

Can Our Beloved Pets Love Us Back?

1. Introduction

There is not much that I can tell you with certainty, but one thing that I can declare without an inkling of doubt is that I deeply love my cats. They are right up there with my romantic partner as the most important things in the entire world for me. I am regularly teeming with feelings of affection for them, I care deeply about them and take care of them on a daily basis, and I would not trade them in for anything. I want to be around them and spend time cuddling with them, and I do not like to leave them for extended periods of time. When they die, I am plagued by intense grief; and when I know they are dying, or when I suspect that they are dying, I experience so much anxiety and dread that I lose sleep and weight. Not only do I love my cats and know that I do, but I know that I am far from alone here in that many other people love their pets as well. My romantic partner loves our cats as deeply as I do, and I have family and friends who love their cats or their dogs. I also happen to know, via testimony from the subject of love himself, that noted moral philosopher David Brink loves his dog and his son's dog. It thus should be clear and uncontroversial that non-human animals can be the *objects* of love. But can they also be the *subjects* of love? Can our beloved pets, for instance, love us back?

For those of us who deeply love their pets and interact with them frequently, it is hard to entertain the possibility that our beloved pets do not love us back. Part of this, I imagine, is due to the fact that this is a rather sad and disappointing possibility that we simply do not want to be true. However, I would wager that another reason it can be difficult to entertain this possibility is because of their behavior toward us. Doesn't it just seem like they love us in light of how they act toward us? At any rate, my guess is that if you surveyed pet-lovers about whether their beloved pets love them back, you would largely receive affirmative answers. Many dog-lovers would surely say without hesitation that their dogs love them back. My romantic partner insists that our cats love us back.¹ The idea that our beloved cats and dogs can love us back is a very attractive one, but us pet-lovers with philosophical tendencies must step back in wonder and worry to ask: is it true? At the very least, is it one that we can reasonably believe as a result of justifying it with a satisfactory philosophical theory of love?

My aim in this chapter is to find such a theory of love that vindicates the claim that our beloved cats and dogs can love us back.² Philosophers of love tend to focus on certain kinds of interpersonal love, such as romantic love, or interpersonal love more generally rather than love involving non-human animals, and though some of them acknowledge the obvious fact from above

¹ She further insists that subjects of love can be found throughout the animal kingdom rather than just among humans and their pets, but my focus here is on whether our beloved pets—and in particular our beloved cats and dogs—can love us back, so I shall set questions about whether other non-human animals can love aside.

² This claim, along with any other in this discussion that asserts one of its conjuncts, should be understood as a restricted one that generally or typically holds true about our beloved pets rather than a universal one about them. That is: it should be understood as the analogue of the claim that “other humans are capable of loving us back,” which, optimistically speaking, generally or typically holds true of other humans and yet certainly admits of exceptions, as some humans are not capable of loving back due to a lack of mental development or to mental deficiency. Since there are exceptions—probably even more than that acknowledged here—to the truth that other humans are capable of loving us back, we should similarly acknowledge that there will almost certainly be exceptions if it turns out to be true that our beloved cats or dogs are capable of loving us back (e.g., cats or dogs that were not exposed to friendly humans early enough in life).

that our pets can be the objects of our love, the possibility of them being subjects of love is either rejected or, more commonly, is not explicitly addressed, let alone substantiated.³ My hope here, then, is to address this relatively neglected topic of our pets as possible subjects of love—and in particular our *cats and dogs* as possible subjects of love—by vindicating this attractive possibility with a satisfactory theory of love.⁴

I shall begin by criticizing some recent attempts by scientists to demonstrate that dogs can love us back, which will reveal two important things in the context of the present inquiry. On the one hand, it will reveal the theoretical shortcomings of these attempts and thus the need to find an adequate philosophical theory of love that can be used to try to show that our beloved cats and dogs can love us back. On the other hand, it will reveal a few plausible ideas about love that direct us to certain philosophical theories of love that, I shall argue, can be used to justify the conclusion that dogs, at least, are capable of loving us back. So, after I critically evaluate these arguments from scientists and sift out their plausible ideas about love that direct us to these philosophical theories of love, I will then discuss these theories and argue that, while they can provisionally substantiate the claim that dogs can love us back, neither is able to show that cats can love us back. From here, however, I shall throw cold water on these defenses of the claim that dogs can love us back by arguing that the two philosophical theories they utilize are unsatisfactory because they both fail to explicitly capture three fundamental truths about love that, I contend, any viable theory must capture. This will eventually lead us, I shall argue, to a slightly modified form of Sam Shpall's tripartite theory of love, which I contend is a tentatively adequate philosophical theory of love that can provisionally support the conclusion that dogs can love us back. Unfortunately, this theory—just like the previous two—will not be able to justify the personally attractive idea that our beloved cats can love us back, and so I will end the chapter by taking the sting out of this disappointing result by explaining why it does not really matter if cats cannot love us back.

2. Attempts from Scientists to Prove that Dogs Can Love Us Back

A great place to begin a discussion about whether our beloved cats and dogs can love us back is with some recent attempts by scientists to establish that dogs can do so, which, at least in some cases, can then be extended to cats. One of these attempts comes from neuroscientist Gregory Burns (2013), another comes from ecologist Carl Safina in a *New York Times* article by Claudia Dreifus (2019), and a few more, which includes the most promising of the lot, come from psychologist Clive Wynne (2019).⁵ Before I examine these arguments, however, I first need to draw an important distinction

³ One notable and wonderful exception here is Milligan (2017), which argues that nonhuman animals can be both the objects and the subjects of love because they can be the objects and the subjects of *grief*, and creatures only grieve over what they love.

⁴ My approach thus differs from that of Milligan (2017) in two ways. First of all, my focus is on whether our beloved cats and dogs can love us back rather than the more general focus on whether non-human animals can love. Second, I am interested in justifying the conclusion that our beloved cats and dogs can love us back with an adequate philosophical theory of what constitutes love rather than relying on the (extremely plausible!) theoretical premise that creatures only grieve over what they love. I am interested in finding a theory that allows me to mount an argument of the following form: love = L, our pets can have L toward us or at least something that comes sufficiently close to L to count as love, so our pets can love us back. Once the theory tells us what constituents make up L, we can then determine whether our pets can love us back by determining whether they can have those constituents of L toward us or at least something that comes sufficiently close to L to count as love.

