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Is Love All You Need?

Abstract: This project investigates Harry Frankfurt's work on love and its role in his model of practical reason. Specifically, it identifies a number of shortcomings in Frankfurt's view focused on his dismissal of objective practical value, putting all such value in terms of personal commitment to what one loves. In other words, this project finds fault in the claim that "love is all you need" to construct a compelling model of practical reason. However, I find that his model can overcome these shortcomings if it can be extended to include non-personal sources of practical value. I conclude by suggesting just such a source: if his view can be made to recognize objective practical value like autonomy, it would address my concerns while hopefully remaining true to the original spirit of the work.

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In 2004, Harry Frankfurt put forward an account of how, *precisely*, love makes the world go ‘round.¹ In short, Frankfurt’s view is that our capacity for love is what provides us with the reasons we employ whenever we deliberate about what we are to do or evaluate what has been done. He refers to this deliberation as “practical reasoning,” and though it is a kind of normative reasoning — it gives one an idea of what one *ought* to do — it is importantly distinct from *moral* reasoning. When we engage in this kind of individual normative judgment, we do so in terms of commitments justified by what we love, not the rational basis for those commitments.² Thus Frankfurt’s work can be understood as two projects: a negative project to rebuke a predominant view that one always ought to defer to moral reasons insofar as they apply and that when they do, they apply decisively; and a positive project which provides a framework with more nuanced and realistic features of practical reasoning.

For Frankfurt, what one ought to do and how one ought to live is a highly individual question, and not one that is typically decided by moral deliberation alone. Echoing Susan Wolf’s thoughts in “Moral Saints,”³ he contrasts those who might “naturally accept moral requirements as unconditionally overriding” with the rest of us, for whom “there still remains ... the more fundamental practical question of just how important it is to obey them.”⁴ Further, it seems that moral reasons are often regarded as the kind of practical reasons that one *ought* to recognize as authoritative — that is, one ought to decide what they ought to do on the basis of

¹ Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (2004), p. 37.

² This is the case whether or not a rational basis for a personal commitment even exists.

³ Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints” (1982).

⁴ Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (2004), p. 9.

moral reasons,⁵ not merely what one desires. It is on pushing back against this point that Frankfurt establishes the need for a more nuanced theory of practical reason; conceiving of one's desires as fundamentally inferior to moral imperatives does a disservice to the philosophical richness of what it is and what it can mean to "merely desire" something.

To construct just such a more nuanced theory of practical reason, Frankfurt extends the notion of a desire in three ways: what we care about, what is important to us, and what we love.⁶ These three notions are central to his volitional framework, and neatly extend his prior work on free will dating back to his seminal "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." In turn, my basic project in this essay is to continue to extend Frankfurt's thought beyond where he has taken it. If I hope to be persuasive in doing so, then not only will I need to show *that* his work can be further extended, but also that it is a body of work *worth* extending. I sketch Frankfurt's work in some detail below in an attempt to allow it to speak for itself; I do not intend this to be a substitute for a close reading of what has been received as an interesting and attractive body of work,⁷ but to give a sense of the context and scope of my own work in this essay.

Frankfurt's theory hinges on our status as *reflexive* beings. He is known for, among other things, his work on the notion of a hierarchical will and its implications for moral responsibility and free will. As beings capable of wanting anything at all, we have first-order desires, which are desires in the everyday sense of, say, wanting a cup of coffee in the morning.⁸ But simply

⁵ This view still only overrides non-moral reasons with moral reasons that are actually relevant enough to a particular context to override them.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁷ Jonathan Lear, Susan Wolf in *Contours of Agency, Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, eds. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (2002)

⁸ This is a sense which Frankfurt considers "overburdened, and a bit limp." (p. 10)

desiring a cup of coffee in my hand does not make it so; this desire must also be *effective* at impelling me to obtain one. This is what makes a desire one's will — those desires which move an agent all the way to action. Frankfurt extends this into second-order desires, which are desires *about* our own desires. This, the ability to reflect on our own desires and effective wills and form new meaningful desires about them is the essential capacity that makes us each a "person" and not merely a "wanton," who does not desire one way or another to be compelled to act a certain way, or to have any particular desires in the first place. Rounding out his hierarchical model of volition, Frankfurt posits that one acts of "her own free will" when the desires she wants, in a higher-order sense, to move her are the ones which actually do comprise her will.

