Integrating an Orthodox Christian Perspective into Emotion-Focused Couple Counselling:
A theoretical exploration

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Thesis Abstract

Acute distress within couple relationships, whether marital or non-marital, can constitute a significant and enduring psychological, emotional, and social challenge, with effects that extend beyond intimate partners to influence child wellbeing and broader societal structures. In response, empirically validated models such as the Gottman Method of Couple Therapy and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) have demonstrated efficacy in improving relationship satisfaction, emotional attunement, and long-term relational stability. While these methodologies offer helpful tools for addressing relational distress and building emotional connection, they primarily operate within a predominantly psychological and secular framework.

This dissertation explores the integration of Saint Sophrony of Essex's hypostatic theology, a trustworthy representative of the Orthodox Christian tradition, into the practice of couple therapy, proposing a spiritually enriched model that situates romantic partnership within an eternal and salvific context. Central to Sophrony's theology is the concept of the "*hypostasis*" – true personhood that is characterized by relationality, other-centeredness, and participation in the divine life. Applying this theological vision to intimate relationships opens a new dimension in couple counseling, wherein love, sacrifice, and mutual self-emptying, or *kenosis*, are not only therapeutic ideals but also ontological imperatives with eternal significance.

By engaging in a conceptual comparative methodology, this study critically examines intersections and divergences between the contemporary therapeutic modalities of John Gottman and Susan Johnson and Orthodox Christian anthropology. The resulting discussion proposes a

path for integrating an Orthodox spiritual and theological formation into clinical work with couples. Ultimately, this approach reframes marital union as a transformative journey toward communion – both with the other and with God.

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INTRODUCTION

Author's Positionality

This dissertation is written from my unique personal perspective as an Orthodox Christian priest who also counsels couples within my faith tradition. Within the Eastern Orthodox Christian context, divorce, while still allowed under certain circumstances, is considered the unfortunate dissolution of a sacred union that was accomplished by God within one of the sacraments of the Church. Consequently, married couples are pastorally guided to understand marital distress as an unavoidable and expected consequence of human limitation, including miscommunication and interpersonal incompatibilities. Within the Orthodox Christian context, couples are provided with a realistic and deeply meaningful framework that helps them to transcend their difficulties and to transform their relationship in way that positively impacts, not only themselves, but even those around them.

Although the primary aim of this dissertation is to evaluate the efficacy of contemporary couple counseling methodologies and to articulate a coherent framework for the treatment of relational distress, assessing the true prevalence of such distress presents methodological challenges. Couple relationship distress is typically documented only when partners seek professional or pastoral assistance, leaving a substantial portion of distressed relationships unreported. Given this limitation, divorce rates are employed in this study as an imperfect but pragmatic proxy for severe and unresolved relational dysfunction, as they are derived from comprehensive legal records rather than voluntary self-reporting. At the same time, this dissertation acknowledges

that framing divorce as an unqualified social or personal harm risks oversimplification. In certain circumstances – particularly in the presence of abuse, neglect, or chronic relational trauma – divorce may constitute a protective and ethically preferable outcome. Accordingly, the position advanced in this dissertation treats marriage in general as a unique opportunity for individuals to deepen their personal relationships with the people that they are closest to, while also recognizing that not all marriages or committed romantic partnerships are healthy and capable of providing enduring benefit to spouses, children, or broader social structures.

Before examining divorce and its documented effects on individuals and societies, it is necessary to clarify the definition of marriage operative within this study. In the Orthodox Christian tradition marriage is a sacrament, a sacred union, between one man and one woman. As such, this dissertation does not address the marriages of same-sex couples, or "open relationships", not as a statement regarding their dignity or worth, but because they fall outside the scope of my pastoral practice and the theological framework of this study. Nevertheless, many of the relational principles, therapeutic mechanisms, and clinical insights discussed herein can be applicable across a wide range of committed partnerships, whether heterosexual or same-sex, married or unmarried. It should therefore be understood that the conceptual framework advanced in this dissertation is explicitly situated within the perspective of a Greek Orthodox priest who is often called upon to counsel couples, and is therefore shaped by my own theological perspectives, and personal therapeutic experiences, both explicit and implicit.

Definition of Terms and use of Acronyms and Abbreviations

Within this thesis, I use the terms *couple*, *romantic partnership*, and *marriage* (or *married couple*). Although these terms carry distinct social, legal, and cultural connotations, they share a common underlying foundation: an exclusive relational bond meant to be characterized by mutual trust and commitment, and are treated within the therapeutic context in the same manner. If a couple is in therapy, the treatment is the same, whether they are formally married or not. Restricting the analysis in this dissertation to a single term would risk unnecessarily excluding relational forms that fall within the conceptual scope of this study. Accordingly, this thesis adopts an inclusive usage that recognizes variation in formalization – whether through religious ceremony, legal contract, or other ritualized commitments – while emphasizing the shared expectation of relational exclusivity and an implicit commitment to fidelity. It is this foundational structure of exclusive emotional and relational connection that constitutes the primary focus of the couple-based counseling modalities examined in this work. Accordingly, terms such as couple, partners, romantic partnership, and spouses are employed inclusively to refer to committed dyadic relationships unless otherwise specified. When the analysis pertains specifically to legally or sacramentally recognized unions, the term married couples is used in a more restricted and precise sense.

This thesis makes use of the following acronyms:

TGI: The Gottman Institute
EFT: Emotionally Focused Therapy
SRH: Sound Relationship House (the theoretical basis of Gottman Couple Therapy)
IBCT: Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy
CBCT: Cognitive Behavioral Couple Therapy

Relationship Dysfunction and The Causes of Divorce

The dissolution of romantic partnerships, including both marriages and cohabiting relationships, represents a significant social, psychological, and religious issue with wide-ranging implications. For the purposes of this analysis, divorce functions as a methodological proxy for the underlying relational, emotional, and attachment disruptions that are more directly responsible for negative individual and societal consequences, given that these antecedent dysfunctions are substantially more difficult to measure than the legal dissolution of a romantic partnership. The pre-eminent divorce researcher Paul Amato notes that various longitudinal studies show that the factors leading to marital disruption include domestic violence, frequent conflict, infidelity, personal perceptions of relationship problems, a weak commitment to marriage, and low levels of love and trust between spouses (Amato, 2010). Reseacher John Gottman offers similar predictors of divorce that could broadly be categorized as low levels of trust and commitment, and the presence of contempt and stonewalling, or emotional withdrawal, within the dynamics of the romantic partnership (Gottman, 1995). Other researchers have noted that relationship dissatisfaction, communication problems, infidelity, financial stress, and differing expectations are some of the most frequently cited causes of marital breakdown (Lammers et al., 2011). Additionally, shifts in societal values, changing gender roles, and the increasing acceptance of divorce[1] as a viable option may have contributed to the erosion of the traditional notion of marriage as a lifelong commitment (Cherlin, 2009).

[1] From the perspective of individuals who, in previous generations, may have felt confined within abusive or chronically harmful relationships, the broader social and legal acceptance of divorce has represented a significant development, offering protective recourse and, in certain circumstances, tangible psychological and social benefits.

As we measure the effects of "divorce", it is really these destructive patterns leading to divorce that we are trying to capture. Thus, references to divorce throughout this thesis should be understood as references to a measurable outcome that indexes these deeper patterns of relational dysfunction, rather than as a claim that marital dissolution itself constitutes the primary causal mechanism underlying adverse psychological or sociological effects. Indeed, there are circumstances in which divorce may be the more preferable and protective outcome, especially when relationships are marked by abuse or entrenched patterns of physical or psychological harm.

The Prevalence of Divorce Today

Although more recent studies indicate that the overall divorce rates in the United States have modestly declined – to below 50 percent of all marriages and under 40 percent for first-time marriages (Amato, 2010) – this trend appears to be influenced by a broader decrease in the number of marriages themselves (Forbes Advisor, 2025). Specifically, the decline in both marriage and divorce rates suggests a correlation rather than a definitive increase in marital stability (Forbes Advisor, 2025). Corroborating this, Census Bureau data reveals that from 2011 to 2021, both marriage and divorce rates decreased – marriages fell from 16.3 to 14.9 per 1,000 women, while divorces declined from 9.7 to 6.9 per 1,000 women – underscoring the role of fewer unions in driving down the divorce rate (Census Bureau, 2023; Popenoe, 2017).[2]

While multiple factors likely contribute to the decline in divorce rates, the significant decrease in the number of marriages is arguably the most influential. As such, the reduction in divorce rates

[2] According to the National Center for Family & Marriage Research (NCFMR) at Bowling Green State University, the divorce rate for first marriages in the U.S. is approximately 42–45%. However, rates for second and subsequent marriages are higher, with around 60–67% of second marriages ending in divorce (Raley & Sweeney, 2020).

does not necessarily reflect an increase in marital stability or improved therapeutic outcomes. Rather, it may simply indicate that fewer individuals are entering into marriage in the first place, the impact of which is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Consequently, the decline in divorce rates should not be viewed as inherently positive or as evidence that the consequences of unhealthy relationship patterns within married couples have diminished. On the contrary, divorce, and the relational dysfunction leading to it, continue to cause substantial and wide-ranging effects on individuals, families, and broader societal structures. And although the legal process of divorce is often accomplished somewhat discreetly, the implications of the underlying distress are long-lasting and multifaceted, particularly in terms of sociological impact, and both psychological and physical well-being.

Adverse Sociological Impact

Although the immediate economic consequences of divorce are reportedly not as severe as they were in the past, divorce is still associated with significant short-term declines in economic resources, especially for mothers and their children (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). In the 1980s, mothers' household incomes were 42% lower the year following a divorce; by the 2000s this number had fallen to 33% (cf. Tach & Eads, 2015) – still a substantial financial impact. Divorce is also associated with lower wealth accumulation among older women (Addo & Lichter, 2013), and with elevated poverty rates for both women and children (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Divorce is also a predictor of downward social mobility among children, as family disruption often correlates with lower educational attainment, increased economic instability, and diminished opportunities for upward mobility (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). These findings align with broader studies that link family breakdown to intergenerational disadvantage and instability in social networks.

From a sociological perspective, the adverse economic impact is only one of the underlying factors that lead to an overall decrease in personal well-being and societal impact. A Swedish study found that divorce, and therefore relationship dysfunction, is a potent risk factor for onset of drug abuse, even after adjusting for deviant behavior in adolescence and family history of drug abuse (Edwards et al., 2018). Divorce is also strongly associated with disrupted family systems and lower levels of social cohesion. A meta-analysis of 92 studies found consistent, albeit modest, reductions in child well-being following divorce, suggesting meaningful sociological implications (Amato, 1991). These reductions in personal wellbeing can be attributed to several factors converging: diminished economic stability, increased personal stress, increased family conflict, and reduced parental involvement.

Adverse Impact on Mental and Physical Health

A meta-analysis by Sands, Thompson, and Gaysina (2020) concluded that individuals with divorced parents[3] are significantly more likely to experience a wide range of mental health challenges: In one of the most comprehensive studies ever conducted on the effects of divorce, the authors analyzed data from over half a million individuals and concluded that the psychological effects of parental divorce can persist well into adulthood, especially when combined with other stressors such as economic hardship or parental conflict. The study found statistically significant associations between parental divorce and the later development of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation. Similar findings emerged from longitudinal studies like the National Child Development Study in the UK, where children from divorced families were more likely to develop serious psychological disorders in adulthood compared to those from intact families (Rodgers, 1996; see also Hewitt et al., 2012). However, it

[3] ie: those who suffered from the parental dysfunction, and possibly abuse, in the home.

should be understood that divorce may simply be the obvious marker of risk rather than the direct causal agent of these mental health challenges. Couple disharmony, for example, could play a more instrumental role in the onset of depression and anxiety than the actual legal dissolution of the marriage.

Men and women both experience an increase in adversity following divorce and the experience of relationship dysfunction preceding it. For men and women, divorce has been associated with long-term declines in physical and mental health. Studies have shown that divorced men and women experience higher rates of depression, adverse chronic conditions, and physical mobility limitations in later life, and that these consequences are magnified by financial hardship, which is most common to women (Brown, 2004; Hughes & Waite, 2009). Although men also experience significant adverse mental health outcomes following divorce, including increased psychological distress and elevated risk for depressive episodes during the post-divorce transition, research suggests that these effects are frequently moderated by structural advantages such as higher post-divorce income and labor-market stability when compared to women.[4] As a result, while men demonstrate clear psychological vulnerability following marital dissolution, the long-term mental health consequences are often less severe or persistent than those observed among women facing compounded economic disadvantage (Kessler et al., 1992; Leopold, 2018; Wilmoth & Koso, 2002). Further research indicates that the consequences of divorce can extend well beyond the immediate aftermath of marital dissolution, particularly for individuals who do not remarry. In a longitudinal study, Couch, Tamborini, and Reznik (2015) found that divorce has significant long-term effects on work disability among men who *remain* unmarried. Notably, these negative

[4] Of course, it must be noted that that men's financial advantage is population-level dependent and probabilistic, not universal, and it varies by age, custodial status, education, and labor-market conditions. Still, the general trend is supported by numerous studies.

outcomes did not manifest until approximately 20 years after the divorce, suggesting that the repercussions of marital disruption may accumulate gradually over time. This delayed impact underscores the importance of considering both the immediate and prolonged consequences of divorce when it comes to an individual's well-being, and the impact that poor physical and mental health can have on a broader societal level.

Adverse Effects on Children

Low levels of parental well-being may naturally contribute to less effective parenting, leading to what is perhaps the most consequential result of divorce: the effect on children. The most comprehensive and influential research on the effects of divorce on children is Paul Amato's meta-analytic program of research, which synthesizes decades of empirical findings across psychological, behavioral, academic, and social domains. Collectively, his work demonstrated that while parental divorce is associated with elevated risk for adverse child outcomes, these effects are heterogeneous and largely mediated by pre-divorce conflict, post-divorce economic conditions, parenting quality, and relational stability – supporting interpretations that conceptualize divorce as a marker for underlying family and relationship dysfunction rather than a uniform causal mechanism. Considering this, it is worth emphasizing that, although marriage does not guarantee a nurturing or developmentally optimal environment for children, nor does divorce inevitably preclude one, a substantial body of empirical research indicates that, on average, children raised by their two biological parents in a stable household demonstrate more favorable psychological, emotional, and behavioral outcomes than those raised in other family structures (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001). In general, divorced homes have shown a decrease in conversation, affection, stimulation of academic behavior, encouragement of social maturity, and warmth directed towards the children (Fagan, P. & Churchill, A., 2012), dynamics

that may also be present within married homes with high levels of conflict and disharmony. In a follow-up study of children from divorced homes, Sharlene Wolchik confirmed that repeated family transitions – such as divorce, remarriage, or cohabitation – can have cumulative negative effects on children's academic performance, social development, and future relational stability (Wolchik et al., 2002). This is not to argue that these same adverse outcomes cannot exist within married homes – they certainly can if the homes contain the same negative underlying dysfunction that led others to divorce. Large-scale meta-analyses and longitudinal studies consistently show that children residing with both biological parents exhibit lower rates of internalizing and externalizing disorders, higher academic achievement, and greater emotional security across development (Amato & Keith, 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Importantly, these associations persist even when controlling for socioeconomic status, parental education, and demographic variables, suggesting that family structure itself functions as a meaningful – though not exclusive – contextual factor in child wellbeing.

Bowlby's Contribution

It is crucial to briefly introduce the work of John Bowlby here, as his attachment theory provides a foundational framework for understanding the relational conditions that support healthy childhood development. Bowlby (1969/1982, 1973, 1980) argued that children are biologically predisposed to seek proximity to consistent and responsive caregivers, whose availability fosters a sense of security that enables emotional regulation, exploration, and social competence. When caregivers function as reliable "safe havens" in times of distress and as "secure bases" from which children can engage the wider world, children are more likely to develop secure attachment patterns associated with long-term psychological resilience. Within this framework, the presence of two consistently available biological parents in a stable household may increase

the probability – though not the guarantee – of sustained caregiver responsiveness, relational continuity, and cooperative parenting. Empirical research has linked such stability to lower levels of child anxiety and behavioral dysregulation, suggesting that attachment security is strengthened when children experience predictable, coordinated caregiving across time. Thus, attachment theory helps explain why stable two-parent biological households, when characterized by low conflict and emotional availability, are often associated with more favorable outcomes in childhood well-being.

At the same time, it is important to note that the advantages associated with two-parent biological households are largely mediated by relational and environmental processes rather than marital status alone. These include reduced exposure to chronic interparental conflict, greater economic stability, more consistent parenting practices, and the presence of at least one reliably available attachment figure (Amato, 2010; McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013). While this is not always the case, from an attachment-theoretical perspective, stable co-residence with both biological parents increases the likelihood that children experience caregivers as accessible, responsive, and emotionally available – conditions that support the development of secure attachment and effective affect regulation (Bowlby, 1969; 1982).

Consequently, while it is empirically accurate that some children fare better following divorce – particularly when separation removes them from high-conflict or abusive environments – the broader population-level findings indicate that the presence of two biological parents in a low-conflict, stable home remains a significant protective factor for childhood wellbeing. Ignoring this correlation risks obscuring the cumulative relational, economic, and attachment-related

advantages that such family structures more reliably provide, even as important heterogeneity in individual family experiences is acknowledged.

However, I must caution against interpreting these findings as an unqualified endorsement of marital continuity *in all* circumstances. Research consistently demonstrates that children exposed to chronic, high-conflict, or emotionally volatile marital environments often experience outcomes comparable to – or worse than – those observed following parental divorce (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995). In such contexts, divorce may function as a protective intervention rather than a risk factor, particularly when it results in a reduction of interparental hostility and restores emotional availability within the parent–child relationship. From an attachment perspective, sustained exposure to parental conflict undermines a child's sense of safety and predictability, impairing the caregiver's capacity to function as a reliable safe haven (Bowlby, 1982). Consequently, when marital dissolution reduces relational threat and enhances caregiver responsiveness, post-divorce environments may better support attachment security and emotional regulation than the intact, but highly distressed, family system they replace.

A child's attachment to a nonresident parent will be considerably weaker, further undermining the amount of support and closeness the child experiences in that parental relationship. And even though post-divorce cohabitation introduces a second adult to the household, because the partner is not the biological parent of the child, it is not as likely that his or her presence will adequately raise the levels of warmth and support to meet the levels experienced by the children who live with parents who self-identify as "happily married" (Brown, 2004). There are exceptions to this, as not every married couple provides a loving and nurturing environment for children, and not

every divorced home lacks them. However, the correlation between childhood wellbeing and the presence of two biological parents in the home should not be ignored.

The term ‘divorce’ is used as a barometer of relationship success in all the studies referenced above. While the term divorce is frequently employed as a proxy for relationship instability in much of the published literature, it is important to recognize that divorce itself is not necessarily the causal agent behind the psychological, sociological, or economic challenges identified in these studies. We can argue that these adverse outcomes often stem from pre-existing relationship dysfunctions. Because these relational dynamics are frequently internal and subjective, they are often difficult to quantify through social science methodologies, which rely heavily on subjective self-report measures or controlled observational data.

Furthermore, although fewer studies have examined the consequences of non-marital relationship dissolution, the evidence increasingly indicates that similar negative outcomes can result from the breakdown of cohabiting or romantically committed, non-married partnerships. For instance, Lamidi, Manning, and Brown (2019) found that cohabiting parents experienced elevated depressive symptoms following separation at the same rate as married parents, though married mothers were more likely to recover over time. Another study reported that young adults ages 17-35 who experienced cohabitation dissolutions showed increased rates of depression and alcohol misuse – particularly among men (Zhang & Axinn, 2022). A 2011 study of similar aged young adults corroborates the Zhang and Axinn study: Among unmarried adults aged 18 to 35, the dissolution of a romantic relationship is significantly associated with increased psychological distress and a measurable decline in life satisfaction (Rhoades et al., 2011). Notably, certain characteristics of the relationship and the nature of the breakup were found to have influenced

the extent of these effects. Breakups that followed cohabitation or involved a prior intention to get married were linked to more substantial decreases in reported life satisfaction. This indicates that the psychological and relational consequences of romantic dissolution are not exclusive to divorce, but rather reflect the broader impact of disrupted emotional bonds, regardless of legal marital status or the existence of children.

The Role of Couple Therapy in Mitigating Relationship Dysfunction and Divorce

Given these far-reaching consequences of divorce and the dissolution of romantic partnerships, understanding the factors contributing to relationship distress and exploring effective interventions to prevent it are critical to fostering healthier couple dynamics and promoting family, and therefore societal stability. Within the landscape of couple therapy, the modalities that view emotion as the primary agent for both the success and failure of romantic partnerships have risen in popularity due to their effective outcomes.

In recent decades, emotion-focused therapies – particularly The Gottman Method of Couple Therapy and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) – have gained prominence within the field of couple therapy, eclipsing more traditional models such as behavioral or cognitive-behavioral approaches. A comprehensive meta-analysis comparing Behavioral Couple Therapy (BCT) to Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) demonstrated that EFT achieved moderately larger post-treatment effect sizes ($g = 0.73$) relative to BCT ($g = 0.53$), with these effects persisting up to six months post-intervention ($g = 0.66$ for EFT versus $g = 0.35$ for BCT) (Rathgeber et al., 2019). Interestingly, comparative reviews emphasize that while EFT's emphasis on shaping emotional experience via attachment processes is theoretically distinct, both EFT and newly evolved Cognitive-Behavioral Couple Therapy , which focuses on healing persistent personality-based

conflict patterns, produce similar efficacy in reducing relational distress (I believe this is likely the case because they each focus on restructuring interactional patterns, which are prime motivators for evoking emotion), reinforcing the empirical rise of emotion-centered frameworks in couple therapy (Bodenmann et al., 2020). These findings reflect a broader shift in clinical preference toward therapies that address the emotional and attachment-based causes of most relationship dysfunction.

Prior to the paradigm shift influenced by John Gottman's longitudinal research on couples, most conventional approaches to marriage counseling – primarily grounded in Behavioral Couple Therapy – emphasized cognitive and behavioral problem-solving strategies. While these methods were effective in addressing surface-level conflicts, they often failed to engage with the deeper emotional needs and attachment-related injuries experienced by romantic partners. For instance, while communication training and conflict resolution strategies can provide short-term relief, they do not directly foster the kind of emotional connection that is crucial for sustaining a secure attachment bond between partners. Thanks to the work of Susan Johnson (Johnson, 2012), attachment theory, which posits that early experiences with a primary caregiver shapes people's relational behaviors in adulthood (Bowlby, 1988), has emerged as a key framework for understanding couple dynamics and offers valuable insight into how emotional bonds in intimate relationships can be strengthened, and attachment wounds can be healed.

In light of this, and at the instigation of John Gottman, there is an increasing call for scientifically-based, emotion-focused interventions that can enhance relationship satisfaction by addressing the underlying emotional dynamics at play in romantic couples' interactions. Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) is a pioneer among these approaches and has shown to be

effective in fostering secure attachment bonds between partners. Emotionally Focused Therapy emphasizes the importance of emotional responsiveness and attunement, helping couples access and process vulnerable emotions with a therapist that provides a “secure base” and “safe haven” (Bowlby, 1988). Research has consistently demonstrated that EFT can significantly reduce relationship distress almost immediately, and improve communication patterns, leading to greater emotional intimacy and marital satisfaction (Johnson, 2004; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). Some other couple therapies that include the treatment of emotion in couple dynamics and have positive empirical backing are Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT), and Cognitive-Behavioral Couple Therapy (CBCT).

This Dissertation focuses on The Gottman Method of Couple Therapy and Emotionally-Focused Therapy because they are the most widely-used couple therapies internationally (Lebow & Snyder, 2022). Furthermore, they each contain the most crucial elements of both IBCT and CBCT, including restructuring interactional patterns, learning to accept one’s partner’s personality, and emotion-coaching, while ignoring some of the skills training associated with these other therapies, because Gottman’s research has demonstrated that they do not lead to more positive clinical outcomes (Gottman, 2012).

While EFT has a strong emotional focus, John Gottman’s approach focuses on building the friendship system, fostering healthy and effective communication, and using conflict interactions as opportunities for growth. Though they approach the subject differently, both EFT and the Gottman Method emphasize the need for couples to develop emotional intelligence and a secure emotional connection, as this foundation is critical for navigating challenges and maintaining a healthy relationship over time (Johnson, 2013; Gottman, 1999).

Incorporating An Orthodox Christian Anthropological[5] Epistemology

In this dissertation I argue that the Christian perspective on personhood substantially contributes to the understanding of the dynamics underlying marital, and couple discord, and therefore points to ways of repairing it. The essence of this Orthodox Christian perspective on personhood, which emphasizes the intrinsic value, dignity, and purpose of human beings, emphasizes that the proper aim of a person is not personal satisfaction and pleasure, but to find fulfillment in harmonious communion with his or her fellows. An Orthodox Christian perspective on marriage emphasizes the sacramental nature of the relationship, encouraging partners to view the other as an icon of God. An Orthodox epistemology of marriage calls each individual to sacrificial love unto the sanctification of their being and union (κοινωνία) with all humankind. This is an elevated perspective of personhood, and it endows romantic partnerships and marriages with a new dimension – one that compels them to reach outside of themselves, to engage with, and to love, the world and persons around them.

Research Questions and Methodology

This dissertation explores whether emotion-focused couple therapies can be further strengthened by enriching them with an Orthodox Christian perspective – one that defines the human person not merely as a psychological subject, but as a being whose ultimate end (τέλος) is communion with God. As St. Maximus the Confessor (ca. 7th century/2014) writes, "The human person has been called to become by grace all that God is by nature" (*Ambigua* 7), a statement that

[5] In its academic usage, *anthropology* refers to the interdisciplinary scientific study of human beings—encompassing biological, cultural, social, and linguistic dimensions—whereas within the Orthodox Christian theological tradition, *anthropology* denotes a doctrinal account of the human person grounded in revelation, particularly concerning humanity's creation in the image and likeness of God, the reality of the Fall, and the vocation toward *Theosis*/Communion with God.

encapsulates the Orthodox understanding of human existence as inherently relational and oriented toward transformative participation in divine life. Ultimately, this understanding proposes that human beings experience themselves as fundamentally relational and teleological, oriented beyond immediate self-interest toward enduring bonds that confer deep meaning, and existential security. Within this framework, romantic partnerships become a formative arena in which deeper patterns of attachment, vulnerability, and relational trust are enacted and reshaped in light of an ultimate telos of communion. By reframing the therapeutic goals for couples within the Orthodox understanding of personhood and the salvific nature of relationships, this study seeks to examine both the practical effectiveness and the theological coherence of such an integrative model for cultivating secure and lasting romantic partnerships. The central research question that this thesis will explore is: Are the two most widely-used couple therapy modalities in the United States, The Gottman Method and Emotionally Focused Therapy, appropriate methodologies for Christian couples, and how can these approaches be further enhanced by undergirding them with an Eastern Orthodox anthropological and theological perspective?

This study employs a conceptual comparative methodology to analyze, compare, and integrate the theoretical frameworks provided by Gottman and EFT, and the theological framework provided by the Eastern Orthodox Christian understanding of personhood. A Conceptual Comparative Methodology facilitates the systematic evaluation of related but distinct concepts across disciplines – in this case the psychological and theological – enabling us to explore the intersections and divergences between frameworks. By isolating and comparing certain core constructs – such as “personhood,” “love,” or “communion” – this approach clarifies conceptual boundaries and enhances interdisciplinary dialogue and comparison (Thoun, 2022; Paloutzian & Park, 2013). A conceptual comparative methodology is particularly useful in studies comparing

psychology and religion (see Bratus et al., 2021), where overlapping meanings demand rigorous conceptual distinctions to support both theoretical integration and practical application (Paloutzian & Park, 2013), which is why it is so useful for the present study.

This dissertation offers a systematic examination of the three conceptual systems and their underlying anthropological assumptions. The goal is to explore the foundational principles of the secular therapeutic modalities, including their understanding of the human person, their views on the role of emotion, and how they perceive conflict, and to compare those principles with an Orthodox Christian theological anthropology. By conducting a conceptual comparison, this dissertation seeks to identify points of convergence, divergence, and integration, where appropriate, between the theoretical and theological paradigms. The intention is not necessarily to invalidate one framework in favor of another, as both provide value, but rather to investigate whether and how emotion-focused therapies – already empirically validated in clinical psychology – can be bolstered by undergirding them with a theologically-coherent and spiritually-elevated vision of the human person.

A conceptual comparative methodology is appropriate for this dissertation because the research draws from two psychological frameworks (The Gottman Method, EFT, and attachment theory) and a theological framework (Orthodox Christian anthropology). The research question is not concerned with measuring therapeutic outcomes in practice, but with critically examining the conceptual and ontological assumptions behind the therapeutic models. Since Orthodox Christianity offers a distinct understanding of the person which supplements and enhances secular or humanistic models of psychology, a comparative analysis enables deeper reflection on where current therapeutic modalities are either consistent with, or deficient in relation to, this

theological anthropology. Beyond "compare and critique", the methodology of this dissertation seeks to support the development of a more holistic, theologically-informed, and spiritually-grounded concept of couple therapy.

This dissertation begins in Section One with a comprehensive study of the two most dominant emotion-focused therapeutic models in use today, The Gottman Method of Couple Counseling and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT). To gain a relative proficiency, I underwent training in both modalities (without the supervised clinical hours needed for certification), and then used academic reviews, text materials and articles to gain a more thorough understanding of the key principles underlining each. By scrutinizing the explicit tenets and implicit anthropological presuppositions of each modality, this dissertation seeks to present them critically, especially as they compare to each other, and to the Eastern Orthodox worldview and theology of personhood.

To provide an Orthodox Christian anthropological perspective, in Section Two this dissertation presents the life and theology of Saint Sophrony Sakharov (1896-1993), a recently canonized Saint of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Saint Sophrony is well-known and respected within the Orthodox Christian community, and is considered the "Theologian of Personhood". Though he wrote very little that specifically addressed marriage, this thesis argues that one can extract from his overall writings the significant themes, ideas, and pastoral guidance that can considerably enrich modern couple therapy.

Ethical Considerations

This dissertation does not employ empirical methods or involve human subjects, but there are still important ethical responsibilities associated with conducting a conceptual comparative inquiry, especially one that bridges psychological and theological frameworks. In drawing from

Orthodox theology – which represents one particular Christian tradition – this dissertation acknowledges that its theological anthropology may not be universally accepted. The goal is not to assert theological supremacy over other Christian and non-Christian theological traditions, but to explore how the Orthodox position might deepen or challenge existing therapeutic assumptions. Sensitivity to religious diversity and pluralism is part of the ethical posture of this study. In addition, special care is taken to engage both the therapeutic and theological frameworks, avoiding reductionist interpretations or distortions of their foundational assumptions. This dissertation seeks to maintain an ethically responsible balance, avoiding the instrumentalization of theology for psychological ends or vice versa, and upholding a posture of epistemic humility when working across both secular and theological paradigms.

Emotion-focused therapies, grounded in empirically validated attachment science, offer a promising avenue for addressing the root causes of relationship distress and promoting healthier, more resilient partnerships. Through a closer examination of these approaches, and by undergirding them with an Orthodox Christian anthropological perspective, this dissertation will provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of couple counseling, especially for Christians.

Chapter I The Gottman Method of Couple Therapy

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

The Gottman Method of Couple Therapy is a research-based therapeutic model for couple counseling that has produced positive clinical outcomes, garnering high respect amongst therapists. Its founder, John Gottman, was the pioneer of a paradigm shift within the landscape of couples therapy, wherein evidence-based modalities have now become the norm for therapists (J. L. Lebow, 1999) (David, 2015) (Giles-Sims, 1994) (Silliman, 1995). The Gottman method, created by Dr. John Gottman and his wife Dr. Julie Schwartz Gottman, is based on their "Sound Relationship House" [SRH] theory, which is meant to be a product of the measurable results of seven separate longitudinal studies (1984, 1985, 1988, 1992, 2002) involving over 700 couples, conducted by Gottman and colleague Robert Levenson, a psychology professor at the University of California, Berkeley from 1984-2002 (Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 129).

The Study of Romantic Partnerships

Gottman's method of couples counseling began as a research project arising from his hypothesis that it was not possible to form a true and comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of romantic relationships, and therefore to develop an effective therapy for couple counseling, without first studying couples from multiple perspectives. He believed that only with a set of measurable data, based on observation, could an accurate basis of understanding be gained on which to develop a theory for counseling (Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 129). In his 2011 work *The Science of Trust,* Gottman wrote:

> I contended that what we needed was a real theory of how relationships work and fail to work, and that that theory ought to emerge from basic research of what real couples do to accomplish the everyday "tasks" of being in a stable, satisfying relationship. As a clinical field so far we have done the reverse: We have started with a theory and constructed a therapy…My point is that our field had not generated a theory of relationships by studying the various ways that people go about the business of being in a good relationship—that is, going from the data to build the theory. All the ideas I present in this book have been developed in light of real data about everyday couple interactions (J. M. Gottman, 2011, pp. 14–15).

Overall, Gottman's scientific approach to couple therapy has been well received, setting a new standard for therapists and researchers. What seems obvious now, that a theory for couple therapy should be founded on measurable data, was revolutionary when Gottman began. In claiming a scientific basis for his therapeutic model, Gottman called attention to the fact that existing practices were not empirically tested, casting their validity into doubt. Gottman's challenge has been a net positive for contemporary couple therapy, which has led to the paradigm shift towards making scientific validation of therapeutic modalities mandatory.

Overall, the public criticism of the Gottman method is limited to just a few journal articles and book reviews. Some have questioned whether Gottman's research data truly matches his therapeutic process, and a few others have criticized Gottman's claim about the surety he proposes in the ability to predict divorce (see Heyman & Slep, 2001). Others have been critical of Gottman for eschewing some of the previous mainstays of couples therapy such as active listening (cf. Stanley et al., 2000). Other couple therapists have publicly defended Gottman, and have presented the positive outcomes in their own work utilizing the Gottman method as verification for his program (cf. Lebow, 1999; cf. Saadati Shamir et al., 2019). According to professional training records from the Gottman Institute, over 135,000 clinicians worldwide have

completed training in Gottman Method Couples Therapy, reflecting its substantial adoption among therapists who work with couples and families (cf. The Gottman Institute).

One of John Gottman's most mentioned criticisms of couple therapies that pre-existed his study is that they had outcome goals that were based on idealized versions of romantic relationships, and which often incorporated unproven assumptions about how healthy couples should relate to each other. Gottman wanted to avoid idealistic distortion in his outcome goals for therapy, so during the longitudinal studies that he and Levenson conducted, they were very purposeful concerning the population they chose to work with. Gottman believed that if they conducted their research in the way that most researchers had done, and were still doing, they would be limiting their study to the types of couples that most often sought therapy – those that were ailing. For example, in *The Science of Couples and Family Therapy*, Gottman states that according to the Dyadic Adjustment Scale [DAS], which is the traditional scale for measuring marital satisfaction, couples seeking therapy score on average about 60 points, or four standard deviations below the mean of 100. The couples that participate in the various university-based outcome studies of couple therapy, score an average DAS score of 93, half a standard deviation below the mean (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2018, p. xiii). This means that those participating in university-based outcome studies, as well as the couples actually seeking therapy, were all entering counseling at satisfaction levels below the mean. Gottman and Levenson believed that if they conducted studies with a similar population, they might gain an accurate understanding of what leads to dysfunction and dissolution of romantic partnerships, but they would still not be able to produce non-idealized, science-based outcome goals for distressed couples.

Accordingly, Gottman and Levenson chose not to limit their observation to distressed couples; they incorporated many healthier couples to gain better insight into the relationship patterns of those romantic partnerships that were successful. This is a crucial aspect of the longitudinal studies, and without this Gottman Therapy would be limited, like many therapies before his, to focusing on conflict management and avoiding certain pitfalls like "The Four Horsemen". By studying healthy couples, the Gottman Institute was able to extract 'positive' data, which indicated the importance of building up a couple's friendship system and fostering positive affect and emotional connection. In their study they also incorporated a wide range of couples from every major ethnic and racial group in the U.S., including elderly and same-sex couples, from the newlywed years through retirement, so that they could establish outcome goals that were grounded in "observable and measurable reality" (Gottman, 2011, p. 12, 13; Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 129). No one had ever attempted a study of couples which was this extensive, and the data that it produced was revolutionary.

Gottman and Levenson conducted their observational studies in an apartment-style laboratory, first at Indiana University, and then at the University of Washington which came to be known as "The Love Lab", and it still functions today. During the studies, Gottman and Levenson incorporated a multi-method approach to their research, using what they called the Core Triad of Balance, collecting data from three domains of human experience: interactive behavior, perception, and physiology (*Gottman Method Couples Therapy*, 2017, p. 2). They accomplished this collection of data through the scoring of recorded video interactions by trained staff, self-report ratings of those interactions by the couple, and physiological recordings of the autonomic nervous system, endocrine system, and immune system.

During the observational studies, couples stayed in the apartment for several days at a time, leaving only to go to work. Couples were instructed to behave naturally while being videotaped as they interacted during every-day situations, which included making and denying bids for emotional connection, engaging in conflict discussions, and making repair attempts following conflict. Gottman and Levenson observed and coded macro levels of emotional expression in each couple's movements and facial expressions, utilizing the Emotional Affect Coding System that he developed himself: "At every second of their interaction in our labs we scientifically described couples' voice, gestures, movements, speech, and emotional and facial expressions, and we scored how they made decisions and how they used humor and affection" (J. M. Gottman, 2011, pp. 12–13; Gottman Level 1 Training video, Chapter 4).

At follow-up sessions, couples were then asked to self-report on their thoughts and feelings during video-playback interviews, while undergoing further physiological recording of their heart rate, blood velocity, and skin conductance during the video play-back (Gottman 2004, 1-11; J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 12; J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 130). Gottman was confident that in conducting studies which had included impartial coding, subjective self-reporting, and physiological data, he had a trustworthy data set that provided definitive insight into the dynamics of couple relationships. Though it is fair to question how "natural" couples were able to be with the knowledge that they were being recorded, in reviews of public literature and scholarly journals, Gottman's longitudinal study data set has not been publicly challenged.[6]

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[6] For example, the therapist colleagues whom I have spoken with have accepted Gottman's data as reliable, even if they do not personally use his full therapeutic program.

Based on the information that he gained from the studies of couples, Gottman developed, tested, and then validated a set of questionnaires that profiled strengths and weaknesses in relationships to use during intake interviews (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 130; J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 13). By utilizing these questionnaires and analyzing the data in conjunction with emotional affect coding of interaction videos, he learned how to predict which relationships would remain stable and which would dissolve, with a divorce prediction accuracy at 90%, which is a rate that had never been seen before in other romantic partnership analysis models (Levenson & Gottman, n.d., p. 85-86; J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, pp. 130–131).

From Study to Theory

Gottman wanted to do more than accurately predict divorce, however. He claims that his main purpose was to understand why so many common therapeutic interventions of the day were ineffective in treating distressed relationships. He referenced Jacobson's 1984 analysis of couple therapy outcomes, which had found that only 33% of couples in therapy had sufficiently reduced marital stress after one year (Jacobson et al., 1984). In *The Science of Couple Therapy,* he criticized the "evidence-based small-effect treatments" as not being able to sufficiently help couples who are severely distressed, since, on average, they were having an effect size of only 0.5 standard deviation (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2018, p. xii). He argued that if a couple were to begin treatment with a DAS score of 93, then half a deviation of increase in marital satisfaction may seem effective, but since most couples seeking therapy enter the program with a much lower score than 93, the treatment does not really accomplish the outcome goal; For instance, if a couple advances from a DAS of 40 to 47 they are still in distress (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2018, pp. xii–xiii). Based on this criticism, Gottman publicly called for a systems

therapy that would have an effect of four standard deviations, and he believed that if his research could illuminate the reasons for the weakness of so many modern couple interventions, then more effective interventions could be created to replace them. This argument makes sense, but Gottman has since admitted that even the Gottman Method of Couple Therapy has not produced outcomes of four standard deviations (J. M. Gottman, 2011). Still, Gottman's criticism is fair, and he should be applauded rather than criticized for urging the therapeutic community to develop more effective interventions.

In 1994, after 21 years of data collection, Gottman believed he had developed an effective predictive model, but he understood that prediction was not enough to help couples strengthen their relationship. "Prediction isn't the same as understanding…and to understand you need a theory" (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 28). Accordingly, he incorporated his research data into a therapeutic framework that would eventually be called the "Sound Relationship House Theory", with a suite of interventions that were intended to be based on the data he had collected. In 1996, John and Dr Julie Gottman co-founded the Gottman Institute (J. S. Gottman, 2004, pp. 1–2), through which they worked together to further develop the Sound Relationship House, with its "Seven Principles" of healthy relationships, as the basis for their couple therapy. They began interviewing and treating couples with their new method of therapy that came to be called the "Gottman Method of Couple Therapy," based on the SRH theory. Dr John Gottman introduced the SRH in his work *The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically Based Marital Therapy,* in 1999.

Because of the confidence with which he presented his new therapy, some therapists claimed that Gottman was giving the implicit suggestion that any two people in the world could create a stable, happy relationship if they simply followed the seven principles of the SRH. Though

Gottman was uncomfortable with this implication, he later admitted that it was, in fact, implicit in his book, and that he deserved criticism for it (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 37).

By the early 2000's Gottman believed that his research and methods were sound, but that the theory underlying the interventions, the SRH, was missing something essential. He wrote, "For many critics of this research, something fundamental, mysterious, and basic was apparently missing from our analysis. Skills didn't seem to capture the essence of what made love relationships work. It all felt too mechanistic—not mysterious, dramatic, poetic, artful, or musical enough. Something about these criticisms felt right" (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 38). In analyzing Gottman's approach, the theme of being 'too mechanistic' will continue to be seen in his methodology.

In response to this belief that something was missing, Gottman began researching and interviewing couples again, especially those for whom the Gottman Method was not working. During interviews one theme was constant:

> …many told us that the central missing ingredient was the ability to build and maintain trust with each other. Many distressed couples complained that their partners simply couldn't be counted on to "be there" for them when they needed them most. Over time, they said, the emotional injuries they sustained from a lack of trust built a huge gulf of emotional distance between them, leading to eventual betrayal or the quiet whimper of the demise of love. Happier couples, for whom trust was not missing, described the concept of "trust" as the mysterious quality that somehow created safety, security, and openness for both of them. Trust was that seemingly indefinable condition that made their relationship safe, that made it possible for them to be vulnerable with each other, and that thereby deepened their love beyond the first passionate infatuations and illusions of courtship (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 38).

This feedback from couples is an important criticism of the Gottman Method. When held up against Susan Johnson's Emotionally Focused Therapy [EFT], The Gottman Method does appear overly mechanistic at times, and lacking the precision with which EFT treats the "mysterious"

aspects of emotion and emotional bonding. Gottman's response to this insight from couples, which is really about their emotional bond, was to conduct further research using mathematics to try to understand trust.[7]

Gottman felt the need to research "trust" across multiple disciplines, including sociology, economics, psychology, political science, mathematical game theory, and philosophy (J. M. Gottman, 2011, pp. 43–47). His research was unique in that he was exploring ways in which he could understand trust scientifically, not only as a theory. This is why he was especially drawn towards his particular area of expertise, mathematics, for he believed that mathematical game theory could provide him with a way of measuring trust during singular couple interactions with the precision of a game theory matrix (Cf. J. M. Gottman, 2011, pp. 51–53). This desire to mathematically explain something that couples had expressed as "mysterious", "dramatic", "artful", and "indefinable", is indicative of Gottman's own inner world at this time. He had studied couples for over twenty years, yet he still felt uncomfortable with various aspects of relationship dynamics which it seemed he could not quite grasp to his own satisfaction. It is apropos to look back at how Gottman came into this profession in the first place: In his training videos he somewhat jokingly explains that he was a researcher who's initial motivation for studying couples was that he wanted to better understand women and how to become more attractive to them. While this might not be completely accurate, it does appear that his primary motivation for collecting data on couples was to gain insight into the dynamics of romantic relationships, rather than to develop therapeutic interventions (cf. *The Gottman Method of*

[7] This is an example of Gottman's limitations as a therapist. While his research remains the gold standard for couple therapy, his inability to accurately understand those dynamics within romantic relationships that are unmeasurable, or "mysterious", is a detriment to his Sound Relationship House Theory, and it is fair to question whether the SRH is truly derived from the longitudinal studies that he is most respected for.