⁵ Although I will be critical of Burns and Wynne in what follows, I still highly recommend their books, which are well-written, provocative, and very informative. The chapters toward the end of Burns' book on losing his beloved dog, Lyra,

that will inform my critical evaluation of them. This is the distinction between love-the-psychological-condition and love-the-relationship,⁶ both of which are legitimately referred to as “love,” where the former is a psychological condition of individual subjects that may or may not obtain within a personal, loving relationship between two individual subjects that love each other, while the latter is such a relationship. The present inquiry into whether our beloved cats and dogs can love us back is one into whether they can have the same kind of psychological condition of individual subjects toward us as we do them, which they of course must be able to have prior to them being capable of participating in personal, loving relationships between two individual subjects that love each other. All talk of “love” in this paper, then, is of love-the-psychological-condition. Furthermore, while love is a psychological condition, it is a deep and stable condition rather than a shallow one or a fleeting mental event (Naar 2013, p. 352; Wonderly 2017, p. 239). Now this is not to say that love must last forever; such a claim is too strong, as love can surely come to an end before the subject of love does. However, in order for something in one’s psyche to be love, it must be something that is deep and stable and thus difficult to extirpate from the subject’s psyche; it must not be something that comes and goes rather quickly, or that we can describe as “just a phase.”

We are now ready to take a look at the relevant arguments. Beginning with that from Gregory Burns, he argues that to love something is to just feel empathy for that something, or to feel whatever that something is feeling, and since dogs can empathize with us—they can feel what we feel—they can love us back.⁷

Unfortunately, this attempt does not work because the theoretical premise that loving something is no more than empathizing with it is false. Besides the fact that love is not, as is a bout of empathizing with another, a fleeting mental event, empathizing with other people that we do not love is an all-too-common occurrence. For instance, many people empathize with the starving children seen on TV by feeling their pain to some extent, and even though these people might *care about* these children, they do not love them (they would not flip the channel and go back to watching TV if they saw actual loved ones on the screen!). Since I understand very well based on my experiences with pet loss what it is like to lose a beloved pet, it is rather easy for me to understand and feel what others, including unloved strangers, who have lost pets feel; I even felt this while reading Burns’ very moving discussion of losing his beloved dog, Lyra, which brought me to tears. Moreover, instances of empathy do not even have to co-exist with positive orientations toward others; instead, people can and do empathize with those that they are rather indifferent toward or even that they absolutely *bate*. As examples of the former: some of us can understand very well, from

and adopting his new dog, Cato, were particularly evocative and will deeply resonate with other pet-lovers that have suffered devastating pet loss and have afterwards experienced the joy of giving new animals loving homes. Burns also expresses some very admirable attitudes toward how dogs should be treated as research subjects and how we should view the potential value of such research: not only should we treat dogs like children when using them for scientific research, but we should see such research involving dogs as having the potential to improve the welfare of dogs rather than just the welfare of humans. The last chapter of Wynne’s book is admirably dedicated to arguing that dogs deserve better treatment from humans, who are the ones that shape the worlds that dogs inhabit. At one point he draws a nice analogy with loving parents who combine love and dominance to argue that human dominance over dogs does not have to—and indeed should not—take an aggressive, cruel, or violent form. Shortly thereafter he rightfully maintains that dogs should be understood and respected as individuals, and that they should be loved and given the amount of social interaction that they require rather than condemned to crushing solitude and loneliness by their first-world humans. He then goes on to explain how to help dogs in shelters get adopted, and he forcefully ends the chapter by pointing to the need to reform lax governmental regulations that allow too much human mistreatment of dogs. In a nutshell: despite my ensuing criticism of their arguments, there is much to admire in their excellent books, which I highly recommend.

⁶ This distinction maps on to that drawn by Smuts (2014a) between “love-the-feeling” and “love-the-relationship.”

⁷ Burns (2013, p. 229): “To love, and to be loved, is to feel what another feels and have that returned. It really is that simple.” I am afraid not. Whatever love is, it is far from simple.

personal experience, the negative emotions that our fellow citizens might experience toward, or as a result of, certain politicians. We can even understand, although not from personal experience, the emotions that dissenting fellow citizens experience from their different perspectives, such as the indignation and horror that anti-abortionists must feel at a practice that they see, given their belief systems, as a horrific and unjustified practice. As a final and rather extreme example of the latter, imagine two enemies, A & B, that hate each other and are intent on harming each other as much as possible. A kidnaps B, ties him up, and tortures him as much as he can, all out of hatred for B. In order to maximally enjoy torturing B, where the enjoyment comes from the understanding of how much pain B experiences, A empathizes with B by putting himself in B's position in order to understand exactly what B must be thinking and feeling, which results in the understanding of how much pain B is experiencing. A empathizes with B, but far from loving B, A hates and tortures B. Perhaps empathy is required for love or for loving well, but it is not the same as love, and so we cannot infer, based on the false equivalence of love with empathizing, that our beloved dogs can love us back from the fact that they can empathize with us.

Next we have Carl Safina's argument. As I understand it, Safina argues that dogs can love us back because they can have the desire to be near us for no other reason than to be near us.⁸ More specifically, he maintains that a fundamental part of love is the non-instrumental desire to be near its object, and since dogs can have this desire toward their humans, they can love their humans back. My cats seem to have this desire to be with me as well, and so, by parity of reasoning, they appear to love me back. How short and sweet!

Unfortunately, this argument is invalid because the relevant desire can be present even though love is not, which means that the presence of this desire—even if it is necessary for love according to the argument's first premise—is not sufficient for love. Such a desire is, for example, part of being obsessed with another, yet obsession is not love. Stalkers are a great example: they are obsessed with their objects and as such possess a strong desire to be near them, but they do not love those objects because their orientation toward those objects is not selfless at all. While romantic love for another may not be completely selfless,⁹ it is, to a large extent, a selfless devotion to the well-being and will of its object, which the stalker, as the reliable tormenter of its object that is completely impervious to outright demands to stop, clearly does not have. As a much less disturbing example, one may desire to be near another because one is merely attached to them. Of course, love often comes in attachment form, so being attached to something might be part of loving it. However, attachment can occur without love, and so the desire to be near someone may signal such attachment. Finally, a desire to be near someone else could, in theory at least, exist completely on its own, apart from any larger psychological complexes such as obsession or attachment. We can imagine, for instance, some advanced neuroscientists who have figured out how to induce new, underived desires making one of their patients desire to be around someone they previously did not know, where this desire is a strange one to the subject that they find very hard to resist. The patient does not feel affection for this strange person, nor are they selflessly devoted to their well-being and will. Basically, this strange person is still a complete stranger that is not loved despite the bizarre yet difficult-to-resist desire that the patient has to be with them. At any rate, these examples all point to a disappointing conclusion: that having the desire to be around something for no ulterior motive is

⁸ Interestingly, Burns (2013, pp. 193-194) suggests the same argument in a tale about how his beloved dog, Callie, uncharacteristically hopped up on his lap and went to sleep, which betrayed the desire to be near him for no ulterior motive (he had no food to give her, and she could have received warmth by cozying up with the other dog, Lyra, rather than him). Unfortunately, this argument, as we are about to see, does not work.

