

Beyond Blood and Taboo: An Ethical Defense of Consensual Romantic Incest

Wei Wei

Minghang Crosspoint High School, Shanghai 694008, China

Email: Vivi_wei0121@outlook.com

How to cite this paper: Wei, W. (2026). Beyond Blood and Taboo: An Ethical Defense of Consensual Romantic Incest. *Literature, Language and Cultural Studies*, 6(2), 130–135. ISSN Print: 3079-5095, ISSN Online: 3079-5109.

<https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9197>

Published: 2026-08-28

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Abstract

This paper argues that consensual romantic incest is not inherently immoral; its condemnation arises from a socially constructed taboo misapplied to genuine love. It first exposes the incest taboo as a man-made norm designed to uphold patriarchal order, distinct from universal morality, and thus an invalid basis for ethical judgment. It then defends the primacy of individual autonomy in pursuing true love—defined as singular, subjective, and intention-driven—where pure motive can supersede convention. A fictional case of siblings Noah and Emma illustrates that authentic love can emerge through mutual protection and vulnerability, demonstrating that such bonds warrant evaluation apart from the taboo. The paper systematically refutes three core objections. It shows that short-term genetic risks are manageable through contraception and prenatal screening, and that denying reproductive rights aligns with unjust eugenics. It distinguishes non-consensual familial abuse from voluntary incest, noting that power imbalance, not kinship, drives abuse and that marriage exhibits higher rates of sexual violence. It contends that psychological distress among consenting individuals results from social stigma and internalized shame, analogous to historical homophobia-induced trauma, rather than from the relationship itself. The paper concludes that the right to authentic love overcomes fabricated taboos, and that true moral courage lies in freeing the heart to belong beyond blood.

Keywords

Consensual incest; Incest taboo; Social construction of morality; Romantic love; Sibling incest; Individual autonomy; Sexual abuse

1. Introduction

Recount to the ancient Egyptian myth story of the goddess Isis and the god Osiris, who were brother-sister, husband and wife. The romance emerging in their relationship was so powerful that it did not corrupt the order as we expect but restored the peace of the cosmos instead (Ramsden 7). The precious bravery in their mythical incestuous story is portrayed as love of divine and altruistic. However, when it comes to real-life incestuous cases, we automatically respond with disgust to the Colt household, where five generations all engage in sexual relationships and

inbreeding. (Candace par.6). We even begin to picture an abnormal child produced by inbreeding and young depressed girls stranded on beds to escape family chaos. This divergence of attitudes reveals that our moral judgement of incest as a taboo is never a natural biological repulsion but a long-term false interpretation constructed by social norms. This paper will clarify that, if understood as a consensual romantic relationship between individuals within a pre-settled family structure, incest itself is not wrong because even kin should be granted the right to romantically love each other; rather, the wrongness of some complex cases biasedly labeled as incest is due to other elements involved, including psychological disorders, sexual abuse, controversial biological consequences and family structure destruction.

2. Incest Taboo as Social Construct

To begin with, incest taboo and family structure are man-made constructions, thus cannot serve as a basis for moral judgment. The foundation of incest taboo is "law of father," or the Oedipus complex, which predicts that sons will grow an incestuous desire for their mother, and fathers will prohibit it and restore the order (Lacan 137). This process, is a socially constructed tool to conform to the patriarchal social order. The aim of the incest taboo is to maintain social hierarchy and gender status. However, obeying the patriarchal authority is just a social norm and not equivalent to being moral. Turiel points out that, because of their location-dependence (varying by the region), changeability (authority can modify the rules of norm), and function for social harmony, norms are distinct from, thus cannot define morality (levy "Turiel's Project"). When different societies have very divergent interpretations of incest with no universality, these interpretations are deeply influenced by the structure of power. Since the incest taboo is a socially constructed and variable norm, this is a social convention, rather than a morality, its mere existence cannot prove incest is inherently wrong. It functions to preserve patriarchal order by regulating kinship and women's sexuality, which challenges the taboo's claim to moral truth.

3. The value of love

Secondly, seeking true love is a valuable thing within people's autonomy. Pursuing true love places profound importance in one's lifelong wellbeing. For one's lifelong felicity and competence, being loved by other is irreplaceable crucial to build up self-esteem, personal identity and disclosing individual value, which cannot be achieved as penetrating as other experiences (Milligan 51). To understand why the experience of romantic love holds a unique power for individual flourishing, we need a clear sense of what is true love. Berenson proposes that true love is unwaveringly singular, irreducibly individual, subjective and reality-distorting delusive (Berenson 79). If true love by definition is singular and subjective by nature then pursuing it should be an act of autonomy, Abelard argues that intention

determines one's morality of his action (Anderson 53). Thus, even the result seems to be against our conventions, the pure intention of love can supersede religious and social conventions which allow individuals to follow their intention.

