

CHAPTER I

The contemporary problem of self love

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE BREAKDOWN OF THE LOVE SYNTHESIS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹¹ We can note a few distinctively modern (theological) ethical responses to these challenges to traditional theism. These responses include apologetic efforts which, for example, appeal to the functional value of Christian beliefs and symbols, or its metaphorical veracity. Many contemporary theologians and ethicists sift through Christian theology as an unparalleled set of resources, or as a kind of talk, for claims and symbols to re-appropriate. See, for example, Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially 46–72, and Charles E. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Or, alternatively, they look to language and stress the conditions for communication in order to locate regulative norms for human interaction. See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

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

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

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

THE SELF AS PROBLEM

Modern roots

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