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The Self, Love and the Other: Thoughts on Nietzsche, Kant and Owen

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Abstract. Owen (2009, 2017) contrasts Kant and Nietzsche's strategies for dealing with self-love. Kant sees our self-love as ineliminable, and looks to adopt a strategy of subordinating or supressing it to the moral law. Owen sees Nietzsche, by contrast, as adopting a strategy of *channelling* self-love, directing it in ways that serve both individual and collective development. In this paper, I argue that we do not need to just supress, subordinate, or channel self-love, for we can also move away from it. Doing this involves recognising our own dependence on and vulnerability to each other, and empathy. I contend that emphasis on these things also moves us away from Kant and Nietzsche.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Kant, self-love, empathy.

Human beings can be self-absorbed, selfish, and prone to self-love. How are to deal this feature of our lives? Owen (2009, 2017) contrasts two strategies for dealing with self-love. Kant sees our self-love as ineliminable, and looks to adopt a strategy of subordinating or supressing it to the moral law. Nietzsche, by contrast, adopts a strategy of *channelling* self-love, directing it in ways that serve both individual and collective development. In this paper, I make the case for an alternative option. I argue that self-love is not ineliminable in the way that these thinkers hold it to be. And thus we do not need to just supress, subordinate, or channel it – we can also move away from it. Doing this involves recognising our own dependence on and vulnerability to each other, and empathy. I contend that emphasis on these things also moves us away from Kant and Nietzsche.

The paper takes the following structure. I begin by briefly outlining Kant's, Nietzsche's and Owen's views on the topic (§1). I then argue that self-love is not as ubiquitous as they make out (§2), before turning to look at empathy, vulnerability and dependence (§3). Finally, I contend that we should move towards emphasising these things, and away from Kant and Nietzsche's emphases on independence, autonomy, self-mastery, and self-responsibility (§4).

I. KANT, NIETZSCHE AND CHANNELLING SELF-LOVE

Kant maintains that we either act from self-love, or duty.[1] These are the two options for human beings. We possess the capacity to act from duty. But when we go wrong, and fail to act from duty, we act from self-love. Kant famously thinks that acting from duty

1] See, for instance, Kant's claims at V: 22-23 in the *Critique of Practical Reason*; for further discussion, see Sticker and Saunders 2022.

alone has moral worth, and so our self-love ought to be suppressed or subordinated to the moral law.[2]

Instead of looking to supress or subordinate self-love, Nietzsche hopes to channel it. And Owen (2009, 2017) provides a compelling account of how this occurs, and how channelling self-love can serve both individual and collective development.

One important part of this involves self-respect:

> A preliminary view concerning the relationship between self-love and self-respect would thus be that valuing the disposition of *amor fati* [love of fate3]broadly equates to valuing the will to self-responsibility (i.e., ethical autonomy) and, hence, that self-love consists in valuing self-respect. (Owen 2009, 216)

This seems plausible. Self-respect is healthy, especially in contrast to pernicious forms of self-hatred and self-denial. And insofar as we can channel self-love towards self-respect, that seems like a good strategy.

What about the other parts of Nietzsche's view, the emphasis on self-responsibility and autonomy? It is worth noting that his conception of autonomy differs from Kant's:

> […] in contrast to Kant, [Nietzsche] takes the achievement of autonomy to be the ongoing achievement of standing in a relationship of self-responsibility and self-overcoming to oneself such that the practice of certain virtues are integral to developing and sustaining this relationship – and that these virtues include those cultivated by an agonal culture such as courage and independence of mind, that is, those virtues integral to taking up and overcoming challenges. (Owen 2017, 153)

Owen draws upon Nietzsche's' interest in ancient Athens *agonal culture* to suggest how self-love can be channelled. An agon is a site of competition, contest, or conflict, and Owen notes that, for Nietzsche:

> An agonal culture […] cultivates just that will to self-overcoming which is the disposition of freedom. Nietzsche takes certain passions – desires for respect, honour, glory – to be channelled by the agon in ways that serve culture, society and polity both by cultivating the appropriate practical relation to self in participants and by developing the excellence of practices (art, politics, etc.). (Owen 2017, 149)

More precisely, the agon:

> […] acts to cultivate will to power (the instinct for freedom) in such a way that the feeling of power (the feeling of effective agency) tracks power (effective agency) *and*, at the same time, supports a practical relationship to self in which the power to engage in the self-directed development of one's powers (and hence the dispositions of self-responsibility and of self-overcoming) is central to one's ethical outlook. (Owen 2017, 149)

2] How exactly this works is complicated. One of Kant' suggestions is that the moral law strikes down our self-conceit, which humiliates us, and produces a special feeling of respect for the moral law, which we then go to act on; see V: 73 in the *Critique of Practical Reason.*

3] For a thoughtful discussion of Amor Fate, see Hans-Pile 2011.