In *The Reasons of Love*, Frankfurt introduces finer detail to his portrait of a person's hierarchical will by incorporating the concepts of care, importance and love. Each of these, like higher-order desires, are rooted in "our distinctive capacity to have thoughts, desires, and attitudes that are about our own attitudes, desires, and thoughts."⁹ Care is a useful concept for his theory because it puts to work the intuition that while I may be no more able to no longer desire a cup of coffee than a smoker able to give up the desire for a cigarette, I can be indifferent to the efficacy of that desire because I simply do not mind not being able to quit — i.e. I do not care about that aspect of my will. On the other hand, to care about something is to maintain a "commitment to one's desires"¹⁰ or a disposition to *volitional continuity* with respect to some

⁹ Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (2004), p. 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 21

motivating will. If someone cares about a desire, “it is a desire with which the person identifies himself, and which he accepts as expressing what he really wants.”¹¹

But the picture of what we care about is not complete without the adjacent concept of importance. When we care about things, we ascribe a degree of importance to them. It is the both the direct and indirect product of the collection of what we care about. It is direct in the sense that importance simply refers to the weight a certain care has on our identity — two people may care about politics and politically vote the same, but one may find that the consistency and continuity of their political action is far more important to them than it is to the other. What we care about directly infuses the world and our responses to it with importance. It can also be indirect in the sense that certain things are highly important to us only by virtue of their bearing on things we do care about. We care about our health, and so something like radiation poisoning might be of real importance to someone even when they do not know it exists. Importance further is how we reconcile conflicts between things we care about — when two continuous dispositions are irreconcilable, we act in the interests of the one we see as more important.

Here we have the conceptual pieces necessary to more neatly define the core concept of love. As a term, love can be used to refer to a vast array of familiar concepts, but Frankfurt’s theory employs only a very specific conception of love, which is unburdened by the complexity and variance in experience that might be the case with something like romantic or sexual love. Instead, the paradigm case of love is the sort of unconditional care like a parent might feel for their child. It is not a mere feeling, and it is not rooted in a belief or appraisal of value. A *love* is a particular kind of caring disposition, “a configuration of the will that consists in a practical

¹¹ Ibid., p.16.

concern for what is good for the beloved.”¹² And as a care constitutes a disposition to find something important, a love more fundamentally constitutes the disposition to find something inherently valuable.

There are four essential qualities to love as Frankfurt employs it: love is disinterested, what we love is ineluctably particular, we identify with what we love, and we cannot directly choose what we love. First, to say love is *disinterested* is to say it serves no other interests. We want what is good for the things we love simply for the reason that it is good for those things. Similarly, the paradigmatic parent does not care about their child’s well-being for any reason except that it is important for their child to be well. The second definitive quality is that love is ‘ineluctably particular.’ A parent loves a child because they are that *particular* child, and though a parent cares about their child’s health to replace their child with a healthier child is unsurprisingly anathema to the parent’s love. Third, the lover identifies with the beloved in that they take the beloved’s interests to be basically their own. This is how we infuse our lives with value — when someone loves something, “he profits by its successes, and its failures cause him to suffer”¹³ Finally, what we love is volitionally necessary, and not something we can claim to choose. While some controllable circumstances are certainly more or less conducive to the cultivation of love, love cannot be willed into existence.

Thus in Frankfurt’s project to articulate a theory of practical reason, he finds that the basic structure of normative judgements is exactly the structure of how we care and love: what we *ought* to do is a value judgement, which ultimately stems from the faculty of love. All

¹² Ibid., p 43

¹³ Ibid., p. 61

positive practical value ‘bottoms out’ either directly in terms of benefit for what we love or indirectly in terms of benefit for something valuable to what we love or at least care about — *care* is the root of normativity, not rationality. Analogous to how logical necessities can make propositions rationally mandatory or impossible to believe, Frankfurt’s model sketches love as the basis for volitional constraints on our practical reason — a limitation of the will which makes an act unthinkable, not a constraint upon belief which makes a statement inconceivable.

