

## Philosophical Profiles

### J. David Velleman

Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at NYU

#### IN BRIEF

J. David Velleman is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Bioethics at NYU and Miller Research Professor of Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University. His interests are numerous, but include predominantly moral psychology, philosophy of action and metaethics. His first book, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton, 1989) was a re-working of his dissertation, written at Princeton under the direction of David Lewis, while his most recent, *On Being Me* (Princeton, 2020) is an illustrated introduction to philosophy in the form of a meditation. Most of this interview, however, centers on perhaps the most influential article on love written in the past quarter-century, "Love as a Moral Emotion" (*Ethics* 109 [2], 1999), wherein Velleman rejected Harry Frankfurt's claim that love and morality were at odds and argued that not only was this not so, but that love and Kantian respect are on the same sliding scale of modes of valuing another person. An entire industry has now grown up around issues surrounding love, and almost everyone who writes on it in the analytical school of philosophy feels the need to address his arguments. In this interview he reveals a surprising source of the underlying convictions that motivated his position. Velleman has also written extensively on personal identity (his papers are collected in *Self to Self* [Cambridge, 2006]) and has firm views about what students need to learn before they can do bioethics, and how philosophy should be written. With that in mind, he is a founding co-editor of *Philosophers' Imprint* and is currently launching a philosophy magazine with David Johnson that is committed to the scandalous notion that substantive philosophy should be accessible to the general public.

#### DETAILS

Simon Cushing conducted the following interview with David Velleman on 11 September, 2020.

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# J. David Velleman

## a philosophical profile

**SC: I'm going to start the interview and I'll just plunge in. I'll start by asking you how is lock-down treating you?**

DV: Lock-down has treated me and my wife and my children and my grandchildren okay. As well as it has treated anyone. We are all well. At the moment, we are not seeing our grandchildren because they started school. We are now thinking about under what conditions and circumstances we might be able to continue visiting them. Before that they were very well really quarantined.

**In the article that I'm going to ask you a lot about which is "Love as a Moral Emotion" (*Ethics* 109 [2], 1999) you describe an example of childhood exposure to an air of paradox which for some of us eventually condenses into philosophy. Was this your entry into philosophy?**

That's a very good question. I'm the middle of three boys. I believe we get on very well...All three of us became academics. My younger brother a logician who is very philosophically inclined, and my older brother a statistician. I believe that I started doing philosophy as a child in a way. I have a vivid memory of a excited conversation with my younger brother, who was the one who was closer to me in age, in which we more or less develop the theory of secondary properties; secondary qualities. Given what we knew of color perception. Whether the fact that I started doing philosophy with one of my brothers as a child is due to the conundrum I describe in the paper, I don't know. My younger brother is only 21 months younger than me which means that he was born at a time when I was still a toddler and I know that my parents went to great lengths to make sure that I did not feel cheated of their attention. But to be honest, I couldn't say... We were very young. We were still sharing a room. My older brother had not gone off to college yet so we were pretty young at the time. Because I remember the room in which the conversation took place.

**It is odd that one can be drawn to philosophy at such a young age but then you have to wait until college to get a chance to study it really.**

That is correct. I did get a chance to study it in high school because I had an English teacher who was extremely influential in my life, who had been educated at Jesuit schools. He had us reading Plato. He had us reading Aristotle's *Poetics*. And he taught us logic. In fact, the course I'm currently teaching online is a logic course. I believe that logic should be a required part of the high school curriculum. It's an extremely valuable thing to learn and college is too late.

**I teach logic both to undergraduates and part of an extension program to high schoolers. And unlike other philosophy courses it's a course that can be done in the**

**same way to both of them. Because there is no point in doing political philosophy with high schoolers! Basically you're discovering who has a logical brain rather than giving them information.**

Well, no, you're also giving them conceptual tools that are useful. I developed over the years a web-based logic course, which I have taught to high school students and in fact underprivileged high school students in New York City, with great success, I believe. They seem to really like it.

**I see that your Ph.D advisor at Princeton was David Lewis. What was your Ph.D on and how was he as an advisor?**

Well David was the most wonderful advisor. I look back on my graduate education and just marvel at how lucky I was. I was at Princeton in the day of David Lewis, and Saul Kripke and Richard Rorty and Margaret Wilson. To give you an idea of what a wonderful advisor David was, when you gave David a piece of writing, and of course in that day, you *handed* it to him because it was on *paper*, he immediately took out his pocket calendar and said "OK, when will we meet to discuss this?" So, he had already committed himself to a day by which he would be ready to discuss it.

