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## THE IMPORTANCE OF WHAT WE CARE ABOUT

1. Philosophers have for some time devoted their most systematic attention primarily to two large sets of questions, each of which develops out of concern with a pervasively compelling and troublesome aspect of our lives. In the first set, which constitutes the domain of epistemology, the questions derive in one way or another from our interest in deciding *what to believe*. The general topic of those in the second set is *how to behave*, insofar as this is the subject matter of ethics. It is also possible to delineate a third branch of inquiry, concerned with a cluster of questions which pertain to another thematic and fundamental preoccupation of human existence – namely, *what to care about*.

It is not properly within the scope either of epistemology or of ethics to investigate the various distinctive conceptual questions to which this third preoccupation leads. Those disciplines need not reflect upon the nature of caring as such, nor are they obliged to consider what is implied by the fact that we are creatures to whom things matter. I shall not attempt to provide a formal and exhaustive account of the branch of inquiry that does specifically attend to such things. I propose in this essay merely to broach, in a somewhat tentative and fragmentary way, a few of its central concepts and issues.

2. There is naturally an intimate connection between what a person cares about and what he will, generally or under certain conditions, think it best for himself to do. But while the third branch of inquiry therefore resembles ethics in its concern with problems of evaluation and of action, it differs significantly from ethics in its generative concepts and in its motivating concerns. Ethics focusses on the problem of ordering our relations with *other people*. It is concerned especially with the contrast between *right* and *wrong*, and with the grounds and limits of *moral obligation*. We are led into the third branch of inquiry, on the other hand, because we are interested in deciding what to do with *ourselves* and because we therefore need to understand what is *important* or, rather, what is *important to us*.

It can hardly be disputed that, for most of us, the requirements of ethics are not the only things we care about. Even people who care a great deal about morality generally care still more about other things. They may care more, for instance, about their own personal projects, about certain individuals and groups, and perhaps about various ideals to which they accord commanding authority in their lives but which need not be particularly of an ethical nature. There is nothing distinctively moral, for instance, about such ideals as being steadfastly loyal to a family tradition, or selflessly pursuing mathematical truth, or devoting oneself to some type of connoisseurship.

The role of moral judgment in the development and pursuit of concerns like these is often quite marginal, not only in potency but in relevance as well. It goes without saying that there are many important decisions with regard to which moral considerations are simply not decisive, and which must accordingly be based, at least to some extent, upon considerations of nonmoral kinds. But even decisions that are not of this sort are also often made, of course, in the light of values or preferences other than moral ones. Moreover, it is not wholly apparent that making them in such ways is always unjustifiable.

Someone who takes morality seriously, and who believes that one of his alternatives is in fact morally preferable to the others, may nonetheless regard the importance of this fact as less than categorically preemptive. Suppose first that he does not actually know which of his alternatives is the morally best one. It might be sensible for him to decline to look into the matter at all, on the grounds that under the circumstances doing so would be too costly. That is, he might plausibly judge it more important to himself to reserve for other uses the time and the effort which a conscientious exploration and assessment of the relevant moral features of his situation would require. Whether a judgment of this kind is ever fully warranted depends upon whether or not moral considerations are necessarily so much more important than others that there is no limit to the resources which it is reasonable to spend in order to see that they get their due.

Or suppose, secondly, that the person does already know what he is morally obliged to do. He may nonetheless choose deliberately to violate this obligation – not because he thinks it is overridden by a stronger one, but because there is an alternative course of action

which he considers more important to him than meeting the demands of moral rectitude. It seems to me that both in this case and in the first the subordination of moral considerations to others might be justified. In any event, it is clear in both cases that the question concerning what is most important is distinguishable from the question concerning what is morally right.

There may be some people to whom ethical considerations are not only unequivocally paramount but exclusive. If so, then nothing else has as such any importance in their lives. Their only purpose, to which they intend all their activities to contribute, is to do whatever they regard as most desirable from the point of view of morality – to maximize human welfare, perhaps, or to make society more just. This sort of overspecialisation is difficult to sustain, and it is rare. But suppose that someone will in fact accept no reason for acting except that the action in question is more likely than any other to lead to the realisation of his moral ideal. It is still the case that this person's moral judgments are one thing and the fact that he cares about them so much is another. His belief that certain courses of action are dictated by ethical considerations differs, in other words, from his belief that no other considerations compare in importance to those.

