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Article

The Finite Promise of Infinite Love, or What Does It Mean to Love Forever?

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Abstract: This paper offers a philosophical account of the specific form of romantic love underlying the ideal of love-based marriages. Rather than examining the institution of marriage, it considers marriage as the promise of infinite love between finite persons. Although this promise may seem irrational, even those who never formally marry still invoke phrases like ‘I love you forever’. In three steps, this paper explores what we could possibly mean by infinite love and how it can be rationally promised throughout a finite life. First, I trace the concept of infinite love back to the metaphysical discussions surrounding the emergence of the love-based marriage among German Idealists and Jena Romanticists. Next, drawing on John Searle’s speech act theory, I examine how the ideal of infinite love can be articulated as a promise. Finally, I turn to early existentialist thought—particularly the notions of passion (*Lidenskab*, *Leidenschaft*), repetition (*Gjentagelsen*, *Wiederkehr*), and the moment (*Øjeblik*, *Augenblick*) as developed by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche—to justify the meaning of the marital promise. In short, I propose that instead of interpreting the marital promise as a description of an expected reality, we should approach it as a passionate necessity that discloses the world in a fundamentally indeterminate way. By re-framing the marital promise in this light, I aim to show that marital love is compatible both with the ideal of personal autonomy and with an alternative conception of rationality and temporality.

Keywords: love; marriage; infinite; existentialism; metaphysics; passion; transcendence; Romanticism; Searle; Kierkegaard



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*Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle,
questa siepe, che da tanta parte
dell'ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude*
- Giacomo Leopardi

Introduction: Marriage Without Institution

Over the past decades, the institution of marriage has been in steady decline throughout much of the Western world. In the United States, for instance, the proportion of individuals unmarried by the age of forty is projected to reach unprecedented levels in modern history [1]. Among younger generations in particular, attitudes toward marriage appear to be shifting, with a growing preference for unmarried cohabitation over formal unions [2]. Even among those who do decide to marry, approximately half of marriages end in divorce, while the majority of the remaining half report seriously considering separation [3,4]. Statistically, stable and fulfilling lifelong marriages are becoming increasingly rare in contemporary societies.

One frequently cited explanation for the declining popularity of marriage concerns its essential condition of love. The ideal of a love-based marriage emerged only two centuries ago, while throughout much of human history, marriage was predominantly regarded as a pragmatic affair [5]. Philosophers such as Angelika Krebs [6], Aaron Ben-Ze'ev [6–8], and Pascal Bruckner [9] have argued that this shift toward love as a central pillar of marriage has rendered it simultaneously more meaningful and more fragile. If it is true, as empirical psychologists have claimed [10], that strong emotions are generated when one experiences a change in one's life, it is not immediately clear how a stable conjugal union can persistently evoke the passionate emotion of love [6]. Furthermore, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev remarks that in an era characterised by an 'abundance of options', 'social acceleration', and an intensified fear of missing out on erotic possibilities, the spontaneous affections that love demands often prove challenging to accommodate within the enduring structure of marriage [7]. Thus, as Pascal Bruckner poignantly observes, 'love has triumphed over marriage, but now it is destroying it from inside' ([9], p. 7).

In response to this, some authors have sought to reconcile marriage and love by emphasising how marriage can deepen love. For example, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev argues that 'profound love' necessitates 'durability', suggesting that the long-term commitment inherent in marriage fosters deeper emotional connections [8]. Conversely, others consider the tension between love and marriage as evidence of the institution's restrictive influence on individual autonomy and the liberation of marginalised groups. Feminist and queer critiques, in particular, have highlighted how marriage has historically served—and, in some respects, continues to serve—as a primary mechanism for the oppression of women and non-heterosexual forms of love [11]. In sum, love and marriage may ultimately prove to be mutually destructive: while the demands of love can undermine the stability of marriage, the restrictive institution of marriage can, in turn, suppress the autonomy of love.

Still, marriage remains one of the most pervasive phenomena across the breadth of human history and cultures worldwide. From the indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea to secluded tribes of the Amazon, it is rare to find a culture that does not practice some form of marriage ritual. Marriage, then, encompasses a diverse array of practices, extending far beyond the bourgeois love-based marriages predominant in the contemporary West—including rituals as divergent as the group marriages of the Nair community in southwestern India, the polyandrous unions of the Surui tribes in northwestern Brazil, or the "walking marriages" of the Mosuo Buddhists in China, to name just a few. Yet the fact that such disparate and sometimes isolated peoples independently developed practices that share a 'family resemblance' to what we call 'marriage' suggests that the institution may align with certain aspects of the human condition—akin to universal experiences like the mourning of the dead, the horror of incest, or the joy of making music. While this is not to make an anthropological claim, it does imply that, despite the statistics signalling its decline, marriage is unlikely to disappear entirely in Western societies. Rather, it suggests that marriage needs to be liberated.

A return to a purely pragmatic institution of marriage, devoid of expectations of love, seems both anachronistic and implausible in contemporary contexts of Western culture. Still, our modern understanding of love and autonomy remains in tension with the institution. Rather than abandoning the ideal of the love-based marriage as such, it needs to be reinvented. In this paper, I suggest an alternative path toward that liberation. Instead of defending the institution of marriage against its socio-cultural critique or attempting to reconcile it with a concept of so-called 'profound love', my proposal here is to de-institutionalise the idea of marriage.

While the feelings of love and the idea of marriage do not necessarily coincide, neither can they be entirely disassociated. It is therefore productive to distinguish between

the *marital institution*—comprising its contingent wedding practices, its (historically oppressive) legal frameworks and religious structures, and so forth—and *marital love*, as a specific form of romantic love that underpins the modern ideal of love-based marriages but does not necessarily rely on ecclesiastical or legal frameworks, and can exist independently of them.

Thus, rather than addressing the moral legitimacy of marriage's crumbling institution, I propose to investigate the (un)meaningfulness of the particular type of love that defines the idea of love-based marriages. Throughout this essay, I define this marital form of love by its paradoxical *promise of infinite love between finite persons*. When we understand marriage as a finite promise of infinite love, it does not necessarily need to involve a formal wedding ceremony, a religious or a social institution. Rather, marriage is understood as the feeling of love that originates spontaneously between individuals independent of institutions—or, as Goethe once declared, 'I am married, though without a ceremony' ([12], p. 362). The phrase 'infinite love' may initially seem more exotic than it actually is. It is most commonly conveyed through the familiar expression, 'I love you'. In romantic contexts—whether within or without the framework of institutional marriage, whether as a first declaration of love or as yet another reaffirmation—I would argue that the expression 'I love you' often carries a promise of infinite love. To clarify this concept, it is essential to distinguish infinite love from 'eternal love' and 'lifelong love', both of which fall outside the scope of the present discussion.

The concept of 'eternity', on the one hand, by definition denotes something that lacks both a determinate beginning and a determinate endpoint in time. The infinite also lacks a determinate endpoint, but it does allow for a specific beginning in time. Accordingly, I reserve the technical term 'eternal love' for theories that approach love as an all-encompassing, unifying principle of existence (as seen in, for instance, Empedocles' concept of Φιλότης or the early Freudian notion of *libido sexualis*), while I use 'infinite love' to describe a *personal* type of love—a desire that genuinely arises at a specific point in time and within a specific individual.¹

The promise of infinite love also differs from that of 'lifelong love', such as expressed in the conventional marital discourse 'till death do us part'. Although the vow of lifelong love is often part of the institutional discourse of marriages, I would argue that it differs from the infinite love that defines the ideal of marital love. A promise of lifelong love entails a commitment to a concrete time frame, which stretches from a determinate beginning to a definite endpoint at the end of one's life. The promise of infinite love, on the contrary, does not make such an ambitious claim to love someone for a determinate duration of time. Instead, infinite love has a metaphysical function that situates the love outside of the boundaries of (linear) time. To say that I love her forever does not mean that I promise to love her *for the rest of my life*, but rather that, in this present moment, I promise to love her *überhaupt*, unconditionally. The promise of infinite love is that of saying 'I love you' without wanting to ascribe any temporal limitation or ambition to these words. If we conceive of marriage not as the crumbling institution, but as a mode of love—understood as the promise of infinite love between finite persons—then we are not concerned with the statistics mentioned before, nor with the question of how the institution of marriage can be reconciled with love, but with a different, more fundamental scepticism instead, namely, does it make sense to promise future feelings of love, given that such feelings are spontaneous? After all, if love is beyond one's control—and if making a promise implies the ability to ensure its fulfillment—then the very notion of promising love seems nonsensical (cf. for a discussion on this point [15–20]). Yet even if promising love were possible—or if marital love were understood as a hope rather than a vow—the question persists: is infinite love between finite human beings not an evident impossibility, and thus absurd to

hope for? At first glance, the marital promise of infinite love appears to defy the most basic principles of rationality. And yet, despite this scepticism, one cannot ignore the fact that the promise of infinite love remains significant for many people. Even those who never formally marry still often employ the infinity idiom of platitudes like ‘I love you *forever*’, ‘you are *everything* to me’, ‘you are *the one* for me’, ‘I will *never* let you go’—a discourse of infinite love that shows no sign of decline. Are these expressions of marital love mere absurdities, or do they reveal a profound passion too great and too indefinite to fit within the vocabulary of finitude? Perhaps, Faust was right when, ridiculed by Mephistopheles for his promise of infinite love to Gretchen, he passionately retorted ([21], pp. 3059–3066, trans. mine):

