

Selves, Existentially Speaking

Annemarie van Stee

“Who am I really?” When people ask themselves this question, they often find themselves in situations or dilemmas that may be labeled “existential.” They may ask themselves, for example, whether to move far away for a job or stay close to family and friends and try to find something else. Their dilemma is exactly that they both love their job and love their family and friends. People may also question their identity after a loved one dies or they lose the job they love. They understood their identity as involving their relation to their loved one and in terms of the job they held; now they rethink who they are in terms of what is most important to them. Furthermore, people do not need to be in existential crisis for the existential aspect to their self to be at play in their lives. People are naturally motivated to act on behalf of what they love, and they are personally affected by what happens to what and whom they love.

This chapter addresses the self as it comes to the fore, and may be at stake, in existential situations: selves as constituted by our relations to what we love. If we want to think through the structure of existential selves, Harry Frankfurt and Søren Kierkegaard are philosophers to turn to. Harry Frankfurt has been a major instigator behind a surge of interest into existential issues in recent Anglo-American philosophy. His work contains a view of the self in terms of what we care about and love. Søren Kierkegaard is often considered to have been the first to introduce existential issues into philosophy at large. His books contain many individuals asking themselves existential questions and responding in different ways to existential situations. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Anti-Climacus developed a view of the structure of selves to account for the human ability to do so.

In dealing with dilemmas such as the one above, moral concerns are not always decisive, motivating, or even relevant at all, Frankfurt points out. Furthermore, as Kierkegaard points out, objective facts cannot decide for us. We will have to choose. Both Frankfurt and Kierkegaard emphasize that we



do not deal with these situations by means of bare, universal reason. Our answers to existential situations and dilemmas are deeply personal, and our will is involved in giving them. What is more, not dealing with such questions when they arise, or answering them in ways that are not true to who we are, will not lead to situations that are objectively wrong or immoral, but instead to alienation from ourselves.

My aim in this chapter is to compare the conceptual resources that Harry Frankfurt and Søren Kierkegaard have to offer concerning the constitution of selves, existentially speaking. My point of departure is in their respective texts on self-constitution. I examine their views on our relations to what we love and how these relations are constitutive of who we are by asking several questions. First, what characterizes these relations that are constitutive of the self? Second, what may we relate to in self-constituting ways? For both questions, it becomes clear that in spite of resemblances at first sight, Frankfurt's and Kierkegaard's views diverge in interesting ways. For whereas both emphasize the importance of the will in the constitution of selves, they disagree on the role of affect and consciousness. Also, whereas Frankfurt clearly indicates the importance of what we love in the constitution of the self, Kierkegaard is much more ambiguous toward or even dismissive of the idea that selves could be constituted by relations to particular people or pursuits. The third section addresses the question why their views diverge in the ways that they do by taking into account the overarching aims Frankfurt and Kierkegaard have with their views of the self. This results in an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of their views in explicating the structure of selves, existentially speaking.

I. Self-constituting relations to loves: Relations

Humans have the capacity to reflect. This allows them to distance themselves from themselves, as it were, and to relate to themselves from that distance. Harry Frankfurt writes:

What is it about human beings that makes it possible for us to take ourselves seriously? [...] It is our peculiar knack of separating from the immediate content and flow of our own consciousness and introducing a sort of division within our minds. This elementary maneuver establishes an inward-directed, monitoring oversight. It puts in place an elementary reflexive structure, which enables us to focus our attention directly upon ourselves. (TOS, 3–4)



When someone has thus distanced herself from herself, she may relate to herself in several ways. Frankfurt writes: “we may want to remain the sort of person we observe ourselves to be, or we may want to be different” (TOS, 4). Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Anti-Climacus describes a wide variety of (mostly troubled) ways in which people relate to themselves. Both Kierkegaard and Frankfurt emphasize the role of the will: we may *want* to remain who we are or *will* to be someone else than we are. These volitional relations we have to what we find ourselves to be are in turn constitutive of who we are and are becoming. Despite these similarities, the actual characterizations Frankfurt and Kierkegaard give of the relations that constitute our selves, existentially speaking, are rather different from each other.

Frankfurt: Necessary volitional identification

In his early work, Frankfurt introduced the concept of second-order volitions to distinguish between what does or does not belong to the self. Second-order volitions are relations that people hold to their first-order desires that make them part of their self. Although all animals, including human beings, can desire, for example, foods, it is only human beings that may form desires of the second order about what they desire: they may not just want ice cream, but they may also want to want ice cream. Their relation to their desire for ice cream is one of appropriation in this case, thereby making their desire part of their self. Conversely, if someone wants ice cream (at the first order), but does not want to want ice cream (second order), she distances herself from her desire (FW, 16–18; OC, 159).

