The Reasons of Love

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1 There has recently been quite a bit of interest among philosophers in issues concerning whether our conduct must invariably be guided strictly by universal moral principles, which we apply impartially in all situations, or whether favoritism of one sort or another may sometimes be reasonable. In fact, we do not always feel that it is necessary or important for us to be meticulously evenhanded. The situation strikes us differently when our children, or our countries, or our most cherished personal ambitions are at stake. We commonly think that it is appropriate, and perhaps even obligatory, to favor certain people over others who may be just as worthy but with whom our relationships are more distant. Similarly, we often consider ourselves entitled to prefer investing our resources in projects to which we happen to be especially devoted, instead of in others that we may readily acknowledge to have somewhat greater inherent merit. The problem with which philosophers have been concerned is not so much to determine whether preferences of this kind are ever legitimate. Rather, it is to explain under what conditions and in what way they may be justified.

An example that has been widely discussed in this connection has to do with a man who sees two people on the verge of drowning, who can save only one, and who must decide which of the two he will try to save. One of them is a person whom he does not know. The other is his wife. It is hard to think, of course, that the man should make up his mind by just tossing a coin. We are strongly inclined to believe that it would be far more appropriate for him, in a situation like this one, to put aside considerations of impartiality or fairness altogether. Surely the man should rescue his wife. But what is his warrant for treating the two endangered people so unequally? What acceptable principle can the

man invoke that would legitimate his decision to let the stranger drown?

One of the most interesting contemporary philosophers, Bernard Williams, suggests that the man already goes wrong if he thinks it is incumbent upon him even to look for a principle from which he could infer that, in circumstances like those in which he finds himself, it is permissible to save one's wife. Instead, Williams says, "it might . . . [be] hoped . . . that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be [just] the thought that it was his wife." If he adds to this the further thought that in situations of this kind it is *permissible* to save one's wife, Williams admonishes that the man is having "one thought too many." In other words, there is something fishy about the whole notion that when his wife is drowning, the man needs to rely upon some general rule from which a reason that justifies his decision to save her can be derived.[1]

2 I am very sympathetic to Williams's line of thought.[2] However, the example as he presents it is significantly out of focus. It cannot work in the way that he intends, if what it stipulates concerning one of the drowning people is merely that she is the man's wife. After all, suppose that for quite good reasons the man detests and fears his wife. Suppose that she detests him too, and that she has recently engaged in several viciously determined attempts to murder him. Or suppose that it was nothing but a cold-bloodedly arranged marriage of convenience anyhow, and that they have never even been in the same room together except during a perfunctory two-minute wedding ceremony thirty years ago. Surely, to specify nothing more than a bare legal relationship between the man and the drowning woman misses the point.

Let us put aside the matter of their civil status, then, and stipulate instead that the man in the example *loves* one (and not the other) of the two people who are drowning. In that case, it certainly would be incongruous for him to look for a reason to save her. If he does truly love her, then he necessarily already has that reason. It is simply that she is in trouble and needs his help. Just in itself, the fact that he loves her entails that he takes her distress as a more powerful reason for going to her aid than for going to the aid of someone about whom he knows nothing. The need of his beloved for help provides him with this reason, without requiring that he think of any additional considerations and without the interposition of any general rules.

To take such things into account would indeed be to have one thought too many. If the man does not recognize the distress of the woman he loves as a reason for saving her rather than the stranger, then he does not genuinely love her at all. Loving someone or something essentially *means* or *consists in*, among other things, taking its interests as reasons for acting to serve those interests. Love is itself, for the lover, a source of reasons. It creates the reasons by which his acts of loving concern and devotion are inspired.[3]

[1] Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality," in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 18.

[2] I do have problems with a couple of the details. For one thing, I cannot help wondering why the man should have even the one thought that it's his wife. Are we supposed to imagine that at first he didn't recognize her? Or are we supposed to imagine that at first he didn't remember that they were married, and had to remind himself of that? It seems to me that the strictly correct number of thoughts for this man is zero. Surely the normal thing is that he sees what's happening in the water, and he jumps in to save his wife. Without thinking at all. In the circumstances that the example describes, any thought whatever is one thought too many.

[3] That, precisely, is how love makes the world go 'round.

3 Love is often understood as being, most basically, a response to the perceived worth of the beloved. We are moved to love something, on this account, by an appreciation of what we take to be its exceptional inherent value. The appeal of that value is what captivates us and turns us into lovers. We begin loving the things that we love because we are struck by their value, and we continue to love them for the sake of their value. If we did not find the beloved valuable, we would not love it.

This may well fit certain cases of what would commonly be identified as love. However, the sort of phenomenon that I have in mind when referring here to love is essentially something else. As I am construing it, love is not necessarily a response grounded in awareness of the inherent value of its object. It may sometimes arise like that, but it need not do so. Love may be brought about—in ways that are poorly understood—by a disparate variety of natural causes. It is entirely possible for a person to be caused to love something without noticing its value, or without being at all impressed by its value, or despite recognizing that there really is nothing especially valuable about it. It is even possible for a person to come to love something despite recognizing that its inherent nature is actually and utterly bad. That sort of love is doubtless a misfortune. Still, such things happen.

It is true that the beloved invariably *is*, indeed, valuable to the lover. However, perceiving that value is not at all an indispensable *formative* or *grounding* condition of the love. It need not be a perception of value in what he loves that moves the lover to love it. The truly essential relationship between love and the value of the beloved goes in the opposite direction. It is not necessarily as a *result* of recognizing their value and of being captivated by it that we love things.

Rather, what we love necessarily *acquires* value for us *because* we love it. The lover does invariably and necessarily perceive the beloved as valuable, but the value he sees it to possess is a value that derives from and that depends upon his love.

