

## 0.1 Chapter 3: relationships: Maturity

### 0.2 Maturity

## 1 On the Importance of Secrets

For years, you felt burdened with thoughts, feelings and opinions that didn't seem to make much sense to anyone else. You sometimes wondered if you were going mad. There were people you didn't like, but everyone else seemed to think they were terrific and so you held your tongue. You got anxious and uncomfortable on social occasions when everyone else seemed happy and relaxed. There were things you would have quite liked to try in bed, but they felt shameful and you would not have dared to mention them even to your best friend. You learnt to keep secrets in order to be liked.

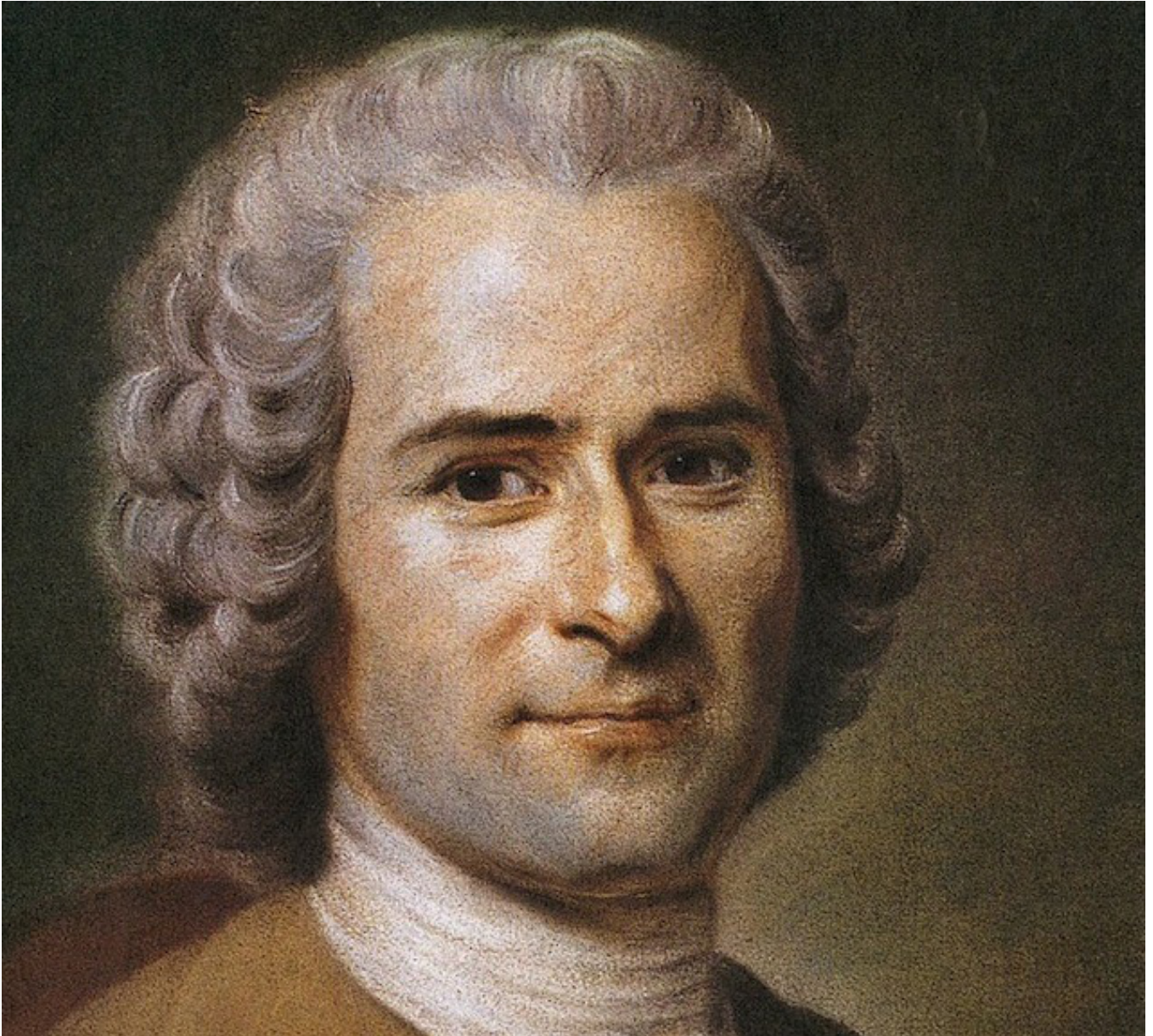
Then finally, you met a very special person. What made them so special was that, at long last, you no longer had to dissemble around them. You could admit to important truths. You could confess, and be rewarded for sharing, your deepest self. It was a favourite game in those early months. You pushed yourself to go as far as you could go. The deeper the secret, the better. No area of the self seemed beyond investigation, no secret too shocking or explicit. You could explain that you found a mutual acquaintance arrogant, narcissistic and mean. Or that you thought some supposed masterpiece of a book very boring. You could explain that you liked pulling hair during sex or had always been excited by ropes. Love seemed to be born out of this new possibility for honesty. What had previously been taboo gave way to exhilarating intimacy.