**Foolish Man!**

And David as people whoever saw him in action know, he was an incredibly incisive critic. His criticism was extremely sharp. Now, David, reveled in having a good objection. At a talk, he would have an objection, a counter example and could not conceal his glee at how clever it was. So, you couldn't be David's advisee if you had a fragile ego. But, I did not because I had previously done Greats - the second two years of the classic's degree at Oxford - and that more or less battered whatever ego I had going in. I was ready to believe there's so much I don't know. His criticism didn't bother me. Now, my thesis was on... my first book, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton University Press, 1989), was a re-writing of my dissertation, so it was not in David's field. There's a story behind why I ended up working with him on this project which wasn't in his field. It wasn't as far from his field as you might think. It was David who told me that I needed to read Iris Murdoch, which people would not have expected, unless they knew that he did tutorials with Iris Murdoch at Oxford. In any case, that was my experience.

**David Lewis' stuff is not really in my field, but I had to take over a Metaphysics class when my colleague retired suddenly, and I came to believe that all Metaphysics basically ended with David Lewis. He got it right.**

He got a tremendous amount right and he wrote beautifully. Clearly. Accessibly. It's one of the things I mourn about the discipline. The kind of prose that was written, not just by Lewis, but by Bernard Williams by Tom Nagel in those days, by many others, you can't find that writing anymore.

**I used to love reading Quine even though I didn't understand it very much just because he was a brilliant stylist.**

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Exactly. The journals won't accept that kind of writing anymore.

**Harry Frankfurt was not at Princeton at the time?**

No. He was at Yale. I did not know Harry.

**That would have been useful because one of the books you encourage people to read is *The importance of what we care about* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).**

About which I have written a lot. I'm a student of Harry Frankfurt, but not from my graduate days.

**Would you describe yourself as a Kantian?**

When I teach the bread and butter ethics course that satisfies the requirement for our undergraduate philosophy major, I teach it historically. So, we read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. We read Kant's *Groundwork*. We read *Utilitarianism*. And we read Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

**Do you read them in that order, because a lot of people do them in the reverse order?**

I don't do them in reverse order. I do Mill first, then Aristotle, then Kant. That's because in teaching Mill, you find yourself introducing many, many concepts that are going to play a role in the rest of the semester. And, introducing them in an especially clear way.

**Although Mill is tricky partly because he's got those 19th century sentences. But also because it's deceptively profound. He seems to go on and on and you don't recognize the meat that's there.**

And it seems so simple, but it is by no means simple. I agree. And the students all complain about the length of the sentences. I just think dammit learn to read those sentences because they are wonderful. What I say to the students is, we are not trying to choose among these views. All of them have something to teach us. Morality in life borrows from all of them. There are situations in which the judgment called for is a judgment of fairness, or whether someone is cheating, and for that you need Kant. Sometimes the judgment is called for is a judgment about whether something is a vicious thing to do and for that you need Aristotle. Then, sometimes the judgment that is called for is the judgment about doing the most good, and if you think that one of these theories is going to enable you to make all of those judgments, you are making a mistake. I am not a Kantian in the sense of being a Kantian to the exclusion of being an Aristotelean or a Utilitarian when I think it's called for. But, I am a great fan of Kant's *Groundwork*. I have read the *Critique of Practical Reason*. I don't understand it. The only reason I feel I understand the *Groundwork* is that I have spent so much time over the course of 35 years teaching it trying to figure out what's going on so that I can explain it to undergraduates. For that reason, I think I understand the *Groundwork*. I don't think I understand the rest of Kant's ethics. What I read about it in the secondary literature, I

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don't always like. I sometimes think, "Oh no. He shouldn't have said that. He should've stuck with the *Groundwork!*"

**You're definitely not a true believe then! I say that as a precursor for the next question. How were you drawn to write about love because it seems to me you approached it from a Kantian direction.**

The way I was drawn to write about it is, Harry Frankfurt wrote a paper ("Autonomy, Necessity, and Love," in *Vernunftbegriffe in der Moderne*, ed. Hans Friedrich Fulda and Rolf-Peter Horstmann [Klett-Cotta, 1994]) in which he talked about Kantian ethics and morality in general as inimical to the spirit of love. He wrote about there being a conflict between being moral and being loving. I can't remember whether it was only being moral in the Kantian sense or being moral in general, but it was in a way, sort of in the spirit of Susan Wolf's "Moral Saints" (*The Journal of Philosophy* 79 [8], 1982). I read [Frankfurt's article] and I thought, "Oh no. That's wrong." That's how I came to write it. It was a response to that paper of Frankfurt's.

