

Preface

This is a book about beginnings and endings, and what happens in between. Many books—particularly those on love—avoid endings, or arrive at them not as any kind of loss but the creation of an everlasting condition (“ever after,” happily or otherwise). Beginnings in stories of love then overtake the narrative, but often only to be recast as the intentions of eternity—accidents of fortune discovered as actually “meant to be.” Other works on love try to focus on what happens in between, as in ethical arguments for commitment, constancy, and the steady fulfillment of duties and promises that must have been made out of frame. The end of love in these discussions can be only a kind of error, while beginnings, where they appear at all, seem nearly natural phenomena, no more interesting to ethics than the evolution of an acorn or the mechanics of tides. Actual beginnings and endings are kept out of view, left implicit or mythologized as fate or failure. In their absence, love seems to be extracted from time. It might not be eternal, exactly, but it isn’t quite temporal, either. It seems hard to count the days or imagine the hours passing. It’s then hard to know how a finite being might be part of the argument or story told. My days are numbered; my hours pass. My loves cannot be everlasting. Of what importance is that to me as a lover? What is love in a life that begins and ends?

One response from many corners of Western philosophy and religious thought is that love intrudes into finite lives plagued by beginnings, endings, and the vulnerability between them as something other to it all: a glimpse of the eternal, a suggestion of the infinite, a promise of transcendence, a relationship with the divine. Love, by these accounts, is not something a finite being can do, know, or feel fully. It addresses

me, and teaches me the limitations of my conditions by its difference from them. It also offers me something beyond them, whether in the form of an afterlife, a relationship with something greater than myself, or simply the idea that this isn't all there is. It might inspire me to practice greater constancy and commitment in my own relationships, or to extend commitments beyond them. It might make the infinite something to aspire to—and clear the ground to mourn and condemn worldly relationships for falling short.

But love to a finite being is more than an invitation to grief or condemnation of our conditions, and less than the everlasting, eternal loves romanticized in stories and praised by philosophers and theologians looking to console. Understanding love only to *intrude* on temporal life does not help us understand the experience of love in time. How does it feel to love as a finite being, however imperfectly we may? How does love seem to someone who doesn't know if it will continue or end? How might finitude and the vulnerabilities it determines define love for human beings, instead of defining only our failures within it?

To answer these questions, we need to follow love in time, spending time with it to see what becomes important to lovers, necessary to their experiences, and prominent among their concerns as it proceeds. Love in time, like any temporal experience, is composed of moments of not knowing what will happen next. It is an experience of vulnerability in this way, the lover exposed to an unknown future and waiting to see how it plays out. Lovers must wait to see how their beloveds respond to them, both in initial overtures and at any moment of address. They must wait to learn who their beloveds are, and who they become as time continues. They must wait as well to learn what life spent loving their beloveds will look like, how it will feel, and whether it will continue to seem desirable—and, significantly, whether they will continue to desire it. They might be anxious about whether love will continue, and unsure whether, if it ends, it will seem a waste of precious time. As finite beings, we cannot know how the future will proceed. What we desire, at least in part, is time spent with our beloveds seeing how it goes.

The method of this project is thus to treat love as lovers want to treat their beloveds, spending time together without knowing exactly how that time will proceed. Call it a lover's dialectic: instead of watching the subject determine itself by alienation and sublation toward self-consciousness, we will spend time with the subject—love—and see

how it shows itself to be in relation to us, finite beings who love, however imperfectly. The aim is not to find it on its own terms, but to be with it, in its relation to us, over time. Its appearance, like ours, will be shaped by time passing. What we know of it will be contingent on the questions, concerns, pressures, and pleasures that arise in that time. Our knowledge will also never be complete. If love is there tomorrow, there will be more about it to learn.

Where philosophers and theologians seek greater certainty, they often look for definitions of love that might secure our knowledge of it against the vagaries of its experience. Some look for definitions that will make clear what is worth loving and why, so that we might judge our loves against these guides and know whether we're getting them right. Others define love as a source of certainty, suggesting that a love worthy of the name will be not only directed at the right person or thing but also without the impermanence of other worldly relations. Uncertainty about whether I love the right person or whether my love will persist can be answered by these projects and overcome by their definitions. Overcoming uncertainty seems to be a crucial aim of their inquiries: lovers' questions should be answered; their anxieties should be quelled.

