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Taking the love pill: a reply to Naar and Nyholm

Abstract – In recent discussions about whether the use of a love pill to enhance love in our romantic relationships is desirable, one argument centers on the question whether this love pill would secure the final value we attribute to love. Sven Nyholm argues that it would not, because one thing we desire for its own sake is to be at the origin of the love others feel for us. In a reply, Hichem Naar argues against Nyholm that a love pill does not need to be incompatible with the final value we attribute to love and that a love pill can have a facilitating role in the creation and sustainment of loving attachment. I think Naar is right but does not address Nyholm’s worry completely. I will argue that Naar and Nyholm are speaking of different ends for which the love pill is used as a means, and that whether the love pill would fail or not fail to secure the final value we attribute to love, depends on this particular end.

The recent debate

There has been some discussion whether pharmaceuticals or other emerging technologies can and should be used to enhance love in adult romantic partnerships. Julian Savulescu et. al argue that love is one of the things we can improve upon using biomedical enhancements.¹ For simplifying purposes, I will, from now on, speak of these biomedical enhancements as if they were a love pill we could take, having the exact same result as the biomedical enhancements, pharmaceuticals, hormonal treatments or other technologies that come up in the discussion. Sven Nyholm argues, against Savulescu et al., that the use of this love pill in our romantic relationships would fail to secure the final value we attribute to love.² On Nyholm’s view, one thing we intrinsically desire in seeking love is to be at the origin of the love others have for us. The satisfaction of this desire, he argues, is incompatible with the use of a love pill insofar as it is responsible for the attachment characteristic of love. Nyholm argues that we don’t want some external agency to bring about the lover’s tendency to bestow loving care upon us if we are to think of this care as an instance or expression of love. We desire that we ourselves are able to activate this disposition on the part of the lover, without there being a need for something else to activate it.

Love is, in this way, a sort of confirmation that we are, as we might put it, ‘lovable’ in the sense of being able to inspire or call forth such dispositions in another (namely, the lover). Part, but not the whole, of what our lover gives us in loving us, in other words, is this confirmation of us as really being able, or having the power, to inspire loving devotion in another.³

If we had to supply our lover with a love pill in order to call forth the relevant sorts of dispositions to act in a caring way in relation to us, then this, Nyholm argues, would show that we are not lovable in the way that, in having the good of somebody’s love, we are shown to be. Hence, taking a love pill would, according to Nyholm, deprive us of the final value we attribute to love.

In a reply, Hichem Naar questions Nyholm's argument and argues that using the love pill to create or sustain the sort of attachment characteristic of love does not need to be less desirable than creating or sustaining this attachment by more ordinary means, such as dancing or romantic music.⁴ He argues that Nyholm underestimates the significance of the various factors that are in some way external to the beloved in the formation and persistence of successful romantic relationships,

[...] such as lighting conditions, room temperature, energy levels, health, background music, dancing romantic weekends, and so on. Such factors, although involving the other person in some way, are *not* the other person.⁵

Furthermore, Naar argues that we need these external factors to play a role in our romantic relationships and that without them, many relationships would not even exist. As a result, he claims, there are factors that are not the other person and that play a significant role in the formation and persistence of our attachment to them. Such factors are generally not problematic because of their *facilitating* role in the creation and sustainment of our attachment to others, so the mere fact that some external factors are needed for our attachment to be secured does not warrant our rejection of them.⁶ Naar concludes with the possibility of the love pill having a facilitating role in the creation and sustainment of our attachment to others.⁷

Naar offers an appealing argument, but I will argue that it doesn't address Nyholm's worries completely. I will argue that if Naar is right about the possibility of using the love pill as a facilitator, whether its use would fail or not fail to secure the final value we attribute to love depends on the particular end for which the love pill is used. I will conclude with a suggestion about why it matters for which end a love-enhancement is used, which has to do with the idea of lovers being able to freely commit to each other.

