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Whom Do I Love When I Love Myself? The Challenge of Narcissism

Joseph Rivera

School of Theology, Philosophy, and Music, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, D09 V209 Dublin, Ireland; joseph.rivera@dcu.ie

Abstract: A central question within contemporary debates about the structure of self-love concerns the place and status of the other. Is self-love identical to, or at least vulnerable to, the accusation of self-absorption and narcissism? Whereas contemporary critiques of self-love argue self-love is in principle impossible, the present essay suggests that self-love can be integrated with the love of the other at an *a priori* level. This material *a priori*, distinct from the Kantian formal *a priori*, entails resources such as commitment to myself, to the other, and to us as relational unit, as well as to the enforcement of boundaries that protects against acts of injury and abuse instigated against that relational unit; I suggest such resources overcome the charge of narcissism levelled at the very idea of self-love. Prior to that, a brief contextual discussion of key moves about philosophical anthropology, focused on the concept of the monad in Leibniz, Husserl and its extreme repudiation in Jean-Luc Marion, is to be addressed. Finally I assess the intimate relationship between self-love and the love of the other inspired in large part by Augustine's anthropology.

Keywords: phenomenology; love; narcissism; the other; the a priori; Marion; Augustine; Kant



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1. Is Self-Love Just Really Self-Absorption?

Time magazine published a not so uncritical column on the popular self-help movement known as “self-love”. It suggests that self-love, as a therapeutic strategy, one formulated repeatedly in accessible guides to authenticity and self-discovery, confines the self within itself. The outcome is a toxic form of possessive individualism that reimagines our journey of self-discovery as a venturing forth to the other solely for the sake of self-satisfaction, or simply put, what philosophers call solipsism. As such it puts the conditions in place for the magazine column's key insight, namely, that self-love does not genuinely connect with, but instead uses, the other, and it thereby contributes to the widespread western phenomenon of loneliness [1].

By the same token, a fortiori, academic literature in the discipline of philosophy and elsewhere agrees—that self-love can lead to a disturbing fixation on one's own self. Harry Frankfurt's *The Reasons of Love* shows that Kant determined self-love to be at risk of consumptive indulgence, what he named the “dear self” (precious self is more accurate in English perhaps). In self-love my ego “craves merely that its impulses and desires be gratified. In other words, it craves that it be indulged” [2]. Erich Fromm's classic *The Art of Loving* warns that self-love can appear to furnish a selfish alternative to love of neighbour, for “the degree to which I love myself I do not love others, and that self-love is the same as selfishness” [3]¹. Jean-Luc Marion's *The Erotic Phenomenon* formulates the problem in striking psychological imagery: when I love myself I really I lie to myself. For only a “happy

idiot" [*imbécile heureux*] would be capable of such a superficial act of bad faith like self-love, which encourages self-absorption that ignores the inner complexity of our relationship with the other. The one who is happy is handsome, rich, lucky, charmed, "someone for whom everything turns out well, without any merit, difficulty, or failure, either" [4]². Such a life is easy to love, or become self-absorbed in. But what about the rest of us, who dispel that illusion of perfection and thus wrestle with vice and failure, not least with our capacity to hurt and abuse others?

Some recent cognitive science appears to align with such philosophical sentiments. Judson Brewer's book *The Craving Mind* indicates neuroscientific research on the chemical structure of the reward centres of the brain appear to encourage a particularly narcissistic explanation of love. This is especially the case in a romantic context (but not always). Here love appears as selfish self-love in that it involves not so much consideration of the other's welfare and happiness, but, in reality, the satisfaction of the brain's addiction centres that entail physiological cravings induced by drugs like, among others, heroin and cocaine. The physical pains we may feel when a lover is absent (my craving for you) reveals dopamine deprivation, nothing more. What I miss about you, one may conclude in the wake of Brewer's analysis, may well feel like the presence of you as a person and our connection. As if extending the critique of solipsism, Brewer demonstrates that the craving for the other instead brings into focus the satisfaction and relief my brain undergoes once I receive a "hit" from my romantic partner. What I miss, then, is myself, or the selfish feeling of having my chemical needs met. Self-love involves me and only my satisfactions, not theirs, or even ours [5]³.

How might the present article defend self-love? Must we abandon self-love as a philosophical category? Shall we break the spell of its being a healthy form of self-esteem (*amour-propre* in French) by exposing it as a toxic command that carries with it an inescapable accusation of gross absorption in my own ego? Is it ultimately a form of utilitarianism in which I use the other to meet my chemical needs? Or if I insist that I do love myself, does it in reality amount to bad faith, in which I lie to myself about what emotional state I am concealing, that is, my narcissism?

