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SELFLESS SELF-LOVE*

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ABSTRACT. This paper challenges the idea that there is a natural opposition between self-interest and morality. It does by developing an account of self-love according to which we can have self-regarding reasons that (1) differ substantially from the standard conception of self-interest and that (2) share enough crucial features with moral reasons to count as morally respectable.

The argument involves three steps. The first step concentrates on the idea of a moral point of view as a means to distinguish between reasons that could be morally respectable and those we have reason to distrust as not morally respectable. The second step discusses Harry Frankfurt's work on love, in order to develop an attitude of selfless love as a source of morally respectable reasons. The third step introduces the idea of an alternative *of* oneself to show that selfless self-love is a coherent conception of an attitude that provides one with self-regarding and self-grounded reasons that are also morally respectable.

KEY WORDS: love, self-love, self-interest, the moral point of view, disinterestedness, Frankfurt, reflexive rationality, alternative of oneself

This paper challenges what sometimes seems to be a quite commonsensical picture: that there is a natural opposition between self-interest and morality, that morality basically serves and protects other people's entitlement to well-being and respect, that morality comes from without and is much needed to correct the egoistic bias build in the all too natural picture of ourselves as rational animals, and that acting on self-regarding reasons comes down to doing what one believes will maximize one's own utility, that is to say, will satisfy one's own preferences.¹

*I owe a debt to Harry Frankfurt who suggested the phrase 'selfless self-love', but refrained from using it himself because he considered it to be a phrase too oxymoronic to be used in philosophical prose. See Frankfurt (1999), p. 168. I am just too lighthearted to fear intolerance, or too confident in the explanatory force of this other peculiar phrase: alternative *of* oneself. See below.

¹ Bernard Gert told me in conversation that in American English one of the main connotations of the term 'morality' is indeed that it is the set of rules you want others to follow with respect to you and that others may want you to follow with respect to them. According to Gert it is a mistake of most philosophers to obscure the term so that it might seem to concern not only your behaviour that affects others but also your behaviour that merely

I shall argue against this picture by developing an account of selfless self-love. I shall argue that this account shows that we can have self-regarding reasons that (1) differ substantially from the standard conception of self-interest, and (2) share enough crucial features with moral reasons to count as morally respectable. The paper is in three parts. In section 1 I argue that there do indeed seem to be good reasons to think that acting out of self-interest is not morally respectable. The argument in this section depends on a fairly general and uncontroversial sketch of what is involved in taking a moral point of view. I then argue in Section 2 that an attitude of selfless love provides one with reasons for action that promise to be morally respectable. The argument in this section involves a discussion of Harry Frankfurt's work on love. In the final section I introduce and utilize the idea of an alternative of oneself to show that selfless self-love is a coherent conception of an attitude that provides one with self-regarding and self-grounded reasons that are also morally respectable.

1. SELF-INTEREST AND THE MORAL POINT OF VIEW

The idea of a moral point of view received quite some attention in the first part of the second half of the twentieth century.² It seemed to enable an approach to moral reasoning that did not start from substantial assumptions about the content of morality, but merely from substantial assumptions about how to proceed one's deliberations in a morally respectable way. The moral point of view can be characterised in a number of ways, but on almost any account it involves giving up the priority of self-interested considerations.³

affects you. Be this as it may, I think we should be unhappy with such an apparently natural opposition between morality and self-interest, and for two reasons. First, we should try to avoid a situation in which we have to rely on two different, and at least partially opposed sources of what the good life would be like, one that is merely relevant for us, and one that is merely relevant for others. Second, and related, we should try to resist thinking of ourselves as naturally a-social individuals, as if being social were an option we could choose at liberty. See also Wolf (1999).

² See e.g. Baier (1958), Warnock (1971), Taylor (1978) and Frankena (1983).

³ See, e.g. Nagel (1986), chapter IX; Blackburn (1998), Chapter 7, especially 200–212; Wiggins (1987), especially 59–66. Joseph Raz argues in his paper "On the Moral Point of View" (Raz, 1999, p. 247–272) against the plausibility of the general weightiness and stringency of considerations that we would entertain from the moral point of view (also characterised by him as involving giving up the priority of self-interested considerations). I am rather sympathetic to his line of argument, and think of his project as quite congenial to the one I try to develop here, although I approach the question from the opposite direction as it were, accepting, for the sake of argument, that considerations deserve special attention when they are conceived of as *moral* considerations.

In this section I shall be using the idea of the moral point of view, not because I want to defend a procedural approach to morality, but because the idea of such a point of view might help us to make sense of what makes a reason morally respectable. My argument shall provide support for distinguishing between two types of self-grounded reasons: (1) self-regarding reasons that basically derive their normative force from an agent's preferences, and that we have reason to distrust as not morally respectable, and (2) self-regarding reasons that derive their normative force from other features of the agent and that might, therefore, be morally respectable.

The aim of the argument in this section is merely negative: not all self-grounded reasons are not morally respectable. In the remainder of the paper I shall provide a positive follow-up by developing a plausible account of selfless self-love as providing self-grounded reasons that *are* morally respectable.

Here is my proposal for a description of the moral point of view: it is (1) an open attitude to the normatively significant features of the situation one finds oneself in, in connection with (2) an unselfish or disinterested willingness to abstain from being moved by one's actual preferences to form the intention that appears to be required in the situation. Let me make some comments on the two parts of this description.

By an open attitude I basically mean an attitude of reflexive rationality. Reflexively rational beings are not merely adequately attuned to their environment, but display a care for being so attuned. That is, being reflexively rational means taking responsibility for your mental states in the sense of (1) being aware of the fact that there might be a discrepancy between the state you are in and the state you should be in, and (2) being inclined to make efforts to remove discrepancies that show up.⁴

An important implication of this idea of reflexive rationality is that we have to assume that our world has normatively significant features. This is a far-reaching implication, but in the context of practical reasoning and the moral point of view, it is also a rather uncontroversial claim.⁵ If we want

⁴I deliberately use the unspecific term 'mental state'. Obviously one might think here of beliefs, and think of the discrepancy as a matter of believing that p when the available evidence suggests that not-p is the case. Epistemic responsibility is a striking consequence of the fact that rationality is a normative matter. In the context of practical reason, however, the fundamental mental states are not beliefs but intentions. My thoughts about reflexive rationality are influenced by Philip Pettit and Michael Smith. See e.g. their (1996).

