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«I am a non-natural mother»¹
Maggie Gyllenhaal’s The Lost Daughter
An interdisciplinary inquiry into love, hate and the overwhelming guilt of a mother

Pregnancy and motherhood are experienced in very different ways depending on whether they take place in revolt, resignation, satisfaction, or enthusiasm. [...] Ordinarily, maternity is a strange compromise of narcissism, altruism, dream, sincerity, bad faith, devotion and cynicism.²

Introduction

In this interdisciplinary essay, combining plot analysis with philosophical analysis, I address the theme «Love and Hate» with an inquiry into Maggie Gyllenhaal’s film The Lost Daughter (2021), further referred to as TLD.³ The film’s plot is based on the novel of the same name by Italian author Elena Ferrante,⁴ a pseudonym.

¹ The Lost Daughter, Netflix, 11:46. Netflix’s counting system is backwards; the time stamp indicates that there are 11 minutes and 46 seconds to watch until the end of the film.
³ Information about the plot and the actors can be found on https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9100054/; accessed 13 October 2022.
In part I, I elaborate on Hannah Arendt’s analysis of Augustine’s concept of love and Plutarch’s definition of hate, rendering the concepts operational for the analysis of the plot. The definition of guilt is from Merriam-Webster online. Part II comprises a detailed presentation of the plot. In part III, I apply the definitions of love, hate and guilt to single scenes, trying to explain the emotions of the *persona* of TLD. I thus check the plot’s presentations of love, hate, and guilt according to the definitions given in part I. Can we find both thinkers’ definitions illustrated by the plot?

In the conclusion, I proceed to connect my plot analysis with the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), inquiring if the plot has theoretical elements in common with the movement. Lastly, I shall attempt to answer my two research questions: First, scrutinizing the human extinction movement, also referred to as anti-natalism: is the idea that mankind should render itself extinct a philosophical question? Second, is an individual’s deliberate, hence rational, refusal to create offspring legitimate in ethical and political terms?

I. Definitions

Hannah Arendt’s (1906–1975) definition of love and Plutarch’s (46–119) definition of hate serve as the philosophical backbones of my analysis. I have chosen these two thinkers because Plutarch is a philosopher and Arendt a political theoretician, as I am no trained

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5 The website of the movement is [https://www.vhemt.org](https://www.vhemt.org).
6 Hannah Arendt: Love and Saint Augustine, Chicago 1996.
8 Arendt said in the famous interview with Günther Gaus that she sees herself as a political theoretician, since the concept of «political philosophy» was invalidated by Plato. Since Plato, thinking about politics cannot be neutral because political thinkers and theorists are principally interested in the normative good, the ethical side of politics, thus the search for a
psychologist, I approach the emotions of love and hate from a philosophical point of view. Note that I use the modern Merriam-Webster description *qua* definition of the concept of «guilt».

**Love**

What is love? Arendt once said that one cannot love countries, states, or food, that is, things, objects. According to her, one can only love human beings:

I have never in my life «loved» some nation or collective – not the German, French or American nation, or the working class, or whatever else there might be in this price range of loyalties. The fact is that I love only my friends.9

Arendt thus distinguishes between love and loyalty: I love my friends, but I am loyal to my fatherland, joining, for example, the military. I love my parents, but my loyalty to my university makes me join my alma mater’s annual volleyball competition. I eat Japanese sushi daily, but that is not love; it is a personal culinary preference. I love my siblings, while I have feelings of sympathy or friendship for my colleagues at work.

Furthermore, I deem it safe to ascertain that we in the English-speaking world use the concept of love not only in an inflationary way, but often also incorrectly. Indeed, the L word seems to be everywhere today; even the slogan of a US fast food chain uses «love» to morally good political system. The interview was broadcast on NDR (Norddeutscher Rundfunk) in 1964, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9SyTEUi6Kw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9SyTEUi6Kw); accessed 19 November 2022.

9 The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem, trans. Anthony David, ed. Marie Luise Knott, Chicago 2017, 206. Arendt’s definition thus refers to the feeling of love as exclusively defined between human beings. If I have understood her correctly, a human being can also love an animal, because the animal, my dog or cat, is an animated being, it has a soul and is alive, not an object like a dish or a vase. I thank the anonymous reviewer for his/her suggestion.
advertise its burgers, milkshakes, and fries. By contrast, the antique world and thinkers had six concepts for love: *eros, philia, ludus, agape, pragma,* and *philautia.*

Let us now look at Arendt’s definition of love, based on her philosophical analysis of Augustine. Note that I fully rely on Arendt, as I am no specialist in Greek antique philosophy or early Christian thought. According to Arendt, Augustine defines love as appearing in two forms: love can appear either in the form of *caritas* or as

10 Eros is sexual passion; philia is deep friendship; ludus is playful love, as, for example, the playful affection of children or adults engaging in flirting; agape is selfless love or empathy, the love for everyone; pragma is the mature, realistic love of an old married couple that knows how to compromise to keep the relationship stable, and philautia is self-love. The six forms of Greek love on [https://www.yesmagazine.org/health-happiness/2013/12/28/the-ancient-greeks-6-words-for-love-and-why-knowing-them-can-change-your-life; accessed 23 November 2022.](https://www.yesmagazine.org/health-happiness/2013/12/28/the-ancient-greeks-6-words-for-love-and-why-knowing-them-can-change-your-life) My esteemed colleague Sebastian Florian Weiner, adjunct professor of antique philosophy at UZH, comments on the source’s interpretation of philautia: «The Aristotelian self-love is not quite correctly presented here. Aristotle thinks that philautia begins once man acts morally, because one aims at one’s own good as one’s personal goal or achievement. Aristotle does not distinguish philautia from narcissism, as the author claims. Therefore, one can state that in Aristotle’s thinking the virtuous person can become narcissistic, seeking in the other his ‘own self.’», email conversation with Weiner from 19 to 23 November 2022.