Consider the love of parents for their children. I can declare with unequivocal confidence that I do not love my children because I am aware of some value that inheres in them independent of my love for them. The fact is that I loved them even before they were born—before I had any especially relevant information about their personal characteristics or their particular merits and virtues. Furthermore, I do not believe that the valuable qualities they do happen to possess, strictly in their own rights, would really provide me with a very compelling basis for regarding them as having greater worth than many other possible objects of love that in fact I love much less. It is quite clear to me that I do not love them more than other children because I believe they are better.

At times, we speak of people or of other things as "unworthy" of our love. Perhaps this means that the cost of loving them would be greater than the benefit of doing so; or perhaps it means that to love those things would be in some way demeaning. In any case, if I ask myself whether my children are worthy of my love, my emphatic inclination is to reject the question as misguided. This is not because it goes so clearly without saying that my children *are* worthy. It is because my love for them is not at all a response to an evaluation either of them or of the consequences for me of loving them. If my children should turn out to be ferociously wicked, or if it should become apparent that loving them somehow threatened my hope of leading a decent life, I might perhaps recognize that my love for them was regretta-

ble. But I suspect that after coming finally to acknowledge this, I would continue to love them anyhow.

It is not because I have noticed their value, then, that I love my children as I do. Of course, I do perceive them to have value; so far as I am concerned, indeed, their value is beyond measure. That, however, is not the basis of my love. It is really the other way around. The particular value that I attribute to my children is not inherent in them but depends upon my love for them. The reason they are so precious to me is simply that I love them so much. As for why it is that human beings do tend generally to love their children, the explanation presumably lies in the evolutionary pressures of natural selection. In any case, it is plainly *on account of* my love for them that they have acquired in my eyes a value that otherwise they would certainly not possess.

This relationship between love and the value of the beloved—namely, that love is not necessarily grounded in the value of the beloved but does necessarily make the beloved valuable to the lover—holds not only for parental love but quite generally.[4] Most profoundly, perhaps, it is love that accounts for the value to us of life itself. Our lives normally

[4] There are certain objects of love—certain ideals, for instance—that do appear in many instances to be loved on account of their value. However, it is not necessary that the love of an ideal originate or be grounded in that way. A person might come to love justice or truth or moral rectitude quite blindly, after all, merely as a result of having been brought up to do so. Moreover, it is generally not considerations of value that account for the fact that a person comes to be selflessly devoted to one ideal or value rather than to some other. What leads people to care more about truth than about justice, or more about beauty than about morality, or more about one religion than about another, is generally not some prior appreciation that what they love more has greater inherent value than what they care about less.

have for us a value that we accept as commandingly authoritative. Moreover, the value to us of living radiates pervasively. It radically conditions the value that we attribute to many other things. It is a powerful—indeed, a comprehensively foundational—generator of value. There are innumerable things that we care about a great deal, and that therefore are very important to us, just because of the ways in which they bear upon our interest in survival.

Why do we so naturally, and with such unquestioning assurance, take self-preservation to be an incomparably compelling and legitimate reason for pursuing certain courses of action? We certainly do not assign this overwhelming importance to staying alive because we believe that there is some great value inherent in our lives, or in what we are doing with them—a value that is independent of our own attitudes and dispositions. Even when we think rather well of ourselves, and suppose that our lives may actually be valuable in such a way, that is not normally why we are so determined to hang on to them. We take the fact that some course of action would contribute to our survival as a reason for pursuing it just because, presumably again thanks to natural selection, we are innately constituted to love living.

4

Let me now attempt to explain what I have in mind when I speak here of love.

The object of love is often a concrete individual: for instance, a person or a country. It may also be something more abstract: for instance, a tradition, or some moral or nonmoral ideal. There will frequently be greater emotional color and urgency in love when the beloved is an individual than when it is something like social justice, or scientific truth, or the way a certain family or a certain cultural group does

things; but that is not always the case. In any event, it is not among the defining features of love that it must be hot rather than cool.

One distinctive feature of loving has to do with the particular status of the value that is accorded to its objects. Insofar as we care about something at all, we regard it as important to ourselves; but we may consider it to have that importance only because we regard it as a means to something else. When we love something, however, we go further. We care about it not as merely a means, but as an end. It is in the nature of loving that we consider its objects to be valuable in themselves and to be important to us for their own sakes.

Love is, most centrally, a *disinterested* concern for the existence of what is loved, and for what is good for it. The lover desires that his beloved flourish and not be harmed; and he does not desire this just for the sake of promoting some other goal. Someone might care about social justice only because it reduces the likelihood of rioting; and someone might care about the health of another person just because she cannot be useful to him unless she is in good shape. For the lover, the condition of his beloved is important in itself, apart from any bearing that it may have on other matters.

Love may involve strong feelings of attraction, which the lover supports and rationalizes with flattering descriptions of the beloved. Moreover, lovers often enjoy the company of their beloveds, cherish various types of intimate connection with them, and yearn for reciprocity. These enthusiasms are not essential. Nor is it essential that a person like what he loves. He may even find it distasteful. As in other modes of caring, the heart of the matter is neither affective nor cognitive. It is volitional. Loving something has less to do with

what a person believes, or with how he feels, than with a configuration of the will that consists in a practical concern for what is good for the beloved. This volitional configuration shapes the dispositions and conduct of the lover with respect to what he loves, by guiding him in the design and ordering of his relevant purposes and priorities.

