically put forward by the lovelorn or cynical. It is the view that what seems to be love is really an illusion. For whatever exactly love is, it must involve a deep commitment to a beloved that simply does not happen on this Earth. In every case the supposed lover is really acting only in his own interests and love is a conceit (whether conscious or non-conscious) for getting what he wants.

On this view Liu Xiaobo was either deceiving himself, his wife, or both. Since the words that I quoted were written from prison toward the end of his life, it is hard to see what interest of his they could have served. Moreover, although Liu Xiaobo’s words are unique in their courage and eloquence, every day millions of people all over the world declare their love for each other. For NE to be plausible there must be an extremely powerful error theory that explains what is going on in these cases. While one can imagine the outlines of such a theory, it is much easier to understand why those who have been wounded or dissatisfied in love would deny its existence. This is the conceptual equivalent of overturning the table when you lose in a high stakes card game. We know that people do these things, and it is not surprising that some people do this when they have lost at love.

PE is a more plausible view. It is a plain fact that love seems to take different forms across history and cultures. Even in a single place at a single time love seems to take a staggering diversity of objects. Contemporary Americans claim to love God, guns, beer, liberty, and of course America—not to mention dogs and mothers and the music that extolls them. Moreover, people say inconsistent things about love: that love is unconditional and fickle; patient and steadfast, the apotheosis of human life and also a form of insanity. Our love was meant to be, yet we both know that if we were born in another time or place, or swiped left
rather than right on some dating app, some other love would have been meant to be.

Existing alongside this array of utterances is the fact that the word ‘love’ itself goes back to the very roots of the English language, occurring in the earliest eighth-century English writings. It is related to the Old English ‘lufu’, which in turn is related to Old Frisian ‘luve,’ Old High German ‘luba,’ and Gothic ‘lubu.’ There is a cognate ‘lof’ in early forms of Scandinavian languages. The Indo-European root of ‘love’ is also behind the Latin ‘lubet,’ which means ‘it is pleasing,’ and ‘lubido,’ which means ‘desire.’

It is also true that some languages have multiple words that are typically translated as the English word ‘love.’ For example, the Greek words ‘Eros,’ ‘Agape,’ and ‘Philia’ are all sometimes translated as ‘love’ and it is often said that each marks a different kind of love. Icelandic distinguishes among the objects of love, marking them with different words.7

Conceptual claims based on such apparent linguistic facts are more complicated and less decisive than they may seem. Languages have histories: meanings change, and distinctions marked at one time may be redrawn at another. In any case while linguistic distinctions are useful guides on the road to conceptual clarity they can also lead us astray.8 While important and useful, they should not be regarded as dispositive when it comes to marking concepts. Still, as a matter of linguistic acceptability, English takes a vast array of objects as the objects of ‘love’ and countenances a capacious range of loving relationships. As a methodological point, we should try to see whether this plethora of uses makes conceptual sense. If it does not, we can return to PE. PE is always an option for those who reject attempts to show how a single concept might hold together. In the next section, however, I will try to show that our prevailing notion of love does hold together and that it can be mapped as a reasonably unitary concept.9

IV. LOVE ACTUALLY

In this section I provide the rudiments of an account of love. I do not purport to offer necessary and sufficient conditions, a complete analysis, or an account that captures everyone’s intuitions about every case. I doubt that such an account could be given. My concern here is to identify some central features of love, and provide enough detail to plausibly account for some central cases. I will focus especially on how the account applies to the possibility of loving nature.

Love has been a persistent eddy in philosophical discourse, but in the last decade it has moved closer to the mainstream. The paradigms of love, at least in recent analytic philosophy, have been narrow, primarily focusing on familial love.10 Familial love is hugely fascinating: it is intense, radically particular, hugely contingent, and its formation and sustenance is almost entirely reason-insensitive in this respect: While we can give reasons for loving our partners or children, our love for them does not arise from these reasons, nor does it depend on them to be sustained.11 But love is large and so (apparently) is the concept. As I have pointed out, we claim to love not only people, but also animals, abstractions, inanimate objects, and more besides. Most recent philosophical writing ignores the capaciousness of love, or quickly notes it and moves on (Jollimore 2011). Yet, as is so often the case (in my opinion anyway), what philosophers regard as marginal is often of the greatest interest. It is on the borderlands where one often gathers the greatest insights.

