

SELF LOVE AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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CHAPTER I

The contemporary problem of self love

Within our (post) modern milieu lurks the problem of self love. Self love is an inescapable problem for ethics, secular, religious, and Christian, because ethics involves claims about human beings, that is, moral anthropologies. Self love is not only a local problem in ethics, it riddles (post) modern culture as a whole. Because ethics arises in response to the demand to orient and guide human life, it must finally be adequate to such a life. Ethics manifests a dialectical relation between human being and thinking about our being in the world and with others. This book explicates and structurally instantiates this dialectic of moral being and moral thinking. It crafts a moral anthropology in response to the practical moral problem of how to love oneself rightly, and argues that right self love designates a particular form of self-relation in which we understand ourselves truly and embody this in our acts and relations.

This project faces several obstacles from the outset. It is increasingly difficult in ethics to offer a normative account of selfhood. In part this is because a going currency, the language of authenticity, has become tired from over-use. Given the surge of self-help programs and products, and the growing tendency to cast religious belief and spirituality strictly in terms of self-fulfillment, the prospect of an adequate theoretical account of the self is undermined by trite exaltations and ideals of self-realization. What seems necessary, some argue, is not an argument on behalf of self love, but one that deflates our ballooning sense of our selves. Others, however, recognize that self-abnegation continues to be a problem for many, one reinforced by religious, especially Christian, suspicion of the self. What appears to be egoism and selfishness is often a desperate grasp for self-worth. Many feminists have noted as well that

women too often *fail* to assert themselves, instead allowing their relations with others to define them. Moreover, women continue to be oppressed by supposedly universal accounts of women's nature that are employed to warrant gender-based inequities and injustice. What we require, from this perspective, is a rejection of selflessness, sacrifice, and obedience as moral ideals, along with the accounts of human nature that are used to apply these norms disproportionately between the sexes. Still others offer a more radical version of this challenge to normative accounts of the self, noting that the social construction of selves involves more than gender socialization. Increasingly, the notion of an authentic self is being replaced by the insight that identities are constructed socially and linguistically. For some this "de-centering" of identity requires resistance to hegemonic systems; it offers a liberating opportunity to choose and change identities, to experiment with various forms of presenting and locating oneself socially. For others it embodies the lamentable fragmentation of contemporary society, as well as our increasing capacity to separate ourselves from one another and from ourselves through the manipulation afforded by communications and Internet media, psycho-pharmacology, cosmetic surgery, and genetic technology.

Thus the complex theoretical accounts of the self that might deflate our ballooning self-estimation and lend substance to ideals of self-realization are widely thought to be philosophically untenable and morally suspect. Indeed, moral anthropological thinking has shifted in recent decades from ontological analyses to epistemological ones. And those epistemological analyses in large part concern the limitations of human knowledge. The general result in ethics is the rise of what I call the norm of self-realization. This norm refers to the dominant subjectivism of recent work in ethics in particular and contemporary culture in general, a shift toward voluntaristic and intuitionistic understandings of the moral good, in which moral values are primarily matters of personal or communal choice and moral obligations are taken to be largely situation-specific.

These challenges to normative accounts of the self, which I will treat in greater detail below, manifest and reinforce a basic moral anthropological problem: how to be a coherent self. This chapter

argues that this dilemma is nothing other than the problem of self love. We require a moral anthropology that illuminates the relation between moral being and moral thinking and orients us practically, but does so in a way consonant with the insights of such challenges and free from their shortcomings. This book offers an account of self love toward that end. This chapter charts contemporary secular (academic and cultural) schizophrenia about the self and shows the need for a theological moral anthropology as the basis for a norm of right self love. First, let us turn to a constellation of problems that isolate the basic moral problem of how to be a coherent self.

THE BREAKDOWN OF THE LOVE SYNTHESIS

While classical accounts of the divine–human relation are varied and sometimes stand in tension with one another, nevertheless they agree on the commensurability of love for self and love for God. Classical accounts shared the claim that God is the highest good and the good of the human as such; this claim wedds individual human flourishing to the self’s relation with God. Proper self-relation and proper God-relation coincide. Classical theological ethics could be read as a kind of theological ethical egoism; notwithstanding the realities of pride and concupiscence, the self legitimately pursues her own happiness in her pursuit of God. Although a considerable amount of classical theology denigrates the self, this traditional link between the divine good and the self’s good, mediated in the world, designates an idea of right self love.¹

