

Love, Reason, and Will

Kierkegaard After Frankfurt

Edited by

Anthony Rudd and John Davenport

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For Jeanine and Robin, again.

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Preface

This volume had its origin in a conference on Kierkegaard and Frankfurt on love hosted by the Hong Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College in the summer of 2007. This conference was organized by Myron Penner and Søren Landkildhaus, who went on to assemble a collection of essays developed from some of the conference presentations, with further additions from other scholars. The result was the first version of the present collection in 2010, which benefited enormously from Søren's and Myron's editorial efforts to help contributors to hone and refine their essays. When life circumstances, including ministry and civic work, compelled Myron and Søren to focus on other projects, we agreed to take over editing this volume in 2013, and have worked to develop it further. But this book would not exist without Søren's and Myron's inspiration; they correctly perceived how fruitful a dialogue between Frankfurtian and Kierkegaardian themes could be on topics related to love and caring, and we have sought to stay true to their vision. Moreover, we would like to emphasize that we developed the Introduction to this book from Myron's initial draft. There is much of their loving efforts in this work, and we are all indebted to them.

This collection also follows, and to some extent builds on, provocative recent works on love in Kierkegaard and contemporary thinkers by Jamie Ferreira, Sharon Krishak, Sylvia Walsh, John Lippitt, and others. Literature on Kierkegaard and love continues to flourish, and we hope this collection will prompt further work on agapic love and other forms of interpersonal love. While many of the chapters in this book offer clear reasons for favoring Kierkegaard's conception of love, we have striven to give Frankfurt his full due, in the interests of provoking a helpful conversation; and we are certain that more scholarship informed both by Kierkegaard and Frankfurt on types of love will be forthcoming in the near future. May the conversation continue!

The Fullness of Faith: Frankfurt and Kierkegaard on Self-Love and Human Flourishing

Marilyn G. Piety

I. Introduction

Frankfurt asserts, in *The Reasons of Love*, that “[w]e are moved more naturally to love ourselves ... than we are moved to love other things” (RL, 81), yet he observes at the end of the book that genuine self-love is relatively rare. Is it possible that self-love could be both a powerful and natural impulse and also rare? This appears to be a contradiction, a contradiction that Frankfurt’s beautiful and otherwise illuminating book never resolves. I will endeavor to show that Kierkegaard provides us with a resolution to this contradiction. The problem appears to be one of motivation in that, as many contemporary psychologists would argue, we are moved naturally not only to love ourselves but also to hate ourselves. Kierkegaard agrees with Frankfurt that we are moved to love ourselves, but he assumes, as well, that we are often moved to hate ourselves, because we feel that we are less than we should be. Hence, rather than consistently willing our own flourishing, we regularly succumb to an inclination to punish ourselves for being less than we should be.

The reason, Kierkegaard would argue, that genuine self-love is both natural and yet rare is that while man was made by God to love himself, this capacity is impaired by sin. I will argue that, according to Kierkegaard, it is only when we feel loved by God that we can feel good enough about ourselves to love ourselves properly. That is, I will argue that it is only through faith, according to Kierkegaard, that we are able to love ourselves properly, and thus to love others properly.

II. Self-love

Frankfurt's examination of self-love begins with the observation that it is very often considered antithetical to morality, or to a genuine love of others. He cites Kant as one of the best-known philosophical proponents of this view. In order, however, to understand Kant's position on the apparent opposition between self-love and morality, we must look briefly at Kant's views on the nature of morality. Frankfurt explains that what concerns Kant about morality

does not arise from doubts as to our ability to identify which action, in the pertinent circumstances, the laws of morality prescribe. For Kant, that is the easy part. The serious problem in arriving at judicious moral evaluations of what people do lies, as he sees it, in the impenetrable obscurity of human motivation. (RL, 72)

"According to his account of the matter," continues Frankfurt, "there is only one way to earn real moral credit: namely by doing the right thing *because* it is the right thing to do. No action is morally worthy, he believes, unless it is performed with a deliberate intention to meet the requirements of morality" (RL, 74). Moral action must be motivated by an unalloyed desire to conform one's will to the substance of the moral law. If there is any admixture of things such as the desire to be viewed positively by others, or even a desire to avoid the pain of a guilty conscience, then the act is not genuinely moral. Unfortunately, as Frankfurt observes, for Kant,

[I]t is not our devotion to morality but our interests in following our own inclinations ... that uniformly enjoys the higher priority and that exerts the more conclusive influence on our conduct. We may tell ourselves – in what we suppose to be all sincerity – that our attitudes and our actions are, at least at times conscientiously designed to respond compliantly to the commands of duty. Kant suspects, however, that in fact they always respond primarily to the pressures of desire. It is our own desires that we care about most dearly. We are inextricably immersed in them, and it is invariably and most urgently by them that we are driven. Even when we do the right thing, we do it basically to satisfy our own impulses and ambitions, and not out of respect for the moral law. (RL, 76)

