



## Could Trump Be His Own Valentine?

*On Narcissism And Selfless Self-Love*

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### 1. Trumpmania

Donald Trump's election as president of the United States has given the world a paradigm of narcissistic self-love well beyond compare. There doesn't seem to be another person showing off such incredibly high self-esteem. Trump is special, really, really special, and he wants the world to know this, to recognize this, to *confirm* this. He deserves to be admired, he deserves to be adored. If we would love him as much as he loves himself, the world would

be a better place. At least for the USA and for their citizens. But one may wonder whether, or why, such an exceptional champion of self-conceit would limit his successes merely to the country he is now making great again. If only we would let him, he could really run the world and make it the best of all possible worlds...for everyone! Such is his limitless self-confidence. And he can prove it! It is not just because *he* loves himself that much. No, he *earns* it. We owe him our love. He just *is* the paradigm of success, of what we all aspire, what we all love. And so does he: he loves himself, the greatest, the one beyond compare!

This picture definitely rings an alarm bell too. For the self-love displayed by Trump obviously exemplifies an egotistic attitude that seems the paradigm counterpart of what morality requires. After all, morality requires us to be prosocial, that is, to serve and protect other people's entitlement to well-being and respect. Morality requires us to act not merely for reasons of self-interest, and is therefore an indispensable feature of any viable society. Morality rightly seems to oblige us to resist our apparently natural egoistic inclination to be interested merely in satisfying our own desires. Does this mean that morality would require Trump to give up his self-love? Should we all give up our tendency to love ourselves? Is that moral duty's message?

Whether or not we are inclined to love Trump, or are inclined to hate him for his excessive self-love, or for his indifference to harming others, or his neglect of our needs and our entitlement to well-being and respect – Trump's case, or so I claim, most of all invites us to rethink and clarify our conception of self-love and its relation to morality. This is so for at least two reasons.

Firstly, to assume that the opposition between morality and self-love is evident supports a bizarre schism in human motivation. It should seem weird to each of us, that other people have moral reasons to care for our well-being but that we ourselves don't have such reasons. Why would morality give everybody else a reason not to harm Donald Trump but not Donald himself? What the heck is wrong with him that he is excluded by morality to take care of himself? Why would morality be picking on him? Is this an elitist conspiracy? What is so special about morality anyway that it allows itself to be blind to the fact that no-one could take care of Trump better than Donald himself? Something similar applies to each one of us, and this should at least raise some concern. For apparently, your friends, parents, children, neighbours, and even anonymous strangers in the street, have moral reasons to take care of your needs and to refrain from harming you. So, if everybody is acting morally when they take *your* interests into account, then why can't *you* be acting morally when you take your own interests into account? How could everybody have a moral reason not to harm you, except you? Why is prudence not morally praiseworthy? There is something puzzling about this apparent bifurcation.

There is unsuspected support for this line of reasoning, as it were, from the other side of the same coin. This support comes from Jesus, who proclaims in the Bible that "thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself".<sup>i</sup> This surely seems to imply that there is something good, something *morally* good, about self-love. For Jesus obviously does not say that we should love others *instead of* ourselves.<sup>ii</sup> Loving ourselves apparently provides us with an energetic motivational force that we could apply equally well to love our neighbours and make them flourish as we would wish to flourish ourselves. And no doubt Donald Trump

will be the first to claim that this is definitely true in his case: *his* power and energy will suffice to ascertain that he will make all our lives as prosperous as his own.

This does not of course amount to an argument in favour of the claim that moral reasons and reasons of self-interest have one and the same source and might be applied for one and the same cause. But it does suggest that the presupposition that self-love and morality stand in a natural opposition needs further critical scrutiny. We may be wrong to think that moral reasons do not allow us to care for ourselves, as we may be wrong to think that loving ourselves impedes caring for others.

Secondly, we might imagine Donald Trump's self-love to be so grandiose that it comes close to what we may call the "Leviathan promise". In Hobbes' philosophy,<sup>iii</sup> the Leviathan is the body politic, representatively actualized in one supreme ruling individual, the absolutely authoritative sovereign. This monarch can be said to need only one motive, one inclination and one aspiration: to love himself, to see to it that he will flourish, that he prospers as an absolute legislator whose will is everybody's law. For if he does, if he loves himself and succeeds in making all his subordinates love him too, this will be good for everybody. And it will be good because his supreme self-love *as an absolute legislator* will create the very possibility of *moral* reasons. That is, the Leviathan's existence will give everybody a reason to care not merely for himself but to act prosocially instead. The Leviathan will make everybody refrain from harming others, because such harm will harm the monarch's absolute authority. And, obviously, the Leviathan will not be pleased by such potentially undermining threats, and will make sure to demolish any insubordinate opponent he comes across. We have seen this corrective power, over the years, in Trump's unscrupulous reactions to those who dare to go against his will.