¹ The connection between denigration of the self and human flourishing is complex. In certain forms such as asceticism, for example, denigration of the self provides an instrument that contributes to the human’s spiritual perfection. The connection between denigration and flourishing would be misunderstood were the two made patently incommensurable or if a causal relationship between them were naively construed. The connection touches on complicated questions about the place of sacrifice in the Christian (good) life, as well as long-standing conceptions of good selves and bad selves, debates about the relation of the individual to community, and the goodness of creation. For treatments of the relationship between asceticism and spiritual flourishing see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987); Maureen H. Tilly and Susan A. Ross, eds., *Broken and Whole: Essays on Religion and the Body* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America Inc., 1994); Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

At the risk of over-simplifying matters, it may be said that the classical Roman Catholic coordination of self love with love for God was unalterably challenged by Reformation theology.² But to argue that, historically speaking, the Christian tradition shifted from a favorable regard for self love to a negative attitude would be to read history reductively. For instance, while Protestant emphases on self-sacrifice are taken to exhibit a denigration of the self, we should note that such emphases are rooted in the ascetic spiritual thinking and practices of Catholicism.³ To be sure, both Catholics and Protestants would only approve of *right* self love; the differences lie in whether such a love is thought possible and if so, in what it consists. Thus, it is more accurate to note that the differences between Protestant and Catholic attitudes toward self love concern the interpretation and weight given to pertinent theological claims, particularly with respect to creation, sin, and redemption.

As I noted earlier, central to traditional accounts of the divine–human relation is the claim that God is the highest good and the good of the human as such. Such accounts often opposed a concupiscible self love with *caritas*, God’s love given to the self, by which the self properly loves God and others. In *caritas*, the human is given her highest good.⁴ Thus, the human endeavor to love God is simultaneously the pursuit of her own good. This link receded as distinctly theological claims about the gratuity of grace and the sovereignty of God became more pronounced; while theological anthropological claims about the utter depravity of the human were by no means new, theologians re-asserted them vigorously in

² For a helpful comparative study of Protestant and Roman Catholic ethics, see James M. Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). Gustafson argues that the major difference between the two traditions historically has been the place of Scripture in ethical thought.

³ For a historical study of Roman Catholic moral theology see John A. Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future: a Historical Study of Catholic Moral Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1990). See also John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: a Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴ The work of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas is paradigmatic of this point. An insightful and subtle analysis of Augustine’s thinking on this matter can be found in Oliver O’Donovan’s *The Problem of Self-Love in Augustine* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980). See especially chapter six, in which O’Donovan touches upon Catholic–Protestant differences in the evaluation of self love and its relation to eudaimonism. See also Gerald W. Schlabbach, *For the Joy Set Before Us: Augustine and Self-Denying Love* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

conjunction with reformation claims about grace and freedom in such a way as to free the self from anxiety over its salvation. In light of reformation theology, portions of classical and medieval Catholic theology appeared to exalt the self unduly, such that the self's pursuit of its own beatitude instrumentalized both God and neighbor and obscured the inevitability of sin and gratuity of grace.

In short, the erotic tenor of classical and medieval accounts of the divine-human relation shifted in the Reformation to an emphasis on God's agape and subsequently, to agape as the norm for Christian life. The agapic love of God manifested in the Christ became the Christian love par excellence.⁵ It differs radically from eros, the love of something for the sake of one's self, rather than for its own sake. The sovereign grace of God manifest in Christ's saving work prompted reformation theologians to separate the moral life from the person's status before God. Salvation and eternal happiness, while never purely a matter of one's own agency, were no longer thought to be formed through love.⁶ Proper relation to others arose from the self's relation to God, no longer conceived in terms of love so much as faith. So the shift from erotic to agapic emphases accompanied, perhaps induced, another change: self love began to be considered not with respect to love for God, but with respect to love for the neighbor. While contemporary Catholic

⁵ In making this claim I differ from Denis de Rougemont, who argues that Christian love prior to the Reformation was dominated by the idea of agape. See his *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1957). His reading of history ignores the role caritas and eros have played. For a critique of de Rougemont on this count, see M. C. D'Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959).

