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## Self-Love and Self-Respect in the Meaningful Life

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## Self-Love and Self-Respect in the Meaningful Life

Erica Lucast Stonestreet

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**Abstract:** Most people have the sense that there's something wrong with living a meaningless life. Since most meaningless lives seem morally blameless, however, it's not obvious exactly *what* is wrong with it. Starting with a plausible conception of a meaningful life as a life engaged with values beyond oneself, I suggest that the problem is that someone living outside of this conception is not according herself a kind of recognition she deserves as a human being. Comparing self-respect and self-love as candidates for this recognition, I argue that lacking self-love is actually the more fitting explanation for what goes wrong in a meaningless life.

It's easy to make light of the question of the meaning of life, since the concept of meaning is so very slippery. But judging from the proliferation of triteness about the meaning of life on the internet, it's something that people really are concerned about. Culturally, there's a fear of leading a meaningless life. And although it's hard to pin down exactly what meaning amounts to, in broad strokes most reflective people have a sense of what meaning is (and isn't) and how (and how not) to achieve it. In recent work, Susan Wolf suggests roughly the following: that a meaningful life is one that engages with things that are valuable beyond whatever value they have to oneself.<sup>1</sup> This strikes me as eminently plausible.

Wolf's strategy for arriving at this conclusion is to look at examples of apparently meaningless lives and try to pin down what's wrong with them. This strategy is premised on our sense that there is something wrong with a "meaningless" life, even though we can't really *blame* people if they want to live morally innocuous but dull, just-going-through-the-motions lives. Respect for people's freedom might keep us from interfering with such a person, but if the "drifter" is someone we care about, we may feel concerned and try to help them break out of what we see as some kind of funk. We think, implicitly or explicitly, that people ought to be developing themselves by engaging in valuable activities, seeking opportunities for growth and embracing challenges. We're supposed to live "intentionally," where ideally, everything we do flows from our sense of who we are and what we value.

In this essay I'd like to offer a normative grounding for this sense. My claim is that what's missing in a life that seems "meaningless" is self-love. I will argue that self-love is a better explanatory fit than the other plausible candidate, self-respect.

The idea that there is something wrong with drifting has a history. One of the more famous formulations comes from John Stuart Mill in the third chapter of *On Liberty*, "On Individuality, as One of the Elements of Wellbeing." In this chapter Mill argues that it is one thing to adopt customs because you find them suitable after exercising some thought and discrimination, but it is another to adopt them out of "ape-like imitation." The danger Mill sees is that conformity for its own sake leads to an atrophy of the "highest and best" in individuals; those who don't guide their lives by their own reasons lose their ability to discriminate among reasons and become no more than animals.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012. Harry Frankfurt's "On the Usefulness of Final Ends" in Harry G. Frankfurt, *Necessity, volition, and love* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) contains a related discussion of the need for us to value certain ends intrinsically in order to live lives of meaningful activity. In this way, "final" ends are simultaneously instrumental (to our living meaningful lives), and "instrumental" ends are final in that they become valued intrinsically. See also Stephen Darwall, *Welfare and rational care* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), ch. 4.

It's relatively uncontroversial to claim that it is intrinsically good to develop one's faculties, at least with the qualification that they be exercised in the service of some worthy purpose. Mill's particular point lies in where he locates the source of this good. As his chapter title suggests, the point is that the self-development that constitutes individuality is an essential element of well-being.<sup>2</sup> So, according to Mill, self-development is not only important for the goods it produces (such as the advancement of knowledge or society), but more importantly as part of what it is to live well as a human being. Put this together with the premise that living intentionally is essential for your development, and it follows that living intentionally is essential to your truest well-being. Although this makes sense, I don't think Mill goes quite far enough here. We might still wonder why we *ought* to care about well-being, though (like meaning) we do seem to think that we should.

