INTRODUCTION

LOVE AND PHILOSOPHY

I

DOUBTS ABOUT LOVE AND LANGUAGE

“Can philosophy possibly say anything of relevance about love?” That is a question I have been asked more than once. “Can I, as a philosopher, say anything relevant about such a vivid manifold phenomenon as love?” That is a question I have asked myself at times. Is it not almost the same as draining this dynamic, living relationship of life to try to put it on paper?

As enticing as such considerations may be, tempting one to think that it would be better to leave out love as a subject for philosophical discussion, I believe there is much for a philosopher to say about love or about love and philosophy. Not only in the sense that philosophers have been said to be “lovers of wisdom” but also in the sense that when we love we all become philosophers; we are all confronted with questions about what it is or what it means to love, what it means to be a lover or a friend, a parent or a child, a brother or a sister. What does it mean that our lives in different ways are touched by the lives of other people? What place do and should we give to the responsibility we have for other people, as well as to the joy and sorrow we may experience with them? What does it mean to be alive and present to the concerns of others or to shut ourselves away from them? These questions are in many ways an integral part of being in love, and are not only of personal but also of philosophical concern.

Moreover, I believe philosophers have much to learn about philosophy through an investigation of love. This is true of the sense in which an understanding of the presuppositions for philosophizing about love may deepen through a reflection on love. Asking what it might mean to philosophize about love, as it were, cannot be separated from becoming clear about this subject. It is, however, also true of the sense in which we as philosophers, in virtue of being the lovers of wisdom I mentioned before, may benefit from thinking about the practice of philosophy in the light of love. What kind of self-understanding may recognizing this as a central aspect of our philosophical practice involve? For me, the question about what it may mean to take seriously the suggestion that philosophy is a form of love has surfaced repeatedly throughout working on this dissertation. I will return to the implications of contemplating the practice of philosophy in this light.

These are part of my reasons for introducing this work with a discussion of the different relationships between love and philosophy. In particular, I want to turn to the ways in which
our claims about love can be seen as personal or private. I do this, because many of the
concerns people raise about the possibility of philosophizing about love take the form
precisely of wondering how a philosopher could say anything general about something as
personal as love. Assuming, of course, that this is indeed what a philosopher is supposed to
do.

The concerns about the possibility of philosophizing about love take at least two different
forms. First, they may be quite a justified reaction to the fact that love is not a uniform
phenomenon. There are many different kinds of relationships that we can talk about as love;
the love between parent and child, the one between brothers and sisters, friendship or erotic
love. In addition to this, every love, every relationship, can be said to take a different,
individual or personal form. Is it not impossible, then, to say anything definite about what
love is? Apparently it can be so many things. What, one may ask, makes all of these cases
instances of love? Second, people often express a doubt or wonder as to how we can ever
know what others mean when they are talking about love. This question often reveals the
disappointments they have experienced in relation to love, as well as the puzzlement they
have felt about what other people might mean by using the word. “She says she loves me
and then she goes and does such a thing!”

Now, undoubtedly love is personal in many ways; in a philosophical investigation of love
it is important to become clear about just how. Yet, it is unclear why the personal character
of love should be a reason for thinking that we cannot talk about it. The gist of my
suggestion will rather be that such a view gives expression to a confused conception of what
it means for something to be personal, and, by the same token, what it could mean to make a
philosophical remark about love. When speaking about the personal or private aspects of
love, as well as the more general aspects of it—universality, rules, grammar—one often runs
together different notions of what it is for something to be personal or private, without
noticing that we may use the word to make several different distinctions. On the one hand,
we may think of “privacy” as denoting something that is for “your ears only”. Similarly in a
social discussion, we may refer to certain questions as belonging to the private, by contrast
to the public, sphere. On the other hand, we may call something “personal” which touches
us deeply. To anticipate a distinction I will return to in the following discussion, we may
speak about something as personal in the sense that it is connected with our lives as
historical and psychological beings. We may, however, also speak about the ways in which
certain questions address us as persons, requiring that we take responsibility for the answers
that we give. Here, we are speaking about what is personal in a moral sense. This tendency
to run together different senses of a word reveals a normal confusion when one starts
philosophizing about a subject. One takes the use of a word in one situation as a model for
how the word is to be used in other situations in which it is not so clear what using the word
could mean.

In what follows, I will argue that the question whether we are able to say something
general about anything as personal as love originates in certain preconceived notions of what
human beings and emotions are and what role language has in our life. Accordingly, the
remainder of this work is an attempt to bring back the different things we may say about
love to the different conversations we may have about it in our life to clear away certain
misunderstandings.\footnote{1} As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1997), whose understanding of philosophy
has served as one of my main sources of inspiration in this work, famously remarks, I aspire
to “bring back words from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (§ 116). The following

\footnote{1 The title of this work, which gives an indication of this move, is taken from the collection of short
stories by Raymond Carver (1989).}
introductory remarks serve as first instances of this move, showing the different ways in which one may think of love as personal, as well as what sense we may find in them. Rather than thinking that the personal character of love is to be found in some private experience, which raises an epistemological question about how we can reach the inner life of another human being, I show the moral dimension of our personal involvement in speaking, as well as in speaking about, the language of love.

The doubts about love mentioned above are very seldom meant to be expressions of strictly held philosophical positions. However, there is a great similarity between them and some views that have traditionally been held in philosophy. Even if these two sources of doubt give voice to slightly different attitudes to the difficulties involved in discussing love, they both express a kind of everyday scepticism about the possibility of understanding others, and what they mean by their words. The feeling that love is personal here seems due to the fact that the meaning of love, because of the diversity of the phenomenon, or its inner character, is essentially private or hidden. What love means, one thinks, is out of reach for others than the one who loves. This way of putting the question is similar to the classical “problem of other minds”. This question about how I can know what others think or feel, and how I can be justified in thinking that there are others like me has been discussed by many philosophers. Different answers have also been given to it; Descartes is perhaps best known for giving one kind of answer to it. Furthermore, the thought that we cannot say anything about what love is since the word “love” either refers to some patterns of behaviour that we cannot define, or to some inner experience that is inaccessible to us, reflects a common misconception about language in philosophy. This is the thought that our words are primarily to be taken as representations, the only function of which is to designate objects, processes, events, states, and so on.

Thus, one is convinced that in every situation in which we talk about love, or any other emotion, there must be one thing, one single feature, which we could identify as the emotion in question. This conviction has also led philosophers to postulate the existence of “inner” or “mental objects” in the case of thoughts and emotions, since there are no other or “outer” objects to which the words can be seen as referring as there are in the case of “houses”, “chairs” or “trees”. If we consider such a view of language, it is quite evident why any philosophical attempt to become clear about love, or to say what love is, as one normally formulates the question, would be expected to fail, since the word “love”, on this view, refers to objects that appear to be essentially private, in one way or another.

This picture of language, or of what it is for words to mean something, is a powerful picture, holding philosophers and laymen alike in a strong grip. It is, however, highly problematic. It is not even an exaggeration to say that Wittgenstein dedicated most of his philosophy to combating this kind of conception of language. In the criticism he directed both at the problem of other minds and at the idea of a private language he showed the ways in which our words do not always represent objects, but have other roles in our life with each other.²

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² For a clear exposition and development of Wittgenstein’s thinking in these matters see e.g. Cockburn (2001) or Dilman (1987).
Wittgenstein’s radical break with the referential view of language is brought to the fore in his discussion of the problems involved in imagining a private language (1997, §243-315). This notion of language as something essentially private also figured in the above mentioned doubts about how I can ever know what someone means when he or she says “I love”. Here again, one thinks of the word “love” as naming some inner process, a sensation or some such thing, and consequently concludes that we cannot know what love is, since we may never know what happens inside somebody else. Wittgenstein, however, questions the intelligibility of the whole idea of a private language. He suggests that we cannot even think of a language in which individual words “refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language.” (Wittgenstein 1997, §243). Thinking of sensations as “private” is in one way wrong, and in yet another nonsensical.3

Wittgenstein asks us to think of a person who keeps a diary in which he marks “the recurrence of a certain sensation”. For every day on which he has the sensation he writes “S” in his notebook (Wittgenstein 1997, §258). What Wittgenstein wants to point out, among other things, is that the whole process of picturing what such a private language would be depends on the meaning, the use, the words have in our common language.