Laß das! Es wird!—Wenn ich empfinde,
 Für das Gefühl, für das Gewühl
 Nach Namen suche, keinen finde,
 Dann durch die Welt mit allen Sinnen schweife,
 Nach allen höchsten Worten greife,
 Und diese Glut, von der ich brenne,
 Unendlich, ewig, ewig nenne,
 Ist das ein teuflisch Lügenspiel?

Stop that! It will!—If I experience,
 And seek a name for that feeling, for that commotion,
 But find no word that can express it,
 Roam through the world with all my senses,
 Reach for the loftiest words,
 And call this fire that burns within me
 Infinite, eternal, everlasting—
 Is that a devilish deception?

If we can overcome the commonsensical scepticism outlined above and demonstrate that the marital promise is not merely a *teuflisch Lügenspiel*—a devilish deception—but rather a rational and autonomous commitment, then we may uncover a new foundation for marriage, independent of its declining institutional structures. To achieve this, we must explain how the seemingly absurd yet deeply familiar promise of infinite love can hold meaning within the confines of a finite life.

Traversing different philosophical traditions, this inquiry will proceed in three main steps, with two intermezzi drawing the most important (polemical) conclusions. First, I will trace the concept of infinite love back to the metaphysical discussions surrounding the emergence of the love-based marriage among German Idealists and Jena Romantics. Next, drawing on John Searle’s speech act theory, I will examine how the ideal of infinite love can be articulated as a promise. Finally, I will turn to early existentialist thought—particularly the notions of passion (*Lidenskab*, *Leidenschaft*), repetition (*Gjentagelsen*, *Wiederkehr*), and the moment (*Øjeblik*, *Augenblick*) as developed by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche—to justify the meaning of infinite love. In short, I propose that instead of interpreting the marital promise as a description of an expected reality, we can approach it as an orientation toward a passionate necessity that discloses the world in a fundamentally indeterminate way. By reframing the marital promise in this light, I aim to show that marital love does not necessarily involve an oppressing institution, but is compatible both with the ideal of personal autonomy and with an alternative conception of rationality and temporality.

I. The Metaphysics of Marriage: Uncivil Love

The present attempt to de-institutionalise marriage is only conceivable within the context of a modern, Romanticist ideal of love-based marriage—the idea that love is an essential condition for marriage and thus its foundation. Historically, marriage was primarily considered sacred, with love seen as a fortunate but unnecessary adjunct. In contrast, for most modern people, love has become sacred, while its institutional embedding in marriage is considered optional (cf. [9], p. 27). Our modern ideal of the love-based marriage was philosophically established in the late 18th and early 19th century, accompanied by

vibrant debates about the nature of marriage. Against the then-dominant Enlightenment theories of marriage—which understood marriage as a primarily legal, moral, biological, or pragmatic affair—the German Idealists and early Romanticists sought a metaphysical account of an autonomous love-based marriage. Through such a metaphysical account, the German Idealists and early Romanticists tried to conceptualise marriage independently from church, state, or other societal institutions, as a union of love that should only be understood on its own terms. The Romanticist writer Sophie Mereau, for example, asserts that marriage ‘exists of its own strength. It is not the fragile buttresses of priestly blessing, of bourgeois honour, of sickly habit that sustain it. We ourselves vouch for ourselves’ ([22], pp. 97–98; transl. [23], p. 23).

Especially in the years around 1800, marriage became a metaphysical problem, intensely debated by philosophers such as Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Hölderlin, Novalis, Friedrich and Dorothea von Schlegel. Drawing on Adrian Daub’s work *Uncivil Unions—The Metaphysics of Marriage in German Idealism and Romanticism* [23], in this section I will explain why the German Idealists and early Romanticists wanted to understand marriage as an autonomous and spontaneous form of love. Subsequently, I will argue that this ideal cannot be adequately expressed through their metaphysical notion of a ‘union’, as the German Idealists and early Romanticists opted for, but must instead be reconceived as a promise.

Metaphysical Foundations of the Ideal of the Love-Based Marriage

Comparable to my proposal to de-institutionalise marriage, Fichte and the Jena Romanticists sought to liberate marriage from its ecclesiastical and legal bonds by regarding marriage and love as ontologically indistinct. Fichte, for instance, claimed that ‘the concept [Begriff] of marriage is already contained in the mere concept of love’ ([24], p. 313). According to Adrian Daub, the German Idealists and early Romanticists did make an essential distinction between authentic and inauthentic love. However, for most of them, authentic love was already considered equivalent to marriage, so that a marriage devoid of authentic love was not regarded as a genuine marriage ([23], p. 13). Friedrich von Schlegel, for instance, writes that ‘perfect love [vollendete Liebe] transitions into marriage, as well as the other way around’ ([25], 10.87).

To add nuance, it must be noted that this ontological identity does not imply that love and marriage are entirely indistinguishable. As Adrian Daub rightly observes, marriage can be distinguished from love through its reliance on discourse ([23], p. 33). Marriage necessarily depends on language: an undeclared affection may still constitute a feeling of love, but it could never be a marriage. To establish a marriage, one must put one’s love into words. Hence, marriage gives rise to a discourse of amorous poetry, love letters, romantic clichés, verbal caresses, intimate promises, and other forms of love language. The pre-articulated feeling of love, on the other hand, is often understood as an affective force that ultimately transcends the discursive boundaries of language. Thus, marriage and love are dialectically related, both opposed to each other and mutually dependent: marriage relies on love as the inexhaustible content of its discourse, while love relies on marriage to be expressed, as well as to remain ultimately inexpressible. Love and marriage are thus considered distinguishable yet inseparable aspects of the same phenomenon.

The German Idealists and Jena Romanticists sought a metaphysical foundation for this ideal of love-based marriage. As Adrian Daub demonstrates, their pursuit of a metaphysical account of marriage stemmed from dissatisfaction with earlier Enlightenment explanations of marriage, which were all empirical ([23], pp. 15–21). One such empirical school in Enlightenment thinking was the ‘natural law’ tradition, which explained marriage as a secular contract grounded in the preservation of the species or one or another

concept of human dignity. Examples include Samuel Pufendorf's conception of marriage as a covenant 'between a man and a woman, for their mutual assistance in serving posterity' ([26], p. 570), or Immanuel Kant's infamous definition of marriage as a contract 'for life-long possession of each other's sexual attributes' ([27], p. 427). Alternatively, materialist accounts such as in Baron d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature* justified marriage pragmatically, emphasising its utility for individuals [28].

In contrast to these empirical accounts, the German Idealists and early Romanticists sought a metaphysical foundation of marriage that was able to explain why marital love comes into being autonomously, independently of contracts, utility, or other societal structures. They rejected teleological justifications (e.g., for the betterment of the species or societal utility) and instrumental rationales (e.g., for human dignity, religious ideas, or moral purposes). Instead, they believed marital love inherently resists reduction to any given empirical reality, be it either the laws of science, the traditions of society, the conventions of morality, the precepts of theology, or the sanctions of the state. Hence, they sought to explain marital love metaphysically—not abstracted from empirical facts but nevertheless capable of transforming empirical reality.