Seeing why will take a bit of work. Let's begin by considering the following question: what's the difference between drifting and living intentionally? This difference is like the difference between steering a boat and drifting in it. In the latter case you and the boat end up wherever wind and water take you; in the former, you have some say in where the boat ends up. No one can avoid having to respond to what the world presents, of course, and just as a boat's pilot will sometimes be contending with forces greater than she can control, much of the time the decisions we are given to make don't come about through any doing of our own, and take us places we don't plan to go. People often end up living lives they would never have anticipated; this can be by choice, but even then it is by choice given the available alternatives among unexpected obstacles and opportunities. Nevertheless, the difference between being in some measure of control and being in no control at all is discernible.<sup>3</sup>

Still, just what is the difference? In steering, the pilot has a hand on the tiller and is on the lookout for rocks, waves, and weather. She anticipates the way the boat will move as a result of these things and calculates the moves she needs to make in order to make the ride as comfortable as possible and keep the boat seaworthy. Most of all, however, there is direction. There's a point to all of this activity, whether it's to end up in a particular place or simply to survive and reach shore. A drifter, by contrast, has no direction and hence no need of activity because it's not particularly important where she ends up.<sup>4</sup> If the drifting goes on for too long, furthermore, she may lose her

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<sup>2</sup> This is not the place for a full-scale discussion of the normativity of well-being, but let it suffice to observe that we do take well-being, both our own and others', to be normative. See, e.g., Darwall, *Welfare and rational care*, as well as work by Connie Rosati (Connie Rosati, "Persons, perspectives and full information accounts of the good," *Ethics* 105, no. 2 (1995): 296-325., "Internalism and the good for a person," *Ethics* 106, no. 2 (1996): 297-326.).

<sup>3</sup> To continue the boat metaphor, it does seem to be true that we fare best when we're in control of the boat rather than jostled around by the waves on which it rides (it certainly cuts down on seasickness). Likewise, it seems plausible to think that it really is part of well-being to be engaged with your life and to make your own decisions rather than let the world make them for you. Most of us like to be prepared for eventualities; consider the fact that the death of a loved one is much more difficult to adjust to when it is sudden than when it is expected.

Of course, when the water is calm, it can be nice just to drift; sometimes we need a break from being in control, and we spend afternoons or whole vacations following our whims and letting the world take us where it will. But this cannot remain a permanent state of affairs; after too much vacation we start to get restless or crabby and long to go back to a directed routine. This is illustrated in the experiment that Mrs. March lets her girls conduct for one week in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. The girls complain about their daily chores, and in order to teach them a lesson about the importance of work, their mother forbids any work for a week. The only activities allowed are leisure pursuits. By the end of the week, the house is untidy, the floors are dirty, there are no dishes to use, no food to eat, and the whole family is grouchy. The girls learn the intended lesson, that too much leisure is not good for the soul, and return to their work with renewed vigor. The point, then, is that while it is sometimes good to take a break from exercising control, before too long the need for control reasserts itself.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Carroll's scene from *Alice in Wonderland* reminds us: "Alice came to a fork on the road. 'Which road do I take?' she asked. 'Where do you want to go?' asked the Cheshire Cat. 'I don't know,' Alice answered. 'Then,' said the Cat, 'it doesn't matter.'"

skill at steering. This is just Mill's fear: someone who lets public opinion and the trends of society guide her life fails to exercise the part of her that truly engages with the world. This is the part of her that makes her an individual, and without exercise it can wither, leaving her without her real self.

So far, the upshot of all of this is that active choices<sup>5</sup> express an important kind of presence and engagement with the values at stake in the decision, as well as the significance of the decision itself—and both aspects are important for well-being.<sup>6</sup> None of this is new, given what I've already said. We still haven't answered the question of why we feel we ought to be engaged in our lives. To move forward, I'd like to highlight that direction is an important piece of the difference between the drifter and the pilot. And the direction in which we steer our lives—the values by which we live—are given to us by what we love.