Couples Counseling Training Video 1). His desire to better understand trust so that he could help couples develop trust in their relationship is sound, but the need to understand it mathematically may indicate that he was uncomfortable trying to teach something that he did not have an innate sense of.

Is it fair to question if Gottman's understanding of trust adds anything new to couple therapy, and if he has applied research and mathematics to an area for which it was not needed? When Gottman began his study of couples, no one else had conducted such in-depth longitudinal studies, and he won acclaim for this. One wonders if his drive to understand trust was in part fueled by the desire to remain relevant and to apply the research methods he was famous for to something that should have already been identified and understood without it.

Because Gottman wanted to measure and define trust within each single couple interaction, he relied on his expertise in observation and examined couples using his own "Trust Metric" that used measurements across three domains: [1] the behavioral coding of social interaction, [2] the perception of that interaction by the couple, and [3] the couple's physiology, with all three measurement domains synchronized in real time (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 48). Using these measurements, and building on the game-theory work of John von Neumann and Anatol Rapoport, Gottman believed that he could accurately categorize each couple's conflict interactions according to the specific game theory dynamic that they appeared to operate under; He categorized these interaction patterns as either: [1] "Zero-Sum", where one partner's loss was the other partner's gain, [2] "Cooperative", where one's loss or gain is shared by the other partner, or [3] "Mixed," where each partner's loss or gain is independent of their partner's loss or gain (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 58).

As a result of this study Gottman came to believe that trust developed within romantic partnerships as couples perceived that their partner was considering their interests as well as his or her own. This principle is already a feature of attachment theory, and Gottman's data collection simply confirms what he should have already understood.[8] It is interesting that he used measurement and coding data to come to this conclusion, when this was already apparent from interviews that he had previously conducted. In *The Science of Trust,* he writes: "Many distressed couples complained that their partners simply couldn't be counted on to 'be there' for them when they needed them most. Over time, they said, the emotional injuries they sustained from a lack of trust built a huge gulf of emotional distance between them…" (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 38). And again, he writes:

> I was amazed to discover that almost all of the conflict discussions were about establishing trust in different aspects of the relationship. Couples appeared to be discussing issues like: "Can I trust you to choose me over your friends when I need you?" "Can I trust you to be there for me when I am upset?" "Can I trust you to help with the housework?" "Can I trust you to back me up even if it's against your mother?" "Can I trust you to keep your promises?" "Can I trust you to not lie to me?" (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 107).

Based upon this research and the incorporation of some of the principles that he borrowed from Game Theory, Gottman devised the first of the two supporting walls of the SRH: "Trust", which he presented thoroughly in *The Science of Trust: Emotional Attunement for Couples* (2011).

[8] The lack of emotional responsiveness amongst romantic partners is treated by Gottman within the friendship levels of the SRH theory, but we will see later that this dynamic, and the foundation that trust and safety play, is given a more thorough explanation and focused treatment by Susan Johnson's Emotionally Focused Therapy, which is based on the work of John Bowlby and the science of attachment theory.

Gottman then added the final supporting 'wall' for the SRH: "Commitment". While conducting his research on trust, Gottman found that one of the prerequisites for genuine trust between partners was commitment: the commitment to be present and emotionally available, or "attuned", to one's partner's inner-world. This was evident in the interviews that he conducted while studying newlyweds in 1990, when the questions about their partner's emotional availability and commitment to be present surfaced often. He wrote about what he considers to be the three "trust building contexts" for couples in *The Science of Trust (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 178)*, and lists them as a) everyday interactions, or "sliding door moments"; b) regrettable incidents; and c) conflict interactions. It is in the context of these interactions, claims Gottman, that couples either develop trust or betrayal. While the term "sliding door moments" was new, none of these three trust-building contexts were foreign to Gottman's Couple Therapy previous to his publishing *The Science of Trust*; They are all addressed as part of the original Sound Relationship House.

Chapter II The Gottman Method of Couple Therapy

THEORY AND THERAPEUTIC TRAINING

John Gottman's longitudinal study of couples is his most important contribution to the area of couple therapy. This section of the thesis analyzes the theories that the Gottman Institute has developed out of John's research. Some of these theories appear self-evident based on the data collected, such as his 'Seven Signs of Happy Stable Relationships', 'Eight Predictors of Divorce', and his criticism of some of the long-held principles that his data contradicted. Other theories developed by the Gottman Institute appear to have less correlation with the data collected by Gottman and Levenson, and can be challenged.

Gottman and Levenson's data revealed the specific elements of romantic relationships that either weakened or strengthened a couple's emotional bond, and he termed these elements "Dysfunctional" and "Functional" accordingly (cf. J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2012). As these specific aspects of romantic partnerships were revealed, he found that they challenged, and in some cases, completely contradicted, long-held beliefs amongst couple counselors and therapists. Gottman believed these contradictions to be so egregious and harmful to couples that he chose to begin his Gottman Method training modules, not by presenting his own interventions, but by presenting and reviewing these long-held fallacies in a systematic fashion. This is an important criticism of previous couple counseling modalities and is worth reviewing.

In the *Gottman Method Level 1 Clinical Training* manual (Gottman & Gottman, 2012 p. 1-17), Gottman presents the differences between what his research indicates, and the long-held

principles that the research contradicts. Because these previous beliefs about couple dynamics were not, according to Gottman, based on scientific findings, he terms them "myths".[9] The following are the most important previously held couple therapy axioms, along with Gottman's research-based contradictions of them. For the sake of clarity and accuracy, this analysis is presented in a similarly ordered way as it appears in the Gottman therapy manual:

1. **Quid Pro Quo**: Proposed by Lederer & Jackson in their work *The Mirages of Marriage* (Lederer & Jackson, 1968), a quid pro quo exchange concerns positive reciprocity, and is not necessarily overt or the tangible result of real bargaining. It is more of a "metaphorical" statement of how the couple has agreed to define themselves within their relationship (Gurman et al., 2015, p. 196), which involves an unspoken contract of reciprocity and exchange of positive behaviors. Jackson argued that healthy relationships contain this process of positive reciprocity, whereas in ailing relationships the reciprocity dynamic breaks down and trust is eroded. Gottman found that this is not the case. He argues that it is not the breakdown of reciprocity that makes relationships dysfunctional, but the very process of the "Quid Pro Quo" itself that leads romantic partners to become what Gottman terms "emotional accountants", playing the zero-sum game, which, he argues is an unhealthy way to relate to another human being, and contributes towards dissolution of trust and commitment. Gottman quotes a 1977 study produced by Bernard Murstein (Murstein et al., 1977) showing that once someone has this "emotional accountant" mindset of expected reciprocity for every good act in a relationship, it is a sign that the relationship is failing, whether it be a friendship or a romantic partnership. Gottman simply argues in favor of Murstein's thesis, but observes that thesis was posited

[9] While Gottman makes a strong case for his argument against these principles, I do not believe the term "myth" is constructive, so I do not use it in my analysis.

nearly fifty years ago, so a more nuanced position is warranted. While the "Quid Pro Quo" dynamic can lead to the "emotional accountant" criticism offered by Murstein, it is also true that within a romantic partnership, expecting love to be reciprocated is appropriate and healthy. Within the Gottman Training Manual this criticism of Lederer and Jackson can read like a rejection of all expectation of reciprocation, but this is clearly not Gottman's intention; and when taking his entire theory into consideration this is not the impression that one gets.

2. **Sexual infidelity is the leading cause of divorce**: It had long been thought and taught that infidelity was the leading cause of divorce. However, Gigy & Kelly in the Divorce Mediation Research Project (Gigy & Kelly, 1993) discovered that in 80% of the cases, divorce was caused by emotional distance, which could also eventually lead to infidelity. Gottman argues that emotional distance is caused by the absence of friendship and intimacy in the relationship, which is why the "Friendship System" forms the base of his Sound Relationship House theory. Gottman concurs with the conclusions of the Divorce Mediation Project, suggesting that the primary motivation behind extra-marital affairs is often the pursuit of emotional connection – specifically friendship and affection – rather than an unfulfilled or deviant sexual desire.
3. **Monogamy is for women**: Also called the "socio-biological theory", the belief was that men want and need to have sexual relations with many partners, but women need security, and prefer to be loved and cared for by just one partner, so biological differences are a threat to romantic relationships (Fisher, 2017). However, Gottman claims that sociologists estimate that affair rates for men and women are now about equal. Gottman argues that the past disparity between men and women when it came to

philandering was due to women's lack of access to men, as they had yet to enter the work force in large numbers,[10] and not because of differences in biology or sexual appetite. It would follow, Gottman argues, that the desire for multiple sexual partners is not a gender-based desire, and neither is the desire to be loved and cherished monogamously, but these characteristics are shared by both males and females.

4. **Gender Differences Cause Divorce**: *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus* by John Gray, is an example of this reasoning that makes use of traditional gender stereotypes, characterizing men as unemotional and task-oriented, while portraying women as affiliative and emotionally expressive (Gray, 2012). Based on these assumptions, Gray hypothesized that relationship failures between men and women stem from fundamentally different emotional needs shaped by gender; with the inference being that women were more emotional than men. However, Gottman and Levenson observed that during conflict interactions, women used an average of nine emotion-related words per minute, compared to eight by men – a difference they deemed negligible. Building on these findings, Gottman argues that both men and women experience strong emotions and are capable of task-oriented behavior. Accordingly, he argues that therapists should avoid relying on gender-based stereotypes and overgeneralizations about how men and women use and understand emotion, as doing so may hinder effective treatment of couples who are experiencing relational distress.
5. **Dominance Structures in Relationships are Dysfunctional:** This theory is that dominance structures, especially traditional 'male-dominated' structures, do not adequately meet the needs of couples and produce dysfunction within the relationship.

[10] At least in the United State of America, which is where he collected his data.

Gottman counters this hypothesis with the results of his research, which show that there is, in fact, more conflict between romantic partners when gender-delineated dominance structures are *not* in place, and couples are forced to go through the process of creating their own dominance structure. Gottman argues that when both partners have the perception that the power dynamic in the relationship is fair, and they maintain emotional responsiveness to each other, the 'traditional' gender-based model is not destructive in and of itself. Gottman contends that when both partners perceive the power dynamics within their relationship as equitable and demonstrate ongoing emotional responsiveness toward one another, the traditional gender-based model of relationship roles is not inherently harmful. Although Gottman does not make this claim explicitly, an extrapolation from his broader therapeutic work suggests that the concerns raised by therapists critical of traditional dominance structures may, in fact, stem from the emotional dysfunction that is sometimes present in male-dominated relationships. Specifically, the core issue may lie not in the hierarchical structure itself, but rather in the emotionally-unresponsive, controlling, or dismissive behavior of the male partner, which leaves the emotional needs of the female partner unmet.

6. **The Residues of Issues in Families of Origin Predict Failure**: An aspect of early Freudian theory was that the resolution of neuroses in one's family of origin is a prerequisite to healthy relationships. Gottman agrees that residual neuroses have an impact on romantic relationships, but argues that these existing neuroses are not, in themselves, predictive of a failed relationship. Gottman found that the success of romantic partnerships is more dependent on how family-of-origin neuroses are managed, rather than on their prevalence. This represents one of the more nuanced critiques

presented by Gottman. He emphasizes the importance of accurate diagnosis in the treatment of marital dysfunction. However, he cautions that if a therapist introduces the belief that a couple's relationship cannot achieve health or stability until unresolved childhood wounds are fully addressed, it may inadvertently foster hopelessness. Such an approach can undermine the couple's confidence in their capacity to grow together and may ultimately contribute to the breakdown of the romantic partnership.

7. **Reinforcement Erosion**: Neil Jacobson (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979) suggested that relationships start off happy, but over time a natural "reinforcement erosion" occurs, with partners becoming less able to "reinforce" the value they hold for the other, and this erosion is the source of couple dysfunction. Gottman bases his counterargument on the longitudinal studies he conducted with Levenson, which indicate that in healthy long-term relationships people actually become *more* important to one another, and that small acts of kindness have an even greater impact. Although not stated explicitly in this context, Gottman would likely argue that the erosion of "reinforcement" within a relationship is not an inevitable outcome of time, but rather a consequence of diminished friendship and intimacy between partners. Over time, this deficit can lead individuals to devalue their partner and the relationship itself.
8. **High Expectations**: This hypothesis (Lederer and Jackson, 1968) is that people's high expectations entering a romantic relationship are the cause of disillusionment leading to divorce. The argument made by Lederer and Jackson is that couples need to be 'realistic' in their expectations, and thus avoid the inevitable disappointment that erodes the romantic bond. Gottman references the research of D.H. Baucom (Epstein & Baucom, 2002) to argue that the opposite is true: people who expect to be treated well in a

relationship get treated well, and those who lower their expectations and expect less are often treated according to those expectations. It is possible that Gottman is taking Lederer and Jackson too literally here, and that both axioms can be true at the same time: Couples who have a realistic view of the challenges in marriage can also maintain high standards for how they will be treated by their partner.

Following the list of long-held misperceptions, the *Gottman Level 1 Training Manual* presents Gottman's "Eight Predictors of Divorce or Continued Couple Misery", which can also be found, though ordered differently, in *The Science of Trust* (J. M. Gottman, 2011, pp. 15–20). Gottman makes the compelling argument that because these "Eight Predictors" are based on the findings of over 30 years of longitudinal studies, they are trustworthy. His purpose for presenting the "myths" above and then the following "true principles" is to help couple therapists focus on what his research indicates are the real causes of relationship decline, and not on those factors that did not predict dissolution in his studies. These principles are set-forth here in the same systematic format that the Gottman Training Manual presents them:

1. **The Failure of Repair Attempts**: Conflict, arguments, and harmful words are inevitable in any relationship, according to Gottman, and this is possibly his most consequential argument for modern couple counseling. Gottman is one of the pioneers of the argument that conflict in relationships is unavoidable. Accordingly, he argues that the goal of therapy should not be to teach couples to avoid conflict, but to help them process through what he terms "Regrettable Incidents", by making repairs to their relationship once they have taken place. According to Gottman, the failure to repair after conflict is a sign of dysfunction and one of the predictors of divorce. This shift in focus, from conflict-

avoidance to conflict-management and eventual repair, was a distinguishing point of Gottman Therapy when it was first published. It remains at the center of his therapy today.

2. **More Negativity than Positivity**: In the seven separate longitudinal studies conducted by Gottman and Levenson, the ratio of positive to negative interactions in the relationships characterized as "stable" was 5:1 during conflict discussions. Gottman found that this ratio was at or below 0.8:1 in couples that eventually divorced; this is why he places such great importance on the use of positive statements and positive affect during conflict interactions, and incorporates training for how to do this during his therapy sessions with couples. Gottman believes that both negativity and negative affect, like conflict, can have constructive value in relationships, and therefore does not agree with therapists and couples who want to eliminate negativity completely. Rather, he argues that negativity must be outweighed in a 5:1 ratio by positive interaction, even during conflict, for the relationship to be classified as happy and stable [see also (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 16)].
3. **The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**: Gottman found that emotional intensity, such as anger, met with reciprocal emotional intensity during conflict is not a predictor of divorce, and does not signify relationship instability. Rather, it is the escalation of negative affect within a particular interaction that signifies instability, and it is the appearance of one of the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" that predicts divorce. Gottman names these "four Horsemen", or divorce predictors, as Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Stonewalling.[11]

[11] The Four Horsemen are a hallmark of Gottman's teaching and are fully explored below.

4. **The Failure of Men to 'Accept Influence'**: Gottman identifies two primary patterns through which men may fail to accept influence from their female partners: emotional disengagement and the amplification of their partner's negative affect. The latter may involve responding to expressions of dissatisfaction (such as complaints) with hostility or belligerence. According to Gottman's findings, emotional disengagement by one partner often precipitates mutual withdrawal, resulting in a breakdown of emotional connection. Furthermore, the use of antagonistic behaviors such as belligerence serves as an indicator of underlying dissatisfaction and frequently precedes the emergence of what Gottman terms the "Four Horsemen" of relationship dissolution.
5. **Negative Sentiment Override**: Gottman relies on the work of Robert Weiss (Weiss, 2005), who argues that couples are always either in one of two states: "Positive Sentiment Override", or "Negative Sentiment Override". What characterizes each of these states is the positive or negative reception to a neutral statement made by one's partner. Negative Sentiment Override is a sign of relationship dysfunction; it is present whenever a neutral or positive message is received and interpreted as negative. According to Gottman's research, if a couple's relationship is in dysfunction due to the deterioration of their friendship, then the negative sentiment that one partner feels for the other will override at least 50% of their positive interactions (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 31).
6. **Emotional Disengagement and Withdrawal**: This negative pattern of emotional withdrawal was observed by Gottman over the course of the longitudinal studies. It is characterized by two similar aspects: The "turning against" bids for emotional connection; and the lack of both escalated negative affect during conflict, and positive

affect outside of conflict. Gottman found that the absence of positive affect, including lack of affection, shared humor, question-asking, excitement, joy, support and empathy, was one of the strongest correlated predictors of relationship dissolution. This claim is supported by other more modern research as well, and Sue Johnson refers several times to the study conducted by University of Texas professor Ted Houston, which examined couples who had been married for five years. His conclusion was that the most accurate predictor of divorce was not the amount of conflict present, but the couple's lack of emotional responsiveness (S. M. Johnson, 2013, pp. 157–158).

7. **Flooding and "The Distance and Isolation Cascade"**: Gottman found that when one partner is overwhelmed by a perceived attack by the other partner it creates physiological arousal [see below] leading to the "fight or flight" response. Repeated and frequent episodes of physiological arousal can lead to emotional distance between partners, especially if repairs are not made following such interactions. Gottman found that men are more likely to maintain a state of physiological arousal by dwelling on the distressed interactions for an extended period. This can lead to what Gottman calls the "Distance and Isolation Cascade," characterized by chronic unhappiness and the perception that the problems in the relationship are not solvable. This perception of hopelessness leads to loneliness, emotional disengagement, separation, and divorce.
8. **Chronic Diffuse Physiological Arousal (DPA)**: According to Gottman, DPA is caused by the activation of a person's physiological "fight or flight", or 'general alarm response', which tells the body that it is in danger. When this response is accompanied by, or activated as a response to, relationship distress, it can lead to (a) a decrease in one's ability to take in information, (b) an increase in defensiveness and the "summarizing

yourself syndrome," (c) the reduction in the ability to be creative in problem solving, and (d) a reduction in the ability to listen and empathize. Gottman Method training emphasizes the need to counter one's DPA with self-soothing to return the body's heartrate to a level below 100 bpm, which will end the secretion of adrenaline and allow a person's response to their partner to no longer be hampered by these physiological effects. During Gottman therapy sessions each partner is equipped with a monitor for heartrate, and the session is paused if either of them experiences DPA.

In the *Level 1 Training Manual* Gottman then presents his "Seven Signs of Happy, Stable Relationships", or What is "Functional" When a Relationship is Going Well (also presented in a different order in J. M. Gottman, 2011, pp. 20–28):

1. **Matches in Conflict Style**: In 1974 Harold Rausch published the first longitudinal study of couples transitioning to parenthood (cf. Raush, 1974). As part of his study, he examined conflict styles and divided couples into three groups: (a) harmonious, (b) conflict-avoiding, and (c) bickering. He hypothesized that only the harmonious couples, those that were neither perpetual bickerers or conflict-avoiders, were functional and healthy. Gottman's research found this not to be true; for his study showed that in the healthiest relationships, couples were matched in their conflict styles, and that in fact those having all three conflict styles (which Gottman renamed "validators," "avoiders," and "volatiles") could still have a functional relationship that was both stable and happy, as long as the ratio of positive to negative interaction during conflict was greater than, or equal to, 5:1. His research indicated that it was mismatches between conflict styles that

was a better predictor of divorce, not whether or not a couple argued too often or not enough, which is a startling discovery. Gottman found that the mismatches in conflict style were rooted in one person's willingness to work on the relationship to bring about positive change, and the other person's unwillingness to engage in the necessary conflict exchanges to bring about change. Gottman discovered that if each partner shared the same interest in either changing, which involves some conflict, or remaining the same, without the conflict, the relationship remained stable and healthy. Expectation appears to be the primary factor when it comes to couple satisfaction regarding conflict in the relationship. When each partner's expectations for the relationship are similar, then the amount of conflict is not predictive of unhappiness. Likewise, when one partner expects changes in couple dynamics or behaviors to occur over time, and the other partner is a perpetual conflict avoider, even though conflict may not be as apparent, the satisfaction of the partners will suffer.

2. **Dialogue About Perpetual Issues**: Gottman and Levenson's research had shown that only 31% of couples' major areas of disagreement were about problems that could be solved. In contrast, 69% of problems were considered perpetual. However, it was not the perpetual conflict that predicted instability and divorce, but the lack of dialogue about the conflict-causing issues. In healthy couples, though some unsolvable problems still existed, the ability to dialogue about them with positive affect, using "softened startup," accepting influence, and de-escalating negativity, were predictors of the long-term viability of the relationship.
3. **Difficult Issues are Joint Problems**: During Gottman's observations, when unhappy couples presented difficult issues in their relationship, they did so as if the issues were the

symptom of global defects in their partner, not as behaviors that needed correction; and they were unable to experience their difficulties as a unified couple who were facing a threat from the outside together. Happy couples, on the other hand, were able to present the struggles in their relationship openly, by discussing how they felt and being direct about what they needed, which demonstrates the presence of vulnerability. According to Gottman, happy couples were gentle in the way they talked about their negative emotions, and did not engage in blaming or defensiveness because they treated their difficulties as a joint problem to work on together. This approach is similar to Susan Johnson's Emotionally Focused Therapy, which helps couples identify and name the harmful interaction patterns that hurt them. This leads couples to ally themselves against the harmful patterns, which fosters unity and connection (cf. S. M. Johnson, 2008).

4. **Successful Repair Attempts**: Gottman noted that even the most stable of couples had disagreements, fought, and hurt each other's feelings. What separated them, however, from dysfunctional couples, is that they were able to make repairs – even during conflict. Gottman singles out the importance of repair after conflict as one of the most important traits of happy couples, and calls it the "basis" of his therapy (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 14). This is one more example of the paradigm shift that Gottman believes should be made in couples counseling away from focusing on conflict-management, to instead being more purposeful about fostering the friendship system and emotional connection, of which repair after conflict is a crucial component. This is another area where Gottman and Sue Johnson are in complete agreement, even if they express this principle using different terminology.

5. **The Ability to Remain Physiologically Calm During Conflict**: Physiological arousal (or DPA), and feeling overwhelmed by negativity, make it difficult to listen with accuracy, be empathetic, and be creative in problem-solving. Gottman found that the ability to create peace in conflict, the ability to self-soothe, and to soothe one's partner are central to relationship happiness because they allow for 'productive conflict'. Gottman counselors teach their clients how to monitor their physiology, recognize when DPA is active, and employ techniques to self-soothe, enabling them to engage creatively and empathetically. Gottman's use of this science was groundbreaking at the time.
6. **The Ability to Accept Influence**: Gottman found that a man's ability to accept influence, which requires curiosity rather than judgment, from his female partner, is a determining factor in how well a relationship functions. In the longitudinal studies it was the men's inability to accept influence from his partner that proved to be a determining factor in relationship viability. While this principle certainly applies both ways, and each partner has the expectation that their partner will be able to adopt their own position at times, in the instances where women refused to accept influence the viability of the relationship was not impacted. Some may consider this a stereotypical generalization, but Gottman's research outcomes in this area have yet to be publicly challenged, and they demonstrate that it was only the man's refusal to accept influence that indicated a negative longitudinal outcome (cf. Gottman & Gottman, 2012., p 1.41).
7. **Active Building of Friendship, Intimacy, and the Positive Affect Systems**: In the longitudinal studies, couples that remained happy over a long period demonstrated continued courtship and intimacy, and purposefully nurtured emotional connection, friendship, fun, adventure, and playfulness – all supported by positive affect. Gottman

found that the presence of positive affect was predictive of relationship success over a long period. This factor proved to be of such importance that the presence of high levels of positive affect was the only variable he found that was directly correlated with both couple happiness and longevity (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2012).

In the *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*, Drs. John and Julie Gottman list the following ten most important conclusions from the breadth of their research, which includes the longitudinal studies, as well as work with couples in therapy sessions. They argue that these ten axioms form the basis of a "science of change" for couples (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, pp. 131–132). With the desire to distinguish Gottman Therapy from other contemporary therapies in use at the time, the Gottmans emphasized the scientific findings that their theory was based on. These are the ten defining principles that led to the creation of the Sound Relationship House Theory:

1. Most (69% of) relationship conflict is not solvable, but is classified as "perpetual"
2. Conflict gets "gridlocked" due to its escalation from mild to moderate/severe negative affect
3. The absence of both negative and positive affect during conflict is also destructive, as it correlates to lack of emotional connection and leads to the Four Horsemen
4. A gentle approach ("Softened Startup", accepting influence and compromise), humor, and affection are characteristics of healthy relationships
5. Physiological soothing versus diffuse physiological arousal (DPA) is predictive of improvement versus deterioration over time in relationships
6. The basis for a dialogue with a perpetual conflict lies in dealing with its core existential nature, or what Gottman calls the "dreams within conflict"

7. Building general positivity in a relationship is essential to ensure lasting change; therefore, improving the couple's friendship, intimacy and positive affect is paramount

8. "Sentiment Override" controls the effectiveness of repair after conflict

9. A "Shared Meaning System" will help facilitate the stability and happiness of the couple

10. The (a) Conflict (b) Friendship/intimacy/positive affect and (c) Shared meaning systems interact bidirectionally, and the nature of each must be thoroughly understood

A Summary of the Sound Relationship House: The Theory of Intervention

Keeping the ten conclusions from their research listed above in mind, Gottman came to believe that the most healthy romantic partnerships (married or unmarried) were characterized by these three primary patterns: (a) they sustained their romance through the fundamentals of friendship, (b) they managed their conflicts well, and (c) they created a shared sense of meaning that fostered connection (J. S. Gottman, 2004, p. 2). The SRH is designed to support these three objectives. The Sound Relationship House (SRH) theory is composed of nine integral components, represented as seven hierarchical levels supported by two foundational walls. Each of the seven levels corresponds to a fundamental relational process that collectively advances the three overarching objectives of the theory. The two structural walls – Trust and Commitment – provide essential support to every level, ensuring the stability and continuity of the relational processes. The first three levels primarily emphasize the cultivation and strengthening of the friendship of the couple. The two intermediate levels focus on navigating and making meaning of conflict through constructive engagement. Finally, the top two levels are designed to deepen intimacy and relational resilience by fostering the mutual exploration and support of individual life dreams, while simultaneously creating a shared sense of meaning within the relationship.

The First Level: Love Maps

Gottman writes, "A love map is a roadmap you create in your mind of your partner's inner psychological world. It is the most basic level of friendship. It's about feeling known in the relationship. It's about feeling like your partner is interested in knowing you, and your partner feeling that you are interested in knowing her or him" (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 29). Love Maps are formed by practicing curiosity and asking open-ended questions, and are fundamental to building friendship, and the Gottmans consider this level of the SRH to be the foundation of the entire theory, because in their view a healthy couple relationship is predicated on friendship (J. S. Gottman, 2004, p. 133; Gottman & Gottman, 2012, p. 1–33).

The Second Level: Fondness and Admiration

The second level of the Sound Relationship House is the Fondness and Admiration System, which Gottman identifies as the most effective antidote to contempt. Contempt is defined as the act of regarding one's partner with criticism from a perceived position of superiority (Gottman & Gottman, 2012, pp. 1–33). This level emphasizes the cultivation of affection and respect within the relationship and is achieved through a two-step process: (a) shifting one's habitual mindset away from scanning the environment for mistakes to correct, and instead focusing on recognizing behaviors in one's partner that are admirable and positive, and (b) explicitly expressing appreciation, gratitude, and admiration (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 29; Gottman & Gottman, 2012, pp. 1–33).

The Third Level: Turning Toward, Rather than Away

The third story concerns emotional connection and the way that it is either fostered or harmed during specific interactions. Gottman found that couples make verbal and non-verbal "bids for connection" from one another constantly: "they are asking for attention, interest, conversation, humor, affection, warmth, empathy, assistance, support, and so on. These tiny moments of emotional connection form an emotional bank account that gets built over time" (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 29). A fundamental process within the SRH is the development of awareness regarding how one's partner initiates bids for connection and communicates emotional needs, followed by the decision to turn toward these bids rather than turning away or against them (Gottman & Gottman, 2012, pp. 1–33). Gottman emphasizes that this process requires cultivating mindfulness of the ways a partner seeks connection and acquiring the skills to recognize such bids, even when they are conveyed in a negative or ambiguous manner (Gottman, 2011, p. 30). Empirical findings from Gottman's research revealed that the couples who divorced within six years of marriage had responded positively to one another's bids for connection only 33% of the time or less, whereas couples who remained married after six years demonstrated an 86% "turning-towards" rate (J. M. Gottman, 2011, pp. 30–31). Gottman further argues that the capacity for successful conflict repair accounts for the causal relationship between responding positively to bids for connection and long-term relational stability. Each positive response to a bid for connection contributes to what Gottman describes as an "emotional bank account," characterized by accumulated humor and affection, which strengthens the couple's ability to engage in effective repair following conflict. Findings from observational studies indicate that couples with greater positive emotional equity repaired relational ruptures more efficiently, thereby contributing to relationship longevity (Gottman Level 1 Training Video, Chapter 4).

Of these first Three Levels of the SRH, Gottman writes that "we discovered, much to our surprise, that love maps, fondness and admiration, and turning toward were the basis for humor and affection during conflict. They were also the basis for romance, passion, and good sex" (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 30). A further discovery was that the first three levels of the Sound Relationship House were the basis for effective repair when couples had a conflict interaction, or "regrettable incident". They found that this was the case because the degree of repair that couples could make after an argument depended on the amount of emotional equity they had built through friendship and emotional connection (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2018, pp. 18–19). Gottman writes, "So these three components of friendship affect the way people behave and feel when they disagree. Couples with a strong friendship have a lot more access to their humor, affection, and the positive energy that make it possible to have disagreements or to live with them in a much more constructive and creative way. It's about earning and building up points. These three levels of the Sound Relationship House are fundamental for accessing positive emotions during times of disagreement" (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 31).

The Fourth Level: The Positive Perspective

The Fourth Story of the SRH is created by the first three, and the Gottman's refer to it as the "Positive Perspective", or the fostering of "Positive Sentiment Override" [PSO], over "Negative Sentiment Override" [NSO], an idea they borrowed from Bob Weiss (Gottman & Gottman, 2012, p. 1–34; J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 31). As previously stated, the theory undergirding Gottman Couples Therapy states that the efficacy of conflict management is dependent on the degree of a couple's friendship (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 30; J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2018,

pp. 18–19). Positive Sentiment Override is active when friendship in a relationship is strong, and positive affect during problem solving and disagreements will also be present, which makes repair attempts more successful. Gottman found that in partnerships where friendship is absent, resentment will eventually build, NSO will be dominant in a couple's interactions, and PSO cannot be forced (*Gottman Level 1 Training Video*, Chapter 5). Gottman writes:

> People are in negative sentiment override for good reason—the friendship isn't working. We see our partner as our adversary, not as our annoying friend. Thus, the Sound Relationship House theory does not try to apply cognitive-behavioral modification to move people from negative to positive sentiment override. Rather, we believe that it won't work unless fundamental friendship processes are working. If friendship is working, you automatically get positive sentiment override. If friendship isn't working, you automatically get negative sentiment override, because you are "running on empty" in the friendship. Research that has attempted to simply move people from negative to positive sentiment override has failed. We think that's because you can't change it except by altering the quality of the friendship (J. M. Gottman, 2011, pp. 31–32).

In his 2018 work, *The Science of Couples and Family Therapy*, Gottman argues that in order for an intervention to be effective it must improve both the couples' conflict interactions, and their friendship (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2018, p. 19). The preeminence that the friendship system holds, even above conflict management, was unique to the SRH and the Gottman Method of Couple Therapy when they were published. Though Gottman does not state this, the success of this emphasis on couples is most likely due to the positive secure attachment that is formed in healthy friendships (see also S. M. Johnson, 2008).

The Fifth Level: Manage Conflict

In Gottman's observation of couples, he saw that even in the healthiest relationships conflict existed. This has led him to posit that conflict is therefore unavoidable in relationships, and he proceeds with his therapy as if this holds true for all. Further, he argues that his findings

demonstrate that conflict is a natural and positive element to romantic partnerships because it promotes growth. This is why, concerning conflict, the focus of the SRH is not on conflict avoidance, but on conflict management, and on finding a way to make discord, and even anger, constructive (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 32). “To live with perpetual problems, couples need to turn their focus away from attempts at solutions, and instead learn how to discuss their different subjective realities. This avoids ‘gridlock’ on the perpetual issue” (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 33). According to Gottman, there are three elements to managing conflict in a healthy way: (a) During dialogue: “Softened Startup” when presenting complaints, accepting influence, physiological soothing, and compromise; (b) resolving past emotional injuries, and (c) establishing a dialogue about perpetual problems that examines the existential dreams that underlie the conflict (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 133).

The Sixth Level: Make Life Dreams and Aspirations Come True

Gottman believes that positive affect systems are not built simply by avoiding or solving conflict; he argues that they must be built intentionally. This level of the SRH helps to foster positive affect by exploring the dreams and aspirations of each partner. Creating an atmosphere that encourages each partner to dialogue with openness and honesty about his or her dreams, values, convictions, and aspirations, is a crucial aspect of the SRH. Gottman found that it was very important for each person to feel that their partner, and the relationship itself, supported their life dreams, otherwise they could not hold the partnership as something sacred and worth struggling to preserve (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 36). One advantage that religious couples have in this respect is that there is an inherent understanding that their relationship holds sacred value,

and this belief has been demonstrated to provide strength to the couple bond in times of adversity (J. M. Gottman et al., 2019, pp. 183-187).

The Seventh Level: Create Shared Meaning

The Gottmans refer to this level as the "attic" of the SRH, the goal of which is for the couple to build a sense of shared purpose and meaning. This level is about creating a new family culture that is the unique blend of each person's philosophies, religion, and spirituality. This is accomplished by creating formal and informal rituals of connection, through creating shared goals and life missions together, and by supporting each other's basic roles in life. (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 36). To create shared meaning, Gottman believes it is necessary for couples to engage in open discussions about matters that are personally significant and emotionally resonant for each partner. This involves developing an understanding of how each partner expresses core emotions, as well as their attitudes toward emotion itself—commonly referred to as meta-emotion. In addition, it is important for partners to explore the meanings they assign to everyday rituals, the personal significance of holidays and rites of passage, and the symbolic and functional roles shaped by their families of origin and current relational dynamics (Gottman & Gottman, 2012, pp. 1-35 & 1-36). Each of these subjects can be emotional triggers that can lead to either more secure attachment between romantic partners, or cause attachment panic. They are crucial elements to providing the 'narrative' of the relationship, which describes its purpose and value.

First Supporting Wall: Trust

The first iteration of the SRH did not include either of the two supporting walls, but the Gottmans found that the SRH-based therapy they were employing was missing something fundamental, and John Gottman received some criticism after introducing the SRH in his book *The Seven Principles*. After further observation of couples, and after going back over data and interviews from his study of newlyweds in the 1990's, Gottman came to believe that the SRH was missing two elements: trust and commitment. Though both elements were already implicit in Gottman's therapeutic practice and in the SRH, he wished to make them more explicit due to the criticism he received. An accomplished and acclaimed researcher, the inclusion of the two supporting walls allowed Gottman to return to scientific observation, and to incorporate the Game Theory work of Anatol Rapoport, for whom Gottman had great respect and fondness (cf. J. M. Gottman, 2011).

In his study of couples, Gottman found that trust dramatically increased a relationship's resilience, which he believed is especially crucial as a couple matures through the various stages of life with its increased complexity and challenges (Gottman, 2011, pp. 77-78) . In the *Level One Clinical Training* handbook, the Gottmans define trust as "the state that occurs when a person knows that his or her partner acts and thinks to maximize that person's benefits, not just the partner's own interests and benefits" (Gottman & Gottman, 2012, p. 1-37). In addition, in his book on trust (J. M. Gottman, 2011), Gottman describes trust as a spectrum, "like a fan," that

opens up to reveal areas in which the question, "Are you there for me?" is asked in different contexts (Gottman, 2011, pp. 49, 178).[12]

Gottman argues in his work, *The Science of Trust*, that "attunement", or the commitment to emotional availability, is the key to building trust. For Gottman, "Attunement" stands for the following categories that he measures in couples during their initial Meta-Emotion Interview:

> Awareness of the emotion
>
> Turning toward the emotion
>
> Tolerance of the emotional experience
>
> Understanding the emotion
>
> Non-defensive listening to the emotion
>
> Empathy towards the emotion (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 191).

Gottman writes that "attuning" is the opposite of being impatient with, disapproving of, or being dismissive of negative emotions demonstrated by one's romantic partner (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 190). His focus and extrapolation on 'attunement' is the strongest corollary to attachment theory that Gottman has presented in his published work.

In *The Science of Trust* (2011), he elaborates on negative emotions and how they are received by one's partner, arguing that emotions are not something that a person chooses, and therefore they are not something that can be "taken off or put on like a jacket" (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 190). To be emotion-dismissing towards one's partner is to say to them, "I do not like this emotion,

[12] "Are you there for me?" is taken from the attachment work of Susan Johnson. Gottman credits her for her "seminal" work around the healing of emotional wounds and insecure attachment fostering trust in (Gottman & Gottman, 2015, pp 149-150).

please get rid of it and put on one that is more positive" (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 190). Gottman found that the reason that many of the couples that he studied would dismiss the negative emotions of their partner is because they themselves would incur negative emotions after interacting with their partner because they believed themselves to be responsible for their partner's negative feelings. This taking of responsibility is "doomed" to failure, according to Gottman, because one cannot make someone feel a particular way; he explains that attunement is not about feeling responsible for someone else's feelings, rather it is a social skill that involves listening non-defensively and empathetically to them in order to better understand the emotions underneath their behavior, without accepting personal responsibility for something that is beyond one's control (Gottman, 2011, p. 190-191). Gottman realizes that this is a difficult skill for one to learn, let alone to practice while amid a negative interaction with one's partner. To help overcome this difficulty, Gottman urges couples to learn how to turn towards one another's bids for connection, by expressing their needs in ways that are more likely to induce positive outcomes and foster connection. This is done, he writes in *The Science of Trust*, by learning to express one's pain as a positive need, instead of what one does *not* need or want (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 193). As in many of Gottman's exercises for couples, he places equal, if not more, responsibility for having a helpful interaction on the speaker than he does on the listener. He writes that converting a complaint into a positive need "requires a mental transformation from what is wrong with one's partner to what one's partner can do that would work" (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 220). This naturally helps the listener to hear with empathy and understanding to the unmet need of the speaker. When a need is instead expressed with a negative statement or emotion, it is much more likely that the listener will respond with defensiveness rather than empathy. For the listener's part, more important than the ability to empathize with their partner,

writes Gottman, is the ability to down-regulate their own defensiveness and flooding while listening.

Second Supporting Wall: Commitment

In their self-help styled book, *Eight Dates*, the Gottmans write, "In a relationship, commitment is a choice we make every single day, over and over again" (J. M. Gottman et al., 2019, p. 42), and "commitment is actually built on thinking and then communicating to one's partner that he or she is precious, and not replaceable" (J. M. Gottman et al., 2019, p. 53). In the chapter designed to facilitate dialogue for couples around trust and commitment, these themes are presented in narrative style. "True commitment" is made when a person decides to forgo the possibility of all other romantic relationships (J. M. Gottman et al., 2019, pp. 42–44), and establishes unwavering boundaries with those outside of their romantic relationship. On this subject, the Gottmans draw upon the research of Dr. Shirley Glass, a leading authority on infidelity (Glass & Staeheli, 2003). Glass contends that within a committed relationship, couples construct an emotional boundary – or "wall" – around themselves, ensuring that others remain outside and excluded from the intimate emotional experiences uniquely shared between partners through a "window" of connection. Infidelity, she argues, occurs when this boundary is altered, either intentionally or inadvertently, as one or both partners open a new window to someone outside the relationship and cultivate an intimate bond concealed from their spouse. Building on Glass's framework, Gottman suggests that what begins as an external "window" can rapidly evolve into a "doorway," creating opportunities for illicit emotional attachments that ultimately lead to betrayal (Glass & Staeheli, 2003; J. M. Gottman et al., 2019, p. 43; J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 149).

The Gottmans contend that individuals in a "truly committed" relationship make the deliberate choice to accept their partner as they are, including the acknowledgment that certain negative traits may persist and continue to present challenges over time. Returning to the analogy of the emotional barrier surrounding the couple, they explain that a "window" to the outside world is effectively opened whenever one partner begins comparing their spouse to others, imagining that alternative, more suitable partners exist beyond this protective boundary. The healthiest orientation for the couple, therefore, is the recognition that "my partner has faults, but so do I, and we are in this together." Within such a bond of mutual acceptance, Gottman argues, betrayal becomes unlikely, as the relationship is not undermined by resentment arising from comparisons to real or imagined alternatives (J. M. Gottman et al., 2019, pp. 44–45). Gottman found that when a person begins to entertain "Negative Comps" in their mind, resentment towards their spouse inevitably builds, windows to the outside are created, and betrayal is more likely to follow.

Commitment is not only about infidelity, for as in the context of trust, commitment also carries the responsibility of emotional availability. Gottman writes that to turn away from one's partner when they are making an attempt to connect can exacerbate any attachment wounds they may have from childhood, leading to more injury, emotional distance, and lack of trust. It is in the "two supporting walls" of "trust" and "commitment" that Gottman began to incorporate more of Susan Johnson's work. Gottman always considered emotion to be an important component of couple therapy, but it was Sue Johnson's work that connected emotion to the science of attachment, which helped him to understand its "mysterious" character better (cf. J. M. Gottman,

2011). While developing the supporting walls of the SRH, Gottman invited Sue Johnson to lead training sessions with his therapists so they could better diagnose and guide couples towards understanding, processing, and healing the attachment wounds that were affecting their relationship (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 200).

Gottman writes that commitment also includes committing to, and learning how to, process through regrettable incidents and pain from past injury. These pains could be related to attachment wounds, but not necessarily so; still, the internal process is similar in that the mind stores past events until they have been fully processed. This has been termed the "Zeigarnik Effect", and it has been widely accepted by modern cognitive and behavioral therapists (J. M. Gottman, 2011, pp. 203–211) (See also Siegel & Hartzell, 2014). Due to the Zeigarnik effect, Gottman writes:

> If a couple's negative events are not fully processed (by attunement), then they are remembered and rehearsed repeatedly, turned over and over in each person's mind. Trust begins to erode. Eventually "cognitive dissonance" arises: One is staying in a relationship, but that relationship is a veritable fountain of negativity. That cognitive dissonance is like a stone in one's shoe. It gets resolved by deciding that one's partner has lasting negative traits that "explain" the continual negativity. Empirically, the most common negative attribution is "my partner is selfish." This fact shows that it is precisely trust that erodes. People stop believing that their partner is thinking about their best interests. The potential for betrayal increases as we start believing that our partner is primarily interested in his or her own gains (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 203).

When, however, partners are committed to working through past negative interactions deliberately, and with patience, practicing the Speaker and Listener roles as explained above, and converting complaints into positive needs, Gottman writes:

> Instead, positive events are remembered and rehearsed. Trust is built because our partner has "been there" for us. We believe that our partner acts with our best interests in mind. Our partner, through processing our negative emotions, has demonstrated that he or she has our best interests at heart and is "there for us." We remember these positive moments

> because thinking about them is intrinsically rewarding. Our needs matter to our partner (J. M. Gottman, 2011, p. 204).

Gottman's work on trust and commitment is what completes the Sound Relationship House theory and leads to its effectiveness. It is fair to wonder why these "supporting walls" were not components of his first iteration of this theory. Without them, the important subject of attachment is not addressed directly, though somewhat supported indirectly, and this would limit the therapeutic effectiveness of The Gottman Method. It is natural to wonder whether the SRH, which now includes the supporting walls, truly emerged from the crucial ten axioms that it is purportedly built upon, or if it is rather an amalgamation of numerous sources. If the SRH was solely built upon the ten axioms, then it missed capturing the science of attachment, which was only added later after criticism of the SRH emerged.