The relief and excitement at unburdening ourselves of all the secrets that life in society demands is at the heart of the feeling of being in love. It is almost as if being in love is the ability to show someone who we really are. This sense of mutual conspiracy underlies the touch of pity that every new couple feels for the rest of humanity.

But this sharing of secrets sets up in our minds and in our collective culture a powerful and potentially problematic ideal: that if two people love one another, then they must always tell each other the truth about everything.



*In his Confessions, the French writer Jean Jacques Rousseau argued that we owe it to one another to be completely honest about our experiences. Its a sign of corruption to put up facades. Real people are direct, they can own up to who they really are. Even if Rousseau didnt quite live up to this ideal himself, he presented it so eloquently and seductively that it has become common sense. The idea continues to be an influence on your relationship to this day.*

Then, inevitably, there came a moment of crisis. Perhaps you were in a restaurant, sitting with your lover,

the beloved person who had joined you in your innermost convictions about the right way to cook pasta, the nicest places to visit in Italy, the best way to perform cunnilingus and the merits of Salman Rushdie's novels. And now with equal confidence and trust in the spirit of having no more secrets you mentioned that you were a little turned on by the fascinating character reading a book in a corner table on their own. But, on this occasion, there was no more conspiratorial smile and shy but decisive agreement. There was no eager leaning forward, no whispered corroboration. Just a slightly pained, quizzical look from the partner, the trusted recipient of every secret to date. Perhaps it wasn't even around sex. Maybe on a Sunday morning, you were reading a review of a new biography of Margaret Thatcher, and the left-wing critic's words struck you as a little harsh and you said so, but at once you got the sense that this was a topic on which no quarter could be given. Even a trace of sympathy for the former British Prime Minister was simply an impossibility.

We are up against a fundamental conflict within the modern understanding of love. Keeping secrets seems like a betrayal of the relationship. At the same time, the complete truth would appear to place the union in mortal danger.