Taking the love pill for different ends

Many of us want to be at the origin of the love of our beloved, that is, we want that our beloved's love depends in great part on us. Few people would like the thought that their beloved has to try very hard to love them or indeed needs pills to secure their love for them. However, Naar is also right about the possibility of the love pill playing a facilitating role, as much as other external factors can play a role in creating or sustaining love without losing the final value we attribute to love that Nyholm is talking about. The fact that I am more likely to sustain my loving attachment to my beloved when listening to romantic music does not mean that my love does not depend in great part on my beloved.

For the sake of the argument I will assume that Nyholm is right about the final value we attribute to love: we want to be at the origin of the love others have for us and one's attachment should depend in great part on the beloved. I also assume that the love pill is capable of facilitating the creation and sustainment of loving attachment, like other additional factors such as a glass of wine or romantic music. These factors

can make the emergence of loving attachment more likely, without losing the final value we attribute to love. So far, it seems as if I am in agreement with Naar.

However I think Naar doesn't address Nyholm's argument completely. Tellingly, Nyholm does not worry as much about wine as he does about a love pill. The explanation must be that his objection against the use of the love pill presupposes that the love pill is used for a specific end. Suppose that when I drink a glass of wine or listen to romantic music I am more likely to create or sustain a loving attachment than when I don't. This tells us something about *enabling a general capacity for loving*, not about *creating or sustaining of love for a particular beloved*. These are different ends. It seems to me that Naar and Nyholm are talking at cross purposes insofar as they have in mind *different ends for taking the love pill*. Let me argue for this interpretation of their disagreement in more detail.

It is not true that when I drink a glass of wine, I am more likely to love person A rather than person B because of the wine. It might be true that I am more likely to love person A rather than person B, but this must be due to other factors than the wine. Would my preference for person A be a result of the wine, then the wine would be some sort of love potion which makes me fall in love with particular person A. However, I think we can assume that wine as we know it does not have this effect. Wine operates on one's psychology in a rather coarse-grained manner: it is known to, among other things, slow down the functioning of the prefrontal cortex, which is linked to reasoning and judgment.⁸ Effects like these could facilitate the creation or sustenance of love, by, for example, judging people in a different manner than in a sober condition. However, wine does not have complete control over one's judgment, one's love and one's love for a particular person. The same goes for other facilitating factors for loving attachment that Naar mentions, such as health, romantic music or energy levels. These factors could indeed play a significant role in the formation and persistence of successful romantic relationships, precisely as Naar claims, but they do not have complete control. These factors play a role in *enabling a general capacity for loving* while this love is already directed at a particular person, or is directed at a particular person by the work of other factors. They do not, and this is crucial, play a role in the formation and persistence of *love for a particular person*.

How a love-enhancement of the facilitating kind works could be understood in two ways. It could either be understood as 1) removing some obstacle that hinders somebody from being able to love, or 2) helping to unleash a pre-existing potential for loving. The quite imaginable case of a person that is unable to love because of a depression and therefore takes a love pill, could be understood in either or both of these two ways: the love-enhancement might remove an obstacle of loving (viz. the depression), or it might help to unleash the inner potential for loving (which is hampered by the depression). Both ways are not a threat to the final value we attribute to love. In these situations the love pill enables a general capacity for loving and does not create or sustain love for a particular person.

When we distinguish between two ends the love pill could be used for, namely 1) enabling a general capacity for loving and 2) creating or sustaining of love for a particular person (from now on I will call this the Crucial Distinction), we can see that Nyholm and Naar might be talking about different ends and *therefore* have a different view on whether taking the love pill would be desirable. Naar is talking about the use of the love pill for the first end, when talking about its facilitating role. Nyholm, in contrast, when he is saying that a love pill fails to secure the final value we attribute to love, is talking about taking the love pill for the second end. People not capable of loving attachment in general and taking a love pill for the first end might be a less problematic scenario for the perspective offered by Nyholm. In that case the love pill could indeed play a facilitating role without losing the final value we attribute to love.