Let us imagine a plausible scenario of incest and examine whether this follows the principles of a true love. Noah and Emma are siblings grown up in a family of domestic abuse and suppressive atmosphere, they are the only emotional support and company with each other. When Noah experiences abuse from their aggressive alcoholic father, Emma stands out and protects Noah from getting hurt even though herself is frightened. At the beginning, Noah loves how Emma is resilient and courageous. Over time with their growth, Noah develops feelings that are beyond familial love, not only when Emma acts as a protector and supporter, but he also loves Emma deeply when Emma has severe illness for two years. At the moment she is most fragile and vulnerable, Noah even learned how to be resilient just as Emma treated him before. One night they confirmed each other's feelings, compassion and impulse led them to have sex and they used contraception. After that night, Noah and Emma gradually end their relationship because breaking the norms brings them excessive internal guilt and torments, and they fear public judgements. However, after ending this relationship, both Emma and Noah find themselves struggling to find a love as genuine and irreplaceable as the one they once had. Noah and Emma's bond starts from mutual protection and support and evolves into loving the original person of each other, whereas they can also distort the reality by blinding themselves to the incest taboo. Their incestuous love proves valuable in itself and should remain within their autonomy to pursue. Therefore, incest should not be morally denied by social convention and should be reevaluated case by case through coinciding harm, coercion and abuse of power.

4. The controversial genetic impact

Now that I have established the moral acceptability of incestuous love, I will continue to explain why incest is commonly mistaken to be wrong beyond being merely seen as a taboo. The first and most common argument against incest states that it may lead to biological and genetic harm to the offspring. However, the extent of these biological risks and effects remains controversial, and often over exaggerated by incest taboo. Inbreeding, the sexual reproduction of offspring between genetically related individuals, is generally believed to increase the chance of death or hereditary diseases. Evidence suggests that long-term inbreeding, purges deleterious genes and establishes genetic equilibrium, and does not increase offspring morality or cause the inheritance of detrimental genes (Livingstone 47). Admittedly, the risk of genetic disorders carried by children born from inbreeding during the initial stage does elevate, but the result after repetitive process of inbreeding will return to normal. Furthermore, this short-term biological risk does not pose significant challenge to modern day incest. First, incestuous couples may

not have the intention of producing offspring, thus will not inbreed, just like the story of Noah and Emma seeking pure pleasure. Second, incestuous couple wants to have offspring, there are advanced medical technologies such as genetic screening and prenatal examination, allowing parents to have the freedom of choice on birth and eliminating the possible diseases or physical pain from genes. Third, individuals in incest relationships still should be granted birth rights. According to the Rawls's principle, each person has an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override (Wikler 192), thus no one should deprive other people's birth rights.

Furthermore, the idea to forbid incest in order to limit the spread of inferior genetics is essentially eugenics. Francis Galton proposed the idea that "human stock" shall be improved by controlled breeding and advocated intentionally selecting and eliminating genes. He defined human eugenics as the study under social control that seeks to improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations either physically or mentally (Galton par.1). Apart from extreme racial prejudice-based eugenics attempts such as the Nazi regime and the forced sterilization of minorities in Northern Europe, these eugenics events entangle too many other inhumane elements. Even when we exclusively focus on the notion of eugenics, this notion still remains intrinsically unfair and instrumentally limiting the diversity of human traits. When we determine the birth of one child in the setting of eugenics, we are evaluating the prospective profit or adverse impact he will bring to others (Wikler 191). When the main purpose is to maximize the benefit of the total population by depriving the minority of benefits or rights, life iteration is reduced to a cost-benefit analysis. On the other hand, eugenics creates a very limiting evaluation on the ideals and values of human excellence. For example, overly flattering the superiority of the highly intelligent but failing to appreciate other virtues such as kindness, empathy, honesty and creativity, which are then neglected, can distort society's evaluation on human virtues.

5. The fallacy of sexual abuse

The second argument against incest highlights the higher rates of sexual abuse correlates with incestuous cases. To begin with, sexual abuses should not be attributed to incest. Intrafamilial sexual abuse is a non-consensual sexual behavior from a family member by physical force or manipulation, thus it is a crime and not incest, which is a consensual romantic relationship. Incest taboo causes people to biasedly label such intrafamilial sexual abusive cases as incest. However, because of the structural obstacles within the patriarchal family structure, informed consent can be distorted and difficult to verify, because an individual can be manipulated or not informed of the consequences of making the choice (Gray 46). A consensual relationship requires free consent, in which individuals make a choice not caused by coercion, undue influence and fraud. ("Free consent" par.6). To note the fragility of

free consent in the family is not to discard, but to show why distorted forms of "consensual" demand a finer distinction. Additionally, characterizing family sexual abuse as incest is a form of victim blaming mentality, which neglects the victim's personal will and implies that the sexual violation is a consensual sexual relation. Moreover, Sexual abuse is a universal issue also involved in marriage, social setting or in human trafficking, etc. The most common sexual abuse occurs in marriage, globally around 30% of women have experienced sexual abuse, and 27% experienced it from intimate partner or husband. (WHO 45). However, 19.7% female and 7.9% of male have experienced intrafamilial sexual abuse (Martijn 72). If we forbid incest because of the correlation with abuse, we should also forbid marriage because of the higher prevalence. The main reason of sexual abuse is the power imbalance, power imbalance appears not only in familial structures but also in marriage, workplaces and any other romantic relationships and its harm has not yet been resolved.

