

Love, Death and Life's *Summum Bonum*: The Before Trilogy as *Memento Mori*¹

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The Philosophy of Richard Linklater's Before Trilogy: Before Sunrise, Before Sunset, Before Midnight

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ABSTRACT. I argue that *Before Sunrise*, *Before Sunset*, and *Before Midnight* are best seen as an example of *memento mori* art. *Memento mori*, the admonition to remember death, can take many forms, but the idea remains the same, namely that an awareness of our inevitable end should bear on how we live. I show how Richard Linklater's warning works in each of the movies and argue that with the *Before* trilogy he makes a Frankfurt-style case that romantic love is life's *summum bonum*—i.e., 'the ultimate ground of practical rationality'.

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I. The *Before* trilogy as *memento mori* art

Little did I know, when I saw Ethan Hawke standing on the corner of Prince and Crosby one afternoon back in the late 90s, justifying the sighs of millions worldwide in jeans and a white t-shirt, and holding a cigarette, that some twenty years later I would be asked to write a philosophical essay on three of his best known movies. But that is one of the mysteries of time: we never know what it has in store for us; only that it keeps rushing through us as we struggle through it, marking our nows, befores, and afters. It is this entanglement of us and time that Richard Linklater tries to make sense of in some of his films. In his *Before* movies in particular, Linklater is concerned with how time is experienced in romantic relationships—the seizing of it in the first flush of attraction, the efforts to beat it by creating and grabbing second chances, the trying to keep it still as it inexorably gives way to the fights big and small that punctuate the everyday of long term partnerships.

No less obvious perhaps is Linklater's concern with what comes at the end of that time as it is circumscribed for us humans, namely death. Although we (thankfully) never see either of them holding a skull, in the *Before* trilogy the topic of death and dying is never far from the lips of protagonists Jesse and Céline. The connection between love and death is made at the very start of the first film, *Before Sunrise*, when Jesse asks Céline what she is reading—a trio of Georges Bataille's

stories, among them *Le mort*—and when she returns the question he shows her Klaus Kinski's *All I Need is Love*. (Strangely, no more is made, in this or the other movies, of these reading choices—unusual at any age, but especially so for two cherubs in their early twenties—beyond a flash of recognition of a kindred spirit, which emboldens Jesse to ask Céline to join him in the train's restaurant car.) They speak of the death of his great-grandmother when Jesse was about three years old; they visit a graveyard. In *Before Sunset*, Céline explains that she did not make it to their reunion in Vienna because her grandmother had died in Budapest and was being buried the day they were supposed to meet, December 16, six months to the Bloomsday when they first met. And in *Before Midnight* Céline mentions a friend who changed his view about life once he learned that leukemia would take him in nine months, and Jesse learns that his grandmother died, less than a year after his grandfather. There are many more instances of death creeping into their dialogue as they fall in love, as they meet again and find themselves still in love, and as they fight to keep their love alive.

The constant pairing of love and death throughout the trilogy invites reflection on how to love—a great-grandmother, a child, a friend, a lover—in the face of death. For this reason, each of the *Before* movies, and the trilogy as a whole, are best seen as works of *memento mori* art. 'Memento mori', the admonition to remember death, can take many forms, but whether the admonition is to be humble (as with Roman generals), keep desires in check (as with the Stoics) or to eat, drink, and be merry (as with so many *carpe diem* proverbs and art works), the idea remains the same, namely, that an awareness of our inevitable end should bear on how we live life. For Linklater, the proper answer to death is love—romantic love in particular—and he pits them against each other in terms of time vs. timelessness. In the *Before* trilogy, he shows us how we can beat the inexorable ticking of our limited hours by loving: In *Sunrise*, by loving *against* time (approaching); in *Sunset*, by loving *in spite of* (lost) time, and in *Midnight*, by loving *because of* time (past). In other words, we can 'exchange time for eternity'—the passing of time with an absorbing timelessness—by being mindful of the future (death) and staying in the present (love). The phrase 'exchange time for eternity', which was commonly used in 18th and 19th century Christian epitaphs and books to mean death (and to make death mean something good rather than bad), encapsulates this idea perfectly: for love absorbs us and keeps us fully in the present, making time appear to stand still. (In this, film, being a temporal art, does one better than *vanitas* paintings: in their stillness, they only show us symbols of death, but cannot propose a 'cure' for the ills of our temporal limitations. An art of time can show us how to deal with time, as it unfolds in it.)

