1. At the beginning of the Second Section of his treatise entitled Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, Immanuel Kant reflects upon the fact that, as it seems to him, it is practically impossible for us ever to know with any real assurance that what a person does possesses genuine moral worth. He is struck by how irredeemably uncertain we must always be concerning whether someone is properly to be regarded as having actually been virtuous. The difficulty that troubles him in this connection does not arise out of any doubts as to our ability to identify the particular sort of action that, in the circumstances under consideration, the laws of morality prescribe. For Kant, that is the easy part. The serious problem in arriving at judicious moral evaluations of what people do lies, as he sees it, in the impenetrable obscurity of human motivation.

Even when it is clear that what a person has done conforms exactly, so far as his behavior goes, to all pertinent moral requirements, it may remain quite unclear whether the person acted virtuously. Indeed, however fully his explicit conduct satisfies the commands of the moral law, it may not earn him any moral credit at all. The mere fact that he has behaved in just the way that duty demands does not of itself warrant a judgment that he was morally worthy in what he did. Reaching a judgment of that kind is not warranted simply by what a person has done. It must take into account what was actually moving the person as he did it.

According to Kant, there is no virtue in performing an action when the performance is decisively motivated by nothing more than what you yourself happen to want. If the desires that move you are desires by which you are moved simply for reasons of your own, it makes no difference whether those desires are directed benevolently towards the...
well-being of others or whether they are greedily aimed at some vulgar personal advantage. In either case, the critical point is that you are doing what you are doing just because you happen to be inclined to do it.

People with generous inclinations are certainly preferable to people who tend to be selfish. It is also true that animals that are naturally gentle and affectionate are nicer to have around than animals that are characteristically hostile and aggressive. Kant insists that our preferences concerning such differences in natural tendency have no greater moral significance in the one case than in the other. He does seem to have a point here. Why should you be awarded any genuine moral credit for doing something that you do just because you are naturally disposed to do it—in other words, just because you feel like doing it? There may be nothing wrong with pursuing personal goals. However, it does seem that success in governing your conduct in accordance with your own desires can hardly be counted as a notable moral achievement. Kant is making just the rather plausible claim that people cannot sensibly be regarded as morally admirable for simply doing as they please.

His view is that real moral credit can be earned only by doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do. An action is not morally worthy, he believes, unless it is performed in a deliberate effort to meet the requirements of morality. In order to reach an accurate moral evaluation of someone on the basis of what the person has done, he therefore considers it essential to know what were the person’s motives in doing it. For Kant, and of course not only for Kant, that is the hard part. It is very difficult to be certain about just what actually has moved someone, on a certain occasion, to act as he did. People are elusive, and the sources of their actions are obscure. We are frequently mistaken, not only about the motives of others, but about our own as well. So it is only very rarely (if ever) that we can legitimately be confident that someone is really acting for the sake of duty—in other words, that he is being moved to act by respect for the rational authority of an impersonal moral imperative rather than by some private inclination or desire of his own.

2. In fact, Kant thinks that we can never really be confident of this. In the first place, he considers it to be "absolutely impossible by experience to discern with complete certainty a single case" in which a person acts solely for the sake of duty.1 Other considerations are always at work. Furthermore, we can never completely rule out the possibility that it is certain of these other considerations—rather than the claims of duty—that are truly motivating the person as he acts.

To be sure, sometimes it looks as though it must be morality that is playing the decisive role. There are cases occasionally in which it seems that we cannot find anything but moral considerations that could plausibly account for a certain action. But Kant warns that "from this we cannot by any means conclude with certainty that a secret impulse of self-love, falsely appearing as the idea of duty, was not actually the true determining cause of the will." People are not only elusive and obscure. They are also deceptive, and in certain things they can deceive themselves even more read-ily than they deceive others.

Kant is not cynical, but he wants to be realistic. In his opinion, a "cool observer…[is bound] to be doubtful sometimes whether true virtue can really be found anywhere in the world." In saying this, Kant is not being derisive. His

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basic attitude towards people is not one of dismissive contempt. As he tries to understand what people are up to, he is quite willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. But only up to a point. "Out of love of humanity," he says, "I am willing to admit that most of our actions are in accordance with duty; but, if we look closer at our thoughts and aspirations, we everywhere come upon the dear self, which is always salient, and it is this instead of the stern command of duty (which would often require self-denial) which supports our plans."