In later work, Frankfurt distinguishes different types of second-order volitions and thereby different types of self-constituting relations (IWC, 85–88). The second-order desire to want to want ice cream is a first general type. But not all desires that we also want to have or experience are particularly important to us. Even if someone accepts her desire for ice cream and identifies with it, she may not be particularly concerned if for some reason she had to give it up (OC, 159). Those desires that we do not just want to want, but also want to continue to want, we stand in a second type of self-constituting relation to: we care about them. Beyond identification with a desire, the relation of care thus also involves a commitment to that desire, in the sense of wanting the desire to be sustained (RL, 14–16, 20–21; OC, 160). In this way, cares form a subset of second-order volitions, and ensure a measure of continuity over time in our individual identities. A further subset of cares (TOS, 40) forms the third type of self-constituting relation: loving. Loves are those cares that we cannot help but treat as final ends (ANL, 137–38). Whereas some of the things we care about, we care



about because they are instrumental toward something else, we care about our beloveds for their own sakes.

Out of the three types of self-constituting relationships, it is only the latter two that involve the self as an entity that has some continuity over time. In existential situations such as described in the introduction, it is generally people's final ends that are at stake. The latter type of relation, that is, loving, is therefore constitutive of selves, existentially speaking.

Frankfurt describes that relation of loving in terms of volition. Love is "a volitional necessity, which consists essentially in a limitation of the will" (RL, 46). As with other second-order volitions, Frankfurt conceives of loves as inherent to the will, structuring the will. In the case of love, he even speaks of love as a limitation of the will. Through loving, our will can be said to be both free and unfree. We, and our wills, are free when we form intentions and act based on what is internal to our will (FW, 20–21). As our loves are inherent to our will, our will is free when we act based on what we love. We are not free, however, in deciding what we love, that is, we are not free in *forming* our will in the case of loves. In this sense then, our will is limited by loves. Frankfurt writes: "The lover cannot help being selflessly devoted to his beloved. In this respect, he is not free. On the contrary, he is in the very nature of the case *captivated* by his beloved and by his love. The will of the lover is rigorously constrained. Love is not a matter of choice" (ANL, 135; compare IWC, 89). In contrast, Frankfurt's early work emphasized the control we have over what to identify with and what to dissociate ourselves from. This measure of freedom to choose what may structure our will does not hold for love, however. "What we love and what we fail to love is not up to us" (RL, 46).

In fact, we need not even be conscious of what we love or care about. In *On Caring*, Frankfurt writes: "This volitional activity [caring] may not be fully conscious or explicitly deliberate" (OC, 160). What is more, we may not like what we love. Frankfurt writes that "enthusiasms are not essential. Nor is it essential that a person likes what he loves. He may even find it distasteful. As in other modes of caring, the heart of the matter is neither affective nor cognitive. It is volitional" (RL, 42). In sum then, according to Frankfurt, the self-constituting relations of love are volitional relations. We identify with what we love and therefore act freely, out of our own will, when we act based upon what we love. We are not free to decide what to love and what not to love however. We thus are not free to decide who we are, existentially speaking. We do not need to be consciously aware of what we love either. That is to say, we may not be aware of what provides us with important motives to act. Lastly, we need not like what we love. Love is first and foremost volitional, sometimes even only volitional.



However, what may “volitional” mean if it need not involve affect or cognition? According to Frankfurt, it “consists in a practical concern for what is good for the beloved” (RL, 43). We have a practical concern for what we love as we identify ourselves with what we love, according to Frankfurt. He writes that

a lover *identifies himself* with what he loves. In virtue of this identification, protecting the interests of his beloved is necessarily among the lover’s own interests. The interests of his beloved are not actually *other* than his at all. They are his interests too. Far from being austerely detached from the fortunes of what he loves, he is personally affected by them. [...] The lover is *invested* in his beloved: he profits by its successes, and its failures cause him to suffer. To the extent that he invests himself in what he loves, and in that way identifies with it, its interests are identical with his own. (RL, 61–62)

Characterizing the relations that constitute our selves, existentially speaking, as necessary volition identifications with what we love leads to a few worries. First, Frankfurt’s use of “identification” leads to the worry that the self dissolves too much, that the self is being surrendered to others and their interests too much. Naturally, using the term “identification” ensures a measure of continuity between Frankfurt’s early and later work: what we identify with is part of our selves and when we act upon what we identify with, we act freely. It is something rather different, however, to identify with desires arising *within us*, as per his early work, versus identifying with *what we love*, which is *outside of us*. Frankfurt does not distinguish between these cases enough. If identification entails that we accept the interests of our beloveds as our own, as Frankfurt has it, the relation of the self to the other collapses. This eliminates an important source of freedom however. For although the necessity of love seems plausible, that is to say, it seems plausible to think that it is ultimately not up to us to decide what we love or not, we may nevertheless evaluate and try to influence the way in which we relate to what we cannot help but love. Indeed, several people have criticized Frankfurt for not sufficiently taking this into account.¹