⁶ For a historical study of love, see Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). See especially volume 1. In my judgment, Singer misreads Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther and does all three a disservice. Indeed, his anti-metaphysical and atheistic commitments effect a reductive and biased reading of religious ideas of love. Nevertheless, the trilogy provides a helpful historical survey and an important analytic framework for love as a psychological state in terms of the appraisal or bestowal of value. See also Robert Hazo, *The Idea of Love* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967); Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (London: S.P.C.K., 1957); D'Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love*; C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960); Alan Soble, *The Structure of Love* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990). As will be made clear shortly, this book moves away from an analysis of love in terms of motifs or types, and instead explores self love by means of an account of the lover, the self who is to love herself. In doing so I suggest an account of (self) love as a hermeneutical or interpretive activity/process.

accounts of love still tend to construe love as mutuality, and often draw upon Trinitarian accounts of God (versus the Christological/soteriological emphases of Protestant accounts of love), it is fair to say that the Protestant approach largely determined the landscape for a contemporary Christian ethical inquiry into self love, and that Protestant critiques of the Catholic coordination of self love and love for God remain insights with which a contemporary account of self love must contend.

However, many contemporary ethicists, theological and philosophical, have problems with traditional accounts of the divine–human relationship. These difficulties can be schematized along theological, anthropological, and meta-ethical lines. First, theological questions challenge classical accounts of the divine–human relation and raise the problem of God. How can we know God? What is the nature of God? How can (and ought) we to speak about God? Classical mythic-agential theories of the divine have given way to highly de-anthropomorphized understandings of God, for example as absolute mystery or being-itself.⁷ While Christian theology historically encompasses a variety of arguments about God’s relation to the world, specifically, epistemic and agential questions raised by modernity now set the parameters within which such inquiry typically occurs. These questions do not permit any naïve return to traditional divine–human accounts. Love for God, then, along with an idea of proper self love in terms of love for God, are problematic ideas at best, and for many, altogether meaningless.

Second, shifts within moral anthropological thinking displace any general consensus regarding human nature and raise the problem of the self. Historical consciousness and the modern methodological posture of doubt moves thinkers to question radically any account of the human that claims to be universal. Appeals to abstract qualities in the human such as reason or freedom as potential foundations for ethics or for visions of human flourishing fail to satisfy many contemporary thinkers. Instead, they stress the specificity of the person as one who occupies a particular culture during

⁷ For a recent treatment of personal language for God, see Vincent Brummer, *Speaking of a Personal God: an Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

a particular historical period, with a particular ethnic and racial background, family unit, sexual orientation, and so on.⁸ Or they focus on how the human subject is constructed and determined by various systems of power.⁹ I will consider these alternatives more carefully in what follows. For now, note that questioning the existence and character of some universal human nature prompts thinkers to revise or reject traditional claims (e.g., the human is the *imago dei*). It is difficult not only to conceive of something universal in humans which provides a point of departure for a theory of self love; the very idea of a self is in question.

Finally, for many thinkers it is unclear whether God is necessary for an ethics. Thinkers such as Iris Murdoch, for instance, develop religious ethics without traditional theism.¹⁰ Others argue that religion and the religious actually impair morality. It is unclear how religion and morality are or should be related. Does religion have some place in the good life? Does morality have anything to do with one's religious standing before God? Is morality restricted, for instance, to the sphere of human interpersonal relations? Some thinkers do exclude the religious relation between God and the human from the domain of ethics. Granted, for many, religion and morality have some relation, even if only a conventional, historical association, and, moreover, the character of that relation has long been a problem within ethics. But, the challenges put to traditional accounts of the divine–human relation not only serve to compartmentalize or neglect the religious dimension of the human and of the moral life, but, as Nietzsche, Freud, and others charge, contribute to an “overmoralizing” of the self. Thus, contemporary ethics grapples with the problem of God, the problem of the self, and the problem of how religion and morality are or should be

⁸ Thinkers who stress this insight do so, of course, in varying degrees. Some simply emphasize that persons are embodied while others contend that our particularity disallows commonality altogether. See for example, respectively, Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: the Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

⁹ Texts which advance some version of this claim are manifold. For some representative works which make such an argument, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

¹⁰ See Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1993).

related.¹¹ If classical theological ethics stressed the commensurability of love for God and self love, the contemporary moral outlook asks if they are related at all. And as the two previous points suggest, the content given to each of those loves is debated.

In response to the breakdown of the love synthesis, this book will argue that love for God, self, and neighbor are dynamically inter-related. The costs of failing to note these inter-relations are high. Unduly separating them risks misconstruing them as competing objects of love. This error in turn threatens to undermine the legitimacy of love for self by fostering negative valuations of it. Further, it may encourage the self's obeisance to the divine quite apart from questions whether the object or form of that relation is morally good; that is, it threatens tyrannous or false devotion to the divine. Moreover, it may encourage unmitigated sacrifice on behalf of the neighbor, a sacrifice that mutilates the identity of the person and does a disservice to the neighbor as well. As a contemporary account of self love makes clear, to construe God, self, and neighbor as competing objects of love establishes false oppositions among them.