I agree that the language of the Leviathan does not seem to fit the current democratic constitution, but those who voted for Trump often voice their choice by emphasizing that they adore Trump and adore him for his ruthless and determined self-love, a love they trust will be good for them. Trump's voters seem to believe, as Trump himself does, that he knows what the American people want and need. *To make America great again!* The rhetoric of this phrase nicely captures the notion of American exceptionalism: the idea that America is entitled to think of itself as the most important and best country in the world because it is the only country in the world that fosters the American dream. This dream is precisely what Trump loves in loving himself. For he obviously is the supreme exemplar. He made the American dream come true. *All by himself!* And actually, just by loving himself. By loving himself in this unprecedented and invincible way. This is why Trump, in loving himself loves the American people, each and every one of them, in quite a similar fashion – if I'm allowed to make this comparison – as when God in loving His Son loves each one of His children.

To be sure, this reasoning does not amount to an argument that by loving oneself one loves other people, not even the people one identifies with. But it does suggest that we should critically scrutinize the distinction between self and other that we presuppose in thinking that self-love implies an egoistic bias and is therefore opposed to morality.

I shall contribute to this much-needed critical reflection on self-love in this paper. I shall argue that there is a variety of self-love that definitely deserves morality's support. I shall

argue that for this a person needs to relate to himself in a *selfless* way. This will require a person to distinguish the lover within themselves from the object of their love that, to be sure, they themselves are too. For the occasion of this exclusive issue of *The Critique* I shall use the name *Valentine* for this alternative of oneself that is one's object of love.

To make sense of this selfless way of lovingly relating to oneself – that is, to make sense of the question of whether Donald Trump can be his own *Valentine* – I need to explain how the ordinary love relation between two persons, a lover and a beloved, can be a useful and informative model for the way in which to think about self-love. I will do so in three steps.

The first step is to give a rather general survey of the characteristic features of love as a relation between a lover and a beloved, explaining what this means for the *lover* as well as for the *beloved*. Step two will zoom in on the role of the beloved, the *Valentine*, which will involve some elucidation of what it means to be active in being passive, of what it means to *receive actively*. The final step will be to spell out how a person might be able to take up both roles in an exercise of self-love. What then is required and what will it mean for someone to be their own Valentine?

Bringing this back to my engagement with the self-love of the president of the United States, the question then will be whether Donald Trump can love himself for letting him be loved by himself. This may be a dazzling question for now. But I hope this will turn out to be a rather straightforward and clear question at the end of my argument. I don't know whether the answer for Donald Trump will be that clear and straightforward. Despite the picture I have been painting in this first section, I actually shall prefer to remain silent about whether or not Trump's self-love is an instance of the *selfless* variety. I cannot look into the man's heart, certainly not from the other side of the Atlantic and through the distorting glasses of the media. But then again, my conclusion is not about Trump. Trump merely provided the occasion and is (*pace* Trump) not all that important. The aim of this paper is to paint a picture of *selfless self-love*, a variety that is morally most respectable and that deserves to beat narcissistic egomania.

## 2. The roles of love

One of the most interesting features of human life is the fascinatingly myriad ways in which *activity* and *passivity* involve, evoke, merge, exclude, imply, contradict and require one another. This is particularly clear in love. From the early beginnings of Western culture this has been recognized, as we can clearly see in that phenomenal image the Greeks gave us of their god of love, *Eros*. Depicted with a bow and an arrow with which he can strike us at our heart, *Eros* both weakens our mind and strengthens our heart, making us hopelessly fall in love. Even though we know *eros* as the linguistic root of 'erotic', there is nothing specifically sexual about *eros*. For the Greeks *eros* implied arousal, to be sure, a strong, resolute motivation, a somewhat dangerous mode of losing control, a kind of madness, which is erotic and corporeal but not necessarily sexual. Those who fall in love are in the grip of a force that is much larger than them, that captivates them, that blinds them, *willingly*. *Eros* comes with an interesting set of features: a lot of energy and inspiration, an overwhelming sense of

urgency, a rather narrow focus, an unusual blend of fearlessness and helplessness, an indifference to more reasoned courses of action, a sense of invincibility, a certain mode of folly and of lightness, of enthusiasm and vitality.

Contemporary neurophysiology offers some kind of explanation of what binds these features under one heading, a story that seems to suggest that a human being in love is neurophysiologically speaking quite similar to an addict: focused, captivated, in the grip of an *accumbens* activated by high levels of *dopamine*.<sup>iv</sup> Dopamine fuels our desire; it devotes us to *wanting*. It directs our attention, so that there is not much else we can think of, except our beloved, the one we want to be with, for whom we will move the earth. There is some evidence that this focused craving is distinct from our libido or sex drive, which is fuelled by a different hormone: testosterone. No doubt dopamine and testosterone often work in tandem, but both from the neurophysiological as from the ancient Greek point of view there is no need to jump to the simple idea that the vitality of love is to be understood merely in terms of the urge to procreate. Erotic love is much more than that and does play a role in such diverse activities as loving the Chicago Cubs, loving one's children, loving one's country, loving sex or even loving one's stamp collection. It is the energetic craving for satisfaction, even though its relationship to the satisfaction itself is rather ambiguous. Erotic love is the devotion to wanting, it is the active *loving* itself that makes it worthwhile, much more than the reward it strives for.