⁵I should like to stress the uncontroversial character of the claim by observing that my proposal does not commit me to take sides in the dispute between moral realists and anti-realists. That is, assuming that our world has normatively significant features does not commit me to saying that the properties to reflect on in investigating possible discrepancies between the intention I have formed and the intention I should have formed, have to be natural, mind-independent properties. The normatively significant features I am speaking of

to maintain that reflexive rationality is one of our capacities, we will just be saying (1) that there could be discrepancies between the state we are in and the state we should be in, and (2) that once we have discovered such a discrepancy we have in fact discovered directions to remove it, for what we will have discovered is a 'should', a normatively significant feature of the situation we are in.

In the sphere of practical reasoning, the sphere in which it makes sense to talk about a moral point of view, the focus of reflexive rationality is on intentions. This is a crucial part of what distinguishes a *moral* point of view from other reflexively rational standpoints such as a *scientific* point of view. Practical reasoning and the moral point of view are about what makes actions and attitudes to actions right, and on the level of being reflexively rational this requires a concern for overcoming discrepancies between the intentions one has and the intentions one should have.

It is of course a very controversial question which features of our world are the normatively significant ones with respect to determining the intentions one should have. My characterisation of the moral point of view, in tune with the general purport of the idea, aims to remain silent on this question. This is best understood as highlighting the openness of a reflexively rational point of view: anything that could possibly play a role in determining the right intention to have should be taken into account. That is, someone who takes a moral point of view should have an interest in what various traditions tell about the determinants of the right intention, as well as an interest in what those who are informed about the situation one is in think about which intention one should have.

The first interest leads one to consider the possible relevance of consequences, duties, obligations, promises, expectations, loyalties, ambitions, needs, desires, preferences, character traits, capacities, incapacities, abilities, virtues, rules, ideals, facts, intuitions, emotions, etc. etc. The point is not that these will all be relevant, but merely that taking up the moral point of view requires that one does not rule out in advance the possible normatively significant import of any of these features.

The second interest leads one to consider the opinions about what should be done of other people involved in the situation, as well as the opinion of those who are otherwise informed about it in possibly relevant ways. Here too one should be liberal in counting the opinions of anyone who

are features of our world. Such a claim is fundamentally compatible with them being nothing over and above expressed sentiments of fellow human beings (Cf. Mackie, 1977; Blackburn, 1998). And this is so, quite independent of the fact that I happen to feel myself drawn to a position that many would take to involve a more serious value realism, although it basically requires first a fundamental critique of the idea of a meaningful distinction between a 'mere' human reality and a robust extra-human reality. (Cf. Bransen and Slors, 1996; see also Taylor, 1989; McDowell, 1998).

might have a view.⁶ The point is not, of course, to please everyone nor to be concerned about everyone. The point is just one of taking one's own reflexive rationality seriously: there is always a chance of having it wrong, and therefore one should always have an interest in anyone who might be able to provide you with evidence you could have overlooked.

The second feature of my description of the moral point of view, 'the unselfish or disinterested willingness to act in accordance with what appears to be required', is – or so I argue – one more consequence of our capacity of reflexive rationality. The openness I discussed above is mainly a matter of being aware of possible discrepancies, and of being sensitive to the directions given by normatively significant features. But reflexive rationality embraces more than mere openness: it also includes what I called above an inclination to make efforts to remove discrepancies that show up. And this is where an unselfish or disinterested willingness enters the stage. If efforts have to be made to change a mental state someone should not be in, these efforts simply have to be made, in order to let reflexive rationality be the positive capacity we take it to be.

Making these efforts is a matter of unselfishness or disinterestedness, because it comes down to giving more weight to the authoritativeness of the normatively significant features of the situation one finds oneself in than to the motivational force of one's actual mental states. This just is what reflexive rationality requires. The point is obvious in the case of belief. For if I believe that the moon is made of green cheese, but am reflexively rational (i.e. I care about being adequately attuned to the world), I do in fact accept that if available evidence would tell me to correct this false belief, I should correct this belief and not let myself dwell in falsehood because of laziness or other forms of internal resistance to external demands.

This latter formulation expresses quite succinctly the unselfish or disinterested character of the willingness involved in taking up the moral point of view. For if, say, I have the intention to needle my younger sister, but care about being adequately attuned to the world and therefore take up a moral point of view, I do in fact accept that if available evidence about the normatively significant features of my world tells me to correct this mistaken intention, I should correct my intention and not let myself dwell in being wrong because of internal resistance to the authoritative demands of the relevant external features. In one more formulation: taking up a moral point of view means accepting that my present mental states are subject to the corrective import of external normatively significant features.

The moral point of view as sketched above may be used to distinguish between reasons of self-interest that would *not* be able to survive as morally

⁶Cf. Morton (2000).

respectable reasons, and other self-grounded reasons that would. A first step towards this distinction can be made by acknowledging that taking up a moral point of view requires a sensitivity to the normatively significant features of one's world, and, as we saw, this comes down to a sensitivity to discernable *external* demands. Being in a particular mental state is not, however, *qua* psychological attitude, a feature of the situation one is in. Although it would be true of the situation one is in that it entails the presence of an agent who has this particular psychological attitude (namely, oneself), one's being in this state, and one's being moved by it, would not count as being moved by a normatively significant feature of one's world. That would only be so if one would also have a second-order mental state that would take the presence of the original first-order psychological attitude as a reason for action. That is, to give an example, my intention to needle my little sister is, obviously, a feature of the situation my sister is in, and her actions directed at preventing the harm I intend to bring about, are actions motivated by a sensitivity to a normatively significant feature of her world. But I might just be busy needling my little sister, reflexively ignorant of what moves me. Taking up the moral point of view would require that I start looking from the outside, as it were, and would consider the normative import of the *content* of my intention, and not the motivating force of its mere presence, as a possible reason for action.

