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Stee, M.J. van

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Author: Stee, M.J. van

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5

Understanding Existential Self-Understanding

Human beings are often not entirely at peace with themselves. Deidre, for example, experiences restlessness concerning her career in mathematics and her attraction to philosophy. Sometimes people experience profound dissatisfaction, as Bob does, who spends his days in frustration and anger. They may even experience outright alienation. Anna wonders what it all is for: why go to work every day? Why stay with her husband of many years? In these cases, as well as in the cases of Clemens and Edward, the dissatisfaction has to do with people they have tied up their identity with and pursuits they have invested themselves in. That is to say, their existential misgivings have to do with the people and pursuits that are of utmost importance to them. Maybe they simply experience frustration, as Bob does. Yet they may also reflect on their situation and wonder what to do about it. Should Anna leave? Should she somehow change perspective on her life?

I aim to understand existential self-understanding. Existential self-understanding is an aspect of the human condition that is at play in the situations Anna and the others are in. In this study, I approach 'existential selfhood' and 'existential self-understanding' in a bottom-up fashion, if you will. Instead of defining them at the outset, I investigate the contributions cognitive neuroscience and philosophy have to make to our understanding of existential self-understanding. In the previous chapters, we have seen how different the contributions are that both academic disciplines can make. Cognitive neuroscience (CNS) investigates the neural activity that correlates with behavior and experiences. It thereby provides insight into the enabling conditions underlying lived experience, but not into the reasons why we behave as we do, as explained in the previous chapter. The philosophers discussed in chapter 3 aim to elucidate lived experience. They analyze structural characteristics of various existential experiences, behaviors and problems. They unearth assumptions underlying ways of talking about the existential aspect of the human condition and critically scrutinize such assumptions too. They also analyze and develop views of the good life, of how we should deal with the existential issues life confronts us with. Yet the philosophers that look into the existential aspect of selfhood have done so with aims in mind that are different from mine. Often, their normative ambitions get in the way of getting the phenomena in full

view. As a result, they do not elucidate the existential phenomena that are key here, or do so only partially.

In this chapter, I draw lessons from the previous chapters regarding the existential aspect of the human condition, in light of the cases of Anna, Bob, Clemens, Deidre and Edward. I develop a philosophical anthropological view of existential selfhood and existential self-understanding and draw on empirical research where that seems appropriate. Mostly, I synthesize the different strands of thought on existential selfhood that I discussed in chapter 3 and try to improve on them and add to them where necessary. One recurrent question is in what ways the shaping of existential selfhood happens to us and how we are nevertheless implicated in it too. Harry Frankfurt's ideas about love emphasize that we cannot help but be who we are, existentially speaking. Charles Taylor and particularly Søren Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus accentuate that we are actively involved in the constitution of ourselves. From the perspective of the first approach, the idea that we constitute ourselves may make the self seem too fickle, i.e. too changeable to form the basis of our identities. From the perspective of the second approach, on the other hand, the worry rises that if self-constitution were not up to us, this would surrender the self to the people and pursuits it is attached to, not doing justice to the measure of independence that is implied in the notion of selfhood. When we look at Anna, Bob, Clemens, Deidre and Edward, we clearly see that they have to deal with an existential situation that is in important ways not of their doing, yet that they still can do something about.

I shall argue that existential selfhood is formed by the relations in which people stand to what is of fundamental, personal importance to them. These relations are characterized by the affective-volitional stance people hold towards what is of fundamental importance to them, as well as by the cognitive understanding they hold of these relations. The affective-volitional stance (as witnessed in people's actions and emotions) and the understanding people hold of it form a constant loop, such that being oneself is always a matter of becoming oneself.

I unpack these ideas one by one. First I explicate what I mean by 'fundamental personal importance'. Then I address 'relations' and their affective-volitional quality. For both, I make clear how I draw on Frankfurt's work, yet deviate from his views too. Subsequently, I discuss the cognitive dimension that is added to the relations through self-reflection and the constant loop it forms with the affective-volitional relations it forms an understanding of. Both Taylor and Kierkegaard are my discussion partners here. Finally, I draw conclusions. By explicating structural characteristics of the existential aspect of the human condition, I in effect elucidate the questions that are structurally at stake in existential situations. Bringing these questions into clearer view is valuable in its own right, as it clarifies the questions we (including Anna and the

others) may ask ourselves when faced with existential situations that need resolving. It is also relevant as preparatory work for the development of normative views on how we should lead good human existences, and optionally, as preparatory work for front-loading phenomenology into CNS research design.