IV.A. Individuals

We can work toward the first feature of love by examining a passage in Dostoyevsky’s Brothers Karamazov. Father Zosima reports that a doctor tells him that “I love mankind but I find to my amazement that the more I love mankind as a whole, the less I love man in particular” (2002, 57). Charles Schulz’s character Linus says “I love mankind . . . it’s people I can’t stand!!” (2006). Both the doctor and Linus claim to love mankind, but this love does not seem to be constituted by nor associated with love for individual people. Indeed, the doctor seems to suggest that his love for mankind may have driven out his love for individual people. It is not that love of mankind is impossible, but rather that it is unwise, at least if we think we ought to love individual people.

There is another way of reading these passages in which the doctor and Linus are self-deceived or speaking ironically. What the doctor’s and
Linus’s lack of connection between loving mankind in general and people as individuals really shows is that neither one loves mankind at all. This chimes with an important truth about love articulated by Iris Murdoch: “love is the perception of individuals” (1999: 215). Neither the doctor nor Linus love individuals so they do not really love mankind.

But what counts as an individual? It is possible to hold that there is a distinct class of entities that are individuals just in virtue of their intrinsic properties, but in the complex, hierarchically ordered world in which we find ourselves this view seems implausible. Virtually everything we ordinarily count as an individual seems open to decomposition. Of course, some forms of decomposition are compatible with what is decomposed counting as an individual, but rather than venturing further into the wilds of ontology I will simply stipulate the following: ‘Individual,’ in the sense in which it is relevant to the account of love which I am putting forward, is a contrastive term. For an entity to be an object of love it must be regarded as an individual in contrast to some general class of which it is an instance, which itself may be an instance of a more general class. For example, my partner Mei is an individual in contrast to the population of New York, the population of New York is an individual in contrast to the American people, the American people are an individual relative to the people of the world, and the people of the world are an individual in contrast to all living things. Each of these individuals can be loved, but only when they are regarded as individuals in contrast to a more general, class.\(^\text{12}\) This account of an individual is quite permissive. Abstract ideals such as equality, freedom, and democracy can count as individuals on this view.\(^\text{13}\)

Returning to Father Zosima’s doctor and Linus, a charitable understanding is that they have an undifferentiated concern for humanity. Wishing everyone well may constitute compassion, but it cannot constitute love.\(^\text{14}\) Compassion can be generic and universal (though we cannot have compassion for abstractions), but love is specific and individual. While we can love many different kinds of things, there is a limit to the number of actual things that we can love. Love is not a generalized stance that we can take toward the world; it requires work and relationship with individuals.\(^\text{15}\)

IV.B. Autonomy

A second feature of love is also suggested by Murdoch: “Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real” (1999, xiv). In one sense this observation may seem trivial: Only a solipsist would deny this “realization” (and it’s hard to see why she would bother to do so). But the point Murdoch is getting at is substantial and important. Often we understand, interpret, and value other people (and animals, nature, and other entities) instrumentally, only in relation to ourselves. We fail to acknowledge their independent reality and value in the way in which we acknowledge (or even perhaps presuppose) our own. Not only do we neglect their reality, we often relate to others, especially those we claim to love, as extensions of ourselves, even while in some way knowing that they are not.

It is easy to think of cases in which this is so, and these are cases in which we would deny the existence of a loving relation whatever those involved might think (or think they think). Imagine a man who understands and interprets his partner’s preferences and desires only in relation to his own, and only values his partner in relation to himself. He may think that he loves his partner but he does not. The failure of love becomes vivid when the partner resists, and expresses values, capacities, and dispositions that are undeniably independent of the man’s. Perhaps the man is a communist and his partner wants to join the Republican Party, or the man is a puritan and the partner wants to take pole-dancing lessons.\(^\text{16}\) In such cases the pretense of love dissolves and it becomes clear that the man does not love his partner. He loves only himself, and it is himself that he saw reflected in his partner before his partner’s independent spirit was revealed. When the pretense can no longer be maintained, the illusion of love dissolves.