The distinction between the motivating force of a psychological attitude and the normative import of its content is important, and relevantly revealed by the idea of taking up a moral point of view. The distinction is important precisely with respect to those preferences I simply have without endorsing them in a reflexively rational way. This can be further illuminated by pointing out the role of the unselfish or disinterested willingness that is part and parcel of the moral point of view, and that precisely requires that the motivational force of my inner mental states is made subordinate to the normative significance of objective features of my world. Taking up a moral point of view implies that I take up an unselfish or disinterested willingness to put in brackets the motivational force of the mental states I am in. If these states are to regain their rationalizing force, then only as morally respectable reasons in virtue of their being appreciated as rightly attuned to the normatively significant features of the situation I am in. Thus, my preference for, say, being on top of Mount Kilimanjaro might be an external normatively significant feature with respect to determining the holiday destination of the family I belong to, but from the moral point of view it cannot have any specific, particular significance *for me*. There might be a good reason to give special weight in the deliberations to the preferences I happen to have, but not because of these preferences I happen to have. It might for example be my turn to determine the holiday destination, or it might be the case that experience did prove that choosing what

I prefer always yields the best holiday. But whatever it is that would give my preferences a special normative import, it couldn't be the fact that I am now in the mental state of being moved by their motivational force. For that is precisely what is put in brackets by taking up the moral point of view.

This allows me to conclude that reasons of self-interest that depend for their rationalizing force *merely* on their being present in someone's internal psychic stew, will drop out from the moral point of view as failing to have normative import. An agent's present preferences are on this account not shown to be morally respectable, unless they re-appear in the agent's deliberations as normatively significant, objective features of the agent's world. This does not mean, however, that all self-grounded reasons are shown to be not morally respectable. My conclusion allows conceptual space for morally respectable reasons that derive their normative force from particular features of the agent herself: namely those self-grounded reasons that enter the agent's practical reasoning as external demands. In the next two sections I shall develop an account of such reasons, making use of the concepts of *love* and *alternatives of oneself*.

2. LOVE AS A MORAL POINT OF VIEW

In a series of lectures delivered at a number of universities Harry Frankfurt describes love as a mode of caring for the well-being or flourishing of a beloved object that is volitionally constrained and distinctively disinterested.⁷ I should like to make some comments on this description to develop and defend the claim that, contrary to what Frankfurt seems to think, love is a state of mind that is strikingly similar to what I have described as a moral point of view.⁸ This will involve challenging some of Frankfurt's claims.

As a mode of caring love is not primarily a matter of feeling, nor of desiring, believing, or judging, but of *willing*. According to Frankfurt love is a volitional structure, revealing something of the essence of a person's will as a volitional necessity. I cannot do justice here to the complexities of Frankfurt's analysis, but here is a rough sketch to get the idea. (a) Love is not primarily a matter of feeling, because loving is not primarily a passive

⁷The Kant Lectures delivered at Stanford University in 1997 were the first. These were published in Frankfurt (1999). The Romanell-Phi Beta Kappa lectures delivered at Princeton University in 2000 and the Shearman Lectures delivered at University College London basically expand on the original material, stressing in certain ways the position I am challenging here. They were published in Frankfurt (2004).

⁸The attempt I undertake in this section to show similarities between love and morality is not original. See, for instance, Murdoch (1970) and Velleman (1999) for comparable attempts.

state of mind. Someone who is in a state of love is not merely exercising her receptivity. To love requires spontaneity. (b) Love is not primarily a matter of desiring, because it is not a state that derives its motivational force from the satisfaction that acting on it might generate. The value that inheres in the beloved object is not a value that can be understood along the lines of desirability, i.e. along the lines of the utility of the object as a satisfier of desires. In loving, the flourishing or well-being of the beloved object is valuable in itself. (c) Love is not primarily a matter of believing, or judging, because it is not primarily a state of recognizing that something deserves to flourish. Judging or believing that something is lovable need not involve the volitional necessity (the power of being moved) that is essential to love.

Locating love, and – more generally – care, somewhere in the conceptual space between feeling, desire and judgement, leads Frankfurt to conclude that as a mode of caring love is an individual and contingent way of willing, of being volitionally engaged with features of the world that one cannot but experience as important and worthwhile.

One of the most striking and important features of love is according to Frankfurt its volitionally necessitating nature. Frankfurt speaks of the ‘necessities of love’, of the ‘categorical commands of love’, of ‘being captivated by love’, of what we ‘must’ do because of our love, of our being ‘bound to final ends’ by our love, etc.⁹ The idea is that our love shows the essential structure of our will by determining what we cannot but will. When we love there are things we simply *must* do, but these are at the same time just the things we *really want* to do.

Almost as striking and important as its volitionally constrained nature, is the disinterestedness that is characteristic of love (Frankfurt, 2004, p. 42). This is, according to Frankfurt, a quite straightforward characteristic of love. To love something means to care for it for its own sake, in a definitely non-instrumental way. To love something does of course involve that one has an interest in the well-being or flourishing of the beloved object, but this is not an instrumental interest. One’s love is not a disguised interest in the utility of the beloved object as something that would satisfy one’s own desires.

A final characteristic of love, according to Frankfurt, is its being ineluctably directed at a particular beloved object. The particularity and the identity of the beloved object are important for the love being love. Love is not directed at a general impersonal aspect of the beloved object. The object is not loved as an exemplar – it is not loved because of its being a member of a relevant class, but because of its being the particular object it is.

⁹ Frankfurt (1994, 1997, 1998, 2004).