11 What renders Arendt’s analysis of Augustine so complicated is the blend of three currents of philosophy: first, Arendt’s analysis of Augustine’s antique Greek philosophy, second, her analysis of Augustine’s early Christian thinking, and third, Arendt’s own approach from a philosophical point of view that is close to phenomenological thought. I think Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Arendt’s doctor father, inspired her with his subjective phenomenology, which was developed from Edmund Husserl’s (1859–1938) initial phenomenology. Thus, we have three different philosophical systems blended into one analysis: Antique Greek philosophy, early Christian philosophy, and modern phenomenological thought. For a brief overview of the distinction between Heidegger’ subjective phenomenology and Jan Patočka’s (1907–1977) asubjective phenomenology, see Josette Baer: Politik als praktizierte Sittlichkeit. Zum Demokratiebegriff bei Thomas G. Masaryk und Václav Havel, Sinzheim 1998, 254–259.
A summary of the complicated relationship of man with God, other men, and the world:

The world is constituted as an earthly world not just by the works of God but by the «lovers of the world», that is, by men, and by what they love. [...] The right love consists in the right object. Mortal man, who has been placed into the world (here understood as heaven and earth) and must leave it, instead clings to it and in the process turns the world itself into a vanishing one, that is, one due to vanish with his death. The specific identification of earthly and mortal is possible only if the world is seen from the point of view of mortal man. Augustine’s term for this wrong, mundane love that clings to, and thus at the same time constitutes, the world is cupiditas. In contrast, the right love seeks eternity and the absolute future. Augustine calls this right love caritas: the «root of all evil is cupiditas, the root of all good is caritas». However, both right and wrong love (caritas and cupiditas) have this in common – craving desire, that is appetitus. Hence, Augustine warns, «Love, but be careful what you love.»

Now, how to explain a parent’s love for his child with Augustine? If I am allowed a simple definition of parental love as evidence of mankind’s biological drive to procreation, hence a natural instinct, I can say: parental love is in Augustine’s sense the right love that seeks eternity and the absolute future. What do eternity and absolute future mean in the context of human procreation? They are, at the same time, the goal and instrument of the survival of the species homo sapiens. If I have children, I secure the survival of the species, and my offspring will do the same, thus steer the species towards eternity and the absolute future, i.e., the abstract and unknown future. Our understanding of the past, that is history, and the future, that is an unknown place, is being made by us now, in the present. Therefore, we know the past, but cannot explain or predict the future. We do not know what is going to happen in the years ahead; all we can do is make an educated guess that originates in our memory of the past, hence our empirical memory, what we have experienced. I assume that my children will procreate as I did, and

13 Ibid. Her first reference: Commentaries on the Psalms, 90, I, 8; the second reference: Commentaries, 34, 5c.
before me, my parents, and grandparents. To sum up, we could say that caritas is geared towards God; it is a kind of metaphysical instrument and goal at the same time.

What is cupiditas? According to Augustine, it is the wrong love and thus source of all evil, yet it is, like caritas, the constituent of the world, the evil pillar of the world. Notice the duality of Christian thinking. Cupiditas is bad, and it does exist as a counterpart to the good, to caritas. If parental love is the constituent of the good, that is, the connection of man with God, cupiditas is, if I am correct, the bad love that makes man covet earthly things, a bad desire, because it is shallow, finite and, at the end of the day, superficial. What are superficial objects of bad love, bad coveting? I think such objects of desire can be defined as not related to God, thus related to man’s desire only, a selfish desire for objects here and now on earth. For example, if I covet an earthly object, I do not connect with God, but to something that keeps me from connecting with God: it distracts me from the good path, the good love towards God. Whether I desire a Bugatti motorcycle, or a pair of Gucci shoes does not play a role at all – they are the objects of my selfish desire. If I engage in an extra-marital affair, such a relationship does not connect with God; it originates in my selfish desire for this person. My desire, my appetitus, my coveting of material objects or human objects hinders me from connecting with God; therefore, my desire for such objects is a sign of my selfishness.

Now, how would Arendt with Augustine explain marriage? She did not mention the love between husband and wife in her analysis, but I think that she would say that Augustine would conceive of marriage, because it is blessed by God, also as caritas, the condition necessary for having children, thus an activity that shall render possible caritas as parental love. Augustine did not define friendship, sympathy, being in love or the end of marriage. Quite naturally, according to the thinking of his times, Augustine did not elaborate on the end of marriage as connection with God, because in his times, it simply did not exist. Couples, once married, lived together, brought up their offspring, and then died. Unlike in Judaism, which
acknowledged divorce in biblical times, Christianity recognised divorce as legal and legitimate only after the French Revolution of 1789 that successfully pushed back the dominance of the Catholic Church.

What is divorce? It is the earthly, legal end of the marriage contract and, also, an act and decision that renders the Church’s blessing of the marriage null and void. I think that Augustine, catapulted into our 21st century, would not understand why a couple files for divorce. Why, their bond is made in heaven, blessed by God via the Church, so how can they go against what God protects and blesses? I think Augustine would not have understood that marriage can end with both ex-spouses still alive and more often happier than before.

Hate

Plutarch distinguishes between envy and hate, which he considered as two bad passions, indeed, vices as the opposite of virtues:

The intention of the hater is to injure, and the meaning of hate is thus defined: it is a certain disposition and intention, awaiting the opportunity to injure. In envy this, at any rate, is absent. For there are many of their intimates and connections that the envious would not be willing to see destroyed or suffer misfortune, although tormented by their good fortune; and while they abridge their fame and glory if they can, they would not, on the other hand, afflict them with irreparable calamities, but as with a house towering above their own, are content to pull down the part that casts them in the shade.¹⁴

According to Plutarch, hate is a strong passion or emotion that makes me want to destroy the object of my hate, to afflict irreparable damage to another person. One can hate other human beings and also irrational animals, hence creatures that lack reason, logos, the human capacity for thinking.¹⁵ If I hate my neighbour, I am thus

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¹⁴ Plutarch’s Moralia, 107.
¹⁵ Ibid., 97: «Some people hate weasels, beetles, toads, or snakes.»
consciously and deliberately ready, intent on killing this person or inflicting irreparable damage to his body and mind. If I am envious, the intention to destroy is absent. I envy my neighbour’s large mansion because I want to have a mansion like him. When I envy my teacher’s intellect and wisdom, I want to be as wise and intelligent as she is. When I hate, I am intent on destroying; when I envy, I covet, I desire what the other has. From this follows that envy occurs only between man and man.