I do not deny that love for God, self, and neighbor can stand in tension with one another. Clearly, love for anything or anyone can become distorted and can encroach upon other morally obligatory loves. Since St. Paul lamented his divided will and Augustine complained that the loves of his heart outnumbered the hairs on his head, Christian thinkers have wrestled with the problem of how properly to order loves (the *ordo amoris*). This problem taps

¹¹ We can note a few distinctively modern (theological) ethical responses to these challenges to traditional theism. These responses include apologetic efforts which, for example, appeal to the functional value of Christian beliefs and symbols, or its metaphorical veracity. Many contemporary theologians and ethicists sift through Christian theology as an unparalleled set of resources, or as a kind of talk, for claims and symbols to re-appropriate. See, for example, Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1987). Some responses to the deconstruction of human nature have emphasized basic, common goods and needs which all humans share, such as the need for shelter and nourishment, the (admittedly varied) kinship structures which accompany human communities, and so on. See, for example, Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially 46–72, and Charles E. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Or, alternatively, they look to language and stress the conditions for communication in order to locate regulative norms for human interaction. See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

into the deepest currents and concerns of human life. The moral life transpires in the ongoing give and take of duties and desires, commitments and changes. As I will suggest later in this chapter, this plurality indelibly marks contemporary moral experience and raises the basic moral question of how to be a coherent self. Here I argue that love for God, self, and neighbor are distinct though mutually entailing. The mutual entailment of love for God, self, and neighbor avoids positing a false opposition among them. But it does so without obfuscating the ongoing tension among those loves. Put differently, love for God, self, and neighbor are dialectically related to one another. Because these loves are distinct, though mutually entailing, the person's endeavor to enact them all will necessarily be a dynamic, lifelong enterprise. Because love for God, self, and neighbor are distinct, there are duties proper to each. This point is important to my argument in two respects. First, it drives my claim that although self love is actualized in love for the neighbor, it is not exhausted by it. Some argue that any good that accrues to the self in her neighbor love is to be regarded as a side effect or derivative of her basic task of love. Others suggest that any satisfaction the self experiences in her neighbor love pollutes that love; the self must love the neighbor disinterestedly. Both kinds of thinking assume a false opposition of self and neighbor and devalue the goods of reciprocity and mutuality in love. I will say more about this later. Second, the claim that love for God, self, and neighbor entail respective duties also drives the argument I make in Chapter Six about the relation between religion and morality. Briefly, I will argue that although self-relation is mediated in our relation to the divine, and that right self love is a response of love to God's self-offer, love for God demands a deliberate, self-conscious (though not necessarily explicitly theistic) self-disposal. That is, love for God requires the self to orient herself around that love, to strive to establish it as the central commitment that harmonizes her self-understanding and her acting in the world. Right self love designates a form of self-relation in which the self knows and accepts herself in the divine. In this manner, then, this book seeks to retrieve and update the classical love synthesis. Its account of the dynamic inter-relations of love for God, self, and neighbor offers a contemporary *ordo amoris*, one predicated not on a supposed competition but on dialectical tensions.

What we have, then, is a complex array of claims and counter-claims, both descriptive and evaluative, about the nature of the self, the self's relation to the divine, and the self's good or flourishing. As I noted earlier, differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant accounts of self love isolate a difficulty which contributes to the contemporary problem of self love, namely, the separation of one's religious relation to God and one's moral life. There are important theological reasons for such a separation, but the link between the religious relation to God and the moral life must be reasserted and rethought. There are two reasons why this must be done. First, the contemporary norm of self-realization is not critically assessed; because it is not assessed, we are unable to identify and argue against forms of self-relation that are destructive. Second, the separation of religious relation to God and one's moral life also fails to assess morally one's relation to God. It leaves unasked the question whether a particular form of relation to God is morally unacceptable. Granted, both the academy and popular culture offer moral criticisms of particular images of and beliefs about God, but they pay less moral attention to forms of the divine-human relation. These two reasons comprise an urgent ethical problem, both for the discipline of ethics and for human existence itself.

Within this modern milieu of the rejection and retrieval of traditional Christian theology lurks the problem of self love. Indeed, while the challenges posed to traditional links between the divine and the self's good receded in part because of a humane concern for the self, these challenges incur significant costs for the dignity and coherence of the self. Let me explore, then, several strands in the contemporary moral outlook which extend modern critiques of this traditional account and which are particularly salient to the problem of self love.