**Now what was the first thing that popped into your mind that made you think "that's wrong"?**

I can tell you. My mother was raised in the religion of Christian Science. My grandparents, her parents were still practicing Christian Scientists throughout the time that I knew them. They both lived until I was a college student and I was very close to them. My mother left Christian Science was she was in college back in the 1940s. When I visited my grandparent's Christian Science church - which I did only once - there were two slogans up on the wall, two principle slogans of Christian Science. One is *God is infinite intelligence*. The other is *God is love*. The idea is, those are compatible. Infinite love and infinite intelligence are embodied in the same being. I was raised by people who believed that, and so the way I put this to myself is there is an intimate connection between clarity of mind and purity of heart. You cannot have a pure heart unless you have a clear mind. And *if* you have a clear mind, you *will* have a pure heart.

**My follow-up question: Put your discussion in context with three names. Harry Frankfurt - you've already done that. Bernard Williams, because the drowning wife comes up all the time, and Iris Murdoch, whom you've already mentioned.**

I mention Murdoch in the paper. I think I also mention Williams and the drowning wife. Let's talk about Williams first. I don't think Kant has any objection to saving your wife.

**Good to know.**

I think that is perfectly universalizable. People think that the morality of the *Groundwork* requires you to give equal consideration to everyone. The sense in which that is true is not that the husband standing on the burning deck should give equal consideration to all of the swimmers who are in the drink. That is not the sense. It is just that you are supposed to consider whether the validity of this maxim could become common knowledge amongst all practical reasoners. Where "all practical reasoners" is an

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abstraction. It's the Kingdom of Ends, that is, this abstract conclave of practical reasoners. It's Rawls's original position behind the veil of ignorance. Looking at the swimmers, you're not supposed to imagine them behind the veil of ignorance. The parties behind the veil of ignorance are abstract practical reasoners. So the people who say, "saving your wife, you did not give equal consideration to the other swimmers," that's a misinterpretation of Kant.

**Williams does say the whole thing is about the "one thought too many." So you don't think it even requires the extra thought?**

I think that the phrase "one thought too many" should be retired.

**It is all that anybody ever uses when talking about that case.**

I know. Under what assumptions about the workings of the mind can there be "too many" thoughts? The assumptions are: thoughts are individuated as propositions, and, each thought takes a certain amount of time. To have this thought would be a laggard in going to your wife's aid because you would have taken time to think this. The answer is: thoughts don't take time. Lots of things are going on in your mind at once. First of all, you have already dealt with this issue in the past, because you have loved ones and you have a family, at least, insofar as you have a marriage. You have already faced the issue of favoritism toward your family members, and you have realized already that favoritism toward your family members is universalizable. So you don't have to stop and scratch your head and take time to think about this. You've already done the test of the Categorical Imperative on the relevant thought. So I have no patience for people who say "one thought too many."

**I retract that question!**

No. I'm glad you asked it. I have been looking for an opportunity to say this in writing and I have not found one yet. Or maybe I have said it in writing somewhere...

**Iris Murdoch. I should preface this. I'm editing a collection of articles on love, which is what drew me to ask you for an interview, since your name comes up all the time, but a couple of people in particular are drawn to Iris Murdoch's work. To what extent do you see your view as an outgrowth of, a clarification of, or a development of a Murdochian approach?**

Yes. I do see it that way. I think the things she says about love being a form of attention, and "really looking," and transcending the fog of self-serving fantasies that prevent you from really seeing what exists, I take to be a form of the thought that love essentially involves clarity of mind. That is the underlying spirit out of which I wrote the paper. So, yes, I think of the paper as an outgrowth of what Murdoch says. Not everything she says, but that part of it.

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The thing that we're supposed to be responding to, or "really seeing," on your view, is Kantian personhood. [Nico] Kolodny had a nice line in his article ("Love as Valuing a Relationship," *Philosophical Review* 112 (2), 2003) that was written between your two articles, "Love as a Moral Emotion" and "Beyond Price" (*Ethics* 118 [2], 2008), "Personal ads do not read 'bare Kantian person seeks same.'" It's a snarky way of putting the point that he or critic of you do not think that what we're really responding to when we love someone is their Kantian personhood. Would you say that the love that you're talking about can therefore be talked about as one love amongst many to which there are alternatives, or would you say it's the core? For example, it's a commonplace to say there's agapeic love, which is the kind of love that Jesus commands, and there's passionate love, and you're talking about agapeic love and it doesn't have much in common with passionate love, or do you think that you're capturing a sort of essence that is the true nature of love and anything else is sort of an offshoot?