So conceived, our desires for respect, honour and glory, and our will to power can be helpful. Here we see that, for Nietzsche self-love can be channelled towards self-mastery and self-responsibility, in a way that benefits the individual, and can even serve culture and society more broadly. We see an ethical outlook in which self-love isn't necessarily problematic, and where self-mastery and self-responsibility are central.

I want to suggest an alternative ethical outlook. But before I do that, let's stop to think about just how ubiquitous self-love really is.

II. IS SELF-LOVE UBIQUITOUS?

The view that self-love is ubiquitous is common in the Lutheran tradition. We find traces of this view in Kant, Nietzsche, and Murdoch, amongst others.[4] I want to put some simple pressure on this view. For I don't think self-love is as ubiquitous as these thinkers make out. I don't deny that it exits, but think the evidence suggests it is less widespread than we might worry. I also contend that where it does exist, we can look to overcome it.

The view that we are always motivated by self-love (or self-interest) is a form of psychological egoism. And this is typically seen as an under-motivated view, in its own way, a sort of scepticism about our motivations. After all, perhaps we are all only motivated by self-interest. That's a possibility, but why is it a possibility that we ought to take seriously?

Here it will help to interrogate the nature of the claim a little bit. What kind of the claim is the claim that we are always motivated by self-love? One option is that it is a sort of conceptual claim: when one acts, one does what one prefers to do, and this is a form of self-love. So conceived, we always act from self-love, but this doesn't tell us anything substantial about our actions or motivations.

The other option is that it is a substantial, perhaps empirical or psychological, claim. Other beings might be able to be motivated by other concerns, but us human beings, as a matter of fact, are motivated by self-love. This is a more informative claim, that tells us something substantial about our motivation, but one that we would need evidence for. And, as far as I can tell, the evidence doesn't seem to back it up.

Of course, one might object that psychological egoism is not falsifiable in this sort of way. If that's true, it takes us back to viewing it as a conceptual, perhaps a priori, claim about the nature of our motivation. But that cuts both ways; it avoids being falsifiable, but in doing so, it also lacks any empirical support. I think we should move away from such an approach, opening up our claims about ourselves to the world and evidence.

The evidence suggests that we can often be self-interested, but are not always. For human beings can be motivated by the thoughts and feelings of others, which we'll look

4] For a helpful account of Luther's influence in German Philosophy, see Robert Stern, "Luther's Influence on Philosophy" *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

at in more detail when we turn to empathy in the next section of the paper. Miller (2018, 109) offers one example, where he considers the motivations behind lying. According to one study (De Paulo et al. 1996, 987), 57% of the time we lie, we do so for self-orientated reasons, but 24% of the time, we do so for others, looking to protect their feelings for instance. Now it is not clear whether this lying is right or wrong, for that we would need to know the full context, but either way it does suggest that we are not always motivated by self-love. Empathy suggests that we can be well-motivated by other things than self-love. And the case of lying to protect others feelings also suggests that we can be poorly motivated by more than just self-love as well. I contend that we go wrong and right in a variety of ways, and not just due to self-love.[5]

III. HOW DO WE MOVE AWAY FROM SELF-LOVE?

So far, I have argued that self-love is not as ubiquitous as we might worry. But I have not argued that it doesn't exist. It does. It is fairly widespread, and can be a serious problem. Thankfully though, we can look to overcome it. How? Well, at the most basic level, by focussing on something outside of the self. Simone Weil offers an influential account of this in her 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God'. She champions the importance of attention, which she claims destroys the evil in us. For Weil, attention takes us out of ourselves:

> Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object. (Weil 1951, 111)

> Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it. (Weil 1951, 112)

For Weil, this is true of attention in general. It is good for us to really pay attention to a problem in maths, as it takes us out of ourselves. The general point about de-selfing is taken up by Murdoch in a famous passage in *The Sovereignty of the Good*:[6]

> I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care. (Murdoch 1970, 82)

For Murdoch, it is paying attention to nature that takes us out of ourselves. This strikes me as a little more promising than maths.

5] For an extended discussion of this, with particular reference to Kant's claim that we always go wrong through self-love, see Sticker and Saunders 2022.

6] Murdoch is an interesting case, because she is also quite Lutheran is her assessment of human nature, and how egotistic we are. For further discussion, see Stern 2022.