3. Providing fully articulated analyses of the concepts of caring and of importance is no easier than defining the notions – e.g., those of belief and of obligation – which are basic to the first two branches of inquiry. Indeed, the concept of importance appears to be so fundamental that a satisfactory analysis of it may not be possible at all. It is reasonable to suppose that things have importance only in virtue of the differences they make: if it would make no difference at all to anything whether a certain thing existed, or whether it had certain characteristics, then neither the existence of that thing nor its characteristics would be of any importance whatever. But everything does actually make *some* difference. How is it possible, then, for anything to be genuinely unimportant? It can only be because the difference such a thing makes is itself of no importance. Thus it is evidently essential to include, in the analysis of the concept of importance, a proviso to the effect that nothing is important unless the difference it makes is an important one. Whether a useful account of the concept can be developed without running into this circularity is unclear.

As for the notion of what a person cares about, it coincides in part with the notion of something with reference to which the person

guides himself in what he does with his life and in his conduct. It is not to be presumed, of course, that whenever a person's life displays over a period of time some more or less stable attitudinal or behavioral disposition, this reflects what the person cares about during that time. After all, patterns of interest or of response may be manifestations only of habits or of involuntary regularities of some other kind; and it is also possible for them to develop merely by chance. They may be discernible, therefore, even in the lives of creatures who are incapable of caring about anything.

Caring, insofar as it consists in guiding oneself along a distinctive course or in a particular manner, presupposes both agency and self-consciousness. It is a matter of being active in a certain way, and the activity is essentially a reflexive one. This is not exactly because the agent, in guiding his own behavior, necessarily does something *to* himself. Rather, it is more nearly because he purposefully does something *with* himself.

A person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He *identifies* himself with what he cares about in the sense that he makes himself vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced. Thus he concerns himself with what concerns it, giving particular attention to such things and directing his behavior accordingly. Insofar as the person's life is in whole or in part *devoted* to anything, rather than being merely a sequence of events whose themes and structures he makes no effort to fashion, it is devoted to this.

A person might stop caring about something because he knew he could not have it. But he might nonetheless continue to like it and to want it, and to consider it both desirable and valuable. Thus caring about something is not to be confused with liking it or with wanting it; nor is it the same as thinking that what is cared about has value of some kind, or that it is desirable. It is especially to be noted that these attitudes and beliefs differ significantly from caring in their temporal characteristics. The outlook of a person who cares about something is inherently prospective; that is, he necessarily considers himself as having a future. On the other hand, it is possible for a creature to have desires and beliefs without taking any account at all of the fact that he may continue to exist.

Desires and beliefs can occur in a life which consists merely of a

succession of separate moments, none of which the subject recognises – either when it occurs or in anticipation or in memory – as an element integrated with others in his own continuing history. When this recognition is entirely absent, there is no continuing subject. The lives of some animals are presumably like that. The moments in the life of a person who cares about something, however, are not merely linked inherently by formal relations of sequentiality. The person necessarily binds them together, and in the nature of the case also construes them as being bound together, in richer ways. This both entails and is entailed by his own continuing concern with what he does with himself and with what goes on in his life.

Considerations of a similar kind indicate that a person can care about something only over some more or less extended period of time. It is possible to desire something, or to think it valuable, only for a moment. Desires and beliefs have no inherent persistence; nothing in the nature of wanting or of believing requires that a desire or a belief must endure. But the notion of guidance, and hence the notion of caring, implies a certain consistency or steadiness of behavior; and this presupposes some degree of persistence. A person who cared about something just for a single moment would be indistinguishable from someone who was being moved by impulse. He would not in any proper sense be guiding or directing himself at all.

Since the making of a decision requires only a moment, the fact that a person decides to care about something cannot be tantamount to his caring about it. Nor is it a guarantee that he will care about it. By making such a decision, the person forms an intention concerning what to care about. But whether that intention is truly fulfilled is quite another matter. A decision to care no more entails caring than a decision to give up smoking entails giving it up. In neither case does making the decision amount even to initiating the state of affairs decided upon unless that state of affairs actually ensues.