Whether being fully in the present is the best response to the passing of time, and whether love is the best response to death, are legitimate questions. Moreover, if the only or best response to death is love, that would make love life's supreme good. And if—as many philosophers would have it—the foundation of morality is life's supreme good, then love is the foundation of morality. So the *Before* trilogy can be judged from a philosophical perspective: does it make a convincing case that love is the only appropriate response to death, life's *summum bonum*, and the ground of practical reason?²

The philosophical literature on death has largely focused on questions regarding what death is and whether it is an evil,³ both of which may seem bizarre to the layperson: death is the end, and of course that is bad—we spend our lives trying to avoid it. But it can be surprisingly difficult to specify what death is, since we have to touch on questions of existence, of what constitutes a self, what consciousness is, what it means to live on in someone's memory, and many other subtle

metaphysical questions. And while the average person would not subscribe to the wisdom of Silenus, and instead consider an early death an evil, it is less obvious that dying at age 100, or if one is suffering greatly from an incurable illness, is bad. Indeed, it may be argued that having a finish line is what gives meaning to the race. Here I will not consider these questions, although my interpretation of the *Before* trilogy lends support to the view that death confers meaning on life. I will rather assume that death is an end to experience, whatever else it may be, and whether that is a good thing or bad will emerge as we go along.

The philosophical literature on love has likewise focused on its nature: what it is to love another human being (is it to love their essence, in which case they are irreplaceable, or a response to their perceived value, or something else?).⁴ Generally, it is assumed that both loving and being loved are goods, possibly life's supreme goods, or at least among its highest goods. The same Corinthians that tells us, at 15:32, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die', also tells us, at 1:13, that though we speak the language of angels, without love we are nothing. The romantic view, of course, is that the beloved is irreplaceable (and Céline states as much in the boat scene in *Before Sunset*), that what is loved is a mysterious essence, impervious to the accidents of the beloved's behavior, even though the evidence is all around us and the empirical studies confirm that we are remarkably quick to find new, love-worthy essences upon the loss of one.⁵ We should not however rush to the judgment that we did not love the previous person but rather that we are capable of loving more than once in a life time—something to be grateful for. I will here further assume that romantic love *is* a good, one of the things that make life worth living, one of the things that make a life better—and even if it turns out that romantic love is *the* good, a life can still be very much worth living without it, of course: presumably Corinthians 1:13 includes other forms of love. I will assume that, all things being within the realm of the normal (by which I mean I leave out abusive or otherwise harmful relationships), it is better to go on loving than to stop loving, though I make no claim as to whether it is better to love one person all life long or two or twenty (although as the numbers grow, the 'love' label becomes questionable, if only because the demands love places on the lover curtail the possibility of it happening too many times in a lifetime). Certainly the contemporary romantic ideal is that of one person till—what else?—death do us part.

The philosophical literature on the relationship between love and death is practically nonexistent—perhaps it is too bizarre to put life's greatest good together with life's greatest evil in the same thought.⁶ Of course literature itself—poems, plays, novels—has been pitting love against death since time immemorial, with death usually having the upper hand, to the cathartic sobs of spectators and readers. From *Iphigenia* to *Romeo and Juliet*, from Sappho's sublime protestations to Poe's popular *Raven*, either death tragically keeps lovers apart, or lovers moan that they would die without the beloved. But that is not what is happening in the *Before* trilogy. Here death hovers but never arrives. Here death is a warning that asks to be heeded—here death, the ultimate evil, makes itself a good by calling on Jesse and Céline to learn how to live (before it is too late). And that is why the trilogy is a *memento mori* artwork: for it charges us to remember death, and live well.

