

The Reasons of Love. HARRY G. FRANKFURT. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. 110 p. Cloth \$19.95.

Harry Frankfurt's *The Reasons of Love* is about love in the way in which his bestseller, *On Bullshit*,¹ is about that. It takes a phenomenon that, while engaging enough, seems to lie on the periphery of serious philosophical interest, and it then proceeds to show that the phenomenon is, in fact, key to a question of recognized importance. Just as we learn from bullshit something about the value of truth, so too we learn from love something about how we should live. When we ask how we should live, is the answer there for us to discover by reasoning? Or is it left to us to create by desire or choice? Can we be right or wrong in what we are most deeply committed to? Or is it nonsense to ask, since what we are most deeply committed to sets the standard of right and wrong? Like many contemporary philosophers, Frankfurt takes the latter view: that one's normative reasons arise from one's own psychology. "[T]he most basic and essential question for a person to raise concerning the conduct of his life cannot be the *normative* question of how he *should* live," Frankfurt writes, "That question can sensibly be asked only on the basis of a prior answer to the *factual* question of what he actually *does* care about" (26), and indeed, as we learn, only on the basis of a prior answer to the factual question of what he loves. But Frankfurt's version of the view that our reasons arise from our psychology is, in several ways, quite unlike other versions that one encounters in the literature.

To begin with, he articulates the view with an unusually discriminating account of what our psychology contains. Cautioning against the obscuring promiscuity of words such as "want" and "desire," in which the view is so often exclusively formulated, Frankfurt commends us to

¹ Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

distinguish the phenomenon of caring, along with one of its consequences, importance, and one of its species, love.

Caring may involve a structure of desire, but it is a special structure. To care about something is not simply to desire it, but also to desire that one desire it: to desire that one's desire for it continue and prevail. Moreover, this must be "a desire with which the person identifies himself, and which he accepts as expressing what he really wants" (16).²

If, for Frankfurt, there is a general answer to the question, "What should I do?" it would seem to be: "What it is most important to you to do." But this is consistent with his view that caring is the source of reasons, for caring about something is what makes it important to one. While something may be important to one even though one does not care about it, this is only in virtue of its affecting something else that one does care about.

Three main differentia distinguish love from the genus of caring. First, love is disinterested. Whereas one can care about something merely as a means to something else that one cares about, one cannot love something as a means. Second, love is particular. Whereas one

² Frankfurt says little in *The Reasons of Love* to explain how this identification might be brought about, or what it might come to. In "Identification and Externality," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 58–68, Frankfurt argued that such identification could not result from, or amount to, the presence of some higher-order attitude. One could always ask whether the agent was identified with this higher-order attitude, and the answer could be "yes" only if the agent had an attitude of an even higher order toward it, provoking an infinite regress. Instead, Frankfurt then suggested, identification results from, or be constituted by, a higher-order decision regarding one's attitudes (68 n. 3). However, he no longer appears to understand identification in this way. In "Reply to Richard Moran," in Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, eds., *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 218–226, Frankfurt contends that the same regress threatens the attempt to account for identification in terms of "any... kind of activity" (220). Moreover, no decision could establish the kind of identification necessary for love, since love is not under our voluntary control. Instead, as Frankfurt suggests in "The Faintest Passion," in *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 95–107, identification with a desire is constituted by a purely negative condition: the absence of any psychic tendency opposed to that desire.

can care about something merely as a member of a class, one cannot love something merely as a member of a class. A humanitarian may care about my beloved in virtue of her being a human being, but I care about beloved simply in virtue of her being *her*. Finally, love is not voluntary. Whereas one may have more or less direct voluntary control over caring about certain things, one does not have such control over loving what one loves. From this analysis of love in general, Frankfurt arrives at two characteristically startling conclusions about love of oneself in particular. These are that far from being a perversion of love, self-love is its purest form, and that self-love represents a kind of primitive aversion to boredom: a concern to be interested in something.