This would hardly be worth pointing out except that an exaggerated significance is sometimes ascribed to decisions, as well as to choices and to other similar “acts of will”. If we consider that a person’s will is that by which he moves himself, then what he cares about is far more germane to the character of his will than the decisions or choices he makes. The latter may pertain to what he *intends* to be his will, but not necessarily to what his will truly is.

The young man in Sartre's famous example is sometimes understood to have resolved his dilemma, concerning whether to remain at home and look after his mother or to abandon her and join the fight against his country's enemies, by making a radically free choice. But how significant is the fact that the young man chooses to pursue one rather than the other of his alternatives, even if we understand this choice to entail a decision on his part concerning what sort of person to be and not merely concerning what to do? It surely gives us no particular reason for thinking that he will actually become the sort of person he decides to be, nor does it even entitle us to assume that he will actually pursue the alternative he chooses.

The point is not that he might change his mind a moment after making his choice, or that he might immediately forget his decision. It is that he might be *unable* to carry out his intention. He might discover, when the chips are down, that he simply cannot bring himself to pursue the course of action upon which he has decided. Without changing his mind or forgetting anything, he might find either that he is moved irresistibly to pursue the other course of action instead or that he is similarly constrained at least to forbear from the course he has chosen. Or he might find that he is actually able to perform the actions he has chosen to perform, but only by forcing himself to do so against powerful and persistent natural inclinations. That is, he might discover that he does not have and that he does not subsequently develop the feelings, attitudes and interests constitutive of the sort of person which his decision has committed him to being.

The resolution of the young man's dilemma does not merely require, then, that he decide what to do. It requires that he really care more about one of the alternatives confronting him than about the other; and it requires further that he understand which of those alternatives it is that he really cares about more. The difficulty he is in is due either to his not knowing which of the alternatives he cares about more, or to his caring equally about each. It is clear that in neither case is his difficulty reliably to be overcome by making a decision.

The fact that someone cares about a certain thing is constituted by a complex set of cognitive, affective and volitional dispositions and states. It may sometimes be possible for a person, by making a certain choice or decision, effectively to bring it about that he cares about a certain thing or that he cares about one thing more than about

another. But that depends upon conditions which do not always prevail. It certainly cannot be assumed that what a person cares about is generally under his immediate voluntary control.

4. There are, of course, wide variations in how strongly and how persistently people care about things. It is also possible to discriminate different ways of caring, which are not reducible in any obvious manner to differences of degree. The most notable of these are perhaps the several varieties of love. Another significant distinction – which is related to but not identical with the one concerning whether or not caring can be initiated by an act of will – has to do with whether or not a person can help caring as he does. When a person cares about something, it may be entirely up to him both that he cares about it and that he cares about it as much as he does. In certain instances, however, the person is susceptible to a familiar but nonetheless somewhat obscure kind of necessity, in virtue of which his caring is not altogether under his own control.

There are occasions when a person realises that what he cares about matters to him not merely so much, but in such a way, that it is impossible for him to forbear from a certain course of action. It was presumably on such an occasion, for example, that Luther made his famous declaration: “Here I stand; *I can do no other.*” An encounter with necessity of this sort characteristically affects a person less by impelling him into a certain course of action than by somehow making it apparent to him that every apparent alternative to that course is unthinkable. Such encounters differ from situations in which a person finds that he is unable to forbear, whether or not he wants to do so, because he is being driven to act by some desire or by some compulsion which is too powerful for him to overcome. They also differ from situations in which it is clear to the person that he must reject the possibility of forbearing because he has such a good reason for rejecting it – for instance, because to forbear strikes him as too unappealing or too undesirable a course of action to pursue.

On the other hand encounters with necessity of the sort in question are in certain respects similar to situations like these. They resemble those of the latter type – viz., the person cannot forbear because his reasons for not doing so are too good – in that the inability to forbear is not a simple matter of deficient capacity on the part of the agent. They resemble those of the former variety – viz., the person is driven by irresistible passion or the like – in that the

agent experiences himself as having no choice but to accede to the force by which he is constrained even if he thinks it might be better not to do so.