There is a striking similarity and a striking dissimilarity between Frankfurt's characterisation of love and my characterisation of the moral point of view. The similarity is in the 'selfless' nature of both love and the moral point of view, the dissimilarity is in the openness of the moral point of view as opposed to the volitional necessity of love. In what follows I shall first make a few comments on the selfless nature of both love and the moral point of view, just to emphasize the similarity. Then I shall challenge the dissimilarity and shall argue that it is in part a consequence of a mistake in Frankfurt's conception of love, and in part a merely apparent dissimilarity. If this argument is plausible we will be in a position to defend that acting on love is a respectable thing to do from the moral point of view.

The disinterestedness of love is according to Frankfurt manifest in the willingness of the lover to make efforts for the well-being and the flourishing of the beloved object. That is, love is disinterested, or selfless, because the motivating force that emanates from the image of the beloved object and the prospects of its well-being and flourishing is bound to outweigh the motivating force of one's own desires and the prospects of their satisfaction. This mode of disinterestedness, characteristic of love, is quite similar to the unselfish willingness that is characteristic of the moral point of view. As I described above, in the case of the moral point of view the unselfishness or disinterestedness is manifest in the willingness of the agent to give more weight to the authoritativeness of the normatively significant features of one's world than to the motivational force of one's mental states. The structure is similar: in both cases a particular state of mind makes it possible for an external object to appeal to the agent's willingness to disregard or silence the motivational force of other concurring and typically self-interested mental states.

Some might think that even in this picture the striking dissimilarity between Frankfurt's account of love and my account of the moral point of view shines through. On the one hand this is so because the moral point of view requires us to take any possible normatively significant feature of one's world into account, whereas love is not such a broadening but rather a narrowing state of mind forcing us to focus merely on the peculiarities of the particular object of one's love. And on the other hand this is so because on the moral point of view the motivating (normatively significant) force really emanates from without, whereas in the case of love it is according to Frankfurt actually the case that the motivating force is the result of the loving itself.¹⁰ That is, the openness of the moral point of view is a matter

¹⁰In his later lectures Frankfurt emphasises this aspect of what motivates love. In fact, he explicitly introduces his discussion of love in the second lecture by emphasising that on his account love is not essentially a "response grounded in awareness of the inherent value of its object". (Frankfurt, 2004, p. 38).

of reflexive rationality implying the presence of normatively significant *external* demands. Love, however, is not a matter of rationality but a matter of the will. Love is not about the recognition of objects that deserve to appeal to our love, but is a matter of our own activity. According to Frankfurt, to love something is in an important sense a way of *making* the object appealing. Thus, he says:

We often make things important to us, or more important to us than they would otherwise be, simply by caring about them. (...) My children are so important to me precisely because I love them. (...) But it is not fundamentally because I recognize how important to me my children are that I love them. On the contrary, the relationship between their value to me and my love for them goes essentially the other way. My children are so valuable to me in the first place just because I love them.¹¹

If this is a right characterisation of the relationship between love and the value of what one loves, then there is a serious difference between love and the moral point of view. Whereas the latter is basically a matter of reflexive rationality, of a concern to get it right and the associated need for recognition, the former is basically a matter of independence and volitional strength.

I think, however, that Frankfurt's characterisation is mistaken in at least one respect, and is ambiguous in another.

First the ambiguity. One might misread Frankfurt and think he maintains that an object derives its value from the act of a subject that starts to love it. This is mistaken in two ways. First it neglects the additional words 'to me' that are consistently used in the quoted passage. These words mark a difference between the value an object has, or could have, in itself, for no one in particular, and the value an object has for a particular subject. Frankfurt is not saying that the intrinsic value of an object, the value it has of and in itself, is projected onto it by the act of loving. Second, and related, Frankfurt need not be read as suggesting that it is possible to be initially related to a valueless object in a neutral or indifferent mode, and that this indifferent phase could be followed by a phase in which the subject, due to some spontaneous act, is in a mode of loving this specific object such that, as a consequence of this love, the object becomes valuable. The point I am making is not merely that one cannot, according to Frankfurt, *decide* to love. The point is also that loving involves a relationship with the beloved object such that, due to this love, the object appears in a particular guise that necessitates the lover to love it.¹² This is the guise of being important or valuable 'to me'. It is, however, unclear, and probably essentially

¹¹ Frankfurt (1998), p. 6. And, again, in the later lectures: "what we love necessarily *acquires* value for us *because* we love it." (Frankfurt, 2004, 39; italics in original).

¹²Cf. Kolodny (2003).

indeterminate, whether this guise in which the object appears to necessitate the lover to love it, is a guise projected onto the object or uncovered in the object. Most of the time it is easier to read Frankfurt as favouring the first, projective reading,¹³ but there are passages that could at least be read as favouring the second, uncovering reading, such as:

it is not so easy for most of us to find things we are capable of loving. (...) People vary in their capacity to be deeply touched¹⁴

The mistake in Frankfurt's account of the relationship between love and the value of the beloved object is that Frankfurt apparently thinks there should be an asymmetrical relation of determination between the two.¹⁵ I guess Frankfurt is misled to believe this as a consequence of his attempt to account for the intrinsic value of loving, i.e. the state of mind and its expression in the actions it demands us to engage in. In arguing that loving is valuable in itself, quite independent of the value of the beloved object, it seems Frankfurt feels forced to maintain that loving would still be valuable as such, even if the beloved object would be valueless from almost every possible perspective (except, of course, the perspective of the lover). I guess this made Frankfurt overlook a possibility that seems much more plausible once we think of it. This is the possibility of denying an asymmetrical relation of determination between the necessities of love and the value of the beloved object.

The point I try to make can be nicely captured by arguing that we should refuse to answer the Euthyphro-question: Do the Gods love an object because it is lovable, or is it lovable because the Gods love it?¹⁶ I think we should refuse to answer this question for two reasons. One is that each possible answer, assessed in isolation and in contrast to the opposing answer, is deeply unsatisfactory.¹⁷ The other is that only by not answering the question can we understand that the necessities of love and the value of

¹³ We might even call it a "creative reading". Cf. Frankfurt (2002): "Given that our capacity for caring about things enables us to be creators of value", p. 250.