It is clear enough what Kant has in mind. He doubts that we can ever thoroughly divert ourselves from the domineering salience of personal inclination. We may tell ourselves—in what we suppose to be all sincerity—that our attitudes and our actions are, at least at times, conscientiously designed to respond compliantly to the commands of duty. Kant suspects, however, that in fact they always respond primarily to the pressures of desire.

It is not morality but our own dispositions, he believes, that uniformly enjoy the higher priority and that exert the more conclusive influence. What we care about most dearly are our own desires and our own inclinations. We are inextricably immersed in them, and it is invariably and most urgently by them that we are driven.

3. In Kant’s view, the fact that the impulses of self-love are so ubiquitous in our lives, and so compellingly salient, undermines the possibility of any genuinely virtuous submission to the dictates of morality. I do not propose to challenge this conception of what virtue requires or, for that matter, to dispute any other element of Kant’s moral doctrine. Nor shall I argue that he is mistaken in his belief that there is an intractably inimical relationship between the requirements of moral virtue and the claims of desire. On the other hand, I think that what he says about the self, and about our attitudes towards our selves, is in certain important respects substantially out of focus.

Kant has a reputation for an uncompromisingly rigid moral austerity. It must be said, however, that in the passages from his work that I have quoted he does not give the impression of being either indifferent to ordinary human feelings or unsympathetic to familiar aspects of human weakness. Indeed, there is something appealingly poignant and rather sweet in his sorrowful allusions to the inherent frailties of human character and to the anxious maneuvers of self-deception with which we attempt to conceal and to deny them.

But while Kant’s regret concerning the inescapable tendency of human beings to be dear to themselves may be warm-hearted and benign, what reason is there to suppose that any attitude of regret is at all appropriate? When all is said and done, what is so unfortunate or so embarrassing about our propensity to love ourselves? Why should we regard self-love with any sort of righteous distaste, or consider it to be somehow a formidable obstacle to the attainment of our proper goals? Why should we think of it as a dangerous threat to the sort of life at which we ought reasonably to aim?

After all, are we not told by an Author whose moral authority is quite favorably comparable to Kant’s that we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves? That does not sound much like a warning against self-love. It does not say that we should love others instead of loving ourselves. It certainly does not at all suggest that self-love is an enemy of virtue, or that it is in some way discreditable to hold the self dear. On the contrary, the divine command to love others as we love ourselves may appear even to imply a positive recommendation of self-love as a fundamental moral
para-digm—a morally indispensable model or ideal—by which we ought seriously to guide ourselves in the conduct of our practical lives.

It might more or less plausibly be objected, of course, that the real meaning of the biblical injunction is actually quite different. Perhaps the Bible, when it admonishes us to love others as we love ourselves, does not intend to convey the notion that the possibility of loving others should be embraced because it is no less reasonable or desirable than what we do in loving ourselves. Perhaps the Bible intends just to encourage us to love others with the same intensity, or with the same relentless dedication, that we are presumed to lavish upon ourselves. On this reading, the point is not to validate love of others by suggesting that it is similar to self-love. The point is merely that we should bring to our love of others the same wholehearted and persistent devotion that we characteristically display towards the dear self. In other words it is not self-love as such, but only the way in which we love ourselves, that is offered as a model.

Perhaps that is the correct way of understanding the Biblical comparison between loving others and loving oneself. Perhaps it would be a gross error to construe the comparison as pointing to the self as a model of what we should love. Be that as it may, I want to take another look at the love that people are supposed to have naturally for themselves. I want to suggest an alternative approach to conceiving the notion of "the dear self." This will throw a rather different light, I expect, on the significance of self-love and on its value.

4. I am going to take my start in this from an observation that Spinoza makes in Part Four of his Ethics. In an earlier work, his Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding, Spinoza had described what he hoped to achieve in his philosophical investigations and in his life: "After experience had taught me," he said, "the hollowness and futility of everything that is ordinarily encountered in daily life, and I realised that all the things which were the source and object of my anxiety had nothing of good or evil in themselves... I resolved at length to enquire whether there existed a true good, one... whose discovery and acquisition would [alone] afford me a continuous and supreme joy to all eternity." Spinoza evidently aimed very high. He proposed as his goal nothing less than to identify and to acquire what would bring him—entirely by itself—"continuous and supreme joy" forever.

Against the background of this rather grandiose ambition, the observation in the Ethics to which I alluded may well seem a bit surprising. In making that observation Spinoza is again concerned with characterizing the goal of life; but what he says about it this time is considerably less extravagant. It may also appear to be quite deeply at odds with Kant’s notion that the proper conduct of life is drastically impeded by the baleful influence of the dear self.

