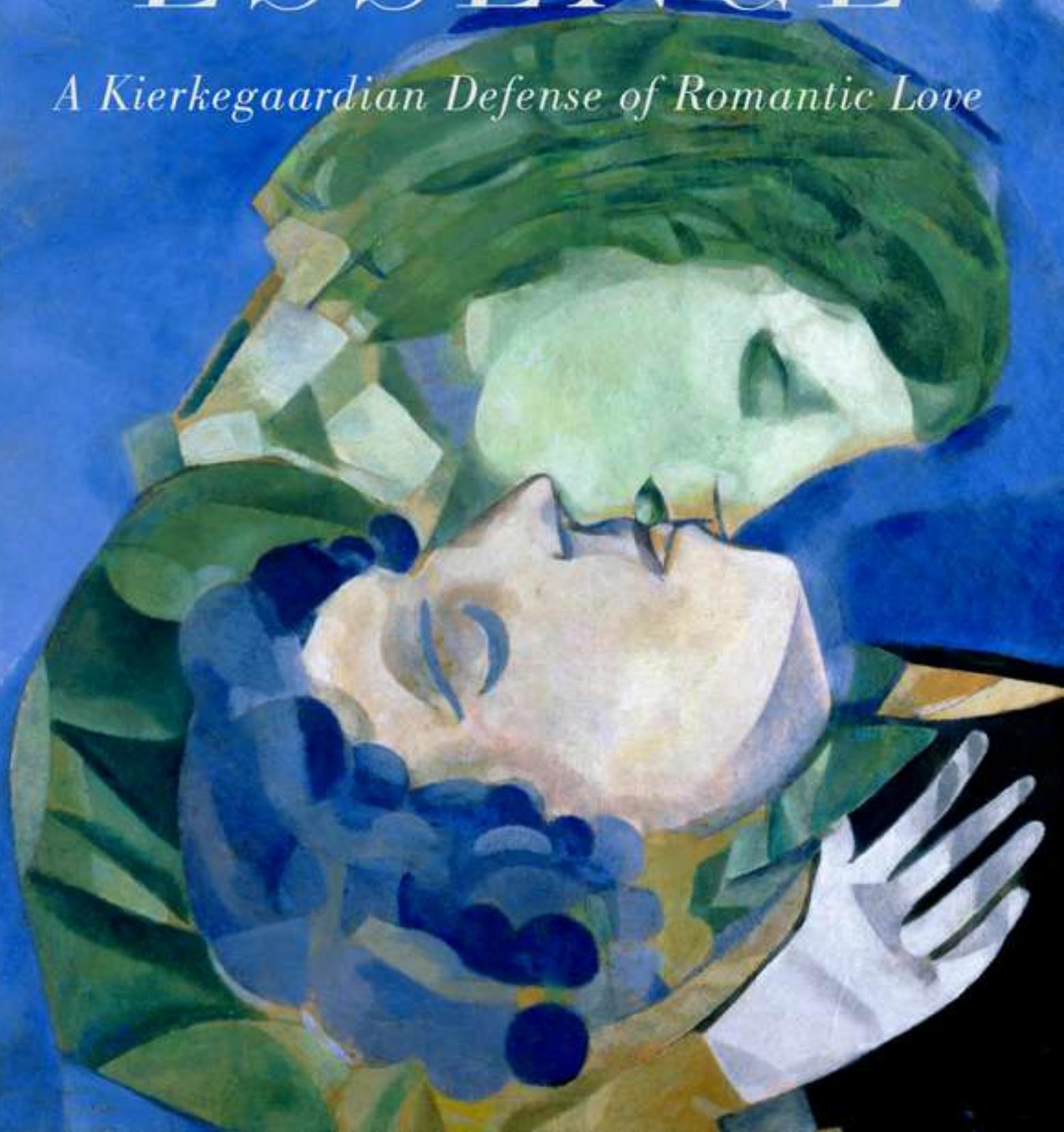


SHARON KRISHEK

LOVERS *in* ESSENCE

A Kierkegaardian Defense of Romantic Love



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OXFORD
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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Krishek, Sharon, author.

Title: Lovers in essence : a Kierkegaardian defense of romantic love /
Sharon Krishek.

Description: New York, NY, United States of America : Oxford University Press, [2022] |
Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021035131 (print) | LCCN 2021035132 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780197500903 (hardback) | ISBN 9780197500927 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Kierkegaard, Søren, 1813-1855. | Love.

Classification: LCC B4378.L6 K755 2022 (print) |
LCC B4378.L6 (ebook) |

DDC 128/.46—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021035131>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021035132>

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197500903.001.0001

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Integrated Books International, United States of America

To Ariel Meirav

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Acknowledgments

This book is the result of an endeavor that spanned several years and involved numerous dialogues with many people, who helped me in the long, sometimes painful, process of its “grinding into shape” (to use Kierkegaard’s words). Its writing was generously supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 111/16), which also provided further financial support for covering publication expenses (grant no. 109/22). I very much appreciate this very extensive assistance. This book would not have been realized in its present form without the trust and patience of Lucy Randall, the philosophy editor at Oxford University Press, and I’m grateful for her help, encouragement, and support. I also wish to express my gratitude to Hannah Doyle, her assistant, for making the process of production pleasant and smooth.

A significant part of the book was written during a sabbatical year at Harvard University, where I was hosted by the Human Flourishing Program at the Institute for Quantitative Social Science. I’m thankful for the research group’s kind and warm welcome, and I thank Jeff Hanson, Matt Lee, Tyler VanderWeele, and Matt Wilson for valuable feedback on my work. I would like to thank especially Jeff, my partner in a different philosophical project, for long and interesting discussions that were often relevant to this project as well.

Ideas from the book were presented at various conferences, and the many questions and comments raised on these occasions undoubtedly contributed much to the development of these ideas. In this connection, I’m particularly grateful to Dani Attas, Helen Daly, John Davenport, Jacob Golomb, Ronald Hall, Eleanor Helms, Hilla Jacobson, Troy Jollimore, Hagi Kenaan, Avi Kenan, Arnon Levi, Oded Na’aman, Karin Nisenbaum, Christoph Schmidt,

Aaron Segal, Danny Statman, Joseph Stern, Preston Werner, Ruth Weintraub, and Hawie Wettstein.

I'm deeply indebted to Rick Furtak, a fellow Kierkegaardian and a very dear friend, for reading and reviewing segments from this book, and for his care, trust, and strong encouragement all along the way. I'm extremely grateful to George Pattison, a constant source of philosophical inspiration and support, for his attentive reading of parts of the book and his insightful comments. I'd like to express a special gratitude to Anthony Rudd, who read in a particularly perceptive and observant way the book in its entirety. This was very meaningful to me, and I wholeheartedly thank him for his invaluable feedback.

I'd like to thank my students and colleagues in the philosophy department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Their friendliness, combined with the rigor of their approach to philosophy, provided the perfect atmosphere for the advancement of this project. In particular, I'd like to offer thanks to Dar Triffon-Reshef, who was my student and research assistant at the time this project was undertaken: her enthusiasm and clear-sighted comments were significantly helpful in many respects; to Carl Posy, for hours and hours of stimulating, highly motivating, and amicable philosophical conversations that were very valuable to me; and to David Enoch, who despite being as far from Kierkegaard as can be, invested—with a truly Kierkegaardian generosity and earnestness—time, energy, and thought in reading considerable portions of this project and commenting on them: I'm immensely grateful for his input, as well as his friendship.

The writing of this book entered its crucial stage, and was finalized, during the strange and unsettling time of the world pandemic. Being closed in at home and having all family members continually sharing the same space was an unusual setting for completing a book. And I would never have managed to do this without the endless support and loving consideration of those family members. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my sweet

and good-hearted Abigail and Elisha, who despite having to deal with the challenging circumstances themselves, were patient with their mom, and gave her—as much as their young age allows—the peace of mind to write this book. I by no means take this for granted.

And finally, I would like to express my greatest gratitude to Ariel Meirav—my true correspondent, my deepest love—who helped so many of the ideas in this book to take shape, and who constantly helps me, in so many ways, to be myself.

Introduction

A Neo-Kierkegaardian Project

I.1. Characterization of the Project

The central aim of this project is to explore the nature of romantic love¹ and, in doing so, to defend it as a moral phenomenon. Such a defense is needed because romantic love is often regarded with suspicion from a moral point of view. Exclusive, spontaneous, and driven by desires as romantic love is, it may seem antithetical to morality, which is impartial, dutiful, and rational.² In sharp opposition to this reserved judgment, however, stands our affirmative experience: it is hard to deny how central, significant, and valuable romantic love *is* for human life.

Interestingly, in Kierkegaard's philosophy these two approaches toward romantic love, reservation and affirmation, meet. On the one hand, Kierkegaard is an existential philosopher with poetic inclinations, who inquires into the very experience, the "drama," of living, and takes a philosophical interest in the joys, thrills, and sorrows of romantic love.³ On the other hand, he is a Christian philosopher committed to the religious understanding of love as

¹ I use "romantic love" as it is commonly used and understood in our daily (as opposed to academic or specifically philosophical) language: namely, the kind of love that involves sexuality or sensuality; that traditionally is taken to lead to marriage or a life-long commitment; that is praised by literature, films, art, and folks in general.

² Regarding romantic love's rather poor reputation and the possible reasons for that, see, for example, Solomon and Higgins 1991, 1–9; Solomon 1991; Jollimore 2011, chap. 7; and Milligan 2011, 1–8.

³ As I show in more detail in Krishek 2009.

selfless and universal, and thus deeply suspicious about romantic love, which is neither selfless nor universal.

This twofold, conflicting approach to the topic makes Kierkegaard's philosophy a fruitful context for an inquiry into the nature and value of romantic love: while in essence disposed to affirm it, he is also alert to the risks it entails. In this regard, what is particularly interesting about Kierkegaard's approach is that while being himself ambivalent about the moral and religious value of romantic love,⁴ he offers us the tools (so I claim) to establish it as a spiritual phenomenon. As we shall see, romantic love, in light of Kierkegaard's ideas, is revealed as (potentially) the beating heart of the highest mode of existence, and as the crossroads where spirituality, morality, and sensuality converge.

Such a view of romantic love, however, cannot simply be ascribed to Kierkegaard. In fact, the thesis that I develop here is independent of the conception of love he explicitly expressed in his seminal text *Works of Love*. It goes beyond it, and is, in some respects, even in disagreement with it. At the same time, my thesis is deeply rooted in some of the most prominent key ideas of Kierkegaard's philosophy: his conception of the self, his understanding of faith, and his emphatic endorsement of universal love.

Hence, although my concern in this project is primarily substantial—namely, to achieve a better understanding of the nature and value of romantic love—I also make here a nontrivial exegetical claim. Having developed a view of love that is different from Kierkegaard's explicit position, I show that this view is nevertheless consistent with his view of the religious life, and may even be supported by the latter. For this purpose, I offer a close reading of *The Sickness unto Death*, arguably Kierkegaard's most important essay, and demonstrate how its understanding of the nature of one's ideal relation to God paves the way for an unapologetic affirmation

⁴ I argue for this ambivalence in my previous study on Kierkegaard. See Krishek 2009, in particular chapter 5.

of romantic love. To put it boldly, then, while my substantial thesis is that romantic love is (in principle) a moral and spiritual phenomenon, my exegetical thesis is that had Kierkegaard been consistent with the religious view that he presents in *The Sickness unto Death*, he should have presented a view of love that agrees with the one that I propose.

In this sense, my project may be considered neo-Kierkegaardian. Developing some of Kierkegaard's central ideas on love, faith, and the self in a way that is sometimes different from his, I do not offer a straightforward interpretation of his view, nor is my project about *Kierkegaard's* view of love. However, the view I do end up with is, so I claim, essentially faithful to Kierkegaard's main concerns and convictions. It is a theory of love that, while it cannot be plainly attributed to Kierkegaard, can be aptly characterized as *Kierkegaardian*.

Finally, in the course of this study I also refer, sometimes at length, to contemporary discussions taking place in the field of the philosophy of love. These discussions are often motivated by normative concerns regarding the rationality and justification of love, which are somewhat alien to the character of this project. Therefore, while not attempting to directly engage in the debates led by central figures in the field, I do raise questions that are of interest to the participants in those debates, and contribute to the discourse revolving around a substantial inquiry of love more generally, asking: What makes us love a person, romantically or otherwise? What is the shared basis for all the different kinds of love? What are the distinctive characteristics inherent in the nature of romantic love in particular? What are the threats to morality that romantic love poses, and how can these be addressed?

It is true that the aforementioned contemporary debates are characteristically secular, and as such might seem overly remote from a theory rooted in Kierkegaardian religiosity. However, as with Kierkegaard's philosophy itself, so with this project: the secular reader can go a significant way without accepting any theological

assumption or framework. Hence, although—relying as it does on Kierkegaard’s religiously committed ideas—this project is theistic in its premises and framework, it does not address itself only to theists. It asks questions that are universally pressing, and attempts to give answers applicable outside the theistic framework. I therefore hope that this project will be of interest not only to those sympathetic to Kierkegaard and religious philosophy, but also to anyone who is curious about the nature of romantic love.

I.2. *Lovers in Essence*

In one of her more famous poems, the iconic Israeli poet Zelda (1914–1984) wrote that “every person has a name”: A name given by God, and by his⁵ parents; given by his height, and by his smile; given by his sins, and by his yearnings; given by his work, his love, his death.⁶ The idea of having a name plays a crucial role in my understanding of love, standing, in my theory, for the key conception of possessing an individual essence. To possess such an essence is to be an individual, or, in Kierkegaard’s terms, a self. Let us take, for example, the eponymous heroine of the novel *Jane Eyre*. In being the particular individual that she is—namely, “Jane”—her essence is both that which determines her identity as Jane over time, and that which captures her nature as Jane, distinct from other individuals.

In this sense, there are two facets to Jane’s essence, and while that which determines her identity over time is invariable, that which stands for her distinct nature as “Jane” is not necessarily so. In the

⁵ In its original Hebrew, the poem is written in the third-person singular, and uses a male pronoun (although obviously referring to every human being). The English translation, titled “Each of Us Has a Name” (see following note), is written in the plural and as a result, in my opinion, loses the poignancy of the Hebrew original.

⁶ This is a paraphrase of only a part of the poem, freely translated by me. An English translation is available online at <https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/site/poem/item/3275/auto/0/0/Zelda/EACH-OF-US-HAS-A-NAME>.

theory that I develop based on Kierkegaard's analysis of the self, the twofold nature of one's essence is explained in terms of having one's essence—one's name—primarily possessed in a state of a potential that one needs, during one's lifetime, to actualize. Jane is Jane by virtue of being given a name by God on the one hand, and by her parents, height, smile, sins, yearnings, work, love, death—in short, by living in the world—on the other hand. The former is the “eternal” (invariable) potential, the latter is the “temporal” (changing) actualization.

The actualization of this potential is the lifelong task of becoming oneself; becoming the self that one can, and should, be. My thesis is that this actualization is enacted and carried out by love: we become who we are by loving. Further, we love the people that we do because of who *they* are. We love them by virtue of their essence—and by virtue of the correspondence between their essence and our own.

To be lovers *in essence*, then, refers to two things. First, it refers to loving as being an important part of every person's essence. In fact, as we will see, to be human is defined by Kierkegaard as, primarily, being capable of loving. Second, it refers to the bond that joins the lovers: to their mutual response to each other, to their correspondence. Such a spontaneous response, however, is not enough. It is not enough to love; we must love *correctly*, that is, in a way that accords with morality. Only when love is moral can it also be spiritual. That is, only a correct love can actualize our potential properly, and, further, it is this successful actualization of one's potential on which the achievement of the ultimate relation to God depends.

I.3. The Book's Plan

In what follows I substantiate the connection between individual essence and love, and in this context explore and defend the nature of romantic love as a moral and spiritual phenomenon. In the first

chapter I explain what it means to possess an individual essence, before moving on, in the second chapter, to explain the role of one's individual essence in exploring the grounds for love. In chapter 3 I explain what it means to *love* by defending a conception of love as a kind of caring that necessarily involves both compassion and joy, and in chapters 4 and 5 I explain what it means to love *correctly*. I do this by demonstrating that to love correctly means that this love must, first, be unselfish (chapter 4) and, second, conform to the demand for universality (chapter 5). In chapter 6 I explore the state of *failing* to love correctly, which is correlated, in Kierkegaard's terms, to a state of despair. It is in this chapter that I provide the *exegetical* defense of my thesis of individual essence. Thus, while in the course of the first five chapters I present ideas that can be "translated" into secular thinking,⁷ this chapter brings into the discussion the nontranslatable spiritual idea of "resting in God." Finally, in the seventh and concluding chapter, I show how loving correctly—loving in a moral way—is a condition for the state of "resting in God," and demonstrate how romantic love in particular has the capacity to lead to this state, thus construing romantic love as both moral and spiritual. As a test case for the possible harmonious convergence of sensuality, morality, and spirituality, I conclude the chapter, and the book, with an in-depth discussion on the passionate, romantic, and, ultimately, redemptive love between Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester.⁸

⁷ I offer such possible "translations" whenever relevant in the course of these chapters.

⁸ In the interest of stylistic coherence and simplicity, and given that my exemplar for a moral-spiritual romantic lover is a female (Jane Eyre), throughout the book I often use the female pronoun when I speak of the romantic lover and the male pronoun when I speak of the romantic beloved. In other contexts I am less systematic: sometimes, to conform with quotations from Kierkegaard, I use the male pronoun, and sometimes, when speaking about people in general, I adhere to the convention of using the female pronoun. That being said, it is important to note that my use of pronouns is not intended to convey any ideological or stylistic agenda. Whenever a female pronoun appears, it can easily be replaced with the relevant male pronoun, and vice versa.

1

Individual Essence

1.1. The Beloved as a Self

1.1.1. Introduction

“Never shall a young man,
Thrown into despair
By those great honey-coloured
Ramparts at your ear,
Love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.”

“But I can get a hair-dye
And set such color there,
Brown, or black, or carrot,
That young men in despair
May love me for myself alone
And not my yellow hair.”

“I heard an old religious man
But yesternight declare
That he had found a text to prove
That only God, my dear,
Could love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.”¹

¹ W. B. Yeats, “For Anne Gregory.”

The girl's desire to be loved for "herself" reflects a common sentiment.² Arguably, we all want to be loved for ourselves and not for the color of our hair, the shape of our body, or our excellence in poetry or philosophy.³ This implies that we take genuine love to respond *not* to contingent qualities that characterize us, but to *us*, to who we *essentially* are. Hence, the conclusion of the poem is rather pessimistic. If only God can love us for ourselves, as the poem suggests, then it is also only God who can love us *in earnest*. Romantic lovers, on the other hand, dazzled as they are by their beloved's yellow hair, are doomed to fail at loving their beloved for herself, hence failing to love her *genuinely*. I beg to differ. In the course of the present project I will demonstrate that it is not only God but also the human lover, and in particular the romantic lover, who can love the beloved for herself.

What does it mean, however, to love the beloved for her *self*? What does a "self" mean? One of Kierkegaard's most important essays, *The Sickness unto Death* (1849), presents an analysis of exactly this issue. The analysis is crucial for the inquiry into despair and sin discussed in that essay, and later we shall explore its significance in this regard, as well as its significance in substantiating the spirituality of genuine romantic love.⁴ Yet Kierkegaard's analysis of the self also stands on its own. In the present chapter I rely on this analysis in order to develop the idea of possessing an individual essence, which plays a significant role in the view of love that the present project seeks to defend.⁵ First, however, since the concept of the self is understood and used in different ways in the literature, as

² A few other contemporary writers in the philosophy of love also refer to this poem, including Velleman (1999) (whose position I discuss at length in the next chapter), Delaney (1996), Hamlyn (1978), Lamb (1997), and Rorty (1986).

³ Segments of this chapter correlate, to a certain extent, with ideas presented in Krishek 2019c.

⁴ See chapters 6 and 7. In chapter 6 I defend the concept of "individual essence" not only as conceptually tenable (as I do in the present chapter), but also as exegetically tenable. In chapter 7, based on this exegetical analysis, I demonstrate how romantic love functions in one's relationship with God.

⁵ Strictly speaking, "essence" is that which determines the identity of X, and as such is invariable. In everyday language, however, "essence" is used to denote the distinctive nature of a thing, without necessarily being committed to its being invariable. My

well as in everyday language, a clarification regarding my use of this concept in the current context is required.⁶

1.1.2. My Use of the Notion of the Self

“Self” is a term that I use to denote a particular person—an individual (say, Jane). By “individual” I mean someone who is identical to herself (Jane is the same Jane over time), and distinct from others (Jane is *not* identical, either numerically or qualitatively, to Charlotte, Emily, or Anne).⁷ My thesis, to be demonstrated below, is that it is one’s *individual essence* that makes one an individual, and I term this quality of individual essence “selfhood.”⁸ Selfhood, then, is the quality that makes one a self, while a self is an individual in the sense just explained. Jane’s selfhood, then, determines her identity as Jane (over time) and distinguishes her from others (Charlotte, Emily, or Anne).

Further, when I speak of Jane’s identity, I refer to something slightly different from Lockean personal identity. To speak of Jane’s identity in the Lockean sense is to refer to her psychological continuity: Jane is the same person as the person who performed a certain act (or had a certain experience), if she is aware of the agent

conception of the beloved’s essence, as will be demonstrated in section 1.5 of this chapter, combines both usages.

⁶ My discussion here takes a different direction from that of current discussions on the self. These discussions understand the self in terms of narrative construal (e.g., MacIntyre 1981; Taylor 1989; Dennett 1992; Schechtman 1996, 2011; Velleman 2006); minimal subjectivity (e.g., Zahavi 2005; Strawson 2017); or simply in terms of agency (e.g., Korsgaard 2009). Despite the different direction, my own discussion is not necessarily in disagreement with some of the ideas that these theories express; it simply asks a different question. The same holds true with regards to discussions, led by Kierkegaard scholars, on the nature of the Kierkegaardian self. I explain the difference in chapter 6, section 6.4.

⁷ For an elaboration of these and other features of individuality, see, for example, Gracia 1994 and Noone 2003.

⁸ In my use of the terms, then, “individual essence” and “selfhood” are synonymous and I use them interchangeably.

of the act (or the subject of the experience) as herself.⁹ However, consider the following thought experiment. Think of Jane Eyre, the protagonist of Brontë's novel. Suppose that a wicked fairy were to change her from an earnest, clever, courageous, and passionate woman to a devious, foolish, cowardly, and cold one. Suppose that she suddenly hated to draw and detested Edward Rochester (her beloved). Suppose that she became extroverted and noisy. It is clear that something significant has been lost, and, under these circumstances, we would be likely to say that Jane was no longer *herself*. We would say so even if we assumed that her ability to recognize herself in her past experiences and acts has been unaffected, that is, if we assumed that she remains the same person in the Lockean sense. Let us say, then, that what has changed is her *selfhood*: she is the same person, but not the same *self*.

To be clear, the change in question—of one's self—does not relate only to character. The transformed self, who loses her identity (in the relevant sense) as Jane, will also have a different set of preferences, passions, desires, and inclinations. She will *not*, however, have a different set of memories. Hence, to emphasize again, she keeps her identity in the Lockean sense while nevertheless becoming "someone else." The notion of "self" as I use it, then, is meant to convey a kind of identity that the Lockean conception of personal identity does not capture. Accordingly, this thought experiment is only meant to demonstrate the specific use of the notion of identity at work here, and should *not* be taken to imply that such a change of identity—that is, of one's self—is at all possible. To avoid confusion in this regard, we can think of another example that demonstrates the same point but from the opposite direction.

A recent television series, *The Good Place*, focuses (comically) on the life after death of four different characters. At one phase of the story they are all, unbeknownst to them, "rebooted," and as such their memory of their afterlife is completely erased and they begin

⁹ See Locke 1979, 335.

their “life” in the Good Place again. This occurs numerous times, and each time, although beginning anew with no memory of themselves in the Good Place, they remain entirely the same characters. By this I mean that they are “the same” in the sense that they keep what I termed their “selves”—the set of qualities, inclinations, preferences, and desires that make each one the distinct individual he or she is. They even create the same relationships with each other over and over again. It is therefore not (Lockean) personal identity that they retain, but rather *self* identity.

We may therefore call the kind of identity at issue (i.e., self identity as opposed to personal identity) “name-identity,” as it is that which individuates and singles one out. And while one’s personal identity is determined (according to Locke) by one’s self-consciousness, my thesis is that one’s identity as a *self*—one’s “name-identity”—is determined, as I will explain in the course of this chapter, by one’s *individual essence* or selfhood.

My choice of the term “self” is not arbitrary. To begin with, the idea of possessing an individual *essence* works well with a common usage of the term “self.” Suppose that we sympathize with the girl in Yeats’s poem, who wants to be loved for “herself alone.” Presumably, her desire is to be loved, as we said, for who she *essentially* is and not for contingencies such as her yellow hair. In the same vein are sayings such as “I am myself only with you,” or “I was not myself when I acted that way.” To be “oneself” in these common usages expresses the notion of being who one *truly* is. However, my main reason for choosing this term is that my understanding of selfhood as an individual essence is inspired by and ingrained in Kierkegaard’s analysis of the self.¹⁰

¹⁰ It should be clarified that the metaphysical picture that I have just articulated is not presented systematically by Kierkegaard, and in some ways goes beyond what he explicitly says. In this sense, what I present in this chapter does not claim to be a straightforward interpretation of *Kierkegaard’s* view of the self, but it is more a “neo-Kierkegaardian” notion of the self. See also note 4 above.

1.1.3. The Three Kierkegaardian Anchors of My Theory

Three ideas that Kierkegaard presents in the first part of *The Sickness unto Death* are crucial for my conception of individual essence. The first idea, which he mentions in passing, is that every person possesses a “divine name.” The second idea is one that is central to his analysis of the self, namely, that a human being is “both temporal and eternal.” The third idea, which although not stated explicitly is yet implicit in his analysis, is that every person has the *potential* to become a specific “self.” Each of these ideas (as well as how they are connected) will be discussed at length in the course of this chapter, but let me begin with a succinct explanation of my understanding of the third idea.

Every human being is primitively intended to be a self, destined to become himself, and as such every self certainly is angular . . . [which] means that it is to be ground into shape.¹¹

Arguably, “being angular” is opposed to “being smooth,” with the latter taken by Kierkegaard to indicate “being like everybody else.”¹² Hence, we can infer that “being angular”—apart from representing a rough, initial, primitive state that has to be “ground into shape”—also attests to one’s distinctiveness.¹³ And as the quotation demonstrates, there is a gap between being created as an “intended” or “destined” singular X, and actually *becoming* that X. The existence of such a gap indicates that one has the *potential* to be the X—the specific self—that one is intended to be (with the task being

¹¹ *The Sickness unto Death* (hereafter SUD), 33.

¹² See SUD, 34.

¹³ Cf. Davenport 2013, 245–46. However, Davenport interprets the “angles” as representing the distinctiveness of one’s particular contingencies, and hence particular “vocation,” while I interpret them—as will soon be clarified—as representing the distinctiveness of one’s particular *essence*. I return to the significant difference between these two interpretations, and clarify it further, in section 1.3.

to fulfill this potential and become that X).¹⁴ Hence, that which makes one the self one is intended to be—let us call it “the quality of selfhood”—is given to humans, upon their creation, in a state of a potential.

Putting aside (for the time being) the theistic assumption that we are *intended* to become X, I use this Kierkegaardian idea to suggest that one’s selfhood, one’s individual essence, is possessed in a state of a potential. This means that just as a talent for singing, for example, is possessed in a state of a potential that one needs to actualize in order to become an accomplished singer, so too is the quality of selfhood. The claim, then, is that one has the potential to become (say) Jane.

The centrality of the idea of “*becoming* a self” to Kierkegaard’s philosophy is acknowledged by virtually every Kierkegaard scholar. It is less common, however, to find among Kierkegaard scholars those who would regard him as an “essentialist” (or, at the very least, would allow for an essentialist view based on his analysis).¹⁵ Nevertheless, by focusing on the connection between Kierkegaard’s idea of becoming and his characterization of humans as temporal and eternal, I attempt to demonstrate the nature of one’s potential (to be a self) by means of possessing an individual *essence*.

Here a clarification regarding my use of the term “potential” is necessary. Potential, as denoting the mode or state of a power before its actualization, usually allows for the possibility of nonactualization. This is not the case with regards to potential *selfhood* however, since there must always be *some* degree of actualization. Hence, while it might be natural to suppose that, speaking

¹⁴ See also “Yet at every moment that the self exists, it is in the process of becoming, for the self in potentiality does not actually exist, is simply that which ought to come into existence” (SUD, 30).

¹⁵ Instead, scholars tend to take the position reflected, for example, in the following claim made in a recent study: “A self, properly speaking, emerges in (and out of) a process of becoming. Each human being is a self-in-the-making in a unique way. . . . far from [an] essentialist picture, the self is a relation that unfolds in a process of subjective becoming” (Marandiuc 2018, 98).

of potential selfhood, the theory is saying that one who has not actualized the relevant potential is only potentially a self—this is *not* the case. One’s potential selfhood is always actualized at least minimally, simply by virtue of one’s existence. What we find, then, are not potential selves but rather different *versions* of self, corresponding to the different degrees of actualizing one’s potential.¹⁶ Hence, while every human being is a self, only a few succeed in actualizing their potential to its utmost and becoming the self they are *intended* to be.¹⁷

However, while it is clear enough what it means to possess, in a state of potential, qualities such as a talent for singing, sense of humor, or rationality—the quality of selfhood is obviously different. To clarify the nature of this quality, we should turn to the second of Kierkegaard’s relevant ideas, namely, his characterization of humans as both temporal and eternal.¹⁸

1.2. Being “Temporal and Eternal” (1): Particularity and Universality

It seems reasonable to assume that by characterizing humans as being both temporal and *eternal*, Kierkegaard is referring to the supposed relation of a human being to God (the “eternal”).¹⁹ This

¹⁶ I return to this point in section 1.5.

¹⁷ There is a disagreement between commentators over whether Kierkegaard uses the term “self” narrowly, to denote only the highest state of accomplishment, that is, of becoming the self *one is intended to be* (see, e.g., Davenport 2013, 231; Stokes 2010, 63), or whether he uses this term to denote both the accomplished and unaccomplished states (see, e.g., Rudd 2012, 42). I belong to the latter camp, not only because such a reading makes Kierkegaard’s essay more coherent, given his different usages of this notion (on this point, see chapter 7, note 7), but because the centrality of the experience of being a “self” is discordant with confining it only to the rare state of accomplishing the highest ideal.

¹⁸ “A human being is a synthesis . . . of the temporal and the eternal” (Kierkegaard 1980, 13).

¹⁹ See, for example, Roberts, who claims that “the eternal” is the term that Kierkegaard uses in order to signify the knowledge of the existence of God that every person possesses, as well as the kind of human capacities that allow access to this knowledge

relation is of a double nature: first, humans are created *by* God, and, second, they are created *in the image* of God. As I understand it, the characterization of humans as both temporal and eternal gives rise to two ideas (both of which are not explicitly presented by Kierkegaard). Namely, the pair temporal-eternal can be understood as expressing the twofoldness of, first, particularity and universality and, second, of contingency and essence. I will now focus on the former idea, and will return to the latter in section 1.5.

To be Jane is a function of many factors: of her past, life circumstances, and relationships, as well as of her inner world, self-consciousness, and memories. However, first and foremost it is, I suggest, a function of her individual essence, which I articulate in terms of her possession of the quality of selfhood. And selfhood, I suggest, amounts to a particular shape of personhood. What does this mean?

Personhood is a universal and essential quality. Possessed by all persons (and thus in this sense universal), it is this quality that makes them a person (and thus in this sense essential). For Kierkegaard, who views humans as created in the image of God, personhood reflects that image—amounting, thereby, to a combination of the qualities that characterize God—for example, rationality, creativity/imagination, free will, caring.²⁰ Determining the

(Roberts 1987, 139). Further support for understanding Kierkegaard's use of "the eternal" as indicative of the human being's relation to God can be found in a number of recent studies. For example, Bernier indicates four different senses of the eternal in Kierkegaard's philosophy and, combining these senses together, suggests that "the eternal is the non-temporal aspect of the self through which the self relates both to God and its own temporally segmented nature, which acts as a *telos* for the 'perfection' of the self" (2015, 23). Lappano claims that "the eternal is the dialectical hinge that turns the individual inward where one is instructed to encounter the divine in its transcendence but also its intimacy," and that "without the eternal in Kierkegaard's scheme the category of the individual is not a religious category" (2017, 102). Law suggests that the "obedience to God constitutes the presence of the eternal within a human being" (2013, 73), while Stokes claims that "the eternal is an irreducibly soteriological category. What the self comes into contact with in its engagement with the eternal is the possibility of eschatological judgement" (2015, 162).

²⁰ The supposition that humans are created in the image of God is debatable. See Welz's *Humanity in God's Image* (2016) for a detailed presentation and discussion

exact nature of personhood—be it, as some suggest,²¹ Kantian rationality or, as the Kierkegaardian framework would have it, God’s image—is not, however, crucial for the present discussion. Suffice it to say that I use “personhood” to indicate the quality (or set of qualities) that is shared by all persons and essential to them as persons.²²

Let us assume, then, an understanding of personhood that extends the Kantian conception into something like Kierkegaard’s theistic one, so that personhood is understood to be rationality in the elaborate sense of including also creativity (or imagination), freedom of will, and the capacity for caring.²³ These universal qualities, then, are essential to Jane (for example) by virtue of her being a person.

Now, I suggest that we think of a person’s *particular* qualities as giving a particular form to abstract universal qualities. After all, qualities such as rationality and creativity are not abstractly possessed.²⁴ Rather, these, and other universal qualities, abide, as it were, in a person by virtue of particular qualities. Accordingly,

of the questions involved in accounting for the meaning of bearing such an image. Kierkegaard’s own understanding of the *imago Dei* is a matter for scholarly debate. As Welz demonstrates, there is a case for claiming that in Kierkegaard’s view our resemblance to God is expressed not directly but inversely. At the same time, however, there is a textual basis (e.g., in essays such as *Works of Love*, hereafter WL) for understanding Kierkegaard as allowing for the view that human resemblance to God is also expressed by the possession of qualities that best characterize God. See, for example, his assertion that “God is Love, and therefore we can be like God only in loving” (WL, 62–63). Cf., in this regard, Evans 2004, 188: “Kierkegaard takes seriously the idea that every human being has been created by God and endowed by God with the potential to love. Anyone who loves God truly must love those creatures whom God who is love *has made in his own image by endowing them with the capacity for love*” (my emphasis).

²¹ For example, J. David Velleman, whose position will be discussed in chapters 2 and 5 below.

²² Secular readers, then, can consider my references to God’s image (and later to a “divine name”) in a more figurative fashion, that is, as an illustrative way for expressing ideas that are perhaps tenable from a secular point of view as well. While personally accepting the theistic framework, I present a way to consider these ideas outside this framework in section 1.5.2.

²³ In this regard, see Kennett’s criticism of Velleman’s identification of personhood with one’s “rational autonomy,” while also claiming that personhood includes “emotional and aesthetic responsiveness” as well (Kennett 2008, 223).

²⁴ Cf. Jollimore 2011, 135.

particular talents can be seen as expressions of rationality and imagination, particular passions can be seen as expressions of will, and moral qualities as expressions of the capacity for caring.²⁵

Let us take this a step further. My claim is that just as there are universal qualities that are essential to being a person, there are particular qualities that are essential to being the *self* that one is. So, for example, while rationality is essential to Jane Eyre's being a person, earnestness is essential to her being the self that she is (she would not be herself if earnestness were to be taken away from her, as in the example of the wicked fairy from above). However, Jane Eyre possesses (as does any other human) many particular qualities, not all of which are essential to her identity as "Jane Eyre." What determines which of her particular qualities are essential?

My suggestion is that one's *essential* particular qualities are those that best manifest one's God-image or personhood (i.e., one's essential universal qualities). For example, Jane's wit and courage are essential to her being who she is (had she not been witty and courageous, she would not have been Jane), and this seems like a manifestation of the essential universal qualities of rationality and will, respectively. The criterion for the essentiality of a particular quality, then, is its proficiency in expressing an essential universal quality.

Hence, of all X's particular qualities, only those that can manifest God's image are relevant (accordingly, having yellow hair, for example, cannot be an essential quality of X, because hair color is not a manifestation of God's image), and of *these*, the particular qualities that are essential to X are those that can manifest God's image in the best possible way (relatively to X). Understanding the relationship between universal and particular qualities in this way enables us to explain why wit (for example) is an essential particular quality for the selfhood of one person, but not necessarily for

²⁵ I do not claim this mapping to be exhaustive. There may be more essential universal qualities, and more groups of particular qualities (other than talents, passions, etc.) that manifest them.

another. With Jane it is her wit that arguably serves as the best vessel for her rationality, while in the case of John (her suitor)—who is as unwitty as can be—some other particular qualities may fill this role.

Further, of the pool of the essential particular qualities that composes one's selfhood, some qualities are interchangeable. For example, suppose that Charlotte possesses both a great talent for painting and a great talent for writing. Both these qualities are essential, because both serve as a vessel for, say, her creativity. My theory allows that Charlotte's individual essence as "Charlotte" is maintained whether she becomes a painter or a writer. She would be herself in both cases. The point, then, is that Charlotte's selfhood is composed of a specific pool, unique to her, of particular essential qualities from which several different combinations may emerge. As long as the combination includes qualities from this specific pool, Charlotte will be herself.²⁶

Recall Kierkegaard's claim that "every self certainly is angular."²⁷ If, as I suggest, we take Jane's selfhood to amount to Jane's particular version (unique to her) of God's image, we may think of selfhood in its "primitive" (i.e., potential) form as a raw and unpolished diamond—crude and angular—which needs "to be ground into shape." The many angles of this crude diamond signify the pool of Jane's essential particular qualities, and just as the same diamond can be ground into different shapes, so can Jane's potential selfhood.

Section 1.4 will account for the way in which these manifold qualities compose one's unified selfhood, but first it would be helpful to examine Kierkegaard's notion of a "divine name," which supports the idea of having an individual essence, namely, of possessing God's image not universally but rather in a *particular* shape, unique to every single person.

²⁶ I am grateful to Ariel Meirav for suggesting that I think of selfhood in this way.

²⁷ See section 1.1.3.

1.3. Divine Name

We saw that Kierkegaard's characterization of humans as not only temporal but also *eternal* provides a basis from which to argue for the existence of *essential* particular qualities. Kierkegaard commentators, however, usually take particular qualities to be contingent. They posit them as belonging in the category of the temporal (with the latter being taken to represent the contingent aspect of human life), and understand them to be possessed by humans as part of their earthly "anchoring."²⁸

If this reading, which is alternative to mine, is correct, then one's particularity as a specific self is rooted only in one's worldliness. The implication is that humans are created as persons, that is, identical to each other, and acquire their identity as individuals—their distinctiveness, their particularity, their "names"—only in the context of their earthly existence. However, it appears that according to Kierkegaard, God creates humans not only as persons but as *individual* persons. That is, in creating them God has already bestowed upon every human a "name":

[The despairer] forgets himself, forgets his name *divinely understood*, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man.²⁹

Kierkegaard delineates here a state of ignorance and rejection of one's identity as a particular person, an individual. After all, if X's identity as an individual differentiates him from all others, then preferring "to be like the others . . . a copy" amounts to X's turning

²⁸ See, for example, Davenport 2013, 245–46, 248; Roberts 1987, 139–40.

²⁹ SUD, 33–34, my emphasis. For Kierkegaard, despair is the opposite of faith (namely, of the good life) and is in fact the failure to become the self that one should (and can) be. I explain the connection between faith and selfhood in chapters 6 and 7 below. For a consideration of this quotation in its wider context, see chapter 6, section 6.3.2.1.

his back on his individuality. It is significant, then, that Kierkegaard describes this rejection in terms of forgetting one's name, *divinely* understood. If, for Kierkegaard, to ignore one's individuality is to forget one's divinely bestowed name, then it is plausible to say that he considers each human to be created with her *own* name. And if so, then it would seem that for Kierkegaard one's name—one's specific individuality—is *essential*. That is, it is essential for (say) Jane to be not just *someone* in particular, but *Jane*.

The alternative view also allows for a conception of something like "essential particularity"—but not through the idea of having a particular name. According to commentators such as Davenport and Evans, the "universal human" receives its particular shape in accordance with a "particular call."³⁰ If I understand correctly, the idea is as follows. Being created in God's image, every human has the potential to be "like God"—this is what is meant by the "universal human." At the same time, every human is also allocated a particular mission to fulfill in the context of her temporal existence, by virtue of which she is able to realize the image of God in which she was created. This is what is meant by the "particular call."

According to this view, then, the potential for becoming a self is the "universal human," and hence it can be described as "eternal" because it indicates the possession of qualities that make humans God-like. In this reading, the acquisition of one's name, by virtue of accomplishing one's "particular call," would be described as temporal. Thus, even if the constitution of one's name is grounded in essentials (God's image and God's call), the name itself is contingent. Since there are arguably many ways for a given person to accomplish even an essential call (and therefore many ways for that person to fulfill God's image), this must result in different names.

³⁰ See, for example, Davenport's claim that God "establishes a self as individual by giving it . . . its own-most singular task," while taking this "singular task" to be constituted by contingencies (2013, 246). Evans, to whom Davenport refers in this regard, uses Kierkegaard's distinction between "the universal human" and "the particular call" (Evans 2004, 170, 174) to make a similar point.

As opposed to this, I claim that by positing the idea of a “divine name,” Kierkegaard’s analysis actually supports the conception of an *essential* name. Hence, while there is a certain affinity between the two alternative interpretations, they are also significantly different. For the sake of clarity, let me emphasize this difference. The two interpretations agree that

- (1) According to Kierkegaard, God creates humans as an intended X
- (2) This intended X is what Kierkegaard terms a “self”
- (3) The task of every human is to *become* the X that God intends her to be, and
- (4) Since there is a gap between being *created* as an intended X and *becoming* that X, it is reasonable to assume (even if most commentators do not say as much) that the quality that makes one X is given to humans in a state of potential.

Also, the two alternative interpretations agree that

- (5) The actualization of the potential takes place “in the world,” and
- (6) Actualizing that quality (which is in a state of potential)—that is, becoming a self—necessarily amounts to being a particular person, an individual.

There are many points of agreement, then, but on one crucial point there is a significant disagreement. The two interpretations differ in their characterization of the quality that makes one X (namely, a self). According to the more common interpretation, the quality in question is that which makes one “like God,” that is, reflects one’s being created in “God’s image.” This quality is the “universal human”—in the sense that all humans, by virtue of being created by God, possess it—and which in the course of its actualization (into a self) necessarily assumes a particular shape. At the same time,

although it is essential that one actualizes one's "universal human" in a particular shape, the shape itself is contingent. The task is to become "like God," while the particular shape that this God-likeness takes is *not* essential.

In my interpretation, however, the quality that makes one a self is a *particular form* of God's image (i.e., a particular form of the "universal human"). That is, the particularity is already part of the potential, not just of the fulfillment. Hence, while in the first view the task is to live up to one's God-image, and this can be done whether one becomes Jane, Charlotte, or Emily, in my view Jane can actualize, and fulfill, her God-image only as Jane, Charlotte can fulfill her God-image only as Charlotte, Emily as Emily, and so on. Therefore, the task is to become the intended *particular form* of the universal human—namely, Jane—even if my view allows that there can be different ways of becoming Jane.³¹

In the first view, then, Jane is created a person in the image of God and becomes, contingently, Jane, with the task being to actualize her God-image by becoming this or that particular person. In my view, however, she is created *Jane*, and the task is to actualize her God-image by becoming the Jane that she can, and should, be. Thus, of the two views it is only my view that allows for the idea of *individual* essence. One does not only *become* an individual; one is already *created* an individual, and the task is to become the individual one is intended to be.

The idea of possessing a divine name, then, supports my thesis of possessing an individual essence. This essence, as I explained, can be understood in terms of a quality—the quality of selfhood—that makes one a self. I recognize, however, that one may claim that I read too much into Kierkegaard's mentioning of "divine name." Arguably his use of "name" can be taken to simply indicate one's true essence as God-created, which works well with the view that ultimately it does not really matter if we are Jane, Charlotte,

³¹ See section 1.5.

or Emily—what matters is our deeper “name” as God-created. However, this implies that for Kierkegaard all people are ultimately the same, which to my mind is contrary to his strong emphasis on individuality.³² Moreover, the concept of “name” is commonly used to indicate that which distinguishes people from each other,³³ so I think it is plausible to assume that when using it Kierkegaard is referring to one’s individuality.

At the same time, I acknowledge that the idea that human beings are essentially created as universally human while receiving their particularity contingently on earth coheres with the view that Kierkegaard expresses in other places, such as *Works of Love*. For example, he states that “the dissimilarity of earthly life is just like an actor’s costume,”³⁴ which suggests that he deems one’s particularity inessential to who one *really* is. Whether or not Kierkegaard can be understood as holding the view that there is an “essential name” is therefore a matter of exegetical consideration, which is my concern in chapters 6 and 7 later. Ultimately, my thesis is that while *Works of Love* is indeed ambivalent with regard to the value of one’s particularity (as I demonstrate in chapter 3), the view that Kierkegaard expresses in *The Sickness unto Death* is the more faithful to what he himself takes to be the heart of a religious life.

However, regardless of the question of whether or not Kierkegaard is indeed committed to the conception of the self as a person with an *essential* name, I find this conception to be, in itself, tenable.³⁵ I will now proceed to explain it further.

³² Such an emphasis is evident throughout his entire philosophy. See, for example, Evans 2004, 173, 178.

³³ As Aldrin puts it: “One of the main functions of a name is to single out and identify its referent” (2016, 383), while “identity is . . . related [among other things] to ‘identification,’ that is, how others look upon us and are able to single us out from a group” (384).