As an agent we are definitely active when love in its erotic guise motivates us. But at the same time we feel passive in some sense, captivated, unable to do otherwise. This rather paradoxical state has been at the center of the work of one of the most influential contemporary philosophers working on love, Harry Frankfurt.<sup>v</sup> He has tried to account for this phenomenon by analyzing the concept of *volitional necessity*, something that we just *need* to do in virtue of the determination of our own *will*. Frankfurt doesn't use the ancient Greek words for love – *eros*, *agapè* and *philia* – and is not specifically interested in the erotic nor in the romantic variety of love. His main examples – loving one's children and loving an ideal – for that matter, seem to fit *agapè* better than *eros*. When your child wakes up in the night, hopelessly crying, you get out of bed. You just *have to* – whether or not it is cold, whether or not you're tired and whether or not you seriously would just prefer to sleep on. You *have to* get out of bed to care for your child. And even though you *cannot* do otherwise, you *wouldn't want* to do otherwise. You have to care for your child because you *want to*. You're captivated, Frankfurt admits, but by the commands of your own will.

To understand the depth of this apparently paradoxical state of both being active and passive, and to begin to appreciate what this means for the *roles* of love, it may be useful to leave Frankfurt's analysis to one side and to say a little bit more about the other two Greek words for love. The word *agapè* has made a glorious career of more than two thousand years through the Christian world. Characteristic of *agapè* is the awe for the object of one's love, the profound dedication it receives and the infinite selflessness it evokes. The adjectives used seem to fit a transcendent, sublime, otherworldly, and divine object of love much more than a merely human and mundane beloved. *Agapè* is used in the Bible to refer to the love Jesus has for his Father: an unconditional, self-sacrificing love that is taken to be perfectly similar to God's and Jesus' immeasurable love for each and every human being.

Crucially, agapè is selfless; it motivates the lover to completely forget about themselves just to care for the beloved's well-being. Agapè is absolutely unconditional, immersing the lover in a totally disinterested dedication to the beloved object. Agapè is not about the lover's satisfaction. Not at all. It implies the lover's willingness to dedicate their life to the beloved object's flourishing, to provide all their resources, unconditionally, to praise and celebrate the beloved's glorious existence, *for its own sake*. The Christian connection with loving the 'humanity' encountered in another human being, in an unconditional and disinterested way, whether or not this other person is of one's own kin, fits the Greek idea that in agapè it is the universal Idea or Form of our *Valentine* that we love, rather than its actual, material, temporal instantiation. That is why I emphasized above that Frankfurt's main example of a parent loving their child fits agapè so well: in loving your child you love it for what it is now, to be sure, but even in what it is now you will be aware of the fact that your child is full of promises, full of potentiality, that it is a person that deserves to flourish, to express its *telos*, its full-blown potentiality as a precious, lovely human being.

There are some important lessons to be drawn from agapè about the relation between passivity and activity in love. And in a significant sense one lesson is the same as the one to be drawn from eros. Love in the guise of agapè motivates the lover to actively spend all their energy and effort for the better cause of the beloved object, but, importantly, the activity is not motivated from within. That is, just as in the case of eros, the motivation comes from without. The lover is not active in making themselves moved to care for their beloved. This willingness to care comes from without. In the case of eros it is *Eros'* arrow that hits you in virtue of which the beloved object, your *Valentine*, strikes you as absolutely worthy of your adoration. In the case of agapè a similar kind of external source motivates you. But whereas in eros it is specifically the actual and material mode of your *Valentine* that triggers you, in agapè it is explicitly not the beloved object as it stands that merits your dedication, but rather its potential perfection.

A further important lesson is that both in eros and in agapè the lover and the beloved are passive in getting the love off the ground. That is, neither you nor your *Valentine* need to do anything to activate your love. For the Greeks there was an easy way to make sense of this. *Eros* is a god, one of the many that were around in Greek life, and it is *Eros'* activity, his hitting you with his arrow, that triggers your love. In agapè the situation is slightly more complicated, but the motivating force comes from the universal Idea, not from your own local and contingent impulses. Either way, whatever your *Valentine* is doing is neither here nor there when it comes to your love for them. Your love has an entirely different source.

This seems different in the third variety of love the Greeks had a word for: *philia*, usually translated as friendship, apparently involving a crucial reciprocity, requiring both friends to be active in having the love flow. *Philia* involves a lot of *sharing*. *Philia* is about joint attention, joint intention and joint evaluation. *Philia* evolves around intimacy, the sharing of joint existential experience. It includes mutual care, the sharing of responsibility for one another's well-being. And it creates commonality, the sharing of schemes of orientation, interpretation and evaluation. A paradigm of *philia* for the ancient Greeks is the intimacy among soldiers, side by side facing death, rejoicing in victory, sharing the deepest encounter with their human lethal vulnerability, and taking care, together, for each one's – and thus their *shared* – survival. The depth of *philia* is obviously significant on the battlefield,

where survival is literally a matter of life and death. But also in the more common lives we live today there is ample room for *philia* and for its depth. The existential experience of communal endurance takes many forms, such as for instance sharing the experience of moving homes, of refurbishing and remodeling one's home together, or of watching the Cubs win the World Series, or even of something as small as singing 'Happy Birthday' to your 5-year-old child.

