

Christian Nitz 2000 Universität Bielefeld	unpublished
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Love's Labours Lost?

A Critical Scrutiny of Frankfurt's Concept of Love

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Harry Frankfurt maintains that love is a purely volitional state which neither includes cognitive states nor emotions. Frankfurt nevertheless assures us that only love can save a person's psychological life from becoming unshaped and deprived. I question the fruitfulness as well as the viability of Frankfurt's concept of love. My argument proceeds in three steps. Firstly, I point out that Frankfurt's does not explicate our mundane concept but rather introduces a term of art labelled 'love'. Secondly, I argue that this concept does not provides new illuminating descriptions or new revealing explanations. Finally, I argue that Frankfurt's is structurally amiss since the very aspect that is most naturally supposed to play the organising role is lacking.

Does love make the world go around? Harry Frankfurt apparently believes that it does. Now it might simply appear evident that the notion of love has a crucial role to play in the metaphysics of human psychology. Yet Frankfurt propounds a rather striking understanding of this concept. He thinks that love is a purely volitional state of the mind and hence does neither include cognitive nor emotional aspects. In this paper I will question the fruitfulness as well as the viability of this understanding. My argument proceeds in three steps. First of all, I canvass Frankfurt's account and compare his understanding with our ordinary concept of love (sec. 1 and 2). From this comparison I conclude that Frankfurt does not explicate our mundane concept but rather introduces a term of art

labeled 'love'. There of course is nothing wrong with this *per se*. But Frankfurt's concept does neither yield illuminating new descriptions nor revealing new explanations of phenomena (sec. 3). However, it is not just that adding Frankfurt's concept does not improve our theoretical repertoire. For taking love to be non-emotional means to disconnect it from the very features of our ordinary concept that alone can plausibly account for love's role in our psychological lives (sec. 4).¹

1. Care and Love as Purely Volitional States

Frankfurt maintains that any description of a person's conative structure that makes do with the notions *desire*, *want* and *preference* is likely to be inadequate. For such a description cannot capture the essential fact that persons regard certain things to be important to themselves — that they *care about* things. Frankfurt considers *caring about something* to be an attitude. He moreover holds that, appearances notwithstanding, caring is a basic attitude, i.e. that it cannot be reduced to an arrangement of beliefs, desires and the like. He also maintains that this very attitude plays a central role in any person's psychology. For what we care about determines what we quite generally want and desire and thus creates the "thematic continuity in our volitional lives"(Frankfurt (1997), 162.).

Caring hence involves an enduring commitment to something. There are more characteristics of his concept to be found (cf. Frankfurt (1997), 160ff). To begin with, caring typically involves a higher-order desire.² Someone who wants to attend a concert might rather decide to help a friend. But if he cares about the concert, he will continue to desire to attend the event and he will *desire* that his desire does not abate. His serious commitment as a rule even ensures that he actively keeps that desire alive. As Frankfurt puts it, the desire involved "must endure through an exercise of his own volitional activity rather by its own inherent momentum"(Frankfurt (1997), 160). Caring about something is, secondly, not an inherently transparent attitude. Someone who cares about something does not have to be aware of this fact. Neither is caring, thirdly, inherently

rational. Someone might care about writing an ingenious novel even though she knows for sure that she will always lack the ability to do so. She might even be unable to change her attitude. That is, fourthly, caring does not have to be voluntary; we might be propelled to care about something we don't want to care about.

Love, Frankfurt explains, is a mode of caring that quite generally consists in a concern for the well-being of the beloved object (cf. Frankfurt (1997), 165ff). The state of love hence inherits the features of caring just mentioned. It does also have characteristics of its own. To begin with, love is typically beyond choice and control. Among the things we care about are some that we cannot help caring about, and among these are the things we love. The concern of the lover is, secondly, intimately bound to the individuality of its object. What is loved is a *particular* individual, a certain *this*, and no other object can be an adequate substitute for it. Frankfurt, thirdly, does not just count any concern for the well-being of a certain individual as love. The concern must rather be selfless, or as Frankfurt usually puts it, 'disinterested'. There are two aspects to this idea. On the one hand, someone who actually loves an object cares for the beloved *for its own sake*, and not for the fact that it possesses one property or other. On the other hand, love is a disinterested or selfless concern in that the lover identifies with the interests of the beloved, i.e. accepts them as his own. Love does not leave a boundary between promoting one's own interests and promoting the interests of the beloved. This might explain the last of love's characteristics. Frankfurt holds, fourthly that the relation between love and action is unmediated. In this respect, love contrast sharply with duty. Someone who believes that a person is in danger and who thinks that it is his duty to help persons in danger needs an additional desire, *viz.* to do his duty, in order to act. Lovers do not need an additional volition to help their beloved. Love is, at it were, directly action-guiding.