II. *Before Sunrise*: Love against time approaching

Each of the *Before* movies plays out the *memento mori* theme in a different way, although all of them enjoin us to be 'presentists'—to beat the temporal (and by extension, death) by staying in the now

of love. But of all three, perhaps *Before Sunrise* is the best example of *memento mori* art, and a true *vanitas* work (*sans* the usual Christian overtones), for it displays for us spectators the three symbols typical of such works: the flower of youth, the passing of time as they wait for the morning to come (when they must part), and the hovering presence of death in their dialogue. And inasmuch as they seize the moment to be together and enjoy the little time that they have, the *Sunrise* response to the encroaching of time is clearly *carpe diem*, *nunc est bibendum*, gather ye rosebuds while ye may. Thus in *Sunrise* we see Jesse and Céline doing their utmost to 'exchange time for eternity' via the power of their budding love: here, now, and without concern for tomorrow.

The youth of Jesse and Céline is of course easy to see, and, I would claim, also easy to hear. There is a sentimentality and artificiality in much of their dialogue. Part of the artificiality in *Before Sunrise* may be attributed to the eager awkwardness of two young people trying to impress one another with their deep and mature thoughts. At the pretend phone call in the café, Jesse confesses his fear: 'I thought everything I said sounded so stupid', only to be reassured by Céline that it was not (later on she, too, will claim she has 'something stupid' to say). Their youth also explains the occasional artificiality in their speech, in that they are discovering their thoughts as they try to articulate them. Finally, their youth is represented poetically when Jesse recites the first line of a stanza from W.H. Auden's 'As I walked out one evening':

'The years shall run like rabbits,
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
And the first love of the world.'⁷

Besides appearing on the cover of Céline's book, in Jesse's description of his great-grandmother's ghost, and in their visit to the graveyard, the topic of death emerges throughout their dialogue. Céline says 'I think I'm afraid of death 24 hours a day. ... It's exhausting' as she explains to Jesse that her phobia of air travel is the reason she was taking a train to Paris. Later, speaking of the Serbo-Croatian war happening at that time, she says, 'I hate that three hundred kilometers away a war is going on. People are dying.' When they are having a drink in the boat-restaurant, Jesse tells the story of the friend who could only think of death as he witnessed the birth of his child. And later stanzas of Auden's poem again give poetic expression to the inevitability of death:

But all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime:
'O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time
...
'In headaches and in worry
Vaguely life leaks away,
And Time will have his fancy
To-morrow or to-day.'

Those are the facts: they are alive, they are young, they will someday die. What of it? It is also on the boat that we hear one of the main claims of the movie and the series, when Céline says: 'I think that's why life is so interesting—because it's going to end':

Jesse: I know. Death ups the ante [on?] being alive.

Céline: It's the same for us tonight, though. If we knew we were going to see each other next week, it would not be the same energy, no?

Jesse: Yeah, I know.

Here we have an explicit statement of the goodness of death as *the* meaning-conferring factor on life. More generally, Céline offers the idea that having limits, times at which something will end, increases the value of that something (even if all too often that is only recognized retroactively). Death being the ultimate limit, the radical end time, increases the value of life and the incentives to get it right—as Jesse says, 'death ups the ante'. They, too, up the ante of their meeting by agreeing, at first, that their Vienna night will be their only night.

It is here that love as the answer to death makes itself felt. In *Before Sunrise*, that answer comes in the form of a *carpe diem*: let's get off the train, let's fall in love, let's live in the now. One hears echoes of Baudelaire's poem 'Get Drunk':

Always be drunk. Nothing else matters; that is the only question. If you would not feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and crushing you to the earth, never stop drinking. But what? Wine, poetry, virtue—the choice is yours. Whatever: get drunk.⁸

The idea is the same: lose yourself in the now, to avoid the inexorability of time's passing. But in Jesse and Céline's case, love is the inebriating means. Here is another piece of their dialogue:

Jesse: But being with you, it's made me feel like I'm somebody else. The only other way to lose yourself like that is, you know, dancing or alcohol or drugs, you know, stuff like that.

Céline: Fucking?

[laughter]

Jesse: Fucking, yeah, that's one way.