A second worry concerns the characterization of loving as volitional first and foremost and the possible divorce of volition from affect or emotion. This seems unrealistic at best and self-alienating at worst. When Frankfurt writes that our identification with the beloved entails that we profit by its successes and suffer when it fails, it is hard to see how this could be understood without reference to affect. When he writes that we need not like what we love, the possibility of self-alienation appears. According to Frankfurt, we may end up



in a situation where we cannot help but be partly constituted by volitional relations to what we find distasteful. When we act upon that love however, presumably not liking that we do so as we do not like what we love, Frankfurt would still consider us to act freely. He does not view this type of situation as problematic for his account. If we were to move for a job that we did not like, for example, but that we could not help but have a practical concern for (which, somehow, in itself need not imply any measure of liking), then we have still decided to move abroad freely for Frankfurt. However, acting upon such a volitional constraint that we do not like is surely going to lead to “a kind of nagging anxiety, or unease” (RL, 5), that is, to the type of psychic distress that Frankfurt himself views as the opposite of a person acting out of her own free will. It seems likely that deciding to move, out of a practical concern for a job we find distasteful, could “cause us to feel troubled, restless and dissatisfied with ourselves” (RL, 5). Describing the relations that constitute our selves in terms of volition only, divorced from affect, without noting the resulting ambiguities in our selves makes Frankfurt’s account of relations problematic. When we turn to Kierkegaard’s account of relations that constitute our selves, we find a rather different picture.

Kierkegaard: Consciousness and will

Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym who wrote *The Sickness unto Death*, outlines a view of the self as constituted by relation(s). It starts as follows: “A human being is spirit. [...] Spirit is the self. [...] The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but the relation’s relating itself to itself” (SUD, 13). The next section analyzes this quote and its context more extensively; for now it is enough to note how Anti-Climacus describes different ways of relating, not all of which are constitutive of the self. The basic relation for example is not in itself a self. It is this relation’s relating itself to itself that constitutes the self.

What characterizes self-constituting relations according to Anti-Climacus? He distinguishes between an enormous variety of ways of relating and deems virtually all of them unhealthy. That is to say, Anti-Climacus differentiates varieties of despair, that ominous yet omnipresent “sickness unto death.” People relate to who they are in such a way, thereby constituting their selves in such a way, that they are not selves in the most healthy, eminent sense. As a chapter title points out, we may in despair not be conscious of having a self; we may in despair not will to be ourselves; and we may in despair will to be ourselves (SUD, 13). These three categories in turn are subdivided into many variations and gradations. Throughout, the despairing ways in which



people self-constitutingly relate themselves to themselves are distinguished from each other along two dimensions: consciousness and will.

“Generally speaking,” Anti-Climacus writes, “consciousness—that is, self-consciousness—is decisive with regard to the self. The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self. A person who has no will at all is not a self; but the more will he has, the more self-consciousness he has also” (SUD, 29). First of all then, the self-constituting relation of the self to itself is characterized by consciousness. As noted earlier, through their powers of reflection, human beings can distance themselves from themselves and relate themselves to themselves from that distance. When we become consciously aware of who we are, we gain the distance from ourselves that allows us to like what we find ourselves to be, or not; and accept who we are or try to change it, or try to forget about it, etc. The capacity that human adults have to relate to themselves in such a way brings about their freedom to try and influence who they are and are becoming. For Kierkegaard, it also entails the responsibility that human adults have to try to establish themselves as healthy instead of despairing selves. Thus, Anti-Climacus characterizes self-constituting relations first of all according to whether and to what extent people are conscious of who they are.

Consciousness of the self does not just *allow* us to willfully relate ourselves to what we find ourselves to be, it *entails* it according to Anti-Climacus. He never speaks of “self-knowledge” or “self-understanding” as if a conscious awareness of the self could exist that is toward which the self is neutral. On the contrary, “self-relation” captures the idea that whenever we become aware of part of who we are, our will is immediately involved in accepting or rejecting aspects of what we find ourselves to be. It is through becoming consciously aware of ourselves that we may will something regarding who we are. Just as Anti-Climacus wants to speak of “the self” only when we reflexively relate to who we are, he reserves the term “will” for the attitude we may have toward ourselves once we become aware of who we are. Hence also the possibility of saying, “[t]he more consciousness, the more will”; for when we become aware of a larger part of who we are, we automatically will toward ourselves to a greater extent too. Secondly then, the qualitative nature of the willing stance we take toward what we find ourselves to be characterizes the relations that constitute our selves, according to Anti-Climacus.

