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SELF-LOVE, EGOISM,  
AND THE DISTINCTNESS  
OF PERSONS

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RICHARD MORAN

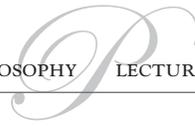
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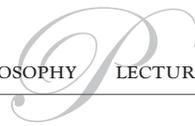
ABSTRACT

The dominance of “self-love” is often taken to be the main obstacle to moral motivation. In this lecture I examine a famous argument from Bishop Butler against the “self-love hypothesis.” I aim to show that his argument depends on clarity about the difference between the object of a desire (what it aims at) and the subject of desire (the person whose desire is in question). This allows us to see a common theme in related arguments from Rawls on benevolence, Scanlon on well-being, and Sartre on the structure of consciousness. In their different ways, they are diagnosing a similar error of perspective, that in thinking about human action and its sources, philosophers tend to adopt a second-order perspective on the agent and then project that external point of view back into the description of the perspective of the agent themselves. A further problem is that the very idea of self-love would seem to entail that here loving and being loved are simply one and the same, which would exclude the various ways that love of another seeks recognition or reciprocity. This helps explain the observation of the poet James Richardson that ‘self-love’ is a “strange name, since it feels neither like loving someone, nor like being loved.”

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# Self-Love, Egoism, and the Distinctness of Persons

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THE DESCRIPTION OF INDIVIDUAL HUMAN LIFE as essentially driven by self-interest has a remarkably robust existence in both Eastern and Western traditions of thought. Many moral traditions see egoism or self-regard as the main obstacle to human goodness, part of our fallen condition and something that we must continually combat in ourselves. On such a view, our basic concern with ourselves is not simply one human failing among others (such as cowardice or coldness or stupidity) but rather the root problem with human life, at the bottom of all our other inadequacies. It is an idea represented in certain Greek and Roman traditions in the ancient world, heavily thematized in Christian thought, and prominent in later thinkers from Bentham to Sidgwick to Iris Murdoch.<sup>1</sup>

An Egoist assumption appears in several different guises, and this variety is no doubt part of the reason for its widespread acceptance. To begin with, it may be said that in everything that we pursue, what we ultimately pursue is our own satisfaction. In this thought, the contrast with any possible concern for *another* person is left largely implicit. This contrast

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1 This is thematic in Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good*: "In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego. Moral philosophy is properly, and in the past has sometimes been, the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat. In this respect moral philosophy has shared some aims with religion" (52). Later she says: "That human beings are naturally selfish seems true on the evidence, whenever and wherever we look at them, in spite of a very small number of apparent exceptions. . . . Even its loving is more often than not as assertion of self. I think we can probably recognize ourselves in this rather depressing description" (78–79).

with others is made explicit in the further thought that throughout our lives we *prefer* the satisfaction of our own desires and interests to those of anyone else. This thought in turn can be given a more explicitly evaluative form in the claim that we take our own happiness to be more important than anything else (including the happiness of any other people). In this version we may be described as under the illusion of the greater “objective value” of our own well-being over that of other people and other aspects of the world. A different but related idea is the psychological-explanatory thesis is that the only consideration that can *move one to act* is the satisfaction of some desire of one’s own, where ‘desire of one’s own’ is assumed to mean ‘desire for one’s own gratification or pleasure’. This psychological thesis is sometimes expressed as the claim that our love for ourselves is *stronger than* any other passion and is the source of all our other (secondary) passions. And from the thought that we can only find something valuable or worth pursuing insofar as we see it as contributing to the gratification of our self-interest we can arrive at a metaphysical claim about the nature of value, viz., that value itself is a matter of projection on to the world, the source of such projection being the passion of self-interest or self-love.

However, when spelled out in any of these ways we can see that the egoistic assumption is really rather distinctive, and not really just the simplest or most encompassing explanation of why we do what we do. For one, this assumption pictures us as exclusively focused inward on ourselves and the gratification of our desires, rather than focused outward on the world and its attractions and its dangers. Sometimes this is true of course. When we are cold we seek the fire because it warms us, not for any value intrinsic to fire itself. So there can indeed be an implicit reference to ourselves in the pursuit of something external to us, and in this case we value the fire only insofar as it gratifies our own internal need for warmth. But it is quite another thing to argue that this is true quite generally of all of our pursuits. We may also aim at success in various projects, from planting a tree to the solution of a problem or the downfall of some local tyrant. It is far from obvious that all such pursuits are at bottom for the sake of improving one’s own condition, as when one is drawn to the fire for the sake of one’s own warmth, but the Egoist will tell us to look more closely and not take these appearances at face value. Chiefly, of course, the point of the Egoist hypothesis is in the contrast between the possibilities of seeking our own good and seeking the good of some other person. One of the most familiar versions of the claim is that we are bound to seek our own good in

everything we do, and the occasional appearances of acting for the good of someone else or some impersonal good can ultimately be explained egoistically. In thinking about this claim, it will be important to understand the Egoistic hypothesis as a thesis about the possible *objects* of a person's desires, cares, or concerns. Any desire at all will of course be *some person's* desire, but the distinctive claim about human motivation in Egoism is that *the object* of any person's desire (what the desire aims at or is for) must itself be that person's own satisfaction and self-interest. And this is claimed to be true of even the aims and aspirations that seem most plainly focused not on oneself but on something found independently valuable or even the benefit of some other person.

Despite its apparent ubiquity, then, this is not an innocuous assumption about ordinary human action. One way to see this is to note that the thesis asserts a severe restriction on what a person could pursue for its own sake, that is, the things someone could care about and pursue which are not merely instrumentally pursued for the sake of something else. On the Egoistic assumption, while there is patently a tremendous variety of things that different people might value and pursue for their own sakes (fame, revenge, twelve-tone music, raw shellfish or other strange appetites), the idea that the good of another person could be among these diverse aims is seen as beyond the pale of human possibility and something that could never be pursued for its own sake, apart from some ulterior motive for self-advantage. But when considered from the point of view of the panorama of human appetites and pursuits, it seems arbitrary to exclude the good of another person as sometimes an ordinary part of this great variety, as one more possible object that some people pursue non-instrumentally. A related problem with the assumption of Egoism to mention at the beginning is that, as Hume notes, it is not at all difficult to imagine the *harm* or the undermining of another person as something pursued for its own sake, quite apart from any instrumental benefit to oneself. It should therefore seem arbitrary in a further way to insist that while the harm of another person can be something directly aimed at this is not possible with respect to the good of another person.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*: "Who sees not that vengeance, from the force alone of passion, may be so eagerly pursued, as to make us knowingly neglect every consideration of ease, interest, or safety; and, like some vindictive animals, infuse our very souls into the wounds we give an enemy?" (92).



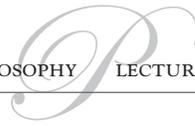
WE CAN DISTINGUISH three basic ideas connected with Egoism. One is the empirical claim, presented as an observation about human life. The thought here is that the immediate object of any action is the gratification of self-interest or self-love, rather than the interest of anyone else. Of course, no one denies that someone can act on instrumental reasons that are secondarily concerned with another person's benefit, but that will only be so when the other person's benefit is believed to serve one's own self-interest. On this view, beneath the appearance of an action aimed directly at the good of another person can always be found the gratification of "the dear self."<sup>3</sup> The *maximes* of La Rochefoucauld are inexhaustibly inventive within this interpretive scheme, the imperative to look beneath the benign surface.<sup>4</sup> And the Egoist will want to have a general hermeneutics like this at hand, to explain away apparent counter-examples. For, as an empirical claim about human life, this form of Egoism will need to be supported by evidence, and it will have to be very strong evidence indeed since it presents itself as a claim about *all* human life and action. Hence the need for an understanding of "self-love" that is capable of concealing itself beneath the surface of more "respectable" motives. Indeed, this is something that the early Sartre complains of in La Rochefoucauld and other "self-love moralists."<sup>5</sup>

According to them, the love of self—and consequently the me — lies concealed within all emotions in a thousand different forms. In a very general way, the me as a function of this love that it bears for itself, would desire for itself all the objects it desires. The essential structure of each of my acts would be a reference to myself. The "return to me" would be

3 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:407: "From love of humankind I am willing to admit that even most of our actions are in conformity with duty; but if we look more closely at the intentions and aspirations in them we everywhere come upon the dear self, which is always turning up."

