

Comments on Harry Frankfurt's "Autonomy, Necessity, and Love"

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Harry Frankfurt argues that we are autonomous when our conduct is necessitated by love. To be autonomous is to be moved by claims that are made upon us by the essential nature of our own wills. Since the essential nature of a person's will is in part constituted by the things he cannot help caring about - the things which, in Frankfurt's terms, he "actively loves" - it follows that when a person is required to act in a certain way by the things which he loves, he is autonomous. In making these claims, Frankfurt takes himself to be disagreeing with Kant.

According to Frankfurt, Kant claims that we are autonomous *only* when our conduct is required by moral considerations. What makes the will susceptible to moral requirement is the fact that moral laws are laws of reason, together with the fact that the will is essentially rational. Frankfurt does not wish to deny that we are autonomous in acting morally. But he wants to argue, as against Kant, that rational nature is not the *only* thing which is essential to a person's will. Active loves are also essential to the will and therefore are also sources of autonomy.

Frankfurt is using "love" in a fairly broad way here, a way that includes the love of people, institutions, and nations as well as dedication to various projects, ideals, and causes. For reasons that will become clear later, I wish to sort these into two categories. I want to distinguish the love of things which themselves have a will - people, institutions, and nations - from the love of things which do not have a will, such as projects, ideals, and causes. Now I want to admit from the outset that this distinction is not quite as crisp as I have just made it sound. When a cause is pursued or an ideal upheld by a more or less organized group of people who share it, there is a sense in which it has a will. That group of people, insofar as they make common decisions or otherwise represent some consensus about *how* to pursue the cause or

realize the ideal, do provide it with a kind of will. Nevertheless, I think that the distinction between loving things that have wills and loving things that do not is of some importance, and we will need it to understand Kant's own views on the issues which Frankfurt has raised. And the focus of what I shall have to say is going to be on loving things that have wills. To keep it simple, we can focus on the case of loving a person, of being a lover or a friend.

It is important to distinguish Frankfurt's criticism of Kant from a more familiar set of criticisms which are commonly though misguidedly deployed against Kant's famous beneficence example in *Groundwork* I. Kant argued that someone who is routinely helpful to others from impulses of sympathy does not display moral worth, while someone who helps others from the motive of duty does. As against this, it is often urged that we should prefer a friend who helps us from spontaneous benevolent feeling. One problem with this response is that it is clear that Kant is not talking about acts of friendship at all in this context. He is talking about generally helpful people, people who help even strangers, and his contrast is between someone who gives such help from sympathetic impulses and someone who gives such help because she acknowledges the moral claims which others have on her as fellow human beings. That is why I said that the criticism is misguidedly deployed against this example. But a more important problem with the criticism is the view of friendship which it seems to presuppose.

To see this, let me contrast two views of personal relationships such as love and friendship which I will call "affectional" and "volitional." According to affectional views, a personal relationship is an affectional tie - you love or like the other, where that is supposed to be some sort of an emotion or feeling. The emotion either consists of or causes two characteristic desires: you want to be around this other person, and you desire his happiness or more generally his good. The affectional view has three important implications. First, since personal relationships are a matter of having

certain desires and emotions, even a completely amoral person could have them. Second, and relatedly, personal relationships are quite different in kind from moral ones. Moral relationships are governed by reason and demand that we be relentlessly impartial; personal relationships are governed by affection and pull us towards partiality. Third, and as a consequence, there is an inherent tension between personal relationships and morality, and that in two senses. First, treating someone like a friend is quite different from treating him morally, and may in a certain way exclude treating him morally. Being motivated by a sense of duty is at odds with being motivated by affection. Second, personal relationships draw us to forms of partiality and favoritism which morality supposedly frowns on.