Broadly speaking, I find Frankfurt’s view attractive for three reasons: (a) it is *practical*, in that the concepts which do the most work for his theory — love, caring, importance, etc. — are apt to describe everyday experience; (b) it is *expressive*, in that the image of other philosophical work through the lens of Frankfurt’s theory is a faithful and illuminating representation, which I will demonstrate with Susan Wolf’s “Moral Saints”; (c) it is *extensible*, in that it is amenable to the introduction of new or reiterated concepts, so long as it remains internally consistent, which I will demonstrate by way of expanding on the notion of boredom.

His work is an account which resolves a number of strong intuitions which often seem to be in tension with otherwise carefully considered philosophical judgements. To see a few examples, his work is invaluable in reconciling why the embarrassment accompanying a factual misunderstanding or logical mistake, e.g. what a one might feel upon realizing they have confused two mathematical theorems, is of a distinctly different flavor than the what one might feel upon realizing they have acted immorally.¹⁴ It also nicely describes why one might, without second thoughts, act to save their beloved from drowning instead of a stranger, despite the

¹⁴ In a footnote, Frankfurt recounts the story of Pythagorean mathematicians’ infamous shock at the proof of $\sqrt{2}$ being irrational, but incorrectly refers to the result as “the Pythagorean theorem” — not merely a wholly unrelated result, but one well-liked enough to be accepted without even a single ritual killing.

decision being at best neutral on strictly moral terms.¹⁵ A third intuition which can be neatly articulated in his framework is one first developed by Susan Wolf in “Moral Saints”: there is something implausible, unpleasant, or just *off* about the idea of someone whose every decision is made to be aligned with abstract moral theory.

For Wolf, there are two ways to construe such a person: a Loving Saint, who finds authentic happiness in performing moral duties, or a Rational Saint who acts out of a sense of rational obligation, without any of the typical consideration of one’s own happiness. In Frankfurt’s terms, in either case the saint is someone for whom moral constraints are also volitional constraints, and volitional constraints must invariably stem from their personal faculties of love. The Rational Saint, then, can be construed as just a different kind of Loving Saint with disinterested love of rationally and morally consistent behavior. The original Loving Saint has an *interested* love of rationally and morally consistent behavior, bottoming out in a *disinterested* love for all things or persons worthy of moral consideration. That is, both kinds of saint might volunteer their weekends at a nearby orphanage and pursue the well-being of the orphans. But where Loving Saint acts to further the well-being of their beloved orphans, Rational Saint’s beloved is the ethical theory which ascribes moral worth to the orphans’ respective well-beings.¹⁶ But merely reframing a compelling thought experiment does not make the case that the framework itself is compelling. What I would like to show is that an articulation of moral saints

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 36

¹⁶ Further, expressed in terms of Frankfurt’s theory, it seems clearer why Wolf only needed to articulate two types of moral sainthood — the strict volitional constraints of sainthood would be the product of some kind of love, which is either interested or disinterested.

under this model helps clarify the intuition Wolf develops: adherence to strict moral reasoning is *boring*.

The term ‘boredom’ is used in Frankfurt’s work to mean boredom in a specific and probably stronger sense than the related mental phenomena to which it commonly refers.¹⁷ It is not a concept on which Frankfurt goes into much detail, but he gives enough of a sense of its position in his framework that I don’t anticipate my connection to moral sainthood being much of a stretch.¹⁸ He paints an image of boredom as more than mere discomfort; being entirely unable to muster interest in whatever is going on is more serious than merely a non-pleasant conscious state. Instead, as we find ourselves overcome with boredom, we face “a radical reduction in the sharpness and steadiness of attention,” which ultimately “threatens the very continuation of conscious mental life.”¹⁹ Thus under Frankfurt’s model, to find something truly boring is to find that upon being confronted with it, an automatic mental response is triggered which is a “variant of the universal and elemental instinct for self-preservation ... in the sense of sustaining not the *life* of the organism, but the persistence and vitality of *the self*.”²⁰ Though it does not seem to me that Frankfurt means for this to be understood as similar to self-preservation

¹⁷ This is similar to how the only kind of love which does any real work for his theory is a particularly strong sense — this is an *overwhelming* boredom, not just a slow day at work.