³⁴ WL, 87. See chapter 3, section 3.3.3.

³⁵ Further, although this conception relies on the theistic premise of being created in the image of God, I suggest that there is a case for conceiving it as tenable also outside a theistic framework. See section 1.5.2.

1.4. Selfhood as a Complex Quality

Having demonstrated in the previous two sections that one's divine name consists of essential particular qualities, we still have to account for the way such qualities compose one's name, one's selfhood. This is because selfhood, despite being accounted for in terms of qualities, is not reducible to a mere *list* of qualities. Selfhood is a *unified body*—an amalgamation—of qualities, and not an aggregation of separate, individuated, ones. It is a complex quality, comprised not just of the qualities that compose it, but also of the way in which these qualities are combined. What does this mean?

Consider, for example, a mixture of colors. In the same way that a mixture of colors results in one new color, so the amalgamation of qualities results in a new quality: selfhood. In continuation with this, in the same way that each color in a mixture of colors “behaves” differently from the same color in another mixture—for example, when mixed with yellow the green behaves differently than when mixed with red—so do qualities. Each quality receives its special character in accordance with the other qualities it is “mixed” with. So, for example, although both are witty, the wit of Jane is different from the wit of Edward because it is “mixed” with qualities that he lacks, such as her shyness, calmness, and so on.

Further, suppose that we have two mixtures of colors, R and S. In R red is used dominantly, while in S it is used to a much lesser extent. It is clear that removing red from R will result in a new color, T, while removing red from S will result in a *version* of S rather than in an entirely new color. Qualities behave the same way. Their dominance—their *essentiality* to one's identity—is determined (as explained in section 1.2) by the extent to which they are a manifestation of essential universal qualities. So, for example, if earnestness were to be taken away (by our aforementioned wicked fairy) from Jane, that would change her selfhood: she would no longer be herself. On the other hand, if earnestness were taken away from Blanche Ingram, a frivolous society woman who is interested in

Edward only for his money, the result would be a slightly different version of Blanche, not a new self: she would still be herself.³⁶

The analogy to colors also helps clarify how my conception of selfhood allows for diversity and myriad of essences. According to my Kierkegaardian theory, one's *essential* particular qualities are those that express, in the best possible way, one's personhood or God image. Accordingly, while the group of relevant qualities is far from being small—there are many qualities that are possible expressions of rationality, many talents that are possible expressions of creativity/imagination, many desires that are possible expressions of will, and many moral qualities that are possible expressions of caring (and so on)—it is obviously limited. However, the number of possible *mixtures* of the relevant qualities is far greater. Just as there are innumerable mixtures of colors, there can be innumerable mixtures of qualities. As was just explained, in my theory selfhood is *not* reducible to a list of qualities, but is rather a fusion of many qualities that are “mixed” and combined into one, new, unified quality. *X*'s relevant qualities create, in their singular combination or mixture, a distinctive and unique whole: *X*'s selfhood or individual essence. Therefore, in accordance with the countless possibilities existing for combinations of qualities, there can be countless diverse individual essences (or selfhoods).

Now, my understanding of one's individual essence as qualitative distinguishes it from the idea of haecceity, a term invented by the medieval philosopher John Duns Scotus. On the face of it, selfhood, as the quality that individuates a person, may seem akin to haecceity,³⁷ which is, as Richard Cross puts it, “a . . . property

³⁶ This is because earnestness is not part of her essence. The possibility of conceiving her as occasionally, or somewhat, earnest (as suggested by the example) indicates that when we encounter a person, it is not only her essence that we experience, but also contingent qualities. I explain this crucial point in section 1.5. Additionally, this example may imply that there are people whose essence lacks those qualities that make one moral. However, this is not the case. While lacking earnestness, Blanche (for example) may well possess other qualities that would enable her to fulfill her God-image as caring (and hence moral).

³⁷ See, for example, Evans, who partly ascribes to Kierkegaard this Scotist doctrine (Evans 2004, 173).

responsible for individuation and identity.” However, haecceity “is a ‘thisness’ . . . as opposed to a ‘whatness.’” That is, as opposed to all the other properties of the object, it is *not* qualitative: “Substances, on the sort of metaphysics defended by Scotus, are basically collections of tightly unified properties, all but one of them qualitative; the one non-qualitative property is the haecceity.”³⁸

Robert Adams, a contemporary defender of what he calls “moderate haecceitism,”³⁹ speaks of haecceity in terms of a “primitive thisness,” while defining “thisness” as the property of being identical with oneself (“my property of being identical with me, your property of being identical with you, etc.”).⁴⁰ However, while in my theory the quality that makes one thus identical with oneself is characterized in terms of one’s individual *essence*, Adams emphatically rejects such a direction. “These properties [that make one identical with oneself],” he says, “have . . . been called ‘essences,’ but that is . . . unfortunate; for essences have normally been understood to be constituted by qualitative properties, and we are entertaining the possibility of nonqualitative thisness.”⁴¹

In contrast with that, John Hare does discuss Scotus’s idea of haecceity in terms of “individual essence,” which is of course the term that I use to describe selfhood, or one’s “divine name.”⁴² However, while in my theory selfhood, although elusive, is nevertheless intelligible, Hare claims that haecceity is intelligible only to God and, interestingly, refers in this context to the idea of a divine name:

A haecceity . . . is not intelligible to us, because of the limits of our knowledge after the Fall, so that our ability to refer to an individual essence outruns our ability to conceive it. . . . We are told

³⁸ Cross 2014.

³⁹ Adams 1979, 26.

⁴⁰ Adams 1979, 6.

⁴¹ Adams 1979, 6.

⁴² See section 1.3.

in Revelation that God has for each of us a new name written on a white stone, which God will give us in the next life but which we do not yet know (Revelation 2:17). . . . So we can think of God as already calling us by a name that expresses what God is calling us to be, even though we do not yet know this name.⁴³

Inasmuch as one's haecceity is accessible only to God, it is clearly different from selfhood or one's individual essence as I have construed it here. In my Kierkegaardian theory God is indeed "already calling us by a name"—but this is not a new name to be given to us "in the next life," but rather the name that God bestowed on us when creating each of us; the one we carry already in this life. And while it is true that we "do not yet" fully know our name—it is nevertheless *knowable*. Our ongoing, lifelong task is to discover our name, discover our potential—and fulfill it. Our name, our individual essence, is conceivable and, in principle, accessible to us. Further, it is crucially also accessible, as we shall see in the chapters to come, to those who love us.

1.5. Being "Temporal and Eternal" (2): Contingency and Essence

1.5.1. Potential and Actualization

One's individual essence, one's selfhood, is an evasive quality. As is evident by our experience, it is very difficult to articulate what it is precisely that makes Jane *Jane*. The evasiveness of selfhood is a result not only of its being a fusion of the many qualities that compose it, but also of its being a potential that is constantly in a process of actualization. This brings us back to Kierkegaard's characterization of humans as temporal and eternal, which can be understood,

⁴³ Hare 2007, 113.

so I suggest, as expressing the twofoldness not only of particularity and universality, but also of contingency and essence.

When I talk about X's essence, I use it in two different senses, which my theory importantly allows to be compatible. First, essence is the quality that determines the identity of X, and as such it is invariable. Second, essence, in maybe a more intuitive or everyday use of the term, denotes the distinctive nature of X—its distinctive presence as X^{44} —and in this latter sense is not necessarily invariable. Experiencing, for example, a tree in bloom, the blooming is a part of its essence in the second sense, although blooming is not a part of its essence in the first sense: it will be the same tree when it is naked of leaves in the winter.⁴⁵

My thesis is that when X's individual essence is in a *potential* state, it determines X's identity, that is, essence in the first sense. When in an *actualized* state, it amounts to the unique (and changing) nature of X, that is, essence in the second sense. Let me explain what I mean.

As the possession of one's selfhood is primarily in a state of potential (see section 1.1.3), it admits manifold actualizations. In the same way that the capacity for rationality, while arguably essential to humans, can be actualized in a person in different ways and to different degrees—the same goes for the quality of selfhood. Although selfhood determines our identity (as specific selves or individuals) and is, in this sense, *essential* to who we are, possessing it in a state of potential allows different actualizations, which are *contingent*: there can be several versions of the same self. In other words, although *in its potential state* one's selfhood/essence is the same and unchangeable, it can be *actualized* into different and changing forms. To clarify this point, consider the following example.

⁴⁴ As in "This photo captures the essence of Princess Diana."

⁴⁵ Essence in this second sense is akin to what Gerard Manley Hopkins termed "in-scape." I explain this idea in section 1.5.3.

In Kiesłowski's film *The Double Life of Veronique* we first meet the Polish Weronika—a lively, passionate, caring young woman, with a great talent for singing, who also suffers from a debilitating heart condition. Despite the danger to her health, she opts to pursue the opportunity to become a professional singer and dies on the stage soon after beginning her promising career. We then meet the French Veronique—a woman as lively, passionate, and caring as her Polish version. She also has a great talent for singing and a heart condition. Veronique, however, decides not to pursue a singing career (to the great dismay of her teacher) and chooses to lead the much quieter life of a school music teacher.

Two different lives, but, as the title indicates, the same Veronique. What makes the two characters identical? They are obviously not the same person in the Lockean sense—after all, they possess a different set of memories—but there is nevertheless an important sense in which they are the same.

For the sake of the present discussion let us consider the film *not* as demonstrating the metaphysical possibility of two persons possessing the same selfhood. This, after all, is a possibility that the Kierkegaardian framework does not allow: God creates each human with her own selfhood, so that there cannot be two people who are the same self.⁴⁶ Rather, we can consider the film as dramatizing the implications of life choices. We can therefore say that the two “Veroniques” are two different *versions* of the same self. They are *essentially* the same because they share the same potential, but the two actualizations of this potential are different.⁴⁷

If this still sounds too strange, just consider how easily we can imagine ourselves in completely different life. Indeed, it is simple enough to envision ourselves working in a different job, living in a different country, having a different marital status, and so on. And

⁴⁶ See also section 1.5.2.

⁴⁷ And while in the film these two actualizations are simultaneous, outside the film there can only be one actualization at a time, of course.

we can take this even further. Just like Virginia Woolf's Orlando, we can imagine ourselves living in a different time, having a different family, inhabiting a different body. I suggest that this "self" of ours that remains the same is our selfhood—our individual essence—in its potential state.

Let us call one's individual essence *in its potential state* "the kernel of individuality."

Understanding selfhood as a quality that, while determining our identity, exists primarily in a state of a potential and hence allows for a dynamic actualization, accommodates the two senses of essence presented earlier. It thus results in a notion of essence as both invariable and changeable.⁴⁸ In its potential state, one's essence is fixed and invariable; in its actualized state it is contingent and changeable.

One's selfhood, then, can be fulfilled in many forms and to varying degrees. Such a conception not only substantiates the common conviction that we can be a better or a lesser version of ourselves, but also gives the contingencies of our life their due. When and where we live, the specific body we are born with, events that occur and things that happen to us, the people we meet, and the interactions that result—all of these have a dramatic effect on the fulfillment of our potential to become the individual that each of us is.

Further, the actualization also depends, significantly, on our will. Accordingly, there is a real weight to our freedom, and responsibility, to choose between options and possibilities. Hence, even if in an important sense we are predetermined—being created as Jane, we cannot become Charlotte (in the same way that, being humans, we cannot become a cat)—in a no less important sense, we have real

⁴⁸ Which is, of course, directly in line with the Kierkegaardian idea of a "synthesis": being both A and the opposite of A ("the infinite and the finite . . . the temporal and the eternal . . . freedom and necessity" [SUD, 13]).

freedom to determine *how* we will be; we are free to determine *what version* of Jane we will be.

This makes us a truly coworkers of God: becoming ourselves is a mutual endeavor of the Creator and his human creature. In this sense, worldly (temporal) actualization is of real significance and is by no means lesser, in its importance and value, from one's (eternal) potential. Kierkegaard's framework of defining the human being as equally *both* temporal and eternal sets the ground for such a genuine equilibrium of the worldly and the nonworldly.⁴⁹

1.5.2. A (Possible) Secular Rendition of Individual Essence

Before moving to the last step in the demonstration of my Kierkegaardian theory of individual essence, I would like to consider, if only briefly, how far the secular reader can go with it. Can there be a secular analogy to the idea that we possess a divine name in a state of a potential, that is, that each human is bestowed with an individual essence?

To begin with, as already mentioned, the idea of a quality that is essential to humans (say, rationality) does not depend on a theistic framework. Moreover, it does not take a theistic framework to speculate that every person has her own individual nature, the result of a combination of particular qualities; a combination which is unique (although, as I soon clarify, not necessarily singular) to her. In the same way that we can think of possessing God's image in a particular shape, then, we can think of possessing personhood—in the broader sense of rationality suggested above—in a particular shape.

Further, it does not require a theistic commitment to conceive of these "essential" qualities as possessed in a state of a potential.

⁴⁹ I return to this point in chapters 2 and 7.

And if so, we can think of a person as predetermined to be herself—which is the secular analogy to being “intended” by God to be the specific person that one is—with the freedom to actualize this potential in a number of different ways. Finally, in an Aristotelian fashion, we can even judge the “becoming of oneself”—that is, the fulfillment of one’s potential—to be desirable.

Hence, given the possible secular affirmation of, first, the idea of personhood in a particular shape and, second, qualities in a state of a potential, this may be considered an atheistic framework that supports the conception of individual essence.⁵⁰ However, there are a few aspects of this conception that may not be translatable into atheistic terms. In a secular understanding the powers that “create” us are blind and hence obviously lack any *intention* that we be who we are. Accordingly, being predetermined by contingent, blind factors, we possess individual “essence” only in the weak sense of having our nature determined by powers external to our will (such as our genes, for example). To be thus determined means that our “essence” is limited to our earthly existence alone (as opposed to being determined prior to it), and, further, it means that we cannot judge humans to be *essentially* good and moral.⁵¹

Finally, individuality should not be confused with singularity: by arguing for the possession of individual essence, my thesis is that Jane’s selfhood is essential to her, not that it is (necessarily) singular. What I defend, then, is the idea that the specific combination of qualities that makes her “Jane” is essential to her; the question of whether or not this combination is also *singular*—namely, cannot, in principle, be repeated—is one that my conception of individual essence is not (as such) committed to address. At the same time, the singularity of each individual—the idea that each self is one of a

⁵⁰ Of course, this is merely an initial sketch, and only points toward a possible direction rather than expressing a substantiated theory. After all, it is not my concern here to defend an atheistic version of my Kierkegaardian theory, but only to suggest that such a defense might in fact be possible.

⁵¹ See also chapter 2, note 44.

kind (i.e., not repeatable)—not only is consistent with how we experience others, but is arguably reflective of Kierkegaard's own view. However, while the claim for the singularity of one's individual essence is relatively easy to establish within the Kierkegaardian-theistic framework—God creates each human as a single self—it is unclear how to establish such a claim within an atheistic framework.

Whether or not it is possible to construe a secular version of the conception of individual essence, however, I believe that this conception is worth considering. This is because, as I hope to show throughout this project, it gives a framework for understanding and substantiating many intuitions that we have with regard to being a lover. Hence, for those readers who may not be convinced that the conception of individual essence can be accepted outside a theistic context, I suggest regarding my line of reasoning as hypothetical. Namely, suppose that my Kierkegaardian analysis is correct, and each person possesses an individual essence: how does this help us to understand love?

1.5.3. The Two Facets of Selfhood

That which determines the identity of Jane as herself is her individual essence. As such, as we said, it is invariable—but only in its *potential* state. Accordingly, Jane's essence may be actualized in several different, changeable forms—because the actualization of her essence is contingent. This contingency has two levels.

First, as explained earlier, given the specific pool of essential particular qualities that composes one's selfhood, there may be different combinations of qualities *out of this pool*, all resulting in the same selfhood. Hence, it may well be that Charlotte would have become a painter rather than a writer. However, because both a talent for writing and a talent for painting are essential qualities in her case—they are both part of the pool of essential qualities that composes her selfhood—she would be herself either way. The first

level of contingency, then, is rooted in the possibility of having one's selfhood fulfilled through different *essential* particular qualities. More straightforwardly, the *second* level of contingency is rooted in *contingent* particular qualities, which are part of the relevant actualization. Physical traits such as the color of one's hair would be an obvious example, but other examples of contingent particular qualities, in the case of the two Veroniques, for instance, would be love for teaching or for performing on stage, being cautious or reckless, being slightly melancholic or cheerfully optimistic.

Returning to the diamond metaphor from above, the contingency of the first level can be described by appealing to the idea of the different shapes that the raw diamond can assume depending on its polishing. Returning to the color analogy, the contingency of the second level can be described by appealing to the idea of the different hues that a specific color can take in accordance with the different colors with which it is mixed.⁵²

Now, contingent particular qualities (of the second level) are no less significant than the essential particular qualities that compose the potential (the "kernel"), because they crucially contribute to the configuration of the *actualized* potential into a certain form (with the potential/kernel including only essential qualities). Let us think again about Jane. Some contingent qualities *support* essential qualities: for example, Jane's perceptiveness is a contingent quality that supports her essential quality of patience. Others are indifferent to essential qualities, but may help to *bring to light*, as it were, the person's essence: for example, Jane's physical smallness rather emphasizes her courage. Still others may even be *disruptive* of a person's essence: for example, Jane's low self-confidence.

To clarify the distinction between the two states of one's individual essence or selfhood—potential and actualization—it would

⁵² Note, however, that the diamond and the color are two similes meant to convey two different ideas regarding the nature of selfhood. The former conveys the idea of the manifoldness of qualities that compose one's selfhood; the latter conveys the idea of the amalgamation and unification of many qualities into one.

be helpful to present the idea of “inscape,” a concept coined by the English nineteenth-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.⁵³ Keeping in mind the two meanings of essence that the idea of selfhood integrates, the idea of inscape, as we will see, captures the second of these senses (namely, that of the distinctive nature of X).

The concept of inscape is somewhat enigmatic, and scholars of Hopkins disagree on its exact meaning.⁵⁴ As I am not, myself, a Hopkins scholar, I do not presume to weigh in on this debate. I am instead availing myself of a more or less widely accepted understanding of the concept; namely, that by “inscape” Hopkins, who was deeply influenced by the thought of Duns Scotus,⁵⁵ was trying to capture something akin to the latter’s idea of haecceity.

In this understanding, “inscape” stands for the experienced individuality of any given object, its particular distinctiveness. To quote Peters, it is “the unified complex of those sensible qualities of the object of perception that strikes us as inseparably belonging to and most typical of it, so that through the knowledge of this unified complex of sense-data we may gain an insight into the individual essence of the object.”⁵⁶ Unlike Scotus’s haecceity, then, inscape is sensible and perceptible. In a way, it is the nature or essence of the individual thing *as it appears to us*. The notion of inscape, then, captures the distinctive *qualitative* presence of X, its special quality of being itself.

Putting aside questions regarding the accuracy of such an understanding of inscape, this concept (as thus presented) is helpful for my present purposes. I use it to introduce the notion of (what I call) *individual persona*, which signifies one’s individual essence in its *actualized* state. As explained, while one’s individual essence in its potential state includes only essential particular qualities,

⁵³ I’m grateful to George Pattison, who referred me to Hopkins in connection with my idea of individual essence.

⁵⁴ See Sobolev 2002, 219–20.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Thomas 1988.

⁵⁶ Quoted from Coogan 1950, 66–67. See also Sobolev 2002, 220.

the actualization includes also contingent particular qualities. It amounts, as we saw, to a set of particular qualities—character traits, desires and preferences, inclinations and aspirations, temperament and talents, gender and looks—of which, obviously, there are qualities that do *not* determine one's identity as a self.

For example, Jane's potential selfhood—namely, her individual essence in its potential state, her “kernel of individuality” (which is composed of only essential particular qualities)—is actualized in Jane the child and Jane the adult. The two (the child and the adult) are the same Jane by virtue of sharing the same “kernel,” but they are also different. That which distinguishes the two actualizations is not only the degree of actualization of her *essential* particular qualities, but also contingent qualities, such as the shape of her body or her maturity.

Now, the understanding of one's individual persona as communicating one's kernel of individuality *by virtue of being its actualized state*, makes it more akin to the notion of “inscape” than to the notion of “empirical persona.” The latter, to be introduced below,⁵⁷ stands for the entirety of a person as we perceive her: her looks, behavior, demeanor. This notion is meant to signify what we normally experience when we encounter a person, and denotes, as we will see, a combination of *contingent* qualities alone. On the other hand, the alternative notion—that of the actualized state of one's essence—denotes, as we have just seen, both contingent and *essential* qualities. This is why there is a need for a different notion to articulate the actualized state of one's selfhood/essence: the notion of individual persona.⁵⁸

To conclude, Jane's selfhood has two facets. In its potential state her selfhood is invariable, hence determining her identity as Jane over time or given different life circumstances. This is what we

⁵⁷ See chapter 2, where I discuss the view of J. David Velleman and his use of the term “empirical persona.”

⁵⁸ This notion will prove to be particularly significant in chapters 2 and 5.

termed her “kernel of individuality,” and it stands for her essence in the first meaning of the term. In its actualized state, Jane’s selfhood is what we termed her “individual persona” (or “inscape”). It is one of the possible fulfillments—Jane1, Jane2, Jane3—of her potential/kernel, and it stands for her essence in the second meaning of the term.

Therefore, when we encounter Jane, we encounter her in one of her possible actualizations. Such an actualization, to repeat, includes both essential qualities and contingent ones. Of the latter, some are expressive of her essential qualities, some are disruptive of it, and some are indifferent to her essence; that is, they neither support it nor detract from it. Of these indifferent qualities, however, some may nevertheless help to “bring into focus,” as it were, the person’s essence. Such contingent qualities may include a person’s posture, her beauty, or even her quirks.

To experience the essence of a person by virtue of encountering her individual persona, her inscape, can be no less immediate than experiencing her empirical features, even if it is often less spontaneous.⁵⁹ Such an immediate discernibility of one’s individual essence—one’s selfhood—will prove crucial when we discuss the tenability of universal love. The accessibility of any person’s essence, as I will demonstrate, makes it possible to fulfill the duty to love.⁶⁰ First, however, let us see how this discernibility, and the idea of individual essence more generally, proves helpful in our inquiry into the grounds of *romantic* love.

⁵⁹ It takes a spiritual and moral openness to experience the essence of a person. This kind of openness is achieved, as I explain in chapters 4 and 5, by the double movement of faith.

⁶⁰ See chapter 5.

2

The Meeting of Essences

If you press me to say why I loved him, I feel that it cannot be expressed except by replying: ‘Because it was him: because it was me.’¹

2.1. “Love Me for Myself Alone”

Montaigne’s words capture, correctly I believe, our experience of love. To love someone “because it was he” is to love him “for himself”—and this is indeed how lovers typically feel. If Jane Eyre, for example, were to have been asked why she loves Edward Rochester, her answer would probably have been that she loves him, simply, because of who he is: Edward. Recall, as well, the yellow-haired girl from Yeats’s poem, who wishes to be loved for “herself alone.” My suggestion, to be defended in this chapter, is that the young man in despair, granted that he truly loves her, actually does fulfill her desire. He loves her for herself, for “who she is.” In my terms, he loves her for her individual essence.

The suggestion that we love the beloved for “who she is,” although intuitive, is rarely considered in the heated discussions on whether or not there are reasons for love. These are usually divided between writers who claim that there *are* reasons for love,

¹ Montaigne 2003, 212.

and those who advocate a “no reasons” view of love—with the latter often being a reaction to the failure of the former to present a fully defensible theory. However, whether endorsed or rejected, the reasons discussed by both camps usually include either the valuable intrinsic qualities of the beloved (such as her yellow hair and sense of humor) or her relational qualities (such as her being our wife or daughter) and the history of our relationship with her. The option that the beloved is loved for “who she is,” on the other hand, if mentioned at all, is often immediately dismissed as a nonstarter.²

One interesting exception in this regard is the analysis offered by J. David Velleman in his “Love as a Moral Emotion,” in which he posits that the beloved’s essence is the reason for love. His view therefore receives special attention in the present chapter. Referring to Yeats’s poem, Velleman acknowledges that “we are like the girl who wants to be loved but not for her yellow hair, and not, we should add, for her mind or her sense of humor, either—because she wants to be loved, as she puts it, ‘for myself alone.’”³

² See Delany 1996, 345–46; Lamb 1997, 36, 46–47; and Keller 2000, 165, who take this to express love for one’s *haecceity*, an idea that they reject as absurd or insufficient. See also Hamlyn 1978, 12 and Smuts 2014, 525 n. 8. Alternatively, the notion of being loved “for who one is” may seem to impart the inexpressibility of the lover’s reasons for loving one, as Jollimore suggests when referring to Montaigne’s well-known statement that opens this chapter. See Jollimore 2011, 19.

³ Velleman 1999, 363. Cf. Adams: “The complaint [that one is being loved for X and not for oneself] is . . . that what is valued in one is too small or peripheral or accidental. . . . Even moral character is sufficiently accidental and changeable that being loved only for one’s moral virtues might be contrasted with being loved for oneself” (Adams 1986, 177). For Adams, the quality that captures that which is essential to the beloved, and hence the quality for which he is loved, is the image of God in him, given “the central, important, and essential place that the image of God is thought to occupy in the constitution of human selfhood” (1986, 177, and see also Adams 1999, 35–36, 165). In this sense Adams’s view is akin to both that of Velleman and the one Kierkegaard expresses implicitly in *Works of Love*, in that it grounds love in a *universal* quality. This is a view that I reject, as will soon become clear.

The girl feels, correctly, that she can dye her hair (as the poem suggests), be stronger or weaker in math, be more or less funny, and, nevertheless, still be “herself.” Such a feeling attests to her belief that there is something essential to her—her “self”—that safeguards her being who she is, regardless of her possession of this or that particular quality. To borrow Delaney’s terms (even if against Delaney’s suggestion), the point does not seem to be that she wants to be loved for “central” rather than “peripheral” properties,⁴ but rather that she does not want to be loved for *any* property. Rather, she wants to be loved for “being who she is,” which does not seem to be simply reducible to a list of properties.

In this sense, the girl could not agree more with Harry Frankfurt, who emphatically asserts that “the focus of a person’s love is not those general and hence repeatable characteristics that make his beloved *describable* . . . it is the specific particularity that makes his beloved *nameable*—something that is more mysterious than describability.”⁵ I think that Frankfurt has it right. Love seems to respond—both in the sense of having its focus on, and in the sense of being grounded in⁶—to something that is not reducible to a list of qualities.

Having explored in the previous chapter the idea of individual essence (that is, of possessing a “divine *name*”), in the present chapter I wish to examine the mystery of the *beloved* “being *nameable*.” My thesis is that love is a meeting of essences: we love the beloved for *who she is* and because of *who we are*. I hope to demonstrate, then, that the conception of the beloved being loved for “who she is”—despite being unpopular among contemporary writers—is not only intuitively held by lovers, but is philosophically tenable.

⁴ Central properties are those with which people “most profoundly identify, which they take to more or less settle the question ‘who am I?’” (Delaney 1996, 343)—in other words, properties that are central to one’s “self-conception.” This position is akin to that of Nozick (1989, 75).

⁵ Frankfurt 1999, 170.

⁶ On the distinction between focus and grounds, see later (section 2.2.3).

2.2. Reasons for Love

2.2.1. An Existential Approach to a Normative Question

In current discussions in the philosophy of love, the question “Why do we love the people that we do?” is typically framed within the larger normative question motivating the inquiry, namely, “Can love be rationally justified?”⁷ In posing this question, however, I am motivated by the experience of the lover, who feels that her love is *not* arbitrary—namely, that there must be a reason for her loving whom she does. Jane Eyre feels that it is no accident, beyond her control and understanding, that Edward Rochester (of all people) is the object of her love. Rather, she feels that there is something about *Edward* that makes her love *him* (rather than anyone else). As Eleanor Stump succinctly puts it:

If there is no [reason rooted in the beloved], then it seems as if the lover could just as easily have loved some other person. Since there is nothing about the particular person he loves which is the reason for his love, there is also no reason why he should love her rather than anyone else.⁸

While acknowledging the crucial part that contingency (and hence accidents and arbitrariness) plays in their life, lovers nevertheless

⁷ See Kroeker 2019; Smuts 2014; Bagely 2019; Jollimore 2017. It should be noted that this kind of question is alien to Kierkegaard’s spirit, who seems to consider any attempt to justify love as being opposed to the very state of being in love: “Do you believe that a lover would ever think of conducting a defense of his being in love . . . do you not think he would suspect that the person suggesting this to him had never known what love is or wanted him to betray and deny his love—by defending it?—Is it not obvious that the person who is really in love would never dream of wanting to prove it by three reasons or to defend it. . . . Anyone who does it is not in love; he merely pretends to be, and . . . he is so stupid that he merely informs against himself as not being in love” (SUD, 103–4). However, it is not my concern to either defend or oppose the normative approach, as my approach is, from the outset, slightly different.

⁸ Stump 2006, 26.

feel that love is not just a result of unintelligible powers. They feel, in other words, that there is something that they *can* say about why they love the particular person that they do. And it is this experience that I wish to explore. Accordingly, posing the same question as many current discussions do—namely, “Why does Y love X in particular?”—my approach is guided by the existential tenor of the entire project, and thus focuses on the *experience* of love. In this sense, my approach to this question is more phenomenological in nature.⁹ Hence, although I *do* offer reasons for love, this is not the crux of the matter. Rather, the emphasis is on articulating the experience of loving *X in particular*; on giving philosophical expression to what I take to be central to our experience of love.¹⁰

2.2.2. Love Is Not Accidental

Love may be brought about—in ways that are poorly understood—by a disparate variety of natural causes. It is entirely possible for a person to be caused to love something without noticing its value, or without being at all impressed by its value, or despite recognizing that there is nothing especially valuable about it.¹¹

⁹ By “phenomenological” I do not refer to the philosophical method known as “phenomenology,” but rather to an inquiry that is guided by the first-person perspective of experiencing *X* (in the manner of “what does it feel like to experience *X*” type of questions). For the distinction between these two senses of phenomenology, see, for example, Helms 2021.

¹⁰ The implication of this shift in perspective is that I do not attempt to offer solutions to problems that are central to the normative discussions in the topic. One such problem is the concern regarding the beloved’s irreplaceability. This concern, as we will see in section 2.2.3, is mostly relevant when the beloved’s intrinsic properties are determined to be the reason for loving her in particular. Now, since loving the beloved for “who she is” is also to love her for something intrinsic to her, the “doppelganger concern” seems to pose a challenge to my thesis as well. However, given the existential framework of the inquiry, such a concern is quite marginal. After all, from the point of view of the experience of the lover, the highly hypothetical possibility of replacing the beloved with a doppelganger typically does not arise. What *does* typically arise is the feeling of nonarbitrariness, and with it the desire to understand the reason for love and its endurance or, on the contrary, the reason for falling out of it. As I hope to show, my thesis accounts successfully precisely for *this kind* of concern.

¹¹ Frankfurt 2004, 38.

In Frankfurt's view, love does not have reasons, only causes (biological, psychological, etc.). Indeed, love is governed by the "necessities" of our will—our will dictates that we do certain things in order to fulfill desired aims, and in this sense there are things that we "should" do if we want to accomplish them—but the desires themselves are constituted arbitrarily by factors beyond our understanding and control. Hence, while possessing a certain desire makes it reasonable for me to do a, b, and c—having that desire to begin with is in itself unexplainable.¹² For Frankfurt, then, who takes love to be a matter of our will, love is not, ultimately, governed by reasons. Accordingly, he claims, it is misguided to think that we love the beloved because we find her valuable. Rather, we love her because our will is constituted (unintelligibly) in a way that brings us to love her, and by virtue of this love, we find her valuable.¹³

However, deeming our coming to love the beloved unintelligible, and hence entirely accidental, does not fit our experience of love. For one thing, as Troy Jollimore demonstrates, such a view does not allow us to judge as inappropriate a passionate, life-committing love for a random object such as a baseball card.¹⁴ Since we *do* judge such love as inappropriate, we must therefore reject Frankfurt's view as insufficient. Further, think of the lover from Yeats's poem. That young man in despair would surely insist that it had to be *this* yellow-haired girl, and no other, that he loves.¹⁵

Such a conviction reflects the understanding that from the point of view of the lover there are reasons for loving the person that she does, which are, unlike extrinsic causes, intelligible to her. After all, Frankfurt's conception of love as groundless is equivalent to conceiving love as the result of drinking unknowingly some drug,

¹² See Frankfurt 2004, 47–49.

¹³ See Frankfurt 2004, 38.

¹⁴ See Jollimore 2011, 22–23.

¹⁵ If we move from poetry to popular songs, the words sung by Sinatra resonate: "For nobody else gave me a thrill, / With all your faults I love you still, / It had to be you, / Wonderful you, / It had to be you" ("It Had to Be You," music by Isham Jones, lyrics by Gus Kahn).

being hypnotized, or subjected to some chemical activity in our brain. But loving a person does not feel as if it is the result of some extrinsic manipulation. It is experienced as deeply related to our values, beliefs, judgments, and yearnings. In other words, it is experienced as rooted in something that we can account for, something that we can explain. It does not feel arbitrary that we love the particular beloved that we do. Frankfurt's suggestion, then, is, ultimately, discordant with our experience of love.¹⁶

2.2.3. Love Is Not Grounded in Accidental Properties

Those who take love to be responsive to reasons usually conceive it as either grounded in the intrinsic qualities of the beloved, or in his relational or historical qualities (i.e., his relationship with the lover or his shared history with her). The former, known as the quality theory, reflects a solid intuition. If it is not accidental that Jane loves Edward rather than John (her suitor), then it is quite reasonable to think that Jane's love for Edward is grounded in the valuable properties that she finds in him (and not in John). To quote Jollimore, who partly endorses this view, "The attractive and otherwise valuable properties of the beloved are the most important and most powerful sources of reasons for love."¹⁷

A standard objection to this theory maintains that since the beloved's valuable qualities are repeatable, taking them to be the reason for love conflicts with conceiving the beloved as irreplaceable. In response, those who defend it emphasize, rather to the contrary, the uniqueness of the beloved (and hence his irreplaceability); maintaining, for example, that the qualities of a person do not appear in a generalized form but in a way particular to the relevant

¹⁶ For a more recent defence of the "no-reasons" position see, for example, Smuts 2014 and Zangwill 2013.

¹⁷ Jollimore 2011, 13. Versions of this theory are also put forth, for example, by Delaney 1996, Keller 2000; Lamb 1997; Naar 2017; and Soble 1990.

person.¹⁸ As against this, the critics posit the following challenge. If X's set of properties justifies loving him, then it is necessary that we will also love a doppelganger of X. However (the argument goes), we will not: our beloved cannot be replaced with a doppelganger. Hence, X's set of properties (even when uniquely and idiosyncratically particularized) cannot justify our love for him.

The problem of irreplaceability motivates the view that it is in fact the *relational* properties of the beloved that ground one's love. Thomas Hurka, for example, sees in these properties the other, necessary, basis of love (alongside the beloved's intrinsic properties):

While we love people partly for qualities others could share, we also love them as individuals, or for themselves. But what exactly does that mean? . . . It's still to love [the beloved] for qualities, but for ones that no one else could share. It's to love [the beloved] for historical qualities, involving her participation with you in a shared past.¹⁹

The only properties that cannot be repeated in others, and hence make the beloved irreplaceable, are the properties that relate him to the lover. Christopher Grau, a prominent defender of this view, terms the value that makes the beloved irreplaceable "unique value," and claims the following:

Unique value is . . . reserved for those things that have particular extrinsic properties that cannot be shared by another. In the case of being in love with another person and valuing them as irreplaceable, I want to argue that it is the particular shared history between the lover and the beloved that plays this individuating role, and thus helps to make the lovers truly irreplaceable to each

¹⁸ See, for example, Nozick 1989, 81 and Jollimore 2011, 134.

¹⁹ Hurka 2011, 52–53.

other. No one else can have that shared history, and accordingly no one else can take the place of the beloved.²⁰

Both Hurka and Grau understand the individuality of the beloved in terms of that which makes him unique and irreplaceable for the lover, which is the beloved's shared history with the lover. In their view, then, to love the beloved as an individual, for himself, is to have our love grounded in our past with him (rather than in his repeatable qualities). However, regardless of its merits, such an account is discordant with the experience of loving the beloved for "who he is." When thus loving the beloved, we feel that it is grounded in something *intrinsic* to him. Being who he is, his individuality, is not the result of how he is related to us. It is primarily something that has to do with him, independent of us. Jane loved Edward for "who he is" *before* they had a shared past. Dante loved Beatrice for "who she is" from the first moment he saw her and for the rest of his life—without sharing *any* past with her.²¹

At the same time, the quality theory, although it grounds love in the *intrinsic* properties of the beloved, does not fare better in accounting for the experience of loving the beloved for "who he is." In trying to do so, listing the valuable contingent properties of the beloved seems off the mark; loving *him* is not reducible to some exhaustive list of these. Here Niko Kolodny's distinction between focus and grounds may seem relevant.²² He urges us not to confuse "the ground of valuation with its focus."²³ "Although my ground for loving Jane is that she is beautiful," he says, "the focus of my love is Jane herself."²⁴

²⁰ Grau 2004, pp. 126–27.

²¹ Cf. Stump 2006, 26. Jollimore also makes use of Dante's love story, but in a different connection.

²² And Cf. Delaney 1996, 343, who makes a similar point.

²³ Kolodny 2003, 154.

²⁴ Kolodny 2003, 187.

Important as it is, however, the distinction between the focus of love and its grounds does not address the problem that concerns me here. What is at issue is not the alleged reservation (which Kolodny's distinction indeed addresses), that the object of one's love is not the beloved's properties but rather the beloved—the person—herself.²⁵ Rather, my reservation is akin to that expressed by Velleman. Rejecting the idea that the reason for love is the beloved's "particular bundle of personal qualities," he maintains that these particular qualities "feel like accidents rather than our essence."²⁶ Whether referring to the focus of love or to its grounds, then, the point at issue is that to experience love as responding to "who the beloved is" is to experience love as responding to something that is *essential* to the beloved (as opposed to accidental). To put it somewhat metaphorically, it is to respond to the beloved's unique and distinctive presence: his very being, his essence.²⁷

Judged from an existential point of view—that is, from the perspective of our lived experience—it seems that none of the major alternatives offered by those debating the reasons for love is satisfying. The no-reasons view cannot account for the experience of love as nonarbitrary, and the two dominant positions of the opposite camp cannot account for the experience of love as responding to "who the beloved is." Inasmuch as we feel that the beloved being "who he is" depends on a quality that is, contra the relation theory, *intrinsic* to the beloved and, contra the quality theory, *essential* to him, neither of these theories is satisfactory.

There is one exception, however. Velleman is alone among contemporary writers in developing the conception of the beloved being "who he is" in terms of possessing a quality that is both

²⁵ Some writers, when raising the question of what it means to love the beloved for herself, tend to examine it from the direction of considering the metaphysical issue of whether a person is more than her properties (see, for example, Grau 2004, 117–121; Hurka 2011, 152–53).

²⁶ Velleman 1999, 364.

²⁷ "Love responds to X" can either mean "X is the reason for love" or "X is the focus of love." I use it in both senses, depending on the context.

intrinsic and essential to him. Does Velleman's analysis account satisfyingly for our experience of love?

2.3. The Beloved's Personhood as the Reason for Love

[The] rational will . . . is . . . the intelligible essence of a person: Kant calls it a person's true or proper self.²⁸

Taking his inspiration from Kant's understanding of respect, Velleman's view is that the reason for love is the beloved's universal personhood, which, following Kant, he identifies with one's rational nature. Acknowledging that the concept of love as a response to the beloved's rationality may seem "odd,"²⁹ Velleman clarifies that "rational nature" should not be interpreted as denoting one's intellect. Rather, it should be understood as denoting the human "capacity to care about things in that reflective way which is distinctive of self-conscious creatures like us."³⁰ Far from being a cold and emotionally detached quality, then, personhood amounts to one's "core of reflective concern,"³¹ namely, one's capacity for valuation.

However, if it is Edward's personhood that serves as the reason for Jane's love for him, and personhood is shared by all, what is the reason for her loving Edward *in particular* (and not, say, John)? Velleman is quick to clarify this point as well. According to his theory, the beloved's universal personhood is communicated to the lover through the beloved's set of particular qualities. This set amounts to what Velleman terms one's empirical persona: "the manifest person, embodied in flesh and blood and accessible to the senses."³² One's empirical persona, unlike personhood, does

²⁸ Velleman 1999, 344.

²⁹ Velleman 1999, 365.

³⁰ Velleman 1999, 365.

³¹ Velleman 1999, 365–66.

³² Velleman 1999, 371.

distinguish one person from another. Accordingly, Velleman says, “There remains a sense in which we love a person for his observable features—the way he wears his hat and sips his tea . . . the way he walks and the way he talks.” However, he makes clear, “Loving a person for the way he walks is not a response to the value of his gait; it’s rather a response to his gait as an expression or symbol or reminder of his value as a person.”³³

Velleman’s explanation of the fact that we love someone in particular (rather than another) is therefore as follows. Although personhood is the reason for our love and *not* the beloved’s empirical persona, the latter nevertheless plays an important role by serving as the “conduit” that conveys or communicates the beloved’s personhood.³⁴ It is therefore Edward in particular that Jane loves, because it is *his* empirical persona—his passionate temper, fierce look, rough honesty—that successfully communicates his personhood to her, while John’s empirical persona doesn’t.

Such an explanation, however, is dissatisfying. To begin with, think about the particular qualities that distinguish Edward from John. Both share the quality of personhood, but Edward is distinct from John in possessing a passionate nature. Is it the case that Jane loves Edward rather than John because, as Velleman would have it, the former’s passion communicates personhood better than the latter’s rigorousness? To claim this, is to belittle the value of the quality itself, as if passion is valuable only as a means to communicate personhood. Accordingly, to claim that Edward’s passion attracts Jane only by virtue of communicating Edward’s personhood to her is to overlook the importance of passion for Jane’s love of Edward, when in fact it seems quite significant for her love that Edward *is* passionate.³⁵

³³ Velleman 1999, 371.

³⁴ See Velleman 1999, 371.

³⁵ Given the conception of selfhood (as developed in chapter 1, and to which I return in the next section), we can say that it is significant because passion, among other particular qualities, is essential to Edward’s being “who he is.” Note that this is where I depart from the quality theory, which is not committed to such a claim.

Such a marginalizing of particular qualities means that while that which serves as a reason for Jane's love is essential to Edward, that which makes her love *him rather than John* is not. Jane comes to love Edward of all people *not* because of his essence—namely, because of who he (truly) is—but rather because of the curious way in which his empirical persona communicates his essence to her. This leads to the following problem. As other critics of Velleman have observed, since his theory provides us with only a *causal* explanation for loving Edward rather than John (the explanation being that Edward's qualities communicate his personhood successfully to Jane, whereas John's do not), it cannot *justify* loving Edward in particular.³⁶

Agreeing with this critique, I further suggest that Velleman's theory not only leaves the lover with no justification for her particular love but, even worse, leaves her with no understanding of it. As Velleman never clarifies how the connection between one's particular qualities and one's personhood actually works, the mechanism behind the very particularity of our love remains obscure. Why and how does Edward's gait express his personhood to Jane, while John's gait does not? What is it about Edward's, or anyone's, gait (or any other particular quality, for that matter) that communicates his personhood?³⁷ Accordingly, as far as our understanding goes, it is unclear why it is Edward whose personhood is communicated to Jane.

Ultimately, to say that Jane loves Edward in particular because for some unknown reason she is affected specifically by his empirical persona is equal to saying that she has been hit by one of Cupid's arrows. In both cases we cannot understand why it is *him*, of all people, whom she loves. *Particular* love, in Velleman's account, becomes arbitrary. But this is not how lovers typically experience it. Velleman's thesis, then, despite its many virtues, leaves us with

³⁶ Cf. Helm 2013, section 4.1; Kolodny 2003, 177–78; Bagley 2015, 484.

³⁷ Cf. Kolodny 2003, 174.

an unwelcome gap between theory and experience. An alternative theory is therefore required.

2.4. The Correspondence between Selfhoods as the Reason for Love

2.4.1. The Particularity and Essentiality of One's Selfhood

According to my Kierkegaardian conception of selfhood, developed in the previous chapter, each person possesses an *individual* essence.³⁸ Namely (so the thesis goes), it is not the case that people are created identical and become specific individuals only contingently, but that they are rather *created* individuals. Indeed, all humans are created in God's image, but each person possesses a specific shape of this image, unique to her. This means that every person possesses a specific pool of particular qualities that express in the best way, relative to her, those universal qualities such as rationality, creativity, freedom of will, and caring, that constitute the image of God (or personhood³⁹). For example, in the case of Jane, to be created in a particular shape of God's image (or personhood) means that she possesses (among other qualities) wit, which best expresses her rationality; a talent for painting, which best expresses her creativity; passion, which best expresses her will; and earnestness, which best expresses her caring.⁴⁰

Furthermore, the possession of one's selfhood, one's individual essence, is primarily in a state of a potential. God—intending us

³⁸ This section presents a concise summary of ideas developed in chapter 1 that are relevant for the present chapter.

³⁹ Understood as rationality in an elaborate sense. See again sections 1.2 and 1.5.2 in chapter 1.

⁴⁰ The qualities that constitute one's selfhood, recall, are combined together so that selfhood should not be understood in terms of a list of qualities but rather as an amalgamation of qualities. See again chapter 1, section 1.4.

to be, for example, Jane—creates us with the potential to become Jane. Our “Jane-hood,” then, is possessed as a potential, and it is our task to fulfill this potential to its highest degree and become the *best version* of Jane possible.⁴¹ Hence, while we can become different versions of Jane, we cannot become, say, Charlotte (no more than a seed of a tree can develop into a dog).