The lesson to be learned in the Narcissus myth outlined in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (entitled the "Story of Echo and Narcissus") lies not in timeless aesthetic of the story, but in the utter clarity with which it illuminates the tragedy of self-love gone wrong, which reveals the logic of vanity. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that Narcissus rejects and dismisses the advance of Echo's love, who in turn curses Narcissus to "not win over the creature whom he loves" [6] (p. 70). After witnessing his own image in a pool, Narcissus falls in love with himself, for "he looks in wonder, charmed by himself, spell-bound, and no more moving than any marble statue. . .the loved become the lover" [6] (p. 70). He could not, predictably, appropriate the fleeting image of himself, but neither could he turn away for fear directed at the prospect that the image would disappear. Narcissus exclaims, "I love him and I cannot seem to find him! When my lips go down to kiss the pool, his rise, he reaches toward me. Where do you go when I am reaching for you?" [6] (p. 71). In the last lines, Narcissus comes to realize, in horror, that "the truth at last. He is myself! I feel it, I know my image now" [6] (p. 72). The idleness of the happy idiot dissolves into grief about the fact he cannot attain or secure what he loves; he cannot kiss it, take hold of it, or possess it, and so, he dies full of sorrow. Narcissistic self-love, is no form of self-love after all, but instead a tragedy of self-absorption. It is like yearning for the chemical hit that serves only to reinforce and strengthen the endless craving for more, in which I fold back onto myself interminably: *incurvatio in se*. Self-love, if framed in this narcissistic manner, is simply vanity.

The present essay suggests such a critique of self-love (as self-absorption or tragic bad faith about self-absorption) achieves a half-truth. I concur that the narcissistic/solipsistic kind self-love cultivates a denial of altruism, sacrifice for the other, and care for the common good in favour of self-interest and selfish analysis of opportunity cost. But I explore if there remains a dynamic type of self-love that does not envision the two objects of love (myself and the other) as rivals. I wish to propose (i) self-love and (ii) love for the other do not appear as a contradiction or as a binary choice, which, in turn, would engender a zero-sum game where one cancels the other out. I propose, by assimilating the lesson of the powerful myth outlined above, to shift self-love away from narcissism by reframing it as an integral interpersonal act that includes (i) myself and the (ii) other, who are held together in my recurring back-and-forth movement of myself outward toward you (and you toward me) that seeks to enhance the intrinsic nature of each of us, without implying that in this movement you and I fuse together or collapse into a single phenomenon—this form of self-love is what we may call the material *a priori* of self-love. A provisional framework concerning the structure of the self obviously obligates us to discuss my sense of self, however briefly, prior to the analysis of the back-and-forth movement of self-love and love of other.

2. The Problem of the Self

Prior to the question of love of self, and indeed presumed in it, lies the question of self as such. One may argue that the command to “love myself” reduces to a trick of sophism in that it gives the impression it has established precisely what needs to be proved and worked out in the first place, or at least broached—the self’s mode of being a self; a definition is required as a first step so that the self can be counted a self to be loved at all. The problem of self-love, therefore, is a twofold problem: the question of the self, and not in logical sequence, then, the question of the internal dynamic of self-love elaborated in accord with the experiential boundaries of the definition of that self; and yet, as I shall suggest in the following sections, the definition of selfhood relies fundamentally on self-love. I am insofar as I love myself. In order to be a self, I wish to advance the claim that an *a priori* of self-love operates within each of us, one which funds my very identity as this unique self, as this unique “I”, interrelated to other unique “I’s”. But first we ask: what kind of I is the self? Who am I?

The post-Cartesian epoch in philosophy has set itself the task of asking “what” I am, what kind of thing or entity am I. In the *Meditations* we read, “I know that I exist; the question is, what is this ‘I’ that I know?” [7] (p. 18). In response Descartes suggested I am indeed a thing or entity, qualified as a “thinking thing”. But the later formulation of an answer to this question discoverable in the writings of Leibniz invokes a reinforced or buttressed Cartesian ego, a fortified citadel of thinghood, an enclosed self, one I should like to critique and surmount—if self-love is possible apart from the loneliness of narcissism.