I'm not sure I want to choose either of those. I believe I say in the first paper that I am not talking about romantic love. Now, I do believe that when romantic love is *true* love, it has the kind of love I'm talking about as its core. Part of what I say is, the kind of love I'm talking about makes you emotionally susceptible, it lowers your defenses against the other. Then, a lot of the components of romantic love are given an opening to rush in: attraction, appreciation for a sense of humor, interest in the other's projects, and on and on. Appreciation of the other's physical beauty. Appreciation of the sound of the other's voice. Wanting to be near the other. All of those things then are given an entry. Now you can have all of those things even though you don't appreciate the personhood of the other, but I would say just liking the way someone walks and the way someone talks – that's not true love.

**That's quirk love as you called it.**

Yes. It's quirk love.

**On the way to becoming a fetish. You're a kink-shamer, that's what you are.**

I am yes. I agree with Kolodny. When you post a personal ad, you're not just looking for someone whose personhood you will appreciate. You're looking for someone who, *having seen* their personhood, you'll come to also appreciate their beauty, the sound of their voice, take an interest in their projects, want to be with them, and so on. You go on your first date with this person and you think, "wow, she's a looker and she has this really interesting job and she knows lots of things that I want to know about, I can ask her questions," and that's it, and that's why you want a second date? That ain't love.

**You say "The account of love offered by many philosophers seems to me less like an analysis of the emotion itself than an inventory of the desires and preferences that tend to arise in loving relationships of the most familiar kind." That's what happens to you when you disarm your defenses. So, there's a puzzle that has obsessed people who write on love of late, which is the selectivity of love. How is it that I can love just one person, the obvious answer is I love one person for their particular features. But**

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**then the problems is substitutivity. Then, it seems that you would love that person's clone. We don't want to say that about love. Your solution to this is to say that in some sense, we don't love people for their particular features. That's something that happens after the love.**

Yes. Or perhaps those are the features that tip you off to their personhood. My experience is, there are some people who, because of the way they look, because of their faces, their voices and the way they talk, I find them-as-persons present in their faces. "Oh yeah, that person is here before me." Then there are other people who look like humans to me but somehow their faces and bodies and voices and mannerisms - the person isn't present to me. I assume what provides that reaction to different people is very different for each person. You can say that you love the person *for* those features and that's then a different sense of love-for. Those are the features that first gave me the realization of their personhood.

**That is one of your very strong examples - loving people for their flaws. What we don't really mean is that we love their flaws and that's why we love them.**

Exactly. What I will say about the selectivity of love is that you just can't be vulnerable to that many people. If we were angels, with infinite attention and infinite minds and so on, maybe we could love everybody, but we're not capable of it. I certainly don't think you can love only one person. I'll find out when I'm done, what my wife thinks of what I'm about to say. I don't think that I am constitutionally incapable of loving someone else the way I love my wife. I *don't* [love someone else]. I never have. I never will. But, there's a lot that goes into that having to do with our relationship and the commitments involved in that relationship and so on. There are cultures that engage in bigamy that engage in multiple marriages and I suspect that, you know, the Arab men who have multiple wives, maybe they love two of them equally. I don't know. I don't think it's part of the human constitution that this is possible only with one person.

**I read an article about polyamory ("Is 'Loving More' Better? The Values of Polyamory," in *The Philosophy of Sex*, ed., Halwani, Soble, Hoffman, Held [Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, 7th Ed.]) where Elizabeth Brake defends the possibility of it. I just don't like the argument. I get it, but I agree with you that I don't see that there's anything kind of contradiction in the notion, but it seems to be something important about love that it be exclusive.**

I agree with that. I don't regard the commitments of my marriage as restrictions, as burdens. I regard them as enrichments of the relationship. I am very glad that I am in a relationship with those commitments and that I have always honored them. That is of great, great value to me, but that's not a point about the emotion of love. That's a point about the value of certain kinds of relationships. I think having a life partner to whom you are exclusively committed is one of the most valuable ways to live. But, that's not about the human capacity for the emotion of love. I will just add, I know someone who is in a polyamorous relationship. I don't know about the emotional part of it. I do know I don't live like that. I'm glad I don't live like that. I greatly value that for over 45 years I have lived in a monogamous relationship and will live in it until I die. I value that.

