Canadian Journal of Philosophy (2021), 51: 7, 508–522
doi:10.1017/can.2022.7

ARTICLE

The Focus of Love

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Abstract

It is widely agreed that the focus of love is 'the beloved herself'—but what does this actually mean? Implicit in J. David Velleman's view of love is the intriguing suggestion that to have 'the beloved herself' as the focus of love is to respond to her *essence*. However, Velleman understands the beloved's essence to amount to the universal quality of personhood, with the result that the beloved's particularity becomes marginalized in his account. I therefore suggest an alternative. Based on Søren Kierkegaard's analysis of the self, I demonstrate that the beloved being 'herself' is determined by a quality—selfhood—that is both essential and particular to her. To have as the focus of love 'the beloved herself,' I claim, is to respond to this quality, which is to respond to her *individual* essence.

Keywords: Essence; individual; Kierkegaard; love; particularity; personhood; selfhood; Velleman

1. The beloved's essence as the focus of love

> The focus of a person's love is not those general and hence repeatable characteristics that make his beloved *describable* … it is the specific particularity that makes his beloved *nameable* —something that is more mysterious than describability. (Frankfurt 1999, 170; emphasis in the original)

The attempt to clarify what are, if any, the reasons for love, is central to present discussions in the philosophy of love. One dominant position holds that love is grounded in the valuable properties of the beloved: the silkiness of her hair, the charm of her smile, her wisdom, kindness, and so on.[1] In contrast, one might feel that detailing these qualities misses the mark: the object of our love is not reducible to an exhaustive list of valuable properties. In response to this kind of reservation, Niko Kolodny points out that such an objection "results from confusing the ground of valuation with its focus" (2003, 154),[2] so that "[a]lthough my ground for loving Jane is that she is beautiful, the focus of my love is Jane herself" (187).[3]

But what does having "Jane herself" as the focus of our love actually mean?[4] The locution "Jane herself" indicates that we perceive her as an individual, but the question remains. What is it to love *X*

[1]Known as 'the quality theory' (see Kolodny 2003, 135), versions of it are held, for example, by Delaney (1996), Keller (2000), Lamb (1997), Naar (2017), Soble (1990), and partly by Jollimore (2011).

[2]*Cf.* Delaney (1996, 343), who makes a similar point.

[3]Although Kolodny himself does not endorse the aforementioned view of love, the distinction he makes between grounds and focus can be used to defend such a view.

[4]I use 'focus' in the same sense as Frankfurt and Kolodny. Note that although Helm also uses the term 'focus,' he uses it to mean something else, and instead uses the term 'target' to designate what I mean by 'focus' (see Helm 2009, 43).

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as an individual? This is the question underlying the present article, which aims to explore the experience of love as responding to an individual.[5] To explore, that is, the experience of the lover who is focused on "something that is more mysterious than describability." As such, my inquiry, more than normative or metaphysical,[6] is phenomenological in nature. Its main concern is not to determine the reasons for love, or to consider the relation between a person and her properties, but rather to examine what it is like to love Jane herself; how to account for the experience of the lover who responds to *her*.[7]

To respond to 'her' is to respond to 'who she is.' To put it somewhat metaphorically, it is to respond to her unique and distinctive presence, to her very being. My suggestion, then, is that to love 'Jane herself' is to respond to her *essence*.[8]

J. David Velleman voices a similar sentiment when he rejects the idea that the reason for love is the beloved's "particular bundle of personal qualities," maintaining that these particular qualities "feel like accidents rather than our essence" (1999, 364, 363). Velleman is alone among contemporary authors in developing the conception of the beloved being 'who she is' in terms of possessing an essence. And while his motivation is normative, his analysis of love as responding to the beloved's essence attests not only to the explicit thesis that the beloved's essence is the *grounds* for love, but also, implicitly, to the view that the beloved's essence is the *focus* of love.

While I agree with Velleman that love responds to the beloved's essence, I take issue with his understanding of this essence as amounting to *universal* personhood. Such a conception, I claim, proves problematic from the point of view of love, with its focus on the beloved's particularity. I therefore develop a conception of *individual* essence that views the beloved as possessing an essence that is *particular* to her: her selfhood.

Here I should acknowledge an idiosyncrasy of my project when compared to relevant discussions in the current literature on love. In developing the conception of 'individual essence,' I use as a framework the thinking of the 19th century theistic philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and, more specifically, his distinctive analysis of being a self. However, my use of Kierkegaard's ideas in the present context is neither historical nor exegetical. I do not offer a straightforward interpretation of his ideas, but rather use them to develop an independent thesis of my own that defends the conception of individual essence.

Nevertheless, because my notion of individual essence *is* rooted in Kierkegaard's ideas, it is examined not as an independent metaphysical view but as one that is more limited in scope. That is, while I do offer a thesis to substantiate the conception of individual essence, it is developed within the context of my interpretation of Kierkegaard's view rather than being considered in the context of the full range of metaphysical views on the topic. For those readers who may find this context too restricted to serve as a substantiation, I suggest regarding my line of reasoning as hypothetical. Namely, suppose that my Kierkegaardian analysis is correct and each person possesses an individual essence: How does this help us to understand the focus of love?

I begin my inquiry with Velleman's thesis (section 2). His analysis of love invites the interesting view that to have as the focus of love the beloved *herself* is to respond to her essence, and I present this view, as well as the problems that flow from Velleman's conception of the beloved's essence as *universal*. Taking this as a starting point, I then present my Kierkegaardian conception of *individual* essence (section 3) and demonstrate how this allows us to articulate and give philosophical content

[5]"Love responds to *X*" may be ambiguous between "*X* is the reason for love" and "*X* is the focus of love." I use it in the latter sense.

[6]Some authors, when raising the question of what it means to love the beloved herself, tend to examine it from a metaphysical angle by considering whether a person is more than her properties (see, for example, Grau 2004, 117–21; Hurka 2011, 152–53).

[7]I am grateful to Oded Na'aman for helping me clarify the framing of my inquiry.

[8]Strictly speaking, 'essence' is that which determines the identity of *X*, and as such is invariable. But in everyday language, 'essence' is used to denote the unique nature of a thing without necessarily being committed to its being invariable. My conception of the beloved's essence, as will be demonstrated, combines both usages.