As Adrian Daub emphasizes ([23], pp. 71–105), the Romanticist notion of marriage's autonomy does not render it apolitical or detached from society. For the Romanticists, marriage held significant political potential, and was even conceived as a revolutionary force capable of transforming the social and political order. According to Daub, figures like Fichte, Schlegel, and Novalis envisioned marital autonomy, modelled after the Kantian subject, not passively opposed to civil society but transformative upon it ([23], p. 21). While even our most intimate feelings of love are thoroughly influenced by ideological structures, romantic discourses, beauty standards, and so on, the significance of these feelings can never be *fully* reduced to that ideology. Hence, due to that autonomy, love has the capacity to challenge and transform those ideological structures.

In his study, Daub analyses how the metaphysical accounts of marriage by the German Idealists and early Romanticists were modelled after their theories of self-consciousness. In short, the structure of self-consciousness was believed to resemble the conjugal bond in two ways. Firstly, the way in which a self-conscious subject relates to itself as an object and at the same time coincides with itself became the model for the way two lovers relate to one another in what Fichte called a 'complete unification' (*vollständige Vereinigung* [29], p. 315). Secondly, similarly to the self-consciousness of a subject, they believed that marriage was something that 'posits' itself in a spontaneous and autonomous way (partly independently from given empirical realities). Combining these elements of unification and autonomy, Adrian Daub comes to typify the German Idealist and early romanticist ideal of marriage as an 'uncivil union'—that is, 'a private configuration that is entirely independent from wider social structures, which nevertheless seem to place some sort of demand on their community' ([23], p. 2).

Daub ultimately concludes that the project of grounding marriage metaphysically as an 'uncivil union' failed and was abandoned by the German Idealists and early Romanticists themselves. The primary obstacle, termed 'the problem of the product' by Schelling, arises from the fact that the conjugal union inevitably creates a new structure, namely the marriage itself, which becomes a reality that is not identical to the love between two individuals yet cannot exist independently of them ([23], pp. 29–33). This 'third thing' imposes constraints akin to those of civil society and empirical reality, which the Idealists and early Romanticists tried to avoid in the first place. Consequently, Daub argues that love and marriage cannot be metaphysically indistinct: the formation of a marital union necessarily posits an objective structure that inevitably erodes love's autonomy.

Spontaneity and Autonomy

While Daub demonstrates why marriage cannot be metaphysically grounded as an ‘uncivil union’, this need not mark the end of the ideal of autonomous and spontaneous love. Perhaps the ideal of *uncivil* love still holds significance, albeit not in the form of the *union* envisioned by the German Idealists and early Romanticists. I propose rearticulating the foundational idea of uncivil love—namely, marriage’s spontaneity and autonomy—to explore how this ideal might be accommodated without the framework of a union.

Both our feelings of love and the practices that enact it are undoubtedly shaped by what it creates—as it is equally without a doubt that marriage only actually exists within the confines of finite reality with its given empirical realities and ideological structures. Yet this does not imply that love can be entirely explained or predicted by those structures. As I take it, to view marriage as *uncivil* is to assert that the categories of civil society ultimately fail to grasp the meaning of marriage. This autonomy entails that the meaning of marital love is fundamentally indeterminate and, in that sense, indeed, ‘infinite’—a love that cannot be fully encompassed by finite reality.

This uncivility or infinity of love is a common experience, as everyone knows how impossible it is to provide an exhaustive explanation for why one loves a particular person. To be sure, love can be subjected to various empirical accounts. Scientists, for instance, might offer precise descriptions of what occurs in the brain during the experience of falling in love. Others might provide guidance on how to behave in order to preserve a romantic connection. Psychologists may advise on how to navigate passions that one hesitates to embrace. Multinational corporations, mining digital data, may even uncover patterns in personal preferences through algorithms. Finally, one might attempt to moralise one’s feelings, aligning them with ideals about the kind of people one should or should not love. However, in the end, no scientist, psychologist, algorithm, friend, or even oneself can provide a complete account of why one loves a specific individual.

To illustrate the metaphysical spontaneity of marital love, consider an imaginary committee of inquiry tasked with predicting the next person you will fall in love with. The committee comprises experts of all possibly relevant fields, with gifted psychologists and skilled scientists, data analysts equipped with access to extensive data sets about you, as well as your closest friends, your former lovers, and anyone else who claims empirical knowledge of your circumstances. The committee meticulously starts to examine every aspect of your life: starting with your age, the city and culture you inhabit, as well as your preference for gender and other characteristic features, the traits you have found attractive in the past, your interests, etc. Based on this comprehensive dossier of objective knowledge about your life, the committee could arguably reduce the pool of people you could possibly meet and potentially fall in love with from seven billion people to a much smaller group. Yet even with this wealth of information, it is evident that the commission could not predict the specific individual(s) you will love.

The crucial question, now, is the following. Does the committee’s inability stem from an actual (*de facto*) lack of data or knowledge or from the principal (*de jure*) impossibility of determining feelings of love? Would a committee equipped with omniscient knowledge of the past and with access to every conceivable set of data be capable of making such a prediction *sub specie aeternitatis*? The conviction of Fichte and the Jena Romanticists is that even such an omniscient committee could never predict or explain love. After all, not only is our perception of reality limited, but reality itself is a finite manifestation of the absolute. Therefore, love’s occurrence principally resists determination and cannot be algorithmicised, but comes into existence spontaneously and autonomously.

From Uncivil Union to a Promise of Infinite Love

This fundamental indeterminacy, autonomy, and irreducible spontaneity of love, I would argue, underpins the infinity idiom of love. The ideal of uncivil love—understood as the metaphysical autonomy and spontaneity of marriage—amounts to infinite love in the sense that it cannot be determined (e.g., explained or predicted) by the rationality of any finite reality. This then raises the question of whether the ideal of infinite love can be accommodated within the concept of a ‘union’. I take this question to be the core of the ‘problem of the product’: if marital love eludes all finite civil realities, how can it be realised within the unity of marriage, which itself inevitably becomes a finite and civil entity?

It is crucial to recognise that the problem of the product, which Daub identifies as the drawback of the metaphysical project, does not apply to the ideal of uncivil love as such. The question of what kind of (finite) marriage might give shape to (infinite) uncivil love remains open. The issue of the inevitable creation of a ‘third thing’ only arises if we try to answer this question by explaining marital love as a union. What is abandoned by the Romantics is not the question of how to discursively articulate and explain the ideal of uncivil love, but rather the answer that this articulation must have the form of a Fichtean ‘complete unification’. For, on closer inspection, what Daub coins as an ‘uncivil union’ appears to be a contradiction in terms, as the finite reality of a union is fundamentally incompatible with an autonomous, spontaneous, or infinite love.

The desire of love may be oriented toward unification, to the fusion of two solitary souls into one blissful symbiosis; yet the realisation of such unity will immediately put an end to love. From the fragments of Sappho to the torn lyric of Ocean Vuong, one crucial lesson of love poetry has been that the desire of love always entails a pathos of distance—a lack, a wound, or a gap that affirms the dividedness of the two lovers. Eros not only requires this lack, it fundamentally *is* this bittersweet tension between complete unification and foreignness, just as the closeness of intimacy *is* a distance, an *amor de lonh*. Intimacy is the impossibility of bridging the closest possible distance. Contrary to Fichte and the Jena Romantics, I would argue that loving someone means that I am *not yet* unified with the other. Marriage, then, is not the idealist ‘sublation’ (*Aufhebung*) of the other as the affirmation of the self; rather, it exists as the cultivation of this twoness, as a discourse of difference. In other words, marriage can only exist if it is unfeasible—its realisation would spell the end of love itself. Accordingly, the idea of infinite love, the discourse of everlasting love, can also never be realised in a finite reality but only makes sense as a *promise*.

Polemical Intermezzo: Relational Models of Love

Before moving on to the next step of our inquiry, it might be insightful to draw a somewhat polemical conclusion from the preceding analysis of the ‘problem of the product’. This will clarify my present position and why I propose to shift focus to the philosophy of language as the next step.

The fragility of the love-based marriage lies in the tension between what I will call the ‘marital product’—i.e., the factual reality of the relationship, be it either conceived as an institutionalised marriage, a union, or any other conceptualisation of a shared ‘we’—and ‘marital love’ as the dynamic feelings of love and the ongoing attempt to express these feelings through discourse or other symbolic means. With regard to ‘marital love’, I explained above how the feelings are inseparable (though distinguishable) from their expression: marital love is always already an expressed form of love. As a consequence, philosophers often identify this symbolic process of marital love with the marital product it brings forth. Yet the expression of love does not equate to the realisation of a relationship. As we have seen with ‘the problem of the product’, when the marital product is seen as the realisation

of marital love, and accordingly explained as its meaning, the openness and autonomy of the Romanticist ideal of uncivil marriage is threatened.