THE SELF AS PROBLEM

Modern roots

The social and intellectual changes wrought by the Reformation aided and abetted, and were aided and abetted by, the intellectual,

social, and cultural changes of modernity, strands of which some argue continue and intensify in post-modernity.¹² The *nominalism* of the Reformation era asserted the priority of real, particular persons over and against universal concepts like humanity. It challenged the medieval moral emphasis (found paradigmatically in Aquinas) on living according to nature. The flourishing *mysticism* of the sixteenth century stressed the possibility of immediate experience of God, thereby qualifying the church as a mediator between the person and God and subordinating its authority to that of individual experience. This religious individualism increased given Protestant rejections of Catholic hierarchy and Protestant emphases on the individual's capacity to understand scripture and to encounter in the Word an invitation to a personal relation with God. The *humanism* of the Reformation era contributed optimism in the capacities of human beings to solve personal and social ills while *political and economic changes* dissolved the rigid socio-political hierarchies of feudalism and at least promised a more egalitarian social order.¹³ These and other changes set the stage for the modern turn to the subject. The self achieved philosophical and cultural prominence thanks to the work of thinkers like Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant, and Hegel. Their respective ways of turning to the subject initiated an epistemological revolution that placed everything else in question, while later thinkers like Nietzsche, Weber, Marx, and Freud questioned the modern subject.

A brief look at some modern conceptions of the self can surface several important themes and problems that figure prominently in contemporary approaches to the self.¹⁴ These themes constellate in a problem that we cannot address adequately without a theological anthropology.

René Descartes (1596–1650) continued the introspective turn that St. Augustine initiated centuries earlier. Descartes insisted that mind/soul is distinct from body and from the material world.

¹² Stanley Rudman *Concepts of Persons and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 81.

¹³ See Steven E. Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975); Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (London: Penguin; Owen Chadwick, 1972); John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; John Bossy, 1985).

¹⁴ For an excellent historical treatment see Charles Taylor *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

The self is essentially mind; of course Descartes then encountered difficulties accounting for sensations and feelings. The *mind/body split* with which Descartes wrestled remains today. Ironically, he wanted to replace speculative philosophy with practical philosophy, but this mind–body dualism deflects attention from the concrete and social conditions in which the self works out her self-relation. Moreover, the identification of self and mind eclipses the import of embodiment for moral knowledge and neglects the fact that the self posits her self-relation in and through her actions in the world.

The mind/body split intersects with the problem of *the self's continuity*. John Locke (1632–1704) cast the issue of identity in terms of temporal continuity. As Stanley Rudman notes, Locke's distinction between "man" and "person" proved particularly important.¹⁵ For Locke, "man's" identity consists in the material continuity of the body, whereas he defines a "person's" identity with respect to rationality and self-consciousness.¹⁶ What is important about Locke's approach to the self is the link he establishes between self-consciousness, moral responsibility and personal identity. Self-consciousness grounds the person's responsibility for her actions, and comprises the continuity of personal identity. Charles Taylor says of the Lockean self, "the disengagement both from the activities of thought and from our unreflecting desires and tastes allows us to see ourselves as objects of far-reaching reformation. Rational control can extend to the re-creation of our habits, and hence of ourselves."¹⁷ This rationalist conception of the self contrasts David Hume's (1711–76) argument that the self is a "bundle of perceptions." He raises thereby the questions whether there is a *relatively stable human nature* and, with Locke, what *the conditions of human agency* might be. Hume rejected the idea of a simple, identical self, and argued instead that a human being consists in a rapid succession of perceptions. Accordingly, Hume understood ethics in aesthetic and passional terms. Reason, argued Hume, is not practical; that is, it cannot move or restrain us from acting. Morality is rooted

¹⁵ Rudman *Concepts of Persons and Christian Ethics*, 81–84.

¹⁶ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. with a foreword by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), II.xxvii.6.

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self the making of Modern Identity*, 171.

in feelings that respond to useful or agreeable qualities because of our natural propensity for sympathy. A system of justice and general rules regulates this process and protects us and the moral enterprise as a whole when particular actions do not appear to be useful. Despite the differences among modern positions, such philosophical inquiry into what the self is occurs with and through ontology and epistemology and for the sake of orienting human life, disclosing the intimate and dynamic connections among ethics, anthropology and beliefs about reality.