This fact, if it is a fact, appears to make it nearly impossible for people to be genuinely moral. It has been argued that Kant makes the demands of morality impossibly high. Kant appears, however, to be articulating what

is a pervasive, if not universal, intuition concerning the nature of morality. "Even children," observes Kant, "are capable of discovering ... the slightest taint of admixture of spurious incentives: for in their eyes the action then immediately loses all moral worth."¹ There is, in fact, widespread cynicism about how much of what passes for moral behavior is really concealed self-interest. There are even people who argue, like Glaucon in *The Republic*, that *all* of what passes for morality is really self-interest.² Yet, in defense of Kant, we seem unable to rid ourselves of the idea that there is something like a moral law that commands our respect and that is essentially distinguished from and sometimes even opposed to self-interest, at least in any straightforward sense. A study published in *Social Psychology Quarterly* showed that even self-proclaimed egoists have more respect for what they believe to be genuinely altruistic behavior than for egoistic behavior.³

There is some ambiguity, however, with respect to what constitutes self-interest, or self-love. "As I understand self-love," begins section five of the third and final chapter of *The Reasons of Love*, "it is quite unlike the attitude that Kant has in mind when he laments that we hold the self too dear. In speaking of those who love themselves, Kant describes people who are motivated predominantly by an interest in satisfying their own inclinations, and desires" (RL, 78). But this, he continues, is not really self-love, but only self-indulgence, and self-indulgence is not merely different from self-love, it is often opposed to it. "Genuine love for ourselves," he asserts, "like genuine love for our children, requires conscientious attention of a different kind" (RL, 79). Love, according to Frankfurt, has four main features:

First, it consists most basically in a disinterested concern for the well-being or flourishing of the person who is loved. It is not driven by any ulterior purpose but seeks the good of the beloved as something that is desired for its own sake. Second, love is unlike other modes of disinterested concern for people—such as charity—in that it is ineluctably personal. The lover cannot coherently consider some other individual to be an adequate substitute for his beloved, regardless of how similar that individual may be to the one he loves. The person who is loved is loved for himself or herself as such, and not as an instance of a type. Third, the lover identifies with his beloved: that is, he takes the interests of his beloved as his own. Consequently, he benefits or suffers depending upon whether those interests are or are not adequately served. Finally, loving entails constraints upon the will. It is not simply up to us what we love and what we do not love. Love is not a matter of choice but is determined by conditions that are outside our immediate voluntary control. (RL, 79–80)

Self-love, Frankfurt asserts, is actually "purer than other sorts of love because it is in cases of self-love that the love is most likely to be unequivocal and unalloyed" (RL, 80). That is, self-love appears to conform more closely "to the criteria that identify what loving essentially is" (RL, 80). Our pursuit of our own flourishing, he asserts, is almost never alloyed by any ulterior purpose. It is, in fact, difficult to conceive how it could be. To love oneself is to be devoted to a particular individual—that is, oneself—rather than to "an instance or exemplar of some general type" (RL, 81). Finally, not only can we not help but love ourselves, "[w]e are moved more naturally," Frankfurt asserts, "to love ourselves, than we are moved to love other things" (RL, 81). Such love, according to Frankfurt, "is deeply entrenched in our nature" (RL, 82).

III. The obscurity of interest

Frankfurt distinguishes between the common conception of self-love, which he argues is really just self-indulgence, and genuine self-love. Genuine self-love, he asserts, requires "conscientious attention" (RL, 79) to the true interests of the self, and these are often opposed to the immediate impulses the self is ordinarily inclined to indulge. To love oneself in the genuine sense, he asserts, is to be devoted to one's own interests and these, according to Frankfurt, are determined by what one loves. So to love oneself is simply to love what one loves. Thus it appears that "[p]eople cannot avoid loving themselves, as long as they love anything at all. If a person loves anything, he necessarily loves himself" (RL, 86).

"There are sometimes difficulties," Frankfurt observes, however,

in determining whether a person who loves a certain object is truly devoted to it. These difficulties arise from the fact that people may be divided within themselves, in a way that makes it impossible to say unequivocally what it is that they love and what they do not love. (RL, 87)

Frankfurt observes that "love is a configuration of the will, which is constituted by various ... dispositions and constraints" (RL, 87). There is no reason, he asserts, that these should always be transparent to the self. Thus, it is possible to be mistaken about what one loves. This is not a serious obstacle, according to Frankfurt, however, to genuine self-love.

A person who does not know what he loves, and who therefore does not know what his true interests are, may nevertheless demonstrate that he loves himself by making a determined effort to understand what is

fundamentally important to him—to become clear about what he loves and what that love requires. This does not imply any deviation from the principle that love requires a concern on the part of the lover for the true interests of what he loves. Being concerned for the true interests of his beloved surely requires that the lover also be moved by a more elementary desire to identify those interests correctly. In order to obey the commands of love, one must first understand what it is that love commands. (RL, 88)

But if genuine self-love is as simple as making a determined effort to understand what is important to oneself, why is it so rare? The problem would appear to come back to the division within the self. "In order," observes Frankfurt,

for a conflict of this sort to be resolved, so that the person is freed of his ambivalence, it is not necessary that either of his conflicting impulses disappear. It is not even necessary that either of them increase or diminish in strength. Resolution requires only that the person become finally and unequivocally clear as to which side of the conflict *he* is on ... [A]s soon as he has definitively established just where he himself stands, his will is no longer divided and his ambivalence is therefore gone. He has placed himself wholeheartedly behind one of his conflicting impulses, and not at all behind the other. (RL, 91)

