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## Love and the need for comprehension

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The question of how well we need to be known, to be loved, is considered. A 'second-person' model is argued for, on which love requires that the beloved's demands to be known be respected. This puts pressure on the idea that lovers need to make a beloved's interests their own, taking that to require *comprehension* of the beloved's interests: a lover would have to appreciate the normative intelligibility and motivating force of an interest. The possibility of love with failure of comprehension is defended, using illustrations from Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*.

**Keywords:** love; comprehension; second-person; Frankfurt

How well does a person have to be known, in order to be loved? I take it that we ordinarily view love as requiring fairly substantial knowledge of the beloved. I cannot claim to love someone whom I know only superficially. As opposed to states or attitudes such as lust, admiration, infatuation, amusement, and attraction, which seem able to be triggered by how one happens to have experienced or imagined someone, love seems to assume a substantial grasp of who the beloved is. The goal of this discussion is to explore this assumption in a way that foregrounds love as a 'second-person' relation: the lover has to address the beloved as someone who asks to be known in certain ways. Although this will need softening and qualification, I will put the claim baldly for now. Anyone who loves you needs to know you in a way that you accept as an adequate basis for love.

Let me acknowledge that what I present as the ordinary view—that love requires knowing the beloved well—is contested. One might think of broadly Freudian approaches to love, for instance, as grounding love in the needs and desires of the lover rather than in knowledge of the beloved. Martha Nussbaum reads Proust as holding that, 'the heart and mind of another are unknowable, even

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unapproachable, except in fantasies and projections that are really elements of the knower's own life, not the other's' (1990: 271). On this view, it seems love could not rest on knowledge of the beloved but only on the lover's imagined and desired projection.<sup>1</sup> Or one might hold that love needs careful restriction of knowledge. Kant, as Annette Baier notes, sees a great danger in love's potential for 'self-exposure': 'we all have a strong impulse to disclose ourselves, and enter wholly into fellowship; and such self-revelation is further a human necessity for the correction of our judgments. ... But even between the closest and most intimate of friends there are still some things that call for reserve.... Even to our best friend we must not reveal ourselves, in our natural state as we know it ourselves. To do so would be loathsome' (Kant 1963, 206; quoted in Baier 1994, 35).<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this argument, I will not attempt to reckon directly with views that see knowledge of others as irrelevant to love, impossible in principle, or likely to make others loathsome to us. I will to some extent take the ordinary view for granted, as I do believe that substantial knowledge of others is possible and that it plays an important role in love.

This discussion sets aside perhaps the central question in philosophical debates about love, which is whether love rests on reasons—roughly, does love require belief that the beloved is good? Although that question will be close to the surface in a way, when considering below how divergence in values and interests affects the possibility of knowledge of another, my concern is not with the evidential relevance of the content of knowledge (or belief) to love, but rather with the kind and depth of knowledge needed and the beloved's role in setting those conditions. Within the constraints of the second-personal conception offered here, a potential beloved might call for a potential lover to know quite negative things about her; it is a further question whether satisfying such a demand must inhibit love.

I will start with a brief elaboration and defence of the second-personal conception. Then I will lay out some claims that are made about the lover's relation to the beloved's interests, in order to consider how these claims interact with the second-personal conception of love. My specific concern is with the kind of knowledge, which I will call 'comprehension', that is required for making a beloved's interests one's own. I will draw on a novel, *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, to help develop the notion of

comprehension and to illustrate the possibility of love that accommodates the failure of comprehension. Finally, I will consider some problems and sketch a few connections between this discussion and accounts of second-person relations offered by Darwall and by Buber.

### **1. Motivating the role of the beloved**

My basic claim is that when we love a person, that person has a say as to the kind and depth of knowledge required to count as loving him or her. Our knowledge of the beloved has to meet a success condition that we as lovers, or putative lovers, do not control. I will offer only brisk and simple support for this claim, linking some functional and normative considerations. First, it seems that part of the point of loving people—that doing so is not a mystifying, capricious form of concern and attachment—is that love can reach and be received by the beloved. It is not that love inevitably is received by the beloved, but the constraints on love need to promote that as a guiding aim. And for love to reach its ‘target’ and be received, the beloved has to be able to recognize herself in the love. It has to be possible for the love to make sense to the beloved as love directed at her. Now, that may sound like a strong requirement, but it presumably leaves it open that I could recognize myself in being loved as the one who satisfies various trivial descriptions (recognizing myself as the one who ate the last doughnut or who occupied particular spatio-temporal points). Here a second, more explicitly normative consideration comes into play.