¹⁴ Frankfurt (1998), p. 7.

¹⁵ In the later lectures Frankfurt avoids phrases that could be used in support of an 'uncovering reading' and is more explicit in thinking about the relation between love and the value of the beloved as an asymmetrical relation. So he observes, for instance: "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. (...) the value he sees it to possess is a value that derives from and that depends upon his love." (Frankfurt, 2004, 38–39). But in a slightly different context there is still an observation that is compatible with the 'uncovering reading': "If love essentially entails a concern for what the beloved one loves, it is difficult to see how a person who loves nothing could possibly be loved" (Frankfurt, 2004, p. 88–89).

¹⁶ The question Socrates asks in Plato's Eutyphro.

¹⁷ This argument resembles the argument developed by Wolf (2002).

the beloved are two sides of the same medal: a relation of real attunement between self and world. Let me explain both reasons in turn.

Suppose I love my children merely because they are lovable in the sense of being worthy of my love (and, yes! they are, of course they are, I know!). Would I be able to explain why my neighbours do not love them as I do? I guess not, at least not if the only reason why I love them is that they are lovable, for my neighbours will most certainly confirm that I am right: indeed they are lovable! I might claim that my neighbours are unable to uncover the guise in which my children are lovable in such a compelling way that would necessitate my neighbours to love them. But it seems unlikely that I would be able to explain *why* they are unable to do so without referring to the state of love that would enable them to see the appropriate mode of lovability. This is the kind of enterprise Frankfurt – rightly – thinks is so hopeless that he – wrongly – opts for the opposite enterprise that is, however, just as hopeless.

For, suppose instead I confess that my wife is merely lovable because I love her. Suppose I do so as part of a defense to justify that I saved her, and not some stranger, from drowning. Aware of Williams verdict I take care not to have one thought too many,¹⁸ but it seems I nevertheless have. If this is my story, it seems I am mistaken about why I saved her. Instead of saying that I saved her, because of *her* (she is valuable and lovable!), I let myself go wrong by saying I saved her, because of me, because of *my love* (for her). Frankfurt discusses this example in his later lectures (Frankfurt, 2004, p. 36–47), suggesting that the thought that it is my wife is itself already one thought too many, implying that the man's love for his wife could do all the motivating work without any thoughts at all. I think, however, that his love can only do this work on the assumption of a symmetrical relation between his love and his wife's value, i.e. on the assumption that the value of his wife is not merely a function of his love.¹⁹ For imagine what the story would be like from the perspective of the stranger's wife, who wasn't around at the time of the drowning. Surely, although she might understand that the man unthinkingly saved his wife, she would feel very sorry that there wasn't someone around who was perceptive enough to see that her husband should have been saved as well. And she wouldn't feel sorry because of her love

¹⁸Cf. Williams (1976).

¹⁹Williams example is discussed too by Velleman (1999) and Kolodny (2003). They both provide different analyses than I do, because of their different projects. Velleman argues against Williams that love isn't really the reason for the man saving his wife (the reason is the wife herself), and Kolodny argues that there is a relevant reason behind the man's love, and that is the relationship between the man and his wife. My argument here is more congenial to Velleman's than to Kolodny's: in accepting love as a reason, I (and Frankfurt) should accept the independent role played by the value of the beloved person in determining the strength and the direction of the reason of love.

(i.e. because of her), but because of her husband. Likewise, it seems to me quite disappointing for Frankfurt's children to hear that he doesn't love them because they are lovable in the sense of being worthy of his love (i.e. because of them), but that they are worthwhile because he loves them (because of him). It seems wrong as well, phenomenologically speaking. Of course I can answer the question why I love my children: because they are lovable! It is because of *them*, and not in virtue of *me*, that I love them.

If both answers taken separately on their own are unsatisfactory, we should feel relieved to note there is one more option: to refuse to answer the Euthyphro-question, at least as long as it forces an 'either-or' upon us. The right position here is to emphasize the symmetrical relation of determination between the necessities of love and the value of the beloved.²⁰ This will also allow us to refuse to accept the apparently deep opposition between on the one hand love as a state of independence and volitional strength, and on the other hand reflexive rationality as a need for recognition and an anxious concern for getting it right.

The point I want to make concerns the way in which love can function as a reason, and is a point about the role that is being played in love's being a reason by the intended flourishing of the beloved object. The point is not about the beloved object being a reason for love, but about the role it plays in determining the strength and the direction of the reasons of love. It is a point, therefore, that concerns the concrete workings of love in a person's moral psychology. For we should keep in mind that love is not an abstract phenomenon but is always a specific state of mind of a particular person living her life.

Suppose some particular person loves her children. On Frankfurt's account this means she is volitionally necessitated to care for the well-being

²⁰ This position differs from Kolodny's attempt to escape from a similar 'either-or' predicament. Kolodny (2003) construes Frankfurt's views of love as a No-Reasons view, and presents it as opposed to what he calls the Quality Theory. According to the Quality Theory our reasons for love are grounded in the qualities of the beloved object, whereas according to Frankfurt's No-Reasons view we do not have any reasons *for* love at all, because according to Frankfurt love grounds, and thereby precedes, the possibility of practical reasons. Kolodny argues for a third way out by claiming that one's reason for loving a person is one's relationship to this person. This is ingenious, and it catches a lot of our intuitions, in particular the intuition that our emotional vulnerability to both the beloved person and one's relationship to this person is a response "to the reasons constituted by a past pattern of shared interaction and the future prospects of a relationship" (Kolodny, 2003, p. 171). Unlike Kolodny, I am here however not interested in the reasons *for* love, but, like Frankfurt, in the reasons *of* love. And my claim is that the reasons of love depend not merely on the love of the loving person, but depend too on what is worthwhile in the object of love. My claim is not about whether the object of love has a role to play in the reasons *for* love, but my claim is that the object of love, or more precisely its particular way of flourishing, has a role to play in determining the content of the reasons *of* love.

and flourishing of her children. But what does that mean for the intentions she will have and act on? Will her love tell her what she should do, specifically, on each particular occasion? In a way it does: what she should do is whatever is required for the flourishing and well-being of her children. But this is obviously not very helpful, and way too unspecific. That is, love provides the motivational force and the strong willingness to do good, but this will be empty and blind without a serious and open-minded sensitivity to what the specific value of the beloved object is and to what is required for this specific quality to prosper. Real love, therefore, will have this open-minded sensitivity to what it means for this specific beloved object to flourish and be well.