It is not simply the internal richness of Frankfurt's picture of the valuing mind that is distinctive, but also the density of its ties to other philosophical questions. In passing, Frankfurt connects his account of caring to the work for which he is perhaps best known, on personhood and freedom of the will. By caring about things, he suggests, we define ourselves; by identifying with some desires and standing opposed to others, we shape a person from what would otherwise be a welter of brutally conflicting desires. What most clearly distinguishes persons from mere animals, then, is not rationality or intelligence, but instead reflexivity: the awareness of, and hence the ability to take a stake in, one's own mental life. Furthermore, by caring about things, we make it possible for us to be free or unfree: to succeed or fail to be guided by that with which we identify ourselves. These glimpses of meshing gears are deeply satisfying, and they confirm the reader's sense of a fully wrought system underlying the book's pleasingly brisk and anecdotal style.

The final distinguishing feature of Frankfurt's version of the view that our reasons arise from our own psychology lies in his grounds for it. In the literature, one finds the view most

often fueled by motivational, metaphysical, or epistemological concerns. How could the making of, or the truth of, a judgment about what one ought to do motivate in the way that it does, unless it somehow depended on our psychology? What kind of fact could it be that one ought to do something if not a fact about one's psychology? How else could we ever come to know anything about it? Frankfurt may share something of these last epistemological concerns. What would an argument for the ultimate value of something look like, he asks, and how could it hope to get off of the ground (23–26)? But he also seems drawn to the view that reasons arise from our own psychology by a far less abstract conviction: that the view is straightforwardly confirmed by our lived experience of love.

Love, Frankfurt contends, does not answer to reasons. It is not a response to the perceived inherent value of its object: a response that would be correct insofar as its object had that value, and incorrect insofar as its object lacked it.³ This is not cheap romanticism, but the seemingly irresistible consequence of a few commonplaces. I may love something, while you do not, even though we agree about its intrinsic properties. Moreover, I may love one thing, but not another, even though I believe that both have the same intrinsic properties. Our love for our children precedes any beliefs about their intrinsic properties, and once in place, is insensitive to changes in those beliefs.

Frankfurt does not seriously consider the idea that we might be mistaken in loving as we do: that either I ought to stop loving what I do, or you ought to start; that I ought to love substitutes; that I ought to wait to see how my child is before loving it and to withdraw my love

³ This does not mean that Frankfurt does or must deny that what we love may have or lack value independently of our loving or not loving it, or, more generally, that things can have or lack value independently of our psychological orientation toward them. All he is committed to, it seems, is the claim that if there are such independent values, our reasons do not depend on them.

should it disappoint me. It goes without saying that the idea is preposterous. Indeed, it may not even be coherent; to love like that would be not to love at all.

It would be no less preposterous, however, to claim that we are mistaken in taking what we love to be relevant to how we should live. Just as it cannot be claimed that reasons give rise to love, it cannot be denied that love gives rise to reasons. There are reasons of love, as the title announces, but these are not the reasons to which love responds, but instead the reasons that love creates. Similar observations suggest that such reasons arise not simply from love for persons, but also from love for groups, traditions, callings, causes, and many other particular objects of devotion.

This argument from love is not only constructed from more concrete materials than the motivational, metaphysical, and epistemological arguments alluded to earlier. It also has different consequences. First, it lacks the reductive tendency of at least some of those arguments. For example, the metaphysical concern, about what the fact that one “ought” to do something could even be, seems to demand not simply that the fact that one “ought” to do something be explained by a fact about one’s psychology, but moreover that it be nothing more than a fact about one’s psychology. There is nothing in the argument from love that presses for this stronger claim, however, and there is no clear indication that Frankfurt accepts it.

Second, the argument from love seems, at least at first glance, not to support as general a thesis about the source of normativity. On its own, the argument seems to show only that some of our reasons are rooted in our psychology, not that all of our reasons are rooted in our psychology. For example, it appears compatible with Frankfurt’s observations about love as it is ordinarily understood—love, say, for people, callings, and nations—that one ought to comply with the dictates of morality whether or not one cares to.