It seems pretty commonsensical to think of friendship as involving very similar roles to both lover and beloved. Neither friend is supposed to carry more weight in keeping the friendship alive. Neither one is merely the lover or merely the beloved. Both play a similar role, the role of *friend*. This might seem to suggest that there are three distinct roles involved in love: lover, beloved, and friend. This is right, as I shall take for granted. But we will make a mistake, as I shall argue, if we would understand this as implying that passivity and activity in friendship (i.e. in *philia*) neatly lines up with the roles of lover and beloved.

To make my case I will need a special occasion of friendship in which the lover and the beloved come apart. There are many such situations (think, especially, of life's bad times), but one of the more glorious and lighthearted occasions obviously takes center stage in this exclusive issue of *The Critique*. Valentine's Day invites each one of us to disregard for a day the reciprocal sharing of orientation, intention and evaluation. On Valentine's Day you are encouraged to take up the sole role of lover. On Valentine's Day you think of your friend as your *Valentine*, assigning them the exclusive role of beloved object. On Valentine's Day Donald Trump is encouraged to think not of himself, but merely of his wife, Melania, his *Valentine*, for whom he will move the earth.

How are we to understand Trump's activity and passivity on Valentine's Day? What does it mean to take up the role of lover in an ongoing reciprocal friendship? Two models seem to suggest themselves, related to the other guises of love the Greeks distinguished. The first would be for Trump to remind himself of the initial erotic inspiration that brought him in this relationship with his beloved Melania in the first place. Trump might remember the enthusiasm and the vitality he experienced in the beginning. He remembers Eros. He uses his emotional imagination. He feels the strength of his heart, the blend of fearlessness and helplessness, the indifference to more reasoned courses of action, and his wish to write his *Valentine* a love poem, trusting the accompanying sense of invincibility. He will resist the thought that Melania will love him for this poem! It's Valentine's Day; it's not about what Trump will receive in return. Valentine's Day is about giving.

**“On Valentine's Day Donald Trump is encouraged to think not of himself, but merely of his wife, Melania, his Valentine, for whom he will move the earth.”**

The other model might help. Trump might practice *agapè*. He may look at his *Valentine*, in this sincerely disinterested and unconditional way. He will see Melania's potential perfection – not, obviously, as a faraway ideal, that will require her to improve her character, her behaviour, her looks, but as a delightful reality that is clearly visible for everyone who knows how to look at Melania. If this would be difficult for Trump, he might be inspired by Melania's example, who seems capable of seeing the perfection in what would

otherwise seem to be flaws: the political incorrectness, the grandiloquent language, the sandy hair, the wide, belittling smile, the small hands.

Importantly, in both the erotic and the agapic model it is obvious that as a lover one has to be disinterested. Love is not about oneself, not about satisfying one's own desires or needs, not about what is in there for oneself. When someone takes up their role as a lover in a friendship one is dedicated to let one's friend flourish. Whatever the effort this requires, taking up one's role as a lover implies that one gains access to the motivation that comes from without. This will necessitate the lover volitionally, to use Frankfurt's phrase: a lover will *love* to do whatever is required for their *Valentine* to flourish in their life, and selflessly so.

I hope this sketch suffices to explain the role of the lover, both in its passivity and its activity, with respect to their actions, attitudes and motivations, again both passively and actively. But what is the role of the *Valentine*? What do we ask in a loving relationship of the beloved? Is the *Valentine* merely an object, a purely passive entity that is being acted upon? These are easily neglected questions despite their vital importance. I shall spend the next section on the *Valentine's* role, arguing that it is a mistake to overlook its relevance in understanding love, particularly self-love.

### 3. Being Valentine: lovingly receptive

Valentine's Day is celebrated all over the world, and obviously local practices will vary greatly. As a Dutch person I may fail to understand and appreciate what Valentine's Day really is like in America, but let me focus for convenience on serious romantic friendships and the custom of giving heart-shaped gifts to one's friend. I take the symbolism to be clear: the lover wholeheartedly gives their heart to their beloved.

So, what is in it for the beloved? Are they merely receptive, the object of attention, care and love of their friend? Well, no. "To receive" is a verb. As with every verb, there are better and worse ways of doing whatever is required for an appropriate execution of the intended activity. And as with every verb, there are even instances that are arguably so far off the mark that they cannot actually be called an instance of suitable activity at all. We can all recall, or imagine, bitter instances or occasions when we gave our heart away to someone who crushed it in response. Giving your heart away, *wholeheartedly*, is a precious, vulnerable deed. Part of the undertaking is of course that you will have to do it unconditionally and selflessly. That is clearly what makes it such a courageous venture. The lover gives, cares, loves *without expecting anything back*. From the point of view of the lover, the beloved does not play a part in making the act of loving successful or not. Loving is the *lover's* activity, merely, purely, wholeheartedly, unconditionally and selflessly.