1. 'Fundamental, personal importance'

Bob is attached to his dog, but his behavior towards the dog is highly ambivalent. The people who are of utmost importance to Clemens have died. Edward allows his professional commitment to overrule any other interest he might have. Bob's dog, Clemens' wife and children, Edward's profession as a butler: these are the people and pursuits that are fundamentally, personally significant to Bob, Clemens and Edward. This shows itself in their actions and experiences, including the problems they experience. Most of Edward's daily *actions* are in accordance with the demands of his profession as a butler. The frustration and anger that Bob *experiences* throughout the day are tied up entirely with his dog. Clemens' identity *crisis* would not have arisen, were it not for the fact that the people who are most important to him are dead. In general, what is existentially important to people provides them with important motivations for action. The fortunes and misfortunes of important people and projects do not leave them cold: they cannot help but be emotionally affected by them. What is more, that these people and projects matter so much also means that when relations to them are for some reason troubled, existential unease is bound to arise. Vice versa, having important people and projects in their lives and having good relations with them, contributes to giving people a sense of meaningfulness.

Existential importance is inherently personal. Food and water are important too of course. When they lack, we are motivated to pursue them, and until we find them, all our experiences may be characterized by a type of cranky restlessness. Yet, where food and water are concerned, this is the same for all of us. In contrast, what is of existential importance to us is different from person to person. It individuates us into different selves. Clemens' identity is thoroughly shaken by losing his wife and children, and he grieves them intensely. The chef of the supermarket at which the family regularly shopped is unlikely to experience an identity crisis after their deaths, however. She may feel very sorry for the family, but to her, they were likely just members of a large group of customers. Personal importance is 'rigidly focused', to use Harry Frankfurt's terminology. It concerns this particular person, not any person of a certain class, say of customers. And people focus rigidly on different people and different pursuits. In this

sense, the set of people and pursuits that are existentially significant to them individuates them.

Existential importance is a gradual notion. Several people and pursuits can be important to us, yet there are bound to be differences as to how important they are to us exactly. Even if we are affected by the fortunes and misfortunes of various people, we may find that the fate of person A affects us deeply, whereas upon hearing what happened to person B, we quickly move on. Likewise, we are immediately inclined to help person A, even though we were planning to spend that time on a project that is also important to us. Whereas when it comes to person B, we prioritize our project instead, hoping that somebody else will help B out. Importance is a gradual notion and it may not be possible to come up with a clear cut-off point.

Naturally, there are differences between fundamentally important people and fundamentally important pursuits. Developmentally speaking, crucially important people are present from the beginning of our lives, whereas projects are not. Also, people talk back, act back, have their own experiences. They are agents themselves, and are thus actively involved in the relation in which we stand to them. Projects, professions and other pursuits that are utterly important to us, on the other hand, depend on our agency for their existence.

It is to a large extent not up to us to decide who and what is thus important to us. Here we thus confront a structural characteristic of existential selfhood that is not ours to establish. We discover what is crucially important to us, more than we decide it. Of course, we can seek out circumstances that make it likely that we start finding someone or something important: we can sign up for a dating site, get a dog, sign up for an intensive ceramics course and day dream about owning a little shop where we sell personally designed, handmade earthenware. Yet, it may turn out that we do not much take to the dog. It may turn out that we find turntables much harder to handle than we had anticipated, and pottery frightfully boring. We can never determine at will to be attracted to, let alone fall in love with a particular individual. Similarly, we cannot stop finding particular people and projects important at will. The marriage may be over, but that does not mean that we are no longer attached to our former partner. For better or worse, we are still affected by how they are doing. Certain people are with us for life in this respect, it seems, even when they die. We remain attached and our relation to them remains constitutive for who we are. In short, we cannot decide at will who and what is of such importance that our existential identities are shaped by them.