One could argue that love is always directed at a particular person and that therefore the Crucial Distinction does not hold. I do not want to argue here for the claim that love is or is not always directed at a particular person. However, the Crucial Distinction needs some clarification. What I mean with the distinction is the following: when a love pill is used to enable a general capacity for loving, the love pill is responsible for the creation or sustaining of the feelings of love and other general aspects of the mind-set of somebody who loves, while other factors are responsible for the particular object of the love. So while feelings of love and other general aspects of the mind-set of a lover are created or sustained by a love pill, the object of the love is determined by the same factors as would have determined the object when one had not taken a love pill. But when a love pill is used for creating or sustaining love for a particular person, the love pill itself is responsible for both the feelings of love and the object of the love. Consider an analogy with Cupid who – in some but not all stories – needs two arrows to make you fall in love with a particular person. One arrow hits you, which invokes a strong feeling of desire in you. A desire that, if Cupid stops intervening, has to find its object by other means. This would be analogous to creating or sustaining general loving. But Cupid can also shoot a second arrow, hitting the particular person you are supposed to fall in love with. Cupid is, by shooting the second arrow, also responsible for the object of your desire. This would be analogous to creating or sustaining love for a particular person.

The desirability of the love pill

I submit that the Crucial Distinction is helpful in the debate about whether taking the love pill would be desirable. Not only does it leave room for both Nyholm's and Naar's arguments, it also refines a claim in a passage from a paper by Savulescu and Sandberg. They claim that many people see the use of love drugs in order to maintain an existing previously loving relationship as acceptable, but are more troubled by the idea of using a love pill to initiate love.⁹ They argue that this view may be mistaken and offer the following argument:

Imagine John and Betty are in love and have been for 10 years. But John becomes prone to mild depression. This affects their relationship adversely. He starts to lose interest in Betty, becomes absorbed in himself, grumpy, withdrawn and painful to be around. He takes an antidepressant

and their love is maintained. From the point of view of their relationships and his life, he has good reason to take the drug. Jack and Gill are not in love. Jack is depressed and this prevents love developing. They stay together because Gill became pregnant by accident and they have a child. They intend to stay together for the sake of their child. Jack could take a drug which would facilitate them falling in love – Prozac. He has the same reason as John, but in this case it creates rather than maintains love. His taking the pill seems as acceptable as John's.¹⁰

In this example John and Jack both take the love pill because they are, at this moment, not capable of the feeling of love and hope the pill will facilitate the creation (Jack) or sustainment (John) of a loving attachment. In the terminology of the Crucial Distinction, both uses of the love pill can be said to play a *facilitating* role without necessarily losing the final value we attribute to love. John taking the antidepressant does not change the fact that Betty is at the origin of his loving attachment. The same goes for Jack: taking Prozac does not mean that Gill would not be at the origin of his love, because Prozac does not make Jack fall in love with Gill in particular.

Savulescu and Sandberg claim that people may be mistaken when they see the use of the love pill as a means to maintain an existing previously loving relationship as acceptable, while being more troubled by the idea of using love drugs to initiate love. But I think that Savulescu and Sandberg's example can be misleading: does Jack take the love pill because he wants to *love* Gill? Or does Jack take the love pill because he wants to love *Gill*? Whether Jack is taking the love pill because he wants to be able to feel love, of which he is sure it will be directed at Gill (through other factors) or whether he is taking the love pill because he is not able to feel love that is specifically directed at Gill, does matter for the final value we attribute to love. Savulescu and Sandberg overlook this fact when they interpret the divergent intuitions of people as based on a mistake or confusion. The main worry behind these supposedly mistaken intuitive judgments, might be grounded in the fact that a love pill used to *initiate* a loving relationship evokes the idea of the love pill determining the object of the love like a love potion. These people might be overlooking the fact that the love pill, like in the Jack and Gill example, can be used as a facilitator in the creation of loving attachment in general, while indeed some other factors (linked to the beloved) need to be in place to direct love at that particular person. A more charitable interpretation of people's intuitive judgments is not that they are irrational or inconsistent, but that they interpret the example in a different way than is done by Savulescu and Sandberg. It is not obvious that this interpretation rests on a mistake: many people think of the example as portraying the difference between facilitating and determining love, while Savulescu and Sandberg think it is about the (admittedly less important) difference between initiating and sustaining love.

