
Love and Solipsism

Rae Langton

1. Solipsism

The meditator peers through a window. He sees people in their hats and coats, and wonders if they may be machines. We pity the solipsist. Poor lad, how is he to defeat the goliath of scepticism, armed only with the slings and stones of an all too finite intellect? We admire his willingness to follow the argument wherever it might lead. But we can spare a thought for the people below, should the meditator leave his stove-heated room unconvinced by his counter-sceptical ruminations.

Suppose I were in fact the only person, in a world that looked just like our own. I would interact with things, but I would treat them as people. I would laugh at the worries expressed in that old book, attributed (falsely) to Descartes. I would laugh at the idea that the beings beneath the window, with their coats and hats, were mere machines. Solipsism would be true, and I would not believe it. I would reject solipsism, but my world would be, in a way, solipsistic. Imagine now the reverse. Suppose the world were crowded with people, but my attitude were solipsistic. I would interact with people, treating them as things. Solipsism would be false, and I would believe it true. I would accept solipsism, and my world would be, in a different way, solipsistic. If both worlds are solipsistic, then (in different senses) I am not socially interacting with people in either. Where I am alone, I am not interacting with people at all, but with things. Where I am surrounded by people, there is nothing social about my interactions, if I act as if I am alone.

Suppose Lois would love to meet Superman. She wins a competition, whose lucky winner will meet Superman. She puts on a funny helmet, she puts on a funny glove, and she meets Virtual Superman. She returns to work. 'So disappointing!' she says to her colleague. 'Too bad!' replies Clark. Has she met Superman? Yes and no, but mainly (I think) no. To meet Superman--to meet him properly--he has to *be* Superman (not Virtual Superman), and she has

to *treat* him as Superman (not as Clark). That provides a kind of analogue with solipsism. To avoid the solipsistic worlds, some of the beings with whom one interacts must *be* people (not things); and one must *treat* them as people (not as things). 'Treat' is here being used as a shorthand for a group of epistemic and practical attitudes which deserve more analysis (correction: *far* more analysis) than I give them here. The solipsist who fails to treat existing people as people adopts an attitude which has both epistemic and practical aspects. It manifests itself in a certain practical orientation, certain ways of acting, towards the beings around him; and if belief is a disposition, then there will be a conceptual connection between his person-denying behaviour, and his person-denying beliefs. Thus described my attitudinal solipsist is an uncomfortably vague and blurry figure. Is he the metaphysical solipsist, who believes he *is* the only person? Is he the epistemic solipsist, who believes he is the only *knowable* person? Is he the moral solipsist, who believes he is the only person who *matters*? Perhaps each of these in turn. I shall be more interested in the connections here than the divisions.

There can also be small, local solipsisms.

Sometimes there is a small, local version of the second world I described, the world of the attitudinal solipsist. Sometimes a person will, in a particular context, *treat some people as things*. What it is to treat a person as a thing depends on what a person is, and what a thing is, and this means that opinions about solipsism will be linked to opinions about persons and things. If a thing is a mere cog in the vast machine of nature, then one treats a person as a thing by treating her as if she were a mere cog in the vast machine of nature. If a thing is a mere body, then one treats a person as a thing by treating her as if she were a mere body. If a thing is a potential possession, then one treats a person as a thing by treating her as if she were something that could be possessed. If a thing is an item whose value is merely instrumental, then one treats a person as a thing by treating her as if she were an item whose value is merely instrumental. Philosophers often condemn this reduction of persons to things, this local solipsism. How they condemn it depends on the particularities of the case, and on their opinions about persons and things. Philosophers might say that such an attitude fails to treat the other person as an end in herself. Or they might say that it violates the autonomy of the other person. Or they might say that it objectifies the other person. They say that something goes wrong morally, and also (perhaps) epistemically, when people are treated as less than human.

Sometimes there is a small, local version of the first world I described, a solipsistic world that is peopled by phantoms. Sometimes a solitary person will *treat some things as people*. A young child sings gently to her doll, sleep my little one sleep. A farmer raises his eyes to streaming thunderclouds, and whispers thank you. A mother pleads before a painting of a woman in blue. A teenager writhes in solitary sexual ecstasy, murmurs to her pillow, oh my darling. But a pillow is nobody's darling. There is no lady in blue to hear any

plea. There is no one to thank for the rain. A doll cannot sleep, or wake. Each person in these examples is alone. There are differences between them, of course: some believe they direct their actions towards someone, and others simply make believe. But the examples illustrate the way that human beings, adults and children alike, have a striking capacity to glean real joy and comfort from merely imagined relations with merely imagined people.

These local solipsisms tend to be thought praiseworthy at best, and at worst harmless--though Kant is something of an exception. Like moralists of past times (and some present) he has something hostile to say about the sexual example. He says that sexual desire is 'unnatural' when a person 'is aroused to it, not by its real object, but by his imagination of this object, and so in a way contrary to the purpose of the desire, since he himself creates its object'. But the charge of unnaturalness betrays a hostility that is ill-founded by Kantian lights, as he himself seems uneasily to acknowledge. The important question, for Kant, should not be about the naturalness of an action, but about the implications it has for people.¹

Sexual solipsisms are among the most local of all, and they can come in either variety: a sexual solipsist can be someone whose sexual partner is a thing, which he in some sense treats as a human being; or a human being, which he in some sense treats as a thing. The first sexual solipsist may treat a thing as a human being in some ways, and not in others: he may attribute to a thing some human properties, and not others. The first solipsist takes as sexual partner a thing, which he treats as a human being, but he may do so in ways that fall short of treating it as a *person*. Perhaps the thing is a piece of paper, perhaps it is a doll, perhaps it is the electronically created virtual being imagined by Jeanette Winterson:

If you like, you may live in a computer-created world all day and all night. You will be able to try out a Virtual life with a Virtual lover. You can go into your Virtual house and do Virtual housework, add a baby or two, even find out if you'd rather be gay. Or single. Or straight. Why hesitate when you could simulate?

And sex? Certainly. Teledildonics is the word. You will be able to plug in your telepresence to the billion-bundle network of fibre optics criss-crossing the

1. In this paper I draw on Kant's *Doctrine of Virtue* (1797) in the translation by Mary Gregor (Harper and Row, 1964), Vol. VI in the Academy edition; and on his *Lectures on Ethics* (1775-1780) in the translation by Louis Infield (London: Methuen, 1930), from the notes made by Brauer, Kutzner and Mrongovius, edited by Paul Mentzer. These two works are abbreviated *DV* and *LE* respectively. The passage quoted in this paragraph is at *DV* 87-88. The signs of unease: 'it is not so easy to produce the rational proof that the unnatural...use of one's sexual power is a violation of duty to oneself' (*DV* 88). Kant then goes on to say that such a use is incompatible with reverence for humanity in one's own person.

world and join your partner in Virtuality. Your real selves will be wearing body suits made up of thousands of tiny tactile detectors per square inch. Courtesy of the fibre optic network these will receive and transmit touch. The Virtual epidermis will be as sensitive as your own outer layer of skin.

For myself, unreconstructed as I am, I'd rather hold you in my arms....Luddite? No, I don't want to smash the machines but neither do I want the machines to smash me.²

Here we have it all: a housework machine, a baby machine, a love machine. What more could one want? The fantastical imaginings of philosophers--experience machines, brains in vats--may be closer to reality than they have been in the past. Perhaps such imaginings are about to make a transition from thought experiments to experiments in living. Like Winterson's unnamed narrator, we can live in hope that we shall not be smashed.

These solipsisms--global, local and sexual--are also the topic of this essay's companion piece, 'Sexual Solipsism'.³ There I discuss in more detail the solipsism of treating things as people, the animation of things, in which some human qualities are projected, seriously or otherwise, on to things that lack them. And there is a focus on the sexual version of this solipsism, hinted at in Kant's description of a sexual desire that is aroused 'not by its real object', and hinted at in Winterson's description of virtual sex. This solipsism is a theme of some feminist thinking about pornography: it is sometimes said that in pornography, things are treated as women. Catherine MacKinnon, for example, says that the use of pornography is 'sex between people and things, human beings and pieces of paper, real men and unreal women'.⁴ But the opposite solipsism is a more common theme of feminist thinking about pornography, which is that in pornography women are treated as things, women are objectified. And one question pursued in this essay's companion piece concerns the connection, if any, between these apparently different, even contradictory, feminist ideas about sexual solipsism in pornography.