It is clear, of course, that the impossibility to which Luther referred was a matter neither of logical nor of causal necessity. After all, he knew well enough that he was in one sense quite able to do the very thing he said he could not do; that is, he had the capacity to do it. What he was unable to muster was not the *power* to forbear, but the *will*. I shall use the term "volitional necessity" to refer to constraint of the kind to which he declared he was subject. To the extent that such constraint actually does render it impossible for a person to act in any way other than as he acts, it renders it impossible by preventing him from *making use of* his own capacities. Perhaps there is a sense in which Luther, even if his declaration was true, might have been strong enough to overcome the force which obstructed his pursuit of any course of action but the one he pursued. But he could not *bring himself* to overcome that force.

A person who is subject to volitional necessity finds that he *must* act as he does. For this reason it may seem appropriate to regard situations which involve volitional necessity as providing instances of passivity. But the person in a situation of this kind generally does not construe the fact that he is subject to volitional necessity as entailing that he is passive at all. People are generally quite far from considering that volitional necessity renders them helpless bystanders to their own behavior. Indeed they may even tend to regard it as actually enhancing both their autonomy and their strength of will.

If a person who is constrained by volitional necessity is for that reason unable to pursue a certain course of action, the explanation is not that he is in any straightforward way too weak to overcome the constraint. That sort of explanation can account for the experience of an addict, who dissociates himself from the addiction constraining him but who is unsuccessful in his attempt to oppose his own energies to the impetus of his habit. A person who is constrained by volitional necessity, however, is in a situation which differs significantly from that one. Unlike the addict, he does not accede to the constraining force because he lacks sufficient strength of will to defeat it. He accedes to it because he is *unwilling* to oppose it and because, furthermore, his unwillingness is *itself* something which he is unwilling to alter.

Not only does he care about following the particular course of action which he is constrained to follow. He also cares about caring about it. Therefore he guides himself away from being critically affected by anything – in the outside world or within himself – which might divert him or dissuade him either from following that course or from caring as much as he does about following it. He cannot bring himself to overcome the constraint to which he is subject because, in other words, he does not really want to do so. The predicament of the unwilling addict is that there is something which he really wants to do, but which he cannot do because of a force other than and superior to that of his own will. In the case of the person constrained by volitional necessity, there is also something which he cannot do but only because he does not really want to do it.

The reason a person does not experience the force of volitional necessity as alien or as external to himself, then, is that it coincides with – and is, indeed, partly constituted by – desires which are not merely his own but with which he actively identifies himself. Moreover, the necessity is to a certain extent self-imposed. It is generated when someone requires himself to avoid being guided in what he does by any forces other than those by which he most deeply wants to be guided. In order to prevent himself from caring about anything as much as he cares about them, he suppresses or dissociates himself from whatever motives or desires he regards as inconsistent with the stability and effectiveness of his commitment. It is in this way that volitional necessity may have a liberating effect: when someone is tending to be distracted from caring about what he cares about most, the force of volitional necessity may constrain him to do what he really wants to do.

Whatever the pertinence and the validity of these considerations, however, they do not explain how it is possible for a person to be constrained by a necessity which is imposed upon him only by himself. To be sure, people do often force themselves to act in certain ways – for instance, when they are strongly tempted to act otherwise. But the strenuous exertion of will power in cases of those kinds is fully voluntary. The agent can discontinue it whenever he likes. On the other hand, even if volitional necessity is self-imposed there must be some respect in which it is imposed or maintained involuntarily.

The condition that it be self-imposed helps to account for the fact that it is liberating rather than coercive – i.e., the fact that it supports

the person's autonomy rather than being opposed to or independent of his will. It cannot be the case, however, that the person who requires of himself that he avoid guiding himself in a certain way accomplishes the self-imposition of this requirement merely by performing a voluntary act. It must be an essential feature of volitional necessity that it is imposed upon a person involuntarily. Otherwise it will be impossible to account for the fact that the person cannot extricate himself from it merely at will – i.e., the fact that it is genuinely a kind of necessity.