For Spinoza evidently believes that it is precisely the dear self that anyone who wishes to attain the most perfect good must value above all. In his view, the highest goal of life is, in fact, nothing other than self-esteem. He says this in so many words: "Self-esteem," he observes "is really the highest thing we can hope for." To say that we can hope for nothing higher does not entail, to be sure, that we cannot think of anything better; and it might conceivably be that the best we can hope for will turn out not to be an effective antithode to "the hollowness and futility of everything that is or-

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3 Ethics, in Curley (ed.), 52.
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dinarily encountered in daily life." Still, Spinoza does assert unequivocally that, so far as he can see, there is no good superior to self-esteem that it is reasonable for us to seek.

As for what it is that he refers to as "self-esteem," Spinoza says that it is "a joy born of the fact that a man considers himself and his own power of acting." This is rather unclear; it does not make very explicit what it is that Spinoza is talking about. However, I shall not discuss here what he must have had in mind. Instead, I shall simply assume that to speak of self-esteem is close to speaking of holding the self dear. As I shall understand it, then, esteem for the self is more or less the same as self-love. In any case, it is with self-love that I shall primarily be concerned.

5. Now as I understand self-love, it is quite a different thing from the attitude towards oneself of which Kant was thinking in the passages from his work that I quoted. In those passages, Kant describes a person who is motivated by an interest in satisfying his own strongest inclinations and desires. That person is not driven by what I construe to be self-love. His attachment to the dear self is less like self-love than it is like self-indulgence, and self-indulgence is something else entirely.

The attitudes of love and of indulgence are not only different in nature. They may often be incompatible in fact. Parents who love their children take great care, if they are sensible, to avoid being indulgent. Parental love does not motivate them to give their children whatever the children happen most to want; rather, they show their love by protecting and advancing their children’s true interests. Precisely because they do love their children, they conscientiously refrain from doing many things that their children would very much like them to do. In just the same way, a person who loves himself demonstrates that love by protecting and advancing his own true interests even at the cost of frustrating powerful desires that divert him from this goal.

On Kant’s account, what the dear self craves is not that it be truly and intelligently loved. It craves merely that it be indulged. That indulgence, which aims simply at the gratification of impulse and of desire, is surely not what Spinoza has in mind when he speaks of self-esteem. Just as indulgent parents are not the best parents, self-indulgence is manifestly not the highest thing for which we can hope. Genuine love for ourselves, like genuine love for our children, requires concerned attention of a different kind.

6. Let us consider, then, the nature of self-love. Like love of any variety, love of a person has four main conceptually necessary features. First of all, it consists basically in a disinterested concern for the flourishing or the well-being of the beloved. It is not driven by any ulterior purpose. It seeks the good of the beloved as something that is desirable for its own sake. Secondly, love, unlike other modes of disinterested concern for people—such as charity—is ineluctably personal. The individual who is loved is not loved as an instance of a type, or as an exemplar, but irreducibly for himself or for herself as such. The lover cannot coherently consider some other individual as an adequate substitute for his beloved, regardless of how similar that individual may be to the one he loves. Third, the lover identifies with his beloved. That is, he takes the interests of his beloved as his own, and consequently he benefits or suffers depending upon whether those interests are or are not adequately served. Finally, love includes constraints upon the will. It is not simply up to us what we love and what we do not love. Love is not a matter of choice. It is determined by conditions that are outside our immediate voluntary control.
With these defining features of love in mind, it seems to me that self-love—notwithstanding its questionable reputation—is in a certain way the purest of all modes of love. You may think that I cannot possibly mean this. When I say that self-love is the purest kind of love, it may seem that I am merely being whimsical or that I am playing irresponsibly with paradox. In fact, however, the truth of this claim that self-love is exceptionally pure can rather easily be established.

The claim is not, of course, that love of oneself is somehow especially noble. Nor does the claim mean that self-love reflects exceptionally well upon a person’s moral character. What I maintain is that love of oneself is purer than other sorts of love in the sense that it is in cases of self-love that the love is most likely to be unequivocal and unalloyed. Instances of self-love fit the criteria that identify what love is more closely than do instances of other kinds of love. Some people may be inclined to regard love of self as a degenerate type of love, or as a type of love that is somehow not altogether genuine. It seems to me that, on the contrary, there is an especially snug fit between self-love and the conceptually indispensable conditions by which the essential character of love is defined.