Understanding selfhood as a quality that determines our identity but yet is primarily in a state of a potential, allows a conception of essence as both invariable and changeable. One’s essence is fixed and invariable in its potential state, and is contingent and changeable in its actualized state. This captures two senses of essence: first, essence as determining one’s identity over time, or under different circumstances; and second, essence as expressing one’s distinctive nature. Jane’s selfhood (or individual essence) in its *potential* state determines her identity and amounts to her essence in the first sense of the term. Jane’s selfhood (or individual essence) in its *actualized* state captures her distinctive presence as “Jane” and amounts to her essence in the second sense of the term.

This—namely, her essence in the second sense—is akin to Hopkins’s notion of inscape: it stands for Jane’s experienced individuality. In my terms, this is Jane’s individual persona. In different times, and under different circumstances, Jane may possess different individual personas. However, regardless of these different versions she will always be *herself*. This is because her potential (what we termed her “kernel of individuality”), of which her individual persona is an actualization, remains the same. And while Jane’s selfhood in its potential state, the “kernel,” includes only essential particular qualities, the actualization—her individual persona—includes contingent particular qualities as well. Some, as we explained, are supportive of her essential particular qualities; some are indifferent but may serve to shed light upon

⁴¹ Simply becoming *some* version of Jane, recall, is not the result of any effort: selfhood is a potential that always has some degree of actualization

these qualities; and some are disruptive of these qualities, working against them, as it were.

Jane's essence, Jane's being "who she is," is therefore governed both by her defining potential and by its specific actualization. Such a conception of essence has several advantages when it comes to understanding the experience of love. It will help us to make sense of the intuition that when we love Jane, we love her for a reason: for being who she is. And it will also help us understand how being who *we* are plays an equally crucial part in our reason for loving *her in particular*.

2.4.2. The Beloved's Selfhood

Ultimately, my suggestion will be that rather than personhood, the reason for love is the *correspondence* between the selfhood of the beloved and that of the lover. First, however, let us explore the pivotal role that the beloved's *selfhood* (as opposed to his personhood) plays when it comes to the grounds of love.⁴² Consider, then, Dante's famous love for Beatrice.⁴³ According to my theory, the reason for his love is (partly but crucially) her selfhood, which—possessed primarily in a state of a potential—is constantly in a process of actualization. In its potential state, Beatrice's selfhood amounts to an amalgamation of particular qualities that are essential to her, among them, for example, purity of heart. In its actualized state, her selfhood also includes qualities that are contingent to her, for example, an excellence in moral philosophy.

⁴² Hence, please note that whenever I speak about selfhood as the grounds or reason for love, I do not mean that it stands alone as the *only* reason. In other words, while it is true that the beloved's selfhood is the reason for loving her, it is a part of a larger picture that I will present later in the discussion.

⁴³ Other writers who refer to this love story are, for example, Jollimore (2011) and Stump (2006).

Any possible actualization (what I termed her individual persona)—that is, the Beatrice that Dante in fact encounters—will include the same “kernel”: the amalgamation of her essential particular qualities. Hence, in any version of her she will possess purity of heart. However, different versions of her will include different contingent qualities that play an important role in the shaping of her essence. As we said, some of these qualities support or express her essence: her excellence in moral philosophy, for example, expresses her purity of heart. Others are indifferent to her essence—say, her brown hair—but of these some may accentuate, or more easily disclose, her essence: her gracious posture, for example. And some may even go against her essence: impatience, nervousness, or whatever poor qualities that she might possess.⁴⁴

As a result, while it is her individual essence *in its potential state* that is fixed and determines her identity (over time, etc.), its *actualization* must also be considered as comprising an integral part of her essence. This is so not only because it expresses her distinctive nature (essence in the second sense), but also because it includes her essential qualities (those that comprise her potential). Beatrice is “herself” then, by virtue of both the potential and the actualization.

Accordingly, if Beatrice had no taste for philosophy but instead possessed a keen attentiveness to nature (a “supportive” contingent quality), Dante would still have a reason to love her. If, on the other hand, purity of heart were removed from her selfhood (hearkening back to the wicked fairy from chapter 1),⁴⁵ Dante would have a reason to stop loving her. This is so, please note, *not* because purity of heart is the reason for his love. Rather, the reason is her *selfhood*,

⁴⁴ I acknowledge that the implication of my theory is that a person is essentially good (so that bad qualities are deviations, or challenges, to her essential goodness). This is of course in line with my Kierkegaardian theistic framework—being created in God’s image necessitates being created as good—and this is the aspect of my theory that is possibly most difficult to defend outside of a theistic framework.

⁴⁵ See chapter 1, section 1.1.2.

of which purity of heart is an essential component. Hence, the removal of this quality would change Beatrice's selfhood, and *this* is the reason for the change of love.⁴⁶

Returning to the Kierkegaardian roots of the theory, recall that for Kierkegaard human beings are what he calls a "synthesis" of the eternal and the temporal. That is, we belong equally in both these two categories: we are neither more eternal than temporal nor more temporal than eternal. The significance of this in the present context is that the temporal, or contingent, actualized selfhood is in no way inferior, in terms of importance and value, to one's "eternal" potential selfhood.

Accordingly, when I claim that the beloved's selfhood—her individual essence—is (a crucial part of) the reason for loving her, this means that we love her both for her invariable potential *and* for its contingent actualization. That is, her contingent individual persona is no less a reason for our love than her invariable determining potential. After all, her essence—her being who she is—is a function of both the potential and its actualization. To reiterate, then, in speaking of the beloved's essence, my claim is *not* that what grounds our love is ultimately her potential, nor do I claim that the actualization is only a vehicle to the beloved's "true self." First, as I demonstrated, the beloved's essence is *not* reducible to the potential. The potential determines what Beatrice can (and cannot) be, but what Beatrice in fact *is*, depends on the *actualization* of the potential. Hence, inasmuch as Beatrice's essence takes its form through the actualization of the potential, the actualization is no less the reason for our love.

⁴⁶ Although my emphasis on the importance of the beloved's particular qualities for one's love may seem to make my theory akin to the quality theory (see section 2.2.3), there is a twofold fundamental difference. The first difference is my claim for the *essentiality* of (some) particular qualities; the second is that the weight that I put on particular qualities is by virtue of their composing the quality of selfhood, with *the latter* being the reason for love.

Second, to have the beloved's essence as the reason for our love is indeed to respond to who the beloved truly is. However, this does not mean that the reason for our love is the ideal version of the beloved: namely, an imagined full actualization of her potential, or the potential in abstract. No, the beloved is who she *truly* is regardless of the extent of the actualization. In other words, the potential does not stand for a "true self" that we have to "find" beneath the incomplete actualization. Rather, the relation between the potential and the actualization is like that between an idea or sketch for a painting (in the painter's mind or on paper) and the painting itself. In a sense, then, the actualization is even "truer" than the potential: we respond to the painting, not to the sketch (although the sketch is discernible in the painting).

Let us compare this with Velleman's conception of the beloved's personhood as the reason for love. Recall that Velleman distinguishes between the beloved's *universal* essence, and her *particular* empirical persona—namely, "the manifest person, embodied in flesh and blood and accessible to the senses."⁴⁷ While the former *is* the reason for our love, the latter, as it communicates her essence, serves as the cause for our loving *her* rather than any other who possesses personhood just as she does.

In Velleman's view, then, Dante loves Beatrice for her personhood. However, while this gives him a reason to also love Jane, who equally shares personhood with Beatrice, he loves Beatrice in particular because it is *her* empirical persona (and not that of Jane) that succeeds in communicating to him her personhood. However, as argued earlier (see section 2.3) such a view makes Dante's love for Beatrice in particular (i.e., rather than Jane) accidental and hence, ultimately, arbitrary. How does my view account for this?

⁴⁷ Velleman 1999, 371.

2.4.3. The Nonarbitrariness of Love

There are two major differences between my theory and that of Velleman. Paying attention to these differences will allow us to understand how my alternative succeeds where Velleman's theory fails, namely, in its ability to account for the experience of love as not arbitrary.

The two theories agree that it is the beloved's essence that serves as the reason for love,⁴⁸ and that the lover encounters this essence by means of the experienced features of the beloved. Velleman terms the latter "empirical persona," and I term it "individual persona." However, while in Velleman's theory the beloved's essence amounts to her personhood, which is a universal quality, in my theory her essence amounts to her selfhood. By introducing the idea of an *individual* essence, then, my theory departs from Velleman's by designating as the reason for love an essence *particular* to the beloved.

Further, while in Velleman's theory there is nothing that guides the connection between the beloved's personhood (i.e., her essence) and the beloved's empirical persona (i.e., the "communicator" of her essence), this is not the case in my theory. Because I distinguish between the two states of the beloved's essence, potential and actualization, the connection between the beloved's experienced individuality—namely, her individual persona (essence in the second sense)—and that which determines her invariable identity (essence in the first sense) cannot be tighter. The beloved's individual persona conveys her invariable essence by virtue of being the actualization of the latter.

Hence, while in Velleman's theory the lover has a reason to love Jane (by virtue of her personhood) but lacks a reason to love *her* in particular, this is not the case in my theory. In my theory, the

⁴⁸ Although in my theory, the beloved's essence is the reason for love as a part of a larger picture that takes into account, as I shortly explain, also the *lover's* essence.

reason for loving Jane is her being “who she is,” that is, her being, essentially, the particular person that she is. Accordingly, there is a reason for loving *her* in particular. The lover who feels that loving Jane is not arbitrary, then, is correct in feeling this way. There is a reason for loving *her*, this reason being, plainly, her being “who she is.”

2.4.4. A Meeting of Essences

Understanding what it means to love the beloved for her selfhood, the account is nevertheless not, as yet, complete. In Montaigne’s words that opened this chapter, the reason he gives when asked why he loved his friend—“because it was him”—comprises only the first half of his answer, with the second half being “because it was me.” Indeed, Jane loves Edward for who he is—for his selfhood—which she finds valuable. However, Jane does not find *everybody’s* selfhood valuable in the way that she finds Edward’s—so why him? And, conversely, clearly not everyone finds Edward’s selfhood thus attractive—so why does she? The answer is simple: because of who *she* is, because of *her* selfhood.

In the spirit of the sentiment that love is a meeting of the minds, my suggestion is that love is a meeting of *essences*. The reason for love, then, is ultimately the correspondence—the match or “click”—between the selfhood of the lover and that of the beloved. This, again, marks a difference between my view and Velleman’s: while for Velleman the correspondence is between the *empirical personas* of the lovers—that is, between the *communicators* of essence—in my theory the correspondence is between the *essences* themselves.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Since everybody possesses selfhood, claiming, as I do, that we love a person for her selfhood implies that we have a reason to love *any* given person. Not only do I happily endorse this implication, but in chapter 5 I also go on to defend the concept and feasibility of universal love. Note, however, that here the point about correspondence becomes crucial again. While there is *always* a reason to love *any* person, that which changes is the *kind* of love—friendship, romantic, parental, universal—which is determined by the

In the final stage of this project⁵⁰ I will claim that the correspondence between a lover and her beloved can be explained in terms of the beloved's ability to help the lover fulfill her potential and become the best version of herself. For the time being, and as a concluding step for the present stage, let us consider further implications that my conception of individual essence (and the correspondence between essences) has with regards to the question concerning the grounds for love.

2.5. Love Me for Myself Alone—and Because of Who You Are

If we return to Kolodny's distinction between the grounds for love and the *focus* of love, my theory allows for a clear distinction between the two: while the grounds for love is the correspondence between essences, the focus of love is the beloved's selfhood, her individual essence. The distinction between grounds and focus, recall, is drawn by Kolodny in defense of the quality theory,⁵¹ in response to the reservation that while love is for a *person*, the quality theory, by listing the valuable properties of the beloved as the basis for love, turns one's love into a love for *properties*.

Indeed, Kolodny is right in suggesting that we shouldn't confuse the grounds for love (arguably, the beloved's properties) with the focus of love, and that the focus of love is the person, not the properties. However, he never clarifies what it actually means to have a person (rather than properties) as the focus of our love. And he is not alone. On the whole, current literature on love concentrates its attention only in inquiring into the grounds for love, not its focus.

correspondence between the selfhood of the lover and the selfhood of the beloved. I return to this point in chapter 7.

⁵⁰ See chapter 7, section 7.2.

⁵¹ Although Kolodny himself does not hold this theory. See section 2.2.3.

My Kierkegaardian theory of selfhood, or individual essence, on the other hand, does clarify what it means to have a person as the focus of love. To love a person is to respond to her individual essence, which is not reducible to a list of fixed properties. It is to respond to the core of her being, to her very distinctive presence. It is, in other words, to encounter who she truly is. To have as the focus of our love a person, then, is to encounter an individual, a person with a name. This, as we said, is completely in line with the common conviction that the focus of our love is, simply, Jane. The advantage of my Kierkegaardian conception of selfhood, then, is that it gives substantial content to this simple truism, so fundamental to our experience of love.

The conception of individual essence—with its twofoldness of potential and actualization—allows us also to account for intuitions regarding both the continuance and discontinuance of love. To see how, let us return to the case of the two Veroniques from chapter 1 and once again understand the “doubleness” to mean the embodiment not of two different persons, but of two different lives.⁵² Let us suppose that the Polish Weronika did not die on stage but became instead a successful singer, so that in one life she is a Polish vocal artist and in another life she is a shy French music teacher. The two Veroniques share the same potential selfhood—the same individual essence in a state of potential—but their individual personas (the actualizations of the potential) are different. The stressful life on stage shows in the appearance of the Polish Weronika, who, at the same time, has a glamour that her French version lacks. Unlike the French Veronique she is also tough and distressed. Additionally, her being a successful artist-singer is central to her self-conception,⁵³ a quality that is irrelevant to her French version.

⁵² See chapter 1, section 1.5.1.

⁵³ In Delaney’s view, this makes it a quality for which she expects to be loved (see Delaney 1996, 343–45). In my view, however, Weronika wants to be loved for herself, which may well *not* include qualities that in a possible actualization of her essence are central to her self-conception (as in this example).

The two Veroniques, then, possess a different set of particular qualities and, accordingly, have different individual personas. Nevertheless, in an important sense they are also the same: they possess the same “kernel of individuality,” that is, the same individual essence in a state of a potential. Given this twofoldness of being both different and the same, let us now consider the ardent lover of the French Veronique, Alexandre. Does he have a reason to love Weronika as much as and in the same way as he loves Veronique?

In Velleman’s view Alexandre has a reason to love Weronika—her possession of universal personhood—but nothing in his love for Veronique *in particular* gives him reason to love Weronika *in particular*. And not only does he lack a reason to love her, in Velleman’s theory it is also quite probable that he will indeed *not* love her. Since Weronika’s empirical persona is very different from that of Veronique, there is nothing to indicate that it will communicate to him her personhood in the same successful way that the empirical persona of the French Veronique does.

In my theory, on the other hand, there is such an indication. As the individual persona of Weronika is an actualization of the same potential that Veronique possesses, there is a deep and strong affinity between the two. After all, in an important sense, they share the same *individual* essence. Accordingly, Alexandre, who, being who he is, loves Veronique for *who she is*, has a reason to love her Polish version. At the same time, if the individual persona of Weronika is a poor actualization of the potential, so poor that it makes the potential almost indiscernible, then Alexandre has a reason to fail loving her. This is so because love is grounded in the correspondence between essences, and the beloved’s essence amounts to both the potential and its *actualization*. Hence, a dramatically different actualization, one that renders the potential difficult to discern, may well affect the correspondence that is the reason for love.

Against this background, we can now ask about both the continuance and the discontinuance of love. Suppose, then, that we transfer the case of the two Veroniques from exemplifying two different lives to exemplifying two different *stages* of life, so that rather than a French and a Polish Veronique we think of a younger and an older Veronique. Given our analysis, we can easily account for both the *continuance* of love (despite, say, the changes that the beloved has gone through after many years of a relationship), and the *falling out* of love. If the beloved changes so drastically that her potential can no longer be detected through her individual persona, then, inasmuch as it affects the correspondence, falling out of love is understandable and reasonable. However, as long as the potential is discernible through the various actualizations, there is a good reason to continue one's love, no matter how the beloved has changed.

This latter point hints at a crucial matter that I will elaborate on later, namely, the active effort on the part of the lover.⁵⁴ Love is not only a matter of spontaneous response to the beloved's value, but is also a matter of *work*. While valuable qualities immediately experienced by the lover easily bring up a spontaneous response (love), the challenge is to create the conditions that allow the lover to experience those valuable qualities that are less noticeable. This is especially true when the actualization of the beloved's selfhood does not manifest the potential in the best possible way, that is, when we encounter a less favorable version of the beloved's self. Given that the potential, the beloved's "kernel of individuality," is "eternal"—that is, invariable (immune, as it were, to the influences and damages of time)—there is always hope for love. Love, after all, is a meeting of essences; and one's essence, as we are now in the position to understand, consists of both actualization and potential.

With this in mind, we can move to the next step of our inquiry and consider the *nature* of love. Love has various forms: what, then, is

⁵⁴ See chapters 4 and 5.

the common ground that all these different forms share? The challenge, as we will see, is to find a model that is general but nevertheless not reductive. Or, to put it differently, the challenge is to explain not only what makes romantic love *love*, but also what makes romantic love *romantic*.

3

Love as a Joyful Compassionate Caring

3.1. Introduction: In Search of a Nonreductive Model of Love

3.1.1. The Challenge

If Jane loves Edward, then at the very least she cares for him, values him, and has positive emotions for him. This seems uncontroversial—after all, if any of these attitudes were not true, then it would be natural to doubt that she in fact loves him. In accordance with this, my point of departure is the assumption that love, *any* kind of love, involves these three attitudes: caring, valuation, and affection (i.e., positive emotions).¹

However, what is it exactly about Jane's attitude that defines it as *love*? Further, what is it that makes this love *romantic* (as distinct from other forms of love, such as the love we feel for friends or for our children, for example)? The challenge we face is, therefore, two-fold. While determining what makes romantic love *love* we must be careful not to disregard its specific nature as *romantic*. Fathoming the nature of romantic love, in other words, requires us, first and

¹ This is in line with the view held by many contemporary writers. However, while agreeing that in any case of love these three attitudes are usually present, writers disagree on which of the three attitudes is *essential* to love. Some conceive love as a kind of caring, others as a kind of valuation, and others take love to be a kind of emotion. Kierkegaard, as we will see, takes love to be a kind of caring. My Kierkegaardian view also presents love as a kind of caring, but in a way that differs substantially from Kierkegaard.

foremost, to establish a model that allows us to account for the nature of love without compromising its diversity.

A satisfying model of love, then, is one that meets the following two conditions. First, it is inclusive and encompassing—it accounts for *any* kind of personal love;² second, it maintains the distinct nature of these different kinds. Establishing such a model will be the central effort of the present chapter.³

3.1.2. The Difficulty in Meeting This Challenge: An Example

As a way of clarifying and demonstrating the extent of this challenge, and in continuation with the previous chapter, let us take as an example Velleman's account of love. Velleman is a particularly fitting example because he presents a view that on the surface seems to meet the two aforementioned conditions, offering a more encompassing model that appears to provide an effective way to distinguish between different kinds of love. Nevertheless, it is my contention that his model is ultimately reductive.

In Velleman's view love is a kind of valuation, meaning that love is primarily the recognition and appreciation of the beloved's value. In the same way that, in the face of an admired piece of art or venerated work of nature, our position is not that of willing or desiring anything but simply absorbing the beauty of the relevant object—so is love for a person. Rather than volitional or emotive, the position of the lover is that of openness to the value of the

² As my project is focused on love for humans, I will not attempt to inquire if and how my model applies to other kinds of love, such as love for nature, love for animals, or love for abstract nonpersonal entities (e.g., philosophy, music, mathematics). I will also refrain from elaborating on love for God, but I do say a few words about the compatibility of my model with love for God toward the end of the chapter.

³ The diversity of love for persons, and the fact that there are forms of love that differ dramatically from each other (for example, romantic love and parental love), has caused some thinkers on the issue to focus only on one form of love in their accounts of the phenomenon (see, for example, Jollimore 2011, xiii-xiv).

beloved. This does not mean that love does not *involve* desires and emotions—it usually does—but it does mean that these attitudes are not *essential* to love. The nature of love amounts neither to caring (which is a form of desiring) nor to emotions, but rather to valuation.

This is not to say that, according to Velleman, emotions (as well as desires and other volitions) do not play an important role in love. After all, love is *one* kind of valuation, alongside, for example, respect, which is another kind of valuation. What, then, characterizes the kind of valuation that love is? Velleman answers, “I suggest that [love] arrests our tendencies toward emotional self-protection from another person, tendencies to draw ourselves in and close ourselves off from being affected by him. Love disarms our emotional defenses; it makes us vulnerable to the other.”⁴ Love, then, is a kind of valuation that makes us susceptible to emotions; it allows us to feel a range of emotions (and desires) that we normally, as a result of self-protection, do not allow ourselves to feel. Hence, it is emotional openness that distinguishes love from other forms of valuation. Nevertheless, despite their significant role, emotions, according to this view, are only *products* of love, not an integral part of it. They are the *result* of love by virtue of love being the attitude that enables them.

This means that not only are emotions not *essential* to love, they are not even necessary to it. Love invites us to feel, but it does not commit us to feel: the fact that love *enables* one to feel X does not in itself entail that one *actually* feels X. After all, while disarming our emotional defenses is a necessary condition for having emotions—we remove that which does not allow them to evoke—it is not a sufficient condition.

And indeed, Velleman does in fact make claims that support a subordination of the typical emotions that we associate with love. For example, he says, “The account of love offered by many

⁴ Velleman 1999, 361.

philosophers sounds to me less like an analysis of the emotion itself than an inventory of the desires and preferences that tend to arise in loving relationships of the most familiar kinds.”⁵ Further, he explicitly suggests that we “distinguish love from the likings and longings that usually go with it.”⁶ As “tend” implies “unnecessarily” and “usually” implies “not always,” it is clear that in Velleman’s view emotions are only a likely possibility when one loves, not a necessary part of it. And, of course, his request that we distinguish between love and “the likings and longings” attests that he takes the latter to be neither essential nor necessary to the former. The same holds true with regard to other emotions and desires that are attributed to love: “The various motives that are often identified with love are in fact independent responses that love merely unleashes. They are the sympathy, empathy, fascination, and attraction that we feel for another person when our emotional defenses toward him have been disarmed.”⁷ The strength of Velleman’s model, however, is its flexibility:

I suspect that those who see particular motives as necessary to love are simply imagining the lover in a narrow range of stereotypical situations, to which love has made him especially responsive. In reality, I think, love can occur in a far wider range of situations, calling for a wider range of motivational responses.⁸

Defining love as a disarming valuation that opens us emotionally (so to speak) to another person, Velleman is not committed to love entailing any *specific* emotion or desire. By preserving the diversity of love in this way, his model seems to allow for different characterizations of different kinds of love. That is, it allows that different objects of love (in different circumstances) will provoke

⁵ Velleman 1999, 342.

⁶ Velleman 1999, 342.

⁷ Velleman 1999, 361.

⁸ Velleman 1999, 361.

different emotions. Accordingly, while any instance of “disarming valuation” is love, these instances will vary significantly from each other by virtue of the relevant emotions that bestow on each instance its distinctive character.

Nevertheless, these differences are not *intrinsic* to love itself. As we saw, in Velleman’s view emotions are not integral to love: whatever emotion is felt, it is neither essential nor necessary to what Velleman takes to be love. Accordingly, if that which differentiates between various kinds of love is the emotions and desires that come with it, and these are not essential to love, then the conclusion must be that various forms of love are not *essentially* different from one another. This means that inasmuch as both are “disarming valuations,” Jane’s intense romantic love for Edward and her forgiving neighborly love for her malicious aunt are, *essentially*, the same.

This conclusion is, however, alien to our experience. Romantic love cannot be reduced in this way. It is *essentially* different from other kinds of love, and that which makes its nature distinctive—for example, the yearning for the presence of the beloved—is furthermore experienced as integral to the *love* that it is (as opposed to being an addition *external to love*). Velleman’s model, then, does not meet the second of the two conditions that we presented earlier, because although it is inclusive, it fails to maintain the distinctive nature of love’s various forms. As we will now see, when it comes to the diversity of love, Kierkegaard’s account does not fare much better.

3.2. “You Shall Love Your Neighbor”: Kierkegaard’s Conception of Love

How could one speak properly about love if you were forgotten, you God of love . . . who spared nothing but in love *gave everything*. . . . How could one speak properly about love if you were

forgotten, you who revealed what love is, you our Savior and Redeemer, who *gave yourself* in order to save all. How could one speak properly of love if you were forgotten, you Spirit of love, *who take nothing of your own* but remind us of that *self-sacrifice*.⁹

This prayer appears in the preface to Kierkegaard's 1847 *Works of Love*, the only text in his large corpus to explicitly articulate a view of love. The prayer portrays divine love as the model for genuine love. And by depicting divine love as a selfless giving to all, it conveys what Kierkegaard takes to be the three major characteristics of love: equality, self-denial, and caring.

3.2.1. Equality

The Christian doctrine . . . is to love the neighbor, to love . . . all people, even the enemy, and not to make exceptions, neither of preference nor of aversion.¹⁰

Perceiving the biblical commandment to love the neighbor as encapsulating the very essence of love, Kierkegaard develops his view of love through the prism of this commandment. "The neighbor" denotes "any given person": "The neighbor is all human beings, unconditionally every human being."¹¹ Accordingly, Kierkegaard posits the demand for equality, expressed in the commandment, as the focal point of his thesis. "Love for the neighbor," he says, is the "equality in loving," while "Equality is simply not to make distinctions."¹²

There are two ways to understand the demand for equality, and Kierkegaard endorses both. First, the equality in question refers

⁹ *Works of Love* (hereafter WL), 3, my emphases.

¹⁰ WL, 19.

¹¹ WL, 67.

¹² WL, 58.

to the *object* of love. The demand for equality is “not to make distinctions,” in the sense that *every* person should be the object of our love. Second, the equality in question refers to the *character* of love. “Kierkegaard says that I must not only love every human being, but love every person equally,” as Stephen Evans puts it.¹³ To my understanding, this means that no matter who the object of our love is—the romantic beloved, the stranger, the enemy—our attitude should be *essentially* the same (in other words, as we shall see later, the features that distinguish between the different kinds are not essential to love). In this sense, although “Kierkegaard is not making the absurd claim . . . that a husband should treat his wife exactly as he would treat any other woman,”¹⁴ in a way he does demand an equality of attitude.¹⁵

But what kind of attitude can be equal in this way? And what can possibly drive us to love *any* person, even someone we have no natural attraction or inclination for? Let me begin with the last question first.

3.2.2. Self-Denial

Kierkegaard does not discuss explicitly the causes, let alone the reasons, for love.¹⁶ However, and at least as far as *romantic* love is concerned, it is clear that he understands love as responding to

¹³ Evans 2004, 198.

¹⁴ Evans 2004, 205; See also 199: “Kierkegaard does not hold the absurd belief that I ought to have the same feelings and do precisely the same things for every human being, or even every human being I know or have contact with.”

¹⁵ Hence, I agree with Lippitt that “the equality of *value* on which Kierkegaard insists [does not imply] the need for an equality of *treatment* which makes it impossible to distinguish my love for my beloved from my love for the stranger” (2013, 84). However, I disagree that the equality in question pertains only to the value of the neighbour. Hence, while *not* demanding an equal treatment in the sense of doing and feeling the same toward any given person, I nevertheless claim that Kierkegaard does demand an equal attitude that is stronger than merely an acknowledgment of the equal value that all humans share. Regarding my debate with Lippitt see Krishek 2014.

¹⁶ See again note 7 in chapter 2.

something in the beloved that attracts the lover. First, he terms romantic love (as well as other preferential forms of love) “spontaneous”;¹⁷ second, he characterizes it as based on inclination.¹⁸ This indicates that he conceives love as responding to qualities that address the lover’s inclinations (the beloved’s beauty, wisdom, etc.). In this sense we can say that he understands love to be grounded in the value of the beloved (who is beautiful, wise, and so on).

Kierkegaard’s demand to “dethrone inclination” and “set the shall of the commandment in its place”¹⁹ might therefore lead us to think that he takes genuine love to originate in the will of the lover alone. If that were the case, that would mean that in his view genuine love is not grounded in the value of the beloved and is, in this sense, independent of the beloved.²⁰ However, this is *not* the case, as Kierkegaard, in fact, explicitly claims the contrary: “Love is not proudly independent of its object,” he says.²¹

My suggestion, then, is that Kierkegaard does not argue against the conception of love as grounded in the beloved’s value, but rather against the understanding regarding the *kind* of value that grounds it. In his view, it is not the particularities—or, in his terms, “dissimilarities”—of the beloved that ground love. Rather, it is the universal quality that all human beings share by virtue of their being “neighbors,” created by God and in God’s image. In continuance with the discussion in the previous chapter, let us call the universal quality that makes us “neighbors” the quality of personhood.

To my understanding, then, Kierkegaard views love as responding to the value of the beloved, but the value in question is the universal quality of personhood, the possession of which makes

¹⁷ See, for example, WL, 29, 33.

¹⁸ See, for example, WL, 44, 49, 50, 56.

¹⁹ See WL, 50.

²⁰ A prominent supporter of such a view is the theologian Andres Nygren, who takes divine love (the model for human love) to be “indifferent to value,” in the sense that “God does not love that which is already in itself worthy of love, but on the contrary, that which in itself has no worth acquires worth just by becoming the object of God’s love” (1982, 76, 78; quoted in Adams 1999, 164–65).

²¹ WL, 67.

us what Kierkegaard terms a “neighbor.”²² This understanding is supported, for example, by Kierkegaard’s discussion of the danger that habit poses to love.

Spontaneous love can be changed . . . over the years, as is frequently enough seen. Then love loses its ardor, its joy, its desire, its originality, its freshness. Just as the river that sprang out of the rocks is dissipated further down in the sluggishness of the dead waters, so also love is dissipated in the lukewarmness and indifference of habit.²³

The conception of love as based on inclination entails that love responds to the beloved’s attractive particularities. Habit, however, tends to make us blind or indifferent to these particularities. As we get used to what we initially found attractive in our beloved, the lure of these qualities somewhat dims. In such a case, the grounds for love are weakened, as is, arguably, love itself. Against this, Kierkegaard claims that “only [the commandment’s] *you shall* . . . can save you from habit.”²⁴ This claim makes sense if we understand it to mean that the commandment broadens our vision to encompass (what Kierkegaard takes to be) the deeper and truer value of our beloved, namely, his being our neighbor, and it is *this* value that now grounds our love.

The understanding of universal personhood as the grounds for love also emerges from Kierkegaard’s comparison between two imagined artists. While one of them complains, “I have traveled much and seen much in the world, but I have sought in vain to find a person worth painting,” the other one replies, “I have not traveled abroad . . . since I have not found one single face to be so insignificant or so faulted that I still could not discern a more beautiful side

²² “The neighbor is eternity’s mark—on every human being” (WL, 89).

²³ WL, 36.

²⁴ WL, 37.

and discover something transfigured in it.” Which of these two is the real artist, Kierkegaard wonders, and emphatically asserts that the latter “is indeed the artist, he who by bringing a certain something with him found right on the spot what the well-traveled artist did not find anywhere in the world—perhaps because he did not bring a certain something with him!”²⁵

Clearly, it is not that the artist bestows beauty on the object by virtue of painting it. Words such as “discern,” “discover,” and “found” indicate that Kierkegaard takes the beauty to belong, objectively, to the objects. The artist is not praiseworthy for making unbeautiful objects beautiful but rather for his ability to see the beauty possessed by every object. In the same way, the genuine lover does not bestow a value on the beloved by virtue of loving him, but rather has the ability to discern value in every person, and by virtue of *this*—this universal value—love him.

Thus, the love commandment is not so much a direct demand to love, since love (so our experience teaches us) cannot be commanded. Rather, we are commanded to create the conditions that allow love to arise spontaneously.²⁶ Hence, if perceiving the value of a person provokes, spontaneously, love,²⁷ then the challenge is to bring ourselves to a position that would enable such a perception. This position, according to Kierkegaard, is self-denial.

To act in self-denial, which Kierkegaard takes to be the hallmark of genuine love, is to be motivated by the desire to benefit the beloved for the beloved’s sake. Accordingly, it is not the interests of the lover—her own benefit, her desires, her inclinations—that drive or guide her; she is entirely focused on the beloved. In this sense, self-denial is a “cleansing” of her attention from anything that may distract her from appreciating the beloved independently of her. While often our encounter with another person is mediated by

²⁵ WL, 158.

²⁶ Cf. Evans 2004, 193–97.

²⁷ In chapter 5 I explain how this constitutes universal love, and in chapter 7 how it constitutes romantic love.

concerns regarding *ourselves*—the extent to which the other person interests us, our fears, hopes, or desires regarding him, and so on—in self-denial we concentrate on *him* (whoever he may be), by setting aside, as it were, these self-focused mediating concerns. In this way we truly see *him*:

If . . . you should see the ruler, cheerfully and respectfully bring him your homage, but you would still see in the ruler the inner glory, the equality of the glory that his magnificence merely conceals. If, then, you should see the beggar—perhaps in your sorrow over him suffering more than he—you would still see in him the inner glory, the equality of the glory, that his wretched outer garment conceals. Yes, then you would see, wherever you turned your eye, the neighbor.²⁸

It is in a state of self-denial, then, that we are in a position to see the “inner glory” of the other person. This “glory” is possessed by virtue of being created by God and in God’s image, and is therefore universal. Accordingly, while to be guided by one’s inclinations is to respond to the value of particular qualities that not everybody possesses, to be guided by the commandment—which for Kierkegaard is to be guided by self-denial—is to respond to the universal value that *everybody* possesses. Hence, self-denial enables us to love equally. Under the supposition (to be explored later)²⁹ that a perception of a person’s value provokes love for that person, self-denial, by opening our eyes to the value that *any* person possesses, enables us to love any given person.

We can therefore understand how a conception of love as based on self-denial adheres to the demand that love be equal. But what is the nature of such a love? What kind of attitude can be directed equally to all, and why call it “love”?

²⁸ WL, 88.

²⁹ See chapter 5.

3.2.3. Caring

The prayer at the very beginning of *Works of Love* (and of this section) emphasizes love as an act of giving that aims at benefiting its object, the beloved, for the beloved's sake. Now, a giving that desires to benefit may well be defined as "caring," and this is indeed the first thing we can say about Kierkegaard's understanding of the nature of love.³⁰ Love is a caring for another person, or, as Evans puts it, "a concern for the good of that person." Loving someone is "to care for that person so that one seeks the person's well-being."³¹ What does caring entail, from Kierkegaard's point of view?³²

In her influential commentary on *Works of Love*, M. Jamie Ferreira interprets Kierkegaardian love in terms of a responsiveness to the beloved's *needs*.³³ "The wife, the friend, the coworker, the foreigner, the enemy . . . anyone who confronts you in need has a claim on your love."³⁴ More than being motivated by the beloved's *value*, then, Ferreira portrays love as primarily motivated by the willingness to bestow on the beloved that which addresses his needs.

Such a conception has several advantages. To begin with, it adheres to the model of divine love: God, in his love, is a God who gives (as emphasized by the prayer). Further, it coheres well with the understanding of love as caring: arguably, to will the good for X commits one to be attentive to X's needs, and to fill those needs when appropriate (given the relevant circumstances). Also, it coheres well with the characterization of love as based on self-denial. After all, in a state of self-denial one is motivated by the

³⁰ In fact, this is what the Danish word that Kierkegaard uses to denote neighborly love (*kjerlighed*) means (see Ferreira 2001, 43).

³¹ Evans 2004, 182.

³² I present a brief analysis of the concept of caring, independently of Kierkegaard's use of it, in section 3.4.

³³ For a more detailed discussion on Ferreira's view see Krishek 2009, chap. 4 and Krishek 2017.

³⁴ Ferreira 2001, 47.

desire to promote the well-being, that is, to address the needs, of the beloved.

Importantly, such a conception also coheres with the demand for equality. Referring to Levinas, Ferreira says that he “complements Kierkegaard’s account by making clear that in one sense our neighbor, any neighbor, is always in need, in being always vulnerable to death.”³⁵ The idea that everyone, simply by virtue of existing, is always in need—and hence, arguably, in a state of suffering—deserves further attention, and I will return to it below (in chapter 5), when I discuss the important role that “existential suffering” plays in love. For now, however, it suffices to note how this idea supports the demand for equality in love. If love (as Ferreira construes it) is motivated by responding to one’s needs, and if every human being is in need, then there is a reason to love any given person.³⁶

Finally, this conception has an additional strength, albeit one to which Ferreira is not explicitly committed. Understanding caring in terms of a responsiveness to the beloved’s needs, enables, I suggest, an apprehension of *compassion* as integral to caring. Arguably, a responsiveness to one’s needs entails an acknowledgment that one *is* in need; that one, in a sense, is suffering (assuming that to be in need is the source of at least some physical or mental pain). And if someone toward whom you are positively disposed (as in the case of caring) is suffering, you cannot but feel compassion.

While Ferreira implicitly acknowledges that a position of love is incomplete if it is bereft of emotions,³⁷ she seems to be hesitant to incorporate any emotion in her analysis of neighborly love,

³⁵ Ferreira 2001, 49.

³⁶ The argument here is not explicitly articulated by Ferreira, but is, I think, implicit in her analysis. Ferreira characterizes love in terms of responding to the beloved’s needs, but the reference to Levinas (as well as the quotation presented earlier) can be seen as indicating a stronger conception of love as *provoked* by the recognition of the beloved’s needs. In this sense, although Ferreira does not construe her analysis in these terms, it seems that she takes love to be *grounded* in the beloved’s—*any* beloved’s—needs.

³⁷ See, for example, her discussion on Levinas’s use of the notion “love” (Ferreira 2001, 49).

presumably because it seems more difficult to demand equality in this case. However, inasmuch as it is possible to honestly acknowledge the need of any given person (and Ferreira claims that it is), it is also possible to feel compassion toward any given person. Further, while it is true that Kierkegaard himself is also silent when it comes to the emotional aspect of neighborly love, he does refer early in his analysis to the paradigmatic neighborly lover, the Good Samaritan, whose acts of love are characterized by mercy, that is, compassion.³⁸

Thus, elaborating on Ferreira's analysis, I suggest that caring, by virtue of willing the good of the beloved for the beloved's sake, and hence responding to the beloved's needs, entails compassion. Such a conception of caring meets Kierkegaard's demands. As its focus is the *beloved's* needs, it is a position of self-denial, and as it can be addressed to *any* person, it is impartial. But can love be rendered to compassionate selfless caring? Does such a conception capture love's nature?

3.3. Can Kierkegaard's Conception Account Adequately for *Romantic* Love?

3.3.1. Love as a Selfless Caring

For many years Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* was criticized for the reserved, not to say disdainful, outlook it was understood to present with regard to spontaneous kinds of love—among them, primarily, romantic love. In his emphatic, uncompromising endorsement of the commandment to love on the one hand, and his harsh criticism of the poets' praise of romantic love on the other,

³⁸ Kierkegaard refers to him as the "merciful Samaritan," and says that he showed his being a neighbor by his mercy—that is, his act, as an act of neighborly love, is an act of mercy (see WL, 22).

Kierkegaard seemed to reject the possibility that romantic love was a legitimate form of love. Accordingly, he was understood as replacing this kind of love—undoubtedly central to human existence and flourishing—with a “cold” duty that has nothing to do with our experience of love.

In recent years, not least thanks to the work of Jamie Ferreira and Stephen Evans, a more balanced understanding of Kierkegaard’s view has been posited. Kierkegaard scholars now concur that rather than rejecting romantic love (and other forms of spontaneous love), Kierkegaard’s aim is to criticize the way it is understood by the poets and offer a renewed understanding of love. Kierkegaard, in this view, does not take romantic love to be *essentially* wrong or morally problematic, and the object of his criticism is not romantic love in itself but rather the problematic way in which we tend to love, when we love romantically. Hence, Kierkegaard is happy to affirm romantic love—granted that we do it “correctly,” that is, in the way instructed by the commandment.

While I agree that Kierkegaard’s intention is to affirm romantic love, my claim is that his view of love as selfless cannot truly account for the nature of love in general, and of the romantic kind in particular. Kierkegaard’s view of love is lacking, and this lack becomes particularly evident when we try to understand, based on his view, what *romantic* love is like. In other words, my claim is that Kierkegaard’s conception of love fails to account for the *unique* nature of romantic love.

Kierkegaard’s analysis, then, falls into the same general problem presented earlier (see section 3.1). It fails to offer a model that is nonreductive, a model that encompasses the different forms of love while yet maintaining their distinctiveness. Kierkegaard’s model of love, like that of Velleman, is too thin to allow the different forms of love to keep their essential distinction. It is my contention, however, that Kierkegaard does affirm romantic love: an affirmation he is committed to in *Works of Love*, but one whose basis is to be found not in that text but in other of his works, as I will set out

in the chapters to come. In the present chapter, however, I will establish my claim regarding the thinness of Kierkegaard's *explicit* model of love. To do so, I will focus (in this section and the next) on interpretations of his view of love put forward by his two major proponents, Ferreira and Evans.³⁹

Kierkegaard could not be more emphatic in his dismissiveness of the differences between various kinds of love:

The worldly or merely human point of view recognizes a great many kinds of love. . . . With Christianity the opposite is the case. It recognizes really only one kind of love, the spirit's love, and does not concern itself much with working out in detail the different ways in which this fundamental universal love can manifest itself.⁴⁰

In her defense of Kierkegaard's view, Ferreira claims that this kind of statement should not be taken to mean that Kierkegaard disregards the important differences that exist between attitudes toward different people. While supporting Kierkegaard's claim that there is only one kind of love,⁴¹ she maintains that it nevertheless allows for a real diversity in love. This diversity is, in her view, rooted in the attention to the differences between people that Kierkegaard emphasizes in several places in *Works of Love*, particularly when discussing "our duty to love the people that we see." Accordingly, the view that she attributes to Kierkegaard is that of "an impartiality (or equal regard) that includes loving the differences."⁴²

³⁹ See Krishek 2017 for a detailed discussion of their respective views in this regard. For a more critically reserved, but ultimately affirmative, assessment of Kierkegaard's view of love, see Lippitt 2013.

⁴⁰ WL, 143. Please note that the claim that "there is only one (fundamental universal) love" is in itself not overly exceptional: it is quite intuitive to think of love as basically one phenomenon with manifold manifestations. The uniqueness of Kierkegaard's assertion, then, does not lie in claiming that love is one fundamental phenomenon, but rather in identifying this one phenomenon with neighborly love.

⁴¹ See Ferreira 2001, 45, 93–94.

⁴² Ferreira 2001, 106.

Ferreira claims that Kierkegaard “exult[s] in the way in which God celebrates diversity and loves each of us in our unique distinctiveness.”⁴³ However, even if she is right that Kierkegaard sets up a model for “celebrating diversity,” is this, when coupled with the maxim that “there is only one kind of love,” strong enough to substantiate the differences between various forms of love? Ferreira seems to think so:

We can assume that seeing a person as she is . . . must make some difference in the character of our response, both in terms of what is seen to be needed by those to whom we stand in special relations and what I can more easily do for them because of proximity or greater knowledge of their situation.⁴⁴

Ferreira explains the differences between love for different people in terms of responsiveness to their different *needs*. A response to need X (say a homeless person’s need for money) will result in one attitude, while a response to need Y (the child’s need for comforting words) will result in a different attitude, which itself is different from the attitude that results from a response to need Z (the husband’s need for companionship).

The appeal to the beloved’s needs as a means of explaining the differences between various forms of love works well with the understanding of love as a selfless caring. Responding to the beloved’s needs, after all, is *integral* to selfless caring. Hence, if the nature of the response, which in itself is dependent on the nature of the beloved’s needs, is that which determines the nature of different kinds of love, then diversity in love is coherent with the conception of love as a selfless caring. In this way, this conception meets all the principles that Kierkegaard formulates: not only those of self-denial and impartiality, but also the oneness of love (there is “only one

⁴³ Ferreira 2001, 47.

⁴⁴ Ferreira 2001, 112.

kind of love”) that is nevertheless diverse. Exegetically speaking, I think that Ferreira succeeds in construing a conception that indeed reflects Kierkegaard’s explicit understanding of love. My disagreement with her, however, is not exegetical but substantial.

I submit that attributing the qualitative distinction between, say, romantic love and parental love to the difference in responding to the beloveds’ different needs fails to account for the unique nature of each of these loves. Think, for example, about Edward’s love for Jane. Can we account for the *distinctive* nature of his attitude to her, which is clearly different from his loving attitude toward his old housekeeper, only in terms of his responding to Jane’s needs? This, evidently, is a misguided way to account for romantic love. In Ferreira’s reading of Kierkegaard (which, as I said, I believe to be accurate), that which makes Edward’s desirous, enthusiastic, longing attitude toward Jane *love* is his selfless caring. This is hardly the way we would have wanted to describe his love for her: it includes selfless caring, that’s true, but it cannot be reduced to it.

Further, if *selfless caring* is that which makes his attitude toward Jane *love*, it means that the distinguishing aspects of his attitude to Jane (compared with his attitude toward his housekeeper) cannot be taken to be an integral part of his *love*. That is, inasmuch as these distinguishing elements—say his sexual passion—are not a manifestation of his selfless caring, namely, *not* a response to her needs, they cannot be taken to constitute his attitude as love. This means that all the elements that make his romantic love *romantic* (e.g., sexual passion) have nothing to do with love. Accordingly, his love for Jane is indeed essentially the same as his love for his housekeeper. And this, after all, is precisely Kierkegaard’s claim: “Christianly, the entire distinction between the different kinds of love is essentially abolished.”⁴⁵

Hence, while Kierkegaard’s conception of one “fundamental universal love” that “manifests” itself in different ways is a good start

⁴⁵ WL, 143.

for an encompassing model of love, the resulting model, based on an understanding of this “fundamental love” in terms of selfless caring, is quite thin. As becomes evident in Ferreira’s reading, when the common ground is selfless caring, the only way to account for *different* manifestations is in terms of its responsiveness to the beloved’s needs, and it is this response that determines the shape of the relevant manifestation (say, as romantic). The price that we pay for understanding love as a selfless caring, then, is precluding from our account everything that is not a response to the beloved’s needs. But this is too high a price to pay: romantic love is simply not experienced in this way.