As is often emphasised, we aim to love a person *as a person*. That involves, very roughly, acknowledging and respecting the beloved as a being with consciousness, interests, and authority over what is important to her.<sup>3</sup> For someone to recognize herself as a person who is loved, it seems the love has to incorporate at least some of the knowledge the beloved has of herself at this non-trivial level. What experiences, interests, and sources of meaning and value make sense to her as importantly relevant to who she is? If my putative love for someone does not manage to incorporate a conception of a person that is adequate by that person’s standards, the love will not only be unable to be received by her but will not, I would argue, acknowledge the person in a way that is required for loving a person.

There are a number of phenomena that suggest problems and complications for the basic claim, such as self-deception and unreasonable narcissism on the part of a beloved. I will return to those particular problems briefly at the end; I will focus on the way in which this basic claim interacts with some larger views about love and the lover's relation to the beloved's interests.

## **2. Comprehension and making the beloved's interests one's own**

There are a number of accounts of love that characterize the lover as in some way taking on, sharing, and promoting the interests of the beloved. One preliminary note is that it is hard to give a definition of 'interests' that does not settle controversial issues too quickly. The broad idea is that a person's interests are determined by what affects her well-being positively or negatively, and whether the person is the judge of that or whether some other standard is to be used is controversial. In any case, in such accounts of love, the way in which the lover relates to the beloved's interests can be put in stronger and weaker terms. On some views, sometimes referred to as 'merger' or 'union' accounts, the interests of the two parties merge, so that in promoting the beloved's interests one is thereby promoting one's own. Nozick says, 'The people you love are included inside your boundaries, their well-being is your own' (1991, 417). Scruton distinguishes love from friendship because in love 'all distinction between my interests and your interests is overcome' (2006, 230). Or, less strongly, the lover and beloved maintain distinct identities and interests, but the lover makes the beloved's interests important to who she (the lover) is, in a way that reflects the basis of the interests in care for the beloved. For Helm, as a lover I make it part of my identity to value what contributes to the beloved's well-being: 'Loving someone ... involves valuing what she values for her sake' (2010, 161). For Frankfurt, when a lover fully realises loving concern for the beloved, 'The interests of his beloved are not actually *other* than his at all. They are his interests too' (2004, 61).<sup>4</sup> Although these accounts differ in significant ways, for the purposes of this discussion, I single out the shared idea that loving a person involves adopting the beloved's interests, in some sense, as one's own.

The strong union statements of this idea have been criticised for characterising love in a way that does or can undermine the autonomy of the lover and beloved.<sup>5</sup> Union and non-union versions of the idea have been charged with celebrating what looks more like an unhealthy, overly intrusive or overly self-effacing devotion to the beloved.<sup>6</sup> I take these to be substantial criticisms to which my own line of thought is sympathetic, especially in the appeal to autonomy, but my concern with the idea of adopting the beloved's interests as one's own comes from a different angle. To take on another's interests as one's own raises a question about the kind of knowledge of another's interests that would be required to unite or identify with the other in that way.

Let me introduce this question by citing a passage from Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*. This is one of the passages in the novel that triggered my thinking about these issues, and, as I hope to make clear, consideration of the issues is furthered by having a 'living'—albeit fictional—context in mind in which the projects of love and of sharing interests are at stake. The novel is narrated by John Ames, an elderly Congregationalist minister in 1950's Iowa, who is writing a letter-memoir to his young son, whom he knows he will not live to see as an adult. One can view the novel as a whole as serving the father's need to make it possible for his child to know him (and perhaps love him). The two relationships that I will refer to are between this narrator and his father, and between the narrator's father and *his* father (all named 'John Ames' and all ministers).<sup>7</sup> This passage is near the beginning of the novel, when the narrator is remembering a long-ago, desolate trip he took with his father, to hunt for their father's/grandfather's grave. The narrator remarks that,

You can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it. A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension. (Robinson 2004, 7)

In the present context, what leaps out here is that the narrator seems to assume that there is 'knowledge' and there is 'comprehension', such that you can know but not comprehend a person, and can love but not comprehend a person. What could these terms mean, and how could people relate to each other, such that love, comprehension, and knowledge could play out in this way?