This blend of features makes it natural to assume that the states of care and love combine volitional, cognitive, and emotional aspects. This seems to be what Frankfurt

himself initially had in mind when he characterised care as “a complex set of cognitive, affective, and volitional dispositions and states”(Frankfurt (1982), 85). Yet Frankfurt has come to believe that neither concept has any emotional or cognitive ingredient *at all*. He does not deny that someone who cares about something will typically have certain feelings towards that object. But these feelings merely accompany an attitude that by itself is *purely* volitional:

No doubts beliefs, feelings, and expectations of those kinds *do*, in many situations, more or less reliably indicate whether a person considers something to be important to him. What is at the heart of the matter, however, is not a condition of *feeling* or of *belief* or of *expectation* but of *will*. (Frankfurt (1997), 161)

Frankfurt holds that there are no conceptual ties between ‘caring about something’ and ‘believing *P*’ or ‘being in the emotional state *S*’. Very much the same is true, Frankfurt assures us, of love. Since it is a mode of caring, love also is a purely volitional state and hence has neither essentially emotional nor essentially cognitive aspects:

Like other modes of caring, this concern is neither equivalent to nor entailed by any type of feeling or cognition. (...) Rather, love is essentially a somewhat non-voluntary and complex *volitional* structure that bears both upon how a person is disposed to act and upon how he is disposed to manage the motivations and interests by which he is moved. (Frankfurt (1997), 165)

Consequently, Frankfurt disowns the idea that romantic relationships reveal the essence of love. To the contrary. The powerful emotions they comprise makes them unsuitable for an adequate view on love’s nature (cf. Frankfurt (1997), 166). Frankfurt rather takes the love of parents for their infants to be one paradigm case of love. Romantic lovers might commonly have selfish motives, whereas the loving parent acts upon quite selfless desires: she simply wants her child to flourish for its own sake. Frankfurt’s other prime example is the love of a person for her life. For a person cares for her life not because of any valuable property attached to it, but simply because it is her life.

According to Frankfurt, then, love is the disinterested as well as purely volitional concern for the well-being of someone or something. This essentially non-cognitive as

well as non-emotional state plays a crucial role in any person's psychological life – or so Frankfurt insists. To an extent, that should be obvious. For love is a mode of caring and Frankfurt holds that caring alone can give our volitional life a thematic continuity. Put negatively, the life of a person who did not care about anything at all would be intolerably fragmented. However, it is hard to see why the special variety of caring called 'love' should in any way be more vital than other, less selfless varieties. Frankfurt believes that this is plain to see. He has to admit, though, that he cannot give a compelling explanation for this phenomenon, and in the end he resorts to stipulation:

In any case, as I shall simply stipulate, without loving in one or more of its several modes life for us would be intolerably unshaped and deprived.
(Frankfurt (1997), 174)

On Frankfurt's account, it thus becomes a mystery why love is so important to us. This is not the only mystery of love as Frankfurt explains it. It is also somewhat mysterious why a purely volitional state should be that much beyond choice and control, and it far from clear how such a state can, as it were, propel us into action without further ado. I will come back to these points in due course.

2. Frankfurt's Notion and Our Ordinary Concept of Love

It might be obvious that Frankfurt's concept of love deviates from our common understanding of that term. However, it is important to determine in what ways Frankfurt's notion differs from the mundane one. This is not an easy task. For it is evident that our common-sense taxonomy classifies a wide variety of diverse phenomena as instances of love (cf. Johnson (2001): ch.1). There is, then, no such thing as *the* notion of love. However, the phenomena we commonly call 'love' do more or less have some common traits, and these traits can be exploited to distinguish between our concept and the notion Frankfurt describes.

