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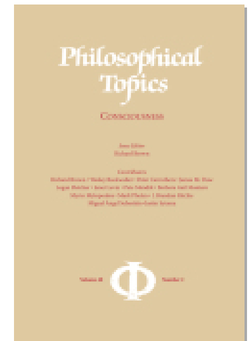

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Learning to Love

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ABSTRACT: Imagine that you find yourself in a situation of considerable adversity and apparent permanence. Does it make sense for me to advise you to learn to love your situation? I argue that such advice is capable of a robust meaning beyond the mere expression of compassion, and far beyond the pragmatic advice to 'accept it' or 'make the best of it'. I respond to the objections that love cannot be commanded, and that I am counselling pernicious forms of self-deception or self-deprecation. The key, I suggest, is to understand what it means to lead a life 'from the inside'.

Let's start with a couple of examples of what I will call 'permanent adversity':

1. *The innocent prisoner*. A middle-aged man is sentenced to life in prison for a murder he didn't commit. He arrives in the prison, is shown to his cell. There is a bunk with a dirty blanket, a toilet and sink, a table and chair. There is a small window that he can barely reach with his outstretched hand. There is the heavy door with the spy-hole. "This," the man says to himself, "will be my home. For the rest of my life."
2. *The disappointed wife.* A young Catholic woman meets, falls in love with, and then marries a man. Within a few months, however, she starts to deeply dislike her husband. She does not expect him to change much.

> And leaving him, she is clear, is not an option. She has to find a way to spend the rest of her life with him.

There are of course plenty of other examples of permanent adversity: developing a permanent chronic illness; giving birth to a child one doesn't like; being stuck in a bad job because one is too old to start again; loathing a place that one has moved to because of one's spouse's job or family. Indeed, it is characteristic of certain kinds of depression to see one's life as under permanent adversity regardless of the objective conditions of such a life.

To focus my philosophical exploration, however, I will stick to the above two examples, since each of them brings out important aspects of the phenomenon of learning to love. The most basic difference is that between learning to love a situation and learning to love a person. In each case there is a spontaneous reaction that could be anything from indifference to repulsion. There is then a sober reflection on the apparent permanence of the situation or relationship, on the fact that each will be stuck in that situation or relationship for what each understands to be the rest of his or her life. Each protagonist therefore makes a *commitment* to love; or at least to try to love; or at the very least to try to learn to love. What sort of commitment is this? And how does it reflect on the protagonist?

I have chosen to speak of love, rather than acceptance or resignation, for reasons that will become clear. However, I am also picking up on the expression of *amor fati* ("love thy fate") coined by Nietzsche in the *Gay Science*, and then mentioned in almost every subsequent work. In *Ecce Homo*, he says: "My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but *love* it."[1] Indeed, the real test of such a love is the willingness to live the exact same life that one has led, over and over, eternally. Although I think much of what I have to say would be acceptable to Nietzsche, I do not want to get bogged down in the particular Nietzschean terminology and assumptions, and will not mention him or the voluminous secondary literature on him at all.

I'm not sure that it will be possible to elaborate a precise definition of the phenomenon, since I believe that it contains a necessary obscurity. As such, I shall be approaching the questions obliquely. I shall start by distinguishing learning to love from a class of phenomena which I shall call *making the best*. These expressions, I will suggest, are philosophically less problematic, and can thus throw light on the problem of learning to love. In the second section, I then examine the question of the will: after all, love is normally taken to be something that cannot be commanded or learned. I will argue that in certain situations—such as musical appreciation—it can, but that learning to love a situation of permanent adversity remains importantly different.

In the third section, I consider the obvious worry that learning to love—insofar as one can make such a commitment—must involve some kind of self-deception. Although this is certainly possible, I will argue that it is not necessarily so. By

examining the normal way that accusations of self-deception are made and confirmed, I will show that there is still room for an undeceived commitment to love.

I. LOVE AS DISTINCT FROM 'MAKING THE BEST OF IT'

Learning to love is not "making do" or even "making the best" of a situation, or looking at it "on the bright side," or "gritting one's teeth and bearing it," or "giving the benefit of the doubt." It is not "accepting" or "resigning oneself to it." A woman, though not the one in my example, might choose to remain with her husband as a "lesser evil" than leaving him, perhaps because "better the devil you know." (Although there are important differences between all these expressions, I will speak only of *making the best* for the remainder of this section.) Although making the best may well be a necessary condition for learning to love, there are nevertheless three important differences that I want to explore.