An accepting or rejecting will may sound rather like Frankfurt’s identification versus dissociation. Yet there are many differences from Frankfurt’s view of self-constituting relations however. First, whereas Frankfurt uses “will” to describe the source of our actions and intentions, irrespective of whether we are conscious of what moves us to act in the ways that we do, Anti-Climacus’ “will” applies to what we have become



conscious of about ourselves. Furthermore, whereas Frankfurt unpacks his view on self-constitution in binary terms—you either love or you do not, meaning that you volitionally identify with something/someone or you do not—Anti-Climacus’ view admits of many different shades of gray in the self-constituting relation, such that the ambiguous nature of people’s relation becomes constitutive of their selves. He writes:

Very often the person in despair probably has a dim idea of his own state, although here again the nuances are myriad. [...(gives an example)...] Or he may try to keep himself in the dark about his state through diversions [...], through work and busyness as diversionary means, yet in such a way that he does not entirely realize why he is doing it, that is to keep himself in the dark. Or he may even realize that he is working this way in order to sink his soul in darkness [...]; but he is not, in a deeper sense, clearly conscious of what he is doing [...] There is indeed in all darkness and ignorance a dialectical interplay between knowing and willing, and in comprehending a person one may err by accentuating knowing exclusively or willing exclusively. (SUD, 48)

What is more, in Anti-Climacus, as in other pseudonyms of Kierkegaard,² will is not something like the pure volition unaffected by affect that Frankfurt speaks of. In another literary example, Anti-Climacus discusses a man who, despairingly, does not want to be himself, but wants to be Caesar. He introduces this man as “the ambitious man whose slogan is ‘Either Caesar or nothing.’” When the ambitious man does not get to be Caesar, he despairs over it and now “cannot bear to be himself. [...] This self, which, if it had become Caesar, would have been in seventh heaven [...], this self is now utterly intolerable to him” (SUD, 19). By using the phrases “he *cannot bear* to be himself” and “utterly intolerable” as opposed to “in seventh heaven,” Anti-Climacus clarifies that he discusses someone who *does not like, or even hates, what he finds himself to be*. In contrast to Frankfurt’s take on the will, Anti-Climacus’ conception includes an affective component. He never divorces affect from volition in thinking through the will as Frankfurt does. When he outlines example after example of people who do not *want*, or do not *wish* to be who they find themselves to be, it is always clear that this is because they do not *like* who they are and would prefer to be different.

In sum, Frankfurt characterizes the relations that constitute our selves as necessary volitional identifications with what we love. He is thus able to account for the practical nature of existential selves and the consequences on our actions. His use of “identification” removes the distance between ourselves and what we love, however, and his emphasis on the volitional



nature of self-constituting relations, possible divorced from affect, also seems odd. The third section discusses why Frankfurt develops his view of self-constituting relations along these lines. Kierkegaard, through Anti-Climacus, characterizes self-constituting relations by the level of consciousness involved and the willful stance we take toward what we find ourselves to be. The will is affective-volitional in his view and he definitely does not collapse the distinction between self and other as Frankfurt does. However, Kierkegaard may seem to overintellectualize the human self by giving conscious awareness such a prominent role in describing the relations that constitute us. Again, his reasons for this focus are clarified in the third section. Before we move on to examining the contexts in which Frankfurt and Kierkegaard develop their views of selves, existentially speaking, let us first have a look at what we may relate to in the constitution of the self, according to these authors.

II. Self-constituting relations to loves: Loves

People occasionally have to make existential decisions such as whether to move country for a job or to stay close to friends and family. People may encounter a situation that makes them rethink their identity, for example, when a loved one among friends and family dies, or when they lose the job they care for. In situations such as these, they may reflect on who they are by wondering what is truly meaningful to them, or in other words, what really matters to them, or in yet other words, what they truly care about and love.³ Can the relational views of the self that Kierkegaard and Frankfurt describe account for these phenomena? That is to say, are we, in their views of the self, relating to specific significant others, pursuits, values, etc., that we love? For Frankfurt, the answer is yes, definitely. For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, this is not so clear.

Kierkegaard: "... in which there is something eternal ..."

When Kierkegaard, or rather Anti-Climacus, states that the self is relationally constituted, what then are we relating to? Are we relating to particular people, pursuits, ideals, and the like, that we love? Anti-Climacus gives the following succinct description of the self:

The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but the relation's relating itself to itself. [...] Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another.



[...] The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another. (SUD, 13–14)

That quote from the beginning of *The Sickness unto Death* does not speak of love directly. Let us examine the basic relation, the relation of this basic relation to itself and the relation to another that established it for the object that is being related to. Do these relations include relations to what we love? Could they?

Anti-Climacus describes the basic relation that in itself is not a self also as synthesis. He discusses the synthesis' constituent pairs in terms of infinitude and finitude, and of possibility and necessity (SUD, 29). With respect to the former, Anti-Climacus states that “the self is the synthesis of which the finite is the limiting and the infinite the extending constituent” (SUD, 30). Becoming oneself consists in “an infinite moving away from [the...] self in the infinitizing of the self and an infinite coming back to itself in the finitizing process” (SUD, 30). In other words, in becoming themselves, people should use their imagination to come up with possible ways in which they might be, but should then also “return to themselves” to deal with the limiting facts about who they are and take the small, practical steps that can be taken at this very moment to move in the direction of who they would like to become. Only in this way may they become concrete selves. Likewise, possibility and necessity refer to the self having the task of becoming itself (possibility) that can only be done by taking into account what it already is and cannot help but be (necessity). These descriptions clarify that the constituents are actually movements or processes. When fleshing out the meaning of the synthesis and its poles, Anti-Climacus time and again uses verbs, not nouns, to describe the constituents. Thus, the relation that holds between these constituents, a relation that is not yet a self, holds between processes. It does not hold between loves or between a person and what she loves.