Plutarch’s wise words furthermore state that one can say openly that one hates, but with regard to envy, things are more complicated: nobody wants to admit that he or she is envious, since to do so would make one look bad, petty and weak:

 [...] is the circumstance that while some confess that they hate a good many people, there is no one that they will say they envy […] cloaking and concealing their envy with whatever other name occurs to them for their passion, implying that among the disorders of the soul it is alone unmentionable.\(^{16}\)

Envy is therefore a feeling that begets, requires, needs secrecy. It is a hidden feeling and thought, hidden in my brain and heart. I conceal my envy because to say to my neighbour that I am envious of her large mansion would prompt her to think of me as a petty and weak person, a loser who is incapable of making the money to buy such a mansion – and the neighbour would be spot on. It would also arouse pity for me, and nobody wants to be pitied, because pity can also be a mild form of contempt.

Guilt

My last definition is «guilt»: The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines guilt in three forms:

First, the fact of having committed a breach of conduct especially violating law and involving a penalty. Second a, the state of one who has committed

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
Guilt is defined first in legal terms, second a, as a psychological state of mind, second b, as feelings of personal inferiority, of not being good enough, or as feeling of regret of my inferiority, that is self-reproach. Third and lastly, guilt is defined as a feeling of understanding that I have done wrong. Let me explain this modern definition of guilt.

First, a court declares me guilty, because it has proof that I, for example, killed my neighbour’s cat. The proof can be an eyewitness or the shotgun that has my fingerprints on it. Second a, I feel guilty after having stolen my colleague’s bike. I know that stealing is an offense, but I did it anyway to get to the railway station in time. Second b, guilt as self-reproach: I could have decided not to lie to my parents, but I did lie to them, and therefore, I reproach myself ex post for lying to Mom and Dad. And third, lastly, if I am feeling guilty, I am consciously aware that I have done wrong. This consciousness of having committed a crime or violated society’s normative, moral rules, makes me accept the punishment. Why? I accept the punishment, because I understand that I did wrong and, therefore, have to be punished.

Let us now look at the plot of The Lost Daughter.

II. The Lost Daughter – the plot

In the early hours of the morning, at dawn, we see a woman with short black hair getting out of her car. She is walking towards the beach and is visibly unstable on her feet. Probably in her late forties, she wears a white linen shirt and skirt. She stumbles onto the beach and collapses into the surf.

As we later learn, Leda, portrayed by Olivia Colman (*1974), is a 48-year-old professor of translation and specialist in Italian poetry and literature. She arrives on a Greek island in the summer. She meets the house carer Lyle, played by Ed Harris (*1950); Lyle helps her with the luggage. The viewer’s first impression: Leda is an attractive, self-confident, and intelligent woman, but prefers to keep to herself. She is not interested in making friends, but she obeys the common rules of social manners.

The next morning, Leda goes to the beach, carrying a large beach tote with books and notebooks. She is preparing a course she is going to teach in the autumn term. Will, the young man who works at the beach hut sells her ice cream, and they have a friendly chat.

With a lot of pomp, a loud and imposing clan from New Jersey arrives on the beach. Leda is annoyed by their noise, trying to focus on her work. She spots a beautiful young mother with a five-year-old daughter; they are members of the clan. The way the little girl clings to her mother, constantly demanding her attention, reminds Leda of something. She has tears in her eyes. The viewer does not know yet why Leda is sad, but one understands that the young mother and the girl remind her of something painful in her past.

The next day, Leda is again on the beach, and a huge boat arrives, spilling out even noisier people, carrying sound machines. They are the clan’s birthday guests. Callie, played by Dagmara Dominczyk (*1976), the highly pregnant wife of the clan’s boss, is organizing her 40th birthday. They are preparing a beach party, asking the tourists on the beach to make room for the party guests. Everybody obliges to Callie’s wish, moving their umbrellas and beach stuff away, but Leda is the only one who refuses. When Callie with her protruding belly – it is quite vulgar, almost obscene18 how Callie demonstrates her pregnancy showing off her naked belly for all to see – approaches Leda, asking her in a kind but determined tone if she could move,

Leda politely refuses. No thanks, she is fine where she is. This public show of self-confidence and open resistance against being bullied leaves Callie rather surprised and frustrated, and she admits that she does not know what to say to Leda. Clearly, Callie is a woman who is used to getting what she wants. She is complaining angrily to the clan’s men, old and young, using foul language, until her husband Vassili, the clan’s boss, tells her to stop.

After an hour, Callie approaches Leda, carrying a saucer with a piece of birthday cake; she apologizes, and they begin a conversation. Leda tells her that she was born in Leeds, UK, but lives in Cambridge, close to Boston. It is unclear if she teaches at Harvard University or another Bostonian college. Callie says she thought that Leda, because of her assertiveness, would be from Queens, New York. They speak about children, and Leda expresses what we are going to understand as her personal tragedy in a short sentence: «Children are an excruciating responsibility.»¹⁹ If we take Leda’s words seriously, and she is not, as we shall soon learn, one to make nonsensical small talk, she thus thinks that having children is close to torture, hence excruciating, the suffering of severe pain. What kind of torture? I think she means psychological torture.

Callie explains that her younger sister Nina, portrayed by Dakota Johnson (*1989), became pregnant immediately while she had to be patient for many years. Nina is the young mother with the clingy daughter Leda has observed the first morning. Callie asks Leda, if she has children, and Leda replies that her elder daughter Bianca is 25 years old and Marta two years younger. The two ladies part in an amicable fashion.