Throughout the contemporary philosophy of love, there is a widespread currency for what we could call ‘relational accounts’ of love. These theories explain romantic love not as a subjective feeling, but as the reality of the product *in between*—such as a ‘shared process of meaning-making’, a ‘joint commitment’, a ‘we-intentionality’, or a ‘dialogical’ practice (see e.g., [30–32]). These theories often claim to replace the often-criticised union model, yet by conceiving love primarily as a mode of togetherness or sharing, these theories risk reproducing the primacy of the ‘we’ inherent to the union model. In framing love as something that emerges *between* the individual’s desire (‘I’) and the beloved (‘you’), these theories regard the relationship—the *we*—as the paradigm of love.

Of course, relational theories of love can very well account for the dynamics of relationships. However, by reducing love to its product—the realised ‘we’—they risk excluding various kinds of uncivil love that do not fit the paradigm of the bourgeois relationship. It is unclear how a theory grounded in a ‘we-intentionality’ or ‘shared meaning’ could recognise forms of love that are *unrealised*, such as momentary forms of love (a fleeting summer romance, a one-night stand, love at first sight) or unilateral love (unrequited love, one-sided inspiration), which are passionate without sharing or realising a ‘we’ or a dialogical exchange. For instance, in their article ‘Love In-Between’, Hanne de Jaegher and Laura Candiotto contend that love ‘fails’ when it lacks one of the three elements: me, you, we ([32], p. 516). But why should failed love be considered no love? Allegedly, Petrarch saw Laura only once, Dante had no relationship with Beatrice, and one might wonder whether Don Quixote’s Dulcinea ever existed outside his imagination. Their love involved minimal—if any—shared interaction. Yet it seems untenable to deny that they experienced love. Perhaps it is more accurate to speak in these cases of a failed relationship instead of failed love. Relational models of romantic love risk subscribing to a perfectionist, bourgeois teleology that recognises forms of love only insofar as they align with the goal of a stable relationship.

One might object that, even if these relational models cannot adequately explain momentary and unrequited instances of love, they could remain a valid theoretical framework for understanding *marital* love. Marriage, after all, necessarily involves a relationship. Yet I contend that although marriage inevitably creates a product (a relationship), its form of love cannot be exhausted by that product. That is, the promise of marital love is characterised by an unrealizability and cannot be understood solely in terms of the relationship it creates. We should therefore distinguish between the marital product and an autonomous process of marital love—even when the latter necessarily gives rise to the former, it cannot be reduced to it. If, as argued above, the passion of infinite love is truly autonomous and indeterminable, marital love cannot be completed by the very relationship it engenders.

To be sure, many advocates of the relational model acknowledge that love ‘in-between’ individuals amounts to an open-ended process. Yet simply insisting on its open-endedness suppresses rather than resolves the ‘problem of the product’. Even an open-ended shared reality is fixed and constraining over time. Throughout long-term relationships, the reality of that shared world can gradually encroach upon the autonomy of one’s feelings. The fragility of the love-based marriage is precisely that it necessarily reifies itself in a shared ‘we’, while simultaneously never being contained by that relationship. Autonomous love needs that ‘we’ in order to overcome it.

Hence, somewhat against the current academic tendency, I advocate for a return to the ‘I’ as the primary locus of both love and marriage. In the first instance, love is not a form of sharing but a form of feeling. Erotic love is a passion, and a passion is first and foremost someone’s passion. Certainly, this passion is influenced and shaped by a relationship, but it remains localised in the individual. *I* feel love for someone who is not me, and

subsequently *we* come to relate to one another (in a way that shapes my feelings again). The individual ‘I’ comes first, then the other, and only lastly the relationship between us.

II. The Semantics of Marriage: The Speech Act of Promising Love

How can we critically examine marital love without reducing it to an uncivil union or other ‘marital product’? In the previous section, I proposed to reformulate the Romanticist ideal of the uncivil union as a finite promise of infinite love, most familiarly expressed in the words ‘I (will) love you (forever)’.² But what kind of promise are we dealing with here? If we seek to understand the meaningfulness of marital love, we must clarify why a fundamentally unfeasible promise (of infinite love in a finite life) could be a meaningful sentence in the first place. Does the sentence ‘I will love you forever’ make sense semantically?

The Constitutive Rules of Promising

For a semantic analysis of *promises*, much of the philosophical tradition appears rather unhelpful. Throughout the tradition that Wittgenstein criticised as the ‘Augustinian picture of language’, the use of language was largely reduced to the function of naming, asserting, or describing ([33], §§1–20). If we were to analyse the promise of infinite love as such a description of an expected state of affairs—as the assertion of a desired future fact—then the marital promise appears absurd. However, as many (post-)Wittgensteinian semantic theories recognise a variety of linguistic usages and functions, we may argue that the marital promise is not meant to describe the world but to *do* something in the world. The sentence ‘I love you’ can thus be understood as a speech act, a performative utterance that does not describe but performs the act it refers to. And what it performs, we may hypothesise, is the act of a promise.

As the speech act of a promise, the sentence ‘I will love you forever’ does not assert a state of affairs and therefore cannot be evaluated as true or false. Yet the absence of falsehood does not imply that the promise of infinite love is a meaningful expression. Instead, we must ask whether the marital promise is ‘felicitous’ or ‘infelicitous’. These felicity conditions of a speech act have been analysed by John Searle as the ‘constitutive rules’ of different types of speech acts—for instance, the semantic rules that define what counts as a correct performance of a promise ([34], pp. 33–42; [35], pp. 41–42).

Constitutive rules pertain to both the ‘propositional content’ of a sentence (in our case, infinite love) and to its ‘illocutionary act’ (the kind of speech act; in our case, a promise) ([34], pp. 29–33; [35], pp. 42–44). With regard to promises, then, Searle discusses the following constitutive rules ([34], pp. 57–72; [35], pp. 46–53). First, a speech act has an ‘illocutionary point’, its essential aim or purpose. For a promise, this illocutionary point is to commit the speaker to fulfilling what has been promised. Second, there are several ‘conditions of propositional content’ that determine which propositional content is compatible with the illocutionary act. In the case of a promise, the propositional content must concern the future—for one cannot promise something that has already occurred—and its fulfilment must be within the speaker’s control—for the ‘ought’ of a promise necessarily implies a ‘can’. Third, there are ‘preparatory conditions’ that determine whether illocution could take place at all. In the case of promises, an important preparatory condition is that the speaker should believe that the hearer wants them to fulfil the promise.³ Finally, every speech act involves ‘sincerity conditions’, requiring that the speaker is in a psychological state of sincerely performing the illocutionary act—in the case of a promise, the speaker must genuinely intend to keep it.

If we now apply Searle’s constitutive rules to the promise of infinite love, we find that marital love arguably satisfies the illocutionary point, preparatory condition, and the sincerity condition of a promise. However, it notably fails to meet the propositional content

conditions: one cannot love infinitely within a finite life, nor control the inherently spontaneous emergence of future feelings of love. This semantic structure—prominently satisfying some conditions while notably failing others—is what renders the marital promise of infinite love so self-willed.

Following this analysis more closely, we might question whether the propositional content of marital love aligns best with what Searle calls ‘commissive speech acts’ (i.e., those speech acts that create a duty for the speaker, such as promises).⁴ Explaining marital love as a ‘directive speech act’, one that aims to make the hearer act in a certain way, such as a request or command, would probably result in a similar ambivalence. After all, the ‘performative verb’ that indicates the type of illocutionary act is often implicit rather than explicit in the most frequent formulations of infinite love, such as ‘I love you’. The only clear thing is that marital love does not fit with ‘assertive speech acts’. The unfeasible yet sincere commitment contained in the sentence ‘I will love you forever’ does not describe a reality, but neither can it be neatly characterised as a typical promise or a command.