To the extent that Frankfurt asserts a division in the will can be eliminated through sheer force of that same divided will, his position looks very much like the position that is often attributed to Kierkegaard by scholars such as Alasdair MacIntyre. That is, MacIntyre argues in *After Virtue* that Kierkegaard's primary contribution to the history of moral philosophy is the "discovery" that one can choose something, and presumably remain committed to that choice—for no reason. Yet, as I, and others, have argued, Kierkegaard does not really believe that it is possible to resolve a division in the will through nothing more than a resolution of that same divided will.⁴ There has to be a reason for choosing one thing over another.

The issue here is again identifying the true interests of the self. Frankfurt asserts that it is fundamental to genuine self-love that one be moved by an elementary desire "to identify those interests correctly" (RL, 88). He gives the example of a man who "is ambivalent with respect to loving a certain woman, part of him loves her, but part of him is opposed to loving her and he is undecided concerning which of these two inconsistent tendencies he wants to prevail" (RL, 92–93). That is, he is unsure concerning which tendencies, if

given free reign, would lead to his flourishing. Should he give himself over to this love, or should he resist it?

In order to make sense of this dilemma, let us assume some sort of obstacle such as a significant difference in age, or that one or the other, or perhaps both parties are already married. In the first instance, the man in question might fear that it would be unfair to saddle his beloved with what he views as the burden of his advanced age. But then the issue is no longer his flourishing, but hers. If he truly loves her and believes in love, then he must also believe that his age, no matter how advanced, would not be a burden to her, but that she would cherish every gray hair on his head and view their love as a blessing for which she could never be sufficiently grateful. His real concern is more likely that his age, as it became even more advanced, would at some point cause her to stop loving him and turn to a younger man instead. He tells himself that giving her up is the *right* thing to do when it is really only the *fearful* thing to do.

The situation is more complicated, of course, if the man's reluctance to give in to his love for this woman stems from the fact that one or the other, or perhaps both parties are already married. It would be an oversimplification to assert without argument that partners in a "good marriage" could not find themselves falling in love with someone who was not their spouse. Let us assume, therefore, for the sake of brevity that the man in question, while he loves his wife, is not happily married in the sense that the marriage is not contributing toward his thriving and that this failure is due either to factors over which his spouse has control but chooses not to exercise it or to factors over which neither spouse has any control, such as a general incompatibility of temperament or values that emerged only after the couple had married. Let us assume as well that the man has some evidence that the woman in question may reciprocate his affection.

In this situation, the man's reluctance to give in to his love for the woman who is not his wife may stem from a fear that she is interested in him only as a diversion. Here again we have his fears and insecurities masquerading as self-sacrifice on the altar of marital fidelity. Of if he has utilitarian proclivities, he may fear that their one union could not generate so much happiness as their two albeit imperfect, but at least undisturbed, unions. Such a fear makes sense, however, only if he assumes the rejected spouses would be irrevocably emotionally damaged and never again able to find even so much happiness as they have at present. Yet this, one could argue, is unreasonably pessimistic. People often find happiness again after a divorce, even at very advanced ages, and second marriages are typically happier than first marriages. To assume that one's spouse has little chance of being part of these statistics is to betray that one views her as particularly unlovable and the choice to remain with

a spouse of whom one has such an opinion cannot be an expression of a fundamental desire to correctly distinguish what is in one's own interest or what would lead to one's own flourishing.

Such considerations are, however, not normally those that create ambivalence in the heart of a prospective adulterer. Uppermost in the minds of such individuals, even ones in so unhappy a union as we are supposing here, is usually the concern that guilt over the betrayal of their spouse will be their psychological undoing. So the issue is not really one of thriving, but of simply surviving. If, on the other hand, the ambivalence stems from a fear of losing the emotional closeness to his present spouse on which he has, to a certain extent at least, come to depend, then again, this fear is nothing other than a lack of faith in love. That is, he fears his present spouse will withdraw affection permanently either because of his affection for this other woman (something over which he presumably has no control) or because of his desire to pursue this affection (which would presumably be an expression of his seeking his own flourishing). In either case, however, his present spouse emerges as singularly unloving, at least in his estimation of her. In the first instance, she condemns him for something over which he has no control and in the second instance she condemns him for pursuing his own happiness—something that if she loves him, she must be presumed to want. For him to expect such a reaction from his spouse to the revelation of his new affection is to betray that he has little faith in her love and the choice to remain with a spouse in whose love one has so little faith cannot be the expression of a fundamental desire to correctly distinguish what is in one's own best interest, or what will lead to one's flourishing.