The infamous analysis of monadology describes the ego in the language of both cognitive reflection and the closure of a self-subsisting thing. The ego adopts the position of *Selbstständigkeit*, an ego-thing that resides in the secure “windowless” configuration of a monad. He writes, “Monads have no windows through which anything could enter them or depart from them. Accidents cannot become detached, or wander about outside of substances, as the sensible species of the Scholastics once did. Thus neither substance nor accident can enter a monad from outside” [8] (p. 15). And monads have “no parts, neither extension, nor shape, nor divisibility is possible. And these monads are the true atoms of nature and, in a word, the elements of things” [8] (p. 14). As if such a tightly hemmed in makeup of the self as an “opaque” or “windowless” element closed in on itself could be limited to the year 1714, Husserl more than two centuries later adopted that very language

of “monad” to describe his version of the Cartesian ego in his Paris lectures of 1929 aptly entitled the *Cartesian Meditations*.

A purified Cartesian ego in Husserl’s phenomenology intends simply to symbolize a transcendental ego that also bears only the faintest imprint of a window, for it resides firmly within itself. Husserl’s phenomenology seemingly accomplishes an ego within the impermeable boundaries of a pure “I myself” that is “my concrete being as a monad, purely in myself and for myself with an exclusive ownness [für mich selbst in abgeschlossener Eigenheit]” [9] (p. 94)⁴ or a “primordial sphere of ownness [Eigenheitssphäre]” [9] (p. 124) located in my “primordial world [primordialalen Welt]” [9] (p. 137). Such a sphere, while mostly shuttered to the outer world populated by others, involves a living ego, a set of intentional powers that does indeed relate to others by way of analogy, mirroring, and pairing, as he discussed in his now-classic discussion of the experience of the alter ego in the Fifth Cartesian Meditation. This enables Husserl to move from the language of pure monad to intermonadology, which is a crucial advance beyond Descartes and Leibniz. But it does not appear to me that Husserl’s ego rids itself of the difficulty of reducing the ego to the thinking thing shut up inside itself, not until his last great work the *Crisis of European Sciences*, where the concept of “We-synthesis” [Wir-Synthese] opens of one monad to another [10,11]⁵. In point of fact, Husserl drops the vocabulary of “monad” altogether in the last work, for it cannot help but invoke the mood of closure and autonomy.

I prefer a brief reengagement with the pre-Cartesian or medieval heritage of the western self, one bequeathed to us in the work of Augustine. Perhaps the first systematic and critical elucidation of self and self-love as an “I” is locatable in the sprawling writings penned by the author of the *Confessions* in the late fourth-century. Returning to an Augustinian framework may foster in us a desire to rethink the self as a complicated question that resists the closure of windowless (or mostly windowless) monadic sphere. While not treating his thesis here in any detail [12,13]⁶, it is fitting that Augustine also considered self-love to involve necessarily a rigorous interrogation of the *quaestio* of the self. A central narrative device played out in his spiritual inventory detectible in the *Confessions* is a persistent question, one he anticipates the reader to ask with him, “Then I turned towards myself, and said to myself: ‘Who are you?’ [Direxi me ad me et dixi mihi: tu quis es?]” [14,15] (Book X, 6, 10)⁷. A few pages later: “And this is mind, this is I myself. What then am I, my God? What is my nature? [et hoc animus est, et hoc ego ipse sum. quid ergo sum, deus meus? quae natura sum?] [15] (Book X, 17, 26, p. 120). While Augustine is hailed as a forerunner of the inner “I” or “ego animus”, he nonetheless made explicit the ego is at once intimate to itself and absent to itself.

Hence such queries did not serve to absolve Augustine of the problem of the self. A genuine puzzle that produced physical manifestations of stress, he correlated himself with existential “sweat”. He wrote, “I find my own self hard to grasp. I have become for myself a soil which is a cause of difficulty and much sweat. . . It is I who remember, I who am mind. It is hardly surprising if what I am not is distant from me. But what is nearer to me than myself?” [laboro hic et laboro in me ipso: factus sum mihi terra difficultatis et sudoris nimii. . . ego sum, qui memini, ego animus. Non ita mirum, si a me longe est quidquid ego non sum: quid autem propinquius me ipso mihi?] [15] (Book X, 16, 25, p. 118).

The whole of Book X in the *Confessions* originates in a theological question about the love of God, and who is this God I have the privilege of loving: “What is it that I love when I love my God?” (Quid ergo amo, cum deum amo?) [15] (Book X, 7, 11, p. 92). Love of self and love of God, as Anders Nygren illustrated decades ago in his classic study *Eros and Agape*, are interconnected and entangled in Augustine [16] (pp. 532–535). What remains important for my purpose here is not theology but the theme of self-love, a theme which prompts the difficulty of proposing a clear definition of the self at all, where nothing

clear and distinct obtains for Augustine: I can only grasp myself as a weighty existential problem, even while I decide I can still say “I”. In the subsequent sections below, I turn this question of who I love when I love God back on ourselves and ask in a late modern idiom, who is it that I love when I love myself in the first-person perspective? Is this self a self in isolation from other selves? If not, what is its structure, however difficult and laborious it is to define?

