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RECONCEIVING ROMANTIC AGENCY:
A QUESTION CONCERNING ITS EXTENT

By

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Professional Paper

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RECONCEIVING ROMANTIC AGENCY

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This professional paper investigates and questions the extent to which romantic love is a matter of agency. Toward this end, I draw a distinction between two contrasting conceptions of romantic love—the “agent-external” conception and the “agent-centered” conception. In this paper I make the assumption that the agent-external conception is pervasive and commonplace in contemporary culture, and that it conceives of romantic love as being involuntary and without agency. My investigation then questions the accuracy of this agent-external conception by juxtaposing it with what I consider to be an agent-centered conception of romantic love. An agent-centered conception, I claim, conceives of romantic love as being a purposive and voluntary endeavor constituted by certain practices on the part of the lover indicative of agency. In order to justify this claim, I examine various practices involved in romantic loving that instantiate this agency. In doing so I not only suggest that romantic love is, to an extent, constituted by practices indicative of agency but that the agent-external conception fails to account for these instances. By examining a commonplace appearance and belief—which holds that the romantic lover is involuntarily compelled to love her beloved—I suggest that an agent-centered conception of romantic love can explain that while this appearance does exist, it is nevertheless wrong in its assertion that romantic love is without agency. By investigating some important features of romantic love I propose that an agent-centered conception is better suited to account for this commonplace appearance, which is often used as evidence for the agent-external conception. The upshot of this investigation suggests that an agent-centered conception more accurately recognizes the extent to which romantic love involves and is a matter of agency.

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Introduction¹

The central question I am concerned with in this paper is the extent to which romantic love is a matter of agency. In order to assess this question I will draw a distinction between two competing conceptions of romantic love—namely, the ‘agent-external’ and the ‘agent-centered’ conception. To start, I should say that an agent-centered conception—or at least the kind I am envisaging here—understands romantic love to be a purposive and voluntary endeavor constituted, in part, by the lover’s agency. This is, in my view, quite different from the agent-external conception. The latter often conceives of love as an involuntary phenomenon apart from the agent, as if love were an external force affecting the lover from the outside inward. In an attempt to situate these differing conceptions I will explicate the agent-centered conception, which I find to be most appealing, and then describe the prevailing agent-external conception, which I take to be unsatisfactory.

The agent-centered approach I am interested in conceives of romantic love as a phenomenon originating most significantly within the agent; as such, it cannot be described, explained, or understood in any accurate sense apart from the agent and her volitional, emotional, or cognitive faculties. This conception entails the understanding that romantic love is a practice and engagement whereby we express our human autonomy, thus making it a matter of agency. By exercising romantic agency, a lover voluntarily interacts and engages with a beloved in purposive ways, thereby altering her life’s trajectory and refashioning her self. Evidence that

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to the people that constitute the Department of Philosophy at the University of Montana for their unwavering support throughout the duration of my time in the Master’s program. Special thanks to Matt Strohl for being a thoughtful teacher every step of the way—I am forever grateful for your guidance and encouragement regarding this project, from its inception to its fruition. Thank you David Sherman for your willingness to serve on my committee, and especially for your kind and constructive guidance throughout this project. Thank you Bob Baker for agreeing to serve on my committee, your support throughout this project was much appreciated. Also, I thank my friends and colleagues Angela Hotaling, Casie Dunleavy, Andrea Gammon, Nicolas Redig, and Bart Walsh for assistance and support on this project—without their friendship this project would not be what it is.

romantic love is voluntary and a matter of agency is found immanent in the volitional, emotional, and cognitive processes the lover exercises during the romantic relationship.

In this way, it can be said that the engagement of romantic love is an activity whereby the lover seeks to develop her self in a voluntary and purposive manner—a manner in which the reflexive processes of loving refashion her current self into a self that reflects her romantic involvement. What constitutes this romantic activity as autonomous is not limited to the intentionality existing between the agent's faculties and her beloved, but also includes broader intentions to realize happiness and an ideal self. In short, the alternative agent-centered conception understands romantic love to be a voluntary and purposive endeavor on the part of the lover.

I will now describe the prevailing commonplace agent-external conception of romantic love, and highlight how this conception is at variance with an agent-centered conception. What is most indicative, I believe, of an agent-external conception is its portrayal of romantic love as a mysterious phenomenon that induces the lover to love involuntarily and in a compulsive manner, which, in effect, over-determines the lover's will. These agent-external portrayals of romantic love are frequently couched in both mundane and supernatural understandings. In the case of supernatural agent-external conceptions, love is often understood to be an external force of a piece with some transcendent order over and above the agent's natural human autonomy. On the other hand, mundane agent-external conceptions do not characterize romantic love as belonging to a supernatural or transcendent order. However, mundane conceptions similarly cast love as an affecting force that influences the agent involuntarily and compulsively, but for unexplainable or ineffable reasons—as opposed to transcendent reasons—external to the lover's personal will and choice.

Whether mundane or supernatural, what is definitive of the agent-external conception is its depiction of love as something that over-determines or nullifies the agent's purposive will. As a result these agent-external views conceptualize love as being both involuntary and compulsive. This definitive element is often supported by the belief that reasons for loving are ultimately ineffable or unexplainable—that is, if they exist at all. While some agent-external conceptions may not disregard the lover's agency entirely, I believe that their conceptualization of love as a phenomenon external to the lover, in effect, diminishes the lover's agency to the point of passivity or obscurity.

I will now briefly suggest how questioning the extent to which romantic love is a matter of agency is itself interesting and why it warrants philosophical investigation. To do this, I will first discuss how this question often garners folk interest. I will then give an interesting reason why the prevailing agent-external conception of romantic love is itself worthy of philosophical scrutiny. In response to this, I will then outline why an agent-centered conception is a more promising as well as remedial alternative to the deficiencies associated with agent-external conceptions.

I take it to be uncontroversial that romantic love is both central and significant in the lives of many contemporary Western persons. Romantic love is central for these persons insofar as it is a chief concern in their lives—often on a par with concerns regarding career, family, or religion. What this means is that contemporary persons invest a good deal of time, energy, and resources into this one particular facet of their lives; a facet commonly referred to as a person's 'love life'. Given its centrality, it is not surprising that romantic love is also significant to the lives of many contemporary persons.

Insofar as romantic love is central to many contemporary persons it is also of considerable significance because of the way it contributes to these persons' identities. This means that, in virtue of its centrality, romantic love often becomes a significant source of self-understanding and an important part of a person's identity formation. In the lives of those where romantic love has become central and significant it is commonplace that such persons identify and understand themselves, often most of all, as being lovers. In much the same way that a doctor's identity becomes intertwined with the practice of medicine, a lover's identity becomes interwoven with her involvement in loving romantically.

One consequence of romantic love being both central and significant in the lives of contemporary persons is that the successes and failures of these persons' romantic relationships become exceedingly important. Correlative to the flourishing of their romantic love, people are subject to both exhilaration and depression alike. In cases where love founders and the latter is experienced, it is not unusual for persons to begin questioning what went wrong and what they could have done differently.

It is with this kind of questioning that the notion of agency becomes pertinent to the concerns of many contemporary lovers. In particular, in order to answer the question 'what could have been done differently?' it first becomes relevant to know what things are actually within the lover's control to begin with. In other words, for a person to understand how her romantic love went wrong or where she may have faltered, it is useful to know the extent to which romantic love is or is not a matter of her own agency.

When confronted with questions regarding the agency entailed in romantic love it is prevalent for contemporary lovers to, in hope of finding answers, consult the everyday conceptions of romantic love prevalent around them. Such commonplace conceptions are,

however, pervasively agent-external—whether mundane or supernatural. By appealing to agent-external conceptions in this way, these lovers are given the commonplace answer that—since the fate of love is decided by forces external to their own agency—there was nothing they could have done to revive their faltering love.

Although this answer may be a source of consolation, it seems to me that it ignores certain realities of romantic love—realities that, in part, render the lover potentially responsible for the outcome of her romantic relationships. Specifically, this commonplace agent-external explanation ignores the fact that, as an agent-centered conception maintains, the behavior of lovers directly influences the flourishing of their romantic relationships. It is with this acknowledgment that the distinction between prevailing agent-external and alternative agent-centered conceptions of romantic love becomes increasingly interesting.

Moreover, drawing the distinction between agent-external and an alternative agent-centered conception entails recognizing that commonplace agent-external conceptions are themselves worthy of scrutiny. One reason these agent-external conceptions are worthy of scrutiny is that they have become ubiquitous throughout contemporary culture. Having gained influential reign over the way people make sense of romantic love, these conceptions influence how lovers conduct themselves within their romantic relationships. Insofar as agent-external conceptions displace the lover's agency—in effect, relegating it to a status of insignificance—these commonplace conceptions promulgate behavior adverse to sustaining a flourishing romantic love. It is this pervasive condition that, I believe, classifies the agent-external conception as a theory worthy of philosophical analysis.

Despite the widespread prevalence of the agent-external conception at the folk level, I believe there is good reason to investigate and pursue the possibility that romantic love is more

agent-centered than what is commonly thought.² There are two particular reasons why I believe an agent-centered conception of romantic love can be a fitting alternative to the prevailing agent-external conception. First, an agent-centered conception is a more plausible theory, insofar as it more accurately recognizes the extent to which the lover's agency, in part, constitutes romantic love. Second, an agent-centered conception is more conducive to meeting the necessities of romantic love in general and, subsequently, toward the flourishing of lovers in particular. If it is true, as I believe it to be, that romantic love is more a matter of agency than agent-external conceptions acknowledge, then lovers would do well to adjust their standing conceptions accordingly.

What seems most plausible about an agent-centered conception is its claim that romantic love is a purposive and voluntary endeavor constituted by certain practices indicative of agency, as opposed to an involuntary experience that renders us passive to an external whim. The folk agent-external conception may not be wrong in its assertion that the romantic lover sometimes appears as though she loves without agency. However, what critical investigation reveals is that this agentless appearance is just that: *appearance*.

By examining the lover's volitional constitution, an agent-centered conception objects to the idea that our desire to love is something that assails us mysteriously. As such, it explains that the appearance of involuntary compulsion is, in actuality, an expression of the lover's intentional seeking and an instantiation of her ability to voluntarily self-legislate necessities of the will. In

² I recognize that in pursuing an alternative agent-centered theory of romantic love I am working within an existing and rich contemporary field. In particular, I wish to express my gratitude to philosopher Robert Solomon for his valuable work regarding the emotions and romantic love. His general thesis is that we choose and are responsible for our emotions—including the emotion of love. While Solomon focuses on the emotional aspect of love, my focus here is concerned specifically with romantic love as an activity and practice. I wish to make clear, however, that I see Solomon's position as being broadly compatible with my thesis here. See: Robert C. Solomon, *Not Passion's Slave: Emotion and Choice*. See also, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*.

this way, an agent-centered explanation identifies, in part, the extent to which romantic love is indeed a matter of agency.

One of the benefits of this kind of explanation is that when a lover recognizes her romantic agency, she is better suited to act in ways conducive to her romantic relationships. In other words, simply in virtue of recognizing the extent to which romantic love is a matter of agency, persons will be in a more advantageous position to flourish as lovers. I believe this to be important and of interest given the centrality and significance of romantic love in contemporary culture. This remedial attribute of the agent-centered conception is yet another reason why a distinction is worth pursuing. Furthermore, by drawing a distinction between folk conceptions and an alternative agent-centered conception of romantic love, lovers can understand with greater lucidity the extent to which romantic love is a matter of agency.

I propose here that romantic love is a purposive and voluntary endeavor constituted by identifiable expressions of agency. The romantic lover expresses this agency through practices that engage her volitional, emotional, and cognitive faculties. In so doing, the lover exercises her autonomy in ways that subsequently shape the contours of her self. This conception of romantic love is what I will refer to as an agent-centered conception, as distinct from agent-external conceptions.

To support this thesis I will first claim, in Chapter 1, that the structure of romantic love is essentially akin to that of care, as developed by Harry G. Frankfurt. In Chapter 2, I will claim that Iris Murdoch's idea of attention is suggestive of, and helps to identify, a perceptual virtue of romantic love. This perceptual virtue is indicative of the fact that romantic love is as I have proposed: namely, agent-centered. Lastly, I will claim that—in consideration of Alexander

Nehamas' work—what commonly appears as an involuntary compulsion to the beloved is actually a voluntary and purposive seeking, and a manifestation of the lover's romantic agency.

Chapter I

1.0

In this chapter I will elaborate upon my claim that romantic love is essentially akin to the structure of care as understood by Harry G. Frankfurt. To support this claim I will first suggest that romantic love is, in part, constituted by what can be called ‘volitional necessities’ and that these necessities are expressions of the lover’s agency. Second, I will examine the reflexive nature of love’s necessities and argue that, in virtue of the agent’s commitment, romantic love gives shape to our will. Lastly, I will contend that—contrary to longstanding belief—romantic love is not an involuntary state, but rather is a voluntary and purposive human activity. Discussing these arguments will serve to support my claim that romantic love is essentially akin to care, and furthermore, will bolster my thesis that romantic love is a purposive and voluntary endeavor constituted by expressions of agency.

In his work on care Frankfurt maintains that, “Loving is a mode of caring” but that “it is not a good idea to suppose that romantic relationships provide especially authentic paradigms of love” (Frankfurt, “Caring,” 165, 166). While I do not think Frankfurt is wrong to believe that romantic relationships may not always be the most authentic paradigms of love, I argue that when romantic relationships are authentic they become instantiations of a specific kind of love, namely, romantic love. In this way, I understand romantic love to be a subcategory of the kind of paradigmatic loving Frankfurt identifies as being a mode of care.³ As a subcategory of Frankfurt’s paradigm of love, I see the structure of romantic love as being akin to that of care. Keeping these nuanced distinctions in mind, I will now proceed with my intention to elaborate the necessities of romantic love.

³ I understand romantic love to be close to what the Greeks would have recognized as a hybrid between eros and Aristotelian friendship. In addition, I aspire to distinguish romantic love from Frankfurt’s paradigm of love in much the way that eros is distinct from, but related to, agape.