This restricted conclusion would still be quite congenial to Frankfurt's guiding skepticism about the reach of reason into our practical lives. In the event, however, Frankfurt asserts something broader. Not simply are there reasons of love, he proposes, but all reasons are reasons of love (55–57). One wonders whether this is, strictly speaking, Frankfurt's position. For he says nothing elsewhere to rule out reasons that arise, at the most fundamental level, from caring that, unlike love, is focused not on particulars as such, but instead on members of a class. Indeed, the reasons of morality, on Frankfurt's understanding, might well be reasons of this kind. Perhaps it would be more accurate to represent his claim as being that all reasons are, like reasons of love, reasons that arise from caring that is noninstrumental and not under the agent's direct voluntary control.

However this broader claim is interpreted, there is the question of what supports it, if not Frankfurt's observations about love, as it is ordinarily understood. This support may come from the epistemological doubts mentioned earlier. But Frankfurt also seems to suggest, more directly, that just as we readily accept that the reasons involved in love as it is ordinarily understood are rooted in our own wills, so too do we accept, on reflection, that reasons of other kinds are also rooted in our wills. "There may be some individuals for whom a commitment to being morally virtuous is a categorically dominant personal ideal." For such people, he grants, moral requirements will be overriding. "That is not, however, the only intelligible or the only appealing design for a human life. We may find that other ideals and other measures of value attract us, and that they recommend themselves to us forcefully as reasonable competitors for our controlling allegiance" (9). Just as your love of your children may give you reasons to care for them that I don't have, Frankfurt seems to suggest, so too your commitment to a life of sainthood

may give you reasons to do your duty that I do not have. Even the authority of morality depends, in the end, on what one cares about.

This broader thesis, that not just some, but all, reasons flow from what one cares about, meets with resistance. We often think that someone ought not to care about what he does, or that he ought to care about something that he does not. Perhaps we don't think this where what he cares about is, say, his own child and the alternative on offer is a stranger's child. Such is the intuitive appeal of Frankfurt's reflections on love, as it is ordinarily understood. But similar thoughts hardly seem unnatural where what one cares about is, say, one's own pointless dissipation, or the destruction of some innocent. It may be optional to see "being morally virtuous" as "a categorically dominant personal ideal." But it does not seem merely optional to give some weight to being minimally morally decent, whether or not one cares about it, or about anything it might serve. Nor does it seem merely optional to care about one's own life, or a great many other things.

In a footnote that appears to address this kind of objection, Frankfurt observes that "we would regard" someone who, say, "cared nothing at all about dying or being mutilated, or about being deprived of all human contact" not merely as "atypical," but also as "irrational," "crazy," and "lacking reason" (45 n. 5). Since this seems to be normative criticism of what a person fails to care about, it seems to be at odds with Frankfurt's insistence that caring constitutes the highest court of appeal on normative questions. The resolution of this tension, it appears, lies in fact that the irrationality is being imputed from our point of view.⁴ Since we care so much about our lives, bodily integrity, and commerce with our fellows, the practical possibilities open to him are, for us, "unthinkable"; we cannot "bring ourselves to do or to accept" them. This is the sense in

⁴ Compare "Rationality and the Unthinkable," in *The Importance of What We Care About*, p. 177–190.

which they appear to us as “irrational.” This does not mean, however, that there is some objective sense in which such a person would be wrong, rather than simply not like us.

