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Précis of *Love, Subjectivity, and Truth: Existential Themes in Proust*

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How does love—personal, particularised, preferential love—figure into our moral lives? Much of contemporary ethics still takes its lead from Kant, who encourages a distrust of love and other emotions; and even those who find their inspiration rather in Nietzsche, for instance, must come to terms with such late remarks as "Love is the state in which man sees things most widely different from what they are. The force of illusion reaches its zenith here" (2000, §23). We celebrate love and sing its praises, we build our lives around it, and yet we sometimes distrust its influence on us—especially on our way of seeing and feeling about others. This is true of human existence in general, and it also shows up in our philosophical explanations.

A different line of thought has been introduced by Martha C. Nussbaum, who contends, polemically—most notably in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990)—that it would be a good thing for contemporary philosophers to write in a way that eschews excessive or needless abstraction, and to learn a lesson from literary authors. In other words, they ought to learn how to do justice to the complexities of particular situations—and this, as she points out, will involve taking love and other emotions seriously.[1] (I say "love and other emotions" since I view love as an emotional feeling in its own right which also gives rise to other feelings: jealousy, for instance, would be unintelligible without a basis in love or care; but love could not arise from jealousy. Love is the more fundamental emotion.) So a nuanced literary narrative might provide us with more insight than an abstract, *impersonal* argument.

It is very much in the spirit of Nussbaum's polemic that I have written *Love, Subjectivity, and Truth*, and taken the remarkable fiction of Marcel Proust as my focus. The question I ask of his vast text, *In Search of Lost Time*,[2] is whether love is a distorted way of seeing the world, or if it might actually enable us to see clearly, leading to trustworthy emotions.[3] Relentlessly, and in many forms, this question continues to perplex Proust's philosophically-inclined narrator. So it is not an imposition on this text to view it in light of what it may show about love's knowledge; how we interpret this novel will have significant implications for the philosophy of emotions.

"*La vérité subjective*,"[4] a phrase used in Proust's novel, is rich with philosophical connotations. Insofar as it includes the conveyance and analysis of experience, the novel is capable not only of exploring existential issues but also of doing something like phenomenology. Kundera (2000), who points out that "all the great

1. See, especially, pages 40–42.
2. *À la recherche du temps perdu* has also been translated as *Remembrance of Things Past*, a less accurate title but one that has Shakespearean resonance (see Sonnet 30).
3. That "love's vision" can provide us with insight is a major thesis, eloquently and convincingly defended, of Troy Jollimore's book *Love's Vision* (2011).
4. I have consulted Proust 1987 (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, edited by Jean-Yves Tadié et al.) throughout this précis.

existential themes" examined for instance by Heidegger are "unveiled, displayed, illuminated" in literary fiction (5), remarks as well that we find "superb 'phenomenological descriptions' in Proust" (32). His multi-volume novel is especially interested in the intermittencies of the heart, in what we come to know about others through love—and in our affective experience generally, from emotions such as jealousy to emotional dispositions such as anxious expectancy. "The search for lost time," as Ricoeur (1985, 139–40) has written, deals in particular with love, and coincides "with the search for truth," most notably the truth about love and subjectivity. That is why Proust's narrative dwells so much on *impressions*, and according to Kristeva (1993) also "blurs the boundaries of the felt and the thought," in addition to blurring the boundary between reporting about, and reflecting upon, experience (80–82).[5]

For this reason, *In Search of Lost Time* is often considered to be *the* novel of ideas *par excellence*.[6] That name is well merited for its detailed evocations of things that are concretely perceived, no less than for its theoretical speculations about the human condition. My approach is guided by the belief that what Proust's narrator tries to understand philosophically arises from his life,[7] and is inseparably bound up with it. To recount that life story, he meanders through first-person memories of what he has experienced and contemplates the meaning of it all. I will claim that Proust's work has something to teach us about the topics of love, subjectivity, and truth, if we as readers are willing to immerse ourselves completely in the texture of his incomparable prose narrative. And my intent is for *this* book to be not merely compatible, but continuous, with my (other) written work about emotion, literature, and existential thought.

What we know is shaped by our way of knowing, just as the properties of visible, coloured objects are determined by the wavelengths of light our eyes can see. Nowhere does the subjective basis of our awareness appear so evident as it does when we view things through loving eyes. In what he portrays as a Buddhist moment, Nietzsche goes so far as to assert that "love is the state in which man [*sic*] sees things most widely different from what they are. The force of illusion reaches its zenith here" (2000, §23).[8] In Proust's novel we find similar declarations made time and time again. However, we also observe counter-currents repeatedly arising, in which love and related emotions are both shown and said to provide a unique type of insight. At these times, love seems to be a prerequisite of veridical apprehension.

So which is it? What I hope to offer is an investigation of this question as it is played out in its various permutations throughout *In Search of Lost Time*. After the first two chapters introduce our major themes and ease us into the contours of the Proustian universe, my third and longest chapter delves into the reasons given by Proust's narrator for being sceptical about what love is capable of revealing, alongside the opposed reasons for overcoming this scepticism. After arguing for how the latter could be viewed as carrying greater weight, I conclude by considering why it is that even a flawed subjectivity can have a large role in acquainting us with particular truths about human existence; then, I clarify the concept of love-based personal identity that Proust's novel ultimately endorses, an ideal of "real life" and "felt truth" that we can affirm through the courage of our emotions. The affective constitution of the world may, therefore, legitimately be viewed through something other than a sceptical eye.

5. As we shall see, the tension between reports and reflections is frequently significant.
6. See, e.g., Weitz 1963, 78, 87; Large 1993, 613–14. See also Landy 2022.
7. The narrator's life, that is, which is not identical with that of Proust. On how we can be moved by the lives of fictional characters, see Cohen 2008, 36–37.
8. In the same section, he praises Buddhism for being "a hundred times colder, more truthful, more objective" than the religion of love, Christianity. Yet this is not Nietzsche's final word.

This reading of Proust must reckon with the numerous motivations for scepticism about love that are rehearsed throughout *In Search of Lost Time*. As I categorise and evaluate these motives, I am attentive at once to the inference that, "if there is but one true world, there can be but one vision of truth", implying that a finite standpoint is untrustworthy (Rawlinson 1982, 1),[9] and to the narrator's habit of denying the antecedent and embracing a plurality of truthful perspectives. From this side, what qualifies as objectively real for us is related to our affective vantage point,[10] delimited by our interests, passions, and concerns.

Readers who care about love and the meaning of life are invited to enter the pages that follow. Those who are not—yet—admirers of Proust are every bit as welcome as those who already are. This book is aimed first and foremost at a literary and philosophical audience, most of all at everyone who is in some way invested in both philosophy and literature. Furthermore, I hope this book will reach researchers into the psychology of emotions, in particular those readers who can appreciate why it is that "a person's interpretations of feelings and events are as fundamental to psychology as genes are to biology" (Kagan 2012, 248).[11] and how one author's writing can clarify human existence for others. Into their hands I commend the spirit of this inquiry.

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9. On Proust's status as a philosopher, see Robert 2021, 21–28.

10. See, e.g., Poellner 2001, especially 98–99.

11. On the same page, he observes that "the neuroscientist's concept of fear . . . does not capture the meaning" of, for example, a person's "fear that he had wasted his life." Regarding the pertinence of literature to psychology as a human science, see also Oatley 1992, 122–26.

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