⁹ For a wonderful discussion of how romantic love is essentially, or at least characteristically, selfish, see Wonderly (2017).

not sufficient for loving it, which means that we have not substantiated the claim that our beloved cats and dogs can love us back by establishing that they can have this desire toward us.¹⁰

Finally, we have some arguments from Clive Wynne, which are actually a bit hard to pin down. One is based in the hyper-sociability of dogs, and it appears in the following passage:

Dogs have an exaggerated, ebullient, perhaps even excessive capacity to form affectionate relationships with members of other species. This capacity is so great that, if we saw it in one of our own kind, we would consider it quite strange—pathological, even. In my scientific writing, where I am obliged to use technical language, I call this abnormal behavior hypersociability. But as a dog lover who cares deeply about animals and their welfare, I see absolutely no reason we shouldn't just call it love (Wynne 2019, pp. 6-7).

I am not entirely sure what the argument is here, but I think that it can be interpreted in two ways. On one reading, Wynne argues that dogs have the capacity to form affectionate relationships with us, and since this capacity just is the capacity to love us, dogs have the capacity to love us back. On another reading, he argues that dogs exhibit hyper-social behavior toward us, and since hyper-social behavior either is love or indicates love, dogs love us back. The first reading can be applied to cats as well: they have the capacity to form affectionate relationships with us, so if this capacity is the capacity to love us, then cats have the capacity to love us back. Even better: since my cats and I have affectionate relationships, it follows that they do love me back!

Although quite attractive for the hopeful cat-lover in me, I do not think that either interpretation of this argument is successful. Let's consider the first interpretation of the argument. By claiming that dogs have the capacity to form affectionate relationships with us and that this capacity just is the capacity to love us, this argument is equating love with affectionate relationships. This, however, is problematic regardless of whether we understand "love" here to refer to love-the-psychological-condition or love-the-relationship. If it refers, on the one hand, to love-the-psychological-condition, then the argument is confusing a psychological condition of individual subjects with a kind of relationship shared by two individual subjects that have that very condition toward each other. To make matters worse, since it equates the capacity to participate in affectionate relationships with the capacity to love, the argument is begging the question by simply asserting, without defense, that dogs have the capacity to participate in affectionate relationships, as this amounts to the very capacity that it is supposed to be proving that dogs have.

On the other hand, if "love" here refers to love-the-relationship (and presumably it does since this is the more charitable interpretation), then the argument rests on a false premise and still begs the question. Remember that love-the-relationship refers to a personal, loving relationship between two parties that love each other, and so under this interpretation of the argument, it equates affectionate relationships with personal, loving relationships between two parties that love each

¹⁰ I want to note two things here. First, another problem with Safina's argument is that the desire to be with another may not be necessary for loving them, (Velleman (1999), for instance, famously maintains that love has nothing essentially to do with desires), which means that his first premise may be false. He could easily skate around this problem, however, by weakening his first premise into the claim that the desire to be with another is only *characteristically* part of loving them. Second, it is possible to interpret Burns as offering a structurally similar argument to that of Safina's here: that empathizing with another is fundamental to love, which means that dogs can love us back because they can empathize with us. However, my examples of people empathizing with unloved strangers or their most hated enemies that sunk his earlier attempt reveal this new one to fail for the same reason that Safina's argument failed: even if we grant the premise that empathizing with our beloveds is fundamental to—and thus necessary for—loving them, we cannot infer that our beloved pets can love us back from the fact that they can empathize with us because empathizing with others is not sufficient for loving them.

other. But this equation is false, since relationships that are characterized by mutual feelings or displays of affection are not necessarily loving relationships between two parties that love each other. Indeed, even if many affectionate relationships do turn out to have unrequited or mutual love in them, such relationships need not have any love in them whatsoever, let alone mutual love. Coworkers, for example, may regularly feel affection for each other and display it through smiles, handshakes, fist-bumps, or other friendly behavior without loving each other. The same can occur between graduate students and their advisors, or perhaps even between amiable service-providers and their customers. Accordingly, our beloved cats and dogs may feel and display affection for us without loving us, and so we cannot infer that they love us back even if we have relationships with them characterized by mutual feelings and displays of affection. Furthermore, by equating affectionate relationships with loving relationships, the second interpretation of the argument begs the question by asserting, without defense, that dogs can participate in affectionate relationships: we saw earlier that one must have the capacity for loving prior to having the capacity for participating in loving relationships between two subjects that love each other, and so it begs the question to simply state, without argument, that dogs can participate in these affectionate relationships that require the capacity for loving. In order to be justified in maintaining that dogs can participate in such relationships between two subjects that love each other, one must *first* have grounds for thinking that dogs can love, yet these grounds are precisely what are lacking here.

Next let's consider the second interpretation of the argument. While dogs undoubtedly exhibit hyper-social behavior toward humans, this behavior does not amount to love nor does it necessarily indicate love. As we have seen, love is an internal, psychological condition of individual subjects—it is not some set of behaviors or performances. Love is a relatively stable or enduring psychological condition, whereas behaviors are quite fleeting. Love surely leads to certain behavioral expressions or even to patterns of these things, but it is not constituted by these expressions or any other type of behavior. Furthermore, hyper-social behavior can be an indicator of other conditions rather than love for others. Such behavior can express loneliness, or a pathological desire to be liked (which perhaps stems from a lack of self-esteem or some deeper psychological condition), or an extroverted personality, or extreme social dependence, or as Wynne himself suggests by comparing characteristic dog behavior to that seen in humans, Williams-Beuren Syndrome.¹¹ Generally speaking, hyper-social behavior indicates a disposition to be very social with others, but conditions other than love, such as those just enumerated, dispose us to be very social, and so we cannot infer love from the disposition to be very social.

Besides the argument based in dogs' hyper-sociability, Wynne seems to offer another argument in the following passage:

Dogs are not merely sociable; they display actual, bona fide *affection*—what we humans, if we were characterizing it in members of our own species, would commonly call love (Wynne 2019, pp. 124-125).