There can be several reasons for such a lack of faith in a spouse's love. They would all appear to come down, however, to two fundamental problems—either a lack of faith that one is truly lovable (e.g., I better do whatever I can to hang onto what little affection I have now because I'm lucky to have even that and could lose all affection forever if I make a misstep) or a lack of faith in love (e.g., no one can really forgive such a betrayal; I will lose the love of my present spouse and will never again be adequate as an object of anyone else's love—not even that of the woman for whom my affection has created this dilemma).

A lack of faith in love and a lack of self-love start to look very much alike. And indeed, Kierkegaard would argue that they are inextricably linked. We cannot really understand where our true interests lie unless we are able to look at ourselves honestly, but most of us, Kierkegaard would argue, fear that we cannot withstand close scrutiny.

It is not merely erotic relationships, however, that highlight our lack of faith in love and how this manifests itself in our failure to love ourselves

genuinely. This lack can be seen as well in the relationship that is often presented as the ideal of a loving relationship—that between parents and children. “[P]arental love,” asserts Frankfurt, “and self-love are similar in the practically inescapable power with which they naturally grip us” (RL, 84). Yet truly selfless parental love is as rare as genuine self-love. The professions of both psychiatry and psychology have emphasized repeatedly that many of our emotional struggles are a result of our sense that the love we received from our parents was not unconditional, but came with a very specific set of conditions, most of which were not set with the objective of furthering our flourishing, but which stemmed from our parents’ struggles with their own feelings of not being good enough.

Rosina Wheeler Lytton, wife of the writer Bulwer Lytton, is reputed to have said that she did not like the company of her children, and did not know what people meant when they spoke of maternal affection.⁵ She is not alone. History is rife with accounts of parents who could barely tolerate the company of their children. Even parents who feel the strong instinctive affection for their children that we think of as normal and healthy often have to labor mightily to avoid letting the stresses of their own lives erode their relationships with their children and, consequently, erode their children’s self-esteem. It is one of our most cherished, and yet most destructive, fictions that parental love is so instinctive as to be essentially unproblematic. People naturally love their children, we think. The real problems arise in their relationships with people to whom they do not have these parental ties. Yet, I know a woman who despite being the best mother I have ever seen liked to take her infant daughter for walks because she felt that being out in public would mean someone would stop her if she tried to hurt her baby. She suffered from postpartum depression from which she eventually enjoyed a complete recovery. Many women, however, if we are to believe the statistics concerning child abuse, never recover from an almost hysterical sense of being trapped by and chained to their offspring.

Fathers, too, struggle with such feelings. And parents almost invariably impose upon their children expectations that have nothing to do with their children’s talents, abilities, drives and desires, and everything to do with the parents’ own feelings of inadequacy. I do not mean to suggest, as Phillip Larkin does in “This Be The Verse,” that we all suffer from wretchedly bad parenting and that we impose this curse on our children as well.⁶ I think it is relatively uncontroversial to claim, however, that most of us suffer from less than ideal parenting and that good parenting, even when it is not perfect, is the result not so much of instinctive forces as of repeated moral victories that are probably more numerous in our struggles to be good parents than in our struggles to love ourselves properly, because the former struggles are more

socially acceptable. Even here, though, we lose these struggles far more often than we are willing to admit.

Not only do we frequently force our children into molds better suited to our own ambitions than to theirs, the growing epidemic of childhood obesity suggests that we are as likely to confuse loving our children with indulging them as we are to confuse loving ourselves with indulging ourselves. We punish our children for failing to be the kind of people we think they should be and then try to make up for it by giving them things we know, or ought to know, are not good for them.

Such phenomena are inexplicable for Frankfurt. If parental love naturally grips us with an inescapable power, why do we so often fail to be sufficiently attentive to the genuine interests of our children? And if self-love grips us with this same inescapable power, why are we, by Frankfurt’s own admission, more inclined to indulge ourselves than to love ourselves in a genuine sense?

We know there is a difference between our immediate drives and desires and what is in our long-term interests, or the long-term interests of our children, and yet we continue to be divided from moment to moment concerning which should be given priority. If we are commanded, as Frankfurt observes, to love others as ourselves, then we need to be able to distinguish genuine self-love from self-indulgence and to pursue the former wholeheartedly. There are two problems here. The first is distinguishing what is genuinely in our interest, and the second is how to discipline ourselves to consistently pursue those interests once they have been distinguished.

The former, I would argue, should not be difficult. We know, for example, that our short-term drives and desires, such as those for immediate gratification, tend to frustrate our pursuit of goals that lead to our long-term flourishing. We know we are better off exercising than sitting in front of the TV, or eating a piece of fruit rather than a hot fudge sundae. We know we are better off pursuing a hobby such as painting or poetry than spending yet another night in front of the TV. We know we are better off tackling our “to do” list than spending the afternoon at the mall or watching football. We know these things not merely abstractly, but from experience. Who has not “wasted” time in a manner that precipitated brutal self-recriminations later? Who has never hurt a friend or loved one through impatience or indifference, regretted this injury bitterly, and yet found himself repeating it later? Many people, if one is to judge from the mental health professions, even slip into the *habit* of repeating such behavior, despite the fact that the memory of the injuries it causes is a source of almost constant torment.