Volitional views by contrast emphasize the element of *commitment* in a personal relationship, where commitment is seen as a condition of the will. One must be careful here. It is natural to think of commitment itself as a voluntary act, but, as Frankfurt points out, commitment to another need not be voluntary. One may simply find oneself committed to another, and in all kinds of ways. Frankfurt's language of passion and captivation tends to evoke romantic or erotic cases, but there are others. Most people love their parents, even deeply, simply because it is natural to love those who looked after you when you were little and helpless. We may love siblings, or old friends with whom we no longer have much in common, just because we have always done so. The fact that love is so often involuntary might be thought to support the affectional over the volitional model, but we need not take it to do so. The fact that you involuntarily love your parents, to take a rather obvious example, does not imply that acting as that love requires is always an easy matter of spontaneous natural feeling. Acting in accordance with commitment, unlike acting from spontaneous natural feeling, can require deliberateness and effort. The important thing on a volitional view is not what feelings you have, but what considerations, emotional or otherwise, you take to be authoritative for your conduct. For this reason, volitional views represent personal

relationships as being like moral ones in many ways. Personal relationships involve duties, or something like duties, and it requires the virtues to sustain them. Weak, cowardly, or selfish people do not make good friends, no matter what affections they may have. Of course, as Frankfurt emphasizes, the volitional view does not imply that emotion and feeling have nothing to do with personal relationships. In some cases, although by no means all, attraction or affection is what gets us into them. More importantly, however, commitment is necessarily accompanied by and causes certain emotions and feelings. If you are committed to someone, that commitment expresses itself, among other ways, in joy in her successes, disappointment at her setbacks, delight in her pleasures and grief at her pains. But this latter point also holds for morality, as Kant himself emphasizes in the *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*. If you are committed to humanity as an end in itself, that commitment will express itself in the feelings of sympathy, love, and respect for others. This, however, does not mean either that those feelings are the cause of your commitment or that they constitute it. In all of these ways, then, volitional views give personal relationships some of the same structure as moral ones. However, volitional views do not subsume personal relationships under moral ones. That is to say, the duties of friendship are not a special sort of moral duty, but rather arise directly from the commitment that constitutes the relationship. The possibility of conflict between moral duty and the duties of love and friendship therefore remains open.

Although affectional accounts of friendship seem popular among undergraduates and in the culture at large, some of the more important theoretical treatments of friendship are volitional. Although there is controversy over whether Aristotle believed in anything like the will, he certainly urges that friendship, like virtue, is not just a matter of feeling a certain way but rather is a state of character. (NE VIII.5 1157b - 1158b1) He also asserts that it cannot be maintained without the help of virtue. Kant's own account of friendship, which I will discuss presently, is also a volitional one.

Now the familiar criticisms of Kant's *beneficence* example which I mentioned before seem to presuppose the affectional view. Such criticisms are, of course, deployed for a variety of purposes. The distinction between affectional and volitional accounts of friendship bears an obvious analogy to the distinction between sentimentalist and rationalist accounts of ethics, and some of the Kant's critics attack the beneficence example in order to urge a more sentimentalist view of ethics. Others accept a rationalist or Kantian account of ethics, but deploy the criticisms of the beneficence example in order to urge that morality isn't everything and should not be taken to have unconditional authority. These thinkers wish to urge that affection-based friendship is just as important a thing as reason-based morality. But as I said earlier, Frankfurt's criticisms of Kant must be distinguished from both of these familiar lines of thought, although it has more in common with the second. Frankfurt's conception of friendship is volitional and his conception of morality is Kantian. Since both of these things are of course true of Kant, I was initially rather puzzled by Frankfurt's firm sense that he is disagreeing with Kant. It is possible, however, to understand Frankfurt's position this way: Frankfurt seems to think that Kant's account of morality makes it impossible for Kant to hold a volitional view of friendship. He therefore thinks that Kant is stuck with an affectional, and hence inadequate, view.

Why might Frankfurt think this? It is clear that Frankfurt thinks that Kant does not or cannot grant the possibility that personal or contingent interests are essential and integral to the will. Since a special commitment to another individual is personal and contingent, that view, if true, would make it impossible for Kant to hold a volitional view of personal love. But why does Frankfurt think this? What I plan to do now is to examine two reasons suggested by Frankfurt's text, and say how I think the Kantian might reply to them.