While she is walking back to her flat, a pinecone hits Leda, and she has a large wound on her back. She does not care and goes down to the bar for dinner. Caretaker Lyle is sitting there with his friends, playing cards, and drinking ouzo. He approaches her in his usual friendly manner, and it is obvious that he is interested in her. Leda replies with short sentences and then dismisses him; she wants to finish her dinner. Lyle is hurt and goes back to his friends.

¹⁹ TLD, 1:41:06.
What happens then is still quite a mystery to me in psychological terms from the point of view of the persona Leda: as if she had a bad conscience about having been so unfriendly to Lyle, Leda goes over to the men, stands behind Lyle, spies into his cards and then whispers into his ear «bellissimo gioco», which means «a most beautiful game» in Italian. Then she apologizes, grabs her handbag and storms out of the bar. Why does she act like this? Is she semi-autistic? Why does she violate Lyle’s personal boundaries by whispering in Italian to him and then apologizes? Or is Leda bi-polar, suffering from mood swings? It is not likely that Lyle, an American who speaks Greek because he has been living on the island for more than thirty years understands Italian. She speaks to him in the language in which she has made her academic career, her professional life. Is she showing off, presenting her academic acumen? Her rushing out looks to us as if she is fleeing from herself, from her recent intrusion into Lyle’s personal space, her violation of his personal boundaries.

The next morning, Leda observes Nina and her handsome husband fighting on the beach. Then, the clan is in turmoil: little daughter Elena is missing. Leda has a flashback: she remembers that years ago, her elder daughter Bianca went missing on a beach, and she, carrying little Marta in her arms, was frantically looking for Bianca. She helps the clan in its search. Nina is shouting Elena’s name hysterically. Leda, guided by her instincts, goes to a part of the beach that is hidden by a little forest. There, she finds Elena and brings her back to Nina. Little Elena is crying incessantly because she cannot find her doll. Leda is now the clan’s hero, and Callie, spotting the wound on Leda’s back, applies some cream, instructing her how long to use it.

Upon learning that Elena is missing her doll, Leda has another flashback: she remembers that she had given her beloved doll Mena to little Bianca, who had painted the doll with some colours – Mena was ruined, and young mother Leda, in a spur of anger, hate, and hurt, had shouted at Bianca and then thrown Mena out of the window. Her beloved doll broke into pieces on the street, gone forever. This
act seems to me like young mother Leda had said a painful good-bye to her childhood after Bianca had ruined her doll.

Later, Leda finds Elena’s doll on the beach and quickly shovels her into her handbag. We do not yet understand why she doesn’t return the doll immediately to the clan, knowing that everybody is looking for it.

In the evening, Leda goes on a sightseeing tour through the village and meets young Will, the beach caretaker, at the port. She invites him to dinner, and they have a nice conversation, much as if Will was the boyfriend of Bianca or Marta, Leda thus a kind of mother-in-law to him. She is opening up to Will and tells him about Bianca and Marta. Then, she asks him about the clan. Will tells her that the clan lives in the pink villa above the village. Complimenting her on her courage in having stood up to Callie’s bullying yesterday on the beach, he warns her not to do this again because «they are bad people».

The next day, Leda visits a children’s toy shop. Her intention, as we understand, is to buy new clothes for the doll that is dirty and dishevelled. Upon paying, she runs into Callie, her husband and Nina, who is carrying Elena. The clan wants to buy Elena a new doll, to make her stop crying. It is visible how unnerved Nina is by her daughter – the young mother is at the end of her tether. She has a nervous, exhausted, and guilty look on her face which prompts a flashback in Leda: she remembers that one day Bianca so got on her nerves that she shouted at her little girl. Indeed, director Gyllenhaal captured that moment perfectly: the viewer can sympathize with young Leda. The constant whiny crying of little Bianca got on my nerves too. One just wants to shout «Leave me alone! Stop crying! Be quiet!» Imagine having to endure a little child’s crying while you are working on an academic paper!

By now, we know that young Leda was pursuing a career in academia, trying to concentrate on her work with two little daughters distracting her all the time. They used to play a game: the girls asked her to do the snake, upon which Leda used to peel an orange

21 TLD, 1:18:44.
without breaking the peel into little pieces, which made the peel look like a snake. Young Leda, portrayed by Jessie Buckley (*1989), conceived of Bianca as a problematic child, while the younger Marta was practically non-existent. Shy, quiet, and reclusive Marta is an obedient and self-effacing child, respecting her mother’s needs for her personal and professional space. Marta is the opposite of loud, pushy, and provocative Bianca.

Walking home to her flat, Leda remembers another episode in her life: she and husband Joe, who is also a young academic, pursuing his career, are on holiday with their daughters in a hut, when Joe, portrayed by Jack Farthing (*1985), spots some hikers who are lost. They invite the couple in and after the daughters have been put to bed the four have dinner together. The young woman tells Leda and Joe about their love story: when she met her man, he was married with three children, but fate had brought them together. He left his wife and children and has been with her ever since. Leda and the female hiker like each other instantly, because the female hiker is Italian, complimenting young Leda on her superb knowledge of Italian literature and poetry. The next morning, the hiking couple leaves, and the Italian asks Leda for copies of her work. Young Leda is happy at being acknowledged as a serious academic.

When Leda gets back home to her holiday flat, she takes the doll out of the cupboard where she has hidden it and puts it on the table on her balcony, planning to wash it and put on the new clothes she has just bought. The doorbell rings. It is Lyle, offering Leda freshly caught octopus; Lyle invites himself to cook dinner for them. They drink wine and ouzo with the meal. They talk about meanness and cruelty, accusing themselves of being mean and cruel – that is the one thing they have in common. Why? We learn from their conversation that Lyle has left his wife and three children in Philadelphia to be on his own on the island. Leda is a bit dizzy from the ouzo and lies her head on Lyle’s shoulder, which is again a violation of his personal boundaries. He does not mind. She falls asleep; when she wakes up, she sees Lyle smoking on the balcony and knows that he has seen the doll on the table. As the caretaker, Lyle knows the clan
and is, like everybody in the village, aware that they are looking for the doll. He does not comment nor ask Leda why she has the doll; he simply says that the doll is full of water.