3.3.2. Neighborly Love as a Moral Purifier

Stephen Evans, in his *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, also presents a defense of Kierkegaard’s conception of love. His account of the relation between neighborly love and other forms of love, however, goes in a rather different direction from that of Ferreira. While she focuses on Kierkegaard’s assertion that there is “really only one kind of love” and, accordingly, takes other forms of love to be a *manifestation* of neighborly love, Evans focuses on Kierkegaard’s idea that neighborly love *purifies* other forms of love.⁴⁶ “Kierkegaard,” he says, “does not see neighbor-love as supplanting natural loves but as transforming them. Special relations are not to be abolished, but purged.”⁴⁷

The view that Evans attributes to Kierkegaard is of neighborly love becoming “the foundation of the special forms of love.” “When this occurs,” he says, “these natural loves are transformed and purified.”⁴⁸ The implication is that “natural

⁴⁶ “Love the beloved faithfully and tenderly, but let love for the neighbor be the sanctifying element in your union’s covenant with God” (WL, 62).

⁴⁷ Evans 2004, 207.

⁴⁸ Evans 2004, 207–8.

loves”—say, romantic love—exist *independently* of neighborly love; as opposed to Ferreira’s construal of Kierkegaard’s view, they are not *manifestations* of neighborly love. The picture, then, is not of neighborly love receiving different forms in accordance with the beloved’s needs, but of different kinds of love—each with its distinctive nature—that share the same “purifying element” of neighborly love:

There must be, so to speak, a baseline of respect for others as humans and a desire for their good that is a *component* of the fuller, complete set of attitudes we have for each other. To say that this neighbor-love is foundational is not so much to rank it higher than *other kinds*, but to say that it is a necessary element of those *other kinds*, if they are to be truly humane.⁴⁹

Evans clearly takes neighborly love to be substantially distinct from natural kinds of love (such as romantic love and friendship): “neighbor-love . . . is a form of love that must be sharply distinguished from all natural forms.”⁵⁰ It therefore follows that neighborly love does not *constitute* romantic love (as in Ferreira’s interpretation) but *transforms* it, makes it *moral*. The significant advantage of this view over that of Ferreira is that it allows for the various forms of love to keep their distinctive nature. Romantic love is not reduced to selfless caring that receives its distinctiveness by virtue of addressing the romantic beloved’s needs, but maintains its unique nature as *romantic love*.

However, the problem with this view is that it turns neighborly love into a mere moral position, as it serves to purify that which is *distinct* from it in its nature: (natural) love. If, on the other hand, neighborly love is in itself love, it is unclear what the common basis is that makes both “neighborly love” and “natural love” *love*.

⁴⁹ Evans 2004, 208, my emphases.

⁵⁰ Evans 2004, 187.

In other words, if, according to Evans's view, neighborly love is not only a moral position but is in fact love, the problem with his view becomes that it does not clarify what *love* is.⁵¹

To be fair to Evans, he does speak about love as caring: "To love someone is to care for that person so that one seeks the person's well-being."⁵² Given his assumption that "love is an emotion,"⁵³ it therefore seems that he takes caring to be an emotional or affectionate position (as opposed to a mere volitional position) and considers this to be love. Hence, inasmuch as he takes natural forms of love to be *love*, they are also instances of caring. However, as caring in itself is not as yet a moral position (as we will see later), neighborly love is the kind of love that makes us moral.

Indeed, Evans describes *this kind* of love entirely in moral terms. "Every human being must be viewed as possessing intrinsic value and worth, someone who *deserves respect and moral consideration*," he says.⁵⁴ And when explaining the way in which love can be equally addressed to any given person, he suggests that "I must love all people equally in the sense that I *acknowledge the inherent worth of all people*."⁵⁵ This holds true also in the context of loving those who are closely related to us: "The neighbor-love that ought to lie at the foundation of special relations makes it possible to begin the process of *morally* transforming such relationships."⁵⁶

We can therefore construe Evans's view as follows. Love is caring, and different kinds of love are characterized by different features that allocate to each kind of love (romantic, parental, neighborly) its special nature. The distinct feature that turns caring into neighborly love is that it is selfless, making *this* kind of caring a paragon for morality.

⁵¹ I present an elaborated version of this criticism in Krishek 2017.

⁵² Evans 2004, 182.

⁵³ Evans 2004, 189, see also 190–191.

⁵⁴ Evans 2004, 199, my emphasis.

⁵⁵ Evans 2004, 214, my emphasis.

⁵⁶ Evans 2004, my emphasis.

Note, then, the subtle but significant difference with Ferreira's view. While she understands the nature of love *in general* to be neighborly—so that love *is* selfless caring—Evans takes love in general to be caring, and only *neighborly* love to be selfless (i.e., morally purifying) caring. Accordingly, while Ferreira would judge an attitude that is not selfless caring to not truly be love, Evans would judge an attitude that is not selfless but is nevertheless caring to be love—just not, as yet, moral. In Evans's view, then, neighborly love as selfless caring does not determine the *nature* of love, but only its *moral* character. As such it should be “inserted” into any (independently existing) love, in order to become moral.

However, if this is indeed Evans's view, it loses its advantage as maintaining the diversity of love.⁵⁷ This is because although broader than Ferreira's view in that it does not restrict love to a selfless caring, it is still, in itself, narrow. As Evans does not say much about caring apart from its seeking the beloved's well-being, identifying *this* with love implies, again, that features such as Eros, which turns love *romantic*, are external to love and are not a part of *love's* nature. And while it is better than identifying Jane's love for Edward with *selfless* caring, it still seems somewhat off the mark to say that what makes Jane's romantic passionate longing for Edward *love* is that she seeks his well-being.

In his analysis of neighborly love as the kind of love that functions as a moral purifier to other, spontaneous, kinds of love, Evans seems to be more concerned with what makes one's attitude moral than in what makes one's attitude love. This may not be surprising, given that Evans's project is an exploration of the nature of *ethics*, not of love. Accordingly, he presents Kierkegaard's analysis of love as providing a model for the right kind of morality, not for the right kind of love. This serves to confirm my point: Kierkegaard's analysis of

⁵⁷ The advantage that comes with the price of turning neighborly love into a mere moral position, as we saw earlier.

love in *Works of Love* is too limited to adequately explain the nature of love.

Hence, while I by no means wish to go so far as to claim that *Works of Love* is not about love (but about ethics), I do posit that it gives us only a partial, and confused, understanding of love: partial because love is not *only* a moral position,⁵⁸ and confused because, in declaring that it presents an alternative to the poets' understanding of *what* love is while in fact being interested in *how* it is correct to love, it conflates love and morality in a misguided way.

3.3.3. The Object of Love

As we saw in the previous chapter, understanding the nature of love also requires an understanding of what *evokes* it: that to which love is a response. Kierkegaard, we saw (section 3.2.2), objects to the natural tendency to be guided by inclinations, and demands that instead love be based on self-denial. Accordingly, in his view, love should be responsive not to the particularities of the beloved, which appeal to the lover's various inclinations, but rather to the beloved's universal quality of being God's creature. Unlike particular qualities, this universal quality would appeal to whoever succeeds, by means of self-denial, to discern it.

According to *Works of Love*, then, the focus of love is the "inner glory," which is like a "common watermark."⁵⁹ This quality is shared by *all* people, as opposed to particular qualities, the "dissimilarities" or "distinctions," which are *not*. However, as Kierkegaard himself

⁵⁸ In my view, as will become clear, love is essentially moral (but yet is not reducible to a moral position alone). I therefore, unlike Evans, think that it is not the case that when loving romantically it is our task to *transform* this love so that it becomes moral. Rather, if an attitude is not moral, in my view it cannot count as love. This, of course, does not mean that every moral stance is love, but it does mean that any stance of love, if it is truly *love*, is moral.

⁵⁹ WL, 89.

emphasizes, love is for individuals,⁶⁰ and to be an individual, as defined in chapter 1, is to be *distinct* from others. Yet *Works of Love*, as opposed to *The Sickness unto Death*, does not seem to support a view of being *created* as distinct particulars (i.e., individuals). On the contrary, given that Kierkegaard repeatedly emphasizes the “*common watermark*” of human beings—their being essentially “the same”—it seems that according to *Works of Love* a person’s particularity is acquired only as part of her earthly existence.⁶¹

Indeed, Kierkegaard’s evaluation of particularity in the context of *Works of Love* is, at best, ambivalent. As Ferreira emphatically demonstrates in her commentary, Kierkegaard does not repudiate the differences and distinctions between people; sometimes he can even be understood as “exulting” in them, as she says. Nevertheless, he does posit them as inferior (in value and significance) to our *universal* and *essential* inner glory:

We seem to have forgotten that the dissimilarity of earthly life is just like an actor’s costume, or just like a traveler’s cloak. . . . But, alas, in the life of actuality one laces the outer garment of dissimilarity so tight that it completely conceals the fact that this dissimilarity is an outer garment, because the inner glory of equality never or very rarely shines through as it continually should and ought.⁶²

In Kierkegaard’s view, then, that which makes us particulars—that is, distinct and different from each other—is only a “costume.” It is

⁶⁰ See, for example, his claim that “for Christ, as for God’s providence, there is no number, no crowd; for him the countless are counted, are all individuals” (WL, 69). See also Evans: “To love . . . people is to love them as the concrete individuals they have been made to be” (2004, 189).

⁶¹ How to reconcile Kierkegaard’s emphasis on being, essentially, both “the same” and individuals? I think that in the context of *Works of Love* (as opposed, again, to *The Sickness unto Death*) the only conception that allows for such a reconciliation is *haecceity*. As I explained in chapter 1, this notion indicates the *quantitative* (as opposed to qualitative) distinctiveness of individuals.

⁶² WL, 87.

an “outer garment” that, as such, is not inherent to who we truly are, and even disguises our essence.⁶³ Accordingly:

If someone is truly to love his neighbor, it must be kept in mind at all times that his dissimilarity is a disguise. As previously said, Christianity has not wanted to . . . abolish dissimilarity . . . but it wants the dissimilarity to hang loosely on the individual . . . when the dissimilarity hangs loosely in this way, then in each individual there continually glimmers that essential other, which is common to all, the eternal resemblance, the likeness.⁶⁴

The picture that Kierkegaard depicts in *Works of Love* is therefore as follows. While we do, indeed, love particular persons, that love is responding to the universal quality of personhood in these individuals. That is, if our love is genuine, we love the particular individual by virtue of his “inner glory,” which is “common to all.” The focus of our love, then, is (or should be) the beloved’s “likeness” to every human being, not his distinctiveness. This, however, is not how love, and in particular *romantic* love, is experienced. Jane loves Edward not by virtue of his being a person but by virtue of his being *Edward*.⁶⁵

The conception of love as a selfless caring cannot account for the unique nature of romantic love. Dismissing the differences between various forms of love as inessential to love, marginalizing the

⁶³ In many contexts it seems that the “dissimilarity” that Kierkegaard undervalues is that of social positions. In such cases he is indeed justified in seeing it as inessential to the intrinsic quality of being a person. However, it is far from clear that he restricts his use of the term dissimilarity to only extrinsic qualities (such as social rank). Rather, it seems that he includes under this category all particular qualities—extrinsic and intrinsic alike—that differentiate one person from another.

⁶⁴ WL, 88.

⁶⁵ Cf. my criticism of Velleman’s view of personhood as the grounds for love in chapter 2. The first two chapters of this book, recall, demonstrate the possibility of conceiving a person’s “inner glory” as *particular*. This possibility goes beyond *Works of Love*, where “particularity” is associated with *worldly* differences. However, it is deeply rooted, as will be further demonstrated in chapter 6, in *The Sickness unto Death*.

beloved's particularity, and ultimately being interested in only the moral aspect of love—the tools that Kierkegaard provides in *Works of Love* are too constraining to explain the nature of *any* kind of love, and in particular romantic love.

3.4. An Alternative Conception: Love as a *Joyful Compassionate Caring*

I take love to be a kind of caring. In his study *Care and Commitment* Jeffrey Blustein distinguishes between four usages of the word “caring,” and focuses on the kind of caring expressed in the usage “care about.” Frankfurt, whom Blustein follows in his conception of caring, defines it as follows:

A person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He *identifies* himself with what he cares about in the sense that he makes himself vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced. Thus he concerns himself with what concerns it, giving particular attention to such things and directing his behavior accordingly.⁶⁶

As Blustein explains, “caring about” can be negative. While “persons who care positively about x experience the diminishment of x as distressing or painful,” to care negatively about x is to “experience the enhancement of x as distressing or painful.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, “caring about” that is positive can still be self-focused. The caring person is interested in x because she depends upon x for “the advancement of [her] own interests” (e.g., employers).⁶⁸ As Blustein puts it, I can “self-interestedly care about you as a *means* to the

⁶⁶ Frankfurt 1988, 83.

⁶⁷ Blustein 1991, 29.

⁶⁸ Blustein 1991, 30.

promotion of my own self-regarding interests, or . . . [as long as] I continue to get pleasures or benefits from you.”⁶⁹ Given that one of the prominent moral maxims is to regard a person as an end and not as a means, it is clear that caring as such is not as yet moral, even if by definition it is concerned with the well-being of its object.

This, however, does not mean that love cannot be moral (in the relevant sense) *by nature*. Hence, while for the time being I’m interested only in a descriptive account of love,⁷⁰ I agree with Kierkegaard that love *is* a selfless caring.⁷¹ Let us call it, in continuation with our analysis of Ferreira’s reading, a compassionate caring.⁷² Nevertheless, I claim, such a caring does not exhaust the nature of love; love is not *only* a selfless, compassionate caring.

In the previous section we saw the shortcomings of this conception from the point of view of the experience of the lover, but its inadequacy can be captured from the point of view of the beloved as well. If, when reunited after his accident, Edward were to realize that all that Jane can give him is her selfless caring, he would surely have refused to marry her. To use Robert Adams apt phrasing, “Let him, or her, who would rather be the object of benevolence than of love cast the first stone.”⁷³ This is so because we (as beloveds) consider a good friend (for example) to be one who “is interested in

⁶⁹ Blustein 1991, 30–31. Frankfurt, of course, makes the same point when he defines love as a *disinterested* concern. See Frankfurt 2004, 42–43. Blustein also emphasizes that “the caring in love . . . is basically disinterested care” (1991, 31), clarifying that “it is one’s susceptibility to being directly affected for better or worse by changes in another’s well-being . . . that is paramount in a love relationship. In other cases of positive caring-about, identification with the good of the other, as an end in itself, is either missing or secondary” (30).

⁷⁰ That is, in what love *is* as opposed to what and how it *should* be—the latter will be the concern of the next two chapters.

⁷¹ This view is shared not only by Blustein and Frankfurt (as we have just seen), but also by other, more recent, writers in the field; cf., for example, Furtak 2018, 123–57, Smuts 2014, 509–10.

⁷² Although, please note, if we understand caring not in terms of responding to the beloved’s needs (as Ferreira does), but rather (compatibly) as willing the well-being of the beloved for the beloved’s sake, we still have to explain how compassion is involved. I explain this point in chapter 5.

⁷³ Adams 1999, 146.

his friend, and not just in the friend's well-being."⁷⁴ What is there about one's interest in the beloved that surpasses mere benevolence or selfless, compassionate caring? I suggest that it is joy.⁷⁵

Kierkegaard himself, although only implicitly, seems to consider joy in the beloved's presence to be crucial for love:

Imagine a person who prepared a banquet and invited as his guests the lame, the blind, the cripples, and the beggars. Now, far be it from me to believe anything else about the world than that it would find this beautiful, even though eccentric. But imagine that this man who gave the banquet had a friend to whom he said, "Yesterday I gave a great banquet" . . . the friend would think that a meal such as that could be called an act of charity but not a banquet.⁷⁶

What is the difference between experiencing an event as a charity and experiencing it as a banquet? Arguably, the latter, unlike the former, involves an enjoyment in the presence of the participants. In the context of charity, there is a clear difference between the charitable person who gives—"responds to needs" as Ferreira would have it—and the needy person who receives. In a banquet, the interaction is more equal in its nature (which is, supposedly, precisely Kierkegaard's point). While the host is generous to her guests, the way to describe her is not as charitable but as festive: she gives, but she also receives. And what is it that she receives? I suggest that it is the pleasure and joy that she takes in the company of her guests.

⁷⁴ Adams 1999, 144.

⁷⁵ Cf. Adams: "A good parent, spouse, or friend is particularly ready to like and enjoy the other person, to recognize and celebrate her strengths and excellences, and to be glad of her existence" (1999, 144). Indeed, inasmuch as joy reflects a valuation and hence affirmation of the beloved's goodness, we can understand why it is desired by the beloved. A beloved does not only want the lover to be concerned about his well-being; he wants the lover to appreciate him.

⁷⁶ WL, 81.

Hence, when Kierkegaard says that Christianity, in its demand to love the neighbor, “requires not only that you shall feed the poor [but] that you shall call it a banquet,”⁷⁷ he implicitly attests to the incompleteness of understanding love only in terms of responding to the beloved’s needs. If love was *only* that, then “charity” would be a good enough word to describe the nature of the encounter with the neighbor. That this is not the case is because love is more than just a selfless giving and compassionate caring. “Charity,” in other words, does not capture the joy in the beloved that love essentially entails.

The most basic form of joy is the one experienced as a result of the mere existence of the beloved. For the lover, being joyous about the beloved’s existence in this way does not even necessitate the physical presence of the beloved. The lover is delighted in the beloved’s being a part of her life, regardless of how active a role he plays in it.⁷⁸ To put it somewhat bluntly: she is simply happy that he exists. Let us call this kind of joy *existence-related joy*.

There are other forms of joy that the beloved provokes in the lover. And while every instance of joy is primarily existence-related in the sense just described, there are forms of joy that are more directly dependent on the (actual or potential) presence of the beloved. Joy in general is an affirmative emotion, and in particular there are forms of joy in X that indicate the seeking of X’s presence and a captivation by X. Accordingly, joy is an emotion that indicates an openness to the presence of X; it is a “being with” X in the “here and now.”⁷⁹

The conception of joy as essential to love may find support in Adams’s notion of enjoying the beloved, mentioned briefly earlier. Adams, who rejects “an overmoralized ideal of love as pure benevolence,”⁸⁰ wishes to include Eros—in the sense of a pursuit and

⁷⁷ WL, 82.

⁷⁸ Consider this from the point of view of the beloved: when we are loved, we feel that our existence matters to someone; our very being makes a difference to her.

⁷⁹ All of these, again, make clear why it is desired by the beloved.

⁸⁰ Adams 1999, 132.

admiration of the good⁸¹—in his conception of love. Accordingly, love, in Adams’s view, has an important appreciative side to it, and he speaks about this aspect of love in terms of enjoyment:

Enjoying the beloved is one of the forms that love characteristically takes. . . . we enjoy other people in our experience of their personal characteristics and what they do individually. We enjoy the sound of their voices, the look or the touch of their bodies. We enjoy their ideas and their feelings, whether explicitly expressed or read by us between the lines. We enjoy the grace of their gestures or the cuteness of their expressions, the wit and style or the candor and intensity of their conversation and letters. In all of this we enjoy the other people themselves: this is the sort of thing we mean when we speak of enjoying other person.⁸²

Indeed, Adams is mostly interested in the appreciation of the beloved that is entailed in “enjoyment,” while my interest in “joy” relates to its affective nature. However, we are in agreement that a full conception of love must include joy/enjoyment. This, I submit, makes love not only an act of giving, but also an act of desiring, not only selfless, but also self-interested.⁸³ Further, and here I go beyond Adams, joy is in particular important to my theory because I take it to be the key to distinguishing different forms of love.

Joy in the presence of the beloved is diverse. There are many kinds of joy, including, for example, intellectual joy, erotic joy, or simply the tranquil joy of spending time together. Accordingly, while love is the kind of caring that essentially incorporates both compassion and joy, various forms of love are distinguished by the various kinds

⁸¹ Adams 1999, 19.

⁸² Adams 1986, 185.

⁸³ The latter claim represents my opinion more than that of Adams, as he distinguishes between self-interested desires and self-regarding desires, and claims that love includes the *latter* (see Adams 1999, 139–41). However, Adams and I agree that self-interest is distinguished from selfishness (see 137–38), and this, as will become clearer in the next chapter (see chapter 4, section 4.2) is what is at stake for me.

of joy that are typical of each. As my interest is romantic love, I elaborate (in the final chapter of this project) only on erotic joy, which I take to be typical of romantic love and distinctive to it. I should emphasize, though, that my suggestion is that *each and every* kind of love is distinguished by a specific kind of joy. There is the joy typical of friendship, the joy typical of parental love, the joy typical of the love among family members. More broadly, there is the joy typical of love among members of the same community, and the joy typical of love among members of the human race. The latter kind of love—universal love—is the focus of chapter 5.

One exception, in terms of having a distinctive kind of joy typical of it, is love for God. My project concerns love for human beings and accordingly not take upon itself the task of inquiring into the nature of love for the divine being. Nevertheless, in my view, love for God conforms as well to the model of love that I develop here. Hence, given the centrality of this kind of love to the Kierkegaardian context of my project, I think it is pertinent to provide here a short précis of what I take love for God to be like.⁸⁴

Here Adams's theory once again comes to my aid. Adams is committed (by his own admission) to the type of theistic piety that, as opposed to "the mystical quest that seeks to go beyond creatures and know and love God directly," "meets and loves God *in* creatures."⁸⁵ Agreeing with this, I understand love for God as consisting of the (various forms of) joy that we feel in created things. Be it the joy engendered by the beauty of a flower or the joy felt in the presence of a good friend—under the assumption that the glory of God is manifested in the world⁸⁶—the joy in these things is, in fact, also a

⁸⁴ It should be noted that this is only an initial sketch. A fuller and more substantial account goes beyond the scope of this project.

⁸⁵ Adams 1999, 195–96, my emphasis.

⁸⁶ To quote Adams: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3). The glory of God of which the whole earth is full is presumably present in ordinary as well as extraordinary phenomena" (1999, 194).

joy in God. And inasmuch as joy is an essential part of love, joy in God constitutes love for God.

At the same time, joy is an attitude of love (as developed here) only when it is a part of a broader attitude that includes also compassion and caring. And while joy seems to be a fitting response to the glory of God, it is more difficult to understand the fittingness of compassion and caring. If compassion is a response to suffering (as I demonstrate in chapter 5), and caring a response to a need (as was demonstrated by Ferreira's analysis), in what sense can God be said to be an object of compassion and care?

My suggestion is that if it is true that joy in creation expresses joy in God *by virtue of the connection between God and his creation*, the same holds with regard to compassion and caring. That is, compassion for created beings and caring about them may express compassion for God and caring about him by virtue of the relation of God to his creation. In the same way that a parent suffers when her child does, so God suffers when created beings—his creation—suffer. We may therefore suggest that it is not only the glory of God that is present in his creation, but also the suffering of God: the latter is present when his creation is violated. In this sense, to feel compassion in the face of a suffering creature is to feel compassion also for God. And the same with caring: to care about creation is also to care about God, the creator.

Further, God may be the object of our care and compassion in a more direct way. God desires that we love him and the neighbor. In this sense God has a need that often goes unmet because humans fail in doing what he desires (namely, to love). Accordingly, to care about God is to wish that his desire be fulfilled, and to feel compassion or sorrow is the fitting response to the failure of humans (including ourselves) to do so. Indeed, understanding the difficulty entailed in fulfilling God's desire and *love*—correctly or at all—will be the focus of the next two chapters.

3.5. Conclusion

My conception of love as a joyful compassionate caring meets the two conditions that we set at the beginning of our inquiry into the nature of love. Such a conception, while explaining the common ground for *all* kinds of love, also accounts for the distinctive nature of *each* of the various kinds. In this view, what makes Jane's romantic love for Edward *love* is her joyful compassionate caring, which is also what makes (or would have made) her attitude to her malicious aunt love. However, these two loves also differ significantly (phenomenologically speaking) from each other, and in my theory this (experienced) difference is rooted, primarily, in the kind of joy involved in each. Hence, what makes Jane's romantic love for Edward *romantic* is the kind of joy typical of *this* kind of love—which is absent from her love for her malicious aunt.⁸⁷

My neo-Kierkegaardian conception of love obviously departs from Kierkegaard's in that it emphasizes joy as an essential part of love's nature. This is not, however, the only difference. While, as in Evans's reading of Kierkegaard, I take it that there are correct and incorrect forms of love, I characterize this incorrectness differently. In my view, it is *not* the case that loving is by nature immoral (or at least amoral), so that there is a need to "purify" it by practicing neighborly love as a part of it (this, recall, is Evans's view). Rather, I take the capacity to love to be moral *by nature* (as, I believe, Kierkegaard does as well)⁸⁸—but possessed in a state of *potential*. This means that this capacity needs to be actualized into instances

⁸⁷ Note that a number of questions remain unresolved. First, what joy *is* and, second, must joy (as well as compassion and caring) always be *actively* present in an attitude for it to count as love, or only in the state of a disposition? My answers to these questions are discussed in the last chapter, where I analyze the kind of joy essential to romantic love. In that chapter I also explain not only what distinguishes different kinds of love *phenomenologically* (that is, as just explained, different kinds of joy), but also what *constitutes* the difference between various forms of love.

⁸⁸ After all, "God is love and therefore we can be like God only in loving" (WL, 62–63). Also, as we saw above, arguably there is a way to interpret Kierkegaard as understanding love to be *selfless* caring (as opposed to neutrally moral caring).

of love. Accordingly, the correctness of love is a function of the way in which the potential of love is enacted. This, then, is where the *work* of love becomes crucial.⁸⁹

However, while I endorse Kierkegaard's emphasis on *works* of love (and share his view that love is essentially moral), I differ from him in that I do not understand the nature of this work in terms of self-denial alone. As we now move to the next chapter, I will demonstrate that the work of love is best understood in terms of the double movement of faith. This, as we will see, allows me to expand Kierkegaard's conception of love to include not only compassion, but also joy.

⁸⁹ See Krishek 2010.

4

Unselfish Love

4.1. The Work of Love

Titling his only explicit essay on love “works of love,” Kierkegaard’s notion of *work* in this connection obviously demands our attention.¹ My suggestion, discussed already in chapter 1, is that Kierkegaard takes love to be a power or capacity that humans possess in a state of potential, by virtue of being created in the image of God, God who is love. As I explain elsewhere, the actualizing of this potential is what he means by the “work” of love.² Kierkegaard’s aim in *Works of Love*, then, is to instruct us regarding *how* this potential should be actualized, *how* we should love. This means that although, in Kierkegaard’s view, love is a *moral* capacity (after all, it is rooted in God and images his nature), this in itself is not enough to secure the morality of the *actualized* instances of love. After all, we may actualize love very poorly or distort its nature in various ways.

What would count as a successful actualization? In other words, what does it take for *actualized* love to be moral? As we saw in the previous chapter, Kierkegaard understands genuine—hence moral—love to be both equal and selfless. Accordingly, the two stumbling blocks on the way to an adequate fulfillment of love’s nature are inequality and selfishness. The two threats to the morality

¹ This chapter presents a substantial development and revision of ideas presented in Krishek 2009. In particular, it introduces new distinctions between two kinds of resignation (existential and religious) and two kinds of “returns” (of the self and of the beloved); it elaborates on the relation between resignation and self-denial; and it demonstrates two kinds of relations between love and faith: love in the model of faith and love as conditional on faith. A version of the latter is also presented in Krishek 2019a.

² For an elaboration and textual grounding of this suggestion, see Krishek 2010.

of love, then, are, first, to fail to love those people who are not naturally loved by us (this is the threat of inequality) and, second, when loving (either those we love naturally or others), to do so selfishly.

When it comes to romantic love, these two threats are particularly pressing. My aim here is therefore to demonstrate the work of love that best addresses them. Differing from Kierkegaard, my suggestion is that love should be actualized, “worked out,” not by way of self-denial but by what Kierkegaard calls the “double movement” of faith. The present chapter will focus on the threat of selfishness, the next chapter, on the threat of inequality.

4.2. Kierkegaard’s Demand for Self-Denial

There are many shapes that romantic love can take, not all of which are praiseworthy. And while my theory does not allow for romantic relationships that are psychologically or physically abusive to be considered as love, my theory does allow romantic *love* to be problematic. Although moral by nature, being in a state of potential the capacity to love is often fulfilled in a way that falls short of adhering to love’s nature. Romantic love can be obsessive and cause misery to the lover and the beloved; it can be arrogant and self-absorbed, with the lover narcissistically preoccupied with herself; and, most commonly, it can simply be blind, or at least not attentive enough, to the needs of the beloved.

Kierkegaard is therefore correct that romantic love is particularly susceptible to the pitfalls of selfishness. Characterized by strong desires on the one hand and deep intimacy on the other, with romantic love the boundaries between lover and beloved can blur, causing the lover to disregard (intentionally or unintentionally) the concerns and interests of the beloved. The ease with which the romantic lover may be tempted to act in a way that is *not* guided by seeking the good of the beloved makes it “selfish” in Kierkegaard’s eyes, who writes: “Only when one loves the neighbor [i.e., through

self-denial] . . . is the selfishness in preferential [e.g., romantic] love rooted out.”³

Hence, inasmuch as selfishness is a threat to the morality of romantic love, and inasmuch as self-denial is the antidote to selfishness—being as it is an attitude directed at seeking the good of the beloved *for the beloved’s sake*—Kierkegaard is justified in his demand. To be genuine, hence moral, romantic love should indeed involve self-denial. However, as we have seen in chapter 3, Kierkegaard claims that for love to be genuine it should not only involve self-denial but actually *amount* to self-denial. There are two problems with this.

First, as was extensively discussed in chapter 3, such a conception fails to account for the nature of love. Love, I argued, essentially involves joy in the presence of the beloved. However, joy, while compatible with self-denial, cannot *originate* in self-denial. Joy is a response to that which pleases the *lover*, that which addresses her inclinations, desires, values, and taste. As such, it is rooted in *her* interests and in this sense is self-interested. Conceiving love in terms of self-denial alone, then, necessarily excludes joy as an essential part of love. This, however, is problematic. As we saw, such an exclusion is alien to our experience of love, and is undesirable not only from the point of view of the lover, but also from the point of view of the beloved.

As beloveds, we desire to be the object not only of the lover’s concern, but also of her interest. We want her to find joy in us, to take pleasure in our presence, to be passionate about us. We want her to be attracted to us intellectually, mentally, and—if it is romantic love—also physically. We do not judge such interests as obscene; rather, their absence will offend (or at least frustrate) us. This is so because those interests reflect the appreciation that the lover has for

³ WL, 44.

us, her *valuation* of us.⁴ If we agree, then, that joy is both essential to love and rooted in self-interest, then love cannot be conceived in terms of self-denial alone.

The second problem with the claim that genuine love *amounts* to self-denial is that it reflects a misguided identification of self-interested concerns and selfishness. It seems that Kierkegaard considers *any* attitude rooted in the lover's self-regarding interests (desires, inclinations, etc.) to be what he calls "self-willfulness," which he identifies with selfishness. "Even if passionate preference had no other selfishness in it," he claims, "it would still have this, that . . . there is self-willfulness in it."⁵ Is he justified in making this identification?⁶ Although Kierkegaard explicates neither his conception of self-willfulness nor his understanding of selfishness, I would like to suggest the following.

In my understanding, selfishness is an act solely motivated by one's concern for one's own well-being, regardless of the implications such an act may have for the well-being of another. Now, to act in self-willfulness is to be guided by one's will. It is to act in accordance with what one wishes or desires, to be driven by one's self-interest. This kind of focus on the self—as opposed to love, which is a concern for another—makes it fairly clear why

⁴ And valuation, as we saw in chapter 2, is crucial for the particularity of love. The beloved being "who he is," which is revealed when valuing him, is the focus of love. I return to the importance of valuation for romantic love in chapter 7.

⁵ WL, 55.

⁶ Discussing the difference between self-regard, self-interest, and selfishness, Adams also objects to an identification of self-interest and selfishness. His reasoning, however, is slightly different from the one that I'm about to present. Identifying self-interest with "desire for one's own good on the whole" (1999, 137), he claims that "to have the rather abstract notion of one's own good on the whole is a rational achievement; so therefore is self-interest. That is enough to show that self-interest is not the same as selfishness. . . . For very young children are certainly capable of selfishness long before they have any conception of their own good on the whole, and hence before they have strictly self-interest motive. Selfishness is a tendency to seek or grasp things for oneself, and do so excessively. But self-interest is not necessarily excessive or bad. Indeed, it can be commendable, and is frequently commended, especially in children, who typically acquire a conception of their own good in being taught (as they must be taught) to take care of themselves" (137–38).

Kierkegaard is suspicious of self-willfulness and takes it to be selfish.

However, the conflation of self-willfulness—and hence self-interest—and selfishness is not justified.⁷ While, indeed, any act of selfishness involves self-interest, this does not mean that every act guided by self-interest is necessarily selfish. One can be genuinely concerned with the interests and good of another while also, at the same time, being concerned with one's own desires and well-being. Such a balance is indeed challenging—but not impossible.⁸

Hence, while it is an important task to secure romantic love as moral against the threat of its susceptibility to selfishness, instructing that love be construed as an act of self-denial is not the best way to do so. We therefore need to find an alternative that, while adhering to Kierkegaard's justified demand for self-denial, will avoid the problems that arise from Kierkegaard's unjustified reduction of love to an attitude of self-denial *alone*. I find the basis for such an alternative in Kierkegaard's conception of faith.

4.3. Kierkegaard's Existential Understanding of Faith

In the world of spirit . . . only the one who draws the knife gets Isaac.⁹

In 1843 Kierkegaard published (under a pseudonym)¹⁰ a poetic philosophical examination of faith, entitled *Fear and Trembling*.

⁷ Such a conflation indeed coheres with (what I claim to be) Kierkegaard's ambivalence toward preferential love in this essay. Regarding this ambivalence, see Krishek 2009, chap. 5.

⁸ My claim is that structuring love in the model of the double movement of faith allows precisely for this balance. See section 4.5.

⁹ *Fear and Trembling* (hereafter FT), 27.

¹⁰ On the meaning of this see Krishek 2009, chap. 2. For an elaborate discussion on Kierkegaard's analysis of faith see Krishek 2009, chapters 2 and 3.

Kierkegaard's exploration is concerned not with a clarification of faith as an epistemic state,¹¹ but rather as an existential one—that is, he is interested in the position of faith as manifesting a unique way of life.¹² He does this by retelling the biblical story of Abraham, the father of faith, at the moment of the binding of his son Isaac.

The story is well known: God tested Abraham's faith by demanding that he sacrifice his son. Abraham was willing to do so, but God prevented the sacrifice at the last moment. In this concise story Kierkegaard finds the two elements he needs for depicting the depth of faith: resignation and reception. These allow him to demonstrate faith as a state of continuous trust. In the present section I explain what this means, and in the two sections that follow I will demonstrate how it is relevant to loving unselfishly.

If it fell to my lot to speak about him . . . I would describe how Abraham loved Isaac. For that purpose I would call upon all the good spirits to stand by me so that what I said would have the glow of fatherly love. I hope to describe it in such a way that there would not be many a father . . . who would dare to maintain that he loved in this way.¹³

Isaac was “the child of promise,”¹⁴ a son given to Abraham and Sarah in their old age after many years of waiting, the son God had promised Abraham, through whom he would become a great nation.¹⁵ But more than that, Isaac was also Abraham's greatest love, the most important thing in his life. This is the first and basic fact

¹¹ Moreover, belief in the existence of God is not identified by him with faith: it is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for it.

¹² In a sense, this is where the distinctiveness of Kierkegaard's existential religiosity is most evident. He is a religious philosopher, but his point of departure is not religious dogma. His philosophical inquiry, as well as some of its religious conclusions, is driven by, and relies upon, existential—and hence universal—concerns.

¹³ FT, 31.

¹⁴ FT, 21.

¹⁵ See FT, 17–18.

in the story (as Kierkegaard tells it), and it makes clear the extent of the sacrifice demanded of Abraham. Accordingly, accepting God's demand is undoubtedly the most difficult thing for a loving father to do:

Many a father has lost his child, but then it was God, the unchangeable, inscrutable will of the Almighty, it was his hand that took it. Not so with Abraham! A harder test was reserved for him, and Isaac's fate was placed, along with the knife, in Abraham's hand.¹⁶

If we take the story seriously, Kierkegaard is saying, we would not be able to comprehend how Abraham could withstand—physically and mentally—this horrifying situation. “Who strengthened Abraham's arm” so that it did not quiver? “Who strengthened Abraham's soul” so that he did not falter?¹⁷ After all, as far as Abraham's human experience and understanding are concerned, he knew very well the irreversible result of the act he was about to perform: drawing the knife on Isaac means to bring about Isaac's death. Accordingly, Abraham's willingness to do so is a manifestation of what Kierkegaard terms “infinite resignation.” A “movement” (Kierkegaard's notion for inner act or position) that is a necessary condition for faith:

The moment the knight executed the act of resignation, he was convinced of the impossibility . . . if he wants to imagine that he has faith without passionately acknowledging the impossibility with his whole heart and soul, he is deceiving himself . . . since he has not even attained infinite resignation.¹⁸

¹⁶ FT, 21–22.

¹⁷ See FT, 22.

¹⁸ FT, 46–47.

Kierkegaard defines faith as a “double movement” not only because it is conditional upon resignation, but also, more crucially, because resignation is a continuous state. As opposed to a stage that ends when the next one begins, resignation must be enacted simultaneously with the “movement” of faith. Every act of faith, in other words, is essentially coupled with an act of resignation. What is resignation, then? It is the acceptance of the impossibility of attaining, or maintaining, something of value: something whose importance one acknowledges, something that one desires.

In the case of Abraham—a knight (as Kierkegaard calls it) of faith who, as such, necessarily performs resignation—the impossibility in question is of two kinds. The first immediate kind of impossibility regards the sparing of Isaac’s life. Given God’s demand, and the knife that was accordingly raised, it seems impossible that Isaac would continue to live. However, when Isaac’s life *is* spared and he and Abraham descend the mountain after the threat has passed, what *then* is impossible from Abraham’s point of view?

Inasmuch as Abraham is a knight of faith when the trial is over—and of course he is—then as such he must also perform resignation. Hence, if resignation is the acceptance of the impossibility of attaining something of importance, what is it that is impossible for Abraham to attain? The impossibility here is of the second, deeper, kind. This is the impossibility of *securing* Isaac’s life, of ensuring that Isaac’s presence in Abraham’s life will always be attainable. This is beyond Abraham’s powers not only because God may demand Isaac again, but, first and foremost, because Isaac’s nature is that of a temporal being. “Temporality, finitude—that is what it is all about”¹⁹—and this is where Abraham’s unique story becomes an existential story that pertains, universally, to every human being.

Arguably, the greatest fear of every parent—of every lover—is to lose his or her child, his or her beloved. This fear cannot be assuaged by means of human understanding or experience. On

¹⁹ FT, 49.

the contrary, it is precisely human understanding and experience that ground this fear. A human being is temporal and finite by nature.²⁰ Accordingly, it is *essential* to humans to be susceptible to loss. This deep vulnerability to loss, the essential impossibility of securing a finite and temporal being's presence, can be termed essential loss: even if no actual loss threatens a finite X (as Isaac was threatened before descending the mountain), X is constantly facing potential loss—simply by virtue of X's temporality and finitude. At any moment God may demand Isaac; at any moment a human being may face her own actual loss.

It is therefore fitting to describe any temporal X as *essentially* lost, in the sense that X's temporal nature makes it inevitable that loss will be a part of the experience of our relationship with X. Be it the quiet, seemingly harmless loss entailed in the passage of time, or the more dramatic possibility of facing the ultimate loss, death—loss is always there. Whether in the shape of actual (and not necessarily welcome) changes, or in the shape of potential destruction, loss is the Siamese twin of time: they always come together.

Joy in the *presence* of the beloved, we saw earlier, is part of the nature of love. Accordingly, the lover yearns for the presence of the beloved and wishes to secure it. But the beloved is essentially lost. Because he is by nature disposed to loss, securing his enduring presence is an impossibility. Resignation, in its existential, universal sense, is precisely the acknowledgment of this fact. It is to acknowledge and accept that it is impossible to *secure* the presence of the beloved—not only intact (against the change of time), but *at all*. This, of course, is necessarily a source of much pain: it is to constantly conceive the beloved's absence, even while present, as a valid, pending possibility. And indeed, when Kierkegaard imagines someone who, unlike Abraham, is capable *only* of resignation (that

²⁰ See SUD, 13: "A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal."

is, someone who does *not* make the further movement of faith), he says as much:

If I had gotten Isaac again, I would have been in an awkward position. What was the easiest for Abraham would have been difficult for me—once again to be happy in Isaac!—for he who with all the infinity of his soul . . . has made the infinite movement and cannot do more, he keeps Isaac only with pain.²¹

Both the knight of resignation and the knight of faith acknowledge the essential loss of the beloved, and hence painfully accept (and behold) the agonizing possibility of the beloved's absence. However, the knight of faith, *unlike* the knight of resignation, is nevertheless capable of rejoicing in the beloved's presence. To fully appreciate the significance of this difference, let us return to the unique story of Abraham.

“We let Isaac actually be sacrificed. Abraham had faith. He did not have faith that he would be blessed in a future life but that he would be blessed here in the world.”²² And earlier in the text Kierkegaard clarifies that “Abraham had faith specifically for this life,” and that his faith was that he be “unforgettable in Isaac, the most precious thing in his life.” As a matter of fact, “If his faith had been only for a life to come”—a position which, as Kierkegaard clarifies, does not really count as faith—then “he certainly would have more readily discarded everything in order to rush out of a world to which he did not belong.”²³

Abraham renounces Isaac: he raises the knife, knowing that this act is supposed to lead to Isaac's death. Hence, his renunciation testifies to his full acceptance of Isaac's loss. Kierkegaard's point is that while being in this position, Abraham nevertheless believes

²¹ FT, 35.

²² FT, 36.

²³ See FT, 20.

that Isaac will live. He does not know *how* it is to happen—“Human calculation ceased long ago”²⁴—but he believes that it *will*. The difficulty of faith, then, is that it pertains to something that is not within the power of the believer:

The next [movement] amazes me, my brain reels, for, after having made the movement of resignation, then . . . to get everything, to get one’s desire totally and completely—that is over and beyond human powers, that is a marvel.²⁵

In resignation there is a correlation between what one does, raising a knife, and what one expects—Isaac’s death. In faith, on the other hand, what one does, raising a knife, does *not* correlate with what one expects—Isaac’s life being preserved. Resignation, then, depends only on the willpower of the one who renounces, and in this sense it takes nothing but one’s own capacities for the movement to succeed. Accordingly, in resignation “There is peace and rest” it “reconciles one to existence” and “Every person who wills it . . . can discipline himself to make the movement.”²⁶

However, while it is in the power of Abraham to renounce Isaac, it is not in his power to bring Isaac back to life. “I can resign everything by my own strength and find peace and rest in my pain,” says Kierkegaard in the name of someone who is only a knight of resignation, but “By my own strength I cannot get the least little thing that belongs to finitude.”²⁷ Abraham’s faith, accordingly, reflects a dependence on the power not of himself but rather of God. That is, as a person of faith he relies on powers that *exceed* his own. Hence, unlike the person of resignation who reflects only “upon himself,” the person of faith “reflects upon God.”²⁸

²⁴ FT, 36.

²⁵ FT, 47–48.

²⁶ See FT, 45.

²⁷ See FT, 49.

²⁸ See FT, 37.

Abraham's case is of course unique. Among other things, it is unique in that Abraham—as opposed to other fathers—had God's specific promise about his son's life: "And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him."²⁹ Abraham, then, was justified in his belief that Isaac's life, come what may, will endure. However, this, needless to say, does not annul the difficulty of his resignation. Recall: he raised a knife above his son, the son "whom he embraced with a love that is inadequately described by saying he faithfully fulfilled the father's duty to love the son."³⁰ After all, Abraham didn't know *how* Isaac's life was going to be preserved: all he knew is that he was about to kill his son, the person he loved the most. This is horrifying.³¹

But Abraham had faith, as Kierkegaard keeps saying. What his faith amounts to, then, is the *trust* he had—under the most difficult circumstances imaginable—that God would fulfill his promise to him.³² That is, he had trust that the promise *would* be fulfilled, while completely lacking the understanding as to *how* it would be fulfilled and, moreover, while acting in a way that works *against* that fulfillment.

Abraham's situation can be likened to that of someone on the edge of a high cliff, who is about to jump off with her eyes closed—without knowing how she will land. The only thing that would enable such a person to jump is a complete, unreserved trust in the person who has promised to catch her. The difficulty of Abraham's "jump" is emphatically greater, and so is the extent and depth of his trust. The test that Abraham withstood, then, does not pertain to

²⁹ Genesis 17:19 KJV. And see also: "In Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Genesis 21:12 KJV).

³⁰ FT, 20.

³¹ Indeed, if one may claim that the promise given to Abraham by God makes the sacrifice any easier, it is only because the dread entailed in this act is forgotten (see FT, 28).

³² Cf. Adams 1990, 392–93.

his willingness to sacrifice his son; indeed, Kierkegaard explicitly presents versions of the story in which Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac but *fails* the test.³³ Rather, the test pertains to his ability to trust God under circumstances that, from a human point of view, make the fulfillment of God's promise impossible.

At the same time, it is important to remember that Abraham is a knight of faith not only at the moment of the binding, but also when he descends the mountain with Isaac walking safely at his side. Now, it is true that the discordance between resignation and faith—namely, between Abraham's acceptance of Isaac's loss, and Abraham's belief that Isaac will continue to live—is more evident when a raised knife is involved. However, this discordance exists also when there is no actual knife around.