First, making the best is much less philosophically problematic, for it is a matter of temporary selective attention. I can choose to concentrate on the advantageous aspects of the situation; or I can remind myself how much worse it could have been (and indeed has been for others); or I can turn the disadvantages into longer-term advantages by seeing them as character-building, or as providing me with material for a novel. Of course I may be more or less successful at making the best of it; every morning I may have to start again in the face of the renewed awfulness of the situation. But as a survival plan, I think it seems clear enough. In contrast, learning to love is much more philosophically problematic because it seems to involve a decision to *feel* something. Normally, we might say, love is a passion, something that happens to one upon encountering a particular person or project. If my spontaneous reaction is indifference or hostility, it is hard to see how a mere decision can overcome that, beyond the attempt to ignore it or redescribe it through selective attention and making the best. Now of course love is much more than just a feeling, and I will have something to say about it in section 2. But for the moment it is enough to note the counterintuitive resonances of 'learning to love' and 'deciding to love'.

Second, making the best has to be an essentially *temporary* project: there has to be not just light at the end of the tunnel, but an end to the tunnel. When I emerge from the awful situation, either to my fondly remembered status quo ante, or to a much-anticipated better life, I can start writing the great novel. Even if the longing for the end of the tunnel is never actually expressed or thought about, it is presupposed by the very attitude of 'making the best'. In contrast, the prisoner and the wife, at least in my examples, have accepted that their respective situations are *permanent*, that what they are dealing with is the rest of their lives. This is not just a rhetorical flourish, they feel the weight of these words: for the rest of their lives.

Of course their situations may turn out not to be permanent for any number of reasons, but their attitude toward their respective situations is one of no longer

hoping or longing for the end of it. Maybe the prisoner does not dare to hope because he fears that his life will be even harder to live after crushing disappointment; maybe the wife cannot imagine leaving her husband because she has come to identify so closely with her role of Catholic wife. But whatever the reasons for their attitude, there is no longer any end to the tunnel in sight.

It is easy to ignore the temporal component of attitudes; that is, it is tempting to see attitudes as something one is 'in' here and now, like a suit of clothes, with no essential reference to the future or past. Benevolent or malevolent attitudes to individual people might be an example. But while they might result in identical behavior, the attitudes of making the best and learning to love differ precisely in the implied temporal location of the protagonist; that is, whether they take themselves to be in the middle of their lives, moving forward to a future that is indeterminate or to a certain extent controllable, or whether they take themselves to be in the 'last phase' of their lives, the "rest of their lives," with the future resembling the present.

Of course my examples might have been different. Another prisoner in the same situation could well hope passively, either by waiting for the miscarriage of justice to be discovered or by waiting for an opportunity to escape; or he could hope more actively, either by petitioning and lobbying for a retrial, or by behaving well in the hope of an early parole, or by developing his own escape attempt. And living in hope or fighting for justice can be sources of great strength for people under adversity. But I am interested precisely in that time when the protagonists have given up hoping, either because there has not been enough improvement, or because they are more and more worried about growing old and dying with their hopes, about 'sulking' away their lives, thereby forgoing any remaining chance that they might have for happiness even under this permanent adversity. Importantly, however, when I say that the prisoner has given up hope, this does not necessarily mean that he has sunk into despair and despondency (although again, another prisoner in the same situation might well). If he has learned to love his situation—whatever that means—he is somehow steering a course between hope and hopelessness.

Now it may be objected that it is at least intelligible to make the best of an adverse situation for the rest of one's life; and as such that making the best is not essentially temporary. In response, I would claim that such a person has not *fully* appreciated the permanence of the adversity, since making the best still contains within it the seeds of hope, of making the best "*until* … ." If the subject did appreciate the permanence, then he would realize that making the best is not enough, that it comes too close to alienated sulking. My reference to 'alienation' here presages the third difference between making the best and learning to love, which I describe in the next section.