What reason have we for calling “S” the sign for a sensation? For “sensation” is a word of our common language, not of one intelligible to me alone. So the use of this word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands.—And it would not help either to say that it need not be a sensation; that when he writes “S”, he has something—and that is all that can be said. “Has” and “something” also belong to our common language. (Wittgenstein 1997, §261)

Even to be able to describe this private language we must use the common language that we share with others. We can only articulate the idea of a private language, and what that could be, in (relation to) the language that we share with other people. Thus, the whole attempt of imagining such a language becomes empty.

If we take a closer look, this is also evident with regard to love. Regardless of what one may say about the difficulty of knowing what other people mean by love in particular situations, it is crucial for a declaration of love that I trust you to understand what I am saying. Moreover, I want you to understand it, and not, say, only make an approximation or take a guess at it. In order for a declaration of love to be just that, it is essential that we share a language, that you may understand what I mean, even if there may, of course, be misunderstandings and situations in which you and I find it impossible to reach a common understanding. But even in such a case, it is important to see that the problem we may have in understanding each other is not a theoretical one. It has a moral form.4

It is not that our psychological make-up, for instance, prevents us from ever understanding what another person thinks, in the sense that I cannot reach into your mind. At times you may exclaim, “I just can’t understand you!” or “I’ll never know what goes on

3 “In what sense are my sensations ‘private’?—Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it.—In one way this is wrong, and in another nonsense.” (Wittgenstein 1997, §246)

4 See e.g. my discussions of Rosamond and Lydgate in George Eliot’s Middlemarch in chapter 2 and 7.
inside your/his head”. Such exclamations, however, do not testify to a failure of communication in principle. Rather they may be a way of saying, for example, that I could not see myself saying or doing the things you do, that I do not find myself in you. In these cases, the words mark a distance between me and you. They are expressive of the ways in which I find you strange or of my exasperation at repeatedly saying something which apparently does not resonate with you. In this they may mark off either a failure in your reactions to me and my situation, or a failure in my response to you. This is even more apparent in situations in which my lack of understanding is a result of or an expression of my not trusting you.

However, my experience or yours of such a distance makes sense only against a background of situations in which I do understand or find myself in you and in which there is no distance between us. It is only against the background of all the things we do understand that certain things stand out as misunderstandings. Think only of the multitude of situations in which it is quite clear to me what it is you are saying—so clear even that I try to deny it—or in which the question whether I understand you normally does not even arise, such as being asked to pass the salt or being offered some coffee, asking what you did this weekend or suggesting that you turn left at the following stop. Contemplating the ways in which we may find comfort in the thought that we are understood, we may only try to imagine what it would be like truly to doubt the possibilities of understanding.

When Wittgenstein tries to draw our attention away from some inner process that the words designate towards the life we live with each other, a life in which we express feelings and emotions, share thoughts and so on, he is not simply moving from something inner to something outer, such as our behaviour, nor for that matter a life or a form of life. He is “not really a behaviourist in disguise” which his imaginary interlocutor suspects him of being (Wittgenstein 1997, §307). In other words, he is not, as the behaviourists are, suggesting that our mental concepts can be explained simply by providing criteria of outward behaviour, with no reference to what may be called our “inner life”, our thoughts, feelings, desires, and so on. Rather, he is criticizing a philosophical picture of what the distinction between “inner” and “outer” amounts to. This is, for one thing, thinking that the “inner” constitutes a realm of objects that are inaccessible to others than the person whose “inner” it is. Or, for another thing, thinking, as the current emphasis on neuropsychological research may make us inclined to think, that it represents a realm of objects that advanced technology has now finally given us the means of exposing. To clear away one possible misunderstanding, this is not to deny that it may be perfectly meaningful in a situation to say, “I had to retain my calm on the outside, but inside I was in total turmoil”. It is only that the distinction that is made here is very different from the philosophical picture of the inner, or for that matter, the outer, that Wittgenstein criticizes.

A central object of this criticism is the thought that our language primarily functions to name or describe things, that mental concepts, for instance, are used to report inner states or, for that matter, outer behaviour. This thought is expressive of what Wittgenstein in other places calls our “craving for generality” (Wittgenstein 1965a, 17-18), which he suggests we need to rid ourselves of when doing philosophy. We need to give up “the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts – which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything you please” (Wittgenstein 1997, §304). Rather he encourages us to think of the multiplicity of ways in which we use

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5 We may also regard Peter Winch’s (1997) remark that we may not be able to imagine what it would mean to take certain things in another culture or our own seriously in one’s own life in this light (199).
language, such as, to name some examples he gives, giving and obeying orders, reporting an event or speculating about it, forming and testing a hypothesis, making up a story and reading it, play-acting, singing catches, making jokes, asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying (Wittgenstein 1997, §23). When reflecting on the meaning of our words, we should remain aware of the different practices and activities in which they have a role. It is by considering our words and sentences in their context, not by searching for some object behind the word that it signifies, that we see what meaning it may have.

Instead of thinking about the words "I am in pain", for instance, as the report of a sensation, Wittgenstein suggests that we think of it as similar to the natural expression of pain, say, a cry or a groan.

[How does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations. Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in it is place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.

“So you are saying that the word ‘pain’ really means crying?” —

On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it. (Wittgenstein 1997, §244)

In a similar manner, I have often found it illuminating to contemplate the ways in which saying “I love you” may in some situations have the same meaning (by which I mean have the same role in our life) as hugging or kissing someone. We may also note that we often tell children we love them when hugging and kissing them; this is one of the countless situations in which the child learns what it is to love. Now, if we think of this use of the words it becomes less tempting to think of them as a report of an inner state or of a process. In what way could we understand a kiss or a hug as a report? It becomes obvious that we do things with words, that our words have different roles in our relationships with each other.

Consider only the different uses of the words “I love you” in the following story.

You were careful not to say those words that soon became our private altar. I had said them many times before, dropping them like coins into a wishing well, hoping they would make me come true. I had said them many times before but not to you. I had given them as forget-me-nots to girls who should have known better. I had used them as bullets and barter. I don’t like to think of myself as an insincere person but if I say I love you and I don’t mean it then what else am I? (Winterson 2001b, 11)

The quote brings out how the words, “I love you”, may be of significance to us, in the same manner that hugs and kisses are, and the different kinds of significance the words may have in different situations. Saying “I love you” may be a comfort or a confession, a promise or a prayer. It serves as a reminder that language does not have to be seen as something essentially different from our other doings but can be seen as an extension of them. Words, very often, are also actions. The quote also shows how expressing or confessing my love for someone may raise questions about whether I am true to the sense of my words. This is a question that I will return to shortly.

III

“THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE”

It is against this background that I want to take the different conversations we may have about love as the object of my study. I will not attempt to answer the question “What is love?”, but approach the subject of love by discussing the different things we may say about
it. What is it that we say to each other when we say, “I love”, “you love”, “he or she loves”, “we love each other”? What may it mean to say that love is a “feeling”, a “commitment”, and so on? At different points of the work I speak about this as an attempt to clarify the language or the grammar of love. I will on several occasions return to the question of what such a clarification may and may not involve. I also believe that the kinds of remarks I make about language and philosophy are best served by being considered in the contexts of the particular problems out of which they arise. To give some indication of the directions in which these discussions will move, however, I will say something about these issues here already. This will also allow us to see some of their connections with my present concerns in these introductory remarks.