One way of explaining why this was not a loving relationship, despite what may be protestations to the contrary, is to say that the man failed to respect his partner’s autonomy. There are many complicated ways of understanding this claim, but there is also a simple way in which it is true and important, and we should not let the philosophical complexities around the notion of autonomy blind us to it.\(^\text{17}\) In the simple sense to which I shall cling, an entity is autonomous if it is free from external control. In this sense most of us most of the time are autonomous, and nature, dogs, and vehicles
can all be said to be autonomous in this sense to varying degrees at particular times.

Autonomy in this simple sense is important since many entities have tendencies, dispositions, desires, or even values that are expressed when they are not under external control. Even many non-intentional entities are active, self-organizing, autopoietic systems that resist externally imposed change. For example, a wild river resists human attempts to change its course. The Colorado River created the Grand Canyon and it will, in a short time relative to the river’s history, bring down the Glen Canyon Dam and other human efforts at controlling it. In this simple sense of “autonomy,” entities such as the Colorado River are more or less autonomous, though their autonomy may be compromised at particular moments.

The man who thought he loved his partner may have demeaned or mistreated his partner in a variety of ways, but he also failed to respect his partner’s autonomy in this simple sense: He did not appreciate his partner as an independent entity. The man lived in his own fantasy, which he projected on to his partner, pretending that his fantasy fully constituted his partner’s identity. The fantasy dissolved when his partner expressed preferences, desires, and values of their own. It became clear then that the man did not love his partner. Love requires recognizing the independent reality of its object, and in most cases this involves respecting its autonomy in the simple sense that I have characterized.

IV.C. Vulnerability

A third feature of love is brought out by how we can identify love, and distinguish it from liking, preferring, desiring, or other positive attitudes or dispositions towards an object. In a letter to Brigid Brophy, Iris Murdoch writes: “I do love you. (You asked earlier: how did I know? Partly by introspection and partly by a study of my conduct.)” (2015, 247).

In this passage Murdoch talks about studying one’s own conduct, in addition to introspection, as a way of discovering whether and what one loves, and there is surely something to this. The behavioral pattern that one expresses toward an object of love is surely different from what is expressed towards the objects of other attitudes that one has. Describing and characterizing these differences is the job of a psychology or sociology of love and I will not pretend to do that work here.

Instead, I will turn to the philosopher’s friend, introspection. One thing we know by introspection, I claim, is that losing something you love triggers a distinctive, painful sensation of loss. This may be most available to us when we think of the death of a parent, lover, friend, or animal companion. As the loss recedes in time, the pain may become encapsulated, contextualized, and appear less frequently at the center of our consciousness. Yet it remains a permanent part of who we are. It is always in some way available, even when not apparently present, sometimes erupting on surprising occasions.

Empirical data show that people’s subjective reports of happiness rebound much more quickly from the deaths of spouses than we might imagine—and a good thing too! Deaths of intimates may give rise to fuller or different understandings of self, others, and the world in general. They may even produce a sense of gratitude. But even when all of this occurs and is acknowledged, the distinctive pain persists.

The distinctive, painful sensation triggered by the loss stems from the fact that love involves making oneself vulnerable in a particular way. Its loss is beyond grief. The world bears the marks of love, as Murdoch observes, and some of those marks are deep in our consciousness.

IV.D. Love’s Escalator

A fourth feature of love is that it is productive both of additional love and respect for love. Quasi-transitivity is the tendency of a lover to treat what her beloved loves as a candidate for loving. Universality is the tendency for a lover to respect other lovers’ lovings. Together I call these “love’s escalator” because instances of loving have a tendency to produce both more instances of loving and greater respect for loving. I will discuss universality first and then quasi-transitivity.