¹⁸ In fact, I intend for the expansion into more detailed view of boredom to be a kind of proof-of-concept of the theory’s extensibility before directing attention toward extending the framework perhaps more controversially.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 54

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55

in a ‘fight-or-flight’ way so much as ‘hibernation.’²¹ In other words, if nothing I can think to do right now pulls me to do it, why waste valuable mental energy forcing myself to act when I can ‘coast’ until something interesting comes along? It seems amenable enough to Frankfurt’s usage to suppose that whereas most of our typical experiences of boredom are a kind of coasting, the one which does necessary conceptual work for Frankfurt’s theory is one of being completely at a standstill.

Though Frankfurt maintains that a person’s practical reasoning and the volitional constraints under which they operate are always particular to that person, there are volitional constraints that seem to apply to everyone. In his discussion, he reduces many such to mere matters of fact — e.g. that we generally cannot help but want to remain attached to our limbs has a clear biological basis.²² Likewise, his paradigm case of a parent’s love for their child is a largely compelling example by virtue of being nearly universal, but the coherence of his framework does not in any way rely on filial love being a logical necessity. Further, when he develops his “purer” paradigm love with the case of one’s love for themselves, though he acknowledges the fact that we generally can’t help but take ourselves seriously, he still leaves room for the existence of people who are not subject to this particular volitional constraint.²³ The strongest claim here he explicitly commits to is conditional: “*If* a person loves anything, he

²¹ This latter sense also works better in terms of capturing what it is like to move out of boredom. For example, consider a paradigmatically loving parent attending their young child’s little-league baseball game. By definition, little-league baseball is boring. The parent might understandably struggle to pay attention to their environment, up until the moment their child steps up to the plate, and the parent finds themselves revitalized and relieved by the sudden reappearance of something they can care about — not unlike a soundly hibernating bear when made aware of something it cares to eat.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 27

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-84

necessarily loves himself.”²⁴ In my understanding of his view, one could express this another way by saying that to love to be bored is a contradiction in terms.

To see why this is the case, ²⁵ note that boredom is what occurs when there is nothing for one *in particular* to do. That is, no actions occur to us as sufficiently interesting — i.e. aligned with the interests of something we care about — to impel us to take them. When we are well and truly bored, not even actions as basic as staying awake can be taken for granted as even that act ceases to generate sufficient interest. And so to propose that one loves to be bored reduces to proposing that one cannot help but be moved by a state in which one is, by definition, not moved at all.²⁶

So how does boredom help to articulate the peculiarity of moral saints? Often — arguably, more often than not — we find that the moral course of action is not the one we are driven to take, even when we recognize it as the moral course. What makes Frankfurt’s framework compelling is that this experience is not a fringe case that needs to be explained away as a failure of our faculties of reason; this is in fact exactly how his view expects even morally and rationally competent agents to engage with moral value. Moreover, his view nicely understands the converse of this — i.e. someone so invested in the laws of morality that they cannot help but always want to always be doing the right thing — not as the standard of what one ought aspire to be, but as the very fringe of practical-reasonable behavior.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 86, emphasis mine

²⁵ Recalling also that Frankfurt does *not* consider a totally carefree person to be logically impossible, merely very far from normal. c.f. p.22

²⁶ Incidentally, this contradiction in terms describes one of my favorite fictional characters — *Catch-22*’s Dunbar single-mindedly cultivates boredom as his personal final end.