It is only relatively recently that care and love have come onto the radar of ethicists in the analytic tradition of philosophy. A lot of work has centered on attitudes like respect and sympathy, which are powerful moral concepts. Love has been more suspect, perhaps, as a religious notion or one that involves too much particularity to do much work in ethics, which is (rightly) supposed to be impartial. Recent work on care and love<sup>7</sup> and related work on the relationship between emotion, reason, and identity<sup>8</sup> suggest, however, that there is something quite fundamental about care or love as not only a motivating, but also a normative force in human life. One dimension of this is that the things we care about give us somewhere to stand and make us the persons we are, shaping our lives into coherent wholes and giving them a narrative structure and direction.<sup>9</sup> This work suggests that it is plausible that being *someone*, in the sense of being a particular person with needs, social ties, and an identity constituted by caring about things, merits a certain kind of recognition—which is not necessarily the basic respect owed to *anyone*.<sup>10</sup>

For present purposes, then, let's understand love as an attitude that involves concern for a particular person, object or project for its own sake (not just as an instance of a type), and that endows that particular thing with personal importance that goes beyond its impersonal value.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The expression of engagement in choice is, notably, inescapably factive here. A true choice cannot be perfunctory, or else it is something other than a choice: it is a drifting, or an arbitrary self-launching à la Sartre.

<sup>6</sup> A skeptic might worry that this talk of active engagement is too exhausting, too demanding: it seems to imply that we should be deliberating carefully over every decision we ever make. I agree that extensive deliberation on every matter would be not only impossible, but undesirable. This is one reason why loving things is important: it cuts down on the available choices, so that deliberation is not required. The channels of our lives are already shaped by love. Even with this in mind, however, someone who weighed out the consequences of every little action would be uptight, a control freak of monumental proportions, missing out on other valuable things in life. Sometimes it's better *not* to deliberate too much, and to be spontaneous. Engagement is valuable, but frequently it is not the most important value in play, and my claim that an agent is only properly engaged with her life when she is making decisions for herself is only about times when the stakes are sufficiently high—for instance, when they will affect what we will love.

<sup>7</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *Necessity, volition, and love* (New York: Cambridge UP 1999) and Harry G. Frankfurt, *The reasons of love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Virginia Held's *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, Global* (New York: Oxford, 2007) contains a summary of recent work in care ethics as well.

<sup>8</sup> Bennett W. Helm, *Love, Friendship, & the Self: Intimacy, Identification, & the Social Nature of Persons* (New York: Oxford, 2010); Bennett W. Helm, *Emotional reason: Deliberation, motivation, and the nature of value* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Jaworska, "Caring and internality," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (3) (2007): 529-68; and Bratman, "Reflecting, planning, and temporally extended agency," *Philosophical Review* 109 (1) (January 2000): 35-61.

<sup>9</sup> See Velleman, "Motivation by ideal," and "Narrative explanation," and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), among others.

<sup>10</sup> See Held (2007) for an overview of care ethics that points in this direction.

<sup>11</sup> My description of love is indebted to many sources. See Jaworska, "Caring and Internality"; Bennett W. Helm, *Love, Friendship, & the Self: Intimacy, Identification, & the Social Nature of Persons* (New York: Oxford, 2010); Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*; and Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love* and "On the Usefulness of Final Ends." With the exception of the later Frankfurt, these sources employ the word "care" for what I am calling "love." The notion I employ here, which

Loving a person recognizes her for who she is, with her specific interests, talents, needs, and so on. It motivates us to protect her and to help her to grow as a person, in part because a lover's welfare is tied to the welfare of the beloved. It builds up another person by connecting with her. Loving people helps to constitute one's identity because relationships are part of the building blocks of a meaningful life. But we can also love objects, causes and projects; these give us other roles by which we define ourselves. (Careers are a salient example.)