The argument here seems to be that, since dogs display affection for others, which are just displays of love, those dogs love others. Cats also display affection (or at least seem to do so), so if these

¹¹ According to Wynne, those with this syndrome are standardly described as “outgoing, highly sociable, extremely friendly, endearing, engaging, showing an extreme interest in other people, and unafraid of strangers” (Wynne 2019, p. 116). While certainly fascinating, it is nevertheless rather puzzling that Wynne compares the behavior and the relevant genes of dogs to that of people with Williams-Beuren syndrome because, so long as this is a different syndrome from that of love, the comparison suggests that dogs have their own version of this syndrome rather than love.

displays are displays of love, then cats can love others as well. But even better: since my cats display affection toward me, they love me back!

Though once again quite attractive for the hopeful cat-lover in me, I do not think that this argument works either. The main problem here is that while displays of affection *might be* displays of love, they might not be—they may be a sign of some other psychological condition besides love. Put differently: although displays of affection might flow from love, they might also flow from other conditions, such as loneliness, extreme social dependence, Williams-Beuren Syndrome, or even obsession. They may also indicate a mere, shallow liking for someone rather than a deep, full-blown love for them. Accordingly, even if dogs display affection for others, this does not guarantee that they love them because this affection can flow from conditions other than love.

The final argument that Wynne seems to offer, which I consider to be the strongest of the lot, appears in this striking passage:

And we can see in dogs' genetic material unmistakable signs of their preparedness to care about us. We can follow this signal back up, through hormones and brain structures, past hearts that beat together as people and their dogs find one another, noting dogs' happy reactions to being with the people they care about and distress at being separated from them, seeing how getting close to their person can sometimes be as rewarding to dogs as the very food they eat, and how they will try to help their people when they are in distress—if they can just understand what needs to be done. At every level of analysis, in studies from independent research groups spread around the world, we see the same message beaming out: The essence of dog is love (Wynne 2019, pp. 125-126).

What seems to be going on here is something like the following: dogs love their humans as evidenced by them showing signs of doing so by (1) their hearts beating “as one” with their humans, which is a popular way of construing the hearts of lovers in Western culture, (2) exhibiting attachment to their humans by showing distress at being separated and happiness while with them,¹² (3) finding it rewarding to be near their humans, and (4) caring about their humans to the point of trying to help them when in distress.

Though much more promising than the other arguments, this one does not clearly work because it is not yet clear that these constitute signs of love rather than a different condition that can give rise to similar signs. We saw above when evaluating Carl Safina's argument that while attachment can be part of love, it can occur without love, and this makes it possible for two people, L and A, to have their hearts beat as one even if L loves A but A is only attached to L. And those who are attached to others are going to find it rewarding to be near them, so as far as the first three signs go, they might indicate attachment without love rather than attachment-love. The remaining sign of caring for their humans, however, is clearly a sign of something besides attachment, and once it is combined with the signs of attachment, these four signs amount to signs that *dogs are attached to and care about their humans*.

But it is at this point that the argument needs to be filled in: how do we get dogs loving humans from them being attached to them and caring about them? Is being attached plus caring about sufficient for loving? At this point we run head-first into the need for theorizing about love in order to complete the argument: we need a satisfactory theory of love that vindicates the idea that being attached to and caring about something is sufficient for loving it. This is especially important because it is not clear that attachment plus care is sufficient for love since such a combination may not be disinterested enough to count as love. For as Monique Wonderly (2017) forcefully argues,

¹² My understanding of attachment comes from the discussions of it found in Harcourt (2017) and Wonderly (2017).

attachment is self-interested rather than disinterested or altruistic because, in addition to affective dispositions to experience distress or insecurity due to separation from its object along with dispositions to experience comfort or security due to being with its object, attachment is constituted by the self-serving desire to be with its object. That is: we want to be with things that we are attached to *for our own sake*, or for the sake of *our own well-being*—namely, to avoid feelings of distress due to separation and to enjoy feelings of security or comfort—rather than for their own sake, or for the sake of their well-being. But if attachment is self-interested in this way, then it is possible that any caring that comes along with it is also self-interested rather than altruistic or disinterested. In other words: caring about one’s object of attachment might take the form of self-interested caring about that object’s welfare, which is caring about the object faring well not for *its* own sake, but rather for the attached subject’s sake.¹³ Such a purely self-interested combination of attachment plus caring is not sufficient for love because love is at least partly disinterested: an essential part of loving something is caring about its welfare *for its own sake*.¹⁴ This kind of caring is surely compatible with an extra layer of self-interested caring about the beloved’s welfare for the lover’s own sake, but one still does not love something if this self-interested caring is the only kind of caring that one has for it because one lacks the kind of caring about it that is essential for loving it. At any rate, this last argument from Wynne, despite its promise, calls for the very kind of adequate philosophical theory of love that I am trying to locate in this chapter.

Although none of these attempts succeeds in justifying the attractive idea that dogs can love us back, some of them nevertheless capture some plausible claims about love that direct us to philosophical theories of love that might be able to do so. Carl Safina’s argument, for example, plausibly claims that the desire to be near something just for the sake of being near it is fundamental to love. Furthermore, Clive Wynne’s last argument points to caring as fundamental to love. Let’s take a look at the philosophical theories to which these ideas point and whether they can justify the claim that our beloved cats and dogs can love us back.

3. First Potentially Vindicating Theory: Hurka’s Theory

We saw earlier when evaluating Carl Safina’s argument that the desire to be near something for no ulterior motive is not sufficient for loving it. However, since it is nevertheless a desire that is characteristically part of love, we might be able to get love—or at least a form of love—if we add to this desire. This brings us to our first potentially vindicating theory from Thomas Hurka (2017), which can be interpreted as one that builds on the desire to be with another and, in doing so, provides additional elements of love that allow us to distinguish it from other conditions such as obsession. Hurka’s theory understands love as a psychological complex of different attitudes and dispositions that varies across cases because it can be “complete” or “incomplete.” What he dubs “complete” love is constituted by at least the following attitudes and dispositions:

¹³ Perhaps this is part of the stalker’s obsession: perhaps the stalker, S, is attached to their object, O, and only cares about O’s welfare for the sake of S’s envisioned life with O. If so, then this is all the more reason to doubt that attachment plus care is sufficient for love.