Up until here, Harry Frankfurt and I largely agree; I draw on his work. Frankfurt speaks of 'love' though, whereas I prefer to steer clear of that term, using 'fundamental, personal importance' instead. Frankfurt thinks through an idealized version of love, for example

when he emphasizes its non-instrumentality. As I noted in chapter 3, Frankfurt has two aims with his work that are sometimes in tension with one another. On the one hand, he wishes to convince practical philosophers of the relevance of ‘what we love’ to theories of practical reasoning (1999b, x). In all likelihood, they are more easily convinced that love can provide us with legitimate reasons for action if love is treated as an ideal and if love is more closely associated with stable volitional tendencies than with loving feelings that may prove unreliable. On the other hand, Frankfurt aims “to consider the structure and constitution of the self” in such a way that it “pertains [...] to our experience of ourselves and to the problems that concern us with the greatest urgency” (1988, viii). This aim, of a more phenomenological than normative bend, if you will, aligns with mine. I aim to elucidate the structural characteristics present in existential experiences, actions and problems. Idealized notions of what love should be like do not serve my purposes, quite the contrary. I choose not to use the term ‘love’ as it carries so many positive connotations. Self-constituting relations to important people may not be all that positive, however.

2. ‘Relations’: affective-volitional

Existential selfhood is formed by the relations in which people stand to what is of fundamental importance to them. When people or pursuits are important to us, a relation between us and them is in place: we are affected by their fortunes and are motivated to act so as to influence their lot. The actual character of our emotions and actions with respect to them depends on the character of the relation, however. I maintain that relations are affective-volitional entities. That is to say, they are characterized both by the feelings someone holds to what is important to her as well as by what she is motivated to do with regard to the other. In yet other words, it involves the particularities of her emotional life as well as of her practical identity.

Affect and volition are inextricably entwined. Bob’s relationship with his dog is troubled. Bob’s existential identity is constituted by his relation to his dog, and is thereby equally troubled as that relation, especially given that Bob has no other important beings or projects in his life. His emotional life is a whirlwind: when the dog is still there, he is often angry at it; when the dog disappears, he is crying in his room, utterly distraught. Bob’s practical identity is characterized by ambivalence: he walks the dog devotedly, but kicks the dog and yells at him during these walks. When the dog has disappeared, he does not know whether to go look for him or not. It is exactly at those moments that Bob is infuriated with the dog (affect) that he wishes him ill and kicks him (volition and

its practical consequences). When he feels sad because he misses the dog (affect), he vouches to search for it after all (volition). Structurally speaking, affect and volition are intertwined in the way they constitute the existential aspect of the human condition.

Although I build on Frankfurt's important work, here I clearly depart from him. As I explained in chapter 3, Frankfurt conceptualizes the relation between love and selfhood in terms of identification. When he describes how "a lover *identifies himself* with what he loves" he states that "[t]he interests of his beloved are not actually *other* than his at all. They are his interests too." And a bit later: "its interests are identical with his own" (2004, 61–62, his italics). Furthermore, Frankfurt treats loving as a volitional matter first and foremost, writing that it consists in a practical concern "for the existence and the good of what is loved" (2006, 40). He also writes that "enthusiasms are not essential. Nor is it essential that a person likes what he loves. [...] the heart of the matter is neither affective nor cognitive. It is volitional" (2004, 42, 1999a, 129, 1999c, 161). I, on the other hand, think that existential selfhood is formed by the *relations* in which people stand to significant others instead of by identification with them and their interests. What is more, I think these relations are best characterized as *affective-volitional*.

Let us take another look at Bob and his dog. The dog is the most important creature in Bob's life. Yet Bob does not include the dog's interests amongst his own, or at least not unambiguously so. The dog's wellbeing may be supported by Bob walking his dog, it is most definitely also hurt by him kicking his dog. There appears to be more distance between Bob and the dog, particularly between Bob's interests and the dog's interests, than Frankfurt's 'identification' can account for. 'Relations' is supposed to capture this distance. It provides the locus where various types of ambiguity and the resulting modifications in existential selfhood take hold. If Bob stands in a love-hate relationship to his dog, then his affective experiences regarding the dog are bound to involve love and hate. Bob's actions are clearly characterized by ambivalence too. His selfhood is formed by the love-hate for the dog, not by an identification with the dog's interests. (For alternative readings of Bob's situation and rebuttals, see Van Stee (2015a).)