The next day, Leda walks up to the pink villa where the clan resides. She has seen many flyers attached to trees in the little forest above the beach and decides in the spur of the moment to call Nina, most probably to tell her that she has found Elena’s doll. One senses that Leda is attracted by Nina in a motherly way. Does Nina remind her of Bianca? Leda hears voices and then, through some trees, sees Nina kissing Will, the young caretaker of the beach.

This sexual scene prompts a flashback in Leda: the young mother is working on a text with her headphones on, while the daughters are playing in a room close to her study. As husband Joe has accepted a position at a Canadian university, she is alone with the children, carrying the burden of a single mother. She cannot concentrate on her text and begins to masturbate, when the daughters rush in and interrupt her – the phone is ringing. Leda rushes to pick up the phone and is delighted to learn that she is invited to a conference, hotel and travel expenses paid by the organizers. She instructs the nanny about the daughter’s eating habits and leaves.

At the conference, Professor Hardy, played by Peter Sarsgaard (*1971) praises her recently published paper, and she joins him and his friends for dinner. Professor Hardy and young Leda get on like a house on fire and end up kissing on the staircase when everybody has gone to bed. We see a young and happy Leda, acknowledged as an academic and courted by an older academic who appreciates her research.

In the evening, Leda decides to go to the local cinema. A group of teenage boys are rushing in, making a lot of noise. So unnerved and angry is Leda about this foul behaviour that she shouts at them – to no avail. The boys keep disturbing the public’s view of the film. Leda leaves the theatre and talks to the usher, asking her to fix the problem. The boys start to behave only once Vassili, the clan’s boss and Callie’s husband, intervenes and tells them to shut up. Here, I had the impression that the boss is keeping a watchful eye on Leda.
What are his motives? Is he grateful to Leda because she found Elena, expressing his gratitude by protecting her? Or is he suspicious of her, following her around? Vassili’s intervention at the cinema makes Leda remember her past: she has begun a love affair with Professor Hardy and stays with him, making husband Joe come back to Boston to take care of their daughters.

The next day, Leda visits the local market at the port. Her phone rings. It is Nina, who wants to talk to her. Leda tells her where she is, and after a couple of minutes, Nina joins her at a stall with antique trinkets. Nina tells her that she knows that Leda has seen her with Will, acknowledging her affair. Nina is wearing a large straw hat, a gift from her husband, who is away during the week, probably doing some shady business. The wind keeps blowing the hat away, and Leda, much like a caring mother, buys a hatpin and fixes Nina’s hat. Clearly, Nina admires the older woman for her self-confidence and asks her what had happened to her in the doll shop. Nina is a sensitive young woman; in the toy shop, she felt that there was something going on in Leda. Leda replies, explaining her memory with tears in her eyes: «I abandoned them and didn’t see them for three years. I left.»

She admits that the three years with Professor Hardy were wonderful, amazing, she felt she was able to be herself again. The girls were seven and five years old, when she left them.

In the evening, Leda explores the village. She spots Lyle, dancing on his own in a local square. The whole village is there, participating in a social event: grandmothers and grandfathers, babies, children, teenagers, and middle-aged couples. This local event is, I think, a symbol for the family as the unity of everything, of human life and social order. Everybody loves the music and the dancing. Leda is wearing a red dress and looks very beautiful. Lyle asks her to join in the dancing; she is having a great time, dancing, and flirting with him. Suddenly, as if some Greek gods had cast a dark shadow on the happy village community, Lyle tells Leda to leave now: the clan has arrived. It is as if the clan is the epitome of evil: everybody is afraid of them, feeling uncomfortable when they show up.

TLD, 30:17.
Leda, taking Lyle’s warning seriously, walks back home. Young Will is standing in front of her door, asking her if she could leave her flat to him and Nina for some hours of privacy. Leda replies that she would like to talk to Nina about this.

In the morning, Nina visits Leda in her flat. She tells her that she has not much time, having given Callie an excuse and leaving little Elena with her. When Nina asks Leda if this will ever stop, referring to her daughter’s exhausting need for constant attention, her own exhaustion and guilt about her exhaustion, Leda replies in a non-committal way. In this scene, I had the impression that Leda was not interested in the feelings of the young mother. Leda seems to be hot and cold; on the one hand, she takes care of Nina, buying her the hatpin. On the other hand, she seems remote and does not really engage with the young mother’s sadness. Then, Nina asks her why she went back to her daughters. With tears in her eyes, Leda replies: «I am their mother. I went back because I missed them. I am a very selfish person.»

Much as if she had realized her bad behaviour, her cruel and mean hiding of the doll, Leda gets up and gives Elena’s doll to Nina, telling her: «I am a non-natural mother.» Nina is so shocked about Leda having hidden the doll that, on the spur of a moment, she storms out, then returns, shouting at Leda that she wants nothing from her, pulling out the hatpin from her hat and pushing it into Leda’s stomach. She leaves the keys to the flat on the table and storms out for good.

In the last scene, at night, we see Leda pushing her two large suitcases down the stairs, getting into her rental car and driving away. She is driving semi-consciously, erratically. She stops at the beach, gets out of the car, stumbles on to the beach and collapses into the surf. In the morning, a huge wave splashes into Leda’s face, waking her up. Is she dead? Is what we see her immortal soul if we believe in the immortality of the soul? Leda calls Bianca: Hi, it’s Mum. We hear Bianca replying that she thought Leda was dead. All of a sudden, Leda has an orange in her hand, smiles happily, keeps

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23 TLD, 13:05.
24 TLD, 11:46.
talking to Bianca on the phone and begins to peel the orange like she did when the daughters were little, making a snake of the peel. Again, in this final scene, it is Bianca that gets all of Leda’s attention. Where is Marta?