Love potions

In order to claim that the distinction between the different ends is helpful in the debate about the desirability of the love pill, there should be some evidence that the Crucial Distinction is not artificial and

that love pills creating or sustaining love for a particular person are a realistic possibility. Such a technology should not only be able to create or sustain the feeling of love, but also be able to direct that love at a particular person. It should have a much more fine-grained impact on one's psychology than the effect of facilitators like wine. Naar acknowledges at the end of his paper that love pills that work in an analogous way to love potions, would indeed be undesirable, but adds that love pills of these kind are unrealistic.¹¹ I disagree with Naar and will explain, with the modesty of being a philosopher and not a neuro-scientist, why the existence of love pills aiming at creating or sustaining love for a particular person might become a realistic possibility. First of all, Naar could be right that pills (and other technologies) that guarantee falling in love with a particular person is not possible on the short term. However, considering accelerating developments in our understanding of the brain and exponential growth in technological possibilities, we cannot exclude the possibility that such a love pill can be created in the future. We merely have to imagine that research of the brain in love, as well as ongoing developments in deep brain stimulation (sending electrical impulses to specific targets in the brain) and developments in brain hacking¹² are brought together in a system or technology that activates the right regions of the brain in the right manner every time you are close to a particular person. Helen Fisher published a study in 2005 that included the first functional MRI (fMRI) images of the brains of people in love. Two of the brain regions that showed activity in the fMRI scans were the caudate nucleus, a region associated with reward detection and expectation and the integration of sensory experiences into social behavior, and the ventral tegmental area, which is associated with pleasure, focused attention, and the motivation to pursue and acquire rewards.¹³ The development of a technology that activates precisely these regions when you are with a particular person, might not be too far-fetched. Such a technology would condition someone to feel something that can become understood as love. Another contribution to a realistic love potion could come from results of studies in partner preference. For example studies that investigate the roles pheromones play in partner choice, or the study that suggests that hormonal contraception may have some effect on women's preferences for sexual partners.¹⁴ It will only be a matter of time before we understand the details of partner choice and the brain in love making it realistic that this information can be used for other purposes.

One might still not be completely convinced of the possibility that love pills one day become love potions. But I submit that, even when this is not a realistic possibility, the Crucial Distinction is helpful because it unravels confusion that seems to be going on in the debate. If Naar thinks that no drug working as a love potion could really exist, there does not seem to be a disagreement with Nyholm's argument, because Nyholm is talking about exactly those love pills that Naar thinks are unrealistic. Naar and Nyholm are talking about different love pills, which clarifies why they have different opinions about the desirability of them. Either there is a disagreement and Naar doesn't address Nyholm's worries completely, or there is no disagreement at all. The same goes for Savulescu et al.: they might not conceive of enhancements as like love potions. In that case there does not seem to be a disagreement with Nyholm's argument, because in that case Nyholm talks about a different love pill compared to the love pill Savulescu et al. are

talking about. Alternatively, one might also say that Nyholm has changed the topic by construing love enhancers on the model of love potions,¹⁵ while that was never the meaning intended in Savulescu et al.¹⁶ In the end, Nyholm, Naar and Savulescu might even all agree that love enhancements as love potions are undesirable. In that case the discussion could be brought further by adding to Nyholm's claim that love pills are undesirable an explanation of why exactly that is so. Either way, the Crucial Distinction is clearing up a possible confusion in the discussion about love enhancement, for example when Savulescu et al. refer to the discussion between Nyholm and Naar and draw on Naar's response for their argument.¹⁷

Concluding discussion: love, freedom and commitment

Taking the love pill isn't necessarily undesirable when it facilitates loving attachment in general. However, if the love pill is needed to create or sustain loving attachment for a particular person, taking it is undesirable. We would find it problematic if someone needed a love pill to facilitate love for *us in particular*, while falling relatively easily in love with others. We would find it less problematic if someone needed a love pill to facilitate *love* for us and is, without it, not capable of feeling love in general.