My intention in speaking about the language or grammar of love is not to provide a definition of love, neither to discern any underlying principles or conditions for correctly using the word. Nor do I want to suggest any rules or criteria for meaningfully applying the word in a concrete situation. On the whole, I will question the intelligibility of these kinds of endeavour, as well as question the idea, inherent in them, that philosophy should be making normative claims about how our language is and should be used. In that way, I do not intend to present us with a general overview, least of all a complete one, of how we go about speaking this language of love. I will, at times, emphasize the need for philosophy to be descriptive (cf. Wittgenstein 1997, §109), but this is not to be understood in the sense in which an empirical, or lexical, study can be said to describe our usage of a word, nor as an injunction to map out meaningful or meaningless conversations we may have about love. It is, as it were, not predetermined what our words may mean in a new situation. What sense they have, or do not have, has to be seen in the particular situation in which we find ourselves. A guiding thought in this work, therefore, is that our language does not constitute a delineable system that can be described independently of what we, who are speaking it, might say, and what is more, what we mean with our words.

In the light of this, I want to emphasize the context-dependence of grammatical remarks. In line with Wittgenstein’s (1997) remark that “[t]he work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (§127), we may say that our remarks on grammar in particular cases are not to be generalized. Contemplating the roles different expressions of love and utterances concerning love may have in our life does not put us in the place of drawing general distinctions between different uses. Rather these reminders of how we may talk about love address the particular problems with which we are struggling. They serve to dissolve specific problematic pictures of love that may turn up when we begin philosophizing about love. In this sense, I align myself with readings of Wittgenstein that regard his philosophy as primarily therapeutic.

This, again, connects with the sense in which Wittgenstein regarded philosophical problems as centrally arising out of our difficulties to recognize how our language is used, or better yet, how we use our words outside of the philosophical context. When we move about in our ordinary life, we do not normally experience any problems understanding what our words mean, even if at times we may ask what someone means with her words, in the sense of wondering about her reasons or motives for saying some particular thing. When we are confronted with a question such as “What is love?” or “Is love a feeling?” in a philosophical conversation, however, the ease with which we otherwise speak about “love” or “feelings” gives way to bewilderment. Asked to explain the meaning of a word in abstraction from the concrete contexts in which it is used, we fail to call up the situations in which the words come alive. Or, then we are convinced we know the answers to the questions, but confounded when we encounter uses of these words that speak against our conviction.

“A philosophical problem”, Wittgenstein says, “has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about’” (Wittgenstein 1997, §123). To find our way out of this confinement, Wittgenstein, as I
have already said, recommends that we remind ourselves of different ways in which our words are at work in our everyday life. Another one of his remarks about finding one’s way in language states: “Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place form another side and no longer know your way about” (Wittgenstein 1997, §203). Using this picture, we could say that the task of philosophy, when we are confused about the use of words like “thoughts”, “beliefs”, “feelings”, “emotions”, “desires”, “intentions”, or about sentences containing these words that taken individually or combined with other sentences do not appear to make any sense, is to show the familiar ways into speaking about these aspects of our life and what light that may throw on the sense or nonsense we experienced these sentences as expressing. If we, say, are faced with a question such as “Is love a feeling or a decision?”6 we may feel that we are forced to opt for one of the alternatives. Here, reflection on the different kinds of concerns that may lead us to emphasize on the one hand the spontaneity of our desires and on the other our responsibility for the other in love may help to dissolve the felt conviction that some of our ways of speaking about love are of necessity paradoxical.

These last remarks also alert us to the sense in which the dissolution of philosophical problems suggested by Wittgenstein’s writings cannot be separated from recognizing the ways in which we as philosophers have entrenched ourselves in certain problems. Finding one’s way out of a philosophical problem is in that way also a matter of knowing where to halt, not to turn around and enter the same kinds of confusion one had just freed oneself from. This is not to deny that we often do precisely this when philosophizing. The sense in which one may be inclined to turn a grammatical remark that has helped one out of one philosophical muddle into a rule for our language use constitutes such a confusion. In this respect, philosophy is as well a reflection on one’s own involvement in different questions and a call to become aware of and question one’s own demands on what a philosophical question or discussion should look like (cf. Wittgenstein 1997, §107). Indeed, it is a way of seeing how one is, oneself, continually confused about one’s use of language.

One might be tempted to think that this way of looking at the language of love is a way of avoiding the question. One might feel that occupying oneself with linguistic matters does not give the necessary weight to the questions one is interested in solving. (Cf. Stenlund 2000, 223.) This appears to be the position of the philosophers who regard the practice of analyzing or investigating our mental concepts as a form of folk psychology, in other words, as a proto-scientific theory of what happens in our minds. Attending to our conversations about love, the thought goes, does not show us anything of value since it only shows what one currently believes love to be. It does not show us love as it really is.7 As I have already indicated, however, it is far from clear what question we think that we are asking when we ask what love is. The real difficulty in philosophizing, as it were, is not finding the means of defining what appears too elusive to be defined, but gaining clarity about what exactly one’s problem is, and what one oneself demands of the question one is raising.

What is more, if we think of focusing on the “language of love” as a way of avoiding the “real” question, we still do not see the fundamental role that language plays in love. We are still caught up in the picture of language as designating objects, thinking that language is somehow separate from love, or from what love really is. Our words are taken only as reflecting or describing the underlying processes of love, and why not, then, “go for the real thing” rather than settling for merely talking about it. This way of looking at things,

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6 I address this question in further detail in chapter 3.

7 See chapter 1 for a closer discussion of this theme.
however, ignores that it is only in or through language that we live love. The ways we speak about love are internal to what we understand as love.

Commenting on this internal relationship, Rush Rhees (1969) remarks, “just as little [as there could be religion without the language of religion] could there be love without the language of love” (121). We would not have the sense of love that we have now unless “people used language in their lives—or to put it the other way around, unless they lived the kind of lives that people live with language” (Rhees 1969, 121). This remark bears resemblance to one of François de La Rochefoucauld’s (1959) maxims: “Some people would never have fallen in love if they had never heard of love” (§136). Nevertheless, there are important differences between what he is saying and what Rhees wanted to say.

The comment made by La Rochefoucauld is reminiscent of the things one might say about advertising, say, that no one would think they need this brand of washing detergent or this soft drink if it had not been advertised everywhere. This statement appears to be true up to a point. There is nothing in the desire for a drink or for having clean clothes that demands that it is satisfied by a certain product. Rather one could say that the desire is stirred by the advertisement. Likewise, we may imagine someone listening to a romantic song or going to a romantic movie being stirred by the thought, “I want to be in love”. The person may even imagine that he is in love, and not, as others may suspect, “in love with being in love”.

My point here is not that whenever someone intoxicated by a film or a song falls in love it is not love. For now we may leave the question whether the person is actually in love, and what that means, as it stands. My point is only that such a description of the relationship between hearing love being talked about and love, presents the relationship between the language of love and love as an external one. It invites us to think of the ways in which the language of love that we encounter in songs, films and literature may induce love in the listener, spectator or reader. Rhees, however, states quite clearly that this is not what he has in mind.

It may sometimes be said that [...] love does something to you. All right; but not in the way in which psychoanalysis does something to you, for instance. The point is that the person in love is different; life is different for him, or the whole world is different for him. [...] I do not mean that the language of love brings about or induces that difference. [...] The language does not bring about the ‘difference’ of being in love, but the language is a part of that difference—I had almost said is that ‘difference’, because the language is not the words on paper nor even reciting them, the language is the way it is used and the role it plays, the language is all it means to him in using it and to her in listening. (Rhees 1969, 124-125)

This I take it, is as close as one may get in formulating the insight that the language of love is not anything distinct from love, but internal to it. The language in which we speak about love is itself expressive of our love. Gaining an understanding of the language of love is not anything different from gaining an understanding of love. Or even, the only way we may understand love is through the language of love. “Knowing what that language means is knowing what being in love is.” (Rhees 1969, 124-125).