Before that next section, however, let me just mention one crucial difference between the prisoner's case and the wife's, and that is that the prisoner is physically trapped, whereas the woman is only trapped—it will be objected—by convention, religious scruple, pride, etc.; she still has the 'physical' choice to leave the marital home, and in most Western jurisdictions, of leaving the marriage. However, what

is important in my example is that the woman herself does not see the Catholic prohibition of divorce as a 'scruple' or a 'convention', but as an absolute against which she cannot even conceive a transgression. To her the prohibitions are as restrictive as prison walls, and she no more chooses her prohibition than the prisoner chooses to be in prison. She may idly fantasize about leaving her husband "if he pushes me too far"; she may say something like "it's so easy for those Protestants"; but the option is not yet a 'live' one for her (to use William James's term),[2] precisely because she still identifies so much with her Catholic faith, and with her marital status. Again, I stress that any number of things might happen in the future: she may come to lose her faith, or lose enough of it to choose to leave; just as she may reach a point of such despair that she finds she has to leave. But at this moment she cannot seriously imagine reaching that point, and the situation stretches out for the rest of her life.

1.1. LEARNING TO LOVE AS 'EMBRACING' THE SITUATION

Making the best differs from learning to love, therefore, first in being less philosophically problematic, and second in being essentially short term. The third way in which making the best differs from learning to love is a bit complicated. Making the best (and the other expressions I listed) on the one hand essentially involves keeping a certain part of myself logically separate from the awful situation, in a space 'behind the lens', whence to judge the situation and plan one's response to it. Learning to love, on the other hand, involves 'embracing' the situation and striving to eliminate the distance between the scrutinizing self and the scrutinized situation. There is plenty of metaphorical language here to unpack, so let me proceed slowly.

What is distinctive about the attitude of making the best is that the subject remains aware that a 'best' needs to be made. In other words, the awful situation before him is not taken as the limits of experience; instead, it is continuously contrasted either with an imagined better situation in the future or with an imagined worse situation in the counterfactual present. In order to resist the awfulness of the real present, the subject has to remind himself, explicitly if necessary, that in being here and now he has moved away from particular unreal alternative situations and toward particular unreal future situations. If a married woman (again, not the woman in my example) considers her situation a 'lesser evil', she fixes her attention on the situation as an evil, and invokes the contrast with the alternative, greater evil: for example, life as someone who has broken her marital vows and abandoned her husband, or life as a single divorcee without the husband's income.

Compare this to the Catholic woman in my example; it is not that she has considered the reasons in favor of abandoning her husband, and then rejected the option. The option never occurred to her in the first place as a 'live' option, an option into which she could fully immerse herself, far beyond the realm of gratifying daydream. Or perhaps she excitedly entertained the option, both to herself and to friends, perhaps she went through the reasons over and over again, but when it

came time to pack the bags she found she couldn't go through with it; the reasons to leave turned out to be idle. A reason's idleness is not the same as its being outweighed, for she was not actually weighing reasons to herself. Indeed, in further conversation to her bewildered girlfriend she might not be able to offer any reasons that would satisfy either the friend or herself; she is left with the vague but firm conclusion that she simply 'cannot' leave. It is a statement of moral incapacity, to use Bernard Williams's term, that comes not from her reason, but from the very depths of her self.

Now here is the important bit. The awareness, or discovery, that she cannot leave her husband might drive her into despair; or she might grit her teeth and make the best of it. Or, a third option, she might say to herself: "how can I go to bed every night with this man, for the rest of my life, merely to make the best of it? How can I live with the pretense? What sort of a life is that?" And she might embrace (that is, choose to embrace the situation, or rather choose to try to embrace) the situation, and thereby make it her own, and *reclaim* her life. Rather than have a life forced on her by circumstances, she retakes the initiative within the circumstances. The circumstances here act as a backdrop, an unchallenged given, against which contrastive characterizations and critical judgments can be made meaningful. I am certainly not suggesting that she become a servant to her husband: embracing the situation, indeed embracing him, is compatible with critical reflection on the aspects of his behavior and their life together that she can change.

In embracing the situation, an attitude of genuine love may develop. 'Love' here should not be interpreted romantically—that is, as some sort of warm glow that strikes the lover passively. Indeed, the attitude of love resulting from successfully embracing an awful situation need not generate anything beyond a vague contentment with one's lot. Importantly, the loving attitude in question is not primarily to be identified with an affect at all; instead, it is a framework of experience, a way of making sense of the world and of one's place in it. And like any successful framework, the structure and workings of it will not be fully clear to the subject of that experience. What this phenomenon does share with romantic love, and why I am using the same word for it, is its transformative power. As romantic love bestows value on the beloved, so too will the successful embracing of the awful situation transform it; not transform it into something wonderful, nor indeed something bearable: but transform it into the given.