7. To begin with, I suppose that it will be conceded without too much argument that when a person loves himself the identification of the lover with his beloved is distinctively robust and uncurtailed. The person who loves himself will obviously consider the interests of his beloved to be identical with his own. Moreover, his identification with them need not contend with the inescapable distance that prevails in other cases between lovers and those whom they love, nor need it cope with the inevitable discrepancies in their interests. The identification in cases of self-love is therefore bound to be exceptionally extensive and considerably less tentative.

Secondly, it is even more obvious that someone who loves himself is devoted to his beloved as a particular individual rather than as an exemplar of some general type. Self-love cannot coherently be transferred to an equivalent substitute. Perhaps it might be natural for a man who loves a certain woman to be drawn also to another woman who strikes him as closely similar to her. But suppose a person comes to believe that someone else resembles him exactly. The similarity will certainly not tempt him to love the other person as he loves himself. Furthermore, while it is conceivable that a man might not notice if the woman he loved were replaced by her twin, there would be no sense at all in suggesting that it might be all the same to someone if he gave up loving himself and loved a person just like himself instead.

In the third place, not only is self-love outside our immediate voluntary control but we are inclined towards loving ourselves more naturally and more heedlessly than we are inclined to love other things. In addition, our inclination towards self-love is less susceptible than our inclinations to love of other kinds to being affected by indirect forms of influence and manipulation. Perhaps the inclination is not wholly unavoidable; but it is exceptionally difficult to expunge or to elude. Our tendency to love ourselves, unlike our tendencies to love other things, is not a product of adventitious causes. The drive towards self-love is deeply entrenched in our nature. To a considerable degree, it is independent of contingent circumstances.

Finally, the unalloyed purity of self-love is almost never spoiled by the prominent intrusion of any extrinsic or ulterior purpose. For the most part, we do not seek our own well-being mainly because we expect that it will lead to
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some other good. The love that we devote to ourselves is one in which, to a greater degree than in other types of love, the flourishing of the beloved is not only sought for its own sake but for its own sake alone. Perhaps it would flirt too egregiously with absurdity to suggest that self-love may be selfless. However, it is quite appropriate to characterise self-love as disinterested. It is nearly always entirely disinterested, indeed, in the clear and literal sense of being motivated by no interests other than those of the beloved.

In attempting to illuminate the character of self-love, it is helpful to invoke, as a suggestive and confirming model or touchstone, the comparably pure love that parents ordinarily have for their small children. In a number of interesting respects, there is a close parallelism between parental love and the love of people for themselves. It might be urged that the most appropriate explanation for this is that people who love themselves are simply being childish. But I think that it is possible to give a less denigrating, and a more authentic, account of the similarity. The affinity of self-love and parental love seems clearly to derive from the extraordinary degree to which the lover, in each of the two cases, identifies naturally and more or less inevitably with the beloved.

In self-love, as I have already suggested, the identity tends to be at once both complete and unconditioned. There is no discrepancy whatever between the lover and the person he loves. The normal identification of parent with child is necessarily somewhat more limited and less certain. Nevertheless, it is as a rule distinctively compelling and close. The child originates literally within the bodies of its parents; and it continues even long after birth to remain, in some less organic way, still a part of them. The intimacy and vividness of this connection tends to diminish as the child grows apart and goes its own way. Until then, however, and often afterwards as well, the extent and the strength of parental identification are exceptional.

To an unusual degree, the identification of the lover with the beloved both in parental love and in self-love is seamless. This accounts for a further inherent similarity between these two varieties of love. Even apart from whatever obligations may be imposed by the principles of law and of morality, parents generally recognise that they have a fundamental responsibility for their children. Analogously, every individual has a fundamental responsibility for himself. It is distinctive of these two sorts of love that, in each, the lover is so closely identified with the beloved as to be especially responsible for him.

Moreover, the loving concern of parents for the interests of their small children resembles self-love in that not only does each consist in a devotion to the good of the beloved, as does genuine love of every kind, but in neither case is that devotion ordinarily motivated by any additional ambition or intent. Parents are generally devoted to the good of their small children in the same wholly non-instrumental way that people are generally devoted to their own good. They do not anticipate that it will be useful in bringing about some further benefit.