Both essays focus on a solipsism in sexual love, and what Kant had to say about it. Kant said, with apparently extravagant pessimism, that 'sexual love makes of the loved person an object of appetite', and that thereby a 'person becomes a thing and can be treated and used as such' (*LE* 163). Each essay explores a different interpretation of what Kant might mean. But both essays

2. Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992) pp. 97-8. Winterson here imagines two real lovers having sex across the network, but the telepresence could be entirely fictional.

3. 'Sexual Solipsism', *Philosophical Topics* vol. 23, no. 2 (Fall 1995), pp. 181-219.

4. Catherine MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) p. 109.

also focus on a possible *escape* from solipsism, and what Kant had to say about it. And that is my topic now.

2. Escape

My world is solipsistic if I am alone, interacting with things, but treating them as people. My world is also solipsistic if I interact with people, treating them as things. How one is to escape these worlds is a matter of philosophical debate. One pursues the path of virtue, perhaps. One finds a reply to the sceptic. In practice however, an effective remedy for (and proof against?) both worlds is to be found in love and friendship. One cannot believe of a friend that he does not exist, cannot be known, does not matter. If he is a friend, then evidently he does exist, he is known, and he does matter. It is true that some of the functions of a friend may, with luck, be performed by beings that are not people: a doll, a teddy bear, a fictional construct of some religious practice. A hymn may tell us what a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. But the need for a hymn points to the slenderness of the friendship. We do not need songs to tell us who our real friends are. There are limits on the extent to which the functions of a friend may be performed by beings that are not people—limits that are placed by nature. An imaginary friend is a friend in the way that fool's gold is gold. Fool's gold may be *believed* to be gold. But there are limits on the extent to which the functions of a friend may be *believed* to be performed by beings that are not people—limits that are placed by reason. There are limits on the extent to which people can treat things as people when it comes to treating things as friends. An imaginary friend is not believed to be a friend, without the assistance of self-deception—or so I suspect. If so, an imaginary friend is even less like a friend, than fool's gold is like gold.⁵

The idea that friendship provides escape from solipsism is to be found, I think, in Kant. He says that friendship provides release from the 'prison' of the self. The man without a friend is the man who is all alone, who 'must shut himself up in himself', who must remain 'completely alone with his thoughts as in a prison' (DV 144). Kant says that each person has a duty to seek out friendship, and escape from the prison. Each of us has a duty 'not to isolate ourselves' (DV 145). It is a duty both to ourselves and to others, and Kant suggests that it is partly implied by our own self-love. We must love ourselves, but according to Kant, 'self-love cannot be divorced from our need of being loved by others (i.e. of receiving help from them when we are in need)'. In loving ourselves we desire that others will love us, and that they will desire to make our ends theirs. This imposes a duty on us to love others as we love ourselves,

5. Thanks to Roger Lamb for comments helping to clarify this.

and to make their ends ours (DV 53, 118) There is a suggestion here that we cannot exercise even the self-regarding virtues unless we are part of a moral community of people, among whom there are some who love us, and are loved by us in return. In friendship the reciprocity characteristic of moral relations in general is present with a unique intensity: friendship is 'the maximum reciprocity of love' (LE 202); it is an 'intimate union of love and respect', an ideal of 'emotional and practical concern' for another's welfare (DV 140).

Friendship is a matter of doing, and feeling, and also knowing: it has aspects that are both practical and epistemic. Friends do things together, act in ways that bring joy to each other; but this is possible only if each (partly) knows the mind of the other. In friendship one must exercise an active power of sympathy, a capacity that is no sentimental susceptibility to joy or sadness, but a communion that is practical in its orientation, providing a way to 'participate actively in the fate of others' (DV 126). Friendship is a duty to know another person, and to allow oneself to be known. The need to 'unburden our heart' is a basic human need, and in order that

this release may be achieved, each of us needs a friend, one in whom we can confide unreservedly, to whom we can disclose completely all our dispositions and judgments, from whom we can and need hide nothing, to whom we can communicate our whole self. (LE 205-6)

In friendship at its best, there will be a 'complete confidence of two persons in revealing their secret thoughts and feelings to each other' (DV 143).

In allowing oneself to be known by another, one is able better to know oneself, and thereby to fulfil the first of the duties to oneself. Kant describes the Socratic injunction to 'know thyself' as the first command, despite the fact that one can never fully fathom the 'depths and abyss of one's heart' (DV 107). Kant's chief interest in the matter of self-knowledge is in knowledge of one's own motives and character. And he suggests that friends can help one to obey the Socratic injunction by providing scope for communication and correction. The process of putting thoughts into communicative words enables us better to learn what we think and feel and desire. Kant might well have said of the communication of friends what he in fact said of prayer, namely that it is

necessary for our own sakes....To grasp and comprehend his concepts a person must clothe them in words. (LE 98-9, emphasis added)

One's own thoughts are but dimly grasped and comprehended unless one has the opportunity to clothe them in words, and communicate them to another. Even Descartes' attempt to grasp the possibility of solipsism is clothed in words and addressed to a reader. Besides communication there is also correction. When we 'clothe our concepts in words' in the process of unburdening our heart to a friend, our judgments about ourselves and our motives are as fallible and in

need of correction as our judgments about anything else, and more vulnerable to self-deception. Kant says that 'self-revelation' in friendship is 'a human necessity for the correction of our judgments'.

To have a friend whom we know to be frank and loving, neither false nor spiteful, is to have one who will help us to correct our judgment when it is mistaken. (LE 206)

To have a friend is to have someone who enables you to escape from the prison of the self: someone whom you can know, someone to whom you can make yourself known, someone who will help you better to know yourself, someone who will help you to be good, someone who will bring you happiness.

A friend thus brings a vast number of benefits, prudential, moral, and epistemic. But none of these self-regarding benefits can be the point of the friendship. The point always involves reciprocity: mutual knowledge, mutual sharing of activity, mutual love and respect. Christine Korsgaard draws attention to the metaphors of self-surrender and retrieval in Kant's discussion of reciprocity in friendship. Kant says,

If I am to love [my friend] as I love myself, I must be sure that he will love me as he loves himself, in which case he restores to me that with which I part and I come back to myself again....Assume that I choose only friendship, and that I care only for my friend's happiness in the hope that he cares for mine. Our love is mutual; there is complete restoration. I, from generosity, look after his happiness and he similarly looks after mine; I do not throw away my happiness, but surrender it to his keeping, and he in turn surrenders his into my hands. (LE 202-3)

This is an ideal of friendship, which is never to be encountered in this perfect form, according to Kant, for 'in practical life such things do not occur'. But ordinary friendships aspire to this ideal, and approximate it to a greater or lesser degree. There is an element of risk. I care for my friend's happiness in the hope that he cares for mine. I trust my friend to keep my confidence, and expect him to place a similar trust in me. This is hope and trust, and not a bargain.

If friendship can provide an effective escape from solipsism, can love--erotic love--provide the same? Kant sometimes sees erotic love and friendship as alike in their power to unlock the prison of the self, their power to create a communion, an 'intimate union of love and respect'. Kant sometimes seems to say that erotic love, like friendship, can be moral love.

Love, whether it is for one's spouse or for a friend...wants to communicate itself completely, and it expects of its respondent a similar sharing of heart, unweakened by distrustful reticence.

Whether it is for one's spouse or for a friend, love presupposes the same mutual respect for the other's character.⁶

Kant writes this in a letter to Maria von Herbert, a young woman who believes she has been abandoned by a 'friend'. The status of the 'friendship' is at first unclear, but Kant says in his reply that, for the purpose of his moral advice, 'it makes no significant difference', since the same mutual honesty and mutual respect is characteristic of love, 'whether it is for one's spouse or for a friend'. If Kant is right in his letter to Maria, then love can be a particular kind of friendship, with the network of benefits, virtues, and duties that this implies. Korsgaard points out that Kant uses the very same metaphors of self-surrender and retrieval in describing the reciprocity of sexual love. Of friendship, Kant writes, if I love my friend 'as I love myself', and he loves me 'as he loves himself', 'he restores to me that with which I part and I come back to myself again' (LE 202). Of sexual love, Kant writes, 'if I yield myself completely to another and obtain the person of the other in return, I win myself back' (LE 167). The friendship does not leave everything as it was, so Christine Korsgaard suggests: one is restored to oneself, but one is also transformed.⁷

If love and friendship are alike, then love, like friendship, will be a matter of doing, and feeling, and knowing. Lovers, like friends, will show 'emotional and practical concern' for another's welfare, they will do things together, act in ways that bring joy to each other. Each will want to know the other, and to allow himself, herself to be known. Each will exercise an active power of sympathy towards one another, a communion that is practical in its orientation, that provides a way to 'participate actively in the fate of others' (DV 126). If Kant is right, then love, like friendship, will also provide that scope for communication and correction which enables one better to know oneself. It involves the same trust--the 'complete confidence of two persons in revealing

6. Kant's letter to Maria von Herbert of Spring 1792. See *Kant: Philosophical Correspondence*, tr. Arnulf Zweig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967). I have adapted the translation. The letter appears in the Academy edition of Kant's works in Vol. XI, p. 331. In the text the point about mutual respect comes before the point about communication. This passage is also discussed in 'Sexual Solipsism', and in my paper 'Duty and Desolation', *Philosophy* 67 1992, pp. 481-505, whose subject is the correspondence between Kant and Maria von Herbert.