In the same way that physical embracing eliminates the gap between the lover and the beloved, so too the (attempted) embrace of the situation eliminates (strives to eliminate) the critical distance between the subject and the permanently adverse situation. Embracing the object brings me so close to it that I am no longer aware of where I end and where it begins: I have come to identify with it as mine. This is an important ingredient in leading a life that approaches a kind of integrity, a kind of authenticity, and avoids alienation. The classic discussions of integrity in recent Anglo-American philosophy focus on agents who have a great deal more freedom than the prisoner and the wife, freedom to live one's life according to one's principles

and thereby achieve integrity. Jim the botanist in Williams's famous example[3] may decide to intervene in the situation (getting his hands dirty while saving nineteen Indians) or to walk away from it, seeing it as unfortunate but not his problem. But either way the situation is not *his*, and he will have the rest of his life to deal with it in his own way. In contrast, I would suggest that the prisoner and the wife, unable to live in accordance with their principles, can nevertheless achieve a kind of integrity by learning to love their situations.

1.2. PRENUPTIAL CONTRACTS

This will still be much too metaphorical for many philosophers' tastes, so perhaps it will be helpful to briefly consider another example: the prenuptial contract. This will help to bring out the distinction between an essentially first-personal attitude to one's marriage and an essentially third-personal or spectatorial attitude.

'Pre-nups' are legal in some U.S. states, although not in many other countries. The central clause of such a contract will typically run:

> "in the event of divorce, each party will assume sole possession of those goods and monies which they brought to the marriage (see list in appendix), and each party will assume possession of one-half of those goods and monies created or acquired jointly or severally during the marriage."

Given the divorce statistics in the United States and other Western countries, they would seem to make a lot of sense as a form of insurance. However attractive this spouse is to me now, people change in unpredictable ways, and relationships deteriorate even with the best will on both sides. Now if I knew, based on statistics for my area, that my house had a one in three chance of burning down I would be culpably stupid not to take out insurance. So why have pre-nups not become more popular?

The key is to distinguish between the involved perspective of the spouse and the detached perspective of a spectator. Discussions of rationality (e.g., statistical likelihoods) presuppose an essentially spectatorial perspective: the question is not what *I* should do, but what *anyone* should do in the situation that I happen to find myself in. But such a perspective is incompatible with the trust and commitment that I suggest is necessary for a healthy marriage. A marriage, to be healthy, needs more than rational calculation, for there will be many times when not enough evidence is available to make a decision about the marriage that will satisfy norms of rationality. And trust, like embracing, is an essentially first-personal view of the event, and a half-blind lurching into the future: it is not an attempt to deny or ignore the divorce statistics, but it has to do with a resolve to make the marriage work, i.e., with *my* resolve to make *my* marriage work, to believe without naïveté or sentimentality that it is only other people's marriages that fall apart. Taking the rational, spectatorial view of my own marriage implies that it is an experiment that might fail, and one that needs regular reevaluation to see if conditions are being met;

I can make the best of it in the meantime, but already I have laid contingency plans.

This first-personal approach to marriage is by no means unusual. It is shared in sports psychology and career-planning workshops and drug-therapy clinics, for example. The only way for some people to finish the marathon or to pass the job interview or to get off the stuff is to *resolve* to win. And my resolve to make my marriage work is fully compatible with the snide remarks among the wedding guests: "I'll be curious to see how long this one lasts." And of course they may turn out to be right, just as I may end up being fleeced in the divorce settlement. They may indeed know me better than I know myself, and struggle to withhold those terrible words "I told you so." But none of this undermines the nature of the commitment—not only at the start, but at every moment of crisis—that is required for any sort of genuine, noninstrumental marriage to work in the longer term.

Indeed, it is not just about maximizing the chances that the marriage will work "in the long term," but that it will last "as long as ye both shall live." Taking a marriage seriously means refraining from making *any* provisions for life after the marriage. (The only exception, of course, would be if one's spouse develops a life-threatening illness that provides a palpable time limit.)