Parents will know about the complicated and burdensome ways in which reflexive rationality, as I shall call it, is indeed part and parcel of real love. And children know too. Both the lovers and the beloved objects will know about the dangers of blind love, and about the unselfish or disinterested willingness it requires on the part of the lover precisely in listening to the demands of the normatively significant features of the beloved. Parents will know that it is not up to them what constitutes the flourishing of their child, and children will often complain that their parents seem to have an interest merely in a chimaera, in an image of what would be a lovable child that fails to do justice to their own particularities.²¹

On this picture love is not merely a state of confident independence and volitional strength, but is mixed with vulnerability and in need of support from reason. This does not mean that on this picture love doubts that the beloved object deserves to flourish. The value of the beloved object is for the lover undisputed. The lover knows, through her love, that the object appears in the particular guise that necessitates her to love it in a selfless way. Reason need not tell her that the object is worthy of being loved. Reason, i.e. reflexive rationality, is merely involved in real love in order to watch over the lover's love, to keep her selflessly oriented to the beloved object's well-being. That is, reflexive rationality will have a role to play in love by keeping the lover focussed on the lovability of the beloved object, on the value that makes the object worthy of love, the value that appeals to the lover as an external demand that will inform the lover's concern for the object's flourishing. The point of this argument is not that the reasons of love are grounded in reasons for love. The point is, rather, that the reasons of love need to be *informed* by the lover's reflexive rational sensitivity to what is at stake in the beloved object's well-being or flourishing.²²

²¹Frankfurt acknowledges this in the later lectures (see Frankfurt, 2004, 87–88).

²²This point is very similar to Wolf's attempt to understand and explain the relevance of the beloved object's worth in assessing the value of love (see Wolf, 2002).

If the resulting picture is plausible it shows that acting on love is very similar to acting from the moral point of view. One probably serious difference, however, remains. I have emphasized that the moral point of view requires a broadening of one's horizon. As I said: anything that could possibly play a role in determining the right intention to have should be taken into account. This seems different in the case of love. Although love is disinterested and involves, at least on my picture, a sensitivity to the beloved object and to the ways in which it could prosper, it also involves a narrowing of one's attention, a concentration on one single object. In the next, and final, section of this paper I shall argue that this narrow-minded concentration does not threaten the demands of the moral point of view, precisely and paradoxically, in those cases where we should like to act on reasons of selfless self-love.

3. LOVING ALTERNATIVES OF ONESELF

The discussion of section 1 allowed me to conclude that reasons that derive their normative force from features of the agent herself could nevertheless be morally respectable if they would enter the agent's deliberations from without, as authoritative, external demands of the situation the agent finds herself in. The discussion of the previous section provided the conceptual resources to think of a particular type of self-relation – selfless self-love – as the right kind of relation in which such morally respectable reasons can obtain.

There is, however, one obvious problem with the very idea of selfless self-love. And this problem is abundantly clear in the blatantly oxymoronic phrase itself. How could loving oneself be selfless? How could we possibly make intelligible the idea that the motivational force of my inner mental states are made subordinate to the normative significance of objective features of my world, if these objective features turn out to be these very same inner mental states with their allegedly bracketed motivational force? How could “the self-lover [be] *selfless* in the standard sense in which being selfless entails being unmotivated by any self-regarding concern”?²³ And, going beyond the merely conceptual to the morally relevant unselfish or disinterested willingness: how could an intention to let oneself be volitionally constrained by the motivating force that emanates from the image of *oneself* as a flourishing beloved object be presented and defended as selfless in a morally respectable way?

I should like to argue that this problem can be solved by taking three steps. The first step is to identify a particular type of situations in which it

²³Frankfurt (1999), p. 168.

makes sense to talk about alternatives of oneself.²⁴ The second step is to show how the introduction of this idea solves the conceptual problem by removing the apparent *contradictio in terminus* that seems to frustrate the intelligibility of selfless self-love. And the final step is to show why the narrow-mindedness of love is in these situations no threat to the openness characteristic of reflexive rationality and the moral point of view.

Whenever we have to act and are therefore bound to make a choice because we can only do one single thing, we often are in the position to reflect on the pros and cons of each of our options in a sequential way and quite independently of what we think of any of the other options. This is often so, because many of the choices we have to make can plausibly be conceived as radically contingent choices between alternatives *for* oneself. Think, for example, of my choice between continue to work on this paper, go out for a walk with the dog, or read a brochure about climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. These alternatives share nothing but my contingent interest in them on this occasion. I can therefore adequately describe and investigate each of them independent and irrespective of how I describe and investigate any one of the others. That they are alternatives to one another has nothing intrinsically to do with them, but is merely a consequence of the fact that they are, on this occasion, alternatives *for me*. Thinking about what it would be like to climb Mount Kilimanjaro can be done completely without ever having to entertain any thought about what it would be like to walk with the dog, or to write a philosophical paper.