Particularly important for the contemporary problem of self love is Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). He distinguished knowledge of things in themselves (noumena) from knowledge of things as they appear (phenomena). Kant's influence can be discerned today in the contemporary "abandonment of ontology as the basis for determining the nature of human personhood."¹⁸ He stressed the *character of freedom* particularly in relation to *desire*. His account of the person centered on rationality, and his account of morality centered on the good will. Rational beings alone, said Kant, have the capacity to act according to principles (that is, have a will). Kant argued that "nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except a *good will*."¹⁹ As we will see, Kant's insistence that the autonomous will is inviolable and his emphasis on universalizability as a moral criterion create problems for self love. They, with his rejection of ontology, undermine our moral assessment of the choices through which we take up relation to ourselves and others. They also make for an ironic egocentrism.

Several propositions about duty underlie Kant's claim for the will's goodness. First, Kant proposed that moral worth be accorded to acts that are performed not because of inclination but because of duty. In this manner, Kant based morality not on the caprice and prejudice of human affection but the will. Kant's second proposition is simply that a universal moral law cannot have a telos as its content; put differently, the moral law cannot be defined in terms

¹⁸ Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 5.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Thomas K. Abbott (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 11.

of some object of desire or state of affairs. Kant did grant that one's duty can simultaneously be an object of desire, but its desirability cannot ground its moral character. In other words, a good will is objectively determined by law. Kant's third proposition introduces respect into this formulation of duty. Dutiful obedience to the law entails respect for the law, such that obedience arises solely from this respect and excludes all inclinations and objects. A good will is subjectively determined by respect for the law.

According to Kant, the moral law can be derived from the a priori presuppositions of practical (pure) reason. One such supposition is freedom. Kant contends that a moral principle follows from the "general concept of rational being," from the very character of rational freedom.²⁰ By rejecting traditional metaphysics, Kant required the determination of moral worth independent of any ends, because any claim about the worth of some things cannot be logically necessary. Human subjectivity alone can specify the moral worth of an action. And since human subjectivity (i.e., practical reason) is concerned with the question of freedom, the moral principle derived from subjectivity will express the very character of freedom. This line of reasoning allowed Kant to argue that, because the moral principle issues from and expresses subjectivity and because subjectivity has universal characteristics, it must be universalizable. Hence, Kant offered the first formulation of the moral principle: "Never so act that thy maxim should not be willed as a universal law."²¹

Kant's understanding of the scope of human reason bears upon the way he conceives the human will. Kant understands the will as self-legislative freedom. Because the moral principle issues from subjectivity and concerns freedom as an a priori presupposition of subjectivity, the moral principle must be rationally necessary. That is, it must bind the will categorically. Human reasoning about possible desired ends cannot bind the will categorically because the worth of those ends has a logically contingent, hypothetical status. This means that moral reason operates independent of desire. Any choice, however, includes some understanding of human freedom. The first formulation of the categorical imperative suggests, then, that the will is categorically bound by rational freedom. But

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

because reason gives this principle to itself, the will is self-legislative. This means that the will, though rationally bound, remains free or autonomous.

Because the moral principle must be an a priori categorical moral imperative, Kant sought to specify just what principle could bind the will irrespective of choice. As I have suggested, for Kant that principle must express the character of rational freedom. According to Kant, the structure of rational freedom is rational freedom. Thus, rational freedom is an end in itself. Kant formulated his moral principle in a second way: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other always as an end withal and never as a means."²² Humanity, or rational freedom, is for Kant an idea. If freedom is only an idea, what enabled Kant to give some content to the moral law? The autonomous will (freedom) is that against which we cannot act. Kant formulated the categorical imperative in a third fashion to express this: "Act only on those maxims which have as their objects themselves as universal laws of nature."²³ Thus, the autonomous will gives negative content to the moral law.

The fact that the moral law has only negative content raises several problems for Kant's relation of reason and desire. What exactly are we not to do so as not to act against freedom? Any action seems at least to limit the choices available to others, and thereby, to constrain their freedom. But for Kant this is morally irrelevant since the choices available to anyone have no moral worth. The sheer demand that a choice be universalizable does not itself distinguish among choices as right or wrong. Kant thus arrives at the conception of a law that determines the will, the supreme principle of morality, which Kant identified as the categorical imperative: the moral project is one of making oneself worthy of happiness. While one can only accomplish this through respect for persons, the fact is that the person's responsibility is not to promote the good of others but the goodness of one's will.²⁴

Hegel (1770–1831) called attention to the historical character of thinking, which prompted him to counter the Kantian account of freedom as autonomy. "The opposition of noumenal and

