Frankfurt's Conception of Love and Personhood

In this essay, I reconstruct philosopher Harry Frankfurt's views on love and its connection to personhood as understood from his three essays *Freedom of the Will and Concept of a Person*, *On Caring,* and *Autonomy, Necessity and Love.*

First, I examine Frankfurt's conception of personhood. For Frankfurt, personhood is dependent on an individual's will—specifically, if an agent can form "volitions of the second-order", then their will is free and they can be considered a person (10, *Freedom of the Will*). To understand what Frankfurt means by second-order volitions, I first analyze his theory of will and desires. Frankfurt defines first-order desires as "statements of the form 'A wants to X", in which X is an action (8). However, first-order desires may or may not be actually motivating. For example, if I'm trying to lead a healthier lifestyle and I resist the first-order desire of wanting to eat McDonald's at midnight, then this desire is not motivating. If I order McDonalds, it is motivating and "identifies" my will (8). Second-order desires are statements "A wants to X" in which X is a first-order desire (9). For example, "I want to *want to* eat salad" is a second-order desire. Second-order volitions are a subset of second-order desires, in which you want the desired desire to *identify* your will, as opposed to just wanting to experience a desire (10). For example, a person who has been cheated on by a partner might "want to want to cheat" to understand the mind of a cheater, without wanting the desire to identify her will (i.e., to cheat on her next partner). Thus, personhood requires that the individual can evaluate the "desirability of desires" and care about what desire identifies their will (11).

Next, I discuss Frankfurt's definition of love. Frankfurt identifies two essential features of love: *disinterestedness* and *specificity*. He considers love to be a mode of caring that is a "disinterested concern for the well-being or flourishing of a beloved object" (167, *Caring*). Here, we should note that 'disinterested' means no ulterior motive—the lover "identifies those

interests" of the beloved and wants to provide for the beloved as an end in itself (168). If I care about my partner's monetary success because it'll also benefit me, this is not disinterested. But if I care about my partner's success because it'll help them achieve freedom, independence, and fulfill dreams like travelling (much like I would care for my monetary success), then it is disinterested. Frankfurt also distinguishes passive love from active: passive love is "conditional upon" the beloved's ability positively contributes to the lover's life: the lover cares about the beloved ultimately due to a "preoccupation with his own good" (133, *Autonomy*).

Furthermore, Frankfurt argues that love is different from other forms of caring that are "impersonal or non-specific" (166, *Caring*). Although we might be "devoted out of charity" to help the poor with no ulterior motives, we care about those individuals not because of their "specificity as individuals", but because they belong to that class of the disadvantaged (166). On the other hand, it would be bizarre to love someone based solely on their belonging to some group, whether socioeconomic or otherwise. Indeed, our love towards the beloved depends on something "rigorously specific and particular" (167). If I love someone, then it will not do to replace that person with another, no matter how similar that replacement is to the beloved (167).

This leads Frankfurt to conclude that caring towards the self is "paradigmatic of love", since humans usually see personal interests as an end in itself (168) —we do not need ulterior motives to care about our own happiness. Furthermore, if one day I find a clone of myself who is indistinguishable from me, I would not be expected to love that clone as myself—there are no replacements for self-love. Hence, as Frankfurt points out, love "cannot be satisfied by anything except that very object" and the beloved need not be entirely unique to be special and irreplaceable (169). Finally, Frankfurt argues "loving is inherently valuable" (173). Without love, we would struggle to find meaning, continuity, or coherence in our lives—we would not

have an active interest in anything (162). It should be noted that the object of love need not be a person: it can be cities/countries, institutions, or even "abstract non-moral ideals" (166).

Finally, I discuss Frankfurt's analysis of love, personhood, and autonomy. Notably, Frankfurt argues love is distinct from other emotions in that love is also "a somewhat non-voluntary and complex volitional structure" that can reorganize the structure of an individual's will to shape a person's "purposes and priorities" even about things unrelated to the beloved object (165). For example, our love for someone may cause us to form second-order volitions in which we desire to desire what the beloved is passionate about. For Frankfurt, to perform deeds out of love is an exercise of autonomy and freedom—much like how Kant perceives deeds performed out of duty. When love demands sacrifices, we may feel compelled by its "unconditional authority" to perform a selfless and autonomous act of love. This is because similar to moral duty, the beloved becomes essential and integral to the lover's will (132). Indeed, Frankfurt writes that the essential nature of a person depends on the "volitional necessities" which constrain our will, i.e., things that we cannot help but care about (138).

We now see that Frankfurt's theory means that personhood is necessary for love. As love is a volitional structure (rather than rational or emotional) (141), it cannot operate in an agent that is incapable of second-order volitions. Indeed, the imperatives and uncompromising demands of active love can only constrain the autonomy of an agent who has autonomous and free will to begin with. It would not make sense to say that a baby cannot help but care about her parents and thus love them since they cannot help but care about *anything* they care about. They cannot form opinions on what they care about and do not feel restricted by love. On the other hand, perhaps Frankfurt agrees that certain animals (e.g. dogs) can be ascribed to personhood, as they are able to respond to the demands of love and choose to make sacrifices for their humans.