If we take up this attitude to language, there is nothing strange in the suggestion that philosophers could have something to say about love. If we think of philosophizing about love as a way of clarifying to ourselves the language of love—how it is used, what it means,

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8 A song by Melissa Etheridge (2001) captures this love-sick feeling well: “In front of total strangers won’t you kiss me, flowers for no reason but you miss me, I want to be in love.”

9 Cf. Wittgenstein (1997): “For how can I go as far as to try to use language to get between pain and its expression?” (§245).
in our life—there does not seem to be anything that must be seen as necessarily hidden to us in love, since the language in which we express it is something that we fundamentally share.

IV

PERSONAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS IN LOVE

I have rejected one way of thinking about the personal character of love that I believe is misleading. That is thinking of love as some private, inner object that we cannot reach by means of language. I now want to turn to the ways in which it strikes me as right to say that love is personal in order to see what impact this may have on what philosophy can or does say about love. The first question to which I turn is what we may regard as philosophical problems in love.

No one would probably challenge the claim that philosophizing about love is not the same as loving. It is quite possible for me to raise philosophical questions about being in love or enter philosophical discussions on the topic without being in love myself. I might, as Rhees says, “in one sense, learn the language of love and never be in love” (Rhees 1969, 124). The emphasis here, I take it, is on my being in love, since it is less clear what it would mean to learn the language of love without myself experiencing love in other relationships, such as with family and friends, as well as experiencing other people being in love. Following the same line of thought one may also conclude that the personal problems we encounter in love are different from the philosophical questions we may raise about it. It is, however, important to note how the two may also converge. Our personal problems may give rise to philosophical questions, and working through philosophical questions about love may clarify, or perhaps sometimes even cloud, what is at stake for us personally.

I have already distanced myself from the suggestion that the philosophical question concerning love is defining it or deciding what may count as love in a specific case. The task of philosophy, as I will argue, is rather to elucidate what it may mean, say, to see something as love or not in different situations. This marks one distinction between personal and philosophical problems in love. Even if we recognize the problems involved in raising the questions “What is love?” or “Is this love?” within philosophy in the belief that there must be one general feature running through all the instances in which we talk about love, we do not need to reject the idea that these questions may meaningfully arise in other contexts of our life. The important point is only to recognize how very different the role of asking such questions in our life may be from identifying such a general denominator. In this work, I will repeatedly return to the significance of recognizing the contexts in which a question arises for clarifying what kind of question it is.

A teenager may raise the questions “What is love?” or “Is this love that I am feeling?” with curiosity. Someone experiencing his first love may express the wonderment he is feeling by saying, “Is this what everyone has been talking about?” A person suffering rejection may utter the words, “What is love anyway?” with a dismissive gesture. Against the background of a long relationship in which the daily routines have taken over the initial romance, the question, “Is this love or just a friendship?” may be asked in disappointment and despair: “Is this as good as it gets?” Now, rather than longing for a general answer to her question the teenager may be seen as longing for an experience—an experience, one may add, that may be tightly connected with the desire to become an adult. Similarly, the one who wonders over his budding feelings can be seen as primarily speaking out of his experience, and not in search of any particular answer. For the ones who, in one way or another, entertain doubts about love, the question actualizes a felt need to change one’s life,
or a possible reason for changing aspects of it. The cynic’s rejection of the whole question, however, can be seen as a categorical avoidance of the realization that there are ways in which she too may be in need of change.

The meaning these questions have in our lives cannot be isolated from what they tell us about these same lives. They are questions about the life we lead. They are personal and moral questions in the sense that they face each of us with a question about the place we are prepared to give to love in our life. What do I see as love or as failures in my love for someone? Do I need to love better or open myself more to other people? It is my responsibility as an individual to take them seriously and try to give them a sincere answer. This does not mean that I cannot turn to others for advice, or that I cannot learn from others’ experiences. In the end, however, I am the one who has to find an answer to them. I cannot turn to philosophy or science for an answer to whether or not I love. This is not a limitation of philosophy or science. It is not as if one day we could find an answer to the question what love is in philosophy or science, but have not done it yet. It is rather a reminder about the language of love and about the fact that it is not clear what it would mean for philosophy or science to answer these questions.

What philosophy can do, however, is to deepen our understanding of what the different answers I may give might mean. What could count as an answer to my question? What difference does giving one or the other answer make in my life? What attitudes do my questions express? In what ways may I deceive myself by looking at things in one way or another? This is one sense in which philosophy can be said to elucidate the meaning of love, not by exposing the referent of the word, but by clarifying the different moves available to us from within the language of love. It is, however, we, or I, that have to speak this language. Philosophy does not live our life for us.

Halting at this point provides us with the opportunity of marking two distinctions between questions of meaning and other kinds of question, first, against the idea that it is in any way predetermined in language what we may say, and second, against the idea that we, ourselves, determine the meaning of our words.

(1) Within continental philosophy there are strands of thought that harbour the fear that language, in virtue of being a conventional system of signs, determines the meaning our life should have for us. By providing us with the categories with which we make sense of our life, it prevents us from making any other sense of it.\(^{10}\) I think this fear rests on very uncertain grounds. First of all, it is not clear what one wants to say with a general statement, such as “language determines what we should say or think”. I do not exclude the possibility that there may be situations in which one could succeed in giving the sentence a meaningful use, by, for instance, speaking about language in a very specific sense to denote, say, certain linguistic practices. One may, for instance, think that Wittgenstein’s (1997) distinction between “surface grammar” and “depth grammar” (§ 664) shows how the form of language may lead us to think in particular ways. It provides us with one example of how a similarity in the construction of sentences may mislead us to conclude that there is a similarity in use. Just think of the conviction that I already discussed according to which the question “What is...” always serves the same purpose of looking for a definition. One may also come to realize how certain uses of language, certain descriptions of our situation that may even...

\(^{10}\) It appears that a similar thought is expressed in the hopes within some branches of analytic philosophy that conceptual analysis could reveal the underlying logic (or principles, or conditions) of language and thereby supply one with rules for correct language use. Only the notion that one could regulate language in this way does not appear to fill these philosophers with the unease experienced by their continental counterparts.
extend to a whole culture’s self-understanding, are oppressive, such as speaking about human beings in terms of “races”, or indeed “different cultures”, or discussing homosexual love in terms of an incurable or curable disease, or more moderately as a biological or psychological orientation or disposition. However, these are aspects of our language use that can be criticized from within our linguistic practices. They are not aspects of language as a whole. Indeed, we may ask from what point we are to criticize these aspects of language, if all of language shares this problematic feature, as well as from what point of view the philosophers who criticize language in its entirety for being oppressive take themselves to be speaking. Furthermore, speaking about “language as a whole”, or as a closed system that has power over it speakers, presupposes that one may give a general description of the character of language. (Or then the saying is just meant as a more or less poetic expression of an existential experience.)

(2) The experience that what we say is determined by the language we speak seems to be a reaction to the recognition that we are not the ones to decide what our words should mean. Where one goes wrong, however, is in thinking that this means that somebody or something else determines the meaning, when it would be better to say that questions of meaning are not settled by a decision, or by a convention. I earlier remarked upon the personal character of the questions of what place I am willing, prepared and able to give to love in my life. I am, as it were, responsible for giving an answer to these questions in accordance with how I live, and for living in accordance with the answers that I give. The personal dimension here, however, does not extend past my responsibility for the answers I sincerely want to or am able to give. Although I am the one who has to answer these questions, I am not free to decide what could constitute an answer to the questions I am posing. If we think about it in that way we are back with the idea that language is something private and that I give meaning to language. However, the question whether something is love is not only a question about what I choose to call love. It is a question about what I, or anyone, can intelligibly understand as love, and about how certain ways of talking about love can be seen as meaningful or not.