Not all choices, however, are like that. There are occasions, and they abound much more frequently than generally recognized, on which we actually are facing a choice between alternatives that cannot be described and investigated one at a time and irrespective of how we think about any of the other alternatives. Some choices are between alternatives that are genuine, intrinsic alternatives to one another.²⁵ This might be thought of as involving a change of perspective; but it is just as well a matter of taking the appropriate perspective. The crucial point is that some choices do not merely involve a choice between alternative courses of action, state of affairs, or objects, but also, or mainly, a choice between alternative determinations of one and the same object: oneself. Deciding whether or not to take a break and read a brochure about climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, is not a choice between such alternative determinations of oneself, but deciding whether or not to climb Mount Kilimanjaro most probably is. After all, choosing to climb Mount Kilimanjaro is very likely to have a lasting effect on the course and character of the life one will live, not only

²⁴I have tried to develop this idea on a number of occasions. See Bransen (1996, 2000).

²⁵Such choices require what Taylor calls a “language of qualitative contrast”. See Taylor (1977).

because of the extended period needed to prepare for the climb, but also, as seems probable, or at least conceivable, because of the dramatic, self-forming character of the experience of being on top of Mount Kilimanjaro. Situations in which we have to make up our minds in ways that will have such a serious impact on the course and character of the life one will live, are best understood as situations in which we face a choice between alternatives *of oneself* rather than a choice between alternatives *for oneself*.

On my account, an alternative of oneself is a continuation of the person one is, such that (1) this person is wholeheartedly moved to make one of the available choices, and (2) this person succeeds in reconciling from her perspective the reasons for this one choice with the crucial characteristics of one's own motivational profile. More should be said about the meaning of the phrase "is a continuation of the person one is". This would, however, require a considerably detailed account of personal identity I am unable to provide here.²⁶

Let me explain this by means of an example. Eve is engaged in a buddy program linking her to children with a terminal disease. The work seems to be asking far too much of her. She is seriously mentally exhausted. She wonders whether it would be best, all things considered, to resign. For reasons of simplicity, I imagine that Eve accepts there are but two alternatives. One alternative of herself, Eve*, wholeheartedly embraces the obligations that are a consequence of engaging in the buddy program. Eve* accepts these obligations as compelling reasons to be and continue to be a buddy to, say, Paul and Claire. Eve* understands these obligations as being in tune with what she considers to be the core features of Eve's (i.e. her) motivational profile, and she feels and appreciates the motivational force (the volitional necessity) of this profile in a way that allows her, without any special considerations as to her relationship with Eve, to be aware of the fact that she views the world from Eve's first-personal point of view. Of course, Eve* will feel some of the agent-regret that is a consequence of her feeling mentally exhausted.

The other alternative of Eve, Eve**, wholeheartedly embraces the need to restore the balance and to free herself from the all too burdensome situation she let herself be drawn into. Eve** accepts the mental exhaustion as a compelling reason to withdraw and to reconsider her commitment to Paul and Claire. Eve** understands the decision to withdraw from the

²⁶ My current thoughts on this question depend heavily on insights and arguments of David Velleman (Velleman, 1996) and Marya Schechtman (Schechtman, 2001). They have made me believe that the appropriate kind of personal continuation implies both an unself-conscious engagement with an anticipated or remembered first-personal perspective and an empathic access to the motivational profile that is an essentially defining characteristic of this anticipated or remembered perspective.

buddy program as being in tune with what she considers to be the core features of Eve's (i.e. her) motivational profile, and like Eve*, Eve** feels and appreciates the motivational force of this profile (but now conceived of as a profile that favours the withdrawal from the buddy program) in a way that allows her, without any special considerations as to her relationship with Eve, to be aware of the fact that she views the world from Eve's first-personal point of view. Of course Eve** will also feel agent-regret, in this case the agent-regret that is a consequence of having to let down Paul and Claire.

Recasting a practical problem in terms of a choice between alternatives *of* oneself, seriously explores and exploits the ambivalence that might occupy an agent's mind. This is an important fact that is highly relevant to get to the bottom of the grounds one might have to change perspective and to view one's predicament as involving alternatives *of* oneself rather than alternatives *for* oneself. That is, the endurance of a deep ambivalence with respect to what would be the right intention to have in a particular situation, is a clear indication that one is not really facing a choice between alternatives *for* oneself but a choice involving alternatives *of* oneself.

Introducing the idea of an alternative *of* oneself makes it possible to remove the apparent *contradictio in terminis* that frustrates the intelligibility of selfless self-love. The selflessness of love, as we saw above, consists in the fact that love (i.e. the state of mind of the lover) makes it possible for an external object (the beloved object) to appeal successfully to the agent's categorical willingness to disregard or silence the motivational force of other concurring and typically self-interested mental states. In the case of self-love this might seem to be inconceivable, because the beloved object is not an external object and so it might seem that loving oneself cannot sensibly be understood to involve a state of mind that is directed at silencing self-regarding considerations. Self-love, or so it definitely seems, entails quite the contrary: self-love certainly seems to be a reinforcement, rather than a silencing, of the motivational force of self-regarding considerations.

However, the idea of an alternative *of* oneself makes it quite straightforwardly possible, and plausible, to conceive of oneself as an external object that could be the beloved object of an attitude of self-love. To love oneself need not at all be a matter of endorsing the categorical importance of the motivating force of self-interested mental states. To love oneself in cases characterised by an enduring deep ambivalence is radically different. It could, and should, be understood as involving a beloved object that presents itself as an external object in a number of different guises emphasising various normatively significant features.

If Eve loves herself she will be in a state of mind that makes it possible for the alternatives of herself to appeal in a volitionally necessitating way to her willingness to disregard or silence the motivational force of other

concurring and typically self-interested mental states. Thus Eve will be touched by the alternatives of herself; i.e. by the different guises in which she can continue as a person worthy of her love, a person with a particular first-personal perspective and a particular motivational profile.