Thus when we fail to be moved by moral reasons, it is a strength of Frankfurt's view that it would attribute this not to a failure to understand those reasons, but to a failure to find them sufficiently interesting. It's not that we don't see the right thing to do; it's that we don't see how it relates to what we care about. Plausibly, over some course of practical deliberation, an agent might find it interesting if a perceived *moral* course of action coincidentally serves an unrelated *personal* interest, and thus motivate themselves to take that action — despite the fact that neither the personal nor the moral interests were enough to drive action before being seen as coinciding. In this case, the agent has behaved in a way that Frankfurt's ethical-rationalist opposition might characterize as moral reasons superseding personal reasons once the imperative was recognized, but the imperative was recognized from the beginning. In fact, our agent may only have been deliberating in the first place because they identify themselves by the idea that they are a good person — hence want to be moved by the moral reasons which they already comprehend — but do not identify themselves as morally good *enough* to generate the interest to act. So they *willfully* deliberate, searching for another personal reason that might tip them over the edge into taking the action they want to want to take, and preserving the continuity of their virtuous identity.

What is striking about a moral saint, then, is twofold. First, their volitional constraints seem ineluctably *general* rather than particular.²⁷ Where we typically come to care about something general by abstracting from our cares for particulars, the saints seem only to care about the particulars by virtue of the fact that they satisfy a generality. In Frankfurt's own words, “for someone who is eager to help the sick or poor, any sick or poor person will do.”[p.43]

²⁷ It seems also it's often precisely the particularity of our constraints that makes them interesting to us.

Second, they are selfless in a way that structures their wills such that they seem totally alien to our own. The steadfastness of their moral commitment further seems to imply that they would have never experienced the self-preservation instinct as described above — saints are never overcome with boredom, so intensely are they interested that their volitional commitments compel them to act clearly and unambiguously whenever they do so, per the rational consistency of well-formulated ethical theory.

In light of my discussion of Frankfurt's work and its strengths, the focus of the remainder of this essay will be a discussion of the framework's shortcomings and how they might be overcome. Frankfurt's project establishes itself as necessary in the first place by indicating that cutting-edge moral theory does a poor job expressing quotidian practical reasoning; "Morality does not really get to the bottom of things."²⁸ His theory is most compelling taken as a set of conceptual tools with which to investigate our own lives — it seems refreshingly down-to-earth. As such, one might find it surprising that such a practically-oriented theory centered on love would not incorporate *some* notion of reciprocity. What constraints imposed on common experience are more obviously volitional rather than logical, than those of unrequited love? But as I will show, not only is reciprocity not a well-defined characteristic of love as Frankfurt's work currently stands, in places it is in fact *in tension* with his theory. As I develop this objection, I would reiterate that his framework can yet resolve this tension, *if* it can be extended to allow objective considerations of value to sometimes function as valid practical reasons.

Before I develop a problem with reciprocity, I would first turn to two other lines of criticism which have elicited responses from Frankfurt that were significant in illuminating the

²⁸ Ibid., p.9

gap in his theory which I intend to expand upon. The first presses Frankfurt on his claim that it is misguided to ask whether something is *worth* loving, insofar as one is able to love it.²⁹ The second presses against Frankfurt along the counter-intuitiveness of conceivably authentic, disinterested love which is realized in a way that is still bad for the lover. Moving from this second criticism, I develop the claim that the reciprocation of love in a kind of inimical interpersonal dynamic entails a “double-bind,”³⁰ which is irreconcilable without Frankfurt extending his view to allow for the kind of objective value impressed by the first. In other words, Frankfurt has bitten two bullets in his responses to critics, and in doing so has provided some direction for a third.