One implication of this conception of love is that true *self-love* involves caring about (particular) other people and things for their own sakes. Now, self-love has historically fared even worse than love as an ethical concept, given its reputed connection to egoism. But it seems to me that, understood properly, self-love can be a powerful force for guiding one's life intentionally and living out one's values, which are key to meaningful lives and to achieving the sort of happiness often thought to be the goal of life. Why? Here's the brief pitch, and my examples will fill in some details. We start with the idea that loving things for their own sakes constitutes a person's identity. So just as loving another person involves attending to their particular identity (which is constituted by what they love), loving yourself involves attending to *your* identity—that is, your relationship with the people and things that you love. But because loving these things requires concern for them for their own sakes, in this sense self-love is incompatible with selfishness.<sup>12</sup>

With this background in place, let's return to the main question. What's wrong with drifting? Why is self-development so important; why be concerned about meaningful lives and intentional living? While Mill makes the case that one's well-being requires it, this explanation still leaves open questions. I claim that meriting a certain kind of recognition is what requires it. Since respect and love are both modes of recognition, the two candidates I want to consider for grounding our explanation of what's so important about meaning are self-respect and self-love. **I will ultimately argue that self-love provides the better explanation of what seems wrong with “drifting” through life because love is an attitude of engagement, and is thus the more fitting kind of recognition for this particular question.**<sup>13</sup>

Some examples will help to propel the discussion. To begin, suppose you are John Smith in Terrence Malick's film *The New World*.<sup>14</sup> You have come to Jamestown in 1607, chafing a bit under the leadership of others because of your own ambition to be an explorer. But you are for the most part a good colonist. You spend time with the natives, trading with them and learning from them, and as a result you serve as something of an ambassador. In fact, you fall in love with the chieftain's daughter, Pocahontas. But the British supply ships return in 1608 with a commission from the king and queen to search for the Northwest Passage farther north up the coast of the New World. Because there is a direct conflict between two things you care very deeply about, you now have a terrible dilemma. Which of two lives will you lead? The situation is such that you cannot have both. In either case, you must give up something deeply important to you, so important that the decision is one that will define your identity for the rest of your life.

This is not a decision that can be made lightly, and the film makes clear how agonizing it is for Smith. The import of this decision for himself and for others (particularly Pocahontas) calls for deep reflection and deliberation, and cannot be made on a whim or by flipping a coin. A coin flip would trivialize the whole situation. Many of the reasons for this fall along the lines of Millian

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encompasses the core volitional features I take these accounts to have in common, is also indebted to J. David Velleman, “Beyond Price,” *Ethics* 118 (2008): 191-212 and the work of Irving Singer.

<sup>12</sup> This shows up in Harry Frankfurt's work (1999, 2004) as well as **other places**...

<sup>13</sup> Not coincidentally, love is also an attitude concerned fairly directly with well-being; it thus harmonizes better with Mill's point than does self-respect, which may not be as directly concerned with well-being.

<sup>14</sup> *The New World*, Videodisc, directed by Terrence Malick (Burbank, CA: New Line Home Entertainment, 2006).

considerations outlined above, but as I mentioned there, I believe there is a deeper explanation available, one based on meriting recognition.

There is a prominent school of thought that identifies this recognition with respect; Stephen Darwall<sup>15</sup> calls it “recognition respect.” According to this perspective, recognition respect is the fundamental kind of respect that Kantians point to as the kernel of all moral interaction, the kind of respect deserved by all beings with a certain dignity, which is typically associated with agential qualities of freedom and rationality. Briefly, respect recognizes others’ reality as agents, motivating us to keep our distance because it recognizes others’ need for space in which to exercise autonomy. It builds up another person by backing off.