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to the experience of love as focused on the beloved herself (section 4). These two sections constitute the main part of the article. I end (section 5) with a tentative suggestion as to how the conception of individual essence may be used to address the question concerning the reasons for love, as well as the related question of the justification for either persisting in one's love or for falling out of it.

2. Personhood as the beloved's essence

> [The] rational will … is … the intelligible essence of a person: Kant calls it a person's true or proper self. (Velleman 1999, 344)

In his "Love as a Moral Emotion," Velleman claims that love is grounded in the essence of the beloved, which he identifies with her personhood: a universal quality that, following Kant, he characterizes as amounting to her rational nature. As the beloved's personhood is the essence (the "true self") of the beloved, Velleman seems to consider it not only as the grounds for love but also as its focus[9]—even if, as we shall see, the lover responds to the beloved's personhood only indirectly. Anticipating possible reservations, Velleman clarifies that 'rational nature' should not be interpreted as denoting one's intellect, but rather, ultimately, as the capacity for valuation. Far from being a cold and emotionally detached quality, then, personhood amounts to one's "core of reflective concern" (365–66) described poetically by Velleman as the ability of one heart to respond to another.[10]

However, while the understanding of personhood in terms of one's capacity for valuation removes one peculiarity from Velleman's account, another peculiarity remains. If the focus of Jane Eyre's love for Edward Rochester is Edward's universal personhood, why does she respond to him and not, say, to John Rivers (her suitor)? That is, why does she respond to Edward *in particular* if both he and John (and anybody else) possess that which is the focus of her love? (Brontë [1847] 1994).[11] Velleman is quick to clarify this point as well, by introducing the conception of the beloved's empirical persona: "the manifest person, embodied in flesh and blood and accessible to the senses" (1999, 371). This set of particular qualities, which distinguishes one person from another, communicates the beloved's universal personhood. Accordingly, while "there remains a sense in which we love a person for his observable features," Velleman makes clear that "loving a person for the way he walks is not a response to the value of his gait; it's rather a response to his gait as an expression or symbol or reminder of his value as a person" (1999, 371). Namely, it is fundamentally a response to his essence, which is his universal personhood.

Velleman's explanation of the fact that we love someone *in particular* is therefore as follows. Although it is not the beloved's empirical persona but rather her personhood to which we ultimately respond, the former nevertheless plays an important role by serving as the "conduit" that conveys or communicates the latter (371). It is therefore Edward in particular that Jane loves, because it is *his* empirical persona—his passionate temper, fierce look, rough honesty—that successfully communicates his personhood to her, while John's empirical persona doesn't.

From the point of view of the experience of love, however, such an explanation is dissatisfying. Think about the particular qualities that distinguish Edward from John; for example, passionate nature. As Velleman would have it, Edward's passion is important for Jane's love only because it communicates his personhood better than, say, John's rigorousness does. However, to claim this is

[9]Or, in his terms, the object of love. See, for example, Velleman's claim that "when the object of our love is a person … then indeed, I want to say, we are responding to the value that he possesses by virtue of being a person" (1999, 365), or his assertion that a particular person is the object of love "*as* embodying something universal" (343; my emphasis).

[10]See 363, 365 and 366.

[11]As the choice of this example indicates, I concentrate here on romantic love. Elsewhere I demonstrate how my view regarding the focus of love is applicable to *any* kind of love. (See Krishek 2022, in particular chap. 7).

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to belittle the quality itself, when in fact it seems quite significant for Jane's love that Edward *is* passionate. In other words, Edward's passion is experienced not as enabling an access to that which is the focus of her love (his personhood), but rather as *a part* of this focus. This is because the focus of her love is Edward as *Edward*—passionate, fierce, honest—and not Edward as a person.

The marginalization of the beloved's particularity—so alien to our experience of love—also results from Velleman's failure to establish any *necessary* connection between the beloved's essence and the particularities that communicate it. Velleman never clarifies why and how Edward's gait, for example, expresses his personhood to Jane,[12] hence leaving the connection between that which causes her love (Edward's empirical persona) and that which is the focus of her love (Edward's essence or personhood) unexplained and thus, as far as we can tell, arbitrary. In this sense, Edward's particularity becomes, again, inessential to Jane's love: if the focus of her love is his essence, and his specific particularity (being passionate, fierce, etc.) is not attached to his essence in any necessary way, then it makes his particularity only secondary, or marginal, to her love. After all, the focus of her love is his personhood—not his specific particularity, which is related to his personhood only accidentally.

Jane, however, would justly protest. She does not experience her love as responding to something that the particularity of Edward only accidentally conveys; she experiences it as responding to his very particularity. His particularity, in other words, is not experienced "as an expression or symbol or reminder" of his essence but rather as integral to it: it is experienced as *essential* to who he is. And while this may sound somewhat vague, there is in fact much to be said about being who one *essentially and in particular* is. The conception of *individual* essence, as I now turn to demonstrate, is philosophically tenable.

3. Selfhood as the beloved's essence[13]

Like Velleman, I claim that the focus of love is the beloved's essence, her being who she is. However, contra Velleman, I understand her essence not in terms of universal personhood but rather in terms of her selfhood: her individual essence.[14] As my conception of selfhood relies on Kierkegaard's analysis of the *self*, it would be helpful to begin by clarifying my use of this notion.[15]

3.a Selfhood and individuality

'Self' is a term that I use to denote a particular person, an individual (say, Jane). By 'individual' I mean someone who is identical to herself (Jane is the same Jane over time), and distinct from others (Jane is *not* identical, either numerically or qualitatively, to Charlotte, Emily, or Anne). My thesis, to be defended below, is that it is one's *individual essence* that makes one an individual, and I term this quality (of individual essence) 'selfhood.'[16] Selfhood is the quality that makes one a self, while a self is an individual in the sense just explained. Jane's selfhood, then, determines her identity as Jane (over time), and distinguishes her from others (Charlotte, Emily, or Anne).[17]

[12]*Cf.* Kolodny 2003, 174.