It may seem difficult to understand how volitional necessity can possibly be at the same time both self-imposed and imposed involuntarily, or how it is possible to avoid the conclusion that an agent who is constrained by volitional necessity must be simultaneously both active and passive with respect to the same force. Resolution of these difficulties lies in recognising that: (a) the fact that a person cares about something is a fact about his will, (b) a person's will need not be under his own voluntary control, and (c) his will may be no less truly his own when it is not by his own voluntary doing that he cares as he does.

Thus volitional necessity may be both self-imposed in virtue of being imposed by the person's own will and, at the same time, imposed involuntarily in virtue of the fact that it is not by his own voluntary act that his will is what it is. Similarly, in such cases, involuntariness does not entail passivity. A person is active when it is by his own will that he does what he does, even when his will is not itself within the scope of his voluntary control. It appears, then, that unless a person cares about certain things regardless of whether or not he chooses to do so, he will not be susceptible to the liberation which volitional necessity can provide.

5. The suggestion that a person may be in some sense liberated through acceding to a power which is not subject to his immediate voluntary control is among the most ancient and persistent themes of our moral and religious tradition. It must surely reflect some quite fundamental structural feature of our lives. This feature remains, however, relatively unexplored. As a consequence, we are unable to give satisfactorily thorough and perspicuous accounts of certain facts which are central to our culture and to our view of ourselves: in particular, that the two human capacities which we prize most highly are those for rationality and for love, and that these capacities are

prized not only for their usefulness in enabling us to adapt to our natural and social environments but also because they are supposed to make available to us especially valuable experiences or states of fulfillment and of freedom. The idea that being rational and loving are ways of achieving freedom ought to puzzle us more than it does, given that both require a person *to submit* to something which is beyond his voluntary control and which may be indifferent to his desires.

When we accede to being moved by logic or by love, the feeling with which we do so is not ordinarily one of dispirited impotence. On the contrary, we characteristically experience in both cases – whether we are following reason or following our hearts – a sense of liberation and of enhancement. What accounts for this experience? It appears to have its source in the fact that when a person is responding to a perception of something as rational or as beloved, his relationship to it tends towards *selflessness*. His attention is not merely concentrated upon the object; it is somehow fixed or seized by the object. The object captivates him. He is guided by its characteristics rather than primarily by his own. Quite commonly, he feels that he is overcome – that his own direction of his thoughts and volitions has been superseded. How are we to understand the paradox that a person may be enhanced and liberated through being seized, made captive, and overcome? Why is it that we find ourselves to be most fully realised, and consider that we are at our best, when – through reason or through love – we have lost or escaped from ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

Rationality and love equally entail selflessness. They differ in that the former is also essentially *impersonal*. The substance of this difference between rationality and love is not that what a person loves depends largely upon his own particular characteristics, whereas those characteristics play no role in determining what he considers to be required or permitted by reason. The judgments a person makes concerning rationality are manifestly no less dependent than are any other occurrences in his life upon contingent features of his nature and of his circumstances. What renders these judgments impersonal is that the claims they make are not limited to the person who makes them; rather, it is implicit that anyone who disagrees with the claims must be mistaken. A declaration of love is a personal matter, on the other hand, because the person who makes it does not thereby commit himself to supposing that anyone who fails to love what he does has somehow gone wrong.

Now moral judgments are also impersonal, and in this respect their force differs fundamentally from that of volitional necessity. Even when volitional necessity arises in connection with actions which are required or forbidden by duty, it does not derive from the person's moral convictions as such but from the way in which he cares about certain things. If a mother who is tempted to abandon her child finds that she simply cannot do that, it is probably not because she knows (or even because she cares about) her duty. It is more likely because of how she cares about the child, and about herself as its mother, than because of any recognition on her part that abandoning the child would be morally wrong. Consistency therefore does not require her to suppose that the action which she cannot bring herself to perform must be found to be similarly impossible by every mother whose circumstances are similar to hers.<sup>2</sup>

In the same way, a person who finds that he cannot bring himself to compromise an ideal to which he has been dedicated, despite his anxiety concerning the costs of remaining loyal to it, probably is not being moved most immediately by objective moral considerations even if the ideal in question is of a distinctively moral variety. Suppose that someone's ideal is to be meticulously honest in conducting his business affairs. Everyone is morally obliged, of course, to be honest; but it does not follow that anyone has a duty to pursue honesty as an ideal of his life – i.e., to accord to pursuing it the preemptive attention and concern which commitment to an ideal entails. A person's discovery that it is volitionally impossible for him to neglect one of his ideals is not to be equated, then, with an acknowledgment on his part of an ethical requirement.