¹⁴ Those who appear to agree that love requires such disinterested care or concern for its object include Brown (1987), Soble (1990), Giles (1994), LaFollette (1996), Noller (1996), Brink (1999), White (2001), Kolody (2003), Frankfurt (2004), Helm (2010), Jollimore (2011), Smuts (2013), Smuts (2014a), Smuts (2014b), Franklin-Hall and Jaworska (2017), Wonderly (2017), and Shpall (2018). For apparent dissent, see Velleman (1999) and Zangwill (2013).

...a benevolent desire for the other's happiness and whatever makes her life go well, plus a tendency to be pleased when she's happy and pained when she suffers; a desire to spend time with her and enjoy her company; some belief that she has admirable talents or character traits; a desire for her love, or desire that she desire your happiness and company and, reciprocally, want you to desire hers; a desire to know things, both important and trivial, about her and perhaps to reveal yourself to her; and a tendency to think about her when she's absent (Hurka 2017, pp. 163-164).

“Incomplete” love, by contrast, is constituted by a sufficient amount of these elements but not, as in “complete” love, by all of them. Now it is important to note right away that Hurka's list here provides us with an important element that allows us to distinguish love from obsession: the benevolent desire for the other's happiness and whatever makes its life go well. While obsession may involve most of these attitudes and dispositions of complete love, it seems to crucially lack this benevolent desire, which is surely an essential constituent of love.¹⁵ The obsessed stalker, S, has an overwhelming desire to be with the other person, P, and seems to only desire P's happiness in the form of *P's being happy being with S*. The object of the desire is not that P fares well, but that *P fares well while being with S and partly because P is romantically involved with S*. The desire is not “benevolent” because it is not truly altruistic or selfless—it is not a desire for P to fare well as an end-in-itself or for P's own sake. P's faring well is not an object of desire or importance in its own right for S; it is only important as an indispensable element of S's envisioned life for himself. It is this envisioned life for himself that is of ultimate importance for S here, and P's faring well is only desired for the sake of that envisioned life rather than for P's own sake. This is why S is obsessed with and cannot truly love P. What this all suggests is that the presence of the benevolent desire in Hurka's collection of love-constituting attitudes and dispositions gives it a strong claim to being love rather than obsession, which makes it a theory that we can use to try to justify the conclusion that our beloved cats and dogs can love us back. Furthermore, given that this benevolent desire is the only element on Hurka's list that can clearly separate love from obsession, Hurka's theory calls for the friendly amendment of specifying this desire as an essential part of love.

Can our beloved cats and dogs have enough of Hurka's collection of love-constituting attitudes and dispositions toward us to love us back? While it seems doubtful that our pets can have everything in this collection, I think that dogs, at least, can have enough of love's constituents toward their humans, including the essential desire for their happiness, to qualify as capable of loving them back under this theory. First of all, it does seem pretty clear that many beloved dogs have the desire to spend time with their humans and to enjoy their company, and they surely have the tendency to think about them when they are gone (if only to wonder where they went). Furthermore, while dogs may lack the concept of admirability or those of the many specific admirable traits, many of them surely have *some* sort of belief or doxastic state to the effect that their humans are particularly good humans.

Can dogs also have benevolent desires for the happiness of their humans plus a tendency to be pleased when they are happy and pained when they suffer? The popular idea of the loyal dog that protects its human from harm even at significant personal cost and that whimpers when its human seems hurt bodes very well here, as it suggests that loyal dogs are pained when their humans are suffering and have such a strong desire for the happiness of their humans that they will put their own well-being on the line to protect them. The only remaining elements here are the desires for knowledge about the beloved and wanting them to love back, but Hurka allows love to take an

¹⁵ Other commentators that appear to agree with me here that this desire is an essential constituent of love are Green (1997), White (2001), Frankfurt (2004), and Wonderly (2017).

incomplete form by having a sufficient amount of the constituents of complete love, and so we can provisionally conclude that dogs can love their humans back because they can have enough of complete love's constituents toward them. In particular, dogs can have (1) the desire to be with their beloved humans and enjoy their company, (2) the benevolent desire for their happiness along with a tendency to be happy when they are happy and pained when they suffer, (3) a tendency to think about them when they are gone, and (4) some sort of doxastic state to the effect that they are good creatures (e.g., they are trustworthy and kind creatures).

Unfortunately, it does not seem like our beloved cats—at least based on my experience with *my* beloved cats—can have enough of these attitudes and dispositions toward us to love us back. My beloved cats, for example, certainly have the desire to spend time with my partner and me and to enjoy our company, and surely there are cats around the globe that have the same desires toward their humans. It also seems plausible to suppose that our beloved cats have some sort of doxastic state to the effect that we are trustworthy and kind, especially with respect to those of us that are reliable sources of food, water, massages, cuddles, and play. They could also have a tendency to think about us when we are gone. However, they seem to lack the benevolent desire for our happiness along with a tendency to be happy when we are happy and pained when we suffer. My cats, for instance, have never seemed troubled in the slightest when I am suffering; in fact, they do not even seem to notice. None of my cats have ever been concerned to avoid trampling over my genitals when walking over me, nor have they ever been bothered at having trampled over them. Ditto when it comes to stepping over and scratching my partner Bethany: they are never concerned to avoid scratching her when trampling over her and they show no signs of being bothered by scratching her. They also do not seem to notice or react positively to us being happy. Although what they do can make us feel very happy, there is no indication that they are doing anything *to make us happy* and thus no good evidence that they desire our happiness. Generally speaking, our cats have shown no memorable evidence that they desire our happiness or that they are emotionally vulnerable to our welfare states, and so, as long as there is no reason to think that our beloved cats are an anomaly among cats, we can provisionally conclude that cats cannot love us back because they cannot benevolently desire our happiness or be emotionally vulnerable to our welfare states.

Overall, then, we have the following provisional conclusion under Hurka's theory: our beloved dogs can love us back, but our beloved cats cannot. At most, then, his theory justifies the claim that our beloved dogs can love us back; it does not show that *both* our beloved cats and dogs can love us back. While this is not a total win here, it is at least a tentative win for dog-lovers who believe that dogs can love us back.