4 See, for example: "We are so thoroughly biased in our own favour that, most often, what we take for virtues are really only vices which resemble them, and which self-love has disguised from us" (La Rochefoucauld, *Collected Maxims and Other Reflections*, IV: 172, p. 173). And: "What men have called friendship is merely social contact, consideration for one another's interests, and exchange of favours; in fact, it is simply a transaction in which self-love always expects to gain something" (v: 83, p. 27).

5 Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*.



constitutive of all consciousness. . . . La Rochefoucauld was one of the first to have made use of the unconscious, without naming it. For him, self-love conceals itself under the most diverse forms. It must be ferreted out before it can be grasped.”<sup>6</sup>

Here Sartre points to something essential to the entire topic that will concern us when we continue with Bishop Butler on “self-love,” and take up John Rawls on benevolence, and T.M. Scanlon on the idea of “well being,” which is the difference between a desire or an act *being mine* and a desire or act being *about me*, or directed at myself. In the background of La Rochefoucauld and other “self-love moralists,” we see the assumption that any desire is essentially focused inward, on the gratification of the person whose desire it is, rather than on the ostensible external objects of desire. And from this perspective it appears that the ostensible external object is not in fact something desired for its own sake but rather something pursued as the means to the end of gratifying one’s own self. This is a reversal of the naïve or “outward” perspective of the agents themselves, a reversal which is especially useful to the “self-love moralists” for the purpose of unmasking of any purported concern with the lives of others, or any other good thing beyond oneself. In Sartre’s terms, “this first moment of desire is not considered a complete and autonomous moment. They have imagined another state behind it which remains in a half-light: for example, I help Peter in order to put an end to the disagreeable state into which the sight of his sufferings has put me.”<sup>7</sup> This familiar interpretive move contains a considerable irony in the fact that it is our vanity that is appealed to in this presentation of the Egoistic claim. No one wants to appear superficial or self-satisfied about their own motives, so it will be prudent at least to publicly accede to the assumption that behind all one’s actions is an essentially selfish motive since then one may at least be spared the accusation of moral posturing or self-deception.

When the egoist tells us to “look closer” at our own motives to find the root of self-love hidden there, he is in fact encouraging us to view all our pursuits as ultimately aimed inward rather than outward on the things we take ourselves to be pursuing. On the surface it may seem that we pursue certain things because of something worthwhile we see in *them*, but in fact they are all only pursued as means to something else, the gratification of the self. From

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6 Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, 55–56.

7 Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, 56.

the perspective of the person themselves the focus may be on some objective to be realized, for reasons connected with what is found valuable in *it*, whereas from an external perspective on the person the so-called “objective” only matters insofar as it contributes to the condition of the person themselves.<sup>8</sup> This outside perspective on the person’s act is then projected on to the person themselves. In Sartre’s terms, “the essential structure of each of my acts would be a reference to myself. The “return to me” would be constitutive of all consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> As mentioned, the empirical claim of egoism, the claim that as a matter of fact every action aims at the gratification of self-love, is a very strong claim and therefore particularly vulnerable to any counter-evidence. Hence it will be invaluable to the “self-love moralist” to appeal to a general hermeneutics of suspicion that can apply anywhere and could never be disproved, since that would involve proving a negative. As Kant says in a related context, “Who can prove by experience the nonexistence of a cause when all that experience teaches is that we do not perceive it?”<sup>10</sup> The point raised by Sartre here is that what this really amounts to is an illusion created by a shift between two perspectives on action and not anything supporting the empirical version of the Egoist claim.

A second notion of egoism is presented not as an empirical observation but as a normative or rational principle of action.<sup>11</sup> This is a claim about what is *worth* pursuing or what people have genuine reason to pursue. Rational Egoism says that a person only has reason to act in the pursuit of self-interest, what is good for themselves. Any other motive is contrary

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8 This reversal of direction in the understanding of desire, such that we only act to put an end to an internal state of discord, and not for the sake of anything external to ourselves, can be found in Schopenhauer and has resonances with themes in Stoicism and Buddhist thought. I examine these in connection with Proust and Freud in “Swann’s Medical Philosophy.”

9 Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, 55.

10 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:419: “One still cannot show with certainty in any example that the will is here determined merely through the law, without another incentive, although it seems to be so; for it is always possible that covert fear of disgrace, perhaps also obscure apprehension of other dangers, may have had an influence on the will. Who can prove by experience the nonexistence of a cause when all that experience teaches is that we do not perceive it? In such a case, however, the so-called moral imperative, which as such appears to be categorical and unconditional, would in fact be only a pragmatic precept that makes us attentive to our advantage and merely teaches us to take this into consideration.”

11 It is this view that is the target of Korsgaard in “The Myth of Egoism.”

to reason. As a normative claim about what people have reason to do, Rational Egoism would have to be supported in a very different way from the claim of Empirical Egoism. It would have to be supported not by the evidence of human behavior but rather by reflection on reasons connected with what is genuinely valuable in life, what is worth pursuing for its own sake.

Philosophers and others don't always keep distinct these two ideas, or if they do, they may disagree about their relation to each other. With regard to Hedonistic Egoism, we could imagine someone like Socrates agreeing in general with the Empirical claim, that people relentlessly pursue their own pleasure, but lamenting this fact because he thinks the Rational case for Hedonistic Egoism is illusory, that personal pleasure is *not* exclusively valuable. The teaching of Socrates is based on the hope that if we were clearer about the illusory nature of the Rational claim for Hedonistic Egoism, we would mend our ways and our actions would be less likely to provide evidential support for the Empirical claim for Hedonistic Egoism. Another philosopher, perhaps John Stuart Mill, might take the behavioral evidence for the Empirical claim (the thought that "people do generally pursue their own happiness") to be support for at least a limited version of the Rational or Normative claim (roughly: the best evidence that something is desirable is that people in fact desire it).<sup>12</sup> And a philosopher who supports the Rational claim about self-interest will have no trouble admitting exceptions to the Empirical claim, that is, actions which are directly aimed at something other than one's own self-interest, since these actions would simply be among the familiar instances of human irrationality.

A third possible variant of Egoism is in a sense closer to Joseph Butler's actual target but is harder to formulate since it involves shuttling between a focus on the Object of desire and the Subject (or source) of desire. What we may call 'Conceptual Egoism' says: "It just doesn't make any sense to talk about any motivation that isn't basically egoistic or self-interested. It's not possible or even conceivable for a person to act on any other kind of motivation." This is neither an empirical claim nor a rational, normative one. Rather it is a claim about the

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12 Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, ch. 4, para. 3: "The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it."