Why is there an evaluative difference between the two ends for which one might take a love pill? I shall not attempt to offer a complete theory of this in the present paper. However, I find the following possible explanation to be worth exploring further. It could have something to do with the idea that lovers are typically thought to have free will to some extent, or at least the ability to commit or to not commit to their loving relationship. As Michael Kühler writes, quoting Erich Fromm, "[t]o love somebody is not just a strong feeling—it is a decision, it is a judgment, it is a promise."¹⁸ Similarly, Dylan Evans writes that, "[a]lthough people typically want commitment and fidelity from their partners, they want these things to be the fruit of an ongoing choice, rather than inflexible and unreflexive behavior patterns."¹⁹ It is surely not the case that love only consists in a loving commitment that is the result of a free or ongoing choice. However, as the just-cited authors note, it is very plausible to think of this as one key aspect of love, as we ordinarily conceive of it. Why is this relevant to the present discussion? The idea is that we must have some choice to commit to a relationship with a person; and if we take a love pill that determines whom we love we are deprived of this ability and the lover becomes more like a pre-programmed robot, or a cyborg human that is remote controlled.^{20 21}

What determines the object of our love? Although many factors such as luck, proximity and a lot of (other) facilitating factors can be of influence, I believe there is always some (minimal) rational thought involved on the side of the lover. Even without being given a complete and detailed theory of how love and rationality are related, most people could concede that human lovers, as rational beings, can reflect on reasons to love someone. We can reflect on what we value as beautiful or important.²² This reflection can guide us in choosing or not choosing a person as the object of our love, even when for example facilitators like wine make us (temporarily) judge otherwise. The love pill as facilitator does not deprive us

of our reflecting thought. To secure the final value that we attribute to love, the lover's autonomy to commit or not commit to a loving relationship should not be completely bypassed by technology. But some technologies might be able to do exactly just that: they could deprive us of reflecting thought in love. Technology that is able to activate the right regions of the brain in the right manner at the right times, deprives us of our reflective thought we normally have about the people around us.

Some questions still remain. We can see that we still have some reflecting ability when drinking a glass of wine (even when we come to realize these reflecting thoughts only later, regretting our actions of the night before) and we can also see that we could be deprived of this reflecting ability when our brain gets a much more detailed impulse. However, it remains unclear where exactly the line is between the coarse-grained effects of facilitators and the more fine-grained effects of 'determinators' that deprive us of reflection. Another possible comment could be that the love pill might also *provide* the lover freedom, instead of only depriving him of it. One might say that when deep brain stimulation is used to get rid of a depression, a patient might be more free with the treatment than without it. But we could see deep brain stimulation as getting rid of an obstacle. The love pill that gets rid of obstacles would be a love pill of the facilitating kind, removing some obstacle that hinders somebody from being able to love. Such a love pill would indeed be freedom enhancing and not undesirable. A last possible question worth mentioning is whether we truly have some freedom in choosing to commit or not to commit to a person. Unfortunately that question goes far beyond the scope of this paper. Whether we have this ability, and to which extent, might be worth exploring further. However, we can still conclude that when a love pill *controls* how we think about a particular person, we are definitely deprived of the ability to choose to commit or not commit to a person, which would fail to secure the final value we attribute to love that Nyholm is talking about.

Furthermore, there are questions to be settled partly by science rather than philosophy alone. It is up to neuro-science to investigate whether love pills can realistically be used to direct love at particular persons (the problematic version) rather than merely to enhance loving attachment in general (the less problematic version). Another problem to be further investigated would of course be the application. When is someone not capable of loving attachment in general? In what situations exactly is it justified to take a love pill? Could science help us detect the application criteria? Although these are practical questions that have to be answered in the debate, keeping in mind the theoretical difference between the particular ends we could use the love pill for (as I have explicated in this paper), might give us a better understanding of whether taking the love pill would be desirable.²³

Lotte Spreeuwenberg, University of Antwerp, Stadscampus, Grote Kauwenberg 18, S.D.409, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium, lottespreeuwenberg@gmail.com

NOTES

¹ Julian Savulescu & Anders Sandberg, 'Neuroenhancement of love and marriage: The chemicals between us', *Neuroethics*, 1 (2008): pp. 405–13; Julian Savulescu, 'Human liberation: Removing biological and psychological barriers to freedom', *Monash Bioethics Review*, 29 (2010): 1–18; Brian D. Earp, Anders Sandberg & Julian Savulescu, 'Natural selection, childrearing, and the ethics of marriage (and divorce): Building a case for the neuroenhancement of human relationships', *Philosophy and Technology*, 25 (2012): 561–87; Brian D. Earp, Olga A. Wudarczyk, Anders Sandberg & Julian Savulescu, 'If I could just stop loving you: Anti-love biotechnology and the ethics of a chemical breakup', *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 13 (2013): 2–17; Jonathan Pugh, Guy Kahane & Julian Savulescu, 'Cohen's conservatism and human enhancement', *Journal of Ethics*, 17 (2013): 331–54.