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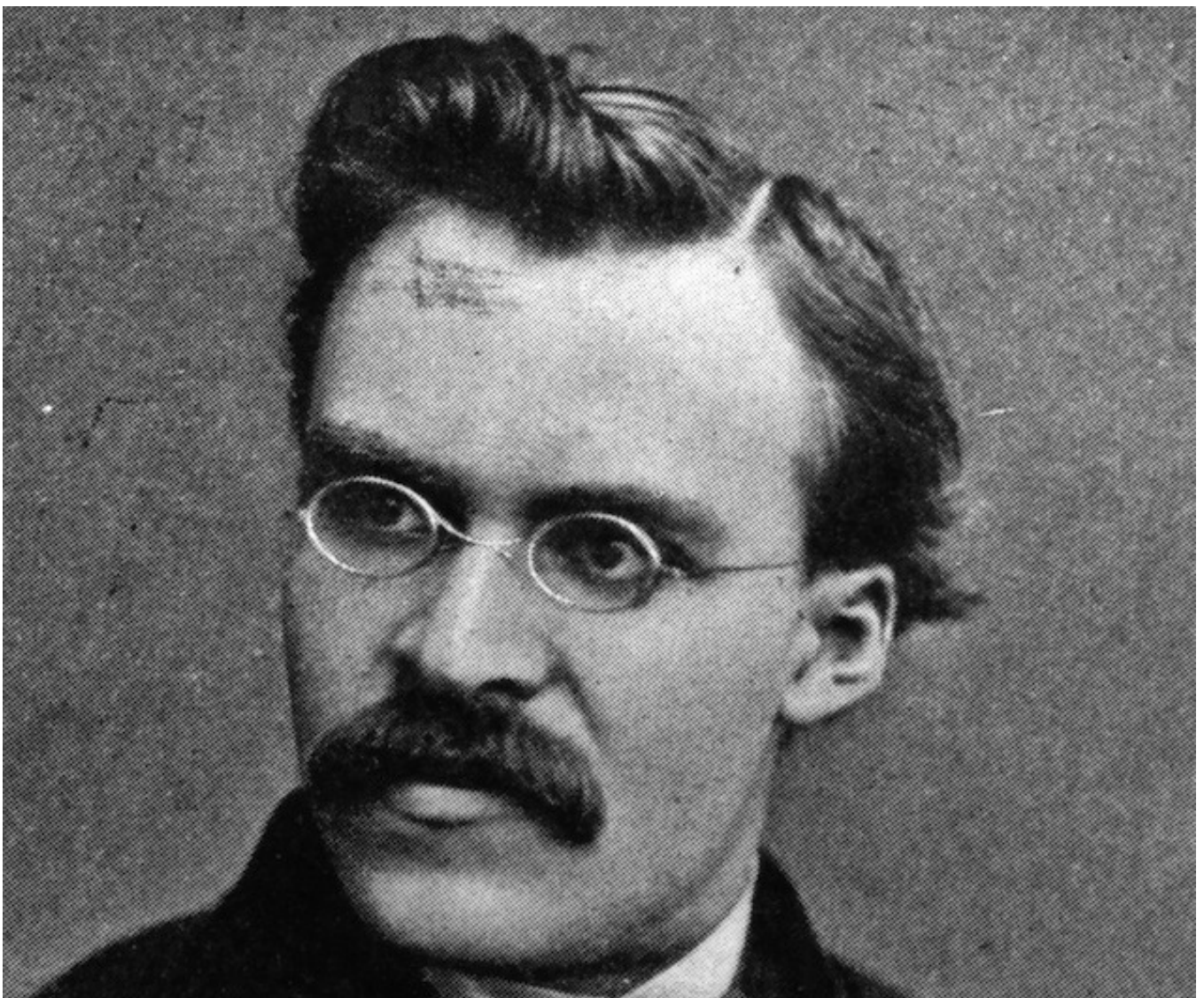
Flickr/Jake Stimptson

The idea of honesty is sublime. It presents a deeply moving vision of how two people can be together and it is a constant presence in the early months. But there is a problem: we keep wanting to make this same demand as the relationship goes on. And yet in order to be kind, and in order to sustain



the relationship, it ultimately becomes necessary to keep a great many thoughts out of sight. We are perhaps too conscious of the bad reasons for hiding something; we haven't paid enough attention to the noble reasons why, from time to time, true loyalty may lead one to say very much less than the whole truth. We are so impressed by honesty, we have forgotten the virtues of politeness, this word defined not as a cynical withholding of important information for the sake of harm, but as a dedication to not rubbing someone up against the true, hurtful aspects of one's nature. It is ultimately no great sign of kindness to insist on showing someone one's entire self at all times. Repression, a certain degree of restraint and a dedication to editing one's pronouncements belongs to love as much as a capacity for explicit confession. The person who cannot tolerate secrets, who in the name of being honest, shares information so wounding it cannot be forgotten, is no friend of love. Just as no parent tells a child the whole truth, so we should accept the ongoing need to edit our full reality.

And if one suspects (and one should, rather regularly, if the relationship is a good one) that one's partner might be lying too (about what they are thinking about, about how they judge one's work, about where they were last night...), it is perhaps best not to take up arms and lay into them like a sharp relentless inquisitor, however intensely one yearns to do just that. It may be kinder, wiser and perhaps more in the true spirit of love, to pretend one simply didn't notice.



*Friedrich Nietzsche departed from philosophical wisdom as it had been defined hitherto by insisting that the truth is not always the most important thing for us to be concerned with. What matters is what we are able to do with what we know: one can use the truth to damage someone, or one can use it to help. This should determine the degree of our dedication to it. We don't have to tell each other the truth all the time unless it genuinely helps us to accomplish our goals. In Nietzsches words, often it really does not: We need art (that is, strategic deceptions) lest we die of the truth.*