*conceivability* of action that is not motivated by self-interest. It is easily mistaken for either an empirical claim or a normative claim, and it is sometimes presented as a confused combination of the two. But in so far as it is a genuine claim about what is *conceivable* it would have to be supported in yet a different way, not by empirical evidence about human behavior, and not by reflection on what is truly valuable or worth pursuing, but by philosophical reflection on how we make sense of human action generally, or what it is to have a motive or aim.

Are any of the above claims true? Here we need to recall the difference between the source or the Subject of some desire (whose desire it is) and the Object of that desire, what it aims at or is satisfied by. And along with this we want to bear in mind the difference between two senses of the word 'satisfaction'.

We speak of a *person* being satisfied or not, where we mean something like the person being *pleased*, or feeling the relief of quenching their thirst. This sense of 'satisfaction' is a subjective *state of the person*, something the person experiences. Often, a person may feel pleased or satisfied when they get the thing that they want (or, importantly, when they merely *think* they are getting what they want). On the other hand, a person may pursue something, like fame or power, and *succeed* in this aim, and yet not themselves be satisfied, not be pleased at all but rather be disappointed. When they attain the thing desired they may come to see that it is in fact empty and vain.

We also speak of the *desire* itself being satisfied or not. This is a formal, or definitional characterization of a relation between desire in general and what it aims at. A desire has an object, it is a desire *for* something, and when that object is realized we say the desire is satisfied. A desire for fame or power is satisfied by gaining fame or power. The desire here may be satisfied (realized, comes true) although the person themselves may not experience pleasure or satisfaction.

What we are calling 'Conceptual Egoism' is a claim about what kinds of *objects* of desire it is possible or conceivable for a person to have. It claims that it is not possible for one's object of desire to be the good of another person but must always be a desire for one's own satisfaction. It tells us that even when it looks as though someone is motivated to pursue some good concerning something beyond themselves (possibly including the happiness of some other person), they are really motivated to gain satisfaction for themselves.

Take a simple example: someone wants to help a stranger in difficulty to get across the street. This person has a desire, and that desire has an *aim* or an *object*. In this case the aim is to help the stranger get safely across the street. If the person then *achieves* their aim, *realizes* the object of their desire, we could say: they got what they wanted. The Conceptual Egoist will say at this point: this shows that *any* action, even one apparently other-directed like this, is ultimately an egoistic one. Even an action of helping the stranger across the street is ultimately done for the sake of personal gratification, or for the pleasure that it gives the person (perhaps in the thought of “doing a good deed”), and not for the sake of something else *not* referring to oneself, such as the good of the stranger getting safely across the street. Or, in Sartre’s words: “I help Peter in order to put an end to the disagreeable state into which the sight of his sufferings has put me.”

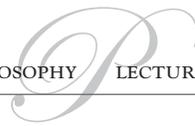
But this conclusion doesn’t follow at all. The debate about egoism is: Can or should a person act on any other aims or values other than egoistic ones? Can people or should people act for the sake of an aim other than their own personal advantage? That’s the point at issue. The person defending egoism cannot *assume* the truth of egoism in this argument to prove his point. That would blatantly beg the question at issue. The non-egoist will reply: When a person helps a stranger across the street it certainly *looks* as though one of the reasons they did so is that they thought the stranger needed help and that it would be a good thing if they got across the street safely. The natural thing to say is that these were among the reasons the person had for doing what they did, reasons which motivated them to do that thing. What they were *aiming* at here seems to be some good, some value, connected with the stranger.

This doesn’t look any different from any other action a person performs. The person sees some good thing to be pursued and they go for it. The good things to pursue in life are quite various: food and drink, friendship, creative achievement, raising a child, sex, status, whatever. *These* things are the objects we pursue, because we find them good in one way or another. And for many of them, we pursue them for their own sake, just because we find them good in one way or another, and not because they are good for something else, a means to some other thing that we are pursuing. So, the non-egoist will say: What reason is there to think that helping a stranger across the street is not an ordinary case like these? Getting the stranger safely across the street is seen by the person as a good thing, and so they go for it.

It is here that the egoist may reply: “Sure, but if the person *achieves* their aim of getting the stranger across the street, then they *got what they wanted*, didn’t they? That’s why they did what they did. And that shows that the person did it to satisfy their own aims, and hence that the project was all along an egoistic one, to gratify their own self-interest.” In this reply, everything in the Egoist reply is true but for the last clause, beginning with “and hence the project was all along an egoistic one.” It is another form of begging the question for this is to simply *assume* that any time a person achieves their aim, that shows that the aim was an egoistic one, a matter of self-interest. But that is the very point at issue here, and the egoist has not given any reason to deny that the good that the person was pursuing was the good that relates to the stranger, the good of getting them safely across the street.

The egoist here is arguing as though the simple fact that a person succeeds in what they aim at shows that *what* they are aiming at is something egoistic, some personal advantage. But that would only follow if we *already* agreed that the only thing a person can really aim at or pursue is their own advantage rather than any other value (in particular, the value of another person’s benefit). And that was the original point of *disagreement*, and so far the egoist has not given any reason at all to think that people don’t actually pursue many different kinds of good and that some of them concern the good of *other* people or things of impersonal value.

A desire aims at some object. The attainment of the object of desire is the *satisfaction* of that desire, no matter what kind of desire it is. This is just true by definition of what a desire is. But it doesn’t say anything about what the different possible *objects* of desire might be. That is, it doesn’t say anything about whether all objects of desire are ways of getting some good for oneself, or whether some objects of desire concern the good of other people or something else valued for its own sake, whether out of deep concern or as a mere whim. We could consider the debate in the following way. A person has many different aims, and pursues many different kinds of thing: money, creating music, family life, revenge, helping the stranger across the street. The conceptual egoist might say: “But see, they are all *their own* aims, right? So that shows that they are all forms of self-interest, because if these aims weren’t *their* aims they wouldn’t pursue them.” Here again, the egoistic interpretation simply doesn’t follow. True (by hypothesis) these are all the aims of *this* person, and if they were not their own aims then they would not pursue these objects. But that says nothing about what the different *objects of desire* might be. As we started out saying, the person has many different



aims, and what is aimed at may be many different kinds of thing, quite possibly including the good of another person or some impersonal value.<sup>13</sup>

In this debate, the tendency to oppose ‘egoism’ to something called ‘altruism’ obscures a simple truth. ‘Altruism’ suggests radical self-sacrifice, the discounting of one’s own needs, which may indeed be the rare exception in human life. But that isn’t because most of us are essentially egoists. Rather, we are creatures who pursue the different things we take to be worthwhile in various ways, and not only for the subjective experience of our pursuits being satisfied (we also pursue aims we don’t expect to live to see realized). And among the various things that we pursue as good, it is perfectly ordinary for there to be the pleasure, the convenience, the interest or the flourishing of some other person we care about. The word ‘altruism’ suggests a kind of selflessness, and in this way it is a concession to egoism and what is confused in it to think of the alternative to egoism as ‘altruism’ or something involving the overcoming of the Self and its particular cares and concerns.<sup>14</sup> But nothing in the considerations so far motivate a restriction on the possible objects of desire or self-interest, such as would rule out the possibility of another person’s good being what the Self directly desires for its own sake. Here, in realizing the happiness of another person the Self is not overcome but rather gains the satisfaction of one of its aims.