7. My understanding of Kant's views about friendship owes a great debt to Christine Korsgaard's work in 'Creating the Kingdom of Ends: Responsibility and Reciprocity in Personal Relations', *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 *Ethics*, 1992, pp. 305-332. Korsgaard sees in this aspect of Kant a possibility of answering that feminist critique of Kant which alleges that he makes the self independent of personal relations (p. 328, n15). As will be evident to the reader, I am sympathetic to Korsgaard's defense of Kant on this issue.

their secret thoughts and feelings to each other' (*DV* 143). If Kant is right in his letter to Herbert, then a lover can also be a

friend...in whom we can confide unreservedly, and to whom we can disclose completely all our dispositions and judgments, from whom we can and need hide nothing, to whom we can communicate our whole self. (*LE* 205-6)

3. Desire

Kant goes too far (by his own lights, as we shall see) if he says that it 'makes no difference' whether the relationship he considers is one of love or friendship. Sexual love brings with it an entirely new constellation of emotions, among which is a sheer delight in the body of another person which sets it apart from friendship. We can find little acknowledgement of this dimension of love in Kant's own writings. But there are vivid descriptions of it by countless novelists and poets, one of whom contributed to a very old book for which Kant had at least some respect.⁸ The Biblical poem describes a dialogue of call and response between two lovers, and a few lines are enough to capture the difference in the mood.

'Thou hast ravished my heart, my spouse,
how fair is thy love!
Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb,
honey and milk are under thy tongue.
A garden inclosed is my spouse,
an orchard of pomegranates with pleasant fruits,
camphire with spikenard, spikenard and saffron,
calamus and cinnamon, myrrh and aloe,
a fountain of gardens,
a well of living waters.'

'Awake, O north wind, and come thou south;
blow upon my garden,
that the spices thereof may flow out.
Let my beloved come into his garden,
and eat his pleasant fruits.
Drink, yea, drink abundantly,
O beloved.'⁹

8. Kant often refers favourably to the Bible; some (random) examples from the works considered here are at *DV* 63, 95, 113, 130; *LE* 10, 100, 108, 114. But I don't mean to suggest he would approve of this particular biblical poem.

9. *The Song of Solomon*, Ch.4: 9-16, Ch. 5: 1 (from the King James version of the Bible). The Song is supposed to have been written by King Solomon in 1014 B.C, but
...continuing...

A gulf of three thousand years divides this poem from ourselves, and yet there is no mistaking the phenomenon it depicts. Readers who suspect a certain metaphorical intent may be pleased to learn that the poem's more recent editors suspect one too. Then again, they may not. Cautious subtitles, in my edition, inform the reader of the true and hidden meaning of these verses: 'Christ setteth forth the graces of the church', and 'the church prayeth to be made fit for his presence'. The news is theologically intriguing but hardly necessary--unless one needs an excuse for erotica in church. This garden of earthly delights, this oasis in the desert, stands for a union that is more familiar, and at least somewhat less mysterious. The captive heart, the driving hunger for which ordinary hunger and thirst provide faint metaphors, the delight in the body, all of these set sexual love well apart from any theological simulacrum, and set it apart from the 'intimate union' of friendship of which Kant spoke.

These features of love make Kant suspicious. Although his letter to Maria expressed a cautious optimism about sexual love, seeing it as a relation of communication and respect, such moments of optimism are rare. There is also the pessimism I alluded to earlier. Kant tends to think that any virtues to be found in sexual love exist in spite of, not because of, sexual desire. Perhaps this is not entirely surprising. We can anticipate that a rationalistic Kant will be wary of love's delusions, its blind and reckless passions. And so he is. A lover is a wishful thinker, who is quite blind to faults in the beloved. Kant warns against the perils of romantic love.¹⁰ But Kant's concerns are at once more basic, and more complicated, than this.

The sexual impulse, he says,

...is an appetite for another human being...Human love is good will, affection, promoting the happiness of others and finding joy in their happiness. But it is clear that when a person loves another purely from sexual desire, none of these factors enter into the love. Far from there being any concern for the happiness of the loved one, the lover, in order to satisfy his desire and still his appetite, may even plunge the loved one into the depths of misery. Sexual love makes of

later critics have dated it to the 3rd or 4th century B.C. See the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. Margaret Drabble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). The passage has been compressed, and I am responsible for the (doubtless inauthentic) arrangement in lines. I attribute the last two lines quoted to the woman, but that is open to interpretation.

10. The wishful thinking of lovers is discussed in DV 94; Kant warns against the perils of romantic love in a letter to Elizabeth Motherby, February 11th 1793, citing Maria von Herbert as a cautionary example. The letter is discussed in 'Duty and Desolation'.

the loved person an object of appetite; as soon as that appetite has been stilled, the person is cast aside as one casts away a lemon which has been sucked dry. (LE 163)

A bleaker view of sexual love is hard to imagine. Sexual love is not really 'human' love at all--except in the sense that one might be prepared to describe the appetite of a cannibal as a love of human beings. Sexual love makes of the beloved an 'object of appetite'. The beloved is consumed by it, sucked dry, reduced to an empty rind, and cast by the wayside. The lover is, in the end, alone, the appetite stilled, a sour taste in the mouth.

Sexual love is said to make of the loved person an 'object of appetite': but what does that mean? Given the moral character of Kant's evident dismay, he appears to mean that in sexual love, or in merely sexual love, one treats people as things. Sexual love is not a remedy for solipsism at all, but forces solipsism upon us. Looking at passages like these, it can be hard to see how Kant imagines that sexual love is even compatible with the moral relations of friendship. That is why I said he goes too far *by his own lights*, if he suggests it 'makes no significant difference' whether a relationship is one of friendship or erotic love. His harsh words are modified, to be sure, by an attempt to allow their compatibility:

Sexual love can, of course, be combined with human love and so carry with it the characteristics of the latter, but taken by itself and for itself, it is nothing more than appetite. (LE 163)

In a comparable passage he allows that, while sexual passion 'really has nothing in common with moral love', it can nevertheless 'enter into close union with it *under the limiting conditions of practical reason*' (DV 90). This uneasy grafting of antagonistic attitudes falls short of the love described in his letter, whose core is affection and respect--but it does show Kant thinks there are solutions to any problems posed by the character of sexual desire. And perhaps it is no surprise that his solution has a familiar and prosaic face: 'the limiting conditions of practical reason' turn out to be those of marriage (LE 167).

While there may be room to doubt this particular verdict, there is no room to doubt that Kant is acutely suspicious of sexual desire, or at any rate, of its common pathologies. It is worth asking why. And in what follows, I look at three ways to understand Kant's idea that a person might be made an *object of appetite*. The first is innocent, and gives no cause for moral alarm. The second (suggested by Barbara Herman) *would* give some cause for moral alarm, and so too would the third suggested by Korsgaard, but for a different reason. In the final section of the paper I take up Korsgaard's interpretation, which describes an attitude that has, I think, been accurately mapped by Proust. It is an attitude which appears, at first, to have something in common with friendship, but it

becomes in the end the solipsism of someone alone, shut up in himself, as in a prison.

4. Three ways to read 'object'

Kant's reference to an 'object of appetite' is not very clear. Although the concept of an object is in many ways central to his moral philosophy, there are different ways to understand it. If sexual love makes of the loved person an 'object' in the sense of making her thing-like, less than human, then it will be incompatible with Kant's moral principles. But 'object' is not always a pejorative, not always a red flag to be waved before some moralizing bull. It has a role in talk about *intentional* attitudes, which is morally neutral: it refers to what Kant elsewhere calls an accusative of thought--an intentional object. When, in the biblical poem, the woman thinks of her lover, he is the object of her thoughts: her thoughts are directed towards him. She thinks that his eyes are like jewels, that his mouth is most sweet, that he is altogether lovely. She thinks about him and says to herself: 'his desire is toward me'.¹¹ He is the object of her thoughts, her thoughts are toward him; she is the object of his desire, his desire is toward her. In this usage, one is never an 'object' *simpli-citer*, but 'an object of ___', where the blank is a place-holder for some intentional attitude: one can be an object of someone's thought, or respect, or knowledge, or devotion, or loathing--or desire. One can evidently be made an object of someone's intentional attitude without thereby being made an object in some pernicious sense. To make a person an object in this merely intentional sense is not to adopt a solipsism. On the contrary, one escapes epistemic solipsism only by making another person the object of one's knowledge; one escapes moral solipsism only by making another person the object of one's respect and love.¹² We therefore have a *duty* to make persons into objects, in these ways. Why then Kant's moral dismay at the prospect that sexual love 'makes of the

11. *Song* 5: 12, his eyes are 'fitly set', i.e. 'set as a precious stone in the foil of a ring' according to the analytical notes on the Hebrew in my edition; 5: 16; 7: 10, emphasis added.