Chapter III The Gottman Method of Couple Therapy

CORE MECHANISMS AND THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

Having outlined the theoretical foundations of the Sound Relationship House model, the following section turns to the core mechanisms and interventions of the Gottman Method, and how these are implemented in clinical practice. The intervention is structured to span between five and fifty sessions, depending on the presenting concerns of the couple. Those seeking general relationship enhancement typically require between 5 and 10 sessions, while couples experiencing significant relational distress, co-morbid psychological difficulties, or the aftermath of an extramarital affair generally engage in 25 to 50 sessions (Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 153). The central objective of the therapy is to provide couples with the skills necessary to communicate effectively without reliance on the therapist. From the outset, couples are informed that the therapeutic process is designed to gradually phase out the therapist's role, thereby enabling them to continue relational work independently. Following the completion of the initial intervention, couples may continue to receive follow-up monitoring and support from a Gottman-trained therapist on an as-needed basis for a period of up to two years, with an emphasis on relational check-ups and repair. (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 154).

Gottman Method Couples Therapy is contraindicated when there is an ongoing extra-couple affair, or in the case of "characterological" (as opposed to "situational") domestic violence. The Gottmans believe that couples who are dealing with these factors cannot benefit from regular couple therapy. In addition to the above, couples will not be admitted to Gottman Therapy unless each partner maintains each of these five "minimal" necessary beliefs: (1) a belief that trust,

loyalty, and commitment are necessary for a long-term relationship to succeed (e.g., there will be no secrets, deceptions, or betrayals); (2) an agreement of some form of sexual and/or romantic exclusivity; (3) an agreement of fairness and care (e.g., a partner who is sick will be cared for); (4) and agreement to treat one another with respect and affection; and (5) an agreement in principle to try to meet one another's wants and needs (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, pp. 154–155).

The Twelve Axioms of Gottman Therapeutic Intervention[13]

The Gottman Method assumes 12 truths regarding therapy (cf. Gottman & Gottman, 2012, p. 6.1-6.26), which appear to have emerged from both the Sound Relationship House theory and from clinical experience. The first "assumption" is that therapy should be dyadic, rather than triadic. In sessions, the therapist acts as a coach and teaches the couple how to communicate effectively. This approach, also used in Emotionally Focused Therapy, has provided couples with the meta-emotion and communication skills to hold important conversations more effectively outside of the therapeutic setting.

The second assumed truth is that emotion is central. Gottman therapists are taught that emotions, all emotions, are acceptable. Emotions should be expressed in therapy and be understood by the therapist and one's partner. Unexpressed negative emotions will leave clients to suffer through the emotions on their own. A prerequisite for an effective coaching of emotion in the clients is a therapist who is comfortable with his or her own strong emotions, and the emotions of others.

[13] As taught in Gottman Method of Couple Therapy Level One Clinical Training. The citations in this section come from the training manual, with pagination that includes one digit for section, followed by a period (.) and 1-2 digits for page.

Assumption three is what the Gottmans call “state-dependent learning”, which indicates that the best learning takes place within the emotional state to which it applies. This is why dyadic therapy with a coach is preferred – so that clients can recognize emotions and emotional patterns as they happen, and learn how to down-regulate negative emotion in the moment.

The fourth “assumption” is the recognition of Diffuse Physiological Arousal, and the expectation that it will be present during intense conflict interactions. Gottman therapists are taught that it is healthy for clients to experience DPA while in therapeutic session so that the therapist can teach them how to recognize when it happens, and the tools of self-soothing. While in session each partner has a measuring device to monitor DPA, while in home interactions the couple will need to recognize when it happens in order to have healthy outcomes.

The fifth “assumption” is that it is more effective to use a “massing and fading” method of scheduling therapeutic appointments. To support this axiom, Gottman references the Boegner & Zielenbach-Coen study that examined the difference in positive outcomes between a group of couples treated with regularly scheduled (such as once-per-week) 14 one-hour therapy sessions, and a group whose treatment began with the same hours of treatment, but with longer (massing) sessions scheduled closer together, and then tapered down, with breaks in-between towards the end of therapy. The study showed that the “massing and fading” group demonstrated significantly less relapse than the other group.

Assumption six concerns Gottman’s use or rejection of other theories on emotion. The underlying tenet is that the emotions are not hierarchically organized. He contrasts his views on

emotion with those of Sue Johnson and others who propose the existence of "softer" emotions underneath the "harder" emotions like anger and contempt. Gottman's reading of Johnson is that she believes that it is the softer emotions of fear and sadness that sometimes present as anger, especially in men. While acknowledging the benefits of understanding the science of attachment, he finds that Johnson is too dogmatic in her teaching on the softer emotions, and he argues that "anger is not always the result of insecurity" (Gottman & Gottman, 2012, p. 6.9). Gottman's basis for this argument is that each of the eight emotions as identified by Paul Ekman have a unique physiological quality which can be seen anatomically in facial expressions. Gottman is an expert in micro-coding facial expressions, having spent thousands of hours charting them during the longitudinal studies, and is a trustworthy source on emotional expression. The question that Gottman does not fully explore is, does the distinction in physiological expression of the emotions disprove any hierarchical relationship at all? He suggests that the emotions may still have a connection to one another, but he remains adamant that fear and sadness do not lie beneath anger and contempt. Having made this argument, he then acknowledges that in the therapeutic context it is probably an effective technique for the therapist to reframe anger as sadness or fear.

Gottman's impression of Johnson is that she is too strict in her views on anger being the result of insecurity, but this criticism both removes Johnson from her context as a couple counselor, and is a misrepresentation of what she actually teaches. While it might be true in the general sense that anger is not always caused by insecure attachment within the context of romantic relationships, Sue Johnson's belief that anger between partners is most often the result of attachment wounds is widely accepted (cf. Johnson, 2020, pp 6-14). The fact that Gottman has

used Johnson to help train his own therapists underscores the effectiveness of Johnson's approach and his respect for her. A fairer critique of EFT by Gottman is that EFT focuses on the emotions surrounding attachment, but is not intentional enough in prioritizing aspects of a romantic relationship such as "courtship, romance, passion, good sex, play, fun, adventure, humor, interest, excitement, joy, and curiosity" (Gottman & Gottman, 2012, p. 6.17). While The Gottman Method addresses each of these distinctly in therapeutic session, EFT presupposes that they will develop within a securely attached relationship.

Assumption seven is that there are cognitive and emotional differences in gender, and that these differences should be considered during therapy. As evidence for this axiom Gottman points to the work of Professor Peggy Sanday on the history of female power and male dominance (cf. Sanday, 1996), which examines the development, through natural selection, of stereotypical gender roles. Gottman extrapolates on her work and considers the effects this has had on male and female cognitive systems. Gottman's argument, which is beyond the scope of this thesis to critically evaluate, is that men tend to exhibit greater physiological reactivity to stress and require more time to recover from diffuse physiological arousal, whereas women demonstrate comparatively stronger memory and language abilities, particularly in the context of interpersonal relationships (Gottman & Gottman, 2012, p. 6.10).

Assumption eight concerns the important role that meta-emotion plays in romantic partnerships. In Gottman's use the term "meta-emotion" describes a person's attitudes, feelings, and values about the expression of emotion. Based on his research, Gottman's understanding is that each person has his or her own executive system that organizes their emotions, and how they "feel

about feelings". This executive system is shaped by each person's experience with emotion, much of it in childhood, and can lead to the hatred or denial of a particular emotion while being comfortable with other emotions. In the therapeutic sessions, The Gottman Method addresses this subject, and using emotion-coaching, helps to draw out and recognize those feelings that are being denied or rejected. Gottman notes that in romantic partnerships meta-emotion mismatches can amplify couple distress, which makes emotion-coaching a crucial component of therapy.

Assumption nine is that the therapist's role is not to soothe. This assumption is related to the belief that therapy should be dyadic, with the therapist as coach. Gottman believes that if the therapist becomes the one to soothe, then they will become irreplaceable. By coaching the clients to self-soothe, they will be better equipped to navigate negative interactions and regrettable incidents that happen outside of therapy. This is an understated, but crucial component of successful therapeutic intervention.

Assumption ten is that interventions in therapy should have a low psychological cost. Gottman's belief is that if interventions appear difficult to the couple, or overly complex, they will not be able to adopt them to use outside of therapy. If, on the other hand, an intervention is simple, such as "softened startup", or "expressing needs rather than offering criticism", the clients will feel confident enough to employ them on their own and will be less dependent on the presence of a therapist.

Assumption eleven is that couple therapy should primarily be a positive affective experience. In Gottman's view, individual therapy is often a very positive experience because the client is

central, and the exploration of their past is the core of the therapy. In this paradigm the client is both loved and accepted for who they are. The difficulty in couple therapy is that the clients are dealing with what can be viewed as failures, and their flaws are made clear. Gottman recognizes that this can be a painful experience. To counter this, The Gottman Method attempts to reframe the 'problem-solving' process as exploration and understanding of each partner's dreams and deeply held convictions. This reframes the couple's disagreements as basic 'life dreams' that are in conflict with one another. In order to resolve the apparent conflict, the clients are able to explore their own dreams and understand the dreams and convictions of their partner. This can give couple therapy sessions the "self-indulgent" quality that makes individual therapy attractive (Gottman & Gottman, 2012, p. 6.24).

Assumption twelve is that Gottman Therapy is not "idealistic" about relationships and their potential. Gottman calls his approach "the good enough relationship", and does not claim that romantic partnerships can be therapeutic and heal people's childhood wounds. He calls Gottman therapists "plumbers, rather than idealists or theologians" (Gottman & Gottman, 2012, p. 6.25). The reason he takes this approach is because he does not want couples to judge themselves on goals that may seem impossible. To use an Orthodox Christian framework, this is a pastoral, rather than theological approach. The theology would say that a secure and healthy romantic relationship can accomplish many lofty goals, including the healing of childhood wounds. But the pastoral approach would be not to emphasize these goals, and to help the couple to be satisfied with simply being able to sit together "on a Saturday afternoon and really enjoy the conversation, even if they don't heal one another's childhood wounds…" (Gottman & Gottman, 2012, p. 6.26).

These are the "twelve assumptions" that The Gottman Method of Couple Therapy presupposes. Together with the theory of the Sound Relationship House, they provide the framework for the therapeutic sessions that are intended to accomplish five primary goals: (1) Down-Regulate Negative Affect during Conflict, (2) Up-Regulate Positive Affect during Conflict, (3) Build Positive Affect during Non-conflict Interactions, (4) Bridge Meta-emotion Mismatches, and (5) Create and Nurture a Shared Meaning System (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, pp. 134–151).

Methods used for accomplishing Goal 1: How to Down-regulate Negative Affect during Conflict

Gottman uses six steps of intervention to help couples down-regulate negative affect during conflict interactions, each of which are meant to address the emotions and perceptions surrounding "regrettable incidents," wherein a couple has experienced an escalation of mild negativity and affect into the much stronger reactions of anger, sulking, or emotional withdrawal.

Step One: Repair-Processing Fights and Regrettable Incidents

There are three components to this step: the first is for the couple to agree that in a regrettable incident there are always two subjective realities, both of which are correct – in essence validating each person's experience of the incident, but not necessarily the series of events (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 137). The second component is for the couple to talk about and process through the incident without re-creating or entering back into the fight, and for this

process Gottman therapists utilize the Gottman-Rapoport Blueprint.[14] In this process, each partner is guided in learning how to validate the other's emotional experience without the necessity of agreeing with their interpretation of the event. Additionally, partners are encouraged to acknowledge their own contributions to the conflict and to offer apologies when appropriate. Facilitated by the therapist, this process is intended to promote mutual understanding, acceptance, and empathy. Ultimately, it aims to enable each individual to perceive the event from the other's perspective, thereby deepening their emotional connection and fostering a culture of empathy within their relationship. The third component of this step is for the couple to gain better understanding of the fight by mapping its "anatomy," identifying the triggers for each person that lead to escalation of negativity and intensity, and most importantly, drilling down to discover the original emotional injuries, or attachment wounds, that caused the triggering. The Gottman's believe that in gaining a better understanding of the conflict itself, couples will gain a better understanding of one another, and thus build an empathic alliance against conflict, seeing it, not their partner, as the adversary (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 138).

Step Two: Reducing the Four Horsemen

As part of the therapeutic process, Gottman identifies three key components designed to help couples reduce the occurrence of the Four Horsemen within their relationship. The first component involves developing an awareness of what the Four Horsemen are (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling), and recognizing how these destructive behaviors manifest during regrettable incidents or accidental provocations. In practice, the Gottman therapist systematically reviews each of these maladaptive patterns with the couple, underscoring

[14] The Gottman-Rapoport Blueprint is described more fully below.

their particularly corrosive effects on relational stability and emphasizing that they are among the strongest predictors of divorce.

The second component of the Gottmans plan to reduce the appearance of The Horsemen is for the therapist to actively stop the couple's interaction during a session when one of the Four Horsemen appears – and especially if the Horseman is verbal contempt, which includes name calling or insults. The Gottmans teach that stopping the interaction immediately provides the opportunity for couples to work on down-regulating their DPA, if present – and it usually is, if contempt is present. Stopping the interaction also allows the therapist to create a teaching moment to identify what just happened and how it can be avoided in the future. Gottman adds a caveat to the above: There are some couple interactions that become so dysfunctional that the Horsemen are being presented with a frequency that would make the conversation impossible to have if the therapist stepped in at every instance. In these cases, the Gottman therapists are trained to use a bell or chime as a way of calling out the Horseman when they are presented, rather than stopping the interaction every time a Horseman appears. Gottman-trained therapists are also encouraged to employ the use of a timer to segment conversations into brief, two-minute intervals, offering feedback to the couple at each pause. This technique has been found effective in de-escalating negative interactions by interrupting reactive cycles and creating space for teachable moments. During these moments, therapists can reinforce the idea that the couple are allies working together against the conflict, rather than adversaries in opposition to one another.

The third component of this intervention involves teaching couples to implement the antidotes corresponding to each of the Four Horsemen. The first of these, "criticism," occurs when one

partner frames a problem as stemming from a fundamental flaw in the other's character. As an antidote, Gottman therapists encourage the speaker to articulate a "positive need" by using first-person "I statements" rather than accusatory or blaming "you statements." To support this process, the Gottmans developed the "Expressing Needs" card deck, a therapeutic tool designed to help partners identify what they feel is missing in a given interaction and to clearly express their underlying needs. In practice, therapists incorporate the card deck during sessions to model effective communication and then train couples to use it independently whenever they struggle to recognize or convey their needs during conflict.

The Second Horseman, "Defensiveness," is presented through either whining, what the Gottmans call the "innocent victim" stance, or through counterattacking, what the Gottmans call the "righteous indignation" stance. Although down-regulating defensiveness can be particularly challenging, the Gottmans propose a nuanced therapeutic intervention whereby therapists teach couples to respond to criticism – or to the expression of a partner's positive need – by accepting responsibility, even if it is only for a small part of the issue. One partner's acceptance of responsibility is meant to prevent the escalation of negativity during the interaction, and works as a gentle response, which reduces the probability that the other partner will be provoked into defensiveness or further blaming. Whereas in an "active listening" format, the greater portion of responsibility falls on the listener to accept what is being said to them without becoming defensive, the Gottmans place the greater responsibility onto the speaker, because their research has shown that a listener is prevented from being empathetic or curious about the other if what is being said to them, or the way that it is being said, triggers a DPA response. This is a point of departure for Gottman from a widely-used practice amongst couples counselors, and Gottman

received criticism when he published his study on which his practice of abandoning active listening strategies is based (Stanley et al., 2000). In his response to Stanley et al., Gottman acknowledged that he had once advocated for the role of active listening in couple therapy, but that numerous studies since, not just his own, have revealed it to be an ineffective strategy that has not produced positive outcomes (J. Gottman et al., 2000, pp. 271–272). In her book *Love Sense*, Sue Johnson makes the same argument that "active listening" was not effective, especially if the couples were not in session with the therapist (S. M. Johnson, 2013, p. 27). Gottman puts more responsibility on the speaker because his goal is for the listener to respond without defensiveness, which is a more likely outcome if the speaker does not use accusatory language. The listener's accepting responsibility for at least part of the criticism was found to be just as effective as the "gentle startup" in guiding the interaction towards a peaceful conclusion that does not illicit defensiveness or the other Horsemen.

The third Horseman, "contempt," is defined by Gottman as communication that originates from a stance of superiority and often manifests through sarcasm, direct insults, or name-calling. Among the Four Horsemen, contempt has been found to have the strongest correlation with relationship dissolution, which is why Gottman-trained therapists are instructed to identify and address it immediately during couple interactions. In clinical training demonstrations, Dr. Julie Gottman frequently interrupts conversations when contempt arises, guiding couples to explore the underlying emotions driving the contemptuous remark and to reframe the expression as a positive need. The antidote to contempt, therefore, is twofold: avoiding its use altogether, and cultivating the self-awareness necessary to articulate needs constructively. This process reduces

the likelihood of provoking defensiveness in the partner and helps prevent cycles of escalating negativity and hostility.

"Stonewalling" is the Fourth Horseman, and Gottman characterizes it as emotional disengagement from interaction. Emotional disengagement is most often a result of DPA, especially in men, so the antidote involves physiological awareness and self-soothing. During therapy sessions, Gottman-trained counselors often employ pulse oximeters to monitor clients' heart rates, pausing the session if either partner's rate exceeds 100 beats per minute. This intervention is particularly relevant in cases of stonewalling, where one partner exhibits physiological flooding as part of the DPA response. To facilitate emotional re-engagement, the therapist invites the stonewalling partner to reflect on their internal monologue during DPA, thereby fostering greater awareness of the cognitive and physiological processes underlying their withdrawal. When signs of emotional disengagement are observed, therapists incorporate relaxation strategies to help couples regulate their physiological state. These techniques are introduced and practiced in vivo during sessions, enabling what the Gottmans describe as "state-dependent learning." By training couples in this way, partners gain confidence in applying self-soothing and co-soothing techniques outside of therapy, without the direct involvement of the therapist.

Step Three: The Gottman-Rapoport Blueprint for Speaker and Listener

"Postponing persuasion" is the principle that Dr. John Gottman borrowed from Rapoport's work on international conflict. Gottman therapists work to establish emotional safety for the couple by postponing any type of persuasion until each person can effectively state the position of their

partner to that partner's satisfaction. This requires the listener to be both interested and active in trying to understand what is behind the speaker's position on a particular issue or disagreement. Gottman therapists employ an exercise for this that helps train the couple to become well-versed in this process: In the exercise, each partner has an equal responsibility, whether they are the speaker or the listener. The speaker's job is to express their feelings using "I" statements, refraining from using any blaming "You" statements (which decreases the possibility of triggering defensiveness in the listener), and then to express a positive need. The listener's responsibility is to write down what they hear and then repeat it to the speaker's satisfaction (this is a way of reinforcing what was introduced in Step Two, regarding The Four Horsemen), even validating the speaker's point-of-view to a certain degree. To facilitate this, Gottman therapists are trained to speak for the listener client to help them become more accurate in repeating what they heard from the speaker client. In therapeutic sessions, couples are given laminated cards with directions for the speaker and the listener on them, and the goal is to empower them to use the cards and perform this exercise on their own at home.

Step Four: Problem Solving, Persuasion, and Compromise

Gottman-trained therapists employ the "Two Circle" exercise to facilitate compromise once both partners have first experienced being heard, understood, and validated by one another. In this exercise, each partner is provided with a diagram of two concentric circles and asked to identify a core need within the issue under discussion that cannot be compromised. These non-negotiable needs are recorded within the inner circle. Partners are then instructed to write in the outer circle those aspects of the issue where they have greater flexibility and can entertain compromise. After completing this step, each partner shares their responses and engages in a structured dialogue

aimed at developing a mutually acceptable compromise, guided by therapist-provided questions. The process is grounded in the principle that sustainable compromise is unattainable if either partner feels pressured to relinquish something fundamental to their identity, which Gottman terms a "core need." Placing these needs in the center of the diagram not only symbolizes their non-negotiable nature but also reinforces their significance within the relationship. By identifying and safeguarding these needs at the outset, the exercise cultivates an atmosphere of safety and trust, reassuring partners that compromise will not require sacrificing essential elements of selfhood. This assurance, in turn, promotes greater openness and flexibility in negotiating the less central issues represented in the outer circle. When viewed through the lens of attachment theory, which will be explored in greater depth later in this dissertation, the Two Circle exercise exemplifies a practice that reinforces secure attachment. Bowlby's foundational work (1969; 1982) established that attachment systems serve to balance the need for security with the drive for autonomy, while Hazan and Shaver (1987), and Susan Johnson (2008) extended this framework to adult romantic bonds, demonstrating that secure attachment enables individuals to remain connected to their partner while maintaining a strong sense of individuality. In line with these insights, the Two Circle exercise creates relational space in which both members of the couple can explore one another's thoughts and emotions without fearing the loss of their own personhood, thereby supporting healthier and more resilient relational bonds.

Step Five: Blueprint for Perpetual Unsolvable Conflict (Dreams Within Conflict)

This step is for conflicts that Gottman calls "deal-breakers." A couple reaches this step when one or both of them feel that compromising on a particular issue is akin to "giving up some central

part of one's values or personality that one treasures, and then compromise, in essence, feels like giving up oneself" (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 140). In these types of scenarios, each person's position is entwined with, and bolstered by, deep symbolic meaning and the dreams that lie hidden beneath the surface. Gottman therapists employ the "Dreams Within Conflict" exercise that utilizes a similar "listener" and "speaker" questionnaire as is used in Step Four. The therapist facilitates a dialogue designed to help the couple explore the underlying meanings and values beneath the emotions they are experiencing. As one partner speaks about the issue at hand, the other adopts the role of an active and nonjudgmental listener, expressing genuine curiosity and a commitment to understanding the speaker's perspective. The goal is to identify and validate the "dream" or core value embedded within the speaker's emotional experience. Once both partners have engaged in this exercise and demonstrated a satisfactory level of mutual understanding, they are encouraged to return to Step Four of the process and work toward a compromise informed by this deeper emotional insight.

Step Six: Down-Regulating Negative Affect with Physiological Soothing

The importance of physiological soothing was briefly covered in Step Two. The Gottmans research showed that frequent DPA responses during conflict interactions was characteristic of a declining relationship, rather than a relationship that was increasing in marital satisfaction. Gottman counselors learn techniques for muscle relaxation, deep breathing, meditation, and biofeedback so they can employ them in sessions when one or both spouses are flooded. The Gottman Method suggests the use of pulse oximeters in therapy session so that each person's heart rate and oxygen levels can be monitored. In their practice, the Gottmans set the oximeters to sound an alarm whenever one of the client's heart rates jumps to 100 beats per minute. If an

alarm sounds, the client understands that they are physiologically flooded, and can pause the interaction until their heartrate returns to resting state (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 140). While this practice does not directly treat the behaviors that brought about the DPA response, it does help prevent couples from engaging negatively while under the influence of DPA, which should also lead to less frequent escalation of negative affect during conflict.

Methods for accomplishing Goals Two and Three: Up-Regulate Positive Affect during Both Conflict and Non-Conflict Contexts

Gottman believes that positive affect between partners helps to foster friendship and intimacy. During his study of couples, he found that when positive affect exists during conflict, it helps to facilitate repair discussions following the conflict, and softens the experience of negative interactions (Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 143). Positive affect between partners during their initial Oral History Interview was correlated with the ability to make effective repairs during and after conflict (J. M. Gottman, 2011). In her systematic presentation of how to accomplish these goals, Dr Julie Schwartz-Gottman combined Goals Two and Three, as the methods for fostering positive affect in and out of conflict are the same, and consist of the following four steps (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, pp. 140–147):

Step One: Emotional Connection During Everyday Moments

The first of Step One's five components is to build a Love Map, which was discussed in the SRH section above. This "map" is created by developing interest and curiosity about one's partner's inner world, and by asking open-ended questions about their interests, motivations, fears, anxieties, history, etc. The Gottmans developed a "Love Map" card deck as a structured tool to

assist couples in engaging with one another through open-ended questions. For the exercise to be effective, couples are encouraged to set aside dedicated time during the week to complete it together. Intentionally prioritizing this activity not only facilitates deeper emotional connection but also strengthens the couple's friendship. Moreover, the act of investing time in one another serves as a meaningful demonstration of mutual value and commitment within the relationship.

In Gottman Therapy, the second component of creating emotional connection is for the couple to be intentional about building a culture of appreciation and respect (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 145). Gottman accomplishes this by teaching a couple how to increase mindfulness of their partner's positive traits and actions. Gottman therapists encourage each partner, through prompts and the use of a card deck, to not only increase their awareness of what their partner does for them, but to verbalize their appreciation. Practice during therapy sessions is meant to carry over into the home life of the couple, so that they can independently create a positive culture that nurtures admiration for one another.

The third component of Step One in Gottman Therapy is to teach couples to turn towards the bids that their partner makes for emotional connection and intimacy, rather than ignoring or turning away from them. This component requires mindfulness and a pro-active awareness of one's partner, their needs, and their methods for making emotional bids. The Gottmans speak of this process as building an "emotional bank account" (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 145), wherein each partner learns to respond with positive engagement to the verbal and nonverbal bids that their partner makes for connection. The positive response to emotional bids for connection fosters more bidding, and thus the "bank account" grows in positivity. The fourth

component is also a way of growing the emotional bank account; it involves couples proactively taking the "emotional temperature" (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 146) of one's partner, by asking open-ended questions about how they are feeling, and being willing to engage in conversation, even if the partner is experiencing painful and negative emotions. Gottman suggests that this be done at least once per week.

In the Gottman Method, the fifth and final component of teaching couples how to foster emotional connection during everyday moments is to discuss with them how they might more frequently engage in activities that are likely to engender positive affect, and how to "savor" those moments. The therapist's role is to help the couple to increase the Panksepp positive affect systems, such as play, comfort, humor, laughter, interest, amusement, curiosity, learning, fun, exploration, and adventure (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 146), by planning activities that will support these systems, and to teach the couple to have a deep appreciation for the positive moments they are sharing, and the memories they are creating. Gottman believes that couples can use the memory of these moments as a way of re-appreciating them and recollecting how precious their partner is. This could naturally lead to more positive affect in the relationship.

Step Two: Daily Stress-Reducing Conversations

The second step in up-regulating positive affect, according to the Gottman Method, is meant to prevent the daily stresses of everyday life to negatively affect the relationship. The Gottman Method encourages couples to try to accomplish this by having intentional daily "stress-reducing" conversations. The format for these conversations is similar to Love Map building conversations, where the goal for the listener is to better understand their partner's inner world

and how they are currently experiencing stress. The focus is to convey empathy, which helps the partner manage their stress, and not to "solve" the problem that is causing the stress. The Gottman's designed a guide for having a 20-minute end of the day conversation to help facilitate these conversations.

Step Three: Build Affection, Good Sex, Romance, and Passion

Based on their 2007 study of couples who were three years out from having their first child, the Gottmans discovered seven important components that helped to build romantic affection around a couple's sexuality. Those components are [1] continuing romantic courtship by occasionally sharing with their partner how sexually appealing they are; [2] giving unexpected compliments or gifts that communicate that their partner is special; [3] often express nonsexual affection; [4] have an agreed-upon ritual for initiating or refusing sex; [5] have an agreed-upon way to talk about sex; [6] have moments of cuddling, sensual touch, and massage; and [7] be flexible about the ways they engage in sex, staying open-minded in order to meet their partner's needs, even saying "yes, ok", when they are not in the mood for it (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, pp. 146–147). The Gottmans developed a website to help couples better understand these components, and to communicate more effectively about their sexual relationship. They also offer a communication deck of cards called the "Salsa Deck" to help facilitate discussions around romance and sex.

Step Four: Process Failed Bids for Emotional Connection

The fourth step in the Gottman Method for up-regulating positive affect – both outside of and during conflict – involves coaching couples on how to effectively process failed bids for

connection that continue to generate emotional pain within the relationship. Gottman-trained therapists employ a structured blueprint for this process, which closely parallels the framework used for processing fights or regrettable incidents. The goal is for couples to internalize this method so they can independently navigate and resolve the emotional impact of failed bids without the intervention of a therapist. The blueprint provides clear and distinct roles for the Speaker and the Listener, guiding the conversation in a way that promotes emotional safety, mutual understanding, and repair.

Methods for accomplishing Goal Four: Bridge Meta-emotion Mismatches

In her summary of "repair and meta-emotion mismatch", Dr. Julie Schwartz Gottman writes, "It is easy to prove mathematically that repair must be the "*sine qua non"* of good relationships (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 151). The Gottmans have found that even in the healthiest of relationships partners will still be either meta-emotion mismatched, or emotionally unavailable to each other 75% of the time (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 151), which makes the repair process so crucial to preserving the couple's bond. The Gottman Method approach to addressing meta-emotion mismatches emphasizes both post-interaction repair and proactive emotion coaching to enhance mutual understanding between partners. This process involves helping each individual gain insight into their partner's beliefs, values, and behaviors related to emotional expression and regulation. During the intake phase of therapy, clients complete a meta-emotion interview or survey, which enables the therapist to identify potential mismatches in emotional orientation. The therapist continues to observe for these discrepancies throughout the therapeutic process, using them as opportunities to foster deeper emotional attunement and improve communication between partners. In this practice couples learn to build awareness of their

partner's "bidding style", and how they can make their own bids and needs more explicit to their partner (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 151). These practices are meant to help couples connect around their emotions during times of emotional need, and to better understand, in the "meta" sense, that emotional moments are important opportunities for intimacy and should be taken advantage of (Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 150).

The Gottmans use two mottos for couples that address emotion and emotional needs; the first motto is meant to create a climate of agreement and positivity: "respond to your partner with a 'yes, and…' attitude instead of a 'yes, but…' attitude." The second motto is meant to foster trust-building attunement: "'When you are in pain, the world stops, and I listen and try to understand what you are feeling and what you need'." When couples have this inner attitude – one of openness and curiosity, instead of problem-solving or defensiveness, it communicates love and acceptance, which leads to better understanding, strengthening their emotional bond. From a Christian perspective, adopting an attitude of curiosity about the other is a humble stance to take and fosters deeper appreciation and love for one's partner.

Methods for Accomplishing Goal 5: Create and Nurture the Shared Meaning System

In the Gottman Method, there are two steps to building a couple's shared meaning system: (1) being intentional about creating rituals of emotional connection, and (2) discussing shared goals and values.

Step One: Rituals of Emotional Connection

In the first step, the Gottman therapist works to make intentional the aspects of the couple's shared meaning system and culture that have until now remained either on the implicit level, or

simply undeveloped. Gottman believes that when two people come together to form a new unit, they develop their own unique culture that incorporates elements from each partner's family of origin and own wider experiences. In Gottman Therapy, the first aspect of building up the shared meaning system is to nurture the couple's feeling of building something valuable together – that even in their differences there is something to be discovered that will become their own (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 153). The Gottmans suggest that one way to do this is the use of both formal and informal rituals of emotional connection. The understanding is that daily rituals like eating dinner together at the dinner table, or weekly events like church services, not only help set the culture of the family unit, but also foster emotional connection between partners. Other rituals of connection include scheduled activities like weekly meetings, coffee dates, and celebrating birthdays and holidays, to spontaneous thirty-second hugs or notes of appreciation placed on a mirror or in a briefcase. Gottman therapists provide guided discussions around these rituals to help clients realize what significance they hold for the life of the couple, and how to be intentional about establishing or supporting them.

Step Two: Goals and Values

The second step in the Gottman Method for nurturing the shared meaning system is to encourage couples to have intentional discussions about their shared goals, missions, and legacy (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 153). Topics for discussion may include central life roles (e.g., as mother, father, son, daughter), central symbols (e.g., "what is a home?" or "What does love mean?"), and about what is sacred to each partner. Gottman therapists guide clients through these discussions so that each partner comes to realize what is most important to them as an individual,

and how to effectively communicate those goals to their partner. The goal is for the couple to be united around a shared sense of creating something that is unique to them.

In Conclusion

The Gottman Method of Couple Therapy is intended to be a scientifically-based method of therapy, built upon the Sound Relationship House theory. The interventions of Gottman Therapy appear to be strong and time-tested, producing outcome goals that are higher than any modalities that came before Gottman published his thesis. As the purpose of any modality is positive outcomes, it may not make sense to criticize the theory that supports that modality, as long as the modality is producing positive results, which Gottman Therapy is. However, it is within the scope of this thesis both to question the underlying anthropological assumptions of the modality, and to question if the interventions used in therapy are supported by those assumptions.

The data that Gottman collected during the longitudinal studies has been widely accepted, and even lauded as revolutionary. This data offers an accurate account of those factors that make romantic relationships succeed or fail. However, it is notable that the two most important elements of the Sound Relationship Theory which supposedly emerged from the data set were not included in the initial offering of the SRH. This means that the significance of 'trust' and 'commitment' in romantic partnerships was either not captured by the data, or that the SRH theory was not accurately based on it. In fairness to Dr. John Gottman, he is a researcher first, and a therapist second – a therapist who has undoubtedly produced positive outcomes. But it is fair to wonder how much of the SRH is truly scientific – based directly on the data, and how much of it comes from something, or someone, else.

In conclusion, The Gottman Method of Couple Therapy has proven to be successful in improving relational satisfaction, communication patterns, and emotional regulation for couples experiencing various degrees of relational distress. Gottman's emphasis on building friendship, managing conflict in a way that fosters growth, and creating shared meaning contributes both to short-term partner satisfaction, and longer-term relationship resilience. The most notable aspect of Gottman Therapy remains the decades of empirical research that provides the Gottman Institute with a robust theoretical framework from which to develop interventions. The Gottman Method has proven to be a valuable modality in contemporary couple therapy, and it has led to a transformation in the therapeutic landscape through its integrative and research-grounded approach; and by publishing its results and the science behind the therapy, other modalities have been doing the same.

Chapter IV Emotionally Focused Therapy

INTRODUCTION TO EMOTIONALLY FOCUSED THERAPY (EFT)

Sue Johnson's Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) is a couple therapy integrating experiential and systemic theories under the umbrella of attachment science, and focuses on the emotional experiences underlying couple interaction patterns. Emotionally Focused Therapy is designed to foster new, secure bonding interactions for couples, promoting new positive emotions and more secure attachment (Johnson, 2020, p. 7, 15), which in turn facilitates personal growth and healing (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 8). Johnson and her colleagues have observed that when couples learn new, healthier ways of interacting by shifting from narrow and rigidly held interactional positions to new positions characterized by accessibility and responsiveness, the partners begin to experience each other in new ways, which further strengthens the emotional bond between them, the ultimate goal of EFT (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 15; Furrow et al., 2011, p. xi; Denton et al., 2000, pp. 65–66).

Johnson notes that the role of emotion is now more widely accepted within the field of couple therapy than it was in the 20th century, and that its importance has been verified by numerous scientific studies, leading her to consider it a "powerful and necessary agent of change" (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 6). Emotionally Focused Therapy has demonstrated a high rate of positive outcomes - Johnson reports that during her first 15 years of practicing EFT, she and her colleagues helped 85% of couples "make significant changes" in their relationship (S. M. Johnson, 2008, p. 45). In more clinical outcome studies, EFT has demonstrated a 70 to 73 percent recovery rate for distressed couples, and a 90 percent rate of "significant improvement"

(S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 9). EFT has also been successful in treating a diverse population, both in terms of culture and in individually based disorders, including traumatic stress symptoms and depression (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 13; Furrow et al., 2011, p. xi; S. M. Johnson, 2019, p. 52; Snyder & Whisman, 2003; Dalton, J., 2009; Furrow et al., 2011, pp. 12–13, 165-368; Johnson, et al, 2023; Denton et al., 2000). Emotionally Focused Therapy also appears to produce better long-term results than most contemporary therapeutic models, with several studies reporting couple stability, and even increased satisfaction, 2 to 3 years after termination of therapeutic treatment (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 8).[15] While the short-term success of EFT can be characterized as indisputable, due to the numerous studies conducted over the past thirty years (cf. Baucom et al., 1998; S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 7), at least one meta-study has shown that the long-term success of both EFT and BCT could be overstated due to possible publication bias (Rathgeber et al., 2019).[16]

EFT was formulated, developed, and tested by Sue Johnson and her thesis adviser Les Greenberg, who officially presented the results of their first test case (as part of her thesis) in 1985 (Johnson & Greenberg, 1985). Just as John Gottman had been vocal about the failings of contemporary couple counseling practices in the 1980's, Johnson and Greenberg likewise found many common interventions unhelpful; Johnson relates that practices such as teaching problem-solving skills, the use of set communication skill sequences as in 'Active Listening', the creation

[15] The results of numerous published outcome studies have been linked to by Johnson at her website www.iceeft.com

[16] My view is that, as with any therapeutic modality for couples, it would be overly idealistic to think that one round of treatment would be sufficient for the lifetime of a couple, and it should be understood by anyone seeking therapy that, though they may experience some immediate and short-term success, the patterns of human life and the dynamics of human relationships dictate that periodic sessions will be needed in the future in order to maintain a strong love-bond.

of behavioral exchange contracts, and examining family of origin histories did not adequately address what she perceived as the "overwhelming emotional drama", and downward-spiraling patterns of negative interaction sequences during therapeutic couple sessions (Sue Johnson *EFT Training, Module 1;* (Denton et al., 2000, p. 66; S. M. Johnson, 2008, pp. 42–44). Unlike Gottman, Johnson does not devote time in her training modules to criticize each of these common practices individually, but she is unequivocal in stating that, as a whole, they did not produce enough positive outcomes for the couples whom she was treating, and should therefore not be considered effective. Though this opinion might be debated by a few contemporary couple therapists, there is substantial authority behind Johnson's claim, since both she and Gottman have published numerous studies demonstrating the efficacy of their therapeutic process, and Gottman's longitudinal studies have shown the weakness of 'Active Listening', and poor outcomes from therapy that relies on contracts and problem solving skills (Gottman's debate with Scott Stanley over Active Listening was covered previously in this thesis). The weakness of these other interventions, in the view of Johnson and Gottman, is that they do not properly consider the importance of emotion, and hence they do not effectively treat the systemic nature of negative couple interactional sequences, which are instigated by emotional responses to attachment wounds and fears (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 97; S. M. Johnson & Greenberg, 1985; Johnson *EFT Training, Module 1*). Gottman and Johnson both criticized common couple counseling methods that not only neglected to recognize the importance of emotion in couple dynamics, but which even went so far as to claim that emotion was a threat to relationships.[17] In her third published edition of *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy* in 2020, Johnson writes that over the past decade, the necessity of addressing emotion in the process of

[17] For a good example of the prevailing thought on emotion during the 1980's, (see Mahoney, 1991).

relationship repair has been more widely accepted, and specific methods and interventions to address it effectively are now more available outside of EFT (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 7).

When she began her career, Johnson also did not fully appreciate the role of emotion in systemic couple conflict; this understanding came later as she was looking for answers concerning what was behind the "drama" she was witnessing in couple sessions. In reviewing the tapes of her own couple therapy sessions, she reports that she began to recognize some specific response patterns in therapy that were leading to positive changes in her clients, both internally and externally, all of which had to do with emotion - internally, in how emotions were formulated and regulated; and externally, in positive interactional sequences characterized by "secure bonding" (S. M. Johnson, 2008, pp. 47–48). After recognizing these patterns of interaction that were characterized by vulnerability leading to disclosure of attachment wounds and the positive responsiveness of the partner to these disclosures, she believed it was now feasible for her to map the steps. She began to break down the interactions of the couples she was treating into individual steps that together formed the process of therapeutic change. She gives the credit for the development of EFT interventions to these couples, who taught her and the original research team how to describe the process of change outlined in EFT (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 7).

From the time that she began publishing her work and her theories about romantic relationships up until the present, the largest observable shift in her focus on understanding and treating couple interactional sequences is the growth of her incorporation of the science of attachment theory.[18]

[18] ['The science of attachment theory' is my phrase, though it is certainly possible that it has been used before by others. I am using this term as I believe it best expresses the development of 'attachment theory' over the past few decades from 'theory' to an observable and measurable 'science'.]

One cannot properly understand or practice EFT without a basic understanding of attachment, and one cannot read Johnson without encountering her own assimilation of John Bowlby's work on childhood attachment. The principles of attachment have shaped Johnson's treatment of couples to such a degree that she now considers EFT to be an 'attachment-based' therapy (S. M. Johnson, 2020, pp. 11, 26–39). She writes that as adult attachment theory and science have continued to be studied and incorporated into therapeutic interventions, EFT has been more and more recognized itself as an "attachment" therapy, and this underscores how important attachment is to Johnson's approach to therapy and her theory of how human relationships work (see Furrow et al., 2011) (S. M. Johnson, 2020, pp. 1–2).

As Johnson began to incorporate the principles of attachment in her work, she found that EFT was increasingly effective (S. M. Johnson, 2013, pp. 3–7; S. M. Johnson et al., 2001, p. 146). As attachment became more crucial to EFT, Johnson's therapeutic focus became the promoting of the partners' ability to 'reach for each other'[19] and express attachment needs and fears, and to respond in a supportive manner to the needs expressed by the other. This approach has been very successful in strengthening the bond between romantic partners (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 100; Levine & Heller, 2011, pp. 188–189; S. M. Johnson, 2019, p. 52; S. M. Johnson et al., 2001, p. 146). A 2013 study demonstrated that EFT increases the security of attachment between previously disconnected and insecure partners, and found that this attachment security is associated with a change in the female partner's neural response to threat (S. M. Johnson, 2013, p. 64; Johnson, et al., 2013; S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 7). This particular study, conducted by Dr James Coan, wherein female participants were placed in fMRI machines and told to expect an

[19] She uses this language often, and is comparable to Gottman's "bids for connection".

electric shock at certain moments, demonstrated that physical contact with a loved one who is perceived to be a safe and secure base [brain activity was monitored while they were alone in the machine, and then while they held the hand of a loved one] mediates the impact of fear and uncertainty, which is a central tenet of attachment theory (Levine & Heller, 2011, pp. 26–27; Johnson, 2013, pp. 64–65, 218; S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 7).

A second iteration of this study was conducted by Coan and Johnson with women in distressed marriages who were actively participating in Emotionally Focused Therapy. Both the women and their partners reported, through standardized questionnaires, that they were insecurely attached and seeking therapy to improve their relationships. Prior to treatment, the women demonstrated responses similar to those in the original study: their neural activity showed heightened alarm responses in the hypothalamus, and they reported experiencing the electric shock as highly painful. Although the presence of a stranger who held their hand modestly reduced both fear and pain, the presence of their husbands produced little to no mitigating effect - an outcome that contrasted sharply with the earlier findings among securely attached couples. In this context, the marital bond was characterized by insecurity, and the husbands did not function as a "safe haven," thereby failing to provide the comfort or security necessary to alleviate anxiety and pain. Notably, after approximately 20 sessions of EFT, the same women reported feeling happier and more secure in their relationships. When they repeated the experiment under these new conditions, holding their husbands' hands virtually eliminated the alarm response, as indicated by reduced hypothalamic activation, and the women self-reported the shock sensation as merely "uncomfortable" (S. M. Johnson, 2013, pp. 64–65; S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016, pp. 252–253). Concerning the results of these studies, Johnson writes:

> The patterns of neural responses in the brain scans observed in this study suggests that connection with loving partners does not so much help individuals regulate or cope with threat better (parts of the brain associated with such coping were not activated in the post-EFT brain scans) as it actually reduces the way a threat is perceived and encoded. It appears that EFT is the first couple therapy to examine the impact of systematic and theory driven intervention on brain functioning (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 100).

Though it did not begin as such, in its present iteration, Johnson primarily considers EFT a treatment for insecure attachment. It seems appropriate for Johnson to focus on attachment insecurities in her therapy, especially considering the results of the above experiments. This focus on attachment has produced positive results to the degree that Johnson has argued for EFT to be "The" attachment wound therapy for individuals and families, in addition to couples[20] (S. M. Johnson, 2019).

EFT and Contemporary Couple Therapy

In the chapter on Emotionally Focused Therapy contained in The Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy, Johnson attempts to place EFT in the context of contemporary couple therapy. It is worthwhile to present her perspective because it gives insight into how she differentiates herself, and how she believes EFT fits within the broader therapeutic landscape of recent couple counseling trends (Johnson et al., 2015, pp. 101–102).