Yet even though the lover is not expecting anything back, receiving someone's love is still an activity on its own that can, as such, be done in better or worse ways. Not better or worse merely for the lover, but also for the beloved themselves, and, moreover, for the act of receiving itself. This may sound a bit strange, but it is relevant to note that activities have their own internal standards of appropriateness and success. As a social and communicative

act, part of what makes receiving a success or not is a function of the assessment of the activity by the interacting persons. If the giver does not consider the receiving a success this matters to the quality of the performance of the receiver, and so does the receiver's judgement. But in addition to this there are also internal standards. Both people may be wrong in their assessment, after all. As a math student you may for instance learn the rules of multiplication, but your teacher may be so crude and uninformative that we will all abhor and be right to conclude that this was a very bad instance of "teaching", or perhaps even that it wasn't "teaching" at all. This is a well-known distinction: it is not always the case that something *is* what it *looks like*.<sup>vi</sup>

So, how should the beloved receive the lover's love? What activity do we expect from a *Valentine*? How do you receive your lover's heart? There seem to be good reasons to do this *lovingly*, even though it will be clear too that these reasons do not necessitate you. Love, after all, is presumed to be a free and unconditional exchange between autonomous persons. Yet, it seems obvious that in the case of *philia*, of *reciprocal* love, we may expect a *Valentine* to receive in a loving way. We should, nevertheless, be careful with the reciprocity, as it might interfere with and blur the disinterestedness that is crucial to love. These complications are known at least since Marcel Mauss published his famous book on gift giving in 1925.<sup>vii</sup> Mauss showed convincingly that gift giving requires complicated sets of interlocking social norms. In some obvious sense a *gift* is an invitation to give something comparable back in return, which seems to imply the expectation that the gift will be reciprocated, and, within a big enough time frame, this expectation seems to entail something close to an obligation. But of course a *Valentine* should not return the gift immediately and neither should they do so merely out of duty, or of calculation. Sharing love is not a business, not an exchange of commodities of comparable value, not a social contract. Love is a much more subtle adventure.<sup>viii</sup>

The gift should first be received, obviously. Moreover, that might seem to be all a *Valentine* is supposed to do. After all, to acknowledge and endorse the essentially *disinterested* character of the lover's gift – which is actually their *love* itself, symbolized in the heart-shape – a *Valentine* could best receive this love as if this receipt is the final move in the transaction between the lover and their beloved. The love of the lover, as a disinterested gift, realizes itself to its full potential by just being this: a disinterested engagement of the lover with the flourishing of their beloved *for the beloved's own sake*.

Intriguingly, however, it is precisely in the receipt of the lover's love as the final realisation of this love, that the beloved's act of receiving this love itself takes on a wonderful *loving* character. Let me explain. Suppose Melania receives a heart-shaped gift from Donald Trump. It is *Valentine's Day*. Melania is Donald's *Valentine*. What should she do? Well, she receives the gift, which may strike her as a mere event. A terrific event, to be sure, but an event all the same, something that happens, that takes place without any interference or activity on her part. Literally, though, Melania will know this to be a misleading and incorrect description. She will have to do *something*: open her hands, look at Donald, listen to him, accept the heart-shaped gift he puts in her hands, thank him. And all this she will do in a certain mode: surprised, affected, flattered, excited, uplifted; or perhaps – this is possible too – disappointed, ashamed, annoyed.

The mode of one's receipt reflects one's attitude towards the gift, towards one's friend's giving of their love. This attitude of the recipient will co-determine the character of the giving, in virtue of the giving being a social, communicative act directed at the recipient. If one would refuse to receive the gift, the action could not properly be categorized as a giving. It wouldn't be a gift at all. This is one of the fascinating peculiarities of the metaphysics of social reality: *other* people co-determine what one does.<sup>ix</sup>

Trump's giving Melania his love is, as we saw above, a disinterested, selfless act. Trump just cares for Melania and wants her to flourish. So there is *truly* no need at all for Melania to give anything back. All she needs to do is let this gift of love *be*. *Let it be!* Let it be what it is: *a gift of love*. That is all. That is what Melania's receipt of Trump's love should underscore. In terms of the role she performs as Trump's *Valentine* this requires her to strike a delicate balance. She may be grateful, sure, and express her gratitude. But she should not overdo it. She shouldn't let her gratitude degrade Trump's gift by being too abundant. On the other hand, she shouldn't receive the heart-shaped gift with indifference, either. And neither with too much self-conceit, as if it was only to be expected that she should receive Trump's love. That would be a bad way of receiving a gift. So, what are we to make of this?

Actually, the best reply, simple but also demanding, would be to say that Melania should receive the gift in a *loving* way. This will mean that as a *Valentine* she will receive the gift, Trump's love, in a disinterested and selfless way, moved to care for Trump, volitionally necessitated to let him flourish *as her lover*. There is no contradiction in this, and no paradox, if you would carefully discern what is at stake here. It is because Melania loves Trump that she will be most happy to *receive* his love, a love that itself intends to accomplish nothing but her own flourishing. This means Melania can just flourish, relax in Trump's hands, feeling on top of the world. She can just enjoy her own existence as beautiful and worthwhile, touched by Trump's love that uncovers the full potential of her life as good in itself, for its own sake.