One general lesson to be drawn from this dialectic is that the tendency to beg the question in favor of the egoistic hypothesis is encouraged by a failure to remain clear about the difference between the question of what the possible objects of one’s affection or desire might be (that is, what they may be directed upon) and the question of the Subject of affection or desire (that is, whose desires it is that are at issue here). The egoist silently inserts the Subject of desire into the description of the Object of desire and concludes that the Subject itself can be the only Object of its own desires.<sup>15</sup> The picture presented is one in which every human

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13 Feinberg, “Psychological Egoism,” makes effective use of the distinction between the “satisfaction” experienced by the person (a psychological notion) and the “satisfaction” of the desire itself (a logical notion) in his critique of the case for psychological egoism. Thanks to Alexander George and Nishi Shah for drawing my attention to this article.

14 This seems to be the relation between Iris Murdoch’s endorsement of egoism as an empirical claim about human nature and her recommendation of a project of “unselfing” (*The Sovereignty of the Good*, 82).

15 Recall Sartre on “reflection”: “The essential structure of each of my acts would be a reference to myself.

action is not only the action *of* a particular person but were also *about* that person, primarily concerned with the state of that person. The first is a purely logical point, while the second is a controversial claim about what sorts of things can be pursued for their own sake. This difference between a formal point (that any desire or action is some person's desire or action) and a claim about the possible aims of action is at the heart of Joseph Butler's famous argument concerning "self-love." Early in the Sermon xi he paraphrases this very confusion in order to distance himself from it.

And if, because every particular affection is a man's own, and the pleasure arising from its gratification his own pleasure, or pleasure to himself, such particular affection must be called self-love; according to this way of speaking, no creature whatever can possibly act but merely from self-love; and every action and every affection whatever is to be resolved up into this one principle. But then this is not the language of mankind."<sup>16</sup>

One thing to note about this passage is that here Butler speaks loosely on behalf of his opponent when he says "the pleasure arising from its gratification [is] his own pleasure". Once we distinguish satisfaction of the aim (a logical notion) from satisfaction of the person (a psychological notion), we should note that the "pleasure arising from its gratification" (that is, the satisfaction of the desire itself) is by no means always followed by the man's own pleasure. We are often disappointed when we get what we want. However his main point here is that in our ordinary language we distinguish between a purely selfish motive to gratify our self-love, on the one hand, and other motives which aim at some external thing or other that is found worth pursuing, which might include the good or harm of another person. And indeed the pertinence of the Egoist's thesis depends on this contrast. These different desires are all equally "a man's own" particular affections, but to say this much only refers us to the Subject whose affection it is and does not tell us what the Object of that affection must be. Clarity about this distinction enables us to see that the Egoist has failed to establish their claim, but at this point in the argument the result is still a negative one to the effect that

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The "return to me" would be constitutive of all consciousness.... Thus, without even realizing it, the self-love theorists suppose that the reflected is first, original, and concealed in the unconscious. There is scarcely need to bring to light the absurdity of such a hypothesis" (*The Transcendence of the Ego*, 55–57).

16 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, xi, para. 7.

nothing in our understanding of ordinary self-interested human motivation should make the concern for another person's welfare seem anomalous or unnatural, along with a diagnosis of the tendency of the Egoist to beg the question.

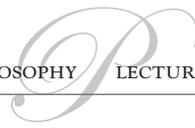
However, while developing from this distinction, Butler's main argument seeks to establish a stronger thesis to the effect that it is simply *not possible* that the gratification of our self-love is the only thing we pursue directly or for its own sake. This is the topic of Sermon XI, which he summarizes in the Preface:

Besides, the very idea of an interested pursuit, necessarily presupposes particular passions or appetites; since the very idea of interest or happiness consists in this, that an appetite or affection enjoys its object. It is not because we love ourselves that we find delight in such and such objects, but because we have particular affections towards them. Take away these affections, and you leave self-love absolutely nothing at all to employ itself about; no end or object for it to pursue, excepting only that of avoiding pain.<sup>17</sup>

The point is that gratifying our own self-interest (or "self-love"), like the gratification of anyone else's interest or happiness, presupposes that we have some independent idea of what the interest or happiness of that person consists in. We may presume for purposes of argument that a person's happiness or self-interest consists in the attainment of their aims, the success of their projects, in short "getting what they want". (Of course, we may doubt that a person's happiness or well-being simply consists in getting what they want, especially if this omits any reference to what is objectively good or harmful to them, but we are arguing on the terrain of the egoist here.) To the extent that a person's happiness consists in "getting what they want" then, if we are to promote that person's happiness, we must presume them to

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17 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, Preface, para. 37. Butler's Sermons were first published in 1726. David Hume makes a closely related point in the appendix on "Self-Love" in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, published in 1751: "If I have no vanity, I take no delight in praise: If I be void of ambition, power gives me no enjoyment: If I be not angry, the punishment of an adversary is totally indifferent to me. In all these cases, there is a passion, which points immediately to the object, and constitutes it our good or happiness; as there are other secondary passions, which afterwards arise, and pursue it as a part of our happiness, when once it is constituted such by our original affections. Were there no appetite of any kind antecedent to self-love, that propensity could scarcely ever exert itself; because we should, in that case, have felt few and slender pains or pleasures, and have little misery or happiness to avoid or to pursue" (92).



want certain things and to want to avoid others. This is what Butler means by his reference to “particular passions or appetites” or what he sometimes calls “particular affections toward particular external things.”<sup>18</sup> Happiness, or whatever we take the object of self-love to be, is a generic description of the good for some person, but one that tells us nothing about what that good may consist in. If we understand happiness in a way that accommodates the egoist framework (i.e., in terms of the satisfaction of one’s desires) we must of course presume the existence of these desires, including an understanding of what they aim at. Butler’s point is that the egoist assumption that each person aims exclusively at their own happiness is either empty or incoherent. For it is incoherent to claim that everyone aims *exclusively* at their own happiness, if that is understood to exclude aiming at anything “particular” or “external” the attainment of which part of their happiness could consist in. And, on the other hand, it is empty to claim that everyone aims at the attainment of what they happen to aim at, for that would not exclude anything at all from the possible *objects* of a person’s aims or desires, and certainly not the good or the harm of *another* person.<sup>19</sup> In short: “So that if self-love wholly engrosses us, and leaves no room for any other principle, there can be absolutely no such thing at all as happiness, or enjoyment of any kind whatever; since happiness consists in the gratification of particular passions, which supposes the having of them.”<sup>20</sup>

The comparison of egoistic concern for oneself and benevolent concern for another person helps us to gain a wider perspective on Butler’s point here. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls makes the case for his Contractualist framework for thinking about justice by way of a critique of Utilitarianism, and the way that Utilitarianism (or any Consequentialism) gains plausibility by framing the question from the perspective of an imagined Ideal Observer. The idea of the perspective of an Ideal Observer is meant to model our interest in impartiality,

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18 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, xi, para. 8: “On the other hand, particular affections tend towards particular external things: these are their objects: having these is their end: in this consists their gratification: no matter whether it be, or be not, upon the whole, our interest or happiness. . . . An action proceeding from any of the latter has its denomination of passionate, ambitious, friendly, revengeful, or any other, from the particular appetite or affection from which it proceeds.”

19 In the Preface, Butler says that the aim of the eleventh discourse is “to show that benevolence is not more unfriendly to self-love, than any other particular affection whatever” (*Fifteen Sermons*, Preface, para. 35).