1.1

To start, it will be helpful to observe Frankfurt's idea of love. He writes:

When I refer here to love I am referring to a concern for the well-being or flourishing of a beloved object—a concern that is more or less volitionally *constrained*. [...] Love is essentially a somewhat non-voluntary and complex *volitional* structure that bears both upon how a person is disposed to act and upon how he is disposed to manage the motivations and interests by which he is moved (Frankfurt, "Caring," 165).⁴

With a definition of Frankfurt's paradigmatic love in tow, I will now examine more closely the notion that romantic love, just like Frankfurt's paradigm love, entails volitional necessities.

Frankfurt states elsewhere that when a person cares or loves a certain "thing" this care/love is constituted by a complex set of cognitive, affective, as well as volitional dispositions and states (Frankfurt, "Importance," 85). He concludes that, "The heart of love, however, is neither affective nor cognitive. It is volitional" (Frankfurt, "Autonomy," 129). So while Frankfurt acknowledges other aspects of love, because he sees love as essentially volitional, he concentrates his focus on the volitional necessities that loving entails.⁵

At this point I would like to consider the claim that romantic love—as a subcategory of Frankfurt's paradigmatic love—is, in part, constituted by volitional dispositions and states. There should be little resistance to this claim if one considers the fact that romantic love is, in part, commonly defined by the behaviors and actions of lovers—for instance: kissing, sex, telling your beloved "I love you", double-dating, etc. In addition to the idea that romantic love is

⁴ Also, I remind the reader that my concern here is with romantic love specifically. The romantic lover's concern is a concern for the well-being and flourishing of another person. As such, the lover's concern should not be thought of as being directed toward an 'object', as Frankfurt's paradigm of love may broadly envisage, but instead as being directed toward the unique particularities that distinguish the beloved in her individuality.

⁵ And to be clear, love's necessities are said here to be volitional since they bear upon, are correlative with, or relate to, the faculty of the agent/lover known as the will. As I will suggest later, romantic love is also constituted by specific cognitive necessities as well—for instance, understanding the beloved as beautiful.

volitional, I claim that romantic love involves the notion of volitional necessity. As will be made clear, this idea of volitional necessity will be understood in a way that challenges commonplace folk depictions—which portray love’s necessities as something the lover is passive to and assailed by.

The necessities of love and care are in many important ways similar to, yet also distinct from, other kinds of action that we *must* perform—in particular, the necessities of duty. The necessities of love are similar to necessities of duty insofar as each kind categorically delimits the agent’s volitional possibilities in a particular situation. This should, in general, make sense since it is widely accepted that being a lover means there are some things one must do—for instance, concerning oneself with the well-being of the beloved. As Frankfurt points out, however, the necessities of duty are imperatives of universal moral obligation—whereas necessities of love are best understood as personal imperatives (Frankfurt, “Autonomy,” 129, 132).

To clarify this, Frankfurt writes: “A declaration of love is a personal matter...because the person who makes it does not thereby commit himself to supposing that anyone who fails to love what he does has somehow gone wrong” (Frankfurt, “Importance,” 90). Romantic love, it seems to me, is especially personal in this way; furthermore, the volitional necessities that follow from such a relationship are themselves distinctly personal. For instance, while forgetting an anniversary may not be inherently ‘wrong’, the act of forgetting an anniversary could easily be damaging to the lover and beloved if ‘remembering anniversaries’ is a significant necessity to the particular romantic relationship in question.⁶

⁶ Put another way, the characteristically personal romantic necessities which constitute the romantic relationship between A and B will be different from those of C and D—or even from A and C, A and D, B and C, or B and D.

In this way, the volitional necessities that constitute romantic love are partly comprised of necessities personal in character. Necessities with a personal character—for example, remembering anniversaries—are binding only to the individual lovers involved in the particular relationship. However, romantic love is also constituted, essentially, by general volitional necessities of a universal character. Such volitional necessities are not legislated according to the particularities of each relationship, but instead are reflectively adopted by each and every romantic lover. I understand these general necessities to be nonnegotiable and binding to all agents *qua* lovers in virtue of their declaration to love romantically.⁷

I wish to take a brief pause at this juncture to review a few points pertinent to my discussion of love's volitional necessities thus far. I first asserted that romantic love is a subcategory of Frankfurt's paradigmatic love and essentially akin to the structure of care. I then claimed that romantic love is constituted by volitional dispositions and states, in conjunction with the lover's emotive and affective capacities. One of these volitional states is that of volitional necessity, whereby the lover's will is constrained to certain courses of action in virtue of her commitment to love romantically. As I will now discuss, the volitional necessities that accompany romantic love are important not only because they are in the interest of sustaining the love in question, but also because they give shape to the lover's will and consequently influence her character *qua* person.

1.2

Although the necessities of romantic love may not be universal moral imperatives, they are imperatives nevertheless and, as personal, they are particularly important to the self-identity

⁷ This suggests that, as I will discuss later, if an agent is incapable of satisfying these universal volitional necessities, the agent's status as an authentic lover becomes questionable.

of lovers. The importance of romantic necessities can be brought into sharper focus if we consider Frankfurt's description of love's general necessities. He outlines this importance in his observation that, "The necessities of love, and their relative order of intensity, define our volitional boundaries. They mark our volitional limits, and thus they delineate our shapes as persons" (Frankfurt, "Autonomy," 129, 138). As we see here, love's necessities are such that they demarcate possible courses of action for the agent *qua* lover, and in such a way that by fulfilling or neglecting these obligations the shape of the agent's will is affected or altered.

This important process, which follows directly from the lover's romantic engagement, can be thought of as a reflexive movement occurring constantly between the lover and beloved. What I mean by reflexive here should become apparent if we consider an example. As stated in Frankfurt's definition of paradigm love, loving entails a concern for the flourishing or well-being of a beloved (Frankfurt, "Caring," 165). This concern is, I assert, nonnegotiable and one of romantic love's most general necessities; as such, I will use it to illustrate the reflexive processes of volitional necessity.

Consider the claim that the lover's concern for the well-being of her beloved necessitates certain courses of action relative to particular situations. If, for instance, a lover's beloved appears to be in mental distress then it becomes incumbent upon her to attend to the beloved in ways that aim to alleviate the beloved's distress and promote well-being or flourishing. Such a loving attempt could be, for example, a thoughtful gesture, smile, conversation, text message, or any other combination of actions motivated by the desire to promote the beloved's flourishing.

While the specific act to fulfill this romantic necessity may vary according to the situation and lovers in question, meeting or neglecting this necessity will consequently, and in a reflexive manner, affect the shape of the lover's will. This means, for example, that if the lover

meets this necessity then her volitional character will be slightly solidified in the shape of someone who is willing to attend to the distress of her beloved. If the lover continually fails to fulfill this romantic necessity, then the shape of her volitional character will begin to reflect someone who is unwilling to attend to the distress of her beloved. In both ways, the agent's romantic love—constituted by certain volitional necessities—influences the kind of person they are continually in the process of becoming.

To be clear, what is reflexive here is the fact that love's necessities come to influence the character of the lover and, more broadly, the configuration of the lover's will *qua* person.⁸ It is this last effect that underscores the importance of love's necessities: our romantic love, and how we conduct ourselves within such relationships, bears heavily upon our identities as persons. In other words, romantic love defines, in part, the persons we become. Moreover, because of its volitional structure, romantic love is an activity whereby lovers shape the contours of their will. I argue that as a consequence of this, romantic love is a purposive and voluntary human activity.

1.3

Thus far, I have made the case that romantic love is essentially akin to the structure of Frankfurt's paradigmatic love. This is exemplified, in particular, by the presence of volitional necessities that accompany the lover's commitment to love romantically. These volitional necessities, I asserted, are instantiated in the actions and behaviors lovers must, in virtue of their love, necessarily perform. In addition, I suggested that the necessities of love reflexively shape the character of the lover/agent's will correlative to the behavior relevant to such necessities.

⁸ The amount of influence one particular fulfillment, or lack thereof, has upon a lover may vary greatly according to the specific lovers in question; some necessities are monumental and significantly alter the character of the lover's will, while other necessities are perhaps less so. Also, it seems that for each particular romantic relationship love's necessities will be ordered in some fashion; whereby the influence of a given necessity is correlative to its rank.

However, what will likely be more objectionable to an agent-external conception of romantic love is my current assertion that—while commonly understood to be instances where the agent acts compulsively and involuntarily—the necessities entailed in romantic love are actually instantiations of the lover’s willful behavior.

In his definition of paradigm love—cited at the outset of 1.1—Frankfurt acknowledged the commonplace appearance that the activity of loving places constraints on the agent’s will in a somewhat non-voluntary fashion (Frankfurt, “Caring,” 165). The experience is in some sense non-voluntary, as Frankfurt says, insofar as the lover is—perhaps unexpectedly—*confronted* by one of her love’s necessities, a necessity perhaps that uncompromisingly demands a particular course of action. It is non-voluntary, then, because it is not up to the lover—if they are in deed an authentic lover—whether or not to fulfill the necessity. If the lover holds an agent-external conception of romantic love, she may experience her love’s necessity as assailing, and then begin to believe her love is a force that compels her to act against her own will.

Contrary to agent-external conceptions, however, an agent-centered conception holds that this commonplace experience is only a *prima facie* appearance; what is really going on here, when examined more closely, is purposive and voluntary activity on the part of the romantic lover. What the agent-external conception fails to recognize, however, is that the lover—in virtue of her commitment to engage in a romantic relationship—legislates these necessities upon her will so as to harbor the well-being and flourishing of her beloved. In this way, love’s romantic necessities are first self-imposed and then later, potentially, experienced as non-voluntary when activated by circumstantial situations in which the beloved’s well-being or flourishing becomes pertinent and salient.

As Frankfurt reminds, it is the self-imposed aspect of volitional necessity that vindicates it as an autonomous, rather than a heteronomous, experience. He observes that:

When someone is tending to be distracted from caring about what he cares about most, the force of volitional necessity may constrain him to do what he really wants to do. [...]

These necessities constrain us from betraying the things we care about most and with which, accordingly, we are most closely identified (Frankfurt, "Importance," 88, 91).

Here we understand that the force of love's volitional necessities are not external to the agent, rather, they flow from the agent and her commitment to be guided, above all others, by her beloved.

That romantic love has become significant and central in the lives of contemporary persons suggests the idea that romantic love and its interests would rank as one of the chief motivations in such persons' lives. However, contemporary lovers often have other important motivations in their lives aside from their romantic love, such as the desire for an accomplished career, which may come into conflict with their romantic engagements. If these persons do in fact care most about their romantic relationships, but nevertheless neglect the well-being or flourishing of their beloved for the sake of pursuing some other motivation, e.g., work, then the character of these persons' will, due to the reflexive processes of love, come to reflect such prioritization and behavior.

In order to prevent lovers from neglecting their beloved's well-being, I suggested that—in virtue of their romantic love—they reflectively adopt the nonnegotiable and universal romantic necessity to preclude motivations and forgo behavior antithetical to the flourishing of their beloved. The will of lovers, as I have claimed, is also constrained by volitional necessities that are characteristically personal and reflect the idiosyncrasies of those involved in the

romantic relationship. These necessities likewise safeguard the lover from acting in ways antithetical to her beloved; however, they differ insofar as they are legislated between the agents participating in the romantic relationship.

Insofar as contemporary persons construct their identity in conjunction with their romantic activity, as is commonplace for many contemporary persons, such identity construction suggests that anything that may affect the character of their will *qua* lover is of importance. As such, it seems to me that lovers would do well for themselves to satisfy both the general and personal volitional necessities that accompany their romantic love. In other words, if the character of a lover's will is shaped by the activity of her romantic loving, then how she conducts herself *qua* lover is not an insignificant matter. In this way, the intentional practice of volitional necessity becomes at once important to agents and germane to an accurate conception of romantic love.

1.4

To be clear, I see the autonomous nature of romantic love as embedded within the volitional structure I have just outlined. Specifically, the ability of a lover to romantically commit her will to a beloved, self-impose necessities that motivate the well-being and flourishing of this beloved, and to then adhere to these romantic necessities, is to will and act in a way indicative of voluntary and purposive conduct. Furthermore, romantic love is instrumental to the agent's own flourishing insofar as the lover's volitional activity determines, in part, the shape and character of her will—and thus the kind of person she becomes.

Frankfurt has, I believe, a keen understanding about the instrumental quality of this kind of activity for persons when he writes, “For our own sakes, we *need* to love; otherwise, our lives

will be miserably deprived,” adding, “Without loving in one or more of its several modes life for us would be intolerably unshaped and empty” (Frankfurt, “Caring,” 174). Due to the fact that we are both rational and willful creatures, it seems to me especially pertinent to point out that romantic love is an activity whereby these faculties are engaged, and our personhood thereby exercised. Because not all activities have the ability to shape our lives or give them purpose, it is important to recognize activities that do. As I have been arguing, romantic love is one such activity.

While romantic love is just one mode of loving—and, as Frankfurt has cautioned, possibly not even its most authentic mode—nevertheless, it has become a prevalent mode of loving for many contemporary persons. As I stated at the outset, agent-external conceptions of romantic love have become, regrettably, commonplace for many contemporary lovers. What is regrettable about this is that agent-external theories conceptualize the lover’s experience as involuntary and without agency, rather than as voluntary and purposive. As I have pointed out, one contributor to this misconception is the appearance that romantic love compels the lover with seemingly external force to perform actions experienced as freedom-stifling. However, as my analysis of love’s necessities has suggested, this is only appearance; when one examines this experience more deeply, what emerges is the recognition that love’s necessities are self-legislated in virtue of the lover’s romantic commitment.

The lover’s purposive and willful activity, which I have just discussed, indicates that romantic love involves agency and should be understood as such. In general, love—and, for many contemporary persons, romantic love specifically—is something we need as persons. Because of this it is all the more important to heed Frankfurt’s advice that, “We need for our own sakes to conduct ourselves in those ways that constitute loving” (Frankfurt, “Caring,” 174).

Insofar as agent-external conceptions commonly—and inaccurately—disregard the extent to which romantic love is constituted in part by the lover’s agency, these conceptions are not conducive to romantic loving. Alternatively, it is my contention that an agent-centered conception more accurately explains the place of agency in romantic love; it can remedy some of the deficiencies I have identified within commonplace agent-external conceptions.