This basic relation, a synthesis, is a self if it relates itself to itself. The reflexive awareness of who we are that is necessary for selfhood always involves the will as well. It is clear from the start that this relation does not extend out to people, pursuits, or other things in the world-beyond-self. The self as a grand relation of the self to itself is nowhere more clear than here. Anti-Climacus is definitely not thinking of a self constituted by relations to loves here.

The final relation included in the grand relation that is the self is the relation to another that established us. Anti-Climacus later identifies this other as the ultimate Other, that is, as God. Mostly however, he uses the phrases “another that established us” or “the power that established us.” These formulations are



in turn answers to a question Anti-Climacus poses early on: a self, he claims, “must either have established itself or have been established by another” (SUD, 13).⁴ Because of the possibility of a particular type of despair, that of despairingly willing to be oneself, Anti-Climacus concludes that a self cannot have established itself (SUD, 14). The way we deal with the fact that we have not established ourselves, or, in Anti-Climacus’ terminology, the way in which we relate to the power that *did* establish us, is therefore constitutive of who we are. Furthermore, as cause of our inability to establish ourselves, our relation to God also becomes the route to establishing a non-despairing self-relation. In Anti-Climacus’ words: “The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it” (SUD, 14). God is not described as an object of love in the text of *The Sickness unto Death*. He was in earlier drafts of the text, however, and is often discussed as someone we can and should love in other works by Kierkegaard as well.⁵ Therefore, our self-constituting relations to God provide us with an instance in Kierkegaard of relations to what we love that constitute our self.

God, however, is a very peculiar object of love. Is the fact that Anti-Climacus thinks our relation to him is constitutive of who we are due to God being a category unto himself? Or can our love for particular human others be constitutive of our self along the same lines as our love of God can? Given that God in Anti-Climacus’ view of selves mainly has the role of being the cause of our inability to establish ourselves, it is hard to extend his view to include particular human others. They are not responsible for establishing us in the way that God is, according to Kierkegaard. To be sure, our parents have had something to do with the fact that we were established in the first place, but not as the individual that we are, with these particular characteristics and not others. Also, our relations to human persons whom we love cannot bring us peace in the way that our relation to the one that established us can, according to Anti-Climacus. In his words: we cannot *transparently* rest in their power; this is only possible with God (SUD, 14). All in all, Anti-Climacus’ description of the self does not include relations to loves that are constitutive of selves as introduced in the example, that is, of selves, existentially speaking.

Nevertheless, some commentators do argue that Kierkegaard includes relations to what we love in his view of self. They tend to refer to other works of Kierkegaard besides *The Sickness unto Death* and its rigorously systematic, somewhat abstract exposition of the structure of the self. Anthony Rudd, for example, offers an interpretation of the second part of *Either/Or*, consisting of letters of B (Judge Wilhelm) to A, to argue that Kierkegaard does view

relations of commitment to concrete human others and to particular pursuits as being constitutive of selves, ethical selves in particular. Rudd uses the following quote:

The person who has ethically chosen and found himself possesses himself defined in his entire concretion. He then possesses himself as an individual who has these capacities, these passions, these inclinations, these habits, who is subject to these external influences [...]. Here he then possesses himself as a task [...] in short, to produce an evenness in the soul, a harmony, which is the fruit of the personal virtues. But although he himself is his objective, [...] the self that is the objective is not an abstract self that fits everywhere and therefore nowhere but is a concrete self in living interaction with these specific surroundings, these life conditions, this order of things. The self that is the objective is not only a personal self but a social, a civic self. (EO II, 262)⁶

In light of all this concretion, and the social nature of the self, the following statement by Rudd reflects his take on ethical selfhood in Kierkegaard: it “arises with the willingness to make long-term commitments, to accept social roles, and, by so doing, to accept the standards of evaluation that go with them.”⁷

Rudd’s view can be challenged however. It can be argued that Judge Wilhelm, with his German name, should be read as a character Kierkegaard developed to show the inadequacy of the position he, that is, Wilhelm, espouses. At the very least he is an exception among the pseudonyms where his emphasis on the social or even civic nature of the self is concerned. Nowhere else in Kierkegaard’s oeuvre are the duties of the world, such as the duty to work and the duty to marry, treated as positively in their character as civic duties. Alastair Hannay argues that the letter by an older friend of Wilhelm that is included immediately after Wilhelm’s letters already demonstrates the inadequacy of Wilhelm’s position: the civic realm is opposed to true selfhood.⁸

Even Wilhelm himself states that loving another human being or a job is not what is crucial to selfhood. Sure enough, he states that *what* one chooses is one’s personality in its “entire concretion,” describing this concretion using nouns such as “these capacities” and “these passions” where Anti-Climacus’ speaks of a synthesis of processes, that he refers to by verbs. Note however that the judge does not prioritize our relations to whom and what we love over other “inclinations,” “habits,” and so forth. More importantly, Wilhelm *agrees* with Anti-Climacus that the most crucial thing is *that* one chooses, that is to say, that people become consciously aware of who they are and will



to be themselves. “Either/Or” is the admonition Wilhelm shouts at his friend A (EO II, 157). Either/or, that is to say: choose!