More will be presented on this ahead in the Core Mechanisms section, but in terms of length of treatment, Johnson posits that EFT is a relatively short treatment, with an average session count of five to ten. This does appear to be short, especially when compared with the Gottman Method

[20] Johnson's assimilation of the science of attachment theory is treated quite fully ahead, in the next portion of this chapter.

of Couples Therapy, which averages 15-20 sessions for most distressed couples (Gottman & Gottman, 2015, p. 153). Johnson writes that, for most couples, the first (and most crucial) stage of EFT, "De-escalation," can be completed in just five to six sessions (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 101).[21]

EFT appears to be in accordance with other more recent research on the nature of couple distress and satisfaction, in which emotion and strong affect play a primary role. This emphasis on emotion is a departure from the major therapeutic strategies of the early and mid-20th century. Gottman, in particular, has emphasized the critical role of negative affect in the emergence of relational distress and the subsequent erosion of couple connection. He underscores the importance of equipping couples with strategies to down-regulate negative affect during conflict interactions. Gottman and his colleagues contend that the primary goal of therapy should not be the resolution of specific conflict issues, but rather the development of skills and practices that enable partners to self-soothe and to cultivate a form of emotional engagement that remains effective even in the midst of disagreement (see J. M. Gottman et al., 2015, p. 135). This emphasis on emotional process over content aligns closely with the theoretical foundations of EFT, which prioritizes how partners communicate over the specific issues under discussion. Emotionally Focused Therapy targets the repetitive patterns of interaction that perpetuate disconnection, as well as the underlying emotional experiences that drive and sustain those patterns. Johnson's model, in particular, emphasizes the structuring of incremental steps toward secure emotional engagement, thereby enabling partners to develop the capacity to soothe,

[21] My experience in working with distressed couples within the context of pastoral ministry confirms this, and I have found that even three sessions of EFT work is enough to greatly stabilize the interaction patterns of distressed couples.

comfort, and reassure one another, particularly in the context of conflict. (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 101).

In the landscape of couples therapy, Johnson notes that there is an increasing focus on issues of diversity and uniqueness. The experiential roots of EFT promote a humble therapeutic stance that respects each client's perspective. During EFT training, the therapist is instructed to view each relationship as a culture unto itself; therefore interventions must be adapted to each unique culture, so that they can be effective. The Gottman Method takes a more rigid approach, and though there are more interventions for the therapist to choose from for each client-relationship, the interventions themselves are more rigid, as Gottman believes that his research warrants trust in what he has developed. So, in this case, it does appear that Johnson and Gottman, while both very respectful of the client's individuality and uniqueness, differ in how they have chosen to apply specific interventions. Johnson adds that, as is the case with narrative therapy, the stance of the EFT therapist should be "informed not-knowing" (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 101), which is an expression of the humility with which EFT therapists are taught to approach their work with clients. In addition, Johnson also insists that the fundamental beliefs undergirding EFT are universal and apply to all cultures, races, classes, and sexual orientations. EFT presupposes that key emotional experiences, as well as attachment needs and behaviors, are universal to humankind. Sociological studies have demonstrated that there are convincing similarities when looking across the entirety of the human race in the recognized "antecedents, shared meanings, physiological reactions, and facial expressions of emotions, as well as actions evoked by these emotions" (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 101). While there are some differences in how central a particular emotion or emotional experience may be to a specific culture, and though different

cultures have their own accepted ways of regulating and displaying emotion, there is also considerable evidence that attachment needs and responses are universal. Therefore EFT, and the science of attachment theory, is applicable to all (see van IJzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988).

In placing her methodology within the context of the present therapeutic landscape, Johnson argues that EFT fits well with what she characterizes as the growing 'feminist' approach to couple therapy (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 101). She uses the term 'feminist' to denote the depathologization of dependency[22] that is now more common amongst therapists, especially those attuned to the role of emotion. It is curious that she uses the term 'feminist' to describe this approach, as Bowlby was advocating for this depathologization long before the 'feminist' movement existed. No matter the terminology, Johnson offers up EFT as a supporting methodology to those who are looking for new ways of appreciating the importance of vulnerability and emotional dependency within romantic relationships, which are aspects that more men than women have traditionally had difficulty with; hence the term 'feminist'. Johnson notes that the emphasis on emotion and vulnerability is especially challenging for men who have been raised in a western culture, who have been conditioned to believe that displaying emotions such as fear and sadness are a sign of weakness, and that reliance on others demonstrates lack of responsibility. EFT addresses this cultural paradigm, and has been effective in treating male partners described as inexpressive by their mates (S. M. Johnson & Talitman, 1997).

The integration of interventions in couples therapy has become more common since the 1990's, a trend that Lebow termed a revolution at the time (J. Lebow, 1997). Johnson points out that EFT

[22] (That is, the notion that to be dependent on another person for love and emotional support is a 'weakness' that should be overcome).

fits well with this movement towards integration, as it integrates systemic and experiential perspectives and interventions (see Johnson, 2019). It is also consonant with narrative approaches in some respects, particularly in step two of EFT's change process, when the therapist externalizes the cycle and frames it as the problem in the couple's relationship (cf. *EFT Training Module One*; (S. M. Johnson & Johnson, 2004). One could argue that EFT has not only benefitted from other therapeutic perspectives, but it has also had an influence on the evolution of other modalities. For example, Johnson writes that new versions of behavioral interventions, such as integrative behavioral couple therapy, have begun to include EFT's focus on promoting acceptance and compassion for each client's perspective, and on evoking softer emotional responses (Johnson et al., 2015, pp. 101–102). Whether or not the incorporation of these EFT staples by modern integrative behavioral therapists has come as a direct result of Johnson's work, is not as relevant as the fact that the larger trend to focus on emotion, and the validation of each client's experience of emotion does in fact validate the focus of EFT on these aspects of couple dynamics in therapy that were not as prevalent when Johnson first started publishing her work. John Gottman agrees with Johnson's claim of EFT's direct influence on the modern landscape of Couple Counseling: "Thanks mostly to Susan Johnson, we have emotionally focused couples therapy, so we know how important emotion is for clinical work. EFT has made a huge impact on the way most of us go about the business of doing couples therapy" (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2018, p. 16).

Already undergirded by an attachment science perspective on relationships, it has been natural for EFT to integrate new concepts and scientific findings from social and developmental psychology and neuroscience. For instance, Johnson incorporates findings on mirror neurons as

the basis of empathy, oxytocin and its role in bonding [examined in depth later], as well as research on the links between social and physical pain, and on factors such as the negative impact that affect suppression has on the brain and relationships (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 102; S. M. Johnson, 2013). Johnson is correct in arguing that EFT fits in well with the move, which started with Gottman, of couple therapy towards the integration of more empirically-validated interventions. This is a strength of EFT, making it a reliable and highly regarded modality for couple therapy.

The final trend in the landscape of couples therapy that Johnson juxtaposes with EFT is the increasing pressure which again, seems to have begun with John Gottman, for clinicians to document and publish the effectiveness of their interventions (J. M. Gottman et al., 2015, p. 102). This is clearly a strength of EFT, as the published articles on the effectiveness of her therapy, which stand at a 70-75% success rate, make clear (Johnson, et al., 2023; (Wiebe et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2015, p. 102). This trend benefits distressed couples, who are now able to access the success rates of the leading couple therapies and interventions before deciding on a course of treatment. This is also a positive shift for therapists, as they will be continually challenged to improve their interventions and reexamine their underlying theories and epistemology in favor of those therapies that are producing higher success rates.

As of 2023, there were 21 studies from North American researchers showing consistently positive outcomes for Emotionally Focused Therapy in terms of its effectiveness to reduce marital distress and to foster marital satisfaction (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 7). The therapeutic reach of EFT has now extended to 65 additional affiliated research and therapy centers, and EFT is now considered “one of the best delineated and empirically validated interventions in the field

of couple therapy" (Baucom et al., 1998), and "the Gold Standard" for empirical interventions in the couple therapy field (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 1).

As part of the introduction to Emotionally Focused Therapy it is imperative to discuss Sue Johnson's assimilation and use of attachment theory, on which the theory of EFT and its Core Mechanisms have been built.

EFT and the Science of 'Attachment Theory'

The most influential and ever-present theory in Johnson's work is that of Attachment Theory, which she often calls "attachment science" in interviews and in her recent work (S. M. Johnson, 2019; S. M. Johnson, 2020). The fundamental role that attachment plays in loving relationships was pioneered by the well-known British psychologist and psychiatrist John Bowlby, who began his career in psychology by working with maladjusted and delinquent adolescents (Bowlby, 1951). Attachment theory grew out of Bowlby's observation that infants and young children behave in ways that express their innate need for a high degree of physical proximity to their primary caregivers, and that they are distressed by separations from their caregivers (Bowlby, 1958). Based on his observations and the well documented similarity of behavior in nonhuman primates, Bowlby postulated the existence of an inborn behavioral system that has evolved to protect infants from danger, and to maximize safe exploration by regulating proximity to a caregiver. As his work is now widely accepted and documented, this thesis will not cover the development of attachment theory by Bowlby, but will focus on the science of attachment as distilled and presented by Johnson, with supporting work from her contemporaries.

The application of attachment principles pioneered by Bowlby were first extended to adult romantic relationships by Cindy Hazan and Philip Shaver in the late 1980's (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Others have contributed towards this area of study, and Johnson recognizes the work of Kim Bartholomew and Daniel Perlman, who compiled a collection of articles detailing the advancement of Bowlby's work into the contemporary understanding of the interconnections between attachment patterns and communication (*Attachment Processes in Adulthood.*, 1994). She also applauds the work of Amir Levine and Rachel Heller, who built upon the work of Hazan and Shaver, and applied the science of attachment to romantic relationships in a manner that made it accessible to the common reader outside of the therapeutic community in their work, *Attached* (Levine & Heller, 2011).

In the Introduction to *Attachment Theory in Practice*, Johnson argues that attachment is the one area of study that can most effectively be applied to all psychotherapeutic models (S. M. Johnson, 2019, p. 5), as it is able to provide a scientifically-based theory that can be used to treat emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal dysfunction (S. M. Johnson, 2019, p. 4). Whether attachment is the 'only' area of study that spans contemporary therapeutic models can be debated, but any thorough study of the science of attachment reveals how applicable this science is to every human being in every culture and stage of life. In their work *Attachment Theory and Research*, Rholes and Simpson write, "Few theories and areas of research have been more prolific during the past decade than the attachment field….The ensuing flood of research that now supports the major principles of attachment theory rank among the most important achievements in the psychological sciences today" (S. M. Johnson, 2019; Simpson & Rholes, 2015).

Johnson's Concept of Attachment Injury

Johnson writes that, since its initial development, the greatest change in EFT has been the growing influence of attachment on her understanding of the nature of close relationships (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 100). This growing influence is most notable in her focus on attachment injury, which she views as the primary source of all repetitive couple conflict patterns. Johnson's more recent work [2001-] is heavily focused on understanding attachment injury in adults, which is caused, she says, when one partner violates the expectation that the other has of them to offer comfort and caring in times of danger or distress. The injury caused by the incident can then become a clinically recurring theme and create an impasse that blocks relationship repair as long as it is left untreated (S. M. Johnson et al., 2001).

Johnson argues further that attachment injury is experienced by the hurt partner as an abandonment, or a betrayal, of trust. As such, she places attachment injuries on the level of trauma events,[23] which cause deep psychosomatic wounds, damaging the bond between partners. If these wounds are not treated, and the psychological effects are not resolved, the lingering pain and internal scars will work to reinforce and maintain negative cycles of interaction between the partners and result in consistent attachment insecurity (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 100), which self-perpetuates and spirals into what Gottman would call the Four Horsemen. Johnson recognizes that healthy relationships take work and a certain amount of self-denial in order to serve the other, but she is less focused on the individual's responsibility to practice unselfishness in favor of emphasizing the systemic psychological and physiological interdependence between loving

[23] Johnson's experience is that clients often speak of attachment distress in "life-and-death terms", and respond to attachment wounds with the same fight, flight, freeze response of trauma victims (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 33).

adults – a force that she argues is primal and 'hardwired' or 'programmed' into each human being's DNA. Because of this primal interdependence, Johnson argues that the incidents in which one partner either responds to, or fails to respond to, their partner in times of urgent need, influence the quality of an attachment relationship more powerfully than all other factors (S. M. Johnson et al., 2001, p. 145), causing a deep sense that one has been abandoned or betrayed. The wound caused by this sense of abandonment or betrayal can then cause perpetual relationship distress, as it is an ever-present reminder (leading to globalization, or attributing characterological weakness) of the lack of dependability of the offending partner (S. M. Johnson et al., 2001).

The sense that one's partner is not dependable exists not only in the mind, but in the entire body, as it is the result of one or more instances that caused a deep emotional wound. Johnson views emotion as the primary motivator and organizer when it comes to attachment behaviors, and thus an attachment wound takes place on the level of emotion, which permeates the entire being. Daniel Siegel writes that wounds caused by traumatic events (in which Johnson includes attachment wounds) are stored in the body as emotional memory until they are resolved (cf. Siegel & Hartzell, 2014).

Sometimes attachment wounds, and the resulting 'attachment style' or 'strategy', are suffered in childhood and are carried into adulthood, affecting one's loving relationships. One misconception about attachment, writes Johnson, is that it is often assumed that childhood attachment injuries cause static 'styles' or 'strategies' for relating to romantic partners. This is not the case; otherwise, the focus of EFT would be similar to some other couple counseling

modalities that fixate only on managing conflict and behaviors without treating the underlying wounds that lead to conflict. If the wounds were untreatable, EFT would lose some of its purpose. However, Johnson's experience in treating couples with EFT has demonstrated that childhood attachment wounds can be healed over time, especially in response to interventions from a loving and responsive romantic partner, and that 'attachment styles' and strategies of relating are adaptive and fluid into adulthood (S. M. Johnson, 2019, pp. 14–15). Johnson writes that "habitual ways of dealing with attachment issues and engaging with attachment figures may be learned in childhood, but they can be revised or confirmed and made more automatic in adult relationships" (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 105). It is these automated, habitual negative styles and strategies, such as 'protest' or 'pursue', for coping with childhood attachment injury that Johnson aims to treat with EFT.

Attachment in Children and Adults

The difference between the way attachment functions in children as opposed to adults is that in the child-mother relationship the child is dependent on the mother, whose function is to provide a 'secure base' and 'safe haven' for her child, while adult attachment is mutual and reciprocal. As Johnson expresses it, with adults, each partner is both a dependent and the prime source of safety and comfort for the other. Another difference between childhood and adult attachment is the need for, and the way, each one seeks touch as a soothing influence. An infant is more secure when he or she is held by a caregiver; and the lack of touch has shown to be a cause of maladaptive behavior for young children, and becomes responsible for future mental and physical health problems into adolescence and adulthood (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 5).

Physical touch is also a source of attachment security and bonding for adults, though in couples this generally contains a sexual element (S. M. Johnson, 2019, pp. 15–16). Johnson refers to a study by Hazan and Zeifman which shows that sexual behavior in adults has the same bonding effect as does a mother holding her child (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). Many studies have now shown that the same bonding chemicals, including the 'cuddle hormone' oxytocin, which also increases the release of dopamine, are released during both breastfeeding and lovemaking; Johnson refers to these studies and the important implications of dopamine for adult attachment in her book, *Love Sense* (see especially Johnson, 2013, pp. 85-111).

Regarding the principles of attachment in adults, Bowlby's argument was that "dependency" needed to be depathologized and recognized as a natural and healthy instinct, programmed by evolution, that leads to the preservation of the species. He termed this healthy dependence "effectively dependent" (Bowlby, 1988; S. M. Johnson, 2013, p. 65), and argued that it is not possible for an infant or an adult to be either too dependent or truly independent; rather, people may be either effectively or ineffectively dependent (S. M. Johnson, 2019, pp. 13–14). Johnson does use the term 'dependency' when speaking of romantic partners, but she is more likely to focus on the idea of 'bonding,' taking great care to treat the bond between clients, rather than the clients themselves. She argues, "attachment is fundamentally an interpersonal theory that places the individual in the context of his or her closest relationships with others; It views mankind as not only essentially social, but also as *Homo vinculum*--The one who bonds. Bonding with others is viewed as the most intrinsic, essential survival strategy for human beings" (S. M. Johnson, 2019, p. 6). Johnson writes that, in couples, a secure attachment bond is an "active, affectionate, reciprocal relationship in which partners mutually derive and provide closeness, comfort, and

security" (S. M. Johnson et al., 2001, p. 145). Bowlby, Johnson, and other proponents of promoting healthy attachment practices in adults argue that being autonomous and being connected are not mutually exclusive, but are 'two sides of the same coin' rather than opposite ends of a continuum.

In her books and interviews, Johnson cites many of the recent studies that have demonstrated the physical and mental health benefits of having secure loving relationships.[24] These are summarized below:

In summary, these are the benefits that Johnson has recognized in adults who have a secure attachment to a loved one[25] (Johnson et al., 2001, p. 145; see also *EFT Training module*):

1. Calming influence on the nervous system
2. One can openly acknowledge distress and turn to others for support in a way that elicits responsiveness
3. Enhances the ability to cope with stress and uncertainty
4. Makes one more resilient in times of crisis
5. Makes one less likely to become depressed when relationships are not going well (Johnson cites the work of Davila & Bradbury in Cobb et al., 2001)
6. Increases the ability to heal after trauma [see (Van der Kolk et al., 1991) for the research behind this claim; Johnson refers to Van der Kolk's work often]
7. Have a model of others that characterizes them as dependable and trustworthy
8. Believe oneself to be loveable and entitled to care
9. More likely to attribute flexible meaning to a partner's negative attributes, excusing their behavior, rather than attributing it to a defective global character trait
10. More adaptable and flexible in opinions, and less likely to view tacit assumptions as through the were absolute realities
11. Better able to take a meta-perspective with loved ones
12. Increased ability to self-reflect and consider alternate perspectives from one's own
13. Able to disclose, and to respond to partner's disclosures – more accepting of vulnerability in oneself and in others
14. Better ability to respond to conflict situations with balanced assertiveness, and can collaborate more, using rejection and coercion less often

[24] See especially chapters Three and Four of *Love Sense*, which are titled "The Emotions" and "The Brain".
[25] These benefits have been noted by others as well, and I have not seen any modern studies that refute them.

Chapter V Emotionally Focused Therapy

THEORY

As other influences on her approach to therapy, Sue Johnson specifically credits Experiential/Gestalt Therapy, and Systemic Therapy. In *The Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*, Johnson reports six premises of Experiential Therapy that she has applied to EFT, which I have summarized, with some quotations, below (J. M. Gottman et al., 2015, p. 98) and (S. M. Johnson, 2022, pp. 40–41)

1. The therapeutic alliance offers, in Johnson's words, a "safe haven" (an expression taken from John Bowlby (1988) where emotion can be tolerated and reflected upon, and a "secure base," again, from Bowlby, where experience can be explored and expanded. This "egalitarian" (S. M. Johnson, 2022, p. 3) bond between therapist and client is a partnership that helps to heal attachment injuries, as the therapist becomes an attachment figure to each of the partners.
2. The acceptance and validation of the client's experience, as opposed to pathologizing, is the key element in experiential therapy, and this is fundamental to EFT. As Johnson applies it to couple therapy, the EFT therapist must validate each person's experience of the relationship, without marginalizing or invalidating the experience of the other person (John Gottman incorporates this principle as well). The dynamic of safety created by each partner's feeling of being accepted allows their "innate self-healing and growth tendencies" to flourish. The dynamic of safety within the therapeutic alliance is fostered by the authenticity and transparency of the therapist, a fundamental element in EFT.
3. Johnson argues that the essence of the experiential perspective is a belief in the ability of human beings to be flexible, to make creative and healthy choices, if given the opportunity; and this is a marker of the health of the individual for her. The EFT therapist helps to articulate the moments when choices are made during the drama of couple interactions (often termed "dances" by Johnson in her mass consumption publishing), and supports clients to formulate new, healthy responses. This approach to therapy is

optimistic about the individual's ability to find creative ways to survive and cope in dire circumstances, but recognizes that those very same methods of coping and survival may be inadequate or harmful once a person is in a romantic relationship; therefore they must be led by the therapist to discover new patterns. Johnson emphasizes that before teaching "adaptive responsiveness", it is first necessary for the therapist to facilitate the client's acceptance of each partner's perspective and positive intentions for the relationship.

4. Experiential therapies encourage an examination of how inner and outer realities define each other; that is, the inner construction of experience evokes interactional responses that organize the world in a particular way. These patterns of interaction then reflect and, in turn, shape inner experience. Therefore, Johnson writes, the EFT therapist is a "process consultant who follows this moment-to-moment shaping of these realities the way a dancer follows music" (S. M. Johnson, 2022, p. 41). Focusing on this ongoing process, and helping clients bring order to and coherently engage with their own inner world, and the interactional "dance" with their partner, are the main characteristics of EFT.
5. Experiential approaches take the position that we are all formed and transformed by our relationships with others. It focuses on how identity is constantly formulated in interactions with others. By helping partners change the shape of their relationships, the therapist may also help them reshape their sense of who they are. Couple therapy can become a place where partners may revise their sense of self, and become more able to deal with problems such as depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder. In EFT this is partially accomplished when the therapist leads a client "into and through their most emotionally charged experience" (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 41) and helps to reframe it.
6. Experiential approaches attempt to foster new corrective experiences that emerge as part of the personal encounters in each therapy session.

The value, for Johnson, of a systemic approach are the following five premises (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 99):

1. Causality is circular, so it cannot be said that action *A* caused action *B*. For example, for Johnson, the common couple pattern in which one partner demands interaction, while the other tries to withdraw, is a self-perpetuating feedback loop (S. M. Johnson, 2020, pp. 46,

48). It is not possible to say whether the demanding led to the withdrawal, or whether the withdrawal led to the demanding. Johnson likens this negative pattern to a "demon dance", one she terms the "Protest Polka".

2. In a systemic approach the behavior of one partner should always be considered in the context of the behavior of the other partner.
3. The elements of a system have a predictable and consistent relationship with one another. This is represented by the systems concept of homeostasis, and is manifested in couples by the presence of regular, repeating cycles of interaction.
4. All behavior is assumed to have a communicative aspect. What is said between partners, and the manner in which it is communicated, define the roles of the speaker and the listener. The nature of a relationship, and that of participants, is implicit in every content message and is particularly seen in the way participants talk to each other.
5. The task of the family systems therapist is to interrupt repetitive negative cycles of interaction so that new patterns can occur (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 46). Systems theory in itself as opposed to EFT does not specifically offer direction as to the nature of these new patterns; it only requires that they be more flexible and less constrained. In EFT the flexibility of movement from old patterns to new ones is preserved, but Johnson has a definitive direction toward which she is guides the clients by fostering vulnerable disclosures, which foster empathic responses.

Johnson believes that experiential and systemic approaches to therapy share important commonalities, as both focus on present experience rather than historical events, which makes their integration natural. In both experiential and systemic approaches, individuals are viewed as fluid, or 'in process', rather than as static beings who are naturally resistant to change (S. M. Johnson, 2020, pp. 41–42). Johnson believes that these two approaches also complement and strengthen each other because the focus of experiential approaches is traditionally within the person, often to the exclusion of external relationships, whereas systemic therapies focus on the interactions between people, sometimes to the exclusion of emotional response. In Johnson's EFT, there is a focus on *both* the circular cycles of interaction between people and the core

emotional experiences of each partner during the different steps of the interaction cycle (J. M. Gottman et al., 2015, p. 99).

The unique contribution of EFT to systemic/family systems therapy is the use of emotion in breaking destructive cycles of interaction. Johnson claims that focusing on emotion, rather than on offering "insight" or "improved skills" (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 43), is what helps to facilitate more satisfying cycles of interaction for the couple. A natural criticism of this approach is that in some cases, the "insight" and "improved skills" help to create more positive interactions with the more enjoyable emotions that accompany them. Even within EFT therapeutic sessions, the therapist does offer insight into the nature of the negative interaction cycles, and helps improve the communication skills of the clients.

The Theory of Relationship Health and Distress in Attachment Terms

Susan Johnson views relationships, especially romantic ones, through the lens of attachment. Therefore, a healthy relationship for her is a secure attachment bond. A secure bond is characterized by mutual emotional accessibility and responsiveness. She often makes use of the acronym "ARE": Are you there for me? Are you Responsive to me? Will you be Empathic towards me? The work of John Bowlby and others have demonstrated that this secure bond creates a safe environment that optimizes each partner's ability to regulate their emotions, process information, solve problems, resolve differences, and communicate clearly (S. M. Johnson, 2008). Like Bowlby, for Johnson, safe attunement and engagement with an attachment figure (such as a parent in childhood, or a romantic partner in adulthood) leads to attunement and active engagement with the world, and facilitates a person's ability to modulate stress and

maintain emotional balance (Levine & Heller, 2011, pp. 31–32). These positive traits, enabled by secure attachment, in turn allow partners to view the distress in their relationship as caused by extraneous forces, the negative cycles, rather than by characterological deficiencies in each other.

Johnson and Gottman can be contrasted in this way: According to Johnson, what makes relationships successful is a secure bond; whereas according to Gottman, what makes relationships successful is a more complex consortium of goals involving five central processes: (1) Couples down-regulate negative affect during conflict; (2) They up-regulate positive affect during conflict; (3) They build positive affect during non-conflict interactions; (4) They bridge mismatches in meta-emotion approach; and (5) They create a shared meaning system (J. M. Gottman et al., 2015, pp. 135–153). Examining Gottman's list, we can argue that each of the elements that he believes composes a successful romantic relationship do facilitate Johnson's goal of establishing a "secure bond" between partners, but they do not directly address the root of negative couple interaction cycles, which Johnson argues is usually attachment panic. In one sense it is as if The Gottman Method is focused on the behaviors during conflict, while EFT is more concerned with the innerworkings that cause the behaviors.

Emotionally Focused Therapy also looks at distress in relationships with an attachment perspective, regarding distress as a result of attachment insecurity and separation distress. When attachment security is threatened, human beings respond in predictable sequences (S. M. Johnson, 2008). Typically, anger is the first response. Johnson explains that this anger is a protest against the loss of contact with the attachment figure. If such protest does not evoke

responsiveness, it can evolve into various panic-ridden strategies of clinging, seeking, and coercion, fueled by despair, to obtain and maintain the partner's attention (S. M. Johnson, 2008, p. 47; Johnson, *EFT Training Module*). Such strategies are not successful, and often illicit a negative response of withdrawal or stonewalling from the romantic partner, which reinforces the attachment panic of the first partner, and leads the couple into a chronic "blame-distance" feedback loop, which Johnson calls a "demon dance" (S. M. Johnson, 2008).

Johnson has observed and identified three basic destructive patterns (the "Demon Dialogues", or "Dances") that couples default into when one or both feel that the connection between them has been broken or is under threat. As a result of the disconnection, Johnson argues that couples have two ways of protecting themselves and of trying to reclaim the connection with their partner in times when they did not feel responded to (S. M. Johnson, 2008, p. 68). These two ways have nuances, but in general they are either to 'flee' or to 'fight'. To flee is for the insecure partner to avoid engagement altogether - to try to numb the emotions, or emotionally shut down, denying the attachment needs altogether; while to fight is for the hurt partner to listen to the anxiety caused by the unmet attachment needs, and to engage with their partner, using various strategies, for recognition and response (S. M. Johnson, 2008, p. 67). The first two of the 'dances' below are caused by the fight response, and the third dance is the 'flee' response, which is brought on by despair over the relationship and a lack of trust in the partner's ability or willingness to respond (S. M. Johnson, 2008, pp. 68–97):[26]

1) **"Find the Bad Guy"**: A pattern of mutual blame, often expressed with hostility, the goal of which is self-protection.

[26] [They are presented here briefly, but will be explored in detail in the section on Core Mechanisms]

2) **"The Protest Polka":** A pattern of demand-withdraw or criticize-defend, the goal of which is to evoke a response from one's partner that reassures connection.
3) **"Freeze and Flee":** A pattern of withdraw-withdraw, characterized by extreme emotional distance and helplessness, the purpose of which is self-protection.

Johnson's attachment-informed perspective on relationships is validated by many, but it is apropos to especially mention the observational research of John Gottman. Both Gottman's research and Johnson's distillation of attachment theory suggest that the expression and regulation of emotion are primary factors in determining the nature and form of intimate relationships. What Gottman terms the "Markov absorbing states" of negative affect, Johnson calls the "demon dances", wherein couples get stuck in a pattern of perpetual negativity, characteristics of distressed relationships (Gottman, 2011, pp. 71-74; J. M. Gottman, 1994; J. M. Gottman et al., 2015, p. 104). Johnson's experience of treating couples with EFT, and Gottman's research, also indicate that rigid negative interactional patterns, such as demand-withdraw, can lead to the dissolution of romantic relationships.

The science of attachment theory would suggest that this is because these patterns work to perpetuate attachment insecurity, making safe emotional engagement impossible. Johnson argues, and Gottman would agree, that research of couples overwhelmingly suggests that how romantic partners fight has a stronger correlation to permanent separation than the actual issues that they fight over (J. M. Gottman et al., 2015, pp. 104–105). From Johnson's attachment perspective, in relationship-defining moments, what people are fighting about is the nature of the attachment relationship and what that implies about who they are as a couple and as individuals

in relation to each other. Where Johnson distinguishes herself from Gottman on the nature of negative absorbing states and patterns is that she explicitly attributes them to attachment injury, rather than simply as "emotion" or "emotional states", as does Gottman.

Johnson and Gottman concur that the presence of anger during couple interactions is not necessarily harmful, as long as the partner's attachment-needs and the feelings associated with them are being expressed. Gottman found that the presence of anger did not correlate with future divorce, and can actually work to engender personal growth and couple development, Johnson similarly argues that anger can sometimes help produce responsiveness, and can therefore be of value in couple interactions. In her words, "any response (except an abusive one) is better than none" (J. M. Gottman et al., 2015, p. 104), and this is congruous with Gottman's position on stonewalling being the final and most corrosive of the Four Horsemen. From an attachment perspective, an explicit lack of responsiveness to a demanding partner directly threatens attachment security, thus inducing helplessness, panic, and sometimes rage.

As stated above, both Gottman and Johnson argue that the skills taught in many communication and conflict-training formats for couples are not generally apparent in the interactions of satisfied couples – that is, these 'successful' couples have not made use of these types of skills, and so we can deduce that it must be other factors that make them successful. For instance, during Gottman's longitudinal studies he did not find a high percentage of satisfied couples in a 'healthy' relationship who used active listening practices[27] as a strategy during conflict

[27] Gottman's criticism of Active Listening is directed at couple therapists who instruct the listening partner to summarize and repeat the perspective of the speaking partner, which often includes hostility, anger, and 'attacking' language, without putting limits and responsibilities on the speaker to present their perspective without attacking or causing an automatic defensive response from the listener. Gottman rejects this practice because he found that when

interactions. Attachment science suggests that a couple's ability to detach, or escape from, negative cycles is dependent on the level of security in the relationship. Johnson and Gottman both argue that factors such as empathy and self-disclosure, and the capacity for metacommunication,[28] are associated with security (J. M. Gottman & Gottman, 2012; J. M. Gottman et al., 2015, p. 105). It is therefore, from the perspective of both Gottman and Johnson, the creation of security – a "secure base and safe haven", to borrow from Bowlby – that will allow a couple to both recognize and escape from a negative interaction cycle. While communication is obviously essential for creating a secure and safe space for a couple to operate within, simply being able to communicate does not guarantee security and safety. Therefore, Gottman and Johnson both eschew the emphasis that some couple therapists place on teaching communication and conflict management skills, while preferring to emphasize emotional connection, in which communication does play a part. However, when conflict begins, if even only one partner is flooded by attachment fears, he or she will no longer feel secure, and physiologically will be moved into the 'fight, flight or freeze' response, which prevents them from accessing their Frontal Lobe and executive functioning, which makes it almost impossible to practice 'active listening,' or to follow the rules associated with conflict training.[29]

Physiological flooding is just one of the reasons that EFT does not incorporate 'skills training' as a way of managing or avoiding conflict. EFT does include therapist-led training, but this takes place withing the therapeutic sessions and is not necessarily a 'skill' training as much as it is a

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couples are in conflict, or when one partner feels attacked, heart rates rise above 100/bpm, which causes them to physiologically go into fight, flight, or freeze mode and prevents empathic listening and creative solution-finding.

[28] In this context metacommunication refers to non-verbal communication, and the ability to communicate about it.

[29] This natural physiological response to fear and stress is the reason that Gottman Therapy calls for a "cooling down" time when at least one partner is flooded, or has a heart rate over 100/bpm.

way of increasing each partner's emotional intelligence and ability to recognize interactional patterns. Johnson reports that at one point in the development of EFT she did experiment with the addition of skills training as a component of EFT interventions, but determined that their inclusion had no impact on therapeutic outcomes (J. M. Gottman et al., 2015, p. 104).

Predictors of Success in Treatment

Contemporary research on the success rates of EFT (Denton et al., 2000; S. M. Johnson & Talitman, 1997) allow EFT therapists to understand the ways in which specific couples may benefit from EFT, and thus are able to fit clients to treatment (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 109). Johnson believes, as her research has shown, that the quality of the alliance with the therapist is the foremost predictor of success in EFT (Johnsonn et al., 2015, p. 109). Johnson reports that in fact, the quality of the alliance in EFT seems to be a much more powerful and general predictor of treatment success than the initial distress level, which has not been found to be an important predictor of long-term success in emotionally focused therapy. This is an unexpected finding, because initial distress level is usually by far the best predictor of long-term success in couple therapy, according to Neil Jacobson (Whisman & Jacobson, 1990). Therefore, Johnson believes that the EFT therapist does not have to be discouraged by a couple's initial distress level, but should place greater importance on the couple's commitment level and willingness to connect with the therapist to collaborate in the therapeutic process. Research indicates that perceived relevance of the tasks of therapy seems to be the most important aspect of the alliance; this appears to be more central than a positive bond with the therapist or a sense of shared goals. The couple's ability to join with a therapist in a collaborative alliance, and to view the tasks of EFT, which focus on issues such as safety, trust, and closeness, as relevant to their goals and couple

therapy, seems to be crucial. Johnson believes that EFT works best for couples who still have an emotional investment in their relationship, and who view their problems in terms of insecure attachment and conflicts around closeness and distance. The first step for an EFT therapist is to form and work to maintain a strong, supportive alliance with each partner.

In a surprising difference with The Gottman Method of Couple Therapy, Sue Johnson has found that a lack of expressiveness, or of emotional awareness, has not been found to hamper the EFT change process, while it is definitively a contra-indication for Gottman. Johnson claims that EFT has produced positive outcomes with male clients described by their partners as "inexpressive." After some treatments with EFT, these men have been able to demonstrate vulnerability in expressing their feelings, and emotional responsiveness to their partner (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 109).

Johnson's work with couples has indicated that the female partner's initial level of trust – specifically, her faith that her partner still cares for her – is a very strong predictor of treatment success in EFT. Johnson attributes this to her assertion that women in Western culture have traditionally taken most of the responsibility for maintaining close bonds in families. Therefore, if the female partner no longer has faith that her partner cares for her, then this may mean that the bond is non-viable and may even stifle the emotional investment necessary for change. This might be a controversial view that Johnson expresses, but it does also show up in Gottman Therapy, and it parallels Gottman's research, which shows that emotional disengagement, rather than factors such as the inability to resolve disagreements, is predictive of long-term marital unhappiness and instability (cf. Gottman, 1994).

Chapter VI Emotionally Focused Therapy

CORE MECHANISMS AND THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

The Role of the Therapist

Emotionally Focused Therapy presupposes, as Bowlby did (1958), that underneath a person's dysfunctional responses lies an explanation that is better understood when past experience is considered in attachment terms. Sue Johnson writes that many of the behaviors that are considered dysfunctional are really just "creative adaptations to impossible circumstances" (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 57). In EFT, the therapist is trained to never assume that the client is the problem, even in the instances when the therapist becomes frustrated with a particular aspect of the client's behavior; in these cases, Johnson directs her therapists to become vulnerable themselves by disclosing to the client that they do not understand – and that they need the client's help in connecting with his or her experience (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 111). Johnson writes that the therapist takes the deliberate stance to not only believe in each client's ability to grow and change, but also to give the client the agency to dictate the goal, pace, and form of this change. In her colloquial terms, the therapist "sets the frame, but the clients paint the picture" (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 111).

Similar to Gottman Therapy, couples in EFT are encouraged to view their therapist as a consultant, not an infallible expert. During sessions the therapist takes an approach that is curious and unpretentious, even allowing the clients to correct them if needed. Therapists can admit if they have made a mistake, and actively encourage clients to teach them about their

unique experience in their relationship. This is a humble approach to therapy that creates the space for, and encourages, vulnerability – a prerequisite for authentic encounter and emotional healing.

At its core, Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) is grounded in the assumption that long-standing difficulties in romantic relationships are perpetuated by the way emotionally significant interactions are structured and experienced by each partner (Johnson, 2020, p. 49). Consequently, therapeutic change within the EFT framework is facilitated through the accessing and reprocessing of the emotional experiences that underlie each partner's relational stance. To support this process, the EFT therapist undertakes three primary, sequential tasks aimed at fostering positive change: (1) establishing and maintaining a collaborative therapeutic alliance with the couple, (2) accessing and restructuring each partner's emotional experiences and responses, and (3) reshaping the couple's maladaptive interactional patterns (Johnson, 2020, p. 53):

(1) Creating an alliance

The first task, creating an alliance, is a core value for Sue Johnson, and is fundamental to everything else that is accomplished in Emotionally Focused Therapy. This process begins during assessment through the validation of each partner's unique understanding of their emotional experience. Johnson writes that the creation of the alliance in EFT is based on the techniques of humanistic-experiential therapies. She instructs the EFT therapist to attempt to be genuine, emotionally present, and available, focusing on empathic attunement and demonstrating a non-judgmental acceptance of both partners, understanding that the alliance with them must

constantly be monitored (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 44). In Emotionally Focused Therapy, the therapeutic alliance is considered a fundamental prerequisite for effective therapeutic work. Any rupture in this alliance must be promptly acknowledged and repaired before meaningful progress can occur. Establishing and maintaining this collaborative relationship not only positions clients as active participants in the therapeutic process but also serves to create a 'secure base' and 'safe haven' for each partner. This sense of emotional safety is essential for enabling clients to access, explore, and ultimately reformulate the core emotional experiences that both underlie and arise from their habitual maladaptive interactional patterns.

In the initial sessions, couples are asked about what brings them to therapy, and the therapist listens for the relational problems that are being experienced by each partner. It is not uncommon for partners' initial complaints in therapy to appear unrelated or even contradictory. In such cases, it is the therapist's task to identify the underlying emotional dynamics and integrate the individual concerns into a shared therapeutic goal that both partners recognize as reflective of their own experiences. For instance, one partner may express frustration that their spouse appears emotionally disengaged when they attempt to share the challenges of their day, while the other may report feeling like a constant failure in their partner's eyes, regardless of their efforts. The therapist must help the couple understand the emotional logic beneath these positions. In this example, the husband's emotional withdrawal may stem from a sense of personal responsibility for his wife's happiness – he internalizes her distress as a reflection of his inadequacy. In this case, the therapeutic intervention involves helping the wife feel heard and validated in her pain without the husband assuming blame for her emotional state, and guiding the husband to decouple his self-worth from his partner's emotional responses. This reframing creates space for

each partner to engage more authentically and empathetically without reinforcing the destructive cycles of interaction.

The common goal is to restructure the thoughts and emotions causing the disconnection. To accomplish this, the therapist must have the discernment and the ability to flexibly move from processing inner experience with one partner to choreographing the interactions between the couple (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 52). In training videos, Johnson demonstrates the ability to do this with a natural ease and efficacy, and the move from focusing on one partner's emotional experience to the choreographing of response by the other partner does not seem disjointed, but part of a natural process. This is a crucial element to achieving positive therapeutic outcomes, and the efficacy of EFT is greatly dependent on this process – this means that a high degree of responsibility falls on the therapist in EFT. Unlike the Gottman Therapy, with its very defined process that is more science than art, EFT requires something that is not always measurable, that cannot always be put into a chart or equation – it requires *discernment*, which comes from experience, and the expert ability to shape interactions in a way that is effective and seemingly non-intrusive.

After working through the initial complaints of each partner, the EFT therapist then begins to identify the negative cycle of interaction that typifies the couple's complaints. Briefly, the therapist wants to find out exactly how the cycle begins, who says and does what as the cycle unfolds, and how it concludes. Again, in training videos, Johnson demonstrates how to do this as part of a seamless and natural transition, rather than as a 'second phase' of therapy. In this assessment phase, the clients may or may not begin to identify spontaneously the emotions

underlying their positions in the cycle. However, at this early stage in treatment, before the therapeutic alliance has fully developed, Johnson believes that expressed emotions tend to be superficial and incongruous with the deeper attachment-related discomfort that is being experienced beneath the surface (S. M. Johnson, 2020, pp. 59–61). In her experience, this has been the case, though Gottman would dispute this point and argue that while the attachment-related discomfort may have a connection with the "superficial" emotions being expressed by the client, there is no hierarchal connection between them. In either case, the goal of therapy would still be to locate and treat the attachment wounds, no matter their relationship to the expressed emotions.

Once the collaborative partnership between the therapist and the couple is firmly established, the two basic therapeutic tasks of EFT – the exploration and reformulation of emotional experience, and the restructuring of interaction cycles – can take place.

(2) Restructuring Emotional Responses

The second task is for the therapist to facilitate the identification, expression, and restructuring of emotional responses. The therapist focuses on what Johnson calls the "vulnerable", or "softer" emotions – these include emotions such as fear, anxiety, shame, and sadness – that play a central role in the couple's negative cycle of interaction. The therapist attempts to expand and reorganize the couple's experience of these negative emotions, while validation of experience, and empathic interpretation, is offered "humbly" and in very small increments (S. M. Johnson, 2020, pp. 43–45). As an example of this gentle approach, the therapist might ask a man whether he might not only be "uncomfortable", as he has stated, but in fact "quite upset" by his wife's

remarks (S. M. Johnson, 2020, pp. 43–45; Johnson, *EFT Training Module*). The goal of such interpretation and suggestion is to assist the client in feeling past the reactive responses, such as anger or numbing, and to become aware of the more vulnerable emotions underneath them, like insecurity or fear. Because Johnson always assumes the existence of attachment-related wounds and fears underneath other presenting emotions and the client's mischaracterization of those emotions, she would suggest that a husband is more than just 'uncomfortable' with being criticized, blamed, or put down by his wife. The attachment-related response to these scenarios is much more akin to being attacked by a wild animal or being betrayed by a loved one, which would rightly make one 'quite upset'. In helping clients attune with the greater level of discomfort, grief, or fear underneath their reactions, EFT allows them to properly understand what is taking place within their body so that they can reframe the conflict and restructure their emotional response. Johnson writes:

> Change occurs, *in the present*, as the result of the expanded processing of experience and the generation of powerful new corrective emotional experiences. Change is not, then, primarily the result of insight, the ventilation of emotion, or improved skills. *It arises from the therapist leading a client into and through their most emotionally charged experience*. This results in the formulation and expression of new emotional experience that has the power to transform how the individual structures his internal drama, views him or herself, and communicates with others (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 43).

(3) Restructuring of Interactions

In the third task, the EFT therapist begins by identifying and tracking the negative cycle, explaining to the partners the role of the cycle in constraining and narrowing their responses to each other. To accomplish this, Johnson might ask a person to share specific fears with his or her partner, initiating a dialogue that includes vulnerability, which fosters trust and secure attachment. This process of reflection and validation is meant to focus the assessment process on

affect and interaction, encouraging disclosure. The presenting problems are then reframed in terms of cycles driven by attachment needs and fears. This reframing is a crucial step in helping the couple ally themselves together against the negative cycles that have been characterizing their interactions. During a therapeutic session with a couple, Johnson will interrupt an interaction when she recognizes that it is the beginning of the negative cycle. Instead of allowing the couple to fall back into the rigid cycle that has been plaguing them, she will interrupt by assigning tasks, such as sharing fears and insecurities, which help create a new, more positive dialogue (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 46).

Vulnerability is a key component in Johnson's strategy for restructuring negative interactions. Vulnerability and openness are prerequisites for authentic interactions. During therapeutic sessions Johnson coaches couples towards greater openness. This is done so that the clients will learn how to incorporate vulnerable "I" statements and empathic responsiveness under the guidance of a therapist, allowing them to 'experience' both the vulnerability of their partner and the new emotions that are fostered in themselves as a result.