We think of love as an essentially emotional state. Our linguistic practice makes this obvious since utterances such as "I do love my daughter, but I do not feel anything

for her” border on the senseless. We moreover assign the emotional aspect of love an organising role. Love admits of degree, and we commonly and conceptually link the intensity of this state to the intensity of the feeling involved. Our concept of love, then, is the concept of a state that essentially includes an emotional aspect. Two further considerations sustain this view. For one, our concept of love is part of a web of concepts that includes such notions as hate, jealousy, grief, anger, joy, elation etc. Since these evidently cover emotions, love plausibly is an emotional concept, too.³ What is more, many of our psychological generalisations that concern the state of love link it to emotional modes of the mind. Consider for instance the following generalisation: “A lover will *ceteris paribus* be extremely alarmed and frightened if his beloved is put in danger”. To be sure, this ‘law’ does not express a conceptual connection. But an explanation of why this correlation holds will plausibly mention the fact that love is an emotional state.

Our concept of love thus is richer than Frankfurt’s notion. Then again, there are respects in which our concept is less demanding than Frankfurt’s. On the one hand, Frankfurt thinks that love consists essentially in a selfless concern for the well-being of the beloved. Yet we simply do not think of love as a disinterested state of the mind. We consider the fact that someone loves a certain person to be consistent with the fact that he acts solely to further his own interests and hence does not take the interests of the beloved to be his own. On the other hand, our common concept is not confined to states that include second-order desires. Frankfurt is admittedly vague on the question whether love *must* include such a volition. It is however plain to see that our notion does not embrace this connection. We think it possible that someone might love a person without desiring that his desire for that person will continue. Lovers are not in need of second order states just because they are lovers – which is why we call the by its very nature unreflexive devotion of a dog for its master ‘love’.

Frankfurt's notion of love, then, differs in important respects from our common concept. That is easy to be explained: Frankfurt simply does not set out to explicate our ordinary concept. He rather knowingly explores a new and technical notion which I will from now on call 'pure love'.⁴ There is nothing wrong with that. Yet anyone who introduces a new notion runs the risk that his concept might turn out to be simply pointless. Most importantly, the introduction of a new concept will be pointless unless the concept provides illuminating new descriptions and revealing new explanations – that is to say, if its applications allow us to see or to understand things *better* than we did before. I guess that Frankfurt wholeheartedly agrees. It is plain to see that he thinks that his notion does indeed improve our grasp on human psychology. For he holds that parental love and love of life cannot be adequately described or explained without the notion of pure love. However, a closer look casts doubt on this claim.

3. Finding Pure Love in Real Life

To begin with Frankfurt's first paradigm case, the attitude that parents have for their children, is unquestionably a very special one. It also is beyond question that parents care for their small children in the sense introduced by Frankfurt, *viz.* that they regard their offspring to be important to themselves. Frankfurt, however, thinks that parental love is a case of pure love. On a first glance, this does not seem to fit the phenomena. Pure love is by definition a non-emotional state. Yet the state of mind of, say, the mother of a small son is quite evidently utterly emotional. Her situation is thoroughly shaped by the way she feels, and any description of her state that ignores or belittles the central role of her emotions appears to be flawed. According to its phenomenology, then, parental love turns out to have a crucial emotional dimension. Describing this state as one of pure love thus distorts rather than illuminates the apparent phenomena. To be sure, parental love is a special kind of love. A small child will be emotionally attached to his parents without reservation, and parents will continue to love their children even

if they think that they are unworthy of their devotion. Parental love thus is pure in the sense that it is unconditional. But it hardly is pure in the sense that it is non-emotional.

But maybe Frankfurt thinks that concentrating on the surface phenomena of parental love makes one miss its essence. Maybe Frankfurt believes that parental love consists essentially in a volitional condition that is hidden from sight by powerful emotions which parents *also* do have. His justification for the claim that care is a purely volitional state and his views concerning romantic relationships strongly support such a reading (see above sec. 1). However, if this is Frankfurt's view, he has to hold that the phenomenon at hand somehow divides into a purely volitional component and a quite independent emotional component. But this idea appears to be flawed. On the one hand, such a separation would be purely *ad hoc*. We do not have any independent reason to believe that the state we are concerned with has two separable components. On the other hand, we do not know how to tell whether the state in question *really* divides into two elements. Hence, the description envisaged would not provide the unequivocally illuminating (re-)description Frankfurt needs.