The Greeks were familiar with this problem. They called it *akrasia*, weakness of the will.⁷ Naming it didn’t make it less mysterious though. The philosophical tradition, which at least in its Western instantiation abhors

mysteries as much as nature abhors a vacuum, fled from it, leaving it to psychologists and theologians to explain. Psychologists give us a reasonable explanation, which can be summarized as that the pain of low self-esteem is so acute we are driven to numb it with the opiate of immediate gratification.

This actually seems plausible, yet it is not entirely satisfactory, because it engages us in an infinite regress. Where did the low self-esteem come from? From one's parents. But where did they get it? From their parents. And so on it goes without anyone ever being able to explain, in a manner that is truly satisfying, how this bad parenting first got started. One thing is clear, however, and that is that, whatever the reason, we seem constitutionally unable to consistently conform our wills to what is in our own best interest, let alone to what is in the best interests of others. To put this problem in moral terms: we seem constitutionally unable to consistently conform our wills to what is our duty to ourselves, let alone to what is our duty to others.

IV. The incentive problem

The Judeo-Christian tradition has an explanation for our inability to conform our wills to what is genuinely in our own interest, let alone the interests of those we love: sin. Kant appears to accept this explanation but seems untroubled by it. There is, for Kant, a reason for choosing to conform one's will to the substance of the moral law: respect for that law appears to be inherent in human nature. Kant is aware, however, of what one could call the incentive problem. He describes this problem in his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. "A human being," observes Kant,

considers himself virtuous whenever he feels himself stable in his maxims of observance to duty—though not by virtue of the supreme ground of all maxims, namely duty, but [as when], for instance, an immoderate human being converts to moderation for the sake of health; a liar to truth for the sake of reputation; an unjust human being to civic righteousness for the sake of peace or profit, etc., all in conformity with the prized principle of happiness. However, that a human being should become not merely *legally* good, but *morally* good (pleasing to God) i.e., virtuous according to the intelligible character [of virtue] (*virtus noumenon*) and thus in need of no other incentive to recognize a duty except the representation of duty itself—that, so long as the foundation of the maxims of the human being remains impure, cannot be effected through gradual *reform* but must rather be effected through a *revolution* in the disposition of the human being (a transition to the maxim of holiness of disposition). And

so a "new man" can come about only through a kind of rebirth, as it were a new creation (John, 3:5; compare with Genesis, 1:2) and a change of heart. (Kant, 68)

"We cannot start out in the ethical training of our connatural moral predisposition to the good," Kant continues, however, "with an innocence which is natural to us but must rather begin from the presupposition of a depravity of our own power of choice in adopting maxims contrary to the original ethical predisposition; and, since the propensity to this [depravity] is inextirpable, with unremitting counteraction against it" (Kant, 70).

Of course, the Judeo-Christian tradition may be wrong in its assumption that we are fundamentally depraved in this way. We know from our own experience, however, that our motives are often mixed, and indeed that it is virtually impossible for us to become transparent to ourselves in a way that what one could call our "moral intuitions" would appear to require. So what hope is there that we could ever become truly moral? Why would we ever even try to be moral if we knew that in a certain sense, at least, we were doomed to fail? Some sort of change in our character appears to be required. But such change alone will not be enough. Kant is clearly correct in his claim that without confidence in this new disposition, "perseverance in it would hardly be possible" (Kant, 86).

Kant proposes a solution to the incentive problem that is charming in its optimism. "We can," he asserts,

find this confidence, ... by comparing our life conduct so far pursued with the resolution we once embraced. —For [take] a human being who, from the time of his adoption of the principles of the good and throughout a sufficiently long life henceforth, had perceived the efficacy of these principles on what he does, i.e., on the conduct of his life as it steadily improves, and from that has cause to infer, ... a fundamental improvement in his disposition: [he] can yet also reasonably hope that in this life he will no longer forsake his present course but will rather press in it with ever greater courage, since his advances, provided that their principle is good, will always increase his *strength* for future ones;⁸ nay, if after this life another awaits him, that he will persevere in it ... and come ever closer to his goal of perfection, though it is unattainable; for on the basis of what he has perceived in himself so far, he can legitimately assume that his disposition is fundamentally improved. (Kant, 86)

So there you have it—a solution to the incentive problem. Just be a glass-half-full optimist! So what if you continue to be morally imperfect, even after

you have experienced a revolution in your disposition such that you now have an unalloyed respect for the moral law. Even if you are still imperfect, you are a better person than you were before, right? And this suggests that you can expect to continue to improve morally. That's enough, isn't it, to ensure the "moral happiness" that, according to Kant, is equivalent to an "assurance of the reality and constancy of a disposition that always advances in goodness (and never falters from it)" (Kant, 85)? That is, a revolution in your moral disposition combined with subsequent moral improvement will be sufficient to motivate you to eradicate the division in your will so that only the desire for conformity with the moral law, or what it may be more helpful in this context to identify as our duties to ourselves and others, remains. A little moral improvement goes a long way for Kant.