Two features strike out in this loving receipt of someone's love. Firstly, Melania is not doing something for herself in receiving this love. She receives it, in this loving way, because she cares for Trump, her lover who is flourishing now, realizing his full potential *by being Melania's lover*. Melania is not satisfying any of her own desires, even though she might obviously feel fulfilled, more than ever, by being loved by Trump. But it is Trump's love that fulfills her, and that is a love she cannot arrange or bring about. It is a gift, a true gift that she can only receive.

Secondly, Melania has no interest, fundamentally, in *loving* Trump for being her lover. She doesn't love Trump in order to receive his love. She just loves him. Period. As it happens, though, Trump turns out to love Melania. It is his own volitional necessity, not a necessity that she brought about, nor a necessity that she would have intended to bring about if she *could* bring it about. This is the difficult part, but it is crucial. Receiving Trump's love in a truly *loving* way means that Melania's interests do not play a role at all. It is the deep truth that echoes in one of Uriah Heep's songs: "I just want you to be happy, even if it is not with me." Melania will be thrilled and exhilarated, grateful for the wonderful coincidence that the universe offered her and Trump the opportunity to share their love together. But if Melania would have been able to guarantee that Trump would love her (by some act of magic), his love would have lost its most precious and most essential quality. What makes it

the love what it is, after all, is that it is *Trump's* love for Melania, a love that comes from without, and truly so.

This, then, is the role of the *Valentine* in a love story: just to be happy in celebrating their own life, lovingly receiving their lover's love, as a true gift from without in which they have no interest. As a loving *Valentine* they feel volitionally necessitated to receive their lover's love in a disinterested way. They do, because they love to see their lover's flourishing, for its own sake.

#### 4. Selfless self-love without narcissism

In each of the roles that I have distinguished in the previous sections passivity and activity play their part. In interesting and subtle ways these attitudes intertwine, but strikingly the satisfaction of someone's desires is not a motivation in either role. Love is not about one's own satisfaction. Love is selfless. Love is about giving and caring. Love is about letting be, about letting go. The lover cares for their *Valentine*, wishing them to flourish, in the grip of the wonderful view of their *Valentine's* full potential that they discern clearly and love for what it is. And the *Valentine* cares for their lover, wishing *them* to flourish, as their lover, grateful and touched by the gift of their lover's love that encourages the *Valentine* to let themselves be what they are.

The selflessness of both lover and *Valentine* can perhaps best be characterised as the radical motivational silence of any occurring self-interested inclination. Of course we are all limited human beings, all too human, no doubt, and so we can easily imagine that all kinds of inclinations might pop up impulsively, even when we receive a *Valentine's* gift, or when we want to give one ourselves. These inclinations could potentially allure us, making us dramatize our gratitude, or fake indifference, or indulge in self-conceit. But when we are in a loving state, wholeheartedly, firmly in the grip of *Eros*, moved by *agapè* or in the flow of *philia*, these alluring, distracting impulses just go by unheard, in silence, motivationally inert. When we are in love, we can just let it be. We will just care for our beloved's flourishing. It will shine for us as the only thing that matters.

How could this relational view of the roles of love help us understand the case of self-love? How could self-love be selfless? Isn't that an oxymoron? Well, no. At least, that is what I argue. The view of the roles of love I developed in the previous sections can be used to model the self-relation at play in self-love as a relation that is complex, but that is significant, intelligible and viable too. The basic move, both for playing the role of one's own lover and for playing that of one's own *Valentine*, is to view oneself from without. And the basic endeavor then is to see whether you can be moved by the full potential of yourself anticipated from without. This may sound like a dazzling and artificial undertaking, at first, a complicated intellectual operation. But once you get the hang of it, you will begin to appreciate that it is not a cognitively demanding task. It requires you to be mindful, sure, but it is mainly a matter of feeling, of feeling at home in this world, and especially in this life, for the opportunity it offers you to embrace your own peace of mind, being just what you are, living *with* your limits.<sup>x</sup>

So let's return to Donald Trump and imagine what it would be like for Trump to love himself in the selfless way that I've sketched in the preceding sections. First, we'll have to imagine a second Trump, an alternative of the man, and wonder whether this alternative can be selflessly loved by the first, or, conversely, can himself selflessly love the first. Let's call them "Donald" and "Trump" and my question now is whether either one can be the other's *Valentine*, and if so, whether each of them can play the roles I sketched in the previous sections?

