

AN ACCOUNT OF VALUING

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Abstract

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(under the direction of Susan Wolf)

This dissertation addresses the question: What is it to value something? Valuing is not reducible to a form of desire or belief. I suggest that valuing is a commitment to seeing an object as valuable, and argue that this way of understanding valuing explains its core characteristics and helps us to answer questions about love, special “oughts,” and meaningfulness in life.

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## Introduction

What is it to value something?

There are several angles from which one can approach this question, corresponding to different reasons to be interested in it. The most direct way in is pure curiosity about the nature of the attitudes we are capable of. We sometimes say of ourselves that we value a certain thing, and one may wonder what it is that we ascribe to ourselves when we talk this way. Is it a mental state on a par with beliefs, desires, hopes, wishes? Is it a species of belief or desire or of some other mental state? A *sui generis* mental state? A complex mental state? Is it a mental state at all, or is it a particular relationship we have with the valued object,<sup>1</sup> or a mental state that stands in a certain relationship with the world,<sup>2</sup> or perhaps something else?<sup>3</sup>

A different reason to be interested in the nature of valuing is its potential significance for a range of other interesting problems. Here are a few of them.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, for example, suggests in her book *Value in ethics and economics* that in order to count as valuing something, one needs, among other things, to *act* in certain ways towards it.

<sup>2</sup> Joshua Knobe and Erica Roebber argue that the criteria used by ordinary speakers in attributing the attitude of valuing include not only features internal to the agent, but also features of the valued object: a speaker will say that an agent values something only if the speaker thinks that the object of the agent's attitude is, in fact, valuable. (J. Knobe & E. Roebber, "The ordinary concept of valuing")

<sup>3</sup> In order not to prejudge the answer to these questions, I will call valuing, broadly, an attitude.

One of the most robust contenders among value theories has it that we create value by valuing things.<sup>4</sup> Any satisfying explanation of how value is created this way needs, I believe, a well-developed account of what it is to value something. In the absence of such an account, the claim that we infuse the world with value by valuing things can only sound mysterious, as if valuing were a magic wand by which we could bring into existence a new dimension to the world, value. Besides, there is a skeptical worry that there may be no attitude we are capable of that could create value as we conceive of it. If, for example, the only attitude we were capable of were desire, one might argue that the mere fact that we desire certain things is not sufficient to endow them with value: it is not sufficient to bring about the normativity endemic to value. When we say that something is valuable, we are saying, among other things, that we ought to act in certain ways towards it. But, the skeptic argues, the mere fact that we desire something cannot bring about this “ought.” To alleviate this skeptical worry, one would need either to explain how desire can, in fact, give rise to such an “ought,” or - more promisingly, I think - to show that we are capable of other attitudes that are normatively more potent.

Another direction in value theory is to analyze “X is valuable” as meaning “X is such that it would be appropriate to value it”<sup>5</sup>, or “X is such that an agent would value it under ideal conditions”<sup>6</sup>, or the like. Here, again, in order to give substance to these claims, one needs an account of valuing and of its appropriateness conditions.

A different cluster of questions for which an account of valuing matters revolves around personhood, free agency, moral responsibility, and autonomy. In inquiring into

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<sup>4</sup> For a paradigmatic case, see Christine Korsgaard’s *Sources of normativity*.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: T. M. Scanlon, *What we owe to each other*; Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in ethics and economics*; Gerald Gaus, *Value and Justification*.

<sup>6</sup> See David Lewis: “Dispositional theories of value”.

what makes us persons, some have argued that the capacity for valuing plays a central role.<sup>7</sup> The plausibility of this claim will depend in part on what the capacity to value amounts to. To take another issue, free agency is notoriously impossible to explain simply as freedom from external constraints. The fact that an action was motivated by a mental state internal to the agent does not necessarily mean that the agent acted out of his own free will: consider compulsions and addictions. Some philosophers think that we can make progress in understanding free agency by distinguishing between motives of the agent that are part of the agent's self, that represent his will, and motives that don't.<sup>8</sup> Since we commonly take actions that stem from our values to be most truly our own, it has been suggested that we can understand free agency in terms of the capacity to have one's motivational system in sync with one's valuational system.<sup>9</sup> Relatedly, one of the conditions for moral responsibility is attributability: an agent can only be responsible for an action that is his own. But what makes an action one's own? "Being motivated by a mental state of the agent," again, does not look like a good answer: we sometimes seem to excuse agents whose actions are motivated by overwhelming emotions, uncontrollable impulses, or unconscious motives on the grounds that it wasn't really them who was acting: it was their anger, or their craving, or their anxiety. We often conceive of such mental states as external to the agent's self and in conflict with it: "His anger took over," "Her fear was stronger than her," "This isn't him speaking, it's his depression." If this means that actions motivated by such mental states are not attributable to the agent in the sense relevant for moral responsibility, then we need a different explanation of what makes

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<sup>7</sup> See Christine Korsgaard, "Kant's formula of Humanity," in her *Creating the Kingdom of ends*; Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the will and the concept of a person".

<sup>8</sup> See Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the will and the concept of a person".

<sup>9</sup> Gary Watson, "Free agency".

an action one's own, and an account of valuing is a possible starting point.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, some have appealed to the attitude of valuing to explain autonomy: if valuing is central to or constitutive of one's self, we can understand self-determination as determination by one's values.<sup>11</sup>

Yet another concern that can lead one to be interested in what it is to value something pertains to what it takes to have a good life. We think that there is something valuable about the various positive ways in which we can engage with things of value: the aesthetic appreciation of a good work of art or a beautiful landscape, respect for people, love, caring. Moreover, we think that these ways of engaging make an important contribution to a good life.<sup>12</sup> The life of a person who had knowledge, talent, accomplishments, health, friends, virtue, and things similarly valuable, but did not value them, seems to fall short of being good. Such a life doesn't seem merely to lack one valuable thing among others. What's wrong with it is not that it could be made better by adding one more valuable thing, the agent's valuing what he has. Rather, the absence of valuing seems to take away from knowledge, talent, accomplishments and the like the ability to make that life good. But why is this so – what is the distinctive contribution that valuing makes to a good life?

These various concerns with which one can approach the question “what is it to value something?” are, of course, very much interconnected. The supposed capacity of valuing to create value is pertinent to the significance of valuing for personhood; the

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<sup>10</sup> See John M. Fischer, “Responsibility and self-expression”.

<sup>11</sup> See Michael Bratman, “Autonomy and hierarchy” and “Valuing and the will”.

<sup>12</sup> See Stephen Darwall, *Welfare and rational care* (esp. chapter 4, “Valuing activity: Golub's smile”); Joseph Raz, *Value, respect, and attachment*; Harry Frankfurt, “The importance of what we care about,” and *Reasons for love*; Susan Wolf, “Happiness and meaning: two aspects of the good life”.

centrality of valuing to personhood may account for the place valuing has in one's self, and thus for its role in free agency, moral responsibility and agency. And the importance of valuing to a good life surely has something to do both with its role in creating value, and with its centrality to one's self, personhood and free agency.

In addition to a pure interest in the nature of the attitudes of which we are capable, my interest in an account of valuing comes largely from questions about what makes a life good, and my approach will reflect this perspective. I will not attempt to answer questions about whether and how valuing can give rise to value, or whether one can use valuing to explain personhood, free agency, moral responsibility or autonomy. However, given the links between the different problems surrounding valuing, my discussion will at times touch on some of these issues.

In most discussions of valuing, the nature of valuing is only of secondary interest.<sup>13</sup> Insofar as philosophers who make use of the notion offer an account of valuing at all, it is merely as a stepping stone for a theory of value, autonomy, or free agency.

Take, for example, philosophers interested in a theory of value. Thomas Scanlon wants to analyze the claim that X is valuable as the claim that X is properly valued, and for this purpose he defines valuing something as “taking oneself to have reasons for holding certain positive attitudes toward it and for acting in certain ways toward it.”<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Anderson in *Value in Ethics and Economics* is primarily interested in giving an account of value and rationality. She maintains that to judge something valuable is to judge that it makes sense for someone to value it – where “making sense” is a rationality concept. To value something is to have a complex of positive attitudes towards it, governed by distinct,

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<sup>13</sup> One notable exception is Michael Bratman's paper “Valuing and the will”.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Scanlon, *What we owe to each other*, p. 95.

socially determined standards for perception, deliberation, emotion, and conduct. According to Gerald Gaus in his book *Value and Justification* to judge something valuable is to judge that it is worthy of being valued - where to value something is to experience a positive dispositional emotion towards it.

There are two ways of construing the differences between these authors. One way is to think that they all agree on the fact that value is to be explained in terms of the appropriateness of a certain attitude – valuing - and disagree on what that attitude consists in. On this interpretation, their conceptions of value carve out one attitude we can have towards things and propose competing accounts of its nature.

But this is not the only way – and perhaps not the most plausible one - of interpreting the debate. For the authors’ apparent agreement on what it is for something to be valuable may be merely apparent, and may consist only in their use of the same term, “valuing.” All they may agree on is that value is in a certain sense grounded in an attitude, to which they all apply the same term. But their use of that term does not guarantee that they have all identified one attitude, about whose nature they disagree. They may simply be talking about different attitudes and reactions people can have towards things, and disagree in their views on value. Where one thinks that value is grounded in emotional dispositions, for example, another thinks it is grounded in reasons for various positive reactions, including actions and attitudes. Thus “valuing” might be a rather technical term that has different meanings in the context of their different theories.

It is quite possible that the common-sense notion of valuing does not pick out a single attitude either. This wouldn’t be surprising or peculiar; it seems to be equally true of some other psychological notions: desire, love, happiness. After all, the verb “to value” is

used in a variety of different contexts: people say they value their friends, their children, particular books, paintings, activities; abstract entities such as justice, friendship, honesty; but also things like their car, money, their free time, each other's privacy; my bank says they value my business. It is unlikely that the term refers to the same attitude in all these contexts.

Nonetheless, the thought driving this essay is that at least one use of the verb "to value" (presumably, a core use) points towards an attitude that is interestingly different from other, more familiar, attitudes, and that a better understanding of this attitude (which I shall from now on simply call valuing) yields important results.

What I propose to do, then, is this. First, I will argue that valuing cannot be reduced to a form of belief or desire. Next, I will outline a positive account of valuing. These tasks occupy chapter one. The remaining three chapters are meant primarily to support my positive account of valuing by displaying its explanatory power. The main goal of chapter two is to show that, if we apply the proposed account of valuing to love, we can solve some of the puzzles that arise in thinking about love. In chapter three I argue that the account helps explain some of the special "oughts" to which we are subject; in particular, the peculiar nature of duties of friendship. Chapter four suggests an explanation of the distinctive role of valuing in a good life.

## **Chapter 1: An account of valuing**

### **I A criticism of attempts to reduce valuing to desire or belief.**

#### 1) Desire.

A first conception of valuing one might have is that valuing X consists simply in desiring X. On this view, to say that I value my friendship with John is to say that I desire to have, or to continue to have, a friendship with John. To say that I value my life is to say that I desire to stay alive; and so on.

As a point about the way we use the word “value,” I believe it is true that we sometimes use it to talk about what we desire. When people say that they value something, sometimes they simply mean that they want it, or that they want it very much. When I say that I value money, or that I value silence at night, or that I value having a family and children, I may be saying that I want very much to have money, to have silence at night, or to have a family and children. This seems to be a legitimate way of using the word “to value.” But it doesn’t seem to be the only, or even the primary, way of using the word. Although it may be plausible that when I say that I value silence at night, I mean that I desire it, there are many other cases where this is not what we mean.

When a friend tells Mary: “Your boyfriend seems to be a good guy, and it sounds like he values you,” she is not telling Mary that her boyfriend desires her. This, of course, is not a fatal problem for someone who claims that talk of valuing is talk of desiring. The reductionist may acknowledge that, strictly speaking, saying that A values X does not

mean that A desires X. But, he will insist, what it means is that A has certain desires pertaining to X. What those desires are may depend on the nature of X, and vary with the context. Nevertheless, talk about valuing can be fully understood in terms of desires. For example, the reductionist will suggest, when I say that the boyfriend values Mary, what I am saying is that he wants her to do well, that he wants her in his life, and the like.

The philosophical literature on desire commonly acknowledges a distinction between two different uses of the term “desire.” On the one hand, we have psychological states such as appetites (hunger, thirst, sexual appetite), cravings, urges, wishes, hopes, and the like. Sometimes – and this is the most common use of the word “desire” in everyday language – we use “desire” to refer to such psychological states, and to set them apart from other states such as beliefs about what we should do, decisions, or intentions. It is this sense of the term that we use when we say things like: “I helped my brother with his homework, although I had no desire to do so,” or “I don’t really want to go to this party, but I’ve decided to be more social, so I’ll go.” On the other hand, we are inclined to say that if you intentionally helped your brother with his homework, then you must have wanted to do so, and since nobody dragged you to the party, the fact that you went shows that you did want to go. In such cases, what we are saying is that, since the agent acted intentionally, he must have been *motivated* to act; but that says nothing about the nature of that motivation. What we are insisting on is not that the intentionally acting agent must have been moved by a psychological state qualitatively similar to cravings and wishes, and different from beliefs or intentions, but merely that the agent must have been motivated to

act. Following G. F. Schueler, let's call the first kind of desires "desires proper," and the second kind "pro-attitudes."<sup>15</sup>

Now, even though in some contexts we may be using the term "valuing" to refer to desires proper, often interpreting talk of valuing in this way seems inaccurate. I can value honesty without having a desire proper to be honest. On the other hand, we are reluctant to say of someone who has no motivation to be honest that he values honesty.<sup>16</sup> And, again, if one is interested in the way language is used, it seems true that sometimes we use "valuing" to refer vaguely to some pro-attitude. However, more often than not, when we say that someone values something, we want to say more than that he has some positive motivation with respect to it. "Your boyfriend values you," "I value your friendship," "I value honesty" are cases in point. But, again, that something more that we want to convey is not that the motivation has the quality of a desire proper.

Now, one might agree with this point about the use of the verb "to value," i.e., one might agree that at least in some cases "to value" is not synonymous with "to desire" in either of its senses, but claim that whatever attitude the term "valuing" refers to in those

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<sup>15</sup> Schueler himself inherits the term "pro-attitudes" from Donald Davidson. Both my terminology here and my way of drawing the distinction between desires proper and pro-attitudes follow closely Schueler's discussion in his book *Desire: its role in practical reason and the explanation of action* (see esp. pp. 29-38). Similar distinctions are drawn by Wayne Davis in "The two senses of desire," Joel Marks in "The difference between motivation and desire," Mitchell Staude in "'Wanting, desiring, and valuing: the case against conativism'". These articles are part of Joel Marks' anthology *The ways of desire: new essays in philosophical psychology on the concept of wanting*.

<sup>16</sup> Although this claim seems for the most part true, there are complications. Someone who suffers from depression might have little motivation to do anything, and, for this reason, many are inclined to say that depression affects one's capacity to value. When you're severely depressed, you can't value anything. My own inclination is actually to resist this conclusion. Imagine a clinically depressed mother whose motivational system is so affected by depression that she cannot get out of bed. She cannot motivate herself to take care of her children, play or interact with them. However, she insists that she still values her children very much. I think that her claim may be true. On the view of valuing I will develop later, it will turn out that the motivation to act in certain ways towards the valued object is not constitutive of valuing. Rather, the things that *are* constitutive of valuing entail, inter alia, a disposition to be so motivated. I think that depression can prevent that disposition from being actualized, without destroying the disposition itself or the configuration of attitudes behind it.

cases is ultimately analyzable in terms of desires of some sort.<sup>17</sup> I believe that this view is false. Its main (fatal) problem is that it fails to capture the relationship between valuing and reasons.