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**But, as you say, one of things you noticed about the Williams' drowning wife case is that it switches viewpoints. It's from the viewpoint of the wife, of the beloved, that they want to be loved uniquely. So maybe that's what we're responding to, that there's something about *being* loved that requires that one be the only one?**

No. That's because of the primal scene that I set in the paper. That is my parents had three sons. The love of a parent for a child, that's a very deep, very powerful, very important kind of love. I think it's possible. I think that the sibling rivalry that includes wanting to be loved exclusively by your parents in a way that they don't love your siblings – that's a tragedy, that's a really bad mistake. No. Again, it's the exclusive *relationship* that I value not the exclusive *emotion*.

**I think you're right. I think if my parents revealed to me that really they didn't love my sister and they'd been faking it and the love was just for me, I would find that more disturbing than comforting.**

Yes. Exactly. What about people who have two very long, very good marriages in their lives and let it be that they were widowed the first time. There wasn't conflict that led to a divorce. They were two perfectly happy marriages. Now, do you want to say that the second spouse should think, "not only does he or she love me, but she loved this other person just as much"? The people who think that we want love to be exclusive, they have to think they want it to be exclusive *at one time*. Not just exclusive over the course of a life.

**Although you should watch the remake of *Rebecca* that's coming out.**

I never saw the original.

**The point is that his new wife is being told by the maid, who hates her, "He doesn't love you. His love is still for Rebecca" who has died.**

If the maid had said instead, "Oh he loves *you*, but he really loved her too." It does sometimes happen, I think, in second marriages that the second spouse is jealous of the first spouse. Because the widowed spouse still loves the first spouse as one loves a deceased person.

**I think actually, if you're going to be the second spouse, it's better to marry someone who is divorced rather than someone who is a widow or widower because you can't compete with someone who's dead because they're perfect.**

I think precisely the opposite. You want someone who was a sound enough person to have made a good choice the first time and to have made the first marriage work, and who is still a loving person who still loves his deceased spouse, as one loves a deceased parent. One should value that in one's spouse.

**But you also say that it's possible to love someone who you can't stand. The "dark truth" about some divorces.**

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Yes. That's true. Yes.

**You also talk about, and I think this is where you need to be careful in today's cancel-culture. Where you talk about love between a student and a teacher. Now, you are careful in your article, but certainly...**

I knew I was taking a chance.

**Which is why you very carefully explained exactly the extent to which you meant this.**

Yes. Some of my former teachers, I think I love them. I don't know whether they love me. It's very common for people to speak of their former teachers as beloved. I don't think it's the kind of exaggerated use of the word. As when we say, "Oh yeah, I really love him. Oh yeah, I really love her." They really mean they have an emotional attachment to this person.

**Another thing that I think marks your writing that I'm familiar with as different from a lot of contemporary analytic philosophy, is that you will bring in people like Freud. I think Freud, of course, is seen as not respectable to a great extent nowadays. I don't think he's seen as a philosopher even though we don't make those distinctions about writers in the past. You also talk about Montaigne, as if he styled himself a philosopher, whereas Freud is some sense is not a philosopher. You bemoan Freud's influence on love. The reason I thought of this is because I think what a lot of people would say about a student's love for a teacher is that it is some sort of displacement or transference. You are very explicit that you think Freud's commentary on love has been unfortunate because it is part of the cause of this idea that love is opposed to morality or that love and morality are not simpatico.**

Right. That part of that paper should not be taken to indicate that I think Freud is not respectable.

**No. I didn't want to say that. I think the first part of what I said, was that you are quite open in seeing Freud as a fount of insightful ideas.**

I think he was a philosopher of mind and a psychologist. I think a tremendous amount of what he says has to be discarded.

**But that's true of Aristotle and Kant.**

Exactly. A very important core of what he says is true and insightful, and threatening. There are psychologists who study the unconscious now who are very careful to say "this is not Freud's unconscious. There is unconscious mentation, and I'm studying unconscious mentation, but it is not Freud's unconscious mentation." Well, I often think, if Freud were alive today, Freud's unconscious mentation would not be what he was talking about in the early twentieth century because he continually changed his mind and learned new things. But you never would have been able to do the research you've

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done on unconscious mentation if there hadn't been Freud. It's like saying, "Oh, I'm a geneticist, but this isn't *Mendel's* genetics." Nobody says that.