Double Direction of Fit

To move beyond this impasse, we might consider a different approach found in Searle’s work. Following the previous section, we not only seek the semantics of a sentence but also the marital love expressed through it. According to Searle, speech acts are the objective, publicly accessible expressions of intrinsically inaccessible, subjective intentional states.⁵ That is, there is a non-contingent relationship between speech acts (e.g., discourse of love) and intentional states (feeling of love). Searle identifies three structural correlations between speech acts and intentional states ([37], p. 446). First, they have the same formal structure: just as a speech act $F(p)$ consists of an illocutionary act F and a propositional content p , an intentional state $S(p)$ consists of a psychological mode S and a propositional content p . Second, both intentional states and speech acts have conditions of satisfaction that are determined by the propositional content p . We see this in two instances: (a) the sincerity conditions of a speech act depend on realising the corresponding intentional state (I promise unconditional love if and only if I sincerely intend to love unconditionally); and (b) the illocutionary point of the speech act must be identical to the conditions of satisfaction of the intentional content (I promise unconditional love if and only if I take on the duty to love unconditionally).

Third, and most relevant for the rest of our inquiry, speech acts and intentional states share a ‘direction of fit’. Both are successful or satisfied if they relate to the world in a certain direction ([37], p. 445). For example, the speech act of an assertion and the corresponding intentional state of a belief are, respectively, successful (for the speech act) and true (for the belief) when they conform or fit with the world. Searle calls this a ‘word-to-world direction of fit’. By contrast, the speech act of a promise and the corresponding intentional wish are realised when, vice versa, the world conforms or fits with the speech act and the corresponding intentional state—i.e., a ‘world-to-word direction of fit’. Unlike assertive speech acts, which represent how things are (word-to-world direction of fit), both directive and commissive speech acts seek to change reality after their propositional content (world-to-word direction of fit).

As we have seen, applying the constitutive rules to the marital promise shows that it does not fit neatly into speech acts with the assertive word-to-world direction of fit, nor into the transformative speech acts with a word-to-world direction of fit. Instead, we might argue that the promise of infinite love exemplifies what Searle calls a ‘double direction of fit’ ([37], p. 451). According to Searle, the double direction of fit characterises the speech act of a ‘declaration’, which changes something in the world (i.e., world-to-word direction of fit) by representing the world as already having been changed (i.e., word-to-world direction

of fit). According to Searle, the social ontology of all institutional reality works through this logic of creating something by representing it as already existing. Indeed, the classic example of such an institutional declaration is the marital discourse of ‘I hereby declare you husband and wife’. We might, then, argue that this double direction of fit not only characterises the institutional reality of marriage but also the intentional structure of marital love. When we promise each other infinite love, the proposition might be something like ‘I want my love to continue forever, but since I can never realise that in a finite life, I represent the world as if it will be the case nevertheless. By the uttering of these words, I constitute at least the promise of its realisation, and thus the world discloses itself to me in a new, significant way’.

From a Representational Promise to the Promise of Unrepresentability

The idea of a ‘double direction of fit’ thus helps us to understand the peculiar intentionality of the marital promise. However, one crucial aspect of the marriage promise remains that Searle’s framework cannot account for.⁶

As I explained earlier, Searle is committed to the view that speech act expressions mirror their underlying intentional states. This conviction rests on the idea that our intentional states have the same representational structure $S(p)$ as their linguistic expressions $F(p)$. Thus, Searle assumes that intentionality always has a certain direction of fit S as well as representational content p . Moreover, since intentional states have certain conditions of satisfaction, it follows that they also include a representation of their satisfaction or realisation. Searle himself states the following:

Because intentional states typically have propositional content, they can represent how things are in the world, how we would like them to be, or how we intend to make them be. Intentionality essentially involves the representation of conditions of satisfaction: truth conditions in the case of belief, carrying out conditions in the case of intentions, and fulfilment conditions in the case of desire ([37], p. 445).

We may object, however, that there are intentional states—such as existential anxiety, or indeed marital love—that have content that is profoundly undetermined. The content of such states is rather unrepresentable. When I am passionately in love and sincerely promise to love another person forever, I do not possess a clear idea of what I am actually promising, nor of how the marriage will or should unfold concretely. The desperate abundance of romantic clichés, idealised notions of a happy marriage, experts or therapists that claim to know what a ‘healthy’ relationship entails—all these symbolic attempts to represent the fulfilment conditions of love—only re-affirm that the promise of love is ultimately unrepresentable. The conditions of love’s satisfaction necessarily remain unknown. As Fichte and the Jena Romanticists emphasised, this indeterminacy or indefiniteness is what defines the emancipatory ideal of marital love. A promise of infinite love is not made with a clear representation of its conditions of realisation. Rather, in our promise of love, we seem to resort to the idiom of infinity (‘forever’, ‘everything’, and ‘never’) precisely to express the impossibility of representing what is promised.

Methodological Intermezzo: The Logic of Infinity

In his well-known studies *A Lover’s Discourse*, Roland Barthes analyses romantic speech acts not as symptoms of an amorous subject, but as ‘figures’ that conceal an unknown mode of discursive construction ([39], p. 3). According to Barthes, this mode of construction lacks a logic or order that links the various amorous figures together in such a way that an analysis of them would result in a systematic ‘philosophy of love’ ([39], p. 6). The reason for this, argues Barthes, lies in the fact that the lover paradigmatically utters ‘what is unreal, i.e., intractable’ ([39], p. 3).

Throughout our exploration above, we have traced multiple layers of meaning concealed within the promise of *infinite* love—ranging from endless continuation to atemporality, and from absoluteness to inexplicability. The final step I now wish to take is to show (*contra* Barthes) that there is a logic embedded within these sedimented layers of meaning—but precisely because (*secundum* Barthes) the figures of speech are oriented towards the unreal and intractable.

The words that we have at our disposal are often far more nuanced and multifaceted than a definition allows us to determine. Through our lifelong exposure to discourse—the vast majority of which is only registered unconsciously and indirectly—words come to mean much more than we realise. We hear much more in a word than we think we hear. A word has an unconscious—and one of the favoured tasks of poets and philosophers alike has been to bring these semantic layers to the surface—to ‘recollect’ (ἀναμνησκειν), as Plato famously put it, what already lingers latently within us. Accordingly, I have attempted to demonstrate how the concepts of infinity and promise carry multiple semantic overtones that are complexly entangled with each other, oftentimes undeniably distinct, yet not mutually contradictory. Their ‘logic’ plays out mostly pre-predicatively, and makes possible what we might call a ‘music of words’, as the dissonance and consonance of these various semantic nuances and associative resonances generate a dynamic tension, the movement of which keeps our thinking about a word in motion.

In the following, I will attempt to reconstruct the internal logic of the various aspects of infinity that were uncovered above and explore how they might relate to one another within a promise that remains meaningful throughout a finite life and is compatible with an ideal of autonomy. We can categorise the vocabulary of infinite love under three levels, depending on the subject: one articulates infinite love as either (a) the everlastingness of one’s own feelings, (b) the absoluteness of the other, or (c) the unconditionality of the relationship.

(a)	<i>I</i>	My feelings are <i>everlasting</i>	‘I will love you <i>forever</i> ’; ‘I will <i>never</i> let you go’
(b)	<i>You</i>	The other is <i>absolute</i> , the <i>true love</i>	‘You are <i>the one</i> ’; ‘you are <i>everything</i> to me’
(c)	<i>We</i>	The relationship is <i>unconditional</i>	‘We are <i>married</i> ’ (‘for better, for worse, for richer...’)

The Infinite I: Everlasting Love

Regarding the notion of *everlasting love* (a), the familiar scepticism, strengthened by the statistics mentioned in the introduction, typically concerns the factual transience of relationships. When I say that I love someone forever, it appears as if I am making a temporal claim—namely of an *endless continuation* of my feelings of love. Yet, this claim fundamentally dissolves temporality itself, for without an ending, linear temporality becomes meaningless. As mentioned before, this atemporality differentiates infinite love (which I take to be the actual meaning of ‘I love you forever’) from *lifelong love* (which may seem to be its literal implication, especially in its institutional discourse). For the latter involves the concrete ambition of loving someone for a finite period of time, namely the rest of one’s life. A lifelong love is therefore in principle no closer to the realisation of infinite love than a much shorter-lasting relationship. For infinity is not a quantitatively larger number but a qualitatively different concept—and thus every finitude is equally finite in relation to infinity. Therefore, I would argue that the truth of infinite love is more dependent on the genuineness of its expression—the thoughts, acts, and feelings that accompany the moment of uttering—than with the factual finite duration of the relationship.

When I promise to love someone forever, I do not promise to feel love for a concrete length of time. Instead, in a particular way, the promise designates a feeling that *transcends*

finitude. The question that we have been examining above is how we should understand this transcendence. For, to be sure, as finite human beings, the transcendence cannot be empirical—the promise of infinity itself is necessarily of a finite nature. Instead, as we discovered in several ways, the amatory transcendence amounts to the inexplicability or irreducibility of one's feelings to any empirical account or finite representation.