Chapter II

2.0

In this chapter I claim that Iris Murdoch's idea of attention is suggestive of, and helps to identify, a perceptual virtue that arises from the structure of romantic love. This virtue, which I will refer to as 'romantic attention', is indicative of the fact that romantic love is as I have proposed: namely, agent-centered. As will be argued, romantic attention is itself an instantiation of the lover's agency. Moreover, I will contend that romantic attention is a virtue that, when practiced, cultivates and refines the lover's perception *qua* agent thereby expanding the contours of her agency in general.

I will argue in 2.1 that, given the structure of romantic love—particularly, its volitional necessities—there arises a need for a supplemental kind of perception on the part of the lover. In 2.2, I will gloss Murdoch's idea of attention, then elaborate how her idea of attention dovetails with Frankfurt's understanding of care. This will allow me, in 2.3, to claim that Murdoch's idea of attention is another manifestation of, and helps identify, the perceptual virtue involved in romantic love—romantic attention. To support this claim, I will argue that Murdoch's idea of attention helps to identify a similar, yet distinct, expression of agency in romantic attention. Furthermore, my intention here will be to suggest that romantic love's perceptual virtue indicates that romantic love is more accurately conceptualized as agent-centered rather than agent-external.

2.1

In order to demonstrate that the structure of romantic love is supplemented by the perceptual virtue of romantic attention, I will first show how the need for this kind of perception

arises from its structure. I will then argue, by way of example, that the lover's vision influences her ability to satisfy the necessities of her romantic love. For these purposes, it will be useful to recall the structure of romantic love as I outlined in the previous chapter.

To start, it should be remembered that, for an agent-centered conception, romantic love is understood to be a purposive and voluntary endeavor. In addition, I have claimed that the lover's romantic agency is identifiable within her cognitive, emotional, and volitional faculties.

Although Frankfurt's notion of paradigm love (a mode of care) is not identical to romantic love, I argued that, when authentic, the structure of romantic love is essentially akin to that of care/love as understood by Frankfurt. In suggesting this similarity in structure I pointed out that romantic love is also comprised of certain volitional necessities in much the same way as Frankfurt's paradigmatic love.

By directing my focus upon the volitional necessities involved in romantic love, I was able to claim further that the necessities that partly constitute romantic love, contrary to commonplace appearances, are actually instantiations of the lover's agency. This claim challenges agent-external conceptions insofar as these conceptions commonly understand the experience of these romantic necessities as involuntary and without agency. My claim—that the necessities of romantic love are, in fact, expressions of the lover's agency—was then further explained by the idea the lover both reflectively adopts as well as legislates necessities freely and of her own volition, thereby exercising her romantic agency. In addition, I noted that this process is essentially reflexive; the character of the lover's will is configured and affected by her ability to satisfy the romantic necessities incumbent upon her in virtue of her declaration to love.

This last point is an important one, I think, because it touches upon the realization that the identity of lovers *qua* persons is something determined, in part, by the reflexive processes they

have involved themselves in by virtue of their romantic engagements. For example, if a lover disavows love's most general and universal volitional necessity—to harbor and further her beloved's flourishing and well-being—then not only will her beloved suffer, and by extension the romantic relationship, but the character of her will does too. Specifically, the character of this lover's will comes to resemble the kind of person who fails to concern herself with her beloved's flourishing and well-being; and, as such, a person who fails to satisfy the necessities that constitute romantic love.⁹

If, as is prevalent for contemporary persons, this lover understands romantic love as something significant and important to her life, then her inability to meet the necessities of romantic love may perhaps have a detrimental affect on her self-identity.¹⁰ It is in this way that engagement in romantic love, while inherently valuable to persons, poses certain risks and hazards to lovers. Frankfurt too is aware of this reality; he cautions, “Lovers are vulnerable to profoundly distressing anxieties and sorrows when, in one way or another, things do not go well for their love (Frankfurt, “Caring,” 173). As I noted in the previous chapter, because loving—whether romantic or otherwise—is something significant to the lives of persons, people would do well for themselves if they acted in ways conducive to loving. One such way, conducive to romantic love in particular, is to act in accordance with the necessities that follow from the engagement of loving.

To act in a way that accords with love's volitional necessities is not always easy, however. In fact, there may be very real obstacles, existing both outside and within the lover,

⁹ If such a person persistently fails to satisfy the volitional necessities of romantic love in this way, it is likely—it seems to me—that the character of her will will become, if it is not already, romantically defective. As such, this person will be unable to qualify as a lover in the definitive sense I have thus far outlined.

¹⁰ To be sure, it is conceivable that being a lover may not be significant or central to the identities or lives of some people. In such cases a failure to satisfy the criteria for being a lover—acting in accord with their beloved's well-being—will still affect the character of these persons' will; however, this change in character will not be significant to such persons in question. In other words, if a person does not care about being a romantic lover, then a negative affect upon their will *qua* lover will not be 'detrimental' in the sense I evoke here.

which may impede the lover's ability to act in ways conducive to romantic love. For instance, situations may arise where circumstances beyond the lover's control make satisfying her romantic necessities overly difficult or perhaps impossible. Or, confusion may arise within the lover as to which course of action is actually most appropriate to satisfy the necessities of her love. Such cases suggest that at times the lover is confronted by and situated within circumstances that challenge or interfere with her romantic agency.

Because such circumstances or situations are continually present in varying degree, the lover's ability to meet her romantic necessities involves, I argue, a particular sort of perceptual virtue—romantic attention. This romantic attention, I claim, is a virtue because it enables the lover to more reliably act in ways conducive to romantic love. In addition, I consider romantic attention to be supplemental because it enhances the lover's agency as instantiated through the volitional structure of romantic love. In this way, I take it to be likely that the lover whose vision is characterized by a romantic attention will thereby also be a more excellent lover than the romantically inattentive lover.

I argue here that the perceptual virtue of romantic attention is a perceptive and cognitive disposition or state involved in romantic love. This perception is cognitive because it is accompanied by a correlative knowledge of the lover's volitional necessities; in particular, knowledge about what course of action will satisfy these necessities. I will now briefly illustrate, by way of example, how the lover's ability to meet such volitional necessities is related to her perception. To demonstrate this I will consider a situation in which romantic attention is lacking, thereby exhibiting the need for a perceptual virtue to supplement the volitional structure of romantic love.

To start, consider a case where the flourishing and well-being of the beloved is at stake; for instance, this beloved is in a condition of mental distress and evidences this through an uncharacteristic foul mood and physical agitation. If the lover does not notice the visible signs of her beloved's distress—saddened eyes, sullenness, pacing, etc.—she will be first, unlikely to recognize her beloved's distress, and second, unable to alleviate this distress by acting in ways conducive to her beloved's flourishing or well-being. Simply put, we cannot properly satisfy the volitional necessities of our romantic love and act in ways conducive to loving, if we do not—in the first place—see and understand when they become applicable in particular situations. Furthermore, the necessities of romantic love do not present *themselves* to the lover; rather, their applicability and relevance arise in situations and within contexts that require an active perception on the part of the lover to apply them in salient fashion.

To continue the example, imagine that the lover observes her beloved's foul mood and physical agitation yet sees these symptoms of distress as bothersome behaviors to be ignored so as to concentrate on her work at hand. She may think, “what nerve; my work is much too important to be bothered by such trivial distractions,” possibly adding, “can't they snap out of it, don't they realize that this work could mean a promotion for me?” What the lover fails to perceive in this case is not that her beloved is exhibiting signs of distress—in fact, she does notice these behaviors—but rather, she fails to see that these signs of distress necessitate some kind of loving action intended to uplift her beloved and support their flourishing and well-being.

The situation encountered in this example is intended to highlight the fact that—based upon the structure of romantic love, which is akin to Frankfurt's volitional account—there arises the need for a certain kind of supplemental perception on the part of the lover. Specifically, the example above evidences that without this kind of perception, the lover has an insufficient

understanding of how the romantic necessities that constitute her romantic love apply to a given situation—in this case, her beloved’s mental distress. Simply put, lovers cannot meet their love’s necessities if they do not, in the first place, recognize the instances when these necessities become salient and, secondly, if they do not understand them as motivating certain kinds of action.¹¹ Furthermore, the necessities of romantic love do not present themselves in a vacuum; rather, they arise in concrete situations that require an active perception to discern the circumstances relevant to the love in question. Romantic attention, I claim, is an active perception capable of supplementing the structure of romantic love in such a way because it enhances lovers’ abilities to satisfy the obligations of their romantic commitments.

In this section I have claimed that the need for a particular kind of perception arises from the structure of romantic love. I have also suggested that the lack of such a perception on the part of the lover can hinder her ability to satisfy the volitional necessities entailed by romantic loving. This may, as I suggested further, have a significant affect on the character of the lover’s will, thereby, quite possibly, influencing the identity of the lover *qua* person.

I also made the claim that romantic attention is an active cognitive perception that enhances the lover’s capabilities to adhere to the volitional structure of romantic love. As such, I have suggested that romantic attention be thought of as a supplement to the romantic lover’s volitional necessities. In the next section, I will introduce the relevance of Iris Murdoch’s idea of attention and relate it to the structure of love as understood by Frankfurt. This will lay the foundation for a positive account of romantic attention and its place as a perceptual virtue of romantic love.

¹¹ As will be discussed later, these kinds of actions are unselfish and grounded in the individual reality of the beloved.

2.2

In this section, I argue, first, that Iris Murdoch's idea of attention dovetails with Frankfurt's understanding of care. This will allow me to argue, next, that Murdoch's idea of attention is suggestive of the perceptual virtue involved and maintained in romantic love. To support these arguments I will first gloss Murdoch's idea of attention. Then, I will elaborate how Murdoch's idea of attention dovetails with, and in some respects complements, Frankfurt's understanding of care. This will support my forthcoming claim in 2.3 that Murdoch's attention is another manifestation of, and thereby helps to identify, romantic attention.

By addressing these points, I intend to bolster my argument that romantic attention is a perceptual virtue that enables lovers to more reliably perform actions conducive to their romantic love. I will then argue that romantic attention is itself an expression of agency; which, in turn, can evidence my thesis that romantic love is more accurately conceived as agent-centered. To start, it will be useful to gloss Murdoch's idea of attention.

On the whole, Murdoch uses the word attention as a "good word," whereas "looking" is used as a neutral word (Murdoch, 36). This distinction implies the idea that attention carries with it normative connotations. This idea is expanded when Murdoch explains that she uses the word attention, borrowed "from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" (33). She elaborates elsewhere that, "The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world and the ability so to direct attention is love" (65). I would like to parse out, and elaborate upon, what I take Murdoch to mean by these statements.

First, it is pertinent to notice that, for Murdoch, attention is a good thing directed away from the self and upon an individual reality. By “reality” I understand Murdoch to be referring to the array of facts, attributes, and features that collectively constitute the subjective experience of something in the world. I take such a reality to be “individual” insofar as it is complex, particular, and distinct in idiosyncratic ways to other, possibly similar but nevertheless distinct, subjective experiences. For instance, the individual reality of a beloved will consist in her facticity (for example, the time and place she was born, where she attended school, the name of her childhood cat, etc.), her physical features, her psychological tendencies, her preferences, ambitions, style, political opinions, religious beliefs, etc. In this way, gazing upon a beloved’s individual reality will involve a perception and understanding of these kinds of aspects, which contribute to the beloved’s identity, worldview, and subjective experience of existence.

This is important, I believe, because it delimits the possible objects eligible for Murdoch’s conception of attention. For instance, there are people who frequently direct their gaze upon themselves—focusing on their own fantasies, status, appearance, etc. In extreme cases, we often think of such people as being self-absorbed and selfish. Perhaps such persons are so engrossed with keeping their self in view that they are, consequently, unable to see anything else around them with due importance. For example, even if her beloved is standing in front of her, the lover whose gaze is fixed upon her personal vanities will more likely than not fail to perceive the individual reality of her beloved. As such, this person’s gaze does not qualify as an instance of romantic attention; this gaze also fails to meet the requirements that define Murdoch’s idea of attention.

I would now like to point out two more of Murdoch’s ideas above; the first, that attention is a loving gaze, the other, that the ability to direct attention is love. In conjunction with these

ideas, it is worth noting that Murdoch views the capacity to love as an ability to see—specifically, to see without the tinge of personal fantasy and “the proliferation of blinding self-centered aims and images” (Murdoch, 65). What I understand Murdoch to mean here is that to look upon something—say, a beloved—with attention is to look upon them with a loving regard. The look or gaze of this loving regard, for example, is constituted by a focus upon the beloved’s individual reality—for instance, her physical and psychological features, her personal history, circumstances of her upbringing, her preferences, desires, fears, ambitions, talents and so forth. In addition to this, a lover’s ability or capacity to direct this gaze upon her beloved’s individual reality is conduct that, in part, constitutes love.

Although she believes that, “Human love is usually self-assertive,” Murdoch also holds that, “When we try perfectly to love what is imperfect our love goes to its object *via* the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just” (100). What typifies the perception of love is, then, its unselfishness and just vision. Although I believe Murdoch is right to express caution with regard to the tendency of humans to be self-assertive, I do not think that, with respect to love, this is “usually” the case. Actually, I think that—with the aid of an unselfish attention—human love can be an exception to what Murdoch has called human self-assertiveness.

It seems to me that what often strikes us as exceptional about acts of loving is that they are in a sense different than most other behaviors humans engage in insofar as they are contrary to usual selfish human tendencies. It is this difference in quality that sometimes seems puzzling to observers of romantic loving, and which inspires praise when instantiated in an act of care between strangers. To be sure, Murdoch has in mind a different kind of love than romantic love, a love that is more aligned to care or Frankfurt’s paradigm of love.¹² Nevertheless, I believe her

¹² The fact that romantic attention is akin to Murdoch’s idea of attention in much the same way that the structure of romantic love is akin to that of Frankfurt’s paradigm of love will be addressed later in this section.

idea that both love and attention are unselfish and contrary to the fantasies of the self is a correct idea, and one that nicely accords with Frankfurt's understanding of care.

Having glossed what I understand Murdoch's idea of attention to be, I now wish to elaborate my claim that attention, so understood, dovetails with Frankfurt's notion of care. To do this, I will argue that Murdoch's idea of attention helps complement the volitional account of love found in Frankfurt. Because the structure of romantic love is akin to his account, I will then make the claim that attention so understood is another manifestation of a perceptual virtue developed and involved in romantic love as I have defined it.