20 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, xi, para. 9.

and the idea of morality or justice as transcending the interests of any particular person and seeking to reconcile different interests when they conflict. A crucial turn in Rawls' argument takes place in section 30 ("Classical Utilitarianism, Impartiality, and Benevolence"), which is where he makes the famous charge that "The fault of the utilitarian doctrine is that it mistakes impersonality for impartiality."<sup>21</sup> On the page leading up to this he makes an argument about the benevolence that is assumed as part of the make-up of the Ideal Observer which is parallel to Butler's argument about egoism: "A perfect altruist can fulfill his desire only if someone else has independent, or first-order, desires."<sup>22</sup> The benevolent concern for another person seeks, among other things, the success of their aims and aspirations, for them to realize their dreams, to obtain the things they most desire. (I say 'in part' because regarding a person I love I will also be concerned that their desires and cares and concerns are worthy of their care and concern, and not just take their happiness to consist in obtaining whatever they happen to desire). If so, then my benevolent aim to promote the well-being of this person presumes some answer to the question of just what their aims and aspirations are. It is these that I want to promote as part of their well-being. If I asked this person themselves and were told simply "I want my own life to go as well as possible," I would not have an answer to my question. As Rawls puts it, benevolence (or love of this form) is a "second-order" attitude and to have a target it presumes the existence of first-order desires, interests and cares on the part of the person whose well-being is to be promoted.<sup>23</sup> What Rawls says about the "perfect altruist" is analogous to Butler's claim about the "perfect Egoist" especially if such "self-love" is seen as analogous to benevolence as applied to oneself. The perfect egoist as well must presume the existence of their own first-order desires, cares and concerns if there is to be anything to seek to promote or give priority to. The egoist cannot have desires exclusively

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21 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 166. A couple of pages earlier he writes: "The approvals of the impartial sympathetic spectator are adopted as the standard of justice, and this results in impersonality, in the conflation of all desires into one system of desire" (164).

22 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 165.

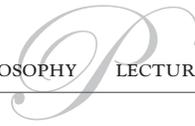
23 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 167: "The reason why the situation remains obscure is that love and benevolence are second-order notions: they seek to further the good of beloved individuals that is already given. If the claims of these goods clash, benevolence is at a loss as to how to proceed, as long anyway as it treats these individuals as separate persons."

for their own well-being because well-being or self-interest are second-order notions that presume the existence of first-order cares and concerns directed at something other than one's own self-interest.

If we think of the benevolent Ideal Observer as concerned with the overall quality of people's lives we must contend with the fact that the "quality of their lives" is also a second-order notion. What the individuals themselves are concerned with are various things they take to be independently worthwhile, and not merely insofar as they contribute to the overall quality of their lives. To a large extent, the point of view of the people themselves is focused on the particular pursuits and the particular people they care about, not how they contribute to the overall quality of their lives. Their interests, aims and desires are in the first instance directed at the "particular" "external" things that Butler refers to, and indeed there would be no content to the idea of "the quality of their lives" apart from these.

In this sense, the perspective of the Ideal Observer is "external" to that of the people themselves, not only in the sense of transcending individual interests as before, but also in the sense of taking those interests themselves in a purely subjective, self-regarding sense. It is in this sense that these interests are to "count" in the overall assessment the Ideal Observer makes of the state of affairs (how happiness or personal satisfaction is promoted and distributed). We can call this perspective "external" because it is focused on how things are *for that person*, considering them from outside their own perspective which is normally directed outward at their different pursuits and the people they care about.

*This* contrast between the point of view of the Ideal Observer and that of the people themselves has less to recommend it than the first contrast, from which the "externality" of the Ideal Observer is seen as broader, more encompassing than that of any individual, a way to model impartiality. In thinking about morality or justice we can see some independent appeal in adopting a perspective of the Whole, transcending that of any particular individual. But there is little independent appeal in adopting a perspective on my own life such that all my cares and pursuits matter to me solely for how they contribute to my "quality of life." Here it is almost as if the moral philosopher, in adopting the model of the Ideal Observer, establishes a framework from which all our cares and concerns are considered in a self-regarding way, subjectively and egoistically, so that then a purely Impersonal alternative seems the only escape from this unflattering picture of ourselves.



In his discussion of the place of “well being” in moral thought, Scanlon draws the crucial distinction in a way that lines up with the concerns of Butler and Rawls.

Concentrating on well-being also has the effect of transforming all a person’s aims into what appear to be self-interested ones. This point might be put by noting that there are two ways in which the idea of “the good for *p*,” where *p* is some individual, might be understood. In the first, broader sense, “the good for *p*” includes all those things that *p* has reason to aim at and to value—“the good,” from *p*’s point of view. But “the good for *p*” can also be understood in a narrower sense in which it includes things just insofar as they are *good for p*, that is to say, insofar as they benefit *p* by making his or her life better.<sup>24</sup>

Scanlon’s “narrower” sense of “the good for *p*,” marks a shift from a first-order “outward looking” perspective of the ordinary agent to a second-order perspective *on* that person and their cares and interests themselves.

The benevolent concern of the Ideal Observer is a second-order perspective with respect to the agent’s own point of view on the various things (including particular other people) they care about. In seeking to promote the good of the individuals under the gaze of the Ideal Observer there is a tendency to make just the confusion that Scanlon identifies, between “the good as seen from that person’s point of view” to “what is good *for that person*.” This is to place the Subject of desire or interest within the scope of the Object of any desire or interest.

The failure to keep track of this difference encourages taking the “external” point of view of the Benevolent Observer and reading it back into the perspective of the agents themselves, so that they are conceived of as exclusively concerned with what is good for themselves. As we have seen, benevolent concern is second-order, meaning that it must presume the existence of first-order cares and concerns on the part of the agents who are the objects of such benevolence. Of course, as Scanlon points out, it is not exactly *false* to say that it is

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24 Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 133. The passage continues: “The idea of well-being has a similar dual character. On the one hand, when we say that something contributes to a person’s well-being it sounds as if we are saying that it benefits him or her. But from an individual’s own point of view many of the things that contribute to his or her well-being are valued for quite other reasons. From this point of view the idea of one’s own well-being is transparent. When we focus on it, it largely disappears, leaving only the values that make it up” (133).

“good for the person” for the things they care about to thrive and prosper. So a benevolent concern for that person will seek to promote such thriving. But the illusion of perspective here comes with importing the “second-order” perspective of benevolence and concern for well-being back into the point of view of the agents themselves. It will indeed be “good for the person” when the activities they care about or the other people they care about thrive and prosper, but that is not their own first-order perspective on why they care about these activities and other people in the first place.

The point of view of benevolence is distinct from the first-order perspective of the people themselves and depends on that first-order perspective for its benevolent concern to have any content, for there to be anything to promote. If these two perspectives are simply merged we get the illusion that Butler diagnoses, the thought that from the fact that “every particular affection is a man’s own,” which simply means that every desire is the first-order desire of some Subject, that it follows that the Object of every desire is the gratification or well-being of that Subject (second-order). Or as Sartre puts it in the passage quoted earlier, “the essential structure of each of my acts would be a reference to myself.”<sup>25</sup> Rawls sees that the standpoint of a benevolent Ideal Observer is necessarily “second-order” and thus presents a problem for how ordinary agents are to see themselves and their interests as represented in this model. We want a schema for representing impartiality in social decision making but one from within which we can recognize our own relation to what we care about, what we pursue, and seek to promote. This is one reason why, instead of the “external” perspective of the Ideal Observer, Rawls recommends that “we define impartiality from the standpoint of the litigants themselves.”<sup>26</sup> The “standpoint of the litigants themselves” is first-order rather than second-order. It is Butler’s standpoint of the agent “towards external things themselves.”<sup>27</sup> The change of orientation that Rawls is proposing for thinking about justice involves a return to the perspective of the person themselves, rather than an external perspective on these persons.

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25 Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, 55.

26 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 165.

27 Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, xi, para. 6



“Self-love, strange name. Since it feels neither like loving someone, nor like being loved.”