However, there is a simpler answer. We get out of our selves and our own concerns, by opening ourselves up to other people. And contemporary moral psychology seems to back this up: through affective empathy, we are open to being moved by others. Here is Elisa Aaltola on this point:

> […] affective empathy is intrinsically involved and other-directed; moreover, it is redolent of openness toward others, consists of it. This is quite simply because, in a very tangible fashion, affective empathy opens us to the influence of others by causing us to resonate with their emotive states. Thereby it impels one to become exposed or receptive to the other, i.e. to allow the other to bear an impact on oneself (hence resisting detachment), and to note and pay heed to others' experiences (hence making other-directedness possible)." (Elisa Aaltola 2014, 247)

This is good news: we are not just self-absorbed creatures. We are capable of being deeply receptive to the thoughts and feelings of others.[7]

This is related to recognising our own dependence and vulnerability. And here, we see an emphasis on aspects of us that depart from Kant and Nietzsche's emphasis on independence, autonomy, and self-mastery. It's worth thinking a little bit more about this. After all, what is so valuable about our vulnerability and dependence. Aren't those just facts about us? And perhaps facts that we should strive to overcome.

No. For one, as Aaltola suggests, they make us better people. How? How does recognising our vulnerability and dependence make us better people? Here's Monique Wonderly on this point:

> Recognising vulnerability and dependence as central features of our own lives allows us to see others' vulnerabilities as evidence of a shared condition between us. Taking up this shared condition is thought to be key to motivating caring attitudes and behaviors towards those who require aid (Wonderly 2022, 993)

This resonates with what we saw earlier from Aaltola:

> […] affective empathy opens us to the influence of others by causing us to resonate with their emotive states. Thereby it impels one to become exposed or receptive to the other, i.e. to allow the other to bear an impact on oneself (Elisa Aaltola 2014, 247)

This is what contemporary moral psychology suggests. And it makes sense. We live together, and are affected by each other. We are dependent vulnerable creatures, exposed and receptive to each other. Acknowledging this is good for us, both individually and collectively.[8]

7] Of course, there are exceptions. For a comprehensive discussion of moral responsibility and psychopathy, see Baxter (2022). And for an intriguing defence of an agent without such emotional capacity, see Sofronieva (2021). Sofronieva's defence centres around the admirable sociopathic character Amos from the tv show *The Expanse*. But also, see Singh 2021, who argues that Amos has failed to properly channel his will to power, and thus falls short as a Nietzschean ideal.

8] This can also lead to the formation of a *we*, which might be thought to expand self-love in a non-pernicious way. Cf. Walther 1922 for an account of ethical community. And see Saunders 2024 for discussion of this issue, including the worry that such a community or we might unhelpfully engulf the self.

Alongside this important moral benefit to recognising our vulnerability and dependence, I think there's something touching to our condition. Here is an uncharacteristic passage from Kant, from the *Metaphysics of Morals*:

> Would it not be better for the well-being of the world generally if human morality were limited to duties of right, fulfilled with the utmost conscientiousness, and benevolence were considered morally indifferent? It is not so easy to see what effect this would have on human happiness. But at least a great moral adornment, benevolence, would then be missing from the world. This is, accordingly, required by itself, in order to present the world as a beautiful moral whole in its full perfection, even if no account is taken of advantages (of happiness). (VI: 458. 2-11)

It's uncharacteristic, given Kant's emphasis on (perfect) duties, and the strict priority these have over all other elements of our lives. But nevertheless, even Kant recognises that without benevolence, "a great moral adornment" would be missing from the world. I think something similar is true of our dependence and vulnerability. One can imagine a world without these things, where we are more independent and less vulnerable. And there would be benefits to this. For life hurts, and it would be no insignificant gain to insulate ourselves from these hurts.[9] But we'd lose something in the process, something touching about our state, the type of creatures we are, creatures who need one another.

IV. TIME FOR ANOTHER RE-EVALUATION OF VALUES?

In Kant, I see an emphasis on reason, freedom and autonomy. In Nietzsche, Owen sees an emphasis on autonomy, independence, self-responsibility and self-mastery. These are good things. And at certain times, for certain people, it would be beneficial to emphasise these things, and encourage people to be more autonomous, independent and to develop self-mastery.[10] I worry that now is not that time.

We live in an increasingly individualistic age.[11] We are increasingly isolated, and encouraged to fend for ourselves. In this age, I think we need an emphasis on different things. I think we need more emphasis (especially amongst men) on our vulnerability, dependence, and empathy.

Johnathon Wolff (2015) argues that one of, if not *the* most important things that political philosophers can do, is to emphasise a value that has been relatively neglected. He draws upon an insight from Margaret MacDonald:

> The value of the political theorists, however, is not in the general information they give about the basis of political obligation but in their skill in emphasizing

9] We'd also safeguard ourselves from some of the downsides of empathy; see Cuff et al. (2016, 149) for discussion of some of these downsides.

10] As we say in §1, Owen (2009, 216) points out that part of self-love is self-respect, and that also seems very important for people to emphasises and develop.

11] See, for instance, Judt 2010.