In a couple of places in his text (p. 6 and p.12 in particular) Frankfurt attributes to Kant the view that action which is "motivated" (p.6) or "guided" (p. 6) by personal

interests, is necessarily heteronomous, or even that - I'm quoting - "the pursuit of any contingent interest is unavoidably heteronomous." (p. 12) Now in one clear sense this is wrong. In order to explain that sense I need to lay out a bit of Kant's moral psychology so we will have it before us.

On Kant's picture what happens is this. Our nature presents us with certain impulses or incentives (*triebfeder*), which prompt or tempt us to act in certain ways. We might say that incentives present certain actions to us as eligible. Among the incentives are our ordinary desires and inclinations. We do not inevitably act on incentives, but rather decide whether to do so or not. If you decide to act on an incentive, you "make it your maxim" to act in the way suggested by the incentive. How do you decide that? In the *Groundwork* and again in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant suggests that there are two principles which might govern this decision. I will call these the principles of volition; they are morality and self-love. If you are operating under the principle of self-love, your principle is to do what you find enjoyable, and you choose to act on those impulses which promise to promote your own pleasure or satisfaction. The impulsively sympathetic man of the beneficence example is acting under this principle. This is why Kant accuses him of self-love at the same time that he credits him with disinterestedness. The pleasure he takes in sympathetic action is in itself disinterested, but his decision to *act* on his sympathetic impulses is based on the principle of doing what will bring him pleasure. The other possibility is that you are acting under the moral law. Here two things can happen. First, you might test the maxim of acting on the inclination in question, and find that it qualifies to be a law. You could will to be part of a world in which everyone acts in the way that you propose to act. In that case the action is morally permissible, and, having learned that, you may act on your inclination *autonomously*. Second, when you submit your maxim to the categorical imperative test you might find that it does not qualify to be a universal law. In this case, the moral law commands you to thwart the inclination,

and, in addition, it strikes down what Kant calls your self-conceit, that is, your tendency to treat your own inclinations as if they had authority. By doing so, the moral law presents itself to you as an object of respect, which is a kind of incentive. You adopt the maxim of acting on respect for the law, and in this case do your duty.

I wish you to draw two lessons from this account. One is that questions about what motivates an action are, when addressed to Kant, ambiguous. A motive involves two things - an incentive which presents the action as eligible, and the principle of volition under which the incentive is adopted into the agent's maxim. So when we talk about the motive we might mean either the incentive or the volitional principle involved. Second, in one of these two senses it is simply wrong to say that Kant thinks that all action "motivated" by personal interest is heteronomous. Most of our incentives - the desire to eat, sleep, read a book, write a paper, take a walk, be a philosopher - are personal and contingent. But if we test the maxim of acting on such a desire to determine whether it can serve as a law and it passes, our action is autonomous. So actions whose incentives are personal and contingent can be autonomous in an unproblematic way. Heteronomy occurs when your principle of volition is self-love, which gives your inclinations authority over your will, not whenever those inclinations are personal.

So acts of love may be autonomous when they are permissible. This consideration, however, is insufficient to rescue Kant from Frankfurt's criticism. It shows that acting from love can be morally autonomous, but it does not show that love is an independent source of imperatives of its own. And, relatedly, it does not by itself support a volitional account of friendship. In fact it seems to fit most naturally with an affectional view. Friendship is here envisioned as a source of natural incentives, of emotions and desires which seem to be on a footing with impulsive sympathy. We test these by the moral law, and we may find them permissible to act on. A grim specter arises here, the ghost of that hapless husband who has been condemned by Bernard

Williams for thinking one thought too many. In Williams's famous example, a husband can save either of two people from a burning building, one of whom is his wife. Williams claims that if the husband asks the moral law whether it is permissible for him to prefer to save his wife, he has thought one thought too many. We need more than permissibility to avoid this criticism.

So it is not enough to urge that the action for personal reasons may be autonomous if it is done with the thought that it is morally permissible. Frankfurt wants to argue that love itself can be a source of necessity and something like obligation. Earlier I said that the term "motive" could refer either to the incentive or to the principle of volition. To satisfy Frankfurt and Williams, we need to have love play the role, not merely of an incentive, but rather of a principle of volition.