By distinguishing the engaged from the spectatorial, the public from the personal perspectives, I would also begin to answer the obvious objection that could be raised against both my protagonists as they try to learn to love their respective situations. While the prisoner and the wife have not got as much to lose in material terms as the uninsured spouse, they can still lose their dignity and self-respect. The spectatorial objection could then run as follows: surely this 'resigned' love is exactly what the prison guard wants the prisoner to adopt; for it makes the guard's job much easier. And the husband will get away with the impression that he himself does not need to work harder to save the marriage. Such docile forms of love, such an absence of expressive defiance, the spectator concludes, are evidence of a crushed personality, not a liberated one.

This objection misses the point precisely because it comes too late. Once the protagonists have accepted the permanence of the adversity, then the advice cannot take them anywhere further *within* their lives—for they are stuck in those permanently adverse situations. The spectator is not implicated in the consequences of his own advice, in the way that the protagonists would be if they took the advice seriously. Given the fixed backdrop that the protagonists experience, what could they do *after* the spirited defiance, if they consider such defiance futile? Again, the spectator may of course attempt to bring the protagonists to see their adversity as in fact temporary, and their defiance as purposeful; there may well be further facts that the protagonists are unaware of. But my examples start from a moment in time when all the facts are in, the situations are taken by the prisoner and the wife as permanent, and there is nothing further that a spectator can say. Importantly, this is perfectly compatible with the spectator sincerely believing that he (the spectator) would not behave as the prisoner did if he (the spectator) were in the prisoner's situation.[4]

II. CAN LOVE BE COMMANDED?

Even if we can accept the difference between making the best and learning to love one's situation, what can it mean to *decide* to love, or to decide to learn to love? Can one directly command one's emotions? I have said something in terms of embracing the situation, but in this section I want to look at a partial analogy, that of trying to learn to love a piece of music.

I cannot decide to love Beethoven's *Fidelio* here and now if I do not spontaneously do so already, that much is perhaps clear. We might call this the position of direct affective voluntarism, and it parallels a debate in epistemology and the philosophy of religion about the viability of direct doxastic voluntarism; i.e., whether one can decide to believe something or not. One response to this in epistemology is *in*direct doxastic voluntarism: while I cannot command my belief that p, what I can control are the conditions that are likely to lead me to believe that p. Analogously, there are things I can do that will greatly increase the chances that I will come to love the *Fidelio* in time. For a start, I can decide to listen to it a second time, and a third, perhaps upon the advice of a friend to suspend judgment. I can decide to listen to it more closely, "especially to this bit" (advises my friend), and so on. Indeed, my friend's enthusiasm might prove infectious on its own.

Second, I can decide to take a music appreciation class, where an expert will tell me and show me what to look for in attending to the *Fidelio*. This might involve some systematic teaching in music theory, or in musical history, or in Beethoven's biography. It would almost certainly involve studying the lyrics closely, understanding their meaning and their dramatic import, studying the plot and the characters. It might involve an introduction to easier, more melodious pieces of opera first, to lay the ground for the more difficult *Fidelio*. In summary, there is a language of musical appreciation that the student needs to learn before a discussion of *Fidelio*'s qualities can take place; and control of the language develops hand in hand with the cognitive development; i.e., the ability to hear what is there below the surface. Of course the process offers no guarantees that the student will come to actually love the piece, let alone that he will even come to appreciate it. But if the course is a success, then it would be correct to say (1) that the student decided to take the course; (2) that he intended to improve his appreciation of music, to deepen his enjoyment, and to widen the repertoire of pieces he loves; (3) that he came to love the piece because of his taking the course; and (4) that he was *missing something* (something that was there all along) in his initial dislike of the piece.

But this analogy with my two examples fails, for two inter-related and revealing reasons. First, there is a relatively uncontroversial canon of musical works that it can be plausibly said that people should appreciate, even if their unlearned ear rejects them. There is also a relatively uncontroversial process by which one can develop a more sophisticated musical ear, and learn to discover features of the music that were hidden before, and indeed there is a process by which one can learn

to become a recognized expert in musical history or theory oneself, where an expert by definition is someone whose authoritative opinion should be listened to. None of this applies to the prison or the marriage, however.

