

Other People

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May 24, 2018

(Draft; do not cite without permission)

Do you believe in love at first sight? Maybe you do and maybe you don't. Perhaps you will refuse to say, complaining that the question is obscure. I sympathize with that response. In a way, it is the subject of this essay, though I hope to show that there is more at stake. I begin with the prediction that, whatever you make of love at first sight, you do not believe in "love at definite description." You may know on general grounds that there is a shortest spy, but you cannot love the shortest spy if you have not met her and know nothing more about her.¹ You could, I suppose, become invested in the prospects of the shortest spy, whoever she is, preferring outcomes that will benefit her to ones that benefit other people, striving to ensure that the shortest spy survives and flourishes. But this would not be love, and absent further context, it would not be rational.

It might be different if the description were more poignant: "the woman who saved your life" or "the brother you never knew." Special concern for individuals so described may be intelligible. Likewise, perhaps, if the description evokes, in richly textured detail, an attractive human being. Personal acquaintance may not be required for love. But mere description, as in "the shortest spy," is not enough.

"Personal acquaintance," here, is a place-holder for the relation to another human being that justifies love at first sight, if there is any such thing. Personal acquaintance is the minimal cognitive contact that makes sense of love. This paper explores the nature of this relation and its

¹ The example derives from Kaplan 1968: 192-3.

place in moral philosophy. As I will argue, personal acquaintance plays a role not just in love but in concern for individuals, as such.

Section I is about the connections between personal acquaintance, love, and moral standing. It maps some puzzling features of personal acquaintance that set parameters for any attempt to comprehend it. The task is to account for the ethical significance of this relation. In section II, we find a similar structure in concern for others of the sort that is morally required. This structure comes out in recent treatments of contractualism, aggregation, and the trolley problem. Section III turns to the work of Emmanuel Levinas as a source of insight into personal acquaintance, tracing the difficulties with his view and the prospects for revision. We are left with a question not just about love but about the basis of human values and the value of human life.

I

In “Love and the Value of a Life,” I argued that it is rational for any one of us to love any other human being, whatever their merits, without the need for any past relationship (Setiya 2014: §1). In rejecting the need for virtues or common histories as grounds for love, I agree with David Velleman. For Velleman (1999: 366), “respect and love [are] the required minimum and optional maximum responses to one and the same value.” Like Velleman, I believe that the subjects of full moral standing, who deserve respect, coincide with those it is rational to love in the distinctive way that we love other people. By “full moral standing,” I mean the kind of significance shared by human beings but not by other animals, at least not the sort we encounter on Earth. Our interests count for more than theirs, and we have rights against each other they do not possess. (We will return to this assumption at the end.)

I differ from Velleman on three counts. First, I do not share his Kantian conception of the basis of moral standing, on which it turns on our rational nature. In my view, human beings who lack reason, and the potential for it, are morally equal to us. Second, I am less resistant than Velleman to the idea that, in its primary forms, love involves a disproportionate concern for the

interests of the beloved, concern that goes beyond what is required by moral standing.² While there are different varieties of love – erotic, parental, and so on – this is a defining feature of the sort of love that interests me. Finally, while I doubt the need for past relationships as reasons for love, I do not deny that friendship, parenthood, and other relationships provide such reasons.³

The permissive view of love is no doubt controversial. My arguments for it turn on the rationality of love in the face of radical change, retrograde amnesia (in which you forget your past relationship), and sceptical delusion (as when you learn that you came into existence an hour ago and that the “memories” of your relationship are false).⁴ I won’t repeat those arguments here, but I will make two observations. First, although it is natural to illustrate the view by appeal to love at first sight, this is potentially misleading. The sort of love involved is not essentially romantic. We could point instead to the love I might instantly feel for an infant abandoned on my doorstep, knowing right away that I would take care of the child even at considerable cost. Second, love need not be as deep or devoted as romantic or parental love, and it need not involve a strong desire for interaction. Think of my attitude to old friends, who I have not seen and may not have thought about for years. I still love them in a meaningful way: if they were in need, I would do much more for them than I would for an arbitrary stranger.

Our topic is not the plausibility of the permissive view, but the question raised by love at definite description, a question neglected by its advocates.⁵ Even on the most liberal conception of love, on which it does not turn on particular merits or past relationships, you cannot love the shortest spy on the basis of that description. What is possible, and rational, is love at first sight. So

² Compare Velleman 1999: 353, Setiya 2014: 252-4.

³ Setiya 2014: 258-62, responding to Kolodny 2003.

⁴ I develop these themes in Setiya 2014: 254-61.

⁵ The neglect is partial: I appeal to “singular thought” at several points (Setiya 2014: 260n21, 265-6). Velleman has urged that emotions such as love depend on “acquaintance-based thought” (2008: 269-70), though he does not develop the point and it is in tension with his earlier remarks about the attachment of adopted children to birth parents they have never met (see Velleman 2008: 263-4).

the position must be qualified. It is rational to love any human being with whom you are personally acquainted, not any human being, full stop. But then we have to ask: what is personal acquaintance and how does it justify love?

Both the interest and the enigma of personal acquaintance come into focus if I am right about the implications of the permissive view. The most dramatic consequence speaks to the moral significance of numbers. Consider a case in which you can save the lives of three strangers drowning over to the left or a single stranger, M, who is drowning on the right.⁶ The circumstance is otherwise unexceptional. You have no special obligation to any given stranger, and their survival would have no unusual consequences, good or ill. On the view that I defend, it would be rational for you to love M, even though you have never met before: this would be love at first sight. I argue further that, in loving M, it is rational to give more weight to her needs than to those of other people. Acting on this concern, it would be rational to save her life instead of saving three. It follows that you could rationally decide to save a single drowning stranger when you could save more. We thus arrive at a version of John Taurek's (1977) startling claim that, in cases of this kind, the numbers do not count: at the very least, they are not rationally decisive.