Universality is relatively straightforward. Lovers have a tendency to respect others’ loving, even when they do not love the lover nor are attracted to the object of the love. If one experiences the power of love and its centrality in one’s own life, then there is a tendency to appreciate the power and centrality of love in the lives of others, and this appreciation is naturally expressed in
Suppose that I love the desert and you hiking become candidates for my love as well. If so, then jazz, eggplant, and imagining that I love you and you love jazz, eggplant, and for L1’s love as well. We can thicken this up by loves O1, and O1 loves O2, then O2 is a candidate of love. Quasi-transitivity holds that if L1 assigns different subscripts to different lovers and (which in some cases can itself be a lover), and assign different subscripts to different lovers and objects of love. Quasi-transitivity holds that if L1 loves O1, and O1 loves O2, then O2 is a candidate for L1’s love as well. We can thicken this up by imagining that I love you and you love jazz, eggplant, and hiking. If so, then jazz, eggplant, and hiking become candidates for my love as well.21

“Being a candidate” is not a very precise notion, nor should it be. Something is a candidate for love in the intended sense if I am open to loving the object of your love in a way that I am not open to loving other things. The object of your love is on my radar as a lovable object. It comes highly recommended as an object of love. Because I love you I will listen to jazz sympathetically, taste eggplant receptively, and hike with a positive attitude, taking them all as serious as candidates for love.

Like universality, quasi-transitivity is in part an empirical hypothesis and its strength can vary across lovers, objects, and situations. When it comes to objects such as vegetables and physical activities, quasi-transitivity is comparatively weak. When it comes to objects such as relatives, it can be so strong that being a candidate for love can morph into a presumption in favor of love. In some cultures it is presumed that marriage brings with it loving relations with the partner’s closest relatives. I know of no culture in which there is this presumption with respect to vegetables.

We might think of quasi-transitivity as producing a gradient: at one end an object is to some slight degree or another a candidate for love; at the other end, there is a presumption that the object will be loved. For ease of reference we can describe this as a “gradient of presumption”: at one end the presumption is so weak that it does not exist; at the other end, the presumption is very strong. When it comes to vegetables, the presumption does not exist. When it comes to relatives, the presumption is strong. Other objects are located in various regions of the gradient.22

Suppose that a nationalistic American falls in love with a nationalistic Frenchman. The American may respect the Frenchman’s love for France (and vice versa) but the presumption that they will love each other’s countries is weaker than the presumption that they will love each other’s parents or children. Indeed, the presumption that they will love each other’s countries is weaker than the presumption that they will love certain natural features of each other’s countries. It is easy to imagine the Frenchman falling in love with the Sierras but not the United States, and the American falling in love with the lavender fields of Provence but not with France. Even more extremely, imagine a case in which lovers of different football teams fall in love with each other. Mutual toleration would be an achievement—forget presumption! What these cases suggest is that there is a relation between how indexical a love is and the strength of the presumption: high indexicality and low presumption; low indexicality and high presumption. Loving a football team is highly indexical, grounded in the particular personal, historical, and cultural experience of the lover. Loving one’s parents or children, on the other hand, is more general and widely shared, hence less indexical.23

Knowledge and shared experience can figure in whether the presumption will result in love actually.24 Suppose that I love the desert and you love me. Given quasi-transitivity, there is a presumption that you will love the desert. But suppose that you have no knowledge or experience of deserts and, at least at the outset, find my love of deserts a charming, but intriguing idiosyncrasy. Since you love me, you are willing to go camping with me. Together we see the desert’s nocturnal inhabitants, the plants that have adapted to these conditions, the shifting colors of the landscape as the day wears on, and the rising of the moon on the desert’s stark features. Together we feel the desert wind, hear the silence of the desert, and sense its solitude. You may become interested in how this place was formed, what sustains it, how its plants and animals make a living. As you learn more about the desert you may come to see it differently and begin to value it. This may lead you to spend more time in the desert, seeing it
in different seasons, watching the spring, with its incredible array of flowers, turn to the haunting stillness of summer. You might start reading some desert literature, from the monastic fathers of the church to Edward Abbey. You may come to love the desert.

Of course, you may not come to love the desert, and your experience and knowledge of the desert may make things worse. You may return from our adventure hot, dirty, hungry for a burger, thirsty for a beer, and with a newfound appreciation for air conditioning.

Quasi-transitivity fares even worse in what Noël Carroll (in conversation) has dubbed the “mother-in-law” problem. The mother-in-law who gives rise to this problem does not love anyone who loves her son. There are cases, it seems, in which the very fact that parents love their children may actually make it more difficult for them to love their children’s lovers. Worse still is the “former lover problem”: How could I possibly love that terrible person whom my lover still loves, who she was with before she was with me?