I cannot, as it were, decide whether something is or is not love by making a stipulation. My falling in love with someone other than my wife does not become less of a problem in our marriage just because I did not intend to do it, or would wish that it did not have as dire consequences as it did. Furthermore, if I cheat on my wife, but insist that she should not feel hurt because I did not mean to hurt her, although I agree that cheating is a hurtful thing to do, I am taking my words in a direction in which it is no longer clear that I am making any sense. Reflecting on meaning, therefore, is a matter of reflecting on what I could possibly say, and further a matter of responsibly taking on the question of what I want to say.

V

PERSONAL QUESTIONS AND MATTERS OF PERSONALITY

This relates to the second question I want to raise about the way I am personally involved in love. In other words, in what ways can my philosophy of love be seen as expressive of my own thoughts on the matter? I want to begin looking at this question by considering a quote from Simone Weil (1977). In the essay “Human Personality” she writes:

If a child is doing a sum and does it wrong, the mistake bears the stamp of his personality. If he does the sum exactly right, his personality does not enter into it at all.

Perfection is impersonal. Our personality is the part of us which belongs to error and sin. (Weil 1977, 318)
The tone in Weil’s example is merciless, and we may well ask whether indeed we always need to look at what is personal as erroneous or sinful. Nevertheless, we have to understand this comment, against the background of the distinction she makes between someone’s person or personality and someone as a human being. Compare, for instance, this statement with the introductory remarks of her essay:

‘You do not interest me.’ No man can say these words to another without committing a cruelty and offending against justice.

‘Your person does not interest me.’ These words can be used in an affectionate conversation between close friends, without jarring upon even the tenderest nerve of their friendship. (Weil 1977, 313).

By saying this, Weil is criticizing modern attempts to identify human beings with their personalities. This is bound up with her thinking that there is something sacred in another human being which cannot be reduced to his or her personal traits. It is him or her, “no more and no less” (Weil 1977, 314). A similar notion will be crucial for the discussion that follows in part two. With Weil and with other philosophers, I argue that we leave out an important dimension of human life if we think that it is possible to reduce human beings to some features of their personality. It is a failure both in our personal life with other people and in our thinking about love and moral philosophy to conceive of the bond of love as a bond between personalities, and not as a meeting between two human beings who cannot be contained in some historical or psychological facts.  

Simone Weil approached these matters from a religious point of view, speaking, for instance, about our eternal obligations towards other people. Whether we completely agree with this perspective or not, it appears right to say that by laying down conditions for what it means to be a person, we fail to capture the unconditional character that seeing someone as a human being, or loving another human being, may have in our life. It gives the concept of a human being a relative character, making it dependent on certain features of the person, whereas Simone Weil introduced the human being as an absolute limit to our thinking and being. This absolute dimension of Weil’s thinking is important for understanding in what ways she thinks the child’s mistake bears the stamp of his personality. It may also help in clarifying what it may mean to be true to one’s words and the ways in which it is not up to me to determine what love is.

Think first of the boy doing mathematics. It is easy to conceive how some aspects of his personality, such as a lack of concentration, or a lack of understanding of the problem may come to stand between him and the task at hand. He may have misunderstood the problem, thinking that it was similar to the previous one, and, therefore, applied the wrong rule in solving it. In respect to the task of philosophizing, I may sometimes also need to work against aspects of my personality that prevent me from gaining a clear view of how certain words are used. I may need to work past what my history and psychology make me inclined to say since that may reveal significant delusions in me. It may sound like a simple point

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11 The failure to appreciate this is apparent in much of today’s applied philosophy, or applied or practical ethics. It is generally believed that the moral problem lies in capturing what makes a person, what capacities are needed for someone to qualify for personhood Thus one starts with the realization that we attribute certain rights to persons, and continues by asking whether different groups of beings, such as animals, foetuses or infants, or gravely handicapped people also qualify as persons and thus as legitimate bearers of such rights. See e.g. most of Peter Singer’s writings, and various articles on abortion or euthanasia, such as Judith Jarvis Thompson (1971) and Michael Tooley (1983). One can only imagine how much Simone Weil would have abhorred hearing these kinds of arguments.
indeed, but one of the most important lessons I have learned in the study of philosophy is that the first thing we may be inclined to say in a matter, is often not what we want to say on closer reflection. This is one way of reading Wittgenstein’s remark that “[w]ork on philosophy […] is really more work on oneself. On one’s own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them)” (Wittgenstein 1998, 24). In this sense it may also be said that philosophical problems are always personal problems. The confusions we need to work with are in the first place our own, and only in the second place, if at all, those of other people.

Emphasizing the need to work on our personal confusions also shows why discussion and dialogue are so important in philosophy. I may turn to you in order to become clear about my own thinking, by seeing in what ways you and others agree with me, or would say the same, and in which respects there are blind spots in what I want to say. The continuing conversation provides room for thinking things through. By seeing how far certain strands of thought can be pursued, what different thoughts imply and so on, we reach a deeper understanding of the question at hand. Saying that I should not let my personal convictions come into philosophy may in this manner be a way of saying that I should not let certain tendencies rule my thinking on some matter. I should not make hasty judgements, but see what the question is truly about. In that sense, philosophy is not a matter of voicing opinions. Coming to see what a question was truly about means recognizing this as something that is not dependent on me. What I can intelligibly say in a matter is not relative to what I believe I want to say. Rather it may be said to constitute a limit to my thinking.

However, this does not mean that I am only personally involved in my thoughts in so far as they are clouded or flawed. If we again turn to the boy doing a sum, it sounds harsh to say that he in no way comes into doing it right. It is true that there is nothing in his person or personality that determines whether the calculation is correct. That the answer is correct is an aspect of mathematics and not of him finding it. Yet, he plays a role in solving the puzzle in various ways. It is he who concentrates on the assignment, he who listens to his teacher, applies the correct rule and carefully does the operations. It is he who finally succeeds in getting the calculation right. Saying that he does not enter into it because he does not determine what the right answer is, ignores what it may mean to do something right. It does not acknowledge that we hold people responsible not only for their shortcomings, but also for how well they succeed in a matter. Furthermore, we could say that he only gets the sum right when he understands that it is right and is able to continue solving similar tasks, and not when he only does what he is told, or tries to guess what the teacher would accept.

This also holds true for what I come to say in philosophy. On the one hand, it is possible for me to elevate my own thoughts. I can emphasize that it was “I” who thought of something, or that they were “my” thoughts. This may in many ways be a dubious matter. However, there are other situations in which it is less clear that emphasizing the personal aspect of one’s thinking constitutes a wrong. This is the sense in which I am responsible for what I am saying, by considering what I really want to say, and when I come to this, stand for what I believe. This addresses a second sense in which philosophical problems can be said to be personal, in that they are directed at us as persons. The reflection on our use of language in philosophy is in that way a call to reflect, in very particular ways, on our own uses of words as individual speakers of our language. What do I see as possible uses of our words, behind what uses do I stand in attempting to make sense of our life, which is also mine? In philosophy, as in our personal life, then, we are faced with a demand for sincerity, asking whether we really mean what we say. In the discussions to follow in this work, I will also emphasize that it is only by living up to this demand, by our meaning what we say, that our language has any meaning.
This aspect also brings out an important difference between philosophizing about love and doing mathematics. Although the truth of mathematical propositions also depends upon mathematics having a place in our life—our doing things with it—there are settled standards for judging whether something is right or wrong in mathematics. When it comes to love, however, the question of what we can meaningfully understand as love is expressive of who we are in other ways. First, the question about how far I can stretch my understanding of different relationships and for which descriptions and expressions of love I am prone reveals something about who I am. Furthermore, my philosophical investigations are personal in the comparisons I choose, the examples I find illuminating, the emphases I make, and the spirit in which I write. What place, say, am I prepared to give to failures in love? In this manner, philosophizing about love can be seen as a moral activity: it tells us something about what place we, as philosophers, are ready and able to give to love in our own life. Recognizing something as a meaningful description of love involves recognizing the demands that are made on us in the light of this concept.