Johnson's strategy of focusing on the negative interaction cycle surrounding the presenting problem that a couple brings to therapy is effective in several ways. First, it allows her to frame both partners as victims of the cycle itself, rather than each another. Secondly, she is able to explain that the couple's struggle to remain connected – to love and to feel loved by their partner – is caused by each partner's attachment-related fears that the negative cycle keeps reinforcing. In this way Johnson reframes the 'problem' and allows the couple to assign its responsibility to the cycle itself, which she will often have them create a name for. This 'personalization' and

demonization of the cycle itself, aids in underscoring the couple's partnership, helping to foster a secure base for the couple, while instilling confidence in the process of therapy and the positive role that the therapist plays in aiding the couple to combat the negative cycle. The negative interaction cycle in the relationship then becomes the partner's common enemy, which allies the couple together, leading to fewer arguments about assigning the roles of the "the devil" and "the saint" in the relationship (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 110).

Johnson writes that the timing and delivery of the interventions are as important as the interventions themselves (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 107). The process of therapy evolves, with the couple and the therapist attuning to each other, and the therapist matching interventions to each partner's style. This is another example of why EFT, though grounded in science, requires its therapists to not only be experts at locating, identifying, and explaining negative interaction patterns, but to also have an intuitive sense of what each client is experiencing and what they need from their partner and the therapist in those moments. Johnson writes, "Expert EFT therapists, for example, slow down their speech when evoking emotion; they use a low, evocative voice; and incorporate simple images to capture people's felt experience. It is as if they emotionally engage with the client's experience, reflect it, and then invite the clients to it on the same engaged level" (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 107). This underscores her fundamental belief that emotional injuries are healed not through abstraction and reason, but through the positive emotions that are evoked when one experiences the love and empathic responsiveness of their romantic partner (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 43). By helping clients attune with their own feelings within the context of a safe therapeutic environment, Johnson facilitates the restructuring of both

the emotional experience and the interaction cycles that had previously been characterized by anger, blaming, or stonewalling.

Therapeutic Intervention in EFT

The Three Stages

Johnson has organized the process of change in EFT into nine treatment steps, contained within three stages: De-escalation, Connection, and Consolidation. Though it is helpful to present these nine steps as individual actions for the sake of clarity, some steps can be accomplished in seconds, and they can also take place simultaneously. The first four steps are part of the "De-escalation" stage, involving assessment and the de-escalation of problematic interactional cycles. The middle three steps are part of the second stage – Creating Positive Cycles of Connection – and they emphasize the creation of specific change events in which the "tight repetitive sequences of self-reinforcing responses" and fixed interactional positions of the couple can shift towards more flexible positions and positive interaction, allowing new connecting, or 'bonding' events, to occur (S. M. Johnson, 2020, p. 47). The last two steps of therapy are part of the third stage of EFT, "Consolidation", and they address the consolidation of the changes made above, and the integration of these changes into the everyday life of the couple.

The therapist leads the couple through these steps in a spiraling fashion, with each step leading to the next. In the case of 'mildly' distressed couples, they are usually able to work quickly through the steps together, at the same rate. However, for more distressed couples, the less active or more withdrawn partner is usually brought through the steps slightly ahead of the other. Johnson compares this delicate process to a 'dance', and observes that it is easier to create a new dance,

or new interactional patterns, when both partners are equally engaged and "on the dance floor" (J. M. Gottman et al., 2015, p. 106). For example, Johnson has found that even during the early assessment sessions, couples entrenched in a pursue–withdraw interactional cycle often begin to experience positive shifts when subtle changes occur in the "steps" of their relational "dance." Specifically, as the attachment-related fears of the pursuing partner begin to subside, the withdrawing partner tends to become more emotionally accessible and engaged. This increased emotional engagement further reduces the anxiety of the pursuer, reinforcing the emerging cycle of responsiveness and contributing to the early stages of relational repair (Johnson, 22, pp. 117-130).

In summary, these are the nine steps of Emotionally Focused Therapy's process of change, as Johnson organizes them in *The Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*:

Stage One: Cycle De-escalation
Step 1: Identify the relational conflict issues between the partners.
Step 2: Identify the negative interaction cycle where these issues are expressed.
Step 3: Access the unacknowledged, attachment-oriented emotions underlying the interactional position each partner takes in this cycle.
Step 4: Reframe the problem in terms of the cycle, the underlying emotions that accompany it, and attachment vulnerabilities and needs.

Stage Two: Changing Interactional Positions
Step 5: Promote identification with disowned attachment needs and aspects of self.
Step 6: Promote each partner's acceptance of the other's experience.
Step 7: Facilitate the expression of needs and wants, to restructure the interaction based on new understandings, and to create bonding events.

Stage Three: Consolidation and Integration
Step 8: Facilitate the emergence of new solutions to old problems.
Step 9: Consolidate new positions and cycles of attachment behavior.

The goal, by the end of therapy, is for each partner to gain a clearer understanding of his or her partner's inner-world, and especially their attachment wounds. During this discovery process, the partners are guided by their therapist through bonding events, and become more securely attached to each other. The 'secure base' and 'safe haven,' that have until now been provided in therapy by the therapist, are now supplied by each partner for the other. Though some new or residual attachment-related wounds may present themselves during future couple conflict interactions, the therapy provided during EFT should equip the romantic partners with the skills to recognize and escape from negative interaction cycles.

The goal of Emotionally Focused Therapy is not conflict management, as Johnson recognized that conflict could lead to growth and change. But the cyclical escalating patterns of negative interaction erode the bond of couples over time. The treating of these cycles should not be mistaken as the managing of conflict. The cycles are treated so that new, healthy patterns can emerge – and this is the ultimate goal of therapy: to foster new patterns of interaction that work to heal attachment injury and strengthen the bond of romantic partnerships.

VII The Ontological Gap: What the Gottman Method and EFT are Missing

INTRODUCTION

While 95% of married couples in the United States identify with a particular religion (Duba & Watts, 2009), the importance of religious considerations in the treatment of couples remains underemphasized by the dominant couples counseling modalities (Nelson et al., 2011). There is a largely unaddressed *ontological gap* in current couples therapy in the United States, a gap between the epistemological foundations of religious clients and the foundational epistemological limitations of these therapies. Ontology speaks to the very nature and deepest truths of these opposing worldviews, which will be more fully examined below. In essence, it is the recognition that the therapeutic modalities naturally have a temporal focus, while the religious worldview adopts an eternal perspective on relationships and relationship distress.

In a recent study of the religious landscape of the United States, Pew Research found that 67% of married couples believe in God with "absolute certainty" (Pew Research Center, 2023); Furthermore, they found that 58% of married couples reported that religion was "very important" to them, with 23% reporting "somewhat important". A 2010 study of MFTs revealed that 96% of the therapists believed that there is a relationship between the spiritual health and mental health of their clients (Carlson et al., 2002, p. 160). Despite the prominence of this extra dimension in the inner-life of religious couples, current counseling models seem unable to fully address it, though its importance is implicit in the dynamics of most couple relationships and understood by the Marriage and Family Therapists who are treating them (Carlson et al., 2002, p. 157).

Within the broad spectrum of couples with a religious worldview there are a multitude of differentiating factors that should be considered in therapy, such as religious practice, involvement, activity, and belief intensity (Duba & Watts, 2009, p. 210), not to mention the difference in religiosity within each person of the couple. The existence of these differentiating and complicating factors within religious worldviews only underscores the importance of addressing them in therapy, because couples rely on their religious tradition – especially during times of relationship distress (Eppler et al., 2020) (Duba & Watts, 2009, p. 211). Therefore, a purely secular approach to couple and marriage therapy, one that does not properly account for the role that a religious worldview plays in the inner life of those that come to therapy, is insufficient to address the needs of at least 60% of American couples. Despite both the reporting of the therapists who are practicing therapy with couples, and the Pew Research data suggesting that most American couples believe in God, most couple counseling models in use today are not able to appropriately consider the role of religion in the therapeutic process (Nelson et al., 2011). While it is possible that some psychologists may choose to ignore religion because they do not see it as a useful tool in therapy, it is more likely that the lack of serious religious consideration has more to do with the need to provide therapeutic solutions within a broad pluralistic society. Whichever is the case, what is being missed is that certain aspects of a religious worldview might well provide more creative and helpful solutions that would lead to more successful outcomes for those in therapy (Wolf & Stevens, 2001).

The Ontological Gap

The worldview of many couples has been shaped by the specific religious tradition to which they belong. These worldviews hold some principles in common, while differing in others. In the

broad context, though, each of the dominant religious traditions in the United States holds a belief in an eternal destiny for humankind, which adds an additional dimension to their perspectives on life and relationships. This section focuses on the perspective of a general American Protestant worldview, as this seems to be the target audience for the later religious additions to Gottman and Johnson's therapeutic materials, the history of which will be explained below.

The worldview of many American Protestants is such that they require particular religiously-informed language, including the presence of Biblical passages during therapy, to trust it (Penner, 2014). The style of language and the inclusion of Scripture comprise part of the issue surrounding the ontological gap. However, this gap exists not only on the explicit levels of therapy, which includes language, but more consequentially on the level of implicit ontological and anthropological assumptions that undergird the therapy. This will be an important distinction to observe while examining the religious additions and revisions that Gottman and Johnson made to their work.

In studying Gottman and Johnson's secular work, the specific passages that might present barriers for some Christians and other religious couples who have taboos about particular family structures are obvious. For these couples, who might already be approaching therapy with a mindset that is skeptical of secular modalities, the solely secular language used becomes a barrier that cannot be overcome, no matter the scientific undergirding of the therapy. Because of this handicap, any therapy that hopes to reach Christians of all denominations [and we can certainly

include other religious groups as well, but this present thesis is specifically about Christians] must take the language used into account (Duba & Watts, 2009, pp. 6–7).

However, the use of specifically Christian language and terms, and the elimination of taboo subjects around marriage and gender, does not entirely address the gap in ontology that exists between the secular and religious worldviews.

Christianity, in the broadest sense, is not inherently opposed to psychology, as is assumed by some religious adherents.[30] In fact, as the very word *psychologia* denotes, psychology is concerned with the care and study of the human soul and the entire inner life of man. The early ascetic Christian writers focused on the healing of the soul, as they explored themes relating to the inner life; they explored subjects such as memory, reason, sensation, appetite, motivation, virtues and vices, and various ideals of human maturation (E. L. Johnson & Myers, 2010, p. 10). Though largely concerned with matters of faith and life, Christian authors like the Desert Fathers, Tertullian, Athanasius, Cassian, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory the Great, wrote epistles and homilies that provided insight into the nature of the soul and soul healing (E. L. Johnson & Myers, 2010, p. 11). Despite the insights into the human being provided by early Christian writers, some modern Christians, especially those who reject any early Christian writings that were not included in the Biblical Canon of Scripture, have become skeptical of psychology, viewing it as the domain of those who often reject religious worldviews and pathologize religious experiences (see Allmon, 2013). This inherent distrust between those of secular and religious persuasions has created a false paradigm and polarization of worldviews. In this

[30] (see the study in multifaith perspectives on family therapy models in Eppler et al., 2020).

paradigm, the eternal perspective of the religiously-conscious is left untouched by social scientists (Carlson et al., 2002, pp. 157–159), who may even view this perspective as fanciful delusion (Allmon, 2013), while the empirical perspective, bolstered by the contributions of the scientific process of observation and data collection, is sometimes minimized or ignored by some religious participants in therapy (Eppler et al., 2020).

Both John Gottman and Sue Johnson authorized (and co-wrote, in the case of Johnson) religious versions of their work that are primarily aimed at Christian audiences. The very fact that these editions were published underscores the existence of the ontological gap in contemporary couple therapy, and that this gap is recognized, even if misunderstood, by leading couple therapists. Though Gottman and Johnson each present faith-related concepts and practices in their primary published works, their therapy was not designed specifically for religious audiences, but for all couples, whatever their faith background. When they first published their work, both Gottman and Johnson believed in the universality of their unique therapeutic modalities, based on the science behind the theories. Gottman states explicitly that the Gottman Method is not based on a particular philosophical or religious ideology (Penner, 2014, p. 4), but neither does he or Johnson consider their therapy antithetical to a person's faith.[31] Despite the lack of explicit Christian language in both Gottman's and Johnson's original work, their therapeutic modalities are effective and compatible with a general Christian faith and understanding of Christian Scripture

[31] I will speak more about this later in the thesis, as it is crucial to my argument that Christians should understand that "science" and "faith" should not be viewed as diametrically opposed principles, but as providing two dimensions for understanding and explaining what is true. These secular couple counseling modalities are not overtly "faith-based", but, in my argument, they support faith-based theory and practices *because* they are grounded in scientific truth.

– though, as will become apparent, lacking in certain core theological anthropological presuppositions.

Over time, both Gottman and Johnson were approached by their Christian colleagues who, believing that the core of each modality fit their Christian worldview quite well (S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016), argued that it would be helpful to include more overt Christian language and Biblical references to use with their more psychology-skeptical Christian clients (S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016, p. 14). In the case of Gottman, he allowed a *Biblical Reference Guide* to be published that would augment his original Gottman Therapy. In the case of Johnson, she co-wrote a new version of one of her original works, *Hold Me Tight*, using more Christian language, and stating explicitly that her theory fits perfectly with basic Christian trinitarian theology (S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016, p. 5), especially in the area of attachment science, where God the Father may be viewed as "the ultimate giver of secure connection and love" (S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016, p. 5).

Two questions to consider upon examining these religious additions is whether they adequately address the request for more explicit Christian language and interventions in couple therapy, and whether this inclusion actually addresses the underlying ontological gap that exists as a result of the differing definitions of personhood within the secular and religious worldviews. This section explores each work on its own, examining the motivations each author had for publishing these religious additions, before finally discussing what they accomplish for the therapeutic process.

The Biblical Reference Guide for the Gottman Method

The Biblical Reference Guide for the Gottman Method is copyrighted by The Gottman Institute (TGI), and authored by Dr David Penner, who at the time of its publication was the Clinical Director of TGI. It is a reference guide without original scholarship, though the organization of material belongs to Penner.[32] Of note is the fact that it was Penner's suggestion to create this reference guide, not Gottman's; Gottman did not contribute towards the introduction or produce any new material for it (Penner, 2014). Despite an extensive search, there is not a secular, or religious, peer or scholarly review of the *Biblical Reference Guide* [*BRG*]. Nor is there any explicit indication of Gottman's motivation for allowing Penner to produce the project under the auspices of TGI. Yet by reading all of Gottman's material several insights can be deduced.

In the Introduction to the *BRG*, Penner states that his motivation for writing the guide was that he felt it necessary, when conducting Gottman's *The Seven Principles* marriage workshops for his church, to supplement Gottman's work with Biblical references (Penner, 2014, p. 4) in order to provide a "Biblical perspective" (Penner, 2014, p. 5) on the therapy. While researching this issue, it became evident that Penner was not the only American church worker who felt that Gottman's work needed to be bolstered with Biblical references for use in Protestant settings (Sharon Lynn White, SSJ, 2001, p. 4), (Penner, 2014, p. 3). The indication is that Penner, as a founding member of The Gottman Institute, believes that The Gottman Method of Couple Therapy stands on its own, but that he also became aware of the need for certain couples to be reassured that the treatment they would be receiving was grounded in their religious tradition,

[32] A note of interest is that this guide was not assigned an ISBN, so it seems to be viewed by TGI as a simple companion guide, created for a niche audience: https://www.gottman.com/product/biblical-reference-guide-for-the-gottman-method/. Also of note is the fact that Penner receives no royalties for this publication.

which would make the therapy more meaningful, since it would be integrated with their core values and belief system (Penner, 2014). As another indication of the existence of the ontological gap in contemporary couple therapy, when the BRG was published, it quickly became the best-selling item in the online store (https://www.gottman.com/professionals/products/).

The ontological gap in contemporary couple counseling is somewhat recognized by non-Christian religious adherents as well, and the desire to integrate secular therapeutic principles with specific religious language and practices is not limited to Christian therapists (Ripley et al., 2022). After the Gottman Institute published the *BRG*, they were approached by therapists from Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Ba'hai faith traditions, who asked for Penner's help in publishing similar guides for their specific faith communities (The Gottman Institute is currently only selling guides for Christians and Muslims). The *Islamic Reference Guide for the Gottman Method* was published in 2016.

In deducing Gottman's own motivation for allowing this project to be produced, it has been recorded by another researcher that Gottman already believed that his Sound Relationship House [SRH], the theory upon which his couple therapy based, is "very spiritual" (Sharon Lynn White, SSJ, 2001, p. 3). He does not use the term 'Christian' or 'Biblical', which, along with the other generalized statements that he has made about the role of religion in his books and training videos, indicates that he never believed that it would be necessary to include Scriptural passages to justify, make acceptable, or enhance his work for various religious communities. His belief was that the work itself would naturally be integrated into any worldview, as it is grounded in scientific truth. Gottman makes no attempts in his public life to hide his own religious identity,

which is Jewish, so he is clearly not opposed to religious worldviews. But his own is clearly not one in which the science of therapy needs to be bolstered by specific religious language or theological underpinnings.

It is apropos to remember that Gottman began his career as a scientist and researcher, which led to his emergence as a world-renown expert in couple dynamics; this is clearly where his passion for working with couples is focused, rather than on the actual therapy.[33] It is easily deduced by those training in the Gottman Method that the SRH theory, though somewhat informed by John's research, is primarily the work of his wife, Dr Julie Gottman. Though this is not explicitly stated in the Gottman training videos or workbooks, it is certainly implied that Julie, rather than John, provided the clinical expertise behind the interventions of the Gottman Method. This belief is confirmed in the "Acknowledgements" section of *The Biblical Reference Guide*, in which Penner credits John Gottman with the "groundbreaking research" and Julie with the "remarkable clinical insight" and "practical application" of Gottman's work (Penner, 2014, p. 2). This distinction between John Gottman's research and what eventually became Gottman Therapy supports the argument that ultimately, Gottman's understanding and trust of the data he obtained from the longitudinal studies is greater than his work with the actual interventions. He never intended to officially incorporate Biblical citations in any of his work. "Level Seven" of the SRH already contains a space for "faith" and "spirituality" to help strengthen the unity of the couple, but it is not, and was never intended to be, specifically Christian, Jewish, or 'Biblical' for that matter. In his book *Eight Dates*, the guided discussion for couples on "Growth and Spirituality" is all-

[33] His passion for research is exemplified by his most recent professional work, *The Science of Trust*, in which he devotes hundreds of pages to the study of game theory and physiology in support of one new intervention, "The Gottman-Rapoport Blueprint"! (J. M. Gottman, 2011).

inclusive – it pertains, not to 'religion', but to "the fundamental belief system" of the individual and couple, and the ways in which they can create "shared meaning" as a couple, which may not involve religion at all (J. M. Gottman et al., 2019, pp. 189–191).

While it is clear that Gottman did not understand the epistemological depth of the ontological gap, he did clearly understand the request for language and references that would more easily reach those whose perception of the gap was related to the more explicit components of his therapy. He believed that the *BRG* would, at least in part, fulfill the demand of some Christians for the inclusion of more explicitly religious references, and that this would be helpful to certain therapists, like Penner. But it is also clear that Gottman did not believe that the BRG would enhance the foundation on which Gottman Therapy is built, or augment it in any ontological way. To use a colloquialism, Gottman viewed the BRG as nothing more than window-dressing that could be replaced by any other religious tradition's reference guide, as he believed that no appeal to any religion would lead to a fundamental change in the therapy. As evidence of this, see the examination of the *Islamic Reference Guide for the Gottman Method* below. Therefore, it is evident that Gottman's motivation for allowing this addition to his work to be published was for one of two reasons: (a) He saw it as a marketing opportunity that would allow his material to make its way into a larger population; and (b) He listened to those, like Penner, who told him that it was a necessary addition for pastors and religious workers, whose target audience needed more explicit Biblical references.

Of these two possibilities, the totality of Gottman's work and speaking engagements supports the conclusion that the second is more important than the first, though the first makes more sense for

The Gottman Institute itself. It is possible that the Institute and Gottman approved the project for two different reasons. With 30% of the TGI online training requests coming from clergy, pastoral counselors, and other faith-based workers (Sharon Lynn White, SSJ, 2001, p. 4), it makes good financial sense for the TGI to produce something that specifically targets that audience. As for Gottman's personal motivation, there is evidence to support the fact that he believed it would help because this is what he was told by Penner and other faith-based workers, and not because he believed his work was lacking (Penner, 2014). With the lack of an Introduction from him, or any new scholarship to support the *BRG*, it is clear that integrating Biblical references into his work was not that important to him, though he understood that some would appreciate it.

The question that must be answered now is whether or not the *Biblical Reference Guide* fulfills its purpose of offering a 'Biblical perspective' to therapists and clients, and whether Gottman Therapy is enhanced by the inclusion of more overt Christian language. The answer is that for some, it does. In Biblical study groups, the use of reference guides alongside the Scriptures is common, and even an expected component of study, especially for American Protestant Christians. Therefore, utilizing the *BRG* in therapy would be welcomed by some, helping some couples to accept that Gottman Therapy is not antithetical to a Christian or religious worldview. In other settings, the *BRG* would not play as important of a role, nor would it alone offer the type of Christian language that certain couples need. This is especially the case in an Orthodox Christian setting, where the recitation of Scripture verses is not enough to lend credibility to the therapy, especially if the therapy in question is based on an ideology that is not grounded in both science and a wholistic and Christian understanding of human life. The overall merit of the contributions of the *BRG* in addressing the Faith Gap is discussed at the end of this chapter.

The Islamic Reference Guide for the Gottman Method

The Islamic Reference Guide for the Gottman Method [*IRG*] was published in 2016 by The Gottman Institute [TGI], and both Dr. David Penner and Menahal Begawala are credited as "Developers", rather than authors (Menehal Begawala & David Penner, 2016), to reflect the fact that, as was the case with the *BRG*, this is essentially Gottman's material with references to religious sources, without any new scholarship. The idea behind this guide belongs to Begawala, who was inspired to do it after encountering Penner's *BRG*. She has organized the material in the exact same way as did Penner, and has even used the exact wording in places where "Christian" is simply replaced by "Islamic" or "Muslim" (Cf. Menehal Begawala & David Penner, 2016, Introduction).

Upon review, this guide appears hastily put together, despite what seems to be an earnest desire by Begawala to more effectively reach her Muslim clients. She writes in the Introduction that her purpose is to offer the Gottman Method with an Islamic perspective. However, despite the citation of verses from the *Quran* and references to the *Hadith & Sunnah*, the Gottman material is presented as is, without any new insight or contributions that would differentiate it from the Christian version. If an "Islamic perspective" simply consists of citations and references, then its perspective on couple therapy is no different from the Christian/Biblical perspective offered by Penner.[34]

[34] Being personally unfamiliar with the theological and anthropological foundations of Islam, I cannot definitively argue that Islamic theology could offer a unique contribution to Gottman therapy. But based on the degree to which this Guide simply borrows the language used by Penner, it is evident that it fails to truly offer an Islamic perspective; and while it does show some compatibility with the Gottman Method, it does not bolster the therapy in any meaningful way, and neither does it directly address the ontological gap.

This underscores the inherent obstacle in the desire to bring secular therapy to clients possessing religious worldviews: Rather than offering a higher resolution examination of the human person, which would heighten the focus on the very meaning of human existence and lead to the exploration of the ontological truths about human relationships, the Gottman Institute remains generalized in its focus. While broadly considering the role that a religious worldview might play in therapy, Gottman does not allow any specific religiously informed principles to influence his theory of couple therapy. Rather, Gottman's theory, and the interventions that have supposedly emerged from that theory, are grounded in scientific observation and study, without consideration of the unmeasurable factors related to faith and the eternal perspective on the human person. Thus, the ontological gap remains untreated. To help put this lack of heightened focus on the human person into perspective, we will consider the example of Sue Johnson's *Created for Connection*.

Created for Connection

Created for Connection was authored by Sue Johnson, with Kenneth Sanderfer, and published by the same secular publishing house that produced Johnson's previous work (S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016). It is a re-write of Johnson's *Hold Me Tight* [*HMT*], which was published eight years earlier (S. M. Johnson, 2008). Much of the language and organization are the same, but the Introduction includes new material from both Johnson and Sanderfer, and the chapter from *HMT* on healing from trauma has been replaced by a chapter entitled "*Our Bond with God*" (S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016, pp. 249–270), and other small additions have been made throughout. The book contains three sections: The first is a summary of Johnson's work with the science of attachment theory; the second contains the "seven transforming conversations" with the edited

versions of the dialogues found in *HMT*; and the third section is a presentation of the importance of love for human beings, and posits God as the ultimate provider of a secure base and safe haven. His creatures can in turn explore the wider world, offering empathy and love to their fellows – this is possibly the most important development in her work.

In the Introduction to *CFC*, Johnson writes that the impetus for rewriting *Hold Me Tight* came from her Christian colleague, Kenny Sanderfer, who made the argument to her that Christian couples looking for guidance in their marriages preferred a therapy that was grounded in their faith, not only in the best science, and that was in compliance with the Christian scriptures as they interpreted them (S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016, pp. 3–4). Sanderfer intimated that for some of the Christian couples he was working with, the language in *HMT* was problematic, and that this language added to the skepticism regarding the whole of EFT and Susan Johnson herself because she was not a Christian (S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016). Sanderfer writes that when he began to study EFT in preparation for treating couples, he found that it fit his Christian worldview naturally. He was especially drawn to the image of the love that exists between the Father and the Son as being an example to couples of a secure connection, an example that Johnson also speaks to. He writes that he felt compelled to share EFT with Christian couples, so that they could "find the love they were created to experience, with God and with each other" (S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016, p. 14).

As much as he appreciated the science behind EFT, Sanderfer felt similar to Penner, in that he wanted to offer EFT with more explicit Christian language to make it more accessible for Christians, to help them discover the science of attachment, and to "broaden the application of

attachment theory to our relationship with God" (S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016, p. 14). [There is also a movement within the chaplaincy of United States armed forces to combine the science of attachment theory with Christian terminology (Cheney, 2017, pp. 179–180).] Sanderfer writes that he felt compelled to share EFT in a "vernacular" that people of faith could easily understand. The implication here is that the problem is not with Emotionally Focused Therapy itself, but that some of the language in the EFT materials presented a barrier to Sanderfer's Christian clients, most of whom are American Protestants. This barrier is not characterized by philosophical differences relating to the nature of romantic relationships, or with the anthropological underpinnings of EFT, but with certain taboos related to family structures. This is once again an example of a superficial understanding of the ontological gap.

Perhaps as a reaction to the consistent pathologization of religious experience within the DSM in the past, and by certain clinical therapists today,[35] for many American Protestant Christians there is some inherent distrust of the therapeutic community (Duba & Watts, 2009, p. 9). For them, the language of therapy, primarily regarding the extent of the inclusion or exclusion of Scripture verses, is the main indication that a certain therapeutic model is trustworthy. This would indicate that the gap in ontology is perceived by some American Protestants as consisting primarily of what is explicit in therapy, and not on the implicit, underlying anthropological assumptions of that therapy.

For her part, as Johnson was developing EFT, she was increasingly impressed by the science of attachment theory, which became the basis for modern day EFT treatment. Though she was not a

[35] See (Allmon, 2013) and (E. L. Johnson & Myers, 2010, p. 7) for a more thorough discussion of this.

professed Christian when she began writing *Created for Connection*, in attachment science Johnson found a natural parallel with Christian Trinitarian theology, as had been expressed to her by a life-long friend Father Storey, a Roman Catholic priest, who described the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as dwelling in a communion of love. In this loving trinitarian communion of persons, Johnson recognized the principle of secure connection, and saw how it could possibly be an inspiration for Christian couples seeking a similar connection with their spouse (Cf. S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016, pp. 4–7).

Johnson was further moved to this rewrite when Sanderfer described the practice in EFT during which the therapists instruct the partners to face each other and look into each other's eyes; he expressed his belief that in these moments the couples are experiencing God's intention for marriage: "that we each experience a divine gaze when we look into our partner's eyes" (S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016, p. 10). This image spoke to Johnson because in her personal experience, it has been within the context of her loving relationships that she has found her "…way to the sacred, to what is holy" (S. M. Johnson & Sanderfer, 2016, p. 7).

The success of *Created for Connection*, which has sold over one million copies, is evidence of the large international market for therapeutic materials for couples that combine scientific research with Christian-based language. In this regard, *CFC* has accomplished its goal. As a result of the demand for this book, Johnson and Sanderfer launched workshops for Christian Couples, similar to the "Hold Me Tight" workshops, that have proven to be even more popular in Great Britain than in the United States (https://iceeft.com/hold-me-tight-workshops/). Certainly, this is indicative of the perception among many Christians today that therapeutic models should

not only *not* be contra-indicative of their religious worldview and traditions, but should include Christian language and examples from Scripture as proof that the therapy they are receiving is 'Biblical'.

The stated motivation for both authors in writing this edition was to help Christians access the science of attachment and apply it to their loving relationships. In this case the authors were speaking to this explicit aspect of the ontological gap in order to help some clients overcome their reticence about using a secular therapy. In employing Christian language and examples, it appears that this was successfully accomplished, especially considering the popularity of the book and subsequent "Created for Connection" workshops that are currently being offered all over the world. The question to address now is, does *CFC* add anything substantive to the foundational theory that Emotionally Focused Therapy is built upon, and does it do more to address the ontological gap beyond simply removing the barriers related to language?

The ontological gap exists as a direct result of the supposedly scientific commitment of those developing therapeutic modalities to work from an areligious foundation in the attempt to strengthen the acceptance of modalities across worldviews. Unavoidably, this leads to an epistemological antithesis, and to opposing views of the human person, which has resulted in the demand of Christian therapists and couples for an added dimension to therapy. In taking the perspective of a Christian worldview, *Created for Connection* does begin to address the ontological gap by introducing the figure of God as a model for, and source of, secure connection. In this work, Johnson also introduces and emphasizes the importance of Christian

theology and anthropology for the science of attachment and Emotionally Focused Therapy, something that had never been done before by a respected public figure in the therapeutic world.

Created for Connection is a sound introduction to the Christian concepts of personhood in relation to God, but it is only an introduction, not a full treatment for the following reasons: Sue Johnson was raised as a part of the United Church of Canada, a western form of Christianity that is very inclusive in its theology, which claims to offer a "progressive and continuing history of welcoming all in the name of Christ" (https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada). A perusal of its doctrines reveals that the United Church of Canada offers a very broad and general Christian theology that is able to appeal to as many Christians as possible (https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/what-we-believe). Johnson's foundation in this church taught her to stay away from theological distinctives that divide, which she and Sanderfer manage to do well in *CFC*. Her inclusive and generalized theology can clearly be seen in *CFC*, and this approach fulfills her purpose of offering the science of attachment theory, through the lens of Emotionally Focused Therapy, to as broad of an audience as possible. However, unlike Gottman, in this work Johnson was able to heighten the focus on the human person a little further, and examine with higher resolution the underlying epistemology of the science of attachment, which is essentially a Christian paradigm wherein human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and thus bear certain distinctive characteristics, one of which is the compelling internal drive to be connected to others.

The primary additions that Johnson and Sanderfer made from *Hold Me Tight* to *Created for Connection* are the incorporation of biblical references and illustrative examples drawn from a Roman Catholic worldview. These additions highlight the parallels between the science of attachment and a Christian theological perspective. Johnson posits that these parallels are not merely illustrative but substantively aligned - they stand on their own merit and support Johnson's belief that the science of attachment and the nature of human bonding is actually a reflection of God Himself. In this volume Johnson and Sanderfer have introduced the idea that Christian theology, in its broadest presentation, is crucial in helping human beings understand the nature and dynamics of their loving relationships. If God is indeed the ultimate figure of secure attachment, this helps explain why the science of attachment is such a powerful organizing force for the inner life of humans.

Johnson's process of examining couple therapy with a higher resolution, bringing depth and heightened focus to her presentation of the science of attachment theory, is a compelling start to offering a more precise examination of human relationships. Her process is one that naturally should be followed. In endeavoring further to bring higher resolution to the examination of personhood and the ontological underpinnings of couple therapy, turning straight from within the Orthodox Tradition enables one to transcend the systemic binds that restricted Johnson due to her appeal to a wider audience. For the purposes of this thesis, we can heighten the focus on the human person, and enrich the entire discussion, by examining the underlying ontology of attachment and bonding science from an Eastern Orthodox Christian point of view. This will also reveal the essential nature and deeper levels of the ontological gap in current couples therapy,

and will provide a pathway for how this gap might be filled by developing an adequate Orthodox Christian epistemology for counseling couples.

To further develop the process that Johnson started we must first define personhood according to the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Then we will examine in particular, the profound understanding of personhood presented by Saint Sophrony the Athonite of Essex.

Chapter VIII The Orthodox Christian Worldview

PERSONHOOD AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Before proceeding with an introduction to the esteemed figure and work of Saint Sophrony of Essex, it is important to describe the human person according to the Orthodox Christian Tradition and to place Sophrony within that Tradition. Some of the aspects of personhood detailed below will be presented with deeper analyses further down in Section II, especially as they pertain to his unique contribution on this subject and the application of his theology to human relationships.

The concept of personhood occupies a central place in Orthodox Christian anthropology, rooted in the theological vision of the human being as created in the image and likeness of God, and called toward eternal communion with Him. Within this Tradition, personhood is not a reference to mere individuality or psychological self-awareness, but is fundamentally relational and ontological: defined by one's capacity for love, self-transcendence, and communion with God and others (Zizioulas, 2000). This stands in contrast to some Western theological frameworks, where personhood has often been shaped by juridical or psychological categories. For example, in certain strands of Roman Catholic and Protestant thought, personhood has historically been closely tied to notions of rationality and moral agency, drawing on scholastic and Reformation-era formulations of personhood in relation to the Image of God (Moltmann, 1993; O'Donovan, 1996). Meanwhile, Enlightenment humanism and secular philosophical traditions frequently reduce the person to a self-contained individual, emphasizing autonomy, rights, and consciousness as the primary markers of personhood (Taylor, 1989). In Eastern philosophical

and religious systems, a framework that Saint Sophrony explored in early adulthood, such as Buddhism, the very notion of a permanent "self" or "person" is often rejected in favor of *anattā* (non-self) and the impermanence of all phenomena (Rahula & Demiéville, 1974). These differing perspectives underscore the unique contribution of the Orthodox Christian tradition, which views the person not as an isolated or impermanent subject, but as a 'being' whose full personhood is only realized in communion with God and others.

The Orthodox Christian understanding of the human being proceeds directly from the Orthodox dogma concerning the Holy Trinity, and especially its Christology. Contemporary theologian Metropolitan John Zizioulas writes, "The person both as a concept and as a living reality is purely the product of patristic thought. Without this, the deepest meaning of personhood can neither be grasped nor justified" (Zizioulas, 2000, p. 27). The Scriptural confession is that humankind was "made in the image and likeness of God," and the Orthodox hold this belief, though there is some disagreement amongst the patristic writers about the particular distinction between 'image' and 'likeness' (see full analysis by Kallistos Ware in Chalamet et al., 2021, p. 50). For the purposes of this thesis, the distinction between image and likeness does not hold importance, as long as the understanding remains that God created humankind with the potential to be like Him through the process of divinization, or '*theosis*'. Contemporary Orthodox Christian theologian Metropolitan Kallistos Ware writes, "we begin from the presupposition that the human person is an icon of God, a finite expression of God's infinite self-expression: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'". Such is the foundation, the polestar, of all Orthodox Christian anthropology. We have God at the innermost

center of our existence. Human beings cannot be understood apart from divine being, for the divine is the determining element in our humanity" (Chalamet et al., 2021).

In keeping with the Orthodox theological tradition (Cf. Mouladoudis & Patrikiou, 2008, p. 3), Saint Sophrony made a distinction between man in his unrealized potential as 'individual', and man in his full and realized potential as '*hypostasis*'. The term *hypostasis* is a theological term that was brought into its current and most dominant theological usage in the east by the Cappadocian Fathers, especially Saint Basil the Great, who was influenced by Origen (Hanson, 2000), to distinguish between God in His one *Ousia*, or essence, and God in His three *Hypostaseis*, or Persons. The classical meaning of both words, '*ousia*' and '*hypostasis*' meant 'underlying reality' or 'substance'.[36] The Cappadocians, without changing the underlying meaning of each term, applied them differently: '*ousia*' for the one essence or substance of God, and '*hypostasis*' for each of the three Persons. Metropolitan Kallistos writes, "A hypostasis is not understood primarily in terms of self-consciousness, but signifies that which has concrete and specific existence, which is unique, differentiated and permanent" (Kallistos of Diokleia, 1986). In attempting to clarify the doctrine of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, Saint Basil and other theologians preferred to use the Greek term '*hypostasis*' over the Greek term '*prosopon*', which is also sometimes used to denote the human person, because '*prosopon*', which we could also translate into English as 'mask', had a closer association, especially in ancient Greek,[37] to the outer life of a man, what we might today call his 'persona',[38] and not the underlying and

[36] For instance, in Hebrews 11:1 (KJV) Paul writes that "Faith is the substance of the things hoped for…" The term 'substance' is translated from the Greek ὑπόστασις, which could also be translated as 'underlying reality'.

[37] Metropolitan John Zizioulas treats the history of the term '*prosopon*' in his work, *Being as Comm*union (Zizioulas, 2000, pp. 29–38).

[38] In this description I am equating 'persona' with the modern English usage of the term found in Wikipedia: "A persona is a strategic mask of identity in public, the public image of one's personality." Saint Sophrony sometimes

eternal reality of the person (Cf. Vlachos & Williams, 2002, p. 71) (Kallistos of Diokleia, 1986). Although in Greek philosophy and in the ancient Greek use of the word, *hypostasis* was never associated with personhood, it was an attractive option for the early Greek Christian theologians to use due to its ontological significance (Zizioulas, 2000, pp. 36–37). In attributing the term '*hypostasis*' to the Persons of the Godhead, Saint Basil was recognizing the ontological existence and substance of the three Persons (Vlachos & Williams, 2002, p. 198), denoting especially their permanence and unchangeability. Therefore, when the term 'hypostasis' is applied to the human person, it elevates him, giving him ontology and substance. As a *hypostasis*, "the human person is not something abstract, not a mask" (Vlachos & Williams, 2002, p. 71) (Also see Kallistos of Diokleia, 1986).

In summarizing the "revolutionary" implications of assigning the term *hypostasis* to the human being, Zizioulas writes of a "twofold thesis" (Zizioulas, 2000; [all formatting is the original author's])

a) The person is no longer an adjunct to a being, a category which we *add* to a concrete entity once we have first verified its ontological hypostasis. *It is itself the hypostasis of the being*.
b) Entities no longer trace their being to being itself-that is, being is not an absolute category in itself--but to the person, to precisely that which *constitutes* being, that is, enables entities to be entities. In other words, from an adjunct to a being (a kind of mask) the person becomes the being itself and is simultaneously--a most significant point--*the constitutive element* (the "principle" or "cause") of beings.

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used the Latin term 'persona' interchangeably with 'hypostasis' when writing to westerners (see Sakharov & Sakharov, 2002, p. 70). However, it is more common for modern Orthodox writers to equate persona with the Greek term *prosopon*, as both signify the way in which one appears to an outside observer (Cf. Kallistos of Diokleia, 1986).

According to Vlachos, and in keeping with Orthodox Christian anthropology, '*hypostasis*' also has an eternal significance for human kind: "a person can never reach non-being, but he is permanently associated with a *hypostasis*. This means that man can never be brought to non-existence or to '*metempsychosis*'[39], which the holy fathers rejected as heresies. Even after the soul's departure from the body the hypostasis-person remains" (Vlachos & Williams, 2002, p. 151).

In order to understand the significance of Saint Sophrony's contribution to the theology of human relationships, it is crucial to understand the term '*hypostasis*' as it relates to the human being, and to recognize its implications for human personhood. In his spiritual biography of Saint Sophrony, Nicholas Sakharov writes that "One cannot easily discover a clear definition within the Eastern patristic tradition of hypostasis [speaking of the human hypostasis, not the divine hypostasis] that would serve as a determinative background for Father Sophrony's understanding of the concept of a person. Indeed, there is no clearly definable consensus among the fathers" (Sakharov, 2002, p. 70). And as Kallistos Ware observes, neither in the Seven Ecumenical Councils, nor in the Creed or later decrees of local synods, are there any "explicit definitions about personhood" (from *In the Image and Likeness,* in Chalamet et al., 2021, p. 50); and "there is in the Greek Fathers no single, systematic theory of personhood, or even agreed terminology, but only a series of overlapping approaches" (Peacocke et al., 1987).

[39] The transmigration of the soul upon the death of the body.

Despite this lack of "clarity" and "consensus" among the Orthodox theologians who preceded Saint Sophrony, his theology clearly falls within the recognized "series of overlapping approaches" that Ware speaks of, and is distinguished by virtue of its being based on personhood as it is lived within the life of the Holy Trinity (Cf. Zacharias, 2003, pp. 17–52). In using this approach, Sophrony is not unique, as his trinitarian perspective on personhood also permeates the writings of his contemporary Russian theologians Florensky, Bulgakov, and Lossky (Sakharov, 2002, p. 69), as well as some modern Greek Orthodox theologians such as Zizioulas and Vlachos. The ramifications of his trinitarian perspective on human personhood are borne out both in his writings and his way of life.

In addition to the teachings of Saint Sophrony, this thesis relies on the teachings of Archimandrite Zacharias Zachariou, the current spiritual father of the monastic community founded by Saint Sophrony. In his PhD dissertation on Sophrony, Archimandrite Zacharias writes that Sophrony wished to use the term hypostasis to describe "personhood" as it is lived in the Holy Trinity and "in humans who fulfill their true potential" (Zacharias, 2003, p. 17). In his manner of describing it, each person is created in the image and likeness of God, and therefore bears the potential of true personhood, which is found in God Himself. Saint Sophrony termed the individual's potential of attaining true personhood "the hypostatic principle," and would say that in this potential lies the very calling and destiny of every human being, as it is only realized in the communion of God and man. He writes, "if we men are in the image of God, then we too are persons – in the present reality, however, we are not yet fulfilled persons; we are but creatures, made out of nothing. We become persons only after the full actualization of this potential, which is initially created by God as pure potentiality" (Sophrony, 2022, p. 114).

For Saint Sophrony, of paramount importance for the realization of the hypostatic principle is the practice of love – specifically, how that love is exemplified within the life of the Holy Trinity. The starting point for the love of God within Himself is that He is a communion of persons, of *hypostaseis*, and therefore God is not self-love, but mutual, shared love. Metropolitan Kallistos writes, "God is exchange, self-giving, solidarity. If that is indeed what the doctrine of the Trinity is saying, then manifestly it is no mere piece of abstract speculation, devoid of practical content, but something that has startling, revolutionary consequences for our own personhood" (Kallistos of Diokleia, 1986, p. 13). This is why Sophrony writes, "Man, in his nature as God intended it in the act of creation, consists of one being in a multiplicity of hypostases" (Sophrony, 2022, p. 129). And, "Without love we do not live any personhood, either our own or that of another being" (Sophrony, 2022, p. 112).

Sacrifical love, in emulation of the Three Persons, is the prerequisite for personhood in the hypostatic theology of Saint Sophrony. In becoming a true person, one is not isolated, but in a sense incorporates every human being. Father Nicholas Sakharov writes, "Along with the realization of the hypostatic principle, deification implies a likeness in humanity to the multihypostatic mode of being after the manner of the Trinity. The deified person 'gives' himself to the whole of mankind, and takes into himself the entire human race" (Sakharov, 2002, p. 163).

Before looking at Saint Sophrony's theology of personhood, it behooves us to recount the basic story of hi life, in order to better understand how his personal experience deeply shaped his theology – especially his profound insights into theological anthropology.

Chapter IX Saint Sophrony

THE LIFE AND WORK OF SAINT SOPHRONY

Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov (1896-1993) is a recently canonized saint of the Eastern Orthodox Church. He was a well-known and respected author, theologian, and spiritual father, whose positive reputation and popularity amongst both Orthodox Christians and theologians of other Christian denominations is demonstrated by the fact that his books have been translated into more than twenty languages (Sakharov, 2002, p. 15). Though his biography is well-known today within the Orthodox Christian community due to the number of treatises published by the monastery that he founded, it is important to present a full account of his life here to draw attention to just how unique his life was, with its wide variety of religious and cultural experiences, each of which helped to shape his theological vision. The reason for the continued popularity of his hypostatic theology,[40] more than 30 years after his death, is that he offered an entirely unique perspective that resonated with people of various cultures, providing insight into the nature of humanity and human relationships. Saint Sophrony's insight came both from the timeless wisdom of ancient Christianity, and from his own wide-ranging experiences.