I don't expect this thumbnail sketch to be convincing: more argument is required.⁷ But it shows how doubts about aggregation flow from the permissive view of love, assuming love can involve a disproportionate concern for someone's needs. Now for the puzzle. When I first drew these connections, I did not stress the role of personal acquaintance. It may be rational to save M at the cost of three lives when you are confronted with M herself: when you look into her eyes and feel the weight of her needs, responding with love. That is contentious enough. I do not think it would be rational to save the person on the right when you know them only by that description. In what we may call the "anonymous" case, you have no contact with the drowning strangers. You are merely told what is happening and must decide where to send the rescue mission. It is

⁶ The case derives from Anscombe 1967: 17.

⁷ I provide it in Setiya 2014.

irrational to give priority to the needs of one in the anonymous case. You are not in a position to love the person on the right. That takes personal acquaintance.

The nature of personal acquaintance matters, on the permissive view of love, not just because it makes love rational but because it makes a difference to questions of life and death. This brings out a pivotal constraint on how we conceive the relation of personal acquaintance. When you stand in this relation to M, it is rational to save her life, moved by the urgency of her needs, instead of the lives of the other three. When you lack this relation to M, when you know her only as “the one who is drowning on the right,” it is irrational to save her life. Personal acquaintance is ethically significant. At the same time, it is utterly minimal, requiring no history of interaction, as we know from love at first sight. What can this relation be?

We may turn for help to philosophical discussions of “knowing who”: to be personally acquainted with M is to know who she is. But accounts of “knowing who” in the philosophy of language only compound the mystery. On the minimal view, you know who someone is when you know an answer to the question “Who is ...?” The answer need not even be a definite description. David Braun begins his essay in defence of this conception with the sentence “Hong Oak Yun is a person who is over three inches tall,” adding boldly: “now you know who Hong Oak Yun is” (Braun 2006: 24). In whatever sense, if any, this is true, it is not one that matters to moral philosophy or makes love rational.

On a more orthodox view, to know who someone is to know a contextually relevant answer to the question “Who is ...?” that takes the form of a definite description.⁸ But this does not amount to progress. At best, it frames our problem: which answers to the question “Who is ...?” are ethically relevant? What do you need to know about someone in order to be personally acquainted with them and why does it matter? In fact, the situation is worse. In love at first sight, you know very little about the person you love apart from their relation to you. Knowing that they are the person with these properties is like knowing that they are shortest spy. It does not count

⁸ This is a drastic simplification of the theory proposed in Boër and Lycan 1986.

as knowing who they are in an ethically relevant sense. The most plausible candidates for a description that matters, morally speaking, will be ones that cite your relationship to them. Why not then conclude that this relation matters, not the further relation involved in knowing about it? The appeal to “knowing who” is a distraction.

It is perhaps more promising to invoke objectual knowledge, as in “knowing M.” We can know people, places, and things, as well as knowing who, where, and what. When you know someone, it makes sense to love them, even if you don’t know much about them. But I doubt that the expression “knowing M” will bear much weight. Unlike personal acquaintance, knowing someone comes by degree: you can know them better or worse.⁹ How well you need to know M in order to count as “knowing M” varies by context. Where does personal acquaintance fall? We might identify personal acquaintance with knowing M to the minimal degree that counts as “knowing M.” But even this is doubtful. Knowing M is usually thought to be reciprocal: you can’t know M unless M knows you.¹⁰ Personal acquaintance is not like that. You can love someone who doesn’t know you exist. Given its contextual flexibility, “knowing M” might be used to refer to personal acquaintance. But this does not illuminate our topic.

Hoping for insight, we may turn instead to the concepts with which we think of others. Personal acquaintance involves the possession of a concept that essentially denotes a particular individual, as in “rigid designation.” Is the problem with “loving” the shortest spy or the person who is drowning on the right that their identity is not involved in one’s response? They are picked out by properties they could lack. According to Philip Pettit, “when an agent displays a commitment to a beloved by acting out of love, the reason that moves the agent has to be rigidly individualized in favour of the beloved. It has to be a reason in which the beloved figures as an essential component” (Pettit 1997: 158-9). But again, this is not the point. Love at definite description remains irrational, or impossible, when the description is rigidified. It makes no sense

⁹ On knowing someone well, see Talbert 2015.

¹⁰ See Lauer 2014, Benton 2017.

to love the actual shortest spy or the person who is actually drowning on the right, picked out in those terms. The shift to naming does not change this. Being told that the shortest spy is Orcutt, or the drowning woman, Pat, is not sufficient to justify love.

Finally, we may turn to the history of “acquaintance” as a pivotal term in the philosophy of mind. For Russell (1910-11) and others, acquaintance with particulars is what makes them available as direct objects of thought. Russell’s views about this topic evolved over time and they are subject to interpretive dispute, but in his earliest phase, he seems to have believed that we are acquainted only with sense-data, universals, and the self. That idea has not fared well and many are now sceptical of any role for acquaintance as a condition of “singular thought.”¹¹ Those who are sympathetic to the idea agree that a paradigm of acquaintance is perceptual contact of the sort that sustains demonstrative reference.¹² That is certainly present in love at first sight or the case in which you see the drowning M; and it is absent when you think of the shortest spy or the person who is drowning on the right. But its significance is doubtful. Why should perceptual contact, past or present, make the difference that personal acquaintance does? Why should seeing someone, or having seen them in the past, make it rational to give priority to their needs, to save their life at the cost of three? Perceptual contact may correlate with what matters; it is hard to see why it should matter in itself.

Personal acquaintance is an ethically significant relation. It is personal acquaintance that explains why it is rational to save one stranger when you could save three; its absence explains why it is not rational to do so in the anonymous case. An account of personal acquaintance must accord with its significance, as appeal to perceptual contact does not.