Second, as we saw in my discussion of prenuptial contracts, the sort of love I am investigating is essentially personal. This means that the prisoner's judgment about what ought to be done carries a special authority in virtue of pertaining to his own life; it also means that there are severe limits about what can be said to the prisoner, even by a close friend. Learning to love the *Fidelio* cannot achieve such importance, cannot fill a life in the same way as the prisoner's learning to love the prison. (Perhaps the situation will be more complicated for a virtuoso musician, but neither of our protagonists are those.) Moreover, there is not the same notion of surface and depth in my examples. With Beethoven, it makes sense to say that the lovable features are already there, below the surface, ready to be discovered with a little guided digging. But the prisoner and the wife already know everything relevant to the awfulness of the situation; there is nothing new that anybody could show them, let alone a putative expert. Even if a close friend reminds the wife that "things could be worse," this is not at all the same thing as saying "listen to it again, and concentrate on the fourth bar." And the friend, while he may know the wife very well, does not have the same *general* authority that comes from expertise built on training, knowledge, and experience in a subject.

Indeed, because learning to love a permanent adverse situation is such a personal process, it is very hard to say anything general about it; there is an essential obscurity to it, akin to a religious conversion.[5] So here is another analogy that might help us to understand, although again there will be limits to the analogy. The religious conversion involves the doubter somehow opening his heart to the real possibility that God exists, rather than opening his mind to reasons and persuasion. It is a 'leap of faith', that flies in the face of the lack of evidence. Indeed, all the ingenious 'proofs' typically offered by theist philosophers through the ages (e.g., the ontological and cosmological arguments) are irrelevant to the business of actually acquiring faith. One cannot decide to believe at a merely intellectual level; but there nevertheless can be a decision at a deeper level, what is sometimes called 'opening one's heart', the willingness to accept the experience *as* a religious one, rather than to reach for debunking or deflationary explanations.

The leap of faith is a form of embracing, as I described the term in section 1, and the leap involves the same risks of embracing. In embracing his situation, the prisoner invites the accusation that he is colluding with injustice and abandoning self-respect. In leaping into faith, the doubter invites the accusation of wilfully deluding himself with false consolations, without evidential support.

However, there remains an important difference between the religious conversion and any nonreligious learning to love, and that is that the former is likely to bring one into a *community* of worshipers with a common language, common reference points and common understandings. One can discuss one's dilemma with the priest, and receive relevant advice in theological terms. Insofar as the religious

conversion can be assisted by taking part in the religious community as a doubter, then it will begin to resemble the case of learning to love the *Fidelio* and thereby slowly acquiring membership in the community of music lovers. However, the prisoner and the wife in my examples remain utterly alone in their respective situations. If they have friends to confide in, the advice of such friends can carry no authority beyond compassion. Indeed, it is not clear the degree to which the wife *can* confide in a friend precisely because the friend has not had to learn to love that particular man.[6] If the friend disagrees with the wife's decision to learn to love, then the friend will not be in a position to reiterate her disagreement again. If she agrees with the wife's decision, then it will have become something unmentionable as a decision in the past or as a project in the present. It is not as if the friend can invite the wife to take a more objective self-conscious stance on her husband by asking "so how's the learning to love coming along, then?" Nor can the friend blame the wife for failing to learn to love, or even for failing to try hard enough. Both the decision, and the subsequent efforts, remain personal in this deep sense, and can only be carried forward by the agent's own will.

To conclude this section in a way that will strike many as lame, I am suggesting that yes, love can be commanded, albeit indirectly. Part of the process will be like making the best, that is, a concerted process of selective attention. Part of the process will be like the religious conversion, with the leap of faith and the opening of one's heart to the possibility of love. But there will also be an irreducible component of luck involved: of two prisoners in the same situation, one might manage to learn to love that situation, the other might not. So much will depend on the contingent 'match' between the prisoner and the situation.

III. THE PROBLEM OF SELF-DECEPTION

Over much of the above discussion hangs the specter of self-deception. Perhaps greater than the prisoner's risk of colluding with injustice, greater than the Catholic wife's risk self-denigration, lies the risk of a life of self-deception. Surely, my opponent will argue, the best way of dealing with a bad situation is to resolve to be as honest as possible about it and about one's spontaneous feelings toward it. This is not the same as saying that one's feelings can't be wrong, for there is always room for reflecting on whether those feelings are appropriate. But in order to reflect on those feelings one needs to know as much as possible about the facts of the situation that one is facing. The alternative, concludes my opponent, is to live a lie. And given the awfulness of the situation, the lie will have to be that much greater, and will take enormous energy to sustain. The big lie would then lead to a thousand daily lies, and whatever the *prima facie* advantages of a cheerful self-deception over lucid despair, the protagonist runs a real risk of losing control of his life and perhaps even going mad.