I think that the narrator is indeed talking about the issue of sharing and not sharing the interests of those we love (or hope to love). I will return to illustrate this more concretely in relation to the novel. But first, let me spell out a distinction between forms of knowledge that I see as relevant to taking on a person's interests. If a lover has to make the beloved's interests her own, then it seems she at least has to know what those interests are. Perhaps not in a very articulated way, but in some form, the lover has to have accurate knowledge, an ability to tick the right boxes in identifying the beloved's interests. The language of box-ticking may make this sound straightforward, but accurate knowledge of a person's interests is an elusive and difficult thing.<sup>8</sup> Supposing that it must include grasp of what the person finds to be meaningful and valuable in her life (even if the person's assessment of her interests is not the conclusive standard), then it involves knowing what looms large for the person in that way—what prospects, concerns, and values are motivating, satisfying, and generally taken seriously by that person? I will label this kind of knowledge 'accuracy' about a person's interests. Now, even though such accuracy is quite demanding, it does not seem sufficient to support the taking on of a beloved's interests. We can readily identify certain things as interests for another, but lack understanding of how those things could be motivating, fulfilling, and worth integrating into one's life. I use the term 'comprehension' to refer to this yet more demanding kind of understanding; I will consider its relevance to adopting another's interests after elaborating on this notion.

Comprehension is an appreciation of *how* things have value and meaning within a person's life. When I know a person, my accurate knowledge may be substantial and yet fail in comprehension in this sense. I may not comprehend how and why certain things are motivating, reason-giving, and fulfilling to another, though I know they are. It is in these terms that I read the narrator's remarks, as I see him reckoning with the fact that he, his father, and grandfather, while knowing each other 'to death'—with accuracy—do not comprehend each other.

Consider two mundane examples. A number of my family members have become increasingly committed to strenuous physical challenges (marathons and triathlons), and I think I can claim to know

somewhat accurately what values, goals, and satisfactions move them in these commitments. But I also think I fail to comprehend how these challenges can be motivating—the concrete lure and meaning of these challenges, how they might be powerful enough to make one adapt one’s working and leisure time to their demands, escape me. Or, I think of the role of ‘Facebooking’ in my son’s life. I think he would say that it is important to him to have an active, daily presence on Facebook. I think I have accurate knowledge of at least some of the things that he cares about on Facebook, but I take myself to lack comprehension, not understanding how it could be experienced as a motivating, engaging prospect. I note that this kind of failure can often trigger a further, evaluative attitude—say, mild disapproval or dismissiveness—but that would be, typically, unwarranted, something like a prejudice against the unknown rather than a justified critical perspective.

I am using the term ‘comprehension’, then, to refer to knowing not only that a certain thing is valued within a person’s life, but to understanding the valuing of that thing. Comprehension in this sense comes in degrees and can vary in the kind of acknowledgement of value it holds. One could make much more fine-grained distinctions; I will only suggest some of the complexity that is encompassed within the notion of comprehension. For example, one might comprehend another’s interests in the sense of having *Verstehen* with respect to the person’s experience of valuing. By this I mean being ‘inside’ what it is like for that person to value something and to experience it as important to well-being. This would be an unusually strong kind of comprehension, going beyond accurate knowledge to the point of bringing the meaning and power of another’s interests to life in one’s own experience. *Verstehen* of this kind would include understanding things as goods—as having normative force of some kind—and feeling motivated by them.

Weaker states that would still count as comprehension have to involve some degree of normative understanding *and* experience of motivational force. I will not try here to identify the lower limit of comprehension, leaving it to some extent open how weak these elements can be and still count as comprehension. But I intend it as a fairly demanding achievement—the rough idea is that, in



comprehending another's interests, those interests show up as 'live possibilities', or much closer to live ones than dead, across the range of interests a person could have. The complexity of comprehension of interests is that it is partly about the valued things themselves—it has to incorporate a grasp of what these things offer and a way of construing what they offer as good—and it is partly about connecting that good to a life in some intelligible and motivating way. I might comprehend the goodness of something quite strongly but have trouble connecting it to conditions of life that make sense for me, or, on the other hand, I might feel the lure of something and see how it would fit into conditions of life that I understand, but not have a clear conception of it as good. So, when comprehending a person's interests, one is finding those interests to be somewhere fairly 'far along' on a continuum of motivating and normatively intelligible elements in a life. Comprehension in this sense points to some fraught and important territory in human relations, as it involves us in meeting others part-way in finding things valuable and motivating. Comprehension does not require committing oneself to *having* the interests the other has, but it is a step in that direction, as the 'comprehender' to some degree accepts the normative intelligibility and motivating force of the other's interests.