—James Richardson, *Vectors*

IN AN INTRIGUING PAPER Kieran Setiya explores the idea of what he calls “self-concern” and argues that it embodies a kind of selfish preference for oneself that is both “commonplace” and mistaken, at least insofar as this preference is thought to be based on a reason that is essentially first-personal in character.<sup>28</sup> Rather, as he says near the beginning of his paper, “I will argue that Self-Concern is false, and that the justification of self-interest is not essentially first-personal. Self-interest involves an attitude of love towards oneself that is justified in the same way as love for anyone else.”<sup>29</sup> The thesis of Self-Concern that is his target is defined as follows: “The fact that an event will benefit or harm me is a reason for me to want, or not to want, that event to happen. This reason derives from the effects of the event on my well-being, not its effects on anything else. And its force as a reason turns on its first person character.”<sup>30</sup>

In this paper I will only take up a few themes from this essay. I will not take up the details of Setiya’s discussion of the logic of the first-person or how it fails to provide a justification for “special concern” as defined above (specifically how it fails to respect a “general constraint on reasons” that he refers to as “Harmony”).<sup>31</sup> Here I am mainly concerned with two things:

1. How Setiya takes ordinary self-concern to be arbitrary or unmotivated unless it can be grounded either in the special character of first-person thought or in some other consideration that makes sense of it as a preference for oneself.
2. How to understand the alternate basis in ‘self-love’ that Setiya proposes to address what would otherwise be arbitrary or unjustified.

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<sup>28</sup> Setiya, “Selfish Reasons.”

<sup>29</sup> Setiya, “Selfish Reasons,” 446.

<sup>30</sup> Setiya, “Selfish Reasons,” 445.

<sup>31</sup> Setiya, “Selfish Reasons,” 466.

In his paper Setiya sometimes moves between talking about “self-concern” in the sense contained in his definition, and talking about the ordinary notion of “self-interest.” In the context of Setiya’s discussion it is important to note that his notion of ‘self-concern’ is not the same as the Egoist assumption that I have been discussing so far and which is criticized by Butler and others. *That* egoist assumption claims that all human motivation aims at self-gratification, either as an empirical observation of human life, or a rational recommendation, or a claim about the conceivable forms of human action. The egoist claim in either of its versions is a form of skepticism about the very possibility of taking a direct interest in the good of another person (or really anything beyond oneself). By contrast, “self-concern” as discussed by Setiya is not a claim about the dominance or exclusivity of “the motive of self-love” but rather is the less radical idea that the fact of something’s affecting *my own* well-being is *by itself* a reason for me to seek or avoid it (a reason perhaps sometimes outweighed by other considerations, possibly including the welfare of some others).<sup>32</sup> In contrast to the egoist claim, on this view my concern for another person is not thought to be impossible or irrational, but to depend on my contingent relation to that person, whereas my ordinary self-concern does not. Setiya’s challenge is that in ordinary self-concern (as evidenced, say, in my special motivation to avoid the fire that threatens to burn *me*) I give a special place to the welfare of a particular person, and that first-person modes of presentation do not supply any features of *that* particular person that could make that special concern anything other than arbitrary. He sums up the point in a rhetorical question late in the paper:

Why care so much about the one you know first-hand, without the need for inference, whose beliefs you can access in a special way? The epistemic relation that secures first-person thought is not a basis for special concern.<sup>33</sup>

Hence, to draw the contrast with the “egoism” that is the target of Butler’s criticisms, the claim of “Self-Concern” that is Setiya’s target is not that everything one does is ultimately with the aim of self-gratification, but rather that the mere fact of my *being* the possible recipient of some benefit or harm can be a sufficient reason for me to seek or avoid it,

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32 Wollheim, *The Thread of Life*, 243–44, usefully contrasts “self-concern” and “egoism.”

33 Setiya, “Selfish Reasons,” 467.

whereas my concern for the benefits or harms to another person usually involves reference to something *about* that person or my relation to them. The rhetorical question—“Why care so much about *that* person?”—is meant to motivate the thought that we need an answer to that question to justify our special concern. “Self-Concern” is seen as a kind of preference for a particular person, and this is meant to seem morally arbitrary. The case is presented as though in our thought and action we could ideally start from an impersonal perspective on states of affairs in a world containing ourselves among others and ask whether the hunger of this person rather than that person provides me with a motive to satisfy that hunger.<sup>34</sup>

So while Setiya’s target is different from Butler’s, the problem he raises for Self-Concern similarly presumes an external or observer’s perspective on states of affairs, from which the person is described as selecting one of the people within this general state of affairs for special treatment. But, as before, I would argue that this is different from the first-order perspective of the agent themselves, whether human or non-human. Consider, for example, the squirrel described by Kristina Musholt

The squirrel that is sitting on a branch of the walnut tree in front of my window and is about to jump to a neighboring branch has a certain perspective and is acting from this perspective. Assuming that it is acting intentionally, that is, assuming that we can ascribe representational content to the squirrel, one possible explanation of the squirrel’s behavior may be something like the following: The squirrel sees some walnuts on the neighboring branch, it wants the nuts, and consequently it jumps onto the branch. But to behave in this manner, the squirrel does not need to have any explicit representation of itself as an individual agent or of having a particular perspective; it only needs to represent the tree and the nuts.<sup>35</sup>

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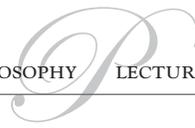
34 But, to anticipate, the primary motivation in being hungry is relief from hunger, not that this particular person gets something to eat, a preference for this particular person that would require some basis of selection from among others.

35 Musholt, *Thinking About Oneself*, 56. The passage continues: “To be sure, the content of the squirrel’s tree representation will be partly determined by the squirrel’s abilities for interacting with the tree, by its distance from the neighboring branch, and its abilities to jump, for example. That is to say, the squirrel will perceive the tree in terms of the kind of actions it affords, which are obviously relative to itself. Nonetheless the squirrel does not need to represent its distance to the tree and its perspective on the tree as such” (57).

The squirrel aims at a particular branch in virtue of *being* at a certain spatial location with respect to that branch, not in virtue of representing itself and the branch as standing in a certain spatial relation to each other. The explanation of the squirrel's behavior does not require the presence of a thought *about* itself and its location relative to the branch, in addition to a situated thought about the location of the branch. Similarly, the squirrel does not conceive itself as aiming to satisfy the hunger of a particular squirrel, one whose well-being it cares about more than that of any other squirrel.

The case of the squirrel is worth pausing on since it shows how easily the description of any situated creature acting in the world morphs, in the human case, to a description of a creature focused on its own well-being or preferring its well-being to that of any other creature. And it helps show what is questionable in the assumption that, in moving directly from being hungry to being motivated to satisfy that hunger, the human or other animal is in need of an additional thought to the effect that the hunger of *this* creature (the one presented to me in a special way) has a special claim on its concern, one that that would need to be supported either by an assumption of the special objective value of this creature, or the fact that it is presented to me in a special way, or that my special concern is grounded in the elective love I bear to this creature.