**There's an example of yours in "Beyond Price" that you use to illustrate the phenomenon of love: loving a dog. Which of course seems counterintuitive, because your love is supposed to both be a response to Kantian personhood, which dogs do not have, I'm assuming. You say, "My feelings for my late poodle were a response to the experience of seeing someone there in his eyes."**

Part of the evolutionary domestication of dogs - and I do believe that animal ethologists think this - part of dogs' evolutionary adaptation to domestication was the ability to simulate personhood in their eyes and in many of their behaviors. That's why they are so easily welcomed into the human family. Because they evolved to look like there's someone there. That's why so many dog owners say, "Oh my dog is a person." That's what dog-lovers say all the time.

**You've used that as an example, but would you say that you loved your dog in the way that you love your children or was it a simulacrum?**

It was a simulacrum. He fooled me.

**But if he fooled you didn't that mean that you genuinely loved him?**

I did. When he died, I was a basket case. You know there are psychotherapists who now specialize in therapy for people who are mourning pets. It sounds silly.

**Only to someone who hasn't had pets.**

Exactly, and I would say in particular to someone who hasn't had a dog. I have had many cats and I never felt this way about a cat. But, I really did fall apart when my dog died. I didn't need therapy, but I was a basket case!

**I'm going to bring up another critic of your view. I'm sorry to keep doing this. But in a more recent article (Benjamin Bagley, "Loving Someone in Particular," *Ethics* 125 [1], 2015), Bagley's version of love is like improvising. He has a section talking about your view. He says that, "Beloveds are incomparable," as you say, "but only up to a point." And his example is drawn from *Wuthering Heights*. Cathy can't switch love from Linton to Heathcliff. She literally can't and it's because Heathcliff is irreplaceable in his particularity. Do you take that as something you can accommodate or as a genuine criticism of your view?**

I've read *Wuthering Heights*, but it was a long time ago. I'd have to re-read it. I didn't like it.

**Me neither.**

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I think that the objects of love are irreplaceable, but that's all part of the story of ends in themselves, that are not to be paired. If what he means is, he can't be replaced in her life; he can't take the role of the other, that's probably true. But I don't know what it means to be replaced in the emotion. To be replaced as the object of the emotion. I don't know what that means.

**Where I think your idea seems most intuitive, as we keep saying, is love of one's children. We say to our children, and I believe it to be true, that we love each of them distinctively, but each of them identically.**

Yes and no. Each of them identically in the sense that we love each of them in a way that prevents us from even making that comparison. We love them identically, singularly, in that we are loath to talk about, to think about, the emotion forbids that comparison. But forbids that comparison for each of them.

**Here's a question for you. One of the things critics hammer at you for is not really accounting for why it is that some people evoke the response of love. Because as you say, respect is required of us for everybody. Love is on the same sort of continuum. Respect is the required minimum and love is the optional maximum. But love seems to come upon us without us choosing it. You say, why don't we love everybody? Do you know the *Flight of the Conchords*? They have a song called "A Kiss is Not a Contract." They play complete losers who nobody would love, so this is a sort of parody of them imagining that everybody loves them and they're talking to all these groupies that are trying to get with them, saying "we can't go round loving everybody. We wouldn't get anything done." Which reminds me a little bit of what you say, we can't be vulnerable to everybody. But, suppose we keep having children. We already love the first child. Then we have a new child and we have to be as emotionally vulnerable to them as to the first child. Suppose we have ten children. At what point do we run out of vulnerability to give?**

That's an empirical question to which I don't know the answer and I'm sure it varies. I do know someone who is one of eleven children. She does not thank her parents for that. In fact, at one stage in her philosophical career, she was an anti-natalist. She went to the opposite extreme. She is no longer in that position, but she definitely believes that one should limit one's fertility before one reaches eleven children. She has very interesting things to say about why that is so. I don't know whether you can really love all of eleven children.

**This is a generalization that is likely to be false, but I'm going to make it. Everybody who has children says, "well you don't understand what it is to have children until you have children, and then, BAM, it hits you: you love your child." By your account, it seems entirely possible through some unfortunate state of affairs, your child does not provoke that response in you.**

Yes. There is the love that you feel for the newborn. That is instinctual and it is a kind of extreme fondness and attachment. I'm very interested in the psychological phenomenon of attachment. Love and attachment often go together, but not always. There are people

“ I don't know whether you can really love all of eleven children ”

I love to whom I'm not attached in the sense that separation from them is upsetting to me.