Beyond the *carpe diem* and the gathering of roses, however, lies Linklater's second deeper claim, namely, that love is life's highest good. In one of *Before Sunrise*'s most famous scenes, we hear Céline say:

Céline: You know I believe that if there's any kind of god, he wouldn't be in any of us - not you, not me - but just this little space in between. If there's any kind of magic in this world, it must be in the attempt of understanding someone, sharing something. I know, it's almost impossible to succeed. But who cares, really? The answer must be in the attempt.

This is of course a more complex notion of love than simply being inebriated in enamored moments under the Austrian stars. Understanding someone takes effort; sharing something takes an openness

of heart and a willingness to be vulnerable. Both take time, perhaps a lifetime. In addition, both involve acts of the will, intentional acts that structure how we who love live our lives. As a response to death, love may start with falling in love, but it does not end there. After *Sunrise*, comes *Sunset*.

III. Before Sunset: Love in spite of time lost

Jesse and Céline meet again, but only nine years later, having not seen each other in the interim. He has written a book about their magical night together; she hears of it and appears at his book signing. They go out for a coffee and a walk around town. Their conversation resumes, and the connection they once had soon reveals itself to be still alive after the initial awkwardness that was to be expected. They are still young, but no longer in the flower of their youth. Life has happened—a marriage and a son for him, some failed relationships for her, a meaningful professional life for both. *Before Sunset* can no longer be a pure *vanitas*—the flower is beginning to lose its sweetness—but it is still a *memento mori*.

It does not take long for Jesse and Céline to return to their old topics of time and death, and again Linklater expresses the importance of being in the moment via his protagonists. Céline reveals that the death of her grandmother prevented her from making it to their six-month reunion in Vienna. At the café, they begin talking about getting older, and Jesse says how he enjoys getting older, how life now feels more immediate. He tells the story of the band he once was in, and how his bandmate was always focused on the future, wanting a record deal. Today, in retrospect, he would enjoy every minute of being in the band, even rehearsals. Céline in turn tells how in her field people enjoy the goal of changing the world but not the process, whereas the little people who could really change the world ‘actually enjoy the process of helping others...they are in the moment,’ to which Jesse responds: ‘Yeah but that’s so hard, to be in the moment.’ While in Vienna they simply threw themselves into the moment, now that no longer comes so easily. They knew it was good then, but perhaps only now do they realize that it is important—and that, as we go along, it becomes a willful act, and something we must remind ourselves to do.

Their conversation moves to the topic of desires. The satisfaction of desires is of course also something that focuses our thoughts on the future and involves the workings of our will. But Jesse complains, ‘I satisfy one desire, it just agitates another’. There is a difference between focusing on the satisfaction of desires and having death as a future limiting point. Death is not a goal; its occurrence is not the satisfaction of a desire (with the possible exception of suicides). The problem with not staying in the moment is not a problem with focusing on the future per se but a problem with focusing on the constant satisfaction of desires, which detracts from the present, and distracts us from possible present enjoyments, ‘the little achievements of the day’, to use Céline’s phrase.

Whereas *Sunrise* was a film very much about the present—they had no past, and knew nothing of their future—in *Sunset* the past emerges and begins to form, and memory, accordingly, becomes important. ‘Memory, Céline says, ‘is a wonderful thing if you don’t have to deal with the past.’ The past however, has come back to deal with them, and the fluidity of a memory’s significance and valence is brought to the fore when she notes that they can now change the memory of that December 16, for it no longer has the sad ending of never seeing each other again. Jesse agrees: ‘I guess a memory is never finished so long as we are alive.’

Finally, the relation between the ‘magic’ of love and death emerges again. Recalling Einstein’s *The World as I See It*, Céline points out that he says (though not quite in these words) that ‘If you don’t believe in any kind of magic or mystery, you are basically as good as dead.’ Jesse talks about how he does not feel any sense of permanence here, so this is it, ‘every day is our last’; she talks about how when she feels that way she calls her mom to tell her how much she loves her, and her mom asks, ‘Are you OK? Do you have cancer? Are you going to commit suicide?’