These are appealing ambitions. But rendering them significant aims of an inquiry into love quickly distorts the ethical thinking in and around love that we need. Turning away from uncertainty distorts our inevitable encounters with it, encouraging us to see what we know now as all there is and to see the vulnerabilities we name now as the whole story of our possible futures. Our choices then seem to become quite clear: if I believe I know what situation I'm in and what situations I'm facing, I can act for the things I desire and against the possibilities I fear. Any uncertainty that creeps in around the edges is a flaw of temporal life to be minimized or overcome. Situations that increase such uncertainty should be minimized or avoided entirely.

Relationships increase uncertainty. They add to one's life more sources of possible actions, feelings, and events; more people one might be accountable to; and generally much more one might need to take into account. They make prediction harder, and they make our vulnerabilities greater. Resistance to uncertainty, then, can make ethical theory broadly averse to ongoing relationships. They appear primarily as arenas of susceptibility and danger, our interactions with others seeming best where they can be negotiated rationally and ended quickly,

everyone parting safely and on good terms. If we are trying to minimize uncertainty—even for the admirable effort to protect the goods of our present situation, not least by knowing what they are—the continuation of relationships in which we are always vulnerable seems unwise. But this appearance constrains ethical thinking by making the conditions of temporal, finite life itself unappealing. It also makes the conditions of temporal, finite life worthy of escape. An ethics formed in these ways cannot meet us where we are. It shows us the limitations of our existence but diminishes our ability to think with those limitations toward better understandings of what we need, what we desire, what we fear, and how we should act.

Tracing love in time, by contrast, suggests the importance of its uncertainties to lovers—and the importance of uncertainty to ethics. Eliminating uncertainty in love, for finite beings, requires love to end. But lovers seem to want love to continue—to continue to be with their beloveds, learn about them, discover who they are and who they will become. Whether our beloveds are good for us or we are good for them cannot be answered definitively. Our questions in this vein must be continuously negotiated, as every attempt to know an answer fully will be defied by the possibilities of what happens next.

And lovers, as we'll see, must *desire* uncertainty insofar as they desire a relationship with their beloveds and not only an assertion of their love, without even listening for a reply. Wanting time together is to want that time to be determined, at least in part, by one's beloved. Attempts at greater control thus run against the desires of lovers—sometimes viciously, but also in the name of responsibility, protection, and the preservation of our lives as they are. This is the inclination of an ethics that resists uncertainty and cannot bear the vulnerabilities of temporal life. It is also an inclination of finite beings, attentive to risk and seeking to act responsibly in the face of it.

I think we should be sympathetic to these inclinations where we encounter them in each other, and in ourselves. But we must attend to them well, which requires us to see what aspects of our experience they run against as well as the aspects of our experience they protect and nurture. We must stop looking for a theory of love that will reconcile the lover's desire for uncertainty with the responsibilities of finite beings to know better, mitigate vulnerabilities, and control for risks as best we can. Following love in time, we can see this tension between

desire and responsibility not as a failure of theory or practice, but as an animation of life itself.

It is also a tension that animates this book, and we will begin from its consideration in the strange speech of Lysias, Socrates's foil in the *Phaedrus*. Lysias's speech, as Socrates notes, seems reasonable and rational but spectacularly disorganized. It cannot proceed from beginning to end, and it describes an ideal of love that is similarly out of order. But what Lysias suggests amid this mess is a concern for how little lovers can know of whether their loves will go well. I think we should not dismiss this concern too quickly, even if it leads Lysias to particularly undesirable—and ultimately irresponsible—solutions.

Our path from there will follow other efforts to resolve this tension between desire and responsibility, considering a diversity of arguments in Western philosophy and religious thought that each pursue strategies of securing love against the uncertainties of its temporal experience. We will see some of these strategies recur, such as the interest that occupies the first chapter in properly assessing the value of the beloved as a way to ensure our desires are directed responsibly. Where efforts run aground to assess—or even describe—the beloved fully, we will turn to another approach in the definition of our loves as our core sources of values, reasons, and ambitions—the things of which we are certain beyond argument or doubt. The tautologies of Plato's *Euthyphro* will turn us to Harry Frankfurt's argument for love as a source instead of a product of reasons, but then back again to practices of reasoning about love as we encounter doubts and questions about our desires in conversation with others, and ourselves. Vulnerability *to* our desires emerges here alongside the vulnerability *of* our desires, compounding the tension between the lover's want for an uncertain future with their beloved and the fear of it all going wrong. Simultaneously, our vulnerability to definitions of love that seek to answer, fully and finally, questions about whether we're getting love right will emerge alongside the vulnerability *of* such definitions to aspects of our experience of love in time. The continuation of love makes every answer conditional, subject to change as we see more of our beloveds and our relationships to them. A definition of love that promises something more secure will be as vulnerable as we are to whatever the future brings.