To put it even more extremely, also people we absolutely hate are important to us. Their fate does not leave us cold, albeit that in such a case we may rejoice when they fail. We are automatically motivated to act in order to have an impact on them too, albeit to their detriment. That is to say, ambivalent relations and straight-out negative relations to people also form the existential part of ourselves. Frankfurt's identification account cannot accommodate such formative influences on our selfhood. A view focusing on relationality can. The examples also demonstrate that we need to take both affect and volition into account when aiming to describe the structural ways in which our selves are shaped. Enthusiasms for important people and pursuits may not be essential for them to have a formative influence on who we are. Yet depending on

whether we are enthusiastic about them or not, the character of that influence is bound to be different.

Hatred and love-hate may be rather extreme examples, but everyday loving relations are generally more ambivalent than the idealized version of love that Frankfurt describes. If we want to elucidate how everyday relationships influence who we are, there needs to be a locus for ambiguities to take hold. What is more, I would argue that even perfectly pure loving versions of relationships and their effects on our identities are better understood through an affective-volitional account rather than a volitional account. After all, Frankfurt writes that a lover thrives or suffers depending on whether his beloved thrives or suffers. It is hard to understand this impact on the emotional wellbeing of the lover in volitional terms only.

Finally, a view in terms of affective-volitional relations is better able than an identification view to elucidate the main phenomenon at stake here: the inchoate dissatisfaction with and outright alienation from oneself and one's life that Anna, Bob, Clemens, Deidre and Edward to a greater or lesser extent experience. Deidre has set up her life according to a commitment to mathematics; through her actions she furthers the progress of mathematics. That is to say, in Frankfurt's terms, Deidre appears to love mathematics as she consistently acts out of a concern for mathematics. Yet her heart is no longer in it. Her existential unease cannot be captured, let alone elucidated, without taking this loss of positive affect regarding mathematics into account.

Inherent to the term 'relation' is the idea that it is something between two entities. We relate ourselves to others who are fundamentally important to us. Exactly because they are so important to us, it matters to us who they are, existentially speaking and otherwise. Crucially, it matters to us what they think of us, whether we matter to them and what their affective-volitional relation to us is. That is to say, our significant others have an influence on the relation in which we stand to them. In contrast, Frankfurt does not take the beloved and the beloved's relation to the lover into account when describing what loving is or should be. When beloveds are young, helpless infants, Frankfurt's favorite example (2004, 43), this may make some sense. Yet insofar as friends, family members, partners and other beloveds are autonomous beings, it seems strange not to take their behavior into account when determining our own stance towards them (cf. Ebels-Duggan 2008). That is to say, Frankfurt's view does not seem to capture the phenomena accurately: how our significant others relate to us has an impact on how we relate to them. A relation view is able to accommodate this, and the affective-volitional ambiguities it may entail.

The relation in which our significant others stand to us may be very different, in its affective-volitional character, than the relation in which we stand to them. There is not one relation between us and them, but two: one relation from them to us,

constituting them; and another relation from us to them, constituting us. They may be incredibly important to us and we may love them wholeheartedly, whereas we are not quite as important to them, and their relation to us is more ambiguous, involving boredom, for example. Or there may be one relation present only, as when fans adore a pop star or writer and paper their bedrooms with posters or buy all their books, watch all the videos that can possibly be found of them online, day dream about meetings with them and feel happy while daydreaming —without the adored pop star or writer even knowing of their existence.

In sum then, existential selfhood is structurally characterized by affective-volitional relations to people and projects of fundamental, personal importance. These relations capture the distance that remains between us and even our most beloved others. Although we may not be able to decide at will to start or stop loving someone, we have some influence over the relation in which we stand to them. Compared to Frankfurt's account, this relational view is better able to accommodate our significant others' influence on our emotional lives, the ambiguities present in everyday loving relationships and the intersubjectivity of love. What is more, the relation account brings into view a ubiquitous practical problem: how should we relate to the people that are existentially important to us? We question the self-constituting relations into which we stand to our significant others. It is through replacing Frankfurt's 'identification' with my 'relation' that integration with some of the insights we may learn from Charles Taylor and Søren Kierkegaard becomes possible.