The plot’s denouement that makes sense to me, since it explains the film’s main tenet and the novel’s title: the lost daughter is Marta, the forgotten child. Leda does not even have a bad conscience, a feeling of guilt of forgetting Marta, so focussed on, almost mesmerized is she with rebellious Bianca. Bianca is the centre and epitome of Leda’s caritas, hate, self-anger and self-reproach, the subject of her guilty conscience as a mother. Marta is lost to Leda because of Leda’s fixation on Bianca, and the most painful character trait of Leda’s we can observe is that she is not even aware that she has lost her second child due to her overbearing caritas for her first. If I am not aware that I have lost somebody, I have no regrets, no feelings of guilt. I am blissfully ignorant of that which other persons, more self-aware and less selfish than me, would regret as a loss.

III. Arendt and Augustine’s love, Plutarch’s hate, and guilt as self-reproach

I have selected several situations of the plot and proceed now to the analysis of these situations.

Love

Quite obviously, Leda expresses her love for Bianca whenever she speaks about her, praising her strong character. This is Leda’s caritas. As I have mentioned before, Marta does not get the attention Leda pays to Bianca. Leda mentions shy Marta too, but not with the emotions she has for Bianca, much as if Marta was just there, a little extension of Bianca, a little thing worthy of mention by name only. There is no detailed description of her character, just the factual,
rational acknowledgement that little Marta exists, that she has two daughters.

Another scene demonstrating love as *cupiditas* is Leda’s affair with the professor. She has left her family to be with him. The Greeks would call this feeling *eros*, sexual passion. They do not marry but live together for three years. She does not have children with the professor; according to Augustine, he was thus a source of evil love, meaning, the object of her selfishness, her selfish craving for happiness, sexual fulfilment, independence, and professional acknowledgement. The professor provides her with what she desires in professional terms: contacts, acknowledgement, and time for her research. Her love for him is *cupiditas*; the professor is the object of her selfish desire. We do not know whether the professor is married and leaves his wife for Leda; if this is the case, young Leda is the object of his *cupiditas*.

The hiking couple who has dinner with young Leda and husband Mike in the holiday cabin portray the love between a man and a woman that destroys families, since the man has left his family for her. This is *cupiditas*. Had they married in church and had children together, their love would have turned from *cupiditas* to *caritas*, a new cycle of parental love that would have connected them with God. But they did not. The Italian woman’s selfish love for a married man is what young Leda experiences with the professor: the selfish happiness that originates in carelessness, or the renouncing of one’s responsibilities, the ignoring of one’s duties to, according to Augustine, one’s family and God. The Greeks would refer to this kind of love as *eros*, while Augustine with Arendt calls it *cupiditas*, evil love. In the last scene, when she is dead, Leda calls Bianca on her mobile phone, peeling an orange. I think this scene is a symbol of her motherly love for Bianca, her *caritas* for her first child.

Nina’s admiration for Leda, the older self-assured woman, could be referred to as a blend of *agape* and *philia*, a deep feeling of sympathy and empathy, non-sexual love. Augustine’s definitions of *caritas* and *cupiditas* do not apply to this relationship. Nina is the only one who senses Leda’s self-reproach, her guilt. This requires empathy, a general interest in another human being. Also, we could refer to
the Italian’s feelings for young Leda, whom she has just met at the holiday cabin and spent some hours with her, as *philia*. If I am correct, *philia* is more personal, that is, directed toward one’s object of one’s love, while *agape* is more general, extending to mankind, to many.

Hate

Naturally, Nina pushing the hatpin into Leda’s stomach is an act of hate; she wants to destroy her, because Leda has hidden Elena’s doll from the clan, although everybody knew they were frantically looking for it. First, upon seeing the doll in Leda’s hands, Nina is confused and asks the elder woman why she hid the doll. Leda replies that she is a non-natural mother. This answer makes Nina so angry that she pushes the hatpin into Leda. Hate can flare up in microseconds. Why does Leda’s answer make Nina so angry? Remember, she admired the older woman’s courage and education, looking up to her as a motherly figure.

I interpret this scene as follows, and, naturally, my interpretation is speculation: it could very well be possible that Nina feels guilty because little Elena is getting on her nerves with her antics. Nina projects her self-reproach and self-anger on to Leda. Nina kills Leda because of her feeling of guilt: Leda’s answer that she is a non-natural mother prompts anxiety and anger in Nina. Nina’s guilt is caused by her almost visceral fear of not being good enough, of also being a non-natural mother, and this strong emotion transforms in microseconds into hatred of Leda. She thus kills the person who has reminded her of her guilt. Leda is the only one in the story who dies, and she dies at the hands of a clan member.

A further situation that demonstrates hate is, I think, the clan’s behaviour toward the villagers. The clan members impose themselves on the villagers; they behave in a bossy and arrogant manner, ignoring other people’s boundaries. Everybody on the beach has to move because of Callie’s birthday party; when the villagers and tourists enjoy themselves dancing in the square, the happy
atmosphere changes lightning fast with the arrival of the clan. I think that the clan’s general perception of the world is based on mistrust, contempt, and the feeling «us against the whole world», which we could interpret as a kind of proto-hate, a precursor of hatred of everybody who is not a member of the clan.

**Guilt**

Besides love and hate, guilt in the form of self-reproach is a very visible emotion in the plot. I think that guilt is the feeling that dominates the plot. Lyle senses that Leda and he have something in common, and he wants to find out what it is. He cooks dinner for them with freshly caught octopus. He confesses his guilt at having left his family in Philadelphia to be on his own on the island, but Leda does not divulge her own guilt to him. Both consider themselves cruel and mean persons – on this point they agree. That is the reason why Lyle does not ask Leda why Elena’s doll is on her table on the balcony. He recognizes her selfishness and is not interested in her motives. Their personal fate is what they both understand and acknowledge in each other: selfishness, the origins of their cruel decisions and mean behaviour. They are mildly flirting while Lyle is cooking the octopus. In antiquity, this activity of superficial playful flirting would have been called *ludus*.