[13]As I present my Kierkegaardian theory of selfhood in the context of another discussion, there is a partial overlapping between that discussion and some of the ideas presented in this section.

[14]This is not akin to one's *hecceaity*. See note 20.

[15]The metaphysical picture that I articulate here is not presented systematically by Kierkegaard and, in some ways, it goes beyond what he explicitly says. In this sense, I do not claim to present a straightforward interpretation of Kierkegaard's view of the self. Demonstrating that my notion of selfhood is a fitting interpretation of his view is an exegetical project that I undertake elsewhere. (See Krishek 2022, chap. 6.)

[16]Accordingly, throughout what follows I will use 'selfhood' and 'individual essence' interchangeably.

[17]Note that individuality (as construed here) does not necessarily imply singularity. Hence, while I defend the idea that a specific combination of qualities (that stands, as will be demonstrated below, for one's individuality) is *essential* to Jane, the

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Further, when I speak of Jane's identity, I refer to something slightly different from Lockean personal identity. To speak of Jane's identity in the Lockean sense, is to refer to her psychological continuity: Jane at a certain time T2, is identical to Jane at a former time T1, if Jane at T2 has access to the thoughts and experiences of Jane at T1 (Locke 1979, 335).[18] However, consider the following thought experiment.

Suppose that a wicked fairy changed Jane from an earnest, clever, courageous woman, who loves Edward and is passionate about painting, to a devious, foolish, cowardly one, who is indifferent to both Edward and painting. It is clear that something significant has been lost, and, under these circumstances, we would be likely to say that Jane was no longer *herself*. We would say so even if we assumed that her ability to access her thoughts and experiences prior to the change is unaffected—that is, if we assumed that she remains the same person in the Lockean sense. Let us say, then, that what has changed is her *selfhood*: she is the same person, but not the same *self*.

The change in question, please note, is not only of character. The transformed self, who loses her identity (in the relevant, *not* Lockean, sense) as Jane, will also have a different set of preferences, passions, desires, and inclinations. She will *not*, however, have a different set of memories. Hence, to emphasize again, she keeps her identity in the Lockean sense, while nevertheless becoming 'someone else.' The notion of 'self' as I use it, then, is meant to convey a kind of identity that the Lockean conception of personal identity does not capture. Accordingly, it should be emphasized that the discussed thought experiment is only meant to demonstrate the specific use of the notion of identity at work here and should not be taken to imply that such a radical change of self is at all possible.

Now, while according to Locke, one's personal identity is determined by one's self-consciousness, I suggest that the identity of one's *self* is determined by one's individual essence or selfhood, which is to say that the essence of an individual is not personhood but rather a *particular shape* of personhood (I explain below what it means), which is unique[19] to her: selfhood.[20]

I use the term 'selfhood' not only because the idea of possessing an individual essence works well with a common usage of the term 'self' (as in "I am truly myself only with you"), but also because my notion of selfhood as an individual essence is ingrained in Kierkegaard's analysis of the self. More specifically, I rely on three of his ideas: (1) every person possesses a 'divine name,' (2) a human being is 'both temporal and eternal,' and (3) every person has the *potential* to become a 'self.' Let me begin with the third idea.

3.b The possession of selfhood in a potential state

In Kierkegaard's view, there is a gap between being created by God as an 'intended' or 'destined' *X*, and actually *becoming* that *X*.[21] This gap indicates that one has the *potential* to be the *X*, the self, that

question whether this combination is also *singular*—namely, cannot, in principle, be repeated—is a further question that my conception of individual essence is not (as such) committed to address.

[18]As Shoemaker (2021) explains: "*X* and *Y* are … identical … in case *X* and *Y* are *related* via consciousness, i.e., … in case *Y* remembers the thoughts and experiences of *X*."

[19]But, again, not necessarily nonrepeatable. And although I take it that one's selfhood is not only unique but also singular, this point is not relevant to the thesis that I defend here and, hence, I neither present it nor argue for it. (See again note 17.)

[20]As I demonstrate later, this quality is a *complex* one and, while being elusive, is nevertheless intelligible. My understanding of one's individual essence as complex and intelligible distinguishes it from the idea of *haecceity*, which is the idea, rooted in Duns Scotus's doctrine, that what makes a person the individual that she is, is the possession of an individuating property of 'thisness.' This quality is *not* complex and is also not intelligible to humans (see Hare 2007, 112–13). *Cf.* Evans (2004, 173), who attributes (to some extent) this Scotist doctrine to Kierkegaard.

[21]"Every human being is [originally] intended to be a self, destined to become himself … [which] means that it is to be ground into shape" (Kierkegaard 1980, 33). There is a wide agreement between commentators that by a 'self' Kierkegaard means an individual or a particular person. However, unlike other interpreters (e.g., Davenport 2013; Evans 2004), I think that to become a self does not amount to becoming *any* particular person (Jane, Charlotte, Emily) but rather a *specific* one: Jane. That is, God

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one is intended to be, with the task being to fulfil this potential and become that *X*. Hence, the quality that makes one the self that one is intended to be—selfhood—is given to humans, upon their creation, in a potential state.

Putting aside (in the context of the present discussion) the theistic assumption that we are *intended* to become *X*, I use this Kierkegaardian idea to suggest that one's selfhood, one's individual essence, is possessed in a potential state. Thus, just as a talent for singing, for example, is possessed in a potential state that one needs to actualize in order to become an accomplished singer, the same is true of the quality of selfhood; the quality of being a *specific* self. The claim is, then, that one has the potential to become (say) Jane.

Here a clarification regarding my use of the term 'potential' is necessary. Potential, as denoting the mode or state of a power before its actualization, usually allows for the possibility of non-actualization. This is not the case with regards to potential *selfhood* however, since there must always be *some* degree of actualization. Hence, while it might be natural to suppose that when speaking of potential selfhood, the theory is saying that one who has not actualized the relevant potential is only potentially a self—this is *not* the case. One's potential selfhood is always actualized, at least minimally, simply by virtue of one's existence. What we find, then, are not potential selves but rather different versions of self, corresponding to the different degrees of actualizing one's potential. I return to this point below.