The fact that we criticize others for what they care about, as we have just seen, seems, at least at first, to tell against Frankfurt’s thesis that caring is the source of normativity. And he appears to respond, again as we have just seen, by interpreting that criticism as itself an expression of caring. The fact that we sometimes ask, in our own case, whether we ought to care about what we do also seems to tell against Frankfurt’s thesis. And he appears to respond in a similar way, interpreting such questioning as itself expressing a desire not to care for what is under review. “Coping with our troubled and restless uncertainty about how to live does not require us to discover what way of living can be justified by definitive argument. Rather, it requires us simply to understand what it is that we ourselves really care about, and to be decisively and robustly confident in caring about it” (28). This “confidence” is not a belief that one has good grounds for caring about what one does, or that one is correct in so caring. If I understand it correctly, it is not, as the word might suggest, a belief at all. It instead seems closer to what Frankfurt elsewhere calls “wholeheartedness”: the absence of any desire opposed to caring about the things one cares about (cf. 95 n. 7). Since normative questions are settled by what we care about, Frankfurt’s thought seems to be, only such a countervailing desire could provoke serious doubt about whether we ought to care about what we do. When combined with Frankfurt’s later suggestion that to love oneself is to care about what one cares about (95), this diagnosis takes on a kind of *ad hominem* sting. Only a kind of self-hatred, or at least lack of self-love, the reader is left to conclude, could drive a person to question whether he ought to care about what he does.

All of this is ingenious and marvelously consistent. For those who have been won over to Frankfurt's view, it offers a new way of understanding the opposition. But one wonders how much it will do to convince those who are likely to bring up the problem. To someone who seriously asks what he should care about, the exhortation to be confident is liable to seem no answer at all. Perhaps he is able to be confident, in Frankfurt's sense: to care about something, or not to care about it, without residue. His question, as he understands it, is whether he would be right in so caring. The enduring intelligibility of this question, he will argue, is a datum counting against our acceptance of Frankfurt's theory.

So far I have been granting that Frankfurt shows that the reasons involved in love as it is ordinarily understood—love for, say, our child, life's work, or people—arise from our psychology. I have been asking whether this is true of reasons of other kinds, such as those of morality. But is it really so obvious that the reasons involved in love as it is ordinarily understood arise from our psychology?

What if someone, peering into the schoolyard, found himself caring about a stranger's child rather than his own child, Alice? Wouldn't we think that he ought to care about something other than he does? Perhaps this parent's affections would be "unthinkable" for us, in the way that a normal parent's would not be. But this itself seems to tell against Frankfurt's view. What we would be finding unthinkable in this case is not failing to love Alice: a person viewed simply as a particular. After all, we too, quite thinkably, fail to love Alice. What we would be finding unthinkable is failing to love one's child: failing to love a person viewed as falling under a certain description. This seems to conflict not only with Frankfurt's analysis of love, which insists that it attaches to particulars as such, but also with his case that there are no reasons for

love. For it offers us a possible reason for loving a person: that one shares a history of a certain kind with her, such as being her parent.

This is something that might be a reason for loving a person: it is a generalizable property of a person that might render love for her intelligible and appropriate. And since this property is relational, rather than intrinsic, the proposal that it represents a reason for love is untouched by the commonplaces about love mentioned earlier. Indeed, the proposal positively predicts that I will love my daughter, whereas you may not, even though we agree about her intrinsic properties; that I will love my daughter, but not any *Doppelgänger* that might appear, even one with plainly the same intrinsic properties (whereas I would love a second daughter with vastly different intrinsic properties); and that my love for my daughter will precede any beliefs about her intrinsic properties and, once in place, be insensitive to changes in those beliefs. In sum, Frankfurt's argument that there can be no reasons for loving a person or thing depends on the implicit assumption that any such reasons would have to be intrinsic properties of that person or thing. Once it is seen that such reasons might be extrinsic properties, such as historical relations to the lover of a certain type, the argument is no longer so clearly decisive (whatever force Frankfurt's other arguments, such as his epistemological doubts about settling normative questions in general, might retain).

Inclined though I am to resist some of its conclusions, this is an undeniably brilliant, resourceful, and provocative book. Still more, these doubts are accompanied by several points of agreement. Perhaps the most important of these points of agreement is with Frankfurt's manifest conviction that a theory of practical reason must attend faithfully to its most intimate and familiar exercises.

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