How does the explanation of the depth of the stakes in Smith’s decision play out in the language of respect? It might go like this. Millian considerations remind us that the stakes here are not just what life Smith will have, but what life he will *choose*—not merely which path he follows, but which path he *takes*. The nature of the dilemma evokes a self-conception as the author of his life. We could construe this as *authority*; it is a familiar Kantian theme that agents have an inherent dignity, and recently Darwall<sup>16</sup> has pointed out that a certain authority to direct one’s life is part of that dignity. The impasse at which Smith finds himself, and in particular the need to adjudicate among two deeply important alternatives, reminds him of the authority he has to lead his life in the direction he wishes; and it calls him to take up this authority, to act from the perspective not of lover or sailor but of director. Respect for himself in this higher-order role demands that he not duck out of the decision by flipping a coin, but take up the burden of a true choice. And this is an identity that cannot be shed, so long as Smith retains his fundamental dignity.

So Smith is a lover and a sailor, but he is also a chooser. He is the man in charge, and it is up to him to make the decision before him. This language of authority is the language of respect; according to this perspective, it is out of self-respect that he should make the choice carefully. He should exercise his autonomy, because an autonomous agent is what he is.

This is a plausible picture; nothing in it isn’t true. But there are other modes of recognition. Love is one. This suggests another route to explaining why Smith’s dilemma should not be resolved hastily or by a coin flip. A predicament like Smith’s involves a conflict among things he cares so deeply about that they form a part of who he is, so that his very identity is at stake in his decision.<sup>17</sup> Caring about things endows them with a personal importance that it is vital for that person, as well as others, to recognize. Ignoring or repressing the part of you that cares about something (or being forced to do so) can have negative, if not devastating, consequences.<sup>18</sup> The recognition here is the recognition of identity characteristic of love.

Above I described Smith as the author of his life, and in the language of respect, this plays out as authority. There is another way to understand oneself as the author of a life, however. Smith can look at his life as *authorship*—as a narrative that he is continually authoring. Making decisions is furthering the narrative, cultivating a new self by interpreting what has gone before, striving to continue the thread by being true to its themes even as they evolve. The value targeted by careful

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen Darwall, “Two kinds of respect.” *Ethics* 88, no. 1 (October, 1977): 36-49.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Darwall, *The second-person standpoint: Morality, respect and accountability*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> There is not space here to go into the details of the connections between identity and caring about something. See Jaworska, “Caring and internality” and Helm, *Love, Friendship & the Self* for a discussion of this relationship.

<sup>18</sup> This is the driving force of the plot of *Dead Poets’ Society*: Neil Perry’s domineering father expects him to become a doctor, but his passion is for acting, and when English teacher John Keating inspires the boys to boldness Neil rebels. Eventually, torn between his need for his father’s recognition and his need to follow his own path, Neil commits suicide.

decision making is not so much autonomy as authenticity.<sup>19</sup> And this is the value that love strives to protect. From this perspective, it is out of self-love that Smith should choose carefully. Making a decision as to which aspect of himself is to become the primary one, given that they can no longer remain on equal footing, is a matter of deciding which of the two paths is more authentic to Smith given the constellation of values and projects that make him who he is.

This is a richer conception of Smith as a self than is the conception of him as an autonomous agent. Certainly, he is an autonomous agent; but if you asked him, this conception of himself would likely not show up on his list of self-defining characteristics. It is a thin conception. And so, I claim, the better explanation of what is wrong with being unengaged in our lives is that it displays a lack of self-love; the concern for authenticity inherent in (self-)love is a truer picture of the way Smith deliberates in this tragic situation. It is less bossy and more developmental.

The case of Henrik Ibsen's<sup>20</sup> character Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House* is another excellent illustration of the point. Nora is the wife of an ambitious bank manager, Torvald, and the mother of small children. Torvald, like her father before him, treats Nora like a doll and a pet. He takes care of her and in return expects her to keep house, tend the family, and not do too much of her own thinking. But she has a secret: she forged her father's signature on a loan in order to help the family afford a trip to the south to recover Torvald's health, and told Torvald that her father had simply given them the money. Now the shady character of Krogstad threatens to blackmail her in order to preserve his job at Torvald's bank. Drama, of course, ensues, and the final result is that Nora realizes that Torvald values her only as one would value a doll: she is a prize and a status symbol, something to be manipulated and kept. She is not loved for herself. She decides that she must leave Torvald and her children and make her own way in the world, though she knows that she is very naïve and that it will be terribly difficult for her. Yet she is compelled; she realizes that she owes it to herself to take up the reins in her own life.