VI

THE MORAL DIMENSION OF PHILOSOPHY

Simone Weil warned us against reducing human beings to personal characteristics. In a similar manner I have argued that we should not reduce questions of philosophy to personal opinions, or products of a person’s history or psychology. This could also be seen in connection to what some philosophers have spoken of as the moral dimension of Wittgenstein’s writing. (See e.g. Diamond 1991e.) Underlying much of his philosophy appears to be a thought that the way in which we look at philosophy, and at what philosophy can or should do, is expressive of an attitude towards life. In his criticism against a metaphysical use of language, there is a suspicion that in doing metaphysics, in trying to fit the world into a system, or reducing language to one graspable thing, we are exercising our will on the world in an improper manner. We are, as it were, trying to control it, by turning it into a thing that we can define. Furthermore, he attempted to open our eyes for how, when doing philosophy, we are often in the grip of this kind of metaphysics. We force our investigation in a specific direction according to our own preconceptions of the questions we are facing.

We may also read Wittgenstein’s remark that philosophy “leaves everything as it is” in the light of these vain attempts to make the world conform to our will (Wittgenstein 1997, § 124). Now, it is well worth discussing exactly how we should understand this remark. For one thing, it is clear that not everything remains as it is when doing philosophy; in most cases, the ways the philosopher comes to see things and his or her own thinking changes. This thought, of course, is also expressed in another of Wittgenstein’s remarks, which I already mentioned, that “[w]ork on philosophy […] is really more work on oneself”. Yet, I would agree with Wittgenstein that philosophy leaves everything as it is in the sense that it should not be aimed at constructing systems or theories, or at inventing new concepts. Instead, the task of philosophy, as I see it, inspired by Wittgenstein, is to start with how we use our concepts and thereby with ourselves. Our philosophizing should not be aimed at making new discoveries but at reminding ourselves of how we, as individuals in our individual lives, use words and what role these words have there.

In these respects, we can also see similarities between love and philosophy, or why it makes sense to think of philosophy as a form of love. In the same manner as we, in love, should not try to reduce other human beings to our picture of them, nor try to define or
control them, we should, when philosophizing, not try to reduce the phenomenon under discussion to fit our pre-conceived notions of it. Just as I cannot decide or determine who you are, I cannot determine how a word should be used. This is also why I am wary of giving definitions in this work. Giving a definition is an attempt to narrow things down and close in on a concept. However, I want to open our eyes to the different uses we make of the word “love” in our life. I want to learn to know the word in its various uses, in the same way that I open up to other human beings and the different things they are, or may be, in coming to know them in love.

This is not meant to exclude the possibility that concepts change as our lives change, or that we can criticise certain practices, as it were, from within, or with reference to other practices in our life. We may, say, criticize certain descriptions of love for being overly idealizing, trivial or corrupt. We may criticize someone for only discussing love from an aesthetic or economic perspective and not recognizing aspects of our relationships that are moral in character. Neither does it mean that there are no limits to our thinking, or that nothing in life is settled. It is rather a point about the place philosophy holds in our life, reminding us that it does not impose limits on our thinking, but instead shows us where we draw limits in our life.

Here again, we can make a distinction between our personal limits and those conceptual ones that are brought to the fore in the philosophical investigation. When becoming clear about what meaning it may have to speak about love in different ways, I may, on the one hand, become aware of my personal limitations in thinking about a matter. My clouded thinking, my self-deception, or unwillingness to regard something as love may prevent me from thinking freely. On the other hand, reflecting on what it means to talk about love in various situations may help me grasp, as it were, the “limits” of the concept. I come to see, for instance, how in saying “I feel great tenderness for the one I love” the tenderness that I feel is internally related to my love, whereas in saying “I feel indifferent towards the one I love” my feelings of indifference are rather externally related to it.

This does not mean that it does not make sense to say the latter. However, someone who claimed that indifference is a constitutive feature of our language of love in the way that tenderness is would fail to grasp in what way my feelings of indifference are in tension with my claiming that I love. He or she fails to see that speaking of indifference is not an expression of love, but may rather have the role of a confession about my failure to love. Here, speaking of limits may also be misleading. Grasping these internal relations between love and other concepts is not a limit to the freedom of our thoughts, but what enables thinking in the first place. All attempts at formulating sentences do not, as it were, express thoughts.

VII

WHAT “WE”? 

In what ways, then, do my discussions merely serve to elucidate the present conceptions of my own culture or even my own culturally influenced understanding? In other words, how can I fend off the suggestion that I am only giving voice to a limited group’s understanding of love, and that I am not saying anything about love per se? First, if I were able to elucidate even my own understanding, or that of my “culture”, it would already have been a noteworthy achievement. Second, since my emphasis in the work to follow will be on clarifying what it means for us, the criticism may in certain ways be said to miss the mark. Yet, I see why someone would react to the use of what may sometimes strike one as a “regal we”, speaking about what we do, think or mean. This may give the impression that the “we”
represents a certain delineated group of people and a conception of love that is restricted to a certain time and place. This objection deserves some comments.

As I have already said, my investigation is, first and foremost, a conceptual investigation and not an empirical one. Although I discuss examples of conversations about love and emotions taken from our ordinary life, literature and popular culture, my aim is not to describe an existing use of language. Rather I want to gain a deeper understanding of the conceptual framework of the things we might say by turning to the question about what is involved in speaking in certain ways. What does it mean, and what may it mean to speak “the language of love”?

This should not, again, be taken in the sense that I am interested in making normative claims about that language. Speaking about what we want to say about love is not normative in the sense that it prescribes a certain usage of the word “love”. I want to call attention to the moral dimension in raising questions about meaning, but this should not be understood in the sense that morality is an activity of making normative statements. Rather the moral dimension of questions of meaning enter through demanding that we consider what we, as individual speakers, including you as my reader, sincerely are able to say in a matter.

Furthermore, when I speak about the language of love, I do not suggest that we think of this “language”, or “language” as a whole, as any clearly delineated system or object of study. By contrast, I will continually stress the open and indeterminate character of language; what one could call the creativity of us as speakers in both using and understanding it in new situations. This openness, or indeterminacy, does not mean that we can mean just anything with our words, or that we can say just anything. It is rather a reminder that what it makes sense to say in certain situations cannot be laid down in some rules or be regulated in a system.

Against this background we may question whether it even makes sense to speak about our “culture” as representing a certain understanding of love. “Can we”, as Peter Winch (1997) asks, “understand ourselves” in the sense that one often assumes when raising questions about our possibilities of understanding other cultures. The problems of understanding that there may be between people do not, in that way, differ in kind from the problems of understanding there may be between people in our own “culture” or “cultures”. (Cf. Motturi 2003.)

Nevertheless, the openness of language also opens for understanding. The presupposition for misunderstandings and differing understandings, as I said, is that we also share an understanding, an understanding that may deepen and change in our conversations with each other. Language, as it were, is constitutively social in character. In that way it will always involve some kind of community of speakers. These communities, however, are not clearly delineated. In the sense that language can be seen as constitutive of human life (or what we understand as human life), in its widest sense this community can be seen as humanity as a whole.¹²

When I speak of what “we” say, I am, therefore, not proposing that there is any particular “we” that speak in a particular way. The “we” is rather an invitation to consider your own ways of speaking; ways which are related to the life you share with other people, which is also the presupposition of language. It is up to you, as a reader, to see what sense you can make of what I say independently of your particular background. Do these ways of speaking, this

¹² One should also add that in asking whether I only represent my own culture’s understanding of love and suggesting that the understanding of another culture may differ, one has already agreed that both give expression to an understanding of love and that it is therefore possible to communicate between them.
concept, have a role in your life? The reflection on meaning proposed in this work, as it were, is not dependent on any new empirical evidence but is available to anyone of us who is prepared and willing to consider our own uses of words. By entering such a reflection, however, we open for the possibility that our understanding of these words may deepen.