12. This is something I also discuss in 'Sexual Solipsism'. It seems to me that the intentional sense and a morally pernicious sense of 'object' may be conflated by some phenomenologists, such as Sartre, when they say that consciousness inevitably makes an 'object' of the other, and that a tendency to oppressive social relations is thus located in the structure of consciousness itself. Perhaps there is another version of this in Luce Irigaray, who seems to locate oppressive social relations (partly) in the *grammatical* category of a direct object, and would therefore like to avoid it, hence her title, *I love to you* (London: Routledge, 1995).

loved person an object' of some intentional attitude? As a moral claim, it looks like a punning *non sequitur*--unless there is something special and pathological about making someone an object of the particular intentional attitude (or attitudes) in question, of sexual desire.

Kant's claim that sexual love can make people into objects finds a modern incarnation in feminist claims that sexual relations, in conditions of oppression, objectify women. This reminds us of a second way to read the notion of an object. Perhaps when Kant says that sexual love makes a person into an object, he means that it objectifies a person, reduces a person to a thing. What this means exactly is also open to debate: but in the Kantian context it will have some of the dimensions I described before. To be a thing, or an object, is to be a determined cog in the machine of nature; or it is to be merely a body; or it is to be something that can be possessed; or it is to be something whose value is merely instrumental. To make a person an object is to reduce her to a thing, in any of these ways. Barbara Herman has drawn attention to the common ground between Kant's views and those of such feminists as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, and these aspects of the notion of an object have surely all had a role to play in feminist analysis of oppression.¹³ Herman shows us the following passages from Kant.

Taken by itself [sexual love] is a degradation of human nature; for as soon as a person becomes an object of appetite for another, all motives of moral relationship cease to function, because as an object of appetite for another a person becomes a thing and can be treated and used as such by every one.

Because sexuality is not an inclination which one human being has for another as such, but is an inclination for the sex of the other, it is a principle of the degradation of human nature....That [the woman] is a human being is of no concern to the man; only her sex is the object of his desires. Human nature is thus subordinated. Hence it comes that all men and women do their best to make not their human nature but their sex more alluring and direct their activities and lusts entirely towards sex. Human nature is thereby sacrificed to sex. (LE 163-4)

Here we have a clear expression of Kant's idea: sexual love does not merely make the beloved the object of some intentional attitude, but in sexual love 'a

13. Barbara Herman, 'Could It Be Worth Thinking about Kant on Sex and Marriage?', in *A Mind Of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, ed. Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993). I do not do justice to Herman's interesting paper here. Herman finds in Kant's argument for the apparently conservative solution about marriage a potential feminist argument for legal institutions to provide solutions to problems in 'private' sexual relations: one possible legal solution being anti-pornography legislation.

person becomes a *thing*', where the concept of a thing is explicitly contrasted to that of a person or a human being. Herman compares these Kantian thoughts to the following, from the writings of Andrea Dworkin.

There is a deep recognition in culture and in experience that intercourse is both the normal use of a woman...and a violative abuse, her privacy irredeemably compromised, her selfhood changed in a way that is irrevocable.

It is especially in the acceptance of the object status that her humanity is hurt; it is a metaphysical acceptance of lower status in sex and in society; an implicit acceptance of less freedom, less privacy, less integrity...a political collaboration with his dominance...[In intercourse] he confirms for himself and for her what she is; that she is something, not someone; certainly not someone equal.¹⁴

Herman points out the common thread in these bleak writings: that sexual relations, or at least heterosexual relations, somehow turn women into objects--that they are, as Herman puts it, 'not compatible with the standing of the partners as equal human beings'. Kant does seem to acknowledge that sexual relations pose a special problem for women, but he is not much concerned with the objectification of women in particular. The human nature of men and women alike is, he says, 'sacrificed to sex'. While the burden of objectification has doubtless fallen chiefly on women, there is something right, I think, in Kant's gender-neutral talk, something right in the suggestion that any human being can objectify another, given the appropriate context and the power. So without ignoring the fact of gender, we can try here to explore the issue in the way that Kant presents it: as a question about what it might be for one human being to make another an object. And the literature we consider is not, in any case, one from which easy conclusions about gender can be drawn.¹⁵

The problem with sexual desire, on Herman's understanding of Kant, is that it is directed towards a person not *qua* person, but *qua* thing. Kant says that when a man desires a woman, the fact 'that she is a human being is of no concern to the man; only her sex is the object of his desires' (LE 164). She is a human being, a rational creature, with desires and plans of her own, an active capacity for sympathy and friendship, a capacity for grasping the moral law and

14. Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Free Press, 1987), pp. 122-3, 140-1.

15. The narrator of Winterson's beautiful novel is not only nameless, but of a gender that is left unknown to the reader, while the author herself is lesbian. Albertine in Proust's novel is a woman, but an ambiguity is introduced when one knows that the novel is largely autobiographical, that the author is homosexual, and that the relationship with Albertine is partly based on a relationship with a man. In contrast to the relatively gender-neutral discussion of solipsism in this essay, its companion, 'Sexual Solipsism', explores feminist aspects of the theme.

conforming her actions to it: but none of that, says Kant, is relevant to the man who desires her. Only her sex, only her eroticized body, is the object of his desires. And he presumably supposes that the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, when a woman desires a man.

If Herman's interpretation is right, there is obviously truth in what Kant says. Love is indeed 'written on the body', to borrow Winterson's phrase, and the biblical poem provides as good an example as any. The poet is entranced by the body of the woman he loves. She is fair as the moon, clear as the sun, terrible as an army with banners. The joints of her thighs are as jewels, her belly as wheat set about with lilies, her breasts as clusters of the vine. And, in the poem, she returns the compliments. She says that her beloved is the chiefest of ten thousand, his eyes are as the eyes of doves, his lips as lilies, his belly as bright ivory.¹⁶ Imagine if she were to say instead that her beloved is the most rational of ten thousand, that his intellect is as the morning sun, and as a precious jewel his capacity for autonomous choice. Thud. The song would not, let's face it, be the same. The biblical love song does not speak of autonomy, freedom, capacity for rational choice, moral agency. What love song would? Each lover talks instead about the unique beauty of the body of the beloved.

It could be that Kant is imagining a prospect that is more reductive than this, when he says 'only her sex is the object of his desires'. He may be thinking, more pessimistically, that sexual desire is entirely impersonal, even genital in its interest--that it is of the kind expressed today in some pornography, and in some novels, where a woman is described by the narrator as a sexual 'automaton', whose body is gratifyingly 'anonymous', 'marvellously impersonal', a kind of sexual experience machine.¹⁷

But whether the body is viewed as an object of unique aesthetic delight, or as an anonymous instrument, it is still, on Herman's interpretation of Kant, a body that is the object of sexual desire. So what? one might ask. Any philosopher who has qualms about this must be both a puritan, and a metaphysical fantasist, who imagines that bodies have nothing to do with people, that bodies

16. These descriptions are from *Song*, chapters 5, 6 and 7.

17. Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn* (New York: Grove Press 1961) pp. 181, 82. See Kate Millett's excellent discussion of Miller's inanities in *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970). Especially interesting is the comparison of Miller with D.H. Lawrence. Note that when Kant says 'only her sex is desired', what he says is ambiguous in various ways, some of which I do not discuss. He may mean, as I have suggested, following Herman, that only her (sexed) body is desired; or he may mean that she is desired only *qua* member of a particular gender, not in so far as she is a person, and to that extent there is the suggestion that any other woman would do just as well. This is noted by Korsgaard, who acknowledges the passage that Herman cites, and says it spoils the interest of Kant's point. ('Creating the Kingdom', p. 327 n11)

are irrelevant to real people, that a person is a pure, transcendent being, a *noumenal* being let us say, who exists beyond the messy world of bodies. This, one might conclude, must surely be the philosophical source of Kant's old-fashioned angst. Not at all, or at any rate, not exactly. It must be admitted that Kant has a heavy puritanical streak. No-one who reads Kant's work on sexuality could seriously deny it, and to that extent the work of Korsgaard and Herman (and myself) is bound to be at least partly reconstructive. However, the puritanical streak is not the essence, and his view about bodies has something to recommend it.