Here are some examples offered by Gary Watson: “Consider the case of a woman who has a sudden urge to drown her bawling child in the bath; or the case of a squash player who, while suffering an ignominious defeat, desires to smash his opponent in the face with the racquet. It is just false that the mother values her child’s being drowned or that the player values the injury and suffering of his opponent. But they desire these things none the less. They desire them in spite of themselves. It is not that they assign these actions an initial value which is then outweighed by other considerations. These actions are not even represented by a positive entry, however small, on the initial ‘desirability matrix’.”<sup>18</sup>

These examples bring out, I believe, two differences between desire and valuing.<sup>19</sup> The mother desires to drown the baby without seeing any reasons whatsoever for drowning it. She does not see, for example, the fact that drowning the baby will make it stop bawling and thus stop irritating her as a reason to drown it. The thought that drowning it will make it stop crying might cause her desire to drown it, but not because she takes this fact to be a reason. It seems impossible, however, to value an action while seeing no reasons

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<sup>17</sup> I will discuss a concrete instance of this approach in chapter 2, when I criticize the view that loving a person consists in a set of desires regarding that person.

<sup>18</sup> Gary Watson, “Free agency,” p. 101. Watson himself goes on to argue that to value X is to believe X to be valuable. What the examples show, according to him, is that one can desire to do something and at the same time believe that there is no value whatsoever in doing so; whereas one cannot value doing something and believe that there is no value in doing it. I actually disagree with (at least a certain interpretation of) his latter claim; but I think that the examples do illustrate some important differences between valuing and desiring, which I will discuss presently.

<sup>19</sup> In what follows I will use “desire” in a way that preserves the ambiguity between desire proper and pro-attitude; I think that ambiguity does not affect the points I am about to make.

whatsoever for performing that action. If I say that I value telling the truth, but there are no reasons whatsoever to tell the truth, I don't seem to make much sense. Similarly, if I say that I value playing the guitar, but I see no reasons to ever play the guitar.

Here is a second difference the example brings out. Not only does the mother see the *fact* that killing the baby would shut it up as no reason to kill it; she also sees her own *desire* to drown the baby as no reason whatsoever to do so. As Watson points out, it is not that she takes that desire to give her only a very weak, easily overridden reason to kill the baby; she ascribes no reason-giving force at all to her own desire. This doesn't seem to be the case with the attitude of valuing. It seems odd, if not unintelligible, to say that I value doing philosophy, but my valuing it gives me no reason whatsoever to do it.<sup>20</sup>

One might object at this point that Watson-type examples show nothing about the differences between valuing and desire, because the attitudes involved in the examples are *urges*, and we should distinguish between urges and desires. Thus, one may defend the view that, while one can have an urge to do something without seeing any reasons to do it, desiring X constitutively involves seeing X as good, or in some other way as to-be-pursued, and thus as reason-giving; and that, unlike urges, one's desires always give one a prima facie reason, however feeble, to pursue them.<sup>21</sup>

Now, one may argue about whether this conception of desire is adequate. But even if it is wrong as a general account of desire, there are no reasons to think that there isn't a *kind* of desire that involves seeing its object as good. Is valuing to be understood as that (sub)type of desire?

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<sup>20</sup> I will discuss this point in more detail later.

Here is a reason to think that it isn't. Valuing is stable in time in a way desire is not. I can have a desire for ice cream for only one hour, but I cannot value friendship for only one hour.

One could reply here by pointing out that *some* desires we have are stable in time: the desire to survive, the desire for happiness, the desire for the well-being of the people we love. Perhaps valuing is reducible to this kind of desire: desire which involves seeing its object as good and is stable in time.

I believe that valuing cannot be equated with this kind of desire, and that reflecting on why this is so will bring us closer to an understanding of what is distinctive of valuing. Some desires are stable, some are not. When a desire is stable, its stability is a contingent fact about it: it is not a necessary feature of its being a desire, that it be stable. But the stability of valuing does not seem to be contingent. If I "value" friendship now, but stop tomorrow, and "value" it again next week, I simply do not count as valuing friendship.

This might seem to be a trivial point about the way we use the verb "to value": we only call "valuing" an attitude that is stable in time. If my desire for friendship happens to be stable in time, it will count as valuing; if not, it won't. Perhaps the whole point of using the term "value" is to distinguish between desires that are stable and those that aren't. There is no deeper necessity to the stability of valuing than that established by the meaning of the term.

The only way to assuage this worry is, I think, to develop a plausible account of valuing that shows how the necessity of stability for valuing reflects something about the nature of valuing, and not merely a rule for the application of the term. I will present such an account in the second part of this chapter. For now, let us assume the truth of the claim

that the stability of valuing is not simply the result of semantic stipulation, and address the worry that a reductionist might explain stability by further specifying the kind of desire valuing consists in.

Some desires are accompanied by second-order desires for their continuation. My desire to be productive is accompanied by a desire to continue to desire to be productive; so are my desires to be fit, nice, interested in the world. When my desire to be productive or fit is stable, its stability could be the result of my second-order desire to continue to do so. Even though stability is not a necessary feature of desires, in the case of some desires – i.e., those desires accompanied by second-order desires for their continuation – it is not completely accidental either: were my desire to be fit to waver, it would be rekindled by my second-order desire to desire to be fit.

David Lewis has proposed that to value something is to desire to desire it.<sup>22</sup> Harry Frankfurt, in “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” can also be interpreted as arguing that valuing consists in having a certain kind of second-order desires.<sup>23</sup> What is

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis makes this suggestion in the context of offering a subjective account of value in his “Dispositional theories of value”. His main interest is in defining value (as what we would be disposed, under ideal conditions, to value), and his discussion of valuing is brief. The only support he offers for the claim that to value something is to desire to desire it emerges from a criticism of the idea that to value is to desire. The thoughtful addict, he points out, may desire his euphoric daze, but not value it. He desires his high, but does not desire to desire it; instead, he desires to desire a mundane state of consciousness. “We conclude,” Lewis says, “that he does not value what he desires, but rather he values what he desires to desire.” (p. 71) If one were to take this as an argument for the claim that to value is to desire to desire, it would of course be too quick. If in one case what one values is aligned to what one desires to desire, it doesn’t follow that valuing consists in desiring to desire. Lewis’s assumption may be that the *reason* why we think the addict doesn’t value being high is that he doesn’t desire to desire to be high; but this is still insufficient for equating valuing with desiring to desire. If valuing X were, say, a belief that X is valuable, and we would have a general desire to be motivated in accordance with our value beliefs, the fact that the addict doesn’t desire to desire to be high would be an indication that he doesn’t value being high, but valuing and desiring to desire would be different attitudes.

<sup>23</sup> Frankfurt does not explicitly talk about valuing in this article, or offer his view on second-order desires as an analysis of valuing. However, he believes that having second-order desires of the kind mentioned above is essentially distinctive of persons, that second-order desires are what constitutes one’s identity, and that one makes the will one’s own through such desires. This suggests that he is trying to capture the same attitude as authors who explicitly talk about valuing.

distinctive about persons, he says, is that they are not merely moved one way or another by their desires to act in a certain way. Unlike other creatures, people care about what desires they have, and about what desires move them. They have not only desires about what to do, but also desires about what to desire. To value something is to desire to be moved by your desires for it.

The main objection against this view is that second-order desires are themselves, after all, simply desires. Their being second-order does not confer a special status on them.<sup>24</sup> If one sees first-order desires as mere occurrences in the agent's mental life, to which the agent is subject in a rather passive way, and which as such do not have a reason-giving force, there seems to be no reason why one shouldn't see second-order desires as well as such occurrences with no reason-giving force. Frankfurt's view doesn't seem to fare much better than the simple desire view in accounting for the relationship between valuing and reasons.

Suppose that I desire to have an effective, stable desire to smoke cigarettes. I have this second-order desire because my group of friends are all smokers and think it's cool to be addicted to smoking. It doesn't look like having this second-order desire makes it the case that I value smoking. Perhaps in this case I value having a stable desire to smoke; but even that doesn't have to be true; I might just be knowingly giving in to peer pressure. My desire to smoke is stable, but its stability doesn't seem to be of the sort that is characteristic of valuing.

Perhaps there are other ways of further specifying a subtype of desire that would come closer to a characterization of valuing. I have considered here what I take to be the

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<sup>24</sup> Gary Watson makes this point in "Free Agency".

major contestants. In the second part of this chapter, I will develop a non-reductionistic account of valuing that will attempt to show that there is no need to try to understand valuing as a type of desire.

## 2. Belief

At the other end of the spectrum, one can hold that to value X is to believe X to be good or valuable. Gary Watson defends this view in “Free Agency”<sup>25</sup>. “.. An agent’s values,” he says, “consist in those principles and ends which he - in a cool and non-self-deceptive moment - articulates as definitive of the good, fulfilling, and defensible life.”<sup>26</sup>

Equating valuing with believing to be good may lead to difficulties because valuing is a motivating attitude, whereas it is not clear that beliefs can motivate. Suppose though, for the sake of the argument, that value beliefs can motivate. There are still other reasons to resist the identification of valuing with believing to be good.

Notice, first, that valuing admits of degree in a way different from belief. Suppose I value music more than I value painting. Someone who claims that to value X is to believe that X is valuable would have to explain this difference either as a difference in the degree of confidence in my belief, or as a difference in the content of my belief (i.e., I believe that music is more valuable than painting.) But neither of these captures what it is to value music more than painting. I can believe, with the same degree of confidence, that music is valuable and that painting is valuable, and also that they are equally valuable. Still, I may value one more than the other. When I say that I value music more than painting, I say

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<sup>25</sup> He revokes it later in “Free action and free will”.

<sup>26</sup> Gary Watson, “Free agency,” p. 346. Michael Smith also suggests that valuing is a kind of belief: to value X is to believe that you would desire X if you were fully rational. (Michael Smith, *The moral problem*, pp. 147-181.) Smith’s view is subject to the same objections as Watson’s.

something about myself and my relationship to the arts, rather than about the arts themselves. If someone asks me “Why do you value music more than painting?” an answer that talks about me and says virtually nothing about features of music or painting can be perfectly appropriate. “I grew up in a house where everyone was a musician, and I’ve been playing and listening to music since I was five. Music has always been a big part of my life, and it is when I play music that I am at my happiest. I couldn’t imagine living my life without music. I don’t deny that painting is as valuable as music, but it doesn’t mean as much to me.”

At this point one might say: OK, valuing X is different from believing that X is valuable. But perhaps to value X is to believe that X is valuable *to me*. Perhaps when I say that I value music more than painting, what I’m expressing is a belief that music is more valuable to me than the other arts. This is compatible with saying that music and painting are equally valuable.

But the mere *belief* that music is more valuable to me than painting is not sufficient for me to value music more. If anything, it has to *be the case* that music is more valuable to me. In the example above, if I just woke up from a dream and, confused, I believe that I grew up in a family of musicians, and that music is my life, my (false) belief that music is thus valuable to me doesn’t make it the case that I value music; music has to (in this particular example) *be* my life, *make* me happy, etc.

Perhaps, then, when one says that A values X, what one says is that X is valuable to A. Now, as a point about the use of language, I think that this is sometimes true. “I value music” and “Music is valuable to me” sometimes express the same thought. Not always though. There are cases where the active involvement of the agent expressed by the verb is

salient. Imagine that I am, again, the person described in the example above, and my parents are worried that I do not value music enough: “We’ve invested so much in your musical education, and you’re so talented, and we know that music is really valuable to you, we know how happy and fulfilled you can be when you’re into it, but lately you’re not practicing enough, and you hang out all the time with those drunkard painters. You should value it more!” I might protest, “I do value it, I just need a break, and will start practicing again with renewed energy in a few weeks.” Here what is at stake is not how valuable music is to the agent; both the parents and the agent agree on that. What is under dispute is the agent’s active involvement with what is valuable to her: her attitude, the actions (or lack thereof) expressive of her attitude. What is at stake is something the agent can be held responsible (in this case, blamed) for. The extent to which X is valuable to A is not something A can appropriately be held responsible for; the extent to which A values X is.

Let’s go back to the idea that to value X is to believe that X is valuable (simpliciter). I will argue that this belief is neither necessary, nor sufficient for valuing X.

That believing X is valuable is not sufficient for valuing X is shown by the difference between the way valuing admits of degree and the way belief admits of degree. Let’s consider now the claim that the belief that X is valuable is necessary for valuing X. Consider the case of Huckleberry Finn, as described by Jonathan Bennett or Nomy Arpaly.<sup>27</sup> Huckleberry Finn believes that he must turn in his friend Jim, because Jim is a runaway slave. However, Huckleberry Finn finds himself incapable of turning Jim in, although he believes that it would be the right thing to do. There are various ways of

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<sup>27</sup> J. Bennett, “The conscience of Huckleberry Finn”. Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*, pp. 75-78.

interpreting what is going on with Huck, and why he doesn't turn his friend in. But here is one possible story that seems plausible to me. According to Huck's indoctrinated beliefs, Jim is his owner's property, and ought to be returned to them. But in the course of their close interaction as friends, Huck comes to see Jim as a being very much like himself. He comes to see Jim as someone capable of having fun, suffering, being a friend, wanting to be free, etc., and he comes to value Jim as a being of this kind. So, even though his beliefs entail that he ought to turn Jim in, and he fully believes that he ought to do so, he finds himself incapable of doing so. Why? Because turning Jim in would be incompatible with his other attitudes towards Jim, with the way he has come to see and value Jim. It is not the case that Huck has contradictory beliefs: that he both believes that Jim is the kind of being who belongs to his masters, and at the same time that Jim is not that kind of being. He is of one mind in his beliefs: he is fully convinced that Jim belongs to his masters, and that he ought to turn him in. But valuing Jim as a person with equal standing need not involve any beliefs about Jim's value<sup>28</sup>.

## II A different account of valuing

I can desire to be friends with John without seeing any reasons to be friends with him. I believe that John is shallow and conceited, and I know that my desire to be his friend is purely the result of peer pressure: John is very popular, and my knowing that

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<sup>28</sup> One may object here that Huck seems to have an *implicit* belief that Jim is valuable; that Huck's feelings, thoughts and reactions are a sign that Huck believes, in fact, that Jim is valuable, even though he is not aware of this belief, and holds on to beliefs incompatible with it. More generally, one might say that whenever a person has feelings, thoughts and reactions typical of valuing X, they can be seen as a sign that the person implicitly believes that X is valuable.

Whether or not one agrees with this suggestion will depend on one's views on what should count as an (implicit) belief. I will not enter that debate here. If one's criteria for implicit beliefs are inclusive enough, I would agree that valuing X involves believing that X is valuable (more on this later). The more important claim is that a belief – be it implicit or explicit – that X is valuable is not *sufficient* for valuing X.

everyone wants to be friends with him makes me want it as well. It's not that I think that everyone's being friends with John is a reason to be friends with him. I don't see any such reason. Nevertheless, I find myself with a desire to be his friend.

It wouldn't make sense to say that I *value* being friends with John, but I see no reason to be friends with him. I can, of course, value being friends with him, and see some overriding reasons against it – his wife, say, disapproves. But if I tell you that I value his friendship, but see no reasons whatsoever to be friends with him, you may rightly wonder what I mean. If, to my mind, there is nothing about his friendship that makes it worth having, or gives me a reason to want it, then talk about valuing it is misplaced.

This suggests that seeing certain facts about X as reasons for certain actions, thoughts, and/or attitudes is an essential feature of valuing X. It matters, of course, what kinds of facts about X one sees as reasons, and what kinds of actions or attitudes one sees them as reasons for. If I see the fact that John is popular as a reason to be friends with him and thus become more popular myself, I do not necessarily value his friendship; if I see the fact that he is a sensitive guy as a reason to be mean to him, I don't thereby value him. However, as long as we talk about valuing in general, it is virtually impossible to give a precise, concrete account of the nature of the reasons, actions and attitudes valuing involves. They will vary widely depending on the kind of valuing in question - romantic love, parental love, friendship-love, respect for the person as a person, respect for the person as a great violinist, consideration, etc. They will also depend on the nature of the

valued object, on the nature of one's relationship with it, and on the context. One can be (somewhat) more specific only if one talks about particular kinds of valuing.<sup>29</sup>

One can see that certain things are reasons, but at the same time be disconnected from, or indifferent to, their reason-giving force. I can, for example, see that the fact that world peace would save the lives of millions is a reason to fight for world peace, without seeing that reason as speaking directly to me; without seeing *myself* as having a reason to militate for world peace. When one values something, one doesn't merely see that certain facts about it are reasons; one also sees *oneself* as bound by those reasons. Thomas Scanlon takes something like this to be the central characteristic of valuing: "To value something is to take oneself to have reasons for holding certain positive attitudes toward it and for acting in certain ways with regard to it. Exactly what these reasons are, and what actions and attitudes they support, will be different in different cases. They generally include, as a common core, reasons for admiring the thing and for respecting it, although 'respecting' can involve quite different things in different cases. Often, valuing something involves seeing reasons to preserve and protect it (as, for example, when I value a historic building); in other cases it involves reasons to be guided by the goals and standards that the value involves (as when I value loyalty); in some cases both may be involved (as when I value the U.S. constitution)."<sup>30</sup>

I believe that Scanlon's remarks on what it is to value something bring out at least two important points. For one thing, as noted before, they point out that seeing oneself as having reasons for certain actions is a central feature of valuing something. But suppose

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<sup>29</sup> Chapter two contains a specific discussion of this kind: it investigates the reasons, actions and attitudes characteristic of love.