If I am to surpass the rigid definition of myself as a mere object or entity, if I not to be reduced to the rank of a mere thing, I can ask an alternative question: Who am I? The conceptual play of grammar in Augustine’s Latin above is noticeably ontological: a “what” (*quid*) can frame the question: What am I? Yet, also in Augustine we glean the vocabulary of “who” (*quis*) that designates the subjective life of the ego who can declare his identity in the statement, if only provisionally, *Ego ipsum sum*, or “I am myself”, a dynamic field of subjective powers in relation to the subjective powers of others. I can and do say “I” or ego, however, in saying this I am not fully graspable as a windowless monad or a thinking thing rooted in a narcissistic sphere of ownness. I am instead, to continue with the metaphor, namely, an “I” who enjoys illumination and breathability from the outside let in by doors and windows that make me fundamentally permeable to the world.

Conversely, not all in contemporary philosophy who write on love would agree with my Augustinian model. Even those indebted to Augustine’s anthropology, like Jean-Luc Marion, do not recuperate a dynamic subject who enjoys interchange with the world by means of open doors and windows. In reacting to Descartes, Leibniz, and Husserl, the theme of love in Marion signifies the complete withdrawal of a self. Like withdrawing troops from the field of battle over the ego, Marion, to be clear, moves so far in the opposite direction with his analysis of love that he not only thinks self-love is impossible, but that a self must be utterly decentered as to be incapable of saying “I”. The problem of the self in Marion is resolved by a reduction of the self to a passive recipient, a dative “me” who lies in wait to receive its identity from the other’s gaze, who is prior to me as a self. I am nothing but open doors and windows in Marion’s model.

In his work *Prolegomena to Charity* as well as in the *Erotic Phenomenon*, Marion carefully and consistently articulates the self according to the logic of pure passivity. Only a brief engagement with each work in succession suffices here to mark the point. First, in the “Intentionality of Love”, an essay in the *Prolegomena*, Marion is unequivocal that the other precedes me, and in that order of priority, she gives me to myself. I do not intend the other, but the inverse occurs, I am intended by the other—this he calls counter-intentionality. He writes, I am not the first to arrive, or “Je n’est pas le premier venu” [17] (p. 83). In the same breath he explains that “For exteriority to be emancipated from the interiority that defines the *I*, it is necessary that it disqualify the denominative power of the *I*” [17] (p. 84). And further Marion declares, “the other strips bare the *I* within me to the point of leaving only the me exposed. The *I* discloses itself before another gaze and discovers that only a me remains. The me designates the *I* uncovered, stripped bare, decentered. I become me by uncovering myself as the simple me of an other” [17] (p. 84). Here, by Marion’s lights, I achieve myself only on the strength of the generous gift of the other, who gives me to myself, since that other precedes me. I arrive after the fact. Who is this *I*? It is, as Marion proceeds in his analysis, in point of fact a “me”. After the other bears witness to me, and thus sees me, I am constituted as a “me” by the other’s look. To say “I” is to fall prey to an illusion, just like to say I love myself is to lie to myself that I have a self to love at all.

In the *Erotic Phenomenon*, similarly, Marion elucidates in §9 (“L’impossibilité d’un amour de soi”) the priority of the other—the one who arrives before me. This priority constitutes the grounds for the impossibility of self-love. I do not enjoy the presence of an “I” to love in myself since I am originally given to myself by the other. Hence, the “Now

such a temporal anteriority [of the other] flows from the very structure of this question, which signifies, ‘Does anyone out there love me?’ and implies aiming at an endpoint that is radically exterior to that which an actual love awaits, that is to say, an other” ([4], p. 44, [18], p. 222)⁸. In other words, for Marion, there is no self in place for me to love within myself, no “I”, but only a “me” that pauses until it is given to me by the gaze or aim of the other. The other arrives before me, which belongs to the rank of primacy inherent in the structure of counter-intentionality.

Self-love, therefore, remains impossible for those philosophers like Marion who deny the self genuinely obtains as an I. The self must sacrifice itself before the altar of the other, or so that is the logic of pure passivity as I understand it. My reading of Marion begs the question not “does anyone out there loves me?” but instead the more urgent question of “what does it mean to say ‘me’ at all?” Marion’s model of a dative self involves no self after all, a fundamental incompatibility that amounts to a patent contradiction in terms.