I think what Leda and Lyle have in common is something deeper: human sympathy and empathy, which is *philia*, the non-sexual feeling of love and understanding of another human being. Both Lyle and Leda sense that they are equal in their guilt; they share the deep emotion of self-reproach. Lyle does not mention his guilt in words, *expressis verbis*, but his face – and this makes Harris such an accomplished, fine actor – displays his deep, devouring sense of guilt. Leda understands him because she has done the same to her family. Indeed, it must be psychological torture to feel guilty all the time for past decisions and choices, aware that one cannot leave one’s skin, that one cannot forgive one’s selfishness and move on.
We could further say that both Lyle and Leda are stuck in the past; their overwhelming feelings of guilt deny them happiness in the present and future. Perennial guilt as self-reproach must be a particular circle in Dante’s hell.

A further scene that portrays guilt is Leda’s attraction to Nina, the young mother. We could interpret their relationship as an ersatz mother-daughter relationship, which naturally ends with Nina killing Leda. Guilt is also the principal feeling that guides Leda; she feels this self-reproach all the time. She was selfish and left the family but came back after three years because she missed the daughters, she tells Nina. She confides her guilt to the young mother, answering her truthfully. Nina has touched something in Leda that makes her openly confess her innermost self to a person she has just met a couple of days ago. Nina is neither a friend nor a colleague, just a holiday acquaintance, but Leda trusts her, because she senses that Nina understands her guilt. Nina wants to understand herself and her own guilt about being unnerved with little Elena’s antics; that is the reason why she seeks Leda’s company.

Conclusion

May we live long and die out.25

This is the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement’s (VHEMT) principal slogan. The movement explains its goal of mankind’s self-extinction with the protection of the planet. Once the species homo sapiens is gone, once mankind has vanished from the earth driven by its own free will to die out, the blue planet shall be safe.

Thus, VHEMT does not advocate mass murder or mass suicide; to achieve its goal, the members simply declare that they renounce

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on having children, thus reject procreation. This is a personal choice
that can turn into a political issue.

If I live in a democratic state and an open, tolerant society and
decide not to have children, that is my personal choice. My govern-
ment cannot make me produce children if I do not want to have any.
Furthermore, in an open society, I can openly declare that having
children is a crime towards the planet, making my personal belief a
political statement. Who can prove the opposite and with what argu-
ment? In an open and tolerant society, any idea thus can be politicized.
Another issue is how many individuals take my ideas seriously.

Now, the VHEMT’s idea is certainly a universal one, because it
reaches out to mankind. Yet, it is also utopian to the core, devoid of
realistic consideration. How do people survive in poor Third World
countries? Children are the only guarantee of the survival of the
parents when they grow older. Poor states do not have social security
systems and pension systems like the rich states of the West. Therefore,
as a poor farmer in, for example, Bangladesh, I must have children
to take care of me when I am old, ill, and frail. Procreation is thus
the only means people in poor states have at their disposal; children
and grandchildren are the instruments of the family’s survival.

Are there elements of VHEMT to be found in TLD? Leda’s guilt
at having abandoned her children is certainly close to the question
whether one should have children at all. Yet, the plot centres on
Leda’s guilt and her lack of awareness that she has lost her second
child, not on the future of the planet and our species on it. Leda is
torn between her caritas for Bianca and her guilt. We do not know if
she has regrets at having had two children, but she openly says to
Callie that children are an excruciating responsibility, thus a respon-
sibility that is torturous. It certainly takes a special character and
mindset to leave one’s young children for a love affair.

Furthermore, Leda self-identifies as being a non-natural mother –
what does she mean? I think that she has the picture of the ideal
mother in her mind, and that would be Mary, mother of God, the
principal Christian symbol of femininity and icon of motherhood.
Leda has been socialized in the Christian West. Saint Mary is the
role model for all Christian women, leading by example through personal sacrifice, modesty, love for mankind and obedience to God. The perfect woman, the perfect mother, has only one child, the son of God, has conceived him without intercourse, and that is why Mary’s heart and body are pure. This is an ideal Leda cannot reach, and she knows it. Her guilt is a daily torture. Therefore, the principal element of VHEMT, namely the deliberate decision not to have children to save the planet, cannot be found in the plot.

Let me now answer my research questions. First, scrutinizing the human extinction movement, also referred to as anti-natalism: is the idea that mankind should voluntarily render itself extinct a philosophical question?

Yes, absolutely. The central idea of the movement, one VHEMT is a philosophical question, and a revolutionary one at that. I compare it with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1712–1778) critique of civilization, which, in his time, was revolutionary to the core and earned him, together with Voltaire (1694–1778), a place in the pantheon in Paris. The post-revolutionary French nation expressed its reverence for these Enlightenment thinkers, placing them in adjacent tombs. Thus, Voltaire and Rousseau rest in perennial peace, facing each other.

Prior to Rousseau, the various themes philosophers and political thinkers since Plato and Aristotle were concerned with were, to name but a few: a moral life; the political rules a Prince should follow; citizens’ right to political resistance; natural and divine law; the contract of the citizens with the sovereign; man’s relation to God; love; hate; violence; conditions of war. To the best of my knowledge, philosophers were always concerned with improving the quality of political rule, of human life, thus attempting to make the world a more civilized place, a world worthy to live in for everybody, a more just world.

Think about how many interesting and intelligent books and texts had been published before Rousseau’s time, from Aristotle’s six forms of government to Montaigne’s essays to Hobbes’ *Leviathan* to Locke’s right to resistance and Montesquieu’s separation of powers. They all thought about human life, political rule, the rules
of a civilization and good and evil and how they could improve mankind’s life. None of the various currents of philosophical inquiry advocated that the species should vanish from the earth, on the contrary: philosophers and political thinkers were always interested in making life on earth better for our species, to protect and promote its future.