Now, while it is clear enough what it means to possess, in a state of potential, qualities such as a talent for singing, sense of humour, or rationality—the quality of selfhood is obviously different. To clarify the nature of this quality, let us turn to the second of Kierkegaard's relevant ideas, namely, his characterization of humans as both temporal and eternal.[22]

It seems reasonable to assume that by characterizing humans in this way, Kierkegaard is referring to the supposed relation of a human being to God, i.e., the 'eternal.' This relation is of a double nature: first, humans are created *by* God, and second, they are created *in the image* of God. Again putting aside the theological context, in my understanding the characterization of humans as both temporal and eternal gives rise to two ideas that are not explicitly presented by Kierkegaard. The pair temporal-eternal, I suggest, can be understood as expressing the duality of, first, particularity and universality, and, second, of contingency and essence.

3.c Particularity and universality

To be Jane is a function of many factors: of her past and her life circumstances, of her inner world, self-consciousness, and memories. But, I submit, first and foremost it is a function of her individual essence. To possess individual essence is to possess selfhood, which amounts to *personhood in a particular shape.* What does this mean?

Personhood is the quality that renders one a person, and it is typically conceived as amounting to one's rationality (recall Velleman's discussion). For Kierkegaard, who views humans as created in the image of God, personhood reflects that image amounting, thereby, to a combination of the qualities that characterize God—e.g., rationality, creativity/imagination, free will, caring. Whether personhood amounts, as Velleman suggests, to Kantian rationality or, as the Kierkegaardian framework would have it, to God's image, however, is not crucial for the present discussion. Let us assume, then, an understanding of personhood that extends Velleman's Kantian conception into something like Kierkegaard's theistic one—so that personhood is understood to be rationality in the elaborate sense of including also creativity or imagination,

intends one to be not just *some* particular person, but *this* particular person, *Jane.* This is what it means to possess an *essence* that is *individual.* For an elaborated treatment of this exegetical controversy, see Krishek (2019).

[22]"A human being is a synthesis … of the temporal and the eternal" (Kierkegaard 1980, 13).

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freedom of will, and the capacity for caring.[23] These universal qualities are essential to Jane (for example) by virtue of her being a person.

My claim, however, which will become clearer as the discussion progresses, is that just as there are universal qualities that are essential to Jane being a *person*, there are particular qualities that are essential to her being *Jane*: e.g., earnestness. What determines which of her particular qualities are essential? My suggestion is that one's essential particular qualities are those that best manifest one's personhood. After all, qualities such as rationality and creativity are not abstractly possessed.[24] Rather, these and the other relevant universal qualities abide in a person (as it were) by virtue of particular qualities. Accordingly, some character traits (e.g., wit, responsibility, resourcefulness) can be seen as an expression of rationality; particular talents (e.g., for painting, math, music) can be seen as expressions of creativity and imagination; other traits or passions (e.g., courage, determination, ambitiousness) can be seen as expressions of will; and moral qualities (e.g., empathy, kindness, sensibility) can be seen as expressions of the capacity for caring.

Now, the criterion for the *essentiality* of a particular quality is its efficacy in expressing an essential universal quality. In other words, its ability to effectively bring person *X* closer to personhood at its best (or to be 'in God's image' as much as possible). Hence, of all *X*'s particular qualities, only those that manifest personhood are relevant to begin with, so having yellow hair, for example, clearly *cannot* be an essential particular quality. Furthermore, of *these*, only the particular qualities that manifest personhood in the best possible way relatively to *X* are *essential* to *X*. For example, while Jane is sensitive and sensible, and has a genuine, even enthusiastic, interest in people, John is stiff and reserved. He is more enthusiastic about ideals than about interacting with people. We can therefore say that in the case of Jane her caring is best expressed by means of her sensibility and enthusiasm, while in the case of John it is rather his rigid kindness that serves as the vessel for his caring. According to the suggested criterion, then, sensibility is essential to Jane, while tough kindness is essential to John.

Every person possesses a 'pool' of such essential particular qualities that are the 'ingredients' of which one's selfhood (in its potential state) is constituted. However, simply listing these qualities does not seem to be an accurate way of entirely capturing one's essence: it risks a retreat back to describing the beloved rather than naming her (to use Frankfurt's distinction). I will shortly return to this point (see section 3.e), but first let me articulate further the important implications of possessing one's selfhood primarily as a *potential*. This brings us to the second meaning of Kierkegaard's characterization of humans as temporal and eternal.

3.d Contingency and essence

When I talk about *X*'s essence, I use it in two different senses, which, importantly, my theory allows to be compatible. First, essence is the quality that determines the identity of *X* and, as such, it is invariable. Second, essence—in maybe a more intuitive or everyday use of the term—denotes the unique nature of *X*: its distinctive presence as *X*, the 'very essence' of its being. Essence in the latter sense is not necessarily invariable. When experiencing a tree in bloom, for example, the blooming is a part of its essence in the second sense, although blooming is not a part of its essence in the first sense: it will be the same tree when naked in winter.

My thesis is that when *X*'s individual essence is in a *potential* state it determines *X*'s identity, i.e., essence in the first sense. When in an *actualized* state, it amounts to the unique (and changing) nature of *X*, i.e., essence in the second sense. Let me explain what I mean.

As the possession of one's selfhood is primarily in a state of potential (again, see section 3.b), it admits manifold actualizations. In the same way that the capacity for rationality, while arguably

[23]See in this regard Kennett's criticism of Velleman's identification of personhood with one's "rational autonomy," and her claim that personhood also includes "emotional and aesthetic responsiveness" (2008, 223).

[24]*Cf.* Jollimore 2011, 135.

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essential to humans, can be actualized in a person in different ways and to different degrees—so does the quality of selfhood. Although it is *essential* to who we are—it determines our identity (as specific selves or individuals)[25]—possessing it in a state of potential allows different actualizations. These actualizations, however, are *contingent*: there can be several versions of the same self. In other words, although in its potential state one's selfhood/essence is the same and unchangeable, it can be actualized in different and changing forms. The following example will help to clarify this point.