The logical inconsistency of Marion’s model of counter-intentionality is that he does not consider how he himself must also be capable of giving the other to herself. What kind of subjective agency and powers of endowment must the act of counter-intentionality involve, whereby I give the self to the other, and vice versa? If the “I” is an illusion as it is Marion, *how* do I give the other her sense of self? How does the other, if she is also stripped bare like me, able to give me to myself? I am inclined to judge Marion’s passive self, the dative me, as tragic as monadic self-possession. The tragedy is not that of bad faith, which can be solved by being honest with oneself, but instead of the fact that pure passivity leads to the erasure of each of us. Neither the lover nor the beloved exhibit selves to exchange; and so, love is impossible as it is conceived under the aspect of Marion’s refusal of the self, of the “I”.

I could unmask Marion’s deficit in candid plain language: one passive “me” stripped bare and decentered lays in equipoise before another “me” also stripped bare and decentered in perfect inaction and quietism. No one makes the first move because no ego or “I” is there to marshal the power to set into operation counter-intentionality. Because the act of my giving yourself to you and my receiving myself from you necessitates that I am an “I” that enjoys the powers to give identity to the other, the requisite of giving and receiving love is not met. Maron’s project fails to make love possible at all, eliminating not only self-love, but love as such. How shall we proceed from here? Self-love, I wish to argue in what follows, solves Marion’s logical inconsistency because it includes a self that loves itself without implying either that it prioritizes the other or excludes the other.

3. The Material Apriori: I Am Because I Love Myself (and You)

I am not a windowless monad. I resemble, if I resemble any structure at all, an open field of subjective experience that involves at every turn existential sweat that pours out onto the other. Recall Augustine’s conception that I am “for myself a soil which is a cause of difficulty and much sweat”. In this airable soil [*terra*] I love myself and the other in one single dynamic movement, just as you love yourself and me simultaneously. This makes possible a pre-given structural *a priori* that is open to the other from the outset and in advance. I love myself *not* because I arrive first, but because you and I arrive at the same time; we are neither early nor late, but just on time together. “We” arrive together. Self-love, then, remains a co-movement, an *a priori* intersubjectivity. *This is what I call the a priori of self-love*, which challenges the closure of narcissism. How might we reconfigure the *a priori* to make sense of love in this open-textured fashion?

Strictly defined, the *a priori* that is self-love cannot be configured in the terminology of the transcendental structure of the *a priori* that Kant specified. The *Critique of Pure Reason* clearly outlines that the *a priori* is situated in the ego wholly independent of empirical

content, of any concrete experiential matter whatsoever. The *a priori* manifold (mainly here space and time among other categories) constitutes a set of pregiven categories arranged in the mind that remain the necessary and universal condition for experience to occur and thus obtain at all [19] (p. 137). Hence they are necessary because they enjoy the status of the “conditions on which the possibility of experience depends and that found it even if one abstracts from everything empirical in the appearances” [19] (p. 227). This Kantian concept of the *a priori* can be characterized as an empty form designed like a placeholder, which represents the possibility of the cognition of objects in general. In fact, the Kantian *a priori* must in principle denote a pure conceptual formality because, as Kant states, it cannot be “borrowed from experience, but must always contain the pure *a priori* conditions of a possible experience and of an object of it”. The *a priori* structure of cognition is “pure” because it can “contain nothing empirical”, which signifies for Kant nothing experiential [19] (p. 227). Such a Kantian conception of the *a priori*, influential though it be, remains abstract, formal, and ultimately, void of material experience.

Noted Kantian of the twentieth-century, C.I. Lewis, adopts a similar position, but with sharper clarity. The *a priori* is herein formulated as empty, formal. The cognitive structure of the faculty of understanding presupposes, for Lewis, two elements: the “concept” and the “sensuously given”. The concept “gives rise to the *a priori*; all *a priori* truth is definitive, or explicative of concepts. Empirical truth, or knowledge of the objective, arises through conceptual interpretation of the given” [20] (p. 37). The given resembles “ineffable chaos”, [20] (p. 230). and the mind confronts the chaotic given with its *a priori* repertoire of concepts, which in turn supply a level of control and boundaries to the chaos of experiential matter. And the *a priori* “must be determined in advance of the particular experience to which they apply in order that what is given may have meaning. Until the criteria of our interpretation have been fixed, no experience could be the sign of anything or even answer any question. Concepts thus represent what mind brings to experience” [20] (p. 232) And these truths, finally, again like Kant, “are definitive” [20] (p. 433). Such a rigid set of categories or concepts, the cognitive architecture of the *a priori*, imposes itself on the chaotic given of the material world, in order to bring forth genuine alignment between subject and object.