<sup>30</sup> Scanlon, *What we owe to each other*, p. 95.

we accept the view that desiring X entails seeing X under the guise of the good, and thus entails seeing oneself as having a reason to pursue X. If we were to accept that to value X is to desire it, it would follow that a person who desires X sees herself as having a reason to pursue it. So far a reductionist view that equates valuing X with desiring X seems compatible with Scanlon's points. But Scanlon's remarks also bring to light the fact that valuing is far more complex than desire. Unlike desiring X, which involves seeing oneself as having a reason to pursue X, and also perhaps a reason to desire it, valuing X involves seeing oneself as having a variety of reasons for different actions and attitudes. When I desire John's friendship, I may thereby see myself as having a reason to pursue, or maintain, a friendship with John. But if I value the friendship, Scanlon points out, I see myself as having reasons not merely to promote the friendship, but also to guide my actions by the ideal of being a good friend. "A person who values friendship will take herself to have reasons, first and foremost, to do those things that are involved in being a good friend: to be loyal, to be concerned with her friend's interests, to try to stay in touch, to spend time with her friends, and so on."<sup>31</sup>

A reductionist might say at this point that all he has to give up is the simple view that valuing X consists in desiring X; but nothing Scanlon said rules out the option that valuing X consists in a set of desires pertaining to X. To value one's friendship with John is to desire to maintain it, and to desire to do those things involved in being a good friend: to be loyal, to help John when he needs help, etc.

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<sup>31</sup> Scanlon, *What we owe to each other*, p. 88.

Suppose that the reductionist could avoid the problems discussed in part I. One question he would have to answer is: why does valuing friendship involve this particular set of desires, and not some other? Are these desires connected to each other in some way?

A non-reductionist faces the same question. Here is one way he might try to answer it. Though perhaps not reducible to belief, valuing X involves, our non-reductionist will say, a belief that X is valuable. To take an example, valuing friendship involves a belief that friendship is valuable. It is part of the content of that belief that there are reasons to develop friendships, to maintain them, to guide one's actions by the standards and ideals of friendship. Therefore, to believe that friendship is valuable is to believe that there are these reasons. Therefore, valuing friendship involves seeing oneself as having these reasons.

Someone who subscribes to this view would have to defend the claim that a belief that X is valuable is (perhaps among other things) a belief about such reasons. I will grant, for the sake of the argument, that this claim is true.<sup>32</sup> I will argue, however, that the reasons one sees oneself as having when one values X are typically not the same as the reasons entailed by the belief that X is valuable.

Some reasons are such that, if one has them, then, other things being equal (i.e., in the absence of overriding reasons to the contrary), one ought, rationally, to act on them.<sup>33</sup> The fact that arsenic will kill me, together with my desire to survive, give me a reason of this kind not to take arsenic: I ought, rationally, not to take arsenic. If I go ahead and take arsenic anyway, I am being irrational; I am violating a norm of rationality about what I ought to do. Let's call these, following Jonathan Dancy, insistent reasons. Other reasons do

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<sup>32</sup> Scanlon defends a version of it in chapter 2 of *What we owe to each other*.

<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Dancy calls such reasons "insistent reasons". See Dancy, "Enticing reasons".

not have this force: they can *justify* an action that I might perform, without “insisting” that I ought to perform that action. The fact that it is sunny outside is a reason of this kind to take a walk.<sup>34</sup> If I go for a walk, my action may be rationally justified (made intelligible) by the fact that it is sunny outside. However, if I see that it is sunny outside, and I know that this is a reason which would justify taking a walk, but I don’t take a walk, then, even in the absence of reasons not to take a walk, I am in no way irrational. Let’s call these justifying reasons.

Now, there are cases in which the reasons involved in something’s being valuable are insistent reasons. For example, the fact that persons are valuable as such may mean, among other things, that there are insistent reasons not to kill them, not to manipulate them, to contribute to some extent to their happiness, etc. But not all cases are like this. Perhaps some of the reasons involved in the value of friendship are insistent – say, there are insistent reasons not to destroy other people’s friendships. But most of them are not; most of them are merely justifying reasons. If friendship is valuable, and I know it, it doesn’t mean that I ought, rationally, to make friends, to guide my life by the ideals of friendship, etc. If being a great piano player is valuable, and I know it, it doesn’t mean that I ought, rationally, to become a piano player, to strive to be the best piano player I can be, etc.

But, unlike the person who merely believes that friendship or playing the piano is valuable, the person who values friendship, or being a piano player, does not see these reasons as merely justificatory; he sees them as insistent reasons. He doesn’t merely think that, if he chooses to be a good friend, his actions would be intelligible, or justified, in light

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<sup>34</sup> What kind of reason it will be may depend, in fact, of the context. But I will ignore that complication here.

of the value of friendship; he thinks that he *ought* to be a good friend, he ought to pursue and maintain friendships, to encourage others to do so, etc. The fact that he sees himself as under this normative requirement cannot be explained by the content of his belief that friendship is valuable; that content says nothing about the fact that he ought to make friends, etc.

Many cases of valuing involve objects considered to be valuable independently of one's relationship to them. Thus one can value people, justice, art, a particular work of art, a particular person, chess, etc. And there are many ways in which one can value such things: one can respect a person, love her, admire her; one can have respect for art and artists, without having any particular interest in the arts; or one can enjoy practicing a certain art form as a hobby; or love it passionately, and devote one's life to it. In many of these cases, one's relationship to the valued object is clearly governed by norms that determine what the agent has reason to, may, or ought to do, think, or feel. For example, in respecting a person one ought not to deceive her, gossip about her, see her as a mere means, etc. One ought not to destroy works of art, and one has reasons to contribute to the advancement of the arts; etc. Arguably, in some of these cases the norms arise from the value of the object – the value of people, the value of works of art, and so on. If we see this value as independent of the agent's attitudes towards the object, the agent is subject to these norms whether or not he values the object; he is subject to them simply in virtue of the objective value of the object.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Some will disagree with this claim, and I do not mean to defend it here. My point is that, *even if* it is true that an agent is subject to certain norms, and has insistent reasons, by virtue of the objective value of the object (or by virtue of a social contract, etc.), that cannot explain all the insistent reasons the agent has, and sees herself as having, when she values something.

Not all cases of valuing are like this, however. There are many ways of valuing that are “optional,” i.e., not required of the agent in virtue of the value of the object. Any person ought to be respected by everyone, but not necessarily loved or admired; any art form ought to be respected, but one is under no obligation to enjoy or fully appreciate aesthetically the value of any particular art form; everyone ought to value justice in some sense, but the value of justice does not give rise to an obligation to make the promotion of justice one’s life goal – to become a lawyer or police officer, and devote one’s life to preventing injustice.<sup>36</sup>

What is interesting is that, even though some ways of valuing are optional in this sense, they are similar to the non-optional forms of valuing in that they, as well, involve insistent reasons and norms the agent is subject to, and sees herself as subject to. But those norms are not (or not fully) grounded in the value of the object; if they were, then *all* agents would be subject to them, and that form of valuing would cease to be optional.<sup>37</sup>

I will discuss in chapter 3 the nature and source of the norms the agent is, in fact, subject to when she values something. For now I will discuss the idea that valuing involves *seeing* oneself as subject to such norms.

Suppose, for example, that I love Jane. She knows nothing about my love for her. She is not related to me, and we are not friends; I am under no obligation to love her. However, I do love her; you can imagine my love to be romantic in nature, or rather similar to the way one loves one’s friends.

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph Raz makes a similar point in *Value, respect and attachment* (chapter 1).

<sup>37</sup> One might try to explain such norms by appealing to the value that the object has *for the agent*. This explanation might work in some cases, but it will not work in cases where the object is valuable to the agent because the agent values it.

Now, suppose that an opportunity arises, where I could do something for her sake - without intruding in her life, and without her knowing it. Let's say, she is in great financial trouble, that might prevent her from going to college; and I could help her, without negative effects of any kind.

Now if Jane were someone I didn't know and had no feelings for, I may or may not want to help her. In any case, I would not feel obligated to help her. But because I love her, I will most likely want to help her, and I will feel that I *ought to* help her.<sup>38</sup>

Although love makes it very likely that I will want to help the person I love, it does not guarantee it. There are instances where we do not find ourselves very inclined to help the people we love, even when we think that we should; this sometimes happens when the person we love is our partner or friend, and it can equally happen when we have no particular relationship with that person.

If I found myself unwilling to help Jane, and wanting to use the money instead for a nice vacation, I would find myself feeling ashamed. The reason for my shame would be the sense that, since I care about Jane, I ought to help her. We generally think that we ought to contribute to the well-being of the people we care about, and that we should want to do that for their own sake; that the well-being of the people we care about should be more important to us than trivial pleasures, and so on.

We do not think, I believe, that we ought to contribute to the well-being of the people we love *only* when those people are our children, our spouses, our parents, or our friends. Loving someone – whether that someone is one's spouse or someone who doesn't

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<sup>38</sup> More on this in chapter 3.

know us - consists, in part, in seeing oneself as having insistent reasons to promote her happiness, to help her when in need, etc.

If love didn't involve insistent reasons, one would have no ground to feel ashamed about failing, in a particular instance, to want to contribute to the well-being of a beloved person one is in no relationship with. A failure to act on justifying reasons does not warrant, and does not give rise to, negative feelings such as shame and guilt, whereas a failure to act on conclusive insistent reasons may.

Love is not the only form of valuing where one sees oneself as having insistent reasons. If I value teaching as my vocation, I will think that I ought to work hard to be an excellent teacher; and nothing but the fact that I value teaching in this way gives rise to this duty: it is not a duty specified in my job description, it is not required by the intrinsic value of teaching, and it does not come with the social role of being a teacher. If I value the china collection I inherited from my grandmother, I will feel that I ought to take good care of it, and not to sell it for \$100 to buy a new dress.<sup>39</sup>

If it's not the belief that X is valuable that unifies the (insistent) reasons one sees oneself as having when one values X, what is it? I believe that it is an attitude that we would call "seeing X as valuable."<sup>40</sup> We can understand this attitude by analogy with perceptual cases of seeing-as. When I see an object as a snake, my experience is different from when I see it as a hose. The visual experience itself may or may not be different, but

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<sup>39</sup> The case I am imagining here is one in which I value the collection because it used to be my grandmother's, but it is not the case that I ought to take good care of it because she asked me to before she died, or because I have a duty of gratitude towards her, or the like. I feel that I ought to take good care of the collection simply because I value it.

<sup>40</sup> In fact, as we will see later, the attitude is often more specific, but for now I will only talk about seeing an object as valuable, for the sake of simplicity.

in any case the associations of ideas, emotional reactions, motivations, and actions I am likely to undergo or undertake will be very different. What accounts for this difference is a question for psychologists and philosophers of perception; but the phenomenon is a familiar one. One thing that seems clear is that, when I see the object as a snake, I categorize it in a different way than when I see it as a hose; and this different way of categorizing it results in different associations of ideas, emotional reactions, etc.

Seeing as is different from belief, although there are strong psychological connections between the two. I can see an object as a snake without yet believing that it is a snake. A moment later, if the object is in fact a snake, I will likely also form the belief that it is a snake. If it's a hose, then I will likely form the belief it's a hose. Typically, as a result in this latter case I will also stop seeing it as a snake, and start seeing it as a hose; but not necessarily. Sometimes a certain way of experiencing an object can coexist with the belief that it is not the kind of object that warrants that experience. This may not be typical in snake–hose scenarios (although, even in such cases, at least some of the reactions characteristic of seeing the object as a snake can linger even after I become fully convinced it's just a hose – I may still be reluctant to touch it, walk around it, etc.) But it is common in other cases. One can be fully aware that the moving object behind one is one's own shadow, but still see it as a threatening stranger, and fear it. A war veteran on July 4<sup>th</sup> can know for sure that the loud noise he is about to hear is a firework, and still hear it as a grenade explosion.<sup>41</sup>

The same phenomenon can occur (in fact, is even more prevalent) with non-perceptual ways of parsing the world. Even though the zoo-keeper assures you that this

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Moran defends in “Seeing and believing: metaphor, image, and force” the interesting idea that metaphors work by making the audience see X as Y, and thus manipulating us into reacting emotionally to X as we would react to Y – even when fully aware that X is not Y.

particular snake species is harmless as a doll, and you fully believe him, you may still see the snake as dangerous, and fear it, and avoid it. An anxious person may know that it's very unlikely that he would embarrass himself, and that the audience is not there to judge him, but still perceive the situation as having a high potential for embarrassment, and feel or act awkward, or avoid it. Conversely, an over-confident person might know from past experience that he is not a great entertainer, and believe that he will likely embarrass himself again tonight, but still see the party as the perfect opportunity to shine, and himself as a rising star.

The concepts involved in these cases are evaluative: dangerous, potentially embarrassing, the opportunity to shine. They categorize an object or a situation partly in terms of how to feel and/or act. In the cases I described, the agent feels and acts accordingly.<sup>42</sup> The same phenomenon of seeing-as is also possible with respect to value concepts. Now, one difference between what I call here evaluative concepts and value concepts is that, besides their descriptive component, evaluative concepts only parse the world in terms of how to feel and/or act, whereas value concepts also parse the world in terms of what one has *reasons* to do.<sup>43</sup>

I can see teaching philosophy as a job, as a career, as a way of making a difference in the world, as a vocation, and so on. When I see teaching philosophy as a job, I see it as

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<sup>42</sup> I will remain silent on exactly how the evaluative concepts are involved in these cases. They are, for sure, part of our third-personal description of the case. It is plausible to think that they are also involved in the agent's experience of the situation: that the agent possesses these concepts, and that they inform the way he categorizes the situation, and thus the way he responds to it. But whether this is true, and how exactly this goes, is an issue that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>43</sup> In this sense, all of *our* evaluative concepts mentioned above (dangerous, potentially embarrassing, the opportunity to shine) might also be value concepts: when we categorize a situation as dangerous, we thereby think we have a reason to fight or fly, etc. But a concept can be evaluative without being a value concept: a dog might have the concept of dangerous and categorize a situation as a fight-or-flight situation, but he doesn't categorize it as one in which it has reasons to fight or fly. The point is that the content of a value concept cannot be fully explained in terms of its evaluative dimension.

the kind of thing one has a reason to practice to pay the bills. If my friends ask me why I teach philosophy, I may answer: “Well, it’s a job.” I also see it as the kind of thing I ought to do reasonably well, where “reasonably well” is defined largely in terms of my job description. To my highly motivated colleagues who work late hours, I say: “It’s just a job!” When I see teaching philosophy as a vocation, I see it as the kind of thing I *have* to pursue: I see its potential to open up and nurture the minds of young people, the ability to share knowledge, the joy and excitement of the dialogue it makes possible as *calling* me to be a philosophy teacher. I see teaching philosophy as the kind of thing I want and *ought* to do to the best of my abilities. If my friends ask me why, I can just give them the list: the potential to open up and nurture the minds of young people, etc.

An interesting difference between believing that X is Y and seeing X as Y is that one has a choice about how to see X that one does not have about what to believe about X. You can see the duck- rabbit either as a duck, or as a rabbit; and you can choose to see it one way or another. (You can implement the choice by focusing on some aspects of the drawing rather than others). But if you believe that the drawing represents at the same time a duck and a rabbit, you cannot choose to believe that it is only a duck, or that it is only a rabbit. If you believe a certain object is a work of art, you cannot choose not to believe that it is a work of art. But you can choose to see it as a work of art, or to see it merely as, say, a urinal (when the object you are looking at is Duchamp’s *Fountain*.)

