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Book Review


In his The Reasons of Love, drawn from lectures originally given in Princeton in 2000 and University College London in 2001, Harry Frankfurt hopes to clarify the concepts of 'what is of interest,' 'what we care about,' and 'what it is we love' (11). In the course of this clarification, however, the possibly rich content of these issues is lost. His analysis is almost impudently unsocial-theoretical. The project is to show that the question about how one should live is dependent upon what one cares about, and that what one cares about is (at least partially) constitutive of oneself and one's life as meaningful. Chapter one sets up this general project and considers what it is to care about something. Chapter two delineates the role of love in guiding one's interests and cares. Chapter three synthesizes these analyses by arguing that self-love is the paradigmatic form of love and best guides one into feeling at home with oneself.

Caring about something is a variation on desiring or wanting. I may want ice cream or global peace, for example without caring much about it, about what variety it takes or when it happens. To care about something is to be "willingly committed" to the desire for that thing (16). Caring about is self-referential, then, and is structurally related to who and how one
is; it “binds us to ourselves” (17). What this discussion lacks, unfortunately, is any account of caring for something and its relation to caring about that thing. Can I genuinely care about global peace if I do not also care for it by, say, refusing to be dogmatic or by trying to convince others of a certain variety of it? The concern intensifies when one considers the importance of caring about and caring for others.

For Frankfurt, what counts as important arises from what we care about (23); international law is only important to me if I care about global justice or the like. To give reasons for how I ought to act is to state what is important to me. But, to state this I must know what I care about. Frankfurt is right, then, to think that the normative question cannot be the most basic; the factual question “What do I care about?” must be more basic (26–8). Resolving the “hesitations” of this question requires “self-confidence,” something afforded by loving something (28).

Loving something is a mode of caring about it. Loving is a kind of caring for which one has no reasons. Rather, it is reason itself for behaving or living in some way. “Love is itself, for the lover, a source of reasons” for acting in the beloved’s interests (37). Thus love just is concomitant with the value ‘found’ in the beloved, and in this sense one falls in love. According to Frankfurt, one distinctive feature of love is that one cannot decide through deliberation to be in love. A second feature is that a beloved’s value is intrinsic and not instrumental. Third, love entails willing what is good for the beloved simply because it is good for the beloved and not for any concerns of the lover. Lastly, love cannot be an “impersonal” care, but is “ineluctably” attached to the particularity of the beloved.

Here one sees the clearest signs of the text breaching its own limits. Frankfurt seeks to treat love as a kind of care about something, which need not be a person. The four characteristics could understandably apply to love between persons, but make less sense when the beloved is something else. Do I love global justice in its specificity and not because it is a kind of justice? Do I love it for its intrinsic worth or because it brings about good ends?

For Frankfurt, self-love is the purest form of love and is the well of confidence one needs to accept the constraints on action and desire which are imposed by the love of something. Love of oneself is the most strictly disinterested and particular to the beloved, the least in one’s control to reject with any kind of ease, and the identification between lover and beloved is clearest (81ff). Frankfurt rightly modifies this to say that one can love oneself even without (knowing one’s) interests, by caring that one have the sorts of interests that operate as goals or as beloveds. Only in the presence of such goals does a life become meaningfully oriented (cf. 90). Loving oneself—as caring for the perdurance of one’s own guiding desires and values—is a kind of wholeheartedness or resoluteness in willing which enables one to properly ask the normative question “How should I live?”

While the trajectory of his thinking is clear, Frankfurt’s metaphorical use of ‘love’ has ramifications. He cannot shake the intersubjective, social core of the issue. He self-critically marks his dependency upon familial love as an example (89). He sees this as a simplification because he wants his analysis of love to have broader scope. But why not recognize the repeated irruption of parental love as indicative of something essential or paradigmatic of love in general? Why persist in trying to show self-love to be the purest kind of love when parental love is doing all the heavy lifting? The praising of self-love in this way is surprising more for taking an intersubjective emotion—but aren’t they all?—as radically individualistic, than for transgressing common moral thinking.

Despite doing harm to the meaning of love in order to give a certain moral-psychological account, it is nonetheless promising to see this branch of philosophy broaching issues previously ignored: being at home in the world and with oneself, self-confidence, emotions generally, pre-normative bases for ethics. Perhaps if these are thought through further, thinkers like Frankfurt will begin to think from a more social or intersubjective basis.
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