This is because the metaphorical knife of temporality and finitude is *always* raised above the beloved's head, not only at the binding, and not only above Isaac. After all, the impossibility of securing the beloved's presence in one's life under *any* circumstances is not unique to Abraham; this is the lot of any lover of a human being. The heavy cloud of the beloved's potential absence, rooted in the human condition of being, always, *essentially* lost, is an inherent part of any relationship.³⁴

Kierkegaard's retelling of Abraham's story, then, presents faith as a position of trust. At the moment of the binding, Abraham's faith manifests his trust that God's promise will be fulfilled, which amounts to his trust that Isaac will continue to be present in his life, *this* life. In a broader, universal (existential) sense, faith is the ability to trust that the beloved's presence in one's life will endure, while acknowledging the impossibility of securing such an endurance.

³³ See FT, 10–14.

³⁴ Ultimately, the retelling of Abraham's story is not about facing the horrifying loss of a son (the kind of loss associated with the binding), as Isaac's life was spared. Rather, it is about facing the *possibility* of such a horrifying loss. In this sense, the story of Abraham is much closer to the story of the "mundane" knight that I discuss later (see section 4.5), who looks like a "tax collector" and more evidently exemplifies the existential import of Kierkegaardian faith.

This brings us back to the crucial difference between resignation and faith. “The moment I mounted the horse, I would have said to myself: Now all is lost, God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him and along with him all my joy.”³⁵ This is so, as we have seen, because the one who “has made the infinite movement and cannot do more . . . keeps Isaac only with pain.”³⁶ What the knight of resignation lacks is the trust that the presence of “Isaac” in her life shall endure. As a knight of resignation, she wholeheartedly acknowledges the impossibility of securing the presence of her beloved and hence vividly sees his potential absence, his essential loss.

The resigned agent is therefore incapable of a wholehearted joy in the presence of the beloved. Understanding how unstable and vulnerable the presence of the beloved is, she “look[s] the impossibility in the eye”³⁷—the impossibility of securing the beloved’s presence—and cannot but feel pain. Keeping in mind the essentiality of *joy* to love, let us now move to explore the relevancy of faith to love.

4.4. Resignation as the Existential Bearing Analogous to Self-Denial

Our appeal to faith, recall, was motivated by the need to find an alternative way to safeguard romantic love as unselfish. Kierkegaard’s way, as we saw, is to demand that love be rooted in self-denial. However, the conception of love as rooted in self-denial cannot account for the nature of romantic love as *romantic*, because that which makes it romantic—a specific kind of joy—is *not* rooted in self-denial. Hence, while Kierkegaard is correct that any genuine love (including, of course, the romantic kind) should necessarily

³⁵ FT, 35.

³⁶ FT, 35.

³⁷ FT, 47.

involve self-denial, he is not correct in understanding genuine love as *consisting in* self-denial.

Faith, as an attitude that essentially includes resignation *and hence self-denial* (as I shortly demonstrate)—but is nevertheless not exhausted by it—is therefore more relevant to genuine love than it might seem. In the next section I will demonstrate the relevancy of faith to love: both as a *model* for genuine love and, further, as a *condition* for it. First, however, there is a need to clarify the connection between resignation, which is a necessary condition for faith, and self-denial—a necessary condition for genuine love. This is the task of the present section.

In its more general or broader sense, resignation, as we said, is an acknowledgment that the presence of anything in time, including the people that we value most, cannot be fully secured. The life of a human being cannot be safeguarded and maintained intact by any other human being. Even if all disasters could be avoided—diseases, accidents, wars, natural catastrophes—time itself, “that crafty power that devises all things . . . that vigilant enemy who never dozes . . . that old man who outlives everything,”³⁸ will bring loss and ultimately death to every living being. This is a truth that, being as painful as it is, is often ignored or repressed. But it is a truth, and as such should be acknowledged. And by doing so one “drains the deep sadness of life . . . [feels] the pain of renouncing everything, the most precious thing in the world.”³⁹ That is, one experiences everything through the lens of loss: the potential absence of “everything” overshadows its actual presence.

This “everything” includes, of course, one’s dearest, closest beloveds. Of these, let us now focus on the renunciation not of a son, as in Abraham’s case, but of a romantic beloved. In resignation, the possibility of the beloved being taken away is as evident and clear as can be, so that the impossibility of securing the beloved’s

³⁸ FT, 19.

³⁹ FT, 40.

presence in the lover's life becomes inescapable. This painful understanding results in a new way of conceiving the beloved.

First, it clarifies how valuable and important the beloved is for the lover. It is a common human tendency to become accustomed to the presence of what one values, so that too often the most important things in one's life are taken for granted. Resignation excludes such a taking for granted, and hence a forgetfulness of value, for two reasons. To begin with, as taking X for granted is based on conceiving X as securely present, this is incompatible with resignation, which is an acknowledgment that X's presence is *not* secured. Further, as the pain of resignation is grounded precisely in the importance and value of X for the lover, resignation is incompatible with a forgetfulness of X's value.

Second, resignation clarifies the essential independence of the beloved from the lover. In a state of resignation, we conceive that anything in time is ultimately, and radically, not "our own" (even if in some ways it is "ours"). Hence, resignation of X and possessing X are incompatible. Inasmuch as possessing X presupposes a control over it, one cannot both renounce X—that is, acknowledge the profound lack of control over it—and see oneself as possessing X.

In this sense, resignation clearly reveals the beloved as a separate being. This means that not only does the beloved have his own fate, but he also has his own will—with the latter, no less than the former, being beyond the lover's control. While love blurs the limits between lover and beloved—intertwining, thereby, in one unit the desires and interests of both sides—through resignation the lover comes to see that the beloved is nevertheless a separate, independent being.

Third, resignation washes away, as it were, a variety of distractive, negative attitudes toward the beloved. Anger, disappointment, resentment, frustration, insecurity, annoyance: all of these, and others, tend to arise (to different degrees) when people entertain *any* kind of relationship—let alone a close relationship such as romantic love. Resignation, however, is incompatible with any of these

negative attitudes. This does not mean, of course, that resignation nullifies *justified* negative attitudes. If the beloved has wronged and disappointed you, for example, resignation does not mean automatically forgetting or forgiving this wrongdoing. Rather, what resignation “filters out” is the kind of negative attitudes rooted in any problematic preoccupation of the lover with herself. For example, it is incompatible with renouncing the beloved—feeling thereby the deep pain thus involved—and resenting him for not acting in a way that pleases you, or be annoyed with him because of his bad habits.

Fourth, a common failure in relationships—even, and maybe particularly, with those closest to us—is to regard them through the prism of our interests, our self-focused concerns, our desires, fears, and anxieties. In doing so we may become insensitive or oblivious, or simply blind, to the interests, concerns, desires, fears, and anxieties of the beloved. Resignation is incompatible with such blindness. In resignation it is the beloved who is the focus. It is he who fills our field of vision (as it were) as the valuable object of our desire.

In edifying our conception of the beloved, resignation operates in the same way as self-denial. Self-denial, recall, is an attitude that denies anything that hinders the lover from focusing on X and on what is good for X. Resignation—in elucidating the lover’s sight of the beloved’s value and importance, in revealing the beloved’s separateness, in purifying the lover’s attitude from negative distractions, and in positing the beloved at the center of the lover’s attention—is a selfless attitude. Renouncing the beloved in the Kierkegaardian sense, then, safeguards love against selfishness by meeting, in fact, Kierkegaard’s demand for self-denial.

Further, Kierkegaard takes both self-denial and (religious)⁴⁰ resignation to be a transformation of one’s love in the face of God’s

⁴⁰ I explain the (implied) distinction between resignation and *religious* resignation in section 4.5.

demand.⁴¹ In the former case the demand is the duty to love one's neighbor; in the latter, it is the demand to renounce the beloved. However, the transformation is of the same nature: it is a purification of our attitude toward the relevant object, and a gaining of a new conception of him as "belonging" to God. Despite its existential bearing, then, resignation is primarily a moral position, in the same vein as self-denial.

Faith, however, while necessarily including resignation, also, significantly, goes beyond it. And so, I claim, should love.

4.5. Rejoicing in the Beloved's Presence

My immense resignation would be a substitute for faith. . . . Neither would I have loved Isaac as Abraham loved him . . . that I loved him with my whole soul is the presupposition without which the whole thing becomes a misdeed—nevertheless I would not love as Abraham loved.⁴²

I can bear to live in my own fashion, I am happy and satisfied, but my joy is not the joy of faith, and by comparison with that, it is unhappy.⁴³

⁴¹ As Kierkegaard says: "His love for that princess would become for him the expression of an eternal love, would assume a religious character, would be transfigured into a love of the eternal being" (FT, 43). It is crucial to understand, however, that the kind of transformation that Kierkegaard is talking about is not of one love (for the princess) to another (for God). Rather, the knight loves the princess; otherwise he wouldn't be *renouncing* her: after all, renouncing X assumes, by definition, desiring X (cf. Kierkegaard's assertion that "there may be someone who found it quite convenient that the desire was no longer alive . . . but such a person is no knight" [FT, 50]). The knight of resignation, then, *loves* the princess, but his love is transfigured: he loves her in a new way, which is mediated by his love for God. This new way—nonpossessive, appreciative, attentive—is, as I claimed in this section, precisely the way of self-denial.

⁴² FT, 35.

⁴³ FT, 34.

As we saw in section 4.3, there is a crucial difference between the two attitudes that Kierkegaard identified as resignation and faith. In resignation the focus is the renounced object (say, Isaac) in its state as being, actually or potentially, taken away. In faith—by which is meant an attitude of trust in God—the renounced object is conceived not only as essentially lost and potentially absent, but also as “received back” (a phrase I explain later) and present. Accordingly, while resignation is characterized by pain, faith is characterized by joy.

How is faith, understood in this way, relevant to romantic love? Recall that the question we are now asking is not *what* love is (that was the subject of chapter 3), but *how* one should love, in particular when bearing in mind the threat of selfishness. Love is a joyful compassionate caring, we explained, and what differentiates different kinds of love and determines their (phenomenological) distinctiveness⁴⁴ is the kind of joy typical of each. In the case of romantic love, the kind of joy that characterizes and determines it as *romantic* is what I call erotic joy, which entails (as I explain in chapter 7) sexual desire and the related desires for intimacy and exclusivity. Accordingly, *this* kind of joy, maybe more than others, may hinder the lover from properly attending to the good of the beloved. Namely, it posits the threat of selfishness. It is therefore with romantic love in particular that the question as to how we should love comes to the fore. In my view, the answer to this question has two levels.

To be morally safeguarded against selfishness, I suggest, romantic love should be both *structured* in the model of faith and *conditional* on faith. Understanding the difference between the two requires, first, clarification of the distinction between two kinds of resignation—existential (or universal) and religious—and

⁴⁴ As I briefly noted in chapter 2 (see note 50), and will explain in chapter 7, the *ontological* (as opposed to phenomenological) distinctiveness of the different kinds is determined by the extent of the correspondence of the lovers' essences.

second, attention to two meanings of “receiving back.” “By faith,” Kierkegaard says, “I do not renounce anything; on the contrary, by faith I receive everything.”⁴⁵ This notion, then, is a pivotal characterization of Kierkegaardian faith, and I suggest that it can be understood in two (compatible) ways.

Kierkegaard himself does not draw a distinction between existential and religious resignation, and he discusses resignation as a religious position. However, his conception of religious resignation is primarily existential. After all, resignation is an acknowledgment of the impossibility of securing the presence of the beloved in one’s life, and this acknowledgment is rooted in an uncompromising recognition of human temporality and finitude. As such, resignation is, first and foremost, a sober acceptance of an existential truth.

The existential import of Kierkegaard’s analysis of faith is most evident in his presentation of an imaginary vision of a contemporary Abraham; someone who, living in nineteenth-century bourgeois Copenhagen, lives up to the high ideal that Abraham exemplifies. And what Kierkegaard portrays is not a father who is about to lose—let alone sacrifice—his son. Rather, this knight, who “looks just like a tax collector,” is someone walking on the streets of Copenhagen “[enjoying] everything he sees.”⁴⁶ “He finds pleasure in everything, takes part in everything,” so much so that

no spruced-up burgher walking out to Fresberg on a Sunday afternoon treats the earth more solidly. He belongs entirely to the world . . . [Nevertheless], every moment of his life he buys the opportune time at the highest price . . . [he] has made and at every moment is making the movement of . . . resignation, he knows the blessedness of infinity, he has felt the pain of renouncing everything.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See FT, 48–49.

⁴⁶ FT, 39.

⁴⁷ FT, 39–40.

To renounce “everything” is to renounce everything earthly, everything belonging to this world, everything in time. The impossibility to which the contemporary knight responds is the impossibility of holding on to anything temporal. His resignation, then, is first and foremost an existential one. It manifests the recognition that everything in time, by virtue of its nature, escapes any secure hold that we wish to have on it. Accordingly, existential resignation, as such, does not as yet assume or require any theistic commitment. It amounts only to the acknowledgment, universally available to all, of the solemn meaning of temporal existence.

Religious resignation, on the other hand, while involving the same acknowledgment as existential resignation, and to the same uncompromising degree, does not amount *only* to that. What is unique to the religious knight of resignation is that having renounced everything in time, just as her existential peer does, the *religious* knight is not left with the void of nothingness. Indeed, she herself lacks the ability to secure anything finite, but from her point of view someone else possesses this ability: God. Accordingly, while in existential resignation things are “taken away” simply because this is their nature, in religious resignation they are taken away because this is the will of God. It is “the eternal being [who] denied the fulfilment,”⁴⁸ as Kierkegaard says in connection with a young man’s renunciation (less dramatic than Abraham’s but painful nonetheless) of a beloved princess.

The beloveds—Isaac, the princess, everything—are therefore not taken arbitrarily by time: they are taken by God. They are not under the control of the annihilating power of the former; they are under the control of the loving power of the latter. In this sense, they belong to God. And if so, then God has the power not only to take

⁴⁸ FT, 43. It is clear that for Kierkegaard “eternal being” is synonymous with God: “My eternal consciousness is my love for God,” he says when he speaks on behalf of someone who makes the religious movement of resignation. He then continues and says that what this person “gains” in resignation is “my love for the eternal being” (see FT, 48). Further, he says specifically that “the eternal being . . . is the object of faith” (FT, 51).

them away, but also to give them back. The crucial significance of *religious* resignation, then, is that it paves the way for faith.

“By faith I do not renounce anything; on the contrary, by faith I receive everything.”⁴⁹ If faith means to trust that X will be “received,” then there must be something or someone with the power to bring it back, to secure its presence. Religious resignation reflects a belief in the very existence of such a power, God; but faith goes further in being a position of deep and unconditional trust in this power.⁵⁰ By faith, then, the contemporary knight receives “everything,” in the same way that Abraham, by faith, “did not renounce Isaac, but . . . received Isaac.”⁵¹ Thinking about the knight of faith as a lover—Abraham who loves his son, the young man who loves his princess, the contemporary knight who loves the world (“everything”)—I suggest that this reception means two things.

First, it is a reception that pertains to the lover’s *beloved*: it is the beloved who is being received, in the sense of being nontrivially present in the lover’s life. In the case of Isaac, for example, his being received refers not only to the surprising reception at the binding, when it seemed most unlikely that he *would continue* to be present in Abraham’s life, but also to his *continued* presence in Abraham’s life thereafter: to his being given to Abraham each and every moment anew. Indeed, in the latter case, Isaac’s being a part of his father’s life does *not* seem unlikely at all. However, as it is out of Abraham’s control in just the same way, it is no less nontrivial.

Kierkegaard wrote *Fear and Trembling* under the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio, who, as we said, testifies about himself that he is someone “who could make only the movement of resignation,”⁵² while emphasizing that resignation is subject to human capacities,

⁴⁹ FT, 48.

⁵⁰ Of course, sometimes things are taken away without being returned. Sometimes their loss is not only essential and potential, but actual. What does faith amount to in such cases? I suggest that it amounts to trusting that goodness, more generally, will be restored. For an elaboration of this point see Krishek 2009, chap. 3. Cf. Davenport 2008.

⁵¹ FT, 49.

⁵² FT, 51.

determination, and willpower. “Every person can make the movement of infinite resignation,” he says, “and for my part I would not hesitate to call a coward anyone who imagines that he cannot do it.”⁵³ Hence, it is true that “by my own strength I can give up the princess.” However, “By my own strength I cannot get her back again.”⁵⁴ Clearly, to get her back depends on the power of God. The knight of resignation—who “in the world of time . . . [has] no language in common” with God⁵⁵—lacks the needed trust in God. Accordingly, he cannot trust the prospect of the beloved being received, being constantly present in his life. Only the knight of faith can, which brings us to the second meaning of “receiving” Isaac (or the princess, or the world).

Reception in the second sense pertains not the object being received (the beloved), but rather to the subject who receives (the lover). It describes the position of being a receiver, the nontriviality of being one who is *capable of receiving*. The contemporary knight “resigned everything infinitely, and then he *grasped* everything again by virtue of [faith].”⁵⁶ That is, the issue here is the very act of receiving: “It takes a purely human courage to renounce the whole temporal realm. . . . But it takes a paradoxical and humble courage to grasp the whole temporal realm . . . and this is the courage of faith.”⁵⁷ The difficulty that Kierkegaard has in mind when he speaks about “the courage of faith” is to wholeheartedly rely on something that exceeds one’s own powers. It is only such a reliance that enables an unqualified receptivity to the presence of that which one renounces. In other words, it is a matter of *how* the received beloved is “grasped.” Taking as an example the case of Abraham, what is praised is his *openness* to Isaac’s presence, and his exceptional *joy* in it: “I can prove [that Abraham had faith] by his really fervent joy on receiving Isaac and by his needing no preparation

⁵³ See FT, 51–52.

⁵⁴ See FT, 49.

⁵⁵ FT, 35.

⁵⁶ FT, 40, my emphasis.

⁵⁷ FT, 49.

and no time to rally to finitude and its joy.”⁵⁸ We can therefore say that reception in the second sense is also *self*-reception, that is, self-affirmation. The lover responds to the beloved not only in the self-denying manner of resignation, but also with joy. As joy reflects self-interest—it attests to the *lover's* interest and pleasure in the beloved—it is rooted in self-affirmation. And as this kind of self-affirmation is simultaneously accompanied by self-denial, we can say the lover is getting *her-self* back.

Hence, bracketing the meaning of reception as dependent on trusting God, the double movement of faith in the sense of, having denied oneself, now receiving oneself back, can be primarily taken as a model for a moral position. That is, given the affinity between resignation and self-denial, and further to my suggestion that the second movement be conceived in terms of self-affirmation (regardless, again, of what the conditions for such self-affirmation are)—the double movement is a model for loving in a way that is not only *selfless* but also *interested*.

Recall the moral edification of resignation that was detailed in the previous section: being resigned, the lover who takes the resignation-affirmation attitude as a model for love (as opposed to self-denial alone) secures her love against the threat of selfishness. However, she is not only resigned, but simultaneously “returns” to herself (in the manner of self-affirmation). She goes further than self-denial without compromising the demands of self-denial (which are met through resignation).

Now, applying the structure of faith to love in this way does not require any commitment to a theistic framework. In this sense it serves only as a *model* for love, demonstrating how self-denial can be contained in self-affirmation. Modeling love in the structure of faith, then, enables the conception of love as essentially involving self-affirming joy, while being purified of selfishness. However, there is a further connection between faith and loving correctly,

⁵⁸ FT, 37.

one that does require theist commitments. Genuine love is not only *modelled in the image* of faith but is also *conditional* on it. In what way? The knight of faith “has this security that makes him delight in [that which he renounces] as if finitude were the surest thing of all.”⁵⁹ Having renounced one’s beloved, the beloved is now conceived as essentially lost. In this sense, the lover who is only a knight of resignation cannot be fully joyful in the presence of her beloved. After all, joy is rooted in envisaging the beloved as *present*, while resignation amounts to comprehending the essential insecurity involved in the relationship, and hence envisaging the beloved as *absent*. Accordingly, the lover’s “soul had full insight into the impossibility of their future happiness.”⁶⁰

Given this, the only way to attain full joy in the presence of the beloved—namely, joy that is not diminished by the poignant conception of the beloved’s possible absence—is by trusting that the beloved’s presence will endure. This, as we have seen, can only be achieved by faith. If (granted that it is compassionate and caring) love *is* joy in the presence of the beloved, then inasmuch as gaining joy at its highest and fullest is conditional on faith, *love* in its highest and fullest is conditional on faith.

We can therefore understand why Kierkegaard judges the lover who is a knight of faith to be “the only happy man.”⁶¹ The knight of faith sees the beloved as clearly as possible by means of self-denial and resignation, and rejoices unreservedly in the beloved’s presence—by means of self-affirmation and by virtue of trust. Such a lover sees palpably the possibility of the beloved’s absence, but despite seeing “the sword hanging over the beloved’s head,” the lover does not “find rest in the pain of resignation” but rather “find[s] joy by virtue of [faith].”⁶²

⁵⁹ FT, 40.

⁶⁰ FT, 50.

⁶¹ FT, 50.

⁶² See FT, 50.

To love *in the model* of faith and *by virtue* of faith, then, not only safeguards love as unselfish but also fulfills its nature. Inasmuch as love is a *potential* for joyfully and compassionately caring about another person, the double movement of self-denial and self-affirmation, of resignation and trust, is the best way to actualize it. To love in this way is to care selflessly and compassionately about one's beloved, and to be wholeheartedly joyful in him. In other words, it is to have love at its best.

5

Universal Love

5.1. Kierkegaard's Demand for Equality

As discussed in chapter 3, Kierkegaard's conception of love is based on the commandment "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."¹ Hence, apart from his demand that love be unselfish, he also demands that it be impartial or equal: "To love the neighbor is . . . essentially to will to exist equally for unconditionally every human being."² The equality in question, as explained in chapter 3, pertains both to the applicability of love and to its nature. While our tendency is to love only the few who attract us or who are otherwise closely related to us, Kierkegaard demands that we love *any* given person—and that our love for the latter will be no less "love" than the love for the former.

As opposed to our experience of love as selective, then, Kierkegaard demands that love be universal.³ Love, according to Kierkegaard, is a kind of caring, and, following Kierkegaard, the view of love being developed in this study is that it is a compassionate caring, an essential component of which is joy. In what

¹ Matthew 22:39 KJV.

² WL, 83–84. As "neighbor" indicates every human being, this category includes both the persons close to us and those who are not. In the previous chapter the focus was on the former; in this chapter the focus is on the latter. Accordingly, when I use the term "neighbor" I refer to a person who is not related to us in any special way, like the stranger on the street.

³ Note that the demand for universal love can be understood as a demand to love the whole of humanity. However, as doing this is virtually impossible, I think that the demand for universal love can be better understood as meaning that *any* interaction with *any* person should be that of love. Given that Kierkegaard himself speaks about "loving all the people we see" (WL, 159, my emphasis), I take him to understand the demand in this way as well. I thank Ariel Meirav for helping me clarify this point.

sense are we required to maintain this kind of attitude toward any person? My suggestion is that Kierkegaard, in his demand for impartiality, is referring to the *act* of (joyful compassionate) caring, its mere occurrence, and *not* to its extent or intensity. Note that he says in the quotation above that “to love the neighbor” is “to *will* to exist equally for . . . every human being,”⁴ rather than defining love as actually *existing* equally for all. The point, then, is to genuinely care, in a joyful and compassionate way, about every person with whom we interact. It is to genuinely will good for them—even if the measure of our caring varies, and even when there is not much that we can do on a practical basis in order to advance their well-being.⁵

For Kierkegaard, it is adhering to this demand that secures love as genuine. In other words, for love to fulfill its moral nature, it must comply with the demand for universality. Romantic love, however, clearly cannot, and should not, be universal. Does this mean that romantic love is necessarily morally problematic? To answer this question, we need to understand more clearly the relation between romantic love and universal love. To do so we first need to examine carefully the ideal of universal love. Most of the present chapter will therefore be devoted to an exploration of this ideal, which, as David J. Velleman’s discussion of love makes clear, is of interest not only from a religious point of view but also from a secular one.

The aim of this chapter, then, is to defend the ideal of universal love and, having done so, demonstrate that this love is entirely compatible with the selectivity and exclusivity of romantic love. Furthering the previous chapter, this will secure the morality

⁴ WL, 84, my emphasis.

⁵ In my understanding Kierkegaard allows that the intensity and extent of love, as well as any practical actions involved, depends on *who* the beloved is—say, one’s spouse or a stranger—and, more generally, on the relevant circumstances. See, in this regard, Evans 2004, 200: “Suppose that I see a homeless person . . . holding a sign that says ‘Hungry. Will work for food.’ What should I do? The principle of neighbor-love does not by itself generate an answer to that question. Perhaps I should stop and give the man some money. Perhaps I should stop and refer him to a social agency . . . [or] talk with him about helping him to get a job. Perhaps I must pass him by because I have a responsibility to another neighbor that I would violate by stopping to help.”

of romantic love and prepare the way for the task of the last two chapters of this project: the affirmation of romantic love not only as a *morally* desirable phenomenon, but also as a *spiritually* desirable one.⁶

5.2. The Challenge of Loving Universally

In the context of contemporary secular discussions in moral philosophy, Velleman is one of the few writers to argue for an understanding of love as being universal by nature.⁷ As we saw in chapter 2, Velleman holds that love is grounded in the beloved's essence, which he identifies with the universal quality of personhood. Hence, given that every person possesses personhood, we have reason to love any person.

Recall that while agreeing with Velleman that a person's essence plays a crucial role in loving that person, my claim is that this essence does not amount to universal personhood but rather to a particular shape of personhood, which I term "selfhood." In my view love is grounded in the correspondence between the beloved's *individual* essence and that of the lover. In chapter 2 I demonstrated the significant role that the beloved's selfhood or individual essence plays in *romantic* love; in the present chapter I will demonstrate the no less significant role that it plays in *universal* love. In order to do so, let me first briefly recall what it means to possess selfhood.

When thinking about a particular person, say, Jane Eyre, we can refer to her as a "person," as a "self," and as "the self that she is." To think about her as a self is to acknowledge not only that she is a person like everybody else, but also that she is distinct from

⁶ I discuss the feasibility of universal love in Krishek 2019c. Segments of the present chapter correlate, partially, with the discussion presented there.

⁷ As Kieran Setiya, another one of the few who defend the universality of love, puts it: "The commandment to love one's neighbor . . . is even less discussed in secular moral philosophy than the golden rule" (Setiya 2014, 252).

everybody else, an individual. However, while to refer to her as a self is already to refer to her as an individual, to refer to her as “the self that she is” is to refer to her in her specific individuality, namely, to refer to her as *Jane*—the difference being that while every person is a self, not every person is Jane.

Further, in contrast to the idea that, given other circumstances, she could have been Charlotte or Emily, in my view being Jane is *essential* to being who she is.⁸ And what makes Jane the self that she *essentially* is is the quality of selfhood; her “Jane-hood,” if you will. Selfhood is an amalgamation of what I take to be essential *particular* qualities. Under the assumption that human beings are created in the image of God, we can say that those qualities that make us in God’s image, or constitute our personhood, are universal essential qualities. However, humans are not just “like God”; they are also very different from God. This difference is manifested in our possession of the essential universal qualities in a *particular*, and hence also limited, form.⁹

Finally, selfhood is an evasive quality. Its evasiveness is rooted not only in the way that the qualities of which it is composed merge to create it,¹⁰ but also in its being a potential that is constantly in a process of actualization. Regardless, however, of the difficulty in discerning one’s selfhood, everyone *is* a self. Therefore, if every person possesses selfhood or individual essence (as was demonstrated in chapter 1), and if selfhood grounds love (as was demonstrated in chapter 2),¹¹ then we have reason to love any

⁸ Hence, in my view, given other circumstances she would have been a different *version* of Jane. See again chapter 1, in particular sections 1.3 and 1.5, and also section 5.4 below.

⁹ Recall that arguably there may be an atheistic version to the conception of individual essence. See chapter 1, section 1.5.2.

¹⁰ In the same way, as I suggested in chapter 1, that colors merge when mixed to create a new color.

¹¹ To be more precise, that which grounds love, as we saw, is not only the beloved’s selfhood but the *correspondence* between the essences of the beloved and the lover. However, it is only in the next two chapters that I give the tools to see that such a correspondence, to *some* degree, exists between any two persons. In the present chapter I demonstrate that there is a correspondence in the weaker sense of the ability of *any* person to provoke

given person. Nevertheless, having a reason to love does not secure, or guarantee, actually *loving*. It is not, in itself, sufficient to *provoke* love.

My concern here, then, is not so much to focus on the idea that we have reason to love any person, but rather to ask whether it is *possible* to love any person. *Can* we love the deceptive politician, the offensive boss, the complete stranger, the enemy? Velleman thinks that we cannot. His analysis presents love for any person as only a theoretical possibility, while in practice, he holds, such love is impossible. My view, however, is different. My thesis is that the concept of selfhood, coupled with the conception of love in the structure of faith, enables us to understand love for the neighbor as being not only reasonable but also feasible.

To substantiate this, two challenges must be met. The first is the challenge of demonstrating the accessibility of the value that provokes love. For Velleman this is the universal value of personhood, while in my view it is the particular value of selfhood, which is arguably more difficult to discern in a person. Second, in a view like Velleman's, who takes love to amount to a valuation of one's personhood, it is clear how the value of personhood can, in principle, provoke love. Love *is* the very act of valuing, so that if we succeed in valuing X in the special way that makes valuing *love*,¹² then this is enough for loving X. In my view, on the other hand, love is a compassionate joyful caring, so that even if we succeed in valuing X, since valuation is not, yet, loving, there remains a gap between valuing X and loving X. The second challenge, in other words, is to explain how responding to the value of the neighbor's selfhood provokes compassionate caring for him and joy in his presence.

an interest in *any other* person. For the purpose of the present chapter this weaker sense suffices.

¹² In Velleman's view, love is a valuation of X that arrests our emotional defenses. Not every act of valuation is of this sort (see chapter 3, section 3.1.2).

5.3. The Feasibility of Loving the Neighbor

The difficulty in loving the neighbor is therefore not conceptual or theoretical, but practical. For one thing, as we have just said, it is rooted not in lacking a reason for love but rather in failing to access the value that provokes love. In my theory, this is the value of the neighbor as the particular individual that he is.

Coming from a different direction, and although having both premises and conclusions different from mine, Harry Frankfurt similarly claims that conceiving a person as the individual that he is (e.g., Edward) is a necessary condition for love. Frankfurt, who, like Kierkegaard, understands love to be selfless caring, claims that the kind of selfless caring manifested in acts of charity or concern for strangers is not *love* because it is impersonal: "Someone who is devoted to helping the sick or the poor for their own sakes may be quite indifferent to the particularity of those whom he seeks to help. . . . His generosity is not a response to their identities as individuals."¹³ Frankfurt seems to assume (quite naturally) that only close relationships allow for an access to one's identity as an individual. Accordingly, inasmuch as conceiving the beloved in his specific individuality is essential to love, he therefore goes on to claim that whatever our attitude to a stranger is, it cannot be love.

To prove the case to the contrary and demonstrate, as against both Frankfurt and Velleman, that an attitude to a stranger can be love, we have to show that access to the neighbor's identity as an individual (in Frankfurt's terms) or his selfhood (in my terms) is possible. For this, we have to return to the idea of love in the structure of faith presented in chapter 4. The double movement of self-denial coupled with self-affirmation will prove no less crucial for universal love than it is for romantic love. There is, however, an important difference: while in the case of romantic love the challenge is to make an existing love genuine (moral, unselfish, true to its nature),

¹³ Frankfurt 2004, 43.

in the case of universal love the challenge is to bring love into existence to begin with. My suggestion is that a faith-like attitude toward those neighbors whom we do not already love is the condition for provoking both compassionate caring for them and a feeling of joy in their presence.

5.3.1. Caring and Compassion as Dependant on the First Movement of Faith

To care about the neighbor is to will good for him and, conditional upon the relevant circumstances, act to secure or advance his well-being. Can we desire good for *any* person? How are we to be motivated to care about a complete stranger (or the offensive boss, or the enemy)? From both a religious and a secular point of view, personhood is considered valuable. Whether we take it to reflect the image of God (if we are religious), our rational nature (if we are Kantian), or simply that which is essentially shared by all humans (common sense)—we acknowledge personhood as valuable. Selfhood is a particular form of personhood. Thus, if personhood is valuable, so is selfhood. Acknowledging that the neighbor is a self, then, is *eo ipso* to acknowledge her as valuable.

To acknowledge something as valuable is to appreciate it as good, at least in some respect. Arguably, such an appreciation involves an interest in preserving that which is valuable, namely, an interest in its well-being. Consider, for example, a work of art, a building, or a mountain. If we truly value it, we cannot be indifferent to its ruin. This implies that we are interested in its preservation: we wish it to endure, we desire good for it. *This*—namely, desiring good for it—is precisely what caring about it amounts to. Thus, to value X necessarily involves caring about it. Inasmuch as we value the neighbor, then, it entails desiring good for him, caring about him.¹⁴

¹⁴ Note that willing good for the neighbor does not, yet, attest to the extent and depth of this willing, and it does not necessarily imply a practical commitment to advance the

However, valuing the neighbor, which is the condition for caring about him, does not necessarily come naturally to us—especially if the neighbor is someone who offends us, threatens us, repulses us, or simply does not attract us much. Hence, the relevant valuation requires a deliberate effort of self-denial. The denial in question, as discussed in chapter 4, is of our natural tendency to be primarily motivated by our own needs and interests. Self-denial, accordingly, is an attitude toward another person that is marked by a shift in focus—concentrating on the other’s interests rather than our own—and is thus purged of any form of selfishness or self-centeredness. This means overcoming obstacles such as treating the other person instrumentally or absentmindedly, treating him suspiciously or with prejudice, or simply letting self-focused attitudes (such as being threatened by, or angry with, him) guide our encounter.

To regard the other person from a position of self-denial, then, is to succeed in considering him “on his own” and “apart” from ourselves, rather than through the prism of our own interests, concerns, and feelings. Accordingly, doing so elucidates our vision of *him*: rather than being preoccupied with ourselves, when we deny ourselves we focus on the neighbor. This kind of focus reveals the neighbor as a self, an *individual* person.

Thus, rather than conceiving the neighbor, somewhat abstractly and absentmindedly, as “just another person,” approaching him in self-denial means that he is singled out. The meaning of his being a *person*—with his own life and story, yearnings and sorrows, fears and hopes—becomes apparent. Hence, self-denial is an antidote to the natural tendency to overlook the neighbor. Conceiving him through self-denial is the opposite of regarding him as a transparent shadow in the backdrop of our own occupations, or as mere stage setting in the drama of our own life; it excludes regarding him as a burden or an annoyance.

neighbor’s well-being. *These* are dependent on who the neighbor is, and on the relevant circumstances. The very existence of such a will, however, is not thus dependent.

Such a purified conception of the neighbor allows his value as God-created to register fully. Accordingly, conceiving him in this way provokes *caring* about him. As we said, to truly appreciate the neighbor as valuable necessarily entails willing good for him. Further, since the caring in question is enabled by self-denial, it is by definition a selfless caring, and hence an attitude of desiring his well-being for his own sake.

However, we said that the kind of caring relevant to love is not only selfless but also compassionate. In chapter 3 we referred to Ferreira's analysis of selfless caring as a response to the beloved's needs, and demonstrated that understanding caring in this way makes compassion integral to it. This is because responding to needs entails an *acknowledgment* of needs. Hence, inasmuch as a need attests to a lacking, and a state of lacking is painful, then responding to X's needs implies an acknowledgment of X as suffering some lack and hence as being in pain. Accordingly, if compassion for X is provoked in the presence of X's suffering or pain, then caring, understood as a response to needs, necessitates compassion.¹⁵

Now, caring understood as a selfless desire for the well-being of X is indeed compatible with the conception of caring as responding to X's needs, but it is nevertheless different from it. How, then, can caring, understood in *this* way - i.e., selflessly desiring the well-being of the neighbor - necessitate compassion? My claim is that it does so by way of resignation, the existential bearing analogous to self-denial. In the previous chapter, recall, I discussed the concept of existential resignation, which amounts to a specific position: that of acknowledging the nature of *everything* as temporal and finite. "Everything" includes also the neighbor. To acknowledge that the neighbor, the person that I encounter, is temporal and finite, is to conceive him as deeply vulnerable and accordingly, I suggest, as suffering. In what way?

¹⁵ See again chapter 3, section 3.2.3.

Being finite and limited, every human life necessarily accommodates pain and sorrow. Subject to the loss that the passage of time inevitably brings, doomed to death, limited in their powers, frustrated by unfulfilled desires—human beings are vulnerable simply by virtue of existing. Such vulnerability entails suffering of a special kind. Unlike other kinds of suffering that are evident to some degree, this kind of suffering—let us call it “existential suffering”—is quiet and inconspicuous. It pertains to living in time, and hence constantly experiencing loss in its many forms.

We may therefore say that existential suffering is the suffering entailed in being essentially susceptible to all other kinds of suffering, those that are more evidently apparent.¹⁶ The burden that living in time brings with it is a burden that every human being carries. Hence, while it may not always be apparent, this suffering is always *present*. Resignation, then, reveals the neighbor as suffering, and hence provokes compassion for him.

The basic attitude toward the neighbor, then, should be that of self-denial and resignation. Focusing on the neighbor in this way reveals both his value, that is, his strength, and his limitedness, that is, his weakness. Accordingly, it provokes both the volitional response of caring, rooted in the acknowledgment of his value, and the emotional response of compassion, rooted in experiencing his limitedness and hence his state of suffering.

However, important and morally desirable as it is, to compassionately care about the neighbor is still not to love her. As the point made by Frankfurt demonstrates, one’s attitude toward X can be a selfless caring (and, we should add, even a compassionate caring) without this being love. After all, the devoted volunteer who helps

¹⁶ In this sense it is closely connected to the conception of “essential loss” that was introduced in chapter 4. To describe X as essentially lost is to refer to its essential susceptibility to all other kinds of actual loss. In this sense, everything in time, which is everything that we have, is essentially lost. The fact that everything that we have is essentially lost makes existential suffering an inseparable part of our existence. For a different (although compatible) suggestion regarding the inevitability of suffering to any human life, see Furtak’s beautiful reflection on the connection between loving and suffering. (Furtak 2005, chap. 10).

the sick and the poor selflessly desires the good for those she helps, and she may well feel compassion toward them, but this in itself does not entail loving them.¹⁷ For selfless compassionate caring to be *love*, we said, it must essentially involve joy.

5.3.2. Universal Love as Dependant on the Second Movement of Faith

5.3.2.1. The Experience of Value

As explained in chapter 3, I take love to essentially involve joy in the beloved. There are many kinds of joy, and among them is what I termed existence-related joy. This is an immediate delight, an immediate broadening of the heart,¹⁸ in response to the very presence of the beloved. It is this kind of joy that is relevant to universal love: after all, as opposed to knowing the person or being already in a relationship with him, it takes only the (physical or imagined) presence of a person to provoke *this kind* of joy. My claim, then, is that for an attitude toward a neighbor who is *not* related to us to be love, it should be a compassionate caring that at the very least involves existence-related joy.

But can joy, even in this minimal form, be felt in the presence of *any* person? This may sound implausible. As we saw in chapter 3, joy is rooted in the *lover's* interests, which guide and motivate her (along with selfless caring) in her interaction with the beloved. However, such a spontaneous interest in the beloved is precisely the hallmark of the so-called preferential forms of love, which manifestly distinguishes it from nonpreferential, neighborly love.¹⁹ In

¹⁷ Recall Kierkegaard's distinction between considering a meal for the poor an act of charity, and considering it a banquet (see chapter 3, section 3.4).

¹⁸ Similar to what one feels when experiencing a first snow, or the flowering of a tree in the spring.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard uses the term "preferential" to denote the kind of love that comes spontaneously (e.g., romantic love and friendship), as opposed to the kind of love that needs to be commanded.

other words, it seems that one of the characteristics of the interaction with those who are *not* related to us is a lack of special interest in them. But if so—and if interest grounds joy—how can we feel joy in the presence of the neighbor whom we arguably lack any interest in? To answer this, I will now introduce the conception of *experiencing* value.

Experiencing value is different from simply acknowledging value. Here I am in agreement with Velleman, who draws a similar distinction. “Grasping someone’s personhood intellectually,” he says, “may be enough to make us respect him, but unless we actually *see* a person in the human being confronting us, we won’t be moved to love.”²⁰ The difference between only *acknowledging* (or “grasping intellectually”) that a person is valuable and *experiencing* (or “seeing”) the person as valuable is akin, I suggest, to the difference between acknowledging that someone is beautiful or wise, and being affected by his beauty or wisdom. That is, to experience one as valuable is not only to *know* that he possesses value but to discern this value in him; to be influenced by it, to be moved by it.

Arguably, the difference between the former and the latter, phenomenologically speaking, is related precisely to the nature of the *joy* that we feel. While an acknowledgment of value does not involve any emotion, when we *experience* someone’s value, the content of this experience is delight: we feel joy in response to the value that we encounter. Again, this is akin to the difference between acknowledging that lilies are a beautiful flower and enjoying the beauty of *this* lily that you brought me. Hence, while mere acknowledgment is sufficient for caring about the neighbor, it is not sufficient for taking joy in him.²¹ For compassionate caring to be love,

²⁰ Velleman 1999, 371.

²¹ Note that compassion, like joy, and as opposed to caring, is rooted in something that is experienced (as opposed to merely acknowledged). However, as opposed to joy, the experience is not of X’s value, but rather of X’s suffering.

we have to experience the value of the neighbor.²² What does an experience of the neighbor's value amount to?

It seems rather uncontroversial that the object of experience is something concrete, particular.²³ While we can acknowledge value in abstraction, we do not *experience* value in abstraction. The example of the lily from the previous paragraph is relevant here as well: I know that lilies are beautiful, but I can only *experience* the beauty of *this particular* lily. Thus, we may acknowledge the value of Jane as a person, but if we *experience* the value of *Jane*, we do not experience her as an abstract person but rather as *this* person, *Jane*.

Accordingly, keeping in mind the distinction between “person,” “self,” and “the self that one is,”²⁴ to *experience* the value of Jane is to experience her value as the self that she is; that is, not just her value as a “person” and not even her value as “an individual,” but her value as the specific individual that she is; as *Jane*. Hence, to experience the value of Jane (as opposed, again, to merely acknowledging it) is to respond to Jane's *selfhood*, to her *individual essence*.

Accordingly, *experiencing* X's value is constitutive of *loving* X, because this experience amounts to valuing X in his individuality and to feeling joy in X—both of which are crucial for love.²⁵ However, while close relationships allow for such an experience due to proximity between lover and beloved or spontaneous attraction between them, it is not clear what allows for it when there is neither proximity nor attraction. Hence, if love requires individuality (as

²² An experience of value is of course not unique to *neighborly* love. Any kind of love involves this kind of response to the beloved's value (namely, experience as opposed to mere acknowledgment). In other words, an *experience* of value is how I describe our response to someone's value *in the context of love*.

²³ Further to my earlier remark, note that compassion, which is also rooted in experience, indeed responds to something particular. The suffering of the neighbor, even when existential and hence universal (in the sense that everybody experiences it), is always concrete, always particular.

²⁴ See section 5.2 above.

²⁵ Note, however, that while experiencing X's value is a necessary condition for love, it is not a sufficient one. For the experience of X's value to be love, it should accompany caring about X and feeling compassion for him.

Frankfurt claims) and joy, and these are what we gain when we *experience* the value of X, then the question regarding the feasibility of universal love comes down to the following: if X is a neighbor who is not related to us in any way, how is it possible to experience his value?

My answer is that such an experience depends on the attitude of the person who loves: namely, on the lover's attentiveness, or openness, to the neighbor's selfhood. This, of course, assumes that the neighbor's selfhood is universally accessible. Before turning to explore the kind of openness required for the experience of the neighbor's value (and hence for universal love), I first wish to substantiate the assumption regarding the accessibility of the neighbor's selfhood.

5.3.2.2. The Accessibility of the Neighbor's Individual Essence

Let me begin with Velleman's conception of the practical impossibility of universal love, as the points that he makes will help me establish, rather to the contrary, that loving universally is in fact possible.

Despite positing universal personhood as the reason for love, Velleman's view is that universal love is only theoretically possible, while in practice love is necessarily selective:

The human body and human behavior are imperfect expressions of personhood, and we are imperfect interpreters. Hence the value that makes someone eligible to be loved does not necessarily make him lovable in our eyes. Whether someone is lovable depends on how well his value as a person is expressed or symbolized for us by his empirical persona. Someone's persona may not speak very clearly of his value as a person, or may not speak in ways that are clear to us.²⁶

²⁶ Velleman 1999, 372.

As already discussed in chapter 2, according to Velleman our access to one's personhood is by means of experiencing one's "empirical persona." It is this persona—"the manifest person, embodied in flesh and blood and accessible to the senses"²⁷—that communicates personhood to us. Thus, love depends on encountering the other person in a way that allows us to experience, rather than simply acknowledge, his value. However, such an encounter is conditional on a fit between the person's success in communicating her value through her empirical persona, and our success in interpreting it. The rarity of such a double success, then, explains the practical impossibility of loving universally.

Contra Velleman, my claim is that loving universally *is* possible: not just in principle, but in practice. This is so because love responds to the neighbor's *selfhood*, and selfhood is *always* accessible. In what way?

To begin with, it is noteworthy that although it may sound implausible to suggest that we have access to the specific individuality of someone with whom we have only a brief encounter, such a possibility is not alien to our experience. Consider love at first sight, for example, or an immediate mental attraction between two people who later become friends. In such cases the feeling is that we have a sense, even if only minimally, of who the person *is*; we get a glimpse (as it were) of his or her essence, even before actually knowing the person. Indeed, if, as I claim, a person has an individual essence, there is no reason to assume that such an essence cannot express itself immediately, that is, without requiring any sort of relationship or prior knowledge.