Self-deception is a notoriously slippery notion in philosophy. I do not want to get bogged down in how exactly the self can both deceive and be deceived at the same time, whether there are different levels of the self, whether two different descriptions of a single object are at play, whether there is some sort of emotional distortion of perception going on.[7] Instead, I want to explore a relatively clear paradigm case of self-deception in order to then ask whether learning to love can fit that paradigm. So let us take that classic tragicomic character, the rejected poet. Although his manuscripts are consistently rejected by different publishers, he remains convinced of his own genius. When challenged, he has a list of names of famous authors whose work was repeatedly rejected (for example, J. K. Rowling), and he supports this with an elaborate conspiracy theory involving cowardly publishers and critics. Now of course while it *is* possible that our poet is an undiscovered genius, the better alternative explanation (becoming increasingly likely with each rejection) is that he simply has no talent. His self-deception is immature and destructive because it is preventing him from looking at himself squarely and making more sensible decisions about how to spend his life.

We might say that the poet's self-deception is his own business, as long as he's not harming anyone and has an independent source of income, let him keep writing and submitting, and maybe one day he'll get lucky. But now imagine a second character, the poet's close friend, who is concerned that the poet is wasting his life. (The friend doesn't think much of the poetry either, but refrains from comment on account of his lack of expertise.) One day the friend shouts at the poet, "For God's sake, man, stop deceiving yourself about this poetry, and get a life!"

There are a number of important assumptions behind the friend's accusation, and these will be worth spelling out. First, we have the presence of a spectator with a less engaged—and therefore more objective, although not infallible—view of what is at stake. This greater objectivity gives him a certain authority. Second, we have the assumption that the poet is capable, at least in principle, of eventually discovering and accepting the truth about his lack of talent, and of moving on. Third, there is the assumption that the poet, if and when he comes to accept that he was deceiving himself, is still the same person throughout.

Is learning to love a form of self-deception? I will argue not, by showing that these assumptions do not apply in the case of the prisoner and the wife. First, while there may be a spectator to the prisoner's plight, it is not at all clear that this spectator could have a more objective point of view of what is going on, and therefore have the authority to criticize: there is nothing a concerned friend could tell the prisoner about the awful situation that the prisoner cannot *already* see or does not *already* know; partly because the prison sentence is much more all-engulfing than a discrete object like poetry, partly because the prisoner's love of his situation is not an expression of distorting vanity.

Now it's true that the prisoner who has loved the situation no longer sees it as awful, and the concerned friend might see it as his job to *remind* the prisoner of how awful he found it at first, in order to bring the prisoner back to what he (the

friend) believes to be the prisoner's authentic engagement with the world. But again, this would not be news to the prisoner: he remembers very well his first reaction to the place, and he fully understands why his feelings then were justified by the awfulness. Since then, however, he has learned to love the awful situation. In addition, if the friend did manage to remind the prisoner of the awfulness—that is, to resurrect the prisoner's initial spontaneous reaction to the situation, what on earth would this achieve—except to plunge the prisoner into despair?

This brings us to the second assumption made by the concerned friend when criticizing the poet: that the revelation of his lack of talent will be good for him, allowing him to move on. As such, the accusation of self-deception is essentially forward-looking and therapeutic. But as we have seen, the wife conceives of her situation as permanent: she does not accept that there is a 'beyond' that she can be helped toward. The poet's life was dominated by a dissonance between his own opinion of the poetry and the opinion of others, especially others whom the poet would normally admit had the authority to pronounce judgment and thereby regulate semi-formal admission to the 'guild'. In the wife's case, she seeks no admission to any guild, nor does she seek approval from relevant experts—what is at stake is her life, not some object for public scrutiny. And even if it is the wife's marriage that is the object of scrutiny, there is the crucial point that it is *her* marriage and not anybody else's: she is the one who has to live it. Again, the risk of a renewed despair is an odd sort of therapy.[8]