I have been describing a view on which it is rational to love any human being with whom one is personally acquainted but irrational, perhaps impossible, to love someone at definite

¹¹ For a recent critique, see Hawthorne and Manley 2012: Ch. 3. On the relation between Russellian acquaintance and knowledge of other people, see Kremer 2015.

¹² See, for instance, Dickie 2015: Ch. 4.

description, at least when the description is as minimal as “the shortest spy.” I want now to suggest that personal acquaintance is sufficient, all by itself, to justify love. How could it fail to suffice? The idea would have to be that rational love depends on further beliefs, beliefs about the object of love. On the permissive view, these cannot be beliefs about his or her specific merits or about your past relationship. Nothing like that is required. Nor can we plausibly appeal to beliefs about the relation of personal acquaintance. As before, it is the relation that counts, not knowledge of it. Must you believe that the object of love is a “person” in the philosophers’ sense, a rational subject? No: you can love human beings who lack reason or the potential for it. Must you believe that the object of love is another human being? While it may be irrational to love a goat in the way that you love another person, as in the play by Edward Albee (2003), I don’t believe that love depends on conjectured species or form of life. That the man across the room is a human being, not a rational Martian, is too theoretical a ground for love at first sight. Finally, we can ask if you must believe that the object of love has full moral standing. There is a sense in which you treat them as if they do; but you need not have beliefs about how they should be treated in order to be rational in loving them.

In principle, there might be other beliefs that justify love, other properties to which we must appeal. There is room for a disjunctive view, on which various beliefs will do. It is not easy to exhaust the options. But if we already know that personal acquaintance matters, that it is morally significant, unlike mere perceptual contact or referring to someone as “the shortest spy,” why keep looking? Why not conclude instead that, given its ethical weight, personal acquaintance is sufficient to justify love.¹³ As its name suggests, personal acquaintance is a relation we can bear only to those it is rational to love in the way that we love other people, only to those who have full moral standing. You cannot be personally acquainted with a goat, though you might believe you are. It is not a belief about someone that makes them available for love but the relation of

¹³ A case of particular interest is self-love. Surely this does not depend on the belief that you are a person, or a human being, or have moral standing. Nor, as I have argued elsewhere (Setiya 2015), does it rest on beliefs about who you are. Instead, it turns on personal acquaintance with yourself.

personal acquaintance. In Wittgenstein's words: "My attitude to him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul" (Wittgenstein 1953: 178).

If this is right, personal acquaintance is ethically significant in two ways. First, because its absence in the anonymous case explains why you cannot save one instead of three; its presence explains why you can. Second, because it is a relation we can have only to those with full moral standing. Each mode of significance constrains what personal acquaintance can be.

II

Do these issues pertain only to curious views about the nature and justification of love? I don't believe they do. Personal acquaintance plays a tacit but essential role in recent debates about contractualism and social risk.¹⁴

The puzzle for contractualists comes out in the following cases, described by Johann Frick. In Mass Vaccination (Known Victims), a million children face certain death unless they are treated with a vaccine, administered to all. Vaccine A prevents the fatal illness but will leave the children with a paralyzed limb. Vaccine B prevents the disease without paralysis but "because of a known particularity in their genotype, [it] is certain to be completely ineffective for 1,000 identified children" (Frick 2015: 183). These children will die. For contractualists, an act is permissible only if it can be justified to each of those affected, in that it is licensed by a principle none of them could reasonably reject. We are not allowed to aggregate claims. Thus, in Mass Vaccination (Known Victims), we compare the harm of losing one's life to the harm of a paralyzed limb. Since no-one can be asked to bear the former in order to save someone from the latter, we must choose Vaccine A.

¹⁴ Contributions include: Scanlon 1998: 208-9, Reibetanz 1998, Ashford 2003, Lenman 2008, Fried 2012, James 2012, Dougherty 2013, Kumar 2015, Frick 2015, Horton 2017.

Now consider Mass Vaccination (Unknown Victims). Here a million children face certain death unless they are treated with a vaccine. Vaccine A is available, but there is also Vaccine C, which prevents the fatal disease without paralysis in 99.9% of cases; in 0.1% of cases, it is utterly ineffective. (The probabilities here are epistemic: they reflect our evidence in making the decision.) The challenge for contractualism is to distinguish the second case from the first, given that the outcome of choosing Vaccine C is virtually certain to involve the death of at least one child, and very likely to involve the death of about 1,000.¹⁵ According to Frick:

[In] real life, we often impose social risks that closely resemble that of choosing [Vaccine C] in Mass Vaccination (Unknown Victims). Thus, it is commonly deemed morally unproblematic to systematically inoculate young children against certain serious but nonfatal childhood diseases where there is a remote chance of fatal side effects from the inoculation itself. (Frick 2015: 185)

Can contractualists explain why it is permissible to impose this kind of social risk while maintaining that it is impermissible to do so when the victims are identified in advance?

Frick's solution takes the form of "ex ante contractualism," according to which we should evaluate Mass Vaccination (Unknown Victims) not by considering how individuals fare in the possible outcomes but by considering how our policies affect their prospects now (Frick 2015: 187-8). The claim is that Vaccine C improves the ex ante prospects of each individual child, by our evidential lights. It gives them a 99.9% chance of perfect health with a 0.1% chance of failure, which is arguably better than the assurance of paralysis with Vaccine A. That is how a policy of using Vaccine C can be justified to all. (If you believe that the imposition of a 0.1% chance of death on a given individual cannot be justified as the alternative to paralysis, reduce the risk until you agree. The general point remains.)

¹⁵ The likelihood is >0.99 that 1,000 children ± 100 will die (Frick 2015: 183n14).