In light of my rejection of this Kantian heritage rehearsed above, what kind of *a priori* is self-love, then? If it is not a set of purely cognitive criteria determined in advance of material experience, how may it be named an *a priori*? Not all *a priori* principles mean the same thing, as even Husserl, a champion of the Kantian *a priori*, admits. Husserl acknowledged that the *a priori* suffered from a notorious infection of “ambiguity” and “obscurity” [21] (p. 5). The effect of such critique of Kant’s abstract language is a shift away from abstract language toward an existential language first formulated by Husserl’s student, Heidegger.

Expressing a move toward the existential domain, then, the *a priori* of self-love turns the Kantian style of *a priori* on its head. The pregiven experience of self-love invokes something like an intimate or concrete or material *a priori* [22]⁹. Heidegger in *Being and Time* [23] explicitly abandons the formality and abstract orientation of the *a priori* of Kantian heritage in favour of a concrete, personal orientation which notifies us of the fact that we exercise ongoing care about our own being as a possibility to be cultivated. Yet, what makes this an *a priori*?

For Heidegger, and for the present essay, the existential *a priori* does not depend on any particular circumstance, attitude, or character trait attached to the self that loves itself—the existential *a priori* is universal, and already there in advance, posited in each of us. The *a priori*, recast in an existential mould, designates that my care for myself is intrinsic to my structure as one whose very being is an issue for oneself. I exercise care and concern for the

unfolding of my being, no matter what. Heidegger writes in this vein exactly: “Care, as a primordial structural totality, lies ‘before’ [“vor”] every factual ‘attitude’ and ‘situation’ of Dasein, and it does so existentially a priori; this means that it always lies in them” [23] (p. 238). Technical vocabulary aside for the moment, Heidegger reconfigures the *a priori* as a fundamental posture I have with regard to myself, my own “primordial structural totality” within me that is directed toward me. This *a priori* orientation I effect toward myself is “always lies” within me, prior to any attitude or situation that is “factual” or on the ground and particularized by me. Before I adopt any specific attitude about my individual situation in life, before I am aware of my gender, ethnicity, height, socio-economic status, IQ, etc., I assume a posture of care and concern toward myself.

This Heideggerian phrase, a primordial structural totality, I think, refers to a parallel attitude of self-love, namely, that an existential structural totality is pregiven in that I love myself as this self intrinsically, quite independently of my status, personality, gender, etc., and quite apart from any episode in life that bears on a specific relationship. I cannot trace back self-love to any specific act or drive, to any mental state like willing, wishing, urging or to an addiction like craving, nor is it a construction composed out of these states of mind. Hence the *a priori* of self-love is a primordial structural totality in which I live toward myself. I, therefore, do not love myself in a contingent manner, in the sense that sometimes I love myself in the world as I remain open to it and sometimes I do not. It is not as if I am simply a self, and then, by way of an extra add-on, I occasionally love myself in relationship with particular traits of myself. The *a priori* of self-love intends to claim that I am never free from self-love. Being in love with myself is intrinsic to the definition of myself as this self; again, I do not love myself only when the inclination strikes me.

Recall as a self, I am a complicated or difficult question. I am not certain who I am, to enlist Augustine’s tendency to make the “I” correspond to existential sweat. Yet, the unknowing of or uncertainty about my identity need not result in the abandonment of my sense of self altogether, as in Marion above. I continue to say “I” even as I acknowledge that I am open to possibilities to be. Thus, self-love is an existential *a priori*, one anticipated with precision in Heidegger, that I adopt. The *a priori*, as I understand it, coincides with the very concrete experience I have of myself as this self who occupies this or that space at any given moment in an ongoing primordial structural totality, inasmuch as I always matter to myself in my state of becoming. Self-love, then, is a “structure of being, not a condition of possibility” [22] (p. 136). The *a priori* of self-love, if it truly counts as material and personal (not abstract and formal), must contain empirical content because it is continuously preoccupied with the self that it is, here and now, and how it is possible to be in the future. Self-love, as I propose it, is therefore decidedly not formal or empty or neutral. I cannot operate as an impartial spectator who reasons about the nature of myself and the world in the third-person stance; I love myself instead as my own beloved just as I experience myself as this self who always matters, within the first-person point of view.