In Kieślowski's film *The Double Life of Véronique* we first meet the Polish Weronika—a lively, passionate, caring young woman with a great talent for singing, who suffers from a debilitating heart condition. Despite the danger to her health, she opts to pursue the opportunity to become a professional singer and dies on the stage soon after beginning her promising career. We then meet the French Véronique—a woman as lively, passionate, and caring as her Polish version. She also has a great talent for singing and a heart condition. Véronique, however, decides not to pursue a singing career (to the dismay of her teacher) and chooses to lead the much quieter life of a school music teacher.

Two different lives, but, as the title indicates, the same Véronique. What makes the two characters identical? They are obviously not the same person in the Lockean sense—after all, they possess a different set of memories—but there is nevertheless an important sense in which they are the same. For the sake of the present discussion, let us consider the film *not* as demonstrating the metaphysical possibility of two persons possessing the same selfhood,[26] but rather as dramatizing the implications of life choices. We can therefore say that the two Véroniques are two different *versions* of the same self. They are *essentially* the same because they share the same potential essence (i.e., the same selfhood in its potential state), but the two actualizations of this potential are different.

If this still sounds too confusing, just consider how easily we can imagine our*selves* in a completely different life. Not only can we envision ourselves working in a different job, living in a different country, having a different marital status, and so on, we can also envision ourselves in *vastly* different circumstances. Just like Virginia Woolf's Orlando, we can imagine ourselves living in a different time, having a different family, inhabiting a different body. I suggest that this 'self' of ours that remains the same is our selfhood/individual essence in its potential state. And if selfhood is a quality in a state of potential, it follows that it can be fulfilled in many forms and to many degrees. Such a conception not only coheres with the thought experiment I presented, but also substantiates the common conviction that we can be a better or a lesser version of ourselves.

Understanding selfhood as a quality that, while determining our identity, exists primarily in a potential state and hence allows for a dynamic actualization accommodates the two senses of essence (presented at the beginning of the section). It thus results in a conception of essence as both invariable and changeable. In its potential state, one's essence is fixed and invariable; in its actualized state, it is contingent and changeable.

3.e The nature of selfhood as a complex unified quality

The thesis, recall, is that to possess an individual essence is to possess the quality of selfhood, which is given to us in a potential state. This quality is constituted (in this state of potential) by a 'pool' of

[25]In the Kierkegaardian framework (which I accept) this idea is built upon the theist assumption that we are created by God: if selfhood is what makes us who we are *intended* to be, we can say that this quality is *essential* to who we are. However, the very idea of a quality that is essential to humans does not in itself depend on a theistic framework (as in Velleman's discussion of personhood), and this is the point that is relevant here.

Further, it also does not take a theistic framework to speculate that every person has her own individual nature, the result of a combination of particular qualities that is unique to her. Because these qualities exist in a potential state, there is also a naturalist sense to thinking of a person as predetermined (i.e., 'intended') to be herself—with the freedom to actualize this potential in a number of different ways. Hence, while it is not my concern here to defend the possibility of having an atheistic version of my thesis, this is indeed a possibility.

[26]Determining whether this is at all a valid possibility is not the concern of my paper. (See again notes 17 and 19).

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particular essential qualities. However, despite being accounted for in terms of many other qualities, selfhood is not reducible to a mere list of these. This is because selfhood is a unified body; rather than an aggregation of separate, individuated, qualities, it is more like an amalgamation of qualities. Being such a complex quality, it is comprised not just of the individual qualities of which it is composed but also of the ways in which these qualities are combined.

To clarify this point, the following analogy may be helpful. In the same way as a combination of distinct colours merges to create a new one, so the combination of different qualities creates a new, unified whole—selfhood. Consider, for example, how colours in a mixture affect each other: when mixed, say, with yellow, green behaves differently than when mixed with red. So, I suggest, do qualities. Each quality receives its special character in accordance with the other qualities it is 'mixed' with. Accordingly, although both Jane and Edward are witty, clever, and passionate, the wit, cleverness, and passion of Jane are different from those of Edward.

Selfhood, as thus construed, is therefore a quality that escapes simple articulation. There is, nevertheless, a way to capture its import: the concept of a name. This, finally, brings us to the first of the three of Kierkegaard's ideas that serve me in my conception of individual essence. The idea of significantly possessing a name is hinted at by Kierkegaard who, when speaking of a person who fails to become the self that he can be, characterizes this person as someone who "forgets his name divinely understood" (Kierkegaard 1980, 33–34). The significance of this, in my understanding, is that according to Kierkegaard Jane is not created a person and becomes, contingently, Jane—but is rather created as Jane.[27] That is, not just *a* person but a *particular* one: a person with an individual essence.[28] Coming full circle, we can say that Frankfurt's appeal to nameability finds a home in Kierkegaard's understanding of individuality. To be nameable is not to be reduced to a list of qualities; rather, it is to be singled out by virtue of possessing the complex, yet unified, quality that makes one who one *essentially* is: a particular individual, a self.

4. The beloved's selfhood as the focus of love

4.a *The twofoldness of selfhood*

We said that the possession of selfhood in a potential state allows many contingent actualizations. This contingency has two levels.

First, of the pool of the essential particular qualities that composes one's selfhood, some qualities are interchangeable. For example, suppose that Charlotte possesses both a great talent for painting and a great talent for writing. Both these qualities are essential because both serve as a vessel for, say, her creativity. My theory allows that Charlotte's individual essence as 'Charlotte' will be maintained whether she becomes a painter or a writer. She would be herself in both cases. The point, then, is that while Charlotte's selfhood is composed of a specific pool of particular essential qualities unique to her, from this pool several different combinations may emerge. As long as the combination includes qualities from this specific pool, Charlotte will be herself.[29] The *first* level of contingency, then, is rooted in the possibility of having one's selfhood fulfilled through different *essential* particular qualities.

More straightforwardly, the *second* level of contingency is rooted in *contingent* particular qualities, which are part of the relevant actualization. Physical traits, such as the colour of one's hair, are an obvious example, but other examples for contingent particular qualities—in the case of the two Véroniques, for instance—would be love for teaching or for performing on stage, being cautious or reckless, being slightly melancholic or cheerfully optimistic.

[27]See again note 21 above.

[28]*Cf.* Carlsson's claim that we "posit essences in persons, which allows us to form holistic pictures of them" (2018, 1399). However, Carlsson is not committed to the claim that people actually possess such essence (1404).