It is here that the certainty of death becomes a challenge front and central: ‘So what about us?’ Céline asks? ‘If we were going to die today, what would we talk about?’ What would we do? Another barrier in their conversation comes down, and after acknowledging that they would have as much sex as possible, their dialogue grows more serious, with both Jesse and Céline revealing that they have not connected with anyone the way they connected with one another, and that relationships as time-fillers (Céline) or that are commitment-based (Jesse) have left both ‘dying inside.’ At last Jesse concludes that ‘there’s got to be something more to love than commitment’—he has tested the idea that if you decide to be with someone and ‘work at it’, all will be well, and the idea has failed. She, too, has tried to be with men she did not love, but the choice has only engendered detachment.

Having at last revealed their hearts to one another, as they slowly go up the stairs to her apartment, time, too, begins to slow down, and Céline’s little waltz seals Jesse’s decision to miss his flight back home. We are back in the now.

IV. *Before Midnight*: Love because of time past

In *Before Sunset* Jesse and Céline had to face the nervousness of the re-encounter and the anxiety over whether there would still be a connection, so some stiltedness and some showing off are still explainable by the circumstances. But in *Before Midnight* they have been together for nine years, have two daughters, and are on the other side of 40. The source of their anxieties has shifted elsewhere. The space for the sentimental has shrunk, the need to impress has transmuted into a need to hold on (Jesse), the wide open hopes for the future have given way to fears that one’s life is slipping away without those hopes being fulfilled (Céline). Appropriately, the sentimentality is left for others to express (at the dinner table), while the language of Jesse and Céline turns raw and confrontational, only occasional glimpses of the connection that brought them here coming through like a sigh of relief amidst the exchanged barbs that leave us cringing in our seats. There is a sense in which they have become slaves to the connection they so cherish—it is too important to leave behind now. In a secular and equitable world, connection is the only thing bringing and holding two people together, so it goes on the emptied pedestal.

The *memento mori* theme is therefore now more pressing than ever. Death is closing in on them, the stakes are higher. Time has solidified their love, but also worn it out. Importantly, time has given them both other sources of love. Jesse is conflicted between his love for his son and his love for Céline, and she is conflicted between her love for him and her love for herself—for the career she would still like to have, between her roles as a wife and mother and her role as a professional. Staying in the present has grown both harder and more pressing, love more of a willful act.

Time and death are still themes explicit in the dialogue, but now the dialogue is between Jesse and the other men, while Céline is slicing tomatoes in the kitchen with the women. Speaking of a character in his new book, Jesse says that the concern is 'Not so much death but transformation. He sees too far into the future.' His Greek friend notes that the characters are lost in time in various ways, and Jesse replies 'It's not time they are lost in—it's perception', i.e. their unique points of view. At the dinner table, one of the guests speaks of her late husband Elias (and makes reference to the titles of the first two movies in the process): 'The sun makes him disappear...he appears, and he disappears, like a sunrise or a sunset, or anything so ephemeral. Just like our life, hmm? We appear and we disappear, and we are so important to some, but we are just passing through.' 'To passing through', offers Jesse, in a toast.

Soon afterwards, as they walk to the hotel, Jesse tells Céline that his grandmother died. She was 96. Céline notes she didn't live much longer after Jesse's grandfather died. A while later, Céline mentions her friend George who finds out he is going to die of leukemia in nine months, and how he felt relief, because he now knew he had enough money to live on for the rest of his life, he had 'made it', so now he could enjoy life. In other words, the absolute certainty of the future meant he could now enjoy the present. Jesse, naïvely hopeful for a turn of events, a happy ending, asks, 'Then what happened to him?' But Céline quickly disabuses him of false hopes: 'What do you mean? He died. A long time ago.' No miracles here. He died. We die. Period.

The forty-minute storm that follows in the hotel room leaves us with no doubt that love, too, has been shorn of its sweet illusions. Jesse calls Céline the mayor of Crazy town; she says he is no Henry Miller in bed. Each bolt of thunder leaves us feeling they must have reached a point of no return. Yet Auden's message comes back from the first movie to tell us 'You shall love your crooked neighbor with your crooked heart':

Jesse: You're fucking nuts. All right? You are. Good luck finding somebody else to put up with your shit for more than like, six months, okay? But I accept the whole package—the crazy and the brilliant, all right? I know you're not gonna change, and I don't want you to. It's called 'accepting you for being you'.