It is important to avoid confusing love—as circumscribed by the concept that I am defining—with infatuation, lust, obsession, possessiveness, and dependency in their various forms. In particular, relationships that are primarily romantic or sexual do not provide very authentic or illuminating paradigms of love as I am construing it. Relationships of those kinds typically include a number of vividly distracting elements, which do not belong to the essential nature of love as a mode of disinterested concern, but that are so confusing that they make it nearly impossible for anyone to be clear about just what is going on. Among relationships between humans, the love of parents for their infants or small children is the species of caring that comes closest to offering recognizably pure instances of love.

There is a certain variety of concern for others that may also be entirely disinterested, but that differs from love because it is impersonal. Someone who is devoted to helping the sick or the poor for their own sakes may be quite indifferent to the particularity of those whom he seeks to help. What qualifies people to be beneficiaries of his charitable concern is not that he loves them. His generosity is not a response to their identities as individuals; it is not aroused by their personal characteristics. It is induced merely by the fact that he regards them as members of a relevant class. For someone who is eager to help the sick or the poor, any sick or poor person will do.

When it comes to what we love, on the other hand, that sort of indifference to the specificity of the object is out of the question. The significance to the lover of what he loves is not that his beloved is an instance or an exemplar. Its importance to him is not generic; it is ineluctably particular. For a person who wants simply to help the sick or the poor, it would make perfectly good sense to choose his beneficiaries randomly from among those who are sick or poor enough to qualify. It does not matter who in particular the needy persons are. Since he does not really care about any of them as such, they are entirely acceptable substitutes for each other. The situation of a lover is very different. There can be no equivalent substitute for his beloved. It might really be all the same to someone moved by charity whether he helps this needy person or that one. It cannot possibly be all the same to the lover whether he is devoting himself disinterestedly to what he actually does love or—no matter how similar it might be—to something else instead.

Finally, it is a necessary feature of love that it is not under our direct and immediate voluntary control. What a person cares about, and how much he cares about it, may under certain conditions be up to him. It may at times be possible for him to bring it about that he cares about something, or that he does not care about it, just by making up his mind one way or the other. Whether the requirements of protecting and supporting that thing provide him with acceptable reasons for acting, and how weighty those reasons are, depends in cases like that upon what he himself decides. With regard to certain things, however, a person may discover that he cannot affect whether or how much he cares about them merely by his own decision. The issue is not up to him at all.

For instance, under normal conditions people cannot help caring quite a bit about staying alive, about remaining physically intact, about not being radically isolated, about avoiding chronic frustration, and so on. They really have no choice. Canvassing reasons and making judgments and decisions will not change anything. Even if they should consider it a good idea to stop caring about whether they have any contact with other human beings, or about fulfilling their ambitions, or about their lives and their limbs, they would be unable to stop. They would find that, whatever they thought or decided, they were still disposed to protect themselves from extreme physical and psychic deprivation and harm. In matters like these, we are subject to a necessity that forcefully constrains the will and that we cannot elude merely by choosing or deciding to do so.[5]

The necessity by which a person is bound in cases like these is not a cognitive necessity, generated by the require-

[5] If someone under ordinary conditions cared nothing at all about dying or being mutilated, or about being deprived of all human contact, we would not regard him merely as atypical. We would consider him to be deranged. There is no strictly logical flaw in those attitudes, but they count nonetheless as irrational—i.e., as violating a defining condition of humanity. There is a sense of rationality that has very little to do with consistency or with other formal considerations. Thus suppose that a person deliberately causes death or deep suffering for no reason, or (Hume's example) seeks the destruction of a multitude in order to avoid a minor injury to one of his fingers. Anyone who could bring himself to do such things would naturally be regarded—despite his having made no logical error—as "crazy." He would be regarded, in other words, as lacking reason. We are accustomed to understanding rationality as precluding contradiction and incoherence—as limiting what it is possible for us to think. There is also a sense of rationality in which it limits what we can bring ourselves to do or to accept. In the one sense, the alternative to reason is what we recognize as inconceivable. In the other, it is what we find unthinkable.

ments of reason. The way in which it makes alternatives unavailable is not by limiting, as logical necessities do, the possibilities of coherent thought. When we understand that a proposition is self-contradictory, it is impossible for us to believe it; similarly, we cannot help accepting a proposition when we understand that to deny it would be to embrace a contradiction. What people cannot help caring about, on the other hand, is not mandated by logic. It is not primarily a constraint upon belief. It is a volitional necessity, which consists essentially in a limitation of the will.

There are certain things that people cannot do, despite possessing the relevant natural capacities or skills, because they cannot muster the will to do them. Loving is circumscribed by a necessity of that kind: what we love and what we fail to love is not up to us. Now the necessity that is characteristic of love does not constrain the movements of the will through an imperious surge of passion or compulsion by which the will is defeated and subdued. On the contrary, the constraint operates from within our own will itself. It is by our own will, and not by any external or alien force, that we are constrained. Someone who is bound by volitional necessity is unable to form a determined and effective intention—regardless of what motives and reasons he may have for doing so—to perform (or to refrain from performing) the action that is at issue. If he undertakes an attempt to perform it, he discovers that he simply cannot bring himself to carry the attempt all the way through.

Love comes in degrees. We love some things more than we love others. Accordingly, the necessity that love imposes on the will is rarely absolute. We may love something and yet be willing to harm it, in order to protect something else for which our love is greater. A person may well find it possible under certain conditions, then, to perform an act that under others he could not bring himself to perform. For instance, the fact that a person sacrifices his life when he believes that doing so will save his country from catastrophic harm does not reveal thereby that he does not love living; nor does his sacrifice show that he could also have brought himself to accept death willingly when he believed that there was less to be gained. Even of people who commit suicide because they are miserable, it is generally true that they love living. What they would really like, after all, would be to give up not their lives but their misery.