The Infinite You: True Love

The second expression of the promise of infinite love, which I have not extensively focused on so far, concerns the familiar declaration of *true love* (b). I declare that the beloved is 'everything' to me, that she is 'the one', my 'fate', the sole person I was 'destined' or 'meant' to be with, and so forth. Even people who are generally wary of such discourse occasionally express its underlying affects, such as the joy to finally have found, or the fear of ultimately losing, that one and only person that could fulfil their lives as no one else ever could.

The scepticism regarding the discourse of true love is probably as much of a cliché as the idea of 'the one' itself. However, what is meant with an avowal of true love is, of course, not the empirical claim that there exists a hidden structure in reality destined to bring the lovers together. Instead, such expressions withdraw from making any claim about reality—they transcend precisely that reality. Comparable to the absolute love of a parent for a newborn child—a baby who is still nobody, whose personhood holds no reality—the erotic version of 'true love' is not so much directed at the reality of the other as to that which transcends any empirical 'character trait' or 'personality'. That is, as I will flesh out in the next section, infinite love is directed at the *promise* of the other.

Accordingly, the discourse of true love does not state that the beloved is the only one I could have fallen in love with. Rather, the expression arises from the recognition that my overflowing feelings of love are uniquely directed toward one particular person only.⁷ 'The one' thus aims to articulate the singularity and irreplaceability of the beloved. Contrary to the popular saying that sexual desire 'objectifies' the other, one could also argue that erotic desire paradigmatically 'subjectifies'. Whereas a dispassionate perspective, such as in professional, practical, or legal contexts, recognises a person as a contingent exemplar of a general category—e.g., the student, my dentist, a civilian—the erotic perception elevates one individual from the anonymous crowd, focuses on their heterogeneity, and thus emancipates the individual as a unique and irreplaceable person. There is probably no more powerful way in which one can become an irreducible somebody, an irreplaceable person, than through the passionate gaze of someone who loves them.

Through this erotic singularisation, the beloved acquires a transcendent or 'absolute' status. Being the absolutely singular simultaneously implies becoming ungraspable. For the irreducible individuality of an individual cannot be captured by any general account. The overwhelming feeling of love thus typically makes the lover recognise the beloved's impenetrable complexity—the other's infinitely rich singularity that can *never* be fully known. Hence, a notorious paradox arises. On the one hand, my erotic desire leads me to believe that I know this person better than anyone else—I am the one who sees 'who she truly is', who recognises her singularity that escapes the subsuming generalisations of a dispassionate perception. Yet, at the same time, precisely because of this recognition, she ultimately remains a mystery for me—for the infinite perspective inherently prohibits any complete understanding. Erotic desire thus embodies the 'bittersweet' (γλυκύπικρον) consciousness of this lack in knowing the other—it is the knowledge of the unknowable (cf. [40]).

The Infinite We: Unconditional Love

Lastly, from this *everlasting* desire (a) for the *true* love (b) arises a marriage that is accordingly praised as *unconditional* (c). As with everlasting love and true love, scepticism about unconditional love is commonsensical and familiar. It is often said that no relationship is unconditional. For, as ethical beings, we enter moral agreements whose transgressions are (or ought to be) intolerable. Moreover, as erotic beings, we have specific reasons to love someone—concrete admirations and appreciations that condition our feelings of love and thereby our relationships. It is thus argued that the conditions of love shape its very essence, as these conditions explain on what terms one loves the particularity of the other.

Naturally, *in reality*, every relationship is conditional—if only upon the existence of the lovers. Still, as discussed earlier in response to the ‘problem of the product’, marital love cannot be reduced to this reality of the relationship. On a practical level, we can imagine how unhappy a relationship becomes when it constantly enters into negotiations about the conditions of its existence. We might wonder whether an autonomous marriage could ever arise if it is constantly confronted with its conditions of existence. It is in that sense that marriage is understood as unconditional—namely, as a commitment to understand marriage not only as a reality *within* one’s world, but also as an *ideality*, a promise imposed *upon* one’s world.

Thus, the phrase ‘unconditional love’ once again signifies transcendence. As long as marital love exists—a merely tautological condition—the reality of its relationship may have conditions, but its ideality, as we have seen, cannot be comprehended solely in terms of this reality. Conversely, reality itself becomes something that I can only understand through the lens of the ideality. Marriage, therefore, is not only subject to the conditions of reality; marriage also puts my reality into perspective—it not only appears in my world but constitutes my world. Lovers understand their reality through their love, rather than the other way around, as they can scarcely imagine their life without one another.

As we saw with everlasting love and true love, the transcendence of unconditional love also leads to a dialectical inversion. For in so far as marriage has become decisive for reality, it cannot be part of that reality. That is, just as everlasting love denotes linear time and true love leads to the indeterminacy of the other, the promise of unconditional love does not make a claim about reality. A marriage is thus ultimately unreal—it can only persist if it does not exist. Unconditional love is a form of love which is ultimately unrealisable, necessarily incomplete, a marriage that always remains to be commenced.

Amatory Negativity

In conclusion, we can say about the ‘logic’ of the vocabulary of infinite love that it expresses, at all three levels, an indeterminacy that lies at the ‘bittersweet’ essence of erotic love: the everlastingness of my feelings amounts to its inexplicability; the absolute particularity of ‘the one’ reveals their impenetrability; the unconditionality of marriage renders it unrealisable. So marital love entails that my feelings, which are inexpressible, are directed to an other, who is unknowable, as a result of which our marriage is never given, but always to be commenced.

(a)	<i>I</i>	My feelings are <i>everlasting</i>	I cannot explain my feelings in any finite account.
(b)	<i>You</i>	The other is <i>absolute</i> , the <i>true love</i>	You are ungraspable through any finite knowledge.
(c)	<i>We</i>	The relationship is <i>unconditional</i>	Our love can never be realised in a finite structure.

Admittedly, what can be said positively about de-institutionalised marriage thus seems very limited. From a metaphysical standpoint, marriage is first and foremost characterised by negativity—to fall in love means to fall short of words, to lose grasp of meaning, to sense the edges of knowledge, to remain unfulfilled. However, as I will argue in more detail below, it is precisely this metaphysical indeterminacy that secures the autonomy of the lived marriage. For due to this negativity concerning the general knowledge structures, the creation of particular meaning can take place in a spontaneous way. As suggested by the German Idealists and early Romanticists, it is precisely the negativity inherent to this spontaneous autonomy that tends to be threatened by the civil and ecclesiastical institutions of marriage.

Still, one may object, this does not explain how the negativity of infinite love relates to the everyday reality of the lived marriage. Exactly how does it make that reality autonomous? After all, the marriage is lived throughout finite reality. In the final section, I will employ some concepts drawn from early existentialist philosophy, to examine the function of this indeterminacy and clarify why it make sense throughout finite life. Thus, I propose a theory of marital transcendence that aims to justify both the rationality and the autonomy of the de-institutionalised marriage as developed above.

III. The Passion of Marriage: Transcendence, Rationality & Temporality

As we have seen in the second section, marital love does not fully satisfy the constitutive conditions of a promise—the unattainable infinity cannot serve as the propositional content of the illocutionary act of promising. Moreover, as has been extensively discussed in analytic philosophy [15–20], it appears to be odd to promise future feelings of love if these feelings are involuntary. If we genuinely wish the amatory feelings of the other to remain spontaneous, it seems contradictory to expect the other to promise them. Why, then, would we encapsulate these spontaneous and unrealisable feelings of marital love in the form of a vow?

Passionate Transcendence

Similar to the notion ‘infinity’, the word ‘promise’ carries several semantic overtones. Perhaps the promissory character of marital love does not primarily lie in the commitment to do or feel something—i.e., the promise understood as a *vow*—but rather in expressing a profound wish or ideality that ‘promises well for the future’—i.e., the promise understood as *hope* for the future. Thus, we may adopt the linguistic form of promise-as-vow in order to give expression to the promise-as-hope. Such an interpretation aligns well with the transcendent character of infinite love, as this ‘promise of the future’ is something that I impose upon, or demand from, my determined reality. From now on, I declare to perceive reality—along with the whole legacy of its past—in the light of the promise of the future, rather than solely the other way around. The realisation of this promise is not in my hands—it is even impossible—but its passionate imperative (*nomos*) is nonetheless mine (*autos*); i.e., it is thus the source of my *autonomy*, it is a promise for which I bear responsibility.