Now, one difference between believing and seeing as is that it is psychologically possible for you (within limits set by the nature of the object, and by your imaginative resources) to choose how to see an object, whereas it is often psychologically impossible,

and in most cases very difficult, to choose what to believe. But this is not the main difference I am interested in. There is a further sense in which you can choose how to see an object, whereas you cannot choose what to believe. If you believe that  $p$ , and that your belief is justified, then you cannot *rationally* choose to believe that not  $p$ . But “seeing as” is not subject to the same constraints. If I believe that Duchamp’s fountain is a work of art, and that my belief is justified, then it would be irrational to try to believe that it is a mere urinal, and not a work of art. But there is nothing irrational, other things being equal, about choosing to see it as a urinal, and not as an art object. That is, there are no rational standards governing “seeing as” that would forbid adopting one stance rather than another.

Are there *any* rational standards that govern *seeing as*? Suppose that I see Duchamp’s *Fountain* as a helicopter. Now, if I’m seeing it as a helicopter because I’m hallucinating, there is definitely something wrong with me as a perceiver. My perceptual system is not fulfilling its function properly. But is the failure one of rationality? If I am hallucinating as a result of high fever, we won’t say it’s a failure of rationality. Now suppose I see *Fountain* as a helicopter because I think that there is a huge conspiracy against me, and everywhere I look there are people in helicopters spying on me or trying to kidnap me; or I believe that the first principle of the universe is a helicopter, and this belief puts me into a constant hallucinative state, where I see everything as a helicopter. In cases like these, the beliefs that lead me to see all objects as helicopters are irrational, but it is not clear whether seeing the objects as helicopters is itself irrational.

In any case, not all instances in which I see something as something it is not, e.g. *Fountain* as a helicopter, involve a failure in perception or in rationality. Suppose that I just love helicopters, and I’d be really happy if I could live in a world populated by them. I

also happen to have a very powerful imagination, and I am capable of actually seeing many of the things around me as helicopters. That is, I am almost always capable of seeing the strong similarities between a given, random object, and a helicopter; I am capable of focusing on those similarities to the extent that everything else about the object disappears in a distant background, and all my reactions to the object are shaped by my perception of and focus on those similarities: the associations I make, the emotions I experience, the thoughts I have, etc. I am not hallucinating, and I am not deluded: I am perfectly aware of the fact that the object in front of me is not a helicopter; nevertheless, I see it as one. I don't think any irrationality is involved in a case like this. It is a strange case, and it's not likely that many people feel this way about helicopters, or want to experience the world in this way. But it is not psychologically impossible; neither is it irrational. And there are many, more familiar, cases that have nothing to do with helicopters, but where a similar phenomenon is involved. A person who believes in God might see every object as God's creation, and everything that happens as an expression of God's will, wisdom, and benevolence; a person in love might see love everywhere; the main character played by Bjork in the movie "Dancer in the dark" is slowly going blind, and she hears the noise of the machines in the dreary factory she works in as music. There doesn't seem to be anything irrational in these cases.

The things that are valuable are at the same time both valuable and things. A person is at the same time a person, an organism, a lump of cells. If one believes that A is a person, one cannot simply choose not to believe it. But one can choose not to see A as a person – to see A merely as an organism, or merely as a lump of cells.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> There may be cases in which a particular individual cannot see an object in a certain way. Someone might be so much in the grip of seeing people as people, that he cannot bring himself to see them merely as lumps

The fact that the way one sees an object is subject to choice opens up the possibility of a *commitment* to see an object in a certain way. I believe that valuing an object can best be understood as a commitment to see that object as valuable in a certain way.<sup>45</sup> I will argue that understanding valuing as a commitment of this kind can best explain the role valuing plays in our agency and, more generally, in our lives.

It would be possible, in principle, to see teaching philosophy as a vocation today, as a mere job tomorrow, and as a career the day after tomorrow. In fact, I think there are people who have difficulties adopting one single perspective, just as there are people who have difficulties settling down. When I value teaching as a vocation, I do not merely see it as a vocation; I am also committed to seeing it as such. It is possible to see people as people most of the time, but then, when I need cash, to see them merely as cash-bearing bodies; to see women as persons most of the time, but as mere sex-objects when aroused; to see animals as sentient beings some of the time, but as potential good steaks at other times. Someone who values women and, generally, people as people is committed to always seeing them as people<sup>46</sup>; and one who values animals as sentient beings is committed to always seeing them as such.

Now, someone could, as a matter of fact, always see people as people, or animals as sentient beings, without being committed to this way of seeing them. The stability over time of his way of seeing animals could be that of habit, of lack of imagination, or of some general rigidity in the way he sees things. Saying that when a person values something, he

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of cells. Or someone might lack the imaginative resources needed to see everything as a helicopter. But this does not mean that the way one sees an object is not the object of choice. Not everyone can run a marathon, but this does not mean that running a marathon cannot be the object of choice.

<sup>45</sup> More about the qualifier “in a certain way” later.

<sup>46</sup> This is not incompatible with sometimes seeing people also as sex objects, but it is incompatible with seeing them merely as sex objects.

is *committed* to seeing it as valuable in a certain way means that this way of seeing the object has a special place in the person's agency. The agent doesn't take it as a mere occurrence in his mental life – the way he might take some desires, urges, or feelings. He in some sense identifies with this way of seeing the object, sees it as part of who he is as an agent, as *his* way of seeing, and as such takes it to have a special authority in his agency.<sup>47</sup>

The difference between merely seeing an object as valuable, and being committed to seeing it as such can best be seen in cases where a person finds herself with a way of seeing something, and experiences it as alien. Think of the woman who grew up in a sexist environment and as a result sees men as more valuable than women – as the kind of beings she ought to defer to, obey, serve, as the kind of beings who are worth deferring to, obeying, and serving. In her adult life, she has come to believe that this way of seeing men is unjustified; however, she still finds herself in its grip, and will be struggling for years to outgrow it. She cannot help seeing men in this way: whenever a man demands something of her, she automatically takes it as a reason to obey. It takes constant effort and a lot of self-reflection on her part to bring her tendency to see such facts as reasons into conscious awareness, oppose to it her beliefs about what should really count as a reason, and resist it.

In this case, our woman's stance towards her way of seeing men is similar to that of the mother in Watson's example towards her urge to drown her crying baby. She experiences it as alien. Her predicament is more serious than the mother's, because the attitude she finds alien is not a fleeting urge; it affects the core of her agency, in that it

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<sup>47</sup> The commitment involved in valuing is not necessarily – and not typically – the result of a decision to make a commitment. We often find ourselves committed to people, causes, careers, without having at some point in time made a decision to commit. The commitment of valuing is thus different from the commitment that arises from making a promise or saying “I do”.

affects what she habitually takes as reasons for action. She thus sees men as more valuable than women, but she doesn't value them as such. This is not because she doesn't *believe* them to be more valuable (although it is true of her that she doesn't), but because she doesn't take her way of seeing men to have authority as *her* way of seeing. She experiences her way of seeing men as the relic of her unfortunate upbringing, and is not in the least committed to it; on the contrary, she is committed to eradicating it.

This suggests that one aspect of the commitment involved in valuing is that the agent takes her seeing the object as valuable to have authority in her deliberations by virtue of representing *her* point of view. This is one way in which valuing differs from desires: a mere desire does not have the authority of expressing the agent's point of view. The example of the sexist woman shows that the mere fact that one sees an object in a certain way does not give that way of seeing the authority of expressing the agent's point of view either. In order for a desire, or a way of seeing, to have that authority, it is necessary that the agent *take* that desire or way of seeing to have that authority when he thinks, deliberates, and acts.

The fact that the agent takes his seeing an object as valuable to have authority in his agency amounts to the following: when he deliberates explicitly, he gives weight as reasons to the things that he sees as reasons by virtue of seeing the object as valuable; he feels guilty or ashamed, and takes himself to have reasons for so feeling, if he does not act in accordance with those reasons; he sees severe violations of what he values as self-betrayal; he feels pride and self-fulfillment, and takes himself to have reasons for so feeling, if he does live up to the standards implicit in his valuing; he experiences the

obligations arising from those norms as coming from within, and not as imposed from the outside.

Understanding valuing as a kind of commitment fits well with common sense observations about valuing. It explains the stability characteristic of valuing, and how it differs from that of persistent desires. As mentioned earlier, our intuition is that the stability over time of valuing is not contingent, like that of persistent desires; it flows from the nature of valuing. It doesn't make sense to say that I value teaching for five minutes. The view that valuing is a form of commitment explains why. It makes no sense to be committed to teaching only for 5 minutes (what would that commitment amount to?) Moreover, the view clarifies one reason why there is something defective about valuing teaching today, not valuing it tomorrow, and valuing it again in three days: a wavering commitment like this is not much of a commitment at all – it defeats the purpose of a commitment.

I have suggested, in this chapter, that valuing involves a commitment to seeing the valued object as valuable. In the following chapters I will further develop this model of valuing and defend it by showing that it helps us to better understand the nature and value of love (chapter 2), the source of some special “oughts” (chapter 3), and how valuing contributes to meaningfulness in life (chapter 4).

## Chapter 2: Love

### I. What's at stake

One hears everywhere how important love and love relationships are for a good, fulfilling life; how no life can be meaningful without love of some kind; how crucial love is for the psychological well-being of both the one who loves, and the one who is loved. If one can get over their platitudinous ring, these assertions seem true and important. What one doesn't hear often enough, however, are convincing explanations of why, and how, love contributes to a good, meaningful, healthy life; what is it about love that makes it so important to us, that enables it to play its role in our lives.

The many and diverse attempts made by philosophers, novelists, poets, or filmmakers to define love seem driven at least in part by the need for an explanation of the *value* of love. Some argue that love is essentially a stable desire for the well-being of the beloved<sup>48</sup>; some that it is an extension of one's self to include the self of another<sup>49</sup>; others that it is an emotion,<sup>50</sup> or an emotion complex,<sup>51</sup> some that it is a complex emotion defined

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<sup>48</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of love*; Hugh LaFollette, *Personal relationships: Love, Identity, and morality*; Richard John White, *Love's philosophy*.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Solomon, *About love: reinventing romance for our times*; Robert Nozick, "Love's bond," in *The examined life: Philosophical meditations*.

<sup>50</sup> D.W. Hamlyn, "The phenomena of love and hate," in Alan Soble (ed.), *Eros, Agape, and Philia*.

<sup>51</sup> Anette Baier, "Unsafe loves," in R.C. Solomon & K.M. Higgins (eds.), *The philosophy of (erotic) love*; Neera Kapur Badhwar, "Love," in Hugh LaFollette (ed.), *Practical Ethics*.

by a socially constructed script for interpreting one's more basic emotions;<sup>52</sup> others that it is a sui-generis way of valuing a person<sup>53</sup>, or a relationship.<sup>54</sup>

Many philosophers who develop such conceptions of love offer them as competing accounts of the true nature of love. They argue that love is essentially a desire for the well-being of the beloved, *rather than* an emotion; or that it is a way of valuing, *rather than* a conative attitude; and so on. It is not always entirely clear what the disagreement is about. Often, the dispute seems merely verbal; and when one looks at the diversity of things we talk about using the word "love," it looks like the concept is flexible enough to accommodate all the conceptions that have been proposed.

One way to understand the debate between philosophers who develop different conceptions of love is as about the nature of the attitudes, emotions, or relationships we are capable of. This seems, for example, a plausible way of understanding the dispute between those who argue that love is a natural emotion and those who believe it is socially constructed. It is also plausible, to take another example, that those who believe that love is a conative attitude resist the idea that love is a sui-generis way of valuing a person because they believe that there is no such attitude as that of valuing a person (in a way recognizable as love) that is not, in the end, reducible to some conative attitude(s).

Other times, disagreements about the nature of love are more plausibly and fruitfully understood as disagreements about value. Someone who believes that love is a sui-generis way of valuing can easily accept that we are capable of conative attitudes such as desiring the well-being of the beloved. What he wants to persuade us of is that such a

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<sup>52</sup> James R. Averill, "The social construction of the emotion: with special reference to love," in K.J. Gergen and K.E. Davis (eds.), *The social construction of the person*.

<sup>53</sup> David Velleman, "Love as a moral emotion".

<sup>54</sup> Niko Kolodny, "Love as valuing a relationship".

conative attitude is not “real love,” not what love really is about. Here, the disagreement is not so much about what kind of attitudes we are capable of; rather, it is a disagreement about the kind of attitude that deserves to be called, or ought to be called, “love.” The concept of love is value-laden in several different ways: we believe that love is a valuable (perhaps necessary) part of a good, meaningful life; that it is morally admirable; that some people ought to love certain others (one’s children, perhaps one’s spouse, parents, old intimate friends in the absence of reasons to the contrary); at least some believe that love creates special responsibilities towards the people one loves.<sup>55</sup> To make a judgment about what should count as love is to take a stance on these value issues. Disagreements about the nature of love are often disagreements about what makes love valuable, about what kind of attitude is most worth striving for in our lives, and / or about how we ought to treat certain others and why.

My aim in this chapter is to explore the thought that love is a way of valuing a person, and the perspective this way of understanding love gives us on some of the value questions surrounding love. I am interested in seeing what it is that we say about love when we say that it is a way of valuing; which features of love are brought to light by understanding it as valuing, and whether highlighting those features helps us to gain some insight into what makes love valuable, into the role love plays in our lives, and, potentially, the role it plays in our moral lives.

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<sup>55</sup> It would be interesting to explore how these different normative dimensions of love are related to one another: whether perhaps love is morally admirable because it is a crucial part of a meaningful life; or it is part of a good life because it is morally admirable (this seems very implausible to me, by the way); or what makes it morally admirable is what also makes it capable of providing meaning in life; whether the grounds or justification for the responsibilities of love are to be found in love’s role in a good life. I will not be able to address thoroughly all these questions, but the discussion to come will bear on some of them.

I will start by describing some of the puzzles that arise in thinking about value questions about love. I will then argue that a conative analysis of love fares poorly at explaining the characteristic value of love, and will show that these puzzles can be solved by understanding love on the model of valuing proposed in chapter 1.

## **II. The puzzles**

One of the most intriguing commonplaces about love is that love can give meaning to one's life. Explaining what that means is a difficult philosophical project on its own, which deserves separate treatment. But even if we only have a pre-theoretical understanding of meaningfulness in life, the thought that love can give meaning to one's life seems a central part of our intuitive conception of love's distinctive value. We don't say, for example, that liking another person or being sexually attracted to her can make one's life meaningful, or that desiring someone's company, or even desiring to benefit her, can make life meaningful. These other attitudes and relationships are valuable to us, but they do not have the same particular kind of value that we think love has. I believe that a good account of the characteristic value of love, of the role it can play in our lives, would have to accommodate, and perhaps shed some light on, the assertion that love can provide a life with meaning.

Here are some other differences between the kind of value and normative significance we attribute to love and to other attitudes. Consider, for example, Bernard Williams' "one thought too many" scenario. A man can either save his wife from drowning, or a stranger, but not both. It would be absurd to require the man to be impartial

between the stranger and his wife. Moreover, points out Williams, there would be something wrong with a man who decided to save his wife *because it was morally right to do so* – whose motivating reason for saving his wife was, say, that special treatment of one’s intimates maximizes utility. Our man should decide to save his wife simply because she is his wife, and not because she is his wife, *and it’s morally right to favor one’s wife*.

On my favorite interpretation of the case, what is essential here is not the fact that she is his wife, but the fact that he loves her. We think that his reason for saving her should be that he loves her, and not that morality says it is right to give priority to the people you love. Entertaining a thought like: “I will save her if doing so maximizes the greater good” seems incompatible with genuine love. We would doubt the depth or authenticity of the love of a husband who reasoned this way. And at least some of us would be reluctant to find him morally admirable: even though he is thoroughly committed to following the requirements of morality, his failure in loving strikes us as a moral failure.<sup>56</sup>

But consider our reactions to a scenario in which the man has to choose between a stranger and a woman he is very much sexually attracted to; or between a stranger and a person he likes very much and hopes to some day be friends with. Some would probably say that it would not be okay to favor one person because he is attracted to her, or likes her. Others might say that it would be okay to save the person he likes very much rather than the stranger. In any case, in such situations, the agent’s pondering about whether it would be morally okay to save the person he likes would hardly strike anyone as “one thought too many.” The apparent incompatibility between loving someone, on the one hand, and seeing

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<sup>56</sup> The moral failure I have in mind here is not the failure to love one’s wife. He would be guilty of the same failure even if he weren’t married to her. He (we assumed) loves her, and it is for this reason that we assess him as doing well or failing in his love for her. More on this, and on why this failure might be moral, in chapter 3.

the saving of her life as contingent on the requirements of morality, on the other hand, is not present in cases of mere liking, or of desires to be with, be in a sexual relationship with, etc. This is a difference in normative significance that needs to be explained.