### **3. Love and failure of comprehension**

Returning to the idea that a lover makes the beloved's interests her own, it seems that this adoption of the other's interests would require a form of comprehension. *Verstehen* of the beloved's experience of valuing would not be needed, but there would need to be comprehension strong enough to support the lover's integration of these interests into her life. If lovers, as Frankfurt puts it, '*identify* those interests as their own' (1998b, 168), it seems they need to understand them as goods and need to feel their motivating force.<sup>9</sup> Otherwise it is hard to see how those interests can play the role of interests in the lover's life.<sup>10</sup> Again, comprehension alone would not make something an interest; it seems that a further commitment or active orientation of some kind is necessary, but the comprehension is a necessary condition. If I lack comprehension of another's interests, it seems those interests cannot function for me as goods that have

moving power in my life, and so I cannot adopt those interests as my own. On accounts that make this a requirement of love, it seems I cannot love a person whose interests I fail to comprehend. I think discussions of taking on the interests of a beloved may assume that love itself is the condition that, if met, supports my ability to adopt the beloved's interests—in wanting the beloved to be happy and flourish I thereby trigger the incorporation of her interests into my own. But comprehension is an independent condition for making an interest one's own, and love itself does not guarantee comprehension.

In the bigger picture, I think that love does not in fact require making the beloved's interests one's own, but my point here is the indirect one that satisfying this requirement for love would demand comprehension. And the latter idea seems problematic, initially on the basis of apparent evidence of love that crosses gaps in comprehension. This possibility, among other things, is what the narrator of Robinson's novel reflects on, as he is gripped by the possibilities of mutual incomprehension and love between, for example, God and humans as well as between the generations of his family. Now, it might be argued that failures of comprehension are acceptable and do not obstruct love when they do not concern sufficiently important interests. The fact that I do not comprehend commitments to running marathons or doing Facebook does not seem to be a terribly important failure of comprehension in relation to my family members, and it does not seem that it would interfere with my loving them. Here, however, I want to bring the second-personal conception of love back into view. I would say that love certainly can accommodate failures of comprehension, but when it does, this is not directly because the failure is trivial—and the failure may not be trivial—but because the beloved does not ask for that comprehension. My family members play a role, ordinarily a tacit one, in taking my failure to comprehend these interests in stride. I do not count these failures as precluding love because I assume that they do not require that my conception of them includes comprehension of these particular interests. Let me note that, while I am emphasizing failures of comprehension, because comprehension is interesting and problematic in relation to the requirement to share interests, a beloved can certainly ask for accurate knowledge as well. Inaccuracy, not just about interests but broadly construed, could mean that a potential

beloved does not find herself to be known well enough, in the would-be lover's conception of her, to be loved.

The significance of failures of comprehension or of broader forms of knowledge is thus not just a matter of how it affects the thoughts, feelings, commitment, concern, and hopes that one person 'aims at' the other; it also matters how important the failure is to the potential beloved. Does the 'target' of the potential love feel that he or she is aptly enough 'aimed at' to establish a relation of love? Let me illustrate this second-personal interplay with the two examples of father-son relations mentioned above. I choose these because both involve important, nearly devastating failures of comprehension, but the impact of these failures on love is different, I would say, because of how the 'you' assesses the significance of the failure.