As a child he was a highly educated pupil in czarist Russia, and then as a young man he experienced life as a soldier in the Communist Red Army. In early adulthood he was an accomplished artist, welcomed in the most popular salons in Paris, amongst the elite of Parisian society. On the one hand, Sophrony experienced both the absolute brutality of both World Wars, and on the other hand the loving, nurturing environment of a large and wealthy family. He lived

[40] In this context, "hypostatic" refers not to the 'model of personality', but to the theological understanding of personhood and its ultimate fulfillment in union with the divine.

in extreme isolation as a hermit, and in community as a brother, spiritual guide, and abbot in several different monasteries. He experienced the social upheaval of the Russian Revolution, and the decadence of continental European life. He was a practitioner of both eastern meditation and Orthodox Christian hesychastic prayer. He spoke, taught, and wrote in Russian, French, Greek, and English. He was formed as a young man by the ideologies and surrounding cultures of both Czarist and Revolutionary Russia, yet lived the final 60 years of his life living within the English Anglo-Saxon culture with its unique approach and philosophies. He studied the Eastern Fathers in the original Greek and assimilated their teachings and way of life, yet was able to apply this with discernment in pastoral settings in both Paris and England in a way that would best fit the lives and various distinct cultures of the people. He was a famed Spiritual Father for some of the greatest ascetics in the Orthodox Christian world, but also a Father-Confessor for Russian, Greek, French, and English families living outside the monastic context. These diverse and dramatic experiences of cultures, philosophies, and major world events gave Saint Sophrony a unique perspective, helping him to create a bridge between the differing worlds of Athonite monasticism, 20th century Russian intellectualism, and modern western culture.

Though there is not one definitive written account of his life in the public domain, several of his pupils have written PhD dissertations on various aspects of his theology and have included brief accounts of his life which, when analyzed and pieced together, form a coherent narrative. For this compilation and analysis, I have relied primarily on the published adaptations of the PhD dissertations by Nicholas Sakharov; Archimandrite Zacharias Zachariou, Archimandrite Peter, current Abbot of the monastery, and Sister Gabriella, as well as Saint Sophrony's published correspondence and journal entries.

Saint Sophrony's ability to engage and have meaningful connection with diverse cultures, while maintaining a holistic understanding of human life was undoubtedly shaped by his upbringing in a prominent, intellectually cultivated bourgeois family in Moscow. He was one of ten siblings[41] (Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 25), and the oldest son of the family from age 13 when his elder brother tragically passed away (Gabriela, 2016, pp. 13–14). Born in 1896, and raised within an Orthodox Christian home, he received the classical education of the Russian Empire of the time (Gabriela, 2016, p. 15-17), and was introduced to the great European and Slavic authors, artists, and philosophers. The classical education he received certainly helped to shape his own outlook on the *sobornost*[42] of humanity and a person's responsibility to their community.

Sophrony's unique path through life was largely shaped by his nanny Catherine, who taught him how to pray to God with stillness of thought and emotion. This feature of his life cannot be overstated, because it became the foundation of his epistemology and the basis for his theology of the human being. In his later correspondence and his spiritual autobiography, he reflected that even as a young boy he would "pray easily for three-quarters of an hour" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, pp. 23–24), and sometimes for hours in church, sitting at his nanny's feet (Gabriela, 2016, p. 14). He also describes how, coming out of church in his nanny's arms, he would see two lights – the light of the sun, and another light that could not be eclipsed (Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 38) (Gabriela, 2016, p. 14). Though he did not have the dogmatic foundation to immediately understand this visitation of grace, the experience of this light made

[41] Some sources simply state that he was one of nine children, but in fact he was one of ten until his elder brother died when Sophrony was 13 years of age (Gabriela, 2016, p. 13).
[42] In the Russian Orthodox Christian context this means "Connectedness" or "communion".

an indelible impression on his psyche, and later in adulthood he realized that this light was the Uncreated Light of God (Cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 8; Vlachos et al., 2015, p. 32) (Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 38).

Sophrony's pupil, Archimandrite Zacharias, describes the experience of eternity in prayer:

> This meeting of the two wills in harmonious identity during pure prayer leads man into God's infinite perfection. He does not leave this life, but is given the power to live in time and space on the eternal level by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. God's eternity captures every moment of time, and His boundlessness encompasses our created and three-dimensional space. Only God Who is boundless is able to contain any moment of time. Yet this is an inner sensation required by the heart of one who bears within him the brightness of the Absolute. That is why he reacts so violently to the thought of death and turns to complete and ontological repentance (Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2016, p. 82).

Saint Sophrony later characterized this practice of deep prayer as a "need" within himself, creating a natural disposition for contemplative prayer, an aspect of his personality that would permeate the rest of his life (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 24). This was the beginning of his experience of the hesychastic life, an ascetical tradition of the Orthodox Church that comprised the foundation of his empirical [experience-based] theology and spiritual vision, and the basis for his anthropological maximalism,[43] both of which will be treated later in this thesis.

As a young man he was captivated by life's ultimate questions. He was not satisfied, as others were, by mere existence, for he had the deep desire to understand the nature of mankind in relation to the Creator. Having been deeply affected by the loss of life and human cruelty that he witnessed during the years of the Great War, the Russian Revolution [when he was arrested and

[43] This term, used extensively by Nicholas Sakharov in his thesis written under the supervision of Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, speaks to the potential unification of human and divine natures (see Sakharov, 2002).

imprisoned twice] and subsequent civil war,[44] he felt deep within himself the vanity of human life without eternity, and continued to ponder the deep existential questions; 'Why was I born? And what is the purpose of my life if it all is to end in death and eternal oblivion?' (Gabriela, 2016, p. 18) (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 64) (Cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, pp. 10–11).

In his personal notes, Sophrony wrote of this time, "Everything around me was death and Nothingness. It became pitiful to look at people, even when they were laughing and enjoying themselves, let alone when they were ill and suffering. Every initiative, every deed lost its meaning" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2022, p. 97). Having experienced the boundless nature of eternity in prayer, he could not bear the thought that death was the end of existence – a plunge into the abyss of 'nonbeing' – and he became captivated by the idea of immortality and how one could "get beyond the confines of this brief small life" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 25). To him, the finality of death made his very existence and the experiences of life seem a "senseless process" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 27). In a world wherein even beauty itself had lost all meaning, life was "unbearable" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2022, p. 96).

He had the thought that if his spirit did not somehow continue to exist after this mortal life, then his every action and thought was nothing but a wasted vanity (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 27). He yearned for the assurance that his being would somehow continue beyond the confines of this life. He pursued an answer to this yearning for his own transcendent immortality; and

[44] Though drafted into both the Czarist and then Red armies, and being an excellent marksman, he was never sent to the front because as a student of art he was instead assigned to the Department of Camouflage (Gabriela, 2016, pp. 24–25).

permanence, not out of pride or for the sake of personal glory – a "historical immortality", as he termed it – but because to him, mortality seemed contrary to man's very nature, and to his own experience of the limitlessness and eternal quality of deep prayer, which had provided him a "foretaste of the bliss of evermore abiding with Him and in Him" ("The Light of Tabor" in Sofroniĭ, 2014, p. 122). Having first experienced the transcendent quality of communion with God in prayer as a child, he continued to long for that escape from mortality, and in his early adult years, his whole being was, as he describes it, "caught up in the quest for a way out of the narrow boundaries of time and space" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 29).

Another important aspect of his personality is that, from early childhood, he was an excellent artist. As he matured into young adulthood, so did his artistic abilities, which became inextricably linked with his pursuit of the eternal nature of existence (Gabriela, 2016, p. 18). In his painting, Saint Sophrony attempted to discover and capture the eternal beauty and mystery of each visible object (Sakharov, 2002, p. 15), possessed as he was by an urgent longing to penetrate to the heart of divine eternity through contemplation of the visible world (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1977, p. 7). He would often be so caught up in a state of contemplating this beauty as he painted that he would lose awareness of time. He later wrote in his journals, "A Christian in his creative quest gradually forsakes everything that could have a relative or temporary character, in order to remain in that which endures forever" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2022, p. 148). He studied art for a short time at the State School of Fine Arts in Moscow, [45] but finding the instruction there too rigid and stifling of creativity (Gabriela, 2016, p.

[45] Sister Gabriella, one of his spiritual daughters and inheritor of his iconographical vision and technique, notes that Sophrony's formal training in the Russian art academies was minimal, and that his classical art foundation came from the private studios that he attended (Gabriela, 2016, p. 97).

52), he co-founded a small group of artists called ‘Being’, with the common goal of portraying the eternal.[46] Then, in order to further his career, he moved to Paris in 1922. In Paris he became a successful artist, with his work receiving critical acclaim as it was exhibited in the Salon d’Automne and then the Salon des Tuileries, which was exclusive to Paris’ most elite artists (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, pp. 31–32) (Sophrony, Archimandrite & Magdalen, 1998, p. 9). Despite his professional success, for Sophrony art remained primarily the means by which he attempted to break through the present reality, “through time, into new horizons of being” (Sakharov, 2002, p. 15). However, while in Paris, he became aware that art could not truly capture the eternal dimensions of the other (Sakharov, 2002, p. 18), and he remained restless in his desire for infinite existence, continuing his pursuit of a ‘Supra-personal Absolute’ (Sofroniĭ & Magdalen, 2015, p. 25, 27; (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1977, pp. 7–8).

His pursuit of a supra-personal Absolute, or ‘Absolute Being’, began while Sophrony was still in Moscow, and stayed with him during his first years in Paris. In his letters to his family, written much later, he describes the exact moment when he first reasoned that because the Christian Gospel instructs us to love every person, as well as to love the personal God, it is existentially limited in scope because on the level of ontology a ‘person’ is finite, and therefore bound by time and space [he would later adjust this belief, and recognize that when in communion with the Eternal Being, a true ‘person’ takes on the characteristics belonging to eternity, including infinitude]. To Sophrony, who would later revise his definition of ‘person’, this doctrine of Christianity was more ‘psychological’ and ‘moral’ in nature, less profound, and thus inferior to the eastern religions that speak of a ‘supra-personal Being’, which is ontologically infinite

[46] Thoroughly described and analyzed by Sister Gabriella in *‘Being’: The Art and Life of Father Sophrony*

(Sakharov, 2002, pp. 17–19) (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, pp. 27–28) and thus closer to satisfying his search for existence beyond the limits of time and space. As a result of the belief that it was the supra-personal Absolute, not the personal Christian God, that would allow him to escape the restricting boundaries of existence in the earthly reality, he forcibly, "with great effort," let go of the deep prayer that had been his "need" from childhood, as a way of fully rejecting the limited nature of the personal God of Christianity, in order to pursue the unknowable and unattainable – the supra-personal Being – so he began dedicating himself to yoga and the transcendental meditation of oriental mysticism (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 27) (Gabriela, 2016, p. 19) (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1977, p. 8) (Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 38). During a period of eight years he lived as if in a "nightmarish" sleep, wherein everything that he saw was characterized by an impending doom and the finality of death (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2022, pp. 90, 92). His seeking to escape the order and laws of natural human life through an impersonal, or supra-personal Absolute did not bring Sophrony any comfort, and he found that he was not making the spiritual progress he had hoped.

He continued his quest, exploring the nature of cognition itself (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 29). He realized that knowledge from academic learning was also limited to the sphere of this present reality (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1977, p. 9), and did not have the capacity to explain the mysteries that lay outside the boundaries of measurable science (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 29) (Sakharov, 2002, p. 18). At one point during this period of struggle in Paris, Sophrony realized that the supra-personal Being he was seeking was not there, and he suddenly called to mind with greater clarity (Cf. Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 28) the commandment related in the Gospel of Luke 10:27: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with

all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind.; and your neighbor as yourself" (translation from the *Eastern Orthodox Bible,* Cleenewerck, 2013, p. 188). Though he had previously considered this commandment to be a "moralistic psychology", he now understood it to be a "pre-eminent ontology" (Sakharov, 2002, p. 19).

It was suddenly clear to Sophrony that real knowledge is "knowledge through union in being" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2022, p. 94), and that communion is only possible through love (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1977, p. 9); hence, to love God and others is to know them experientially, in all their fullness (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, pp. 29–30). This stands in contrast to the theologies and cosmologies of eastern mysticism, which were compelling Sophrony to rise beyond personhood and experience. The deep anguish that Sophrony experienced by rejecting the personal God of Christianity is probably the reason that he later placed such a great emphasis on the person-hypostasis of Christ and the 'hypostatic principle' in mankind. The supra-personal cannot love or be loved, and therefore cannot be experienced. As Saint Sophrony's *gnoseology* developed over the next decade and formed his theological vision, he would clearly give the pre-eminent place in the hierarchy of knowledge to the experience of being.

Saint Sophrony relates in his letters and journal writings that upon the realization that The Absolute Being was a Person, the Person of Christ Who had said, 'before Abraham was I AM' (*John* 8:58) (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2022, p. 94), prayer returned to him with such power that he could no longer focus on anything other than the experience of God in communion with Him. Saint Sophrony's great nephew and theological biographer, Nicholas Sakharov, writes that it was

when Sophrony came to this understanding that the Absolute Being he desired was the personal God as is expressed in Exodus 3:14: “I AM THAT I AM”, that he began to experience the Uncreated Light in a more powerful way than he had during prayer as a child (Sakharov & Sakharov, 2002, p. 19; (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 40).

During this time he was living in alternating experiences of the visitation of God in the uncreated light, and the remembrance of death and his own sinfulness (Sophrony, Archimandrite & Magdalen, 1998, p. 9). When he preached on the Feast of Transfiguration two decades later, he reflected upon his search for the knowledge of God:

> Within the confines of the Earth, we cannot satisfy our hunger or quench our thirst for knowledge of God, since we seek to attain the Unattainable, to behold the invisible, to know the Unlimited. In every man, this urge grows ever stronger when the Light of Divinity is pleased to shine on him, albeit faintly, for it is then that the eyes of our mind are opened to the abyss of darkness in which we are living. This vision confounds the whole man, and henceforth his soul knows no respite, and can have no peace, until she has fully escaped the clutches of this darkness, until she is sated with the Inexhaustible Food, until the Light increases within her and unites with her to the point that Light and the soul become one, transfiguring her indigence into divine glory.

In this practice of loving and knowing, he no longer felt constrained by temporal reality and the natural laws of this life that result in death. For about another two years following his return to the God he had worshipped as a child, he struggled to continue to paint. Ultimately, he felt that as a natural result of his rededication to contemplative prayer, the quality of his art was suffering due to his inability to give his entire self to it, as he had previously done (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2022, p. 94) (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 31). His attention, and very being, was being torn between his desire to express eternity in art, and his *experience* of eternity in prayer. As described by one of his spiritual successors Archimandrite Zacharias, Sophrony’s

encounter with the eternal Lord in prayer "constitutes the fullness of time and space. It is the highest accomplishment of every reasonable creature's purpose, and the fulfillment of man as a person" (Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2016, p. 81). This deep experience of eternity was his measure when attempting to capture the eternal perspective in his painting, which is why his art demanded such excruciating effort and attention. When he could no longer bear the battle within between the requirements demanded by both contemplative prayer and painting, as each path demanded the entirety of himself, he chose to give up art, because the perception of eternity for him was stronger in prayer than it ever possibly could be through painting,[47] devoted as he was to it (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 31).

With great pain, Sophrony renounced art and enrolled as a theology student in Paris at the Saint Sergius Theological Institute, in hopes of better understanding the Orthodox Christian Faith and to become more familiar with the Fathers of the Church (Sofroniĭ & Magdalen, 2015, p. 31-32). While at Saint Sergius he was a student of Sergius Bulgakov and Nicholas Berdyaev, among others. Bulgakov, especially, provided Sophrony with some of the theological framework that he would later use to articulate his own experience of God and theological vision.

Critical for this thesis is that Bulgakov taught that the unity of the three distinct Persons of the Divine Trinity is in their very mode of being, which is sacrificial, self-denying love (Sakharov,

[47] During this period, he was ultimately unsuccessful at capturing eternity in art because, as he reflected later, he came to the realization that he could not create 'ex-nihilo' as God does: "my creative power appeared to me like a disintegration of being, a fall into a vacuum, into the absurd, a return to the nothingness from which we were summoned by the creative Act of God. Then my intellect abandoned the fruitless attempts to create anything completely new, and the question of creativity became united in my understanding with the question of the knowledge of Being...Light became something different than before.: it caressed objects, it surrounded them with an aura, as it were, of glory, communicating to them the energy of a life which cannot be portrayed by the means which an artist has at his disposal (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2022, p. 150).

2002, p. 20). While previous Church Fathers, notably the Cappadocians, ascribed self-emptying "*kenotic"* love to God, they did so only to the economy of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity; Bulgakov was unique in describing the inner life of the Trinity as *kenotic*. This *kenotic* aspect in the life of the Holy Trinity, and especially as it concerned Jesus Christ, left an indelible impression on Sophrony; he would later apply the term 'kenosis' to his own formulation of man's attaining to true personhood in Christ. [The role of kenosis and its importance to the theological vision of Saint Sophrony will be more fully developed later in this thesis.] Despite this and several other contributions that Bulgakov made to Sophrony's own theology, Bulgakov is largely absent in Sophrony's later writings due to the controversy surrounding his Sophiology (Sakharov, 2002, p. 20).[48]

In a letter to his family, Sophrony wrote about his time at the Theological Institute, remembering it as an unremarkable time in which he had merely learned "some names, dates, who said what" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 32). Yet, despite this less than enthusiastic description of his time at the Institute, it is clear from his other writing that his theological training should not be dismissed as unimportant in his spiritual formation. Rather, from this recollection and description of his time at Saint Sergius, we understand that Sophrony had reached the conclusion that the knowledge of experience (i.e. the lived experience of God in prayer) was preeminent to academic theological study in one's pursuit to know God (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 204). And though he still recognized the value of theological study – in his own spiritual autobiography, he

[48] While researching I did find one mention of Bulgakov that Sophrony made in one of his archived papers that was finally published in English in 2023 – this reference indicates that Sophrony was not in complete agreement with all of Bulgakov's teaching (Saint Sophrony the Athonite, 2023, p. 21), which is further evidence that Sophrony's theology was an amalgamation from many different sources, together with his personal experience of God in prayer. And while some have intimated that Bulgakov must have had a larger influence on Sophrony than is represented in the works published by the monastery, another researcher has demonstrated that this is simply not the case (see: (Presbyter Mikel Hill, 2017).

remarks that to "live an upright life" requires a proper understanding of the Holy Trinity (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 9) (Cf. Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 75) – he believed that deep prayer and the practice of Christian asceticism was a prerequisite for the proper comprehension of Orthodox Christian dogma. As Nicholas Sakharov summarizes it, "for example, to prepare one's mind for the comprehension of the dogmas of the Church, one has to purify it, so as not to cloud the perception of the divine reality with elements of human imagination" (Sakharov, 2002, p. 61). In his recently published journals Saint Sophrony writes similarly, "We need ascetic purification of our mind in order that our dogmatic teaching of the Church about God, based on the revelation about the mode of divine being, should not be distorted by the elements of imagination coming from below. No human guess or postulate has a place in the dogma about the Holy Trinity" (Saint Sophrony the Athonite, 2023). For Saint Sophrony, theology does not belong to the realm of human philosophy, "…for the human intellect is extremely limited and incapable by itself of penetrating the mysteries of God" (Sophrony, Archimandrite & Balfour, David, 2016, p. 96), but emanates from, and is the expression of, the lived experience of God.

Since while at Saint Sergius his focus was still directed towards the most powerful desire within him – to attain eternity (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 32) – it is no surprise that Sophrony found his theological studies, though helpful, ultimately unfulfilling and a hindrance to his desire to "dwell in prayer" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1996, p. 40). He later reflected on his criticism, not only of Saint Sergius, but of theological faculties in general (Sakharov, 2002, p. 61. From Birth into the Kingdom, p. 29):

> Throughout the ages, theological faculties have struggled to convey to their students, by systematic exposition the content of divine revelation and the teaching of the Church,

> their fruit of her conciliar experience. In this way, in a few years of academic study, someone can grasp an outline of this vast knowledge, both in its earthly side and in its heavenly quality. Indisputably, learning of this kind is far from authentic theology, understood [properly] as existential knowledge of God....do theological academies give people, not intellectually, but in reality, the experience of communion in divine Infinity, which astonishes our spirit and gives rise to the fervent prayer of repentance? Do they provoke a scorching thirst to absorb the love of Christ, His humility and His meekness, which led him to Golgotha? And if these academies do not teach prayer, by which the soul actually touches divine eternity, then who can judge how far away we are from Him?

Desiring to learn more about the ancient Orthodox ascetic path of deep prayer and freedom from the passions[49] unto communion with God and the experience of 'divine eternity', he departed for the peninsula of Mount Athos, the home of male Orthodox Christian monasteries in northern Greece. In November of 1925 he arrived at the Russian Orthodox Monastery of Saint Panteleimon, where he would, in the Spring of 1930, encounter the Staretz Silouan, who would further instruct him in the hesychastic ascetical tradition of the Orthodox Faith, and who would become the central figure for the rest of his life (Cf. Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 31).

During his first five years in the Monastery, Sophrony lived in a nearly constant state of repentance over his earlier apostasy and pursuit of a 'supra-personal god'. While in this very focused state of being, keeping his mind constantly in the presence of God, he also experienced deep pain of heart and near-despair at his inability to obtain sinlessness. He later wrote in a letter, referring to himself anonymously, after the manner of Saint Paul:

[49] In the life of Saint Sophrony, this state was described by the current Abbot of the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist in his PhD Dissertation: "… he was gradually led to divine passionlessness, whereby all the patterns that normally impress the human mind are abolished. The ascetic ceases pursuing any honor, renown, or material riches, and has no thought of supremacy over his brother. Later, Elder Sophrony wrote that man attains the highest degree of freedom when he vanquishes the power of sin and death over himself" (Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 51).

> I know a man who many times not only contemplated the frightening abyss of hell, but was also suspended above it, and even as it were plunged into it, but each time the hand of God drew him out. He was walking on the earth, and people were speaking to him, but he did not feel the earth beneath his feet; instead, below him was an endlessly deep black chasm. His body was numbed by tribulation. It is impossible to describe the horror experienced by the soul at that time. For the soul, time is only, as it were, a little thread to which she is attached, while she is suspended above the abyss. Around her she sees eternity, but it is still perdition: hell, where the sufferings have no end. Finding herself in such calamity, the soul learns real prayer (Sophrony, Archimandrite & Balfour, David, 2016, p. 73).

He was living in the tension that he would speak often of throughout the rest of his life: awareness of his sinfulness and complete 'otherness' from God, counterbalanced by knowledge of God's overwhelming and unconditional love for him, which he experienced in prayer (Cf. Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 46). He once expressed the concept of deep repentance in this way to a certain monk who had asked him how one can be saved: "Stay on the verge of despair. And when you feel your strength begins to fail you, step back, sit down and have a cup of tea" (Sofroniĭ & Magdalen, 2015, p. 35). When he encountered his future spiritual father, Silouan, from the beginning they spoke of this principle (Cf. Sakharov, 2002, p. 22), which illustrates the tension that they both experienced as ones who remained acutely aware of their own sinfulness, yet with equally measured awareness of God as their ultimate hope and only Savior.

In the person of the monk Sophrony, Staretz Silouan found a man of similar spiritual orientation. He knew that Sophrony not only shared in the same deep repentance and experience of the uncreated light of God, but he also understood that Sophrony had been given the brilliant human intellect to accurately express and articulate this shared experience to the wider Orthodox world. Very early in their relationship Silouan entrusted to Sophrony the notes he had recorded about his life and spiritual journey. Though Silouan had had no proper theological training, and had not

systematized his own distinct theological vision, he was able to accurately, and in accordance with patristic teaching, articulate the experience of God in the vision of the Uncreated Light. As Nicholas Sakharov writes, “his simply expressed theological and ascetic concepts formed an integral basis for Fr Sophrony’s own theological development” (Sakharov, 2002, p. 22).

Foremost among his ascetic axioms is the saying given to him by God in a time of despondency, and for which he is now most closely associated: “Keep your mind in hell, and despair not” (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2015, p. 36). This saying, and the ascetic principle undergirding it, which concerns the tension of deep repentance and hope of salvation in Christ, permeates the theology of both Silouan and Sophrony, and will be more fully presented later in this thesis, as will Silouan’s other significant theological principles: a) Prayer for the whole world, b) Christ-like humility, and c) Love for one’s enemies as the measure of one’s love for God (Sakharov, 2002, pp. 22–23), and his basis for Sophrony’s later application of Silouan’s Christo-trinitarian model to the level of human existence (the theoretical and practical application of Silouan’s theological vision for human life).

Staretz Silouan reposed on September 24, 1938, and Sophrony asked for a blessing to leave the Monastery of St. Panteleimon, as he had been instructed to do by his Staretz. However, it was not for another year until he received a blessing from the abbot and council of Elders to leave (Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2016, p. 40). This is an example of the deep humility of Saint Sophrony: even though he had been told by his holy Staretz to leave upon his passing, to live in isolation, it is the monastic tradition to first get a blessing from the abbot before beginning any new task. Not arguing or ‘presenting his case’, Sophrony humbly obeyed and submitted to the

will of the Abbot, so as to be blessed by God. Finally, in 1939, with the blessing of both his Abbot and the Council of Elders, he departed for the harsher, desert side of Mt Athos in the area known as 'dread' Karoulia, and later in a cave near the Monastery of Saint Paul, where he lived in extreme asceticism and poverty. In isolation, his constant occupation was deep prayer, with weeping over his own sinfulness and 'otherness' from God. Yet, even as a hermit he could not escape interaction with others because he had already gained a reputation as a discerning spiritual guide, and many sought him out for instruction (Cf. Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, pp. 32–33). Because of this reputation he became the spiritual director for three of the monasteries on Athos, and spiritual father to many of the anchorite monks living in the area (Gabriela, 2016, p. 89) (Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2016, pp. 41–42). This experience of caring for souls allowed him to translate the theology of Staretz Silouan and apply it to human relationships. Guiding monks who were practicing extreme forms of asceticism helped Father Sophrony to become adept at discerning the nature of the inner life of a human being, and to help others understand the subtle movements of their heart, emotions, and mind during prayer.[50]

Through his letters and later treatises, we can recognize that during this period in Karoulia he lived a life of kenotic and empathic love for his spiritual children and the entire world. He later taught that being a spiritual counselor involves the kenotic action of transferring one's attention and care from one's self unto others to the point of deep empathy, so that the spiritual father suffers as if his children's pains were his own (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1977, p. 11). Father Sophrony surely experienced this pain of heart for the sake of his spiritual children throughout most of his life; he speaks of it often in his now well-publicized letters to friend and pupil David

[50] For an example of this discernment, see *Letter 5* to David Balfour in (Sophrony, Archimandrite & Balfour, David, 2016, p. 79)

Balfour. In these letters, published together posthumously as *Striving for Knowledge of God*, Sophrony exhibits the internal anguish that he would often suffer on behalf of his brother, as if his brother's life were his very own.

Even during the years of his more extreme isolation in the cave of Saint Paul's, Sophrony was not ignorant of the pain and suffering of the world. He was made aware, by bits of information and rumors, but more acutely by divine grace, of the horrors of the Second World War, and he spent many hours praying, prone on the earth of his cave, in agony over the mass death and suffering of humanity (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1977, p. 10). Prayer for the entire world, "for the whole of Adam", is an important characteristic of Sophrony's theology, which he would later refer to as 'Adamic' prayer, indicating the ontological oneness of the human race (Sakharov & Sakharov, 2002, p. 23, 28). This involved not only his 'calling to mind' the suffering of others, but a realization of the interdependence of his being and that of his fellows, and an 'entering into' their experience, placing himself in their position before the throne of God – both as penitent and supplicant. During the Second World War his prayer for the entire world, bringing before the Creator the whole humankind as "One Man" (Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 113), became an ontological state that was accompanied by the agonizing despair at mankind's tragic destiny (Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 53). Despite the agony that accompanied his prayer during this period, Sophrony always considered those years as one of the most blessed in his life (Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 55); He considered the poverty that he was allowed to live in as blessed freedom (cf Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2016, pp. 38–38).

In 1947 Sophrony relocated back to France, possibly due to the deteriorating health he suffered as a result of his extreme ascetic life on Athos, or partly because of the political instability of Greece immediately following the Second World War. In either case, he believed that going to Paris would allow him to finish his theology degree at Saint Sergius [which he never completed due to political division within the Russian Orthodox Church], and to begin working on the texts entrusted to him by Staretz Silouan (Sakharov & Sakharov, 2002, pp. 29-30). He first published those writings as a collection in 1948, along with his own introduction (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991).

The originality with which Sophrony depicted the life and teachings of his Staretz was remarked upon by others, as it was a departure from the classic hagiographic literature that Europe was accustomed to. In Sophrony's publication, "he both presents the life of his Elder and, at the same time, converses with his generation with regard to its problems. He not only attempts to answer the agonizing questions of his times, but also interacts with contemporary currents of literature, and debates within philosophy, particularly existentialism, and psychology" (Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2016, p. 43). This was the first indication of how the multifaceted experiences of his early life would enrich his public ministry. Having previously lived in the milieu of the great philosophical and existential debates of early 20th century Europe while living in both Russia and France, he was able to interact with the new generation of philosophers and seekers, who were debating the ontological nature of society and humanity following the social upheaval caused by the Second World War and extending into the 1970's.

In later editions, Sophrony's publication on his teacher was titled *Silouan the Athonite.* This has become one of the most read pieces of Orthodox ascetic and hesychastic literature; it has been translated into over twenty languages. Considering all the favorable reviews of the book, Sophrony was most pleased that it was well received by the Athonites. His fellow ascetics on the Holy Mountain confirmed the volume as a true reflection of the ancient ascetic and hesychastic traditions of Eastern Christian monasticism; they recognized Staretz Silouan as a spiritual heir to the great fathers of Egypt, Palestine, Sinai, and other historic schools of asceticism dating back to the beginning of Christian era (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1977, p. 12). The positive reception by his contemporaries on Athos was an important validation of the life and spiritual worldview of his Staretz Silouan. He remarks on this, though not referring directly to himself, in *We Shall See Him as He Is* (see Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, pp. 160–161). He writes that, beginning with the examples of the Virgin Mary, who consulted with her elder cousin Elizabeth following the annunciation of the Archangel Gabriel, to Saint Paul, who conferred with the other Apostles after revelations were bestowed upon him, it is the tradition of the Church for its members to never trust a revelation or experience of God without "testing the spirits" and verifying one's own experience with the fullness of the Church's wisdom and Tradition. Considering the extreme humility expressed by Saint Sophrony in his publications and journal entries regarding the admonition not to solely trust in one's own experience or reason, it is almost a certainty that without this validation from the Athonite Elders he would not have later embarked with such creative boldness and conviction upon the formation of his unique monastic community that became his spiritual legacy.

During his second stint in France Sophrony suffered from poor health - at one point he underwent an almost complete gastrectomy to fix the bleeding ulcers in his stomach (Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 33). Thus, he never returned to Mt. Athos, as his health would not allow it. Instead, he focused on introducing the life and teachings of Staretz Silouan to the world (Cf. *The Cross of Loneliness*, 2021). Gradually, a small monastic community gathered around him, at first as young laypeople seeking out his spiritual guidance, and later as a brotherhood of monks and nuns living in a house on church property in St. Genevieve-des-bois, and worshipping in a converted goat stable (Gabriela, 2016, p. 89) (Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2016, p. 44).

Due to the positive reception of the manuscripts that he was publishing on the life and teachings of Staretz Silouan, by the late 1950's his popularity in the English-speaking world had grown substantially, both in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the spring of 1959, he received help from spiritual children in England to purchase property at Tolleshunt Knights in Essex. There, on March 5th he founded the Monastic Community of Saint John the Baptist. As is the case with his theological vision, which is both in accordance with established tradition yet unique in its expression, his vision for the monastery was both in keeping with Orthodox monastic tradition, yet unique in the Orthodox Christian world. In this case, it was primarily a practical consideration that made it unique; for while it is customary for men and women to have separate monastic communities, Elder Sophrony found that it would be more practical to have one community for both men and women, for which he would be responsible rather than to travel between two separate locations and minister to two separate brotherhoods. Besides this, he desired to keep all his spiritual children close to him, and he realized that this could only be the case if the monks and nuns lived in one common community, made possible by having separate,

gender-specific dwellings. It is worth stating again how unique a situation this was. Because Father Sophrony's experience of God and his expression of it had been validated by the Athonite fathers, he felt secure to depart from certain historical customs. He felt freedom in Christ, and could allow the Spirit to move him creatively, using the traditions and customs of the Church as guidelines, without being fettered by them. We can relate this principle to the science of Bowlby's attachment theory, in that Sophrony had complete trust in God as his 'safe base' and 'secure haven' and was thus free to explore the bounds of his creative inspiration from God to meet the needs of his community and to all that came to him for spiritual direction. However, this was only made possible because he was assured by other respected spiritual guides that he was on the right path, and that his experience of God in deep prayer and the Uncreated Light was true and authentic, and therefore could be trusted.

In addition to establishing a monastery that included both monks and nuns, Sophrony broke from recent Eastern Orthodox monastic tradition by locating it within driving distance of London, amongst the people.[51] It is commonly held that this choice was likely influenced by his own childhood experience of the monastic communities in Russia, which were established within, or close to, the city limits. The focus of these communities during the time of Dostoyevsky, though still bolstered by deep prayer and asceticism, was to provide hospitality, philanthropy, and spiritual direction to the city dwellers. Having seen the ever-present spirit of despondency in modern life following the world wars and economic struggles, Saint Sophrony's vision was to establish a monastery that could be a light of encouragement to those living 'in the world'. Due to his growing popularity and reputation as an insightful counselor and trusted spiritual guide,

[51] For example, in the United States and Canada 27 monasteries were founded by an Athonite Elder in the late 20th Century, and all of them were placed in remote areas, at least an hour away from any major city.

many pilgrims gravitated towards his monastery, and a dedicated community of Orthodox Christians formed around it, attending services and theological lectures on the weekends.

Sophrony's popularity amongst the Orthodox was not only due to his writings and teachings, but many witnessed miraculous healings, even from very serious and rare illnesses as a result of his prayers (Peter, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 19). However, in visiting the monastery and reading the various accounts of Saint Sophrony's life, it is made abundantly clear that the community does not place an emphasis on these miracles, and instead chooses to honor the memory of their Elder by focusing on his love for God and his fellow human beings, because this is what he would have wanted (Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2016, p. 46). The community of Saint John the Baptist has continued to grow to this day, providing philanthropy and spiritual guidance for thousands of pilgrims from all over the world, in addition to the hundreds of Orthodox Christians who have made the monastery their weekly home for worship, instruction, and fellowship. The monastery also continues to publish both theological and pastoral treatises based on his Sophrony's unique spiritual and anthropological vision.

In the latter part of his life, nearly forty years after he first published the life of his Elder Silouan, Sophrony was most pleased by the decision of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople to declare Silouan the Athonite an official saint of the Orthodox Church, which took place on the 26th of November 1987. This was the final validation of Father Sophrony's work and spiritual vision – that the entire Church was embracing his teacher and finding value in the example of his life and teachings. By the time this took place, Sophrony was suffering with cancer, and due to the deterioration of his health he spent a greater amount of his time secluded in his cell. In his

humble way, feeling that his end was near, he wrote a letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch asking for his blessing to depart this life (Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2016, pp. 45–46). In 1993 the monastery had been informed that the only way that it could bury people on its property was to build an underground crypt, which it proceeded to build. As another example of the great grace and spiritual gifts bestowed on him by God, Father Sophrony declared that he would not repose until the crypt was ready. Then, having been told of the expected completion date of July 12th, he declared that he "would be ready", and on the 11th, he reposed peacefully in his cell.

For the overall argument of this thesis, the two most important factors in Saint Sophrony's biography are his experience of God through the visitation of the Uncreated Divine Light, and the incomparable width and depth of his experience of various cultures, philosophies, and world events. These two factors are what formed him, leading to what is most prominent in his later work, as he became known as the "Hypostatic Theologian". That is, what made him distinct among other theologians of his day was his focus on the human person and the emphasis that he placed on the intrinsic value and potential that God planted inside of man at creation. This focus was both theological and anthropological: on the one hand, Saint Sophrony's own experience of God made him aware of a human being's capacity to be in intimate communion with both God and mankind to the point of extreme agony over the suffering of others; and on the other hand, his wide-ranging experience of life made him relatable to others, allowing him to translate his hypostatic theological vision to the practical, ordinary life of his readers and students.

His Place Within the Orthodox Hesychast Tradition

> "If there is one great hesychast today who has lived Orthodox hesychasm in depth and, most significantly, can formulate it in writing and compare it with other traditions, it is Elder Sophrony."
>
> -Elder Theoklitos of Dionysiou (Vlachos et al., 2015, p. 28).

Hesychasm is a mystical tradition within Eastern Orthodox Christianity that emphasizes inner stillness and the contemplative experience of God. In the context of Orthodox Christian spiritual life, the Greek word *hesychia* denotes stillness, quietness, tranquility, and absence of passion. Hesychasm, as the characteristic spiritual orientation of the Eastern Orthodox Church, refers to the quieting of thoughts, passions, and desires — especially employing *nepsis*, 'mindfulness' or 'watchfulness', toward them — as a way to draw near to God in a prayerful, contemplative manner, in keeping with the admonition in *Psalm 46* (45, LXX): "Be still and know that I am God." Orthodox Patristic Soteriology teaches that man's salvation is to be in communion with God unto *theosis*, and ascetic literature from the Orthodox Tradition indicates that the surest pathway to communion with God is in the ascetic practice of watchfulness over every thought and movement of one's being, and deep hesychastic prayer (Vlachos, Hierotheos, 2000, p. 63).

Though often associated with the spirituality of Mt. Athos, hesychasm has earlier origins in the monastic domains of Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula, and Cappadocia. It later received some of its most important formulations in the monastic centers of the Slavic lands, and it is readily identifiable throughout the whole of Orthodox spirituality to this day (Foltz, 2011) (Vlachos, Hierotheos, 2000). Its great compendium is the five-volume *Philokalia*, a collection of spiritual writings from the 4th to the 15th centuries, first compiled in 1782 by SS. Makarios of Corinth and Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, and later translated into Slavonic by St. Paisios

Velichkovsky (1792) and into Russian by St. Theophan the Recluse (1876–1890) (Nicodemus et al., 1979). While living in the hesychastic center of the Orthodox world, Mount Athos, Sophrony became well acquainted with the texts of *The Philokalia*, as well as many other writings of patristic ascetical literature, so that his personal experiences in deep prayer and in relationship with God were validated by the experience of other hesychastic writers. As advanced as he was in the spiritual life and in the experience of God in deep prayer, the validation of his experience by the Church was of extreme importance to him.

Central to the practice of hesychasm is 'the Jesus Prayer', a short, repetitive invocation often phrased as "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The most common posture while saying this prayer is seated, with the head bowed toward the chest, while one hand employs a prayer rope (*komboskini*, in Greek; *chotki*, in Russian) to more easily keep count of the repetitions of the prayer without distracting the mind. During the recitation of this prayer, the hesychast's attention is drawn to the heart, as he or she focuses on each word – whether said by the lips, or mentally. With the mind stationed in the heart, the ascetic "prays from the very depths of his being, without images, with a pure mind standing before God" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 132). Through the continuous practice of this prayer, Orthodox Christian ascetics cultivate a deep sense of stillness, which facilitates a connection with God. This is the prayer that young Sophrony was taught by his nanny Catherine, and it is the prayer that he began to use in earnest following his return to Christianity while studying in Paris.

So central was the practice of the Jesus Prayer to Saint Sophrony's spiritual experience and theological vision, that he placed an emphasis on it for his monastic community. One of the

unique practices that he introduced was the communal recitation of the Jesus Prayer. The communal Jesus Prayer services replaced the typical morning and evening prayers that are hallmarks of most Orthodox Christian monastic communities. The daily cycle of the monastery remains centered around this practice to this day.

Chapter X Saint Sophrony

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEOLOGY OF SAINT SOPHRONY

Saint Sophrony's approach to theology can be considered an analytical description of his own ascetic experience (Cf. Sakharov, 2002, p. 39), validated by the universal experience of the Church. Everything that he wrote of a theological nature is an attempt at describing his mystical experience of God in deep prayer. He describes this knowledge as "dogmatic consciousness" (Cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, pp. 185–187). Sophrony understood that a 'dogmatic consciousness' was not something obtained by academic study or through the powers of discursive reasoning,[52] but rather through spiritual experience, rather than the logical brain's activity (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 186). This experience of divine grace is communion with God Himself, and usually takes place only after much ascetic exercise and discipline (Cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 188).

As an introduction, there are two important points to make regarding Sophrony's theology: The first is that he is not a systematic theologian - his main writings are not dedicated to a systematic exposition of patristic ideas, neither do they build an innovative, complete, and unified theological system (Sakharov, 2002, p. 39). His two main theological books, *We shall see Him as He Is*, and *His Life is Mine*, are instead a collection of essays or chapters, most of which do not flow naturally from one to the other (though the intent to build on the preceding chapter is

[52] In this context 'discursive reasoning' refers to reasoning that proceeds through a step by step, logical process, relying on arguments and analysis rather than intuition or immediate understanding. In Aristotelian thought. "discursive" reasoning is directly opposed to "intuitive" reasoning. In Sophrony's writings it is through neither discursive nor intuitive reasoning that one obtains a "dogmatic consciousness", but through the direct experience of God through the nous – hence, noetic knowledge.

somewhat evident), and which do not have an overarching argument that naturally resolves at the end. These chapters read more like inspired prose rather than dogmatic instruction. The second important introductory statement is that his theology is existential in nature: that is, it emanates from his experience of God, and is meant to have practical applications by guiding believers toward a deeper, experiential faith, rooted in the lived reality of Christ's presence in their life. Though he is not a systematic theologian, Sophrony is consistent in his theological vision, and this provides the 'system' and consistency of his work. As his monastic pupils have demonstrated in their attempt at systematic presentations of his ideas, there is a definitive coherence to his theological axioms, and though often repetitive, they are consistently found throughout his theological treatises and ascetical homilies and letters.

Saint Sophrony did not use the term "axiom" to describe his theological principles, and he never presented them in a systematic way, utilizing numbered lists or anything of the sort. Furthermore, in the published work on his life and theology, I have found only one instance where one of his pupils used the term "axiom" to describe an aspect or principle of Saint Sophrony's theology. However, 'Axiom' is a term that is used in the Gottman and EFT literature, and for the sake of consistency and clarity I have chosen to employ it to describe Sophrony's main theological concepts, principles, and assumptions. In doing so, I am taking the liberty of extracting from his theology the basic theological principles that are of the greatest importance for human relationships, as these encapsulate the essence of his theological and pastoral approach.