On the other hand, the love of adults other than oneself is rarely so exclusively disinterested. That sort of love is nearly always obscurely mixed up with, if not actually grounded in, a hope for reciprocity and for goods that are distinct from the well-being of the beloved: for instance, companionship, psychological and material security, sexual gratification, or the like. It is only when the beloved is the lover’s child that the love is likely to be as free of such calculated or implicit expectations as it is almost invariably free of them in the case of a person’s love of himself. It is true that parents do nor-
mally hope that their infant children will love them some-
day. Ordinarily, however, that hope is not salient; it gener-
ally remains inconspicuous, and quite irrelevant, at least as 
long as the children are very young. It is distinctive of un-
demanding parental love and of self-love alike, then, that the 
lover’s disinterested concern for the good of his beloved 
tends to be uncontaminated by an interest in any other good.

Finally, the tendencies towards parental love and self-
love are similar in the practically inescapable power with 
which they grip us. To be sure, there are some unfortunate 
small children whose parents do not care at all about their 
well-being. There are also some wantonly indifferent or 
mindlessly self-indulgent individuals who do not care at all 
about themselves. However, cases of these sorts are rare. 
They are also so incoherent with our fundamental expecta-
tions concerning human nature that we generally consider 
them to be pathological. Normal people, we suppose, can-
not help being powerfully moved to love their children and 
cannot help being powerfully inclined to love themselves. 
Our dispositions towards parental love and towards self-
love are innate. Moreover, we expect dispositions of both of 
these kinds to be exceptionally reliable. When it comes to 
our children and to ourselves, we do not tend to be fickle.

9. So what is the particular character of self-love? How 
does this mode of love manifest itself, and what does it en-
tail? Insofar as a person loves himself, just what does the 
love come to?

In its central reality, self-love is of course no different 
than love of any other kind. As with every variety of love, 
the heart of it is that the lover cares about the well-being of 
his beloved for its own sake. He is disinterestedly concerned 
to protect and to pursue the true interests of his beloved. 
Since in this case the beloved is himself, the interests to 
which he is devoted by his self-love are his own. Now those 
interests, like the true interests of anyone, are defined and 
determined by what he loves. Thus, the heart of self-love is 
simply a disinterested concern for whatever it is that is be-
loved. A person who loves himself displays and demon-
strates that love just by being devoted to what he loves.

This appears to imply that a person’s love of himself 
cannot properly be understood as an attitude that is funda-
mentally directed at a certain object to which it is appropri-
ate to refer as his “self.” There must be something else that 
he loves in order for there to be an object to which his love of 
himself is devoted. The love of people for themselves is 
never primary. It is necessarily derived from, or constructed 
out of, their love of things that are not identical with them-
selves. Perhaps self-love cannot accurately be regarded, 
then, as a condition in which the lover and the beloved are 
strictly the same. It is not possible for a person to love him-
self except insofar as he loves other things.

That may well make it seem, furthermore, that the very 
notion of self-love amounts to nothing more than a mere re-
dundancy generated by a pointless iteration. Given that de-
vo tion to what is loved is an essential element of loving, the 
love of a person for himself is essentially a devotion to what-
ever it is that he loves. Now a person who loves something 
is necessarily already devoted to what he loves just insofar 
as he loves it. That he also loves himself—which means only 
that he is devoted to those things that he loves—appears to 
add nothing to the devotion in which his love of those things 
consists. Self-love collapses simply into a love of the things 
one loves. If a person loves anything, then he necessarily 
loves himself. People cannot avoid loving themselves, it 
seems, as long as they love anything at all.

However, there is more to be said. The situation with re-
gard to these matters is rather less straightforward than the
account I have so far given makes it appear. I want to con-
sider, in particular, two sets of complications that bear upon
the extent to which that account needs to be revised or sup-
plemented and upon how self-love is finally to be under-
stood. In the first place, there are complexities that arise in
connection with the supposition that self-love is essentially
dependent upon love of other things. Despite what I have
said, it seems that room must after all be made for the possi-
bility that a person may actually love himself even though
he does not love anything else. Secondly, there are com-
plexities that arise in connection with the supposition that a
person necessarily loves, or is devoted to, whatever he loves.
My account so far has neglected the possibility that a person
may be divided within himself in a way that precludes giv-
ing an unequivocal report concerning what he loves and
what he does not love.

10. Regardless of whether or not self-love is dependent
upon a person’s love for things that are not identical with
himself, it is clear that self-love does not require that a per-
son actually recognize that he loves such things. People may
love themselves despite being uncertain, or even despite
being entirely ignorant, concerning what they love. It is
quite possible for a person to love someone or something
without realizing that he does so; and it is also possible for
people to believe that they love something or someone that
they do not truly love at all. Love is basically a configura-
tion of the will, which is constituted by various more or less
stable dispositions and constraints. The effectiveness of
these neither requires nor ensures that the person be aware
of them. He may not know, and he may perhaps even con-
fidently deny, the role that they play in governing his atti-
dudes and his conduct.