Ex ante contractualists thus permit the imposition of social risk while resisting the imposition of harms when the victims are known, or knowable, in advance.¹⁶ It is important to stress that the dividing factor is not the chanciness of Vaccine C or the possibility that no-one dies. It is about identification. Consider a third case, Mass Vaccination (Unknown but Definite Victims), which is just like Mass Vaccination (Known Victims) except that there is no way to guess who has the distinctive genotype. Vaccine A prevents the fatal illness but leaves each child with a paralyzed limb. Vaccine B prevents the disease without paralysis except for 1,000 unidentified children. For the ex ante contractualist, this case is like Mass Vaccination (Unknown Victims): Vaccine B improves the prospects of each child, by our evidential lights. No individual should object to our choosing Vaccine B even though, as in Mass Vaccination (Known Victims), 1,000 children are sure to die.¹⁷

Some will resist this verdict, assimilating victims who are definite but unknown to those who are known in advance. They will need to square their resistance with a plausible view of social risk. Why refuse to employ Vaccine B in Mass Vaccination (Unknown but Definite Victims) when it improves the prospects of each individual as much as Vaccine C? Imagine administering the vaccine to each child in succession. On our evidence, it is preferable to administer Vaccine B than Vaccine A, just as it was preferable to go with Vaccine C in Mass Vaccination (Unknown Victims). Shouldn't we choose Vaccine B? But if we should do it for each child, we should do it for all.¹⁸ I won't pursue this reasoning here. I want instead to trace the implications of ex ante contractualism, drawing out an ethical idea that turns on personal acquaintance. In doing so, I will assume, for the sake of argument, that Frick's analysis is right.

¹⁶ On the extension from known to knowable victims, see Frick 2015: 191-3. I return to this below.

¹⁷ Unfortunately, Frick does not discuss this case, but he considers a variant of Mass Vaccination (Known Victims) in which the genetic test is very costly, and concludes, on ex ante contractualist lines, that it is permissible to choose Vaccine B; see Frick 2015: 193-4.

¹⁸ For a similar argument, see Horton 2017: 69-70.

The basic question for ex ante contractualists is what distinguishes Mass Vaccination (Known Victims) from Mass Vaccination (Unknown but Definite Victims), given that the objective probabilities of the various outcomes are the same. The terminology tells us that the difference is whether the victims are identified or known. But what exactly does that mean? It had better not suffice for a victim to be identified that we can pick them out by definite description. After all, we could “identify” the unknown victims by some irrelevant feature, like height: “the shortest child who has the gene”; “the second shortest child who has the gene”; and so on. We know that these children will not be saved by Vaccine B in Mass Vaccination (Unknown but Definite Victims). If that makes them “known victims,” the alleged distinction will collapse. Suppose instead that we are given a list of names: these are the children who have the distinctive gene. We have no other way to determine who they are. Again, this is not enough. We knew all along that the children had names; knowing what they are is not sufficient to identify them, not in the sense that matters here. In contrast, I would urge, personal acquaintance must suffice for a victim to be identified or known, to transform the circumstance into Mass Vaccination (Known Victims), and so preclude the use of Vaccine B. What guides the ex ante contractualist is the idea of “personal concern”: a concern for others directed at them as individuals, made possible, and rational, by personal acquaintance.

This leaves some difficult questions. Presumably, it is not required that we in fact identify the victims or that we know who they are. For the ex ante contractualist, the question is what personal concern would motivate if we were personally acquainted with those involved, given what we know, or what is knowable, about them. In Mass Vaccination (Known Victims), concern of this kind does not speak with a single voice; for those who have the gene, it favours Vaccine A; for those who do not, Vaccine B. Where the victims are unknown, personal concern is arguably unanimous: it favours Vaccine B on behalf of each. That is why it is permissible to choose Vaccine B.

The idea, then, is not that you should be more concerned with personal acquaintances than anyone else, or that it is rational to give their interests greater weight. The idea is that, when

you aim to justify a policy to each of those affected, their prospects on your evidence will depend on how you pick them out. In *Mass Vaccination (Unknown but Definite Victims)*, the prospects of the shortest child with the gene are very bad if she is given Vaccine B. But if you meet a random child, her prospects on your evidence look better with Vaccine B than Vaccine A. For the ex ante contractualist, the first way of picking children out, by definite description, is irrelevant: that is not how you should think of individuals when you ask whether a policy can be justified to each. In contrast, the second way of picking children out, by personal acquaintance, is morally apt.

Whatever you make of contractualism as a theory of right and wrong, the idea of personal concern, concern that is mediated by personal acquaintance, is ethically compelling. It is like love, as described in section I, except that it is not disproportionate, and like respect but unlike love, it is a response to others we are required to have. It is a form of impartial concern for individuals that personal acquaintance demands. Arguably, such concern is akin to love in that its justification does not turn on further beliefs about the object of concern. Personal acquaintance is again significant in two ways. First, because it justifies a kind of concern that has ethical weight in decisions that benefit others. Second, because it is a relation we can have only to those with full moral standing. Each mode of significance constrains what personal acquaintance can be.

I have argued that ex ante contractualists share the puzzle of personal acquaintance: the task of explaining its character in a way that meets these ethical constraints. But the idea of personal concern appears elsewhere. Perhaps the most self-conscious invocation of personal concern in recent moral philosophy is due to Caspar Hare (2016: §3). Hare begins with the standard Footbridge case, introduced by Judith Thomson (1976): you can push a button to drop one person from a bridge into the path of a speeding trolley that will otherwise kill five. Most believe that doing so would be wrong. Hare contrasts the original case with what we can call “Opaque Footbridge”: six people you know and care about are caught up in the trolley case, five on the track, one on the bridge, but you do not and cannot know where in particular they are. As Hare contends, there is a powerful argument that concern for each of those involved counts in favour of pushing the button. If we give them alphabetical names, we can see that, by your lights,

pushing the button will improve A's prospects from a 5/6 chance of death to just 1/6. It is true that pushing the button will change the potential cause of death, from being hit by a runaway trolley to falling from a bridge as a result of your intervention. But from A's perspective, why care? Why should it matter whether you die on the tracks or falling from a bridge to save the five? The upshot is that, in Opaque Footbridge, concern for A alone, not weighing her interests against those of others or aggregating claims, should lead you to push the button. The same is true of concern for B, and C, and all the rest. Benevolence speaks with a single voice.