But what is it, then, that I choose—is it this or that? No, for I choose absolutely, and I choose absolutely precisely by having chosen not to choose this or that. I choose the absolute, and what is the absolute? It is myself in my eternal validity. Something other than myself I can never choose as the absolute, for if I choose something else, I choose it as something finite and consequently do not choose absolutely. (EO II, 214)⁹

Choosing is what matters most for Wilhelm and choosing should be done absolutely, he says. The only “things” we can choose *absolutely* however are things in which there is something *eternal*, to use Kierkegaard’s words, just as we saw earlier that we can only relate *transparently* to God who established us. That is to say, the only objects that we may self-constitutively relate to according to Kierkegaard are objects in which there is something eternal. As “next to God there is nothing as eternal as a self” (SUD, 53), we may relate to ourselves and to God in such a way as to constitute our selves, but not to particular, concrete human others, or pursuits that are not eternal, not even if we love them.

All in all then, Kierkegaard focuses on the relations of the self to itself and to God in his view of selves, existentially speaking. His texts do not present relations to particular human others or particular pursuits as constitutive of the self. He therefore passes by an important facet of the self as it comes to the fore and may be at stake in existential dilemmas and other existential situations. The third section provides context as to why this is so. Let us first see, however, what Frankfurt has to offer with respect to our relations to what we love and their role in the constitution of our existential selves.

Frankfurt: “involuntary, nonutilitarian, rigidly focused and [...] self-affirming”

What may contribute to the constitution of self, existentially speaking, for Frankfurt? The answer is clear: what we care about and, most of all, what we love. Frankfurt describes what we love in three ways. First, he mentions that loves form a subset of cares (TOS, 40), that is, a subset of those things we want to want and want to continue to want. We may care about getting up early, for example, not because this is *in itself* terribly important to us, but rather as a means to the end of pursuing a particular line of work. This work is what we love then, it is an end in itself. Others may care about, though not love their work: they may pursue it as a means to the end of sustaining



the family that they love, for example. Secondly, Frankfurt lists examples: “The object of love is often a concrete individual: for instance, a person or a country. It may also be something more abstract: for instance, a tradition, or some moral or nonmoral ideal” (RL, 41). Elsewhere, he declares that “[t]he object of love can be almost anything” (TOS, 40) and adds “a life” and “a quality of experience” to the list. When fleshing out his views however, he returns time and again to his favorite example: that of parents loving their children.

The third way in which Frankfurt delineates loves is by putting forward four conceptually necessary features: love is “an involuntary, nonutilitarian, rigidly focused and [...] self-affirming concern for the existence and the good of what is loved” (TOS, 40; see also RL, 41–47, 79–80; TOS, 40–43). As we have already seen in the previous section, loving is involuntary: we cannot help loving what we love. Love is “a volitional necessity, which consist essentially in a limitation of the will” (RL, 46). Furthermore, loving is nonutilitarian: we care about what we love for its own sake, rather than as a means to some other goal. Loves are final ends. Also, loving has a rigid focus: we cannot substitute what we love with someone/something of a similar type (TOS, 40). Finally, loving is self-affirming: we identify with what we love, Frankfurt states. We accept the interest of our beloved as our own. We benefit when what we love flourishes, we suffer when it is harmed (TOS, 41; RL, 80).

The three different ways of describing what we may love, and thereby, what we may relate to in such a way that it constitutes our selves, make it clear that unlike Kierkegaard, Frankfurt clearly thinks we are who we are, existentially speaking, through what we love. Kierkegaard circumscribed what we may relate to in such a way by his focus on objects in which there is something eternal. Frankfurt, on the other hand, focuses very much on concrete human others in the world, concrete pursuits in the world, ideals and traditions that may orient us in situations in which existential choices have to be made. Indeed, he focuses on what we love as what guides us and motivates us in life, regardless of whether we engage in explicit reflection on our lives or not.

This does not mean Frankfurt’s account should be accepted, no questions asked. We have already considered objections to the involuntariness of love and the idea that we identify with our beloveds. Although it may be true that love is involuntary in the sense that we cannot ultimately decide by an act of our will to love this person but not the next, we do have a measure of freedom in influencing the relation in which we stand to a beloved. We evaluate and try to influence the way in which we relate to what we cannot help but love. This cannot be understood, however, if we characterize the



relation to our beloveds as one of “identification,” for then the relation we have to them is effectively erased from the picture. The characterization of love as “nonutilitarian” has also been criticized. Identifying with whom (and what) we love without expecting something in return seems closer to admiration or benevolence than to love. It has been proposed that a criterion of “reciprocity” be added.¹⁰

The “rigid focus” on an object of love in its particularity, instead of as an example of a general type, seems unproblematic.¹¹ It is a strong point of Frankfurt’s account of the self, existentially speaking, as it contributes to the idea that we may be individuated by our relations to what we love. Where Kierkegaard focuses on the love that all of us should have for all of our neighbors, Frankfurt focuses on objects of love that are particular to an individual.