A little improvement in our disposition is far from sufficient, according to Kierkegaard however, to encourage us to continue our efforts at moral improvement. Such improvement will not rid us of the consciousness that we are not so good as we should be. Not good enough to earn God's love, not good enough to meet the unconditional demands of the moral law. If we are so fundamentally flawed, what incentive do we have even to aspire to consistently pursue the good in the sense of what is genuinely in our interests? What incentive do we have to strive for wholeheartedness when we know we will inevitably fail to achieve it? Not only do we know we will inevitably fail, we must on some level feel that we do not even deserve to succeed. Even if we have some success in improving our behavior, or character, we will still be far from meeting the absolute demands of the moral law, far from deserving God's love. Indeed, God's love, "the forgiving love," asserts Kierkegaard, "which does not want, like justice, to make the guilt manifest but on the contrary wants to hide it by forgiving and pardoning; ... makes the guilt more frightfully manifest than justice does!" (WA, 173). Thus we sink deeper and deeper into the abyss of self-recrimination.⁹

Frankfurt asserts that our pursuit of our own flourishing is almost never alloyed by any ulterior purpose and that it is even difficult to conceive how it could be. Kierkegaard would argue, however, that this is not at all difficult to conceive. It would appear, in fact, that our pursuit of our own flourishing is almost *always* alloyed by an ulterior purpose—that is, by the purpose of obscuring from ourselves how short we fall from the moral ideal. Frankfurt acknowledges himself that most of what passes for self-love is actually self-indulgence and self-indulgence does not lead to the flourishing of the self. On the contrary, it more often than not is an obstacle to such flourishing. Yes, we have an interest in our own flourishing. Yes this is something that we will. The difficulty is that our will is divided. We will our own flourishing, but to do this effectively would involve exposing ourselves to closer self-scrutiny than we

fear we can bear. We flee from the awareness of our own inadequacy into the refuge of immediate gratification of both the sensual and the psychological (or egoistical) sort. We seek pleasure. We equate being "good" to ourselves with indulging our immediate inclinations. We give ourselves permission to do things we know are not good for us. We eat more than we should, and the wrong kinds of food. We "rest" rather than exercise. We spend more money than we make. We abstain from political life and spend what free time we have on ourselves rather than on helping others. We encourage those we love, including (and often most especially) our children, to do things we think will reflect positively on ourselves rather than to actualize their specific potential for genuine happiness.

Often, however, our failure to love ourselves rightly is not obviously an expression of self-indulgence, except to the extent that it can be characterized as an indulgence of our fears. Often it is more properly viewed as an avoidance of pain than as a pursuit of pleasure. That is, self-love, in the negative sense, can also appear in the form of cowardice. We can be so afraid of social censure, or censure from those we love, that we come to care more for maintaining the appearance of propriety (our bird in the hand) than for pursuing what would genuinely make us happy (the elusive bird in the bush). We can be so afraid to lose the love of those we love that we endeavor to acquiesce in their every wish. At the same time, however, that we do these things, we are aware, according to Kierkegaard, on some level that those are precisely the things we should not be doing.¹⁰ If we construe "self-gratification" broadly so that it involves both self-indulgence in the positive sense of the pursuit of pleasure and in the negative sense of the avoidance of pain, then we can say that the more we pursue self-gratification, the more we come to despise ourselves, the more we need the opiate of self-gratification to dull the pain of self-loathing. So while on one level we think we are being good to ourselves, on another level we know we are punishing ourselves for not being so good as we feel we should be. That is, we allow ourselves to descend into a vortex, or abyss, of self-gratification because we think we deserve no better than this kind of existence. The more we ignore our true interests in favor of our immediate sensual and egoistical desires, the harder it is for us to do anything else.¹¹ We find ourselves actualizing Kierkegaard's observation in "Three Upbuilding Discourses" that "the punishment of sin breeds new sin" (EUD, 68).

Thus Kierkegaard's references to "self-love" often appear to equate it with self-indulgence in the manner that Frankfurt says is so common. He observes, for example, that the reason the lower class was just as indignant with Christians was the upper class was that "each was pursuing his own interest and wanted him to join them in self-love" (WA, 59). That is, the interests referred to here are clearly not the genuine interests of the self. They are the interests

of selfishness, of the self that has sunk into the abyss of self-gratification. The association between self-love in this sense and selfishness is so close in many of Kierkegaard's works that the Danish "*Selvkiærlighed*," which translates literally as "self-love," is sometimes translated as "selfishness," as is the case, for example in the following passage from the Hong's translation of *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*: "[C]owardliness is mistaken for sagacity with a generally esteemed common sense that secretly is selfishness" (EUD, 355).

This self-love is not genuine self-love, though, according to Kierkegaard. When Christ said we were to love our neighbors as ourselves, he was not advocating that we should endeavor to indulge our neighbors' every wish, that we should make efforts to ensure that their desires were gratified just as immediately as we wish our own to be gratified. The self-love that is the foundation of Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, is very different from what people ordinarily understand by "self-love."