In fact with these distinctions before us, it becomes rather easy to map Frankfurt's terminology onto Kant's. Frankfurt distinguishes "passive love" from "active love." And he describes the person who acts from passive love this way:

...the lover is motivated by an expectation that obtaining or continuing to possess the object of his love will be beneficial to him. The expectation may not be self-consciously explicit; it certainly need not be the result of any deliberate calculation or assessment. In one way or another, however, the object strikes the lover as being capable of providing him with gratification or with joy or with some other desirable state... What mainly binds him to the object of his love, whether he is prepared to acknowledge this or not, is a preoccupation with his own good. (pp. 8-9)

This is pretty much what Kant thinks of the impulsively sympathetic person in the beneficence example. So what Frankfurt calls "passive love" is the case of someone who acts from incentives of affection under the volitional principle of self-love. Whereas what Frankfurt calls "active love" is the case of someone in whom love itself has become a principle of volition. This is confirmed by what Frankfurt says about the two lovers'

attitudes towards the actions they undertake in the name of their love. The passive lover sees loving actions as the source of gratification, either because they are instrumental to his pleasures or because he finds them inherently enjoyable. (pp. 9-10) But the active lover “is motivated by an interest in the loving itself.” This distinction quite exactly maps Kant’s own distinction between “acting from interest” - which is what one does under the principle of self-love - and “taking an interest in the action” - which is what a moral agent does. (G 413 n3). The passive lover acts from interest; the active lover like the moral agent takes an interest in the action itself, in its character as a loving action.

So to get a volitional account of love, we must see love as a principle of volition. Could Kant do that? On the one hand, as I have just said, Kant standardly sets morality and self-love forward as the only two possible principles of volition. This seems to support Frankfurt’s case against him. However, Kant never provides an argument for that view, and there is evidence on the other side, evidence drawn from Kant’s own account of what love and friendship are.

I begin with Kant’s account of sexual love, since this is the case in which he most clearly comes down for a volitional account. (At this point I will be more or less paraphrasing some passages I have already published, in a paper called “Creating the Kingdom of Ends: Reciprocity and Responsibility in Personal Relations.”) In both the *Lectures on Ethics* and the *Metaphysics of Principles of Justice*, Kant voices a worry about the moral character of sexual relations. What worries him is *not* the conventional idea that one party is using the other as a means to his own pleasure. Using someone as a means is fine as long as one has the other’s consent. What worries him is rather that sexual desire takes a person for its object. He says:

Man can, of course, use another human being as an instrument for his service; he can use his hands, his feet, and even all his powers; he can use him for his own purposes with the other’s consent. But there is no

way in which a human being can be made an Object of indulgence for another except through sexual impulse... it is an appetite for another human being. (LE 163)

The problem with that, in turn, is that it makes sexual desire possessive. Kant sees sexual desire as something like a desire to own someone, to have him entirely at your disposal. And that in turn means that to yield to sexual desire is to allow yourself to be owned, or possessed. The problem is how you can do that in a way that is consistent with respect for your own humanity. Kant's solution is that the possession must be completely equal and reciprocal, a condition which he calls "marriage." He says:

... if I yield myself completely to another and obtain the person of the other in return, I win myself back; I have given myself up as the property of another, but in turn I take that other as my property, and so win myself back again in winning the person whose property I have become.

In this way *the two persons become a unity of will*. (LE 167; my emphasis)

What matters to us today is not the truth of Kant's views about sexuality, but the obviously volitional character of his account of the sexual relationship. The language of self-surrender and retrieval here is strikingly similar to the language Kant uses elsewhere for both friendship and justice. In making the social contract, Kant says, we do not sacrifice part of our freedom for a particular purpose, but rather sacrifice all of our lawless freedom in order to regain our freedom again, undiminished, under law. (MMJ 316/80-81) Again, in the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant says that friends exchange their private projects of pursuing their own happiness, each undertaking to care for the other's happiness instead of his own. He says: "I, from generosity, look after his happiness and he similarly looks after mine; I do not throw away my happiness, but surrender it to his keeping, and he in turn surrenders into my hands" (LE 203). Kant says this requires the maximum reciprocity of love because - quoting again - "if I am to love him as I love myself I must be sure that he will love me as he loves himself, in

which case he restores to me that with which I part and I come back to myself again”(LE 202). The later account in *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* adds another element. Friendship is “the union of two persons through equal mutual love and respect.” (469/135 my emphasis) Respect is added in part because - quoting again - “the sweetness of the sensation arising from that mutual possession which approximates a fusion into one person” is too fragile to survive unless it is undergirded with principles (471/137).