As we have seen, earlier writers often move indifferently from describing the human condition as that of a creature driven by self-interest to one that is driven by something deserving the name of "self-love." And indeed the primary motivation of self-interest is often thought to be something we share with the "lower creatures" but which we rational beings have the ability to rise above. Be that as it may, it is surely it is a stretch to see the squirrel as driven by "self-love." The language of self-*interested* motivation is only slightly less distorting when thinking about such creatures. And the language of "self-love" is only the more filled out version of the assumption in the picture of "self-concern," such that for the squirrel or the human to move directly from being hungry to seeking to satisfy the hunger of the creature that it is requires it to have a thought *about* that creature, a thought which could make sense of the special immediacy or urgency in this transition. But the need for a thought *about* one's own desires and their priority has no more place here than would a parallel thought on the part of the squirrel that locates itself in public space along with the branch whose nuts it is trying to reach. Rather, the squirrel perceives and acts from *here*, looking over to



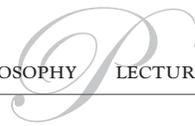
there where the branch is, without taking an external perspective on the spatial scene that includes both itself and the branch.

Matthew Boyle's discussion of action, desire, and what he calls "representing as subject" is especially helpful for bringing out an implicit shift in perspective, similar to what we have seen in Sartre, Butler, Rawls and Scanlon.<sup>36</sup> Many ordinary desires of a particular person are expressed in a way that does not make reference to any particular person at all. Someone may decide to learn to play the clarinet, a desire which may be expressed in what Boyle calls the subject-mode as "I want to learn to play the clarinet." In the verbal form of the description of desire ("to learn play the clarinet") there is no reference to any person, under any mode of presentation. As Boyle points out, it is of course true that if this desire of his is satisfied it will be he, MB, who learns to play the clarinet. But the absence of a reference to MB in the original expression of this desire is not just an elision, for it would misdescribe his desire itself to re-write it as "I want it to be the case that I, MB, learn to play the clarinet." For in the example, MB may give no importance to the fact that he, of all people, learn to play the clarinet, as though adding MB to the list of clarinet players has some special value for him. As he puts it, while there *can* be desires of this latter kind, "there is something palpably self-involved about this sort of wanting: one wants, not primarily to *do* something, but for it to *be the case, of oneself*, that one does it."<sup>37</sup>

36 Boyle, "Ethics and the First-Person Perspective," 7. This paper discusses Kieran Setiya's. See also chapter 4 of Boyle's *Transparency and Reflection*. In writing this paper I have also benefitted from the insightful response to Setiya by Marie Guillot and Lucy O'Brien ("Self Matters").

37 At one place in his paper, Setiya seems to want to pre-emptively deflect a criticism like Boyle's, as when he says, "According to Self-Concern, it is rational to respond aversively to the belief that I will suffer not just because it represents someone as suffering, but because it represents him as me. It is consistent with this being false that one should respond aversively to the experience of *being* in pain, and that this involves a relation to oneself one cannot have to anyone else. When I am in pain, I have non-instrumental reason to change my condition. What is involved here is a rational response to pain itself, not to beliefs about that state. Immediate Knowledge is irrelevant, as is Self-Concern" (Setiya, "Selfish Reasons," 468).

However, in making the thesis of "Self Concern" strictly a thesis of how I represent myself to myself, representing some person as "me" (a notion that Setiya's paper shows is quite a difficult one to parse), and detached from the difference between anticipating being in pain and anticipating *someone's* being in pain, I think we lose any reason to see this special formulation of "Self Concern" as representing any common view of ordinary people of the sort taken up by Butler or La Rochefoucauld, or in everyday life.



I think we can see this same “self-involvement” in the picture criticized by Butler, where the egoist moves from the truism that “every particular affection is a man’s own” to the conclusion that the *object* of every affection is that man’s own gratification, and in the ‘second order’ perspective of the benevolent Ideal Observer criticized by Rawls, and in Scanlon’s diagnosis to the effect that, in concentrating on a person’s “well being” we silently move from the perspective of the person themselves, from which various things are pursued for their own sake, to an external perspective *on* that person which “has the effect of transforming all a person’s aims into what appear to be self-interested ones.”<sup>38</sup>

In all these cases, we move from the agent’s own perspective, focused outward on something found worth pursuing, to an external or second-order perspective on that agent such that the issue is the satisfaction or not of *that person’s* desires. We shift from the agent’s perspective on the value of learning to play the clarinet to the value of the state of affairs in which MB plays the clarinet. We interpret the immediate transition from *being* hungry or *being* a certain distance from the branch to moving toward that branch to get something to eat to involve a reference to oneself, and the representation of a spatial state of affairs that includes oneself and the branch, and the special importance of one’s own hunger. This external perspective involves identifying or picking out one individual from among others, and then representing the pursuits of that individual as so many states of affairs that give a special place to that person, pursuits that are *about* that person. This “special place” in the (second-order) propositional representation of the case is then read back into the perspective of the agents themselves, either as an exclusive concern for one’s own well-being or as “self-concern” that gives priority to one’s own needs over those of others.

Actions that proceed from *being* at a certain location or from *being* hungry are seen as tacitly including a thought *about* a certain location or a thought *about* the needs of a particular person. This is a version of the same illusion diagnosed by Sartre, Butler and others: “The essential structure of each of my acts would be a reference to myself. The ‘return to me’ would be constitutive of all consciousness.”<sup>39</sup>

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38 Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 133.

39 Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, 55.



EARLIER WE SAW that Setiya proposes the challenge “Why care so much . . . about the one whose beliefs you can access in a special way?” where this is meant to seem like an arbitrary preference. Toward the end of his paper, he answers his own question by appealing to what is elective or “rationally permissible” in the love for any human being, quite apart from their merits or the relationship itself.<sup>40</sup> And in this response, he shows how closely he takes the relationship to be between ordinary self-concern and something deserving the name of ‘self-love’.

It is not irrational for me to love myself, whatever I am like, and so to take a disproportionate interest in my own well-being. The justification for doing so is not that I am me, but the fact of our shared humanity. Self-love is the primordial case of love at first sight. Or better, since I am available to myself not just perceptually but through immediate knowledge, in both agency and introspection, it is love at first act, or first thought. I am presented to myself in a special and primitive way in which I am presented to no-one else: as the agent of my actions and the thinker of my thoughts. What could be more natural than to love the person who is given to me this way?<sup>41</sup>

Setiya is not unaware of what is provocative in this description. Nonetheless I think the very language of ‘self-love’ to describe a situated person’s (or creature’s) ordinary concern to avoid suffering or to realize its own aims introduces a further distortion of an essentially second-order perspective on action and its aims. To begin with, “acting from self-interest,” even as a description of genuinely selfish motivation, is surely something different from acting from any special affection for oneself. For example, in the film *Groundhog Day*, the Bill Murray character (Phil) is an unhappy self-centered man who must live through the same day over and over until he learns to become a better person, and perhaps thereby win the love of his co-worker (played by Andie McDowell). At one point when his progress is still quite incomplete, she angrily turns on him and says “I could never love someone like you,

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<sup>40</sup> Setiya, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, 468–69.

<sup>41</sup> Setiya, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, 469.

Phil, because you'll never love anyone but yourself," to which he quite simply and accurately replies, "That's not true. I don't even like myself." His selfishness is not a special affection for a particular person that he prefers to all others. Rather, he simply lacks the capacity for other people to matter to him in the right way.