Frankfurt could still maintain that his concept allows for revealing new explanations. However, this idea doesn't fare any better. To begin with, Frankfurt does not provide examples to support the idea that explanations invoking the concept of pure love are in any way better than explanations that make do with our ordinary concept. This is rather unfortunate, for it is hard to see why an explanation – say, of protective behaviour of parents towards their offspring – in terms of common love should in any way be inferior to an explanation featuring Frankfurt's concept. Quite to the contrary. There are a number of well-confirmed psychological generalisations that concern the emotional state of love. But we cannot at all be sure that there are any well confirmed instances of law-like sentences about pure love to be found. For law-like sentences are confirmed by their instances, and we have yet to see a single clear cut case of pure love.

Frankfurt's second prime example for pure love is love of one's own life. We all have a very strong concern for our own lives. We mostly try our best to stay alive, and doing so comes quite naturally to us. Frankfurt offers a straightforward explanation for this phenomenon: We simply love our lives. That is, we are disinterestedly concerned for its flourishing. This explanation implies that we do not want our life to continue because it has some valuable attribute or other. We simply want our life to continue because it is *our life*. There is, Frankfurt thinks, nothing more to be said. Any request for further justification would be misguided.

Yet Frankfurt's ideas are once again hard to square with the phenomenology of the state of love. I am evidently emotionally attached to my life and my survival. I do love my life in the ordinary, emotional sense of the word, and this fact can very well explain why I try my best to survive. In fact, the case of love of life is quite similar to the case of parental love: In order to understand it as an instance of pure love, Frankfurt has to assume that it can be decomposed into an essential volitional part and a contingently attached emotional part. We have already seen that this is an awkward idea. Love of life, then, doesn't seem to be a clear cut case of pure love either, and we have still to see one. Yet Frankfurt's idea that love of life is pure love is flawed in a more fundamental respect. For our concern for our life does not appear to be disinterested. This is hard to see in normal cases, since it is admittedly hard to tell whether someone loves his life because it has certain positive attributes, or whether he values his life because he loves it. But think of people who do *not* love their life. Think, say, of a terminally ill person. *Why* doesn't she love her life? Precisely because it *lacks* certain attributes. Hence, if the life of a person lacks certain properties, she will not love it. But this implies that a person will love her life only if it has certain attributes.

Frankfurt might want to reply that our dying lady will quite naturally be disinterestedly concerned for the flourishing of her life. He might want to add that this is easy to miss since she, like most of us, loves something else more, *viz.* being free from un-

bearable pain. However, this rebuttal doesn't save his position. On the one hand, it is hard to see why we should accept this description of the case. It is quite evidently problematic, since it relies once more on the idea that the state of a loving person can be decomposed into an emotional and a purely volitional element. On the other hand, Frankfurt must convince us that introducing the notion of 'pure love' is not a pointless endeavour. In order to do so, he'd better show that this notion allows *better* descriptions and explanations than our traditional conceptual repertoire. But all he manages is to show that the situation outlined is *compatible* with his ideas. I fear that this is not quite enough.

4. Pure Love: The Deficiencies of a Concept

The fact that Frankfurt's concept lacks applicability in our present situation is hardly sufficient to disown its viability. For Frankfurt can argue that his notion is evidently suited to describe ideal situations, and this is certainly enough to legitimise its introduction and use. However, this move would not solve the most pressing problem. Frankfurt maintains that pure love is a purely volitional state of the mind. Yet in jettisoning the emotional dimension of love, Frankfurt construes a notion whose defining features are awkwardly unrelated to one another. Or, to put it the other way around: The phenomenology of the state of love that Frankfurt's concept is designed to cover is intelligible only if the state envisaged includes emotional elements. In order to show this, I will raise three problems for Frankfurt's account. Each of these arises precisely because Frankfurt understands love to be non-emotional, and each of these concerns an aspect of love that we take to be crucial for that very state. The latter two moreover concern aspects that Frankfurt himself highlights in his phenomenology of love.