Yet, and I will address this in the subsequent section below, self-love can be damaged, vitiated, drained. Possibilities can be robbed. The certainty of the *a priori* conceived in this manner does not produce indubitable or unshakeable abstract principles like $2 + 2 = 4$. If I don’t enforce boundaries, then it follows that my “I” can be subject to abuse, betrayal, manipulation—especially by a narcissistic other. The antipode of self-love is the narcissistic impulse to use the other for self-gratification, to absorb the other for my benefit. In light of this threat, self-love belongs also to the larger process whereby I love the other. As a consequence, self-love already involves the love of “us”. The love of us suggests that I am called to be receptive to the other’s flourishing, just as they are, in their unique dignity, without controlling them or seeing them as a reflection of myself as in the Myth of Narcissus. To that complicated interchange between myself and the other we now turn.

4. A Commitment to You and Me: The Entanglement of Self-Love and Other-Love

I am not making a plea that self-love is the type of *a priori* that corresponds to absolute certainty, as if my personal identity were impenetrable to doubt. It is not a pure form that is formally true in every case. Self-love consists instead of a commitment to myself that is regularly negotiated and reinforced. But I can break a commitment. Self-love does not fulfil all of its duties in furnishing me with certainty about me, that I am absolutely unshakeably in love with myself without any work or effort. Recall, I am Augustinian “sweat” to myself. The labour to achieve self-love as a lived experience is lived in light of the other, for the *a priori* of self-love is neither monadic nor empty/formal.

The preferable language to employ here is that this primordial structure in which I love myself is an ongoing act of commitment to myself. By any measure, commitment takes work. I am committed to show up to my job every day on time. I am committed to my spouse as a faithful and attentive partner. I am committed to my kids to be a parent who provides for them, and thus does not abandon them. All of these commitments and more are proven over and over and can fail in the face of resistance or struggle or circumstance. There exists now or in the offing *no guarantee*, except to say that the act of commitment is held up and reinforced over and over again.

Self-love, as a commitment to myself, is a promise to value myself without qualification, which constitutes a risk in that I am vulnerable to being violated by the other. Boundaries arise at this conjunction between myself and the other; boundaries endure only so long as they are enforced, and boundaries function to preserve self-love. In my act to protect the love of myself, I also love you. I am fundamentally interpersonal in that I am fractured to and open to other subjective I's. Insofar as I am not purely isolated, I love you and me together, as “us”. What happens, however, if you abuse or manipulate me? Or if I abuse and manipulate you?

I cannot love myself by permitting others to injure or harm me. Intimacy continues to be vulnerable to abuse if I let my guard down when it comes to enforcing boundaries in the face of the advance of the other. Anthony Steinbock calls the capacity to decide to protect myself and thus strengthen my self-love an activity of discernment. The result of boundaries, to be sure, is that I do not only protect my own self-love of myself, but also my love of you, precisely in that I do not permit you to violate your humanity and dignity by treating me abusively. In retreating from an abusive relationship that has denied me as intrinsically valuable and worthy, I am loving myself and you. Since the “I” is interpersonal and thus airable to you as other, and none assumes priority over the other, the act of retreating from you does not imply abandonment. It is instead an act of loving you in that I protect you too. So, to manage the situation by removing myself from a relationship with you is to protect us both from a situation subject to physical or emotional abuse. The concern for “myself” (self-love) is also and simultaneously a concern for “us”, and thus an act of loving us together [24]¹⁰.

Only the happy idiot enjoys a level of self-love purified from such dangers of abuse, or so is the lie to which the happy idiot succumbs. The happy idiot, free from conflict, is also free from the possibility of abuse and manipulation, and ultimately, is invulnerable to doubt or insecurity. The shocking reality unveiled by the happy idiot will always remain the lack of self-awareness such behaviour requires, and precisely in this way, the happy idiot relies on self-absorption: in other words, it is a chief symbol of narcissism. Unaware of others and thus the prospect that the happy idiot indeed does hurt and abuse others, the lie remains intact because he dwells happily in his or her own self-absorbed monadic world. Philosophically, the happy idiot may well be adopted unintentionally by some philosophers who seek to defend self-love on these terms.

Thus the inverse may well be possible, even if we do not have space to pursue it fully. How might we outline a train of thought that moves in the opposite direction of the happy idiot, namely, that I love myself in the other. In loving the other's self-love, we may well combat or therapeutically treat narcissism. In loving the other's self-love, therefore, we do not treat the other person as if she were identical with ourselves. The quantitative extension of self-love cannot literally project onto the other the identical formation of self-love I have of myself, which constitutes an act of projection devoted merely to my own self-maintenance or self-satisfaction. In place of loving the other in myself, perhaps I could love myself in the other's self-love; hence I would join in with your self-love occurring in an *a priori* domain, which is already entangled with my self-love.