One response to these cases would be to deny that the mother-in-law truly loves her son or that I really love my lover. It is true that love is often mixed with less admirable attitudes, which in some cases may drive love out altogether without the full awareness of the supposed lover (remember the man in the discussion of autonomy in Section iv.b). Still, it seems wrong to suppose that such attitudes cannot exist as part of a loving relationship.

A better response is to remember that a presumption is only a presumption and we learn to live with its failure. However, this does not mean that the failure is not disturbing. I may know my lover well enough to predict that she will not share my love for the desert; that she will always prefer Hong Kong, haute cuisine, and well-planned golf courses. Despite my prediction, I will be more than disappointed if she fails to love the desert. This will not diminish my love for her, but something will seem amiss in the world.\textsuperscript{35}

Part of what drives quasi-transitivity is the desire of lovers to share the objects of their love, just as they share their love for each other. There is a sense of metaphysical disorder when lovers are not in solidarity regarding the objects of their love, which does not occur with respect to the objects of their likings and preferrings. If my mother fails to love my partner this is a rupture of a wholly different order than when my mother fails to like my favorite bartender. Underlying quasi-transitivity is an almost instinctive commitment to the idea that loves are supposed to align, which itself may be driven by a kind of Platonic commitment to the unity of love. This may seem surprising, especially given the specificity and reason-insensitivity of love mentioned earlier. Yet such a commitment may linger in our commonsense conception of love. We may see loving someone as a gateway to loving everything that is lovable.\textsuperscript{26}

In this section I have provided the rudiments of an account of love. I have suggested that love is a relation taking an individual as its object, that involves respect for autonomy, requires making oneself vulnerable in a particular way, and displays quasi-transitivity and a tendency towards universality. Moreover, love comes in degrees and so does quasi-transitivity, which also displays several kinds of indexicality which also comes in degrees.

In light of the complexity of love, it might be helpful to repurpose the metaphor of the “web of belief” introduced by W. V. O. Quine and Joe Ullian (1970). According to Quine and Ullian, we can think of our beliefs as forming a web. Some beliefs, such as belief in the truths of elementary arithmetic, are near the center of the web. They cannot be abandoned without repercussions and revisions across the entire web. Other beliefs are at the periphery of the web. Their rejection sets off barely a ripple. My belief that Cleopatra was an Aries may be an example. Perhaps we should think of the web of belief as being complemented by a web of caring. Loves are near the center of the web of caring, while preferences and weak desires are near the periphery. Different instances of love are located in different places near the center of the web, depending on their strength and their object. When I stop loving the love of my life, this systematically disrupts my entire web of caring. If I come to dislike my colleague’s brother-in-law, not much changes. On this picture it is not surprising that necessary and sufficient conditions are hard to come by, that indexicality and entrenchment matter, and that various features including love itself would come in degrees.

V. LOVE, AESTHETICS, AND PROTECTING NATURE

The environmental movement has long recognized the importance of the concrete, local, and
particular for motivating people to protect nature. Nature writing, from Henry David Thoreau to Wendell Berry and beyond, with its focus on place, has been a powerful vehicle for conveying the power, complexity, and vulnerability of nature. The most important successes of the American environmental movement during the 1960s and 1970s were responses to highly visible assaults on particular places. Think about, for example, the uncanniness of a fire breaking out on the surface of the Cuyahoga River, and the feeling of desecration associated with the Santa Barbara oil spill. Decades earlier Aldo Leopold had observed that: “We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in” (1986, 251). If we read the “only” in the sense of a logical connective this may be an overstatement, but there is no doubt that Leopold has a hold on a profound truth about the psychology of human valuing.