As Hare insists, this argument does not apply in the original Footbridge case (Hare 2016: 466). Again, suppose you know the six involved, from A to F. If you know that F is on the bridge, concern for each is not unanimous. There is no way to argue that you ought to push the button without comparing or combining claims. Benevolent concern is simply divided. Concern for F speaks against pushing the button, concern for the others speak in favour. This conflict cannot be ignored.

Hare gives further arguments.¹⁹ But we need not go into them. Nor need we accept his conclusion that, in Opaque Footbridge, you ought to push the button.²⁰ What matters is that, regardless of this conclusion, Hare's argument taps an ethical idea that has real force. He seems right to insist that in Opaque Footbridge, concern for the interests of those involved speaks unanimously for pushing the button. If there is a moral objection to doing so, it does not flow from benevolent concern but from a different and potentially conflicting source: a respect for rights that is not grounded in and may diverge from people's interests.

As with ex ante contractualism, this reasoning appeals to personal concern: concern for individuals that rests on personal acquaintance. We can see this by asking what explains the contrast between Footbridge and Opaque Footbridge. The answer is that, in Opaque Footbridge,

¹⁹ His strategy is to decompose your action into six, each of which affects only one individual, improving their prospects without affecting anyone else. For details, see Hare 2016: §4.

²⁰ I object to it in Setiya ms.

you do not know who will die if you push the button, whereas in Footbridge, you do: the victim is identified or known. As before, it had better not suffice for identification that you locate someone by description, since you can “identify” the victim in Opaque Footbridge as “the one who is on the bridge.” If that makes them an identified victim, the contrast we are tracking disappears. Nor do names suffice. The verdict of benevolence does not change when you are told that the person on the bridge is Jim – unless you know Jim in some other way.

In what meaningful sense, then, do you know who the victim is in Footbridge but not in its opaque counterpart?²¹ Confronted with this question, Hare contends that the sort of “knowing who” that makes a difference is knowing facts about what matters in the lives of those involved, about their friends and families, hobbies and careers. What blocks the argument for pushing the button is the plurality of values realized by these diverse activities: values that are incommensurable (Hare 2016: §6). But this cannot be the right account. It would not affect the ethics of Footbridge if the people involved were perfect duplicates of one another, identical sextuplets who lead identical, solitary lives. Nor would it matter if they were people you just met, about whom you know nothing at all. What counts is personal acquaintance, not biographical knowledge. In Footbridge, personal concern for the one who is on the bridge restrains you from pushing the button. In Opaque Footbridge, personal concern – concern for individuals that turns on personal acquaintance – speaks in favour. Concern for the person on the bridge, described as such, can be ignored.

Again, the moral of the story is that personal concern has ethical weight. It is not that you should be more concerned with personal acquaintances than anyone else, or that it is rational to give their interests greater weight. The idea is rather that, when you care about people’s interests, their prospects, given your evidence, depend on how you pick them out. In Opaque Footbridge, the prospects of the person on the bridge are bleak if you push the button. But the prospects of A

²¹ A question raised about a similar case by Elizabeth Harman, in her review of Hare 2013; see Harman 2015: 870.

to F, picked out by personal acquaintance, all improve. It is the second fact that bears on concern for the interests of those involved. In order to make sense of this, to see the contrast between Footbridge and Opaque Footbridge, we must appeal to a form of concern that attaches to individuals not by name or description but by personal acquaintance. Such concern resembles love, except that it is not disproportionate and is not merely rational but required. It is tempting to add, once more, that the justification for personal concern does not depend upon beliefs about its object: personal acquaintance is enough. It is a relation we can have only to those with full moral standing.

There are thus three routes to the puzzle of personal acquaintance. It follows from the permissive view of love, from ex ante contractualism, and from Hare's appeal to concern for others in Opaque Footbridge, that personal acquaintance justifies a kind of concern that makes a difference.²² My hope is that, even if you doubt the premise of each argument, you can feel the pull of personal concern as an ethical idea. Non-aggregative, distributed concern for individuals with whom one is personally acquainted: this makes moral sense. Concern that is mediated by definite descriptions or the second-hand use of names does not. An account of personal acquaintance should explain why.

III

What is personal acquaintance? It is a relation that justifies both love and personal concern. In the first case, one's response is selective and disproportionate. In the second case, it is not.

When we weigh the effects of our actions on the prospects of individuals, it matters how we pick those individuals out. A's prospects may differ from the prospects of the person on the bridge, going by your evidence, even though, unbeknownst to you, A is the person on the bridge. Which way of picking people out is morally relevant? It is the one involved in personal concern,

²² As I argue in *Setiya ms.*, there is a fourth route, too, through the nature of respect for rights.

which runs through personal acquaintance. Personal acquaintance plays a role in determining the object of our attitude that is elsewhere played by definite descriptions or the second-hand use of names. This mode of presentation is deployed in thoughts – for instance, beliefs about the prospects of a given individual – that interact with such concern. In Fregean terms, personal acquaintance is the basis of distinctive singular concepts; alternatively, it is a guise under which we can think of others. Either way, it is a cognitive relation that individuates its object, sustaining reference, and it is a relation with moral weight. That an act will harm or benefit A, picked out by personal acquaintance, has a significance not shared by the fact that it will harm or benefit someone. What more can we say?

In the work of Emmanuel Levinas, spanning four decades of the mid-twentieth century, we find what I think is a profound phenomenology of personal acquaintance.²³ Levinas comes back again and again to the face of the other as an ethical address. This theme is central to his most well-known book, *Totality and Infinity* (1961). But his argument is sketched in “Freedom and Command,” published in 1953:

The being that expresses itself, that faces me, says *no* to me by this very expression. This *no* is not merely formal, but it is not the *no* of a hostile force or a threat; it is the impossibility of killing him who presents that face; it is the possibility of encountering a being through an interdiction. The face is the fact that a being affects us not in the indicative, but in the imperative, and is thus outside all categories. [...] The metaphysical relationship, the relationship with the exterior, is only possible as an ethical relationship. (Levinas 1953: 21)

²³ I am no expert on Levinas, but I have been inspired by his writings. Michael Morgan’s (2007) *Discovering Levinas* is an invaluable guide; I have also been helped by Perpich 2008.