3. 'Relations': reflexivity and the loops that we are

Harry Frankfurt emphasizes how we are shaped by what we love, which is to a large extent not up to us. In contrast, Søren Kierkegaard, particularly his pseudonym Anti-Climacus, emphasizes how we constitute ourselves by taking a step back from our automatic ways and consciously relate to who we are. Narrativists such as Charles Taylor emphasize how our narrative self-understanding shapes us. Meanwhile, empirical disciplines such as cognitive neuroscience and psychology remind us how much of our behavior happens on auto-pilot, so to speak. The situations in which people stop doing so for a moment and reflect on themselves are often situations when there is something at stake: when their actions or emotional reactions surprise them, when their existential identity is no longer self-evident, when important decisions have to be made, or when persistent feelings of dissatisfaction lead them to question what is truly important to them. Through reflection, people form an explicit understanding of themselves in terms

of what matters most to them and how they relate to what matters most. What does such self-reflection involve?

First of all, people interpret their actions and experiences and formulate a piece of self-understanding that has cognitive content. They form an understanding of the relations that shape them. They conclude that someone is more important to them than they would have thought. Or they realize that their relationship to them is not as straightforward as they may have thought. They thus establish something about the particular existential selves that they are. The persistent dissatisfaction that they experience becomes a little less inchoate as they form an understanding of it.

People scrutinize their behavior and experiences to see what these may have to tell them about who they are and in what direction they are becoming. In turn, the understanding they thus form influences their behavior and experiences, which is to say, their selves. ‘Why do I act like I do?’ we can imagine Bob asking himself. ‘Why do I react like I do to my dog in the ways that I do; why, for example, do I experience such flaming anger at my dog so often?’ It matters immensely whether Bob formulates an answer along the lines of ‘because my dog is an unruly mongrel’ or ‘because I have a tendency to pick fights with whomever is close to me. I did the same with my wife when she was still alive.’ Self-understanding’s cognitive content thus has important consequences for the affective-volitional relations it reflects on. If he decides that the dog is the problem, Bob is bound to dislike the dog even more and may decide to get rid of his dog. Alternatively, if he thinks the issue lies with himself, he is bound to empathize more with the dog from now on and seek to improve his own behavior. To be clear, I do not argue that one or the other option is better, but only wish to point out structural characteristics of these phenomena: when people form an understanding of the existential aspect of their selves, this changes their selves, as it changes the relations in which they stand to their significant others.

As another example, say we stand in an unproblematic, loving relation to our father. Yet somehow we become convinced that our relation to him is much more ambiguous. Maybe we read that grown-up children always need to break away from the dominating presence of their fathers and that they experience resentment for never being fully able to do so. Or maybe some friends of ours project their own troubles with their fathers onto our situation. In any case, when we meet our father, he asks us to help him with some little chore. Right before we almost automatically do so, we think to ourselves that we need to break away from our father’s dominating presence. Therefore we tell him that we do not want to help. Our father looks surprised and a little hurt. This makes us feel bad about refusing to help, which makes us experience resentment at our father for making us feel bad for refusing. Et voilà, our understanding of the relation in

which we stand to our father has now, like a self-fulfilling prophecy, lead to ambiguities in the relation in which we stand to our father that forms part of our existential self.

Self-understanding and selfhood form a constant loop. Both Taylor and Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus explicate how self-understanding changes selfhood. Taylor writes that insofar as people can embrace what they find themselves to be, the motivations that result from the relations in which they stand to significant others and significant projects are likely enhanced (1989, 96). People may act more easily on these motivations and gain a stronger sense of purpose through that. They may gain self-confidence as they now understand themselves better and like what they see. Vice versa, inner conflict may result when people find that they value different things that clash, or value something that they wish they would not value (1989, 107).

When what people find themselves to be is not in line with what they would like to be, their dissatisfaction with themselves gets intensified, at least at first. Anna does not admit it into so many words to herself, but she cannot stand herself for failing to experience positive connections to her husband and her work. If she starts to reflect on this, however, it is likely to intensify her dissatisfaction with herself at first. After all, Anna then has to face the disturbing fact that she currently cannot experience any love for her husband, nor for her line of work. Of course this may provide the impetus for her to try to change her situation. It need not, however, as Anti-Climacus explicates. Anna may use all her powers to deny her discovery, to others and also to herself. Anti-Climacus writes of the "interplay between knowing and willing" or what I would call the cognitive and affective-volitional dimensions to existential self-understanding. Using Anti-Climacus' words, we can see how for a while Anna tries "to keep [her]self in the dark about [her] state through diversions [...], through work and busyness as diversionary means, yet in such a way that [s]he does not entirely realize why [s]he is doing it, that is to keep [her]self in the dark" (1980 [1849], 48).