4. Second Potentially Vindicating Theory: Franklin-Hall and Jaworska's Theory

Although Clive Wynne's final argument, I argued, did not clearly succeed as it stands, it suggested that caring is fundamental to love. When evaluating the apparent theoretical underpinnings of this argument, I further claimed—in agreement with other commentators—that this caring must be disinterested: what is fundamental to love is caring about the beloved's welfare for its own sake or for their own sake. Now the first two theories that this points to are two of the big dogs (pun intended!) in the philosophical literature on love: Niko Kolodny's (2003) relationship theory of love and Harry Frankfurt's (2004) volitional theory of love. Unfortunately, neither of these two prominent theories are hospitable to the attractive idea that our beloved cats and dogs can love us back. Kolodny's relationship view maintains that love is *valuing the beloved and the personal relationship shared with them*, where this valuing encompasses caring and is constituted by an enormously complex

set of attitudes and dispositions, including beliefs about the existence and reason-giving force of the relationship shared with the beloved, which our beloved pets surely do not have the cognitive capacity to have. Under the relationship view, then, our pets do not seem able to love us back even though we can presumably love them. By contrast, Frankfurt's theory claims that love is *a configuration of the will that primarily consists in a special mode of disinterested concern for the beloved's good*. However, Frankfurt's theory further maintains that true concern—and therefore love—is unique to humans because it is partly constituted by higher-order desires about our other desires and thus depends upon our mind's ability to have higher-order attitudes, desires, and thoughts about our attitudes, desires, and thoughts. So, even though we can love our pets under Frankfurt's view, our beloved pets cannot love us back.¹⁶

In a similar fashion to Frankfurt, Bennet Helm (2010) seems to understand love as a disinterested mode of concern for another but claims further that such concern contains what he dubs “intimate identification”, which, as I understand it, is a concern for the beloved's identity, or for who they are as a person in terms of their interests, values, and so on.¹⁷ Since our beloved pets surely are not concerned with our identities, they cannot love us back under Helm's theory either. Of course, his theory focuses only on interpersonal love, so it might only preclude our beloved pets from loving us back in the same way that we love other people, where this leaves open the possibility that they love us back in some other way in the sense that this possibility has not been definitely ruled out as illusory. This still, however, falls short of substantiating the conclusion that our beloved cats and dogs can love us back.

While these prominent theories do not support this conclusion, there is another theory here—the dispositional theory of love offered by Andrew Franklin-Hall and Agnieszka Jaworska (2017)—that builds love out of caring and yet is rather hospitable to our pets being the subjects of love. Much like Hurka's theory, their dispositional theory understands love as a complex cluster of dispositions that can vary across cases because it can come in typical or atypical form. Typical love, under this view, consists of three elements: (1) caring about the beloved's welfare for its own sake, (2) caring about being with the beloved, sharing activities with them, and otherwise interacting with them, and (3) caring about the beloved's appreciation of the lover's love and the beloved loving in return. Atypical love, by contrast, need not contain both (2) and (3), but it must contain (1), because caring about the beloved's welfare for its own sake is an essential constituent of love under this view. And these instances of caring about something are all analyzed in dispositional terms. So, for example, to care about the beloved's welfare for its own sake is, in part, to be disposed to experience a pattern of emotions focused on the beloved's welfare. This includes the disposition to be happy when the beloved is happy and pained when they suffer, which was partly constitutive of complete love under Hurka's theory, but it also includes the dispositions to be worried when they are in trouble, angry at what threatens to harm them, and relief when the trouble passes. Additionally, caring about the beloved's welfare for its own sake is partly constituted by dispositions to perceive actions that promote their welfare as things that must be done and to be reluctant to even consider

¹⁶ This pessimistic conclusion that our beloved pets cannot love us back is suggested by other prominent theories of love as well, such as David Velleman's (1999) notorious Kantian view of love that understands it as a moral emotion that, like moral respect, *is a response to another's inherent value as a self-existent end*. Under this theory, our beloved pets can love us back if and only if they can have their emotional defenses arrested by the awareness of our dignity or rational nature, which seems rather unlikely.

¹⁷ As I understand him, Helm presents his view as one that, unlike Frankfurt's view, captures the depth of love and conceptually separates love for another from the mere concern for their well-being. It seems to me, however, that Frankfurt's view may not really be different, as being concerned for your beloved's identity might just be one of the many ways in which you are concerned for their well-being.

actions that would harm them. Something similar will then be true of the other two elements of caring.

Although Franklin-Hall and Jaworska portray loving as characteristically human, they do acknowledge the possibility of our most sophisticated fellow animals being able to love. They do not provide specific examples of the animals they have in mind here, but I think that, once again, at least dogs can have something that sufficiently resembles typical love, which includes the essential caring about the beloved's welfare for its own sake, to qualify as possible subjects of love under this theory. Recall first the popular idea of the loyal dog that protects its human from harm even at significant personal cost and that whimpers when its human seems hurt. This strongly suggests that loyal dogs care about their human's welfare for its own sake. Furthermore, while I doubt that even these loyal dogs can care about their humans appreciating their love and reciprocating it, they might be able to care about being with and interacting with their humans, and at the very least they certainly *desire* to be with and interact with their humans, which is close enough to the second kind of caring that partly constitutes typical love under this theory. So, while it does seem like dogs are precluded from loving in the typical way under this theory, it nevertheless seems like they can love atypically because they can care about their human's welfare for its own sake and desire to be with and interact with them.

While dogs seem capable of loving under this theory, our beloved cats, alas, do not. As we saw in the previous section, cats do not seem to be emotionally vulnerable to our welfare states or even to benevolently desire that we fare well, and so they do not seem to care about our well-being for its own sake. Yet such caring is the only essential constituent of love under this view, and so our beloved cats do not seem capable of loving us back under this theory because they do not seem capable of having the only essential constituent of love toward us. We therefore end up with the same provisional conclusion under this theory: our beloved dogs can love us back, but our beloved cats cannot. This is of course rather disappointing for loving cat-parents like me, but it is another tentative win for dog-lovers that believe that dogs can love humans back.

5. Theory Troubles

Although Hurka's attitudinal-dispositional theory and Franklin-Hall and Jaworska's dispositional theory can both offer provisional support for the claim that dogs can love humans back, the theories themselves are unfortunately problematic because they fail to capture three fundamental truths about love that, I contend, are ones that any viable theory of love must capture. One of these truths is suggested by Clive Wynne's second to last argument: that affection is fundamental to love.¹⁸ More specifically, I contend that it is the disposition to feel affection for the beloved that is an essential, fundamental part of love that any viable theory must capture. Lovers feel affection for their beloveds; it is hard to conceive of a full-blown love for someone or something that involves no such feelings of affection for that someone or something. However, love is not itself, either completely or in part, these feelings of affection that come and go; rather, it is an enduring psychological condition that characteristically manifests itself in such feelings of affection. Accordingly, love must be partly constituted by a disposition to feel such affection, as such a disposition is the enduring psychological condition that characteristically manifests itself in such feelings of affection. Unfortunately, neither of our first two vindicating theories captures this essential feature of love.