5 There is among philosophers a recurrent hope that there are certain final ends whose unconditional adoption might be shown to be in some way a requirement of reason. But this is a will-o'-the-wisp.[6] There are no necessities of logic or of rationality that dictate what we are to love. What we love is shaped by the universal exigencies of human life, together with those other needs and interests that derive more particularly from the features of individual character and experience. Whether something is to be an object of

[6] Some philosophers believe that the ultimate warrant for moral principles is to be found in reason. In their view, moral precepts are inescapably authoritative precisely because they articulate conditions of rationality itself. This cannot be correct. The sort of opprobrium that attaches to moral transgressions is quite unlike the sort of opprobrium that attaches to violations of the requirements of reason. Our response to people who behave immorally is not at all the same as our response to people whose thinking is illogical. Manifestly, there is something other than the importance of being rational that supports the injunction to be moral. For a discussion of this point, cf. my "Rationalism in Ethics," in *Autonomes Handeln: Beiträge zur Philosophie von Harry G. Frankfurt*, ed. M. Betzler and B. Guckes (Akademie Verlag, 2000).

our love cannot be decisively evaluated either by any a priori method or through examination of just its inherent properties. It can be measured only against requirements that are imposed upon us by other things that we love. In the end, these are determined for us by biological and other natural conditions, concerning which we have nothing much to say.[7]

The origins of normativity do not lie, then, either in the transient incitements of personal feeling and desire, or in the severely anonymous requirements of eternal reason. They lie in the contingent necessities of love. These move us, as feelings and desires do; but the motivations that love engenders are not merely adventitious or (to use Kant's term) heteronomous. Rather, like the universal laws of pure reason, they express something that belongs to our most intimate and most fundamental nature. Unlike the necessities of reason, however, those of love are not impersonal. They are constituted by and embedded in structures of the will through which the specific identity of the individual is most particularly defined.

Of course, love is often unstable. Like any natural condition, it is vulnerable to circumstance. Alternatives are always conceivable, and some of them may be attractive. It is generally possible for us to imagine ourselves loving things other than those that we do love, and to wonder whether that might not be in some way preferable. The possibility that there may be superior alternatives does not imply, however,

[7] It may be perfectly reasonable to insist that people *should* care about certain things, which they do not actually care about, but only if something is known about what they *do* in fact care about. If we may assume that people care about leading secure and satisfying lives, for example, we will be justified in trying to see to it that they care about things that we believe are indispensable for achieving security and satisfaction. It is in this way that a "rational" basis for morality may be developed.

that our behavior is irresponsibly arbitrary when we wholeheartedly adopt and pursue the final ends that our loving actually sets for us. Those ends are not fixed by shallow impulse, or by gratuitous stipulation; nor are they determined by what we merely happen at one time or another to find appealing or to decide that we want. The volitional necessity that constrains us in what we love may be as rigorously unyielding to personal inclination or choice as the more austere necessities of reason. What we love is not up to us. We cannot help it that the direction of our practical reasoning is in fact governed by the specific final ends that our love has defined for us. We cannot fairly be charged with reprehensible arbitrariness, nor with a willful or negligent lack of objectivity, since these things are not under our immediate control at all.

To be sure, it may at times be within our power to control them indirectly. We are sometimes capable of bringing about conditions that would cause us to stop loving what we love, or to love other things. But suppose that our love is so wholehearted, and that we are so satisfied to be in its grip, that we could not bring ourselves to alter it even if measures by which it could be altered were available. In that case, the alternative is not a genuine option. 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.

6 In the end, our readiness to be satisfied with loving what we actually do love does not rest upon the reliability of arguments or of evidence. It rests upon confidence in ourselves. This is not a matter of being satisfied with the range and reliability of our cognitive faculties, or of believing that our information is sufficient. It is confidence of a more fun-

damental and personal variety. What ensures that we accept our love without equivocation, and what thereby secures the stability of our final ends, is that we have confidence in the controlling tendencies and responses of our own volitional character.

It is by these nonvoluntary tendencies and responses of our will that love is constituted and that loving moves us. It is by these same configurations of the will, moreover, that our individual identities are most fully expressed and defined. The necessities of a person's will guide and limit his agency. They determine what he may be willing to do, what he cannot help doing, and what he cannot bring himself to do. They determine as well what he may be willing to accept as a reason for acting, what he cannot help considering to be a reason for acting, and what he cannot bring himself to count as a reason for acting. In these ways, they set the boundaries of his practical life; and thus they fix his shape as an active being. Any anxiety or uneasiness that he comes to feel on account of recognizing what he is constrained to love goes to the heart, then, of his attitude toward his own character as a person. That sort of disturbance is symptomatic of a lack of confidence in what he himself is.

The psychic integrity in which self-confidence consists can be ruptured by the pressure of unresolved discrepancies and conflicts among the various things that we love. Disorders of that sort undermine the unity of the will and put us at odds with ourselves. The opposition within the scope of what we love means that we are subject to requirements that are both unconditional and incompatible. That makes it impossible for us to plot a steady volitional course. If our love of one thing clashes unavoidably with our love of another, we may well find it impossible to accept ourselves as we are.

However, it may sometimes happen that there is in fact no conflict among the motivations that our various loves impose upon us, and hence that there is no source or locus within us of opposition to any of them. In that case, we have no basis for any uncertainty or reluctance in acceding to the motivations that our loving engenders. Nothing else that we care about as much, or that is of comparable importance to us, provides a ground for hesitation or doubt. Accordingly, we would be able deliberately to arouse ourselves to resist the requirements of love only by resorting to some contrived ad hoc maneuver. That *would* be arbitrary. On the other hand, it cannot be improperly arbitrary for a person to accept the impetus of a love concerning which he is well informed, and that is coherent with the other demands of his will, for he has no pertinent basis for declining to do so.