One wonders why Céline is so distressed, but *Before Sunset* provides the answer: 'sometimes I worry that I'll get to the end of my life without doing all that I wanted to do.' Whereas in *Sunset* we saw a Céline distressed about missing out on love, in *Midnight* we see a Céline worried about missing out on herself. She sees her life flying by, and she has not done what she wants to do. While Jesse is busy thinking about his next book, which is about people stuck in the present in various pathological ways, she is attuned to the furious pace of time passing and the coming of death; she is worried ahead. Earlier, as they watched the sun set, it was Céline who pointed out, anxiously, that the sun was 'still there. Still there. Still there. Gone.'

Midnight ends with Jesse trying to get Céline to join him again in the present, and stay in love, and not respond to death by worrying about it: that is focusing on the future, and the worst thing one can do in response to it. Bringing back the time-traveling trope that started their story in *Sunrise*, he says

Jesse: I've come to save you just like I said I would.'

Céline: 'Save me from what?'

Jesse: 'Save you from being blinded by all the little bullshit of life.'

The time traveling is required because death only clears the view if we return from our awareness of its future certainty to immerse ourselves fully in the now. 'This is real love', Jesse says; 'it is not perfect but it is real.' At last Céline breathes deeply and—as I interpret her action—decides to play along, return to the now, and stay in love. Now love is not only a feeling that they open themselves to (*Sunrise*) or a connection they recover and a relationship they try to form (*Sunset*), but also a choice they voluntarily make. That choice comes at the very end, but it does come. In one of the extra features of the Criterion Collection set, we see Linklater's cartoon version playing pinball and telling his friend: 'Life is this constantly saying to time 'No, thank you, no, thank you', until finally you say 'I give in, I accept, I embrace.'"

V. Romantic Love as Life's *Summum bonum*

I have been arguing that, in each of his three *Before* movies, Linklater intimates that love is the only appropriate response to death: that love enables us to 'exchange time for eternity' by grounding us in the now. While death itself may be an evil, an awareness of it allows us to clear the debris of distractions and recognize life's highest good.

At least since Aristotle, philosophers have argued that something in life must have value in itself if anything else is going to have any value at all and drawn a connection between that something—life's highest good—and the ground of morality. Here is how Aristotle puts the matter:

If therefore among the ends at which our actions aim there be one which we will for its own sake, while we will the others only for the sake of this, and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (which would obviously result in a process *ad infinitum*, so that all desire would be futile and vain), it is clear that this one ultimate End must be the Good, and indeed the Supreme Good.⁹

Thus far one can easily go with the aid of a little logic, but the connection from here to moral action is not obvious. I can agree that having a highest good confers meaning on life, but why should that enjoin me to act morally? Aristotle continues:

Will not then a knowledge of this Supreme Good be also of great practical importance for the conduct of life? Will it not better enable us to attain our proper object, like archers having a target to aim at?

It is certainly true that if you have a target, that tells you where you should aim your arrows. But it does not tell you, say, that you should be nice while you are shooting. In other words, there seems to be at least a conceptual difference between *practical* reasoning and *moral* reasoning. Of course Aristotle will draw the link from one to the other by looking to our essence as rational beings and

enjoining us to reason well by aiming for the golden mean. Still, there seems to remain a gap between the practical and the good or morally right.

Mill makes the connection explicit at the opening of his *Utilitarianism*: 'the question concerning the *summum bonum*, or, what is the same thing, concerning the foundation of morality, has been accounted the main problem in speculative thought', to which his answer is that 'the creed which accepts as the foundation of morals 'utility' or the 'greatest happiness principle' holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness'.¹⁰ For Mill, then, an action is morally right if it promotes our highest good, namely, happiness: the only thing, in his view, desirable for its own sake.