There is a deeper problem with the idea of "self-love" as a description of how we matter to ourselves. In the celebrated anecdote from Ernst Mach, he boards a tram that has a mirror for the driver up front, catches his reflection and says to himself, "What a shabby-looking pedagogue that is," only to realize later when he sits down that it is his own appearance that he was passing judgment on.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, when Narcissus first falls in love with the image of the beautiful youth reflected in the water, he does not recognize this person as himself. At this point in the story of Narcissus we do not have a case of "self-love," either as understood by La Rochefoucauld or by Setiya. "Self-love," as it figures in these discussions as well as in everyday life surely involves loving oneself *as oneself*, not under a presentation in which one fails to recognize the person as oneself. The idea of "self" in "self-love" is not arrived at by picking out a special entity (the "self," the "me") for special concern but is rather the grammatical mark of the reflexive form of self-consciousness that we express with the first-person pronoun 'I'. Mach's later realization when he takes his seat on the tram can only be expressed in the thought, "I myself am that shabby pedagogue I saw in the mirror." But once we notice the reflexive character of the thought here the very notion of love in "self-love" is put under strain to the point where it loses so much of its character as to be unrecognizable as a form of human love. For now in this reflexive form of thought, to love *x* and to be loved by *x* are one and the same thing, the very same fact, and this identity will be part of the person's own self-conscious thought.<sup>43</sup> And in this way none of the forms of dependence on another person that are part of ordinary love can have any application here, none of the interplay between two distinct persons that gives love of anyone the importance it has in our lives. As a matter of logic, there can be no unrequited self-love, and therefore no gratified self-love either. This

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42 Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations*, 4n1.

43 To be clear, both before and after his realization Mach's thought about the shabby pedagogue is a thought about himself, the very person he is, and hence it will be true that "to find *x* shabby looking" will be the same as "to be found shabby looking by *x*." The difference when he takes his seat is in his self-consciousness of this identity.

is what the aphorism from Richardson expresses, when he says that what we call ‘self-love’ “feels neither like loving someone, nor like being loved.” What is being described as ‘self-love’ is simply not subject to the risks or contingencies that are internal to loving someone.

Loving someone can take many forms, but it is common for them to aim at the *recognition* of oneself and one’s love by the other person, a recognition that may or may not be forthcoming. In romantic love, the lover may be torn between the desire to declare their love and the desire to conceal it, out of fear that their love will not be reciprocated when it is avowed. This tension around recognition and reciprocity is part of the drama and pathos of romantic love. On the other hand, some other forms of love may be more like a purely benevolent concern for some dependent being, a benevolence that may even prefer to be anonymous. But “self-love” could not be modeled on either of these forms. Unlike the situation of the romantic lover, “self-love” could not seek recognition of its love because in this case the consciousness of loving and of being loved simply cannot come apart. Here there is nothing to declare to oneself and nothing to conceal from oneself either. There is no possibility of the glad realization that one’s love has been responded to and returned. Nor, of course, is there any possibility of anonymous benevolence in relation to oneself.

Even in the love for an infant or a pet there is normally the desire and expectation that one’s affection will be recognized and responded to, in the ways that such creatures are capable of. The pleasure in giving the characteristic expressions of love for an infant or a pet is tied to seeing the natural reactions of pleasure or comfort in the responses of the beloved creature, however primitive and non-verbal they may be (and perhaps all the more cherished for that). This responsiveness on the part of the other creature is part of the “actualization” of one’s love. In the love between more grown up children, and certainly between adults, there is also normally the desire not only for recognition and response to one’s love, but also for reciprocation or mutuality, to be loved in return.

The hope for either recognition or mutuality in love can be disappointed, and the possibility of such disappointment is part of the special vulnerability and drama of such love. It can be a special kind of helplessness in that one has to recognize the limits of what one can “make happen” by one’s own efforts here, for the essential thing one seeks depends on the response of a separate person. As in the situations where there is a need for another person’s expression of gratitude or remorse, if you could simply produce that person’s response by your

own efforts, then by that very fact it wouldn't have the importance it has, wouldn't be the thing wanted in the first place.<sup>44</sup>

Outside of romantic love, there are related ways in which love requires the acknowledgment of the distinctness, if not the separateness, of the other person, and with that the limits of how far you can act on their behalf or in their place. In friendship or in parental love for a child, I have a "stake" in the fortunes of the person loved. In loving another person their well-being becomes part of my own well-being. This is sometimes interpreted in terms that suggest the merging of distinct individualities but in fact the stake the person has in the fortunes of someone they love owes its special character to the consciousness of difference and dependence between persons.<sup>45</sup> For the special vulnerability as well as the special gladness of such love derives from the awareness that here your own good or bad fortune is constituted in part by the good or bad fortune of another being. Far from the idea that there is now only one (larger) life at stake, to love one's friend or one's child is to be invested in their happiness while recognizing that this person has their own life to lead and that, however ardent one's love or benevolent one's concern, one cannot live their lives for them. Even as their happiness is now a constituent part of one's own happiness, it does not cease to belong to a life that is *theirs* and not one's own. This is one of the hard lessons of love, particularly parental love, particularly as children grow up, and there can be no analogue to this dependence in anything deserving the name of 'self-love'. Conceived of as a kind of love, the idea of "self-love" short circuits much of what makes loving someone rewarding, difficult, gratifying and sometimes despair-inducing.

Toward the end of his paper Setiya says that "the theory of self-interest as self-love is less surprising than it seems," in part because of its resonance with "a moral idea I find compelling . . . the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself."<sup>46</sup>

Instead of being read as a severe, almost inhuman demand for complete impartiality, this

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44 The theme of alterity and dependence is central to Proust. I take up these themes in "Proust and the Limits of the Will," including the Narrator's fantasy of writing his own love letter from Gilberte and the role of self-consciousness in the undoing of that fantasy.

45 See Aristotle on the friend as "another oneself" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. IX, ch. 4, 1166a30).

46 Setiya, "Selfish Reasons," 469.

formula may point to the fact that what justifies self-love is equally a ground for love of anyone else. Love of neighbour involves a prior self-alienation: “To love a stranger as oneself implies the reverse: to love oneself as a stranger” (Simone Weil 2002).<sup>47</sup>

From the perspective of the themes of this paper, this seems an unsatisfying response. One familiar problem with the commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself is the question of its application to all those among us who “don’t even like” themselves, or who love themselves poorly, in falsifying or destructive ways. These would not be forms of self-relation we wish to see applied universally to others. And there are other reasons, some of which were explored in this last section, to avoid modelling our relations to others on the special ways we necessarily relate to ourselves. In various ways, other people can have claims on us, or certain needs of responsiveness from us, that have no analogue in our relations with ourselves. These are masked from view when we picture the first-person perspective as a form of “self-love.” And if we are persuaded by any of the reasons given here against construing our ordinary concern with our lives, or even ordinary self-interest, as something deserving the name ‘self-love’ then the reversal of direction suggested by Simone Weil will not seem helpful. For the addressee of the injunction to “love thy neighbor as thyself” is expected to see themselves in this description, to acknowledge a familiar form of self-relation that can accurately be described as a kind of love. We are assumed to recognize ourselves as bearing a kind of love toward ourselves, and then enjoined to extend this form of care and concern to others. In this paper I have been challenging the presupposition that we do or should understand our ordinary concern with our lives as a form of “self-love.” But this assumption cannot be rescued by re-interpreting that familiar form of self-concern as something that might obtain between myself and someone I fail to recognize as myself (“loving oneself as a stranger”), for then the injunction to love one’s neighbor loses its model in anything we could be expected to be familiar with in our own case, prior to the “self-alienation” that is being recommended.

As it is, the injunction to “love thy neighbor as thyself” is only the most sublime expression of an alienated stance toward our lives, one whose external or observer’s perspective encourages the illusion that all our pursuits are essentially self-serving simply because they

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47 Setiya, “Selfish Reasons,” 469.



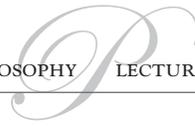
are ours. “Love thy neighbor” is often excellent advice, but not when seen as a form of relation one bears essentially to oneself.

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