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BOOK REVIEW

Fannie Bialek. *Love in Time: An Ethical Inquiry*

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In *Love in Time: An Ethical Inquiry*, Fannie Bialek advances a striking reorientation of philosophical reflection on love by foregrounding its temporal and epistemic structure. Against what she identifies as a dominant tendency to privilege permanence, stability, and certainty, Bialek insists that love is constitutively bound up with finitude and not knowing. As she puts it, love unfolds in "moments of not knowing what will happen next" (Bialek 2025, x), and any attempt to secure it in advance is misguided, since "our knowledge will also never be complete" and relationships themselves "increase uncertainty" (Bialek 2025, xi). Her central claim follows from this: lovers must not merely endure but *desire* this uncertainty. To love is to want a future with another person that one cannot determine in advance.

Bialek's project may be situated within familiar debates in the philosophy of love while subtly displacing them. Contemporary accounts of love often revolve around whether love responds to value (appraisal views), creates value (bestowal views), or consists in forms of concern or union. Rather than asking primarily whether love is justified or grounded in value, Bialek asks what it means to remain in love over time when such justification is never complete. She suggests that appraisal and bestowal theories share a deeper aspiration: to secure love against uncertainty. Her intervention is to show that this aspiration is not only unattainable but conceptually mistaken, since it attempts to eliminate what is essential to love itself.

At the outset, Bialek adopts a deliberately broad understanding of love, one that encompasses "love between parents and children, family members, romantic partners, friends, and even love for ideas, places, and things" (Bialek 2025, xv). What unifies this diverse set of relations is a shared orientation toward time—specifically, the desire for "more time with the beloved," an aspect she takes to be common across these forms of attachment (Bialek 2025, xv). This expansive definition allows her to move beyond narrowly romantic or erotic models and to develop a more general ethical account of loving as such.

She begins her argument about the structure of love in Chapter 1, through a reading of Lysias's speech in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Lysias, Bialek argues, represents the standpoint of the "nonlover" who seeks a relationship grounded in knowledge—who "wants a relationship of knowing instead of wanting" (Bialek 2025, 3). What Lysias desires is a guarantee: an assurance that love will go well before entering into it. But this desire for certainty misunderstands the structure of love. To know how things will turn out would require that love come to an end; yet lovers do not want love to end.

Instead, they "seem to desire the uncertainties of its continuation," such that "part of the lover's desire is for the future to proceed in ways they do not determine themselves" (Bialek 2025, 4). Love, then, is best understood as "a desire for an uncertain future with the beloved, wanting time together without knowing what that time will bring" (Bialek 2025, 4).

Bialek then critiques attempts to render love intelligible in terms of evaluation or rational justification. In a consumerist cultural context, for example, love increasingly appears as a project of optimization, where one evaluates potential partners and chooses among them. Drawing on Byung-Chul Han, she situates this tendency within a broader account of late-modern subjectivity, in which individuals are formed as "achievement subjects" oriented toward maximizing choice and minimizing risk (Bialek 2025, 12). Within such a framework, "love…is a project of trying to know what we would be getting if we were to love someone, not of desiring them themselves" (Bialek 2025, 13). What is lost is precisely the openness to alterity—the encounter with a beloved whose future cannot be reduced to a set of evaluable traits. Against this evaluative model, Bialek emphasizes the irreducible particularity of the beloved. "We don't live as collections of attributes; we live in time, as part of stories with a past, present, and future" (Bialek 2025, 17). Drawing on Alexander Nehamas, she argues that our attraction to persons and works of art alike cannot be adequately explained in terms of generalizable properties; rather than offering reasons why something is good, we invite others to spend time with it—to discover its "promise of happiness" in experience (Bialek 2025, 27).

At this point, Bialek brings Nehamas into conversation with the Platonic account of eros as a desire for beauty. In this view, the lover is drawn not simply to a particular individual but, through that individual, toward beauty as such. Nehamas reads this as preserving the connection between beauty and desire: we seek beauty because it moves us to love; and love, in turn, is a desire to remain with what we find beautiful (Bialek 2025, 21–23). However, Bialek argues that this "more philosophical" lover remains a "strange lover" (Bialek 2025, 22), insofar as he risks losing sight of the particular beloved in favor of the universal. The Platonic ascent thus becomes another attempt to escape the unknowing intrinsic to love, replacing the desire for an uncertain future with the desire for conceptual mastery. Drawing on Adriana Cavarero, Bialek underscores that such moves efface the singularity of the beloved, whereas love remains bound to what cannot be fully known or anticipated. In the face of the failure of description and of evaluation, lovers desire to narrate each other to each other (Bialek 2025, 24).