> at a critical moment a criterion which is tending to be overlooked or denied. (MacDonald 1940, 112)

Wolff notes that the latter half of the twentieth century emphasised the value of individual responsibility, which ended up doing considerable damage to the welfare state, and large numbers of people who live in poverty. He does not deny that individual responsibility is a valuable thing, but he thinks its value has been overemphasised, to the detriment of other values, such as compassion and solidarity, and now is the time to emphasise these.

I agree with Wolff, both in his methodological point about what philosophy can do, and in the substantial point about the importance of emphasising compassion and solidarity now. And I think these points both apply roughly in this paper. I worry that Nietzsche (and Kant) overemphasise the importance of individual responsibility, amongst other things.

I worry that Nietzsche lionises strength, pride, and independence. I worry that he champions self-mastery and self-responsibility to the detriment of other important features of our lives: our weakness, our vulnerability, and our dependence on each other.[12]

But am I being unfair to Nietzsche here? After all, he does not only lionise these things. At times, he writes beautifully of a fuller picture of human life:[13]

> He who knows how to regard the history of man in its entirety as his own history, feels in the immense generalisation all the grief of the invalid who thinks of health, of the old man who thinks of the dream of his youth, of the lover who is robbed of his beloved, of the martyr whose ideal is destroyed, of the hero on the evening of the indecisive battle which has brought him wounds and the loss of a friend. […] to take all this upon his soul, the oldest, the newest, the losses, hopes, conquests, and victories of mankind: to have all this at last in one soul, and to comprise it in one feeling: - this would necessarily furnish a happiness which man has not hitherto known, - a God's happiness, full of power and love, full of tears and laughter, a happiness which, like the sun in the evening, continually gives of its inexhaustible riches and empties into the sea, - and like the sun, too, feels itself richest when even the poorest fisherman rows with golden oars! This divine feeling might then be called humanity! (GS §337)

And while he is very critical of (what we would now call) sympathy, he does have some intriguing things to say about (what we would now call) empathy.[14] Moreover, even though he is critical of sympathy, pity and compassion, he does express some compassionate thoughts:

12] For an overview of an alternative ethics, one that focuses upon situations where we are powerless, see Batho 2015.

13] See also the learning to love passage (GS §334); thanks to David Owen for pointing me towards these passages.

14] See D §142, and Ganesh 2017 and Özen 2021 for discussion.

> What dost thou think most humane? To spare a person shame. (GS §337)

There is more to be said about weakness in Nietzsche as well.[15] At one point, Owen (2009, 216) draws upon passage 290 from the *Gay Science* to suggest that:

> Nietzsche distinguishes between non-necessary weaknesses that can be removed or overcome and necessary weaknesses that are to be concealed or reinterpreted and made sublime. (Owen 2009, 216)

Owen (2009, 217) then continues to approvingly cite Ridley (2005) who claims:

> What is not necessary, and is weak or ugly, should be removed. What is necessary should, if weak or ugly, either be concealed […] or else 'reinterpreted', so that one learns how to see it as beautiful, as a strength.

This seems to allow for some valuing of weakness.[16] But both Nietzsche and Ridley suggest that if weakness is not necessary, it should be overcome. And when it's necessary and can't be overcome, it should be concealed or reinterpreted as strength.

On the first point, I'm not sure that our vulnerability and dependence is strictly necessary. Perhaps we could strive to overcome it, and become more independent and insulated from each other. For some people, in some situations, that will be helpful. But I think it can also be a mistake. For, as we have seen, this is an important part of who we are, it brings us together, and connects us.

As for the second point, perhaps Nietzsche, Owen, Ridley and I end up in a similar place here, where we can all agree that our vulnerability and dependence are good things. For Nietzsche, it might be a weakness, but one that we can reinterpret as a strength.

If that's right, then the key difference is one of emphasis. Nietzsche provided some helpful correctives to the self-denial and self-hatred he found in certain forms of Christianity, with his emphasis on self-love, pride, honour, self-responsibility and self-mastery. But maybe it's time to emphasise other values now. Allow me end with such an emphasis, a beautiful passage by John Jeremiah Sullivan, talking about Jesus:

> "The latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose." I can barely write that. He was the most beautiful dude. […] His breakthrough was the aestheticization of weakness. Not in what conquers, not in glory, but in what's fragile and what suffers—there lies sanity. And salvation. "Let anyone who has power renounce it," he said. "Your father is compassionate to all, as you should be." (Sullivan 2012, 33)

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15] See Owen 2005 for further discussion of weakness in Nietzsche.

16] Of course, this is not the only passage in Nietzsche on weakness. At one point, Owen discusses another passage from the *Genealogy of Morals*, which seems more dismissive of weakness: "[…] it enables the majority of mortals, the weak and the down-trodden of all sorts, to practise that sublime self-deception – the interpretation of weakness itself as freedom, of the way they simply are, as merit." (GM1 §13); for discussion, see Owen 2014, 78-79. See also GS §357.

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