² Sven Nyholm, 'Love troubles: Human attachment and biomedical enhancements', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 32, 2 (2015): 190–202.

³ Nyholm op cit., p.196

⁴ Hichem Naar, 'Real-World Love Drugs: Reply to Nyholm', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 33 (2016): 197–201.

⁵ Naar op cit., p.5, italics in text

⁶ Naar op cit., p.200

⁷ Earp, Sandberg and Savulescu refer to the discussion between Nyholm and Naar and draw on Naar's response for their argument in Brian D. Earp, Anders Sandberg & Julian Savulescu, 'The medicalization of love: Response to critics', *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, 25, 4 (2016): 759–771.

⁸ Casbon, T. S., Curtin, J. J., Lang, A. R., & Patrick, C. J. (2003). Deleterious effects of alcohol intoxication: diminished cognitive control and its behavioral consequences. *Journal of abnormal psychology*, 112(3), 476.

⁹ Savulescu, J., & Sandberg, A. (2008). Neuroenhancement of love and marriage: The chemicals between us. *Neuroethics*, 1(1), 31-44.

¹⁰ Savulescu & Sandberg op cit., p.38

¹¹ Naar op cit., p.200

¹² Brain hacking in animals is already used in reconstructing natural insects into steerable robots, stimulating living insects to induce user-desired motor actions and behaviours (Choo, H. Y., Li, Y., Cao, F., & Sato, H. (2016). Electrical Stimulation of Coleopteran Muscle for Initiating Flight. *PloS one*, 11(4), e0151808). Although these cyborgs are insects, whose brain and body cannot be compared with those of humans, and the controlled actions are bodily movements which cannot be compared to human love, the knowledge of controlling muscles in animals by hacking their brains and bodies and its application will give more insight in how to control or stimulate the brains or bodies in larger animals, like humans.

¹³ Fisher, H., Aron, A., & Brown, L. L. (2005). Romantic love: an fMRI study of a neural mechanism for mate choice. *Journal of Comparative Neurology*, 493(1), 58-62.

¹⁴ Roberts, S. C., Little, A. C., Burriss, R. P., Cobey, K. D., Klapilová, K., Havlíček, J., ... & Petrie, M. (2014). Partner choice, relationship satisfaction, and oral contraception: The congruency hypothesis. *Psychological Science*, 25(7), 1497-1503.

¹⁵ Nyholm op cit.

¹⁶ The articles of Savulescu et al. that Nyholm is arguing against are listed in the first endnote of this paper.

¹⁷ Earp, Sandberg & Savulescu op cit.

¹⁸ Michael Kühler, 'Loving Persons: Activity and Passivity in Romantic Love' in C. Maurer et al. (eds.) *Love and Its Objects* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 41–55

¹⁹ Dylan Evans, 'Wanting the Impossible: The Dilemma at the Heart of Intimate Human-Robot Relationships' in Y. Wilks (ed.) *Close Engagements with Artificial Companions* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010), 75–89.

²⁰ Sven Nyholm & Lily Frank, 'From Sex Robots to Love Robots: Is mutual love with a robot possible?' in J. Danaher & N. McArthur (eds.) *Robot Sex: Social and Ethical Implications* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2017), 219-243

²¹ Referring to the discussion in note 12.

²² In the philosophy of love there is an ongoing debate about whether we love for reasons or have no reasons for love. My position in this debate is that love is a kind of valuing: what we value in and about the beloved are reasons for us to love them.

²³ Many thanks are due to Katrien Schaubroeck, Sven Nyholm, an editor and two anonymous reviewers of this journal and the audience of the research seminars at the Centre for Ethics (University of Antwerp), for their helpful comments of earlier versions of this paper.