A first concern might be whether the world, or better *Trump's* world, can be big enough to include both. Could Trump bear Donald's presence if he were another man? Could the world harbour two men of such megalomaniac proportions? This is relevant, metaphorically, because in the selfless self-love that I'm trying to make sense of, the lover is supposed to love their beloved without thereby satisfying their own interest. So, there is a sense in which the question of selfless self-love is the question of whether the lover, call him Trump, would be capable of loving his beloved, call him Donald, if Donald would not be Trump. We may be reminded of Uriah Heep's lyrics: "I just want you to be happy", the lover sings, "even if it is not with me." If Trump could love Donald for what *he* – that is, Donald – is, and not for the immediate satisfaction this would give Trump, then this implies that Trump would be happy to stand in Donald's shadow, that he could bear the thought of himself – that is, Trump – merely being the stem that feeds the blooming rose he supports. For Trump to love himself, he needs to be able *to love*; that is, he needs to be able to be volitionally necessitated to care about something else, something that is worthy of his love, something that deserves to flourish *for its own sake*. Even though this something is Trump himself, it is not in order to satisfy his own desires that he does what he does when he takes up the role of the lover. When he takes up that role, whatever it is that he loves, he starts out with a motivationally silenced self-interest. He is in love, so it is not about him, but about his beloved. In the metaphor of duplication: when Trump loves Donald, Trump's motivational structure is such that Trump does not care about himself. He only cares for Donald.

### **“Could Trump bear Donald's presence if he were another man?”**

The *erotic* variant would look a lot like Narcissus' fate in Greek mythology: Trump would be captivated by Donald's image, unaware of the fact that it is merely his own reflection in the water. Helplessly and fearlessly overwhelmed by the infatuation, narrowed down by the dopamine to sheer wanting, Trump would forget about himself, would neglect his own well-being, would be indifferent to more reasoned courses of action, and would chase Donald's image – a fool in love. The *agapic* variant would be self-sacrificing too, but not in this reckless and destructive way. It would be like an enlightened Narcissus, full of admiration for the glorious reflection in the water, but without any inclination to grasp at the image. *Agapè* is full of awe, but without brash imprudence. It is full of devotion, aimed at seeing the full potential of the beloved, aware of the fact that the object of one's love is glorious in themselves, and can do without one's love, yet deserves this love unconditionally. In the *agapic* variant Trump would unconditionally devote his care to Donald, completely independent of the efforts this would require and without any attention to whether or not he – that is, Trump – would be rewarded for his dedication.

So far, the picture I'm painting of selfless self-love merely covers what it means for someone to take up the role of lover. The picture may confirm what is almost taken for

granted in the diagnosis of narcissism. The pathological narcissist is typically unable to have intimate relationships. For the narcissist relationships merely seem to exist to serve the regulation of their own self-esteem. The narcissist cannot really love. This might seem to imply that the narcissist also cannot really love himself. I'm inclined to believe this is a correct observation. But, of course, one may now object that this conclusion hinges on the assumption that love and self-love are similar kinds of volitional attitudes. That assumption, however, goes unsupported so far and might simply be false. My artificial duplication, separating Trump from Donald, might not only be deeply inconceivable, but also fundamentally misleading. It might suggest that love is essentially a prosocial attitude. This could be the case, and perhaps trivially so, when one loves another person, but it seems quite absurd in case of self-love. Why should Trump need to silence his own interests when he imagines himself to love himself? My sketch may have been suggestive – if it is, as I hope. But that all depended on the duplication I proposed, on modeling Trump's love for Donald on Trump's love for Melania. But is that fair? Shouldn't you need to object to such rhetoric?

I think, however, I can strengthen my case by discussing the role of the beloved in the case of self-love. What would it mean for Trump, or Donald, to be his own *Valentine*? The duplication will help, but I shall be able to discard it in my conclusion, showing that we have good reason to think there are three distinct volitional attitudes: (1) loving another person, (2) loving oneself, (3) being narcissistic. With respect to these three attitudes the import of this essay is that we may have been inclined but do not need to take (2) and (3) together as morally disrespectable attitudes. Loving oneself is not necessarily an egoistic and narcissistic attitude. I have argued instead that we have good reason to take (1) and (2) together. Both are varieties of love, fundamentally selfless, and morally respectable. Both should, therefore, be distinguished from (3), the egoistic tendency to be moved merely by the urge to satisfy one's own desires. Self-love is not intrinsically narcissistic; it can be selfless.

So, how does Donald perform, being Trump's *Valentine*? As we have seen above the easy bit for the *Valentine* is that they are just invited to be what they are, to be happy with themselves, to celebrate their own life. They are lovely, just the way they are. This seems an easy bit for Donald too, being the self-conceited person that he is. Of course, he is lovely the way he is. Sure! No-one needed to tell him that. So there he goes, celebrating his own life, in glory. But there is more to being a *Valentine*. This is so in the case of being another person's *Valentine*, but similarly in the case of being one's own *Valentine*. In both cases part of the performance is in the receptive bit. The *Valentine* has to *receive* the gift of the lover's love. That's a true gift, from without, a gift that only means what it means because it *is* a gift, not something ordered, arranged or otherwise brought about by the *Valentine*. Donald doesn't need the gift. He *knows* he is marvelous. The best there is. Huge. So he could do without the gift. Donald doesn't need to be loved for him to be great. He just *is* great!