The first line of criticism is pressure Frankfurt’s view has received on his resistance to characterizing our love or its objects as “worthwhile,” except insofar as we are able to care about them.³¹ Another way to put this is that Frankfurt’s view bites the bullet for Euthyphro in a way that his critics do not find satisfactory: on his view, one values what they love because they love it; they do not love what they value because it is worth loving. In Frankfurt’s words, “what we love necessarily *acquires* value for us *because* we love it.”³² In the paradigm case of a parent’s love for their child, this seems intuitive enough. One does not love his child after a careful appraisal of their child’s merits, nor does one care for their child because such a care has the

²⁹ Susan Wolf, “The True, the Good, and the Lovable: Frankfurt’s Avoidance of Objectivity” (2002) in *Contours of Agency, Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, eds. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton pp. 227–244.

³⁰ By “double-bind” I mean to specifically denote an unresolvable contradiction in practical reasoning, intended to be roughly analogous to logical undecidability.

³¹ *Ibid.*, also this appears to be fairly common criticism from what I have seen.

³² Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (2004), p. 39

potential to enrich their own life. Likewise, for one to ask whether their own children are worthy of love strikes Frankfurt as “emphatically misguided.”³³

This first line of criticism agrees with Frankfurt in uncontroversial cases, but finds his model less apt at capturing our intuition farther outside of paradigm cases. This is not to say that this line of reasoning is the opposite view to Frankfurt — that we should *only* love what is worth loving and in proportion to its worth seems “horribly wrong.”³⁴ Instead, objections of this sort are of the form that Frankfurt throws the paradigmatic baby out with the bathwater when he claims that even if things have objective implicit value, this can have no practical bearing whatsoever on whether or not they ought to care about those things. Strikingly, Frankfurt leverages Adolf Hitler as an example of a total contrast between valid moral and practical reasoning:

From a *moral* point of view, it would have been preferable for Hitler to have been idle and bored throughout his adult existence. However, being devoted to the Nazi ideal was very likely better *for Hitler* than just sitting around ... the value *to Hitler* of living the life he chose would have been damaged by the immorality of that life only if morality was something Hitler actually cared about, or if the immorality of his life had a damaging effect on other matters that he cared about.³⁵

Thus Frankfurt does not need to deny the existence of objective kinds of value — an umbrella under which moral value falls — he simply maintains that such impersonal value does no work in answering “how should I live?” unless it is, as a matter of fact,³⁶ already related to some

³³ Again, it is worth noting that this is a very specific usage of love that Frankfurt employs. A judgement of worth might precede other kinds of love, e.g. romantic, without being a problem for this theory.

³⁴ Susan Wolf, “The True, the Good, and the Lovable: Frankfurt’s Avoidance of Objectivity” *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, edited by Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, p.231 (2002)

³⁵ Harry Frankfurt, “Reply to Susan Wolf” in *Ibid.* [emphasis mine]

³⁶ Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (2004), p. 48

independent personal value. For Frankfurt, an objective normative judgement is only ever compelling when it is already subjectively compelling. While we can certainly find compelling reasons that Hitler ought not have cultivated his love of Naziism, under Frankfurt's view this is merely an expression that Hitler was compelled by values in tension with values we more collectively find compelling. This is a highly restricted account of normativity, and one that might be too narrow to be convincing.³⁷

The second bullet I would like to introduce is distinct from the first in the following way: instead of finding it implausible that objective worth is only ever derivatively relevant to practical reason, it aims to construct a case where love's authority over our actions is self-defeating.³⁸ This criticism looks to find cases where an agent would be better off without loving; the implicit value their commitment infuses into their life is ultimately negative. What would be best *for the agent* is to reject the love. If such cases of essentially misguided loves are plausible, it seems that they would contradict Frankfurt's view — how could an agent, via practical reason, conclude that they ought to avoid cultivating a love that would be bad for them? On Frankfurt's view, the only criteria with real bearing on practical reason are either (a) rooted in what is important to the agent or (b) the sole objective criteria that bears on practical-reasoning, i.e. whether one *can* develop a love? It seems that (b) moves our agent to cultivate the love, since it's

³⁷ It strikes me as significant that he does not fully reject *every* impersonal good as not compelling. His view hinges on the fact that while different things are good *for* different persons, it is *good for everyone* to have something to love — I find this is clearer in terms of boredom as I've sketched it, but his discussion on self-love may also be illuminating. It is a possible red flag that there exists one — but *only* one — coherent impersonal practical good.