I would like to add that when people cannot embrace what they think they are, they may not just try to forget about it, but may also actively deny it through forming a different story about themselves. That is to say, besides effects of the cognitive content on the affective-volitional relations (which Taylor focuses on) and besides the reverse effect in the shape of people trying to repress cognitive content because they do not like it (which Anti-Climacus speaks of), people may also *alter* the cognitive content of their self-reflections, to be more in line with what they would like to be. That is to say, people may not just suffer from self-induced oblivion with respect to a part of themselves, they may also flat out delude themselves with respect to who they are. After all, self-reflection is an activity that involves the interpretation of your own behavior and experiences. And people come up with interpretations serving all sorts of purposes.

Edward, for example, strives to be a dignified butler. In his opinion, one of the things a dignified butler should definitely *not* do is fall in love with the housekeeper. To the readers of Edward's story, his emotional reactions to Ms. Kenton and his behavior towards her clearly signal love. Yet he interprets them time and again as indicative only of a professional relation between a butler and a housekeeper. In the short run, he manages to quiet any lingering unease he may have about not living up to his own ideals. In the long run, he lives a life that is disconnected from important personal feelings. Whether this is bad or not is not the issue here; I want to point out structural characteristics at play in existential selfhood. One of them is that the cognitive understanding we form of our relations to significant others interacts with those relations in both directions. Plus, when we do not like what we find ourselves to be, we may not just repress cognitive content, but also replace it with content that is more in line with how we wish things were.

All in all, we are implicated in our selfhood. We are not just passive victims or passive beneficiaries of the circumstances that befall us, but influence the course of our lives. Implicit in any understanding of the particularities of our selfhood is the discovery *that* we are existential selves. We discover that people and pursuits can be of utmost importance to us, and that our relations to them have an impact on how we experience things and what we are inclined to do. We also implicitly discover that we are capable of self-reflection, of distancing ourselves from what we are automatically inclined to do and experience. It is *in our power* to ponder what else could be important to us and how else we could relate to what is important to us. We discover questions to ask ourselves in this respect. At a distance from our automatic, unreflective tendencies, we can imagine that we could lead our lives differently. The question may arise whether the way we currently are relating to our lives and what is vital to us in them, is the best way, or at least good enough, at least for us, at least for now. We can make plans on how to change ourselves. We can decide to alter some of the circumstances of our lives to make it likely that we change as we envision. In sum, we discover that it is to some extent up to us to determine who we are.

When people live through existential unease, as Anna, Bob, Clemens, Deidre and Edward all do to some extent, they may decide that it is time to take action. Again, I do not argue that they should; this is not a normative argument regarding how people should deal with the existential aspect to their lives. Instead, I explicate the structure of existential unease and the corresponding ways in which it may be relieved, at least to some extent. People may try to alter something in the relations to significant people and significant pursuits and/or in the understanding that they hold of what these relations

should be like. They may attempt to bring who they are and who they would like to be more in line with each other.

To start with the latter, people can ask themselves what it is they think they would like to be and whether they actually agree that this is what they would like to be. They may decide that what they think they would like to be makes unrealistic demands on them, for example. Deidre may feel that she should be a mathematician as her entire family works 'with numbers'. Disavowing this ideal may release much existential tension and give her the space to act on what she is actually attracted to. Anna may have a sense that she should relate to husband and children in a perfectly loving way all of the time. Realizing this a rather extreme demand and replacing it with a more moderate ideal may take away some of the unease she experiences for being unable to do so at present. The particular sense people have of who they should be is unlikely to go away immediately and may never leave them entirely, especially if it has been engrained in them from early on in their lives. Yet, it does not hold the same force over them when they consciously reflect on it and reject it as a valid ideal.

Alternatively, people may tackle the relations in which they stand to their significant others, in the hope of changing the actual behavior and experiences they have. Whether at New Year's or otherwise, people vouch to change the way in which they relate to what is most important to them. People may make resolutions to become more sociable and start immediately by calling their friends and family for a chat and to make appointments for visits. People may try to talk things over with someone who is dear to them when their relationship has soured, in the hope of improving it again. People may try to contribute to gaining or losing a few significant others, by taking a dog or signing up on a dating site on the one hand and on the other hand by leaving a job or leaving a lover. Explicit reflection allows people to check where they stand with respect to becoming who they would like to be.