Overall, Frankfurt’s view on love and on how love shapes our identities tries to account for precisely the phenomena regarding selves, existentially speaking, that were exemplified in the introduction. Although certain aspects of his views can be questioned, his ideas exactly tackle questions about how love binds our will and thus provides us with an identity and a sense of direction when it comes to dealing with existential situations. In contrast, although Kierkegaard explicitly develops a relational view of the self, he is much more hesitant to say of relations to concrete beloveds that they are constitutive of selves. In the previous section, we have also seen how Kierkegaard and Frankfurt’s views diverged with respect to the question of how self-constituting relations can best be conceptualized. Why do their relational views of the existential self differ to such extent?

III. Frankfurt’s and Kierkegaard’s selves in context

If we want to understand why Kierkegaard’s and Frankfurt’s relational views of the self end up looking so different, both in terms of what characterizes self-constituting relations and what we may self-constitutingly relate to, we need to take a step back and look at the contexts in which their views of the self function. What overarching aims motivate Frankfurt and Kierkegaard to develop their relational views of selves, existentially speaking? And how do these aims influence the strengths and limitations of their views when it comes to thinking through the structure of the self as it comes to the fore in existential situations?

In a reflection on his own professional journey, Frankfurt describes his dissatisfaction with “the philosophical irrelevance of much philosophical activity.”¹² According to Frankfurt, the standard focus of (Anglo-American) philosophy on matters of truth and morality leaves many urgent concerns



of human life out of the picture. It is to gain a fuller view of these human concerns that Frankfurt introduced the concept of “what we care about,” later extending its discussion by the concept of “what we love.”

The particular context where he deems these concepts relevant is in discussions of practical reason. When we are trying to figure out how to live, what guides us? Frankfurt asks. He reacts against practical philosophers who want to locate the sources of our practical reason in an independent normative reality (TOS, 32) or in the impersonal demands of rationality (TOS, 21–22). Instead, Frankfurt argues that practical reason is not at all universal or impersonal. On the contrary, practical reason is individual and personal. It is grounded in ourselves, particularly in the structure of our will: in what we care about and love (TOS, 33). Frankfurt wants his account not only to be an account of how people act according to what they love, but also an account of why people *are justified* to act based on what they love. He does not want to build his account of practical reason on feelings, as they may be fleeting and occur coincidentally, and therefore lack normative force. Figuring out how to live and what to do is never just a cognitive exercise, nor is it ultimately based on feelings. It is volitional first and foremost.

Frankfurt’s overarching aim is exactly to be able to account for situations such as those described in the introduction. In the preface to his collection *The Importance of What We Care About* (1998), he writes that he tries to understand the structure of the self in such a way that it can accommodate “our experience of ourselves and [...] the problems in our lives that concern us with the greatest urgency” (IWCA, viii). His view of the self in terms of our relations to what we care about and love is developed to account for the phenomenon that people may find themselves with existential dilemmas, as well as for the phenomenon of them drawing on what they love when making decisions regarding how to live, forming intentions and acting on them. It is thus understandable that he has an account of selves in terms of what we love.

Where Frankfurt wants to correct practical philosophy, as he thinks its main theories do not do justice to important ways in which people actually live, Kierkegaard wants not just to correct Hegelian thought for not being able to do justice to categories that belong to human existence; he also wants to correct the people of his times for not living their lives to the full potential of human existence, and Christian existence in particular. His account is therefore explicitly and heavily normative. Anti-Climacus states that he is writing in “resemblance to the way a physician speaks at the sickbed” (SUD, 5). He is addressing a readership that has forgotten what it means to exist; diagnosing all the different ways in which people can fail to exist; and presenting his diagnosis in such a way as to be upbuilding for his patients,



that is to say, for all of us. The first part of *The Sickness unto Death* deals with what it means to exist humanly, as a self; the second part with what it means to exist Christianly, as a self before God. The structural view of the self he presents allows him to articulate an ideal self that people should strive toward, as well as all the ways in which people deviate from that ideal. This ideal self is one in which we consciously relate to who we are, will to be ourselves, and in doing so transparently rest in the power that established us. This is a radical ideal, practically impossible to reach. Anti-Climacus declares: "there is not one single living human being who does not despair a little" (SUD, 22). He wants to annoy his readers out of their complacency and into a conscious awareness of their own (despairing) self through the confrontation with his radical ideal.