In the case of the narrator's grandfather and father, the defining historical event for them is the U.S. Civil War. The grandfather headed to the Midwest before the war, driven by a vision from God that called him to work for the abolition of slavery. He remained prone to visions and was a fiery, uncompromising, uncomfortable presence. The narrator's father cannot reconcile himself to the fact that his father participated in violent resistance to slavery, helping to kill at least one man, and furthermore preached in support of the war. In the following scene, the two are talking soon after the grandfather has walked out on his son's sermon on a pacifist theme. The grandfather speaks of his disappointment in his son:

My grandfather said, 'And that's just what kills my heart, Reverend. That the Lord never came to you. That the seraphim never touched a coal to your lips—'

My father stood up from his chair. He said, 'I remember when you walked to the pulpit in that shot-up, bloody shirt with that pistol in your belt. And I had a thought as powerful and clear as any revelation. And it was, This has *nothing* to do with Jesus. Nothing. Nothing. And I was, and I am, as certain of that as anyone could ever be of any so-called vision. I defer to no one in this. Not to you, not to Paul the Apostle, not to John the Divine, Reverend.'

My grandfather said, 'So-called vision. The Lord, standing there beside me, had one hundred times the reality for me that you have standing here now!'

... And that was when a chasm truly opened. (Robinson 2004, 84-5)

The father cannot grant that his son's religious commitment has genuine force and cannot see how he can preach pacifism when injustice is rampant; his son cannot hear the implacable voice of God that his father

hears and takes his father's embrace of violence to violate their faith. This father-son pair know each other well, with great accuracy, but in crucial respects they fail to comprehend each other.

The narrator and his father (that is, the pacifist son just discussed) also find themselves ultimately at odds. The father has moved away from their town, Gilead, leaving the narrator to take over as pastor of their church. When the father returns for a visit, it emerges that the father has lost his faith and no longer preaches. He tries to convince the narrator to leave Gilead.

He told me that looking back on Gilead from any distance made it seem a relic, an archaism. ... He said, 'I have become aware that we here lived within the limits of notions that were very old and even very local. I want you to understand that you do not have to be loyal to them.'

He thought he could excuse me from my loyalty, as if it were loyalty to him, as if it were just some well-intended mistake he could correct for me, as if it were not loyalty to myself at the very least, putting the Lord to one side, so to speak ...

I couldn't believe he would speak to me as if I were not competent to invest my loyalties as I saw fit. (Robinson 2004, 235)

When he subsequently receives a letter from his father, which he burns (and of which the reader never knows the contents), he is bereft.

I have mentioned loneliness to you, and darkness, and I thought then I already knew what they were, but that day it was as if a great cold wind swept over me the like of which I had never felt before, and that wind blew for years and years. (Robinson 2004, 236)

Here, the son charges his father with a failure of comprehension; the reader is not given direct evidence of how the father understands their situation, but it seems clear that the father *wants* to love his son and probably thinks that he does.

Now, how do these failures affect the possibility of love between these fathers and sons? The novel does not make it obvious how to understand these relationships, and I offer my view of these characters in a speculative spirit. I take the older father and son pair to maintain love, and in this case mutual love, despite their strong rejection of each other's commitments. They are portrayed as being locked in a battle of sorts, but still locked together. While failing to comprehend each other, they have a kind of mutual respect in which each understands that the other simply cannot occupy the same ground. I would say each finds the other's love to be sufficiently 'on target', in the sense that each takes the other to grasp the severity of the chasm—each is adequately aware of how much is at stake in their differences. I

take the narrator, however, to no longer feel or be loved by his father. The narrator's loneliness in relation to his father is radical. In part this is because the father has abandoned the comprehension of the world that matters most to his son. The father no longer finds what moves the son—that the world holds genuinely sacred blessings, that there is 'a visionary aspect of any particular day' (Robinson 2004, 91)—to be an intelligible and moving possibility. But it is also due to the fact that the father does not recognise the struggle and depth of questioning that lie behind his son's faith. More than the divergence over faith itself, it seems that the father's failure to comprehend the seriousness and integrity of the son's spiritual testing stands in the way of him loving his son. From the son's point of view, the father crucially misses the person who is there to be loved.