One thing Nora learns is that authority over one's own life is vital to not only leading a full life, but also to respect for oneself and respect from others. We might say that she (inchoately) realizes that, even though as a free and rational being she merits recognition respect, she cannot expect respect from others until she exercises the authority she has by expecting such respect *of* them. She knows that her decision to leave her family faces her with an uncertain future, and that she may come to regret where it leads her. But she knows too that she must make an attempt, because self-respect is more fundamental than material prosperity. She may regret where she ends up, but she cannot regret the decision to set off on her own because she owes it to herself to do so.

Nora's story shows that it *is* possible to care not only about one's first-order projects (e.g., being a wife and mother), but also about the "project" of directing one's life. It's clear at the end of the play that she must do this. But there is more going on here than Nora's acquisition of self-respect. The revelation that Nora has at the end of the play is couched in terms of *love* rather than respect. She accuses Torvald of having never understood her—never seen her for who she is. "You have never loved me," she says.<sup>21</sup> She goes on to explain how she always followed the opinions and tastes of first her father and then her husband, and accuses them of never having loved her truly because they *wanted* her to follow them in this way; they never wanted her to be her own person. But being one's own person (i.e. having one's own interests) is exactly what a lover should want for a beloved. Her language here is that they did not *love* her, not that they didn't respect her—though

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<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Blustein, "Choosing for Others as Continuing a Life Story: The Problem of Personal Identity Revisited," *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 27 (1999): 20-31; Mark G. Kuczewski, "Commentary: Narrative Views of Personal Identity and Substituted Judgment in Surrogate Decision Making," *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 27 (1999): 32-36.

<sup>20</sup> Henrik Ibsen and Nicholas Rudall, *A Doll's House* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Ibsen (1999, 76).



clearly they did neither. They never allowed her the space to have her own opinions, let alone encouraging her to cultivate them herself. Nora realizes that she has been inauthentic all her life, and to remedy this she must become the author of her life. She must leave even her children, because she cannot be a good mother to them. If she does not know how to have her own identity in her own projects—how to love herself—, she realizes, she cannot love them and guide them to become themselves. In the moment of revelation, she gains self-respect and takes up her autonomy; she then leaves Torvald to seek authenticity and self-love.

This makes explicit a hitherto unstated relationship between respect and love. In a sense, respect is more basic because it requires less of the respecifier. Respect can be accorded to anyone. Thus, respect is a prerequisite for love, and self-respect for self-love. But self-love is much deeper, and for that reason can be much harder. The reflection, self-examination, self-interpretation it requires are difficult work.

To illustrate what it looks like when someone consistently fails to be engaged in his life, consider another example. In Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*,<sup>22</sup> Franklin ("Doc") Hata is an elderly Japanese immigrant a few years into his retirement from a small but prosperous medical supply business in a New England town. He is well-known and liked. The story is told as a first-person narrative relating Mr. Hata's life on two fronts: his service as a medic in the Japanese army in World War II, and his troubled relationship with the daughter he adopted in mid-life. In both narratives, we come to realize that he ducks crucial choices that would have caused him pain. In the war, he does not stand up for the life of a military-employed prostitute he loves, or believes he loves. Decades later with his adopted daughter Sunny, he does not commit to loving her the way a father should; he is merely dutiful, and he never fully recognizes what's wrong with this. He never comes to understand Sunny and her rebellious behavior, despite his relationship with a neighbor woman who tries both to be a mother to Sunny and to get Mr. Hata to come out of his shell and *feel* something deeply. But she cannot succeed. He never lets anyone in, never makes himself vulnerable by caring enough to take on the responsibility of the kind of full-blooded, life-shaping choice that faces John Smith or Nora Helmer.