Consider one further difference. Al loves his friend Ben. When Al meets Cecil, who appears to have all the qualities Al loves about Ben, plus a few extras, Al stops loving Ben, and starts to love Cecil. Then one day Al meets Dan, who seems even cooler than Cecil, and he stops loving Cecil, and starts loving Dan instead. If asked what they think about Al, the first thing people would probably criticize him for is his lack of loyalty towards his friends. But even if we set aside moral issues about what Al owes to his friends, and focus on the attitudes, emotions and relationships Al seems capable of, and the contributions they make to his life, we would be inclined to say that they are far from ideal. Al doesn't really love his friends, we'll say. When you really love someone, the person you love is not replaceable to you in the manner Al's friends seem to be replaceable to him. And we believe that the irreplaceability of the person(s) you love is a valuable characteristic of love.

There are two main questions raised by the idea that the beloved is irreplaceable to the lover: How is this irreplaceability even possible? And why is it valuable?

The very possibility of the irreplaceability of the beloved poses a problem because it seems incompatible with another deeply held belief about love. We commonly think that we love people for their personal qualities: for being kind, warm, sensitive, smart, quirky. But, the worry goes, if personal qualities are one's reasons for love, then the beloved is in

fact replaceable by any other person with the same qualities. How can we make sense of this?

It is easy to see one reason why irreplaceability is valuable from the perspective of the beloved: whatever advantages there are to being loved by someone will be diminished by the prospect of being replaced whenever someone better comes along. But we also believe that the person who loves benefits himself from this characteristic of love. We are inclined to pity AI for not being capable of entertaining genuine love. It is less obvious why irreplaceability is valuable for the person who loves. After all, why isn't it better to have attachments that are easily transferable to other people, when other people have even more loveable qualities? We seem to think that it's not better; that even if you could get everyone else to love you as irreplaceable, without reciprocating, you wouldn't be better off; in fact, you would be worse off; but it's not obvious why.

### **III. Love as a conative attitude**

If asked to define love, a first thing people will say is that if you love someone, you want her happiness. Indifference to the fate of your beloved, no inclination to contribute to her well-being, unwillingness to make sacrifices for her sake are commonly thought to be incompatible with love; they are the best proof that what you may feel is not love. Given the centrality to our conception of love of the presence of a stable, solid desire to promote the well-being of the person one loves, it is tempting to conclude that this is what love *is*: that to love somebody just is to have a (perhaps particular kind of) desire for her well-being.

Harry Frankfurt defends a conception of love along these lines. Love is, he argues, a “disinterested concern for the well-being or flourishing of the beloved object.”<sup>57</sup> The key lies in the meaning of “disinterested.”

The kind of concern for a person’s well-being most clearly contrary to love is concern for an ulterior motive: if I want my aunt’s well-being because if she dies before 70 I will not inherit her fortune, my concern is by no means that of love. Even when one’s ulterior motive is not that selfish or reckless, concern for a person’s well-being does not amount to love: if I want my aunt’s well-being because she is about to find a cure for cancer, I do not necessarily love my aunt.

What if my concern for her well-being has no ulterior motive whatsoever – if I simply want her to be well, for no further reasons? This pure concern seems close to what we have in mind when we say that to really love someone is to care about her well-being *for her own sake*: not for the sake of her money, not for the sake of the good she can do for the world, but for her own sake. It is this kind of concern for someone’s well-being, concern based on no ulterior motives, that Harry Frankfurt calls “disinterested concern” and with which he identifies love.

As it stands, the analysis of love as disinterested concern for the beloved’s well-being fails to distinguish love from benevolence or charity. One can be disinterestedly concerned about the well-being of children who starve in third-world countries, without thereby loving them. Frankfurt is aware of this difficulty, and suggests the following solution: what distinguishes love from benevolence is its *personal* character. In the case of charity, he says, the particular identity of the people whose well-being I am concerned with

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<sup>57</sup> Harry Frankfurt, “On caring,” p. 167. Frankfurt intends this definition to apply to love of persons as well as any other type of love: love for a pet, for one’s country, etc. My primary interest here is in love for persons.

is not relevant to my concern. What qualifies them to be the object of my concern “is not their specificity as particular individuals, but their membership in a class”<sup>58</sup> - the fact that they are children who live in conditions of extreme poverty.

“With regard to what we love, on the other hand, that sort of indifference to the identity of the object of concern is out of the question. Substituting some other object for the beloved is not an acceptable and perhaps not even an intelligible option. The significance to the lover of what he loves is not that of an exemplar; its importance to him is not generic, but ineluctably particular.”<sup>59</sup>

This qualification seems to be a step in the right direction, but is still insufficient. It is not clear that benevolence is always indifferent to the identity of its target, as Frankfurt suggests. Imagine that I receive in the mail a letter presenting the heart-wrenching story and photos of a little girl Sonya. I am touched by the story and, from that day on, out of a stable concern for her well-being, I send \$20 every month to “Help a Child,” a charity organization that promises to use my money for food, medical and education expenses for Sonya. My concern in this case is personal: I was moved by *Sonya*’s story, and care about *her* well-being, and although I may also contribute \$50 to a different charity, say Oxfam, that helps whoever it deems to be most in need, I want my monthly \$20 to go to Sonya, and not to someone else. I need not love Sonya, however, in order for this to be true; my attitude towards her is still one of benevolence rather than love, even though it is not transferable to some other helpless child.

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<sup>58</sup> Frankfurt, “On caring,” p. 166.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, p. 166.

The identity of the beloved does play an essential role in love, but the mere fact that it does is not distinctive of love. To understand what is specific to love and its characteristic value, we need to know more about the particular nature of the role played by the identity of the beloved.

Frankfurt argues that the irreplaceability of the beloved is simply a consequence of the fact that the *object* of love is a particular individual. Suppose I love Frank, who is kind, honest, blond, smart, etc. – where “etc.” includes all of Frank’s qualities. The object of my love is not whoever satisfies the description “kind, honest, blond, smart, etc.”; it is *this* particular individual, Frank. Love is a *de re* attitude. This is why, says Frankfurt, if another person were instantly created with the same qualities, my love would not be transferable to him.<sup>60</sup>

If that were all there was to the non-transferability of love, then it wouldn’t be distinctive of love, and its presumed value would be a mystery. After all, any fixation on a particular is non-transferable in the same way. For instance, even though one’s libido is typically indifferent to the identity of its object, a particular individual can become the fixed object of one’s sexual desire. When this happens, that desire cannot be satisfied by any other object, however similar, but only by the individual it got stuck on. We don’t think there is anything especially valuable about this kind of irreplaceability.<sup>61</sup> But we do

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<sup>60</sup> Here one might ask Frankfurt: how are we to explain the *de re* intentionality of love? In virtue of what is a particular individual, qua individual, the object of a particular agent’s love? Robert Kraut in fact asks this question in his paper “Love *de re*”. His answer is that love’s *de re* character is to be explained by its historicity, which he construes in terms of counterfactuals about replaceability. Is Sandra the *de re* object of Walter’s love? The answer to this question, Kraut argues, depends on what Walter would do if he lost Sandra. If he would replace her within 3 days, then Sandra is not the *de re* object of his love. If he never replaced her, she is; and there is a grey area somewhere in between. If Kraut is right that the *de re* character of love is to be explained in terms of the irreplaceability of the beloved, then one can’t explain irreplaceability by appealing to love’s *de re* character, as Frankfurt wants.

<sup>61</sup> This doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with it, only that it doesn’t have that special kind of value.

think that there is something intrinsically good, something admirable and desirable, about the kind of irreplaceability characteristic of love. If someone desired your well-being as a result of a fixation of some sort, you might welcome the concern, but it will not mean as much to you as love. One of the things we appreciate about love is that, when someone loves you, your identity is essential for that love – not merely in the sense that you, and not someone else, happen to be the fixed object of that love, but also because that love is somehow grounded in who you are. What we need is an account that makes sense of and clarifies this vague intuition.

The thought that love is a way of valuing an individual seems promising in this direction. If love is a response to the value of the beloved, then the beloved plays a more significant role than the chance object of a fixation. It is his value that the lover responds to. The challenge is to clarify and flesh out the thought that love is a way of valuing: what exactly are we saying about love, when we say it is a way of valuing an individual, and how can this help us to understand the value of love?

David Velleman has defended a very suggestive and provocative conception of love as valuing. I believe that ultimately his account is unsatisfactory, but his analysis of love contains many important insights, and is a great starting point for uncovering the possibilities of understanding love as a form of valuing. So we will turn to it next.

#### **IV. Love as valuing a person as a person**

Velleman argues that love is a particular way of appreciating the value of a person as a person. In this respect, love is similar to respect. However, love differs from respect in being a different form of appreciation. When we respect someone, we appreciate his value

as a person in a way that checks our self-love: our awareness of his personhood acts as a chaperone to our self-interested motives, and allows us to act only in ways that are compatible with his value as a person. But sometimes we come to appreciate a person's value differently: we become aware of the value of his personhood in a way that, as Velleman puts it, "arrests our tendencies toward emotional self-protection from the other person, tendencies to draw ourselves in and close ourselves off from being affected by him. Love disarms our emotional defenses; it makes us vulnerable to the other. (...) the various motives that are often identified with love are in fact independent responses that love merely unleashes. They are the sympathy, empathy, fascination, and attraction that we feel for another person when our emotional defenses toward him have been disarmed. (...) in suspending our emotional defenses, love exposes our sympathy to the needs of the other, and we are therefore quick to respond when help is needed."<sup>62</sup>

On Velleman's view, personal qualities such as intelligence, wit and the like are not justifying reasons for loving their possessor. It is the person's value as such that is the reason for loving him, and in this sense all people are equally worthy of one's love. We only love some and not others, explains Velleman, because our emotional resources are limited, and we cannot be emotionally open and vulnerable to everyone. Although a person's qualities do not justify one's loving her rather than someone else, they explain, causally, why one loves her and not someone else. Personal qualities are the gate to one's personhood; they are concrete manifestations of one's personhood, and as such they are ways into appreciating it. But there are differences between people in what they are receptive to. For some of us, a person's intelligence is what gets to us, what makes us

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<sup>62</sup> "Love as a moral emotion," p. 362.

sensitive to and receptive to his personhood and his value as a person; for others, it is a person's peculiar sense of humor that leads to an emotional openness to and appreciation of the value of her personhood; for others, it's beauty; and so on. This is why a person's qualities can explain how we come to love some people rather than others.

I believe this view is appealing because it fits with and promises to make sense of our sense that love goes beyond a person's qualities, that it is a response to something deeper to the person. It also seems promising in explaining the value of love: love is not merely a fixation; it is an appreciation of the value of the person, an appreciation that engages the lover's emotional being and thus results, typically, in a stable desire for the well-being of the beloved. The desire for her well-being is rooted in the beloved's value.<sup>63</sup>

In spite of these promising qualities, Velleman's view seems implausible as an account of love. As many have pointed out, it is implausible that love consists in an appreciation of the value of a person *as a person*. The view conflicts with the common belief that we love a person for his personal qualities. We love people because they are kind, generous, beautiful, intelligent, sensitive, and the like, and we believe that such qualities *are* good reasons for love. If your best friend or spouse asks you: "why do you love me?" and you answer: "because you are a person," you're in trouble. There is a kind of love that is grounded on the value of a person as a person – but that is a love that one can feel for all people, or for humanity in general. That kind of love has emotional components that are interestingly different from respect, but it is not the love that forms the basis of close relationships. However, it is the latter that philosophers writing on love, including Velleman, are trying to define.

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<sup>63</sup> Velleman argues – and this is the target of his paper - that these features of love explain love's value as a moral emotion, but this is not our main concern here.

A defender of Velleman's view might argue that common sense fails to distinguish between explanatory reasons and grounding reasons for love. The claim that personal qualities are good reasons for love is true, but only if interpreted as the claim that they are good explanatory reasons. If one insisted that the common sense view is that positive personal qualities can ground love, he might say that, in that case, common sense is wrong, and that in any case we wouldn't want to accept the consequences of the claim that personal qualities are grounding reasons for love. First, he might say, the claim implies that the beloved is replaceable by someone with the same qualities. So someone who criticizes Velleman on the grounds that his view is incompatible with the intuition that personal qualities are grounding reasons for love has the burden of showing that this intuition does not conflict with irreplaceability. I will take up this challenge later in the chapter. Secondly, Velleman's defender might argue that the intuition conflicts with another intuition of common sense: that even a person who lacks any appealing qualities deserves to and can be loved in the context of a personal relationship. The frog only needs to be kissed to turn into a prince. But notice that the frog in the story really is a prince, and eventually returns to being one. We wouldn't be very satisfied if the frog actually turned out to be only that, a frog, and the princess stayed married to a frog her whole life; or if the frog transformed into an unattractive, stupid, annoying, boring, humorless person, with no positive qualities whatsoever.

To the claim that the love grounded in a person's value as a person is a love one can feel for all people, and not the love of personal relationships, Velleman's defender might object that both kinds of love can be grounded in the same value. The difference between them need not be a difference in the value they respond to; it is a difference in the

way one responds to that value. Now, it is true that one can respond in different ways to the same value; but the problem is that, whereas humanitarian love makes sense as a response to the value of people as people, the love of personal relationships doesn't. Here is one reason why it doesn't make sense: the irreplaceability of the beloved characteristic of personal relationships is at odds with the claim that one's love for him is based on his value as a person.

Velleman's view is that the irreplaceability of the beloved is not a consequence of the fact that the value we see in her, and love her for, is unique to her. Rather, irreplaceability is a consequence of the kind of valuing warranted by her value as a person. Velleman makes use here of the Kantian distinction between dignity and price. People have a special kind of value, dignity, that differs from price in that it does not warrant comparisons or replacements. Since love is, on Velleman's view, an appreciation of a person's dignity, it is incompatible with regarding the person as replaceable.

I find this account unsatisfying because it does not seem to explain the irreplaceability *characteristic of love*. If one's beloved is irreplaceable because his dignity does not warrant replacements, then he is irreplaceable in the exact same way in which any other person is irreplaceable. But this is not what we mean when we say that the beloved is irreplaceable. What we mean is that it is unintelligible to transfer one's love for a person to some other person. It is not clear, however, why someone's value as a person would make this kind of transfer unintelligible. After all, one's dignity is not incompatible with *all* types of replacements; it is not incompatible, for example, with replacing an employee with a better one, if the first one is given proper notice. Velleman's account is in need of an explanation for why dignity is incompatible with being replaced in love. Besides, we

believe that one's beloved is irreplaceable in a special way – in a way different from that in which any person is irreplaceable.

### **V. An alternative account of love as valuing**

When we value an object, I argued, we see that object as valuable in a certain way. Seeing the object as valuable involves at the same time taking some facts about it to be reasons for certain kinds of actions, beliefs, conations, and emotions, and being motivated to perform those actions and experience the beliefs, conations, emotions. The particular way in which we value something depends on what we see as reasons, and the set of actions etc. they are seen as reasons for. Often, if not always, the reasons we see and the motives we have are structured by the concept under which we value the object.

When we respect someone, for example, we see her as valuable as a person. The concept of a person is value-laden; seeing someone as a person is not reducible to seeing her as, say, a member of the species *homo sapiens*. It involves seeing her as someone to be treated in certain ways, and at the same time being motivated, to some extent, to treat her in those ways. What features are constitutive of personhood, and what kinds of treatments are characteristic of respect are open questions. If a Kantian answer is right, seeing someone as a person amounts to seeing her capacity for rationality as requiring treatments that do not interfere with, and to some extent support, the exercise of her capacity. Respecting someone involves, then, seeing her capacity for rationality as a reason not to coerce her, not to deceive her, not to kill her, to sometimes help her when in need, etc., and being motivated to act in these ways.