Especially with respect to those we love and with respect to our ideals, we are liable to be bound by necessities which have less to do with our adherence to the principles of morality than with integrity or consistency of a more personal kind. These necessities constrain us from betraying the things which we care about most and with which, accordingly, we are most closely identified. In a sense which a strictly ethical analysis cannot make clear, what they keep us from violating are not our duties or our obligations but ourselves.

6. The formation of a person's will is most fundamentally a matter of his coming to care about certain things, and of his coming to care about some of them more than about others. Although these processes may not be wholly under his voluntary control, it is nonetheless

often possible for him to affect them. For that reason, as well as because people are generally interested in knowing what to think of themselves, a person may care about what he cares about. This leads to questions concerning evaluation and justification.

The fact that what a person cares about is a personal matter does not entail that *anything* goes. It may still be possible to distinguish between things that are worth caring about to one degree or another and things that are not. Accordingly, it may be useful to inquire into what makes something worth caring about – that is, what conditions must be satisfied if something is to be suitable or worthy as an ideal or as an object of love – and into how a person is to decide, from among the various things worth caring about, which to care about. Although people may justifiably care about different things, or care differently about the same things, this surely does not mean that their loves and their ideals are entirely unsusceptible to significant criticism of any sort or that no general analytical principles of discrimination can be found.<sup>3</sup>

People often do not care about certain things which are quite important to them. They may simply fail to recognise, after all, that those things have that importance. But if there is something that a person does care about, then it follows that it is important to him. This is not because caring somehow involves an infallible judgment concerning the importance of its object. Rather, it is because caring about something *makes* that thing important to the person who cares about it.

It is necessarily the case, of course, that a person who cares about a certain thing is not cold-bloodedly indifferent to it. In other words, what happens to the thing must make a difference to a person who cares about it, and the difference it makes must itself be important to him. This naturally does not mean that he cares about it just because it affects him in important ways. On the contrary, it may well be that he is susceptible to being affected by it or on account of it only in virtue of the fact that he cares about it.

This suggests that it is necessarily important to people what they care about. The fact that a person cares about a certain thing or about some person, or the fact that he does not care about them, makes an important difference to him. It means that he is, or that he is not, susceptible to being affected by various circumstances in ways which he considers important. Thus the question of what to care about

(construed as including the question of whether to care about anything) is one which must necessarily be important to him.

It does not quite follow from this that it is necessarily worth a person's while to care about the question. The question may not be sufficiently important to him for that. What does follow, however, is that if *anything* is worth caring about, then it must be worth caring about what to care about. It could hardly be the case both that there is something so important to a person that it is worthwhile for him to care about it, but that it is not worthwhile for him to care about whether or not he cares about that thing.

In any event, there are two distinct (albeit compatible) ways in which something may be important to a person. First, its importance to him may be due to considerations which are altogether independent of whether or not he cares about the thing in question. Second, the thing may become important to him just because he does care about it. Correspondingly, there are two distinct sorts of ground on which a person who thinks it worthwhile to care about a certain thing might attempt to justify his view. He might claim that the thing is independently important to him and that it is worth caring about for this reason. Or he might maintain, without supposing that the thing is antecedently important to him at all, that he is justified in caring about it because caring about it is itself something which is important to him.

People naturally want the things they care about to coincide, up to a point, with those that are independently or antecedently important to them. Thus a person often begins to care about something when he recognises its capacity to affect him in important ways, ceases to care about it when he discovers that it does not have that capacity, and criticises himself for caring too much or too little about things whose importance to himself he has misjudged. When the importance of a certain thing to a person is due to the very fact that he cares about it, however, that fact plainly cannot provide a useful measure of the extent to which his caring about the thing is justified.