In Chapter 2, Bialek turns explicitly to philosophical theories of love, examining attempts to account for love in terms of reasons and value. She notes that much of the discussion in contemporary analytic philosophy takes a form structurally analogous to the Euthyphro dilemma: is the beloved valuable because we love them, or do we love them because they are valuable? (Bialek 2025, 41–45). This framing maps onto the familiar opposition between bestowal and appraisal theories of love, and reflects a broader effort to ground love in stable justificatory terms. Yet, much like the original dilemma, this formulation risks distorting the phenomenon by presupposing that love must be explainable in terms of reasons at all.

Here, Bialek engages most directly with Harry Frankfurt's influential bestowal view. Frankfurt rejects the idea that love is justified by reasons grounded in the beloved's value; instead, he argues that love itself generates reasons. This claim is rooted in his account of the structure of the will, according to which persons are capable of second-order volitions—reflective endorsements of certain desires as constitutive of their agency. Love, on this view, is a form of "volitional necessity": one finds oneself bound to care about certain persons or projects in a way that is not chosen on the basis of reasons, but that organizes one's practical identity from within. As Bialek puts it, "we do not love people because of their value… our loves create reasons to do other things" (Bialek 2025, 51), and to love is, in part, "to find oneself loving" (Bialek 2025, 53).

On this account, the direction of explanation runs from love to reasons, not the other way around. Love is not irrational, but neither is it justified in the usual sense. Instead, it constitutes a basic orientation of the will that determines what counts as a reason for the agent. Bialek engages this view with both sympathy and critique. While she shares Frankfurt's rejection of appraisal-based accounts, she argues that his view still reflects a desire to stabilize love by locating it in a relatively fixed structure of the will. In the succeeding chapter, Bialek characterizes Frankfurt's view as bearing "a strange individualism" in that love is understood as an orientation of my will (Bialek 2025, 87). The problem with this is that "it is less clear how this love is a relationship *with* the beloved so much as a state of the self" (Bialek 2025, 88). By contrast, Bialek emphasizes that love in time cannot be secured in this way: the project of fully accounting for love ultimately fails because love is oriented toward a future whose shape cannot be determined in advance (Bialek 2025, 37).

At the same time, Bialek resists the conclusion that reasoning about love is therefore futile. In her discussion of "reasoning with others," she shifts attention from the search for justificatory foundations to the interpersonal contexts in which our loves are called into question. While reasons may not be able to generate or extinguish love—since one may be, as Frankfurt suggests, bound by the will—our loves remain subject to normative scrutiny within relationships and social life. As Bialek notes, judgments about whether a love is appropriate or inappropriate express and reinforce social norms (Bialek 2025, 59), and although reasoning may not persuade someone to stop loving, it can shape how they act in light of that love (Bialek 2025, 63–65). Thus, while love may resist foundational justification, it does not stand outside the space of reasons altogether. We may not be able to justify our loves "from the ground up," but we are nonetheless accountable to others for them. As Bialek emphasizes, we "owe them—and [ourselves]—a reply," even if that reply ultimately takes the form of a circular avowal: "I love them" (Bialek 2025, 69). Such exchanges are not failures of reason but constitutive of the ethical life of relationships, where the limits of justification do not eliminate the need for conversation.

A further dimension of Bialek's critique of love in the Western tradition emerges in Chapter 3 through her engagement with Christian accounts of agape, particularly those of Søren Kierkegaard and Anders Nygren, and with the later Protestant tradition of "modern agapism." The chapter begins from a tension internal to Christian ethics itself. On the one hand, agape appears as a response to the fragility of worldly love, promising a form of constancy not dependent on the changeable value of the beloved. On the other hand, this very aspiration threatens to suppress the vulnerability and finitude that characterize love as a human relation. As Bialek puts it, the problem is what kind of example divine love presents for finite creatures, and what love would be "without the vulnerability and uncertainty we know in other relations" (Bialek 2025, 71).

Nygren is Bialek's principal target here. His famous thesis in *Agape and Eros* opposes eros and agape as two fundamentally different religious motifs: eros is acquisitive and responsive to value, whereas agape is "the abundant, freely flowing, unmotivated, and value-creating love of God" (Bialek 2025, 78). For Nygren, the proper starting point is not the double commandment to love God and neighbor, but Christ's command to "love your enemies," because this shows most clearly that agape is not responsive to the worthiness of its object. God's perfection is manifested precisely in loving unworthy human beings; agape therefore creates value rather than recognizing it. Yet Bialek argues that Nygren's account is less free of value than it claims, since it still depends on a reversed value judgment—the negative value or unworthiness of the beloved—and, more importantly, it renders divine love invulnerable to anything about the beloved themselves.