For this section of the thesis, I reviewed Saint Sophrony's published writings, as well as the dissertations and presentations of his theology written by his disciples, all of whom are part of the monastic brotherhood in Essex. The texts that I will be drawing from are:

Saint Sophrony The Athonite of Essex
- Saint Silouan the Athonite
- We Shall See Him as He Is
- His Life is Mine

Archimandrite Zacharias
- Christ, Our Way and Our Life
- Man, The Target of God
- Remember Thy First Love

Nicholas Sakharov
- I Love Therefore I Am

Sister Gabriella
- 'Being': The Art and Life of Father Sophrony

Archimandrite Peter
- Theology as a Spiritual State: In the Life and Teaching of Saint Sophrony the Athonite

Though there are some differences in how his pupils have organized Saint Sophrony's theology, and which of his primary theological axioms they have emphasized, the following are the most pertinent to this thesis because they directly influence his anthropological vision and pastoral guidance on personal relationships: (1) The 'Hypostatic Principle' as True Personhood, (2) Kenosis in Christ and Humankind, (3) 'God-Forsakenness', (4) "Keep Thy Mind in Hell and despair not", (5) Love for One's Enemies as the Measure for One's Love for God, and (6) 'Adamic' Prayer for the whole world. While this thesis' main argument is focused on the pastoral and theoretical implications of Saint Sophrony's theology for relationships, I have extracted these six theological axioms from his writings, as I believe them to be the foundation of his anthropological teachings. It is worth noting again that he did not directly apply these

axioms to couples or married life in any public teaching or published work. These axioms concern the salvation of human beings and their relationship with God, but when viewed through the prism of couple counseling, I believe they can add a new dimension to therapeutic work and our concept of married life. The primary six axioms are summarized here:

1) 'The Hypostatic Principle' as Journey to Personhood

The term 'Hypostatic Principle' was often used by Saint Sophrony to clearly distinguish the process of transformation from man as individual to man as a true person in communion with God. This dichotomy between 'individual' and 'hypostasis' speaks to Sophrony's anthropological maximalism – that is, the potentiality that is intrinsic to human nature for a man to rise above his egocentric individualism to become a true *hypostasis* who is in communion with God and all of 'Adam' (or 'humankind'). In Saint Sophrony's construct, *hypostasis* is an ontological destination, what the fathers of the Church often term *Theosis*, while the 'hypostatic principle' is the process, or the way, to this destination. In calling this principle 'hypostatic', Saint Sophrony is differentiating himself from previous fathers by bringing out the emphasis on the implicit anthropological consequences of *Theosis*. His choice of terms draws specific attention to the personal nature of 'the way' to salvation, which is a relationship with the personal God through the Person-hypostasis of Jesus Christ. Some might argue over whether this distinction is important, as most practicing Christians of all denominations would already presuppose that salvation at least includes a personal relationship with Christ. However, Saint Sophrony was expressing a principle, born from his own experience of God, that brings forth the great and limitless nature of this relationship. It is clear from his pastoral writings that his experience of interacting as a spiritual guide with other Christians, both Orthodox and non-

Orthodox, taught him that there was a need to re-emphasize the very personal nature of salvation, and to describe in great detail the ontological transformation that human beings must undergo in order to be 'saved'.

In addition, the Hypostatic Principle is an important distinguishing point for Saint Sophrony in comparison to the ascetical practices of non-Christian religions. Having immersed himself in eastern meditation practices as a young man, he found that they did not lead to true personhood, but were meant to "annihilate the human hypostasis, so that the soul may be dissolved in the anonymous ocean of pure Being, which is the Supra-personal Absolute" (Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2016, p. 114). By stark contrast, in Sophrony's anthropological maximalism, ascetic practice leads to the union of the true person with the personal God, while eastern meditation practice is intended to eliminate personhood altogether.

As his theological axioms are explored below, it becomes clear that Sophrony's focus on the Hypostasis of Christ and the personal nature of salvation, in keeping with the Orthodox Christian Anthropology, is not the same as the emphasis expressed by other Christian traditions that do not share his anthropological maximalism (ie.'deification'). Therefore, it is the description of the nature of this relationship between God and man that distinguishes Saint Sophrony from other Christian writers, while it is the emphasis on the Hypostasis of Christ that distinguishes him from other Orthodox Christian theologians.

In contrasting a mere 'individual' with a *hypostasis*, Saint Sophrony is also emphasizing the inherent connectedness of the human race – an individual is one who remains isolated, while an

hypostasis is in communion with others. His theology of personhood includes the notion that as a person grows in communion with God, he or she naturally becomes more connected to the rest of the human race. For Sophrony, this is an ontological process that is also reflected in two of his other axioms that we will examine below – 'love for one's enemies', and 'Adamic' prayer. Again, it must be stated that his emphasis on the *sobornost* of humankind of all ages, past, present, and future, comes from his own experience of God in hesychastic prayer. As God's grace permeated his being, he found that his heart was also 'enlarged' to encompass all of humanity, so that when he prayed, it was not for himself only, but for all who have ever, and will ever, live (more will be said on this below).

His experience of being joined to all humanity in deep empathic prayer led him to emphasize the communal aspect of the principle of deification. This is another unique contribution of Saint Sophrony to Christian Anthropology. His emphasis on the communal aspect of deification, or what might be called, 'hypostatic interchange', is found in the language that he often uses when teaching on this subject. While some Orthodox Christian writers remain focused on the person's participation in God, Sophrony more often emphasizes the capacity for the deified person to take within himself the life of another. This principle is undergirded by his understanding that deification implies a likeness in humanity to the 'multi-hypostatic' mode of being after the manner of the Holy Trinity. Sophrony's emphasis is that the deified man gives himself to the whole of mankind, and takes into himself the entire human race, becoming himself 'multi-hypostatic' (cf. Sakharov, 2002, p. 163). This idea is fully explored in the axiom below titled "Adamic Prayer".

The Formulation of The Hypostatic Principle

Saint Sophrony's theological construct for this principle follows a simple, four-point logical flow:

1) Jesus Christ is the Person-hypostasis, *par excellence*
2) Human beings are also called to be persons (*hypostases*), as they are created in God's Image
3) The ontological content of the Person of Christ is His kenotic (self-emptying) love of humankind
4) Human beings likewise prove themselves to be true hypostases when they cultivate love for God to the point of self-hatred,[53] pure hesychastic prayer which accompanies this, and kenotic prayer for the entire world, similar to Christ's "High Priestly" prayer at Gethsemane.

Therefore, in Saint Sophrony's construct the full potential, or hypostatic principle, in humankind is realized through both the negative aspects of Christian asceticism as well as the positive aspects of putting on Christ and being renewed by His grace. For Saint Sophrony the pathway to both the negative and positive aspects of the hypostatic principle is *kenosis*, or 'self-emptying,' wherein the individual rejects his egocentric individualism in favor of sacrificial love for God and others. According to Archimandrite Zacharias, St Sophrony said that the Hypostatic Principle is fulfilled in three main ways: 1) by invoking the Name of Jesus, 2) through the observance of His words and commandments, and 3) through participation in the Divine Eucharist (See pgs 150-154 in *Man the Target of God*).

2) Kenosis in the Holy Trinity and the Person of Jesus Christ

Kenosis in the Holy Trinity

Saint Sophrony considers kenotic, 'self-emptying', love as the "basic trait of Divine Life", making the unity of the Trinity both "complete" and "absolute" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004,

[53] In the Orthodox Christian ascetical tradition, self-hatred is an expression of deep humility. It is the opposite of self-love, and is without any element of despair.

p. 216). Sophrony locates this kenotic action, firstly within the inner life of the Holy Trinity, and secondly within both the eternal and temporal economy of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ. Because mankind is also called upon to become one after the likeness of the Holy Trinity, Sophrony naturally places kenosis at the center of his hypostatic theology, the prerequisite for the unity of man with his fellows and with God.

As discussed in the chapter above defining personhood, Saint Sophrony's thoughts concerning the kenosis of the inner life of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity was somewhat influenced by his seminary professor Sergei Bulgakov, though it was not an entirely new concept for him, and there are differences between their theological emphases. While Bulgakov taught that kenosis can be located within the eternal generation of the Son by the Father (cf. Bulgakov, 2008, p. 468), and in the acts of both 'fatherhood' and 'sonship' (see Sakharov, 2002, p. 103), Sophrony focused on the kenotic coinherence, or *perichoriseis*, of each of the Three Persons (see chapter above on personhood), relating this action to the very hypostatic existence of God, the content of which is self-emptying love (Sakharov, 2002, p. 103) (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 230) (Zacharias, 2003, p. 44).

There are other differences between the way that Bulgakov and Sophrony treat the theme of kenosis as it relates to both the inner life and the economy of God, the examination of which would not provide value for this present thesis. These differences are treated in detail by Father Nicholas Sakharov in *I Love Therefore I Am* (see Sakharov, 2002, pp. 99–104); they can be summarized simply by adding that though Bulgakov provided some of the language to convey the concept, his kenotic theology in no way determined the theology of Saint Sophrony. For this

thesis, the importance of Sophrony's view of kenosis within the inner life of the Holy Trinity is that he views it as a natural and "absolute" dimension of God's love which, when viewed through the lens of the Eastern Orthodox ascetical tradition, establishes self-sacrificial love as a prerequisite for communion with God and deification (cf. Sofroniĭ & Edmonds, 2004, p. 136, 139). In the following passage from *Hearken my Beloved Brethren*, his process of describing the kenotic activity of God in Trinity, and his application of kenosis to human life is clear:

> "In the Holy Trinity each Hypostasis contains in Itself the whole absolute fullness of the other Two, without abolishing them or reducing them simply to the content of its own life. Each Hypostasis itself also enters totally into the being of the others, affirming them in their personhood. In the same way, in multi-hypostatic humanity, each person is called to contain in himself all the fullness of human being, in no way abolishing other persons, but entering into their life, so that the content of life is actually lived in common. By this movement the person reinforces also the personhood of others" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 39).

In the above passage Saint Sophrony's framework for the hypostatic theology, his defining principle, is made clear. This framework allows him to call the individual souls under his care to 'empty themselves' out of love for God and their fellows,[54] unto true personhood. Identifying the kenosis manifested within the relationship of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity is a crucial step in establishing Sophrony's hypostatic theology. And when it comes to the practical and pastoral implications of his theology, his focus shifts from the example of the inner life of the Holy Trinity to the economy of the Son of God.

[54] The icon of Saint Sophrony that the brotherhood placed in the refectory at the monastery depicts the saint holding a scroll (a common practice in Orthodox iconography is to depict a scroll with the words that clearly delineate the saint's main teaching) that reads, "We must give our life for the others to live".

Kenosis in Christ

In the Person of Jesus Christ, Saint Sophrony locates the kenotic activity in both its eternal (divine) and temporal (human) aspects. Just as the kenotic action within the inner life of the Holy Trinity is ontological in nature, so Sophrony also considers the eternal kenosis of the Son to be ontological in nature. This ontological self-emptying of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity in the Incarnation, His taking on 'the form of a servant', and assuming that which was 'lower', accomplishes the unification of divine and human natures, which has eternal, ontological implications for humanity (Sakharov, 2002, p. 96).

Saint Sophrony also locates the kenotic action of Jesus Christ within His entire temporal and earthly economy (Zacharias, 2003, pp. 44-45). The kenotic suffering of Christ during His earthly life takes a central place within the consciousness of Saint Sophrony; this is the topic on which his voice speaks most often and most powerfully. In doing so, he focuses specifically on Christ's voluntary[55] act of becoming incarnate, His experience of temptation in the wilderness following His baptism, His prayer of agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, and in His sufferings on Golgotha (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 139). Sophrony is so moved by the Lord's kenotic suffering that he desires to experience each of these aspects himself, to undergo the same ontological experiences in grace-given commensurability with Christ, and he encourages others to seek the same. Archimandrite Zacharias writes, "someone who struggles rightfully, according to the commandment of selfless love, receives through grace the state of Christ Himself, and becomes like Him in mind and in feelings" (Zacharias, 2003, p. 51). Saint Sophrony teaches that

[55] Saint Sophrony is very clear that the incarnation of Christ was a voluntary act, and therefore a humble kenosis, which is a distinguishing point of emphasis between him and Bulgakov when describing the ontological nature of the eternal kenosis of Christ.

in deep prayer one can be mystically joined to Christ, to have a share in Christ's suffering and eventual glory (cf. Sofroniĭ & Edmonds, 2004, p. 188; (see Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 201). Though he seeks this commensurability in mystical experience with Christ, he never considers his experience of suffering equal to the Lord's, because it is given by God's grace, not by his own nature. He admonishes his pupils that if they are to be joined to Christ in prayer, "there must be something analogous" within them to Christ's experience of Golgotha and Gethsemane, even if they cannot experience the same "tension" as the Lord did (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 86).

Christ in the Wilderness

In the wilderness, the divine self-emptying of Christ is evident, Saint Sophrony argues, by His voluntary subjection to the laws of fallen human nature—for by fasting from food, He became weak in body, and that is when the devil appeared in order to tempt him (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2021, pp. 143–144). Sophrony often uses imagery like this in his transcribed homilies and talks, encouraging others by referring to the kenosis of Christ. He appeals to the great dichotomy that exists when one posits the Creator of the Universe vis-à-vis a frail human that suffers from weakness, acknowledging that these are one and the same person, the greater choosing that which is 'lesser'. Saint Sophrony considers this an example of divine humility, expressed kenotically, and applicable to human life.

Christ at Gethsemane

Saint Sophrony presents the kenotic-induced suffering of Christ during His prayer in Gethsemane as the most excruciating of all His suffering as a man: "His agony certainly had to be more acute than that of the whole of the rest of mankind if He were to be 'the Saviour of all men'" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 188). Sophrony underscores the Biblical understanding that Christ's internal agony was so great that it induced the sweat "as great drops of blood falling to the ground" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 200). This agony of the Lord was physical, yet primarily mental and spiritual. Sophrony presents Christ's prayer to the Father as a prayer of agonizing repentance for the sins of the whole world (Sakharov, 2002, p. 107), for who could possibly understand the tragic consequences of sin more than God Himself? Christ's suffering in the Garden was caused by the kenotic act of taking upon Himself the sins and suffering of 'the whole Adam' and preparing to undergo a human death – something that is a consequence of sin and completely alien to God. The Eastern Orthodox liturgical and ascetical tradition emphasizes the mental and spiritual agony of the Lord in Gethsemane over the physical agony of the Cross, which is why Sophrony speaks of it so often - holding up this type of 'agonic' prayer to God as the deepest, and most profound, prayer that a human can experience:

> "In prayer like the Gethsemane prayer, we are given existential experience of the hypostasis; and self-emptying is the way to make our death like Christ's death. The more total our self-emptying, the more absolute is our spirit's ingress into the bright realm of Eternal Divinity" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 220).

In some places he likens this Gethsemane prayer to his own prayers of repentance (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 201) (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 71), and at other times he speaks of the Gethsemane Prayer in terms of the 'High Priestly Prayer' portion of *John 17*. For him, this represents the "Adamic" prayer for the whole world in fulfillment of the commandment to 'love your neighbor as yourself' (cf. *John* 17:11-26; 13:35).

Christ at Golgotha

Saint Sophrony considers the Lord's crucifixion and human death the paramount act of love for one's enemies, and the pinnacle of Christ's kenotic action. He writes:

> The Christ-Man is exalted: no one can come up to Him in the act of His self-emptying – to go to an infamous death appointed for evil-doers; to hang stripped naked on the cross in the presence of His mother, of the women who had attended Him; To be deserted by the disciples; To see the final failure of His preaching... But who can reckon all that He suffered inside himself during those days? (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 136).

He uses this image as the measure to judge whether or not he truly loves God and other human beings. In his humility, unable to see himself ascending such a cross as Christ did, Saint Sophrony uses this occasion to humble himself before God in repentance and to weep over his inability to truly love. He writes in another place:

> "If we have not yet reached our full measure of the suffering which Christ endured on Golgotha, there does exist for us a way of preparing for this suffering. When the Holy Spirit showed me Christ praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, and afterwards His ascent to the Mountain of Golgotha... (I will call Golgotha the highest summit on earth, not materially but spiritually) … when we are not in that state, we see that we do not manage to live according to the commandments of the Gospel, and our desire to truly follow Christ is the more ardent" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 88).

It follows that in striving to keep the commandment to love God and others, Saint Sophrony is not interested in either a moralistic philosophy or a manufactured sentimentality. His striving is severe. His self-condemnation is accompanied by a strict ascetical life that "mortifies his members on the earth" (cf. *Colossians* 3:5). The tears that come to him in his moments of deep prayer and reflection on the kenosis of Christ are not sentimental or contrived – he calls them God-given tears of repentance that purify the mind and heart. Reflecting on his life during a gathering of his monastic spiritual children he says, "Finding myself incapable of loving as Christ commanded us, I saw myself as the most wretched in this world, as if under a terrible

curse. And I wept for decades to be liberated from this incapacity" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 89).

Kenosis in Humankind

As mentioned above, the theme of kenosis is replete throughout Saint Sophrony's ascetical homilies and writings. He presents kenosis as *the* distinguishing mechanism whereby human beings are transformed from mere individual to full person in union with God.

Nicholas Sakharov summarizes the anthropological dimension of kenosis in this way: "When man's self remains his ultimate existential concern, he is existentially directed toward himself, and so his potential for embracing the infinite, God, and thus himself becoming infinite, is not realized" (Sakharov, 2002, p. 83). Saint Sophrony taught that the opposite is also true: when a human being is able to kenotically vacate space from his finite self to make room for the infinite God, this is when the Hypostatic Principle is actualized in him (cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, pp. 139–140) (Sakharov, 2002, p. 83). In *His Life is Mine* he writes, "when, as I have said, a shadow of the likeness to the Gethsemane prayer is granted him, man then transcends the boundaries of his own individuality and enters into a new form of being - personal being in the likeness of Christ. By participating in the sufferings of His divine love we, too, in spirit can experience a little of His death and the power of His resurrection" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 118).

Sophrony's emphasis on kenotic love leading to the realization of the Hypostatic Principle, or full personhood, is what makes his theology so applicable to human relationships. Whereas his

primary concern in preaching the necessity of self-emptying is so that one may share in the experience of Christ's own suffering through kenoticism (see Sofroniĭ & Edmonds, 2004, p. 188, 220) (see Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1996, p. 56), he also understands it as being a necessary component of truly loving others (cf. Sister Magdalen, 2021, p. 39). This point is crucial to the overall argument of this thesis, since for those who are married, one's spouse is surely the first and most important of 'the others' to be loved.

In encouraging others to imitate the kenotic humility of Christ, Saint Sophrony draws inspiration from Christ's willingness to become incarnate and experience a human life with its limitations and boundaries. Saint Sophrony likens this kenotic love exhibited by Christ to His commandment to take up one's cross and follow Him – He can command it because He accomplished it first. Sophrony paraphrases the commandment in this way: "'If any man come to me, and hate not (all that is dear to him), yea, and his own life also,[56] he cannot be my disciple'" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 136). The taking up of the cross is synonymous in Sophrony's writings with the absolute surrender of the self to God, just as the Son did to the Father "in one's will, action, word—that is, in every manifestation of one's being" (Sakharov, 2002, p. 105).

In his hypostatic theology, which contains both dogmatic and ascetical components, Saint Sophrony presents kenosis as a necessary condition for union with God. In his anthropological-

[56] To 'hate one's life' is an ascetical theme of the Orthodox tradition, and is an aspect of deep repentance (see Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, pp. 141–149). Sophrony describes this 'hate' as the "plentitude of God's love", which "draws us to follow Christ. Seeing ourselves held fast in the bonds of egoism and incapable of following Him, we hate ourselves. The pain of this hallowed loathing casts us beyond the bounds of time and space, until only the driving force of love remains - all else vanishes" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 200).

maximalist view, every human being has the capacity to experience infinite life with "supra-cosmic dimensions" in communion with the divine, but in order for this to be accomplished he must first be emptied of every limiting, or finite, movement and law of his being (Zacharias, 2003, p. 52). For Saint Sophrony, the finitude of human life limits one's capacity to experience eternity. Man, in his fallen state, is bound by that which is finite from birth - in the form of 'natural' law and the inherent desire for self-preservation and self-love. For Saint Sophrony, it is therefore the aim of the ascetical life to rid oneself of all passion and selfishness – of everything that binds one to that which is finite. Without kenotic experience in man's life, his hypostatic capacities remain unrealized, he cannot experience the infinite-uncreated life of God, he cannot properly love, and he cannot become a true hypostasis (Sakharov, 2002, p. 106) cf. Zacharias, 2003, p. 49-52).

3) God-Forsakenness

Saint Sophrony speaks often of God-forsakenness, which is the chastening of God through His absence (cf Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2016, p. 175). This is an aspect of kenosis, wherein a person experiences the "blessed despair" following the withdrawal of God's comforting grace. In his experience, the period can last for days, or even years (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 129). While there is a negative aspect to God-forsakenness, Sophrony considers it a positive and necessary phase of the spiritual journey that accomplishes the eradication of pride and egoism in the human being, allowing for the increase of God's grace unto perfection, the transformation of an individual to a true hypostasis.

Saint Sophrony speaks about this period of spiritual growth from his own lived experience, and from the shared experience of guiding his spiritual children through it. In the Orthodox Christian understanding of spiritual health and how to foster a personal relationship with God, pride is considered the biggest evil and obstacle. In *We Shall See Him as He Is*, Sophrony writes, "Self-satisfaction is the symptom of either spiritual paralysis or decline. Constant judging of ourselves against the Divine commandments intensifies our awareness of being distanced from God and deepens our understanding that pride is the root of all evil. Pride is hostile to God. Pride runs counter to Divine Love. Through pride, mankind became captive to corruption" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 122). In Sophrony's hypostatic theology, pride is an obstacle to loving God, and therefore an obstacle to loving others. More will be said on this below, but in human relationships one cannot possibly love others properly to the degree that pride dominates one's thoughts and feelings. Therefore, if love is the goal, then this dynamic of God-forsakenness can be helpful in accomplishing true sacrificial love for others, especially one's spouse.

Pride, with its various facets and manifestations that limit one's ability to love, remains the chief obstacle. Saint Sophrony therefore locates repentance as the primary tool for reversing the inner movements of pride, turning away from self-love and towards love for others. In his construct, which is consonant with the common Orthodox Christian understanding, repentance is not a static state, but a dynamic action and way of life. Archimandrite Zacharias describes it this way:

> Repentance is man's return to the state of a regular functioning of his free self-determination. It first becomes manifest in the negative struggle to put off the corruption of the old man, and then in the positive one to put on the grace of God that brings salvation, which regenerates and develops man so that he becomes fit to be a partaker of the inheritance of the Saints in light. From this perspective, one can see why there is no end to repentance on Earth (Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2016, p. 129).

Saint Sophrony's lived experience demonstrated that his repentance was deeper when it was propelled by the feeling that he had been 'abandoned' by God. The primary characteristics of these periods of abandonment are patient endurance and repentance. Sophrony teaches that by enduring with patience, (that is, without falling into despair), the overwhelming experience of God's withdrawal, one demonstrates his fidelity to God, and receives the confirmation in his heart that he truly belongs to the Lord (cf. Zacharias, 2016, p. 179). During this period of "blessed despair" leading to repentance a person, "discovers within himself hidden depths of distortion which do not comply with God's ultimate purpose for him" (Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2016, p. 177). Sophrony argues that these "distortions" are all manifestations of pride, such as "conceit" and "self-absorption" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 128). These obstacles to love came more clearly into focus for him during these times of "abandonment", which worked to increase his repentance. He writes, "Bitter dissatisfaction with – revulsion from – oneself is the first sign that we are approaching the fulness of love commanded of us by God – surmounting the terrible obstacle of self-centeredness" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 130). These manifestations of pride are only eradicated by the Grace of God through repentance. This positive aspect of divine "abandonment" is why Sophrony valued the "painful state of feeling bereft of God" so highly – it inspired him to give maximum effort in observing God's commandments (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 135). The results of this period of "maximum effort" and repentance are stronger faith, profound humility, and both a stronger commitment and ability to love God and others (see Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 188).

4) "Keep Thy Mind in Hell…"

Saint Sophrony brought to the consciousness of the Orthodox Christian world the now well-known phrase, "Keep thy mind in hell, and despair not". This phrase comes from the life of his own Elder, Saint Silouan the Athonite, which was given to Silouan as a revelation from God during a time of excruciating temptation. Much has been written about this saying, which is meant to encapsulate the repentant demeanor of one who stands before the Lord as one condemned by his own deeds, yet who bears within himself the absolute assurance of God's love and mercy. While the lived experience of this saying is related to both the "kenosis" and "God-forsakenness" above, it contains some additional facets that are crucial for understanding the hypostatic theology of Saint Sophrony. The phrase "Keep thy mind in Hell and despair not" was introduced to the world in Sophrony's book covering the life and theology of his staretz *Saint Silouan the Athonite*.[57] At a time in his life when Saint Silouan was experiencing deep pain due to his inability to pray with a pure mind, he cried out to God in despair, and this is the phrase that was given to him by God in response. The implication was that pride was preventing Silouan from praying and loving God in the manner that he wished, so if he was to learn humility he must freely condemn himself to hell without falling into spiritual despondency (see Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 42) (cf Sakharov, 2002, pp. 107, 109).

The descent into hell experienced by Saint Silouan was not abstract or intellectual. It was not simply on the level of the emotions or psychology; it was an existential movement of his being that created an ontological change within him (cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, pp. 212, 431). In many places Saint Sophrony likens this descent into hell to Christ's prayer in Gethsemane and

[57] First published in 1958 as *The Undistorted Image*

His subsequent descent into Hades following the Crucifixion. Sophrony also experienced this spiritual phenomenon when he found himself struggling in a similar way as his Elder had, though this was before they had ever met. At one point he realized that it was only when he was actively condemning himself that the Grace of God would come to him. During this period he sought an answer from the Lord about how to remain humble and free in spirit, and he received a reply that was akin to 'Keep thy mind in hell' (cf. Sofroniĭ & Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1991, pp. 298–299, 430-431, 460). He describes this experience in *His Life is Mine*: "When we properly condemn ourselves to eternal infamy, and in agony descend into the pit, of a sudden, some strength from above will lift our spirit to the heights. When we are overwhelmed by the feeling of our utter nothingness, the uncreated light transfigures and brings us like sons into the Father's house" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1977, p. 60). According to the witness of Saints Silouan, Sophrony, and Orthodox Desert fathers[58] who confess similar experiences of self-condemnation, the natural result of this mystical descent into hell is deep humility, something akin to the humility of Christ, which is the catalyst in driving away the forceful pull of the ego and all spiritually harmful actions (cf. Zacharias, 2003, p. 265).

For Saint Sophrony, the completion of the phrase that begins with "Keep thy mind in hell" holds equal importance: "and despair not". This end of the phrase is the 'ascent' following the 'descent', a common theme in Sophrony's writings (cf. Zacharias, 2003, pp. 267–270). In the chapter introducing the meaning of this phrase, Sophrony writes, "But the one who knows 'how greatly the Lord loveth us' escapes the pernicious effect of total despair and knows how to stand

[58] Sophrony specifically mentions Abba Poimen and Saint Anthony the Great as other fathers who have described this experience.

prudently on the verge so that the hellish fire burns away his every passion and he does not fall victim to despair" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 211).

Saint Sophrony teaches that most Christians spend the majority of their life in what he understands as the second of three stages of the spiritual life. During this second stage, the primary temptation is to despair over the lack of progress that one is making despite great effort to eradicate self-love and pride. This teaching comes from his own experience. He views this temptation as such a threat that when a recent pilgrim visited his monastery, this famous phrase was offered with the additional clause, "with Christ" – 'keep thy mind in hell *with Christ*, and despair not'. The meaning that is then conveyed is that even when one places oneself at the edge of the abyss, considering it one's due reward for the inability to love perfectly, the Lord is always with us, offering His love and mercy (cf. Zacharias, Archimandrite, 2024). In his PhD dissertation on the theology of Saint Sophrony, Archimandrite Zacharias summarizes this principle:

> "…when we are commanded to descend into hell, it is not so that we may perish, but that we may explore there the unspeakable mystery of the divine and humble love, which reaches down even to that dread place. It is in order that we may humble ourselves unto the end before the greatness of this love, and in our turn respond with gratitude to Christ, and love him so perfectly and unwaveringly that wherever we are, even in hell, nothing can separate us from God the Saviour" (Zacharias, 2003, pp. 266–267).

5) Love for One's Enemies as the Measure for One's Love for God

Saint Sophrony's axiom that a person's love for God can be measured by the love for one's enemies is, by his own proclamation, the "cornerstone" of his entire teaching (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 232). The commandment to love one's enemies is Biblical in origin (cf.

Matthew 5:44; cf. *Luke* 23:34). It was emphasized by Sophrony's teacher Saint Silouan to such a degree that he is considered a pioneer amongst the fathers of the Church in applying it to ecclesiology (cf. Sofroniĭ & Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1991, pp. 115–116; Zacharias, 2003, p. 257). Saint Silouan was known to often repeat the phrase, "He who does not love his enemies does not know God" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 104). Neither Christ nor Saint Silouan chose to have "enemies". In the context of this spiritual axiom, an 'enemy' is simply inclusive of the entire human race without distinction. In both the teachings and the experience of Silouan and Sophrony to love everyone indicates the presence of "the compassion of a loving heart" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 228), which becomes an ontological reality that includes experiencing the suffering of others.

Sophrony understands the commandment to love one's enemies as a natural law of the spiritual life, governing the relationship between God and mankind. In order to 'know' God, one must become like Him, especially imitating the life of Christ, who fulfilled His own commandment to love enemies both in Gethsemane and on Golgotha (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1996, p. 18). He explains the natural law this way: God is love, and to the degree that one desires to abide in God, one must also become 'love' like God is. This love does not, and cannot, have any partiality. This love does not distinguish between friend and foe, but includes everyone and everything (cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, pp. 115–116). He writes, "God is love, absolute love embracing every living thing in abundance. God is present in Hell too, as love" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 115).

Saint Sophrony admits that this axiom will seem impossible to some, especially to "Rationalists," and he recounts that even a certain monk argued against its validity (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, pp. 14, 196). However difficult the commandment is to love one's enemies, Sophrony encourages his readers to at least consent to the principle – to agree that the axiom is true – and to understand that one cannot love or know God without at least striving to love all people. He writes, "If you cannot love, then at least do not revile or curse your enemies, and things will already be better…" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 377). While human effort may be enough to abstain from reviling or cursing one's enemies, Sophrony taught that the ability to advance to the love of one's enemies is only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 105). Within this operation of loving all human beings is a synergy between God and man. Sophrony indicates that loving one's enemies takes both human striving, and the grace of God. Within the life of Saint Silouan, Sophrony witnessed how Silouan's love for others would lead to an increase in grace, allowing him to love in an even greater measure. (cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 115). Sophrony explains that it is the synergy between the person and God that allows the human being to transcend the order of the natural world and to take on the characteristics belonging to the eternal, divine dimension (cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 224), (cf. Zacharias, 2003), especially during periods of intense prayer, as is presented below in the next axiom.

Because God is love, He has endowed humanity with free-will, such that it is in a person's choosing to love, that they experience the joy that God desires for us. Silouan and Sophrony each spoke of the joy and peace that came upon them due to their love for all, in imitation of Christ, even including those who might be considered 'enemies'. In his biography of Saint Silouan,

Sophrony writes, “There is no better way than to live in humility and love. The soul then knows a great peace within her, and will not set herself above her neighbor. If we love our enemies, there will be no place in our souls for pride, for in Christ-like love no one is ranked above another” (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1991, p. 310). And in *We Shall See Him as He Is*, he writes, “All our striving is concerned with acquiring the love commanded of us by Christ. When this spirit of Christ-like love enters within us our soul thirsts for the salvation of all people” (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 202).

6) ‘Adamic’ Prayer: Prayer for the whole world

In the teaching of both Saint Silouan and Saint Sophrony, the fullfillment of the commandment to love one’s enemies finds its fullness in empathic prayer for the whole world, desiring the salvation of all (Zacharias, 2003, p. 247). Sophrony terms this activity “Adamic prayer”, meaning prayer for ‘The Whole Adam’. It is significant that Adamic prayer is the final chapter in Part I of his spiritual autobiography, *His Life is Mine*, the inference being that Adamic prayer is the fulfillment of all the other principles (cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1977, pp. 113–118). This offering up of the heart and mind in deep prayer is characterized by repentance, as well as the awareness of one’s own “sin and worthlessness”, which mystically transport him beyond time and space (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1996, p. 114) to “the plane of the tragedy common to the whole human race” (Zacharias, 2003, p. 236). In this prayer, both Silouan and Sophrony experienced on an ontological level the pain associated with the natural results[59] of the fallenness of every human being who has ever lived (cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1996, p. 17). With deep

[59] Death and corruption.

empathy that is only possible by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they truly experienced the fall of mankind and its loss of communion with God (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 195).

In the theological vision of Saint Sophrony, Adamic prayer is closely related to Christ's prayer in Gethsemane. During his early life Sophrony had experienced the opposite of the commandment to 'love one's enemies' in the wars of the 20th century, yet he had also been raised to the heights of deep contemplative prayer in the vision of the Uncreated Light. Even more tragic, then, was his experience of this dichotomy between his absolute love for God and all humanity, and his witnessing the absolute hatred among men, and the horrors of war and death. In striving to become like unto God in all things, Sophrony understood that this was only possible if he could also suffer the tragedy of mankind's fall away from God in the same way that Christ experienced it during His prayer to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. As was stated previously, throughout his writings and transcribed homilies, Christ's prayer in Gethsemane is a constant theme, as it illustrated for Sophrony the depths into which Christ willingly descended out of love for the human race. Therefore his effort to pray for the whole world had its basis in the kenotic love of Christ, "which reaches down to the depths, ascends to the heights, and extends universally in breadth and length" (Zacharias, 2003, p. 247). In deep prayer Sophrony sought to 'descend' mentally, but in an ontological way, in order to suffer with Christ and all of Adam. He described this 'descent' in the life of his teacher, Saint Silouan: "In profound prayer for the whole world as for himself – making him like Christ Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane – he really does live all humanity as *one* life, one nature in a plurality of persons" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 216). He summarizes his own experience of this phenomena in *Saint Silouan the Athonite*: "In the desert also, more than elsewhere, it was given to me, too, to pray

for the whole world, for all mankind, all Adam. Through prayer, 'all Adam' ceases to be the product of an effort of the imagination, but becomes a concrete reality, the effective content of contemplation" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 208). Sophrony considers this prayer for the whole world as coming from God Himself, "like a faint echo of Christ's prayer in Gethsemane" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 209). And again he writes, "in actual fact, it is already a question of following Christ to the Garden of Gethsemane and onto Golgotha, in order to live with Him, by His strength, the tragedy of the world as one's own *personal* tragedy; of outside time and beyond space, embracing in spirit, with compassion and love, our whole human race bogged down in insoluble conflicts" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1996, p. 114).

Saint Sophrony is also able to locate this transcendent prayer of descent into the universal suffering of mankind within his own experience of the suffering that is common to human life. He teaches that when anyone is experiencing pain of any kind they have the opportunity to translate that experience to that of the 'Whole Adam'. He writes, "In spirit we translate our own individual state to universal dimensions" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1996, p. 17). This desire that we find in his life and writings to universalize his suffering is motivated by love. It is natural to human life that when one is suffering his attention is drawn to himself, and to the pain that he is experiencing. Sophrony's lived example and teaching is to transform this process, and to transcend even that which we might consider a 'natural' self-focus, so that we might instead locate our suffering withing the broader context of the human experience, and to empathize with all humanity. He writes:

> When we are "…pierced by sorrow, pain, loss, we transfer our own hurt to the universal plane, and suffer not merely for ourselves but for all humanity. To the extent of our

> personal experience, we can live everyman's tragic lot, his dread and despair. We call to remembrance the multitude of dead and dying. It may be that our suffering will at some point exceed our powers of endurance. Then, when mind and body can no longer keep up with the Spirit, the Spirit continues to follow after Christ, to crucifixion, to the grave, into the anguished hell of his love for mankind" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1977, p. 89).

Saint Sophrony considers Adamic Prayer "hypostatic prayer" because in this activity a human being gradually moves from individualistic modes of being to the "hypostatic" mode of being, becoming a true person in fulfillment of the commandment to love one's neighbor (cf. Zacharias, 2003, pp. 59–60, 233-234, 250). Sophrony teaches from his own experience that in charismatic and empathic prayer for the whole world, his prayer acquires cosmic dimensions and significance. In this prayer he experiences the union of his own self with all humanity – he seeks the saving grace of God for all people with the same fervor as for himself, even to the point of death (cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2004, p. 113). In this act he demonstrates that he truly loves all people, and proving himself a true child of God, Who willingly suffered and died for all.

Chapter XI Integration and Pastoral Application

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

The hypostatic theology of Saint Sophrony has profound implications for the human person and his or her relationships. These six spiritual axioms of Saint Sophrony do not call us to moral rectitude, but to share in the Divine Life and experience the transformation of grace in Christ. In his theological vision, sin is not construed chiefly in juridical terms – as a legal infraction demanding punishment – but rather as a separation from God and a condition of spiritual illness requiring healing and restoration. While Saint Sophrony would readily acknowledge that interior wounds – such as attachment injuries or relational trauma – do not impute personal guilt to the one who suffers them, he would nevertheless maintain that each person bears responsibility for cooperating with grace in the movement toward wholeness in Christ. This journey toward spiritual fullness entails the gradual healing and integration of those wounds which, if left unaddressed, distort perceptions, impede deep connection, and can give rise to maladaptive patterns within our relationships, including our relationship with God.

In these six axioms Sophrony calls for the uniting of mankind, not merely in a symbolic, psychological, or emotional way, but ontologically. In his experience, an ontological union with his fellow human beings was only possible by the grace of God and after much effort. For Sophrony, this is the calling of Christian life – to be united with God, and through His grace, with all of ‘Adam’. He locates the origin of this calling from within the inner-life of the Holy Trinity:

> In the Holy Trinity each Hypostasis contains in itself the whole absolute fullness of the other Two, without abolishing them or reducing them simply to the content of its own life. Each Hypostasis itself also enters totally into the being of the others, affirming them in their personhood. In the same way, in multi-hypostatic humanity, each person is called to contain in himself all the fullness of human being, in no way abolishing other persons, but entering into their life, so that the content of life is actually lived in common. By this movement the person reinforces also the personhood of others (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 39).

From this perspective, which includes both a personal ascetic dimension and a divine dimension, a romantic partnership[60] has the potential to embrace within itself, to some extent, the "fullness" of human being. This is not possible when the connection of the romantic partnership is not secure, or when one of the partners dominates the other in a way that distorts the free will and personhood of the other. Saint Sophrony directs couples to love each other to the point that each partner, to a significant extent, experiences the full life of the other (cf. Sister Magdalen, 2016), where the content of the life of the couple is lived in common by each partner without losing their own unique personhood.

Saint Sophrony gives further indication of what is meant by experiencing the "full life of the other" in his correspondence with a man who was seeking the Elder's blessing to get married for a third time (cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2018). In his response to this man's request, Sophrony uses the expression "fullness of communion" to express the ontological reality of what is meant to occur within the community of an Orthodox Christian marriage, which can be applied, in some sense, to all romantic partnerships. As it was apparent to him that this man had not experienced this "fullness" in his previous marriages, Sophrony expressed a positive sentiment,[61] about the upcoming third marriage, with the hope that the man would experience the "fullness"

[60] In his context this would be within the community of marriage, but the axiom may be applicable to all.
[61] He wrote, "Do not be troubled! Go boldly, with gratitude to God!"

of communion that is made possible when each partner empties themselves and works in synergy with God. In this specific case, Sophrony did not want 'bless' a third marriage, and was, in a sense, adamantly against it – but this is an example of where his pastoral sense allows him to rise above all legalism and juridical notions of what is 'appropriate'. In a footnote to this letter, which he did not share with the man seeking a third marriage, he records his thought process regarding this situation. He writes that this dear man had clearly already reached a decision to remarry, and that by offering an objection, Sophrony would have caused trouble to this man's conscience and "made his future less joyful" (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2018). Out of love, he subtly encourages the man to move forward with the third marriage, "boldly", but without giving his official 'blessing' to do so. He admits that he, Sophrony, knows nothing of what romantic partners experience in marriage, but he understands that there should be, if the union is "successful", an experience of "fullness" in communion with each other and with God (ibid). In giving his encouragement, he prays that this man will finally experience the joy that comes with experiencing 'the full life of the other'.

The purpose of this thesis is to adopt the anthropological insights and hypostatic theology of Saint Sophrony in a way that enriches our understanding of couple therapy in the context of our modern world. Though he did not write much for couples, we can extract from his theology of personhood the principles that will elevate our understanding of the nature of romantic unions, whether within community of marriage, or exclusive romantic partnerships. This is accomplished by examining the implications of each of the six of his theological/anthropological axioms presented above for the life of a couple. Each axiom is now re-presented here and discussed in relationship to the therapeutic modalities of both John Gottman and Susan Johnson. For example,

where can support for this axiom be located within either modality, and where does this axiom help to enhance therapy? What are the practical implications of applying this axiom to the therapeutic treatment and relationship dynamics of a committed romantic partnership? This is the analysis that is presented below.

Pastoral Implications – the Six Axioms

Axiom One: 'The Hypostatic Principle' as Journey to Personhood

In the teachings of Saint Sophrony, the dominant characteristic of someone who is an 'individual' is psychological and spiritual isolation. This 'isolating' mode of being is primarily selfish in nature, concerned with one's own well-being above the needs of others. Though there may be growth towards true personhood for an individual, their underlying occupation with their own needs and desires prevents them from developing a more collective consciousness, and they instead live predominantly for themselves, without a serious consideration for the people around them. This state of being leads to the objectification of others, and is described by respected theologian Dr. Jean-Claude Larchet in volume one of his compendium *Therapy of Spiritual Illnesses*:

> "Self-love opposes love for one's neighbor and leads one to hate him, Since the lover of self seeks above all his own pleasure by means of the various passions that self-love engenders. Instead of aiming for the good and benefit of others, a lover of self seeks affirmation of self and his own interest. More often than not, his neighbor, is only a simple means of obtaining the pleasures he seeks to attain, and thus is reduced by him to the level of an object" (Larchet & Sprecher, 2017, p. 149).

In contrast to the individual, a person, or "hypostasis", is one who bears within oneself a collective consciousness, understanding their responsibility to those around them. While this is

not a static stage, the predominant mode of being for a ‘person’ is a humble awareness of his or her responsibility towards all, marked by a love that is without conditions, without the expectation of reciprocity. Saint Sophrony teaches that this mode of being, while possible, is contrary to fallen human nature and requires the grace of God, along with a person’s ascetic effort, to establish a heart that is unencumbered by selfishness.

When this anthropological axiom is applied specifically to the community of an Orthodox Christian marriage, the “Hypostatic Principle” indicates that the goal of each partner should be to develop from the sinfulness of individualism to the holiness of full personhood. When this axiom is applied to all romantic relationships, it still offers the goal of selflessness in love. The expanded consciousness that occurs in those who are actively suppressing the selfishness of individualism for the sake of the other leads them to consider the needs and desires of their romantic partner much more seriously. In cooperation with divine grace, over time a couple will come to the realization that they bear a God-given responsibility for the well-being of the other, and that God has given each of them a very major role in helping each other on the journey to true joy, to *salvation*. When referring to this expanded consciousness in couples, Saint Sophrony says that this is to take one’s partner “into one’s own existence” through empathic love, awareness, and responsiveness (cf. Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 39) (cf. Vlachos et al., 2015) (cf. Sister Magdalen, 2016).

The assimilation of the other into one’s life does not involve a loss of autonomy or personhood. In accordance with Orthodox Christian hypostatic theology, in marriage, or within a romantic partnership, the action described as “taking one’s partner into one’s own existence” is analogous,

on a human level, to the "coinherence", or "*perichoreseis,*" that characterizes the relationship of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity. In this communion of beings, there is a high degree of cooperation and unity of wills, without the loss of unique personhood. Saint Sophrony bases his hypostatic theology of relationships on this trinitarian model, which becomes the basis for every description of the dynamics at work in 'individuals' who are becoming 'persons' by learning to live for the other. In a romantic relationship, this dynamic of mutual sacrifice and reciprocity works powerfully to strengthen the connection between partners.

The development of this kind of connection for a couple is naturally composed of several elements, and it begins with the understanding that they are designed to be in communion with eachother. Beyond an intellectual or abstract consent to a deep intimacy resulting in such 'oneness,' their bond will have psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions – each of which should be considered as a necessary component to the overall connection of the partners. Both the Gottman Method Couple Therapy and the Emotionally Focused Therapy of Susan Johnson seek to strengthen the bond of romantic couples, with various emphases placed on the psychological and emotional dimensions of that bond.

As we noted in Part One, while The Gottman Method provides a suite of interventions that address the 'mechanics' supporting the psychological and emotional aspects of the romantic partnership, EFT focuses more narrowly on the underlying emotions surrounding attachment wounds that are the cause of much of the disconnection in couples. For instance, Gottman Therapy offers therapeutic sessions for couples to target specific mechanisms of the relationship such as communication, building the "friendship system," and conflict resolution. Emotionally

Focused Therapy offers sessions that might include some of these mechanisms, but its focus is on revealing and healing the specific attachment wounds that present barriers in the romantic relationship. Both modalities have demonstrated effective positive outcome rates through their treatment, and should be incorporated in pastoral work.

Some of the major themes found in these secular modalities that are congruent with the Hypostatic Principle of Saint Sophrony are the following:

1) Authenticity and trust are required for true union.