7 What we love is necessarily important to us, just because we love it. There is also a rather different point to be made here. Loving itself is important to us. Quite apart from our particular interest in the various things that we love, we have a more generic and an even more fundamental interest in loving as such.

A clear and familiar illustration of this is provided by parental love. Besides the fact that *my children* are important to me for their own sakes, there is the additional fact that *loving my children* is important to me for *its* own sake. Whatever burdens and distresses loving them may in the course of time have brought me, my life was notably altered and enhanced when I came to love them. One thing that leads people to have children is precisely the expectation that it will enrich their lives, and that it will do this simply by giving them more to love.

Why is loving so important to us? Why is a life in which a person loves something, regardless of what it is, better for him—assuming, of course, that other things are more or less equal—than a life in which there is nothing that he loves? Part of the explanation has to do with the importance to us of having final ends. We need goals that we consider to be worth attaining for their own sake and not only for the sake of other things.

Insofar as we care about anything, we make various things important to us—namely, the things that we care about, together with whatever may be indispensable as a means to them. This provides us with aims and ambitions, thereby making it possible for us to formulate courses of action that are not entirely pointless. It enables us, in other words, to conceive activity that is meaningful in the rather minimal sense that it has some purpose. However, activity that is meaningful only in this very limited sense cannot be fully satisfying. It cannot even be fully intelligible to us.

Aristotle observes that desire is "empty and vain" unless "there is some end of the things we do which we desire for its own sake."[8] It is not enough for us to see merely that it is important for us to attain a certain end because that will facilitate our attaining some further end. We cannot make sense of what we are doing if none of our goals has any importance except in virtue of enabling us to reach other goals. There must be "some end of the things we do which we desire for its own sake." Otherwise our activity, regardless of how purposeful it may be, will have no real point. We can never be genuinely satisfied by it, because it will always be unfinished. Since what it aims at is always a preliminary or a preparation, it will leave us always short of completion. The actions we perform will truly seem empty and vain to us, and we will tend to lose interest in what we do.

[8] *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a18–21. Aristotle apparently believed that there must be a single final end at which everything we do aims. I mean to endorse only the more modest view that each of the things we do must aim at some final end.

8 It is an interesting question why a life in which activity is locally purposeful but nonetheless fundamentally aimless—having an immediate goal but no final end—should be considered undesirable. What would necessarily be so terrible about a life that is empty of meaning in this sense? The answer is, I think, that without final ends we would find nothing truly important either as an end or as a means. The importance to us of everything would depend upon the importance to us of something else. We would not really care about anything unequivocally and without conditions.

Insofar as this became clear to us, we would recognize our volitional tendencies and dispositions as pervasively inconclusive. It would then become impossible for us to involve ourselves conscientiously and responsibly in managing the course of our intentions and decisions. We would have no settled interest in designing or in sustaining any particular continuity in the configurations of our will. A major aspect of our reflective connection to ourselves, in which our distinctive character as human beings lies, would thus be severed. Our lives would be passive, fragmented, and thereby drastically impaired. Even if we might perhaps continue to maintain some meager vestige of active self-awareness, we would be dreadfully bored.

Boredom is a serious matter. It is not a condition that we seek to avoid just because we do not find it enjoyable. In fact, the avoidance of boredom is a profound and compelling

human need. Our aversion to being bored has considerably greater significance than a mere reluctance to experience a state of consciousness that is more or less unpleasant. The aversion arises out of our sensitivity to a far more portentous threat.

The essence of boredom is that we have no interest in what is going on. We do not care about any of it; none of it is important to us. As a natural consequence of this, our motivation to stay focused weakens; and we undergo a corresponding attenuation of psychic vitality. In its most characteristic and familiar manifestations, being bored involves a radical reduction in the sharpness and steadiness of attention. The level of our mental energy and activity diminishes. Our responsiveness to ordinary stimuli flattens out and shrinks. Within the scope of our awareness, differences are not noticed and distinctions are not made. Thus our conscious field becomes more and more homogeneous. As the boredom expands and becomes increasingly dominant, it entails a progressive diminution of significant differentiation within consciousness.

At the limit, when the field of consciousness has become totally undifferentiated, there is an end to all psychic movement or change. The complete homogenization of consciousness is tantamount to a cessation of conscious experience entirely. In other words, when we are bored we tend to fall asleep.

Any substantial increase in the extent to which we are bored threatens the very continuation of conscious mental life. What our preference for avoiding boredom manifests is therefore not merely a casual resistance to more or less innocuous discomfort. It expresses a quite primitive urge for psychic survival. I think it is appropriate to construe this urge

as a variant of the universal and elemental instinct for self-preservation. It is related to what we commonly think of as "self-preservation," however, only in an unfamiliarly literal sense—that is, in the sense of sustaining not the *life* of the organism but the persistence and vitality of *the self*.

9

Practical reasoning is concerned, at least in part, with the design of effective means for attaining our ends. If it is to have an appropriately settled framework and foundation, it must be grounded in ends that we regard as something more than means to still other ends. There must be certain things that we value and that we pursue for their own sakes. Now it is easy enough to understand how something comes to possess instrumental value. That is just a matter of its being causally efficacious in contributing to the fulfillment of a certain goal. But how is it that things may come to have for us a terminal value that is independent of their usefulness for pursuing further goals? In what acceptable way can our need for final ends be met?

It is love, I believe, that meets this need. It is in coming to love certain things—however this may be caused—that we become bound to final ends by more than an adventitious impulse or a deliberate willful choice.[9] Love is the originating source of terminal value. If we loved nothing, then nothing would possess for us any definitive and inherent worth.