¹⁸ Something along these lines is endorsed by Hoffman (1980), Brown (1987), Noller (1996), Abramson and Leite (2011), Jollimore (2011), and Shpall (2018).

Moreover, neither of the two theories here explicitly capture the fact that an essential part of loving something is not just to be concerned about its welfare, but to have a *special* concern for its welfare. In particular, loving something does not just require being concerned about its welfare *non-instrumentally* or *for its own sake*; love also requires being *especially* or *partially* concerned about its object's welfare. So, compared to an employer who is only concerned about their employee's welfare for the sake of filling their own pockets, the lover is concerned about their beloved's welfare for its own sake. Furthermore, compared to the non-instrumental concern that a virtuous person might have for the welfare of strangers that they do not love, the non-instrumental concern that such a person must have for the welfare of their loved ones must be stronger such that they must be disposed to prioritize and otherwise privilege the promotion of their beloved's welfare. Our theories of love, then, should build this special concern into their conceptions of love. However, Hurka's theory does not explicitly build the non-instrumental concern for the beloved's welfare into complete love, let alone a special version of this concern that privileges the beloved's welfare. Franklin-Hall and Jaworka's dispositional theory, by contrast, does explicitly build the concern for the beloved's welfare for its own sake into ideal love and even makes it the only essential constituent of love, but it does not explicitly make this concern special.

Finally, neither of these two theories capture the fact that two related, essential parts of loving something are seeing it as irreplaceable and being unwilling to accept substitutes for it.¹⁹ More specifically, an essential part of love is seeing its object as a special one that simply cannot be replaced without a sense of loss. Whereas other things easily admit of substitutes—they can be replaced by qualitatively equal or superior entities of the same type without any sense of loss—our beloved is a special object whose replacement necessitates a sense of loss. It is no wonder, then, that the lover must also be unwilling to accept replacements. Besides the other two essential features of love stressed above, then, our theories of love should also build this cognitive-volitional cluster into love, yet neither theory here explicitly does so. Since both theories under consideration here fail to explicitly incorporate the essential features of love discussed in this section into their accounts of love, they cannot, after all, substantiate the conclusion that dogs can love us back; we have to use a different philosophical theory.

6. The Last Potentially Vindicating Theory: Shpall's Tripartite Theory

Fortunately, there is a third philosophical theory of love that, with some friendly amendments, can provisionally justify the claim that dogs can love us back while capturing the three truths about love discussed in the previous section. This is Sam Shpall's (2018) tripartite theory of love, which is motivated by the idea that love is a significant source of felt meaning in life. Under this theory, love—or at least the central kind of love that makes life feel meaningful and worthwhile—is *devotion to something you like that makes you vulnerable to it*. Intense devotion is the most important feature of love under this theory, and it is a devotion to three things: promoting the beloved's good, promoting its ends, and being with it. Part of this devotion is that it makes the lover emotionally vulnerable in the sense that they are disposed to have emotional reactions to states of affairs in which the beloved figures (these are the same affective dispositions that the two previous theories discuss). And besides

¹⁹ Something along these lines can be found in Ehman (1976), Brown (1987), Kraut (1987), Nozick (1989), LaFollette (1996), Lamb (1997), Velleman (1999), White (2001), Solomon (2002), Kolodny (2003), Frankfurt (2004), Grau (2004), Landrum (2009), Helm (2010), Jollimore (2011), Smuts (2013), Zangwill (2013), Smuts (2014b), Pismenny and Prinz (2017), and Wonderly (2017). See Soble (1990) for apparent dissent.

being devoted to them, under this theory we must like our beloveds, where liking them can include being disposed to enjoy them or to feel affection for or attraction to them.

Put in slightly different terms, Shpall's theory of love construes it as follows: love is a devotion to something liked, where this devotion partly consists of special concern for the beloved's good (i.e., devotion to their good), which in turn partly consists of emotional vulnerability to the beloved's good and to what affects it. Now the first thing to note here is that this theory, unlike the previous two, captures the first two fundamental truths about love from the previous section. It claims, on the one hand, that an essential part of loving something is liking it, where such liking can be understood as the disposition to feel affection. On the other hand, it claims that an essential part of loving something is to be *devoted* to its ends and its good, where such devotion to its good is just another way of describing a special concern for its good. Of course, the second thing to note here is that, like the previous two theories, Shpall's theory does not explicitly capture the last of the three fundamental truths about love from the previous section—namely, that an essential feature of love is the cognitive-volitional cluster of seeing its object as irreplaceable and being unwilling to accept substitutes for it. This makes Shpall's theory look better than the previous two yet still insufficient for failing to explicitly capture this third and final truth.

Fortunately, Shpall's theory contains the resources to capture this third and last truth about love because we can expand the notion of devotion a little bit to capture the cognitive-volitional cluster of seeing the beloved as irreplaceable and being unwilling to accept substitutes for it. For being devoted to something, such as another person or a non-human animal, is partly constituted by seeing them as a special object in two ways.²⁰ One is seeing them—and thus their good—as not just important in its own right, but as more important than similar things that are not objects of devotion. The other is seeing it as something in your life that you cannot replace without loss. The perception of its good as particularly important is part of devotion's special concern for the beloved's good, while the perception of its non-fungibility gives rise to the unwillingness to accept substitutes. Devotion, then, also partly consists in the cognitive-volitional feature that is essential to love, and so Shpall's account of love can capture this essential feature of love with its inclusion of devotion as central to love. It therefore succeeds in capturing the three fundamental truths from the previous section that viable theories of love must capture, and so unlike our previous two theories, it is at least a tentatively sufficient theoretical foundation for substantiating the attractive idea that our beloved cats and dogs can love us back. The only question now to try and answer is: Can they love us back under this theory?

One thing to notice before trying to answer this question is that this theory is best understood as a theory of *meaningful love* rather than of love in general, and so like the previous two theories, Shpall's theory permits love to deviate from the central kind of love and still count as love. Just as we did with the previous two theories, then, we can attempt to find sufficient grounds for believing that our pets can love us back in them being able to have something that is sufficiently close to Shpall's meaningful love for us to count as capable of loving us back.