While the structure of romantic love was shown, in Chapter 1, to be akin to Frankfurt's volitional account of care, I argued in 2.1 that out of this structure there arises the need for a certain kind of perception on the part of the lover. Specifically, I claimed that the lover requires a romantic attention to complement the volitional necessities that constitute her romantic love. This is because the lover cannot satisfy her volitional necessities if she is not perceptive to the contexts in which they become salient and applicable in the first place. I believe Murdoch's idea of attention dovetails with the volitional account of love I have laid out, and in ways important to a robust agent-centered understanding of romantic love. In particular, there are two conceptual points pertinent to an agent-centered conception: first, the constraints of necessity placed upon the agent's will and second, the selflessness involved in loving.

I should state at the outset that both Frankfurt and Murdoch recognize certain conditions of necessity and obligation as being expressions of the will's freedom. This should already be evident in the case of Frankfurt, since my analysis of volitional necessity in Chapter 1 showed that such necessity is, in fact, an exercise of the agent's autonomy. For the sake of further clarity, however, consider Frankfurt's explanation. "The condition that it [volitional necessity]

be self-imposed helps to account for the fact that it is liberating rather than coercive” (Frankfurt, “Importance,” 88). Frankfurt rightly acknowledges here the important observation that the volitional necessities of love, or romantic love for my purposes, are self-imposed and liberating rather than coercive. It seems to me that this is evidence for questioning the commonplace agent-external interpretation that lovers behave involuntarily as a result of being determined by the forces of love, forces entirely apart from their own will.

As I understand volitional necessity, the lover self-imposes certain romantic necessities upon her will so as to ensure that she will perform activity constitutive of, and consistent with, romantic loving. In other words, these self-imposed volitional necessities delineate the movement of the lover’s will by precluding courses of action antithetical to the flourishing or well-being of their beloved. I take this to be indicative of the lover’s autonomy insofar as it is an voluntary exercise of purposive activity. As I noted already, love’s general nonnegotiable necessities are reflectively adopted, while necessities of a personal character are self-legislated by the particular lovers involved in the relationship. Both of these types of romantic necessity are, I maintain, self-imposed as Frankfurt’s understanding suggests. Moreover, I believe that this purposive activity is an instantiation of the lover’s agency—which suggests, as I have been arguing, that romantic love is more a matter of agency than is commonly conceived.

In a fashion similar to Frankfurt, Murdoch has a more nuanced understanding of freedom and how necessities of the will should be construed. Murdoch rightly observes that the free movement of the agent’s will is largely influenced by his vision—and not only at the precise moment of action. Consider her idea that, “If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at.” She continues, “The ideal situation...is rather to be represented as a kind of ‘necessity’. [...] The idea of a patient, loving regard, directed upon a

person, a thing, a situation, presents the will not as unimpeded movement but as something very much more like ‘obedience’ (Murdoch, 38, 39). What I understand Murdoch to be saying here is that, in a situation when a person is confronted with alternative choices of action—say, between Choice A which is conducive to her beloved’s flourishing and Choice B, which is antithetical to her beloved’s flourishing—the person’s quality of attention leading up to this choice will have largely decided which course of action she will perceive as being proper. This means that—with respect to romantic love, in particular—if the lover has been romantically attentive to her beloved she will more accurately perceive the *necessary* course of action in accordance with her beloved’s flourishing, and will thus have no ‘choice’ to deliberate upon.¹³

Murdoch affirms this point saying, “By the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act” (Murdoch, 65). It seems to me Murdoch is suggesting that an agent’s choice, and ability to act on this choice, is determined by the quality of her vision—which is, ideally, a vision of obedient attention. Moreover, Murdoch suggests that freedom entails this attentive vision when she states, “Freedom is not strictly the exercise of will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action” (65). This stipulation, that freedom entails the “experience of accurate vision” makes sense when one considers Murdoch’s position that most of an agent’s willing is self-centered and belonging to egotistic fantasy (65). The upshot of this is that, in the context of love, if an agent’s vision is obscured by her fantasies and selfish interests then she cannot by pure will act freely and lovingly. To act freely in the context of loving

¹³ Because Murdoch’s idea of attention is informed by Simone Weil’s conception, it is relevant here to cite Weil’s understanding of the relationship between attention and necessity of the will. Weil writes, “The attention turned with love towards God (or in a lesser degree, towards anything which is truly beautiful) makes certain things impossible for us...There are ways of behavior which would veil such attention should they be indulged in and which, reciprocally, this attention puts out of question.” See Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 148-149.

requires an attentive vision which, when obedient, occasions proper action; as Murdoch says above, this situation will, ideally, be one of necessity.

What I wish to clear up, however, is that the attempt to see with attention is still, I maintain, an exercise of the agent's will—even though Murdoch portrays the accurate vision of attention an “experience” in relatively passive terms above. Surely it can be said that the agent who—by an exercise of the will—sees with attention has an experience of accurate vision; but this should not, I maintain, be thought of as something which happens irrespective of the agent's will altogether. As Murdoch rightly suggests, agents often will courses of action based upon motives of selfishness and fantasy. The role of attention then becomes to purify the agent's vision, refocusing it toward the individual reality of a beloved so that the agent can then will action free from selfishness and fantasy. Attentive and accurate vision is not something that fortuitously happens to the agent, instead, the agent must of her own volition actively practice this way of looking with an unselfish and loving regard.

If we recall that attention consists of a loving, unselfish gaze directed away from the self and upon an individual reality, then it becomes evident that the vision of attention is in this way selfless. In the context of romantic love, if the lover's quality of attention is poor then his gaze will have an eye towards selfish interests and as a result will be blind to the interests of his beloved's flourishing. This being the case, it seems to me that Murdoch is correct to propose that the nature of the action has probably already been determined; the lover with a poor quality of attention will not recognize the *necessity* of Choice A, and will instead choose Choice B.

The idea that the lover's gaze is selfless immediately makes sense with respect to, and is readily compatible with, Frankfurt's understanding of love as well. Frankfurt's paradigmatic love—which, structurally, an agent-centered conception of romantic love is akin to—is itself

typified by selflessness. He writes, “When a person is responding to a perception of something as rational or beloved, his relationship to it tends toward selflessness.” He continues, specifying that, “His attention is not merely concentrated upon the object; it is somehow fixed or seized by the object. The object captivates him. He is guided by its characteristics rather than primarily by his own” (Frankfurt, “Importance,” 89). It is here that Murdoch’s idea of attention, as an unselfish and loving regard for an individual reality, dovetails strikingly with Frankfurt’s notion of caring.

The fact that Frankfurt’s paradigm lover responds to a perception of his beloved in a selfless manner, and, moreover, that he concentrates on the characteristics of his beloved rather than his own is, I argue, indicative of Murdoch’s idea of attention. To be clear, I see Murdoch’s idea of attention belonging, more accurately, to the dimension of Frankfurt’s paradigmatic love, rather than the dimension of romantic love specifically. However, because the structure of romantic love, as I have defined it, is akin to Frankfurt’s paradigmatic love, Murdoch’s idea of attention still helps to identify the particular perceptual virtue involved in romantic love. In other words, Murdoch’s idea of attention helps identify what I have called romantic attention—a perceptual virtue that is also indicative of the lover’s agency. I will elaborate upon this claim further in the following section.

2.3

In the previous section, I defined Murdoch’s idea of attention and explained how this idea dovetails with Frankfurt’s understanding of care. Based upon this discussion, I argued that Murdoch’s idea of attention is another manifestation of the perceptual virtue involved in romantic love. As will become clear, Murdoch’s idea of attention is not identical to this

perceptual virtue; nevertheless, her idea of attention does help to identify what I consider to be its romantic variant—romantic attention. In addition, I will claim that this perceptual virtue is indicative of the fact that romantic love is as I have argued, specifically agent-centered. To support these claims, I will first cite a similarity and a difference existing between Murdoch’s idea of attention and my understanding of romantic attention. Second, I will argue that, as illuminated by Murdoch’s idea of attention, romantic attention signifies and evidences the lover’s agency.

To start, I should specify that I see Murdoch’s idea of attention as related, but not identical, to romantic attention. Although these two are, in important ways, alike—for example, both are perceptual and cognitive states or dispositions—there is also at least one crucial way in which they are distinct. The difference that I would like to address here is that Murdoch’s idea of attention pertains solely to the moral dimension, whereas romantic attention—because it is particular to romantic love, which is not moral but, rather, personal—is not. Murdoch states very explicitly that she believes attention to be, “The characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent” (Murdoch, 33). I will discuss the idea that attention is “active” below, but right now I wish to explain a bit further how the domain of romantic attention differs from the moral domain of Murdoch’s attention.

As was discussed in Chapter 1, the necessities of love and morality are both categorical; however, the necessities of love differ from those of morality insofar as the former involves necessities with an individual and personal character, whereas the latter is comprised of necessities strictly universal in character. As Frankfurt reminded, we do not suppose that someone else has committed a moral wrong if they fail to love the person we love (Frankfurt, “Importance,” 90). In similar fashion, I do not think that if a person fails to attend to her beloved

they are morally reprehensible—they may just be a lousy lover. On the other hand, I do think that if a person attends well to her beloved, and, as a result, satisfies the necessities of her romantic love, they become in a sense a virtuous lover. For these reasons I believe it helpful to appreciate that Murdoch's idea of attention manifests itself in ways similar to romantic attention. It is also crucial, however, to recognize that her idea belongs to a moral dimension and is thereby not interchangeable with its romantic variant.

I now wish to point out an important similarity between romantic attention and Murdoch's attention, one that identifies the expression of agency within these two perceptions. What is essential to both Murdoch's idea of attention and romantic attention is that they each enhance the agent's ability to meet the necessities germane to their particular dimension, the former being moral. Each does this, specifically, by curbing the selfish tendencies of the agent, thereby producing clarity of vision conducive to (loving) action consistent with the flourishing and well-being of the beloved. In this way, both romantic attention and Murdoch's attention are perceptual and cognitive dispositions that constitute, in part, proper action—whether loving or moral.

This becomes all the more clear if we consider Murdoch's words directly. She writes: "Our ability to act well 'when the time comes' depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention" (Murdoch, 55). As I pointed out in the previous section, for Murdoch, an agent's performance of a moral action does not occur solely at the moment of outward action—rather, the action is partly conditioned by her inner practice of directing accurate vision. Murdoch further explains the relationship between will and vision stating, "Man is not a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a personal will. He is a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees, and who has some continual slight

control over the direction and focus of his vision” (39). If we reflect upon her comments here, what becomes evident is that, for Murdoch, our ability to be moral depends upon our ability to see attentively—or what amounts to: seeing morally.

In like fashion, I claim that our ability to be lovers depends upon our ability to see with a similar sort of attention—romantic attention. I have referred to this particular variant of attention as romantic because it produces vision conducive to romantic loving specifically. Moreover, the kind of vision produced by romantic attention is cognitive in the sense that it includes knowledge about the beloved’s individual reality and the kinds of action that would be conducive to the flourishing of the beloved. I would now like to illustrate, by way of example, this attribute of romantic attention.

But first, I would like to briefly pause here and address Murdoch’s claim above that human beings have “some continual slight control” with respect to the direction and focus of their vision. In order to better situate this claim, consider Murdoch’s belief that human beings are naturally selfish. She writes, “The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself.” She adds: “By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. [...] Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world” (Murdoch, 76, 82). As I noted in the previous section, agents are not free to act in ways constitutive of loving unless their vision is, through the practice of attention, purified of the selfishness and fantasy antithetical to such loving. Because Murdoch believes human life is naturally characterized by selfishness, she similarly reasons that most of an agent’s vision will reflect this state of selfishness. However—and this is, for my purposes, of great importance—within this more or less selfish condition, human beings still have some—however “slight” it may be—control over the direction and focus of their vision.

That the agent has control over her vision is indicative of agency. Even if slight, it nevertheless remains a possibility for the agent to practice, develop, and hone her ability to control the direction and focus of her vision. Moreover, the slightest difference in an agent's vision may have a considerable effect on how she will perceive a given situation and thus how she will be disposed to act as a result of such perception. The result of an agent's attempts to develop control over her vision will, ideally, be such that she will have a refined—but never perfected—ability to see the world and her beloved with the unselfish and loving gaze of romantic attention. This is, I believe, especially true in the case of romantic love, where the slightest difference in perception can result in a misperception that may have significant consequences to the flourishing of the beloved and the relationship in question.

Imagine, for instance, a situation in which a lover learns by way of conversation that gummy bears were his beloved's favorite childhood candy; and that gummy bears are connected to cherished memories that when recalled bring a profound joy to his beloved. It is important to pause here and take notice that the lover comes to hold this knowledge as a result of his ability to listen to his beloved's story with a romantic attentiveness.¹⁴ Imagine further, some time later, that this lover's beloved is in a state of distress; the lover is aware of this fact; and while at the grocery store walks past a bulk of gummy bears. Now, if he perceives this situation with a romantic attentiveness, the lover will both see and understand the gummy bears as being significant and salient insofar as they have the potential to bring joy to, and thus contribute towards the well-being of, his beloved. Having recognized this, a necessity emerges which this

¹⁴ I am suggesting here that romantic attention be practiced not only in the visual sense, as a kind of seeing, but in other senses as well, such as listening. By actively listening with a romantic attentiveness, the lover is able to glean—through content, tone, or other sources—much more about her beloved's individual reality than otherwise. In this way, the awareness of the lover becomes expanded and more vivid.

lover cannot ignore: he must, with the intent of furthering his beloved's well-being, purchase some gummy bears for his beloved.

Aside from illustrating the way romantic attention enhances the lover's ability to act lovingly, this example also suggests that this perceptual virtue is not concerned with the universal dictates of morality—as Murdoch's idea of attention is—but, more accurately, the personal and idiosyncratic necessities that partly constitute an individual's romantic love. Using this example as a basis, I wish to examine the perceptual virtue of romantic attention with an eye towards its active quality. This will assist me in arguing that romantic attention signifies, and evidences, the fact that romantic love is more accurately conceived of as agent-centered.