³⁸ This line of criticism is specifically employed by Jonathan Lear in his discussion of Frankfurt's work. However, Lear primarily understands his objection as indicating the existence of an authoritative external Good, hence more like the first sort of line of criticism above. I am deliberately not borrowing directly from his discussion to make it clearer that there is a distinct, second sort of criticism.

better than nothing. And it seems that (a) doesn't help our agent either, since the things ultimately devalued for the agent only have subjective value to lose in the first place rooted in the misguided love.

Frankfurt could handle this second kind of criticism in one of two ways: he could bite another bullet or try and describe how the agent could practically reason themselves out of subjective harms way. In places where he comes close to directly anticipating this objection, he would appear willing to bite the bullet:

We are sometimes capable of bringing about conditions that would cause us to stop loving what we love, or to love other things. [But] whether it would be better for us to love differently is a question that we are unable to take seriously. For us, as a practical matter, the issue cannot effectively arise.³⁹

However, it also seems that he could address the concern with a line of reasoning not unlike how he argues that an agent who does not *yet* find anything to be of particular value for them can still sensibly locate a love for the well-being of their self, and thus make efforts to find something to love.⁴⁰ I want to call special attention to this argument for two reasons: (1) It allows for the model of practical reason to “get off the ground” initially by describing a state from which the rest of one's subjective values can be constructed; (2) it seems to indicate the point at which a form of objective value could fit coherently in his theory, if it were shown that one would be of theoretical use to the framework.

So now that we see *where* objective value could be incorporated, I would like to put forward a bullet that cannot be bitten so easily by a stubborn internalist. The double bind I would like to construct is this: suppose that two agents, A and B, are in an exploitative interpersonal

³⁹ Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (2004), p. 49

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89

relationship. I mean exploitative in a fairly rudimentary sense, i.e. A exploits B by leveraging some vulnerability of B's so as to benefit unfairly. I mean interpersonal in the sense that both A and B are persons with fully-fledged hierarchical desires, not wantons. Further, suppose this is an ongoing structural relationship, not merely an occasional unfair transaction or exchange. Here, some or all of A's final ends are distinct from B's final ends, and when their interests are in tension with one another, A leverages the nature of their relationship and causes B to act to serve A's ends instead of his own. Frankfurt's model would characterize B's actions against his own interests as disunited or conflicted will.⁴¹ Thus the exploitative relationship is a kind of structural obstacle to a unified configuration of B's will — which, so far, is the only thing Frankfurt has been willing to consider as basically good for everyone.⁴²

If we retain the strict internalist mindset of Frankfurt's original model, we might be inclined to think that a turn of events that would be fortunate for B might be one where B cultivates an authentic, disinterested love for A, or grows to identify his authentic self as reflected by his subservience to A. Thus what is good for A becomes *directly* good for B, and by adopting A's best interests as reasons in themselves to act, B subverts the exploitative nature of the relationship, effectively unifying his will. This seems unsatisfying — whatever the psychological benefits, is mere structural integrity enough support to claim that falling in love with one's oppressor can be an authentically good thing for the oppressed?

⁴¹ Ibid., p.92

⁴² While a wholehearted unified will is good for everyone, it need not be considered *overridingly* good. Frankfurt only needs an objective interest to provide a foothold to start generating particular interests—interests which might turn out to be more important to them than maintaining a unified will.

Frankfurt would probably still be willing to bite this bullet as it currently stands. In a response to a less generalized version of this objection articulated as one centered around the transparently evil institution of slavery,⁴³ Frankfurt readily accepts that, on his view, a slave “would act autonomously when, out of love for his master, he serves his master’s ends ... it seems obvious to me that a slave who achieves autonomy within his slavery may thereby improve his life.”⁴⁴ However, he is careful to stress that this course of action is almost certainly not the only one available in which the slave acts autonomously, nor is it likely to be most rewarding, even next to options that would fail to unite the slave’s autonomous will. In other words, this is not yet a particularly serious objection to Frankfurt’s view.