And, once again, I think that dogs can have something toward their humans that is sufficiently close to the central kind of love under Shpall's theory to count as capable of loving their humans back. One part of this love is clearly something that dogs can have toward their humans: dogs can like them, as evidenced by Wynne's claim that dogs display genuine affection toward their humans. The hard part here is the vulnerable-making, three-headed devotion to their humans that

²⁰ That love must involve this kind of seeing, which is delivered by making love a kind of devotion, captures the basic idea of Troy Jollimore's (2011) vision view that love is a kind of perception or a way of seeing the beloved. For a more in-depth discussion of love's devotion—or, as I prefer to call it, love's *loyalty*—that is along the same lines as the discussion in this paragraph, see Stringer (forthcoming).

includes seeing them as irreplaceable and being unwilling to accept substitutes: can dogs be so devoted? Well once again, the popular idea of the loyal dog that reliably obeys and that protects its human from harm even at significant personal cost and whimpers when its human seems hurt bodes well here, as it suggests some important things. One is that these loyal dogs seem to be devoted to their human's ends and their good, which means that loyal dogs seem to have at least a two-headed version of love's three-headed devotion. The second is that these loyal dogs seem to be emotionally vulnerable to states of affairs in which their humans figure, and so they seem to have the needed vulnerability that is part of being devoted to the good of their humans. The only thing that is left for them to be capable of having is the devotion to spending time with their humans and the cognitive-volition part of love's devotion that consists in seeing their humans as irreplaceable and being unwilling to accept substitutes for them.

Though it may not be possible to prove that dogs can see their humans as irreplaceable and be unwilling to accept substitutes for them, once again the idea of the loyal dog, which is just a devoted dog, suggests that dogs can in so far as devotion includes seeing its object as irreplaceable and being unwilling to accept substitutes for it. Furthermore, one of the most powerful pieces of evidence of dog love for humans that Gregory Burns (2013, p. 204) mentions in his excellent book is the fact that the brain activation of dogs to familiar humans is similar to what scientists have seen in people when they are shown pictures of people that they love, which suggests that dogs can see their humans in the way that we see our beloved humans. And with respect to the devotion to spending time with their humans, I think that dogs can have something that is sufficiently close to such devotion for our purposes here: the desire to spend time with their humans for no ulterior motive that took center stage earlier in Carl Safina's attempt to show that dogs can love us back.

We are now ready to put all of this together into the following, plausible, theory-based defense of dogs as being capable of loving humans back:

- (1) Meaningful love for humans = liking them (or being disposed to feel affection for them), being devoted to their ends and their well-being, being devoted to spending time with them, being emotionally vulnerable to their welfare states, and seeing them as irreplaceable and being unwilling to accept substitutes for them.
- (2) If dogs can have something that almost amounts to meaningful love for humans, then they can love humans.
- (3) Liking humans, being devoted to their ends and their well-being, desiring to spend time with them for no ulterior motive, being emotionally vulnerable to their welfare states, and seeing them as irreplaceable and being unwilling to accept substitutes for them = something that almost amounts to meaningful love for humans.
- (4) Dogs can (a) like their humans, (b) be devoted to the ends and the well-being of their humans, (c) desire to spend time with their humans for no ulterior motive, (d) be emotionally vulnerable to the welfare states of their humans, and (e) see their humans as irreplaceable and be unwilling to accept substitutes for their humans.
- (5) Dogs can have something that almost amounts to meaningful love for humans. (from 3 & 4)
- (6) Dogs can love humans. (from 2 & 5)

Unfortunately, we cannot mount such an argument with respect to cats. For as we saw earlier, cats do not seem emotionally vulnerable to our welfare states and seem to lack the benevolent desire for our happiness. Since they lack even this desire, they definitely lack a more full-blooded devotion to our well-being. And, as any cat-parent knows, they most certainly are not devoted to our ends! Now of course, cats can like us and desire to be with us for no ulterior motive, but they lack the devotion and vulnerability that love requires under Shpall's theory, and so they come nowhere close to having

enough of his tripartite love to count as loving us back. Overall, then, Shpall's theory seems to be about as hospitable as the previous two theories in that it, at most, can vindicate the claim that dogs are capable of loving us back. Cats do not seem able to love us back under any of these views.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to provide some plausible, theory-based justification for the attractive claim that our beloved cats and dogs can love us back. After critically evaluating and rejecting some recent attempts by scientists to show that dogs are capable of loving us back, I sifted out a few plausible ideas about love from these arguments that directed us to some philosophical theories of love that are rather hospitable to our beloved pets being able to love us back. The first theory here was Thomas Hurka's attitudinal-dispositional theory of love, which can be seen as a theory that builds on Carl Safina's idea that the desire to be with the beloved for no ulterior motive is fundamental to love. The second theory here was Andrew Franklin-Hall and Agnieszka Jaworska's dispositional theory of love, which can be seen as one that builds on the idea, suggested by Clive Wynne's last argument and very popular among philosophers of love, that caring is fundamental to love. As I argued, both of these theories can provisionally justify the claim that dogs are capable of loving us back, yet neither can show that cats are so capable. From here, however, I put pressure on my arguments and argued that the theories on which they are based are insufficient because they fail to explicitly capture three fundamental truths about love that any viable theory must capture. This then led us to a third philosophical theory of love—Sam Shpall's tripartite theory of love—that, I argued, can be modestly developed so that it captures those three fundamental truths about love and thereby succeeds where the other theories failed. Shpall's theory thus emerged as a tentatively sufficient theoretical foundation for attempting to show that cats and dogs are capable of loving us back. I then argued that, just like under the other two theories, dogs do seem capable of loving us back under Shpall's theory, whereas cats, once again, do not. So, while my inquiry in this chapter suggests the attractive conclusion that dogs can love their humans back, it also suggests the rather disappointing one that our beloved cats cannot love us back.

In closing, however, I would like to take the sting out of this unpleasant result. Suppose the worst: suppose, as my inconclusive inquiry here suggests, that our beloved cats cannot love us back. Would it really matter if they cannot love us back? No, it wouldn't. Our beloved cats do not need to be able to love us back for us to love them and for them to enrich our lives by being in them. They do not have to be able to love us back for us to care for them and give them good lives. Cats can like us, trust us, and desire to spend time with us, and even if this ability to have these attitudes toward us does not quite amount to the ability to love us back, it is still the ability to have a love-like orientation toward us that, in turn, allows us to have intimate relationships with them that bring meaning and enjoyment to our lives and that make their lives go well. We can already have what is truly important.²¹

²¹ Many thanks to Simon Cushing for his helpful feedback on earlier versions of this chapter.

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