In such cases, the critical question cannot be whether the object is sufficiently important to the person to warrant his caring about it. It must instead be whether the person is justified in *making* the thing important to him by caring about it. Now the only way to justify doing this is in terms of the importance of the activity of caring as such. It is manifest that the varieties of being concerned or dedicated,

and of loving, *are* important to us quite apart from any antecedent capacities for affecting us which what we care about may have. This is not particularly because caring about something makes us susceptible to certain additional gratifications and disappointments. It is primarily because it serves to connect us actively to our lives in ways which are creative of ourselves and which expose us to distinctive possibilities for necessity and for freedom.

It would be a serious mistake to believe that the importance of an object to someone is not fully genuine unless it is independent of his caring about the object. Consider the fact that many of the people we care about most would not affect us in important ways if we did not care about them. This can hardly mean that they are not genuinely important to us. In certain cases, to be sure, it may appear that something does lack real importance to a person despite the fact that he cares about it. But if the importance of the object in such cases is not fully genuine, that is not because it derives from the fact that the person cares about the object.

Suppose, for example, that what a person cares about is avoiding stepping on the cracks in the sidewalk. No doubt he is committing an error of some kind in caring about this. But his error is not that he cares about something which is not really important to him. Rather, his error consists in caring about, and thereby imbuing with genuine importance, something which is not worth caring about. The reason it is not worth caring about seems clear: it is not important to the person to make avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk important to himself. But we need to understand better than we do just why this is so – i.e., what conditions must be satisfied if it is to be important to us to make something important to us which would not otherwise have such importance.

Even when the justification for caring about something rests upon the importance of the caring itself, rather than being derivative from the antecedent importance of its object, the choice of the object is not irrelevant or arbitrary. According to one theological doctrine, divine love is in fact bestowed without regard to the character or antecedent value of its objects. It is God's nature to love, on this view, and He therefore loves everything regardless of any considerations extrinsic to Himself. His love is entirely arbitrary and unmotivated – absolutely sovereign, and in no way conditioned by the worthiness of its objects.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it is possible only for an omnipotent being – to

whom nothing is antecedently important – to love altogether freely and without conditions or restrictions of any kind. In any case, a capacity for wholly unconditioned love is by no means an essential constituent of our finite nature.

What makes it more suitable, then, for a person to make one object rather than another important to himself? It seems that it must be the fact that it is *possible* for him to care about the one and not about the other, or to care about the one in a way which is more important to him than the way in which it is possible for him to care about the other. When a person makes something important to himself, accordingly, the situation resembles an instance of divine *agape* at least in a certain respect. The person does not care about the object because its worthiness commands that he do so. On the other hand, the worthiness of the activity of caring commands that he choose an object which he will be able to care about.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We are also susceptible to being overcome by beauty and by grandeur; and we encounter similar, though perhaps not identical, experiences when we lose ourselves in the thrill of a moment or in work. These experiences also tend to be liberating. On the other hand, experiences of great fear or pain provide analogues to the selflessness of reason and of love in which the loss of self is not ordinarily construed as fulfilling or as liberating. It seems unlikely that this is merely because these experiences are less enjoyable than those of love and rationality, but it is unclear what does account for the difference.

<sup>2</sup> Although *consistency* does not require her to suppose this, she and others might suppose it anyhow on other grounds. Even if it is not morally obligatory for mothers to care deeply about their children, a mother who does not do so might still be open to criticism – not that her attitude violates a duty but, for instance, that it is “unnatural” or “shameful” and that she lacks important human qualities.

<sup>3</sup> One version of scepticism with regard to these matters is the view that there is really nothing worth caring about. Whatever the merits of this view, it is important not to confuse it with – nor to suppose that it entails – the more radical claim that nothing is of any importance to us. A person who cares about something thereby incurs certain costs, connected with the effort which investing himself requires and with the vulnerability to disappointment and to other losses which it imposes. In virtue of these costs, it is possible for something to be important to a person without being important enough for it to be worth his while to care about it. The view that nothing is worth caring about therefore entails only that nothing is of *sufficient* importance to make caring about it reasonable.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (New York, 1969), pp. 75–81, 91–95.