According to an agent-centered conception of romantic love, the lover does not love involuntarily or passively; rather, romantic love is an endeavor whereby the lover exercises her agency in a voluntary and intentional fashion. This agency is instantiated within processes that engage the lover's cognitive, emotional, as well as volitional faculties. In the previous chapter I argued that the lover's volitional faculty is exercised through the volitional necessities that, in part, constitute romantic love. By reflectively adopting and legislating, then upholding these necessities, the lover exercises her volition in a way indicative of agency and expressive of her autonomy. Throughout this chapter I have been suggesting that romantic attention, the perceptual virtue involved in romantic love, is a perceptual and cognitive disposition or state. The fact that the agent can practice, hone, and develop her vision so as to better direct and focus romantic attention is indicative of the romantic lover's agency. I wish here to emphasize this, and outline how this fact suggests that romantic love is more a matter of agency than commonplace agent-external conceptions grant.

As I have claimed, romantic attention is a perceptual virtue because it enhances the lover's ability to act lovingly in accord with the volitional structure of romantic love. As Murdoch rightly acknowledges, however, this perception is *active*—the agent/lover is engaged in a kind of internal struggle to see, free from the fantasies of the self, the beloved's individual reality. If we consider another example, we will be in a better position to identify how romantic attention is sustained through the lover's agency.

In this example, imagine that the beloved is a vegan and that the lover is planning a short road trip and picnic for the two. While planning this trip the lover must exercise his romantic attention in a manner that attends to the individual reality of his beloved, which includes the reality that this beloved does not consume animal products. While packing the picnic basket the lover's romantic attention will omit those items that do not meet the dietary requirements of his beloved—however, it is important to recognize that this is not automatic. The lover will need to inspect the listed ingredients of potential items to verify that they meet his beloved's requirements. In this instance, the activity of romantic attention is fairly straightforward and overt; let us now develop the example further to illustrate how the activity of this perceptual virtue is practiced in more subtle ways.

Continuing the example, let us say that these two romantic lovers visit some friends while on their road trip and attend a party. Imagine that at this party there is an abundance of snacks and food, but none of it is vegan. The lover's romantic attention will be active here insofar as he will inquire into the ingredients of the dishes and dips, out of a concern for the well-being of his beloved. However, the lover must be vigilant in exercising this romantic attention. The activity of romantic attention is not something switched on and off—instead, it is always more or less active depending upon the requirements of the situation. I believe Murdoch suggests this notion,

that the activity of an attentive vision requires persistence, when she noted above that human beings have some “continual” slight control over the direction and focus of their vision (Murdoch, 39).

So, while enjoying a conversation about Nietzsche, for instance, the lover in this example may overhear that someone is going to the store to procure more party supplies. At this moment his romantic attention—which was always present, just in a waiting mode—becomes tuned in to this fact; his awareness of this knowledge then necessitates his asking this person to bring back a vegan snack for his beloved. Notice further that this lover does not selfishly continue his discussion of Nietzsche; instead, he immediately and as a result of his romantic volitional necessity and obedient romantic attention lovingly concerns himself with the interests of his beloved. This example is an example of what Murdoch considers to be an ideal situation, where the agent’s course of action is represented as a kind of necessity of the will rather than a spontaneous choice.

Although subtle, these voluntary attempts on the part of the lover to direct and refocus his vision with romantic attention are imperative to an active romantic attention. A romantic attention that is constantly being developed through practice is influential to and enhances the lover’s ability to act in accord with the necessities of his romantic love. As such, the perception of romantic attention is not something that happens automatically, as a result of the lover’s declaration to love. Instead, it is something that the lover must develop and maintain in order to follow through on his initial declaration to love, and to thereby satisfy the necessities constitutive of romantic loving. In this way, romantic attention indicates that romantic love is not a passive and involuntary experience but an endeavor that is typified by certain practices wherein the lover’s agency is at work—volitional necessity and romantic attention are two such practices.

2.4

Before concluding this chapter, I wish to argue that romantic attention actually refines the lover's perception in a way that cultivates and expands her agency *qua* agent. Recall that, in the above examples, the lover's exercise of romantic attention applied not simply to his sight, but was active with respect to his capacity to listen as well. It is in such instances that romantic attention can expand the contours of agency; the space available for the lover to act lovingly is no longer limited to outward action observable to the external world, it also extends into her inner world. When this is recognized, the lover is able to apply a romantic attention to her other senses as well, thereby cultivating her awareness of the world in a more multidimensional loving manner.¹⁵

When the lover realizes that the flourishing of her romantic engagement is contingent upon her ability to perceive the beloved and the world at large with a romantic attention, it becomes imperative that she begins to actively develop and practice such attention. Through active practice, the lover's ability to look, listen, and think with an unselfish and loving regard is honed as a result of her continual efforts. Although this romantic attention is, at first, directed toward the beloved, I believe it is very plausible that the awareness of romantic attention can spill over to other contexts and relationships as well. What I would like to claim here is that one of the virtues of romantic attention is that, when it is properly developed, it begins to improve the lover's ability to act well *qua* agent in circumstances not related to her romantic love. I think it very likely that the lover whose perception has become sharpened through practice of romantic attention will also, as a result of this continual development, be a more considerate agent

¹⁵ When romantic attention expands beyond the lover's sight to other senses, referring to the lover's romantic attention in terms of a 'perception' becomes misguided. To avoid this category mistake, I think it more appropriate to refer to this multidimensional romantic attention as an 'awareness' rather than perception.

generally. For instance, the practice of romantic attention may also be helpful in cultivating the agent's moral sensibility as well; and as such, it may be a small step from the attention of romantic love to Murdoch's idea of a moral attention.

I understand romantic attention to be a virtue insofar as the lover who develops and embodies it is also refashioned into a more excellent agent generally. Recall that by practicing and developing her control over the direction and focus of her vision—away from her selfish interests, toward the individual reality of her beloved—the romantic lover refines her ability to perceive and act in ways considerate to the well-being of her beloved. It seems to me that this refined ability to perceive and act considerately is something the romantic lover need not limit to her beloved alone; it can apply to other persons in contexts and relationships other than romantic love.

For example, consider the case of a bachelor who habitually leaves the toilet seat up. Imagine that this bachelor enters into a romantic relationship with a female beloved and begins to practice seeing with romantic attention, thereby directing his vision toward the individual reality of his beloved. Let us imagine further that, as a result of his attempts to see his beloved with a romantic attention, this bachelor lover becomes aware of the fact that by leaving the toilet seat up he is potentially hindering the well-being of his beloved. Acting from this perceptual awareness, and in consideration of his beloved, the bachelor lover then makes an intentional and voluntary effort to put the toilet seat down.

This is a straightforward example of how the practice of romantic attention can make an agent a more considerate lover. I will now continue this example to show how, in virtue of practicing romantic attention, the lover becomes more perceptually refined and considerate *qua* agent. Continuing, let us imagine that this bachelor lover also has a sister who comes to visit

him. What I want to suggest here is that, having honed his perceptual awareness through the practice of romantic attention, this bachelor lover will direct his refined perceptual sensitivity toward the interests his sister. In so doing, the bachelor lover will recognize that his sister's well-being would also be furthered if he were to put down the toilet seat. Acting out of care and consideration for his sister, the bachelor lover puts down the seat—not habitually *qua* lover, but intentionally *qua* brother.

Murdoch has said that, “Anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue” (Murdoch, 82). Insofar as romantic attention alters the lover's perception in an unselfish manner, it seems appropriate that it be characterized as a virtue of romantic love. Moreover, insofar as an agent-centered conception of romantic love accepts this claim—that romantic attention is a virtue—such a conception can account for the ways in which the lover's agency is refined and expanded *qua* agent as a result of her romantic engagement.

Because commonplace agent-external conceptions often inaccurately neglect the role of the lover's agency, they are unable to account for this virtue and unable to explain how lovers may achieve it. The fact that an agent-centered conception of romantic love can account for this important notion makes it not just a more accurate theory, but a more attractive theory as well. What I mean by this is that because an agent-centered conception recognizes the lover's agency as an essential component to romantic love, it can explain how this agency is instantiated in romantic attention. Insofar as it can give an accurate account as to the function of romantic attention, which I have suggested it very well can, an agent-centered conception equips contemporary lovers with an understanding conducive to actualizing this perceptual virtue. I

believe this to be further evidence for pursuing an agent-centered conception and dismissing commonplace agent-external conceptions.

In this chapter I claimed that Iris Murdoch's idea of attention is suggestive of, and helps identify, a perceptual virtue involved in romantic love. Furthermore, I claimed that this perceptual virtue, which I called romantic attention, is indicative of the fact that romantic love is as I have proposed: namely, agent-centered. These claims were made in service of my larger argument that romantic love is a purposive and voluntary endeavor involving the lover's agency. My broad intention within this chapter was to give a convincing account of the fact that the lover's perception is an important capacity that, in part, constitutes an agent-centered conception of romantic love.

In support of this agenda, I first claimed that—based on the volitional structure of romantic love outlined in Chapter 1—there arises the need for a particular romantic perception on the part of the lover so as to more reliably satisfy love's volitional necessities. I then glossed Iris Murdoch's idea of attention, and explained how her idea dovetails with the structure of love found in Frankfurt's account. This laid the groundwork for my suggestion that Murdoch's idea of attention is another manifestation of, and thus helps identify, the perceptual virtue involved in romantic love—romantic attention.

I then gave a positive account of romantic love's perceptual virtue by outlining a crucial difference that exists between romantic attention and Murdoch's idea of attention, as well as an important similarity shared between them. I also discussed an example that helped to illustrate the activity of romantic attention; this indicated that the lover's vision is not something passive but, rather, is active and an instantiation of her romantic agency. Finally, I pointed out that one attractive feature of an agent-centered conception of romantic love is that it can account for the

fact that romantic attention helps expand and refine the contours of the lover's agency *qua* agent. In the following chapter I intend to expand upon my thesis that romantic love is, in part, a matter of agency and thus a purposive and voluntary endeavor that comes to influence the shape of the lover's self.

Chapter III

3.0

In this chapter I intend to argue that what commonly appears to be an involuntary compulsion towards the beloved is actually a voluntary and purposive seeking on the part of the lover. In addition, I will claim that this seeking is a manifestation of the agency constitutive of romantic love. In arguing for these claims, I intend to bolster my thesis that romantic love is a voluntary and purposive project constituted by identifiable expressions of agency—which, subsequently, comes to refashion the lover’s self.

Toward this end, I will first examine a mundane and a supernatural interpretation of the agent-external assumption that romantic love is involuntary insofar as lovers appear to be captivated and compelled by their beloved. Second, I will explore the function of beauty within romantic love, focusing in particular on the lover’s judgment of beauty. Finally, I will argue that the lover’s relationship to beauty manifests as a voluntary and purposive seeking, which consequently refashions her self. One of the reasons agent-external conceptions of romantic love are so prevalent is attributable, I believe, to a misinterpretation regarding the appearances of the romantic lover. What I will be doing in this chapter is arguing that such appearances are just that, *appearances*.

3.1

I have said elsewhere that agent-external conceptions of romantic love depict the lover as being over-determined by forces outside of her self, and thus conclude that romantic love is involuntary. The prevalence of this conception is, in part, attributable to the appearance that the beloved compels the lover’s attraction—I will refer to this notion as ‘the appearance of

compulsion'. In this section, I will examine a mundane and a supernatural interpretation of this appearance; each of which is expressive of the agent-external conception. Although both the mundane and the supernatural response interpret the lover's attraction as being compulsive, it will be useful to observe that they differ with respect to the reason why they understand the lover's attraction to be involuntary.

To be clear, I should emphasize that it does, in fact, commonly appear as though—particularly with respect to romantic love—the beloved compels the lover. Recall, for instance, that in the previous chapter I cited Frankfurt's position that the lover's attention is guided by the beloved's characteristics rather than his own. Moreover, Frankfurt recognizes this common appearance of compulsion when he indicated that the lover's attention is "Somehow fixed or seized by the object. The object captivates him" (Frankfurt, "Importance," 89). As we notice here, the words "fixed," "seized," and "captivates" indeed suggest that the beloved in some way compels the lover. It will be important to remember, however, that what an agent-centered conception of romantic love takes issue with is not whether this appearance in fact exists—it admits that it does. Instead, an agent-centered conception takes issue with the notion that this appearance is sufficient evidence for the commonplace agent-external assumption that the lover's attraction to his beloved is essentially an *involuntary* compulsion.

To begin, consider that when a lover is asked why she is drawn to her beloved, she may very well respond with a host of reasons. Some reasons may consist of qualities—for example, because of the beloved's personality, physical appearance, intelligence, talents, humor, style, etc. Other reasons may be personal, idiosyncratic, or even selfish—for instance, because they lived next door, because of their likes and dislikes, because they make the lover happy, because of their money, etc. The sum of all these reasons does not, it seems to me, amount to an ultimate

explanation as to why the lover is attracted and drawn to her beloved; this is because there is always some qualitative aspect or reason left unaccounted for by such quantitative appeals. In other words, a list of reasons itself does not explain why the lover is attracted to the particularity of her beloved.¹⁶

The mundane agent-external response holds that because lovers cannot give a comprehensive reason explaining the particularity of their romantic attraction, it appears—and is commonly experienced—as if their attraction is in a sense involuntary. In other words, this mundane agent-external conception reasons that, if lovers themselves are not in possession of such an explanation for their attraction, it must be that they are heteronomous with respect to their motivations for being compelled to the particularity of their beloved. As such, the actions that constitute the lover’s drawing nearer to her beloved are often interpreted by commonplace conceptions as being determined by forces other than her own will. In this way, it commonly happens that lovers who hold such folk conceptions often understand and experience their attraction as a kind of magical or mysterious compulsion. Insofar as contemporary lovers act in accordance with this understanding, they contribute further to the appearance that lovers are—seemingly—involuntarily drawn to their beloved.

Instances in which a lover is clearly involved in an unhealthy relationship but remains in it despite the concerned pleas of friends and family are often cases that exemplify the way lovers experience this apparent involuntary compulsion to the beloved. Consider the following example, which illustrates the perspective of a lover who embraces this agent-external conception. In such cases the lover, in spite of her own well-being and best interests, may claim

¹⁶ To be sure reasons that appeal to the attributes of the beloved—for instance, pretty, smart, compassionate, etc.—are illuminating and by no means trivial. However, I find that a list consisting of attributes such as these falls short of capturing something qualitative about the particularity of the individual beloved. In other words, these reasons do not explain why the lover is drawn to *this particular* person, instead of someone else in possession of exactly the same attributes and then some.