Something important follows from this picture, and that is that because of the multiplicity of the alternatives of herself, Eve cannot permit to have a love that remains blind and insensitive to the specific value of the beloved object. She will need, for her love to be love, an open-minded sensitivity to what it means for her as a specific beloved object to flourish and be well. That is, in loving herself Eve seriously needs to attend carefully to the quality in terms of flourishing and well-being of the various alternatives of herself. She knows she is lovable in the sense of being worthy of her love. And she feels the volitional necessity to do whatever is required to let herself flourish and prosper, but she nevertheless needs to investigate and determine which alternative of herself is the one that flourishes most. This is, of course, no easy matter, and for all that, Eve might continue to be ambivalent about what to do, even after extensively reflecting on the character of her loves for Eve* and Eve**. That is, clarifying Eve's predicament by recasting it in terms of alternatives of herself is one thing, but providing a procedure to overcome an ambivalent lover's heart is quite another thing.

The resemblance with loving your child who is engaged to be married with someone you're very ambivalent about, might be clear. In such a case you will also have to determine which possible life will allow your beloved child to flourish, and this will require the investment of your most precious, considerate love, as well as a careful sensitivity to what the flourishing of your child would need.

In her attempt to determine the right intention with respect to solving the problem she is facing, Eve considers the normatively significant features that have their source in the alternatives of herself. These features, then, are the kind of reasons I wanted to identify in this paper so as to challenge the assumption that there is a natural opposition between morality and a concern for oneself. These features are on the one hand self-regarding and self-grounded reasons. Their normativity is derived from the lovability of Eve herself. They are on the other hand not, however, self-interested reasons in the more restricted sense identified as not morally respectable in the first section of this paper. In being normatively significant features of the alternatives of herself, of Eve* and Eve**, her beloved objects, these reasons enter Eve's practical reasoning as external demands. They do so by Eve's love coinciding with her taking up the moral point of view.

One worry remains to be addressed. I have argued that the moral point of view entails a broad-minded openness to any possibly normatively significant feature of one's world. And we have seen that love entails a

narrow-minded concentration on the well-being and flourishing of one's beloved object. This might lead one to worry that even if I have successfully shown that the idea of a selfless self-love required for self-grounded reasons to be morally respectable, is coherently conceivable, it might still be that for all that love is just too focussed, and therefore just too biased, to definitely pass the test of moral respectability. That is, it might be that the essential feature of the open attitude that is characteristic of the moral point of view is *not* the capacity to be directed from without *but* rather the capacity to be sensitive to anyone's entitlement to respect and well-being.²⁷ And it seems to be a defining characteristic of love that it ignores and neglects everyone who is not the beloved object.

The intriguing thing, however, about alternatives of oneself as objects of love is that a concentrated attention to the differences in their flourishing and well-being, is by the same token, surprisingly and paradoxically, a careful weighing of the quality of their attunement to the normatively significant features of their environment. This needs explaining. Crucial about alternatives of oneself is that they never come alone. They come in sets, and each member of such a set shares something important with every other member of the set: that it is a *continuation* of one and the same person. They only differ in one respect: each alternative succeeds in reconciling from her perspective the reasons for exactly one of the available choices (a different choice for each alternative) with the identity-defining characteristics of the person's motivational profile. This means that in assessing the lovability of each alternative of oneself (i.e. the value that makes each of these alternatives worthy of one's love), one need not, and indeed cannot, focus on anything else but the value of each alternative's success in integrating the available reasons into one's motivational profile. The available reasons in question are here to be understood as the total set of all normatively significant features of the situation one finds oneself in. The striking thing to note is that loving an alternative of oneself is a *contrastive* state of mind. It is a state of mind in which one cannot but focus on what makes this alternative differ from its companions. And the only respect in which they differ is in the different choice they succeed in reconciling with one's motivational profile. This just means that selflessly loving oneself *in situations in which one can only do this by loving the alternative of oneself most worthy of one's love*, comes down to loving the success of one's capacity for reflexive rationality in the area of practical reason, i.e. the capacity to take up the moral point of view with respect to forming the right intention.

²⁷ This objection might be understood as emphasizing that taking up the moral point of view is not merely a matter of being answerable to the findings of a shared sensibility, as Wiggins calls it (1987, p. 66), but rather a matter of being answerable to the demands of impartiality, as Nagel (1986) argues.

The qualification added in italics in the previous sentence is important. I am not saying that in loving oneself just like that on any daily occasion one's lovability is a matter of one's success as a moral agent. Not any self-love is selfless. But I have in this article tried to find the conceptual space for something we can justifiably call selfless self-love, and I've argued it requires the idea of loving an alternative of oneself. This requires that situations in which selfless self-love is possible, are situations in which one actually and honestly experiences oneself as confronted by a difficult choice that will have a serious impact on the course and character of the life one will live. In such a situation of deep ambivalence – that one possibly cannot construct at will, although one might be able to invoke it by seriously considering courses one's life might take if it would answer to very different, and possibly much more demanding standards of worth – one cannot but love oneself by loving one's capacity to attune to the normatively significant features of one's predicament.

In the end, therefore, much hinges in my account of selfless self-love on the character of situations in which one is struck by a deep ambivalence as to the direction one's life should take. In such situations of deep ambivalence our reflexive rationality will naturally be triggered: if I am unable to wholeheartedly embrace a specific intention, (1) I will take up an open attitude to discern possible discrepancies between the intentions I'm inclined to form and the intention I should form, and (2) I will have an unselfish or disinterested willingness to abstain from being moved by my actual preferences to form the intention that appears to be required in the situation. Should I be able in such a situation to love an alternative of myself, this will be the alternative that has the intention that appears to be required in the situation. That is, it will be the alternative that is most worthy of my love because it is best attuned to the situation I find myself in.

I conclude by summarizing the features of the reasons of selfless self-love that I've tried to identify in this paper as reasons that are self-regarding in that they derive their normative force from features of the agent herself, but that are also morally respectable. Such reasons of selfless self-love

- (1) have their source in the identity of the particular beloved alternative of oneself
- (2) concern the quality of one's own flourishing and well-being
- (3) captivate oneself in virtue of the volitional necessity of one's loving state of mind, and
- (4) are morally respectable because in their concern for the quality of one's own flourishing and well-being they display, by the same token, a concern for the quality of one's own attunement to the normatively significant features of one's environment.

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