Climate change and other issues associated with the Anthropocene have presented serious challenges for environmental communication and action. Global issues are located everywhere in general but nowhere in particular, and the natural form of communicating them is in terms of abstract concepts. For example, the fact of global warming is typically expressed as a deviation expressed in Centigrade, from a norm regarding Earth’s mean surface temperature. There are three different influential methodologies for calculating Earth’s mean surface temperature (“Global Surface Temperature”). They agree that over the last thirty years there has been a warming of .69°C–.89°C; for most purposes this is usually characterized as an .8°C warming. But even the simplified version of the claim it supports (“the Earth has warmed by .8°C over the last thirty years”) is hazy to most people. We think of the Earth as having a climate not a temperature (it is people that have temperatures but then they do not have climates). In the United States we are not used to thinking in Centigrade at all (and it is worth mentioning that temperatures in Centigrade are expressed in lower numbers than in Farenheit). Even if we claim to believe that Earth has warmed .8°C over the last thirty years, we still have little idea of what this is supposed to mean for our everyday experience, other than a vague expectation that wherever we are will be warmer than we remember it as being (often followed by surprise when it is not).

Consider Figure 1, which is normally used to express the fact that 2016 was the warmest year on record. Compare this with another image that we might use to alert us to climate change (Figure 2).

It is not obvious from looking at the first image that there is anything about it that is bad, much less that a response is called for. Alarm is immediate when viewing the second image, and responses also come immediately to mind.27

We can reason ourselves from images such as the former, to actions that should be taken—that is what academics and enlightened policy-makers do. But the trail from reason to action is uncertain and rife with threats. The route that goes directly from concrete, emotion-charged images to actions is more reliable and immediate. The fact is that we are better at sensing than thinking. Evolution built us to respond primarily to accessible rapid movements of middle-sized objects in our visual fields. We privilege the visual, proximate, and dramatic. This is the foundation for Leopold’s claim, and explains why love can be a powerful motivator for environmental protection, for love is closely associated with the visual, proximate, and dramatic. Love is not the only relation built on the proximate, but it is one of the most powerful (terror might compete).

In bringing together love, nature, and aesthetics we are again following the trail blazed by Iris Murdoch. I have quoted Murdoch as saying “Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realization that that something other than oneself is real” (1999, 203). She goes on to say, in the same passage: “Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. What stuns us into a realization of our supersensible destiny is not . . . the formlessness of nature but rather its unutterable particularity” (1999, 203).

Here, I will extract only two themes that are important to understanding what it is to love nature, why this love is so motivating, and how it is bound up with the aesthetic. First, the discovery of reality that is central to love, art, and morals is the antidote to narcissism. Just as loving another person involves recognizing the independent reality of their beliefs, will, and desires, so loving the desert involves recognizing the independent reality of the wind, and the autonomous existence of the plants and animals that inhabit the place. Second, for Murdoch, loving nature involves a relation, not to its “formlessness,” but to
**Figure 1.** Summary Information: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Department of Commerce (public domain). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

**Figure 2.** Somali refugees displaced by floods cross a swollen river in Kenya. BRENDAN BANNON/AFP/Getty Images. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
its “unutterable particularity.” Art, for Murdoch, is in all of these ways revelatory.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

There is much in this article that is speculative, programmatic, and left unsaid. Some of the dangling details include how love arises (love at first sight (including the love of infants)); the role of reciprocity and the possibility of unrequited love; and the importance that some theorists find in making the beloved’s ends one’s own. Perhaps most profoundly, I have not discussed the dark side of love explored by Freud and others. We fall in love with what we experience as beyond our will, and then almost immediately seek to dominate it. Love can only persist when there is a living relationship between these two contradictory impulses.

What I have hoped to achieve in this article is a vindication of the everyday view that love encompasses vastly more than persons, and that nature is among the objects that it encompasses. This matter because although the motivation to protect, nurture, and respect comes from many sources, none is more powerful than love, and never has nature needed our protection more than now.28

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but I have no idea whether he knew Spanish or the work of Quevedo.

4. This point is discussed brilliantly by Scheffler in his (2013).

5. Some may think this is merely an ad hominem response to a philosophical claim. Whatever the general standing of ad hominem responses, in this case the view is so implausible yet ubiquitous that it invites such a response.

6. See, for example, May (2011) for the history of love in the West.

7. I have been informed by Gudrun Svavarsdottir.

8. One should not, for example, go off in search of goodness’s sakes.

9. “Reasonably unitary” is an important qualification. Linguistic animals are creative, language churns, and there is no hard distinction between literal and non-literal uses.