“I know I should leave, but I can’t. I don’t know why, I just can’t help but love them.” Because this lover cannot give a satisfactory reason for her attraction, mundane conceptions attribute the cause and origin of her behavior to the beloved instead of the lover’s own will; the upshot of which is the view that this lover is involuntarily compelled to remain with her beloved.

To be sure, this lover may very well recognize she is accountable for the actions that result from her attraction. Nevertheless, it would not be uncommon for her to maintain that the compulsion to stay with her beloved was, in a fundamental sense, not of her own volition. It is a short step from this conclusion to the belief that romantic love is itself, essentially, an involuntary state experienced without agency. It seems to me that agent-external conceptions commonly suggest making this conceptual step.

In response to the appearance of compulsion, what is typical of mundane conceptions is that they refrain from appealing to transcendent qualities in order to give a comprehensive reason explaining why the lover is attracted to a particular person. However, in the absence of a satisfactory reason explaining the particularity of this attraction, mundane responses conclude that the lover’s attraction to her beloved is ineffable, without explanation, and involuntary. The upshot of such a conclusion is this: insofar as the romantic relationship is constituted by the lover’s attraction to her beloved, romantic love itself is subsequently mysterious, without purpose, and subject to unknowable forces or circumstances.

Contrary to mundane responses—although similar insofar as both are expressive of an agent-external conception—supernatural responses appeal to the transcendent for a reason explaining the particularity of romantic attraction and its appearance of compulsion. The supernatural response may very well admit that while it is true that lovers themselves cannot give a satisfactory reason why they are compelled to their beloved, this lack of evidence does not

mean that this involuntary compulsion is without explanation. What the supernatural response asserts, however, is that the ultimate reason for the appearance of compulsion is found through revelation. As may be expected, this revelation is typically grounded in mythology, religious doctrine, or some form of the occult. I will now examine one particular supernatural interpretation and explanation, of the appearance of compulsion.

The conception of *Eros* articulated by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* has been a significant precedent for historical and contemporary agent-external theories of romantic love. As such, it will be worthwhile to examine how this interpretation of the lover's attraction is suggestive of the claim—made by agent-external conceptions—that such attraction is an involuntary compulsion to the beloved. After outlining this interpretation, I will show how contemporary agent-external conceptions of romantic love espouse, in one way or another, Aristophanes' account of love.

To start, consider how Aristophanes appraises the commonplace appearance that lovers are compelled to and captivated by one another. He describes this appearance as follows: “The two are struck from their senses by love, by a sense of belonging to one another, and by desire, and they don't want to be separated from one another, not even for a moment” (Plato, 475). Notice that this attraction is cast as something that lovers are ‘struck’ by; this external imagery is, I argue, indicative of contemporary agent-external conceptions insofar as forces outside of the lover determine her attraction. It is also worth noticing that, in this particular interpretation, the lovers are portrayed as being delighted by their love-struck condition. However, I would point out that the desire of these lovers—they don't *want* to be separated—is an afterthought and a reaction to their being externally love-struck. In other words, the origin of these lovers'

attraction and subsequent love is still, in the first place, the result of forces external their own will.

It is important to observe that Aristophanes acknowledges the fact that these lovers cannot produce a reason to explain their attraction. He writes:

These are the people who finish out their lives together and still cannot say what it is they want from one another. [...] It's obvious that the soul of every lover longs for something else; his soul cannot say what it is, but like an oracle it has a sense of what it wants, and like an oracle it hides behind a riddle (Plato, 475).

What typifies Aristophanes' account as supernatural is the fact that he appeals to mythology in order to find an ultimate reason why these lovers are compelled to one another—despite the fact that they themselves cannot say why.¹⁷

Specifically, Aristophanes appeals to a creation myth intended to convey the idea that human nature, as we presently know it, is an aberration of an original nature. In our original nature, as the myth reveals, humans were whole creatures until Zeus cut them in halves much like pomegranates. With this myth as the basis for his evidence, Aristophanes claims:

This, then, is the source of our desire to love each other. Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature. [...] 'Love' is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete (474, 476).

In this way, Aristophanes interprets the appearance of compulsion as an innate human desire to mend and restore an original nature. With this interpretation in tow, lovers can then give a

¹⁷ It is at this juncture that, to the contrary, mundane interpretations assert that such a reason does not exist or that it is unknowable.

reason for why it appears as though they are compulsively drawn to their beloved: “Because they are my other half; my attraction to them is the expression of my desire to be whole again.”

What I would like to briefly point out is that while this reason may give lovers the impression that the source of attraction has been returned to their own will; this is actually, I argue, illusory. What I mean by this is that although the lover understands her attraction to the beloved as a desire to be whole, this desire to be whole does not originate from her will. As innate, it is the kind of desire that is not self-determined but, rather, determined by something other than the lover’s will—in this instance, by an original condition and the mythical forces of Zeus. It is in this way that such supernatural responses to the appearance of compulsion contribute to the agent-external belief that romantic love is essentially a state of involuntary compulsion.

Before I conclude this section, I would like to briefly show how contemporary commonplace conceptions of romantic love espouse and perpetuate Aristophanes’ account of *Eros*. To do this, I will consider how the contemporary use of everyday language—perhaps unintentionally or unreflectively—reflects the prevalence of an Aristophantic conception of romantic love. For example, the notion that aspiring lovers hope to find ‘*the one*’ is language suggestive of a conception that believes there to be, in fact, one other person preordained and ideally suited for the lover. In a way expressive of Aristophanes’ tale, this cliché calls to mind a scenario where lovers are, in effect, wandering about looking for their other half.

The expression a ‘match made in heaven’, usually uttered to describe two ideally suited lovers, is another commonplace saying that indicates the prevalence of agent-external thinking. As opposed to an agent-centered conception, it suggests conceptual imagery where Aristophanes’ Zeus or Christianity’s God the Father are the essential forces constituting romantic

love—irrespective of the lover’s own will. While many do not take these commonplace utterances literally, the fact that this language is so evocative of an Aristophantic account of love indicates, in some form or another, the pervasiveness of the agent-external conception in contemporary culture.

My aim in this section has been to examine the interpretive basis for the agent-external claim that, because the lover appears to be involuntarily compelled by her beloved, romantic love itself must therefore be involuntary and passive. Because I take the agent-external conception to consist of mundane and supernatural camps, I have examined how each might interpret the lover’s attraction to her beloved. As discussed, mundane understandings differ from the supernatural in certain respects, nevertheless, they reach the same conclusion: that the lover is involuntarily and compulsively attracted to her beloved.

The appearance of compulsion, as I have called it, contributes in a significant way to the agent-external belief that romantic love consists of an involuntary compulsion on the part of the lover. Having examined the interpretive basis for this claim, I intend to continue my argument that—to the contrary—romantic love is a voluntary and purposive project constituted, in part, by the lover’s agency. In the following section, I will begin to challenge the agent-external interpretations I have examined here by investigating the role of beauty in romantic love. Understanding beauty’s significance will help to disclose the fact that while the lover may appear to be involuntarily captivated by her beloved, the appearance of this can more accurately be explained as a voluntary and purposive seeking indicative of romantic agency.

3.2

In response to the question, “why do you love your beloved?” it is commonplace for lovers to answer—amongst other possible reasons—“Because they are beautiful.” As noted in the previous section, I do not find this to be a satisfactory explanation since it prompts the further question, “but *why* do you find *them* beautiful?” A commonplace response to this question typically involves an appeal to characteristics or features the lover believes to be constitutive of her beloved’s beauty. As I have already discussed, a quantitative list does not—in my view—answer the question as to why the lover loves *this* person instead of someone else who may possess the same exact features and characteristics.

However, I would like to suggest that the lover does not somehow go wrong in trying to explain her love by appealing to the beloved’s beauty. As I will show, the answer: “because they are beautiful,” is actually more revealing than it may appear at first blush. With this idea in mind, I will examine the function of beauty as it pertains to romantic love in particular. This examination will yield the recognition that the romantic lover’s relationship to beauty is not something involuntary and compulsive. Instead, this relationship to beauty is intentional and determined, in part, by the lover’s voluntary judgment to find her beloved beautiful. This ‘judgment of beauty’ as I will call it, suggests that romantic love is more a matter of agency than commonplace agent-external conceptions acknowledge.

To begin, I will gloss Alexander Nehamas’ understanding of beauty—which I find to be both an accurate theory as well as appropriate to the kind of agent-centered conception of romantic love I have been pursuing here. Second, I intend to suggest that the lover’s judgment of beauty is a general and nonnegotiable necessity of romantic love, which the agent *qua* lover must adhere to. Lastly, I will claim that this judgment of beauty is indicative of agency in two specific ways.

First, it will be helpful to grasp the distinction Nehamas draws between attraction and love. He writes:

The difference between the clear desires of attraction and the complex desires of love...is that in one case desire grows mostly out of what one already knows, which includes what one wants, while in the other it is also a yearning for features still undisclosed and desires that are still without shape (Nehamas, 64).

In conjunction with this view, consider Nehamas' understanding that:

Beauty' is the name we give to attractiveness when what we already know about an individual—whether it is from a distance, from up close, or as a result of interaction—seems too complex for us to be able to describe what it is and valuable enough to promise that what we haven't yet learned is worth even more, perhaps worth changing ourselves in order to come to see and appreciate it (70).

It is important to emphasize here that while beauty so conceived includes attractive features already known, it entails the notion that there is something else of value to it that presently eludes our description. Beauty promises then, that what has yet to be disclosed is worth even more than what is already known.

Nehamas expands upon this idea noting, "beauty is always revealed in appearance but never completely...we can be attracted to things of which we are not yet fully aware" (Nehamas, 70). This is why, as I have suggested, a litany of features—no matter how comprehensive—turns out to be insufficient for explaining why a lover finds her beloved beautiful. Moreover, while such a list may very well explain an agent's attraction to a person, it stops short of explaining why the agent may come to love this person.

However, if we couple Nehamas' suggestion that love is a yearning for features still undisclosed and desires still without shape, together with the idea that beauty entails something yet to be learned (or disclosed) and is worth changing oneself (by reshaping one's desires) in order to appreciate it—then an intimate relationship between love and beauty emerges. In other words, based upon my reading of Nehamas, love turns out to be a yearning for beauty. That beauty contains within it a promise of something valuable yet to be learned and worth pursuing is essential to the idea that love is a kind of yearning insofar as it is, specifically, a yearning for the promise that beauty issues.

I think that this notion of a yearning for something unknown is consistent with the experience (soon-to-be) lovers commonly have when first meeting their (soon-to-be) beloved. As Nehamas observes, beautiful people—just like beautiful works according to Nehamas—“spark the urgent need to approach, the same pressing feeling that they have more to offer, the same burning desire to understand what it is” (Nehamas, 73). He continues, noting that this desire, “springs from a sense that it would be good to do so, that...my life would be better if you were to become a part of it” (54). Misinterpretation regarding this desire to approach and understand something attractive has contributed to what I have called the appearance of compulsion. What such commonplace misunderstandings neglect to appreciate is that this desire is contingent upon the lover's agency—which is manifested through her active judgment of beauty.

As I will now argue, this desire and attraction does not—as agent-external conceptions commonly suggest—originate from a source external to the lover's own will, whether supernatural or otherwise. Instead, I claim that the agent's desire to draw nearer to and understand a person she is attracted to is a result of her own voluntary judgment that such a

person is beautiful. Before proceeding further, I should make clear that the beautiful person Nehamas speaks of above is not beautiful in an objective sense, nor is her beauty a completely subjective matter. He clarifies this, arguing that while most people are not considered to be beautiful, if by beautiful what is meant is physical attractiveness, but most people at some time or another have both loved and been loved by someone. What this suggests, according to Nehamas, is that psychological and bodily features interpenetrate (Nehamas, 68).

In recognizing that the criteria for evaluating attractiveness and beauty are not solely a matter of objective physical features Nehamas opens the door to the idea that judgments of beauty are personal and voluntary. He writes:

The question is not whether I can love someone who is *in fact* ugly...but whether I can love someone I *find* ugly, and I believe that's impossible. But to the extent that I find you beautiful—which is always, in one degree or another, a matter of love—life will seem better to me with than without you (62).

I believe Nehamas rightly emphasizes the notion that the agent must “*find*” the other beautiful insofar as this finding suggests agency consistent with an intentional and voluntary sort of seeking. In terms of romantic love, this language of finding calls into question commonplace conceptions that often portray the lover as being struck involuntarily or captivated by the beloved's beauty—as if beauty were a kind of tractor beam.

Notice that, as I have already pointed out, finding someone beautiful is intimately and essentially connected with loving. In this way, I claim that one of the most general and nonnegotiable volitional necessities involved in romantic loving is that the lover find her beloved to be beautiful; this entails what I have been referring to as the judgment of beauty. The judgment of beauty, as I mentioned above, is neither objective nor completely subjective;

instead, Nehamas argues that the judgment of beauty is personal (Nehamas, 85). To better understand what this means consider Nehamas' elaboration that, "What we find beautiful is central to our taste or sensibility, and taste or sensibility is manifested whenever we act on our own and not only along the lines already drawn by routine and convention" (85). Nehamas claims here, as I understand him, that what we find beautiful is a reflection of our personality—which includes aspects of our self such as taste, sensibility, character, and style. Also, insofar as these aspects are manifested "whenever we *act* on our own," Nehamas seems to imply that when an agent finds someone beautiful she is acting, in a sense, autonomously so long as her judgment is not solely determined by convention. In this way, the judgment of beauty is very much a matter of agency, especially since it involves distinct abilities to act in aesthetic contexts—e.g. taste and sensibility. And insofar as it is true, as I claim it is, that romantic love necessarily entails such a judgment of beauty, romantic love itself is in part constituted by agency.

In virtue of the differences in personality existing between persons, it makes sense that while one person may find a particular person beautiful another may quite possibly find this person ugly. I believe that awareness of this phenomenon is prevalent at the folk level, and is expressed in the—often backhanded—cliché expression: "I don't know what she sees in him." This cliché expresses is not simply a tacit disagreement about judgments of beauty but, moreover, expresses disbelief with respect to the conception of beauty Nehamas has developed and which I have endorsed. The person who articulates this cliché, it seems to me, simply does not grasp the fact that judgments of beauty are personal—or, to the contrary, believes that everyone's judgments of beauty should conform to hers.