This is compatible, to be sure, with both the absence and the presence of the gift of love. Someone can be happily celebrating their own life in the absence of anyone loving them. But once the gift of love comes their way, a *Valentine* should receive it. And we have seen above that receiving a gift is a delicate affair that is best done lovingly. Since we are imagining that Trump loves Donald, and that this is actually a matter of self-love, we need to imagine whether Donald can *receive* Trump's love lovingly. That is the bit where, I argue, self-love will clearly show its potential for being a *selfless* accomplishment, a selfless volitional

attitude. So, Donald, in being loved by Trump (appreciating that Donald *is* Trump and that his is a case of self-love), realizes that he – that is, Donald – doesn't need Trump's love to be completely satisfied with himself. Yet, if Trump *would* love Donald, Donald should have to receive this love lovingly. That is, Donald should have to appreciate that Trump gives himself his love, which means that he, Donald, should *receive* his own love in a way that sincerely reflects his gratefulness for the gift of his love being a true gift.

But in so receiving his own love Donald would display, and realize, two layers of disinterestedness. The first is that the acknowledgment of Trump's love as a gift that Donald doesn't need, shows that Donald does not do what he does – namely celebrating his life as a glorious *Valentine* – *in order to* satisfy any of his needs. As a *Valentine* he is not directed by his own desires. Donald is not depending on the gift of Trump's love. The love he receives is not needed to meet an urge. Donald is satisfied with the way he is and he doesn't need Trump's confirmation to feel happy with himself. This is not because Donald is so great and that Trump's love would be insignificantly small compared to Donald's grandiosity, but because Donald's contentment allows him to live happily with himself *whatever he is*. Here we can see a glimmer of what self-love would be for ordinary people. When you can acknowledge that a gift of love is *a gift*, you will realize that you are not craving for love. You can be grateful for the gift, definitely, because it comes from without. But receiving it in this loving way, shows that you feel that what you are is enough for you to be you. In an important sense this is independent of your wealth, looks, character, successes or limits. It is a matter of contentment, of peace of mind. Being capable of receiving love in this selfless way is fundamentally a matter of accepting yourself for what you are, whether or not you are as rich, brilliant, powerful, arrogant and complacent as Donald Trump.

And secondly, receiving Trump's love lovingly requires Donald being sincerely touched by the appearance of Trump *as a lover*, as a person capable of caring in this unconditional and selfless way. Donald loves to see this guise of Trump. Donald loves to see him – that is, Trump – as a loving person. And he loves this guise of Trump *for its own sake*. That is what Donald shows in lovingly receiving Trump's love. Donald receives this love not for Donald himself, but for the opportunity his receipt entails for Trump to exist, *and flourish*, as a lover. In receiving one's own love in this selfless way, a person really shows that he loves himself selflessly.

## 5. Taking stock

The academic world is in an atrocious shock since Donald Trump's election as president of the United States. There are more than enough convincing reasons to justify this repulsion. Yet, I have tried another approach, gratefully receiving Trump's blatant self-conceit as an opportunity to elucidate an important distinction between two varieties of self-love: an egoistic and narcissistic variety on the one hand and a selfless and morally respectable one on the other.

I warmly recommend all of you, and Donald Trump in particular, to practice the selfless variety. It may require quite an effort, in the beginning. Being one's own *Valentine*

may feel alienating, artificial and inappropriate. But it will entail a continued exercise in *receiving* – in *lovingly* receiving – love. That will allow love to grow. And if Donald Trump could be the cause of such a growth... Well, shouldn't that be a reason to welcome him in our world?

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31.

<sup>ii</sup> Harry Frankfurt makes this observation in his *The Reasons of Love*, p. 77.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. C.B. Macpherson (ed.), London: Penguin Books, 1968.

<sup>iv</sup> Marc Lewis, *The Biology of Desire. Why Addiction Is Not a Disease*, Philadelphia: Public Affairs, 2015.

<sup>v</sup> See, in particular, his collection of essays *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, and his *The Reasons of Love*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

<sup>vi</sup> These are complicated issues, to be sure, and I'm not in the business of defending realism here. I'm merely reminding us of the layered nature of the criteria of appropriateness and success of categorizing activities. This should open up a lot of dialogical space for critical thinking about facts and their so-called "alternatives". I should like to defend this space as providing room for an honest and seriously open-ended conversation on contested concepts that we do need to overcome the confused and confusing war on the media the Trump Administration seems to wage.

<sup>vii</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Originally published in *L'Année Sociologique*, 1925. English Translation, 1966. See: <https://archive.org/details/giftformsfunctio00maus>.

<sup>viii</sup> It may even be the kind of extraordinary social interaction that goes beyond Mauss's sociological interpretation.

<sup>ix</sup> There is an awful lot written on this. I'm particularly charmed by Rom Harré, *Social Being*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1979; and Ian Hacking *The Social Construction of What*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1999.

<sup>x</sup> The phrase is Valerie Tiberius's. See her *The Reflective Life. Living Wisely With Our Limits*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.