The ignorance or errors of a person concerning what he
loves are no obstacle to self-love. After all, parents often fail
to understand what is important to their children; but that
does not imply that they do not love their children. We do
not charge them with lacking love for their children unless
we believe that they have no genuine desire to get things
right. That desire itself expresses their love convincingly. It
is evident that parents love their children as long as they
make a conscientious effort, however inept or unsuccessful it
may be, to understand what the true interests of their chil-
dren are.

The same is true of self-love. A person who does not
know what he loves, and who therefore does not know what
his true interests are, nonetheless demonstrates his love for
himself insofar as he attempts seriously to determine what it
is that he loves and what his love requires of him. His self-
love then is constituted by his trying to identify what is fun-
damentally important to him. This entails no deviation from
the principle that love consists essentially in the concern of
the lover for the true interests of whatever he loves. The
concern of any lover for the true interests of his beloved
plainly entails a preliminary concern to identify those inter-
ests correctly. In order to obey the commands of love, it is
first necessary to understand what it is that love commands.

11. A more difficult issue pertaining to complexities of
the first sort has to do with whether it actually is impossible
for a person to love himself unless he already loves some-
thing else. At first glance, it might seem that the absence of
any other love would necessarily preclude self-love. If love
is essentially a concern for what is loved by the beloved, it is
difficult to see how a person who loves nothing could possi-
bly be loved; for it would seem impossible to identify any
concern that would constitute loving him. In the case of
someone who loves nothing, it seems that there is no way in
which love for him can be expressed. There is nothing for his lover to do.

Referring to the model of parental love indicates, however, that this analysis is excessively hasty and simplistic. The devotion that expresses the love of loving parents is not limited to attempting to identify and to support their children’s true interests. Parents express their love also by doing what they can to ensure that their children actually have genuine interests and are therefore not condemned to lives that are chaotically fragmented and empty of meaning. Thus, their concern may extend also to helping their children to become capable of loving and to encouraging and assisting them to find love. This suggests that a person who loves nothing may nonetheless be able to show that he loves himself by attempting to alter whatever personal characteristics may impair his capacity to love and by making suitable efforts to find things to love.

Now suppose that someone is in fact trying seriously to find love. Suppose further both that he cannot help doing so and that his interest in finding love is entirely disinterested. He has no ulterior purpose; love is important to him just for its own sake. He might perhaps be a person who loves nothing in particular, and who wishes to repair that condition; or he might be a person who already loves various things, but who wishes to love more. In either case, it seems no less appropriate to regard his interest in doing what he can to find love as expressing love for himself than it is to regard parents as expressing love for their children insofar as they do what they can to help their children find love.

The most elementary form of self-love, then, consists essentially in the desire of a person to love. That is, it consists essentially in the person’s desire to have goals that he must accept as his own and to which he is devoted not merely for their instrumental value but for themselves. Now this is nothing but a desire on the person’s part that he be in a position to act with firm and genuine purpose. Without such purposes, our actions could not be satisfying; they would inevitably be, as Aristotle says, "empty and vain." By providing us with final ends, which we value for their own sakes, love protects us from the emptiness and vanity of activity that is basically pointless because it has no definitive goal and therefore aims at nothing that we really want. In other words, it makes it possible for us to engage in activity that is meaningful. The desire to love is just the desire that there be some meaning in our lives.

12. The second sort of complexities to which I referred earlier have to do with the possibility that people may be divided within themselves in such a way that it is impossible to give any definitive or univocal answers to questions concerning what they love and what they do not love. It sometimes happens that although a person truly loves something, it is also true that he does not want to love it. As we might say, part of him loves it, but part of him does not love it. Part of him is opposed to his loving it, in fact, and wishes that he did not love it at all. In a word, the person is ambivalent.

Resolving this conflict, and freeing himself of his ambivalence, does not require that either of the conflicting impulses within the person disappear or even that either diminish in strength. Resolution requires only that the person decide finally which side he is on. The forces that are mobilized on the other side may then persist with as much intensity as before; but once he has determined where he stands, his will is no longer divided and thus his ambivalence is gone. He is wholeheartedly on one side of the conflict that he experiences, and not at all on the other.

When this happens, the tendencies that he has decided to
oppose are made in a sense external to him. They are extruded from his will and become alien to it. They are then not just opposed by the occurrence of some contrary inclination. They are opposed by the person, in his attempt as a volitionally unified agent to withstand their assault upon him. If they prove nonetheless to be too powerful, what they overcome is not merely an opposing inclination but the person himself. He himself, and not merely one of his tendencies, is defeated by them.