VIII

REMARKS ON STYLE

Before closing the discussion about how we are personally involved in love and philosophy, I want to bring out one further aspect of it that is reflected in the ways we usually express our love, as well as in the way I have chosen to make use of certain examples in my text. That is the personal voice that finds expression in any declaration of love, the “I” that loves “you” in saying “I love you”. In some of the first versions of these texts I often wrote about a general “we” loving “them”, to avoid always talking about “me” loving “you”, which somehow sounded “too personal”. This, however, came to strike me as quite an awkward, indirect way of capturing the ways in which we talk about love. We do not love in a philosophical “we”, rather the language of love centres on two “I:s” loving two “you:s”. This does not exclude the fact that we may talk about “we” and “they” in relation to love in some situations. Parents may tell their child, “You know that we love you”, and you may say of them, “They really love their children.” However, this does not contradict the claim that we always meet each other as individuals in love, rather it strengthens it. Remember that a usual way of talking about “we” or “they” in love, is “We” or “They love each other”.

Now, one might ask what role the choice of pronoun has for making a philosophical point. Is this not just a question of style? However, I want to bring out the grammatical difference in who is saying what, for here we could say that style and content intersect. It makes a difference for the kind of conversation I am involved in whether I say, “I love...”, “You love...”, “He or she loves”, “We love” or “They love”. Mats Furberg (1998), for instance, remarks that I cannot declare someone else’s love in his or her place (232). I may say, “He loves you” or “He should just admit that he loves you”, but this does not serve as a declaration of love, unless he has asked me to tell you in his absence. Only when he says, “I love you” himself, does his feelings have the character of love. Or rather, calling something love, on my part, has a different sense depending on whether the one I claim loves you, would be prepared to say it too. This is true even if he has confided his love for you in me, but not in you. Therefore, the questions with which you and I are faced, when you ask me, “Does he love me?” or ask him, “Do you love me?”, are not the same. What examples we use in philosophy may in that sense alter the meaning that saying something has.

Another choice could have been to follow the traditional philosophical way of talking about “lover” and “beloved” as he and she. This use is quite questionable from a gender perspective, for even though one has often tried to refrain from inducing any stereotypes about gender or giving this use any explicit gender connotations, it often gives rise to certain associations rather than to others. One may easily come to think of the “active male lover” and “the passive female beloved”, which also raises the question whether it is necessary to regard the lovers as either subject or object. Apart from the objections one might raise about gender, however, I find this use problematic, since it only understands love from a third person perspective. It views the lovers from the outside, and not from within, emphasizing what it means to describe someone as loving and not what meaning it may have for me to express my love. Moreover, it neglects the second person perspective and what different roles
it may have to direct myself to another as a “you” and not only speak about them as a “he” or “she”.\footnote{On the whole, the second person perspective has been neglected in philosophy, and I will not do much to amend it in this work. One exception to this rule is Martin Buber (2004).}

Pointing these differences in the different perspectives from which we may talk about love, I should hasten to add that I do not want to give priority to any one perspective. Rather I hope that the different examples may make us sensitive to what these different uses of the word “love” from different persons’ perspective may mean. Being able to shift between the different perspectives also contributes to a deepened understanding of what is at hand. Relying quite heavily on the use of “I” and “you”, however, I am aware that it may sometimes be unclear which “I” is speaking in the text. Is it I (CK) as the philosopher writing the text and discussing certain questions, or the generalized “I” in the examples of what it may mean for me to love you? Nevertheless, I hope that the context in most cases makes this clear.

The primary example of love within my discussions is “erotic love” or “sexual love”, although I mostly speak of “love” without defining “what kind” of love I am discussing. To the extent that I bring in examples of other forms of love, such as friendship, the love between parents and children, familial love, the love of neighbour, they mostly, although not always, serve as contrasts aimed at bringing out certain distinctions between the different kinds of love. In many cases, however, I do not see any sense in overly emphasizing the sense in which we may speak about different kinds of love. Rather talking about “kinds” or “forms” of love may, where some uses of “love” are concerned, obscure the matter, implying, for instance, that they have clearly defined characteristics, involve different demands and so on. It makes sense, as it were, to speak of all of these different relationships as love because they share certain features, although there may not be one specific feature running through all our uses of the concept. This is an additional reason for using the word “love” quite freely rather than constantly stressing the “erotic” or “sexual”. Another is that it is not evident that we should reserve the term “erotic” to characterize only sexual love.

Choosing a term for the love that I am mostly discussing, in other words, the love that evolves around a special “you”, bearing relations to sexuality, marriage, child-rearing, in itself raises certain questions. Through history the emphasis on different aspects of these relationships has changed. We may trace remnants of uses, sayings, and understandings of eros that go back on the development of what has been called “courtly love”, “chivalrous love” and “romantic love”, the concept has come to involve aspects of the love of God (agape) and friendship (philia).\footnote{For an exposition of how the concept of love has been understood under these different terms see e.g. Singer (1984a, 1984b, 1987), Osborne (1996a), Nygren (1953), de Rougemont (1983), Airaksinen (2001).}

Against this vast background one may question why I have chosen to speak only of “love”, “erotic love” or “sexual love”. The answer to this is simply that I have wanted to attend to the ways in which we speak about love in our daily life and dealings with other people, not as philosophers, not as theologians, not as philologists. Even if the distinctions between, say, eros, agape and philia correspond to some of the distinctions we may make between our different uses of “love”, I am first and foremost interested in the distinctions that we make. Add to this that our uses of the word are often quite “eclectic”, in other words, that they comprise features of what has been taken to be aspects of different forms of love, and you have the recognition that if we consider, say, the distinction between eros and agape,
our ways of speaking about erotic love do not strictly keep within the boundaries of *eros* but include many aspects which have primarily been assigned to *agape*.

Therefore, I have chosen to speak of *sexual love* because it strikes me as one of the most straightforward ways in which one may bring out the sense in which this love differs from other kinds in being constitutively connected with our sexuality and sexual desire. More often I have spoken of *erotic love*, because that notion seems to capture the sensuous nature of this love better. It bears acknowledgement that an understanding of sexual desire cannot be reduced to a biological drive, but belongs to the context of our “embodied intentionalilty”. However, since this choice is mainly a matter of feeling, I admit that my decision on what term to use is slightly contingent. Nevertheless, I have consciously decided not to speak about “romantic love” although that is quite a commonly used term. I do not do this only because the term carries so much baggage from “romanticism”, candle-light dinners and moonlight serenades, but also because I suspect that many of its idealizing features involve a temptation in or a corruption of love.

As the observant reader may notice there is one other common name for erotic love that I consistently leave out of the discussion. That is the “love between man and woman”. My reason for doing it, and for hoping that it would also be left out of philosophical discussions of love completely, is that it does not have any apparent bearing on the philosophical points one is interested in making. The distinction, one may think, may be useful if one wishes to distinguish between the love between man and woman and that between man and man or woman and woman in order to point out the differences or similarities in how they have been portrayed in literature, art and history. In most philosophical discussions, however, the phrase “love between man and woman” does not serve to distinguish this love from other kinds of erotic love—if they are indeed different kinds, posing different questions, bearing different implications—but to distinguish erotic love from other forms of love such as friendship, love of family, and so on. In doing that, however, the philosophical discussion intentionally or unintentionally excludes relationships that do not fit under the heading of “man and woman” from the sphere of erotic love. Sexual love is assumed to be one with *heterosexual* love.

It is easy to shrug off this usage as a euphemism or a mere manner of speaking, but as such the notion is far from innocent. Considering the history of violence that has accompanied the exclusion of homosexuals from both love and society, finding them rather to be a proper object of hate, it strikes me that much of this violence is still contained in this formulation. Certainly most philosophers using it, such as Ilham Dilman, Hannes Nykänen and Rush Rhees, whose thinking in other respects has been an inspiration in this work, did not or do not mean to be violent. But if we agree that there is nothing more to this term than a manner of speaking, there should not be any problem in leaving it out of our philosophical or moral vocabulary and replace it with other expressions.