The book depicts Mr. Hata's life as a series of failures, even in his own eyes, though he never comes to understand why they are failures. It is not difficult for *us* to see why, however; he is exactly the kind of man who was Mill's target. The novel makes it quite clear that Doc Hata is not an individual who leads his life by making engaged choices and taking responsibility for them. To what extent is this a failure of self-respect, and to what extent failure of self-love?

Mr. Hata has the inherent dignity that merits recognition respect, because he lacks conviction and does not take up the authority he has to direct his life, he does not (even implicitly) expect or *demand* respect from others. He expresses his opinions—even forcefully—that Sunny should continue her piano studies, or dress more modestly, or respect the local police officer. Furthermore, he leads a "respectable" life, in the sense that he has been a good citizen and contributor to the community, and he is well-liked. So he has self-respect and respect from others in the sense that he is free to take the actions he decides upon. But this is a relatively weak sense. He never *asserts* himself. He does not act from authority. Those who know him well do not fully respect him in the end; they do not give his decisions and desires much weight. This is at least in part (if not entirely) because he fails to respect himself enough to demand the respect of others.

I think this problem stems from a deeper one, however. Mr. Hata is too timid to care about anything deeply enough to make authoritative choices. He failed to act out of love once (if it was even love at all), which led to failing to love again (or sealed his inability to love), hence to having no conviction to act from. He fails to assert himself because there's a sense in which there is no self

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<sup>22</sup> Chang-Rae Lee, *A Gesture Life* (New York, NY: Riverhead, 1999).

there to assert. This is in one sense an exaggeration, of course; it isn't difficult to describe him from a third-person standpoint. But without the attachments to people and things that deeply constitute a person's identity, the third-person description is the best we can do. Sunny articulates the problem beautifully when she accuses her father of leading "a gesture life." Mr. Hata is a hollow figure; nothing he has ever done has been anything but a gesture, something done out of duty but not out of conviction. He respects others, but respect will only take you so far in action. He does not have the conviction of love: in that moment of the war when he failed to stand up for the prostitute, he laid the course of the rest of his life. Mr. Hata leads a life of mere gestures. We can identify him by his actions, but not by his values—not by what he cares about, or loves.

Contrast this with the story of Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*. Here I will use the Broadway musical version<sup>23</sup> because it illustrates the problem quite conveniently. Valjean learns that Inspector Javert has apprehended a man whom he believes to be Valjean. The real Valjean broke a harsh and unjust parole and has been in hiding for years now, living under the assumed name of M. Madeleine. Beginning with the silver given to him by a kind bishop in a life-changing act of forgiveness, "Madeleine" has become a famously morally outstanding citizen, built a prosperous factory which provides work for many otherwise unemployed villagers, and become the mayor of his town. Upon hearing Javert's triumphant news, Valjean realizes the terrible choice he faces: shall he protect his prosperity and the livelihood it provides for people less fortunate, or should he give up everything he has worked for, turn himself in, and be returned to the galleys for the sake of preventing the injustice of condemning an innocent man? He sings (forgive the long quote):

*He thinks that man is me  
He knew him at a glance!  
That stranger he has found  
This man could be my chance!  
Why should I save his hide?  
Why should I right this wrong  
When I have come so far  
And struggled for so long?  
If I speak, I am condemned.  
If I stay silent, I am damned!*

*I am the master of hundreds of workers.  
They all look to me.  
Can I abandon them?  
How would they live  
If I am not free?  
If I speak, I am condemned.  
If I stay silent, I am damned!*

*Who am I?  
Can I condemn this man to slavery?  
Pretend I do not see his agony?  
This innocent who bears my face  
Who goes to judgment in my place—  
Who am I?  
Can I conceal myself forevermore?*

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<sup>23</sup> Boubil, Alan and Michael Schönberg. 1980. *Les Misérables*. Based on the novel by Victor Hugo. English lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer.