And then, almost out of the blue, or so many of Rousseau’s aristocratic contemporaries must have thought, appears this little nobody from Geneva, the son of a watchmaker, and declares that civilization, everything mankind has achieved so far is bad and must be condemned! On top of his nonsensical musings about the good of nature and the evil of civilization, of the enslaving nature of the capitalist division of labour, this little nobody even wins the first prize of the prestigious Dijon academy in 1751!26

Indeed, one can reproach Rousseau with hypocrisy, paranoia and selfishness that borders on narcissism.27 His critics, first and foremost Voltaire,28 would argue that he was a hypocrite of the highest order: lecturing the world about how to bring up children in his treatise on education Emile, while having rid himself of his own five children, condemning them to a cruel upbringing in orphanages.

Rousseau was selfish to the core – a lot of cupiditas with Thérèse Le Vasseur, no caritas for his children. He also changed his Calvinist confession when he saw a personal benefit to becoming a Catholic and then returned to Protestantism, again motivated by selfish


27 In my humble opinion, the best source about narcissism, its symptoms, behavioural patterns, and characteristic traits is H. G. Tudor on https://narcsite.com/; accessed 27 November 2022. Tudor’s analysis is unprecedented because he explains the narcissistic behaviour and mindset in the finest detail. Tudor should receive the highest accolade because he has been educating the global public about narcissism, helping many victims to recover from narcissistic abuse and warning the public not to get trapped by narcissists. Tudor is making the world a better place.

reasons. The paranoiac way he had accused David Hume (1711–1776) of stealing money from him, after Hume had generously provided him with shelter and food while the Genevan was in England, leaves one speechless.\(^\text{29}\) Certainly, one can reproach Rousseau his negative character traits and bad decisions, but one has to admire him for his revolutionary political ideas, his critical questioning of civilization and his promotion of direct democracy. His intellectual audacity, his thoughts were so fresh and bold that he rightfully belongs in the pantheon of great thinkers.

Rousseau added an immensely interesting new theme to philosophy: the idea that nature is good, and man’s social order, namely civilization, bad. Rousseau turned the mainstream philosophical thinking of his times on its head: man can be happy and free only if he recognizes the overpowering beauty and goodness of nature. With regard to political rule, the Genevan praised direct democracy as the only legitimate form of government: if I delegate my right to vote and elect, I have ceased to be a free citizen, and because I have delegated my freedom as a citizen, I have ceased to be alive. If I give up my freedom, I am no longer a human being. From this follows that I am dead, as a citizen, as a human being; I am nothing other than an animal walking on two legs.

Certainly, the survival of *homo sapiens* on our blue planet has been threatened. The last big threat to mankind’s survival was the technological possibility of a nuclear war during the years of the Cold War (1948–1991).\(^\text{30}\) Yet, during the Cold War, nobody

\(^{29}\) I mustered all my patience, tolerance, understanding and attention to listen to the *Confessions* on Audible. Rousseau does not mention the affair of the money with David Hume. He explains his decision to send away the five children he had with the illiterate Le Vasseur by saying that the institutions would take better care of them than he ever could. Sending them to orphanages would therefore be in their best interest, while he would have the time and quiet to focus on his work.

\(^{30}\) I define the Cold War as follows: the US Marshall Plan, launched in 1948 was the beginning of the systemic political divide between the West and the Soviet Union, the separation into two ideological camps. The Cold
expressed the idea that if a nuclear war extinguished human life on our planet, the planet would be saved. Everybody was afraid, and I think that fear saved mankind; the nuclear balance of power between the USA and the Soviet Union saved mankind from extinguishing itself. Nobody denied or questioned our species’ progress and development in individual, political and legal terms.

I hold that today the anti-natalist VHEMT is as revolutionary as Rousseau’s critique of civilization was in his times. Therefore, the issue of not having children, of rejecting procreation, is a philosophical question, for all of us to discuss.

Second, is an individual’s deliberate, hence rational, refusal to create offspring legitimate in ethical and political terms?

Yes, I have no doubts that the rejection of procreation is legitimate in ethical and political terms. If I live in a free society, that is, a Western-type democracy and rule-of-law state that grants my civil rights, I have the right not to procreate. Apart from the fact that nobody is interested in my personal decisions, in the way I arrange and manage my life, my decision is legitimate in ethical and political terms since they originate in my free will, in my exercise of my civil rights as a citizen. Just think of the opposite: if my government can pressure me into motherhood against my will, what does that say about the regime?

Europe’s political history has examples of regimes that forced motherhood on women. Is it not interesting that authoritarian and totalitarian states have always institutionalized procreation, actively encouraging women to become mothers? Nazi Germany had the Reich’s mothers producing sons for Goebbels’ Endsieg, honouring especially fertile women with the Ehrenkreuz der Deutschen Mutter, while the Croatian Ustasha regime and the Slovak clerical fascist Tiso regime had similar programmes that were intended to guarantee the future of their nations.

War ended with the political and economic collapse of the Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union in 1991.

A superbly researched question that is related to the theme of deliberate rejection of procreation is Orna Donath’s study about regretting motherhood.\(^{32}\) She has interviewed twenty-three Israeli mothers from all social classes, ethnic backgrounds and religions who have admitted that they regret having had children, although they love them. To them, motherhood is ambivalent: «the co-existence of love and hatred».\(^{33}\)

To conclude: motherhood is perhaps one of the last taboos of modern society. To some, life is unthinkable without children; to others, life is enjoyable only without children. Should we pass judgement? I think judging individuals on their life choices is everybody’s right, as it is just the expression of one’s opinion. Motherhood as a choice should never become a political issue, certainly not in a free society. I should always have the freedom to debate anything, but I should not have children if I do not want any.

A modern and tolerant society can deal with diversity of opinion, even if an idea is utopian, promoting the revolutionary idea of mankind’s voluntary extinction, the death of our species, *homo sapiens*. Let me conclude with a quote from an immensely gifted modern thinker:

> Of course social and political collisions will take place; the mere conflict of positive values alone makes this unavoidable. Yet they can, I believe, be minimised by promoting and preserving an uneasy equilibrium, which is constantly threatened and in constant need of repair – that alone, I repeat, is the precondition for decent societies and morally acceptable behaviour, otherwise we are bound to lose our way.\(^{34}\)

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