While Frankfurt emphasizes that we are not free to establish the outlines of our existential selfhood, Anti-Climacus emphasizes our freedom to constitute ourselves. That is to say, he acknowledges that we have not established ourselves and therefore have to deal with possibilities and limitations that are not of our own making. In light of what I just wrote, I could give the example of 'that which we think we would like to be': it often consists, at least at first, of an internalization of what our social environment holds up as exemplary, much in line with the 'goods' and 'supergoods' of which Taylor speaks that stem from our social environment. We do not choose the environment into which we are born, yet cannot escape its formative influence. This is but one of the ways in which we do not establish ourselves and that we have to deal with. Yet Anti-Climacus thinks that exactly in our dealing with ourselves, in our relating to ourselves, we are entirely free. He holds us entirely responsible to deal with ourselves in ways that are, in

his eyes, poorer or better. In light of empirical research, however, it seems that we are creatures of habit also in our ways of relating to ourselves and to others. Attachment theory posits as much and psychological research appears to back this up (Cassidy and Shaver 1999; Holmes 1993). Normative theorists may decide to take this empirical fact into account. Importantly, this requires an additional decision, to adjust one's views on how people should relate to their significant others depending on how they, on average, are able to relate to them. This decision is one that requires argument and not every normative theorist may be willing to make it. I think Anti-Climacus is unlikely to change his normative views in light of what people generally are like, deeming any possibility, however low in likelihood, enough possibility to ascribe responsibility. In terms of the phenomena, when we consider that humans are able to distance themselves from themselves, developing an understanding of themselves that influences the direction in which they develop, we may want to add: to some extent at least.

4. Questions at stake in existential self-understanding

In this study, I have chosen to approach 'existential selfhood' and 'existential self-understanding' in a bottom-up fashion. Instead of deciding at the outset how to conceive of these notions, I started with a few examples of phenomena in which they are at play. I then examined the contributions CNS literatures concerning love and self-reflection and a few representative philosophers have to make to our understanding of the existential aspect of the human condition. CNS contributes to our insight into the neural enabling conditions underlying the possibilities for finding particular people and projects fundamentally important, for relating to these significant others in various ways, and for reflecting on these self-constituting relations. Philosophers elucidate existential selfhood at the level of lived experience and articulate structural characteristics of existential phenomena. Often, they do so by relating their own analyses of those structural characteristics to those of others, unearthing assumptions embedded in other philosopher's views, building on these where possible and criticizing them where necessary. In this chapter, I aimed to do as much, synthesizing important insights by Harry Frankfurt, Charles Taylor and Søren Kierkegaard, building on the analyses and criticisms I provided of their views in chapter 3. This is not just relevant in relation to existing philosophy of existential selfhood, but first and foremost as it elucidates the phenomena: the behavior, experiences and problems that we encounter as the existential aspect of our lives and that are exemplified in the stories of Anna, Bob, Clemens, Deidre and Edward.

In brief, I argue that existential selfhood is formed by the relations in which people stand to people and projects that are of fundamental significance to them. These relations are affective-volitional in character, which is to say that there is an inextricable connection between how people feel about their significant others and how they are motivated to act towards them. As humans are able to reflect on who they are, they are able to form a cognitive understanding of the affective-volitional relations that constitute the existential aspect of themselves. This understanding may influence those relations. Yet when people do not like what they understand themselves to be, they may also repress their understanding or adapt it so that it is more in line with who they would like to be. When people have existential problems that they wish to solve, they may try to bring who they are more in line with who they would like to be. That is, they may address their relations to significant others, aiming to change the actual behavior and experiences they have. They may also scrutinize their ideas about who they would like to be, to see whether they in fact endorse them upon reflection. Whatever the result of these reflections is, it is likely to change them and these changes have therefore been influenced by themselves. Yet people also change in ways that they have little influence over, for example when their significant others change or the relationship to significant others changes due to changing circumstances. At some point, all the changes lead people to wonder anew who they are in terms of what is most important to them and how they relate to what is most important to them. And so on: the ongoing loop of selfhood.