This suggestion is in fact supported by Velleman's contention that a person's personhood communicates itself through "the way he walks and the way he talks," that is, through his empirical persona. Surely, it does not require time, knowledge, or relationship to

²⁷ Velleman 1999, 371.

experience the latter. Therefore, if we agree that one's empirical persona serves as the "conduit," as Velleman terms it, of one's essence, then the latter can be communicated in the briefest of encounters.

Indeed, what Velleman calls "empirical persona"—one's physicality, demeanor, the way one walks and talks, one's facial expression—is what we first experience in our encounter with the neighbor. However, as opposed to the examples of immediate friendship and love at first sight that I mentioned earlier, most often the neighbor's empirical persona leaves us indifferent: it is not particularly attractive or of interest to us. On what basis, then, do I claim the feasibility of experiencing the individual essence of *any* given person?

Recall that my theory differs from Velleman's in two important ways. First, while in his view one's essence is identified with universal personhood, in my view one's essence is identified with particular selfhood. Second, Velleman distinguishes between one's personhood and one's empirical persona, with the latter serving as the communicator of the former. In my view, on the other hand, the distinction is between one's individual essence (selfhood) *in its potential state*, and one's individual persona (or "inscape"), which is the *actualization* of the former.²⁸

Hence, while in Velleman's theory the connection between the experienced person (her "empirical persona," in Velleman's terms) and her essence is unclear, in my theory there is a clear connection between the experienced person (her "individual persona," in my terms) and her essence. This is because in my theory it is *not* the case that there are two distinct entities—unintelligible essence and palpable appearance—with the latter communicating the former. Rather, there is one entity—one's individual essence (selfhood)—with two facets. And unlike the seemingly accidental connection between one's empirical persona and one's personhood, the connection between the two facets of selfhood

²⁸ See again chapter 1, section 1.5.3.

is the opposite of accidental: the one is an actualization of the other.²⁹

As we saw, Velleman leaves it unclear how the beloved's empirical persona succeeds in communicating the beloved's personhood to the lover. Accordingly, while in Velleman's theory one's essence is in principle accessible but not always discernible, in my theory one's essence is always discernible. This is because one's individual persona is not a *communicator* of one's essence: it *is* one's essence (in its actualized state). As such, despite the many contingencies involved, any actualization reveals also that which is constant and unchanging: one's essence in its potential state. In this sense, even if what we encounter is a poor actualization of one's essence, we nevertheless encounter one's *essence*; we encounter *who one is*.³⁰

This is not, of course, an easy task. For example, think again about Jane. The difficulty in encountering her individual essence is twofold. First, since her individual persona includes both contingent qualities (such as being quiet and plain) and essential qualities (such as being wise and courageous), it may not always bring the latter easily to light. Second, as her individual essence is primarily in a state of potential, Jane's individual persona—the Jane whom we actually encounter—may not be the best version of herself. However, as challenging as it is, Jane's essence, her being who she is, is always “there.” It shows itself in her very presence, in the actualization of her potential.

This, however, is not sufficient for love to occur. It takes two to tango, and, to continue with Velleman, the problem is not only that often the neighbor's individual persona is an “imperfect” version of him (making it difficult for us to appreciate the value of his essence) but also that “we are imperfect interpreters” (see again Velleman's words earlier). Based on this phenomenology of human

²⁹ For an elaborated comparison between Velleman's theory and mine on this point, see chapter 2, section 2.4.3.

³⁰ On the actualization being no less one's essence than the potential, see chapter 2, section 2.4.2.

interactions, we saw, Velleman concludes that universal love is impossible (in practice). In my view, however, not only is one's essence accessible (as I've just demonstrated), but it is possible for us to become better interpreters. That is, we can experience the value of any neighbor's individual essence. This brings us to the openness of the lover, achieved through the second movement of faith.

5.3.2.3. The Openness of the Lover to the Neighbor's Individual Essence

In chapter 4 I made a distinction between faith as a model for genuine love and faith as a condition for it, and demonstrated how each is relevant to romantic love. In the final chapter I will return to love that is *conditional* on faith, but here my focus is on universal love that is *structured* in the double movement of faith, entailing, thereby, self-denial and self-affirmation. When it comes to universal love, we said, the moral challenge is not only to love *correctly*—as is the case with romantic love—but to love *at all*. My thesis is that a faith-like attitude toward any given person has the power to provoke love for her.³¹ Let me recap the argument thus far.

Love is caring that essentially involves both compassion and joy. Caring and compassion spontaneously arise when one undertakes the first movement of faith, with its twofoldness of moral self-denial and existential resignation. The former allows one to fully conceive the value of the neighbor as God-created, and as such elicits selfless caring about him. The latter involves encountering the neighbor as deeply vulnerable—and hence as suffering—and as such evokes compassion for him.

However, because it lacks joy, compassionate caring is still not love. Different kinds of love involve different kinds of joy, but for an attitude to be love it must include, at the very least, what we termed

³¹ In the present chapter I only explore the possibility of loving universally. In the last chapter I also refer to loving the neighbor *correctly*—and in that context I return to love not only in the structure of faith but also as conditional on it.

existence-related joy. This is the kind of joy that characterizes universal love: a delight in the very existence of the relevant neighbor. Now, joy is what we feel when we *experience* the value of the neighbor (as joy is a function of such an experience). This means that for joy to be provoked, the first movement is not enough. It is not enough that we *acknowledge* the value of the neighbor as a person who is created by God as an individual. To *experience* the value of the neighbor we must value him as the individual that he is, as Edward. If we succeed in valuing him in his particularity—if we succeed, that is, in *experiencing* his value—joy, being the very content of this experience, is what we feel.

Such a success, however, is not trivial. It depends on, first, the accessibility of the neighbor's selfhood and, second, on the lover's entertaining the right kind of openness that would allow her to experience the value of the neighbor's selfhood. Given that the first condition is always met (as was demonstrated in the previous section), it all now hinges on the attitude of the lover. And this brings us to the second movement of faith.

Based on the model of Abraham, who receives Isaac back while simultaneously renouncing him (see chapter 4), I presented the conception of self-affirmation that encompasses self-denial. This position of self-regard allows for self-interested desires to stand because, secured by self-denial, they are purged of the immoral elements of selfishness, egotism, and self-centeredness. Hence, although such a position necessarily *includes* self-denial, it is, importantly, *distinct* from it. While in self-denial the lover is motivated by the needs and concerns of the beloved alone, in self-affirmation she continues to be motivated by these but is also motivated by her *own* needs, concerns, and interests. Her attachment to the beloved, and her involvement in their interaction, is also guided by her own inclinations and incitements.

To regard the neighbor in this way, I submit, is to be truly open and attentive to the neighbor's specific individuality. After all, to be open to someone is to be genuinely *interested* in him. Such a

genuine interest is naturally guided by the concerns of the one who *loves*: her inclinations, her points of strength and weakness, her yearnings, her desires, her inspirations, her sensitivities. Pushing all of these aside (as it were) in self-denial in order to achieve a clear vision³² of the neighbor, she now has to return to herself—to her inclinations, sensitivities, and so on—in order to experience the neighbor in his specific individuality. In other words, she can be truly open to the specific individuality of the neighbor—to his being, say, Edward—only by means of her own specific individuality, which is determined (among other things) by her interests (i.e., concerns, sensitivities, inclinations, etc.).³³

Being open in this way to the neighbor—being *interested* in the neighbor—allows one to perceive the neighbor's value not as a person, but as the particular person that the neighbor is. And *this* amounts to *experiencing* the neighbor's value, which is, as we said, precisely to feel *joy* in the neighbor.³⁴

Think, for example, of a person about whom we say: "She really loves people." What this calls to mind is a person who takes genuine interest in every occasional acquaintance, including complete strangers: in their stories, activities, and inspirations. Such a person is clearly driven not only by care and compassion but also by her interests, as a result of which she is truly involved in the situation.

In this sense, then, real openness and attentiveness to the neighbor means to engage oneself in the interaction with the neighbor. Guided by one's *interest* in the neighbor, such an engagement must therefore be rooted not only in self-denial but also in

³² The metaphors of sight and vision are used by Kierkegaard in his discussion of love, as well as by contemporary writers on love, most notably Troy Jollimore in his work *Love's Vision* (2011).

³³ I return to the crucial significance of the correspondence between essences in the last chapter.

³⁴ In chapter 3, recall, we elaborated on the way that the lover's interests are crucial for provoking joy in one's romantic beloved. We now see that this is relevant also for neighborly love. Joy is necessary—and possible—even when the beloved is not a natural object of our interest in the same way that our romantic beloved is.

self-affirmation. Only this kind of attitude allows one to feel joy in the neighbor.³⁵

To the question of whether universal love is feasible, then, we can now answer emphatically in the positive. Love is a caring that involves both compassion and joy, and while it takes much effort on our part (in the form of the double movement of faith, that is, self-denial coupled with self-affirmation), it is possible to be caring, compassionate, and joyful with regard to any neighbor. This obviously gets harder the briefer the encounter (say, in the case of a stranger on the street), especially when it comes to experiencing the value of the neighbor. However, at the very least, we can say that should an experience of this sort take place—namely, should we succeed in making the two movements—we will love the relevant neighbor.

For love to be universal, then, we need to approach the neighbor, any neighbor, in a faith-like attitude. Accordingly, the fact that we normally do not feel either joy in the presence of strangers (for example) or compassion for them, does not indicate that such a suggestion is implausible. It simply indicates that we normally fail to achieve the demanding state of self-denial coupled with self-affirmation. My claim, then, is that *if* we succeed in experiencing the value of the neighbor in his specific individuality—achieved by the second movement of faith (which necessarily includes the first movement as well)—then not only compassion but also joy will be

³⁵ Of course, the extent and intensity of joy depends on who the neighbor is. Joy in the presence of one's romantic beloved is much greater than joy in the presence of one's boss, for example. There may be extreme cases, though, when joy simply seems impossible. How can one feel joy in the presence of a cruel mass murderer, or any "enemy" for that matter? However, since one's enemies are also neighbors, and so should also be the objects of our love, my theory is committed to the possibility of feeling joy in their presence. I believe my analysis can account for this: as long as we can discern the selfhood even of the lowliest of humans, we will be able to apprehend some value in them, and respond to it with delight. Although this is an ideal we will likely fail to achieve, my account demonstrates that, at least in principle, it is achievable. See in this regard Roberts 2012, where he explores the substantial difficulty in loving one's enemy, and explains which virtues are required for the lover to be able to respond to the enemy as a beloved of God (and hence worthy of our love).

the content of our experience, making our attitude not only selfless caring but love.

To conclude, then, inasmuch as the neighbor's selfhood is in principle accessible to us, and inasmuch as the neighbor's selfhood conveys a value that through a faith-like attitude we are capable of experiencing, we are, at the very least, disposed to love any given person.³⁶

5.4. Intermediate Reflection: Divine Name and Universal Love

Under the conception of love as a compassionate caring that essentially involves joy, then, the ideal of universal love is not only reasonable but also feasible. Our duty, by means of self-denial and self-affirmation, is to be attentive enough to notice and experience the vulnerability and value that every person conveys by her very essence. If we succeed, care, compassion, and joy will naturally follow.

Having this thesis in mind, I want to return to the exegetical issue concerning the two possible understandings of what a "divine name" might mean. As I explained in the first chapter, "divine name"—a notion that Kierkegaard mentions in passing—is a term that I borrow to express the idea of possessing an individual essence. To claim for such an essence (as I do) is to suggest that being "Jane" (for example) is *essential* to being who she is. This claim is opposed to the contention of the alternative view that considers being "the self that one is" as *contingent*. That is, according to the latter view, given different circumstances, Jane could well have been

³⁶ Cf. Roberts 2012: "Love . . . comes in *episodes* of action and feeling. But love is also a virtue, a personal *disposition* to feel love for enemies and to do them good" (168). I return to the dispositional state of love, and to the difference between universal love and romantic love in this regard, in chapter 7.

“Charlotte” or “Emily”; it is not essential for her to be “Jane” (see again chapter 1, section 1.3).

In my view, then, her “divine name” is that which makes Jane the self that she *essentially* is. This is the quality of selfhood (her “Janehood”) that is given to her in a state of potential. While the potential is invariable, the actualization of the potential (which takes place over the course of Jane’s life) is changing. Hence, different circumstances (and different life choices) will result in different *versions* of Jane (Jane₁, Jane₂, Jane₃ . . .), but she will never become “Charlotte,” or “Emily.”³⁷ In the next chapter I provide more textual ground to support this view. However, regardless of the question of whether the possession of individual essence is Kierkegaard’s own view, the analysis of universal love proves that there is much to gain if we accept the conception of selfhood as indicating individual *essence*.

This is because only the possession of such essence, which is communicable even in the briefest of encounters, enables access to the specific individuality of the relevant neighbor. After all, in the *absence* of such an essence, which is the case in the alternative view, it is not clear how we can gain immediate access to one’s specific individuality. Thus, if we agree that an attitude for just a person is not love (again, recall Frankfurt’s point), and that *love* is for *individuals* (in their specific individuality), then only a view that enables access to the specific individuality of *any* person under *any* circumstances, allows for the possibility of universal love.

5.5. The Morality of Romantic Love

Moral obligations are universal. For example, the Kantian duty to treat persons as an end in themselves does not exclude anyone as

³⁷ Under the assumption that her potential remains the same, which is in line with Kierkegaard’s repeated contention that one cannot get rid of the self that one is.

its object: every person should be treated in this way. Love, on the other hand, is experienced as selective: we normally love only a few people and exclude all the rest. In this regard, Velleman's formulation of the problem is right on point. "Love and morality," he says, "are generally assumed to differ in spirit. The moral point of view is impartial and favors no particular individual, whereas favoring someone in particular seems like the very essence of love."³⁸ The concern that Velleman expresses is whether love can be understood as akin *in its spirit* to morality. His question, then, is whether there is a case to claim that love, like morality, is universal.

My answer to this question, as I demonstrated throughout this chapter, is decisive. I argued that not only do we have *reason* to love any person, but it is also *possible* to love in this way. In this regard, the case that I made here for the universality of love goes a step further than that of Velleman, who is probably the most prominent contemporary (secular) defender of universal love. Velleman, as we saw, goes only as far as claiming that we have reason to love any person, not that it is actually possible to do so.

Moreover, we saw that the price that Velleman pays for allowing love to be universal is a thin model of love.³⁹ While his suggestion that love is a valuation of personhood enables an account of the universality of love, it fails to offer a satisfying account of the diversity of love. Accordingly, when it comes to explaining the distinctive nature of romantic love, his view falls short. Velleman's shortcoming, in this regard, is akin to that of Kierkegaard. While Kierkegaard does not understand love as a valuation of personhood but rather as a selfless caring, his account evinces the same weakness as Velleman's. As demonstrated in chapter 3, understanding love as a selfless caring indeed works well with the demand that love be universal. However, the result, again, is a thin model of love that

³⁸ Velleman 1999, 338.

³⁹ See chapter 3, section 3.1.2.

fails to account for the diversity of love in general, and for the nature of romantic love in particular.

Kierkegaard's worry with regard to romantic love, recall, is that it distorts love's genuine nature. Being exclusive and selective as it is, and characterized by elements such as Eros, which *cannot* be universal, romantic love seems to be incompatible with genuine love and hence seems to pose a threat to it. Since "Erotic love is undeniably life's most beautiful happiness,"⁴⁰ and since it undoubtedly comes more naturally to us than loving a complete stranger, Kierkegaard considers it to be a real obstacle to our loving as we *ought*—namely, in an unexclusive, nonselective, universal way.

Accordingly, Kierkegaard's rendering of *any* kind of love to being essentially selfless caring indeed solves the problem. Romantic love is no longer a threat: it is a manifestation (one among others) of selfless caring, and as such its erotic aspect is nothing but second violin to its true nature. In this way loving the romantic beloved and loving a complete stranger are indeed, from the point of view of love's true nature, essentially the same. The demand for universality is perfectly met, and romantic love in its dethroned form is thus judged as moral. However, this not only dethrones romantic love: it devitalizes it. In Kierkegaard's rendering of romantic love as selfless caring, love gains its moral status at the price of losing its distinctive nature.

But does it have to be this way? My conception of love as joyful compassionate caring, and my defense of the feasibility of universal love, suggest otherwise. Under my alternative conception of love, romantic love is compatible with universal love *without* losing its distinctive nature. In this alternative view (presented in detail in chapter 3), while the nature of love in general is compassionate caring that essentially involves joy, different kinds of love involve different kinds of joy. Hence, while romantic love essentially involves erotic joy, neighborly love (i.e., love for any person)

⁴⁰ WL, 267.

essentially involves existence-related joy. The two kinds of love share the same nature, that is, joyful compassionate caring, but they are also essentially different. While romantic love is essentially characterized by Eros, neighborly love is obviously not; and while the latter is decidedly universal, the former is downright selective.

The universality of love, then, does not pertain to love in general, but to one kind of love: neighborly love. Hence, while one kind of love, romantic love, is selective and exclusive, the other kind of love, neighborly love, is not. Yet the two kinds are entirely compatible. They share the same nature, and each receives its distinctiveness in accordance with the object of love. Given that love, *any* love, responds to the selfhood of the beloved, different people, with different selfhoods, will provoke in us different kinds of love. This is not, however, a problem. While any person can (and should) provoke in us neighborly love, only a few can (and will) provoke in us romantic love.⁴¹

Both from the religious perspective of Kierkegaard and the secular perspective of Velleman, the realization of the ideal of universal love renders one eminently moral. Hence, inasmuch as loving romantically is compatible with this ideal—and, as we have seen, it is—then romantic love is no longer an obstacle to morality. It can therefore be affirmed from a moral and religious point of view without any need to compromise its distinctive nature.

⁴¹ However, while Kierkegaard's demand for the universality of love does not pertain to romantic love directly—as it does not imply that we should love *romantically* every person that we see—it does pertain to romantic love indirectly. The demand for universality pertains to romantic love in the sense that even if we love our romantic beloved unselfishly, as long as we do not love universally—that is, love, in the relevant way, *every* person that we see—our unselfish love for our beloved is still not entirely moral and genuine. In other words, romantic love is moral and genuine only when the lover leads a *life of love*, in the context of which she loves (in the relevant way) not only her romantic beloved, but every person she interacts with.

6

The Failure to Love Correctly

Despair

6.1. Introduction: Selfhood and Despair

My thesis, as presented in chapter 1, is that to be a self is to be an individual: a person with a distinct identity, a person with a name. It is to be Jane. Kierkegaard's thesis, presented in *The Sickness unto Death*, is that despair is the failure to be a self. On the face of it, to claim failure can occur in this context may sound strange, not to say implausible. How can one *fail* to be oneself? If to be a self, for Jane, is to be Jane—how can she fail in that; how can she *not* be Jane? As was demonstrated earlier, while Jane cannot be Charlotte (in the same way that she cannot be a cat), she can nevertheless be a different *version* of herself. Hence, she can be a lesser version of the Jane that she has the potential to be, a lesser version of the Jane that God has destined her to be. Thus, when Kierkegaard speaks about the failure to be a self, he speaks about the failure to be the self that God *intends* one to be. *This* failure is despair.

My goal in the present chapter is to exegetically substantiate my reading of selfhood as an individual essence. I will do so by demonstrating how such a reading both adheres to Kierkegaard's understanding of despair and sheds light on his rather complicated analysis. A close examination of this analysis not only provides a textual basis for my thesis of individual essence, but also prepares the way for taking the final step in my defense of romantic love. The healing from despair, as we shall see in the next chapter, necessarily involves correct love for another person. Such a healing is defined

by Kierkegaard in terms of “resting transparently in God,” and it amounts (as we shall see) to becoming the self that God intends one to be. Becoming such a self, as I demonstrate in the next chapter, depends on loving correctly.

Hence, as healing from despair is the state of being most closely related to God (a “resting in him”), correct love—including the romantic kind—is proven to play a crucial role in one’s relationship with God. Under the aegis of Kierkegaard’s analysis of despair, then, romantic love emerges as a *spiritually* valuable phenomenon.

6.2. Kierkegaard’s Definition of the Self

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates . . . to itself or is the relation’s relating . . . to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating . . . to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.¹

This paragraph, which opens Kierkegaard’s discussion, is overwhelming in its complex terminology. I will therefore break it down into the four major claims it presents.

Claim (1): A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self.

Kierkegaard identifies being human with being spirit, and spirit with being a self. Hence, despite the complexity to soon follow, it is important to keep in mind that when we talk about a self we are

¹ SUD, 13.

talking about a human being. However, the term “self” designates something specific, and special, about being human: being a spirit. But what does *this* mean? What does it mean to be human by virtue of being a spirit; what does it mean to be a self?

Claim (2): But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates . . . to itself or is the relation’s relating . . . to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating . . . to itself.

Simply put, that which turns X into a *self* is not her being a “relation”—and the next claim will detail what this relation amounts to—but her relating to herself. This claim can be read as follows. Every human, by virtue of being a human, can be described in terms of being a relation between A and B. However, being a relation does not as yet turn the human into a self: there is something else, beyond the relation, that is required in order to be a self. That something is the human’s self-relation: namely, the way she regards her being a relation between A and B; the way she posits A and B into a relation. The next claim makes this abstract formulation clearer by clarifying what the A and B in question *are*.

Claim (3): A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two.

A synthesis, Kierkegaard says, is a relation between two, and a human being *is* a synthesis. Having learned in Claim (2) that a human being is a relation, we therefore now learn *what* it is of which a human being is a relation: of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. Surely, we still need to understand what it actually means to describe a human being in these terms, but as a first step, when we read Claims (2) and (3) together, the idea put forward is that a human being is best described

by these categories (the finite and the infinite, etc.). This initial characterization, however, is not as yet complete, and here follows the next claim.

Claim (4): Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.

Kierkegaard's claim is that by virtue of being a relation between the finite and the infinite, and so on, a human being is still not a self. After all, as we have learned in Claim (2), to be a self is not only to be a relation, but also to be a relation that relates to itself; it is to put in a relation the respective polarities of the three sets of syntheses.²

Having examined these four claims, we can now render somewhat more explicit this condensed paragraph. Kierkegaard can be seen as aiming at characterizing the distinct nature of the human being. Humans are finite and limited creatures who, unlike other creatures, are aware of this limitedness. Further, unlike other creatures, they are created in the image of God. That is, another specific quality of humans is their being connected in this special way to God. Hence (Kierkegaard is telling us), to characterize properly the unique nature of human beings requires these three sets of opposing categories: a human being is both finite and infinite, both temporal and eternal, both subject to necessity and free.

Commentators often regard the three sets as being reducible to describing the human being as both limited and capable of transcending her limitations. According to this reading, "the finite / the temporal / necessity" stand for human limitedness—the kind

² One may wonder how Claim (4) coheres with the identification that Claim (1) does between a human being and a self. To begin with, it may simply mean, as I already said earlier, that the term "self" indicates something that is not captured by the fact that a human being is a relation. That is, a human being is a *self* not by virtue of being a relation but by virtue of her relating to herself. Hence, as long as a human being is considered only as a relation, this does not capture her being a self. Further, and more substantially, this claim may be taken to indicate that a human being is *essentially* a self, but her selfhood is primarily in a potential state. Hence, she needs to do something to become the self that she essentially, but only potentially, is. And this "something" is precisely her relating to herself, her putting in a relation the polarities of the syntheses.

of limitedness entailed in living in time and in the shadow of death, with physical, mental, and other kinds of restrictions more generally; while “the infinite / the eternal / freedom” stand for the human ability to transcend both physical and mental limitations by means of the imagination, reason, and power of will.

Although agreeing with this interpretation, I nevertheless hold that it is not exhaustive. In my view, as discussed at length in chapter 1, “the temporal and the eternal” synthesis describes not only human limitedness versus human transcendence, but something further. If we agree that for Kierkegaard the concept of the “eternal” signifies something which is God-related,³ then it would seem that to describe the human being as “eternal” is primarily meant to indicate *this*, namely, the human being’s connection to God. This connection is exclusively represented by the temporal-eternal synthesis, and indeed, in his analysis of despair, Kierkegaard treats the other two sets (finite/infinite and necessity/freedom) as akin to each other, while the temporal/eternal set appears (implicitly) only at a later stage of the analysis.

All of this is still quite abstract. Kierkegaard’s discussion of the forms of despair, which I present in the next section, makes it more concrete and hence clearer. Before turning to this discussion, however, we must pay attention to yet another important component in Kierkegaard’s definition of the self. Let us call it Claim (5).

Claim (5): The human self is . . . a derived, established relation, a relation that relates . . . to itself and in relating . . . to itself relates itself to another.⁴

The claim here is that relating to oneself—which is what makes a human being a *self*—necessarily involves a relation to another: someone who is not oneself. Accordingly, if we understand

³ See again chapter 1, note 19.

⁴ SUD, 13–14.

“selfhood” to stand for the identity of a person—that is, her being who she distinctively is, say, Jane—then the claim is that a person’s identity is not autonomously constituted. One’s identity is not grounded in oneself alone, but rather in the relationships that one has with an “other.” Namely, the individuality of a person—her being a self, her being X who is distinct from others—is not constituted *independently* of others but by virtue of *relationships* with others. The others in question are both other people and God.⁵ In what way?

When we consider the emergence and shaping of a person’s identity, one intuition is that interactions with other people play an important role in this process. At the same time, it is no less intuitive to think that there is something that *precedes* these interactions and which plays a no less significant role in the development of one’s identity. As we shall see, the analysis of the self in terms of the three sets of syntheses accommodates the two intuitions. According to my reading, one’s selfhood is a result of both one’s relationships with other people and something more preliminary, something “primitive”⁶ that exists prior to this interaction.

This aspect of one’s selfhood—its primitiveness—reflects, I suggest, the intimate connection of the human being to God; her being created in his image.⁷ According to my thesis, then, this primitive something that precedes any interaction with other human beings and that reflects one’s ontological connection to the divine being, is one’s individual essence *in its potential state*. This is the core of the identity with which one is created; it is one’s “kernel of individuality,” as I termed it in chapter 1. And that which affects and shapes the *actualization* of the potential is the way one *exists* in the world.

⁵ See Evans 2006.

⁶ “Every human being is primitively intended to be a self, destined to become himself” (SUD, 33).

⁷ Please note that the claim is not that every self has a *relationship* with God. A person does not even have to acknowledge the existence of God in order to be connected to him in the way that I discuss here. The claim about the connection to God is an ontological, rather than epistemological or psychological, one.

In other words, what shapes one's selfhood is, to a large extent, one's interactions with other people.

Such an understanding of the syntheses has an explanatory force when it comes to understanding Kierkegaard's analysis of the forms of despair. This analysis, to which we now turn, will clarify what it means to be a "relation that relates to itself"—that is, a "synthesis" that synthesizes—and in this way "relates to another."⁸

6.3. Despair as the Failure to Become the Self One Is Intended to Be

6.3.1. Introduction

We know what it feels like to despair. When we judge a situation as undesirable, despair is the bleak state of seeing no prospect for improvement or change. Accordingly, despair is associated with a family of negative emotions: distress, disquietude, depression, dissatisfaction, misery. For Kierkegaard, however, all of these emotional states are only symptoms of despair. Despair itself, as he understands it, is neither an emotional nor psychological state but primarily an existential and ontological one. This means that being in despair is independent of a person's understanding of her state, and of the way she feels: a person may feel satisfied and happy and yet be in a state of despair.

The analogy that Kierkegaard provides is that of a physical sickness. A person may be sick without feeling sick and without even knowing that she is sick. It may take time until the symptoms that indicate the existence of the illness appear, and these symptoms may come and go while the sickness remains. The same relation

⁸ The present chapter will mostly clarify the role of one's relation to God in becoming a self, and how such a relation is connected to worldly existence. The next chapter will clarify more specifically the role of one's relation with other people in becoming a self.

exists between despair—the sickness of the *spirit*, as Kierkegaard characterizes it—and the emotional states that we associate with despair. The latter is only symptomatic of something much deeper.

So what are the conditions for despair; what counts as a sickness of the spirit? Kierkegaard uses the same existential categories by which he defines human nature in order to analyze the state of despair: the infinite and the finite, freedom (or possibility) and necessity, and also, implicitly, the eternal and the temporal. Despair is a state of failing to adhere to one's nature, and accordingly it is a state of misrelation, or disharmony, between the elements of these syntheses. That is, despair is the state in which a person understands herself (and lives accordingly) in terms of only one pole of the synthesis; for example, as essentially submitted to necessity—hence lacking possibility/freedom. Being created by God, the failure to adhere to our nature is in fact the failure to be the self that God intends us to be.⁹ This is, simply put, the underlying idea at the root of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair.

Kierkegaard examines this failure—the failure to be the self that God intends one to be—from different perspectives. First, in a section entitled “Despair Considered . . . Only with Regard to the Constituents of the Synthesis,”¹⁰ he characterizes what I suggest to be the two basic versions of despair. I call them “despair of detachment (from the world)” and “despair of confinement (to the world).” This analysis is given as if from the “outside,” from the point of view of the doctor who explains the nature of the disease. Then, in the following section entitled “Despair as Defined by Consciousness,”¹¹ Kierkegaard returns to these two versions, this time examining how these states of despair are experienced from “within,” from the point of view of the sick person, the point of view of the despairer.

⁹ “To be unaware of being defined as spirit is precisely what despair is” (SUD, 25).

¹⁰ SUD, 29–42.

¹¹ SUD, 42–74.

Given the close connection between being in despair and being a self (after all, despair *is* the failure to be the self that God intends one to be), the analysis of despair in the context of this section—the analysis of the despairer’s consciousness—is in terms of the despairer’s attitude toward her being who she is, namely, toward the self that she is. Kierkegaard examines two such attitudes: *not* willing to be oneself (which he terms “weak” despair) and *willing* to be oneself (which he terms “defiance”).

Finally, having examined the consciousness of the despairer who does not understand her sickness, Kierkegaard examines the despairer who *does* understand—but refuses to be cured. Under the title “Despair Is Sin,”¹² Kierkegaard returns to the states of not willing and willing to be oneself—which are now aggravated because the despairer consciously acts against the will of God.¹³

Hence, we can say that *The Sickness unto Death* as a whole is about one fundamental phenomenon—the failure to be the self that God intends us to be (despair)—while each step in the text adds a further dimension to the same analysis. It begins by characterizing the sickness (“the forms of despair”), then it examines the attitude of the sick person to her sickness when *lacking* an understanding of the sickness (“the consciousness of despair”), and finally it characterizes the attitude of the sick person to her sickness when *possessing* an understanding of her sickness (“Despair is sin”). Looking closely at Kierkegaard’s analysis, in the present section (6.3) I therefore show the exegetical validity of understanding selfhood as a divinely bestowed individual essence.

¹² SUD, 77–131.

¹³ As we will see, as long as a person is in a state of despair, both willing and not willing to be oneself are forms of refusing to be who God intends one to be.

6.3.2. The Two Basic Versions of Despair: Confinement and Detachment

Kierkegaard presents four patterns of despair: each defined by one pole of the syntheses finitude/infinitude and necessity/possibility and in accordance with the “principle” that A’s despair is to lack the opposite of A (for example, infinitude’s despair is to lack finitude).¹⁴ The four forms share the same kind of misunderstanding about oneself: in each case the despairer understands herself as belonging only to one pole of the sets of syntheses, so that the person who exemplifies infinitude’s despair understands herself as essentially only infinite, the person who exemplifies finitude’s despair conceives herself as essentially only finite, and so on.

Finitude’s despair and necessity’s despair manifest a state that can be described as “confinement” to the world; infinitude’s despair and possibility’s despair manifest a state that can be described as “detachment” from the world.¹⁵ Since there is a correlation between finitude’s despair and necessity’s despair on the one hand, and infinitude’s despair and possibility’s despair on the other hand, I will focus on only one representation of each of the two basic versions of despair: finitude’s despair as representing confinement, and possibility’s despair as representing detachment.

6.3.2.1. Finitude’s Despair (Confinement)

For the self is the synthesis of which the finite is the limiting and the infinite the extending constituent. . . . the self is healthy and free of despair only when, precisely by having despaired, it rests transparently in God.¹⁶

¹⁴ One may wonder why Kierkegaard refers to only two of the three sets of syntheses; what happened, in other words, to the set temporal/eternal. Isn’t there a despair of the temporal and despair of the eternal? I answer this question in sections 6.3.3 and 6.3.4.

¹⁵ For an elaboration of this kind of categorizing the forms of despair, see Krishek 2016.

¹⁶ SUD, 30.

The way to healing (the transparent rest in God) must go through despair, because our very worldly existence disrupts the initial harmony inherent in human nature.¹⁷ However, it is also our worldly existence that allows us to *restore* this harmony by fulfilling our potential and becoming who we are created to be. But what does a disharmony in the set finitude-infinity mean?

Finitude's despair, Kierkegaard says, is to lack infinity in one's life. Of course, the kind of infinity Kierkegaard has in mind does not pertain to exceeding the limits of earthly existence. Rather, it pertains to exceeding facts *within* one's earthly existence, such as one's place of birth, gender, various traits, and the choices one has made. The finite is "the limiting constituent," as Kierkegaard says, and facts of these sort, which have the ability to define us and determine our life, are indeed limiting. These facts may be considered as finite in the sense that they are finished, hence unnegotiable, states of being. For example, I may change my nationality by moving to another country, but I cannot change the fact that I was born in a particular country. I may regret my choice of leaving my homeland and return to it, but I cannot change the consequences entailed in my earlier choice to leave it, and so on.

Finitude's despair, then, is the state of a person who gives excessive weight to the facts of his life. This is how Kierkegaard describes it:

This form of despair goes practically unnoticed in the world. Just by losing himself this way, such a man has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making great success in the world. . . . he is as smooth as a rolling stone, as passable as a circulating coin.¹⁸

¹⁷ "Despairing lies in man himself. . . . he could not despair . . . if the synthesis in its original state from the hand of God were not in the proper relationship" (SUD, 16).

¹⁸ SUD, 34.

This kind of despairer is submerged in his social and other preoccupations, identifying himself with them to such an extent that nobody, primarily not himself, suspects him to be in despair. The images that Kierkegaard uses depict the despairer as undistinguishable (like a smooth stone) and hence exchangeable or replaceable (like a circulating coin), and as living his life without any struggle or resistance: he “rolls” and “passes” uninterruptedly wherever life takes him.

A life devoid of struggle means that reality does not posit any resistance to one’s will. This, however, indicates conforming one’s will to reality, to the facts of one’s life. After all, resistance (and hence struggle) emerges when what I want is different from another “will” that is imposed on me: the will of my family, of my society, of my given reality. These “wills” are facts in my life, and in this sense are finite: it is a fact that I live in such and such society, that I was born to such and such a family, with such and such a body, and so on. If I shape myself, my identity, only in accordance with these facts, I will live my life with no resistance.

However, shaping oneself in accordance with a reality external to one’s individualistic will results in becoming one smooth stone among many others, an (ultimately) exchangeable coin. If I am the product of only those circumstances shared by others, and conform my will to the shared will of, say, my society or milieu, then I am like everybody else who is the product of the same circumstances. We can therefore understand why Kierkegaard connects adhering to one’s finitude (i.e., the “facts” of one’s life) and losing one’s distinctiveness. But why is this a state of despair? What is wrong with being like others? Why should this count as a state of dissatisfaction and disquietude?

[This] kind of despair seems to permit itself to be tricked by “the others.” Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world—such a person forgets himself, forgets his name divinely

understood, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man.¹⁹

One's divine name, according to my theory (see again chapter 1), signifies one's individual essence. That is, to possess such a name is to be essentially different from any other person (who is herself also different from any other person, and so on). And *this* is precisely what the despairer of finitude, by virtue of attempting to be like all the others, forgets. Thus, although Kierkegaard depicts this kind of despairer as a philistine bourgeois, his despair is not rooted in his style of life. There is nothing intrinsically wrong about being a bourgeois—as we saw, one of these may well be a knight of faith.²⁰ Rather, his despair is rooted in his willingness to be like all the others. *This* is intrinsically wrong because it contradicts his nature as an individual: as possessing an individual essence, as bearing his own name.

Hence, when we act like the despairer of finitude, we act against our nature, and this, obviously, is an unsettling state. Note that also outside the Kierkegaardian framework the state of “being like the others” is taken to be undesirable. This is because we experience ourselves as irreplaceable; we don't feel that we are “a number, a copy, a mass man.” Accordingly, there exists a tension between experiencing ourselves as distinct from others and attempting to be the same as others. My Kierkegaardian thesis of possessing an individual essence allows to substantiate this kind of deep disquietude: it gives us the tools to understand what is wrong in attempting to be like everybody else; attempting to avoid any struggle or confrontation with the will of “the others.” It therefore clarifies why

¹⁹ SUD, 33–4.

²⁰ As is the one who looks like a “tax collector” from *Fear and Trembling* (see FT, 38–41; see also chapter 4, section 4.5).

conforming oneself to one's facts—namely, understanding oneself only in terms of one's finitude—is a state of despair.

6.3.2.2. Possibility's Despair (Detachment)

According to the “principle” of despair (despair A is to lack the opposite of A), possibility's despair is to lack necessity. Namely, this is the state of a person who understands herself only in terms of freedom and possibility, by ignoring or disregarding that which is necessary: the limits that her reality imposes on her. What kind of limits?

The mirror of possibility is no ordinary mirror; it must be used with extreme caution, for, in the highest sense, this mirror does not tell the truth. That a self appears to be such and such in the possibility of itself is only a half-truth, for in the possibility of itself the self is still far from or is only half of itself.²¹

The claim here is that “the mirror of possibility” is a deceptive one. This is a telling image, as a *mirror* reflects the person who is using it. The idea, then, that what I see in the mirror of possibility is not so much a complete lie—it is not that I see someone else there—but more a twisted truth: I see a deluded version of myself. For example, suppose that I'm passionate about ballet dancing, but am myself a very mediocre dancer. Being a great dancer is my dream, and I ignore the limits imposed on my dream by my poor talent; I look at the mirror and I see a successful prima ballerina. It is not accidental that what I see is a ballerina and not, say, an astronaut: this is a mirror, after all, and it reflects *me*, and I am passionate about dancing (and not about traveling into space). In an important way, then, the mirror of possibility does tell the truth—but only half of it. The second half of the truth, lacking in the mirror of possibility,

²¹ SUD, 37.

belongs to the realm of necessity. And while the realm of possibility is the realm of that which *can* be, the realm of necessity is the realm of that which *is*.

On one level, the realm of necessity is akin to the category of the finite: it includes the earthly facts of our life. Hence, no matter how deeply I desire to become a successful ballet dancer, there are facts in my life that make this possibility unattainable: my poor capacities, my wrong age, my past choices that took me on a different route (with a particular style of life, other commitments, and so on). These are facts that I cannot disregard, a necessity that I cannot deny.

On another level, however, the necessity in one's life is rooted even deeper: "Possibility is like a child's invitation to a party; the child is willing at once, but the question now is whether the parents will give permission—and as it is with the parents, so it is with necessity."²² Necessity is here likened to a child's parents. Parents are loving, and in an example such as this (giving permission to participate in a party) they know better than the child what is good for her. It is they who determine the child's course of action, and their decision must be respected and obeyed. In this context, then, necessity seems to pertain to something deeper than contingent facts (such as one's place of birth, choices one has made, etc.). While there are facts that one is capable of transcending (in the sense that one has the freedom to act differently than these facts prescribe), there are facts that one is incapable of transcending. Thus, while I can transcend the fact of being born in one country by living my life as a citizen of another country, or transcend my inability to become a ballet dancer by channeling my passion for ballet into different routes, I cannot transcend the fact of being a human being, for example. No matter what I do, I will not be able to become a cat.

²² SUD, 37.

The realm of necessity, then, includes both contingent facts (e.g., one's place of birth) and essential facts (e.g., being human). And the interesting idea that Kierkegaard presents (in my reading of his analysis) is that not only being a person is essential, but also being the *particular* person that one is: being, for example, Jane. That is, the Jane-hood of Jane, her individual essence, is no less essential to her than her being a person. It is therefore *necessary* for her to be Jane: she cannot become Charlotte, just as she cannot become a cat. This is "essential necessity" (as opposed to contingent one). As Kierkegaard says of possibility's despaire: "The tragedy is that he did not become aware of himself, aware that the self he is is a very definite something and thus the necessary."²³

At the same time, one's essence—one's selfhood—is given in a state of a potential. In this sense, Jane's Jane-hood (for example) is not a finite fact in the same way that being English, or being a woman of small stature, is. Fulfilling her Jane-hood, actualizing her potential, is a lifelong task. Accordingly, having her essence in a state of a potential allows her to constantly transcend her partial actualizations, the latter being "contingent necessity." Accordingly, "Insofar as it is itself, it is the necessary, and insofar as it has the task of becoming itself, it is a possibility."²⁴ Jane's selfhood is both necessary and develops through possibilities precisely because her selfhood is given to her in a state of a potential (this is an "essential necessity"), with her task being to actualize it (and hence transcend the contingent necessity of partial actualizations).

Thus, the two senses of necessity (the one entailed in finite facts and the one entailed in the possession of essence) converge. Every given actualization of Jane (Jane₁, Jane₂, Jane₃) includes a set of finite facts ("contingent necessity"), and as her potential ("essential necessity") is detectable in its actualization, the latter reflects the former. Hence the potential ("essential necessity") helps her

²³ SUD, 36.

²⁴ SUD, 35.

navigate the transcending of her partial actualizations (“contingent necessity”). Just like parents who navigate their child’s path in the face of various invitations, so one’s essence—the name given to one by God—navigates one’s way in the face of various possibilities.

For this reason, when we do *not* let necessity navigate us, and accordingly lose ourselves in the mirror of possibility, we are, according to Kierkegaard, in a state of despair. Again, we can relate to this observation outside the Kierkegaardian framework as well. One may escape the limits of one’s life and delude oneself, but flourishing in a fantasy (rather than in reality) cannot endure. Reality will always find a way to reassert itself, and the gap between reality and fantasy, once exposed, is painful. But what if a person never wakes up to the realization of such a gap? What if she succeeds in deluding herself? It seems to me that this must still be a state of despair; our intuition is that there is something profoundly wrong in denying who one *truly* is. But what does it mean to be who one truly is?

Again, the Kierkegaardian framework (in my reading) gives us the tools to understand and substantiate this intuition. While the despairer of the former kind (finitude’s despair) forgets her divine name, the despairer of this kind (possibility’s despair), by ignoring necessity, *escapes* her divine name. This is because to disregard the facts of her life means to refuse to listen to the deeper necessity commanded by her essence. After all, the latter (her essence in a state of potential) conveys itself by virtue of the former (the actualization of her essence). By thus acting, such a person in fact attempts to give herself a new name. This, however, is impossible precisely because her name is essential to her: she cannot be rid of it and still be herself. Accordingly, to escape her name and attempt to become someone else is to act against her nature. And not only is this doomed to fail, but the journey leading to this failure is inevitably a painful one. Acting against our nature is obviously a state of deep disquietude and acute dissatisfaction.

6.3.3. Conscious Despair: Weak and Defiant

Let us return to the analogy of physical sickness: we can easily distinguish between characterizing the sickness itself—say, from the point of view of the doctor—and characterizing the patient's *attitude* to her sickness. Does she recognize that she is ill (and the degree of her illness) or deny it altogether? Does she understand correctly the nature of her illness? Is she willing to do what it takes to bring about a cure? Kierkegaard's discussion of the consciousness of despair is meant to explore this aspect. That is, having presented the nature of the sickness, he now explores the attitude of the spiritually sick person regarding her own sickness—with the difference being that with *spiritual* sickness, the attitude of the patient is part of the sickness itself.

And as the sickness at issue, despair, is a failure to be the self that one is intended to be, a consciousness of this state involves a consciousness of being a self. “[A] rise in the consciousness of the nature of despair and in the consciousness that one's state is despair . . . [is] a rise in the consciousness of the self.”²⁵ In other words, there is a correlation between one's consciousness (or lack thereof) of one's sickness, and one's consciousness (or lack thereof) of being a self. Accordingly, given that for Kierkegaard being a self is primarily rooted in one's ontological connection to God, someone's despair is a function of her conception (or misconception) of this relation.

Every human existence that is not conscious of itself as spirit or conscious of itself before God as spirit, every human existence that does not rest transparently in God but . . . in the dark about his self, regards his capacities merely as powers to produce without becoming deeply aware of their source, regards his

²⁵ SUD, 49.

self . . . as an *indefinable something*—every such existence, whatever it achieves . . . is nevertheless despair.²⁶

In my reading, one's ontological connection to God amounts to possessing a divine name—that is, a *definable something*, an individual essence—in a state of a potential. Accordingly, inasmuch as a relationship with God amounts to following God's will, then the fuller one's actualization of one's divine potential is, the stronger, closer, and more intimate one's relationship with God. As I now turn to show, Kierkegaard's discussion of the consciousness of despair supports this reading.

"Next to God there is nothing as eternal as a self,"²⁷ Kierkegaard says, and claims that "despair of the eternal and over oneself . . . is indeed the formula for all despair."²⁸ That is to say, every instance of despair is in fact an instance of a failure in one's relationship with God, which is a failure to become the self that God intends one to be. Having discussed the nature of despair using only two sets of syntheses—the finite and the infinite, necessity and possibility—Kierkegaard's discussion of conscious despair implicitly refers to the third set: the temporal and the eternal. If, as I suggest, this set in particular describes one's relation to God (in its characterizing the human being as not only temporal but also *eternal*), it makes sense to use this set when discussing conscious despair. Why?

According to Kierkegaard, as we already said, despair is an ontological state: it is the failure to be the self that one is created and meant to be, a failure to live up to one's divine name and actualize one's individual essence to its fullest. Accordingly, a person is in despair independently of her recognition of her state, that is, regardless of whether or not she is conscious of her despair. In Kierkegaard's view, a person begins to be *conscious* of her despair

²⁶ SUD, 46, my emphasis.