V. The fullness of faith

"The commandment," writes Kierkegaard in *Works of Love*, "said, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'; but if the commandment is properly understood it also says the opposite: *You shall love yourself in the right way*" (WL, 22). "When the light-minded person," he continues

throws himself almost like a non-entity into the folly of the moment and makes nothing of it, is this not because he does not know how to love himself rightly? When the depressed person desires to be rid of life, indeed of himself, is this not because he is unwilling to learn earnestly and rigorously to love himself? When someone surrenders to despair because the world or another person has faithlessly left him betrayed, what then is his fault (his innocent suffering is not referred to here) except not loving himself in the right way? When someone self-tormentingly thinks to do God a service by torturing himself, what is his sin except not willing to love himself in the right way? And if, alas, a person presumptuously lays violent hands upon himself, is not his sin precisely this, that he does not rightly love himself in the sense in which a person ought to love himself? (WL, 23)

Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, presupposes that no one knows how to love himself in the sense in which a person ought to love himself. We are all conscious, quite independently of Kant, of how short we fall of the moral ideal. We are too conscious of this, it would appear, for us

to feel we deserve to flourish in the sense in which it would be possible for us to flourish if we loved ourselves rightly. Most of us cannot even conceive of what it would mean to love ourselves rightly because we are too preoccupied with finding ways to deaden the pain of what we take to be our unworthiness.

Frankfurt is right when he says that genuine self-love requires "conscientious attention" to the true interests of the self. The difficulty is that such attention is profoundly problematic. How can we look at ourselves honestly when it is just such a view of ourselves from which we so often want to flee? Not only is it clear that we are often, if not always, ignorant of what it would mean to love *ourselves* properly, it is similarly clear that we do not know how to love *others* properly, not even those we do, in fact, really love. "If your beloved or friend," writes Kierkegaard, "asks something of you that you, precisely because you honestly loved, had in concern considered would be harmful to him, then you must bear a responsibility if you love by obeying instead of loving by refusing a fulfillment of the desire" (WL, 20).

We fear censure from those we love, so we give them what they want, even when we know, on some level, that it is not what is best for them. To the extent that we really love them, we earnestly desire their flourishing, but fear of losing their love will often lead us to sacrifice their true interests to our immediate need for their approval. Our will is divided. We want what is best both for ourselves and for others, but we also need to feel loved. Our persistent sense of our own inadequacy makes the need to feel adequate so urgent that it often obscures our better judgment. This explains Kant's observation, paraphrased by Frankfurt that, "[i]t is not our devotion to morality but our interests in following our own inclinations ... that uniformly enjoys the higher priority and that exerts the more conclusive influence on our conduct" (RL, 76).

"Being concerned for the true interests of his beloved," asserts Frankfurt, "requires that the lover also be moved by a more elementary desire to identify those interests correctly" (RL, 88). But is the husband who sacrifices the love of his life on the altar of fidelity to a dysfunctional marriage motivated by a desire to identify anyone's true interests correctly? Is the wife who knowingly accepts such a sacrifice? Is the parent who forces a child into a profession such as law or medicine, on the grounds that art or music will not pay the rent, moved by a desire to identify anyone's true interests correctly?¹²

According to Kierkegaard's retelling of the story of the incarnation in *Philosophical Crumbs*, God, or "the god," as he is referred to throughout much of this work, resolves to become a human being in order to communicate his love for human beings, or for "the learner," the person who would receive the gift of faith. "But just as love is the reason," asserts Kierkegaard, "so must

love also be the goal ... The love must be for the learner and the goal must be to win him, because only in love are the different made equal, and only in equality or unity is there understanding."¹³ The "understanding" that comes from faith is thus not simply that God is love, but that one is loved by God. Thus Christ says "love one another as I have loved you."¹⁴ We learn what genuine love is, including genuine self-love, from the example of God in the person of Christ. That is, we come to understand love, according to Kierkegaard, when we feel loved by God.

Is it possible, asks Kierkegaard, for anyone to misunderstand the injunction that appeared originally in Lev. 19:18 that we should love our neighbor as ourselves "as if it were Christianity's intention to proclaim self-love as a prescriptive right? Indeed, on the contrary, it is Christianity's intention to wrest self-love away from human beings" (WL, 17). That is, it is Christianity's intention to wrest the tendency to self-gratification, or self-indulgence, away from human beings. To the extent, however, that the tendency is necessary in order for us to be able to live with the pain of our sense of not being worthy of genuine love, the only way to wrest the tendency away from us is to effect a radical transformation in the way we feel about ourselves. Kant was right. So long as the will is divided, moral goodness "cannot be effected through gradual *reform* but must rather be effected through a *revolution* in the disposition of the human being" (Kant, 68). This revolution is effected, according to Kierkegaard, by faith.

According to Kierkegaard, if we believe God appeared in human form, lived among us, and suffered and died for us, we cannot help but believe that he loves us. If we believe that God loves us, then we will feel loved by him and if we feel loved by God, we cannot help but feel that we are lovable. This is Kierkegaard's insight. If we feel we are lovable, despite being morally imperfect, then and only then can we believe that we deserve to flourish, then and only then can we will to love ourselves rightly. If we feel we are lovable despite our failings, we can look those failings squarely in the face and resolve to be better people out of sheer gratitude for the love we feel, just as the child who feels genuinely loved by his parents resolves out of gratitude to be worthy of that love.