In the hypostatic theology of Saint Sophrony, the Holy Trinity is the model for all human relationships, including romantic ones. Authenticity and truth are divine aspects of the Three Persons, and God contains nothing within Himself that contradicts these. Analogously, a married couple should strive for authenticity and truth, and avoid falsehood, which is usually destructive. Secret keeping can be a sign of inauthenticity, and is of course a grievous betrayal of trust.

Falsehood is also introduced unwittingly when one or both partners believe that their authentic self is unlovable, or at least unattractive to their partner. As John Bowlby demonstrated, the desire to be loved and connected is deeply rooted within human psychology, and when this force is stronger than the desire for authenticity, this leads to minimizing or hiding certain aspects of one's personality, or in taking upon oneself the personality of another, or another's expectations, in order to gain approval or love. And while not all falsehoods carry the same destructive consequences, when a dynamic of misrepresentation is at work within a romantic relationship, the bond of the couple is compromised, because it is at least partly based in falsehood.

For the bond to be strong, it must be based upon the authenticity of each partner. And each partner becomes trustworthy to the degree that he or she is striving to be authentic, allowing their 'true self' to shine forth. At the same time, this process is facilitated when each partner trusts the other to be patient, and to stay committed to the relationship, no matter how difficult this process may be.

Gottman focuses on the issue of trust in his later work, adding the "supporting walls" of Trust and Commitment to his Sound Relationship House theory. In surveying his clients, he found trust to be so important that he even explored game theory as a way of understanding this "mysterious" dynamic of romantic partnerships. While it is certainly fair to criticize his method of applying mathematical probabilities to relationship dynamics that he found "mysterious", he is not wrong in placing the concept of trust at the forefront of what is important for the well-being of the couple's bond. Susan Johnson also explores the issue of trust in her therapy. She especially does this within the context one partner expecting empathic responsiveness from the other (i.e., "A.R.E." Are you there for me? Will you be Responsive to my needs? Will you show Empathy? See below for more on this). Both modalities offer support to couples who are struggling to trust each other, and each of them discusses the importance of authenticity, though Johnson does this more directly due to her focus on attachment and attachment wounds.

2. Freedom

Freedom is another aspect of the Hypostatic Principle that is treated both within the Gottman Method and Emotionally Focused Therapy. Within the inner life of the Holy Trinity there is perfect freedom in communion. In the life of humanity, Saint Sophrony speaks about freedom as

a great gift from God. It is the gift of being able to freely choose to love. He refers often to a Christian's freely taking upon himself 'the Cross' or 'the yoke' of Christ – in this context meaning voluntary sufferings. But the principle of freedom is also found within his pastoral guidance for relationships. An important aspect to his pastoral theology is the principle of allowing the freedom of each person, without coercion, without the forcing of one's own will upon the other. Within the context of the Hypostatic Principle, Sophrony teaches that as an individual moves towards hypostatic life, as his or her consciousness is expanded to see the need to love all people, one will naturally respect the freedom of others, being ready to 'give way' to the will of the others, if this is appropriate.

Within the therapeutic modalities of Gottman and Johnson, freedom is treated on a more humanistic plane – as a basic human right. Romantic relationships characterized by coercion or force are considered, at best, inherently fragile and, at worst, abusive. While both Gottman and Johnson advocate for voluntary compromise and the making of minor sacrifices in support of one's partner, they do not inherently appreciate self-sacrifice as a moral good. In the absence of an explicitly eternal framework for understanding relationships, their emphasis remains on fostering experiences that are emotionally satisfying and mutually enjoyable in the present life. Saint Sophrony's perspective is eternal, and therefore his framework helps us to understand and freely accept without any resentment that sacrifices made in this life will not necessarily be reciprocated. The purpose of using one's freedom to make sacrifices for the sake of the other is to build the best temporal relationship possible – and more importantly, to help us grow in love for God and the other, as we develop from mere individual to full person.

3. Intimacy

According to the Hypostatic Principle, intimacy does not necessarily have a sexual component. Saint Sophrony does not consider that the physical love between a husband and wife necessarily helps lead them to sanctification; it is a human need that can be transcended. This does not mean that he considers marital sexual relations to be sinful, but as being limited in its ability to raise each partner from individuality to personhood. For Sophrony, the most profound and deepest human intimacy reflects the *perichoresis* in the Holy Trinity, and therefore involves a co-inherency and inter-penetrability of soul and spirit, not just of body. Beyond the obvious connection between intimacy and childbearing, Saint Sophrony offers little reflection on this aspect of marriage. Without denigrating the role that human sexuality plays within the confines of a marriage, he would say that while intimacy might begin on the physical/psychological level, in its most profound and important form it contains a spiritual dimension, characterized by self-sacrificial and unconditional love, strengthened by the grace of God.

Of course, the secular modalities limit their therapeutic approach to intimacy-building to the physical/emotional level, which is cetainly very important for most couples. Without first fostering a strong physical emotional bond, most are not inclined to work together towards something that transcends physical desire. Gottman Therapy begins intimacy-building by developing the "Friendship System," acknowledging that authentic intimacy is impossible without trust and commitment. Gottman Therapy has also developed a suite of interventions around sexuality that focuses on communication and sharing desires and expectations with one's partner without the presence of shame. These tools can help the couple and the therapist to identify the problematic issues that may present themselves in the area of sexual intimacy, but

which are really caused by some other injury or dysfunction within the romantic partnership. Emotionally Focused Therapy is especially adept at locating the causes of any type of sexual dysfunction because, as Sue Johnson has found, most of these issues are caused by untreated attachment wounds.[62] Even though Saint Sophrony presents intimacy as a spiritual bond that is only made possible by the grace of God, most couples are not able to manifest this type of unity without first establishing physical and emotional intimacy. While he would acknowledge this to be true, he would also exercise pastoral guidance to lead couples to develop an intimacy that is ontological in nature, transcending all selfish passion. In the Orthodox Christian context, we can both acknowledge the importance that marital relations play in fostering intimacy, while also understanding the limitations. Ultimately, within the Hypostatic Principle, physical intimacy is about preparation for parenthood and living for the other, not self-fulfillment.

While each of these aspects of the Hypostatic Principle are treated by the secular modalities, the aspect that is missing is, naturally, the spiritual dimension. As demonstrated in previous chapters, both Gottman and Johnson acknowledge that spirituality has some importance in securing the couple's bond, but this is not a subject to which they give serious consideration, which is why their therapeutic modalities are limited. Ultimately, in the teaching of Saint Sophrony, the bond of the couple can become *ontological* in nature, wherein the connection that has been facilitated through psychological and emotional means takes on a spiritual character – allowing each partner 'to live the life of the other', by God's grace. As each partner's psychological and emotional wounds are healed through the experience of being loved unconditionally by the other, they in turn expand their consciousness to include even those outside of their romantic

[62] In my pastoral work with couples, I have also found this to be true – many emotional wounds and attachment fears go unspoken and untreated until they present themselves through disharmony in the bedroom.

partnership, beginning with children and then incorporating all others. In *Hearken My Beloved Bretheren*, Saint Sophrony writes of this expanding consciousness:

> We know, for instance, two young people, a husband and his wife, each of them…[are] already in the unity of the couple. Out of this unity in love, children are born. And what happens is that when they speak of themselves, their own life includes two or three people (adding in the children)... The family grows bigger, the circle of their awareness is widened. They can now live, not only as themselves, as a couple, but also with the children, with friends, with other relatives and so on. In this manner the horizons of man are broadened. When he says 'I', all those whom he loves are now included in this 'I' (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 2021, p. 72).

Axiom Two: Kenosis

Kenosis, or self-emptying, is an important aspect of Saint Sophrony's hypostatic theology. Its foundation is the kenotic action that exists within the life of the Holy Trinity, and as seen in the saving economy of Jesus Christ. As was covered above, Sophrony was deeply moved by the love of Christ and His willingness to suffer the 'self-emptying' by pouring out His life for the life of the world. In imitation of Christ, Sophrony instructs others to do the same – to "give our life for the others to live".[63] While kenosis involves the negative action of self-denial, its purpose is to create space for the positive action of loving the other and bringing them into one's own existence.

One of the aspects of Christ's kenosis that is most applicable to human relationships is His obedience to the Father. Christ did not do His own will, but aligned His will with the will of the Father in the sacrificial act of enduring the cross and death. Obedience is an important monastic

[63] This phrase is on the scroll that he holds on his icon: "We must give our life for the other to live".

principle, and should also be applied, with great care and discernment, to marriage.[64] The difference between obedience in these two contexts is that in monasticism the brotherhood practices "blind obedience" to the Abbot as a method of cutting-off their self-will and 'emptying themselves' of selfishness and self-love. In a romantic partnership, neither of the partners is 'The Abbot' and 'obedience' is not practiced blindly, but with discretion and love. Obedience in the monastic life applies to thoughts, deeds, and the regulation of daily life. Obedience within the confines of an Orthodox Christian marriage is more about sacrificing one's will for the sake of the other, rather than obeying a command.

Obedience is a sensitive subject in the modern world, especially within the context of romantic relationships. Because at times abuse has been justified under the guise of 'obedience', this is not a theme that is directly treated by secular modalities, and certainly not in a positive context. Obedience is sometimes addressed by certain Christian pastors during marriage or pre-marriage counseling, who mention Paul's admonition that "the husband is head of his wife", but this principle has been so misunderstood and misapplied over time that it is not a part of secular couple therapy.

However, when examining Gottman Therapy and EFT more closely, a type of obedience is found. Though they naturally do not use Biblical language to justify or establish obedience of one spouse to the other, both modalities approach this subject at least in indirect ways. Both

[64] In my visits to the monastery founded by Saint Sophrony I have had general discussions with the monastics about kenosis and its relationship to the monastic rule of obedience. Though Sophrony did not write much about marriage, he did write and preach many homilies about monastic life. I was told by his great nephew Fr Nikolai Sakharov that everything Saint Sophrony wrote about obedience in the monastic life could be applied to obedience in marriage very naturally.

encourage romantic partners to make concessions to each other, and to consider the other when deciding everything from where to eat dinner on a date to the larger issues about having children or purchasing a home. Gottman goes even further by arguing for the establishment of a "dominance structure" over various aspects of the couple's life, even if it is gender-based. He argued that his research indicated that there is more conflict between romantic partners when gender-delineated dominance structures are not in place, which forces couples to go through the process of creating their own dominance structure. He argues that as long as both partners have the perception that the power dynamic in the relationship is fair, and they maintain emotional responsiveness to each other, the "traditional" gender-based model is not destructive in and of itself. This is not the same as proclaiming that the Biblical model teaches female servility, and it is closer to an Orthodox Christian approach, wherein even if gender-based dominance structures are in place, absolute obedience to one's husband is not the practice. Rather, each spouse is called to honor and serve the other for the greater good, regardless of gender.

Another aspect of kenosis is especially emphasized by Sue Johnson in her treatment of attachment in romantic relationships. As mentioned briefly above, she uses the acronym A.R.E., with the three questions: "Are you Accessible to me? Are you Responsive to my needs? Are you Engaged with me and showing Empathy?" The practice of empathic responsiveness is a kenotic act. Selfishness and self-love limit one's ability to respond empathically, to enter into the experience, positive or negative, of one's partner. Therefore, the kenosis that one experiences is both the emptying of one's self-preoccupation and self-will as a prerequisite, and the kenosis of responding to the other with love and true empathy.

Both Gottman and Johnson emphasize the need for empathic love in a romantic partnership. Once again, the Gottman Method is more mechanical in its approach, teaching empathy as a skill, a technique, to be developed. For instance, in order to be empathetic, demonstrate understanding by repeating what your partner said in your own words and show compassion by saying which emotions they are experiencing. This is a 'top-down', or 'head-then-heart' approach: Listen, diagnose, and communicate understanding. In contrast, Emotionally Focused Therapy assumes that each partner is empathetic by nature and will respond accordingly as long as a need or emotion is communicated properly. This is a 'bottom-up', or 'heart-then-head', approach. The focus is on emotion, and the belief is that if one truly loves one's partner, the response to the partner's suffering will be empathetic. If there is any 'mechanistic' training in EFT, it is that the therapist is taught to put words into each partner's mouth, demonstrating how to communicate what they are already feeling. Both modalities offer helpful tools for empathic and kenotic responsiveness. The EFT method is a more natural approach for pastoral work, but for those undergoing professional therapy, the Gottman Method's methodical approach can help build empathic practices for those struggling with more serious emotional impasses.

The extrapolation of Saint Sophrony's use of kenotic practice to couples also includes the 'self-emptying' of the mind. In this context, it does not mean a complete emptying of the mind or its function, but pertains to one's predispositions and judgments. When locating *kenosis* in epistemological perspectives, it is understood as the ability to empty oneself from one's presuppositions and preconceived perceptions, especially of one's partner's personality, actions and intentions. This can be one of the most important ingredients in any form of receptivity in human relationships, and is especially applicable in the context of couple counseling. Within the

practice of Emotionally Focused Therapy, positive receptivity is fostered by the humble acceptance of the other, including their weaknesses and shortcomings. These 'negative' aspects of their personality are reframed as wounds caused by unmet attachment needs. Properly understanding one's partner, which requires the emptying of one's presuppositions and judgments about them, creates space for empathic love and compassion, allowing for this reframing and insight into their deepest needs and desires.

Since intimacy is both an important component and one of the goals of a healthy romantic partnership, there is another prerequisite that requires kenosis: vulnerability. Just as without authenticity a couple's bond is not fully developed, so without vulnerability their intimacy will not be as deep as it could be. Saint Sophrony only uses the word vulnerability in its negative aspect, as in 'vulnerability to temptations'. But in examining the totality of his work, it is clear that a vulnerable openness to God and to others is necessary for the fulfillment of the Hypostatic Principle. Without vulnerability, one cannot be 'open' or authentic before God or others, and this will prevent hypostatic interchange. The theme of vulnerability before God is worth exploring, but not necessarily for this dissertation. However, the theme of vulnerability before one's partner is crucial.

Vulnerability is an area where both The Gottman Method and EFT offer helpful interventions, as it is crucial to both modalities. A very helpful tool that Gottman uses in therapy with couples is called "softened startup". This was covered more fully in chapter one, but the purpose of beginning any conflict interaction with a 'soft' startup is to establish a non-threatening atmosphere that does not trigger automatic defensiveness. One of the barriers to vulnerability is

fear of judgment or the belief that one's partner will be overwhelmed by what the speaker reveals about himself or herself. This possible danger for couples is why Gottman emphasizes non-judgment and teaches empathic response – so that the experience of becoming vulnerable will be positive and foster closeness. Emotionally Focused Therapy similarly teaches romantic partners how to practice vulnerability by employing "need" statements, rather than "blame" statements. In teaching partners to share their needs instead of blaming each other, EFT helps to uncover their attachment wounds, which also fosters intimacy.

Axiom Three: God-Forsakenness

While there is a negative aspect to God-forsakenness, or the chastening of God through His absence, Saint Sophrony considers it a positive and necessary phase of the spiritual journey, which accomplishes the eradication of pride and egoism in the human being, allowing for the increase of God's grace. Analogously, within the confines of a romantic partnership, the temporary withdrawal or absence, physical or emotional, of one's lover provides an opportunity for personal development and the eventual strengthening of the couple's bond. Whereas in this axiom of Saint Sophrony the withdrawal of God from man is strategic, in the human context the withdrawal or absence of one's romantic partner can be either purposeful or accidental. The 'why' is not as significant as is the perception of the partner who is feeling forsaken.

When someone suffers from insecure attachment, almost every withdrawal of their partner will be taken personally and viewed as an act of purposeful distancing and a sign that the partner's love is waning. Sue Johnson explains that the attachment panic that one feels when one's partner withdraws is akin to being threatened by a wild animal – the body is put into 'fight or flight', and

it becomes very difficult to analyze properly or to think creatively. Even for those who do not suffer from insecure attachment, the physical or emotional withdrawal of one's partner can be painful, giving rise to questions regarding their fidelity. The unresponsiveness of one's partner to bids for intimacy or closeness can also cause feelings of abandonment or being unloved. When these instances are examined through the prism of the spiritual axiom of Saint Sophrony, they can be understood as opportunities for self-reflection and personal growth in two main ways, though this is very difficult. The two ways are patient endurance with self-accusation, and the translation of one's pain to an ontological state in commensurability with the suffering of Christ.

According to the teaching of Saint Sophrony, enduring the pain of abandonment is an imitation of Christ, Who endured physical pain and the 'abandonment' of the Father while on the Cross. The feelings of 'fight or flight' that rise in the body are difficult to ignore, and they can give rise to feelings of anger and despair. In the Orthodox Christian context, one is not called to 'ignore' these feelings, but to refrain from acting on them. Using the spiritual axiom as a guide, a partner who is feeling abandoned is called to examine themselves to see in what ways they may have elicited the physical or emotional withdrawal of their partner. When one is suffering, it is more natural to feel anger towards the person who caused the pain, so becoming introspective and practicing self-accusation is a way to reject that negative response and 'rise above human nature' to become more like Christ. While the body is experiencing the turmoil of the fight/flight response, the mind can remain disciplined and cease from judgmental and destructive thoughts, and instead look for positive ways to self-accuse. This type of patient endurance with self-accusation is also an assault on one's pride and selfishness. To deny oneself the satisfaction of either speaking or acting out in anger is a humble response that demonstrates true love for one's

partner. To ‘stay’ rather than ‘run away’, either physically or emotionally, is also contrary to the instincts of fallen human nature, and also demonstrates fidelity to one’s partner.

The other positive response to feelings of abandonment has to do with translating one’s psychological pain to something that is ontological, or ‘spiritual’. Saint Sophrony teaches that experiencing psychological pain provides an opportunity for us to draw closer to Christ by converting what is psychological and earthly to the spiritual plane. He did this by prayer. Instead of blaming the one who hurt him and allowing bitter and destructive thoughts to corrupt his mind and heart, Saint Sophrony sought to translate his painful experience from this plane to the spiritual plane by raising his mind to God. He writes, “In spirit we translate our own individual state to universal dimensions” (Sophrony, Archimandrite, 1996, p. 17). In this way he accepted the pain as a gift. Sophrony teaches that, even though the pain that one is experiencing may have nothing to do with God, a person can still offer it up to Him and suffer for His sake, rather than for their own sake. Suffering in this way removes the bitterness that one feels for the partner who withdrew. When a person assimilates this axiom it fosters even greater love, gratitude and repentance. In translating his suffering to universal dimensions, Saint Sophrony was drawn into a deeper realization: the suffering was a gift of God, and in choosing to suffer for His sake, Sophrony was being granted a blessing of which he was unworthy. This realization led him to a place of greater gratitude for God, and a stronger sense of God’s love for him.

One of the strengths of EFT is the recognition and diagnosis of negative interactional patterns. Sue Johnson identifies the “demand withdrawal” pattern as the most common amongst couples, wherein one partner has an insecure attachment style. The insecure partner unwittingly pushes

the more secure partner away by demanding more of them. As the insecure partner seeks assurance that they are loved, the secure partner feels overwhelmed by the demands, and withdraws – this can happen physically, emotionally, or both. This response of the secure partner only intensifies the insecurity of the other partner, and they again make a demand for assurance, closeness, and/or intimacy, and the cycle continues. Emotionally Focused Therapy treats couples suffering from this cycle by helping them identify the negative pattern of interaction and to properly understand the attachment needs and fears that lie underneath it. When one of the romantic partners is withdrawing due to this interaction pattern, EFT is very successful at treating this. When the withdrawal is caused by some other factor, EFT can also be helpful in diagnosing the cause, helping each partner understand the other's perspective and the emotions underneath it. The ability to reframe negative interaction patterns in terms of attachment needs and fears makes EFT very useful in therapy and in pastoral work with couples. Gottman Therapy is also helpful in that it provides structured conversations that can help each partner understand the other's experience and have their own experience validated.

The content that neither modality provides is the recognition of the spiritual dimension of suffering, and the translation of psychological pain into ontological/prayerful pain. There is also an inherent dichotomy between the hypostatic theology of Saint Sophrony and the theories underlying the secular modalities: The one understand suffering as a potential tool, when used properly, for purification and identifying more fully with Christ, while the other does not generally see a positive role for suffering.[65] Gottman and Johnson offer tools and strategies to

[65] The closest that Gottman comes to seeing a positive role for suffering, is his acknowledgement that growth only comes through conflict. He recognizes that conflict can be helpful, but does not directly address the role of suffering specifically.

help identify when and why certain types of interactions between couples cause a withdrawal response, and to help heal the attachment wounds that present themselves during these events. These strategies can be successfully combined with an Orthodox Christian pastoral approach that incorporates the hypostatic theology of Saint Sophrony, including giving a very nuanced understanding about suffering as something not to be sought for, but to learn from and be used positively when it is experienced.

Axiom Four: "Keep Thy Mind in Hell and Despair Not"

This axiom's purpose is to lead a person to humbly accept who he or she is before God and before their romantic partner, including accepting responsibility for one's own shortcomings, without falling into despondency or doubting that one can still be loved, despite not being perfect. In the life of Saint Sophrony, this axiom concerned his relationship with God; and it was an existential movement of his being that created an ontological change within him. In the community of a romantic partnership, this axiom is applied more on the human level, though it still offers the opportunity for one to transcend human nature by mentally dwelling on the spiritual plane with God.

Various degrees of conflict exist in every romantic partnership, yet these offer opportunities for personal introspection and even repentance. Both modalities, the Gottman Method and EFT, employ strategies for helping partners understand the perspective of the other, while also accepting valid criticism for their contributions to the conflict in their relationship or pain experienced by their partner. In Orthodox Christian ascetical writings, you find the phrase, "To know thyself is a greater miracle than raising the dead". To become aware of one's

shortcomings, either during therapy or during a conflict or post-conflict conversation, is valued by both secular and Christian therapists. But accepting criticism is difficult to do because it generally triggers a defensive stance inside us. The more instinctive human response to criticism is not acceptance, but defensiveness. John Gottman's use of "softened startup" is helpful in not triggering an automatic defensive response, but it takes more than just a gentle approach for criticism to be accepted, valued, and brought into one's consciousness.

One of the factors that makes it difficult for romantic partners to accept criticism from each other is the self-belief that they are not loved unconditionally, but conditionally. They may start thinking that their partner will only really love them when they attain some degree of perfection or conformity to their partner's expectations. To admit weakness, to accept criticism, is to place oneself in a vulnerable position, where one imagines that one is not being loved unconditionally. This is the first area where this axiom of Saint Sophrony can help. He was able to condemn himself to hell without falling into despair because he was sure of God's love and mercy. From a simply psychological point of view, knowing that God's love is unconditional, it might be easier to conceptualize His love than the love of our spouse or romantic partner for us, because previous experience may have shown us that despite their best efforts, sometimes their love does seem to have conditions attached to it. During a conflict interaction, perhaps one may not be able to convince oneself that their partner has unconditional love for them, but they can learn not to be controlled by the fear of losing their partner's love. Overcoming the fear of losing love, whether it is the love of God or of one's partner, is the first step to accepting criticism and fault.

Accepting criticism is difficult, even when someone is assured that the criticism is coming from a place of love. But according to this spiritual axiom of Saint Sophrony, one can learn to accept criticism even when it is offered as blame, or delivered in an unkind manner. Our defensive human nature is one natural obstacle to this, but an even more troublesome obstacle is the ego, our pride. Sophrony was willing not only to accept the criticism of others, but to condemn himself even for the faults of others – as if it were his sinfulness that caused the other person to fall. This practice humbled him, and he began to live it ontologically, not just theoretically or psychologically, always placing himself mentally below every other person.

The Gottman Method incorporates a strategy during conflict interactions called "accepting responsibility". This strategy allows someone to accept 'part' of the blame being leveled at them, without accepting all of it. While it may seem to stop short of Sophrony's axiom, which would be to accept all criticism, the Gottman strategy is probably a healthier approach within the confines of a romantic partnership, and in practice I have seen it help to diffuse conflict and change the 'atmosphere' within a conflict interaction. It is a practice that also fosters humility, which is the goal of this axiom.

Another aspect of humbling oneself before one's partner is not only to learn to accept criticism and responsibility, but also to go even further and to reject judgmental thoughts about one's partner. As was said above, for this Saint Sophrony would use self-condemnation, accusing himself of the faults of others. For him, this was not just a technique, but an ontological state. For most married couples this will not be an ontological state, but it can be used as a technique at first until it becomes a permanent 'mode of being,' an ontological state within them. During a

conflict interaction, and until the damage from the conflict is repaired, one's thoughts are usually focused on one's own pain and the faults of the partner. It takes force to be aware of one's feelings without giving way to anger, and to condemn oneself for the conflict, despite what one is feeling. In Gottman Therapy couples are taught about Diffuse Physiological Arousal – when the heartbeat is over 100-bpm. This triggers the alarm system in the brain, which is the 'Fight or Flight' response. During therapy, couples are taught that when this occurs, when either one of them is experiencing "flooding," to take a break – to take a short walk and drink some water. This allows blood flow back into the prefrontal cortex, which enables creativity and empathy. During conflict interactions this is a good practice for those who desire to humble themselves, and to reject judgmental thoughts about their partner.

The EFT practice of diagnosing negative interaction cycles using a comprehensive view of attachment science can be helpful in making 'excuses' for one's partner. Using this practice, one can understand their partner's actions as coming from a place of illness or pain, rather than a place of malintent or selfishness. A person can train himself to see wounds instead of behaviors – to see what lies underneath rather than what is presented. This is a humble approach that softens the heart towards one's partner, which can become a permanent practice with repetition and the grace of God.

Self-condemnation, rejecting judgmental thoughts, and taking responsibility for one's faults and the faults of one's partner are made easier when a strong connection or love-bond is present. When the connection between romantic partners is sound, then the trust between them will be strong, which makes it easier to repair after conflict, and to accept blame without fear. The

Gottman Method places “The Friendship System” as the foundation of the Sound Relationship House. During Gottman therapy, couples work to strengthen their friendship, trust, and intimacy before engaging in more difficult and emotionally-charged discussions. Though a strong friendship in a romantic relationship cannot approximate the love of God that Saint Sophrony experienced as he cast his mind into hell without despairing, having a strong friendship and experiencing the love of a spouse provides the ‘secure base’ for one to be more confident that love will be returned following conflict. This assurance also helps one to accept criticism without defensiveness, and to even accept the blame for one’s partner’s perceived faults.

Axiom Five: Love for One’s Enemies as the Measure of One’s Love for God

Of all the axioms of Saint Sophrony, this is perhaps the most difficult one to translate to romantic relationships, and it is the most challenging for partners to practice. This is a call to ‘transcend human nature’, which is only possible with God’s help. One of the early Church Fathers, Saint John Chrysostom, said, “one only loves God to the degree that one loves the person that one loves the least.” This is a difficult but true saying, related to Sophrony’s conviction that one does not truly love God unless one loves one’s enemies. Translated to marriage, this would indicate that one’s love for one’s spouse is equal to the degree that one loves their worst parts – those characteristics and shortcomings that have become an ‘enemy’.

Saint Sophrony uses the word “enemy” because it is the word that Christ uses in the Gospel, but he had no true ‘enemies’, so this term is used with the understanding that for most people, ‘enemies’ are simply those who are difficult to love, or who oppose one’s self-will. There are many people throughout history and in our modern world who have experienced hatred, bigotry,

and persecution, so they can be said to have enemies in a more existential way. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the focus is on romantic relationships, and so 'enemies' is defined as delineated above.[66]

For Saint Sophrony, Christ was not only the giver of the commandment to love one's enemies, He was also the paramount example of it. Christ loved until the end, and did not condemn those who hated Him. Within a romantic partnership conflict arises when two separate wills compete against each other. According to John Gottman, this is unavoidable – and to the degree that pride and self-love exist in each partner, he is correct. Even in cases where each partner is humble and seeks the best for the other, there will be certain characteristics or flaws in the other that will on occasion cause irritation or distress. The axiom to love these 'enemies' in the other, has two dimensions: The first is to learn to tolerate the faults of one's partner without condemnation, and the second is to even learn to appreciate and to be thankful for the flaws as being beneficial for the cutting-off of one's own self-will and the elimination of one's pride.

Another aspect of this axiom, which is an even more difficult practice, is to learn to love the other when love is not reciprocated. How one behaves when nothing is expected in return reveals one's true intention. Christ's love proved to be constant and full when He forgave His 'enemies' while on the cross. In desiring to emulate this selfless and sacrificial love, romantic partners can learn to transcend human reason and limitations, with God's help, and to offer love to the other,

[66] As another disclaimer, I must also add that in no way does this commandment to love one's enemies indicate that abuse within a marriage is permissible. According to modern Orthodox Christian practice, divorce is acceptable in cases of physical or even verbal abuse. However, it is also within the Orthodox tradition, depending on the degree of abuse, and the capacity to bear it, for one to remain in such a marriage and to endure for the sake of Christ, or for the benefit of the children. However, this subject must be treated very carefully and with discernment in each unique case.

despite receiving nothing in return. In order to accomplish this, it is helpful to keep an eternal perspective on one's relationship. In the next life one's spouse will be perfect – not only sinless, but without character flaws or weaknesses. Keeping this in mind can help someone to love their partner, not as they are in the present, but as Christ sees them, and as they will be in eternity.

The secular modalities offer little support regarding this difficult axiom. Limited by their temporal perspective, they do not teach loving one's enemies as a virtue. But this is not to say that they make no contribution at all. In this regard, Emotionally Focused Therapy teaches couples in distress that their partner is not the enemy, rather it is the destructive cycles and interaction patterns that cause the hurt. This is not the same as loving one's enemies, but it at least introduces the idea that one's partner is not the problem. Further, as stated above, EFT helps each partner to view the defects of the other as wounds rather than sins. This falls short of the admonition to be thankful for those weaknesses, but it does help to conceptually reframe the least loveable parts of one's spouse as being unintentional.

Axiom Six: 'Adamic' Prayer

In the teaching of Saint Sophrony, the fullfillment of the commandment to love one's enemies finds its fullness in empathic prayer for the whole world, desiring the salvation of all. In deep prayer for others, Sophrony experienced *hypostatic interchange* – mystically taking another's existence into his own existence.[67] On the human level, this is a deep empathy, where one

[67] Saint Sophrony employs this phrase in various texts. By taking another's existence into one's own existence, he does not mean to say that the other's personhood is taken from them or mingled with one's own. There is some debate as to whether in his use, "existence" is limited to 'life' and 'energy', or if it also includes the 'hypostasis'. Saint Sophrony was not specific on this issue. However, he is clear that each person always retains their own hypostasis.

experiences the pains and joys of another person as if they were their own. On the spiritual level, this is an ontological experience that is only possible by the grace of God. For this axiom's application to romantic partnerships, we will discuss how it is lived out on the human level, though still with the help of God.

In Saint Sophrony's writings, and in his own experience, agonizing prayer for the entire world is an imitation of Christ's Gethsemane prayer. It is a way of fulfilling the commandment to love everyone. Human empathy has the capacity to adopt the pain of another – to enter into it – and to make it one's own. In the experience and teaching of Saint Sophrony, the adopting of the suffering of others through the hypostatic interchange in no way diminishes personhood, as each hypostasis retains its own uniqueness. As he took on the suffering of others in deep prayer, Sophrony did not lose any part of his hypostasis, neither did it get confused with the hypostasis of others, for it remained distinct and unrepeatable. In a similar fashion, showing empathy and adopting the suffering of others should not in any way diminish one's own personhood or autonomy.

In the community of marriage there is ample opportunity to love one's partner through empathic responsiveness. God designed human beings with the capacity to do this, even giving them a proclivity for it through the mirror neurons. It is one thing to be able to demonstrate compassion towards one who is suffering, which is the beginning of fulfilling this axiom; however, it takes much more effort to become empathic. Some of the obstacles to empathy are selfishness, narcissism, a preoccupation with one's own feelings, and difficulties with meta-emotion. When a person is self-consumed or narcissistic, empathy for others will have to be forced. To the degree

that one is pre-occupied with one's own feelings, as this is the natural human response to any type of suffering, they will not be able to empathically take on the pain of others. Therefore, it follows that those ascetic practices which help eliminate self-love and self-occupation are beneficial for one who desires to love others empathically.

The other obstacle to empathic responsiveness within romantic partnerships concerns "meta-emotion", a term used by John Gottman (how one feels and thinks about emotion). Some people become unnerved or distressed by the expression of negative emotions by others. Whether this difficulty stems from adverse childhood experiences or other factors is not crucial to this thesis, but both secular modalities attempt to help romantic partners overcome it. In pastoral work with couples, it is a common theme that the husband feels responsible for the feelings of his wife, and therefore he has difficulty bearing her negative feelings, especially sadness. Some partners react in fear or dismissiveness to the negative feelings expressed by their spouse, as if showing empathy would overwhelm or shatter them. In some cases, teaching meta-emotion can help shape how one partner experiences the negative feelings of the other partner, while in other cases the difficulty with negative emotion has more to do with personal resiliency and should be treated in a therapeutic setting outside of couple counseling.

Though it was specifically designed to be used with parents of young children, The Gottman Method has a module that teaches meta-emotion, or "emotion coaching," in five steps. These steps are 1) To be aware of the emotion, 2) Connect with your child, 3) Listen to your child with empathy, 4) Name the emotions, and 5) Find solutions. Translated to couples, these steps could be 1) Awareness of the emotion, 2) Connect with your partner, 3) Listen and respond

empathetically to your partner, 4) Locate the 'softer' primary emotions underneath the presenting emotion, and 5) Find solutions, or accept that there may not be a solution. The goal of emotion coaching in the Gottman Method is to help partners bear the emotions of the other with empathic love, even if it makes them feel uncomfortable. Gottman's belief is that the better one understands emotions, the more able one will be to bear them in oneself and in one's partner. The ability to bear the negative emotions of one's romantic partner increases one's capacity for empathy.

In the Emotionally Focused Therapy training module, Sue Johnson says that empathic responsiveness is the very essence of EFT. By helping couples reframe conflict interactions as responses to attachment needs and injury, she also helps them understand the emotions involved in their conflict or mutual distress. When each partner is able to see the attachment needs of the other, they are more likely to feel compassion and respond empathically. Both modalities offer effective support for teaching empathy and helping romantic partners better understand emotions. This is an important step towards fulfilling the spiritual axiom to take upon oneself the sufferings of others. Yet by building upon the foundation that Gottman Therapy and EFT provide, we can progress even further on the theme of empathy. Not only can romantic partners learn to bear the emotions of the other, they can learn to love more fully by taking upon themselves the sufferings of their partner in deep prayer to God – to present their partner's pains to God with even greater desire and care than if they were their own.

This axiom is the pinnacle of Saint Sophrony's spiritual teaching, as it demonstrates the purest form of love – to sacrificially pray for the entire world with pain and empathy. For a couple, this

is also perhaps the pinnacle of love – to sacrificially offer oneself in prayer for the benefit of the other. It is one way of fulfilling the saying of Christ, "greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (*John* 15:13). Empathic responsiveness and sacrificial prayer are small ways of "laying down one's life" for the other. In the Orthodox Christian marriage service, the Bride and the Groom are 'crowned' as martyrs for each other, which indicates that this is a fundamental purpose of marriage – to give one's life so that the other may live.

CONCLUSION

We have focused in this dissertation on the Gottman Method of Couple Counseling and Emotionally Focused Therapy because they are the two most prevalent and effective couple counseling modalities currently in use. As we have seen, beyond their high rates of positive outcomes, what they hold in common is a scientific backing, and a focus on the crucial role of emotion in couple dynamics.

As we noted, Gottman Therapy proclaims itself to be the first "Evidence-Based" therapy, a claim that is backed by the production of multiple longitudinal studies of couples. These studies were groundbreaking, offering many insights in couple dynamics, and making clear the factors that were most instrumental in a couple's long-term success or failure. Whether the Sound Relationship House, the Gottman theory of intervention, comes directly from the research in the longitudinal studies can be questioned, but on its own merit, the Gottman suite of interventions has demonstrated positive outcomes for distressed couples.

Susan Johnson's Emotionally Focused Therapy also has a scientific backing, being supported by the attachment work of John Bowlby. Again, more research could be done to deduce whether EFT comes directly from Bowlby's insights, or is an amalgamation of his work and Johnson's own experience with Les Greenberg and his focus on emotion. In either case, EFT's interventions have a stellar reputation and effective outcome rates. As we have noted, while both Gottman's and Johnson's focus on emotion helped change the landscape of modern couple therapy, Johnson's inclusion of the science of attachment theory elevates her work, and brings

into focus the primary cause of repetitive couple conflict patterns and disharmony. Her pioneering dissection and explanation of negative couple interaction patterns brought a new understanding of how attachment wounds affect the present moment, preventing couples from communicating effectively.

Despite the success of both therapies, we observed how Gottman and Johnson each authorized religious versions of their work. The Gottman Institute published a Biblical Study Guide and an Islamic Study Guide, demonstrating that Gottman felt his work was compatible with various religious worldviews since it was grounded in the truth of science, and thus applicable to all. Johnson rewrote her seminal work, *Hold Me Tight*, positing God as the ultimate secure attachment figure. Her new offering, *Created for Connection*, began to explore the source of the attachment system in humans, and found a possible link with the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. If God is indeed the ultimate figure of secure attachment, this would help explain why the science of attachment is such a powerful organizing force for the inner life of human beings.

Johnson's process of examining couple therapy with a higher resolution, bringing depth and heightened focus to her presentation of the science of attachment theory, provides a compelling start to offering a more precise examination of human relationships, and it even hints at an ontological gap that exists between secular counseling and religious worldviews. This ontological gap, as we have seen, is a direct result of the scientific commitment of those developing therapeutic modalities to work from an areligious foundation in the attempt to strengthen the acceptance of modalities across worldviews. While admirable, this effort unavoidably leads to a diminished, incomplete view of the human person, which has resulted in

the demand of Christian therapists and Christian couples to have an added dimension to secular therapy. That dimension is the inclusion of a Christian worldview which maintains an elevated and holistic perspective on relationships.

As this dissertation articulates, that worldview and understanding of the human person is provided by the Eastern Orthodox father Saint Sophrony the Athonite of Essex. Formed by the grace of God in the experience of deep hesychastic prayer, together with the wide-ranging experiences of his unique life, Sophrony's theology of the human person calls for the expansion of each person's consciousness to consider the life of the other as one's own – this consideration has great and wonderful ramifications for romantic relationships. His perspective that individuals become true persons only when they are in communion with God and the entire human race makes every human relationship consequential for one's salvation. In applying his "Hypostatic Principle" to marriage, for example, a couple can embrace the potential that their marriage has for sanctification, and for the development of each spouse from being a spiritually and intellectually isolated individual, to becoming an integrated and connected person.

In Saint Sophrony's hypostatic theology, all people are called to live for others – that is, to offer their life so that others may live more fully. Without losing one's own personhood, each partner in a committed romantic relationship[68] is encouraged by Saint Sophrony to practice kenotic love in imitation of Christ, and thereby learn what it means to be truly human – to take another's existence in some sense into one's own existence. By combining the science and effective interventions of secular couple counseling modalities with the hypostatic theology of Saint

[68] In Sophrony's context, he would be speaking specifically to married couples, but his principle can be applied to all committed partnerships.

Sophrony, couples can gain an eternal and integrated perspective on the adversities they face, while working together towards the healing of themselves and their partner.

The introduction of Saint Sophrony's primary spiritual axioms into the context of couple counseling initiates a broader discussion into how his theological understanding of personhood may illuminate the dynamics of marriage. Central to this contribution is his concept of kenotic love – a self-emptying orientation toward the other – which offers couples a framework for reframing both the ordinary adversity inherent in intimate relationships and the more acute distress arising from attachment injuries or entrenched negative interaction cycles. From this perspective, adversity is not interpreted solely as failure or dysfunction, but as a potential site of transformation. Whether relational suffering emerges from actions for which one bears responsibility – what Saint Sophrony would describe as sin – or from wounds incurred with little or no personal agency, such as early attachment trauma, such experiences may become catalysts for growth when engaged with intentionality and openness to transformation.

This reframing finds resonance in the work of Professor Renos Papadopoulos, founder of the Centre for Trauma, Asylum and Refugees, who developed the concept of "Adversity-Activated Development." A close student of Saint Sophrony, Papadopoulos argues that the outcome of adversity – even in cases of profound trauma – is not predetermined. Rather, adversity can generate "positive developments that are a direct result of being exposed to adversity… [as] individuals and groups find meaning in their suffering and transmute negative experiences into new strength and transformative renewal" (Papadopoulos, 2008). Within a Christian theological horizon, this possibility is grounded in the conviction that the ultimate revelation of love in

human history is the kenotic love of Christ for His enemies. In emulating this self-emptying love, couples are invited to cultivate a disciplined awareness of their own ego-driven impulses and to orient themselves toward the good of the other, thereby transforming relational adversity into an arena for mutual maturation and deeper communion. Practicing kenotic love is not about self-abasement or neglect – reframed, it can be considered the pursuit of joy, peace, and the experience of God's unconditional love. From this perspective, the practice of kenotic love is the highest form of one's personal development. And from the perspective of the Hypostatic Principle, all adversity and daily sacrifices in marriage and family life provide the opportunity to show one's love for God and to grow closer to Him, and to one another.

Limitations of this Study and Suggestions for Further Research

As a conceptual and theological inquiry, this study does not attempt to measure clinical outcomes or provide statistical evidence of therapeutic efficacy. Rather than conducting empirical research, the project seeks to engage critically with the theoretical and theological dimensions of emotion-focused couple therapies in light of an Orthodox Christian anthropology. The integration of theological and psychological frameworks inevitably presents challenges, particularly given the differing epistemological foundations upon which each discipline rests. This dissertation also does not engage directly with other Christian theological perspectives beyond the scope of the Orthodox Christian Patristic Tradition. As a married priest serving within the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America – specifically in a parish located in Anchorage, Alaska – my pastoral experience, while inclusive of parishioners from diverse ethnic backgrounds, nonetheless remains contextually limited. I acknowledge that these limitations have surely shaped my interpretive lens and the ways in which I have engaged with the source

materials. Nonetheless, this study aims to provide a coherent and intellectually responsible framework that may inform future empirical or clinical work.

In my pastoral role, I often serve in a counseling capacity; however, I acknowledge the limitations inherent in not being a clinically trained therapist. The "Six Theological Axioms" proposed in this dissertation are intended as foundational constructs that could be further developed by practitioners with clinical expertise and translated into therapeutic methods and training programs. Until such work is undertaken, the theoretical framework offered here remains untested in empirical settings and cannot be evaluated through outcome-based clinical studies. Although this is primarily a conceptual and theological study intended for application across diverse marital and cohabitating contexts, it is my conviction that it could provide an even more meaningful framework within an Orthodox Christian context. It remains for someone with clinical training to build upon this work in a way that maintains both its theological depth and pastoral applicability, so that it may be offered specifically for Orthodox Christians.

Concerning the secular modalities presented in this dissertation, more research could be done on the relationship between John Gottman's longitudinal studies and the Sound Relationship House theory. Is this theory even necessary, or do the interventions in the Gottman Method respond to the data of the studies without being informed by the theory? Gottman's transition from a background in mathematics as a data-driven researcher to an 'relationship expert' could be explored more fully, which might give some insight into his role as a therapist and his over-reliance on mathematics to understand human behavior.

In addition, Sue Johnson's pioneering use of attachment science to treat romantic partners needs more attention. There are at least two areas of her work that could be more fully explored: (a) her discussion of oxytocin as a powerful biological force for emotion bonding in couples, and (b) her concept of attachment injury, which has some parallels with Daniel Siegel's concept of "emotional memory". A synthesis of Johnson's focus on attachment emotions and Siegel's interpersonal neurobiology applied to romantic partnerships could provide couples with a fascinating insight into how and why they respond to certain stimuli from their partner.

Another area of potential exploration involves examining the relationship between Saint Sophrony's anthropological vision and the contemporary science of attachment, particularly in its implications for faith and prayer. Insecure attachment may significantly shape an individual's conception of God and influence the quality and depth of their experience of The Divine in prayer. The intersection between biological and neurobiological understandings of attachment and the existential perception of God – as expressed in the hesychastic tradition – offers a promising field for theological reflection and pastoral application. Saint Sophrony's teachings could provide valuable insight into how human attachment wounds might be understood and addressed, both from a biological standpoint and within the spiritual framework of Orthodox Christian theology.

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