On Kant's view human beings are partly *constituted* by our bodies:

...our life is entirely conditioned by our body, so that we cannot conceive of a life not mediated by the body and we cannot make use of our freedom except through the body. It is therefore obvious that the body constitutes a part of ourselves (LE 147-8)

Kant's moral concerns about sexual desire do not flow from a Platonic hostility or blindness to human embodiment, but from an acute awareness of it. Since a human being is partly constituted by her body, the surrender of one's body is a surrender of one's own person. Puritan or no, Kant is not, at least here, a metaphysical fantasist.

There is a third way to read the notion of an object. A different interpretation of Kant's claim that sexual desire makes a person into an object of appetite has been suggested by Korsgaard. What is wrong with sexual desire is that it is directed towards a person *qua* person: that from the outset it takes, not a body, but a person as its intentional object. There is some plausibility in what she suggests. Consider what Kant says:

Amongst our inclinations there is one which is directed towards other human beings. *They themselves*, and not their work and services, are its objects of enjoyment...There is an inclination which we may call an appetite for enjoying another human being. We refer to sexual impulse. Man can, of course, use another human being as an instrument for his service; he can use his hands, his feet, and even all his powers; he can use him for his own purposes with the other's consent. But there is no way in which a human being can be made an object of indulgence for another except through sexual impulse...it is an appetite for another human being. (LE 162-3, emphasis added)

Sexual inclination is...not merely a pleasure of the senses...It is rather pleasure from the use of another person...[it has] nothing in common with moral love. (DV 90)

Sexual desire is directed not towards a body, but towards a person in his or her entirety. 'They themselves', and not their services, or their body, are its objects of enjoyment. Korsgaard suggests that what troubles Kant is the idea that sexual love demands that the beloved put not simply her body but her entire self

at the lover's disposal. 'Viewed through the eyes of sexual desire another person is seen as something wantable, desirable, and, therefore, inevitably, possessable. To yield to that desire, to the extent it is really that desire you yield to, is to allow yourself to be possessed.'¹⁸ Kant says that 'a person cannot be a property': to allow oneself to be possessed would be to allow oneself to become a thing (LE 165).

Of these three ways to read the notion of object in Kant's remark, the last two give grounds for moral suspicion. We have two moral interpretations of Kant's claim that sexual love 'makes of the loved person an object of appetite'. On Herman's reading, sexual love can make of the loved person an object, by viewing her as a mere body: *something*, not *someone* (to borrow Dworkin's phrase), and something to be used and possessed. On Korsgaard's reading, sexual love does not make of the loved person a mere body. It is directed towards a person in her entirety, viewing her therefore as *someone*, not *something*, but nevertheless *someone* to be used and possessed. Must we choose between these two readings? And what plausibility does either of them have as a story about the reality of sexual life, or some aspect of that reality?

Perhaps we could bring the two readings together by distinguishing opaque and transparent versions of Kant's claim. Kant thinks that the extensional object of sexual desire is in fact a person, and on this (transparent) reading Korsgaard is right; but the desire is for that person *qua* body, and on this (opaque) reading Herman is right. Sexual desire is a hunger for a (person's) body. When Kant says, in the passage crucial to Korsgaard's interpretation, that '*human beings.... themselves*, and not their work and services' are the objects of sexual desire, what he says is ambiguous between the opaque and the transparent readings--and compatible with Herman's interpretation if we take the opaque. The earlier point about bodily constitution is relevant here. Perhaps the idea is that sexual desire takes just a body as its intentional object (as Herman suggests), but since the body partly *constitutes* the person, one cannot surrender one's body without in fact surrendering one's self. Kant says that

The body is part of the self; in its togetherness with the self it constitutes the person....But the person who surrenders [only for the satisfaction of sexual desire] is used as a thing; the desire is still directed only towards sex and not towards the person as a human being. But it is obvious that to surrender part of oneself is to surrender the whole, because a human being is a unity. (LE 166)

On this interpretation, Korsgaard would be partly right: she would be right to say that, on Kant's view, sexual love demands that the beloved put not simply her body but her entire self at the lover's disposal. But Korsgaard would be partly wrong. Sexual love demands that the beloved put her entire self at the

18. 'Creating the Kingdom', p. 310.

lover's disposal, not because the lover desires the person *qua person* (as Korsgaard suggested)--but rather because of the *essentially embodied* nature of the person desired. The demand stems not from the (intentional) content of the desire, but from the (extensional) nature of the one desired. On this compromise interpretation, Herman is right, and Korsgaard partly right, partly wrong. However, since Korsgaard, like Herman, is actually aiming to describe the *intentional* content of sexual desire, on Kant's view--that it is a desire for a person *qua person*--the attempted compromise fails to do her justice.¹⁹

A different path to compromise might be to say that Kant holds both views about the intentional content of sexual desire, and that they apply to different kinds of sexual desire, both morally suspect. Perhaps he did not distinguish them very clearly. Perhaps sexual desire can sometimes be a desire for a person *qua* body, a *reductive* desire; and perhaps it can be a desire for a person *qua* person, but what we can call an *invasive* desire. I am not sure whether this is what Kant means: to take this path is admittedly to retreat from the universalizing aspect of Kant's remarks, the appearance he gives of wanting to describe the inevitable character of sexual desire. But his remarks are plausible, as descriptions of some (possibly common) pathologies. It is true that sexual love can sometimes focus on the body of a person, in a way that is reductive; and it is true that sexual love can sometimes focus on a person as a whole, in a way that is invasive. Each of these two ideas is worth pursuing in its own terms. I find the seeds of each of the two ideas in Herman and Korsgaard, respectively, but I shall develop them in ways that they may or may not endorse. I address the first idea, the reductive desire discussed by Herman, in the companion piece to this essay.²⁰ In what follows I address the second. My aim is very limited. It is to consider what such an invasive desire might look like, and whether Kant's moral dismay would be well-founded, if the desire did, indeed, look like this.

5. Invasive Desire

The 'appetite for a human being' which Kant describes might be, as Korsgaard suggests, a desire which takes as its intentional object a person in his

19. Thanks to Roger Lamb for helping me to get a little clearer on this possible compromise.

20. 'Sexual Solipsism'.

or her entirety. As she says, it is likely to be 'more of a problem about sexual love than about casual sexual encounters'.²¹

Proust describes a desire that seems to have just this character. His hero, Marcel, has been watching Albertine, of whom he as yet knows nothing, and with whom he is in love, and he reflects on his desire.

For an instant...I caught her smiling, sidelong glance, aimed from the centre of that inhuman world...an inaccessible, unknown world...If she had seen me, what could I have represented to her? From the depths of what universe did she discern me? It would have been as difficult for me to say as it would be, when certain features of a neighbouring planet appear to us thanks to the telescope, to conclude from those that human beings live there, that they can see us, and to guess what ideas the sight of us can have aroused in them.

If we thought that the eyes of such a girl were merely two glittering sequins of mica, we would not thirst to know her and to unite her life to ours. But we sense that what shines in those reflecting discs is not due solely to their material composition; it is, unknown to us, the dark shadows of the ideas that being cherishes about the people and places she knows. It is she, with her desires, her sympathies, her revulsions, her obscure and incessant will. I knew that I should never possess [her] if I did not possess also what was in her eyes. And it was consequently her whole life that filled me with desire; a painful desire because I felt it was impossible to fulfil, but exhilarating, like the burning thirst of a parched land--a thirst for a life which my soul, because it had never until now received one drop of it, would absorb all the more greedily, in long draughts. (I 851-2/793-5)²²

The biblical poet saw his beloved as a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters. One lover called out to the other, 'Drink, yea drink abundantly, o

21. What I am taking from Korsgaard is the idea that sexual desire may take as its object a person in his or her entirety. The Proustian interpretation I give this, however, goes beyond what Korsgaard says, and may be in some conflict with it. She takes the idea to involve a kind of *aesthetic* appreciation of a person, an idea which I do not take up here, despite its manifest interest. See Korsgaard's 'Creating the Kingdom', p. 310, 327 n12. The quotation is from n13.