Although I have been suggesting and arguing for the idea that judgments of beauty are neither completely objective nor subjective, I have so far only discussed how it is that the lover's

judgment of beauty forgoes complete objectivity. I certainly do not, however, wish to insinuate that judgments of beauty are entirely subjective—this would be quite mistaken. Instead, it is important to recognize that lovers’ judgments of beauty are not without normativity. Nehamas is aware of the normativity judgments of beauty require when he writes about the taste involved in such judgments. He writes, “The judgment of taste has an inescapable social dimension...the interaction with others the judgment of taste requires prevents is from being purely subjective or private” (Nehamas, 77). In other words, Nehamas is anticipating here—quite rightly I believe—that lovers’ judgments of beauty must be answerable to the norms of a community.

For instance, if a lover finds—for whatever reason—the Wicked Witch of the West to be beautiful, the fact that judgments of beauty are personal does not mean that such a judgment cannot be challenged and shown to be misguided. Although the lover’s judgment of beauty is personal and constituted, in part, by her taste, style, and sensibility, these characteristics operate within a backdrop of community standards. In response to this lover’s judgment of beauty, her friends may very well respond, for example: “you say that you find this Witch of the West beautiful, but you are mistaking her indifference as boldness. With such a disregard for the wellbeing of others, this Witch of the West cannot rightly be said to be beautiful.”

It is in this sense that Nehamas claims judgments of beauty are essentially social (85). While the lover’s judgment of beauty is personal, it must adhere to some normativity—a normativity that is grounded within a community and expressed through social interaction. As such, the judgment of beauty, as Nehamas says, “Requires me to learn what others think and take it into account as I shape my own understanding, making me willing to spend part of my life in their company” (Nehamas, 77). It is in this way that the personal judgments of beauty involved in romantic love fall short of being completely subjective.

In any case, I find it to be an indication of accuracy, and a strength of Nehamas' theory that it can satisfactorily explain the phenomenon of variance between judgments of beauty. As I have already mentioned, I take it to be another strength of his theory that it recognizes the agency involved in judgments of beauty—this is one of the main reasons why I have decided to appropriate his understanding into an agent-centered conception of romantic love. As I have suggested, the fact that the lover's judgment of beauty is personal indicates that her relationship to the beloved's beauty is not an involuntary captivation, but one that is self-constituted. I would like to point out another way in which the judgment of beauty involves agency; this will further underscore the idea that judgments are personal.

I have already stated that I take the language of "finding" a person beautiful to appropriately suggest the fact that, as I have been arguing, the judgment of beauty is an instantiation of agency. This is because "finding" connotes activity on the part of the (soon-to-be) lover/agent that is contrary to the prevalent agent-external conception, which construes the lover as having a passive role with respect to beauty. Nehamas further suggests the lover's active role when he writes, "Whenever we find something beautiful...we are actively engaged in interpretation" (132). Once again, this understanding of beauty evokes the notion that the agent's relationship to beauty is far from passive.

Expanding upon the assertion that an agent's judgment of beauty entails active interpretation, Nehamas explains that, "To interpret is to try to see in things what is distinctly their own. That is in turn to see them in ways that are distinctly *our* own and, to the extent that they are ours alone, these ways of seeing turn out to be aesthetic features in their own right and have themselves a claim to beauty" (Nehamas, 132). In what follows I aim to parse out Nehamas' idea, that finding something beautiful involves an active interpretation on the part of

the agent. In so doing, I will argue that the active interpretation entailed in the judgment of beauty indicates agency in two ways particular to an agent-centered conception of romantic love.

What is immediately important to take notice of is Nehamas' contention that the active interpretation involved in finding something beautiful requires trying to see in it what is *distinctly its own*. In reference to this idea, he states that, "To understand the beauty of something we need to capture it in its particularity, which calls for knowing how it differs from other things, and that, in turn, is to be able to see, as exactly as possible, what these things are and how each one of them, too, differs from the rest of the world" (120). What I want to underscore here is the idea that finding something beautiful, through active interpretation, requires seeing in it what is distinctly its own and understanding it in its particularity. In consideration of these requirements, I suggest that the seeing and understanding belonging to this active interpretation will likely call for a certain quality of perception on the part of the interpreting agent. I claim that this perception, which I have discussed at length in Chapter 2, is romantic attention.

If we recall that romantic attention, as I have outlined, is an active and cognitive perception, then its applicability to the active interpretation and understanding of beauty right away is fitting. In addition to this, the focus of romantic attention is directed at the beloved's individual reality—which is comprised of aspects such as the beloved's distinctly particular attributes and features. In this way, the focus of romantic attention is conducive to seeing in something what is distinctly its own as well as capturing it in particularity—which finding something beautiful requires. Insofar as judgments of beauty entail romantic attention, such romantic attention will likewise prevent the lover's judgments of beauty from being completely subjective. This is because the perception of romantic attention focuses not upon the lover's

subjective fantasies, but rather upon the distinct features and particularity that belongs to the person in question—as such, the lover’s judgment of beauty is guided to a certain degree by an objectivity that prevents total subjectivity.

Lastly, because the gaze of romantic attention is unselfish and loving, I believe that if an agent’s vision is characterized by romantic attention she will be in a more suitable position to actively interpret in the way Nehamas has indicated. If, as human beings are often disposed, an agent tries to actively interpret through a lens of egotism and self-assertion, it is likely that he will fail to find beauty. While it is plausible that this agent may very well find this something attractive, attractiveness itself falls short of being the object of love.

It is for these reasons that I find romantic attention to be the appropriate perception an agent’s judgment of beauty and, by extension, active interpretation. Because romantic attention is an instantiation of the lover’s agency, importing this perception into the judgment of beauty enables me to claim that since finding this beauty is, in the first place, a willful activity on her part the lover is not involuntarily captivated by her beloved’s beauty. That an agent’s active interpretation involves romantic attention is one way in which the judgment of beauty—a romantic necessity for the lover—is a matter of agency. I will now move to discuss the second way in which finding someone beautiful—namely, the person who is to become the romantic lover’s beloved—manifests agency.

I have just discussed how trying to see in things what is distinctly their own—a requirement of the active interpretation belonging to judgments of beauty—instantiates agency on the part of the lover. I now wish to parse out the remainder of Nehamas’ above assertion so as to exemplify a second way in which finding something beautiful instantiates agency. Nehamas claims that active interpretation is, “to try to see in things what is distinctly their own”

which is “in turn to see them in ways that are distinctly *our own*,” adding, “There is no real distinction here; in finding beauty we create it ourselves” (Nehamas, 132). It seems to me that Nehamas is suggesting that the way in which an agent sees and understands the distinctness and particularity of something is itself a creative act—an act that, in turn, can also be judged as beautiful.

Insofar as finding someone beautiful is a matter of love, the endeavor of romantic love—which, by necessity, entails the judgment of beauty—is an engagement whereby lovers continually create beauty with one another. That lovers, in virtue of their individual taste and sensibility, create beauty through active interpretation of their beloved—specifically, by directing their gaze upon the aspects and features that are distinctly the beloved’s—gives a further sense of significance to the lover’s perception. As such, the lover’s perception becomes not merely a matter of agency but in addition, an activity of self-fashioning. By directing her vision in ways that express her taste, sensibility, character, and style, the romantic lover cultivates these distinct and particular aspects of her self, which in part, constitute her individuality and identity. In this way, when lovers find their beloved beautiful, they themselves *act* beautifully.

In this section I outlined Alexander Nehamas’ understanding of beauty, which I found to accurately account for the agency involved in love. By appropriating his theory of beauty into the agent-centered conception I have been pursuing, I suggested that the romantic lover’s relationship to beauty is contrary to what I have called the appearance of compulsion. Instead, the lover’s relationship to beauty is self-constituted via her voluntary judgment of beauty. I then argued that the judgment of beauty is a general and nonnegotiable volitional necessity constitutive of romantic love and reflectively adopted by the agent *qua* lover. Lastly, I suggested

two ways in which the judgment of beauty indicates that, as I have been arguing throughout, romantic love is more a matter of agency than commonplace conceptions acknowledge. In the proceeding section, I intend to suggest that the agency entailed in the lover's relationship to beauty manifests as a purposive and voluntary seeking.

3.3

My broad intention in this section is to continue my argument that what commonly appears to be an involuntary compulsion to the beloved is, in fact, actually a voluntary and purposive seeking on the part of the romantic lover. In casting romantic love as a voluntary seeking, I am calling into question the pervasive agent-external conception that the beauty of the beloved captivates the lover and therefore impels her to love involuntarily. As a result of holding agent-external conceptions of romantic love, many lovers cannot give a satisfactory explanation as to why they love the particularity of their beloved. Due to this shortcoming, these lovers often experience the effects and alterations that follow from their loving as uncontrollable and assailing—which, in turn, reinforces their conception that romantic love is involuntary and without agency. In what follows I will be suggesting that an agent-centered conception of romantic love can more accurately explain the appearance of compulsion and the alterations that result from romantic loving.

To begin, I will discuss what I take to be the basis for an agent's finding *this* person beautiful instead of someone else. This discussion will suggest, contrary to commonplace conceptions, that romantic love is not without agency. Next, I will examine the ways in which the lover voluntarily and purposively seeks out and relates to her beloved. This will provide me with an opportunity to suggest how this romantic seeking is a matter of agency. Finally, I will

suggest that what results from this voluntary and purposive seeking is a refashioning of the lover's self, which is itself a matter of the lover's agency.

Recall once more that in response to the question "why do you love your beloved?" it is commonplace for lovers to appeal to their beloved's beauty as an explanation. When asked in response "why do you find them beautiful?" these same lovers will often try to list physical features they feel constitute their beloved's beauty, or will answer: "because I love them." While perhaps mundane, I believe these responses may be expressing an intuition not too far from the truth. I will now move to discuss the basis for the lover's decision to engage in romantic love, which may shed light on how one might go about answering these questions.

Consider how Nehamas might begin to answer the question "why do you find them beautiful?" He explains, "My reasons for finding you beautiful include characteristics I feel you have not yet disclosed, features that may take me in directions I can't now foresee" (Nehamas, 63). This is not to say, however, that reasons for finding someone beautiful cannot include characteristics and features one is already aware of. As was discussed in the previous section, beauty includes attractiveness—which pertains to those features and characteristics that are already known. What distinguishes the beautiful from the attractive is the intimation that there is some aspect of the beautiful that has yet to be disclosed, "perhaps worth changing ourselves in order to come to see and appreciate it" (Nehamas, 70). As such, the commonplace urge lovers have to list characteristics so as to explain why they find their beloved beautiful is not entirely wrong—but only half right.

Keeping our focus on beauty, I want to point out that what will be attractive or beautiful to one person may possibly be repulsive to another. This is because, as Nehamas says, "What we find beautiful is central to our taste and sensibility, and taste or sensibility is manifested

whenever we act on our own and not only along the lines already drawn by routine and convention” (85). Insofar as persons have differing tastes and sensibilities it should not be surprising that there will be variance with respect to what some people find attractive or beautiful. In this way, as was discussed in the previous section, our judgments of beauty are neither objective nor subjective—but personal.

I want to discuss in greater detail at this point the idea that what we find beautiful is central to our taste and sensibility. This is important because, if you remember, I claimed that one of the general nonnegotiable volitional necessities of romantic love is to find the beloved beautiful. If who we are capable of loving is dependent upon finding them beautiful, and finding someone beautiful is central to our taste and sensibility, then our taste and sensibility have a large bearing on whom we will be capable of loving. If we are to find a basis for why an agent finds *this* person beautiful instead of *that* person and, similarly, why she loves *this* person over someone else—then it seems to me that looking for an answer amidst the agent’s taste and sensibility is a reasonable place to start.

While taste may also connote a kind of preference, both taste and sensibility are types of abilities; and in particular, they are aesthetic abilities. Even though some people may be born with more or less refined abilities, they nevertheless need to be practiced and developed by those who wish to exercise them. Practice and development are themselves intentional, purposive, and demonstrative of agency. As such, insofar as an agent’s taste and sensibility are practiced and developed both become marked by agency. Because what we find beautiful is central to our taste and sensibility, and taste and sensibility are marked by agency, then what we find beautiful is to some degree a matter of agency. Although it is important to recognize the agency in

judgments of beauty, and by extension romantic love, what still has yet to be established is a basis as to why we judge *this* person to be beautiful and not someone else.

In pursuit of this basis consider Nehamas' claim that, "Character and style are an essential part of what distinguishes a person from the rest of the world. They are the grounds of individuality" (Nehamas, 86). I agree with Nehamas here, and would like to claim that character and style—and therefore, individuality—are important components to a person's project of self-fashioning. By project of self-fashioning what I am referring to is a person's fundamental and intentional ongoing effort to develop and create aspects of her self—such as her taste, sensibility, character, and style—in accordance with the kind of person she desires to become. As should be evident, I take this project to be, like most projects, a matter of agency. Because this is a fundamental project, I understand this self-fashioning to involve other activities, endeavors, and projects that aim to realize the person's desired manner of being.

With this in mind, reconsider Nehamas' notion that when we find something beautiful we actively engage in interpretation—where interpretation means seeing in things what is distinctly their own, and to see them in ways distinctly *our* own (Nehamas, 132). Following this I argue, with respect to romantic love specifically, that finding someone beautiful requires seeing in her what is distinctly her own, and in ways expressive of the lover's taste, sensibility, character, and style.

Recall that, as I claimed earlier, one of the lover's general romantic necessities is to find the beloved beautiful. Taking this into consideration I want to make clear the essential connection between finding the beloved beautiful and the lover's taste, sensibility, character, and style. In other words, if the agent's taste, sensibility, character, and style are configured in such a way that allows for seeing in *this* person what is distinctly her own, then the agent will be able to

find *this* person beautiful—but unable to find *that* person beautiful. As such, I suggest that there is an aspect of fit or compatibility at play here.