For Kant the issue is how we are to maintain faith that we can succeed in a project in which we have reason to believe we cannot help but fail. The situation for Kierkegaard is a little more complex and hence more interesting. Indeed, Kierkegaard actually anticipates insights of the later psychiatric profession in his view that not only do we fear we cannot succeed, we feel we do not deserve to succeed. We punish ourselves for what we feel is our fundamental unworthiness by systematically undermining our efforts to ensure our own flourishing.

According to Kant, what is needed is a revolution in one's disposition that amounts to what one could call a radical reordering of our priorities so that the desire to be "*morally good* (pleasing to God)" takes precedence over all other desires. For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, the new man is properly characterized not as one who desires to be pleasing to God so much as one who has faith that he is pleasing to God. It is, Kierkegaard would argue, only when one believes he is loved by God and thus, by inference, is inherently lovable, that he can love himself properly—that is, will his own flourishing.

Faith solves the problem posed by Kant in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* of how one is to motivate himself to conform his will to the demands of the moral law given his obvious inability to achieve the perfection the law demands. That is, to the extent that faith enables us to love ourselves properly it encourages us to focus on our moral successes rather than on our moral failures and thus transforms us from glass-half-empty pessimists to glass-half-full optimists.

Kierkegaard would agree with Frankfurt's claim that self-love requires "conscientious attention" to the true interests of the self and that these are often opposed to immediate inclination. Kierkegaard has an explanation, however, for why self-indulgence so often passes for self-love. According to Kierkegaard, the effect of sin on human consciousness not only makes us unable to love ourselves properly, but even to understand what that would mean. Kierkegaard's is a dogmatic, Christian position, yet it coheres more closely with ordinary experience than does Frankfurt's position in that it accounts for the fact that, as Frankfurt observes, himself at the end of the book, genuine self-love is rare.

There is no genuine self-love, according to Kierkegaard, without faith. Kierkegaard may be wrong, of course. It may be that the whole story of the incarnation is only that—a story. Given, however, that, according to Kierkegaard's interpretation, this story resolves the mystery of why genuine self-love is so rare, it offers a more coherent account of our experience than does Frankfurt in *The Reasons of Love*. Given that it recognizes the division in the will, which Frankfurt acknowledges so often plagues us, but does not propose the paradoxical solution that we can eliminate this division through a resolution of that same divided will, it offers a more coherent solution to the problem of eliminating that division than does Frankfurt. Perhaps it is only a story. It is a story, though, that is rich with promise, a story that holds out the hope that we can attain a kind of happiness, a kind of flourishing that we glimpse now only dimly.¹⁵ So perhaps even if we cannot know whether it is more than a mere story, it demands our conscientious attention.

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Notes

- 1 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 69.
- 2 *Republic* 358e--359c. Such a view has often been attributed to Hobbes. See, for example, David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 296-97. I am indebted, for this latter reference, to the editors of this volume.
- 3 Brent Simpson and Rob Willer, "Altruism and Indirect Reciprocity," 37-52.
- 4 Cf., for example, M. G. Piety, "Kierkegaard on Rationality," 59-74.
- 5 This remark was recorded by Lady Elizabeth Stanhope (*née* Greene) in a manuscript entitled "Miss Green's Recollections" in the collection of Knabworth House, Hertfordshire. It is quoted by Leslie Mitchell in her book *Bulwer Lytton*, 68.
- 6 Philip Larkin, "This Be The Verse," 2, 223.
- 7 Cf., for example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII.1-10.
- 8 It is interesting to note that Kant sounds very much like Aristotle here when the latter asserts in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that virtue is the habit of acting virtuously. That is, the more often one behaves virtuously, the easier such behavior becomes. It thus "makes no small difference," asserts Aristotle, "whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference" (II.1). I do not mean to suggest that there is no difference between Kant's position and Aristotle's, but only that their positions are perhaps much closer than the philosophical tradition generally acknowledges. Cf. also Aristotle's claim in Book III that "the exercise of appetite increases its innate force" (II.12).
- 9 Cf., *ibid.*
- 10 Cf., for example, WA, 182, on how "a person cannot hide his sins from himself"
- 11 Cf., note 8.
- 12 It is perhaps important to acknowledge here that instances such as these can also be described as attempts at storming the walls of moral perfection rather than as instances of moral cowardice. That is, such a husband,

or parent, endures the excruciating pain of sacrificing the immediate happiness that comes with the fulfillment of erotic desire, or with the vision of a child's joy and loving gratitude, for what he often thinks to himself is the greater good of doing his duty. That is, such a husband, or parent, may fear the censure of doing his duty. That is, such a husband, or even more than the censure of society, or of those he loves. If this is, in fact, what a person takes to be his motive for such self-sacrifice, then, I would argue that his is nothing other than the case of the person who, according to Kierkegaard, "self-tormentingly thinks to do God a service by torturing himself" (WL, 23).

- 13 Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, tr. M.G. Piety, 101.
- 14 Jn. 13:34. Emphasis added.
- 15 Cf. 1 Cor. 13:12.