This view on existential selfhood is indebted to views by Harry Frankfurt, Charles Taylor and Søren Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus. Particularly, I draw on Frankfurt's ideas about love and his explications of the structural connections between love and selfhood, on Taylor's views of what articulating an understanding of oneself does to selfhood and on Anti-Climacus' writings on the relations that constitute selfhood. Yet my view is different from Anti-Climacus' view, as Anti-Climacus espouses a radical conception of selfhood in which selfhood is constituted by people's relations to themselves and to God. He acknowledges that people ordinarily often think of themselves in terms of their relations to people and pursuits that are important to them, but does not think this is true selfhood and therefore does not explicate how these relations may constitute selfhood, as I do. My view is different too from Taylor's views, which revolve around values that are socio-culturally shared and therefore do not individuate people in the way that existential selfhood does. Last but not least, my view is different from Frankfurt's, who describes selfhood in terms of volition, as consisting of an acceptance of the significant other's interests amongst our own, as our own. I argue that my ideas about the *affective-volitional* relations constituting selfhood are better able to clarify the influence our significant others have on our emotional lives and to

elucidate the ambiguities that are often present in human relationships. What is more, I think a relational view does more justice to the intersubjectivity of loving and thus brings an important practical problem in view: how should we relate to our significant others? All in all then, my view on existential selfhood is a view on how various strands within existing philosophical thought may be integrated and that future philosophy of existential selfhood may build on.

As philosophical analyses often do, my analysis clarifies the questions that are at stake in existential self-understanding. I can outline them now in an order corresponding roughly to the different sections of this chapter. First, who and what is of fundamental importance to us? That is, what affects us profoundly? Where do our strongest motivations stem from? Second, how do we relate to whom and what is so important to us? That is, what are our feelings for our significant others? How do we feel about the projects we have invested some of our identity in? What are we naturally motivated to do with respect to them? And how do our significant others relate to us? Third, how does the understanding that we thus gain compare to ideas we already held about ourselves? How does it compare to our ideas about what we would like to be? In fact, what are our ideas about who we would like to be? And do we actually endorse them now that we reflect on them? Is there something we can do to our lives and ourselves to live more in line with who we would like to be? Is there something we can do in the hope of changing our significant others' way of relating to us? Finally, there is a question to be added on the basis of the previous chapter, particularly relevant in cases where we appear fundamentally, pathologically unable to relate to others or to self-reflect as we would like to. Has some enabling condition gone unmet preventing us to love or self-reflect? Is there something we can do to enable us to love and self-reflect adequately again?

The clarification of these questions may be relevant in several ways. Where it comes to CNS, these questions may be front-loaded into CNS experimental design, if neuroscientists would want to extend the range of their research to include self-reflection on the existential aspect of the self. Where it comes to philosophy, the work I do here may serve as preparatory work for the development of a normative view on existential selfhood. Philosophers who wish to develop such a view may focus on any of the above questions and have to take into account the various other structural dimensions to existential selfhood that I outline too, I would argue. Particularly, my analyses brings into light a practical question that has not received much attention so far. Susan Wolf and Harry Frankfurt have argued about who and what we should love and on what basis we should decide this (Wolf 2002; Frankfurt 2002). My analysis points to the relevance of a different question: how should we relate to the people and projects that are fundamentally important to us, that is, how should we deal with them?

Finally, the clarification of these questions may be relevant to all of us, including Anna, Bob, Clemens, Deidre and Edward, where we are interested in understanding our own existential situation better. After all, the understanding we hold of ourselves is often hazy, and existential dissatisfaction often inchoate. As I said in chapter 3, philosophy does not provide therapy for people's troubles, existential or otherwise, as it does not take people's personal circumstances into account. At the end of this chapter, we therefore do not know how Anna, Bob, Clemens, Deidre and Edward should resolve their situations. However, the questions that Anna and the others may ask themselves, or that their significant others or therapists may ask them, are hopefully clearer now than before.

Philosophy may contribute to our understanding of existential selfhood and existential self-understanding by analyzing the structural characteristics of phenomena as well as structural connections between them. In the process, they often point out phenomena that we glance over in daily life. Philosophers also unearth assumptions present in ways of thinking about existential issues and critically question these assumptions. Furthermore, philosophers may develop normative views on how to lead a good human existence. In effect, philosophy clarifies the questions that are structurally at stake in the existential aspect of the human condition. It thereby clarifies the questions that all of us may ask ourselves and each other when we wish to understand ourselves better.