*Pretend I'm not the man I was before?  
And must my name until I die  
Be no more than an alibi?  
Must I lie?*

*How can I ever face my fellow men?  
How can I ever face myself again?  
My soul belongs to God, I know  
I made that bargain long ago  
He gave me hope when hope was gone  
He gave me strength to journey on.*

*Who am I? Who am I?  
I'm Jean Valjean!*

Unlike Doc Hata, Valjean recognizes that he is at a critical moment that will decide the course of his life. He wrestles with it desperately, notably as a question of identity. He is asking whether he will be true to the values that make him the man he really is, a man whose past was erased by a redemptive act. He finds that cannot betray himself by allowing the innocent man to be punished in his place, even though it will likely mean the closing of his factory and the loss of work for hundreds. His deliberation revolves around the question of what is most authentic to him, who he really is. This suggests that it is not primarily a matter of self-respect; it is a matter of self-love.

Every example I've used is a literary one. But this doesn't dull the point that many of the important decisions we make involve not only self-respect but questions of identity and authenticity that indicate that love is also in play—perhaps even more deeply. The considerations these characters raise (or fail to raise) are familiar to most of us. Not everyone will face a self-defining crisis like Nora Helmer's or Jean Valjean's, but we do make decisions about how to live on a fairly regular basis. Thinking about these decisions in terms of the way they express and shape our values, and making them on the basis of what we really care about, is what it is to live meaningfully, as Mill urged. And this is a matter of self-love at least as much as self-respect.

Moreover, this conclusion provides a normative grounding for the sense that there's something wrong with *not* living meaningfully. The reasons to make these decisions intentionally and to be engaged in our lives are normative beyond any normativity that well-being may have. To the extent that it is a matter of self-respect, the normativity plays out as follows. Someone with healthy self-respect realizes that she is worth the work of difficult, engaged decisions because part of what it is to be a human being is to be someone capable of autonomy, with the authority to direct her life. She owes it to herself to live intentionally because otherwise she's not living up to her nature as a rational being with dignity. Self-respect is normative because you cannot shed your identity as a chooser. Lack of self-respect is a failing because you deserve recognition as a chooser, which is an identity you cannot shed.

This seems perfectly true, but it lacks the ring of a complete fit with experience. From the inside, most decision-making doesn't seem to involve much thought of owing it to an authoritative, choosing self. Contrast self-love. First, notice that because they are concerned with the beloved for its own sake, love and self-love are directly concerned with the beloved's well-being in a way that respect is not. Respect may allow certain kinds of self-abuse if that is how the person chooses to exercise autonomy. Love will resist this. So framing the issue as a matter of self-love fits well with Mill's argument, but offers a deeper explanation.

Second, self-love is normative because you cannot shed your identity, period. Lack of self-love is a failing because you deserve recognition as *you*, with your projects, relationships, and needs.

A self-loving person will engage with her difficult decisions because in doing so she is shaping a self. This is much closer to what a person experiences as she makes decisions. She owes it to herself to live intentionally because being engaged in her projects and decisions is what it is to develop her nature as a particular person with projects and roles—a thicker conception than the one offered by self-respect. Being present to her cherished people and projects is being present to herself.<sup>24</sup>

Although love's normativity is not as universal because not everyone can love you, those with whom you do share your identity—those with a certain level of intimacy—should accord you this recognition. Self-love's normativity is universal in the sense that everyone is capable of it. No one is closer to you than you. So you owe it to yourself to live a meaningful life and develop your talents because you are your most intimate lover, and a meaningful life is what love requires.

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<sup>24</sup> There are limits, of course; there is such a thing as too much selflessness, as many caregivers of all sorts well know.