This notion of ‘promise’ aligns with the concept of ‘passion’ (*Lidenskab*) as used in the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard (and, comparatively, with words such as *Leidenschaft*, *Fülle*, *Reichtum*, *Ferne*, *Hohe*, and *Zukunft* in Friedrich Nietzsche).⁸ Here, the technical term ‘passion’ does not designate a fleeting emotional state, but rather refers to a transcendent ideality—indeterminate in itself yet capable of imparting fundamental meaning to one’s life.⁹ Passions such as God, freedom, or marriage thus represent infinite ideas, which do not exist within empirical reality but nonetheless provide existential orientation for one’s finite existence. According to Kierkegaard, such a passion possesses a singularity (*enkelthed*) that

is ‘incommensurable’ with the general (*Almene*), as a result of which it ultimately escapes the symbolic order of reality.¹⁰

How can such an indeterminate idea come to determine one’s life? To understand how an infinite idea can be meaningful throughout a finite life, it is crucial to conceive of the passion’s transcendent orientation not as a vertical transcendence—from empirical reality to some supposedly ‘higher’ reality—but as horizontal or ‘modal’ transcendence—namely, as a *transgression across different modalities of being*. That means that when something is said to ‘transcend empirical reality’, we should imagine a different modality than phenomenal reality—for instance, an intelligible *possibility* or a noumenal *necessity*. Accordingly, we may argue that the infinite content of the marital promise refers neither to an empirical reality (as reality itself is transcended), nor to a possibility (as infinite love is impossible within a finite life), but rather to a passionate necessity. That is, the promise of infinite love is neither something that is the case nor something that could be the case; it is something that *must be*. Crucially, this necessity does not amount to a necessity *within* reality, such as a law of nature, but rather a noumenal necessity *for* reality—i.e., a necessity not as given within (*gegeben*) but as imposed upon (*aufgegeben*) the empirical world. A passion has the status of an existential axiom—a first principle from which one perceives and thinks about life, rather than merely the result of those thoughts and experiences.

Passionate Rationality

With this idea of passion as modal transcendence, we can now finally demonstrate why the marital promise is not absurd. For the kind of thinking that allows itself to be guided by such passion engages with a different form of rationality. To clarify the passionate mode of rationality, I will draw upon insights developed by Victor Kal in his interpretations of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.¹¹

Generally speaking, by rationality, we mean a mode of thinking that justifies itself by appealing to valid reasons. Nevertheless, we might question the metaphysical location of these ‘valid reasons’—that is, we might ask in what modality of being we should seek them. Usually, we legitimate our actions and propositions by referring to reality. Through this empirical mode of reasoning, one *refers back* to something that is *already* established as real or true (cf. a ‘word-to-world direction of fit’). Through such ‘backward rationality’, reality is always decisive.

However, when we are guided by a profound passion, our thinking does not justify itself by referring back to the legacy of the past, but instead by referring *forward* to a promise of the future—to a passionate *necessity* which, strictly speaking, does not exist, yet nevertheless *ought to be*. This generates a ‘forward rationality’, wherein I demand something from reality (in the mode of necessity) without claiming its empirical existence (in the mode of reality). In principle, this passionate reason is more modest than the empirical rationality. For one does not claim to know (backwards) that one will indeed love forever; yet one does know with absolute certainty (forwards) that one cannot live without believing in it. It is this passionate ‘cannot’ that constitutes the compelling force essential to rationality.

It might be illuminating here to briefly compare the rationality of marital love to another familiar passion, namely that of freedom. To most people in modern Western societies, the ideality of freedom points towards an infinite idea. After all, the promise of freedom cannot be reduced to any specific set of possibilities. For instance, merely possessing certain political freedoms, such as the right to vote or the freedom of speech, does not guarantee that someone is free. Even more so, the promise of freedom can never be truly fulfilled, since freedom cannot be realised through any finite possibility. Instead, the promise of freedom appears to point toward the infinite idea of *possibility as such*. This infinite freedom cannot be proven or empirically demonstrated—we cannot, for instance, find

‘free will’ somewhere on an fMRI scan or explain it in a neuro-biological theory. Nevertheless, most modern individuals would assert that they are free and responsible for whatever follows from that freedom. Such freedom cannot be proven (backwards), as something necessitated by the legacy of the past; yet it can be demanded (forwards), as something necessitated by a passion for an open future that could deviate from the dictates of the past. For most people—including the self-declared ‘determinists’—cannot conceive of their life without acting upon the (tacit) assumption of free will. This amounts to an alternative rationality, paradigmatically expressed by the classical Idealist formula: ‘du kannst denn du sollst’—you can because you should.¹²

Passionate Temporality

If we now turn to the underlying conceptions of time implicit in both modes of rationality, we can more clearly see how the passionate transcendence of reality may be relevant to reality.

The conception of time underpinning the backwards rationality is that of a linear progression, in which the past merely foreshadows the future, and the future is nothing but an extrapolation of the past. Within such a linear framework, the present is reduced to an insignificant, vanishing point situated between past and future. When the future is thus dictated by the legacy of past, a strong present—such as the unpredictable and autonomous moment of marital love—cannot be adequately accounted for.

As we have seen, the forwarding rationality inherent in infinite love is not compatible with any kind of linear temporality; viewed from within this linear order of time, marriage confronts us with an ‘atemporality’. This rejection of the linear temporality, however, gives rise to an alternative notion of time—one that takes as its point of departure the promise of the future, rather than the legacy of the past. For when one is enchanted by a promise of the future, one does not take reality for granted. Consequently, a contradiction arises, characteristic of the experience of falling in love, between the open (infinite) ideality and the fixed (finite) reality. Since the former cannot be fully realised in the latter, the promise of the future inevitably puts the legacy of the past into perspective, as a result of which reality loses its previous stability and authority. That is, when one is deeply in love, the absolute status of the beloved radically suspends the reality as one knew it before, unsettling the prevailing standards and norms.

The truth of this ‘negativity’ of love—equally responsible for liberation as for quixotry, for profound insights as much as for love’s blindness—is that it reveals the plasticity of reality and the contingency of the symbolic order. In other words, by placing the reality inherited from the past in the light of the necessity of the future, reality appears *anew* in the perspective of *possibility*. The amatory negativity thus also creates an openness through which reality acquires a modified significance. In the philosophy of Kierkegaard, this modification or renewal of fixed meaning is described as a ‘repetition’ (*Gjentagelsen*) of one’s existence, which occurs in the irreducibly spontaneous happening of an *Øjeblik* (‘the moment’, cf. [42], pp. 125–225, pp. 132–133, p. 148, p. 173; cf. *Augenblick* in Nietzsche). Although such repetition is ultimately a passive happening that cannot be fully controlled, predicated, or explained by any general account, one can nevertheless anticipate it by actively making room for the promised repetition to passively take place. If one is committed to a promise of the future that is incompatible with the legacy of the past, it is indeed logical (or ‘rational’) to ‘sacrifice’ part of that legacy in order to reclaim reality with a renewed, modified significance.¹³

To Conclude: Autonomous Love

In response to various ethical and empirical issues regarding the institution of marriage, I have proposed to ‘reinvent’ marriage as a subjective process of an unrepresentable disclosure rather than the objective structure of an institution. In doing so, I have sought to extend the project of the German Idealists and early Romanticists to emancipate the ideal of an autonomous love-based marriage, yet without grounding this ideal within the reality of a union. Instead, I have reconceptualised marriage as a passion for infinite love between finite persons, performed through a promise that operates via a ‘double direction of fit’.

Rather than following a linear temporality—from past to present to future—the marital process starts with (1) an enchanting necessity of the *future*, in the light of which (2) the meaning of the reality of the *past* is suspended (‘negated’, ‘sacrificed’), potentially resulting in (3) a renewal (‘repetition’) of that past within the *present*. This renewal cannot be controlled but can be prepared through a forwarding rationality that requires both (1) the infinite movement of the amorous promise and (2) the finite movement of sacrificing fixed meanings from the past. The (3) renewal that may result from this double movement is the actual marriage that takes place—the moment (*Øjeblik*) the infinite promise touches upon finite reality.