22. *Remembrance of Things Past*, translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981); *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Gallimard, 1954). References are to the page numbers in the translation, followed by the page numbers in the Gallimard edition. The translations given are usually very close to Moncrieff/Kilmartin, although they have occasionally been adapted somewhat by me, and in this particular passage the translation is substantially mine. The Proust I describe is doubtless crude and oversimplified, but it would take a longer work to do him justice. Thanks to Richard Holton for generously lending me his volumes of Proust despite my unkindness to the hero; and for perceptive comments on earlier drafts which have helped to improve this essay.

beloved'. We have here the same familiar metaphors of thirst and its quenching, but they take on a different and sinister cast in the meditations of Marcel. He is gripped by 'a thirst for a *life*' which he wants to 'absorb...greedily, in long draughts'. Marcel's desire has a predatory, almost cannibalistic, quality: and perhaps it is this possible quality of desire that appalled Kant, and led him to speak of it as an appetite for another human being. Marcel's desire for Albertine is not simply a desire for her 'material composition' (quaint phrase), not simply a desire to gaze into her glittering eyes, not simply a desire to unite his body with hers, but a desire to annexe her whole being: a desire to 'unite her life' to his (or to 'ours' as he in fact says, with a conspiratorial use of the plural). It is a desire to know those dark shadows of her inner life, 'her desires, her sympathies, her revulsions, her obscure and incessant will'.

Marcel's desire, thus described, is a thirst for knowledge, and in particular, a thirst for knowledge of the mind of another human being. But thus described, is it not a desire to break out of the 'prison' of the self of which Kant spoke? Is it not a desire for an 'intimate union' in which Albertine will satisfy him by 'revealing [her] secret thoughts and feelings' (LE 202, DV 143)? Kant said that a certain kind of lover ignores the humanity of the one he desires: the fact that the one he desires is a human being is 'of no concern' (LE 163). That would be a false description of Marcel. The fact that she is a human being is precisely his concern: 'it is she, with her desires, her sympathies, her revulsions, her obscure and incessant will'. What Marcel desires is that she will reveal the dark shadows of her inner life, that she will (in a heavier Kantian idiom) 'disclose completely all [her] dispositions and judgments', that she will 'hide nothing', that she will 'communicate [her] whole self' (LE 206). This does not seem to be a desire that reduces persons to things. This desire for knowledge of another person, this desire for revelation of a self, is distinctively associated with friendship, according to Kant. Should we not say, then, that Marcel's desire is a desire to *escape* from solipsism? Should we not say that Marcel desires Albertine not only as a lover but as a friend?

To say this would be to ignore the predatory character of Marcel's desire. The arrangement he anticipates is, as Kant would say, 'one-sided'.²³ Recall that Kant contrasted the 'appetite for another human being' with that 'human love' which is 'good will, affection, promoting the happiness of others and finding joy in their happiness' (LE 163). It seems right to contrast Marcel's love with the love that Kant described as 'human'. Marcel seeks an intimate union of some kind, but it is nothing so prosaic as an 'intimate union of love and respect'. There is none of the reciprocity Kant attributes to friendship. Instead there is the driving desire for Albertine, which is at the same time a

23. Kant describes various kinds of sexual relationship as 'one-sided' in his chapter on the topic, LE 162-8.

desire to know her, and at the same time a desire to possess her. 'I knew I should never possess her if I did not possess also what was in her eyes'. Knowledge of her thoughts, desires, and sympathies is described as a possession of what was in her eyes: a possession of what it is that makes her a human being, what it is that makes her eyes something more than glittering sequins of mica. If he can possess this, he can possess her. The desire to know and the desire to possess are indistinguishable, for Marcel. He describes 'perfect knowledge' as 'the complete *absorption* of a person' (I 859/802, emphasis added). This is not communication but consumption. To know someone is to invade an alien territory, and annexe it. To know someone is to absorb and assimilate, and the activities of eating and drinking provide the metaphors.

Whenever the image of women who are so different from us penetrates our minds....we know no rest until we have converted these aliens into something compatible with ourselves, the mind being in this respect endowed with the same kind of reaction and activity as our physical organism, which cannot abide the infusion of any foreign body into its veins without at once striving to digest and assimilate it. (I 859/802)

Marcel's desire is not a reductive desire to enjoy a person's body, as one might enjoy a fruit in the garden. It is a desire to swallow up a human life. And although it is inspired by an apparent yearning to escape the prison of the self, Marcel's desire is in one way quite as solipsistic as a reductive sexual desire which ignores the person altogether. It is interesting to observe the moral and epistemic dimensions to Marcel's attitude, how they interact with one another, how they change over time. While in one way Marcel does not, at this stage, ignore the humanity of the one he desires, in another way he does. There is a yearning to escape from epistemic solipsism--a yearning for knowledge of another mind, another human being with unknown but knowable desires, sympathies--and in this sense he does not ignore the humanity of the one he desires. In his desire to escape epistemic solipsism, he treats a person *as a person*. But in another sense he *does* ignore the humanity of the one he desires: for there is at the very same time a moral solipsism, which treats a person *as a thing*. In treating Albertine as something to be possessed and controlled, Marcel treats her as a thing. In the Kantian idiom, Marcel fails to treat Albertine as an end in herself. Kant wrote (to Maria) that 'love presupposes' a certain 'respect for the other's character', and there is none of that here. Marcel treats Albertine as a knowable human being, who is to be known--and possessed, and controlled. The desire to escape the epistemic solipsism coincides with a desire to create a moral solipsism--or rather, *is* that desire, if the desire to know *is* a desire to possess.

Marcel aims to convert the 'alien' into something compatible with himself, he aims to 'digest and assimilate' her: but because he thinks of knowledge in

terms of possession and control, he tries to make her conform to a rigidly scripted role that he brings to their encounters.

I carried in my mind...the mental phantom--ever ready to become incarnate--of the woman who was going to fall in love with me, to take up her cues in the amorous comedy which I had had all written out in my mind from my earliest boyhood, and in which every attractive girl seemed to me to be equally desirous of playing, provided that she had also some of the physical qualifications required. In this play, whoever the new star might be whom I invited to create or to revive the leading part, the plot, the incidents, the lines themselves preserved an unalterable form. (1951/890)

Marcel's desire, the desire to know and possess, is not to be fulfilled, and the frustration is foreshadowed in that first description: 'It was...her whole life that filled me with desire; a painful desire because I felt it was *impossible to fulfil*'.

Why is the desire impossible to fulfil? Marcel's answer, in the end, is that it is because knowledge of another person cannot be had. His answer is the answer of epistemic solipsism. We can imagine a different answer. Marcel's desire is impossible to fulfil, not because knowledge of another person cannot be had, but because something else cannot be had: knowledge of another person *that is possession* of that person. The goal of possession is not identical to the goal of knowledge, as Marcel thinks, but inimical to it. For Marcel to treat Albertine as a potential possession, a puppet whose actions are controlled and scripted, is for him to doom himself to *ignorance* of her. To aim for possession and control is to thwart the knowledge that was his goal in the first place. Marcel ends as an epistemic solipsist, because he began as a moral solipsist, and one of a certain kind: the kind described by Korsgaard, who desires a person *as a person*, but as a person *to be possessed*. This moral solipsism can lead to epistemic solipsism in more ways than one. To possess and control someone is *not* to know them: so to the extent that Marcel succeeds in possessing and controlling, to the extent that he *succeeds* in making Albertine play his scripted role, to that extent he fails to know her. That is one way in which the moral solipsism might lead to the epistemic. However, if one *believes* that to possess and control someone is to know them, then one believes that failure to possess is failure to know: so to the extent that Marcel *fails* to possess and control, and believes that he fails to possess and control, he believes that he fails to know. That is another way in which the moral solipsism might lead to the epistemic. Hope of knowledge is blocked by the attempt to control and possess, *whether the attempt succeeds or fails*. Perhaps that is why Marcel's projects of possession are, as Martha Nussbaum says, doomed before they begin.²⁴

24. Martha Nussbaum, 'Love's Knowledge', in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy...continuing...*

If there is this connection between the moral solipsism and the epistemic, then we can note that moral virtues and epistemic virtues may be interdependent. On Kant's view, as we saw earlier, the morally good life depends on some epistemic virtues. He mentions in particular the need for an active 'power' of 'sympathy'. Some knowledge of other minds is a condition of many moral actions, since it is a condition of sharing others' goals. And there seems to be a dependence in the other direction too. The epistemically good life, so far as it relates to knowledge of people, partly depends on some moral virtues. The person Kant describes will not reveal his 'secret thoughts and feelings' when he is 'hemmed in and cautioned by fear': he will allow himself to be known only when there is 'complete confidence', the kind best achieved in friendship, that intimate union of love and respect (DV 143, 140). Albertine will not 'reveal her secret thoughts and feelings' when she is 'hemmed in and cautioned' by Marcel's demands. Some moral attitudes are a condition of some knowledge of other minds. So there is a kind of reciprocal dependence of the epistemic and moral virtues.