5. The misconception of psychological harm

The third argument accuses incest of causing psychological disorders, such as depression, PTSD and anxiety disorder (Turan 6). This can be categorized into two conditions. First, most of the psychological disorders directly caused by the so-called incest cases is the non-consensual sexual abuse, especially of minors. ACE and traumatic experience can cause victims in vast issues psychologically. The second condition, individuals in a consensual romantic relationship still experience psychological issues, however, plagued and burdened by a social norm against incest. As I mentioned above, the incest taboo is merely a man-made construction and morally does not stand. However, when individual insist to pursue their genuine love and engage in incest, as how Emma and Noah experienced torments by social norms, the reason behind the feeling of guilt is cognitive dissonance will interrupt their moral belief, making their belief not align with their actual behavior, this severe guilt and unalignment can cause depression PTSD and anxiety (Keating 30). Individuals in incest relationship are facing the same dilemma just like the homosexual people when homosexual was insisted as morally false and against the law. But now people realize homophobic is a toxic social norm and we should encourage liberal love between homosexual people. However, back when homosexual has been seen as forbidden, homosexual minority's mental health had been severely damaged, the external social value creates distress and discriminations to homosexuals and leading to internalized homophobia, higher stress and suicide prevalence (Meyer 691).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the right to pursue authentic love surpasses the socially constructed incest taboo, genetic risks can be resolved and eugenics remains an unjust belief.

Lastly, abuse and psychological issues come from non-consensual acts or invalid conventions instead of from incest itself. True love is within human instinct, it has the power to transcend blood and break the chains, reminding us that the greatest moral courage is daring to let hearts belong freely.

References

- [1] Anderson, J. M. "Romantic Love as Natural Right in Bérout's Romance of Tristan." *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, vol. 39, 2015.
- [2] Berenson, F. "What Is This Thing Called 'Love'?" *Philosophy*, vol. 66, no. 255, Jan. 1991, pp. 65–79, doi:10.1017/s0031819100052852.
- [3] Candace, Sutton. "Real Story Behind Colt Incest Family." *News.com.au*, 1 Jun 2026, <https://www.news.com.au/national/nsw-act/courts-law/real-story-behind-colt-incest-family/news-story/940bbdbedfcdc323551dbb663ea2ed7a>.
- [4] "Free Consent-Definition-law dictionary" SooperKanoon, sooperkanoon.com/dictionary/definition/96400/free-consent.
- [5] Galton, Francis. "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims." *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 10, no. 1, July 1904.
- [6] Gray, Bradford H. "Complexities of Informed Consent." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 437, no. 1, May 1978, pp. 37–48, doi:10.1177/000271627843700104.
- [7] Keating, Aaron. "Risk and Protective Factors for Psychological Distress Following a Morally Injurious Event in Combat Veterans." *Digital Commons@NLU*, digitalcommons.nlu.edu/diss/484.
- [8] Levy, Neil. "The Moral/Conventional Distinction." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 June 2022, plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-conventional/.
- [9] Livingstone, Frank B. "Genetics, Ecology and the Origins of Incest and Exogamy." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1969, pp. 45–61. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2740683>.
- [10] Martijn, Frederica Martina. "What About the Family? Exploring the Role of Familial Dysfunction in Intrafamilial Child Sexual Abuse Offending." *NTU Institutional Repository*, 2025, irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/53725/1/Frederica%20Martijn%202025.pdf.
- [11] Meyer, Ilan H. "Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: Conceptual Issues and Research Evidence." *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 129, no. 5, 2003, pp. 674–697.
- [12] Milligan T. A sense of worth. In: *Love*. Acumen Publishing; 2011:51–72.
- [13] Ramsden, Renee. "The Myth of Isis and Osiris." *The Myth of Isis and Osiris*, pp. 1–3, jungsouthernafrica.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Isis_and_Osiris_Renee_Ramsden.pdf.
- [14] "The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book V: The Formations of the Unconscious: 1957-1958." eSource (Dublin Business School), Aug. 2011, hdl.handle.net/10788/156.
- [15] Turan, Ömer, et al. "An Examination of the Relationship Between Psychopathology and the Sociodemographic, Clinical, and Abuse Characteristics in Children Who Have Experienced Sexual Abuse." *Child Abuse & Neglect*, vol. 169, no. Pt 1, Aug. 2025, p. 107620, doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2025.107620.
- [16] Wikler, Daniel. "Can We Learn from Eugenics?" *Journal of Medical Ethics*, vol. 25, no. 2, Apr. 1999, pp. 183–194.
- [17] World Health Organization. Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2023: Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and non-partner sexual violence against women. WHO, 19 Nov. 2025, www.who.int/westernpacific/publications/i/item/9789240116962.