²⁷ SUD, 53.

²⁸ SUD, 60.

(even if she does not characterize it as such) when she acquires a sense of selfhood.

In other words, speaking of the “ignorance of having a self and an eternal self”²⁹ and of being “conscious of having a self in which there is something eternal,”³⁰ Kierkegaard’s analysis of “despair as defined by consciousness”³¹ is an analysis of a person’s understanding of herself as a “self” and, given that she is in despair, it is an analysis of her failure to understand the nature of her selfhood as rooted in God.³² A reflection on one’s selfhood, then, is *eo ipso* a reflection on one’s (even if not as yet acknowledged) connection with God. Accordingly, the discussion of the consciousness of despair—that is, of the way a person regards the fact of being a self—is the context for using the category of the eternal, which was lacking from the analysis of “the forms of this sickness”³³ that preceded it.

Once a person is conscious of herself as a “self,” which in my reading is to recognize herself as a person with a distinct identity, a person with her own “name,” she has two ways to regard herself, which Kierkegaard terms “weak despair” and “defiance,” to indicate their passive and active attitudes. Being in despair—namely, short of fulfilling her divine name—she can either not will to be herself (weak despair) or will to be herself (defiance). Now, the self that she either wills to be or doesn’t will to be is the *actualized version of her potential*—what I termed “individual persona”—which, given that she is in despair, is necessarily only a *partial* actualization.

We saw earlier that there are two basic versions of despair. The state of ignoring finitude and necessity, which Kierkegaard describes

²⁹ SUD, 42. Please note that the distinction between “self and “eternal self” works well with my suggested distinction between one’s actualized self (“self”) and the potential (“eternal self”).

³⁰ SUD, 47.

³¹ SUD, 42–74.

³² While the further step of the analysis, despair is sin, is of a person who *does* understand the nature of her selfhood as rooted in God—she has the correct theological conception of being created by God—and is unwilling to be who she is. (See 6.3.5).

³³ SUD, 29–42.

under the headings of “infinite’s despair”³⁴ and “possibility’s despair,”³⁵ is a despair of detachment. The state of denying infinity and possibility, which Kierkegaard describes under the headings of “finitude’s despair”³⁶ and “necessity’s despair,”³⁷ is a despair of confinement. Each of the two failed self-regarding attitudes—the weak (not to will to be one’s individual persona) and the defiant (to will to be one’s individual persona)—can appear in either a detached or a confined version.

Let us begin with exploring weak despair. This is how Kierkegaard characterizes such a despaier:

He has no consciousness of a self that is won by infinite abstraction from every externality, this naked abstract self, which, compared with immediacy’s fully dressed self, is the first form of the infinite self and the advancing impetus in the whole process by which a self infinitely becomes responsible for its actual self with all its difficulties and advantages.³⁸

In light of my interpretation of selfhood as amounting to one’s individual essence, which, bestowed as a potential, is in constant need of actualization, this passage reads as follows. The “naked abstract self” describes selfhood in its potential state, while “immediacy’s fully dressed self” describes the actualization. Any actualization discloses the potential, but such a disclosure demands an effort of the imagination. It demands a distancing of oneself from the present actualization in order to discover the potential of which the present “fully dressed self” is an actualization.

Such a distancing is what Kierkegaard means, in my understanding, by “infinite abstraction,” and this gives rise to the “infinite

³⁴ SUD, 30–33.

³⁵ SUD, 35–37.

³⁶ SUD, 33–35.

³⁷ SUD, 37–42.

³⁸ SUD, 55.

self”: the endless possible “selves” that a person can envision himself to be. Having one’s selfhood primarily in a state of a potential, then, is “the advancing impetus” in the process of becoming oneself. Accordingly, a person “becomes responsible for its actual self” because it is he who is responsible for the actualization of his potential. One’s “actual self,” then, is the result of an actualization of one’s potential. Ideally, when a person attempts to fulfill his potential and to become the self that he is destined to be, he becomes responsible for being who he is, “with all [the] difficulties and advantages” of being, truly, himself.

However, this is *not* the case when one is a weak despairer. Such a person does not take responsibility over the self that he is, as he does not will to be himself. Such unwillingness, as we said, can appear either in a detached version or in a confined one. In its detached version, weak despair exemplifies a kind of escaping from oneself, by means of imagining, desiring, and fantasizing. Given, however, the essentiality of being who one is, it is not possible to ever truly escape from oneself:

His relation to the self is like the relation a person may have to his place of residence . . . which becomes an abomination because of smoke fumes or something else . . . he leaves it, but he does not move away, he does not set up a new residence; he continues to regard the old one as his address.³⁹

When a person dislikes himself—when he is unhappy about being who he is, angry with himself because of the way he acts or behaves—he may easily desire to escape from himself by imagining himself to be what he is not. Kierkegaard likens such an attitude to moving away from home, without actually leaving it. This is so, because no matter how fierce his dislike is—and no matter how far his imagination takes him—he “cannot get rid of himself.”⁴⁰ This kind

³⁹ SUD, 55.

⁴⁰ SUD, 19.

of despair is “weak” because the despairer is passive in the way he regards himself. His object of desire comes in a negative form. It is not that he wants to be a specific someone; he simply does not want to be himself.

To be weak in this way can also appear in a confined version. However, while weak despair in its detached version takes the shape of fleeing from oneself to imagined possibilities, in its confined version weak despair takes the opposite shape of ignoring any prospect for change. Out of fear, narrow mindedness, or simply laziness, the despairer, rather than conjuring an alternative reality, confines himself to his actuality. Using Kierkegaard’s metaphor, we will say that this kind of despairer would stick to his wretched house by turning a blind eye to the defects, or by convincing himself that the house is in fact just fine. He simply cannot imagine, or dare, to have his place amended.

As an example of a *detached* weak despairer we can think of the female protagonist of David Lynch’s film *Mulholland Drive*. Diane is a young actress who arrived in Hollywood full of dreams and expectations, only to face the harsh reality of being unacknowledged and rejected; not only by film directors but also by Camilla, a successful actress with whom Diane fell in love and had a romance. Driven by her jealousy (of Camilla’s success) and sense of offense (caused by Camilla’s abusive attitude), Diane hires a hitman who kills Camilla. Most of the film takes place within a dreamscape being dreamed by Diane (possibly under the influence of drugs), who, by not willing to be herself, conjures in this dream a world that allows her to imagine herself as someone else: Betty, a young actress who achieves both fame and the girl. Looking at the mirror of possibility, Diane sees herself as loved, successful, innocent, and virtuous. But reality keeps knocking on the doors of her subconscious, and the sweet fantasy is constantly interrupted by disturbing images of darkness and death. She cannot escape the horrifying reality of Camilla’s death and cannot escape from being the self responsible

for this reality. Reaching the depths of despair, and overwhelmed by agony and horror, she manically commits suicide.

Of course, one does not have to reach such extremes in order to be a detached weak despairer. Diane—who does not want to be herself, who (most of the film) sees herself as a fantasized version of herself, and who cannot ultimately escape herself—stands for anyone who has experienced the bitter taste of shattered dreams and the agony, disappointment, and frustration caused by painful failures. Experiencing this while being a weak despairer, however, one does not understand that despair is rooted in one's failure to be the self that one is intended to be and *not* in one's failure to achieve one thing or another.⁴¹ Accordingly, by escaping from oneself (into the mirror of possibility) one only strengthens one's despair.

A less colorful but no less poignant case of weak despair, this time of the *confined* kind, is exemplified by the protagonist of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. The famous novella depicts the misery—and despair—of Ivan Ilyich, who, on his deathbed, realizes that his life has been a waste and was not what he thought it should, and could, be. And while only at this very late point does Ivan Ilyich actually experience the depth of his despair, it is clear that his life was all along characterized by confined despair. While evidently unhappy about himself too often during his life, his unwillingness to be himself—the present Ivan Ilyich, the Ivan Ilyich he came to be—takes the shape of confining him ever more closely to his actuality. Desiring a distraction from his dissatisfaction, he immerses himself in his work, chases after social rank and honor, and fills his time with vapid interactions and empty preoccupations. All of

⁴¹ One of the important stages on the way to becoming conscious of one's state is to realize that the reason for one's despair is oneself: *this* is the object of one's despair. This, please note, does not mean that those things whose loss causes one misery have no value or significance. Rather, it means that losing them is a source of pain and sorrow, not of despair. This kind of understanding is indeed reflected in Diane's dream, in which one mysterious character warns another character (in her dream) that a man's attitude is that which ultimately shapes his life (as opposed, again, to achieving or losing this or that valuable thing).

which serves to divert his attention from his unwillingness to be himself, and takes him further away from becoming the self that he is intended to be, thereby deepening his state of despair.

Now, *defiance* is an intensification of one's conception of oneself—and an intensification of the state of despair. In defiance the despairer wills to be himself, but the self that he *wills* to be is not the self he is *intended* to be. Having a “naked self” and accordingly an “infinite self”—that is, possessing his essence in a state of a potential and thereby having the freedom to shape himself—gives him the ability to go in a terribly wrong direction. In this sense “defiance . . . is really despair through the aid of the eternal, the despairing misuse of the eternal within the self to will in despair to be oneself.”⁴² What, then, does defiant despair in its two versions—detachment and confinement—look like? Let us begin with despair of detachment.

In order in despair to will to be oneself, there must be consciousness of an infinite self. This infinite self, however, is really only the most abstract form, the most abstract possibility of the self. And this is the self that a person in despair wills to be, severing the self from any relation to a power that has established it, or severing it from the idea that there is such a power. With the help of this infinite form, the self in despair wants to be master of itself or to create itself, to make his self into the self he wants to be.⁴³

With “the aid of the eternal” this kind of despairer understands that he has the capacity to shape his identity, but he misunderstands this to mean that he possesses the ability to constitute his identity in accordance with his will—and his will alone. This is a “misuse of the eternal” in the sense that while being conscious enough to realize that he has the ability to become an individual (i.e., a person with

⁴² SUD, 67.

⁴³ SUD, 67–68.

a distinctive identity), he denies the “eternal” source of this ability. In other words, he can do what he does thanks to possessing a divine potential that dictates his talents, desires, abilities, and so on, as well as the freedom to imagine possibilities and choose between them. However, he takes himself to be the source of this potential. In this sense he severs himself, as Kierkegaard says, “from any relation to the power that established it.”

The despairer who exemplifies the *detached* version of defiance, then, wants to be himself in the sense that he wants “to make his self into the self he wants to be.” The object of his willfulness is the self that he now is, inasmuch as he takes this self to be someone with powers of self-constitution, someone who is the master of himself. Kierkegaard terms this despairer an “acting self” who is relating to himself “only by way of imaginary constructions, no matter what it undertakes, however vast, however amazing, however perseveringly pursued. [He] recognizes no power over [him]self.”⁴⁴ In a manner reminiscent of Sartre, such a despairer takes himself to be the ultimate author of himself, the sole authority in the shaping of his identity.

Defiance, however, may appear also in a *confined* version; the despairer who exemplifies *this* is termed a self “acted upon.” Kierkegaard describes the transition from detached defiance (an acting self) to a confined one (a self acted upon) as follows:

Perhaps such an imaginatively constructing self, which in despair wills to be itself, encounters some difficulty or other . . . something the Christian would call a cross, a basic defect, whatever it may be. . . . [T]he infinite . . . self feels itself nailed to this servitude. Consequently, it is a self acted upon.⁴⁵

. . . he defiantly wills to be himself, to be himself not in spite of it or without it . . . he wills to be himself with it, takes it along,

⁴⁴ SUD, 68.

⁴⁵ SUD, 70.

almost flouting his agony. . . . Rather than to seek help, he prefers, if necessary, to be himself with all the agonies of hell.⁴⁶

In detached defiance, the “acting self” disregards limitations and necessity, seeing himself as essentially capable of achieving that which he desires. Ultimately, he thinks, “Everything is possible” and nothing can stop him from becoming the person—the individual—he envisions himself to be. Such a person, when encountering a limitation that by all his powers of will and imagination he cannot surpass, may feel himself “nailed to this servitude.” If he does, he becomes a self “acted upon”: he exemplifies the confined version of defiance. In confinement, recall, there is a denial of possibilities and lack of hope for change. To be confined when *defiant*, the despairer *wills* to be his lesser, “defected,” self. He refuses any possibility of becoming better and “with all the agonies of hell” sticks to himself: confining himself thereby to the deficient version of himself.

Using again Kierkegaard’s metaphor of the “abominable” home,⁴⁷ we can say that both detached and confined defiance are ways to willfully stay in the wretched home. However, while the detached despairer does so because he imagines himself capable of building the house anew, the defiant despairer refuses to fix it because he draws a twisted pleasure from living in the ruins. Two literary examples may help to give a sense of these types.

Echoing Kierkegaard’s metaphor of the house, the protagonist of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* is someone who wills to stay in his wretched house—he wills to be himself while full of contempt and hatred toward himself—because he keeps imagining himself as the hero of a conjured alternative reality. Acting as if he is a character in a book, he keeps detaching himself from reality and retreats to the secure world of his underground, where he can imagine himself to be the person he fails to be in reality. Affirmative

⁴⁶ SUD, 70–71.

⁴⁷ See again SUD, 55, and the discussion earlier.

enough of himself and his situation to be defiant,⁴⁸ and imaginative enough to be detached, this unnamed narrator of the story exemplifies the despair of detached defiance.

Finally, the darkest of them all is the confined defiant, and a literary figure that depicts such a despairer is the protagonist of Camus's *The Fall*. The "cross" that he bears is his selfish cowardice, which pokes fun at his self-image as a noble altruist. This cowardice is magnificently disclosed in a one fateful night, when he witnesses the fall of a young woman into the river—and does nothing to help her, simply letting her drown. This event changes his life in a demonic way: making "precisely this torment the object of all his passion,"⁴⁹ he becomes someone whose self-allocated task in life is to assert the abomination and sinfulness of others. Confessing his rotten selfishness to strangers, he leads them to confess their own misdoing for the sake of proving that they are as detestable as he is. Rejecting decisively the hypothetical prospect of a second chance to save the girl from drowning, he echoes Kierkegaard's metaphor on the error that refuses to be erased because it wants to stand as a witness against its author, proving the author to be second-rate.⁵⁰ In the same way, the protagonist of *The Fall* despises himself and the entire human race, and in his deep contempt and hatred stands as a witness to the pettiness and wretchedness of human existence.

6.3.4. Despair as a Rejection of One's Potential

We can now see how all the categories that Kierkegaard uses to analyze the nature of a self, of an individual human being—the finite and the infinite, necessity and possibility, the temporal and the eternal—are crucial for describing despair. In despair one

⁴⁸ My thanks to Anthony Rudd for helping me to see this.

⁴⁹ SUD, 72.

⁵⁰ See SUD, 74.

understands oneself primarily and essentially in terms of one category, at the expense of the category that opposes (and completes) it. Accordingly, lacking finitude and necessity is what Kierkegaard describes, respectively, as infinitude's despair and possibility's despair: in my terms, despair of detachment (from the world). Lacking infinitude and possibility, on the other hand, is what Kierkegaard describes, respectively, as finitude's despair and necessity's despair; in my terms, despair of confinement (to the world).

Against this background, I suggest that defiance in its *detached* version can be termed "eternity's despair." The despairer who is "an acting self" ignores the constraints of the temporal, which include both circumstantial (i.e., contingent) constraints and essential ones. Positing himself in the place of God—after all, recall, it is a "despair through the aid of the eternal"⁵¹—he makes use, or rather "misuse," of "the eternal within [him]self."⁵²

Now, the *confined* version of defiance can be termed "temporality's despair." The despairer who is "acted upon" confines himself to temporality by refusing any prospect of transcending his undesirable situation. "He wants to be himself, himself in his torment, in order to protest against all existence with this torment."⁵³ Refusing to see any possibility for goodness by immersing himself in his miserable actuality, such a despairer indeed rejects the eternal (although he does so, again, "through the aid of the eternal"). This rejection is first and foremost a rejection of God as a source of goodness—God for whom "everything is possible"—and thereby a rejection of hope.⁵⁴ But no less than that, it is also a rejection of the despairer's potential to become the self that God has created him to be.

⁵¹ SUD, 67.

⁵² SUD, 67.

⁵³ SUD, 73–74.

⁵⁴ See, for example: "[Despair is] to be unwilling to hope in the possibility that an earthly need, a temporal cross, can come to an end" (SUD, 70). On the understanding of God in terms of "everything is possible," see SUD, 38–41.

The latter rejection is common to all forms of despair. Given that these are all different ways to wrongly regard one's *actualized* self (one's individual persona),⁵⁵ all the forms manifest a rejection of one's potential, one's kernel of individuality. Accordingly, all of these forms come down to one basic position: not to will to be the self that God intends one to be.⁵⁶ After all, the self that the despairer defiantly *wills* to be, or weakly does *not* will to be, is the actualized version of her potential, her present individual persona (say, Jane₂). Because she is a *despairer*, this actualization is necessarily only a partial fulfillment of her potential, but it nevertheless also reflects the potential. Hence, *not* willing to be the present version of Jane is eo ipso to reject also the potential embedded in this version, while *willing* to be the present version of Jane is a refusal to become the Jane that God wants her to be (which is necessarily different from the Jane that she presently is).

Having portrayed the “map” of despair, we are now able to understand the special status of the temporal-eternal synthesis (compared with the other two sets of syntheses). This synthesis, by characterizing the human being as “eternal,” specifically describes the connection of the human being to God, her creator. Hence, it arguably serves as the anchor of Kierkegaard's analysis of the self, in the following way.

“To despair is a qualification of spirit and relates to the eternal in man,” Kierkegaard says.⁵⁷ In my reading, “the eternal in man” is selfhood in its potential state. A human being is therefore “eternal” by virtue of being given, by God (the Eternal), an individual

⁵⁵ In its weak forms it is *not* to will to be one's individual persona and to either run away from oneself (detachment), or, conversely, to stick to being the individual persona that one does not will to be (confinement). In its defiant forms, despair is to *will* to be one's individual persona by seeing oneself as self-creating (detachment), or, conversely, by identifying oneself with one's faults and shortcomings (confinement).

⁵⁶ Indeed, when talking about defiance—that is, in despair to *will* to be oneself—Kierkegaard also speaks in the negative to describe this. The detached defiant despairer, he says, “does not want to put on his own self, does not want to see his *given self* as his task” (68, my emphasis).

⁵⁷ SUD, 17.

essence. This essence, in its potential state, is “eternal” not only by virtue of reflecting the image of God, but also in the sense that it is not dependent on time and circumstances. However, no less than being “eternal” (in the sense just explained), a human being is also temporal. It is only in the realm of time, the realm of *this* world, that a human being can fulfill her essence and become who God created her to be. Her ontological connection to God—described by one side of the synthesis, “the eternal”—becomes a *relationship* with God through, and by means of, the other side of the synthesis, “the temporal.” The temporal, then, stands for the way of living in the world. And this, as we saw, is described by the two other sets of syntheses, which, unless harmonized, depict the states of either being detached from the world or confined to it.

This twofoldness—having a relationship with both God *and* the world—is the key, as we shall see in the next chapter, to healing from despair.

6.3.5. Despair Is Sin

The Sickness unto Death is divided into two parts. The first, examined thus far, presents both the formula for faith—“in relating . . . to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it”⁵⁸—and, as we have demonstrated, also the “formula” for despair: not to will to be the self that God intends one to be. Hence, it provides us with the tools needed for an understanding of selfhood, despair, and the healing from despair. What, then, is the need for a second part?

This part, entitled “Despair Is Sin,” has a twofold significance. First, it presents a further intensification of the consciousness of the self. Second, it explicates the nature of the distinctively Christian

⁵⁸ SUD, 14, 49.

relationship with God. Let me say a few words on each of these points.

The preceding section concentrated on pointing out a gradation in the consciousness of the self; first came ignorance of having an eternal self, then a knowledge of having a self in which there is something eternal, and under this, in turn, gradations were pointed out.⁵⁹

The Sickness unto Death can be understood as depicting the long journey of a person to herself. It analyzes what it takes for a person to understand the roots of her *being who she is* and dictates that such a journey can be successful only if she *wills* to be who she is *intended to be*. Accordingly, this journey must involve an understanding of her connection to God. When such an understanding exists but the person is unwilling to live in accordance with it, *this* is sin.

Sin is: *before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will be oneself*. Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the intensification of despair. The emphasis is on *before God* or with a conception of God; it is the conception of God that makes sin . . . “aggravated” despair.⁶⁰

A genuine understanding of what it means, and what it takes, to be who one is (say, Jane) requires a consciousness of one’s existence before God: “The greater the conception of God, the more self there is; the more self, the greater the conception of God.”⁶¹ And while the first part of the book, no less than the second part, makes it clear

⁵⁹ SUD, 79.

⁶⁰ SUD, 77.

⁶¹ SUD, 80.

that the healing from despair requires such a conception of God, it is only in the second part that the state of a despairer who *has* a conception of God—and in particular the *Christian* conception of God—is analyzed.

The difference between designating a state as despair and designating it as sin is therefore as follows. Despair is to fail to be the self that God intends one to be. However, while one degree of intensification is to refuse (that is, not to will) to be the self that God intends one to be—without necessarily being aware of such a divine intention—*sin* is “despair qualitatively intensified once again.”⁶² It is to refuse to be the self that God intends one to be, while being aware—if only in the sense of *having a conception*—of such a divine intention.

This whole deliberation must now dialectically take a new direction. The point is that the previously considered gradation in the consciousness of the self is within the category of the human self, or the self whose criterion is man. But this self takes on a new quality and qualification by being a self directly before God. This self is no longer the merely human self but is what I, hoping not to be misinterpreted, would call the theological self, the self directly before God. And what infinite reality the self gains by being conscious of existing before God, by becoming a human self whose criterion is God!⁶³

The “new direction,” it should be emphasized, does not stand for a gradation of the *analysis* of the self, as if it is only in the second part of the book that the analysis comes to a completion. Rather, the gradation that the second part presents is that of the consciousness of the despairer. In what way?

⁶² SUD, 100.

⁶³ SUD, 79.

The state of healing, and the conditions for it, are analyzed in the first part, as Kierkegaard's analysis of the nature of the self by means of the three sets of syntheses makes it clear that to achieve the state of healing, a person must be "before God." That is, she must be aware of her ontological connection to God and turn this into a relationship with God by becoming the self that she is intended, by God, to be. To be "directly before God" in this way is to understand oneself as possessing a divine name. In this sense, one is "no longer the merely human self" but "the theological self." That is, one understands oneself to be a person whose identity (as the individual that one is) is rooted not only in one's relationships with humans, but also in one's relationship with God. It is exactly *this* that is the focus of the second part. Namely, while the first part demonstrates the crucial significance of having a relationship with God, the second part depicts the nature of this relationship in the context of despair.

And this brings us to the second point. The healing from despair, as I elaborate in the next chapter, is conditional on the interdependence of the two sets of relationships: with other humans and with God. Such an interdependence means that a genuine, fully fulfilled, relationship with God depends on a genuine, fully fulfilled, relationship with another person, and vice versa. In my understanding, the conception of such an interdependence is the crucial (and exciting) message of *The Sickness unto Death*. And *this* message remains valid whether or not we agree that the highest relationship with God is achieved only in the context of the distinctively Christian framework.

This is, of course, not to deny that Kierkegaard himself—elsewhere and particularly in *The Sickness unto Death*—took the Christian framework to govern the highest relationship with God. Indeed, most of the second part of *The Sickness unto Death* focuses, as we have just said, on explicating the nature of one's relationship with God when understood in accordance with the Christian teaching of sin and offense and the relationship with Christ.

However, my concern here is not accepting the purported religious superiority of the distinctively Christian framework, or rather arguing against it (in favor of a more universally understood religiousness). Of course, it is clear that differing in understanding of the “God relationship” factor will affect that of the “human relationship,” as well as the shape their interdependence takes. But it will *not* affect the very interdependence, the very formula that tightly interconnects these two factors. And it is this interconnectedness, this mutual dependence, that is crucial for my project, as will become clear in the next, and final, chapter of this book.

6.4. Being a Kierkegaardian Self: Alternative Interpretations

Recent discussions on the nature of the Kierkegaardian self have taken place in the wider context of inquiring into the philosophical problem of personal identity, namely, of finding the conditions that secure the identity of a person with herself over time. Of the various approaches to this problem, the Kierkegaardian participants are mostly interested in the idea of “practical” identity, and in particular in the so-called narrative approach to identity. According to those who understand identity in practical (as opposed to metaphysical) terms, one’s identity is something that one “actively shape[s], through reflective commitment and certain types of volitional comportment.”⁶⁴ Such a conception of identity works well with the idea of *narrating* one’s identity:

[The practical] description provides an Humean bundle of psychological events with a kind of deeper integration, giving it both a backward-directed explanatory coherence and a forward-directed regulative one. It is not far from this practical conception

⁶⁴ Stokes 2015, 6.

of identity to a *narrative* conception of identity, whereby this practical identity has a diachronic unity analogous to that of a story.⁶⁵

According to Anthony Rudd, a prominent Kierkegaardian defender of the narrative view,⁶⁶ “selfhood” and “narrative” are two concepts that come together: we cannot understand the one independently of the other.⁶⁷ Accepting the idea of self-constitution (which is fundamental to the conception of practical identity), he claims that “we need to understand the self teleologically, as a being that orients itself in evaluative terms and which has the capacity to relate to the (objective) Good.”⁶⁸ However, “To make full sense of the evaluative, self-constituting teleological self, one has to understand it in narrative terms,”⁶⁹ because “narrativity” is the framework that makes our actions (and desires, and choices, and aspirations) intelligible:

*As self-conscious temporal agents we are aware of the pasts that we have and we consciously attempt to build our futures on the basis of those pasts as we understand them. . . . We live our lives forwards with an always partial and revisable sense of what they mean to us, a sense that we try to build as we live. . . . this means that we live our lives as narratives.*⁷⁰

Patrick Stokes, another major Kierkegaardian participant in the debate around personal identity, claims that even if the account of practical identity offered by the narrativists is correct, it is incomplete.⁷¹ In his view, for a fuller account we need the concept,

⁶⁵ Stokes 2015, 6–7.

⁶⁶ Along with John Davenport, whose view of Kierkegaardian selfhood was discussed in chapter 1.

⁶⁷ See Rudd 2012, 176.

⁶⁸ Rudd 2012, 163.

⁶⁹ Rudd 2012, 163.

⁷⁰ Rudd 2012, 175.

⁷¹ Stokes 2015, 167.

introduced by current phenomenologists, of a “minimal” self. While “the *narrative or autobiographical self*” is the term to describe a person’s “self-image or self-conception that is diachronically constituted,” the “*core or minimal self*” describes “the present locus of consciousness which relates to the diachronically extended narrative self.”⁷² The “minimal self,” then, stands for my present-tense experience of myself, the experience of myself in the here and now. The minimal self is the “I” who, standing at a distance from my narrative self, is capable of forming an opinion on it, of taking volitional and emotional stances regarding it.

Responding to a criticism by Rudd, Stokes emphasizes that this split in the self is not an ontological one—it is not a question of two “selves”—but rather a phenomenological one. The duality at issue is not of substance but of experience. The conception of “minimal self,” which Stokes applies to Kierkegaard’s notion of a “naked self,” is necessary, he claims, for a full account of our self-experience: “Such a conception, understood as a subjective dimension of experience rather than a feature of any metaphysical theory, helps to . . . [bridge] the affective gap between self and person, or present subject and diachronically extended human being.”⁷³

In contrast to Rudd and Davenport, who take the narrative approach to identity to be the best framework for understanding the Kierkegaardian self, Stokes claims that “Kierkegaard’s discussion is less about diachronic identity per se and more about the interaction between the present-tense self and the diachronically extended person.”⁷⁴ This ongoing debate is undoubtedly an interesting and fruitful one. However, my own view of the Kierkegaardian self is somewhat outside it.

Motivated by other concerns, my own view differs in its direction. After all, there are many different questions that one can ask about the nature of selfhood. The question dealt with in the

⁷² See Stokes 2015, 180.

⁷³ Stokes 2015, 191.

⁷⁴ Stokes 2015, 23.

Kierkegaardian “personal identity” debate regards the experience of *being* a self, whereas my question regards the experience of *encountering* a self. While the former is an inquiry into the nature of selfhood from the perspective of experiencing myself as a self, the latter is an inquiry from the perspective of *loving a self*; the subject of the inquiry, in other words, is not *myself* as a self, but another person—the *beloved*—as a self.

As I said already in chapter 1, to be Jane—to be an individual, to be a self—is a function of many factors. Thus, while it is indeed a function of her experience of herself, which is the focus of the inquiry led by Kierkegaardians such as Rudd, Davenport, and Stokes, it is also, I suggest, a function of her individual essence. Thus, it is not that my thesis—of selfhood as an individual essence—rivals their theses of conceiving the self in terms of a narrative or a minimal self. Rather, our different conceptions of the Kierkegaardian self are a matter of inquiring into different aspects of being a self. Accordingly, my disagreement with these views is not over whether it is best to understand the Kierkegaardian self in terms of a narrative self or a minimal self: it is not my concern here to take a stand on *this* debate. My disagreement with them is on the very interpretation of Kierkegaard’s analysis of the self, and in particular on how we should understand the element of “the eternal” in his analysis.

As I demonstrated in chapter 1, in contrast to my understanding of “the eternal” as denoting the *essentiality* of a person’s particularity—that is, the essentiality of being, for example, Jane—commentators such as Davenport and Evans understand one’s particularity (say, as Jane) to be gained in temporality. It must, therefore, be necessarily contingent. Rudd’s and Stokes’s (respective) views of “the eternal” reveal their being on a par with Davenport and Evans, inasmuch as nothing in their views indicate that they take the self’s particularity to be *essential*.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Although, it should be noted, the idea of individual essence may well be compatible with their views.

In Rudd's interpretation, the three sets of polarities (finite/infinite, necessity/freedom, the temporal / the eternal) are "three different ways of formulating one basic polarity."⁷⁶ On the one side is immanence—the human state of being limited—and on the other side is transcendence: the human capacity "for stepping back from ourselves and our situations in order to think about what may be utterly remote from us in space and time—or outside of space and time altogether."⁷⁷ In this reading, "the eternal" stands for the ideal—the Good—which is the telos, and in her striving to achieve it, the person (qua a self) balances between self-acceptance (her immanence) and self-shaping (her capacity for transcendence):

As a process of reconciling the tensions that constitute a personality, it has to be continually renewed. But this is only possible because the Good to which we relate is not itself something changing. And this is why the self is a synthesis of the eternal and the temporal.⁷⁸

In this reading, then, "the eternal" is *external* to one's selfhood; it plays an important role in shaping it, but selfhood itself is entirely a temporal matter. In this sense, Rudd's interpretation addresses only indirectly Kierkegaard's claim that the self—being "a synthesis of the eternal and the temporal"—*is* eternal.⁷⁹

In a similar vein, Stokes—by providing an understanding of "the eternal" that, like Rudd's, describes not so much the self as something external to it—seems to be uncommitted to any idea

⁷⁶ Rudd 2012, 41.

⁷⁷ Rudd 2012, 41.

⁷⁸ Rudd 2012, 165–66.

⁷⁹ Rudd acknowledges that there is a stronger, more literal, way to understand "the eternal": according to Kierkegaard, "We are to live in time in 'the expectancy of an eternal salvation' which lies outside of time" (Rudd 2012, 166). However, he is not committed to that understanding, "bracketing" the belief in immortality and suggesting that we could instead understand the conception of "looking back on our lives from eternity" as a regulative ideal (166).

regarding the essentiality of the self's particularity. In his reading, "Eternity is a situation in which one's life *as a totality* receives a *final judgement*."⁸⁰ "The eternal," then, signifies the atemporal state of the minimal self, which, unlike the narrative self, does not extend in time but "is *entirely present tense* because entirely oriented towards how the diachronic totality [i.e., the narrative self] . . . will be judged in eternity."⁸¹ Having no past or future but only the consciousness of the "now," the state of the minimal ("naked") self is therefore as if existing out of time:

The "naked self" . . . [has] a sense of itself as being *more than* the totality of a human life, precisely because it is *answerable for* that totality. My human life, what I am, have been and will be, presents itself to the subject I experience myself as being now as the thing for which I am to answer.⁸²

Hence, just as in Rudd's interpretation, the "eternality" of the self is understood somewhat indirectly. While for Rudd "eternal" is used to denote (atemporal) ideals, for Stokes it denotes the (atemporal) experience of being present to oneself in the "here and now": one is "eternal" in the sense of "living" in eternity by virtue of being answerable for who one is. As Stokes puts it, "Insofar as we are both present-tense subjects *and* diachronically extended human beings, we simultaneously live both in time *and* in eternity."⁸³

Diverging from both Rudd and Stokes, in my interpretation the eternality that Kierkegaard ascribes to humans denotes our ontological connection to God. It therefore enables a straightforward understanding of what it means to be "eternal." Strictly

⁸⁰ Stokes 2015, 200. See also: "Eternity is presented to us as a sort of atemporal state of *final judgement*" (203).

⁸¹ Stokes 2015, 162.

⁸² Stokes 2015, 202.

⁸³ Stokes 2015, 202.

speaking, the self is literally eternal by virtue of possessing an element that is unchangeable and independent of time. That is, the self is “eternal” by dint of possessing an individual essence in a state of a potential. And while the actualization of the potential always occurs in time, the potential itself is atemporal, and in this sense eternal.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, understanding a person as possessing an individual essence—which is in principle accessible to our immediate experience—has the advantage of allowing the conception of universal *love*.⁸⁴ Having explored in the present chapter the spiritual meaning of being a self, it is now time to see how my understanding of Kierkegaardian selfhood as amounting to individual essence allows for the conception of spiritual *romantic love*.

⁸⁴ See again chapter 5, and in particular section 5.4.

7

Spiritual Romantic Love

Every human being is . . . destined to become himself, and as such . . . is to be ground into shape.¹

7.1. The Healing from Despair: Becoming Oneself by Loving Another

In the previous chapter we examined Kierkegaard's definition of the self, and learned that despair is the state of failing to be the self that God intends one to be. It is a failure to fulfill one's potential, to live up to one's given divine name.² To analyze this state, we saw, Kierkegaard uses three sets of opposing categories—"syntheses," in his terms—that together characterize the nature of a human being: finitude/infinity (S1), necessity/possibility (S2), and the temporal/the eternal (S3). Due to the affinity between S1 and S2, they can be considered together, while S3, although akin to the other two sets, also expresses something further that is unique to it. While the first two sets explicate the state of being related to the world—describing what living in space and time and with other people is like—the third set explicates specifically the state of being a worldly creature *who is connected to God*.

By using these three sets to characterize the human being, Kierkegaard presents humans both as limited creatures who are

¹ SUD, 33.

² A prior and less-developed version of this thesis appears in Krishek 2016 and 2019b.

aware of their limitedness and as capable and gifted. We are limited in time, space, and capacities, but we are also capable of transcending limitations, by virtue of our being created by God and in his image. From Kierkegaard's perspective, all of these are facts about human nature, and it is this combination of facts that dictates the human way of existing in the world. Given this, every person lives in one of two states: either in despair or in *faith*.

The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating . . . to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.³

Kierkegaard states this formula again in the first part of *The Sickness unto Death*,⁴ and, after asserting in the second part that "faith is: that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God,"⁵ he concludes the book by saying: "This contrast [sin/faith], however, has been advanced throughout this entire book, which at the outset introduced . . . the formula for the state in which there is no despair at all. . . . This formula in turn . . . is the definition of faith."⁶ Healing from despair is when "despair is completely rooted out." Hence, if despair is the failure to be the self that God intends one to be, then to *completely* root out this failure is to *be* the self that God intends one to be. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the healing from despair is defined in terms of "resting transparently in God." A state of rest is the opposite of struggle, and a state of transparency is the opposite of hiddenness or concealment. Hence, it is a state of perfect and complete accordance between the two relevant parties, namely, the human being and God. "Resting transparently

³ SUD, 14.

⁴ See SUD, 49.

⁵ SUD, 82.

⁶ SUD, 131.

in God,” then, is a fitting way to describe the state of fulfilling God’s will and becoming the self that he intends one to be.

And this state of “transparent resting”—of becoming the self that God wills one to be—is achieved, as the formula details, by relating to oneself and willing to be oneself.⁷ Such a self-relation, as Kierkegaard’s definition of the self demonstrates, amounts to understanding oneself in terms of the three sets of syntheses. The set temporal-eternal, as we saw, describes the human being as related both to the world and to God, and the other two sets describe ways of existing in the world (as a God-related creature). Hence, despite being defined in terms of “resting in God,” it is clear (given the formula) that the state of healing necessarily includes the human being’s relation to the *world*. Recall that the state of despair, that is, of *not* healing, manifests a distorted relation of either being detached from the world or confined to it.

The crucial role that one’s relation to the world plays in one’s healing from despair is evident in my reading of Kierkegaard’s analysis. The task is to become the particular self that God intends one to be. However, if, as I suggest, one’s selfhood is given only in a state of a potential, then the actualization is as important as the potential. And while the potential is “eternal”—namely, invariable and independent of contingent circumstances—the actualization is “temporal”: it takes place “in the world.” What does such an in-worldly actualization include? “If I have ventured wrongly, well, then life helps me by punishing me. But if I have not ventured at all, who helps me then?”⁸ To actualize one’s selfhood, there is a need to act in the world, to pursue passions, to take chances, to make

⁷ Note that the latter factor “willing to be oneself” is absent from the definition of the self with which Kierkegaard opens his analysis (see chapter 6, section 6.2). This, I suggest, indicates that Kierkegaard distinguishes between “being a self” and “being the self that God intends one to be”—the former being the *default* state of humans, the latter being the *ideal* to strive to. In other words, while every human being is a self, the task that Kierkegaard posits is to become the self *that God intends you to be* (see again note 17 in chapter 1).

⁸ SUD, 34.

mistakes. One has to “be ground into shape,” as we saw⁹—and such a grinding is often painful. Hence, suppose that, in the manner of the despairer of detachment, we live only in the safe realm of our fantasies because, out of fear of failure, we do not dare to pursue our passions in the actual world. In such a case we may be avoiding some pain—but we are also avoiding ourselves. Or suppose that, in the manner of the despairer of confinement, we live only in accordance with the will, decisions, or roles determined by someone else (our family, milieu, society), because we fear to make mistakes. In *such* a case we might “cowardly gain all earthly advantages,” but, “spiritually speaking,” we “lose” ourselves.¹⁰

The point, then, is that it is only through living life, through *venturing* in life, that we can—sorely and with hardship—“be ground into shape.” That is, only by virtue of relation to the world, by existing in it, can we fulfill our potential and become the self we are intended to be.

Now, a central component (if not *the* central component) of existing in the world is being in relationship with other people. Kierkegaard makes this clear as soon as he asserts that in relating to oneself one is relating to another. Further, reflecting on the two basic versions of despair, detachment from and confinement to the world, it is evident that, to a great extent, the different ways of detachment and confinement are enacted through our relationships with the people who inhabit (directly and indirectly) our reality. We are affected by the wills, desires, and opinions of other people and are responsive to them. We are affected by the way they depend on us, and by the way we are dependent on them. We are influenced by our interactions with them and are constantly shaped by both the opportunities and restrictions that they posit (less and more subtly) before us.

⁹ SUD, 33.

¹⁰ See SUD, 35.

Hence, we may say that the importance of having relationships with other humans not only is presented explicitly (through the claim that in relating to oneself one relates to another), but is implicit in Kierkegaard's analysis of despair as a whole. If relation to the world is crucial in order to become oneself, and relation to the world consists largely in interacting with people, then becoming oneself (and thus accomplishing the highest relationship with God) is dependent on interacting with people. At the same time, while *The Sickness unto Death* presents the formulation according to which one's proper relationship with God (the transparent resting in him) is dependent on one's existence in the world—and hence, as we have just demonstrated, on one's relationships with other people—it does not elaborate on the nature of these relationships. For this, we have to turn to the Kierkegaardian work that does so explicitly, namely, *Works of Love*. In that text we learn that the nature of one's relationship with any other person should always be an interaction of *love*:

Just as Christianity's joyful message is contained in the doctrine of humanity's inherent kinship with God, so is Christianity's task humanity's likeness to God. But God is Love, and therefore we can be like God only in loving, just as we also, according to the words of the apostle, can only be *God's co-workers—in love*.¹¹

If we want to live up to our likeness to God, and act in accordance with our “inherent kinship” with him, our living in the world must be characterized by love. Namely, the hallmark of living correctly is loving other humans. Only in this way can we be “like God” and “co-workers” of God. But what does it mean to be a coworker of God?

My Kierkegaardian theory of selfhood accords well with this conception, as it proclaims that becoming a self is a shared enterprise

¹¹ WL, 62–63.

of God and the human being. God creates every person as an individual, but since one's name (i.e., one's essence, or identity, or selfhood) is given only in a state of potential, it is one's lifelong task to actualize this potential to its fullest, an actualization that takes place in the world and thus by virtue of interaction with other people. The need to actualize the potential that God bestowed on one, then, indeed makes one God's coworker.

However, as Kierkegaard emphasizes, one can be God's coworker *only in love*, which means that a successful actualization of one's potential is conditional on loving. Namely, while the actualization of one's potential takes place in the world and thus by virtue of interaction with other people, to become the self *that one is intended to be*, it is not enough that one interacts with other people simply as a matter of living in the world. Rather, in order to actualize one's potential *properly*, one's interactions with other people should *always* be an interaction of love.¹²

All the steps in the analysis have therefore led to a straightforward conclusion: we become the self that God intends us to be by loving another person. The following words, by Dostoevsky's Father Zosima, vividly express a similar idea:

I maintain that [hell] is the suffering of being unable to love. Once in infinite existence, immeasurable in time and space, a spiritual creature was given on his coming to earth, the power of saying, "I am and I love." Once, only once, there was given him a moment of active living love, and for that was earthly life given him, and with it times and seasons. And that happy creature rejected the priceless gift, prized it and loved it not, scorned it and remained callous. Such a one having left the earth . . . can go up to the Lord. But that is just his torment, to rise up to the Lord without ever having

¹² This is of course far from easy. It is a real challenge to make every single interaction, with any given person, a loving interaction. However, as demonstrated in chapter 5, although the ideal of universal love is undoubtedly difficult to achieve, it is nevertheless achievable.

loved. . . . For he sees clearly and says to himself, "Now I have understanding, and though I now thirst to love, there will be nothing great, no sacrifice in my love, for my earthly life is over."¹³

Reading this passage through the lens of the Kierkegaardian formula for healing from despair, we can say the following. To rest transparently in God is to become the self that God wills one to be. But for this, one has to cowork with God and fulfill, in the context of *this temporal life*, the eternal potential that God has bestowed on each of us. To do so, one must experience "active living love." If one goes through one's life without loving, one eo ipso fails to fulfill one's potential. Accordingly, such a person is forever doomed, because there is no other way to achieve self-fulfillment; it is for this very purpose that "earthly life has been given" to each of us.¹⁴

Love for people, then, is crucial for becoming oneself and hence for one's relationship with God. *Any* act of love actualizes one's potential, but, obviously, for higher and fuller actualizations love per se is not enough: it must be *correct* love. Correct love is the subject of *Works of Love*, but, as was demonstrated in chapter 3, the conception that it presents is lacking. Hence, as was demonstrated in chapter 4, a more satisfying conception of love emerges with the help of the analysis of faith that Kierkegaard presents in *Fear and Trembling*. It is not only *Works of Love*, then, but also *Fear and Trembling* that is required for a completion of the formulation that *The Sickness unto Death* presents.

The appeal to *Fear and Trembling* in association with *The Sickness unto Death* is fitting for two further reasons. First, as the formula for healing from despair "is also the formula for faith,"¹⁵ the turn

¹³ *Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoyevsky 2009, 410–11).

¹⁴ Note that my theory allows for the possibility of the endurance of oneself after death. As that which makes one a self is the quality of selfhood, this quality in principle can be the property of a spiritual entity (and not just of a bodily one, as it is in life on earth). This, again, bestows the highest significance to earthly existence. It is here, in this life, that one enacts one's potential, thereby giving one's selfhood its shape; and this achievement (or failure) is for eternity.

¹⁵ SUD, 49.

to *Fear and Trembling*—a work devoted to the exploration of faith—is called for. Second, in my reading of *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard’s analysis of faith depicts the correct way of living in face of the human predicament of loss and limitations. This, of course, echoes the way *The Sickness unto Death* acknowledges human limitedness and evaluates its role in the life of faith. In this sense, *Fear and Trembling* may be taken to elaborate on what a balancing of the three sets of syntheses—namely, the correct way of living—looks like.

Positing these three works together, then, we can say that while *The Sickness unto Death* postulates the formula for faith—the transparent resting in God that is fulfilled through worldly existence—*Works of Love* and *Fear and Trembling* fill in the formula with much-needed details. While *The Sickness unto Death* posits correct living—“working” in the world—as a condition for faith, *Works of Love* teaches us that this work should be a work of *love*, and *Fear and Trembling* teaches us to live, and love, *correctly*.

To appreciate how these three works complement one another, let us distinguish between an ontological connection to God, a fully fulfilled relationship with God, and a dialogue with God. The first describes the “primitive” connection to God that every human possesses by virtue of being created by God and in his image. The second describes the state of faith: this is the complete healing from despair, the transparent resting in God, which is also, as *Fear and Trembling* teaches us, a state of complete trust in God. The third describes the kind of religious/spiritual life that *aspires* to achieve faith; strives to achieve the state of healing. The starting point is one’s ontological connection to God (the “primitive” connection). This is the creation of one as an individual; the bestowal of one’s divine name in a potential state. At this initial point, there are only two parties that are related: God and his human creature. However, this soon becomes a relation of *three*. Once “thrown” into the world, the human being is immediately, and constantly, in direct and indirect interaction with other human beings. *These* relationships

actualize one's potential, one's divine name, and thus bring one into a *relationship* (as opposed to a mere ontological connection) with God. This is a relationship in the sense that by means of the actualization of her potential, the relevant person realizes that she is a self and gets to know her essence. In doing so she indirectly (and often unconsciously) comes into contact with God's will.