To develop what I think poses a stronger and more interesting problem, I would take a step back to the more general case and consider what Frankfurt’s model would entail if A happens to cultivate a reciprocating love for B. This reciprocal love does not need to be something with which A consciously engages with on any level; it can be entirely outside of A’s control, so long as this it has the effect of suffusing her life with practical value in terms of what is good for B. Then the problem arises as soon as their initial interests come into conflict: what interests should be acted upon? If A’s original interests remain more important than her newfound interest in B’s well-being, then practical reason suggests she ought to continue to maintain the exploitative dynamic, such that her original aims would still be served.⁴⁵ The only

⁴³ Jonathan Lear, “Loves Authority,” in *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, edited by Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, (2002) p. 286

⁴⁴ Harry Frankfurt, “Reply to Jonathan Lear” in *Ibid.* (2002) p. 295

⁴⁵ A might not need to actively leverage B’s vulnerability to get what she wants, as B’s will has been structured to offer minimal resistance to acting on A’s interests. However, A still has no reason to dismantle the exploitative dynamic which serves her interests overall.

difference is that there is now the possibility that her will is now be internally conflicted where it wasn't before.

More interestingly, in the case that A's newfound disposition towards B causes her to favor B's well-being over her own interests, then what would A desire for B to do? Recall that we have as given that B resolves this tension between interests by internally preferring those which he is externally forced to pursue. Supposing that B had truly unified his will to favor A's interests over his original interests, it seems that A's love for B reduces to simply reinforcing her own interests from another angle. Again, it seems that practical reason dictates that A maintain a relationship in which her beloved is exploited. There is no practical basis for A to dismantle the exploitative relationship, even when A authentically loves B.

The problem is this: in relationships which are exploitative,⁴⁶ the cultivation of love restricts the capacity for the exploited to develop meaningful interests of their own. I would like to construe this relationship as structurally at odds with B's *personhood*, to leverage one of Frankfurt's own concept of a person. As I've described it, an exploitative relationship can be expressed under Frankfurt's model — perhaps compellingly — as one which fails to appreciate the personhood of the exploited. A's relationship to B resembles one in which B were a mere wanton, with no hierarchical desires at all. The reflexivity which characterizes human experience becomes superfluous. Because the subversive love B develops for A has the effect of reflecting A's own interests back at her, even where A's disposition toward B satisfies the definition of an

⁴⁶ I have deliberately tried to contain my depiction to an abstract concept of such a relationship, but examples of this sort of relationship might very well include the institution of slavery as Lear discussed it, as well as abusive domestic relationships, cases of Stockholm's syndrome and others. I am optimistic that my intuition here might be employed with a more sophisticated sense of exploitation and/or oppression, but that is not a focus of this paper.

authentic love, A cannot really *see* B as a fully-fledged person capable of infusing the world with importance. But Frankfurt's view, as it stands, appears resistant to classifying B's functional loss of personhood as essentially *wrong*.

I noted earlier that one of the most attractive aspects of Frankfurt's theory is that it provides a theoretical framework with tools to express familiar concepts such as love, importance, care or boredom in precise enough terms to yield insight into our experiences of them. It seems to me that a model of practical reason which relies so heavily on a notion of love as the basic expression of personhood becomes far less attractive when a possible implication of reciprocated love under the same model is to make meaningful personhood a practical impossibility. On these grounds I would argue that even if the way I have thought extend the role of objective practical value turns out to be insufficient or inconsistent in a way I do not realize, one still would need to *somehow* extend Frankfurt's model before accepting it as a wholly plausible view of practical reason. In conclusion, I would propose as slight an emendation to Frankfurt's model I think would account for this problem: much like Frankfurt cautiously allows for that it can be objectively worth loving one's self, I contend that his theory could similarly allow that it is objectively *not* worth cultivating a love which is at odds with the authentic development of one's self as a person. Regardless of what a person loves, it is worthwhile to consider structural obstacles to their independent flourishing.

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