[29]I am grateful to Ariel Meirav for suggesting that I think of selfhood in this way.

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Crucially, understanding one's selfhood in these terms—i.e., as both a potential and an actualization—gives the contingencies of our life their due. While our essence is a fixed given, having this essence primarily in a state of potential genuinely allows for various changing and changeable actualizations. Such an actualization is dependent on our will, which means that we have real freedom to determine *how* we will be. Namely, even if in an important sense we are predetermined —being created as Jane, we cannot become Charlotte (in the same way that, being humans, we cannot become a cat)—in a no less important sense, we are free to determine what *version* of Jane we will be. Further, the actualization also depends significantly on circumstances: when and where we live, the specific body that we are born with, events that occur and things that happen to us, the people we meet, and the interactions that result. All of these have a dramatic effect on the fulfilment of our potential of becoming the individual that each of us is.

Following Velleman's notion of 'empirical persona,' I want to suggest the related, and yet different, notion of an 'individual persona.' 'Empirical persona,' recall, denotes the person as we experience her: her looks, manners, behaviour, and so on. That is, in a way it is akin to what I have just described as the *actualized* state of one's essence. However, while the notion of an empirical persona denotes a combination of *contingent* qualities only, the actualized state of one's essence —i.e., one's individual persona—includes, as we have just seen, both contingent and *essential* qualities.

My suggestion is that when we encounter a person as 'Véronique,' as an individual, we respond to the actualized state of her essential qualities, with her contingent qualities crucially contributing to the shape this actualization takes (or rather, to use the analogy from above, to its 'colour'). Some contingent qualities *support* essential qualities: for example, Veronique's friendliness is a contingent quality that supports her essential quality of trustfulness. Others are indifferent to essential qualities, but may help to *bring to light*, as it were, the person's essence: for example, Veronique's quiet beauty emphasizes her gentleness. Still others may even be *disruptive* of a person's essential qualities: for example, Veronique's restlessness or impulsiveness.

What we face and experience when we encounter Véronique, then, is her *individual persona*: it is Véronique in one of her possible actualizations.[30] We might not be meeting the best version of her, but nevertheless it conveys her potential by virtue of being an actualization of it and so, in principle, we can detect it. No matter what version of her we encounter, then, we are always in a position to perceive 'who she is.' This is because her essence, both in its actualized state and in its potentiality, is accessible to us by virtue of her experienced qualities.

As a way of concluding my view of individual essence with its different aspects, let me present yet another example. The Danish television series *Borgen* (*The Government*) tells the story of Birgitte, who somewhat incidentally becomes the prime minister of Denmark. Birgitte is an idealist—a strong, sincere, and wise woman, whose ambitions and self-confidence do not clash with her openness and warmth, and do not get in the way of her loyalty to family and friends. Let us call this version of her B1. The series demonstrates how the pressing demands of her new position change her. She (slowly and unconsciously) becomes a lesser version of herself: less confident in herself and yet more ruthless, suspicious, and cynical; less idealistic and, most painfully, less devoted to her friends. She deals with this unwelcome change in herself by becoming tougher and increasingly emotionally detached. Let us call this version of her B2. Birgitte, however, evidently does not like who she has become, and is strong enough to understand this and act accordingly. She hence 'returns to herself,' as it were, becoming a sober, and more mature and realistic version of her former self. She quits politics and goes into business. Let us call this version B3.

It is clear that B2 is a less successful actualization of Birgitte's potential selfhood than B1. She is the same Birgitte (because the potential is the same), but essential particular qualities such as her

[30]While in the film these two actualizations are simultaneous, outside the film there can only be one actualization at a time, of course.

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friendliness or loyalty, which are essential to Birgitte because in her case they are the vessel for her universal essential quality of caring, appear to a lesser degree in B2.[31] Hence, there is a strict correlation between failing to properly realize one's potential selfhood and failing to best express essential universal qualities; after all, the former is rooted in the failure to realize properly those essential *particular* qualities that serve as the vessel for the latter. A result of this failure is that one becomes a lesser version of oneself. In version B2, Birgitte's individual persona is only a partial, incomplete, and even distorted actualization of her potential. In version B3, however, especially after deciding to return to politics (a space that gives better expression to her idealism than the business world did), her individual persona is no lesser an actualization than B1. B1 and B3, then, are two different ways to realize her potential properly.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that in all these versions—better and lesser alike—Birgitte is always 'Birgitte,' because the potential remains the same. In each instance, however, she is a different version of herself, a different individual persona, and this is crucial because the *actualization* of the potential is as important to 'being *who she is*' as the potential. Being Birgitte (or Véronique or Jane), then, consists of both her potential and its specific actualization.

My claim is that when we love Birgitte (or Véronique or Jane), the focus of our love is her being who she is: namely, her selfhood in its twofoldness.

4.b The beloved's selfhood

Let us think about Dante's famous love for Beatrice.[32] All would agree that the focus of his love is Beatrice herself, and, according to my theory, this means that his love responds to her individual essence—her selfhood—possessed primarily in a state of potential and constantly in a process of actualization. In its potential state, Beatrice's selfhood amounts to an amalgamation of particular qualities that are essential to her, among them, for example, purity of heart. In its actualized state, her selfhood also includes qualities that are contingent to her, for example, an excellence in moral philosophy.

Any possible actualization, her 'individual persona,' will include amalgamation of her essential particular qualities. Thus, in any version of Beatrice she will possess purity of heart. However, different versions of her will include different contingent qualities. As we said, some of these qualities support or express her essential qualities: her excellence in moral philosophy, for example, expresses her purity of heart. Others are indifferent to her essential qualities (say, her brown hair) but of these some may accentuate, or more easily disclose, her essential qualities (her gracious posture, for example), and some may even go against them: impatience, nervousness, or whatever poor qualities that she might possess.[33]

Hence, although that which is fixed and determines her identity (over time, etc.) is her individual essence *in its potential state*, the *actualization* should equally be considered as her essence. Firstly, it is her essence by virtue of amounting to her unique nature as constituted by the specific actualization (essence in the second sense)[34]; secondly, it is her essence by virtue of including her essential qualities. Beatrice is 'herself,' then, due to the actualization no less than the potential.