**Well, like you said. Student and teacher can be an arm's length, loving relationship.**

Exactly. I don't miss them when they're not around. What you feel, immediately, for the newborn child is not yet the emotion I'm talking about. I have a toddler grandchild. He's one and a half. I love him. I say I love him, but I'm just head over heels, fond and attached. But frankly, he's not a person yet. He can't talk. He understands only a very few things that you say to him.

**The conversations just go nowhere!**

Exactly! My own children, while I eventually graduated from that emotional constellation to real, interpersonal love.

**So you think you do not love your children, in the sense that *you're* interested in, until they become their own distinctive persons.**

Yeah, I think that's right.

**So, you fall in love with your children.**

I think that's right. Well, first of all, I think that my view commits me to that. But, also, now that you say it, I am willing to sign on to it. I think that gradually your child defines him or herself as a person and there comes a point where, yeah, yes. By the way, for many, many years, I taught bioethics. I was a professor of bioethics at NYU... Well, I have to tell you, I taught a very, philosophical bioethics that had very little real-world content. I taught bioethics that was mainly about the harm of death, the so-called gift of life, and things like that. Which, I think you have to study before you start talking about Dr. Kevorkian... When I taught bioethics at NYU, my students didn't know who Dr. Kevorkian was and I started teaching bioethics when Dr. Kevorkian was a thing. His lawyer, Geoffrey Fieger came to U of M and spoke, and I went to hear him speak. And he was a rock star!

**Fieger still is a big deal.**

Oh yeah? Ok. My view was there's no point in talking about Dr. Kevorkian until you've thought a lot about death in the abstract.

**I find the Epicurean position very attractive but I'm not sure I want my students to be convinced of that when they're doing bioethics.**

Well, I distinctly remember doing bioethics at Michigan. I felt that when my students talked about things like assisted suicide and so on and euthanasia. They had no idea what they were talking about because death wasn't real to them. They were still at the age when the brain is not sufficiently developed to take proper precautions; when

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people still do crazy things, crazy, dangerous things because they feel immortal. They would spout off about this and that. And I would say, this is a mistake, you're too young to study this subject. You have to study it once you've come to a point where death is real to you.

**Reading *On Being Me* (Princeton University Press, 2020), I got the impression that these questions were becoming more and more real to you.**

Absolutely.

**I find myself almost obsessing on those kinds of issues. I try to be interested in other issues in philosophy, but personhood and death and autonomy, are the issues that sort of suck you back with the force of gravity.**

Exactly. Personhood and autonomy have also been the issues that organize my philosophical life. Death not so much. Although, I did have a health problem at a fairly young age, when death did become real.

**Here's another one of your books, *Foundations for Moral Relativism* (Expanded 2nd Edition, Open Book Publishers, 2015). It seems odd for someone so influenced by Kant to be talking about Relativism. Would you like to say why it isn't?**

Well, what I say in that book on relativism, is that morality is a feature of a shared way of life. And, ways of life are not all on a par because some ways of life do better than others at the function that shared ways of life serve for us. But, it's quite likely that there are ties; that there are very different ways of life that are just as good as other and that differ on moral questions. Finally, I also say, in the paper called "Sociality and Solitude," I argue that there are features of the structure of personhood that exert a kind of pressure in the development of shared ways of life in directions that we recognize as moral, and that I think that Kant and Aristotle and Mill would recognize as moral. It has to do with the fact that a way of life has to be shared, it has to be shareable, in order to do what it does, which is make living together with other people possible, given the difficulties of radical interpretation and the way practical reason works. There are these equilibria, abstract equilibria, which are shareable ways of life. Given certain fixed points in human nature, those equilibria are limited in certain ways and so ways of life tend to evolve in ways that we recognize as moral progress.

**Or they don't survive.**

Exactly. They don't survive or features of them don't survive in the sense that they borrow from other ways of life to which they look and say, "Their life makes a whole lot more sense than ours. That's a much more workable way to live." We see that happening in the world today. Polygamy is on the way out. The traditional treatment of women in Islam - that's on the way out, in Saudi Arabia at least. Why? That's in part because of the shrinking of the world. They've got to live with the rest of the world now. Communities aren't as small as they used to be, so you've got to live with everyone else in the world.