Anti-Climacus, like other pseudonyms of Kierkegaard, does not necessarily consider a self constituted by relations to what we love as a true self, in his rich sense. It may only be "what we in our language call a self" (SUD, 56). He reserves the term "self" for what arises when we start to consciously relate to who we are, for it is this conscious relation that gives us a measure of freedom to influence who we may become. It is there that we may take upon ourselves the responsibility for who we are and are becoming. Thus, in his exposition on selves, Anti-Climacus does not refer to what people draw on when they find themselves in existential situations, questioning their identity. He does not discuss people's relations to what they love as if they may constitute their true self. He may refer to such relations in passing, as when he discusses "a young girl, [...] who despairs over the loss of her beloved" (SUD, 20), but only to deplore the misguided idea that such relations actually constitute selves. "This self of hers, which she would have been rid of or would have lost in the most blissful manner had it become 'his' beloved, this self becomes a torment to her if it has to be a self without 'him.' This self, which would have become her treasure (although, in another sense, it would have been just as despairing), has now become to her an abominable void" (SUD, 20). As Anti-Climacus finds such a take on self, that would crucially depend on others, to be despairing, he never focuses on what it would entail to have such a self.

If we want to address the self as it comes to the fore in existential situations, Frankfurt's views are more on topic. Unlike Kierkegaard, Frankfurt does point out how our relations to what we love shape who we are, existentially speaking. The plight of people who have lost a loved one, as the young girl has, is taken to be a reality of the human condition by Frankfurt, and taken to indeed involve her identity. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, deplores it as a misguided notion of what it means to be an existing self. Also, Frankfurt's view fleshes out the possibility that we may not be consciously aware of what we love, nor, therefore, of the motivations

underlying our actions and intentions. Kierkegaard acknowledges this possibility, but is dismissive of it and therefore does not pay it the attention that it, given its ubiquity, deserves.

At the same time however, Frankfurt's account of the self runs the risk of alienating us from ourselves where he allows for the possibility that we volitionally identify with what we do not like; as well as the risk that our self dissolves too much into others, surrendering our independence from others to a too large an extent. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, focuses exactly on what remains independent and would dismiss the idea that our selves can be summed up by reference to our loves as despairing and as self-forgetfulness. In the context of existential selves, we can use several aspects of Anti-Climacus' thought without necessarily embracing his normative ideal or his unease with people not living up to that ideal. We can, for example, extend his notion of self-constituting relations we have to what we find ourselves to be to include self-constituting relations to what we find ourselves to love. These relations are characterized by their affective-volitional quality and by the level of conscious awareness we have of them. We can use Anti-Climacus' analysis of the freedom we gain when we become consciously aware of who we are, what we love, and how we relate to what we love, that is, the freedom to try and influence our relations to what we love and thereby how our selves are constituted.

All in all then, in elaborating relational views of the self and doing so with a particular interest in existential issues, Kierkegaard and Frankfurt nevertheless come up with very different selves, plural. Frankfurt aims to enrich discussions regarding practical rationality with concepts that do justice to people's experiences and the problems they encounter. Kierkegaard aims to correct Hegelian wrongs and to remind his readers of a normative ideal of selfhood and the ways in which they fall short with respect to it. These different aims are reflected in their different characterizations of the relations that constitute our selves, as well as in their different answers to the question whether our relations to what we love are constitutive of our selves. If our own interest is in explicating the structure of the self as it comes to the fore and may be at stake in existential situations, we can use aspects of both views to flesh out the idea that our relations to what we love constitute our selves, existentially speaking.

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Notes

- 1 Susan Wolf, "The True, the Good and the Lovable," 227–44.
- 2 Likewise, though vice versa, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, another pseudonym called Johannes Climacus develops a concept of subjective truth, which is truth of appropriation. This truth needs to be passionately appropriated. Passion here, however, does not just refer to some emotional state. It has to do with volition as well, with commitment.
- 3 To use the words of, respectively, existential psychotherapists such as Viktor Frankl; of Charles Taylor; and, obviously, of Harry Frankfurt.
- 4 He does not discuss the possibility that a self may be established by impersonal, natural forces.
- 5 Most notably in *Works of Love*, to which other contributions to this volume testify.
- 6 Anthony Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, 77. Rudd uses a different translation of *Either/Or* than is used here, the one by Walter Lowrie.
- 7 Ibid., 72. Although originally pertaining to morality in general, not just to ethical selfhood. Rudd's newest book *Self, Value and Narrative* takes up the same point, especially in chapter 2 and the Introductions to parts 2 and 3.
- 8 Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 62–63.
- 9 Rudd quotes this passage too, on p. 75 of his book, but does not take it to have the consequences I take it to have.
- 10 For example, Kyla Ebels-Duggan, "Against Beneficence," 142–70. Reciprocity, however, does not sit easily with objects of love that are not people.
- 11 It seems a bit strange though to say of, for example, an ideal or a quality of experience that it is rigidly focused, whereas it can easily be said of people, projects, countries, and football teams.
- 12 Harry Frankfurt, "Een intellectueel zelfportret" [An intellectual self-portrait], in *Vrijheid, noodzaak en liefde*, eds. Katrien Schaubroeck and Thomas Nys (Kapellen: Pelckmans, 2011), 17–30, my translation.