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15 See Scruton (1987), especially the introduction, and chapter 6 for one discussion of this aspect.

16 Roger Scruton (1987, 305-311) does draw more far-reaching conclusions than this. He thinks that only “the strangeness of the other gender” (Scruton 1987, 310) that is desired in heterosexual love makes it into a true meeting with *another* first person-perspective. The homosexual rather desires the other as a mirror of his or her own body. I regret that this is not the place to bring out at length just how strange his suggestion is.
IX

OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

I have chosen to divide the chapters in this thesis into three different parts, each consisting of chapters which concern a central theme. In the first part I discuss the relation between love and emotions, in the second I ponder questions about identity and love and in the third part I ask how questions of meaning may enter into love.

The first part addresses questions pertaining to love’s status as an emotion. What understanding can emotions be said to constitute and how is this related to love? Chapter one and two take on two dominant views in the philosophy of emotion; (1) that emotions are passive experiences such as feelings or dispositions (chapter one), and (2) that emotions are rather characterized by their rational character (chapter two), in other words that they involve constitutive beliefs or judgements concerning their object; the thing, the person or the situation at which they are directed.

I acknowledge that these accounts bring out important aspects of the emotions in that they point towards the fact that emotions involve a bodily as well as a mental dimension. In this, they capture one of the main difficulties with talking about the emotions or trying to define them; emotions are neither purely physical, or bodily, nor purely mental. At times it is important to notice that emotions are something that we feel; we may think of expressions such as “boiling with anger” or “being overwhelmed with fear”. Yet in other situations, emotions appear to be closer to thoughts, and so how we feel is not what matters but what we think or may say about our situation.

Despite the insights these accounts may offer us, I argue that they both run the risk of generalizing the emotions in opting for one of the alternatives in trying to say what an emotion is. Returning to the thought that we do not primarily use emotion-words to report something, either an inner or outer state or process, I suggest that we shift focus to what it is we say to each other when we express or refuse to express emotions. In doing this, I particularly emphasize the different roles emotions and love can be said to have in the moral drama that is our life.

In the first two chapters I come to the conclusion that it involves a reduction of the language of love and the other emotions only to give a psychological, or epistemological, description of it. In chapter three I begin to spell out what it may mean to recognize the moral character of the command to love, by bringing together themes from the first two chapters in a discussion of the interrelation between our will and our responsibility in love. Beginning with the observation that loving someone is not just about feeling, but also about regarding certain aspects of our relationships to others as demands, I raise the question about what we may be said to be responsible for in love.

The second part turns to questions concerning identity, discussing the role that “I”, “you” and “we” may have in love. Beginning with the thought that love necessarily has to be seen in connection with a relationship, I ask what it may mean to come to know each other and oneself in the light of love. Here, again, I find it crucial to acknowledge that the question about what we are bound to in love is a moral question, and not merely an epistemological one. I return to Simone Weil’s thought that the human being cannot be reduced to his or her personality, and emphasize in what ways the questions “Who am I?” and “Who are you?” are moral questions. I develop this thought in the light of the internal relations between the concepts of love, goodness, beauty and truth.

In chapter four I discuss what it may mean to talk about reasons in the context of love and other emotions. In what ways do questions of justification arise in love, and what does it mean to regard someone as an intelligible object of love? I show why it is problematic to
understand the bond of love as a bond to specific qualities of the other and how such a view ignores the unconditional character of our turning to someone in love. The personal qualities of the other cannot be taken as explaining our relationship, since it is only against the background of our relationship that we can understand what is meant by speaking about your qualities.

Chapter five takes on the question about what kind of self-understanding can be gained through a reflection of love. I argue that notions such as “being oneself” or “being true to oneself” do not depend upon an unchanging core of the person which philosophers discussing personal identity have often assumed. Rather they raise a question about unity that is of moral concern, calling us to be true to the sense of our words and in our relationships with others. Furthermore, I argue, partly inspired by, but also critical of, Jean-Paul Sartre, that holding on to a settled picture of what one is like may form a kind of self-deception.

In chapter six I discuss how we are to understand the bond of love or whether it is meaningful to think of love as a bond in the first place. I criticize Robert C. Solomon’s account of love as a “shared identity”, for only giving a psychological description of what it means to share a life in love. This neglects that what we share in love, which I suggest is a certain conception of goodness, is as important for our being able to understand a life together as loving. It is of paramount importance for the goodness we find in love that it cannot be reduced to what is pleasant.

Chapter seven starts off with the observation that the lover often sees things in the loved one that may be hidden from others, and asks what this means for the truth of love’s vision. I argue that the frequent tendency in philosophy to think that the one I love is not as I say is based on several problematic assumptions about what it means for a statement to be true. One assumes, for instance, that the criterion for the truth of a statement is that it corresponds with something in reality. In response to this view I show in what ways love involves a different kind of confrontation with what is real, which rather raises a question of truthfulness and sincerity.

The third part turns to the understanding of the world and our life that can be said to be internally connected with love. The title of the part is “Meaning” pointing to what meaning our life can be said to have in love, and dwelling on the relationships between the “meanings” of our words and the sense in which our relationships with other human beings are meaningful to us. Chapter eight begins with the recognition that love may make our lives meaningful in many ways. Pondering whether we may also regard a love of someone as a love of life, that is, as a way of finding meaning in life, I ask whether love truly gives meaning to our life or only makes us forget how meaningless it is. What kind of world is it that the one in love inhabits?

In chapter nine I raise the question what it may mean to say, “That won’t happen to us” in love. What different kinds of attitude to chance and circumstances does such a statement express, and what risks are connected with wanting to determine the kind of meaning something may have in a relationship? Is the belief that nothing will happen an expression of faith in the relationship or a way of taking you for granted? I point out that statements such as this one take the form of promises and not of predictions, and the differences between these two kinds of attitudes towards future events.

Finally, in chapter ten, I raise a slightly different question about meaning: What meaning may it have to say, “Love is the meaning of life” or “What is the meaning (or purpose) of love?” I discuss these questions in connection with Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of the place the ancient Greeks gave to love in a good or flourishing life (Nussbaum, 1986). This question brings us to yet another discussion of reasons for love, now on a more general level: Is there on the whole a point in loving? Is love good for anything? I question whether this is
a meaningful question and what kind of meaning it assigns to love. It is misleading to think that we, as philosophers, could give an external justification for love, which is not in itself motivated by love, or the place we, as human beings, want to give to love in our life.

The current division into three parts follows one thread of my discussions. However, it would be misleading to say that this is the only pattern that runs through this thesis. It would be more correct to say that the thesis consists of a web of intertwining thoughts, of which the current disposition serves to pick out one line. As a rule, I have tried to write the chapters so that the content of each chapter follows on the thoughts developed in the previous ones. It would, however, be completely possible to discern a different line of thoughts by spotting the connections between different chapters in the three parts.

A reader interested in the question of reasons for love may, for instance, turn to the second, fourth and tenth chapter for an exposition of ideas connected with this theme. A discussion of why I think it is problematic to search for criteria for love takes place in chapters one, six and ten. A reader concerned with the possibilities of making promises in love may be interested in reading chapters three and nine. Someone interested in a continued discussion of the ways in which the world, or life, as Rhees said, is different for the one in love may find useful observations in chapters three and eight. Furthermore, chapters seven and eight can be said to deal with questions concerning idealizations and beauty in love, whereas chapters five, six and nine take on a discussion of the place of goodness in love. Chapters six and eight raise questions about the roles that sharing a life may have in erotic love, whereas chapters one, seven and nine and the epilogue to part three entitled “The End”, involve comments on what it may mean to make mistakes in love.