[9] In addition to its concern with the design of means, practical reason is also concerned with setting our final ends. It accomplishes this by identifying what it is that we love. This may require significant investigation and analysis. People cannot reliably discover what they love merely by introspection; nor is what they love generally unmistakable in their behavior. Love is a complex configuration of the will, which may be difficult both for the lover and for others to discern.

There would be nothing that we found ourselves in any way constrained to accept as a final end. By its very nature, loving entails both that we regard its objects as valuable in themselves and that we have no choice but to adopt those objects as our final ends. Insofar as love is the creator both of inherent or terminal value and of importance, then, it is the ultimate ground of practical rationality.

There are many philosophers, of course, who claim to the contrary that certain things have an inherent value that is altogether independent of any of our subjective states or conditions. This value does not depend at all, they maintain, upon our feelings or our attitudes, nor does it depend upon our volitional tendencies and dispositions. The position of these philosophers is not truly viable, however, as a response to issues concerning how practical reason may be grounded. Its pertinence to those issues is decisively undermined by its failure to deal with, or even to confront, a fundamental problem.

The fact that a goal has a certain inherent value may be presumed to entail that it is qualified or worthy to be pursued as a final end. This plainly does not entail, however, that anyone has an *obligation* to pursue it as a final end; nor is that entailed even by the stronger assumption that the goal in question has greater inherent value than anything else. It is one thing for a person to assert that a particular object or state of affairs has inherent value, and that there is accordingly some reason for choosing it. But it is another thing entirely for the person to assert of that object or state of affairs that it is or should be important to him, or that he should care about it enough to make it one of his goals. There are many inherently valuable goals in which no one is required to be particularly interested.

The claim that things have independent inherent value does not so much as address, much less answer, the question of how a person's final ends are appropriately to be established. Even if the claim were correct—that is, even if certain things do have a value that is utterly unconditioned by subjective considerations—it would still provide *no account at all* of how people are to select the ends that they will pursue. That question is not immediately about inherent value, but about importance. So far as I can see, it is not possible to deal with it satisfactorily except by referring to what it is—if anything—that people cannot help considering important to themselves. The most fundamental issues of practical reason cannot be resolved, in other words, without an account of what people love.[10]

10 With respect to a rather curious feature, the relationship between the importance to the lover of loving and the importance to him of the interests of his beloved parallels the relationship between final ends and the means by which they may be reached. The fact that something is effective as a means to some final end is ordinarily supposed to entail only that it possesses a certain *instrumental* value; and how valuable that usefulness makes it is presumed to depend upon the value of the end to which it is a means. It is ordinarily also supposed that the value of the final end

[10] It might be argued that we are morally obliged to care about certain things, and that these obligations do not depend upon any subjective considerations. But even if it were true that we have such obligations, it would still be necessary to determine how important it is for us to fulfill them. So far as practical reasoning is concerned, the issue of importance is—as suggested in the preceding chapter—more fundamental than the issue of morality.

is in no way dependent upon the value of the means that make its attainment possible. Thus the relationship of derivation between the value of a means and the value of its final end is generally understood to be asymmetric: the value of the means derives from the value of the end, but not vice versa.

This way of construing the relationship may seem to be straightforwardly incontrovertible—a matter of elementary common sense. Nonetheless, it rests upon a mistake. It assumes that the only value that a final end necessarily possesses for us, simply in virtue of the fact that it *is* a final end, must be identical with the value for us of the state of affairs we bring about when we attain that end. In fact, however, this does not exhaust the importance to us of our final ends. They are necessarily valuable in another way as well.

Our goals are not important to us exclusively because we value the states of affairs that they envisage. It is not important to us only to *attain* our final ends. It is also important to us to *have* final ends. This is because without them, there is nothing important for us to do. If we had no goals at which we aimed for their own sakes, there would be no meaningful purpose in any activity in which we might engage. Having final ends is valuable, in other words, as an indispensable condition of our engaging in activity that we regard as truly worthwhile.

Similarly, the value to us of useful activity is never exclusively instrumental. This is because it is *inherently* important for us to engage in activity that is devoted to advancing our goals. For its own sake, as well as for the outcomes at which it aims, we need productive work. Apart from the specific importance of the goals that we happen to pursue, it is important for us to have something that we consider it worthwhile to do.

It turns out, then, that instrumentally valuable activity, precisely because it is useful, necessarily also possesses intrinsic value. And, by the same token, intrinsically valuable final ends necessarily are instrumentally valuable precisely in virtue of being essential conditions for attaining the intrinsically valuable goal of having something worthwhile to do. Despite the air of paradox, we may fairly say that final ends are instrumentally valuable just because they are terminally valuable, and that effective means to the attainment of final ends are intrinsically valuable just because of their instrumental value.

There is a similar structure in the reciprocal relationship between the importance to us of loving and the importance to us of what we love. Just as a means is subordinated to its end, the activity of the lover is subordinated to the interests of his beloved. It is only because of this subordination, moreover, that loving is important to us for its own sake. The inherent importance of loving is due precisely to the fact that loving consists essentially in being devoted to the well-being of what we love. The value of loving to the lover derives from his dedication to his beloved. As for the importance of the beloved, the lover cares about what he loves for its own sake. Its well-being is inherently important to him. In addition, however, what he loves necessarily possesses an instrumental value for him, in virtue of the fact that it is a necessary condition of his enjoying the inherently important activity of loving it.

11 This may make it seem difficult to understand how the attitude of a lover toward his beloved can be entirely disinterested. After all, the beloved provides the lover with an essential condition for achieving an end—loving—that is intrinsically important to him. What he loves makes

it possible for him to acquire the benefit that loving provides, and to avoid the emptiness of a life in which he has nothing to love. Thus the lover seems inevitably to profit from, and hence to make use of, his beloved. Is it not clear, then, that love must inevitably be self-serving? How is it possible to avoid concluding that it can never be altogether selfless or disinterested?