²² *Ibid.*, 54. ²³ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁴ William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 82.

phenomenal worlds is overcome, not by cosmic absorption or reductionism, however, but by the self-realisation of absolute reason in finite human spirits, who retain their rational individuality and existence. This emphasized the significance of self-consciousness in the concept of person.”²⁵ Hegel recognized that freedom is shaped communally and historically. Real freedom requires us to recognize this influence and to realize our rational natures by building with others a rational community. Such a community reconciles self-interest and duty. The Hegelian and Kantian traditions differ in *the relation between the person and value*. As I noted above, Kant (and his heirs) depict the self as unencumbered, as one who constitutes her world through her choices and actions. Goodness designates a quality of the will rather than an external, objective order. Hegel and heirs depict the self as situated in history and society, which means that the self is shaped by these particulars and that value is in some measure socially constructed.

There were other important counters to Kantian thought. Some thinkers reacted against the rationalism of modernity with naturalist accounts of morality. Sigmund Freud, for instance emphasized the deception of reason and its vulnerability to natural, unconscious impulses. Versions of Marxism (in Friedrich Engels and in Lenin) have (respectively) pronounced emphases on natural laws and correspondence theories of knowledge respectively. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) offered an aesthetic existentialism in contrast to the smug rationality of modernity and in response to the wane of religious and metaphysical systems. Nietzsche joins the company of thinkers who find metaphysics untenable in religious and secular forms. Nietzsche argues that human thought is interpretive and perspectival. We cannot know things “in themselves” because there is no “true world of being.” There is only the ceaseless tumult of forces arranging and re-arranging themselves in power relations. There is no order or telos to this process. Nietzsche described it as the will to power. Nietzsche’s anti-ontologism, however, should not lead to nihilism. Indeed, Nietzsche’s point was to affirm life without resort to fictions like God or ontological categories. The issue is how best to interpret and assess experience. Nietzsche

²⁵ Rudman, *Concepts of Persons and Christian Ethics*, 95.

called for a reevaluation of received values in light of the will to power. It shows that most moral and religious thought reflects the "all-too-human," fosters weakness, and stunts creativity. Nietzsche contrasted such slave or herd moralities with a master morality, one that enables greater independence and creativity, the maximization of the will to power, and the emergence of a higher humanity of supermen.

It might seem that an argument for self love would find an ally in Nietzsche, and in fact there are aspects of his thought that prove helpful. Nietzsche draws our attention to the activities of interpretation and evaluation as exercises of power. And he notes rightly that moralities, as such interpretive and evaluative exercises, ought to enhance human life. In fact Nietzsche poses a two-fold challenge that shows the requirements an ethics of self love must meet. There is, first, Nietzsche's anti-ontologism, which places him in a large and generally esteemed company. The second prong of Nietzsche's challenge is the import of the will to power for an argument against slave moralities. Nietzsche seems to trap us into showing him to be right. An unadulterated argument for self love seems to exemplify the will to power (even if it proves inadequate to the task of fostering a life that maximizes the will to power). An argument against self love, or ones for it that construe it as an indirect result of or precondition for loving one's neighbor seem to be slave moralities, deployed by the masses to defend themselves against the strong. For a Christian ethics of self love to find a way out from under Nietzsche's challenge it must differ from a simple endorsement or instantiation of the will to power by directing self love to love for God and neighbor in the world. But it must do this without endorsing values that diminish human life and without naïve dependence on the fictions and constructs of religious and metaphysical thought. It must affirm with Nietzsche the interpretive and perspectival character of human thought and share his conviction that morality should enhance human life. How can it accomplish all this without exemplifying, explicitly or implicitly, the will to power?

Might the very metaphysical frameworks Nietzsche and others reject as constructs have a heuristic value? The issue is whether they help us to see what sort of person the human is. This question

keeps us from dumbly re-asserting the modern self after Nietzsche's devastating critique of it. It also keeps us from concluding too quickly that this critique of the modern self is simultaneously a critique of all ontologically indebted accounts of the self.²⁶

This admittedly rough identification of various modern conceptions of the self isolates some important problems that contemporary inquiry into the self confronts: *the mind-body relation, the temporal continuity of identity, the question of some relatively stable human "nature," the character of freedom and its relation to desire, the conditions of moral agency, and the relation between the person and value.* In varied ways, modern thinkers reconceive the relations among ontology, anthropology, and morality. Charles Taylor notes of modernity and its legacy that "selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes."²⁷