In many cases of this kind, however, the person cannot make up his mind which side he is on. He cannot bring himself to identify himself definitively either with one of the opposing tendencies of his will or with the other. He cannot decide conclusively whether to stand behind his tendency to love or behind his desire to resist that love and to refrain from loving. He does not know which of these contending forces he would prefer to prevail. He is uncertain, with respect to each of his conflicting inclinations, whether to oppose it or whether to join himself to it. This is a radical ambivalence, in which the will of the person is more or less obstinately unsettled and undefined. The person is volitionally fragmented; his will moves him incoherently in opposite directions. As long as he is unable to resolve the conflict by which he is torn, and to unify his will, he remains at odds with himself.

Suppose that he is ambivalent with respect to loving a certain woman: part of him loves her but part of him is opposed to that love, and he himself is undecided concerning which of these tendencies he wants to prevail. Thus, his will is indeterminate. There is no unequivocal truth, or straightforward fact of the matter, as to whether he really loves her or not. Therefore, it cannot be said that he loves himself. Loving himself means loving whatever it is that he loves. But since he is undecided whether to endorse and to support his love of the woman or whether to identify himself with and to mobilize his energies behind his opposition to that love, he is undecided as to whether he loves what he loves. He is undecided, accordingly, as to whether he loves himself. His self-love is as deeply equivocal as his love for the woman. In other words, he is radically ambivalent about himself.4

13. Self-doubt is, of course, both the originating matrix of modern philosophy and the source of a considerable part of its energy. For the last three or four hundred years, self-doubt has defined the most salient and persistent ambitions of philosophical inquiry. Moreover, the vitality and the flavor of contemporary life are notoriously impaired by modes of radical ambivalence that are even more poignant and more urgent than the sceptical inhibitions imposed upon themselves by Descartes and his successors. Needless to say, however, the story of ambivalence is an old one: people have suffered from divided wills, and from being alienated from themselves, for a long time. St. Augustine, who wrestled with the phenomenon in his own life, understood it as a kind of sickness. Here is how he describes it:5

The mind orders itself to make an act of will..., but it does not fully will to do this thing and therefore its orders are not fully given. It gives the order only in so far as it wills, and in so far as it does not will the order is not carried out.... It is...no strange phenomenon partly to will to do something and partly to will not to do it. It is

4 Suppose that he cannot help loving her despite a settled determination on his part against that love. He is not ambivalent; his will is resolved. In that case too, since he stands unequivocally against loving what he loves, he clearly does not love himself. For lack of space, I shall not consider this possibility further here.

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a disease of the mind.... So there are two wills in us, because neither by itself is the whole will, and each possesses what the other lacks. (Confessions VIII, 9)

St. Augustine thought that ambivalence, and the dissatisfaction with oneself that it entails, might have been inflicted upon us by the deity on account of the Original Sin. It may be, he says, that its cause "lies in the secret punishment of man and in the penitence which casts a deep shadow on the sons of Adam." Thus, he supposed that escaping from a divided will into a state of volitional unity might be impossible for us without the assistance or at least the acquiescence of God.

Now if ambivalence is a disease of the mind, then the health of the mind lies in having a unified will. That is to say, it lies in being wholehearted. A wholehearted person is a person whose will is undivided. The wholehearted person knows what he wants. With regard to any conflict of feelings or tendencies within himself, he knows where he stands. So far as his loving is concerned, he is wholeheartedly invested in it; he lends himself to it without any qualification or reserve.

Thus, he identifies himself fully and uninhibitedly with the volitional configurations that define his final ends. This wholehearted identification means that there is no ambivalence in his attitude towards himself. There is no part of him—no part with which he identified—that is opposed to or that resists his loving what he loves. He is altogether wholehearted in loving what he loves. In other words, he loves himself. His self-love is constituted by the wholeheartedness of his unified will.

14. To be wholehearted is to love oneself. The two are the same. Kierkegaard used as the title of one of his books the emphatic and rather dogmatic statement, "Purity of heart is to will one thing." But willing one thing is not being pure; it is just being single-minded. The degree to which a person's heart is pure is not a direct function of how many things are willed. It depends more immediately upon how they are willed. What counts is the quality of the will, not the quantity of its objects. People do not achieve purity of heart merely by virtue of becoming narrowly focused. The pure heart, it seems to me, is the heart of someone who is volitionally unified and who is therefore intact with himself. Purity lies in wholeheartedness. To the extent that a person is wholehearted, no part of his will intrudes upon him; none is unwelcome to him, or alien. His heart is pure in the sense that his will is purely his own.