That conclusion would be too hasty. Consider a man who tells a woman that his love for her is what gives meaning and value to his life. Loving her, he says, is for him the only thing that makes living worthwhile. The woman is unlikely to feel (assuming she actually believes this) that what the man is telling her implies that he does not really love her at all, and that he cares about her only because it makes him feel good. From his declaration that his love for her fulfills a deep need of his life, she will surely not conclude that he is making use of her. Indeed, she will naturally take him to be conveying just the opposite. It will be clear to her that what he is saying implies that he values her for herself, and not merely as a means to his own advantage.

It is possible, of course, that the man is a phony. It is also possible that, although he believes he is telling the truth about himself, he doesn't really know what he is talking about. Let us assume, however, that his professions of love and of its importance to him are not only sincere but also correct. In that case, it would be perverse to infer from them that he is using the woman as a means to the satisfaction of his own interests. The fact that loving her is so important to him is entirely consistent with his being unequivocally wholehearted and selfless in his devotion to her interests. The deep importance to him of loving her hardly entails the absurd consequence that he does not really love her at all.

The appearance of conflict between pursuing one's own interests and being selflessly devoted to the interests of another is dispelled once we appreciate that what serves the self-interest of the lover is nothing other than his selflessness. It is only if his love is genuine, needless to say, that it can have the importance for him that loving entails. Therefore, insofar as loving is important to him, maintaining the volitional attitudes that constitute loving must be important to him. Now those attitudes consist essentially in caring selflessly about the well-being of a beloved. There is no loving without that. Accordingly, the benefit of loving accrues to a person only to the extent that he cares about his beloved disinterestedly, and not for the sake of any benefit that he may derive either from the beloved or from loving it. He cannot hope to fulfill his own interest in loving unless he puts aside his personal needs and ambitions and dedicates himself to the interests of another.

Any suspicion that this would require an implausibly high-minded readiness for self-sacrifice can be allayed by the recognition that, in the very nature of the case, a lover *identifies himself* with what he loves. In virtue of this identification, protecting the interests of his beloved is necessarily among the lover's own interests. The interests of his beloved are not actually *other* than his at all. They are his interests too. Far from being austerely detached from the fortunes of what he loves, he is personally affected by them. The fact that he cares about his beloved as he does means that his life is enhanced when its interests prevail and that he is harmed when those interests are defeated. The lover is *invested* in his beloved: he profits by its successes, and its failures cause him to suffer. To the extent that he invests himself in what he loves, and in that way identifies with

it, its interests are identical with his own. It is hardly surprising, then, that for the lover selflessness and self-interest coincide.

12 The identification of a lover with any of the things that he loves is bound to be, of course, both inexact and less than totally comprehensive. His interests and those of his beloved can never be entirely the same; and it is improbable that they will even be wholly compatible. However important to him a beloved may be, it is unlikely to be the only thing that is important to him. It is unlikely, indeed, to be the only thing that he loves. Thus there is ordinarily a strong possibility that disruptive conflict may arise between the lover's devotion to the well-being of something that he loves and his concern for his other interests.

Loving is risky. Lovers are characteristically vulnerable to profound distress if they must neglect what is required of them by one love in order to meet the requirements of another, or if what they love does not do well. They must therefore be careful. They must try to avoid being caused to love what it would be undesirable for them to love. For an infinite being, whose omnipotence makes it absolutely secure, even the most indiscriminate loving is safe. God need not be cautious. He runs no risks. There is no need for God, out of prudence or anxiety, to forgo any opportunities for loving. For those of us who are less extravagantly endowed, on the other hand, our readiness to love needs to be more mindful and more restrained.

On some accounts, the creative activity of God is mobilized by an entirely inexhaustible and uninhibited love. This love, which is understood as being totally without limit or condition, moves God to desire a plenum of existence in which everything that can conceivably be an object of love

is included. God wants to love as much as it is possible to love. He naturally has no fear of loving unwisely or too well. What God desires to create and to love, accordingly, is just Being—of any and every kind whatsoever, and as much as there can be.

To say that the divine love is infinite and unconditional is to say that it is completely indiscriminate. God loves *everything*, regardless of its character or its consequences. Now this is tantamount to saying that the creative activity in which God's love of Being is expressed and fulfilled has no motive beyond an unlimitedly promiscuous urge to love without boundary or measure. Insofar as people think of God's essence as love, then, they must suppose that there is no divine providence or purpose that constrains in any way the sheer maximal realization of possibility. If God is love, the universe has no point except simply to be.

Finite creatures like ourselves, of course, cannot afford to be so heedless in our loving. Omnipotent agents are free of all passivity. Nothing can happen to them. Therefore, they have nothing to fear. We, on the other hand, incur substantial vulnerabilities when we love. Consequently, we need to maintain a defensive selectivity and restraint. It is important that we be careful to whom and to what we give our love.

Our lack of immediate voluntary control over our loving is a particular source of danger to us. The fact that we cannot directly and freely determine what we love and what we do not love, simply by making choices and decisions of our own, means that we are often susceptible to being more or less helplessly driven by the necessities that love entails. These necessities may lead us to invest ourselves unwisely. Love may engage us in volitional commitments from which we are unable to withdraw and through which our interests may be severely harmed.

13 Notwithstanding the risks to which the constraining force of love exposes us, that constraint itself contributes significantly to the value for us of loving. It is in some degree precisely because loving does bind our wills that we value it as we do. This may seem implausible, given that we customarily represent ourselves with so much self-congratulatory pride as being dedicated above all to the value of freedom. How could we claim convincingly to cherish freedom and at the same time welcome a condition that entails submission to necessity? However, the appearance of conflict here is misleading. The key to dissipating that appearance lies in the superficially paradoxical but nonetheless authentic circumstance that the necessities with which love binds the will are themselves liberating.