Levinas is as much concerned with justice (“That shalt not kill”) as with benevolence, though he connects the two:

From the start, the encounter with the Other is my responsibility for him. That is the responsibility for my neighbor, which is, no doubt, the harsh name for what we call love of one’s neighbor; love without Eros, charity, love in which the ethical aspect dominates the passionate aspect, love without concupiscence. (Levinas 1982a: 103)

Levinas insists on the particularity of our relation to the other, its distributed, non-aggregative character, in ways that resonate with personal concern.

I must judge, where before I was to assume responsibilities. Here is the birth of the theoretical; here the concern for justice is born, which is the basis of the theoretical. But it is always starting out from the Face, from the responsibility for the other that justice appears, which calls for judgment and comparison, a comparison of what is in principle incomparable, for every being is unique; every other is unique. (Levinas 1982a: 104)²⁴

For Levinas, our relation to the other is always already ethical: it affects us in the imperative, not the indicative. He does not try to justify this relation or explain its basis in other terms. To many philosophers, this will seem like an abdication of responsibility. What grounds the ethical phenomena Levinas describes? What cognitive relation justifies love at first sight and mediates personal concern, a form of concern that structures ethical thought? Since the ethical supervenes on the non-ethical, there must be an answer to this question.²⁵ Isn’t that where personal acquaintance comes in? As I read him, however, Levinas does not believe that the gap

²⁴ On the particularity of ethics in Levinas, see Morgan 2007: 61, 79-80.

²⁵ I discuss supervenience in Setiya 2012: 8-11.

can be filled.²⁶ While I resist his verdict, I think he is right to see a difficulty here. It is hard to say what personal acquaintance is in terms that are both extensionally adequate and make sense of its ethical role.

Personal acquaintance is a psychological relation that involves perceptual contact; but perceptual contact is not enough. (If you are looking at someone but take them to be a statue, you are not personally acquainted with them.) What can we add to perceptual contact to explain why personal acquaintance matters? One idea is to look at the facts to which we gain perceptual access. Personal acquaintance might involve perceptual contact of a kind that affords perceptual knowledge of properties that matter, morally speaking. For instance, it might allow for knowledge of mental states. When we are personally acquainted with someone, the suggestion runs, we can perceive their joy and suffering, weal and woe. Whether or not that is true, however, it is doubly unpromising. First, it gets the extension wrong. If we can perceive human suffering, why not the suffering of non-human animals, who lack moral standing of the sort at issue here? Second, it is hard to see why the perception of suffering, or its possibility, should matter more than knowledge of human suffering acquired by other means. Why would it justify a distinctively personal concern? The second problem applies to variations of this approach that turn on perceptual access to specifically human qualities, to perception of the face, or mind, or body, that brings it under concepts specific to human life. Views of this kind fare better extensionally, but they do not accord with the moral weight of personal acquaintance. If it is simply a matter of how we know about the other, why should personal acquaintance matter in the ways it does? For Levinas, “[the] encounter with the face is not an act of seeing; it is not perceptual or judgmental” (Morgan 2007: 75).²⁷

What goes missing in the turn to perceptual knowledge is the practical dimension of personal acquaintance. One way to fill this deficit is to stress the role of perceptual contact as

²⁶ Here I follow Morgan 2007: 46-50; see also Perpich 2008: 51-4, 74-5, 115-7.

²⁷ See also Morgan 2007: 92.

a basis for human interaction. Personal acquaintance matters, on this more Kantian approach, because it allows us to act and reason together. For Christine Korsgaard, “the violation of a deontological constraint *always* involves an agent and a victim, and thus [...] deontological reasons are always shared reasons. They cannot be the personal property of individual agents. Instead, they supervene on the relationships of people who interact with one another. They are intersubjective reasons” (Korsgaard 1993: 298). That might explain why personal acquaintance counts. It is in the spirit of Stephen Darwall’s (2006) invocation of the “second-person standpoint,” the point of view from which we make claims on one another, holding each other accountable, you and I.

Is reciprocal recognition, or a nexus of rational wills, the ground of personal concern? I don’t believe it is. The view in question could take various forms but they share two basic flaws. The more mundane objection is again extensional. Human beings with whom we cannot interact as agents have full moral standing. They are rational objects of love and personal concern. This is true even if they lack the potential to interact with us. I don’t know how to prove that infants with irreparable cognitive disabilities and people in persistent vegetative states are morally equal to us, and I do not think the implications of this fact are clear, but I am quite sure that it is true.

The less mundane objection is phenomenological. Though Darwall cites both Levinas and Martin Buber (1923) as precedents for the second-person standpoint, their views are not the same.²⁸ Buber appeals to the reciprocity of the “I-Thou” relation. Levinas emphatically does not.

[The] relationship with the other is not symmetrical, it is not at all as in Martin Buber. When I say *Thou* to an *I*, to a me, according to Buber I would always have that me before me as the one who says *Thou* to me. Consequently, there would be a reciprocal relationship. According to my analysis, on the other hand, in the relation to the Face, it is asymmetry that is affirmed: at the outset I hardly care what the other is with respect to

²⁸ On Levinas, see Darwall 2006: 21-22n44; on Buber, Darwall 2006: 39-40.

me, that is his own business; for me, he is above all the one I am responsible for. (Levinas 1982a: 105)

One of the themes of *Totality and Infinity* [...] is that the intersubjective relationship is a non-symmetrical relationship. In this sense, I am responsible for the other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is *his* affair. (Levinas 1982b: 98)²⁹

On this point, I think Levinas is right. The phenomenology of personal acquaintance is not mutual or interactive: the demand for personal concern is unilateral. It is about what I owe to you not what we owe to each other.³⁰ This ethical reality is obscured by the Kantian focus on the second person. We should not conflate attention to relational phenomena in ethics – not just personal concern but the relational or bipolar notion of wronging an individual – with appeal to reciprocal recognition.³¹ The second person matters, but it is not essential to “directed duty.”