Kant, too, recognizes the necessity of final ends when he says that 'Rational nature separates itself out from all other things by the fact that it sets itself an end'; moreover, 'rational nature exists as an end in itself'. And he draws a connection between final ends and the moral law when he writes that 'morality is the only condition under which a rational being can be an end in himself'. The will, which is 'nothing but practical reason', is 'a power to choose only that which reason independently of inclination recognizes to be *practically necessary, that is, to be good*'.¹¹

Some recent philosophers have concurred with these giants in the history of philosophy that a final goal, something of inherent or absolute value, must exist to ground our actions, including our moral ones. But they have noticed a tension between the dictates of an impartial reason, or of an impersonal majority, and the motivating bonds of personal affection. At the end of 'Persons, Character and Morality', Bernard Williams notes that 'somewhere... one reaches the necessity that such things as deep attachments to other persons will express themselves in the world in ways which cannot at the same time embody the impartial view, and that they also run the risk of offending it':

They run that risk if they exist at all: yet unless such things exist, there will not be enough substance or conviction in a man's life to compel his allegiance to life itself. Life has to have substance if anything is to have sense, including adherence to the impartial system; but if it has substance, then it cannot grant supreme importance to the impartial system, and that system's hold on it will be, at the limit, insecure.¹²

For Williams, deep attachments (in this case he was speaking of the attachment to one's spouse) are what provides the necessary substance, or inherent value, to life, and without it, impartial morality is meaningless. The partial must ground the impartial.

Following Williams' lead, Harry Frankfurt develops this idea and gives 'deep attachment' the label we are more familiar with: love. 'The origins of normativity' he argues, 'do not lie ... either in the transient incitements of personal feeling or in the severely anonymous requirements of eternal reason. They lie in the contingent necessities of love':¹³

It is love...that satisfies these requirements of practical reason. In loving we provide ourselves with ends that we care about for themselves rather than only as means. Love is the originating source of terminal value. If we loved nothing, then nothing would be inherently valuable, and there would be nothing that could serve us as a final end. ...loving entails both that we regard its objects as valuable in themselves

and that we adopt those objects as our final ends. Insofar as love is the creator for inherent or terminal value, then, it is the ultimate ground of practical rationality.¹⁴

For Frankfurt, 'Love is a *disinterested* concern for the flourishing of what is loved. That is, the lover desires the good of his beloved, and he desires it for its own sake, rather than for the sake of promoting any other interests', and 'Loving someone or something essentially *means*, among other things, taking its needs and interests as reasons for acting to serve those interests and needs. Love is itself... a source of reasons'. So love is not about feelings or thoughts, but about the will: it guides our actions and orders our priorities. Moreover, not only is the object of love inherently valuable for its lover, but also 'loving itself is inherently important to us'. Indeed, it is only because loving itself is inherently important to us that the beloved has absolute value. 'Why, Frankfurt asks, 'is a life in which a person loves something, regardless of what it is, better for him—other things being equal—than a life in which there is nothing he loves?' Because love provides him with the final goal, the highest good, the absolute value, without which life would be meaningless.¹⁵

We can agree that something of absolute value is required for life to be meaningful, and we can agree that love provides that terminal value. It is less clear how love can be a universal moral principle, insofar as moral principles are supposed to apply to all impartially, and love seems to imply favouritism. What do we use as our guide when no one we love is involved? Don't the majority of our moral decisions involve those we do not love? Perhaps Frankfurt means to use love as a model, and is ultimately offering us a new version of the golden rule: Do unto others as you would your beloved: regard them *as if* you were concerned with their flourishing, recognize that they, too, are potential sources of terminal value.