The next chapters explore what can be learned from following these

vulnerabilities to their extremes. In chapter 3, I will consider an effort to escape them entirely in the promise of the perfect invulnerability of God's love. In modern Protestant considerations of *agape*, principally those of Søren Kierkegaard and Anders Nygren, God's love, *agape*, is defined in contrast to erotic desire. In this form, it is bestowed by the lover without regard for the value of the beloved and is thus invulnerable to changes in them. This love promises an enviable constancy, but in Nygren's definition of it particularly, it isolates the lover from a relationship with the beloved. Being perfectly invulnerable makes the lover—even the divine lover—assertive of their love but not clearly in relationship with their beloved, never waiting for their beloved to respond, vulnerable to how they will react or reply. Nygren's denial of vulnerability in divine love suggests the importance of vulnerability to lovers. It also suggests the difficulty of being vulnerable in love: even God, knowing how things turn out, must wait to hear how the other responds.

The possibility of responding badly, as well as the pain of waiting for another's reply, sits at the center of the last chapter. We will turn there to a different set of questions about desire, responsibility, and vulnerability, reconfigured by illness as it reconfigures love. In two relationships, each encountered in works of art—one through a series of paintings and the other a fictional couple at the center of a play—the uncertain future desired by lovers becomes increasingly certain, as their beloveds decline toward death. Desire here stands in tension with responsibility not as lovers seek to protect themselves—or not only there—but as lovers struggle with obligations to care for their beloveds, and with others' expectations of what care a lover must provide. Spending time with these lovers, or the works of art in which they are depicted, makes desire seem again insecure, but here as a motivation for care. What we can demand of each other on its foundations seems similarly unsteady, suggesting the limits of love as an ethical ideal and the need for other forms of relation in our fragile, finite lives.

My interlocutors through these discussions are not part of a single existing tradition, except in a broad sense of Western philosophy and religious thought. They are sometimes representative of certain smaller conversations, but I do not offer them specifically in this way. Rather, they constitute a range of approaches to love in time—often through its escape. What they share is some anxiety about how to make love

more secure, less vulnerable, and easier to know fully. What I share with them is the sense that love would need to be very different from how we encounter it in time for such anxieties to be overcome. Where we differ, when we do, is over whether that is a worthy ambition—or whether trying to describe love in time might offer more to lives lived within it.

First, a few notes about language. I have spoken about love thus far as if “love” is one thing. Many accounts of love are concerned with defining its multiplicity: different forms of love, defined by different feelings, expectations, behaviors, and surrounding relationships and roles between lover and beloved. In certain contexts, there can be a lot at stake in differentiating the love of parents for children from the love of romantic partners, for instance, or in defining the intimacies of a sexual encounter as something other than the love of a romantic relationship, or otherwise drawing lines around some relationships to hold them apart from others. Differentiating between kinds of love isn’t my project here. When I say “love,” I mean the broad set of things generally called love, including love between parents and children, family members, romantic partners, friends, and even love for ideas, places, and things. The aspect of love I am interested in—the want for more time with the beloved—is part of each of these relationships in some form. The significant differences among them are important to other questions.¹

Second, I have used throughout the text the words “lover” and “beloved” to refer to the parties to a loving relationship. These words are not ideal. “Lover,” in my experience of the English language, has a tone of licentiousness, or parody. “Beloved” is also more romantically marked, or the language of prayer. It is also not particularly popular; outside of liturgy, it belongs to saccharine greeting cards or hackneyed love poems looking for a rhyme, or, in a very different register, it is hung in the rafters as the title of one of the best novels ever written on the theme (or maybe any other). It is hard to imagine a parent loving a child, a friend loving a friend, or even many romantic couples as a “lover” and “beloved” without stumbling a bit over the terms. I tried others—“lover” and “loved one,” “person loving” and “person loved”—but found nothing that wasn’t somehow more awkward and unwieldy. I hope the connotations of “lover” and “beloved” will be at worst amusing, and not distracting.

Finally, every example of love reflects social norms of what counts as love; what I am able to see as love; what I am inclined to think is “good” love, “bad” love, or specious as love at all, and so on. I have used a range of examples that generally draw on norms shared by broad swaths of my society as I have experienced it. This practice produces relatively conservative examples. Appealing to your intuitions with them upholds the norms they represent, and thus participates in the forms of exclusion, denigration, discipline, and domination that they enforce. My point in any example is not that it represents the *right* norm to have. My point is usually—as I try to suggest throughout the text—that these are norms and not truths about what love is, determined by social practice and remade in every iteration of their performance, for better or worse.