Returning to the Kierkegaardian roots of my theory, recall that for Kierkegaard human beings are what he calls a "synthesis" of the eternal and the temporal. That is, we belong equally in these two

[31]Consider for example two initially identical mixtures of colours that contain the colour red as a dominant element. If in one of the mixtures the amount of red is reduced, they will then become two different *versions* of the same colour. Note that the new mixture is a *version* of the other colour and not a new colour altogether, because red is not completely removed from the new mixture but rather used to a lesser degree.

[32]Other philosophers who refer to this love story are, for example, Jollimore (2011) and Stump (2006).

[33]I acknowledge that the implication of my theory is that a person is essentially good (so that bad qualities are deviations, or challenges, to her essential goodness). This is in line with a theistic framework (being created in God's image necessitates being created as good), but is obviously more open to challenges outside of it.

[34]See again the beginning of section 3.d.

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categories: we are neither more nor less eternal rather than temporal. The significance of this for the present context is that the temporal (that is, contingent) *actualized* selfhood is in no way inferior in terms of importance and value to one's 'eternal' (that is, independent of time and circumstances) *potential* selfhood. Accordingly, taking the beloved's selfhood to be the focus of our love is to understand our love as responding to both the beloved's invariable potential *and* its contingent actualization.

4.c The focus of love

To emphasize: when I claim that the focus of our love is the essence of the beloved, I do *not*, by any means, claim that the genuine object of our love is ultimately her potential, nor do I claim that the actualization is only a vehicle to the beloved's 'true self.' First, as I demonstrated, the beloved's essence is *not* reducible to the potential. The potential determines what Jane can (and cannot) be, but what Jane in fact *is*, depends on the *actualization* of the potential. Hence, in as much as Jane's essence takes its form through the actualization of the potential, the actualization is no less the focus of our love.

Second, to have the beloved's essence as the focus of our love is indeed to respond to who the beloved truly is. However, the beloved is who she *truly* is regardless of the extent of the actualization. The potential does not stand for a 'true self' that we have to 'find' beneath the incomplete actualization. Rather, the relation between the potential and the actualization is like that between an idea or sketch for a painting (in the painter's mind or on paper) and the painting itself. In a sense, then, the actualization is even 'truer' than the potential: we respond to the painting, not to the sketch (although the sketch is discernible in the painting).

It would be helpful to compare this with Velleman's view. Recall that he distinguishes between the beloved's universal essence and her particular empirical persona. While the former is the focus of our love, the latter serves only as that which *enables access* to the former, hence it is not in itself the focus of love. In Velleman's view, then, the focus of Dante's love for Beatrice is her personhood not her particularity as Beatrice. However, as argued above (section 2), failing to account for Beatrice *in her particularity* as the focus of Dante's love does not accord with the experience of love.

There are two major differences between my theory and Velleman's; spelling them out will allow us to understand how my alternative preserves Velleman's basic and, in my view, correct, intuition that the focus of love is the beloved's *essence*, but succeeds where his theory fails.

The two theories agree both that the beloved's essence is the focus of love and that this essence is experienced through the particular qualities of the beloved. Velleman terms the latter 'empirical persona' and I term it 'individual persona.' However, while in Velleman's theory the beloved's essence is constituted by her personhood, which is a universal quality, in my theory her essence is constituted by her selfhood. In proposing the idea of an *individual* essence, then, my theory departs from Velleman's by designating as the focus of love an essence that is *particular* to the beloved.

Further, while in Velleman's theory there is nothing that guides the connection between the beloved's personhood (her essence) and the beloved's empirical persona (the communicator of her essence), this is not the case in my theory. Understanding the beloved's essence as existing in two states—potentiality and actualization—the relation between the beloved's essence and her individual persona is of a different nature. Far from being an accidental vehicle of the former, the latter—being the actualized state of the former—does not serve as a communicator of her essence but *is*, in itself, her essence.

Thus, while in Velleman's theory the particularity of the beloved is inferior to her universal essence—it only mediates that which is the real focus of love—in my theory essence and particularity are inseparable. From the point of view of the lover, who in his love responds to *Beatrice*—to who *she* is—the conception of Beatrice's *individual* essence as the focus of his love fits more adequately with his experience.

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5. Further implications

I would like to conclude with a tentative suggestion as to how my theory of individual essence may contribute to the debate concerning the reasons for love. Whether endorsed or rejected, the reasons considered by the participants in these discussions usually include either the valuable intrinsic qualities of the beloved (such as her yellow hair and sense of humour), or her relational qualities (such as her being our wife or daughter) and the history of our relationship with her.[35] The option that the beloved is loved for 'who she is,' on the other hand, if mentioned at all, is often immediately dismissed as a nonstarter.[36] In this sense as well, Velleman's suggestion that we love the beloved for her essence is an interesting exception. Nevertheless, his marginalization of the beloved's particularity proves problematic in this context as well. As other critics of Velleman have observed, his theory provides the lover only with a causal explanation for loving the beloved *in particular*, not with a reason.[37]

Endorsing Velleman's concentration on the beloved's essence, I nevertheless depart from his view when it comes to understanding the grounds for love. In my view, while the focus is indeed the beloved's essence—which I understand in terms of her selfhood—the *reason* for love is the *correspondence* between the beloved's selfhood and that of the lover.