Similarly, loving someone involves seeing her as valuable in a certain way – that is, seeing certain facts about her as giving one reasons for the feelings, attitudes, thoughts, motivations, and actions characteristic of love. In order to specify the form of valuing characteristic of love, we need to say what are the facts about the beloved that one sees as reasons, and what are the feelings, attitudes, actions one sees reasons for. A lot has been written on the latter, and I will not say much about it, though I will come back to this later. As for the facts about the beloved one sees as reasons, I have argued that they are not the facts that form one’s personhood. What are they then?

I suggest that we take literally the common thought that when you love someone, you love her for who she is. When you love someone, you see her as valuable by virtue of being who she is: you see some facts about her as contributing to who she is, and you take them to be reasons for your feelings of love, for your desire for her happiness, for contributing to her happiness – for the attitudes, feelings, thoughts, motivations and actions characteristic of love.

In order to value someone for who she is, you need not have a metaphysical conception of what makes her who she is; just as when you respect someone as a person, you need not have a theory of personhood.

Think of the value of a work of art – say, Rodin’s *Kissers*. This work of art has value by virtue of being *a* work of art; it has value by being unique; it has value by being a good work of art; it has value by being beautiful, graceful, expressive, masterful. But it also has value by virtue of being *the work of art that it is*, the *Kissers*; (a value that differs, for example, from the value it has by virtue of being *the piece of marble* it is).<sup>64</sup> It is

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<sup>64</sup> This could be said about any work of art. But the value that one work has by virtue of being the work of art that it is can be very different from the value another work has by virtue of being the work of art that *it* is.

difficult to say what that value consists in; though it seems clear that its uniqueness, its being a work of art, its beauty etc. contribute to it, without exhausting it. Nevertheless, the notion that the *Kissers* has a particular kind of value by virtue of being the work of art that it is makes sense even in the absence of a theoretical account of that value. So does the idea that that value can be the object of appreciation. The same holds, I think, for the idea that an individual can have value by virtue of being the individual he is, and that that value can be the object of appreciation.

There are various ways in which one can appreciate a work of art and its qualities. One can love the feel and look of marble, and be in awe as to how that look can be brought out / enhanced / polished in a work like Rodin's; or one can be in love, and be touched by suggestive representations of love, wherever one sees them; or one could be an aspiring sculptor and a connoisseur of Rodin's work, and admire the new twist of skillfulness of a yet another masterpiece; or one could admire the beauty of the human bodies represented in the sculpture. In all these different ways, one focuses on one aspect, part or quality of the sculpture, and appreciates it. But there is also another way of appreciating the sculpture and its qualities. Rather than focusing on qualities of the sculpture considered individually, in separation, one can focus on how they contribute to making the sculpture the sculpture it is. One can appreciate the sculpture as a whole, and appreciate its qualities or parts as ingredients of that whole. Rather than focusing on and enjoying the look of marble in this particular sculpture, one can take in the look of marble insofar as it contributes to the overall aesthetic experience one has when looking at the sculpture. One can appreciate the look of marble not by itself, but as part of what makes this sculpture the sculpture it is.

I think something similar goes on when one loves a person. One appreciates her wit or beauty not only as such, but also as part of who she is. The focus is not on the qualities themselves, but on the contribution the qualities make to the person. Nobody likes, of course, all of a person's qualities. But there is a difference between picking and choosing qualities, and loving the person as a whole – even though the latter does not involve loving all the qualities. This is, I think, one reason why making comparisons is somewhat foreign to love, if not at odds with it. When what you notice is that your beloved is less funny (or, for that matter, funnier) than others, the focus is on funniness itself, and on how your beloved fares on the funniness scale. It is not on the beloved herself, and on her funniness as a part of her self.

There are various forms of love. You can love someone as a friend, as your child, as your romantic partner, as a student, as your parent, and so on. They all involve, I think, valuing the beloved for who she is; but they differ in that the way in which the beloved is seen as valuable differs from one kind of love to another.

When you love someone as a friend, the (value-laden) concept that structures your way of seeing him as valuable is the concept of a friend. The things that you notice about him, the qualities you respond to, are those pertinent to friendship: you typically respond to his kindness, wit, ease, his being a good chess player, a good sport, etc – rather than his being highly sexually attractive or earning \$100,000 a year. Insofar as you love him *just* as a friend, you are not picking on the value he might have as a potential romantic partner; or the value he has as a brilliant mathematician; or as a moral saint. The value you respond to seems to be the value he has by virtue of being the *friend* that he is. This is not merely the value he has by virtue of being *a* friend. A response to that value, though common and

valuable in its own right, does not have the sensitivity to your friend's identity characteristic of love. The concept of friend plays an important role in the way of seeing characteristic of loving someone as a friend; but what it does is not to circumscribe the value perceived to the value he has by virtue of being a friend. Rather, it defines the value responded to as the value he has by virtue of being the *friend* that he is – as contrasted to the value he has by virtue of being the *person* that he is, or the *lover* that he is, the *student* he is, etc. His identity is still crucial to the kind of value responded to, but the concept of friend fixes the aspect under which that identity is being valued.

The value someone has by virtue of being the friend that he is is also different from the value of being a *good friend* (though the latter might contribute to the former). It is a value given in part by his individual traits, relational and non-relational, that are relevant to his being a friend. Those traits need not be traits that make him a good friend; they only need to be traits that are relevant to friendship.

When you love someone as a person, you love her for being the person she is; it is the features that are relevant to her being a person that your love focuses on. When you love someone as a student, the features relevant to her being a student; and so on.

Now, it seems possible to love someone in a way that is not structured by the concept of friend, student, person, or the like. Love may not always be “love as.” In that case, it seems that the value one responds to is the value of being the *individual* that he or she or it is. As with works of art, it is difficult to say what that value consists in; just as it is difficult to say what makes an individual the individual it is. What seems clear is that it is not reducible to the value she has by virtue of being a person (or a pet, or a dog, etc.); neither is it reducible to the sum-value of her various qualities like wit, intelligence,

kindness, or beauty; nor to the value she has by being a unique individual. Her personhood, uniqueness, and qualities may contribute to that value, but they do not exhaust it. Now, I cannot develop here a positive account of that value, but I will sketch a hypothesis. Each individual has a point of view in the world; a point of view from which she experiences the world, and from which she acts. The hypothesis is that love is a response to that point of view – to its being a point of view, to its uniqueness, to its being the point of view that it is. Love, in its most general form, is a response to the value one has by virtue of one's particular point of view in the world. One's personhood and one's personal qualities are relevant to love because they are part of what shapes a person's point of view in the world.

Some features are essential to one's point of view in the world, and valuing an individual in the way characteristic of love is impossible without valuing those features. For a person, personhood is an essential aspect of his identity, and thus failing to value his personhood amounts to a failure of valuing him for who he is, i.e. a failure to love him. This explains why you cannot love someone unless you also respect him.

Think of someone who owns a slave and sees all slaves as inferior beings, as sub-persons. We can imagine this man to be very much emotionally involved with his slave: he is sad when she is not doing well, happy when she is, he makes all efforts to promote her well-being, he treats her as well as he would treat any non-slave lover, but he doesn't see her as worthy of this treatment. He thinks and acts as if he is doing her a favor by treating her the same way he would treat a person. He takes joy and pride in her beauty, intelligence, and various talents, but does not see them as raising her to his own status. He sees these qualities as making her an exquisite slave – but not an exquisite person, because

he does not see her as a person at all. We wouldn't say that his emotional attachment is love.<sup>65</sup>

We don't need to go as far as owner-slave relationships to see emotional attachments that fall short of love for the same reasons. What is extreme about the slave owner case is that he actually believes that his lover is not a person. But one can, unfortunately, fail to see and value someone as a person even when one believes she is a person all right. Think of how often we hear the complaint "I want you to love me as a person, and not just as a woman / for my body / for my beauty" etc. This is a request for fully recognizing one's personhood, and for seeing the value one has as a person.<sup>66</sup>

A conative conception of love as desiring the well-being of the beloved cannot explain why respect is a necessary condition for love. The valuing model of love does: you cannot value a person for who she is without valuing the core of what makes her who she is.

One of Velleman's objections against a conative analysis of love is that it cannot capture the idea that when you love someone, you do things *for her own sake*. Suppose that I don't particularly enjoy going to the synagogue, but my mother really wants me to go. So I go, for her sake. What is involved in acting for her sake? It may be tempting to say that acting for her sake consists in acting out of a desire to fulfill her wishes. But I can go to the synagogue in order to fulfill my mother's wishes without doing it for her sake. I might want to fulfill her wishes so that she will leave me alone; or I may simply have a desire to

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<sup>65</sup> In any case, not in the sense of "love" we typically have in mind when we talk about love for a person. As Bill Lycan pointed out to me, you might love a slave as you love your dog.

<sup>66</sup> One can also hear the opposite request: "I want you to love me as a woman too, and not just as a person". This is a request to be seen and valued not only as a person, but also as an embodied, sexual, gendered being.

fulfill her wishes, for no ulterior motives. But this isn't the same as going to the synagogue for her sake. Now, one might point out that acting for my mother's sake doesn't necessarily involve acting out of a desire to fulfill her wishes (I could, for example, believe that it is not good for her if I constantly do what she wants, but that my going to the synagogue would help her social status, and so I go, out of a desire to do what's good for her); however, one insists, acting for my mother's sake can be explained in terms of whatever conative attitudes motivate me. But, Velleman argues, any conative attitude of someone who acts for my mother's sake can be shared by someone who doesn't act for her sake.<sup>67</sup><sup>68</sup>

Here is what I take to be involved in acting for someone's sake. Suppose that I go to the synagogue out of a desire to fulfill my mother's wishes. Typically, a desire like this is not free-floating: it is not a desire that I simply happen to have at this moment, and that is disconnected from my other desires, thoughts, emotions, beliefs. It usually stems from,

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<sup>67</sup> Although I agree with Velleman's point, I think that the argument he gives in its support fails. The reason why what is distinctive of acting for the sake of a person cannot be captured by the content of one's motivating conative attitudes has to do, Velleman argues, with the object definitive of a conative attitude. A conative attitude has as its object a state of affairs to be brought about. But what is needed, according to Velleman, in order for an action to be done for somebody's sake is the presence of a motive that, as he puts it, takes the person herself as its object. In Velleman's words: "If one is to act for the sake of a person, the person himself must be the object of a motive operative in one's action: he must be that with a view to which one is moved to act. 'That with a view to which one is moved to act' is nearly equivalent to 'that for the sake of which one acts', and either expression can serve as the definition of an end."

On Velleman's view, conative attitudes cannot play the role of motives characteristic of acting for someone's sake because their object are states of affairs, and not persons. By contrast, respect and love for a person have the person herself as their object: they are, he argues, two different kinds of awareness of the value of the person as a person. One acts for the sake of a person when one is motivated by an attitude of this kind.

Although I agree that acting for someone's sake cannot be defined by the content of the agent's desires (or other conations), I don't think that the formal difference between attitudes that have states of affairs as their object and attitudes that have persons as their object is the real issue here. After all, (as he himself mentions in a footnote), hate can have a person as its object, and an action motivated by hate is not an action done for the hated person's sake. What is important in acting for someone's sake is not so much the fact that the person herself (rather than a state of affairs) be the object of one's motivating attitude. What's important, as I will go on to argue, is the substantive way in which the person figures in one's motivation.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Stocker makes a similar point in "Values and purposes".

and is made intelligible by, a web of other attitudes. The difference between going to the synagogue for my mother's sake and not for my mother's sake is not perceptible at the level of the desire that ultimately motivates my action. It resides in the story behind that desire: in the way I conceive of my mother, and of her wishes, and the way her wishes affect me, the significance I attribute to them, and so on. The story need not always be the same, but some stories support acting for her sake, and some do not. The same is true of desiring a person's well-being for her own sake: what is distinctive of desiring her well-being for her own sake is the role she plays in the web of attitudes that ground my desire for her well-being. The mere absence of an ulterior motive does not make my desire a desire I have for her sake. What does make it a desire for her own sake is that fact that the desire stems from a way of seeing my mother as valuable in herself.

Let's go back to the question: what are the attitudes, actions, thoughts, feelings one sees oneself as having reasons for, when one loves? Some of these can be easily read off various platitudes about love: caring about the beloved's well-being, feeling happy when she is happy, contributing to her well-being when appropriate, wanting to be with her (in certain kinds of love), and so on. Now, I believe that it is also true that, when you love someone, you see him as irreplaceable; that is, you see the things that make him who he is as giving you reasons to treat him, feel about him, and think of him as irreplaceable.

I think that this feature about the way one values the person one loves is sufficient to explain the irreplaceability of the beloved. Irreplaceability is not a matter of the metaphysical nature of the beloved, of his intrinsic value, or of the nature of one's reasons for love; rather, it is a matter of the way one sees the person one loves. When we say that

the person one loves is irreplaceable, we say that the lover's replacing the beloved would not be intelligible. This unintelligibility is not due to the nature of the beloved, or to the reasons love is based on; rather, it is due to the fact that replacing the beloved is incompatible with the perspective of love. The commitment to seeing and treating the beloved as irreplaceable in the way characteristic of love *makes* the beloved irreplaceable. This commitment is not a response to a pre-existent irreplaceability that is to be explained by the nature or value of the beloved. Rather, it gives rise to that irreplaceability.

Some might be suspicious of the idea that love can make the beloved irreplaceable simply by seeing him as such, and find this process rather mysterious. But the process by which the beloved becomes irreplaceable is no more mysterious than the process by which a promise gives rise to an obligation. Before promising to vacuum your living room, I had no obligation to do so. Now that I've promised, I do. The reason I promised to vacuum was to get you to give me \$20. Now you've paid me; but that doesn't mean I now have a reason to refuse to vacuum. Similarly, Jack's potential to be a good friend is a justifying reason to love him. Once I love him, a better potential friend might come along; but this doesn't mean I now have a reason to love her instead of Jack.

The matter is complicated by the fact that one can adopt different perspectives on the same thing, and that different perspectives can be independent sources of different reasons. In the promise case, *from the perspective of morality*, the fact that I already got the money is not a reason to refuse to vacuum. But from the perspective of, say, self-interest, it may be a reason.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, from the perspective of love, the fact that Jane would make a better intimate friend than Jack is not a reason to love her instead of Jack. From the

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<sup>69</sup> I am assuming here, for illustrative purposes, that these two perspectives can come apart.

perspective of self-interest, it may be.<sup>70</sup> But when we are saying that the beloved is irreplaceable, we are saying that he is irreplaceable *from the perspective of love*; that it would be unintelligible for the lover, qua lover, to replace him; we are not saying that there is no point of view from which one might have reasons to replace him.

The possibility of conflicting perspectives is what makes irreplaceability puzzling. Consider the following scenario. Brenda and Greg love each other, and have been in an intimate relationship for 7 years. Brenda has to relocate to the other coast, Greg cannot relocate, and the situation is not likely to change in the future. Brenda says: there is no chance we'll be a couple again, so you should move on, find someone else to love, who lives in the same area. Greg is indignant. Now, from the perspective of one's self-interest, from the perspective of one's need for close relationships, one's beloved *is* replaceable: if one loses a beloved, one can usually find someone else to love. But from the perspective of love, this way of reasoning does not make sense: the fact that one's beloved does no longer live in the same town is not a reason to cease to love him and look for someone else to love. Just like, from the perspective of morality, the fact that you've got the \$20 is not a reason to now refuse to vacuum.

However, the possibility of conflicting perspectives does not make it the case that the beloved is *not*, in fact, irreplaceable to the lover; from the perspective of love, replacing the beloved *is* unintelligible, even though there may be other perspectives from which it is intelligible. From the perspective of morality, the fact that you've got the \$20 is not a reason not to keep your promise; and that is not changed by the fact that there may be some other perspective from which it is a reason.

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<sup>70</sup> Like in the case of morality, one might make the argument that, if you think about it carefully, it will turn out that in the end it is not in your best interest to dismiss the requirements of love. But what I'm interested in here is that it is possible for the two perspectives to come apart.