“ A way of life has to be shared, it has to be shareable, in order to do what it does, which is make living together with other people possible, given the difficulties of radical interpretation and the way practical reason works. There are these equilibria, abstract equilibria, which are shareable ways of life. Given certain fixed points in human nature, those equilibria are limited in certain ways and so ways of life tend to evolve in ways that we recognize as moral progress ”

J.David Velleman

There's a reason why they are adopting, they are very gradually - all too gradually - evolving in our direction, rather than we are evolving in theirs.

**At least on that axis. We could certainly learn from more hierarchical cultures about treatments of strangers in the desert.**

Absolutely. And maybe we will.

**Currently, I don't think many cultures are learning anything of value from the US.**

We have nothing to teach other countries.

**Well, we do, but not in the way I would want.**

We are a cautionary tale.

**I feel like the modern world is sucking the life out of me. It's making me anxious. Making me sleepless. It's not the pandemic. I think the pandemic suited me.**

I find it very calming. The future is completely unpredictable. You can't plan for the future or worry about many future things because there's no knowing what kind of world it's going to be when we come out of the pandemic. So time has sort of contracted, and I feel I'm living in the moment. I've always wanted to live in the moment.

**Well, I don't know that you should given what you say about Frankfurt's caring about certain things giving structure to one's life.**

Yes, yes, yes. But it is pleasant to live in the moment. At least in the moment that I've got in the apartment that I'm living in.

**Have you ever looked into Korsakoff Syndrome? Clive Wearing is the name of the famous guy whose memory doesn't extend more than 30 seconds.**

Well, you have to think about that if you do personal identity, so I've thought about it a little bit.

**Do you think that would be a little too much living in the moment?**

Yes. That's a little too much because, although I can't really think about the future, one of the things I can do is reflect on the past, and I have lived such a very fortunate life, such an unbelievably fortunate life. I have been so lucky at every single point. So sitting around remembering my life is great. It's wonderful. I love it. Not having to worry about the future because I can't imagine what it's going to be like, that's nice too.

**I usually ask one more question. Which is "how do you see the role of philosophy in the world?" But to a certain extent you've said something about that in that you believe it should be taught. A lot of the things you do are very much engaging with**

“ Time has sort of contracted, and I feel I'm living in the moment. I've always wanted to live in the moment ”

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**the world, attempting to reach out from academia to the world. With *On Being Me* in particular and the fact that you make all your work available even pirated copies.**

So, I should tell you that with someone named David Johnson, who is a lapsed philosopher who went into journalism after philosophy, I am starting a magazine. It's going to be a magazine of public philosophy in a difference sense from the sense in which that phrase is understood. It is going to be a magazine that aims to publish articles like the ones I was talking about, that you can't publish anymore. Like "What is it Like to be a Bat" (Thomas Nagel, originally 1974, collected in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, 1979) and some of Frankfurt's papers. Frankfurt's "Freedom of the Will and The Concept of a Person" (originally 1971, collected in *The importance of what we care about*). Some of Bernard Williams' papers. Although, some people say Williams was a great writer, but I don't think so.

**No. I find Bernard Williams very gnomic. I was talking to Susan Wolf about this, she loves reading Williams, but she loves reading Henry James and I wouldn't wish that on my enemies.**

I hate Henry James. I love Williams James. Henry James couldn't write. I always say the writing talent went to the philosopher not the novelist.

**When I was in graduate school, I imagined setting up an agency where a philosopher could call you up, describe what they were trying to write and you would give them the perfect example for them to use. Every philosophy paper needs the drowning wife or the Mary in the black and white room, and so few of them have it.**

Yes. This magazine is going to publish original, serious, substantive philosophy, not just op-ed essays, but written in a way that the intellectually curious reader can understand.

**Are you going to ban footnotes?**

We're not going to ban them, but we're certainly not going to like them. References to the philosophical literature will simply be of no interest. Unless, they're references to the kinds of things that you recommend to your non-philosopher friends. When people ask me, "I never studied philosophy. What do you think I should read?" I tell them, read Tom Nagel's *Mortal Questions*.

**I must say, I agree with you and that book is sort of the paradigm. David Lewis wrote somewhere he wanted to be a philosopher like that. Someone who dabbled in this and dabbled in that and he said "Against my wishes I became a systematic philosopher."**

Exactly. He wrote things that you could recommend to that friend.

**Oh yes. On free will.**

His paper on time travel is a great read. We want to publish that kind of thing, so footnotes referring to that, the kinds of things that I recommended at the end of *On*

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*Being Me*, those are fine. But recommendations to read things that are impenetrable to the non-philosopher, no.