In Bialek's reading, Nygren's agape becomes a purely unilateral bestowal, isolated from "anything valuable about God's beloveds and their vulnerability" (Bialek 2025, 89–90). She goes so far as to describe an egoism in his account, not the egoism of eros that wants the beloved for oneself, but that of "asserting love by bestowing it on others without regard for their participation in the relationship, or even any clear regard for them" (Bialek 2025, 90). Nygren's formulations even obscure the lover as a vulnerable self, since, as Bialek notes, in his account "Love is defined as a relationship doing the relating, not a relationship between beings" (Bialek 2025, 92). Against this, she insists that "It is vulnerability to the other that makes love a relationship and not only an assertion of the lover" (Bialek 2025, 74), and that as lovers we desire to be changed by the beloved (Bialek 2025, 75).

It is against Nygren that the modern agapists define themselves. One of their explicit criticisms of Nygren is that he diminishes agape as the commanded love of neighbor (Bialek 2025, 99). Unlike Nygren, they do not think agape must wholly ignore the value or particularity of the beloved. In modern agapist discussions, human beings possess worth as creatures made in the image of God (Bialek 2025, 102), and agape cannot ignore the beloved's particular qualities if it is to love them for their own sake (Bialek 2025, 103–104). Even so, Bialek argues that the modern agapists do not fully overcome Nygren's "divine perfectionism." Their worldly version of agape still derives, in practice, from obedience to God's command; as she puts it, for them agape is not really unmotivated but motivated by duty rather than by the value of the beloved (Bialek 2025, 106). This means that the problem of love is displaced into a problem of faithfulness and obedience, a problem of the will (Bialek 2025, 107). Bialek's complaint is not simply that this remains religiously grounded, but that it still fails to place the vulnerability of the beloved at the center of ethics. As she writes, "The vulnerability of God's beloveds… should be at the center of their ethics [modern agapists] given what they say agape should do and be in the human experience and emulation of it. Nygren's divine perfectionism must be overcome more fully, by correcting its mistaken response to the vulnerability of the world" (Bialek 2025, 96).

Finally, in Chapter 4, Bialek turns to the problem of loving the dying. Drawing on Ferdinand Hodler's series of portraits of his dying lover Valentine Godé-Darel, as well as the story of two lovers caught in the AIDS crisis in Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America*, she explores what happens when the uncertain future that lovers desire becomes increasingly certain. Hodler's paintings, which chronicle the physical decline of his lover, present a sustained meditation on love under conditions of impending loss. The beloved's future becomes progressively foreclosed, yet this certainty does not resolve love's anxieties. Instead, it intensifies its vulnerability, as the desire for more time persists even as its possibility diminishes. A similar tension animates *Angels in America*, where relationships unfold under the shadow of terminal illness. Bialek gives particular attention to the character of Louis, whose abandonment of the HIV-stricken Prior is often read as a moral failure. Rather than simply condemning Louis, she interprets his actions as revealing a tension internal to love itself: the difficulty of sustaining a desire for a shared future when that future has effectively collapsed. Louis's failure thus exposes the limits of love as an ethical ideal under such conditions.

It is in this context that Bialek's distinction between love and care becomes especially significant. Love, on her account, is essentially oriented toward an uncertain, shared future, defined by the desire for "more time together" under conditions of openness. Care, on the other hand, consists in forms of attention, responsibility, and responsiveness that can persist even when the temporal horizon of the relationship has collapsed. Love involves a forward-looking desire that presupposes uncertainty, whereas care can endure independently of such desire, grounded instead in the ongoing needs of the other. This allows Bialek to explain why love may falter in circumstances where care does not. What appears, from one perspective, as a failure of love—such as Louis's inability to remain with Prior—can instead be understood as revealing the limits of love as an ethical ideal, rather than a failure of ethical relation as such.

This distinction is philosophically important because it resists the tendency to treat love as the highest or most comprehensive ethical category. Furthermore, as Bialek observes, "Love and care are often entangled by social expectations that are significantly gendered…. the entanglement then can serve another role: to devalue women's labor in caregiving as the happy work of love, expected and even obligatory, but commended as a desired pleasure—and uncompensated as such" (Bialek 2025, 149). By separating love from care, Bialek not only clarifies their conceptual differences but also exposes the ideological work performed by their conflation. Aligning her account with feminist critiques of idealized, reciprocal models of love, she shows how the language of love can obscure relations of dependency, asymmetry, and labor. Care, on this view, is not a deficient or secondary form of love but a distinct ethical orientation—one that becomes especially visible in situations where love, understood as a desire for an open future, can no longer be sustained.