The first problem concerns the relation of the concept of love to other concepts. I have already mentioned that we take the concept of love to be embedded in a web of concepts such as hate, grief, anger etc. Purging the concept of love of its emotional dimension forces one either to understand all these notions as purely volitional or to sever

the conceptual connections between love and the concepts mentioned. Both alternatives are unpalatable. On the one hand, it is hard to see how one could set out to define, say, the concept of pure grief as a purely volitional counterpart to our concept of grief. On the other hand, its location in the web of concepts is, at least in part, what gives the notion of love its point. It would hence be rather unfortunate if one were to sever the conceptual ties between love and the other concepts involved. I suspect that Frankfurt would not want to opt for either alternative. But I can't see how he can avoid both.

The second problem takes us back to the mystery of pure love Frankfurt himself explicitly acknowledges: On his account of love, it is difficult to see why love is that dear to humans that a life without love is considered empty and shallow. This is hardly surprising. For on Frankfurt's understanding of love, to claim that love is what gives our lives meaning is to maintain that our lives would be empty unless we were disinterestedly concerned for the well-being of a beloved. On the one hand, this hardly squares with the way the world appears to be. One simply does not have to be selfless in order to enjoy a meaningful life. On the other hand, there just aren't any good theoretical justifications for this view to be found. This is true even if one accepts Frankfurt's framework. On his understanding, pure love bestows volitional continuity in my life. But it is not the only state that does that; if I care for something, the volitional continuity of my life is already taken care of. Hence, even on Frankfurt's premisses, there is no justification for the claim to be found that our lives are empty and shallow unless pure love figures in them. To be sure, they *are* empty and shallow if they lack love. But this is easily to be explained. Love is an intense emotion, and the absence of this feeling makes us miss it. A life that does not comprise love thus is emotionally deficient. But it's very hard to see why the life of someone whose cares about some things but does not purely love anything should be in any way deprived.

The third and most serious problem concerns the relation between love and choice as well as action. Frankfurt maintains that love is usually beyond choice and control,

and he thinks that someone who acts on love acts without further deliberation or ado. But *why* does love have these features? *Why* is love beyond choice and control? And *why* is love directly action-guiding? There appears to be a straightforward answer to this, for one might want to argue that it is precisely the *emotional* aspect of the state of love that gives rise to these phenomena. We cannot help to love what we love because love is an emotion and emotions are very often beyond our choice and control. And we act on love without thinking because there is an immediate connection between emotions and actions — just as fear makes us flee, love moves us to help. The underlying mechanisms of the state of love that are responsible for the characteristics at hand are thus emotional mechanisms. Yet by taking love to be a purely volitional state Frankfurt cannot resort to emotional mechanism to explain the phenomenology of love. However, it is hard to see how anything else could possibly account for the characteristics mentioned. In the end, then, dissociating love from its emotional dimension means to sever the connections between the surface features of the state of love and the underlying mechanisms that, as it were, generate the very bundle of phenomena that make up the state of love in the first place.

On Frankfurt's account, then, one cannot explicate the links between love and other states, one cannot explain why love is necessary for a happy life, and one cannot account for the motivational powers that are so crucial for love. It thus seems apt to conclude that there is something structurally amiss with the concept Frankfurt propounds. The features Frankfurt wants to combine in his concept just do sit easily with one another, for the very aspect that is naturally supposed to play the organising role is lacking. In the end, then, a scrutiny of Frankfurt's ideas does not only create doubts as to the fruitfulness of the notion of pure love. It also creates doubts as to the viability of the very notion defined. Hence, it is not just that pure love apparently doesn't make the world go around. It is also quite plausible that it couldn't.

Notes

¹ In what follows, I will concentrate on the claim that love does indeed involve an emotional dimension. I will neither assume any specific theory of the emotions. To keep things simple, I won't even distinguish between 'emotion' and 'feeling'. Nor will I presuppose any specific account as to of how the emotion 'love' is to be understood.

² Frankfurt does not make it clear whether he thinks that the second-order desire is essential to caring or whether there can be cases of caring which do not include an attitude of this kind. It is evident, however, that Frankfurt capitalizes on cases that do involve such a state of mind.

³ I here assume (something like) an inferential role semantics. I take this to be the semantics stance that fits Frankfurt's talk of 'concepts' best.

⁴ In discussion, Frankfurt openly admits that his notion is a technical term.

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