The features of these relationships that I am highlighting—divergences of interests and second-personal engagement—are prominent in part because these are adults who love or try to love each other. If they love each other, it will be as people who have long individual experience, responsibilities for action and interpretation, and whatever interests have developed through their experiences, decisions, and senses of meaning. Each knows that the other has a parallel 'accretion' from years of living. One of the points that Frankfurt argues for is that a parent's love for the infant or very young child is the paradigm of love. Rather than romantic love, for instance, 'the love of parents for their infants or small children is the species of caring that comes closest to offering recognizably pure instances of love' (2004, 43). Love for the infant is most likely to meet the demand for selfless and disinterested concern—for making the beloved's interests one's own—that is, in Frankfurt's view, essential to love.<sup>11</sup> The idea that lovers adopt the interests of their beloveds and promote them as their own is relatively easy to conceive of in the case of the parent caring for an infant, but part of why it seems easy is that such relations take a minimally second-personal form. Infants are not yet able to conceive of themselves as beings with interests, and they need adults who will identify and pursue interests on their behalf. They are not capable of fully occupying the role of another self, a 'you' who makes claims that an 'I' has to address, about interests or anything else. And the infant is not capable, I would say, of having interests that the parent cannot comprehend. If

one takes love between adults either as the paradigm, or as an equally central paradigm, the conception of love needs to accommodate different factors: the beloved can make claims that affect the conditions for love and can have interests the lover cannot comprehend.<sup>12</sup> A beloved may or may not call for me to comprehend her interests, and it may often not be possible for me to make those interests my own.<sup>13</sup> While love indeed seems to mean that one cares about the well-being of the beloved, there must be ways of conceiving of that concern that do not require the comprehension (much less the adoption) of the beloved's interests.

#### **4. Conclusion: comparisons and complications**

When thinking about love as a second-person relation, other work on second-person relations is relevant as part of the context of understanding such relations. I will not do justice to this context here, but will make some brief comparisons, bringing Stephen Darwall's work on the second-person perspective and Martin Buber's ideas about human relation in *I and Thou* into view. Darwall's notion of the second-person perspective is developed within his account of moral reasons, as he argues that moral reasons involve the making of claims *to each other* and the recognition of each other's authority to make those claims. In this account, 'any second-personal claim ... presupposes a common competence, authority, and, therefore, responsibility as free and rational, a mutual second-personality that addresser and addressee share and that is appropriately recognized reciprocally' (2006, 21). Buber is concerned with the reciprocity of relation with a 'You' that is required for each of us to become truly a person: 'I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You' (1970, 62). The aspect of love that I am exploring here follows these views in tying love to a recognition that a 'you' contributes to the relation—love involves coming to know a person who 'talks back' to the lover and constrains the possibility of love. Let me note some of the interesting issues that arise in relation to Darwall's and Buber's ideas.

First, love is not being cast here as a *morally* demanding engagement with the beloved, in Darwall's terms. The person who *morally* addresses a 'you' posits or aims for consensus and mutual

recognition within a community of free and equal rational beings. These moral beings take each other to have mutual claim-making authority because of what they share. Love is similar to this moral second-person relation in that it involves positing each other as beings with conceptions of value and interests, and as having some authority over how a lover needs to know or comprehend those conceptions. So the lover recognises a 'you' who has authority to make claims on a 'me', as for instance in making a claim for accurate or comprehending knowledge, but this is not in itself recognition of authority to make moral claims. Love, as construed here, makes room for the lover and beloved to address each other as not sharing consensus and as perhaps *not* granting the equal rationality of the other. Mutual recognition is required, but it can accommodate and acknowledge gaps or 'blind spots' where we do not affirm the rationality of the way the beloved assesses evidence, value, and importance. We can love those we take to be irrational and with whom we fail to find crucial forms of consensus. One might say that love is 'individualising' in a way that moral address is not. Love here takes the other's individuality as something to be concretely known and accepted, while in moral relations, though we of course acknowledge that others are individuals, we are simultaneously assuming or aiming for common ground with them. The moral second-person relation is also reciprocal in a way that love need not be; love involves the 'I' and 'you' recognising each other as persons, but the love need not go both ways.