Obviously, all of these cases have a common structure. A personal relationship is a reciprocal commitment, a commitment to respect one another’s wishes and pursue one another’s ends, and which results in a unified will. Entry into the relationship is something like a commitment to join your lives and therefore to make a certain range of decisions together, to share them. In the case of the social contract the result is the general will and decisions made in common are political ones. In the case of the marriage contract the result is a fusion of two lives into one and the range of decisions that must now be made together encompasses everything that is required for a shared life. Friendships fall in between: they may be extensive and indefinite life-sharing commitments - like marriage but less so - or they may be defined, like the social contract, by the subject matter of the decisions which are to be made together, the region of the will that is shared. Business partners and colleagues are friends in that sense.

Now let me draw some conclusions. First of all, if love or friendship is a unity of will, a little social contract for the sharing of our lives, it is clearly volitional. As I said earlier, affections and attractions may precipitate us into personal relationships, and more importantly will inevitably result from them, but the essence of the relationship is commitment. Because friendship is volitional, it is the source of obligations. These obligations are not derived by indirection from morality, but spring from the relationship itself. And when we act on these obligations, we act autonomously, on the

dictate of our own wills. Suppose a married woman is offered a new job in another city, and she is tempted by it. She might say: "I cannot say right now, I must go home and talk it over with my husband." This is literally true. Since she is married, her will and his are joined on decisions affecting such issues as where they will live. Until they have talked it over, she cannot know what her own will is. Once they have talked it over, she acts autonomously from her own will, which in this case just is their shared will. She might call back and say, "Thank you, but I can't take the job. My husband and I have decided that this would not be best for him, and therefore that it is not best for us." The necessities of love have obligated her to reject a tempting offer. And in voicing this necessity she is speaking the language of autonomy, the language of freedom.

Having agreed with Frankfurt so far, and claimed that Kant would do so as well, let me note a few points of difference. The first picks up a promissory note from the beginning of these comments. Since you cannot unify your will with an object which does not have a will of its own, this account of volitional love applies only to the love of things which have wills - people, nations, and institutions. It does not apply to one's dedication to projects, ideals, and causes. I leave open the complex question of what the correct account of those is. The second concerns the nature of active love. Frankfurt says that the primary goal of the active lover is not to receive benefits but to provide them. In the case of the love of things which have wills, I think that the goal is neither to receive benefits nor to provide them, but rather to share in their lives.

The third point is more complex. It concerns the question how different the obligations of love are from moral obligations. Frankfurt portrays them as being quite different; I think they are not. There are two ways to approach this point. One is to discuss the nature of the relationships of the people involved; the other is to discuss how the dictates of love and reason are determined. I'll start with the first. Kant thinks that personal relationships are characterized by mutual love and respect. But these are also our primary moral duties to people in general. It is the essence of personal

relationships that we share a region of our will, that we have common interests and make decisions related to them together. It is the essence of moral relationships that we make our decisions be ones which others *could* accept. To act morally is to act autonomously as a citizen of the Kingdom of Ends. To act from love is to act autonomously as a citizen of a kingdom of two, two who are committed to being in a special degree ends for one another. Morality is a matter of having a certain attitude towards all of humanity, an attitude that is, more than anything else, like volitional friendship. It is not, as Frankfurt suggests, a matter of caring more than anything else about the moral law. (p. 7)