The third assumption was that the poet would remain the same person throughout—a relatively straightforward assumption—but this is importantly disanalogous with the prisoner and the wife because of the two interrelated *transformations* involved in learning to love. The protagonist is transformed, making him effectively a different person from the person who first faced the permanent adverse situation. When I say 'different', I am not denying that he remembers his earlier experiences as his own, or that he would not take responsibility for those experiences; I am not denying Locke's psychological connectedness. But he is different in that he has moved on, and the adverse situation no longer has the same effect on him. It could be said that the situation has also been transformed. Not the facts of the situation, of course, but its significance in his life. He grasps its awfulness in a detached sort of way, but is not struck by its awfulness. These two transformations are interrelated precisely because the protagonist has embraced the situation, meaning that he cannot contemplate it from the entirely detached position which the poet is assumed to be capable of when contemplating his poetry. Indeed, because the poetry is relatively discrete, the poet can fall back on other aspects of his life when he finally discovers that the poetry isn't much good. The prisoner and the wife do not have any other aspects of their lives to retreat to for solace.[9]

One last thought. Even if this is right, could we not accept that learning to love constitutes a more benign or justifiable form of self-deception—the noble lie or the vital lie—but that it is still a case of self-deception? After all, most of us would be reluctant to blame the prisoner and the wife for trying to learn to love. The notion

of non-blameworthy self-deception is the sort of self-deception that some people need to attempt just to get on in life at all. For here what is at stake is a very real truth, but one that would undermine the subject's performance or recovery if faced squarely. There are certain facts that the tightrope-walker would be wise not to contemplate until he returned to solid ground, and nobody would blame him for his avoidance. The low self-esteem of the recovering alcoholic requires a systematic program of self-praise and self-encouragement until he manages to rid himself of temptation. However, there is one thing about the vital lie that makes it more akin to 'making the best' than to learning to love, and that is its essentially short-term nature—and this is important for the indulgence we accord it. Temporary but justifiable self-deception should either result in cure, or in the decision to try a different form of 'treatment' before the patient loses too much contact with reality. The concept doing the work here is that of *justification*, and justification has a forward-looking aspect, as when we say that the ends justifies the means, and the proof of the pudding is in the eating. As such the prisoner's and the wife's situations differ essentially because of their perceived permanence. The present situation will, from their point of view, end only in their deaths. And given that fact as a starting point, there is plenty that they can learn to enjoy, appreciate, and love before they die.

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NOTES

1. F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo,* section 10, in Kaufman, ed., *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1967), 714.
2. H. James, "The Will to Believe," *The Will to Believe; and other essays in popular philosophy* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1956).
3. B. Wiliams, "Against," in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, ed. J. Smart and B. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).
4. In this I am accepting the truth of Bernard Williams's 'reasons-internalism'. See his "Internal and External Reasons," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
5. I say 'akin' here, and stress that the wife in my example is only Catholic with respect to her views of divorce; otherwise she is quite secular. I do not have space to discuss the extra complications arising from the devout religious believer's encounter with permanent adversity, such as the Biblical story of Job.
6. There is a question of whether the wife has to learn to love her husband or her situation. In terms of the phenomenology of her experience, it is the husband who must be the first object of love; if she can learn to love him, the other aspects of the situation will fall into place. On the other hand, learning to love the situation in the abstract would not necessarily lead to loving *this* particular man.

7. An excellent survey of the current philosophical debates on self-deception is offered by Alfred Mele in "Real Self-Deception," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 20 (1997).
8. Now it could be said here that I have made things easy for myself by placing the wife in a *tolerable* marriage, where it is only emotional discord that has to be overcome. What about the notorious cases of battered wife syndrome, where the wife claims to have "learned to love" an abusive husband? Surely this could more plausibly be classed as self-deception, and concerned friends would be more justified in saying that the wife only *thinks* she loves him. In response, such a situation would have added too many complicating factors for a clear philosophical discussion. So I have assumed that both the prisoner and the wife have entered their respective situations with a reasonably robust self-confidence and with a minimum of psychological 'issues'. I have also assumed that the wife's reason for not leaving her husband has been mainly ideological, whereas I like to think that the battered wife would have much better reasons (including reasons that the Catholic church would accept) for leaving her husband. But I accept that these are nowhere near conclusive as responses.
9. It may be argued that unlike the prisoner, the wife can *avoid* her marriage, spend less time at home and more time at the tennis club, etc. But this would be to neglect the intimacy that still remains in all marriages: sharing a house, a bathroom, and a bed with a man she does not like.