Closer to our concerns, what happens when one loves more than one object? *Before Midnight* brings these conflicts to the fore, since here we see the tensions of equally demanding loves come to a boil. Jesse is torn between love for his child and love for his romantic partner, and Céline is torn between love for Jesse and love for herself and the life goals she holds dear. Something has to give, but how does one decide between two absolute values? *Before Midnight* ends on a note suggestive that a choice has been made, and that their love for one another will prevail. If this is true, then love as 'the space in between' two romantic partners is being presented here as the foundational love, the kind of love that is life's *summum bonum*. This would put Linklater at odds with Frankfurt, according to whom romantic love often comes with 'a number of distracting elements that do not belong to the essential nature of love... among relationships between humans, the love of parents for their infants or small children comes closest to offering recognizably pure instances of love'.¹⁶ For Frankfurt, this is because early parental love is a love that is not based on reasons: it is not a response to the perceived value of the individual, since infants have not yet done anything to demonstrate what kind of person they will be. And yet such a love is a source of reasons to behave in various ways that promote the flourishing of the child. The child is not loved because it is valued; it is valued because it is loved, and it is loved because it is one's child—indeed, Frankfurt notes, this is a love a parent cannot help feeling.¹⁷ For Frankfurt, love, though the ground zero and motivating force behind our choices, is not itself something we choose.

There is something of this idea in the romantic notion of love at first sight: the powerful motivational attraction felt before we know anything about the beloved. Yet here the similarities end, and romantic love comes out ahead. One may rightly question whether love not freely entered

is truly love. If, as Frankfurt has it, *loving* is what is of ultimate value, the foundation of practical reason, then a love one enters freely and willingly, and builds over time, would seem to be the kind of love most apt to satisfy the role of *summum bonum*. For romantic love is the only love that fully exercises our practical reason, our capacity to understand another and take its needs into consideration, to reach compromises between two ultimate motivational sources. We do not ask a child whether it wishes to move to Chicago, and especially not an infant; we simply do it. And we leave infants and small children behind, as Jesse did, for the sake of romantic love: 'I fucked up my whole life because of the way you sing', he tells a distressed Céline. For the sake of romantic love, we compromise our personal goals, as Céline has. And love their children dearly as parents may, they will still want romantic love in their lives if they are without it, but not everyone happily paired up feels the need to exercise parental love (indeed, is the having of children late in life not sometimes a consolation prize for those despairing of ever finding romantic love, and eager to satisfy *loving* itself?).

However Jesse and Céline's predicament is ultimately resolved in the fictional world, in the *Before* trilogy Linklater is clearly trying to remind us of the inevitability of death, and offering us romantic love as the way to 'conquer' it. His *memento mori* may thus be seen as a filmic defense of a revised version of the Williams-Frankfurt position that only love can fit the bill of life's *summum bonum*. In this he, and they, echo what E.M. Forster said about a hundred years ago, via his character Helen in *Howards End*:

'Death destroys a man: the idea of Death saves him.' Behind the coffins and the skeletons that stay the vulgar mind lies something so immense that all that is great in us responds to it. Men of the world may recoil from the charnel-house that they will one day enter, but Love knows better. Death is his foe, but his peer, and in their age-long struggle the thews of Love have been strengthened, and his vision cleared, until there is no one who can stand against him.¹⁸

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² Although I do not claim that film directors 'do philosophy' in the way that professional philosophers do, I here take it as a given that at least some directors make claims and provide evidence for those claims with their movies. See Wartenberg for discussion.

³ See e.g., Nagel, Yourgrau, Kagan.

⁴ See e.g., Taylor, Velleman, Frankfurt, Kolodny, Zangwill, and Wolf.

⁵ See Moller.

⁶ The exception is Moller.

⁷ This and all quotations of the poem from Auden 60-62.

⁸ Baudelaire 74, with minor revisions to Varèse's translation.

⁹ This and the following quote, Aristotle 1094a18-21.

¹⁰ Mill 1 and 7 respectively.

¹¹ Kant 105, 96, 102 and 80 respectively.

¹² Williams 18.

¹³ Frankfurt (2000) 7.

¹⁴ Frankfurt (2000) 10.

¹⁵ Frankfurt (2000) 5, 3, 5-6, and 9 respectively.

¹⁶ Frankfurt (2000) 6. For Frankfurt, 'the object of love is often a concrete individual: for instance, a person or a country', but 'it may also be something more abstract: for instance, a tradition, or some moral or non-moral ideal' (5).

¹⁷ Frankfurt does not address this, but one may presume the love of a child for her parents is similarly structured.

¹⁸ Forster 222.