I think that Frankfurt gets this wrong for a deep reason, and this brings me to the second thing I mentioned, the determination of the dictates of reason and of love. Frankfurt construes Kant as a traditional dogmatic rationalist rather than as a critical or constructivist one. This shows up at a number of points in Frankfurt's discussion. At one point (pp. 13-14) he says that the dictates of the pure will are supported by rational necessity. At another, he says that the necessity of the categorical imperative "derives from the requirements of reason itself." (p. 22). Perhaps the point is clearest in Frankfurt's account of how respect functions. He describes the moral law as "theoretically necessary" and credits that necessity with providing the moral law with an authority that inspires respect, which then in turn influences the person's conduct. All of these things suggest that rational necessity is something theoretical which pre-exists the dictate of the pure will. This is a dogmatic rationalist view and it is not Kant's. Kant's view is that what the pure will wills is *therefore* rationally necessary. That is to say, the fact that we will something autonomously and purely *makes it* a requirement of reason. Kant expresses this most clearly in the First *Critique* when he says: "Reason has no dictatorial authority; its verdict is always simply the agreement of free citizens." (A 738-739/B766-767) This isn't just rhetoric, but the expression of a deeply constructivist view. And it follows from this view that to hold oneself bound by reason

is just to hold oneself bound to others in a certain way - to make practical decisions and arrive at theoretical beliefs which all can share, which make the world, both theoretically and practically, into a common space. I cannot of course urge the merits of this complex position here. My purpose in mentioning it is leave you with this thought, with which I shall conclude: On a Kantian view, the difference between following the dictate of reason and following the dictate of love is at most a matter of scope.

APPENDIX: IMPERSONALITY, IMPARTIALITY, AND THE WILLIAMS CASE

I have no idea what Frankfurt has in mind when he characterizes moral concerns as “impersonal.” Two possibilities suggest themselves: (i) that he says this because of his construal of Kant as a dogmatic rationalist, which prevents him from seeing how deeply the laws of reason are our own laws or (ii) that, like Williams, he tends to equate the personal with the individual, the impersonal with that which abstracts from the individual case.

Williams supposes that there is some clear sense in which Kantianism, like Utilitarianism, is characterized by a demand for impartiality. This is one sense of impersonality which is related to the idea of abstracting from the individual. I have never known what to make of this claim either. Kant says we must treat each person as an end-in-herself, but Williams would surely not wish to deny this. Kant does not say that we should treat each person *equally* as an end-in-herself, nor, indeed, can any clear sense be given to quantifying the idea.

The truth is that impartiality is a limited notion, which has application only in certain contexts, situations where a judgment is to be handed down or where something is to be distributed. Utilitarians do insist that morality is through and through a matter of impartiality, but that is because they insist that action is through and through a

matter of distributing benefits. Kantians do not think of action in this odd way: we think of actions as expressions of our essential nature.

Now the way that the wife-saving case is described can make it look as if it were a case of distribution. There is only one unsplittable act of pyro-salvation available, and two needy aspirants for it: the question is who to give it to. This way of describing the situation does make it look as if some concern about nepotism is in order. And it is this concern that Williams thinks prompts the man to ask the moral law's permission to give the act of pyro-salvation to his wife. But to imagine this is to imagine a Utilitarian (or someone who thinks of his actions in the way that a utilitarian does) trying to apply the Kantian principle. The Kantian does not think of his actions as distributable commodities, but as expressions of his nature. In this case, his nature as a human being, a citizen of the Kingdom of Ends, demands that he help those who are in need. This latter is a broad duty; nothing requires him to distribute his help fairly, impartially, maximally, or anything of the kind: justice is not at issue here. Kant says:

But by a broad duty is not understood a permission to make exceptions to the maxim of the actions, but only the permission to limit one maxim of duty by another (e.g., the general love of one's neighbor by the love of one's parents); and this in fact broadens the field for the practice of virtue. (MMV 390/48)

The man's humanity, as I said, demands that he help those in need; it is also true that his husbandhood demands that he help his wife. His duty to save his wife is smoothly overdetermined in this case. There is no reason why the question of checking the moral law for permissibility should come up: the moral law has already spoken.

This of course is not to say that love and morality cannot conflict. But that is not in question here.