10. For example, Frankfurt (2004) and Kolodny (2003). Some philosophers focus on “romantic” love (for example Jenkins [2015] and Brogard ([2015]).

11. These points are all persuasively made by Frankfurt (2004) and Singer (2009).

12. More precisely, they do not fail to be objects of love because they fail to be individuals. It is true of course that some individuals are more lovable than other individuals. There are a wide range of considerations that bear on the lovability of individuals including something as mundane as size. It is difficult for us to love something as small as a bacterium or as large as a galaxy even if we view them as individuals in contrast to some general class.

13. Frankfurt (2004) and Singer (2009) explicitly endorse the view that such abstract ideals can be objects of love.

14. I understand “compassion” in the spirit of the Dalai Lama who characterizes compassion as the wish to relieve others of their suffering (2011, 55). For discussion, see Curtin (2014).

15. Here I engage in some linguistic prescription that would have to be defended, for it might seem that I am ruling out love the kind of love commanded in some religious traditions (for example, Christianity) or in some Beatles’ songs (for example, “Love Is All You Need”). Discussion of this point would lead us too far astray for present purposes.

16. These are of course extreme examples and there are practical limits on the differences that love can transcend. Yet it does appear that vegans and carnivores, Christians and atheists, and even James Carville and Mary Matalin can love each other.

17. For some of these complexities see Hill (1991), who distinguishes at least four different Kantian senses of ‘autonomy,’ and Korsgaard (2009, 108), who distinguishes two senses of ‘autonomy,’ one of which animals are autonomous and the other of which they are not.


19. It is this sense of the autonomy of nature that Turner so wonderfully articulated in The Abstract Wild (1996).

20. For some of the complexities involved, see Moor and de Graaf (2016). There are other backward-looking, painful sensations that should not be confused with the loss of love, for example, those triggered by regret. Characterizing the difference between regretting that a relationship did not work out and losing a love would take us too far afield.

21. These examples can be misleading. Objects of love are extremely important to lovers, and however much you like and enjoy eggplant and even say that you love it, this may be an exaggeration. But if you really do love eggplant and I really do love you, then, I maintain, eggplant is a candidate for my love as well.

22. Of course, even when strictly speaking the presumption does not exist, the beloved’s love is still a candidate for the lover’s love. Lovers and situations are on a gradient with respect to presumption as well but I cannot develop that point here.

23. A point of clarification: that I love the particular people who are my parents is highly indexical but that I love my parents is not; there is no similarly general love of sports teams that is the basis for loving particular teams.

24. Think about that old song, “To Know Him Is to Love Him,” first recorded by The Teddy Bears in 1958. On first hearing, the song can seem insipid, and the better you come to know it (for example, by listening to Amy Winehouse’s performance [available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GscEZGOQhPY]) the more likely you are to love it. To know him is to love him and to know the song is to love it as well—another reflexive postmodern masterpiece by Phil Spector.

25. Indeed, loving what someone loves can be a landmark on the road to coming to love them, but that is a part of the story that I cannot go into here.

26. Something like this was Murdoch’s view, but it raises further questions. What is the domain of what is properly lovable? Is it everything, or only some things? Is Platonic love conditional and Christian love unconditional? And where does our concept of love fit with these conceptions? In any case, even if a commitment to the unity of love is part of our conception it does not follow that such a view is true or livable.

27. Similar points could be made about other environmental problems we face such as biodiversity protection and wilderness preservation.

28. The proximate cause for this article was a conference on Environmental Ethics and Aesthetics organized by Sandra Shapshay and Levi Tenen at Indiana University—Bloomington. Thanks to both of them for their invitation, comments, patience, and good humor. Later versions were presented at the Gotham Philosophical Society, Carleton College, the University of Vienna, North Carolina State University, and the University of California at Davis. This article develops and revises ideas that were originally presented in the coda to Love in the Anthropocene (2015), co-authored with Bonnie Nadzam. My greatest debt is to Bonnie with whom I have passionately discussed these issues for many years; I no longer know which ideas are mine, which are hers, and which are ours.