Though it is impossible to survey every option, I hope you can begin to see how hard it is to state the nature of personal acquaintance in psychological terms: to identify a psychological relation we can bear only to those with full moral standing, a relation that justifies love and necessitates personal concern. It is no accident that Levinas does not describe the basis of the ethical relation. There is an echo of Wittgenstein in this refusal: “If I have exhausted the

²⁹ See also Morgan 2007: 62.

³⁰ Levinas finds a deeper asymmetry in the ethical relation: “If there were only two of us in the world, there wouldn’t be any problem: it is the other who goes before me ... The only absolute value is the human possibility of giving the other priority over oneself” (Levinas 1982a: 106, 109). I don’t think this is right, either in substance (one is not required to give the other priority over oneself) or in form. Since the ethical relation is reflexive, it cannot involve the priority of an other. We are personally acquainted with ourselves.

³¹ This distortion affects even those who resist the Kantian line. In a broadly Aristotelian approach to bipolarity, Michael Thompson assumes that “relations of right” are fundamentally reciprocal: in the paradigm case, they are recognized on both sides, though there may be marginal occasions in which the party who is wronged is unable to recognize the obligation of the other (Thompson 2004: 348, 367-72). If I understand him, Levinas would question this assumption.

justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned” (Wittgenstein 1953: §217). Cora Diamond takes a similar view of membership in the moral community:

The sense of mystery surrounding our lives, the feeling of solidarity in mysterious origin and uncertain fate: this binds us to each other, and the binding meant includes the dead and the unborn, and those who bear on their faces ‘a look of blank idiocy,’ those who lack all power of speech, those behind whose vacant eyes there lurks ‘a soul in mute eclipse’. I am not arguing that we have a moral obligation to feel a sense of solidarity with all other human beings because of some natural or supernatural property or group of properties which we all have, contingently or necessarily. I am arguing, though, that there is no need to find such a ground... (Diamond 1991: 55)

Levinas in fact goes further. My relation to the other is ethical through and through: it lacks any rational-psychological ground. Nor can its content be captured in words. This relation is presupposed by communicative speech, which is a condition of language and so of rational thought. (Like many philosophers, Levinas sees a distinction in kind between our mental lives and the “non-conceptual” psychology of non-linguistic animals.) Our ethical relation to the other is thus a precondition of openness to the world: “the order of meaning, which seems to me primary, is precisely what comes to us from the interhuman relationship, so that the Face, with all its meaningfulness as brought out by analysis, is the beginning of intelligibility” (Levinas 1982a: 103). The ethics of the face, of love and personal concern, is the transcendental origin of thought, as such.³²

³² “Preexisting the disclosure of being in general taken as basis of knowledge and as meaning of being is the relation with the existent that expresses himself; preexisting the plane of ontology is the ethical plane” (Levinas 1961: 201).

This is the argument of *Totality and Infinity*, in outline.³³ It is transcendental in two ways. First, the ethical relation is transcendental in that it cannot be conceptualized: it is fundamentally inexpressible. Second, the argument is transcendental in a Kantian sense: it aims to undermine a sceptical threat by showing how the sceptic's position assumes or implies the very thing she purports to doubt. In this case, the moral sceptic cannot think conceptually without relying on a public language that depends in turn on her ethical acknowledgement of the other. For Levinas, “[to] kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely” (Levinas 1961: 198).

I have sketched this argument not because I accept it but to give a more adequate view of Levinas on the ethical roots of metaphysics, and to explain how the ineluctably ethical character of personal acquaintance or the face might bear on moral philosophy. Those are topics to pursue elsewhere. I want to return, instead, to the supervenience of the ethical: the pressure to insist that the justification of love and personal concern derives from a relation to the other we can specify in other terms. As we have seen, it is difficult to meet this pressure, to give a psychological account of personal acquaintance. What psychological relation makes love rational and calls for personal concern? The relations we have considered are extensionally wrong or ethically insignificant or both. Must we concede that, in this respect, morality is groundless?

Perhaps there is another way. Suppose, to begin with, that love and personal concern are natural kinds, emotions that play particular, distinctive roles in human life. Suppose, further, that there are regulated by a relation, R, that can be specified in psychological terms. And adopt the conjecture that R is personal acquaintance. Human beings feel love or personal concern for those with whom they are personally acquainted, not those who are known to them merely by name or by minimal description, like “the one on the left” or “the shortest spy.” We should treat this as a generic proposition, a claim about what is characteristic of us that allows for exceptional cases, in

³³ See, especially, Levinas 1961: 72-81, 194-219. The argument is explored by Morgan (2007: 52-5) and Perpich (2008: 132-5, 140-9). An early version appears in Levinas 1953: 18.

which our emotions are misdirected. The psychological relation we are targeting is one by which they are naturally regulated, though the regulation may be imperfect. Suppose, finally, that the psychological relation thus described is one that relates human beings only to those with full moral standing: presumably, in the first instance, other human beings. We cannot be personally acquainted with inanimate objects or with non-human animals of the sort we encounter on Earth.