	(1) Future Necessity Promise	(2) Past Reality Negativity	(3) Present Possibility Moment
(a) I	My feelings are <i>everlasting</i>	My feelings are <i>inexplicable</i>	<i>Autonomy</i> of the self
(b) You	The other is <i>absolute</i> , the <i>true one</i>	The other is <i>ungraspable</i>	<i>Recognition</i> of the other
(c) We	The relationship is <i>unconditional</i>	The relationship is <i>unrealisable</i>	<i>Challenge</i> of the relationship
	Infinite movement (‘enchantment’)	Finite movement (‘sacrifice’)	Marriage (‘repetition’)

As visualised above, through a renewal or modification at all three levels, a de-institutionalised marriage can potentially lead to the autonomy of (a) the self, (b) the other, and (c) the relationship.

With regard to an individual’s relation to oneself (a), the marital process involves the courage to allow oneself to be guided by an inexplicable passion. To be in love, above all, means to put oneself at stake. Frightening as it may be, one’s existence becomes dependent on a feeling that is ultimately ungraspable and uncontrollable. Yet if one allows one’s existence to be touched and hence to be modified by that passion—a modification that necessarily involves sacrifices—one gains a strong will that is profoundly decisive and certain. In being able to impose this highly personal (*autos*) passionate imperative (*nomos*) upon one’s reality, one can become—in that very moment—an autonomous person in the true sense of word. Thus, if only for a moment, this surrender to, or dependence on, one’s passion can ‘repeat’ itself in a moment of sovereign autonomy.

Similarly, the double marital movement can set the beloved (b) free as an autonomous person. To love someone ‘forever’ above all means not to take the other for granted. By placing the beloved in the light of an infinite, indeterminate promise of the future, everything I have come to know about her is reframed within a perspective of possibility. There may be no other person in the world whose thoughts and deeds I have examined more closely, whose body I have observed more intimately, and whose feelings I contemplated more deeply—no one I could claim to know better than the beloved—yet still I find myself wondering who this individual truly is, or what she might do to me today. My extensive knowledge thus ‘repeats’ itself in a truthful lack of knowledge. To recognise the other’s ‘infinity’ is, therefore, to recognise them as a free person. When the beloved, in my eyes, loses this indeterminacy—when the other comes to coincide entirely with a fixed identity,

rather than remaining someone still to be discovered—the institution of marriage may persist, but the marital passion, and with it the autonomous potential of love, is lost.

Lastly, this renewal involves a challenge to the relationship itself (c). For as autonomous as marital love may appear, its existence remains just as insecure. Since the moment of renewal is as brief as an *Øjeblik*, marriage is de facto as short as that fleeting moment. It is this fragility that makes many yearn for the stable reality of a Fichtean ‘complete unification’. However, rather than striving for such a backwards fusion, one can instead engage with marital love as a continuous forward repetition of the precious moment. In the everyday life of the spouses, this repetition may sound as prosaic as the words ‘I love you’ can become. Yet within an autonomous relationship, these reaffirming words express the commitment of the spouses to not take their marriage for granted.

Thus, I propose to see marriage not as an eternal unification, but rather as the necessity to repeat the finite promise of infinite love over and over again—as in an infinite recurrence of the same—as once captured in a marriage poem by Ingrid Jonker ([49], p. 52, transl. mine):¹⁴

Ek herhaal jou	I repeat you
Ek herhaal jou	I repeat you
sonder begin of einde	without beginning or end
herhaal ek jou liggaam	I repeat your body.
Die dag het ‘n smal skadu	The day has a thin shadow
en die nag geel kruise	and the night yellow crosses
die landskap is sonder aansien	the landscape is without regard
en die mense ‘n ry kerse	and the people a row of candles
terwyl ek jou herhaal	while I repeat you
met my borste	with my breasts
wat die holtes van jou hand namaak	imitating the hollows of your hands

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Notes

- 1 Notwithstanding my technical delineation of these terms, I do recognise that people—including philosophers such as Alain Badiou [13] or Slavoj Žižek [14]—use the term ‘eternal’ to designate something similar to what I would classify here under the technical term ‘infinite love’.
- 2 In this essay, the variations ‘I love you’, ‘I love you forever’, ‘I will love you forever’, etc. are all considered designating the same promise of infinite love.
- 3 The social status and institutional conditions that play an important role in preparatory conditions of the institutional marriage vow are not considered here, because we are dealing with the discourse of marital love.
- 4 For this classification of types of speech acts (commissive, directive, assertive, expressive), see [36].
- 5 Defined by him as ‘those mental states (...) that are directed at or about objects and states of affairs in the world’ ([37], p. 444).
- 6 This similar critique is raised by Martin Stokhof ([38], p. 221).
- 7 A brief note on polygamy. The recognition of singularity of the beloved lies at the origin of the absolutistic character of eros—‘she is the one’ first and foremost means that she is the only object of my particular desire, an object that I accordingly cultivate in all its possible heterogeneity. The possibility of polygamy—one person being engaged in more than one marriage—does not

need to be understood as a relinquishment of this absoluteness of erotic desire, as if one would *share* one's feelings of love over several partners, but rather the possibility of having several passions of infinite love, multiple 'one's', next to each other.

Throughout this chapter I will primarily draw upon Kierkegaard. The references to Nietzsche are rather comparisons, offered to the reader to see a similar (yet also different) line of thought in Nietzsche's work.

For the notion of 'passion' in Kierkegaard, see e.g., [41], p. 22, p. 29, 35f, p. 38, 43f, 49f, p. 52, pp. 61–69, p. 74, pp. 77–81, p. 84, 90f, 93f, 96f, pp. 100–105, 128d, p. 132, p. 139; [42], p. 33, p. 42, p. 51, p. 55, p. 67, pp. 78–79, p. 99, p. 102, p. 110, pp. 121–122, p. 142, p. 154, p. 180, p. 193, p. 205, p. 207, pp. 214–215; [43], pp. 132–133.

For the notion of singularity, see [42], pp. 54–56, pp. 61–62, p. 66, pp. 69–71, pp. 74–79, p. 81, p. 82, p. 93, pp. 97–99. For 'the general' (*Almene*, translated by Hong as 'the universal', by me as 'the general'), see [42], pp. 54–56, p. 60, pp. 68–69, p. 71, pp. 76–77, pp. 81–83, p. 99, p. 115.

For the following parts on rationality and temporality, I will draw on Victor Kal's unpublished lectures. Some of the ideas can be found scattered around in his critical books on Spinoza [44] and Alexander Doegin [45], as well as in his recent book on Nietzsche [46]. Although the following is an application rather than a presentation of Kal's philosophy, the expressions 'legacy of the past' versus 'promise of the future', as well as 'backwards' versus 'forwards rationality' come directly from him.

The exact formulation of this well-known Kantian phrase comes from Schiller ([47], p. 208). Cf. Kant's formulation: 'Denn, wenn das moralische Gesetz gebietet, wir *sollen* jetzt bessere Menschen sein: so folgt unumgänglich, wir müssen es auch können' ([48], AA, VI, 50).

For the 'sacrifice movement' cf. [42], pp. 30–31, p. 74, p. 77, pp. 109–110, p. 113, p. 119, p. 140, p. 143.

This essay is entwined with explorations from various periods in my academic history, both as a student, a lecturer and as a researcher. For the first section, I am indebted to Frank Rebel, who introduced me to the metaphysics of marriage. The section on John Searle is informed by the lectures of Martin Stokhof. For the section on Kierkegaard, I owe a great debt to my mentor Victor Kal, as many ideas presented there are directly derived from his thinking. I am also grateful to my former students who enthusiastically participated in my BA course *Marriage in Theoretical Philosophy*. Furthermore, I would like to thank the organisers and participants of the *Philosophy of Love* workshop at Tilburg University (2020), especially commentators Hanne de Jaegher and Laura Candiottio, *The Concept of Love* conference at University of Bucharest (2021), and the Dutch-Flemish Day of Philosophy *On Desire* at KU Leuven (2024). Moreover, I wish to thank Sepp Eckenhausen, Lieke Knijnenburg, Matisse Huiskens, Aldo Kempen, Gael Gawlinkski and Jan Warndorff for proofreading parts of the text, and of course the three anonymous editors for their valuable feedback. Finally, it remains for me to say that, in accordance with the principles of good academic practice, I have written this essay as an unequivocal bachelor, without having to justify any marriage of my own. Yet, of course, as befits a philosopher, I have largely drawn on my own experiences. In gratitude for these experiences, I dedicate this exploration to those who have made me feel, if only for a finite moment, the unsettling infinities that have never ceased to make me think. *Amor ipse notitia est*.

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