My model of self-love, then, unfolds in the following manner: I extend my self-love to the other's self-love in an exchange that negotiates in and through their difference not as a source of conflict and alienation but as a source of celebration of the other just as she is given. Love does not seek out opportunities to change or educate the other, which can convert into abuse and control. Love instead accepts wholly the other person as she is given. I myself can learn the narrative of patience, in which I love myself and the other as both as unique "I's" who are intrinsically valuable, and to whom I am fully and wholeheartedly committed. Such a wholehearted approach to self-love, I pause to note, would ramify self-love into further exciting avenues of future research, which for the sake of space, can only be hinted at here.

5. Conclusions: Self-Love Is Whole-Heartedness

By way of conclusion, permit me to accentuate the subjective manner in which I am acquainted with myself in the ongoing act of self-love, namely wholehearted commitment. I have suggested that when I love myself genuinely I am committed both to myself and to you as an "us", without reservation or hesitation, except when that dynamic interpersonal exchange becomes threatened by abuse, injury, manipulation, and ultimately, narcissism¹¹. In point of fact, to resist narcissism, its consumptive and greedy attitude toward the other, is to demonstrate my commitment to self-love as an interpersonal phenomenon. To be half-hearted would be to descend into the domain of the happy idiot who lies to himself about the certainty and security of love, where bad faith neglects to attend to the contingencies of pain, abuse, injury.

The interrelationship between myself and you, between each of us, necessarily forces upon us the problem of the self, in which I stressed the only way to challenge the narcissism of the monadic ego. Even if we lack the conceptual skills to articulate it, I suggest a recuperation of the proto-existential self of Augustine. Here resources point to an interpersonal self in which I find myself to appear like a soil that remains difficult (*terra difficultatis*) insofar as I struggle to the point of sweat in the pursuit to define myself in clear and distinct ideas. From that point of departure of philosophical anthropology, the existential *a priori* of self-love complimented the dynamic self who never may close in on itself. As a material and personal *a priori*, the experience of self-love necessarily involves the other. The entanglement of the first-person perspective and second-person perspective opens up the entanglement of "us", in which I do not love you inside of me (narcissism once more), but instead I venture forth outward, fully committed to myself, to enter into your domain by joining in with your self-love, encouraging the mutually indwelling of the love of us. Risk, vulnerability, and contingency may well undercut the *a priori* of self-love. Boundaries and their enforcement represent a commitment of self-love and love of the other. A wholehearted gesture toward and discussion of boundaries enjoys welcome as a therapy or medicine readied to treat the ailment of narcissism.

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Notes

- 1 Fromm ultimately recuperates self-love from being identical with selfishness; much of his analysis influences my own below.
- 2 For the French see [4] (Paris: Grasset, 2003), p. 76.
- 3 See chapter 6, “Addicted to Love”.
- 4 For the German, see [9] vol. 1, *Gesammelte Werke* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), p. 125.
- 5 For more on We-synthesis and intersubjective harmony, see [10], and also my article on this complex theme in Husserl [11].
- 6 See my previous articles on the Augustinian self and self-love [12,13].
- 7 For Latin, see [15], hereafter the Latin is LOEB.
- 8 See [4], also see [18], where he writes, “Such an inversion of phenomenality’s polarity evidently implies that the I not only renounce its transcendental function of constitution, but that it pass to the figure of what we have already thematized as the witness (§22): me, insofar as I receive myself from the very givenness of the irregardable phenomenon, me insofar as I learn of myself from what the gaze of the Other says to me in silence. And in fact, the concept of witness finds its full phenomenological legitimacy only when related to the saturated phenomenon of the Other, who alone can constitute me as his own because he precedes me in the order of manifestation”.
- 9 see [22] chapter 3 “The A Priori as Material” and chapter 8, “The A Priori as Corporeal”.
- 10 I am influenced here by Steinbock’s [24] assessment of self-love.
- 11 I am drawing from Frankfurt’s claim that wholeheartedness has for its outcome self-love that is genuine. While I would extend his insights to self-love and love of other as entangled, I appreciated the style of commitment to oneself that wholehearted love displays. He writes, “Being wholehearted means having a will that is undivided. The wholehearted person is fully settled as to what he wants, and what he cares about. . . There is no part of him—that is, no part with which he identifies—that resists his loving what he loves. There is no equivocation in his devotion to his beloved. Since he cares wholeheartedly about the things that are important to him, he can properly be said to be wholehearted in caring about himself. Insofar as he is wholehearted in loving those things, in other words, he wholeheartedly loves himself. His wholehearted self-love consists in, or is exactly constituted by, the wholeheartedness of his unified will. To be wholehearted *is* to love oneself. The two are the same” [2].

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