The discussion so far has asked, in effect, why relation R would justify love and necessitate personal concern. It treats our hypothesized emotions as if they were in need of external vindication, holding human nature up to a normative standard independent of us. Could that be a mistake? What if we insist that human nature, and the facts of human life, play a constitutive role in ethics, as in the tradition that descends from Aristotle?³⁴ That a human response is rational or justified is not independent of the fact that this response, or affirmation of this response, is functional for us. We need not read the virtues directly or naïvely from the book of human life in order to accept some measure of constitutive dependence. In fact, we had better not, unless we believe that human beings are by nature perfectly good. The devil is in the details.³⁵ But the approach has merit, in part because it is the only way we have seen, thus far, to reconcile the ethics of personal acquaintance with its psychological grounds. On this view, personal acquaintance matters not because it ought to play a certain role in human life but because it does: it is the relation that underlies both love and personal concern. Personal concern is called for, and love is justified, whenever they are humanly possible.

There is more to say in defence of these ideas. Because I don't know how to say it, I want to end, instead, by placing the puzzle of personal acquaintance in a wider context of reflection on human values. At the beginning of section I, I assumed without argument that human beings have

³⁴ See Foot 2001; Thompson 2013.

³⁵ If we focus on practical rationality, the simplest view identifies this trait with the proper functioning of our psychology with respect to practical thought. I find it more plausible to begin with ethical judgement as a capacity that regulates human life; practical rationality is what this form of judgement tracks when it is functioning well. I defend this sort of view, under the heading of "Natural Externalism," in Setiya 2012: Ch. 4.

an ethical significance that is not shared by other terrestrial animals. Our interests count for more than theirs, and we have rights against each other they do not possess. Positions of this sort have acquired a very bad name. Don't they reflect an odious form of "speciesism"?³⁶ It helps to emphasize their relational character: they are about the significance we have for one another, not about the significance of human beings in some absolute sense, as though we should matter more to rational Martians than they do to themselves. But even with this proviso, the basic challenge remains. How is such "humanism" (as I prefer) morally better than racism or sexism, attributing ethical significance to brute biological difference?³⁷ This question, which casts doubt on the distinctive value of humanity, has less force if human nature is involved in the foundations of ethics. If human beings by nature respond to one another in distinctive ways, as with love or personal concern, and this fact plays a constitutive role in how it is rational to respond, humanism might be true. By contrast, there is no credible theory of ethics on which its foundations appeal to race or sex, nor is there reason to believe that human beings are by nature racist or sexist in ways that might support an Aristotelian defence of such repugnant views.³⁸ There is, if not a direct argument from humanism to Aristotelian ethics, at least an affiliation between the two.

The ethics of personal acquaintance amplifies and complicates this connection. It is, to begin with, another instance of moral thinking that is difficult to sustain if we deny a constitutive role in ethics to the facts of human life. Perhaps we should not hope to sustain these thoughts, but if we do, we will be led, through Levinas, to Aristotle. At the same time, personal acquaintance puts constraints on the nature of moral standing: it has to mesh with human psychology in ways hypothesized above.

³⁶ The term was coined by Peter Singer (1975: 6).

³⁷ This challenge is central to Singer's (1975) argument; for a more recent discussion, see McMahan 2005: §3.

³⁸ I defend this claim in Setiya 2012: 142-58.

This points to a final question, often raised as an objection to humanism: what about rational Martians? Don't members of other rational species count for us in the same way other humans do? The standard response, which I accept, is that humanism does not imply otherwise. What it suggests is not that rational Martians lack full moral standing but that, if they have it, the ground on which they do so is quite different from the ground that applies to you or me. Whether we should care about the members of another rational species, what rights they have against us: these are open questions. The answers turn on how they relate to one another and to us. (Bernard Williams makes this vivid by imagining rational predators who come from outer space.³⁹ We can also conceive of rational beings who regard one another as prey.)

The idea of personal acquaintance introduces something new. For there is nothing in the psychology of love or personal concern that prevents us from being personally acquainted with non-human beings. One thing we learn from unimaginative science fiction, in which the aliens are mostly humanoid, is that love across species boundaries makes sense. The same is true of personal concern. If it is rational to love the members of another rational species, their moral standing should not be in doubt. The ethics of personal acquaintance is not humanist in giving special weight to specifically human life. It is humanist in treating every human being as a moral equal and, in its Aristotelian form, in giving special weight to human values, values that may be cosmically cosmopolitan.

We have traveled far along a speculative path. Let us go back to the start. I have argued that personal acquaintance plays a crucial role in the permissive view of love, and in the idea of personal concern that is brought into focus by ex ante contractualism and Opaque Footbridge. If we want to make sense of these phenomena, we need an ethics of personal acquaintance. But it is hard to say what personal acquaintance is in terms that would explain why it justifies love and calls for personal concern. We have considered an approach that has some promise, one that draws on Aristotle, echoing Levinas without his quietism. Personal acquaintance is a cognitive

³⁹ See Williams 2006: 149-52.

relation whose significance for us can be explained by giving an essential role in ethics to the facts of human life. If this is wrong, we are left with a serious, unsolved puzzle. Can we make sense of love at first sight, and of concern for individuals, as such?⁴⁰

⁴⁰ For discussion of this material, I am grateful to Gregory Antill, Marcia Baron, Anastasia Berg, Ian Blecher, Paul Boswell, Matt Boyle, Jason Bridges, Sarah Buss, Alex Byrne, Imogen Dickie, Jimmy Doyle, Kyla Ebels-Duggan, Camil Golub, Marah Gubar, Matthias Haase, Caspar Hare, Samia Hesni, Abby Jaques, A. J. Julius, Irad Kimhi, Andy Koppelman, Michael Kremer, Ben Laurence, Jonathan Lear, Michael Morgan, Anselm Müller, Sasha Newton, Ryan Preston-Roedder, Tamar Schapiro, Paul Schofield, Will Small, Jack Spencer, David Sussman, Daniel Telech, Nandi Theunissen, Quinn White, Stephen White, and Steve Yablo, and to audiences at Brown University, the Normativity Research Group in Montreal, Northwestern University, the University of Chicago, Brandeis University, and MIT. Special thanks to Jennifer Lockhart for generous, constructive comments on an earlier draft.

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