Believing his desire impossible to fulfil, Marcel abandons his 'thirst' for another life. The character of his love changes accordingly. Abandoning the thirst for another life, he turns inward. Proust gives us one of the most claustrophobic portraits in literature of what it can be like to be the solitary described by Kant: the one who has 'shut himself up in himself', who remains 'completely alone with his thoughts as in a prison' (DV 144). Love is not a relation between two human beings, but at most 'a rather interesting relation with oneself', as Nussbaum aptly comments.²⁵ Communication is irrelevant to such love.

I knew now that I was in love with Albertine, but alas! I didn't trouble to let her know it...the declaration of my passion to the one I loved no longer seemed to be

phy and Literature, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) p. 271. I have learned much from Nussbaum's essays on Proust, especially the final part of her discussion of Marcel in 'Love's Knowledge'. I discuss in a more Kantian idiom many themes discussed by her, including that of solipsism. We are both interested in the connection between the moral and epistemic aspects of Marcel's solipsistic attitude. Her conclusions about the commonality between prayer, love, philosophy and literature I find depressing and (fortunately) implausible. If love were like prayer, we would be back in the prison of solipsism, in a world peopled by phantoms. For a different kind of discussion of the relation between love and the rejection of scepticism, see Bas van Fraassen, 'The Peculiar Effects of Love and Desire', *Perspectives on Self-Deception*, eds. Brian McLaughlin and Amélie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

25. 'Love's Knowledge', p. 272.

one of the vital and necessary stages of love. And love itself seemed no longer an external reality, but only a subjective pleasure. (I 987/925)

Or else love is not a relation, but a monadic property of the individual:

I realised in the end that...my love was not so much a love for her as a love in myself...not having the slightest real link with [her], not having the slightest support outside itself. (III 568/557)

When we are in love with a woman we simply project on to her a state of our own soul. (I 891/833)

It is only a clumsy and erroneous form of perception which places everything in the object, when really everything is in the mind...love places in a person who is loved what exists only in the person who loves. (III 950-1/912)

A love story is not a story about two people, but one. The individual is 'irremediably alone', and must find the courage to free himself from 'the *lie* which seeks to make us believe that we are *not* irremediably alone' (I 969/908, emphasis added).

The individual lover must perform a kind of sense-datum reduction of any apparent relationship with another existing human being.

Courage was needed...it meant above all to abandon one's dearest illusions, to stop believing in the objectivity of what one had oneself elaborated, and instead of soothing oneself for the hundredth time with the words, 'She was very sweet', to read through that, 'It gave me pleasure to kiss her'. (III 933/896)

Here we have an application of a venerable philosophical principle. Let us retreat from ontological commitment. Let us retreat to sense-datum constructions. We can do it for electrons and photons....nothing but blips and flashes. We can do it for apples and desks and cats....nothing but rather different blips and flashes. It's not always easy, admittedly, to follow the principle wherever it leads. Cats, for example, seem hungry from time to time; yet as a puzzled philosopher said, a bundle of sense data is as incapable of hunger as a triangle is of playing football. Still, perhaps success will come with persistence. Whoever wishes to become a philosopher must, after all, learn not to be frightened of absurdities.²⁶ And now, if we can do it for science, if we can do it for everyday life, why not do it for the ones we love? Do not say, 'she was kind'. Say

26. The point about the cat, and the point about absurdities, are both from Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, first published in the Home University Library, 1912, reprinted (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 11, 9. Russell goes on to say that 'the difficulty in the case of the cat is nothing compared to the difficulty in the case of human beings' (p. 11).

instead, 'it gave me pleasure to kiss her'. Do not say, 'she was cruel'. Say instead, 'I was filled with grief'.

Solipsism provides the excuse for leaving the character of Albertine a hollow shell: she is not much more, for the reader, because she is not much more for the lover, the narrator, and (let me be naive) the author.

A novelist might...be expressing...another truth if....he *refrained from giving any character to the beloved*...Our curiosity about the woman we love overleaps the bounds of that woman's character, at which, even if we could stop, we probably never would...Our intuitive radiography pierces them, and the images which it brings back, far from being those of a particular face, present rather the joyless universality of a skeleton. (I 955/895, emphasis added)

The driving thirst for a life, that 'intuitive radiography' which seeks to invade the depths of her being, defeats itself. A person cannot be consumed or possessed. But the attempt to consume or possess blinds the lover to the knowledge which was his goal in the first place. The initial 'thirst for another life' did have something in common with the human love of which Kant spoke: a desire to reach beyond the self, a desire whose satisfaction could perhaps be found in that 'intimate union of love and respect' which is friendship, and which involves those mundane virtues of which Kant wrote, trust and sympathy, communication, and respect.

But that is not how Marcel has proceeded. His love has followed a different pattern. First there was the dim awareness of another life. She exists. Then: If she exists, I can know her. I want to know her. Then: If I can know her, I can possess her, since knowing is possessing. I want to possess her. Discovery: I cannot possess her. Marcel performs a gruesome *modus tollens*. I cannot possess her. Therefore I cannot know her. Therefore she does not exist. And Marcel contents himself with this conclusion, instead of treating it as the *reductio* of his strategy: the *reductio* of his equation of knowledge and possession.

The inference pattern applied to Albertine is likewise applied to friends.

The sign of the unreality of others is shown in the impossibility of their satisfying us...friendship is a simulation, since...the artist who gives up an hour of work for an hour's chat with a friend knows that he sacrifices a reality for something that doesn't exist (friends being friends only in that sweet folly which we lend to ourselves throughout the course of life, but which we know deep down to be the delusion of a fool who chats with chairs and tables, believing them to be alive). (III 909/875)

Albertine fails to satisfy him; so she does not exist. His friends fail to satisfy him; so they do not exist. And Marcel extends his inference to every other human being.

It is the misfortune of beings to be nothing more for us than useful showcases for the collections of one's own mind. (III 568/558,)

Chairs, tables, display cases--not people, but things. Marcel lives in a world that is crowded with people, but his beliefs are solipsistic. He interacts with people, treating them as things. Solipsism is false, but he believes it true. Is Marcel the metaphysical solipsist, who believes he is the only person? Is he the epistemic solipsist, who believes he is the only knowable person? Is he the moral solipsist, who believes he is the only person who matters? He is (at least sometimes) each of these.

What we have here is a complex web of solipsisms, a web that shifts over time. Marcel becomes an epistemic solipsist, I suggested, because he was a moral solipsist in the first place: one whose attitude to other human beings was predatory, one who matched Korsgaard's description, one who desired a human being as a person ('she, with her desires and sympathies...'), but as a person to be possessed. Given the moral solipsism which governed his relations with others from the start, the project of knowing others was itself understood in terms of possession and control. That strategy undermined the possibility of knowledge that was its goal, in the ways we looked at before. But once the epistemic solipsism is in place, the shift to metaphysical solipsism becomes apparently easy. From the fact that he cannot come to know another person, Marcel infers that he is irremediably alone. His friends have no more life than a chair, or a table. The only mind is his own.

However, other beings have their *uses*. Other beings are *useful showcases* for the collectables of one's mind. Albertine herself, despite her inability to satisfy his 'thirst for a life', nevertheless has her uses. She begins as unknown person, a human territory, ripe for invasion; and she ends up as a thing to be used.

These painful dilemmas which love is constantly putting our way teach us and reveal to us, layer after layer, the material of which we are made...By making me waste my time, by causing me grief, Albertine had perhaps been more useful to me, even from a literary point of view, than a secretary who would have sorted my papers. (III 947/909)

...the important thing is not the worth of the woman but the profundity of the state; the emotions which a perfectly ordinary girl arouses in us *can enable us to bring to the surface of our consciousness some of the innermost parts of our being*, more personal, more remote, more quintessential than any. (I 891-2/833, emphasis added)

Albertine is more useful to Marcel than a secretary, since she helps him to know the one thing he can know about, the one thing worth knowing about, the one human being that really exists: his own dear self, in its innermost parts, the material of which he himself is made.