Buber portrays love as *the* relation, the way of being with others in which we are actually related to them as persons, as opposed to so-called relations with others in which we participate only as things. I think that Buber might say that, to dwell on the importance of *knowing* the beloved would be to dwell precisely on a problematically objectifying project. To aim for knowledge of another, as a conceptually identifiable entity in the world, is not to relate to a 'You': 'only as an It can it be absorbed into the store of knowledge' (1970, 90; see also 59-63). I am in some sense working at a less fundamental level than Buber, not trying to address the nature of the most basic mutuality between persons, and it may be that there is a basic second-person relation in which knowledge is irrelevant. But working at a perhaps less fundamental level, I reject the view that the project of knowing people inevitably treats them as things. I

take love to be important to us partly *because* it calls for knowing each other and being known.<sup>14</sup>

However, I think that the beloved's role in shaping the terms of knowledge might mitigate the knowledge-project's 'objectifying' impact, from Buber's point of view. That role means that the knowledge a potential lover needs to have is knowledge that a beloved thinks matters to relating to him or her, so the lover's knowledge-project in that way builds in, I would say, a concern for relation to a person.

Let me conclude by pointing to two problems that complicate the workings of second-person love, the phenomena of unreasonable narcissism and self-deception. These are both phenomena which challenge the justification for giving a beloved a say about how she is to be known by a lover. Do we inevitably have authority to set conditions for knowledge, as a basis for love? The term 'unreasonable narcissism' is being used to refer to the tendency to think that far too much of one's life and interests calls for knowledge and comprehension, in order for love to 'reach its target'. I might persistently feel that no one understands me well enough to count as loving me, because no one adequately grasps the factual record of my life or comprehends the values and interests shaping my experience and actions in large and small respects. Perhaps acquiring such exhaustive knowledge and comprehension of a person is possible, but it seems that, on top of the unreasonableness of this person's demands for knowledge, it would be unreasonable to take loving such a person to require accepting her conception of the knowledge needed.<sup>15</sup> In the case of a substantially self-deceived person, someone whose self-conception is filled with rationalisations, selective highlighting, misinterpretation of motives and decisions, and so forth, it seems that a potential lover's conception of the person to be loved could be less misguided and more adequate. So again, it seems unreasonable to grant such a potential beloved any kind of authoritative 'say' as to how she is to be known. One clarificatory point is that the second-person relation is not one in which we get to ask lovers for 'knowledge' and 'comprehension' of how we would *like* ourselves to be or how we would like ourselves to be known, but of how we are. The self-deceived person makes it difficult to satisfy both the demand to know the person well and to know them in a way that respects the potential beloved's demands for knowledge. So, if we seriously misconceive what we value, and tie love to comprehension in



terms that do not in fact apply (asking for the central priority of egalitarian social arrangements to be comprehended, when really we value and promote inherited interests), why should our demands for comprehension have any weight?

I do not have a particularly clear answer to such questions. I have gestured at these phenomena in their extreme forms—the completely unreasonable narcissist and the substantially self-deceived person. But these phenomena have less extreme manifestations that loving relationships reckon with every day, so the questions also have an ordinary presence and common significance. We need to have something sensible to say about what it takes to love an ordinarily narcissistic and self-deceived ‘you’. Instead of opening up these complex issues, let me just state a position that needs further exploration and defence. Even in the extreme cases, I would say the beloved’s claims for knowledge and comprehension constrain the possibility of love. If the narcissism or self-deception is extreme enough, it may not be possible to love the person—it is very difficult to connect with such a person adequately in a second-person relation. But let’s suppose that love is possible if difficult in many such cases. Even though the demands the beloved makes cannot be met, or do not help one know the person in the way they are intended to, loving that person still requires that those demands have a privileged status. Perhaps their status is not ‘authoritative’—whether they function the way the beloved wants them to can be contested and so it may be justified to bring other or lesser forms of knowledge and comprehension into play. But the expectations for knowledge and comprehension that allow the beloved to recognise herself in being loved, and that reflect the requirements for love of persons, remain relevant to the possibility of loving this person.

In general, the possibility of loving the narcissistic and the self-deceived, in extreme or ordinary cases, is not straightforward. When I am self-deceived about what I value, it is likely that the self-deception is partial—I do value what I think I value, but I ignore something else that is in fact more dominant. Further, there may rarely be a settled truth about the values and interests that most deeply or authentically characterise a person, so that ‘success’ in comprehending oneself or a beloved is more like

an ongoing project. If that is our situation, claims for comprehension must be less settled as well.