Given the relation between anthropology and ethics, being and our thinking about it, one way we can gain some purchase on secular ethical treatments of the self is to consider how the self is related to the object of ethics. Disparate ethical appraisals constellate around the insistence that the self is *not* the object of ethics. Utilitarian ethics for instance aims not at the development of persons but some state of affairs, the maximization of utility for the greatest number of people. Marxist theories endeavor to show the economic and conflictual character of social relations. The ethics of some analytic philosophy takes the meaning and operation of moral terms as its object. This is not to say that such positions lack moral anthropologies; indeed, they entail quite important claims about human beings. The utilitarian self is a producer and consumer of utility, a rational calculator of ends but not a unique and particular center of value. Marxist theories include some accounts of truly human activity in contrast to the alienation caused by disassociation from the means of production and the ideological fog of bourgeoisie values. Analytic philosophy construes the self as an agent capable of choosing within some world of facts.

²⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edn (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

²⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3.

The point is that these positions do not take the self as the aim of ethics. But, in other positions the self *is* the object of ethics. Virtue and narrative ethics are clear examples of this. Virtue ethics stresses the self's flourishing and the importance of her dispositions and capacities. Narrative ethicists argue that narrative is a constitutive feature of selfhood. According to Paul Ricoeur, "the idea of gathering together one's life in the form of a narrative is destined to serve as a basis for the aim of 'good' life."²⁸ Some liberation ethics, various feminist ethics for example, take the self as their object as well. In different ways and for different reasons these ethics aim at the flourishing of the self. Others construe ethics as the task of showing there is no self, at least not in the sense of a sovereign, unified essentialist agent. Especially problematic for these ethics, and for many of the above, is a self defined in substantialist terms. Deconstructing and de-centering the self is an ethical task because it liberates us from the definitions imposed on us by others. Sometimes this is construed as a post-moral task, since ethics itself is considered a weapon of control. But the task of showing that there is no self given this liberatory aim also has the self's good in view. Hence, Foucault deconstructs the traditional metaphysical subject in the service of an ethics of care for the self.

Enamored by autonomy: the self as "free agent"

The modern legacy is obvious in contemporary Western culture. Autonomy ranks as a chief good and echoes in a number of central cultural values and in legal, social, and economic systems and practices. Even a brief sampling of advertising shows this: as I write the radio blares public service announcements concerning the deregulation of electricity utilities, and commercials for bank services, sport utility vehicles, and allergy medications. They all tout freedom as an unqualified good. But, the idea of freedom that contemporary Western societies inherit from modernity is largely a negative freedom, a freedom defined chiefly as the absence of constraints.

²⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 158.

This negative freedom belongs to a complex of values like self-sufficiency, independence and self-determination. In other words, in autonomy, negative freedom meets the power of self-definition. The tension inherent to this union spawns a confusing mentality in which the power to define and determine oneself through one's choices and pursuits requires a new and, paradoxically, freedom from those very "commitments." This means that the value of autonomy confers on the self a certain sovereignty and reality prior to and independent from her choices and pursuits even as the meaning of autonomy is indexed to the capacity to define or locate oneself in her choices and pursuits. To borrow from the world of professional sports, the self is a "free agent," loosely and provisionally tied to a team, ready and willing to affiliate itself with another one should the terms be – and remain – to its liking.

There are other reasons in addition to this confusion why the contemporary exaltation of autonomy is problematic for self love. The negative freedom entailed in autonomy is an impoverished account of freedom. By treating freedom largely as the absence of external constraints, it neglects various internal conditions for and impediments to freedom. It becomes difficult to account for the ways prejudice, habit, convention, and experience can limit freedom even in the absence of external constraints. Negative freedom ignores the multiplicity and conflictual character of human motives and implies instead a relatively unified will. It misses the ways culture and consumerism circumscribe freedom – under the guise of enlarging it – by directing freedom to fairly pre-packaged identities and lifestyles. The uncritical endorsement of autonomy reinforces a sense of entitlement. This sense of entitlement is stoked by capitalism though it has more salutary roots in a modern discourse of individual rights. It insulates the autonomous self from duty to others and from criticism. An uncritical autonomy also threatens to collapse authority into authoritarianism. All of these difficulties contribute to the individualism that autonomy encourages. In sum, an uncritical exaltation of autonomy is descriptively inadequate to persons and normatively problematic.

Of course, this ongoing love affair is now curiously related to a contemporary permutation of determinism, the culture of vicimization. Consider the rising number of disorders included in