Here we have a final strand in the messy knot of solipsisms. We end as we began, with a moral solipsism again--but there is a twist. This time there is a moral solipsism apparently vindicated by the metaphysical solipsism which preceded it. If I am the only person, then of course I am the only person who matters. And there is another twist. This time there is a moral solipsism that is not the solipsism Korsgaard described, which desires a person *qua* person (but as a person to be possessed). Albertine is no longer desired as a person *qua* person: as a human being with discoverable desires, sympathies and will. She is desired as a useful tool. Desire, if it exists, is no longer invasive in character but, if anything, reductive. Albertine, like any other being, has the status of a table, a chair, a showcase. This moral solipsism is reductive--but not quite in the way that Herman describes either, in her interpretation of Kant. Marcel's attitude is not quite--not *even*--the attitude of one who reductively desires someone as a body that is a pleasure-giving sexual automaton. Albertine is reduced not merely to her own physical properties, but to Marcel's own psychological properties: Albertine is a showcase, not for *her mind*, not even for *her body*, but for *his mind*.

And a showcase can be very useful indeed, if one's mind is a splendid treasure trove. Albertine unwittingly helps him to mine the treasure. Marcel does not know Albertine, he does not possess her in the way he desires, she--as an independent human being--is no longer an item in his ontology. But she none the less helps him obey the Socratic injunction: know thyself. She does not help as a friend helps: she cannot provide the opportunity for communication and correction of his judgments. She cannot do that, because that takes human interaction, and Marcel does not allow her to be human. That takes faith in the perception of another person, and a trust which is quite foreign to Marcel. Albertine helps in a different way: and it is by providing him with new experiences. She produces in him experiences he would never otherwise have encountered--not (primarily) sexual experiences, but experiences of grief and pain. That is how she helps reveal to him the material of which he is made.

It all sounds oddly familiar. My awareness of my own self is much truer and more certain than my awareness of Albertine. If I were to judge that she exists from the fact that I experience profound emotion, clearly this same fact would entail much more evidently that I myself also exist. If I were to suppose that, beneath the hat and coat, there exists another thinking being, that would prove only that *I* exist, as a thinking being--not that she is more than an automaton. Every consideration which contributes to my experience of Albertine cannot but establish even more effectively the nature of my own mind. The more I seem to learn about anything else, the more I learn about me. The more I seem to learn about *anyone* else, the more I learn about me. My mind is better known than anything else. Nothing else, no-one else, is to be known. Marcel is

a Cartesian solipsist who has abandoned his stove heated room for something that he calls love, but he is still alone with his thoughts, as in a prison.²⁷

This last strand of the web, this last reductive moral solipsism, is born from the metaphysical solipsism, or so I have suggested. It is plausible to think that metaphysical solipsism might lead to a reductive moral solipsism--that if I am the only person, I am *a fortiori* the only person who matters. There are no other persons, but only things to be used. This kind of link between the reductive moral solipsism and the metaphysical solipsism is explicit in Marcel's own thinking, as we can see in the passage above, now quoted in more detail.

I had guessed long ago...and had verified since, that when we are in love with a woman we simply project on to her a state of our own soul; consequently the important thing is not the worth of the woman but the profundity of the state; the emotions which a perfectly ordinary girl arouses in us can enable us to bring to the surface of our consciousness some of the innermost parts of our being, more personal, more remote, more quintessential than any. (I 891-2/833)

Love is an experience that happens to be caused by some being, let us say a 'woman'. It has 'not the slightest real link with that person': it does not quench one's thirst for knowledge of another life, it is not a love 'for her' but rather a love 'in me'. Any property that we mistakenly attribute to her is really 'a state of our own soul'. 'Consequently', says Marcel, 'the important thing is not the worth of the woman but the profundity of the state'. *Consequently*. Albertine is not a person, who is kind or cruel: she is that unknown something which causes him pleasure or anguish. One might entertain futile hypotheses about 'dark shadows' of a human reality behind this appearance, shadows of the ideas she cherishes about people and places she knows, shadows of desire, sympathy, revulsion, obscure and incessant will. But any such reality is unknowable. Consequently, it is irrelevant to practical life. Albertine exists merely as a screen on which emotions can be conveniently projected.²⁸ Consequently, the important thing is not the worth of the woman. Consequently, her worth is simply instrumental. If Albertine has no more inner life than a piece of furniture, a chair, a table, a display case, then she can have only the value of a

27. Cf. Descartes' Second Meditation, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* vol. II, tr. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 22. At this stage the meditator is certain only of his own existence, and considers hypothetically: if he were take his sense experience to indicate the existence of other things (which he at this stage does not), that would entail much more evidently his own existence. And so on.

28. This treating a person as a kind of canvas for projective thoughts is discussed in 'Sexual Solipsism', and compared with the projective aspect of the solipsism in pornography use.

tool. Then indeed she proves useful, as an engine for producing those feelings of love and grief that are so interesting to the literary narcissist. She proves more useful than any secretary in her capacity of an experience machine.

Kant thinks that relations with others can help one to obey the Socratic injunction: know thyself. He thinks that friends can help us obey it, and lovers too, in so far as love and friendship are thought to share a common moral core--when, and to the extent that, they are relationships of reciprocity. Proust at least partly agrees. He thinks that love can help one to obey it--that despite its scope for self-deception, love can help 'reveal to us, layer after layer, the material of which we are made'. What role does the lover play, though? The human need for communication, the need to 'clothe our concepts in words', can be met by a friend or a lover 'to whom we can communicate our whole self'. But Marcel's lover cannot have this role. The need to clothe one's concepts in words, the need to communicate one's whole self, is not met in love, but in solitary writing. Love provides knowledge of oneself, not through a process of communication, reciprocal interpretation, and correction, but rather by providing an experimental test. As Nussbaum says, the role of the lover is almost incidental.²⁹ Proust draws a chemical analogy. The moment of self-knowledge here is provoked by Marcel's discovery of Albertine's departure, and he instantly learns that he loves her.

Our intelligence, however lucid, cannot perceive the elements that compose it and remain unsuspected so long as, from the volatile state in which they generally exist, a phenomenon capable of isolating them has not subjected them to the first stages of solidification. I had been mistaken in thinking that I could see clearly into my own heart. But this knowledge, which the shrewdest perceptions of the mind would not have given me, had now been brought to me, hard, glittering, strange, like a crystallised salt, by the abrupt reaction of pain. (III 426/420)

She has helped him learn something. Notice the minimal role she plays in his great discovery.

On Marcel's way of thinking, love happens to be occasioned by some being: some pleasure-causing, anguish-causing being. Love brings suffering, and suffering is a catalyst that brings self-knowledge. And that is how a lover can help one know oneself. This is, to put it mildly, a different conception of what it is to be helped by someone else to learn about oneself. Suppose I do not know the answer to some question about myself: suppose I do not know, for example, *whether I am brave*. There are two ways a friend could help me find out. He could help me reflect intelligently on the character of my past actions,

29. Nussbaum discusses this moment of 'discovery' in great detail in 'Fictions of the Soul', and 'Love's Knowledge'. She describes the minimal role played by Albertine in Marcel's quest for self-knowledge on p. 271 of 'Love's Knowledge'.

argue with me, alert me to revealing details I may otherwise miss; or he could push me off a smallish cliff. With the former method, he offers communication, interpretation, correction; with the latter, he gives me an experiment. In both ways I am helped by someone else to learn about myself: but with the former method, it must be *someone* else; with the latter, it could as easily be *something* else (a gust of wind, a loose shoe-lace) that provides the test of courage.

Solipsistic love provides no communication, but only the experiment: a nasty fall, and then not even a shoulder to cry on. The role of the other is better played by an absent ex-lover than by a lover or friend. Ordinary love, on the other hand, might well provide both routes to self-knowledge. Perhaps love can be a bit like falling off a cliff. Perhaps it does provide a new experimental setting. Perhaps unexpected aspects of one's self do come to light, and we discover new layers of the material of which we are made. In addition, though, there is something else. Any apparent self-discovery generated by the experiment has the chance to be tested and revised in the fires of communication and mutual interpretation:³⁰ that is, if a lover can also be a friend 'whom we know to be frank and loving', one who will 'help us to correct our judgment', one from whom 'we can and need hide nothing' (*LE* 206); if a lover can be one who cares for my happiness, as I care for his.

In any case, the assumption here is wrong. *Self*-discovery is hardly the point. Why look back to the prison? Why look back to the prison, when the gate is open to a garden, an orchard of fruits where things are growing (calamus and cinnamon, myrrh and aloe), where there are cool breezes, the sound of water --and someone seems to be calling? There are risks, perhaps. There might be no time to record a remembrance of things past, a remembrance of years in solitary confinement. There might be no time for that, because time has a well-known habit. Time does tend to fly, when you're having fun.

30. For an interesting discussion of the role of interpretation in friendship, although not (to me) wholly convincing, see Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett, 'Friendship and the Self', ms. 1995. It is argued there that reciprocal interpretation, and a reciprocal willingness to be interpreted, are essential features of friendship.