Allowing that there is complication and nuance in most cases, it remains true that phenomena of narcissism and self-deception are not easy to accommodate on a view that gives the beloved authority over how he or she is to be known by a lover. But I do not think we can surrender this role as the ‘you’ in love, even if our contribution is problematic. Perhaps the most constructive point that can be drawn from these problems is that being loved implicitly gives the beloved a responsibility for reasonable self-concern and self-knowledge. We will have a hard time being loved, if we seek to be known by others on terms they could never meet or which do not help them to be adequately related to us.

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### **Notes**

1. See Landy (2004, Ch. 2) on Proust and the ‘will to ignorance’. Ronald de Sousa remarks that in love the object of love ‘need not be as the subject believes it to be’ (1987, 109). Marcia Cavell argues that Freud in fact has the basis for an ‘objective view’ on which love ‘motivates an understanding of another’s point of view; motivates, that is, a relatively accurate characterization of the object’ (1992, 81).
2. Baier herself, in contrast, champions Hume’s view that, ‘We rejoice ... in the presence of a “Being like ourselves, who communicates to us all the actions of his mind; makes us privy to his inmost sentiments and affections ...”’ (Hume 1978, 353; quoted in Baier 1994, 40).
3. See Helm (2010), especially Ch. 5, and Velleman (1999), especially 360-70, on loving a person as a person. Both appeal to the idea that we love persons as beings who have ‘the capacity to love’ (Velleman 1999, 365; Helm 2010, 173), where this is shorthand for a range of ideas about the beloved’s status. In Velleman’s terms, a person is to be loved as ‘an instance of rational nature’, with ‘a capacity to care about things in that reflective way which is distinctive of self-conscious creatures like us’ (1999, 365). In Helm’s terms, ‘persons ... are capable of exercising a capacity for autonomy in deliberating about and so determining which values they shall have and so what their identities shall be’ (2010, 147-8). Helm ties this to a knowledge requirement: ‘the kind of intimate identification essential to love requires that the lover has a reasonably accurate understanding of the beloved’s identity’ (2010, 162).
4. See also Frankfurt (1998b, 165-8).
5. See Soble (1997) and Friedman (2003).
6. ‘In most contexts, a love that is inseparable from the urge to benefit is an unhealthy love, bristling with uncalled-for impingements’ (Velleman 1999, 353). Considered in a certain light, ‘devotion to a beloved’s ends has a distinctly sinister side’ (Westlund 2005, 14 and surrounding passages). See also Friedman (1989, 4).
7. See Acocella (2005) for a fuller account of the novel, with particular attention to these father-son pairs.
8. Helm asks, ‘by whose standards ought I to assess what affects [a beloved’s] well-being ... mine or his?’ Helm argues for a ‘middle ground’ on this (2010, 158-61). Susan Wolf points to the value of not being overly confident about what one’s interests are (2002, 239).
9. On Helm’s view, ‘Loving someone ... involves valuing what she values for her sake ... It should be clear, however, that although I value these things for her sake, *I* am the one who values them’ (2010, 161).

10. See Soble for discussion of a difficulty in Frankfurt's view concerning the lover's ability to be invested in a non-reciprocating beloved's interests (2005, 12).
11. 'Love is, most centrally, a *disinterested* concern for the existence of what is loved, and for what is good for it' (Frankfurt 2004, 42). See Frankfurt (1998b, 165-8). Scruton says of love for one's child that 'all its interests are my interests' (2006, 233).
12. Friedman says that one learns from friends 'what life is like for someone who is motivated by springs of action different from one's own' (1989, 9). See Helm discussion cited above, on finding the 'middle ground' in which one acknowledges that the beloved's conceptions and one's own diverge (2010, 158-61). Wolf points to the common experience of parents finding their non-infant children to have interests they do not find worthwhile (2003, 231-2). Frankfurt discusses conflicts with and difficulty in understanding one's children's interests (2004, 62, 88); these seem to be problems, in his view, that represent a falling away from an ideal.
13. It also seems plausible that demands for comprehension within love can be negotiated differently in relations with different people (a romantic partner might need to comprehend things that one's parents would not, etc.). See Flanagan on revealing oneself differently in different love relationships (1991, 155).
14. See Stanley Cavell on *King Lear*. Lear 'avoids love', shunning the mutual recognition that love involves. Love would require, e.g., seeing through to Cordelia and being 'seen through' by her (1969, 301).
15. Thank you to Diarmuid Costello for raising this issue.

### Notes on contributor

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