By 'correspondence' I do not mean to say something about the lovers being similar to each other, or to refer to the (supposed) attraction between those who are alike; the relation I have in mind is therefore *not* one of resemblance. Rather, in light of my conception that *L*'s selfhood consists of both *L*'s potential self and one of its possible actualizations, my suggestion is that beloved *B* corresponds to lover *L* in as much as *B* helps *L* to fulfil *L*'s potential. That is to say, Dante loves Beatrice because it is *her*—by virtue of *her selfhood* (and the values, inclinations, passions, and preferences of which it is comprised)—that enables him to actualize his potential in the best possible way. Hence, unlike theories that posit the reason for love as being the relationship with the beloved or the qualities of the beloved (respectively), or, as in Velleman's theory, the personhood of the beloved, my position is that it is the correspondence between the beloved and the lover—the fact that Beatrice (for example) helps Dante be a better version of himself—that justifies (rather than merely explains) Dante's love for Beatrice.[38]

To demonstrate how my theory may provide what is lacking in Velleman's, let us return to the case of the two Véroniques—taking the 'doubleness,' again, to embody not two different persons, but rather two different lives. Let us suppose, then, that the Polish Weronika did not die on stage and instead became a successful singer, so that in one life she is a Polish vocal artist and in another she is a shy French music teacher. The two Véroniques share the same potential selfhood—the same individual essence in a state of potential—but their actualizations of the potential are different. The stressful life on stage shows in the looks of the Polish Weronika, who, at the same time, has a glamourous appearance that her French version lacks. Unlike the French Véronique, she is anxious

[35]See note 1. Defenders of the latter theory include Grau (2004, 2010), Hurka (2011, 2017), and Kolodny 2003.

[36]See Delany (1996, 345–46), Lamb (1997, 36, 46–47), and Keller (2000, 165), who take this to express love for one's *haecceity*, an idea that they reject as absurd or insufficient. See also Hamlyn (1978, 12) and Smuts (2014, 525n8). See also Kolodny's criticism of Frankfurt's idea that the focus of love is the beloved's "bare identity" (2003, 142–43). Alternatively, the notion of being loved 'for who he is' may seem to impart the inexpressiblity of one's reasons for loving another, as Jollimore suggests when referring to Montaigne's well-known exclamation: "If someone were to urge me to say why I loved him, I should feel it could not be expressed except in the reply: 'Because it was he; because it was I'" (Jollimore 2011, 19; *cf.* Bagley 2015, 481).

[37]See Helm (2013, sec. 4.1), Kolodny (2003, 177–78), and Bagley (2015, 484).

[38]It should be emphasized, though, that while the proper motivation for love *is* the fact that the beloved can help us actualize ourselves to the fullest, *this is not an instrumental reason for love.* The fact that we love someone because he or she is the person who can make us who we are does not entail that we love the person *in order* to become who we are or that we treat this person *instrumentally.* I elaborate on this conception of correspondence, and defend it, elsewhere. (See Krishek 2022, in particular chap. 7.)

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and stressed. Additionally, her success as an artist-singer is central to her self-conception,[39] a quality that is irrelevant to her French version.

The two Véroniques, then, possess a different set of particular qualities and, accordingly, have different individual personas. Nevertheless, in an important sense they are also the same—they possess the same potential selfhood. Given this twofoldness of being both different and the same, let us now consider the ardent lover of the French Véronique, Alexandre, in the life of the Polish Weronika. Does he have a reason to love her as well? In Velleman's view, Alexandre has a reason to love the Polish Weronika—her possession of personhood—but nothing in his love for Véronique *in particular* gives him a reason to love Weronika *in particular*. In fact, as the latter's empirical persona is very different, it is instead quite probable that he will *not* love her: after all, there is nothing there to indicate that her empirical persona will communicate her personhood in the same successful way that the empirical persona of the French Véronique does.

In my theory, on the other hand, there is such an indication. Because the individual persona of the Polish Weronika is an actualization of the same potential that the French Véronique possesses, it is a form of the same essence. Accordingly, there is a reason to think that the correspondence between their essences will endure. Alexandre, who, being who he is, loves Véronique for who she is, has a reason to love her Polish version. At the same time, if the individual persona of the Polish Weronika is a poor actualization of the potential, so poor that it makes the potential almost indiscernible, then the correspondence between their essences may break down. After all, as I have been arguing, being 'who she is' is constituted both by the potential and the *actualization*. Hence, the original correspondence may well be affected in instances where the actualization is dramatically different, and, in such a case, Alexandre has a reason to fail to love *that* version of Véronique.

Now, suppose that we transfer the case of the two Véroniques from exemplifying two different lives to exemplifying two different *stages* of life, so that rather than a French and a Polish Véronique we think of a younger and an older Véronique. Given our analysis, we can easily account for both the *continuance* of love (despite the changes that the beloved has gone through after, say, fifty years of a relationship), and the *falling out* of love (despite the beloved being essentially the same self). Given that, in my theory, the beloved's selfhood, with which the lover's selfhood is correspondent, is constituted by both the *invariable* potential and the *changing* actualization, the former thus allows for the possibility of *endurance* and the latter the possibility of *discontinuity*.

Hence, if the beloved changes so drastically that her individual persona (i.e., her essence in its actualized state) does not enable the detection of the potential that links it with the individual persona with which the lover was correspondent in the first place, then, in as much as there is no longer correspondence, falling out of love is justified. However, as long as her potential is discernible through the various actualizations to the extent that the correspondence remains, love should endure and flourish,[40] no matter how the beloved has changed.[41]

Acknowledgements. The writing of this article was supported by The Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 111/16). It is the result of a very long endeavour, and I thank all those who encouraged me along the way. The article took its final shape thanks to the input of many people, and in particular I would like to thank Oded Na'aman and Carl Posy, who helped me significantly in clarifying the nature of the question that I'm after; to David Enoch, Avi Kenan, and Dar Triffon Reshef for reading this article attentively and providing invaluable feedback; and to Ariel Meirav for endless hours of conversation that gave rise to many of the ideas presented here. Finally, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for *CJP*, who clearly invested much thought in reading this article and whose comments undoubtedly improved and strengthened it.

[39]In Delaney's view, this makes it a quality for which she expects to be loved (1996, 343–45).

[40]This hints at an *active* effort on the part of the lover. This means, therefore, that love is not only a matter of spontaneous response to the beloved's selfhood, but is also, crucially, a matter of *work*. I elaborate on this pressing issue in Krishek (2022).

[41]This article has emerged from, and is a part of, a larger project, and accordingly the discussion here parallels some of the ideas that I present in that project. However, the main task of the present article is to abstract from the specifically Kierkegaardian framework of the larger project and introduce the applicability of my thesis to current analytic discussions on love in an independent way.

https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2022.7 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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Cite this article: Krishek, S. 2021. The Focus of Love. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 51: 508–522, doi:10.1017/can.2022.7

https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2022.7 Published online by Cambridge University Press