It is in the purity of a wholehearted will, then, that self-love consists. But now, why should we care about purity, or wholeheartedness, or self-love? What is so wonderful about all that? Why should anyone think that loving ourselves is, as Spinoza suggested, the highest thing for which we can hope? What is it about an undivided will that qualifies it as the most precious goal of life?

For one thing, a divided will is self-defeating. It is the counterpart in the realm of conduct to contradictoriness in the realm of thought. A self-contradictory belief requires us simultaneously both to accept and to deny the same judgment; volitional disunity requires us to act in contrary directions at the same time. A deficiency in wholeheartedness is, then, a kind of irrationality that infects our practical lives. By the same token, of course, a person whose will is undivided enjoys a fundamental sort of inner freedom. To the extent that he loves himself, he does not resist the movements of his own will. He does not oppose, or seek to impede, the expression of his love for whatever it is that he loves. He is free to love it, in other words, without interference from himself.
Thus, self-love has going for it the ways in which it is pertinent both to rationality and to the mode of freedom that rationality ensures. It is not so implausible that it should be regarded as the highest thing for which we can hope. It is tantamount, after all, to being satisfied with ourselves. How could we possibly, or even coherently, desire more for ourselves than that?

On the other hand, there is the fact that self-love has, as such, no specific content. Wholeheartedness is only a structural characteristic, which has to do with the unity of the will but which implies nothing whatever concerning the direction of the will or its object. In particular, self-love is morally neutral. A person loves himself insofar as he wholeheartedly loves anything at all. The character of what he loves is irrelevant to whether he is wholehearted in loving it. This evidently leaves open the possibility that a person may wholeheartedly love what is evil.

Of course, one might attempt to demonstrate that there cannot actually be an unconflicted and unequivocal love of what is evil. Many philosophers and religious thinkers have in fact tried to show that an immoral will is necessarily and inevitably irrational and hence that only a good will can be genuinely wholehearted. I confess that I do not find their efforts convincing, or even very promising. So far as I can see, being wholehearted is quite compatible with being wicked. Self-love may be the highest thing for which we can hope, but it is not a moral virtue. The life of a person who loves himself is enviable for its wholeheartedness, but it is not necessarily admirable. The function of love, after all, is not to make people good. It is just to make their lives meaningful and hence to make their lives good for them to live.

15. Wholeheartedness is not easy to come by. It is very difficult for us to be satisfied with ourselves. We are only too susceptible to ambivalence and to uncertainty about what we love. St. Augustine regarded the impediments to self-love not only as innate, but very likely as having been entrenched in us by God; and so he thought that they could probably be overcome only by a miracle. My own observation is that whether we achieve any substantial degree of wholeheartedness in our lives depends heavily upon luck. Perhaps this is not actually so different from what St. Augustine had in mind. In any event, there may not be much more that we can do to induce self-love than we can do to induce ourselves to love anything else.

And what if we cannot love ourselves? Suppose that we are unable to attain the highest thing of which we are capable and that we remain irredeemably deprived of self-love? One essential difference between human beings and other animals is that they are not reflective. They do not consider what to think of themselves, nor do they care about what they are. In other words, they do not take themselves seriously. We can take ourselves seriously, and often we do. So we are capable, unlike the animals, of being dissatisfied with ourselves.

But perhaps it is a good idea for us not to take ourselves too seriously. I will make the point, in closing, by telling you about a conversation I had a number of years ago, when I was teaching at Yale, with a secretary whose office was not far from mine. I did not really know her very well; but she was quite good looking, I was unmarried at the time, and one day we got to talking a bit more personally than usual. In the course of the conversation she told me that in her opinion the only two things that really matter in an intimate relationship are honesty and a sense of humor. Before I had a chance to respond to this, she evidently had some second thoughts, and she said: "You know, I'm not really all that sure about honesty. After all, even if they tell you the truth,
they change their minds so fast that you can’t count on them anyhow.”

So here is my advice. Suppose that you are just unable to be wholehearted. Suppose that you find it impossible to overcome your ambivalence, and that you simply cannot help vacillating back and forth. If it is clear that you will always have doubts about yourself, and never succeed in being fully satisfied with what you are—if true self-love is, for you, really out of the question—at least be sure to hang on to your sense of humor.