In the Afterword, Bialek returns to the central themes of the book, drawing together her reflections on time, uncertainty, and finitude. The earlier chapters have shown the limits of attempts to secure love—whether through knowledge, value, will, or divine ideal. Here, she underscores what remains: love as an ongoing practice of remaining with another in the face of what cannot be known or controlled. The desire for more time together reappears here as both the condition of possibility and the fragility of love. To love is to commit oneself to a future that cannot be guaranteed, and to accept that this very openness is what makes love meaningful.

Bialek's *Love in Time* is a philosophically ambitious and, in many respects, remarkably successful work. As the foregoing overview suggests, one of its most notable achievements lies in its ability to bring into conversation a wide range of traditions—ancient Greek accounts of eros, Christian reflections on agape, and contemporary analytic discussions of love and reasons—while maintaining a coherent and compelling central thesis. That Bialek is able to do so in prose that is both readable and conceptually precise is no small accomplishment, especially given the conceptual diffuseness and overuse of the term "love," which often lends itself to idealization and cliché.

At the same time, it is precisely the breadth of Bialek's account that opens up further questions about the philosophical resources she mobilizes and those she leaves unexplored. Her treatment of Christian accounts of agape, for instance, is both nuanced and critical, bringing into sharp relief the tension between divine love and love as it is lived in time. In doing so, she raises an important question: whether the divine ideal of agape is one that can or should be emulated by finite human beings in their relationships with one another. This question, however, might have been further illuminated through engagement with existentialist accounts of love, particularly that of Jean-Paul Sartre.

Sartre's analysis of love in *Being and Nothingness* famously characterizes love as an inherently unstable project, insofar as it aims at an impossible ideal: to possess the freedom of another as freedom. Love, on this view, is structurally conflicted, since it seeks both the independence and the submission of the beloved. While Bialek resists the conclusion that love is doomed to fail, her emphasis on the openness, indeterminacy, and vulnerability of love in time bears a striking affinity with Sartre's diagnosis of its instability. Moreover, Sartre's account of consciousness as value-creating—his rejection of objective values—resonates in interesting ways with Harry Frankfurt's bestowal view, which Bialek discusses at length. Both thinkers, in different registers, displace the need for an external grounding of love in objective value, thereby offering an alternative to both appraisal theories and theological accounts of agape. A more sustained engagement with this existentialist tradition might therefore have enriched Bialek's own attempt to articulate a worldly, non-foundational account of love.

More broadly, the relative absence of existential phenomenology from Bialek's discussion is notable, particularly given the centrality of temporality, finitude, and relationality to her project. Thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Simone de Beauvoir offer rich analyses of temporality, embodiment, and gendered existence that could provide additional grounding for Bialek's account of love as a temporally extended, vulnerable relation. Heidegger's account of being-toward-death, for instance, might deepen Bialek's reflections on loving the dying, while Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodied intersubjectivity could complicate the picture of relationality she develops. Beauvoir's analysis of love, in turn, especially her critique of asymmetrical and gendered relations, would sit naturally alongside Bialek's feminist concerns about the conflation of love and care.

Indeed, while Bialek's discussion of the distinction between love and care is one of the most philosophically and ethically compelling aspects of the book, it might have been further developed through engagement with contemporary feminist writings on love. In particular, the absence of bell hooks is striking. hooks' trilogy on love—*All About Love*, *Salvation*, and *Communion*—offers a sustained and influential account of love as an ethical and political practice, one that explicitly addresses issues of race, gender, and power. Bringing Bialek's account into dialogue with hooks' work could have deepened the analysis of how love is shaped by social structures and historical conditions, especially in relation to the gendered expectations surrounding care that Bialek so incisively critiques.

These points of critique, however, should not obscure the genuine contribution of Bialek's work. If anything, they point to the generative character of her account: *Love in Time* opens up avenues for further philosophical engagement rather than closing them down. By insisting that love cannot be secured against uncertainty, Bialek shifts the focus of philosophical inquiry away from justification and toward the lived reality of loving as a temporally extended, vulnerable practice. In doing so, she offers not only a critique of existing theories of love but also a framework within which those theories can be reinterpreted and, where necessary, transformed.

What ultimately emerges from Bialek's analysis is a conception of love that resists both idealization and reduction. Love is neither a stable achievement grounded in value nor a purely volitional commitment insulated from contingency. It is, rather, an ongoing engagement with another whose future—and whose significance for us—cannot be fully known in advance. If this account leaves certain philosophical resources underexplored, it also succeeds in reorienting the discussion of love in a way that makes those resources newly relevant. In this respect, *Love in Time* is best understood not as a definitive account of love, but as a compelling invitation to rethink its ethical and temporal dimensions.

Noelle Leslie dela Cruz
De La Salle University, Philippines