There is a striking and instructive resemblance in this matter between love and reason. Rationality and the capacity to love are the most powerfully emblematic and most highly prized features of human nature. The former guides us most authoritatively in the use of our minds, while the latter provides us with the most compelling motivation in our personal and social conduct. Both are sources of what is distinctively humane and ennobling in us. They dignify our lives. Now it is especially notable that while each imposes upon us a commanding necessity, neither entails for us any sense of impotence or restriction. On the contrary, each characteristically brings with it an experience of liberation and enhancement. When we discover that we have no choice but to accede to irresistible requirements of logic, or to submit to captivating necessities of love, the feeling with which we do so is by no means one of dispirited passivity or confinement. In both cases—whether we are following reason or following our hearts—we are typically conscious of an invigorating release and expansion of ourselves. But how can it be that we find ourselves to have been strengthened, and to have been made somehow less confined or limited, by being deprived of choice?

The explanation is that an encounter either with volitional or with rational necessity eliminates uncertainty. It thereby relaxes the inhibitions and hesitancies of self-doubt. When reason demonstrates what *must* be the case, that puts an end to any irresolution on our part concerning what we are to believe. In his account of the satisfaction he derived from his early study of geometry, Bertrand Russell alludes to "the restfulness of mathematical certainty."[11] Mathematical certainty, like other modes of certainty that are grounded in logically or conceptually necessary truths, is restful because it relieves us from having to contend with disparate tendencies in ourselves concerning what to believe. The issue is settled. We need no longer struggle to make up our minds. As long as we are uncertain, we hold ourselves back. Discovering how things must necessarily be enables us—indeed, it requires us—to give up the debilitating restraint that we impose upon ourselves when we are unsure what to think. Then there is no longer any obstacle to wholehearted belief. Nothing stands in the way of a steady and untroubled conviction. We are released from the blockage of irresolution and can give ourselves to an unimpeded assent.

Similarly, the necessity with which love binds the will puts an end to indecisiveness concerning what to care about. In being captivated by our beloved, we are liberated from the impediments to choice and action that consist either in hav-

[11] "My Mental Development," in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (The Library of Living Philosophers, 1946), 7.

ing no final ends or in being drawn inconclusively both in one direction and in another. Indifference and unsettled ambivalence, which may radically impair our capacity to choose and to act, are thereby overcome. The fact that we cannot help loving, and that we therefore cannot help being guided by the interests of what we love, helps to ensure that we neither flounder aimlessly nor hold ourselves back from definitive adherence to a meaningful practical course.[12]

The requirements of logic and the needs of a beloved supersede any contrary preferences to which we are less authoritatively inclined. Once the dictatorial regimes of these necessities have been imposed, it is no longer up to us to decide what to care about or what to think. We have no choice in the matter. Logic and love preempt the guidance of our cognitive and volitional activity. They make it impossible for us to exercise, for the sake of other goals that we happen to find appealing, control over the formation of our beliefs and our will.

It may seem, then, that the way in which the necessities of reason and of love liberate us is by freeing us from ourselves. That *is*, in a sense, what they do. The idea is nothing new. The possibility that a person may be liberated through submitting to constraints that are beyond his immediate voluntary control is among the most ancient and persistent themes of our moral and religious traditions. "In His will," Dante wrote, "is our peace."[13] The restfulness that Russell reports having found in the discovery of what reason required of him evidently corresponds, at least up to a point, to the escape from inner disturbance that others profess having discovered through accepting as their own the inexorable will of God.

[12] It does not in itself guarantee decisiveness, since the fact that we love something does not settle how much we love it—i.e., whether we love it more or less than other things whose interests may compete for our attention.

[13] *Paradiso* 3.85.

14 I have maintained that love need not be grounded in any judgment or perception concerning the value of its object. Appreciating the value of an object is not an essential condition for loving it. It is certainly possible, of course, for judgments and perceptions of that sort to arouse love. However, love may be aroused in other ways as well.

On the other hand, a sensitivity to the risks and costs of loving does often motivate people to try to minimize the likelihood that they will come to love things that they regard as not especially valuable. They are disinclined to be bound by love unless they expect that there will be relatively little harm—to themselves, or to whatever else they care about—in the loving. In addition, they naturally prefer to avoid expending the attention and the effort that loving requires unless they consider it desirable for the beloved to flourish.

Furthermore, what a person loves reveals something significant about him. It reflects upon his taste and his character; or it may be taken to do so. People are often judged and evaluated on the basis of what they care about. Therefore pride and a concern for reputation encourage them to see to it, insofar as they can, that what they love is something that they and others regard as valuable.

What a person loves, or what he does not love, may be counted to his credit. Or it may discredit him: it may be taken to show that he has a bad moral character, or that he is shallow, or has poor judgment, or that he is in some other way deficient. One variety of love to which everyone is sus-

ceptible, and that is widely regarded as reflecting badly upon the lover—especially if it grips him very powerfully—is love of oneself. A propensity toward self-love may not be universally condemned as outright immoral. However, it is commonly disdained as rather unattractive and as unworthy of particular respect. Right-thinking people suppose that anyone ought to do better with his love than to turn it upon himself.

That is not how things look, though, when they are examined in the light of the general account of love that I have given. In the next chapter, I shall develop a way of understanding self-love that supports an attitude toward self-love quite different from the one I have just sketched. Far from demonstrating a flaw in character or being a sign of weakness, I shall argue, coming to love oneself is the deepest and most essential—and by no means the most readily attainable—achievement of a serious and successful life.