I have claimed that when one loves a person, one sees her as valuable in a certain way – that is, one sees the facts that make her who she is as giving one reasons for the feelings, attitudes and actions characteristic of love – in particular, for treating, feeling and thinking of the beloved as irreplaceable. But one may ask: *are* those facts such reasons? The worry is that, if they are not, in fact, reasons, then love is in some way defective in that it involves seeing reasons where there aren't any.

One way of approaching this question is to say that, if the facts that make a person who she is are reasons for the feelings and actions characteristic of love, then we should be able to see, by looking at those facts as they are independently of one's love for the person, what it is about them that makes them reasons for the feelings and actions of love. If there is nothing to see there, then they are not in fact reasons, and love is defective.

I believe this approach is misguided. A better question to ask is: does it *make sense* to see the facts that make a person who she is as reasons for the feelings and actions of love? That is, are those facts the kinds of things that can be taken as reasons, and is there anything good about taking them as reasons for the feelings and actions of love? If they are, indeed, the kinds of things that can be taken as reasons (and they are, because they are facts), and if there is a good justification, if there are good reasons for taking those facts as reasons for the feelings and actions of love, then there is nothing defective about seeing them as reasons. What makes them reasons for love is the fact that there is value in, there are reasons for, taking them as reasons.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Notice that the situation might be different if love (and valuing, in general) involved a *belief* about reasons. The value of seeing X as Y is a proper justification for seeing X as Y, but the value of believing that X is Y is not a proper justification for believing that X is Y; one needs epistemic reasons for believing that X is Y.

## VI. Reasons for love

It is part of the common sense conception of love that qualities like warmth, kindness, wit, intelligence are good reasons to love someone. But many philosophers are suspicious of this feature of the common sense view because, they believe, it is incompatible with the nature of love. The threat is perceived in various forms: if you love a person for her qualities, you don't love her for her own sake; loving a person for her qualities is very close to loving the qualities, rather than the person; if you love a person for her qualities, the person is replaceable to you by someone with the same qualities. I will argue that these worries are unfounded.

(i) "Loving a person for her qualities is at odds with loving her for her own sake."

Qualities like wit, warmth, kindness, intelligence seem to give a person instrumental value: your wit can make you valuable to me because you can entertain me; your kindness, because you are likely to treat me well and help me when I need help; your warmth, because it fulfills my need for affection; and so on. If you love a person for such qualities, the worry goes, it looks like you love her for what gives her instrumental value to you. And this seems incompatible with loving her for her own sake. This is a puzzling

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Suppose that, when there is value in believing that X is a reason for Y, then believing that X is a reason for Y makes X, in fact, a reason for Y. Would then one have good epistemic reasons for believing that X is a reason for Y? Suppose that I have special powers, and my believing that grass is red makes grass red (and I know this). Do I have good epistemic reasons to believe that grass is red? If there is a *causal* connection between my belief and the color of grass, such that grass *turns* red when I form the belief that it is red, then the belief is not epistemically justified, because at the moment when I form my belief grass is not yet red. But the case of reasons is more difficult, because there my belief that X is a reason for Y is supposed to be partly *constitutive* of X's being a reason for Y.

feature of our thinking about love. On the one hand, we think that the fact that a person is smart, can make you laugh, treats you with consideration, is very relevant to why you love her. On the other hand, we say that genuine love means loving the person for her own sake.

But the qualities that make someone instrumentally valuable can also contribute to the value she has by virtue of being the individual she is. I can see the wit of a person as a quality that makes her capable of entertaining me. But I can also see the wit of a person as a quality that contributes to making her valuable in herself, to making her a being whose existence and flourishing are worth promoting for her own sake, whose existence and flourishing I have reasons and am motivated to support and contribute to, whether or not they affect my own well-being. If this is how one sees a person's qualities, then it is not incompatible with loving her for her own sake – in fact, it is constitutive of it.

(ii) Reasons for love and the irreplaceability of the beloved

Some philosophers believe that there is an incongruity between the common belief that a person's qualities are reasons for love, and the belief that the beloved is irreplaceable to the lover. If the reasons you love Mike are that he is kind, compassionate, witty, etc., it follows, they argue, that it shouldn't make any difference to you if Mike left overnight and you woke up with John, who is also kind, compassionate, witty, etc. But it does make a difference to you, so, some say, it can't be that kindness, compassion, and wit are reasons for loving Mike. This leads some philosophers to deny that love is based on reasons at all (Frankfurt); or to deny that personal qualities are reasons for love (Velleman, Kolodny<sup>72</sup>); or to interpret the metaphysical nature of these qualities in ways that allegedly ensure irreplaceability (Badhwar, for example, argues to the effect that John's kindness - one of

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<sup>72</sup> See Niko Kolodny, "Love as valuing a relationship".

your reasons for loving him - is not to be understood as a universal he shares with Mike and others; rather, it is to be understood as a particular constitutive of him as an individual, that he cannot share with anyone; as an expression of his unique style as a person, a style that constitutes his essence.<sup>73</sup>)

I don't think that we need to deny that a person's qualities are reasons for love, or to defend a particular metaphysical interpretation of those qualities, in order to accommodate irreplaceability. In fact, I believe that the worry that if qualities are reasons for love irreplaceability is threatened is unfounded. The worry takes several different forms, all of which rest on problematic assumptions.

Here is a first version. If X's properties A, B, C, D... are the reasons I love X, and if a different individual Y also has A, B, C, D..., then my reasons to love X are equally good reasons to love Y. I have no reasons to love X rather than Y. Therefore, it is not unintelligible to transfer my love for X to Y. Here is an example meant to support this argument. Suppose the only reason I desire to eat a piece of chocolate is that it is sweet. When someone offers me ice cream instead of chocolate and says it's equally sweet, it would not be unintelligible to take the ice cream and forget about the chocolate. In fact, it would be a reasonable thing to do.

Although the example itself makes sense, there are several problems with the argument. First, the common-sense view is the view that a person's qualities are good reasons to love the person. It is not the view that qualities are the *only* reasons we have in loving a person. Philosophers often argue as if love is *either* grounded on qualities-based reasons, *or* on historical reasons (i.e., reasons based on one's common history with the

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<sup>73</sup> See Neera Kapur Badhwar, "Friends as ends in themselves," esp. pp. 19-21.

beloved), or on something else. But this need not be the case. One's love for a person can (and typically is) based on both kinds of reasons. So even though a person's qualities may not give one sufficient reasons to love that person rather than a similar other, this does not mean that her qualities cannot be good reasons to love her. One may have other reasons (say, historical ones) that do apply uniquely to her. I can desire chocolate both because it is sweet, and because it is the only thing that reminds me of my mom's home-made cookies. The fact that only the latter reason is unique to chocolate does not show that its sweetness is not a good reason to want chocolate.

But suppose that A, B, C, D... are my *only* reasons for loving X. It still doesn't follow that X is replaceable by Y. Suppose that I promise my six years old daughter a pony for her birthday, and the (only) reason for my promise is that I know she has been dreaming about it for months now, and a pony would make her very happy. But after I make the promise my husband, who spends a lot more time with my daughter, tells me that she has also been dreaming about a bicycle, and a bicycle would make her equally happy. (And, of course, he also points out that a bicycle is much less expensive than a pony.) This doesn't mean that I can now change my promise to a bicycle instead of a pony.

One form the worry about irreplaceability takes is that loving a person for her qualities is suspiciously close to loving the qualities. At a first level, the difference between loving someone's qualities and loving her for her qualities is straightforward: it resides in the object of one's attitude. In the former case, you love the qualities; in the latter, you love the individual. But the worry is that this difference is not significant: that what happens when you love someone for her qualities is that you love the qualities, and love the individual only *as an instantiation* of those qualities. Hence the worry that loving

someone for her qualities is incompatible with irreplaceability. If you love the individual as an instantiation of certain qualities, the individual won't matter to you as an individual; your love is transferable to any other instantiation of those qualities.

Here is why this argument has some prima facie appeal. Consider again the case of my desire for chocolate. When my reason for wanting chocolate is that it's sweet, it seems plausible to think that I want something sweet, I represent chocolate as sweet, and as a result I want chocolate. I represent chocolate as sweet, and desire it under that description. The chocolate's being chocolate, its cocoa content, its particular taste, etc. are irrelevant to my desire for chocolate. Now, what interests me here is the relationship between the content of my desire and my reason for wanting chocolate. In this case, the sweetness of chocolate is a reason for me to want chocolate because what I really want is something sweet. The fact that this is my (only) reason is thus an indication that I represent chocolate as sweet, and desire it (only) as such.

It seems that our last version of the worry about irreplaceability rests on applying to love this model of the relationship between one's reasons and the content of one's attitude. If one's reasons for loving X are A, B, C, D..., then it must be, the thought goes, that what one really loves are A, B, C, D..., and X is the object of one's love only insofar as it has A, B, C, D...; one represents X as A, B, C, D..., and loves her as such. The mistake here is to think that one's reasons fix the content of one's attitude, that they fix the way in which the attitude represents its object. Reasons are sometimes an indication of the content of one's attitude, but not always. This is because, although sometimes what makes A a reason for B is the content of B, other times the story is different. The fact that John tells me that it will

rain tomorrow is a reason for me to believe it will be sunny. Why? Because John is a pathological liar, and I know it.

Loving someone for her qualities does not necessarily mean loving her *as an instantiation* of those qualities. The former has to do with one's reasons for love; the second, with how one conceives of and values one's beloved. When I love Mary for her beautiful blond hair, I take her beautiful blond hair to be a reason for loving her. Although sometimes this goes hand in hand with seeing Mary as a member of a class, it doesn't have to. I can see Mary as an individual, and love her as such, while taking her beautiful blond hair to be a reason for loving her.

I take the above arguments to show that there is no inconsistency between the ideas that personal qualities are reasons for love, and the ideas that the beloved is irreplaceable, and that one loves a person for her own sake. At this point, one might push the question: okay, perhaps there is no inconsistency between taking personal qualities as reasons for love, and other features of love. But why should we think that personal qualities *are* reasons for love? If love was, say, a desire to be with the beloved, then we could see how qualities like wit, intelligence and the like would be good reasons for love (but, of course, in that case love would not be for the sake of the beloved). But if love involves, as I argued, seeing oneself as having reasons for the feelings, thoughts and actions characteristic of love, including irreplaceability, then why should personal qualities be reasons for love? Why is, for example, a person's intelligence a reason for treating her as irreplaceable? This seems, again, puzzling, since intelligence is a quality she shares with others, and as such it does not seem to warrant irreplaceability.

I believe that the mistake here is to think that the reasons for treating a person as irreplaceable are such reasons because they *make* the person irreplaceable. (I think it is this mistaken assumption that lead some to deny that personal qualities can be reasons for love, or to give personal qualities a metaphysical interpretation that makes them unique to an individual). If this were the case, it would be indeed difficult to see how personal qualities could be reasons for love, since, if anything, they make the person replaceable. But this is not the story we need to hear. What we need to understand, if my account of love as valuing is right, is why personal qualities are reasons for valuing a person for who she is – among other things, for seeing and treating her as irreplaceable. So the question we need to ask here is: what is the role that this way of valuing people plays in our lives? If we understand that role, then we can see whether it makes sense for this way of valuing to be a response to personal qualities – that is, whether personal qualities warrant, or give reasons to, this way of valuing.

Why is fear a warranted response to danger? The answer to this question has to do with the role of fear: fear is, say, an emotion whose functional role is to promote survival by motivating the agent to avoid danger.<sup>74</sup> Given this functional role, it makes sense to experience fear in response to danger. It wouldn't make sense to experience fear in response to pleasure (barring special circumstances).

To understand warranting reasons for love it would make sense, then, to look at the role love plays in our lives. Here is one way one might want to go here. Love makes possible close relationships between people, relationships that enhance our lives in various ways. People in love-based relationships rely on each other for emotional and practical

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<sup>74</sup> The exact contour of the story about fear is not important for our purposes here.

support, they shape, to a large extent, each other's self-concept<sup>75</sup> and character, they are often engaged in common projects and form shared intentions, plans, and attitudes towards the world. There are several different ways in which love is necessary for this kind of relationship to exist. Its characteristic concern for the other's well-being makes possible the trust needed for this degree of closeness and the vulnerability it entails. Treating the beloved as irreplaceable ensures, to some extent, the stability needed for embarking in shared long-term projects. The positive quality of the emotions characteristic of love provides a balance to the difficulties endemic to close relationships and an incentive to overcome them. And as I will discuss shortly, being valued for one's own sake by one's intimates is crucial for one's sense of self-worth and for one's agency.

Since an important role that love plays in our lives is to make possible relationships of this kind, love makes sense as a response to those qualities of a person that make her a potentially good partner in such relationships.<sup>76</sup> The concrete shape of a love relationship varies from case to case and from one type of love to another, and so what counts as good reasons to love a person will depend both on the agent's own personality, and on the kind of relationship in view. Typically, kindness, generosity, honesty, intelligence, a sense of humor, and the like tend to promote good close relationships, and are therefore good reasons to love someone.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett argue for this view in "Friendship and the self".

<sup>76</sup> Hugh LaFollette makes a similar argument in his book *Personal Relationships: love, identity, and morality*. See esp. pp. 61-81.

<sup>77</sup> My focus here has been on non-relational qualities, but it is worth mentioning that an implication of this view is that relational qualities concerning the other person's attitude towards the agent may also be reasons for love. The fact that she loves you, likes you, admires you, respects you, etc. are qualities of a person that make good premises for a good relationship, and hence justifying reasons for love. This consequence seems to fit with our intuitions about love: the fact that a person loves you *is* a reason to love her (though, of course, not a sufficient reason, but neither is any other one reason).

## VII. The characteristic value of love

The proposed model of love as a way of valuing construes the relationship between the motivations and emotions characteristic of love, on the one hand, and the appreciation of the person's value, on the other hand, in a way different from both Frankfurt's and Velleman's. On this model, when you love a person, your desire for her well-being is not free-floating, à la Frankfurt; neither is it merely caused, or "unleashed," as Velleman puts it, by the appreciation of the person's value. Rather, your desire for her well-being, as well as your emotional reactions – your happiness when the beloved is doing well, your sadness when she is unhappy, etc. – are grounded in, and seen by the agent to be grounded in, the value of the beloved.<sup>78</sup> I believe that this feature explains better an important aspect of the value characteristic of love.

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I do not mean to imply, however, that *anything* that may support a good relationship is a good reason for love. The fact that she lives in California and you like the climate there, or that she has a great income and financial security tends to be a good premise for a good relationship, doesn't make these reasons for love. Here is why. X cannot be a justifying reason for Y unless it is also a warranting reason for Y. It cannot be a good thing to respond to X with Y if it's not intelligible to respond to X with Y. And, for reasons I discuss below, love is not intelligible as a response to a person's location.

<sup>78</sup> One worry about this account is that it seems to imply that only the existence and flourishing of persons who have qualities like wit, intelligence, kindness, etc. is worthwhile, whereas we believe, of course, that any person's flourishing is worthwhile, simply by virtue of her being a person. But we need not have this worry. Loving someone involves seeing her in a certain value-laden way; it involves seeing her as warranting one's personal concern and interest and a host of emotional reactions. This is not incompatible with seeing all people's existence and flourishing as valuable. The kinds of value perceived in the two cases are different. The value all people have as people warrants respect. As persons, all people are equally valuable. But people are not valuable only as people. For example, they are also valuable as athletes, teachers, members of the homo sapiens species, etc. Love is, I will claim, a response to a certain kind of value that a person has that goes beyond her value *qua* person. That response involves seeing that kind of value in a particular person as warranting and justifying (though not requiring) the motivations and emotions characteristic of love. It will become clear later in the chapter that that kind of value, unlike the value a person has by virtue of being a person, does not entail an obligation to appreciate it. An analogy with the value of art might be in order here.

Many psychologists and some philosophers point out that one of the most important contributions love relationships make to a person's life is promoting and maintaining one's sense of self-worth. Our self-image and sense of self-worth are shaped to a large degree by the way others see us and treat us. If we understand love as a way of valuing a person, it is not difficult to see how love contributes to one's sense of self-worth. When you love someone, you see her as having a kind of value that warrants concern for her well-being, commiseration, happiness at her achievements, treating her as irreplaceable, etc. Since, as social psychologists point out, we tend to see ourselves and treat ourselves the way others (especially close others) see and treat us, your seeing your beloved as worthy of care, understanding, striving for happiness, will support his seeing himself as worthy of the same.