While it is certainly reasonable—and in a sense true—to suggest that the basis for an agent’s finding someone beautiful is the configuration of her taste, sensibility, character, and style, I think there is an even more fundamental basis at work. I have already mentioned that a person’s project of self-fashioning includes her taste, sensibility, character, and style—however, it may also include other aspects both pertinent to her desired future self and to her judgment of beauty. As such, I understand projects of self-fashioning to entail a wider array of aesthetic considerations than taste, sensibility, character, and style alone. Also, understanding an agent’s project of self-fashioning to be the basis for her judgments of beauty allows for the further claim that romantic love is a matter of agency, since at bottom this project is as well.

At this juncture I now move to discuss ways in which the romantic lover, contrary to the view of agent-external conceptions, purposively and voluntarily seeks out and relates to the beloved. In doing so I will suggest that the appearance of compulsion is inaccurate in its assertion that lovers are involuntarily drawn to and captivated by their beloved’s beauty. First, consider Nehamas’ assertion regarding the agent/lover’s willful decision to seek out the beloved based upon her judgment of beauty. He writes:

Prospective as they are, my judgments reflect my willingness to interact with such things over time, longer with some than with others but in every case giving over a part of my life over to them because, far from having made up my mind about what makes them beautiful, I still hope to find in what their beauty consists (Nehamas, 84).

As I have already mentioned, Nehamas highlights the fact that the lover’s judgment of beauty reflects her *willingness* to interact with—in the case of romantic love—beautiful persons.

Also, I wish to point out the important idea that the judgment of beauty is, essentially, just the starting point of a relationship. What is crucial is that, in virtue of finding someone beautiful, the lover makes a voluntary decision to commit—or “give over” as Nehamas says here—part of her life to this person. This is because the commitment to further seek out in what this person’s beauty consists in is something that happens over time, which is why Nehamas rightly considers the judgment of beauty to be “prospective.”

I want to emphasize the idea, held by the agent-centered conception I have been pursuing and also by Nehamas, that the romantic lover interacts with the beauty of the beloved. I see it as commonplace that many persons hold conceptions of the lover as being passive. This is, I believe, a result of the pervasiveness of agent-external theories that portray the lover as a kind of vessel to be filled up with love. Nevertheless, it seems to me that romantic love requires activity on the part of the lover and beloved. And by activity I do not just mean the reflective acts that are also important to loving, but activity through contexts of engagement—such as play, for instance.

Nehamas, as I understand him, would agree insofar as it is through interaction that the beloved’s beauty is disclosed to the lover—that is, so long as the lover is interpreting properly. He expresses this much stating, “Making beautiful things part of my life is neither loose talk nor a metaphor: I must literally come into direct contact with them and spend part of my life in their presence and company” (Nehamas, 101). By spending time in the presence of her beloved—for instance, on a camping trip—the lover is in a position to see in her beloved those features and characteristics that belong distinctly to the beloved.

As an example, let us imagine that while hiking on this camping trip the lover witnesses her beloved pick up some litter that was left by some other forgetful or inconsiderate hikers. In

virtue of her own style to “pack in–pack out” the lover may find it beautiful that her beloved acted in consideration of the interests of future hikers and picked up the litter. In this way, the lover has a better idea of the kind of person her beloved is and can relate to them in a more intimate way. I think this is the kind of thing Nehamas has in mind when he says that to understand something better—in this example, a person—“is to see how it is like and unlike every thing that surrounds it—and that, in the end, is everything” (121). In order to reach a better understanding, however, the lover must actively seek out these similarities and differences; and this is, I maintain, why the voluntary seeking on the part of the lover is intentional and a matter of agency.

Before concluding this section I will suggest that as a result of the lover’s voluntary interaction with the beloved she finds beautiful and the purposive seeking this entails, her self is refashioned. To begin, I would like to make clear that romantic love is a risky activity. It is risky, in part, because it is uncertain as to how the lover will be affected by her involvement in the relationship. What is certain, however, is that simply in virtue of engaging in romantic love and actively participating in its practices the lover will be, to some degree, affected. I now move to suggest, in respect to lovers’ interactions with what they find beautiful, how this happens.

Consider Nehamas’ assertion that, “Beauty inspires desires without letting me know what they are for, and a readiness to refashion what I already desire without telling me what will replace it” (Nehamas, 63). It is evident from this that Nehamas believes there to be a good deal of uncertainty as to how our interactions with beauty will turn out. What is more noteworthy for my present purposes, however, is his reference to refashioning—specifically, that beauty “inspires” a “readiness to refashion” one’s desires. Nehamas, once again, rightly acknowledges the agency we have in relation to beauty by implying that although beauty may inspire desires, it

is up to the agent whether or not she has a *readiness* to refashion her desires. In this way, I find Nehamas to avoid slipping into language that may wrongly suggest passivity on the part of the agent.

What I think is important for an agent-centered conception of romantic love to recognize, as Nehamas seems to recognize himself, is that the refashioning that results from the lover's interactions with beauty is, as an initial matter, due to her own voluntary initial judgment of beauty. What is more, is that it is up to the lover's volition whether or not she chooses to seek out a further understanding of what such beauty consists in—which entails spending time in the company of the beloved. This should evidence that the lover's agency is constantly at issue with respect to her interactions with beauty.

With respect to the refashioning that ensues from the lover's judgments of beauty Nehamas writes, "My aesthetic judgments literally determine the course of my life, directing me for their answers to other people, other objects, other habits and ways of being" (Nehamas, 85). What this process looks like can be shown through a short example. In addition to exemplifying the process of refashioning, this example will underscore the agency involved in trying to relate to someone we find beautiful.

To start, imagine that due to Waldo's sensibility, he finds beauty in Wilma's concern and compassion for the welfare of animals, as exhibited lets say, by her door to door petitioning for more humane conditions on local chicken farms. Acting from his attraction and judgment of beauty, let us say that Waldo asks Wilma to dinner. While at dinner Waldo learns that Wilma is a moral vegetarian. With this new knowledge Waldo finds further beauty in Wilma's conscious and reflective diet. Over conversation Wilma suggests that Waldo watch a documentary on factory farming to learn about the conditions she is working to alleviate. After watching the film

Waldo decides that becoming a vegetarian would contribute toward his living a more compassionate and considerate moral life—which is one of the aims of his overall project of self-fashioning.

Before I conclude this section I want to briefly highlight a few points in this example. First, I want to point out that when Waldo initially finds Wilma's compassion and concern for animals beautiful it results from his sensibility—which as I have already discussed, is something that is his own and is a part of his more fundamental project of self-fashioning. If, for instance, Waldo did not have the sensibility he did then it is plausible that he would not have seen in Wilma features that were distinctly her own—namely, her particular concern and compassion for the welfare of local chickens. Finally, there is the obvious characteristic of uncertainty at work in this example. Waldo had no way of knowing that his initial judgment of beauty would lead him in the directions that it did and that, subsequently, he would make the voluntary decision to become a moral vegetarian.

3.4

In this chapter I argued against what I called the appearance of compulsion—which is the view that because romantic lovers often appear to be captivated by their beloved's beauty and involuntarily compelled to them, this must be true. In arguing against this prevalent misconception I claimed that while the relationship between lover and beloved may *appear* this way, the lover's draw to her beloved is actually a voluntary seeking of beauty. As such, I suggested that the lover's seeking is purposive and manifests agency, which in turn comes to refashion the her self. In this way, I sought to bolster my thesis that romantic love is a voluntary and purposive project constituted by identifiable expressions of agency.

To accomplish this I first examined a mundane and supernatural agent-external interpretation of the appearance of compulsion. What this examination yielded was the acknowledgment that the appearance of compulsion was largely based on misinterpretations surrounding the lover's relationship to her beloved. Next, I moved to explore the function of beauty within romantic love, where I focused on the lover's judgment of beauty in particular. In doing this I was able to call into question the prevalent view that the romantic lover is passive with respect to the beloved's beauty. Instead, I claimed that the lover is actually active in relation to the beloved's beauty insofar as her judgment of beauty consists in finding beauty in the beloved.

Finally, I argued that the lover's relationship to beauty manifests as an active, voluntary, and purposive seeking—not a passive involuntary compulsion. In addition I argued that the lover's initial choice to find a person beautiful depends upon her taste, sensibility, character, and style—which are all indicative of agency. I then moved to show that what results from the lover's romantic seeking is a refashioning of her self. Pursuing these claims in turn supported my general claim that romantic love itself is more a matter of agency than agent-external conceptions acknowledge. In this chapter, my broad intention was to respond to and call into question the appearance of compulsion—which I argued was just that, appearance. However, in recognizing that aspects of romantic love may in fact *appear* this way, I sought to give an alternative agent-centered explanation for this appearance.

Conclusion

The central question I have concerned myself with in this paper is the extent to which romantic love is a matter of agency. In an effort to address this question I drew a distinction between two contrary conceptions of romantic love. The agent-external conception is the pervasive commonplace understanding that romantic love is an involuntary and compulsive phenomenon, the origin of which is taken to be apart from the agent. To the contrary, the agent-centered conception alternatively understands romantic love to be a voluntary and purposive endeavor, which cannot be properly understood except in relation to the agent herself. With these polar conceptions in tow, I then set out to gain an understanding as to the extent romantic love can be considered a matter of agency.

In response to my stated question, I proposed that romantic love is a purposive and voluntary endeavor constituted by discernable expressions of agency. In particular, this agency is instantiated through processes that engage the lover's volitional, emotional, and cognitive faculties. I proposed further that in virtue of her willful romantic engagement, the shape of the lover's self and the trajectory of her life become altered. This proposal was then elaborated upon as I pursued an answer to my stated question regarding the extent of romantic agency.

My first intention was to show that the structure of romantic love was essentially akin to Harry G. Frankfurt's understanding of care. By demonstrating the similarities between his volitional account of care and that of romantic love, I was in a position to state that romantic love is constituted by certain volitional necessities. These necessities, it was argued, are indicative of romantic love's agency insofar as there are some things the lover *must* do simply in virtue of her love—for instance, to promote the wellbeing of the beloved. What my examination showed is that far from involuntarily forcing the lover to do such things, love's volitional necessities are

indicative of the lover's agency to the extent that it is the lover who self-legislates and then constrains her will to meet such obligations.

My discussion of volitional necessity, it should be remembered, also yielded the acknowledgement that the lover's will is reflexively shaped by the volitional boundaries her love has defined for her self. In this way, the lover's ability or inability to perform the personal duties of love—which she has willfully committed to—contributes to the future character and shape of her will. Because this type of activity is indicative of voluntary and intentional autonomous behavior, I claimed that the structure of romantic love is essentially such that it engages the volitional faculties of the lover. As such, it suggests romantic love is a matter of agency.

With this understanding, I then pursued my stated question further by investigating the perception of the romantic lover in search for signs of agency. Having defined the structure of romantic love as being volitional, I pointed out that there arises a certain supplemental perception on the part of the lover so as to meet love's volitional necessities. It was with this that Iris Murdoch's idea of attention became informative for my purposes. By examining her idea of attention I found that Murdoch helped to identify a perceptual virtue of romantic love, namely, romantic attention. Because the practice of romantic attention supplements the lover's cognitive capacities, enabling them to perceive and understand love's volitional necessities, I found romantic attention to be a perceptual virtue of romantic love.

What is more, is that this perceptual virtue—romantic attention—was shown to be an active perception suggestive of the lover's agency. By practicing and developing their romantic attention, I claimed, romantic lovers are able to act in ways conducive to the flourishing of their romantic engagements. Furthermore, I suggested that practicing and developing the virtue of romantic attention also refines the lover's perceptual habits *qua* agent. This is important, I

maintained, because it helps make the lover a more considerate agent, which in turn can extend into other relationships and realms of agency such as the moral realm. By investigating the romantic lover's perception, my efforts identified the lover's romantic agency within her perceptive and cognitive practices.

At this point, my inquiry into the extent to which romantic love is a matter of agency was directed at the interpretive basis for the agent-external conception that the lover's attraction to her beloved is involuntary and compulsive. This claim, as I discussed, is based on the appearance that the lover commonly appears to be compulsively drawn to her beloved in involuntary ways. By examining a mundane and a supernatural interpretation of this commonplace appearance, I laid out how the appearance of involuntariness was just that, *appearance*. In order to prove this, I then examined the function of beauty as it pertains to romantic love—focusing on the lover's judgment of beauty, her voluntary seeking, and the beauty she finds in her beloved.

Insofar as commonplace conceptions appeal to the beloved's beauty as a motivating reason for the romantic lover's attraction, I found it important to dispel the notion that the beloved's beauty somehow externally determines the lover's attraction. To do this, I consulted Alexander Nehamas' aesthetic understanding. By examining the romantic lover's relationship to beauty I found that the lover sees in her beloved features that are distinctly the beloved's—features both known and yet to be disclosed.

The lover then actively finds the beloved beautiful by seeing in a way that is distinctly her own; for instance, through the lover's own style. In this way, beauty is not simply a list of features but includes intimations that there is something more still to be disclosed and worthy of pursuing. Insofar as the lover finds her beloved beautiful, she is engaged in active interpretation

indicative of agency. Furthermore, the lover's active interpretation involves her taste, sensibility, character, and style. These personal qualities constitute, I argued, the lover's original choice to voluntarily seek out her beloved's beauty and interact with the beloved in ways that allow her to learn what the beloved's beauty consists in. In addition, I claimed that through her voluntary romantic seeking the lover relates to the beloved in ways that come to refashion her own self.

Because it is commonplace for contemporary persons to understand romantic love as being both central and significant in their lives, it seems to me that such persons deserve a conception of romantic love that accurately describes their role as agents. This is one of the reasons why I have concerned myself with questioning the extent to which romantic love is a matter of agency. The understanding my present investigation has reached is that romantic love is, in fact, a voluntary and purposive endeavor constituted by certain identifiable expressions of agency.

My investigation has similarly shown that agent-external conceptions often neglect to account for the agency inherent to romantic love. As a result, such conceptions mislead lovers with the false belief that romantic love is an involuntary phenomenon subject to a mysterious or unknown whim. Insofar as agent-external conceptions are commonplace at the folk level, it appears as though contemporary persons may be holding conceptions of romantic love antithetical and unfavorable to the flourishing of their love. In this sense, questioning the extent to which romantic love is a matter of agency becomes an important and worthwhile philosophical endeavor.

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