Ideally, the more a person actualizes herself, which happens through relationships with other people, the closer she gets to understanding the source of her self and, accordingly, the more profound and advanced her relationship with God becomes. However, as Kierkegaard's analysis makes clear, the process of actualization does not necessarily lead to such a disclosure, and so, as long as her understanding is partial or incorrect, she is in a state of despair.

And despair goes hand in hand with flawed love. In its spontaneous, natural state, our relationship with a person, our love for him (or lack thereof), is problematic and incomplete—and so is, accordingly, the actualization of our potential. Therefore, the relationship with God—the intimate listening to his will by becoming who he intends us to be—is necessarily incomplete as well. For a more complete fulfillment of our potential, there is a need to maintain *correct* relationships with other people. The striving for *this* is in the context of a *dialogue* with God, namely, in the context of a life which even if not as yet free from despair, is nevertheless spiritual in aspiring to adhere to the ideal of fully *trusting* in God (by way of the double movement of faith).

The picture, then, is of interdependent relationships: If the highest relationship with God depends upon living correctly, living correctly depends upon correct love, and correct love depends upon *trusting* God – this means that one's relationship with God and one's relationships with other people are mutually dependent. It takes love for another person to fulfill one's potential and hence (in the case of successful fulfillment) to rest transparently in God, and it takes trust in God to love *correctly* another person. Accordingly, when faith, as described in *Fear and Trembling*, is

achieved, so is correct love achieved. And thus faith, as described in *The Sickness unto Death* (i.e., the state of resting transparently in God) is eo ipso fulfilled. Hence, into the desirable state of transparency are converged self-realization, the highest relationships with other humans, and the highest relationship with God.

Of course, although every person goes through at least a part of the process of “self-fulfillment”—which (as just explained) amounts to a transition from a connection to God into a relationship with God (by virtue of loving)—this does not guarantee its completion. While I have presented the process as a whole, there are almost endless phases, inclusive of regressions and struggles, on the journey to accomplishing it. After all, transforming from naturally interacting with people to *loving them correctly* is highly difficult.¹⁶ It is difficult to deny oneself, it is difficult to renounce (let alone infinitely), it is difficult to trust. However, when the two movements—of self-denial and resignation on the one hand, and of affirmation and trust on the other—are fully accomplished, our love for another person is as full and genuine as can be. Having achieved *this* state, we rest transparently in the power that established us: we become who God wants us to be.¹⁷

¹⁶ See again chapters 4 and 5. This is in particular difficult, please note, because the state of transparency is achieved only when every single interaction in our life is not only of love but of a *correct* love. Hence, it is not the case that we can love correctly one person and love incorrectly all the others. Loving incorrectly one person—say, the stranger—indicates that the lover has not as yet achieved the highest spiritual state that allows her to love another—say, her romantic beloved—correctly. (See again chapter 5, note 41.)

¹⁷ One may wonder if this ideal state is at all attainable, not only in practice but also *in principle*: Can one work one’s way to salvation (faith)? As Kierkegaard is unclear about the attainability, in its two senses, of this ideal, I will leave this question open. However, let me suggest, with caution, the following. To begin with, even if it is the case that achieving this ideal *is* in principle a human possibility (conditional on works of love), it is important to remember that one is only a *co-worker*. Hence, God’s providence and grace are a crucial part of the story. Keeping this in mind, we can also account for the achievability *in practice* of this ideal and suggest that even if most of us fail to live a *life* of transparency, maybe we can at least aspire to *moments* of transparency.

7.2. The Correspondence between Selves: Being Helped to Become Oneself

To help another person to love God is to love another person; to be helped by another person to love God is to be loved.¹⁸

Whatever loving God amounts to,¹⁹ it must include adhering to God's will. Now, based on the analysis in *The Sickness unto Death*, the ultimate adherence to God's will is to become, or strive to become, the self that God intends one to be. Hence, loving God at the very least *includes* becoming (or striving to become) that self. Accordingly, "to help another person to love God" is to help another person to fulfill her potential, and "to be helped by another person to love God" is to be helped by another to fulfill one's own potential.

Thus, if we agree that loving God at the very least includes self-fulfillment—that is, becoming the self he intends us to be—then it is just such a reciprocal self-fulfillment that Kierkegaard defines (in this context) as love between two persons. For Edward to love Jane, then, is to help Jane become herself, and for Edward to be loved by Jane is to be helped by her to become himself. The idea here, then, is that in loving one another, the interaction between the partners is that of helping each other to fulfill themselves; helping each other to become the selves they are intended, by God, to be.

Further to what we said earlier on the connection between love and being God's co-worker, we can take the connection implied here between love and self-fulfillment a step further. To love the beloved is not only to help the beloved become who he or she is intended to be, but it is also to become who *I*, the lover, is intended to be. This suggests that the *attraction* between lovers can be explained

¹⁸ WL, 107.

¹⁹ See again my discussion in chapter 3, section 3.4.

in terms of each being helped by the other to become the self each is intended to be. In light of this, we can return to the conception of the correspondence between essences outlined at the beginning of this project.

In chapter 2, recall, I argued that we love a person for *who she is* and because of *who we are*: Edward loves Jane (rather than, for example, Blanche) due to the correspondence between their essences. The question of what being thus correspondent amounts to, however, was left open. Having explored the connection between loving and becoming ourselves, I suggest that the correspondence between lover X (say, Edward) and beloved Y (Jane) can be understood in terms of Jane helping Edward to become himself. That is to say, the correspondence between Edward and Jane—which is the reason for Edward’s love for Jane—amounts to Edward being affected by Jane in the fulfillment of his potential. Note, then, that the correspondence at issue attests only to the lover’s side, without necessarily implying mutuality. Ultimately, a successful relationship requires a *double* correspondence, that is, a *meeting* of essences. First, however, we should account for the very idea of correspondence being a function of the beloved’s effect on the lover’s selfhood. What, then, does this mean?

Let us begin with what I take to be uncontroversial intuition. Different relationships have different effects on the development of our identity. We “take” different things from different interactions. That is, different relationships make us listen differently (to advice, criticism, praise), encounter our limits differently, discover our capacities differently. Generally speaking, in different relationships we are reflected to ourselves differently. And while sometimes the quality and extent of the effect on us is rooted in the proximity and nature of the relationship itself (we listen differently to, say, our parents, simply because they are our parents), sometimes it is rooted in *the person* with whom we are interacting. (For example, Jane’s strength and honesty cause Edward to value her opinion of him and take it seriously.) Taking this intuition a step further,

I want to suggest that when it comes to people we are *not* already related to, what determines the extent of our attraction to person X is the extent of that person's capacity to affect the shaping of our identity.²⁰

Further to this, assuming that the extent of attraction to a person governs the kind of love that emerges for that person, I posit that the way and extent that a person can help us fulfill our potential is what determines the kind of love that emerges. As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, given the structure of selfhood, every relationship with a human being affects the actualization of our potential (even if minimally). In this sense, relationships are meaningful. However, there are, of course, relationships that are more meaningful than others, and my suggestion is that the attraction at the basis of such meaningful relationships—the attraction that dictates the depth and interest entailed in such relationships—should be understood in terms of the beloved's help in actualizing the lover's potential. This kind of help is the correspondence in question, and the stronger it is, the deeper the love.

Thus, the mutual attraction between two people who become romantic lovers can be explained in terms of the double correspondence between their essences—the *meeting* of their essences—which amounts to their respective capacity to help one another fulfill their potentials. Hence, romantic love, while undoubtedly (and importantly) involving strong physical and psychological attraction, is primarily rooted in metaphysical, or spiritual, attraction. According to my theory, Jane is romantically attracted to Edward because it is he, who—by virtue of being who he is, his individual essence—is particularly, and to a high extent, capable of making her

²⁰ When it comes to people we are already related to—say, in familial ties or long-term relationships—love is additionally determined, at least partly, by the history of the relationship and its nature (this is most evident in parental love). However, even in these contexts, the way the beloved corresponds to the lover, that is, helps to fulfill the lover's potential, is crucial for the continuance and deepening of the love. Arguably, it is always primarily the correspondence that determines the love, while the context of the already existing relationship may provide better conditions for such a correspondence to occur.

a better person, a better self. He has the capacity to help her to become herself; to become who she is intended to be. And if Edward is attracted in the same way—if Jane is particularly and to a high degree capable of helping him become himself—the result is a strong relationship of romantic love.

While every interaction of (correct) love helps the lover to become herself, to whatever extent, romantic love does so in a particularly powerful, intensive, and efficient way. Our experience indeed teaches us that much: it is easier for us to be a better version of ourselves in the context of (correct) romantic love. Moreover, we are arguably attracted romantically—that is, in the passionate, intensive way characteristic of romantic love²¹—to those who can make us the best version of ourselves. The reason for this, in my theory, is that romantic love is the result of a strong correspondence between essences: when there is a particularly strong attraction or fit, namely, when the beloved is particularly capable of helping the lover to become herself, romantic love (on the part of the lover) emerges. To put it somewhat poetically, we fall in love with those who hold the key, as it were, to our very essence.

A number of clarifications are needed here. First, in suggesting that a strong initial fit between essences results in romantic love I am not implying, by any means, that other kinds of love are weaker, less genuine, or incapable of helping us to fulfill our potential. Rather, my suggestion is that the unique character of romantic love can be explained in terms of the strong initial fit between the lovers' essences. Such a strong initial fit, however, is not a necessary condition for love in general, nor, accordingly, is it a necessary condition for the realization of our potential. Any kind and instance of love—granted that it is a *correct* love—actualizes our potential, and any kind of love can help us fulfill our potential to its utmost. My aim here is not to present romantic love as superior to other

²¹ For an elaboration on the nature of *romantic* love, see next section.

kinds, but rather to defend it as not inferior—morally and spiritually speaking—to other kinds of love.

Second, my suggestion that we are romantically attracted to those who can make us the best version of ourselves may sound hopelessly naive in the face of the familiar experience of being attracted to the wrong people, and given the all too many cases of romantic lovers who make each other miserable because they are clearly unsuited to each other.²² My answer is simple: as long as we love incorrectly, and as long as, due to the partial actualization of our potential (which comes together with incorrect love), we do not really know ourselves, the phenomena of miserable love will endure. However, the implication of my theory is indeed that, ideally, were people to love correctly and fully actualize themselves, miserable love would not occur.

Accordingly, it is important to note that the correspondence that generates love is not only an ontological matter but crucially depends on the moral and spiritual state of the lover. In other words, while the initial fit between different essences—that is, the capacity of Y to help X become the X she is intended to be—is independent of the acknowledgment of the lover (her understanding, desires, etc.), for love to *actually* occur this ontological correspondence needs to be experienced by the lover. And here is where the active role of the lover is pivotal: the experience depends on the lover's openness to the selfhood of the beloved, which is a matter of the lover's moral and spiritual upbuilding. This brings us back to the *work* of love, which is crucial not only for interactions with those we are not naturally attracted to (because the initial fit is not

²² One may also wonder how my theory can be reconciled with the phenomenon of unrequited love. However, as already noted, the correspondence between essences does not necessarily imply the mutuality of (the same kind of) love. The correspondence at issue, as explained earlier, is in the sense that beloved Y is capable of helping lover X to become the X she is intended to be. This grounds X's love for Y. However, this does not mean that X is capable to *the same extent* of helping Y actualize Y's potential. In such a case, the correspondence from Y's point of view will be of different kind and may result in a love for X which is different from X's love for Y (say, in the kind of love typical of friendship as opposed to romantic love).

strong enough to be experienced spontaneously), but also for long-term romantic relationships, in the context of which we might grow blind to the essence of the beloved and to the way it corresponds with our essence.²³

Finally, although love for people functions in my theory as a condition for the achievement of the desirable states of self-realization and a fulfilled relationship with God, this does not make love for people a means to these ends. This is because love, as construed here, is provoked by nothing but the very encounter with the beloved. Love is a response to the beloved's essence, itself characterized by caring and compassion for the beloved and by joy in her presence. If the lover is motivated by a goal outside the very encounter with the beloved, then regardless of how valuable that goal may be, his love is in some way tainted, and may even no longer be love at all (because love, by definition, is focused on the beloved, not on the lover).

In other words, although it is indeed true that if our love is genuine and correct, we become a better version of ourselves and get closer to God, we do not, however, love *for the sake* of these things; we do not love *in order* to become a better version of ourselves or get closer to God. If we did, that would defeat the purpose because self-realization and getting closer to God are dependent on *correct* love, and correct love is provoked by the value of the beloved and motivated by things related to *the beloved*—not by the benefits for *the lover*.²⁴

As was demonstrated up until this point, we become the self that God intends us to be by *loving correctly* another person. This holds true with regard to *any* kind of love, including, not least, the romantic kind. Hence, even if not explicitly, *The Sickness unto Death* gives us the tools to appreciate romantic love as a spiritual

²³ See again chapter 2, section 2.5.

²⁴ Cf. Frankfurt's analysis of love as being an ultimate end that cannot serve a further goal (2004, 59–62).

phenomenon. In this sense, it succeeds where *Works of Love* fails. It allows us to straightforwardly and wholeheartedly, without ambivalence or reservation, affirm the value of romantic love.

7.3. The Nature of Romantic Love

At the root of love there is a meeting of essences: a self that encounters another self, a self that responds to the value of the other's selfhood. The lovers' essences correspond to one another, and it is the extent of this double correspondence that determines the kind of love that develops between them. However, while we *always* have a reason to love (as there is always *some* correspondence between our selfhood and the selfhood of any other person), the *kind* of love that we (as lovers) experience is a result of the extent and degree of the relevant correspondence.

Romantic love is experienced as particularly intensive: encompassing and overruling, it envelops the lover, and is characterized by an intense craving and longing for the presence of the beloved. Such intensity may inform a strong correspondence. Hence, as suggested earlier, given this intensity we may say that when the correspondence between essences is particularly strong, the love being provoked is romantic. But what *is*, exactly, romantic love?

Recall that taking Kierkegaard's identification between love and caring as our point of departure, I claimed that for caring to be *love* it is not enough that it be a compassionate response to the needs of the beloved: it must involve joy.²⁵ Love, then, is a response to the selfhood of the beloved that amounts to compassionately caring for the beloved for his own sake, and feeling joy in his presence. This is true regarding *any* instance of love, but different kinds of love are characterized by different kinds of joy. Hence, while that

²⁵ See again chapter 3, section 3.4.

which *constitutes* different kinds of love as different is the extent of the correspondence between essences, what *phenomenologically* distinguishes between the different kinds of love and accounts for their different *quality* and *character* is the kind of joy that typifies each.

The kind of joy that characterizes romantic love is what I call “erotic joy.”²⁶ My aim in this section is to explain what I mean by this.

Let me first offer a tentative conception of joy in general. I think we can agree that joy is a positive feeling. Phenomenologically speaking, in a state of joy there is an elevation of mind and body, an alleviation (even if only momentary) of distress or pain, a widening of the heart, and an awakening of the body. A state of joy excludes depression, boredom, or indifferent detachment. When one feels joy, one feels active, invigorated, attentive. One feels positively alert. One feels, in other words, alive. We can therefore say that joy is a feeling of attachment to the world and to life. It is an affirmation of the very experience of living, an intense feeling of vitality.²⁷

Now, there are many loci of vitality and vigor, which can be found in moments as various as experiencing the magnitude of nature or the sublimity of a work of art, when dancing or listening to music, engaging in an intellectual enterprise, or advancing an ideal or a cause. Among these, one particularly strong locus of vitality is sexuality. Sexuality is that “ingredient” that is usually associated with romantic love. Indeed, often it is this phenomenon—sexual desire and attraction—that is seen as the hallmark of romantic love, the element that makes a relationship *romantic*. Sometimes it is even conceived as the root of romantic love; as its starting point and

²⁶ The notion of Eros, of course, has a long history of different usages. Here I use it in the rather simple sense that aligns with the following description: “What characterizes *eros* in general . . . is an intense quasi-physical, even ‘grasping,’ affection for a particular person” (Solomon 1991, 494).

²⁷ Note then that my claim that different kinds of love are characterized by different kinds of joy amounts to claiming that different kinds of love makes us feel vigorous—engaged, “alive”—in different ways. I believe such a claim reflects our experience.

driving force.²⁸ However, without denying the importance of sexual desire to romantic love, I nevertheless believe that the conception of it as the impetus or hallmark of romantic love is mistaken.

To begin with, in my view romantic love is not rooted in sexual desire. Rather, as I explained, it is rooted in the correspondence between essences, and it is that correspondence that provokes, among other things, sexual desire. In this sense, in the context of romantic love²⁹ sexual desire is not the *basis* of this love but rather its *symptom*. We can think of sexual desire as the bodily manifestation of a spiritual attraction: the attraction of one divinely named person to another, a metaphysical attraction, or correspondence, of essences.³⁰ In other words, romantic love does not *originate* in sexual desire; rather, in the context of romantic love, sexual desire is the *result* (of a metaphysical correspondence), not the *cause*.

Further, sexual desire in itself is not enough to make a phenomenon romantic love. Not only are there cases of sexual desire that are not at all connected to love, but there can be cases of love, such as friendship, where the parties involved are sexually attracted to each other, and yet are “only friends.” In such cases, what is missing is the further layer of being “in love.” *This*, it seems to me, demands something stronger than a mere combination of friendship-love and sexual attraction. It demands, in my view, erotic joy.

²⁸ This, at least, is the folk conception of romantic love (although it is reflected also in philosophical discussions concerning the relation between romantic love and sexuality. See, for example, Jollimore 2019; Milligan 2011; Singer 1991; Solomon 1991). For my present purpose, this somewhat rough conception (that connects romantic love and sexuality) is accurate enough, as whatever subtler and more sophisticated views of romantic love we can find, sexuality is always a part of it. The same is true with regard to the conception of sexual desire, which I here regard as simply standing for a sexual interest in another person, without attempting to explicate it further. For a detailed and encompassing study of sexual desire, see Scruton 2006. See also Brown 1987; Halwani 2017; Nagel 1979; and Soble 2008.

²⁹ Obviously, sexual desire can be experienced independently of love. We can be sexually attracted to many people, but love only a few.

³⁰ Let me clarify that by claiming this I do *not* mean that there is only one person that romantically fits each of us. The strong correspondence at the root of romantic love is rare, but not that total.

True enough, sexuality is an important aspect of erotic joy. After all, sexual desire is the particular shape that the feeling of vitality—which is what joy is—takes in this context. However, erotic joy is nevertheless neither equivalent to sexual desire nor reducible to it. This is because erotic joy—the feeling of vitality that the lover feels in the presence of her romantic beloved—involves further desires, namely, the desire for intimacy and, relatedly, the desire for exclusivity. To put it differently, then, while the kind of joy that amounts to sexual desire alone is the kind of joy that we typically experience outside the context of love, the kind of joy that we experience *in the context of love* (of the romantic kind) necessarily includes the further desires for intimacy and exclusivity. The latter kind of joy is what I term erotic joy, and it is *this* kind of joy that makes love *romantic* (i.e., gives romantic love its special nature as romantic).

Intimacy with another person is a state of being close to him in a trusting way. It is to open up to someone who, for his part, is open to you. In the spirit of the ideal of resting transparently in God, we can say that intimacy with the beloved is to rest transparently in his loving gaze. The lover allows herself to relinquish her defenses, to let go of any pretense, to remove any mask, any disguise. She trusts her beloved to accept her despite her flaws, in spite of her weaknesses. Simply put, she allows herself to be *herself*—while wholeheartedly allowing her beloved to be *himself*.³¹

Such a mutual trustful disclosure, although a place of “rest,” is obviously also intensive and energy consuming: the two lovers are immersed in finding and accepting each other in their most exposed form. Accordingly, this is a confidential alliance that is a mutual enterprise of two, who create their own “private space” in which each knows the other and is known by the other. In this sense, intimacy implies exclusivity. The kind of connection established by

³¹ Note that such an understanding of intimacy supports the suggestion that in romantic love the correspondence between lovers—namely, their ability to help each other become who they are—is particularly strong.

the two intimates is for them alone. Establishing an intimacy of this sort with a third party is like breaking the alliance between them, darkening the transparency of their reciprocal “resting in each other,” by inserting something alien into the relationship.³²

The combination of these three related desires—sexual desire, the desire for intimacy, and the desire for exclusivity—constitute, then, what I call erotic joy. Together they create what I believe is the most distinctive quality of romantic love: the craving for the beloved’s presence; the intense yearning to simply be with him or her. Of course, as joy in the presence of the beloved is an essential part of any love (as here construed), *every* love involves a desire for the presence of the beloved to *some* degree. However, in the context of romantic love the longing for the beloved’s presence is particularly intense.³³ Indeed, here we can see how it is different from mere sexual desire. When loving romantically, the lover does not only want to have a sexual relationship with the beloved: she wants to spend time with the beloved, share experiences with him, share her life with him.

Hence, given the phenomenology of the joy unique to romantic love—the particular vitality that one experiences in the present of one’s romantic beloved—the best way to account for it (so I suggest) is in terms of the combination between the relevant desires. The kind of joy that makes love *romantic*—erotic joy—amounts, then, to sexual desire for the beloved, combined with the desire for intimacy and, relatedly, the desire for exclusivity. This joy is essential

³² In this sense, as a sexual relationship may create intimacy, we can understand why a beloved would feel betrayed if her lover embarks on a sexual relationship with another person. However, it should be emphasized that the claim regarding the connection between intimacy and exclusion is that a romantic relationship excludes inducing *the same kind* of intimacy with a third party. Romantic love does allow, of course, for inducing *other* sorts of intimacy (say, familial, or of friendship) with persons outside the romantic relationship.

³³ As beautifully depicted in mythological terms in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, where the longing for the beloved, and the deep disquietude and pain when the beloved is away, is explained by means of the beloved’s nourishing the feathers of the lover’s wings of the soul. (See *Phaedrus* 251–53.)

to romantic love, which means that if one is a romantic lover, one necessarily feels this kind of joy.

This, however, does not mean that erotic joy need be *constantly* felt. No lover feels this way *all* the time. We do not imagine Jane, for example, as persistently possessed by erotic longing for Edward. Even in the state of “falling in love,” the first and arguably most sexually infused stage of romantic love, one does not *consistently* feel erotic joy, let alone in the more advanced stages of a long-term romantic relationship. This is also true with regard to compassion (and to some extent even to caring). While love is constant, the emotions that are essential to it are—as emotions typically are—episodic.

Hence, to love X (romantically or otherwise) is to compassionately care for him and feel joy in his presence, but this does not mean that to be loving we have to feel compassion and joy (and be actively preoccupied with caring) in each and every moment. It suffices that we have, in each and every moment, the *disposition* to care and feel in this way. At the same time, there are instances of love that in themselves are short and episodic—for example, neighborly love for a stranger in the street—and hence cannot be dispositional in this way. I therefore suggest distinguishing between *bonds* of love and *interactions* of love.

When it comes to bonds of love, namely, love in the context of a long-term relationship, there will be moments, or phases, when one or more of the three elements will not be actively experienced. Nevertheless, as long as the three elements exist in one’s attitude to the other person—even if only in a dispositional state—this will be an attitude of love. One’s love is surely “alive and kicking” in those moments when all the three elements are experienced, but it is also “alive and kicking” in those moments when only some of its elements are experienced, and even at moments when none of them are actively experienced. As long as one has a disposition to care for one’s beloved with compassion and erotic joy, one, in my theory, is in love. Further, it may also be that there are phases in a

long-term relationship during which the disposition to feel erotic joy is stronger. But this does not mean that the phases when it is weaker no longer count as romantic love. Only when there is no longer *any* disposition to such a joy does love cease to be romantic (turning, say, into friendship).

On the other hand, when it comes to interactions of love—namely, love for a person with whom one does not have any special relationship—an attitude can be considered love only if the three elements of love are actively experienced. That is, for an attitude toward X to be love, when X is not related to one by any bond, one has to actively care for X, feel compassion for her, and feel joy in her presence (if only an existence-related joy). As I elaborated in chapter 5, this, although difficult, is in principle possible. We can love universally, that is, we can have an *interaction* of love with any given person. But it is only with a few that we will have *bonds* of love, and with fewer still a bond of romantic love.

7.4. Redeeming Romantic Love: Jane Eyre as a Test Case

7.4.1. The Correspondence of Essences

I feel akin to him—I understand the language of his countenance and movements: though rank and wealth sever us widely, I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him.³⁴

³⁴ Brontë 1994, 243. Two preliminary notes: first, the reading of the novel that I present here does not presume to engage with the many interpretations of the text that exist. As this is a project in philosophy and not in comparative literature, I allow myself the freedom to present my philosophically motivated and Kierkegaardian inspired reading, which is nonscholarly in the sense of being uncommitted to comparing and defending it in relation to other readings (with which, I must confess, I am unfamiliar). Second, as my goal in reading this novel is to substantiate my Kierkegaardian conception of romantic love from the perspective of emotional and lived experience (as it were), I give Brontë's vivid words their due, and quote them at length.

The basic storyline of Charlotte Brontë's canonical novel is well known but worth repeating in some detail. At nineteen years old, Jane Eyre, a poor and rejected orphan, is hired to be a governess and arrives at Thornfield, the house of the rich, sophisticated Edward Rochester, twenty years her senior. In spite of all social predispositions and expectations, they fall passionately in love with one another, and Edward proposes to her. However, in a dramatic anagnorisis, in the midst of their wedding ceremony Jane discovers that Edward is already married to Bertha, a severely mentally ill person, whom, given the lack of a more humane alternative and the risk that she poses to herself and others, Edward has been concealing in the attic. Despite Edward's desperate begging and heartfelt plea that he is trapped in a marriage that means nothing to him, Jane refuses to continue the relationship and flees Thornfield.

Traveling as far as the little money she has allows her, she finds herself in a small, desolate place, where, on the verge of perishing from hunger and exhaustion, she is rescued by three good-hearted siblings. The two lively sisters and their rigid brother welcome Jane into their home and their family. After some time passes, the brother, John, who is a priest, proposes that they marry—but not out of love. He sees in her the perfect companion to help him fulfill his intention of becoming a missionary, with the goal of traveling to India and helping the poor there. Jane is willing to travel with him, but not as his wife. For the second time in her short life she finds herself refusing an insistent marriage proposal, although for completely different reasons. Then, mysteriously, she feels that she hears Edward calling to her and decides to return to Thornfield; she needs to know his fate. She discovers Thornfield burned to the ground, set alight by Bertha, who was killed in the process, while Edward, in attempting to rescue her, was left blind and disabled. Thus reunited, the pair finally fulfill their enduring love for each other.

The intense attraction between Jane and Edward, immune to all the obstacles in the path to their union, is constantly described in terms of a strong attachment between two who are alike, and

suitable for each other. When Edward describes to Jane his fruitless search for a beloved, he stresses that “you are not to suppose that I desired perfection, either of mind or person. I longed only for what suited me,”³⁵ while of Jane he says:

You are . . . my better self . . . I am bound to you with a strong attachment. I think you good, gifted, lovely: a fervent, a solemn passion is conceived in my heart; it leans to you, draws you to my centre and spring of life, wraps my existence about you, and, kindling in pure, powerful flame, fuses you and me in one.³⁶

After their reunion, blind and disabled as he is, Edward seeks confirmation—“Jane suits me: do I suit her?”³⁷—and emphatically receives it: “To the finest fibre of my nature, sir.”³⁸ Jane, for her part, is indeed as delighted in their renewed togetherness as can be:

My spirits were excited. . . . There were no harassing restraint, no repressing of glee and vivacity with him; for with him I was at perfect ease, because I knew I suited him; all I said or did seemed either to console or revive him. Delightful consciousness! It brought to life and light my whole nature: in his presence I thoroughly lived; and he lived in mine.³⁹

The strong attraction between them is not only of minds but also of bodies. This is expressed in the novel only implicitly, but yet unmistakably. Generally speaking, the senses, the aesthetic, and worldly joys and pleasures play an important role in the text. As does, in particular, the physical presence of the characters. Jane is very perceptive, and as not only the protagonist of the story but also its

³⁵ Brontë 1994, 438.

³⁶ Brontë 1994, 444.

³⁷ Brontë 1994, 633.

³⁸ Brontë 1994, 633.

³⁹ Brontë 1994, 620–21.

narrator, she provides the reader with lively and detailed portraits of the different characters. Furthermore, what makes her portraits subtle and informative is that they always convey a sense of the relevant person's selfhood. One's bodily features and gestures are an inseparable part of who the person is. Take, for example, how she describes Edward after realizing that she is in love with him:

I looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking—a precious yet poignant pleasure; pure gold, with a steely point of agony. . . . My master's colourless, olive face, square, massive brow, broad and jetty eyebrows, deep eyes, strong features, firm, grim mouth—all energy, decision, will—were not beautiful, according to rule; but they were more than beautiful to me: they were full of an interest, an influence that quite mastered me—that took my feelings from my own power and fettered them in his.⁴⁰

Throughout the novel each character's physical appearance is presented as the embodiment of their essence; the observed, experienced aspect of their selfhood. Accordingly, the physical attraction between Jane and Edward—their erotic joy in each other's presence—is not a marginal ornament or minor addendum to their spiritual love but rather an essential part of it. It is both the result, and the expression, of the strong correspondence of their essences; of the perfect suitability of their selves.

Indeed, when it comes to John, despite his glaring beauty and high virtuousness, Jane does not see any possibility for romantic love between them (hence her refusal to marry him). There is a clear correlation between the lack of correspondence between their selves and the lack of romantic attraction. I will return to Jane's relationship with John shortly.

Now, as was suggested earlier (section 7.2), the correspondence between selves is not primarily a matter of psychological or mental

⁴⁰ Brontë 1994, 242–43.

correspondence. At its deepest level, the double correspondence between selves should be understood in terms of helping each other to become who one is intended to be, one's best self. This is evident in the attraction between Jane and Edward. For Jane, Edward is the person who awakens her: he vitalizes her, activates her strength, gives shape to her appetite for life, and nourishes the seeds of liveliness buried inside her. For Edward, Jane is the person he sees as his redeemer, the one who can help him become the better person he longs to be. Describing his meeting with Jane, he testifies:

Heart-weary and soul-withered, you come home after years of voluntary banishment: you make a new acquaintance . . . you find in this stranger much of the good and bright qualities which you have sought for twenty years, and never before encountered; and they are all fresh, healthy, without soil and without taint. Such society revives, regenerates; you feel better days come back—higher wishes, purer feelings; you desire to recommence your life.⁴¹

However, as was demonstrated earlier, the initial correspondence is not enough. To fulfill their potentials, it is not sufficient that Jane and Edward follow passively the spontaneous attraction rooted in the correspondence between their essences. To become the self each of them is intended to be, they need to love correctly. For their love to be spiritual—that is, the locus of resting transparently in God (by becoming who God intends them to be)—it must be moral.

7.4.2. The Morality of Love

The formal obstacle to Edward and Jane's marriage is his being already married to Bertha. However, given that divorce was not an option, and that his love for Jane was clearly known and

⁴¹ Brontë 1994, 305.

acknowledged by the latter, this obstacle may seem, especially to modern eyes, quite artificial and easy to remove. What harm would it do, and to whom, to live with Edward, despite his being already a married man? Given that this marriage was a mistake and evidently means nothing to him, why let it prevent their future happiness?

Edward himself, in his agony before Jane's stubborn refusal to stay with him, raises this question:

Is it better to drive a fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law, no man being injured by the breach?—for you have neither relatives nor acquaintances whom you need fear to offend by living with me.⁴²

Jane is torn. She loves Edward wholeheartedly, and understands his misery. She believes him and is not angry or resentful. She does not feel betrayed and does not question the sincerity and depth of his love for her. The last thing she wants to do is to leave him, but she feels obliged to—and she does. Why? The explicit answer given in the novel is that she takes living such a life to be a disgrace: “Your wife is living . . . If I lived with you as you desire—I should then be your mistress: to say otherwise is sophistical: is false.”⁴³ To be a mistress would injure her dignity and self-respect, and she suspects that eventually it will also make Edward respect her less.

However, I think that the novel also supplies (albeit implicitly) two other, deeper and more interesting, reasons for her refusal to fulfill their love under these circumstances. First, the offense committed by disregarding his marriage to Bertha is not primarily against a human law, but against a human being: Bertha. The problem is not so much disrespect for the marriage, but disrespect for her, his thinking of her with hate and regarding her

⁴² Brontë 1994, 447.

⁴³ Brontë 1994, 428.

without compassion. Edward detests Bertha and dehumanizes her. Contrasting Jane to her, he exclaims:

This young girl [Jane], who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon. I wanted her just as a change after that fierce ragout. . . . look at the difference! Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder—this face with that mask—this form with that bulk.⁴⁴

In calling her a “demon” and a “fearful hag,”⁴⁵ with “a nature the most gross, impure, depraved I ever saw,”⁴⁶ and describing her (regardless of her madness) as possessing a “pigmy intellect,” a nature “wholly alien to mine,” a taste “obnoxious,” and a mind “common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger,”⁴⁷ Edward fails abysmally in loving Bertha, not just as a wife but more importantly as a human being. Jane understands this. “You are inexorable for that unfortunate lady: you speak of her with hate—with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel,”⁴⁸ she says. And I believe that this is the real reason for her escape from Edward. Love cannot flourish on the back of a hateful debasement of another love. *This* is the moral failure that Jane is unwilling to accept.⁴⁹

Second, on a more symbolic level, Bertha, although an actual character in the novel, can also be understood as a reflection or representation of Edward himself. Bertha—pure drive, violent and dark, wild and unrestrained, a fire that consumes everything—is but an extreme version of an aspect of Edward’s selfhood.⁵⁰ This is

⁴⁴ Brontë 1994, 414.

⁴⁵ Brontë 1994, 423.

⁴⁶ Brontë 1994, 432.

⁴⁷ Brontë 1994, 431.

⁴⁸ Brontë 1994, 424.

⁴⁹ Recall the demand for universal love: one cannot love correctly one person unless one loves correctly all the others as well. (See again note 16.)

⁵⁰ In the same way that John—rigidly virtuous and principled—is an extreme version of an aspect in Jane’s selfhood. To borrow Nietzsche’s distinction between the Dionysian and Apollonian aspects in a person’s soul, and the need to reconcile them (see his *Birth*

also a part of his charm: of his passion, his strength, his warmth, his sensuality. Jane is (rightly) attracted to this. However, Edward is not reconciled with the “Bertha” element in himself that, in its extremity, is destructive, abhorrent, and offensive. He struggles with and is ashamed of it but nevertheless feels responsible for it. So he tries to repress it—locking it up in the attic of his soul, if you will—but it keeps bursting out. Jane’s refusal to tolerate this forces him—with much pain—to come to terms with it: he has “to be ground down into shape.” Bertha’s death, in this reading, is not an elimination of this element of his selfhood—this is impossible—but is rather a part of his “self-shaping.”

On both these levels, then, being married to Bertha posits a much deeper obstacle than a mere (religious or social) convention. It posits a genuine threat to the morality of their love. Whether it is, on the literal level, Edward’s offense against Bertha (by virtue of denying her humanity) or, on the symbolic level, Edward’s offense against himself (by virtue of denying the dark powers in his soul), Jane, as a genuine lover, cannot be complicit with this. If she would have agreed to love him on his terms, she would have helped him maintain these offenses, these denials. In which case she would have failed in her love: after all, genuine, correct, love is one that helps us to fulfill ourselves, not run away from ourselves. Hence, Jane indeed had no other choice but to act in the way she did. They both, then, had to renounce the relationship—as they do⁵¹—but

of Tragedy [1994]), we can say that both Edward and Jane strongly possess the two elements, but while in Jane’s the Apollonian element needs to be reconciled with the Dionysian in her, with Edward it is the other way round. Bertha and John, then, represent the extremes of the undesired state of being unbalanced. Ultimately, violent sensuality on the one hand, and cold rigidity on the other—the consuming fire of Bertha and the deadening freeze of John—both work against life. And indeed, neither Bertha nor John knows how to live in this world. Each, although in opposite ways, is detached from the world and seeks to quit it. In contrast to them, Edward and Jane each need to reconcile these two elements. Part of their correspondence is their mutual help in doing precisely that.

⁵¹ Inasmuch as resignation is a reconciliation with a loss, we can say that both Jane, and ultimately also Edward, make that movement: “I, in my stiff-necked rebellion, almost cursed the dispensation: instead of bending to the decree, I defied it. . . . Of late,

keeping their desire alive and being capable of hope and trust, they also receive each other back. When Jane returns to Edward, he tells her about an event that took place a few days before her arrival:

I longed for thee, Janet! Oh, how I longed for thee both with soul and flesh! I asked of God, at once in anguish and humility, if I had not been long enough desolate, afflicted, tormented; and might not soon taste bliss and peace once more. That I merited all I endured, I acknowledged—that I could scarcely endure more, I pleaded; and the alpha and omega of my heart's wishes broke involuntarily from my lips in the words,—“Jane! Jane! Jane!”⁵²

As for Jane, it is during the apex of her inward struggle over whether or not to acquiesce to John's request to marry him so that she can travel with him to India (a journey that she is certain will result in her death), that she receives the sign that prompts her to return to Edward: “I saw nothing, but I heard a voice somewhere cry—‘Jane! Jane! Jane!’”⁵³

7.4.3. Spiritual Romantic Love

“Jane, you would not repent marrying me—be certain of that; we *must* be married. I repeat it: there is no other way; and undoubtedly enough of love would follow upon marriage to render the union right even in your eyes.”

Jane—only—only of late—I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. I began to experience remorse, repentance, the wish for reconciliation to my Maker” (Brontë 1994, 634)

⁵² Brontë 1994, 635.

⁵³ Brontë 1994, 596.

“I scorn your idea of love,” I could not help saying. . . .
 “I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St. John,
 and I scorn you when you offer it.”⁵⁴

The two refusals—her refusal to marry Edward and her refusal to marry John—can be seen as diametrical. Whereas her rejection of the relationship with Edward is based on her respect for neighborly love, her rejection of the relationship with John is based on her respect for romantic love. The strong correspondence between her selfhood and Edward’s stands out against the lack of correspondence between her selfhood and John’s. She admires him, but cannot be herself in his company:

I felt daily more and more that I must disown half my nature, stifle half my faculties, wrest my tastes from their original bent, force myself to the adoption of pursuits for which I had no natural vocation. He wanted to train me to an elevation I could never reach; it racked me hourly to aspire to the standard he uplifted. The thing was as impossible as to mould my irregular features to his correct and classic pattern, to give to my changeable green eyes the sea-blue tint and solemn lustre of his own.⁵⁵

For this reason, the idea of becoming his wife is almost a horror to her:

I looked at his features, beautiful in their harmony, but strangely formidable in their still severity; at his brow, commanding but not open; at his eyes, bright and deep and searching, but never soft; at his tall imposing figure; and fancied myself in idea *his wife*. Oh! it would never do! As his curate, his comrade, all would be right. . . . I should suffer often, no doubt, attached to him only in

⁵⁴ Brontë 1994, 579–80.

⁵⁵ Brontë 1994, 565.

this capacity: my body would be under rather a stringent yoke, but my heart and mind would be free. I should still have my unblighted self to turn to: my natural unenslaved feelings with which to communicate in moments of loneliness. There would be recesses in my mind which would be only mine, to which he never came, and sentiments growing there fresh and sheltered which his austerity could never blight, nor his measured warrior-march trample down: but as his wife—at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked—forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital—*this* would be unendurable.⁵⁶

Unique to romantic love, we said, is erotic joy. Such a joy is characterized not only by sexual desire, but also by a strong sense of intimacy between lovers. There can be no intimacy in the relationship between Jane and John, because he does not allow her to be herself. He is indifferent and even contemptuous of her love of life, her passions, and her tenderness. He does not see any value in her talents, sensitivities, or aspirations. If correspondence between essences is a function of the beloved's helping the lover to become the self the lover is intended to be, then it is clear why Jane can never romantically love John. His cold and harsh rigidity results in the opposite of helping her to become her better self. Rather than furthering the actualization of her potential, he builds barriers against it.

John is a virtuous man, but he lacks any warmth or gentleness. He is a man of charity but not of compassion.⁵⁷ His brilliant sermons are also bitter and leave Jane with a sense of "inexpressible

⁵⁶ Brontë 1994, 578–79.

⁵⁷ When Jane recovers from her illness, she thanks John: "I know all your sisters have done for me . . . and I owe to their spontaneous, genuine, genial compassion as large a debt as to your evangelical charity" (Brontë 1994, 492) and John acknowledges the division: "I am quite sensible of the distinction drawn, nor do I resent it—it is just" (492).

sadness; for it seemed to me . . . that the eloquence to which I had been listening had sprung from a depth where lay turbid dregs of disappointment.”⁵⁸ It is clear that John’s religiosity is characterized by detachment from the world: he has no interest in earthly matters and perceives of worldly joys and loves as mere temptation and distraction:

The humanities and amenities of life had no attraction for him—its peaceful enjoyments no charm. Literally, he lived only to aspire—after what was good and great, certainly; but still he would never rest, nor approve of others resting round him.⁵⁹

John’s rejection of worldly existence, however, is not perceived as a model for genuine religious feeling, as Jane’s reservedness toward him indicates. She observes that he “did not appear to enjoy that mental serenity, that inward content, which should be the reward of every sincere Christian,”⁶⁰ and is repelled by his lack of compassion, which, she feels, verges on cruelty. Somewhat sarcastically, Jane observes:

He is a good and a great man; but he forgets, pitilessly, the feelings and claims of little people, in pursuing his own large views. It is better, therefore, for the insignificant to keep out of his way, lest, in his progress, he should trample them down.⁶¹

We can therefore say that *Jane Eyre* presents two alternative models for striving to “rest in God,” that is, two kinds of religiosity. One, that of John, consists of a rejection of life; the other, that of Jane, affirms life. And it is clear where romantic love resides. This kind of love, far from being an obstacle to spirituality (as it is viewed in the

⁵⁸ Brontë 1994, 498.

⁵⁹ Brontë 1994, 556.

⁶⁰ Brontë 1994, 497.

⁶¹ Brontë 1994, 591.

context of the first kind of religiosity), is rather the site where spirituality is achieved.

Reading *Jane Eyre* along the lines of my Kierkegaardian theory of individual essence, then, romantic love can be said to be redeemed from its poor reputation. As presented in *Jane Eyre*, romantic love has the power to redeem the lovers, exemplifying thereby the Kierkegaardian correlation between loving correctly, having faith, and becoming the self that one is intended to be. *Jane Eyre* is a classic Bildungsroman, but it is not only Jane who is built up. By virtue of loving each other, the two characters, Jane and Edward, become the best versions of themselves. As in *The Sickness unto Death*, *Jane Eyre* presents us with an ideal: an ideal of religiosity, an ideal of life, and an ideal of love. By the end of the novel we can say that the lovers “rest transparently” not only “in the power that established them” but also in their love for each other:

All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited . . . perfect concord is the result.⁶²

⁶² Brontë 1994, 640.

Conclusion

The Value of Romantic Love

Returning to the poem referred to in the introduction, we are now in a position to understand what it means to say that “every person has a name.”¹ And we are also in a position to understand what it means to be given a name: primarily by God, but no less crucially by one’s existence and acting in the world. And most significantly, we are in a position to understand how one’s name, while determined by God, is enacted and shaped by human love.

The picture portrayed throughout the book is a complex one: we were introduced to the distinctions and connections between individual essence in a potential state and its actualization in an individual persona; between invariable identity and changing “inscape”; between (one) potential selfhood and (many) different versions of self. However, in a way this picture is also quite simple and straightforward. It portrays love as an attraction which is rooted in the meeting between the individual essences—the selfhoods—of the lovers.

Love is a joyful compassionate caring, provoked in response to the value of the beloved’s individual essence: her selfhood, her name. Every person possesses selfhood, hence every person can provoke love: we can (and should) love any given person. However, the *kind* of love one feels for another is determined by the degree and extent of the correspondence between the essence of the lover and that of the beloved; a correspondence that is a function of the

¹ See introduction, section I.2.

ability of the beloved to help the lover fulfill the latter's potential. *Romantic* love occurs when the correspondence between essences is particularly intense.

However, a spontaneous incitement of love due to such a correspondence is only the beginning; for love to flourish and endure, work is needed. Correct love is achieved by a moral work of resignation and self-denial on the one hand, and affirmation and the ability to “receive back,” on the other. Such a double “movement”—in the form and structure of Kierkegaardian faith—secures love as both unselfish and universal. It ensures that we treat our beloved properly, and that our love for our preferred beloved does not hinder us from loving others; from loving (as a neighbor) *any* other. This double movement entails an openness to the selfhood of the beloved (romantic or other), and to both the strength and the vulnerability that his or her selfhood conveys. As a result, we are able to respond to the relevant beloved with a compassionate caring and joy. Further, it is the nature and type of joy we experience that distinguishes different kinds of love. In the case of romantic love, this joy is the sensual kind of joy that I termed “erotic joy.”

Loving correctly, according to my reading of *The Sickness unto Death*, is the path to actualizing our potential in the best possible way. Such an actualization is the path to becoming who God intends us to be, and hence to resting transparently in God. Loving correctly another human being, then, establishes the highest possible relation (at least in the context of this life) with God. This is true for *any* kind of (correct) love, but particularly so with regards to romantic love.

Romantic love, then, when structured in the double movement of faith and supported by it, is a moral and spiritual phenomenon. This love, no less than any other, enables us to become our best selves: in this sense, it has a redeeming power. By making the case for such a conception of romantic love, I hope that I have also made the case that the time has come for this kind of love *itself to be redeemed* from its inferior position in philosophy and religion.

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