This explains several things. It explains why we see only certain qualities, and not others, as good reasons for love. We do not want to be loved for our blond hair because we do not believe that *that* is the kind of quality that makes our existence and flourishing a good thing, desirable for its own sake. Implying that *that* is what makes us worthwhile can be seen as an insult, as a way of saying that there is nothing more valuable to us. We want

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If a painting is an exquisite work of art, its value as a work of art might entail an obligation to preserve it; but it does not entail an obligation to be ecstatic every time I see it. If I am color-blind, or simply have no taste for that kind of art, there is nothing wrong with my spending my time listening to music instead. But if I am capable of appreciating and becoming ecstatic at its particular value – the value it has not simply by being a work of art, but in virtue of its particular artistic qualities – that value warrants and justifies my ecstatic response. Similarly, the value a person has *qua* person entails an obligation to respect her, but not to love her. The value she has by virtue of certain qualities does not require, but warrants and justifies a love response, where that occurs.

to be loved for “who we really are” – that is, for those qualities that we ourselves believe (or are open to believing) make us individuals whose flourishing is worthwhile.

Love’s value in supporting one’s sense of self-worth also explains why the irreplaceability of the beloved, and the specific role her identity plays in grounding love, are crucial features of love. If someone’s concern for you were not based on an appreciation of who you are, it would not convey the message that you are *worthy* of such concern, and therefore make no difference to the way you see and treat yourself.

If love didn’t involve seeing the beloved as irreplaceable, then it wouldn’t convey the message that *you* are worthy of concern. Here is how I think irreplaceability comes into play. In order to be able to function as a practical agent, you need to be able to see the fact that something is *your* desire, aim, intention, project, dream etc. as a prima facie reason to act on it.<sup>79</sup> It would be useless for an agent to form a desire, intention, or the like, if she never took these attitudes to give her reasons for acting on them. Imagine what it would be like to form an intention to go for a walk at 7 pm, but then, at 7 pm, to think of the fact that you have the intention to take a walk as giving you no reason whatsoever for taking the walk. The number of actions that are worth performing at any point in time is large; and if one did not regard the fact that *one* has a preference, desire, or plan to perform one of those actions rather than the others, one would have no way of choosing between all possible equally good actions, and would be paralyzed to inactivity.

In order for one to function effectively as an agent, it is necessary, then, to be able to see oneself as the source of reasons for action in this way. Love can support this kind of

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<sup>79</sup> John Broome argues, in “Are intentions reasons”?, that intentions do not constitute reasons for action; rather, they provide a “rational justification” for action that is different from reasons. For my purposes here, I will ignore the possible distinction between reasons and rational justifications. The argument I make above can be made by using the concept of rational justification instead of reasons throughout.

sense of self-worth only if the beloved is seen as irreplaceable. If I desire your well-being in a way that does not differentiate between you and other (possible or actual) people with the same qualities, my desire for your well being does not say that *you*, as an individual, are worthy of being cared for, it does not say that the fact that something contributes to *your* well-being (as opposed to “to *a person’s* well being,” or “to the well being of *a person with qualities x, y z*”) is a reason to pursue it, that the fact that something would fulfill *your* desires or dreams is a reason to go for it.

Seeing the beloved as irreplaceable is also a condition of the characteristic dynamic of relationships based on love, and one of the aspects of love that enable it to bring meaningfulness into the lover’s life.

### **Chapter 3: How valuing gives rise to special “oughts”**

#### **I Peculiar oughts**

You’ve been a Tar Heel fan since the first game you saw. It was love at first sight, and for years you’ve followed their ups and downs, you’ve been worried when they were stumbling, hopeful when they were challenged, happy, excited and proud when they won one game after another. Recently you’ve transferred to NYU, and you forgot the Tar Heels, and are rooting for the Violets.

Paula is a painter, and painting is her passion – it is, in her own words, what she lives for. She is fascinated by this art form, by its possibilities, by the power of good paintings to move people, by the transforming and intriguing experience of bringing a painting to life. She’s been striving to be the best painter she can be, to create paintings that can fascinate, she has devoted many years to developing and polishing her skills, and made a lot of progress. One day, Paula is offered a permanent contract with a high-end interior design company. They need paintings that fit with the decorating projects of the designers, and that appeal to the taste of the targeted customers. The job would leave her no time or energy for what she considers to be authentic painting. But it is easy work and would afford her a comfortable life style. Paula decides to take the job.

Patrick is a fifty year old catholic priest. In his twenties, he fell in love with Sara; unfortunately, she was already in love and engaged to her now husband, Morton. Patrick never stopped loving her, but, out of respect for her relationship with Morton, he has never

declared his love. He has chosen to be a casual friend of the family, and he is their priest, but keeps his love in the background. Now, Sara's son is falsely accused of armed robbery. Patrick is convinced that a famous detective could prove his innocence and save him fifteen years in prison, but hiring him costs a fortune, and Sara is poor. Patrick has the money, but wants to use it for a dream trip to Japan.

Something seems to be wrong in each of these cases. Many – especially other Tar Heel fans - would be outraged by your new allegiance to the Violets. Even a neutral party would disapprove of your behavior. It looks like a betrayal; there are no good reasons for your change of allegiances, and you should feel guilty or ashamed.

We'd also have little respect for Paula's decision. She is not true to her passion for painting. She gave up her dream for the sake of comfort. Moreover, she is betraying her artistic values: the choice to produce commercial paintings is inconsistent with her conviction that painting should strive at artistic excellence, and not at pleasing the customers. Similarly, if Patrick chooses to spend his money on the trip, when he could prove the innocence of his beloved's son, he is not true to his love for her.

What I find interesting about these cases are the grounds for our disapproval. In the Tar Heel case, even if we think that the Tar Heels and the fan community are in no way affected by losing you as a fan (you're an introvert, a quiet fan, always watching the games on TV), many people will still think that there is something disquieting about your change of heart. You are betraying your allegiance to the Tar Heels. Similarly, our judgment of Paula does not necessarily rest on the thought that, had she continued to be a painter, she would have produced good art, which would have benefited other people. What we react to

is her attitude towards her own values: she is not true to them. Likewise, Patrick is not true to his love for Sara: even though he is not her husband or lover, and thus has no role obligations to give up his dream trip for her sake, we still think he ought to have done so, because he loves her.

In what follows I would like to take a closer look at the reasons for our disapproval in such cases. I will argue that the conception of valuing proposed in chapter one can help us to better understand those reasons.

One question we might be concerned with is whether our disapproval of cases like those of the Tar Heels' fan, the passionate painter, or self-effacing lover is moral in nature. I believe that it is, but a full-fledged defense of this claim would require a discussion of the difference between the moral and the non-moral. My main concern, however, is not to show that our disapproval is moral; rather, it is to gain a more precise understanding of the grounds for our disapproval. In any case, I think that, as a by-product of this investigation, the picture that will emerge in the end will show why one might be inclined to believe that those grounds are moral.

One thing to notice about these cases is that the stories are likely to elicit not only disapproval, but also surprise. We don't expect ardent fans to switch teams, or people to abandon their life passions for the sake of comfort, or fail to help those they love when in dire need. A true fan, people will say, would not have switched teams; were she really passionate about art, she wouldn't have given it up for comfort; had he really loved her, the

thought of going on a trip rather than saving her son's life wouldn't have even crossed his mind.

It is not obvious how we should understand these assertions. At first, it looks like they are expressing conceptual truths: a true fan doesn't switch teams; you don't count as a fan if you switch teams; you don't count as loving if you let your beloved down when she most needs you. But this can't be true: we also think that people sometimes do betray their allegiances, fail to live up to their own values, let down those they love. This wouldn't make sense if something would count as an allegiance, as one's value, or as love only if the person would never betray it. The very notion of betrayal wouldn't make sense: it is precisely because one loves, that certain actions count as a betrayal of love.

How are we, then, to understand these claims? I think that the best way to interpret them is as expressing and / or applying evaluative standards implicit in the deployed concepts. Concepts such as fan, love, allegiance, personal value, valuing, have both descriptive and normative conditions of application. The descriptive conditions: one counts as a fan only if one likes the team, watches a reasonable number of games, roots for the team, and the like. But imagine a society where some people satisfy all these conditions. However, none of them, nor anyone else in that society, thinks there is anything wrong with rooting for the opposite team at the same time, or switching back and forth between teams, or wearing the opposite team's colors at the game, etc. In this society the practice of fandom wouldn't exist, and we wouldn't call these people fans. It is implicit in the concept of fan that a fan is subject to certain norms about how to root for the team, when, if ever, it is appropriate to switch teams, etc.

One interesting thing about some of these concepts is the interplay between the descriptive and the normative. Respecting at least to some extent some of the norms is a descriptive condition. If you consistently root for the opposite team, you don't even count as a fan. More interesting for my purposes here: in the case of some of these concepts, the agent has to see himself as subject to the norms implicit in the concept, in order for the concept to apply to him. A person who sees nothing wrong with rooting for the opposite team doesn't count as a fan. A person who doesn't think he ought to stand by his beloved when in need doesn't count as a person who loves.<sup>80</sup>

I think that the fact that some of our concepts referring to attitudes have normative conditions of application indicates that we believe we are subject to certain norms whenever we have those attitudes. What goes wrong in Paula and Patrick's cases is that they break norms they are subject to by virtue of valuing art and loving a person. The question we need to answer is why we are subject to such norms.

Notice, first, that in both Paula's and Patrick's case, there are no explanations of the grounds for our disapproval that do not appeal to their attitudes. If Paula didn't have a passion for art, there would be nothing wrong with her taking a job with an interior design company. Not everyone ought to pursue artistic excellence, or devote their life to art. We think that Paula ought to have continued to strive for excellence as a painter; but the reason we do so is not that artistic excellence is intrinsically valuable, or that painting as an art form is intrinsically valuable. We may think, of course, that they are intrinsically valuable, but it does not follow from this that people ought to strive for artistic excellence. We

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<sup>80</sup> I intend the claim that one ought to see oneself as subject to the norms implicit in the concept to be rather weak. I do not mean that the agent has to be consciously aware of the norms, or to have an explicit belief that he is subject to them.

believe, however, that Paula should have; and what's special about her is the way she values art. Similarly, there are no external reasons why Patrick ought to give up his vacation to help Sara. He is not her husband, or otherwise related to her; they are not in a relationship. And, of course, the mere fact that Sara needs help, and he is in a position to help, doesn't entail that he ought to do so. It is because he loves her that we think he ought to do so.

But why would one, merely by having a certain attitude, be subject to an additional set of norms? This idea will strike many as odd. And, if having the attitude renders me subject to new norms, can't I just get out of it at will by giving up the attitude? Granting that we are, indeed, subject to norms like: "if you love X, you help her when in need"; can't one get out of the demand to help simply by ceasing to love X? But notice that this is not the logic of the norms we are considering. Ceasing to love X because you don't want to help (or, in general, because doing what love requires you to do is hard, demanding, or inconvenient) is itself a violation of the norms of love. The norms we are considering do not have the form: "you ought to [if you love X, help her]," i.e. "you ought to [either help X, or not love her]"; they have the form: "if you love X, then you ought to help her." The norms are contingent, but not hypothetical: although they are contingent on having a certain attitude, i.e. one is subject to them only if one has the attitude, they do not have the form of hypothetical imperatives, they are categorical. Once the attitude is in place, one is subject to a categorical imperative.

This idea is not all that unfamiliar. Some of the norms involved in our practices and institutions take this form as well. It is true that many of the norms of our practices are hypothetical. For example: "If you are a teacher, you ought to show up for class every

time.” If you don’t want to come to class, you can quit and stop being a teacher; doing this won’t violate any of the norms of being a teacher. But some norms are not hypothetical in this way: for example, norms pertaining to when, under what circumstances, and for what reasons it is legitimate to quit, exit the practice, or give up the attitude.<sup>81</sup> If your job description says: “you ought to give us two months notice before quitting,” your quitting today without notice does not get you out of the norm; it constitutes a violation of the norm. Many of the norms that govern close relationships, and many of the norms that govern valuing attitudes are of this sort. They are norms about what constitutes a good reason for ending the relationship, or about what constitutes a good reason for ceasing to value something or someone. Hence ending a relationship, or ceasing to value something, for reasons that are not within the bounds that are recognized by the relationship or by the attitude as good reasons may constitute a betrayal of the relationship or of your attitude (of your love, allegiance, passion, vocation, etc.). Had Paula taken the job, for example, because she was in deep financial trouble, that would not have counted as a betrayal; but taking the decorating job merely for the prospect of a marginal increase in comfort does. It does because the decision to take the job signifies more than just taking a job; it says something; it says that the art form of painting is not, after all, worth her life effort; that it is not worth sweating over, giving up luxury, striving for excellence. And this is inconsistent with Paula’s previous attitude towards painting, which involved seeing painting as what made her life worth living, as worth dedicating her life to. Similarly, Patrick’s decision not to help Sara has a significance that goes beyond that of its immediate practical effects (her son’s conviction). It is a decision that says: she is not, after all, worth

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<sup>81</sup> Some of these norms are moral, some are social, some are legal, etc. For our discussion the nature of these norms is not important, so I will not keep track of the differences in nature between them.

the sacrifice of my dream vacation; and that is inconsistent with love as an assertion of her value as worth significant sacrifices.

So far I have explained why we should think that at least some of the norms involved in valuing are, though contingent on the attitude, categorical. The question remains: why are those norms binding for us?

There are two different questions in this vicinity. Those who believe that the mere desire to do X does not give one (even a *prima facie*, defeasible) reason to X are struck by the difference in normative status between desire and valuing: the mere fact that one values X *does* give one a reason to X. So the first question is: what explains the reason-giving force of valuing? This question is independent of my particular account of valuing. A second question, which is specific to my account, is: if it is true that valuing X involves seeing oneself as subject to certain norms about how one should think, feel, act with respect to X, why is one, in fact, subject to those norms when one values X? Though distinct, the two questions are related, so I will start by discussing some answers that have been proposed to the first question, and then address the second directly.

The fact that I value my career in philosophy gives me a justifying reason to pursue it. Now, some people believe that merely wanting a career in philosophy would also give me a justifying reason to pursue it.<sup>82</sup> Others believe that a mere desire wouldn't give me a reason. In any case, we need an explanation for why valuing gives me a reason. Those who think that desire also gives me a reason might be tempted to think that the explanation for the reason-giving force of valuing is the same, or similar, to the explanation in the case of

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<sup>82</sup> For the record, I am actually one of those people.

desire. But here is a reason to think this is not true. Assume, for the sake of the argument, that desire and valuing are both reason-giving; there still seems to be a difference between the justificatory power of desire and of valuing. The reasons given by valuing are weightier and, perhaps, of a different kind than those of desire. If my child needs money to go to college, and the only way to make it would be to quit my job in philosophy and take up a job in law, the mere fact that I desire a job in philosophy doesn't seem to give me the right kind of reason to choose not to quit, whereas the fact that I value my job might.

There are a few interesting stories about why valuing is reason-giving in the way that it is. One common thread, which appears in significantly different versions in different authors, is the role that valuing plays in agency; others, related, are the relationship between valuing and one's identity, between valuing and integrity, and between valuing and autonomy.

Christine Korsgaard's account of normativity in general is a good example of a story that explains the normativity of our values as grounded in our nature as autonomous agents. As self-reflective beings, she says, we have the capacity – and, with it, the inescapable need – to reflect on what pulls or pushes us to act in a certain way, and ask ourselves whether we have a reason to act that way. Insofar as we are agents, i.e. have practical reason, we cannot conceive of ourselves as acting and choosing for no reason. But reasons are derived from principles. Moreover, in order for us to be *autonomous* agents, these principles cannot be imposed from the outside; they must be self-imposed. Korsgaard's argument, as I understand it, is that, unless we regard some principles as normative for us, we cannot see anything as a reason for action, i.e. we cannot be agents; and unless these principles are self-imposed, we cannot be autonomous. But we are,

inescapably, by virtue of our reflective nature, autonomous agents. Hence we must regard our self-imposed principles as normative for us. Hence their normativity.<sup>83</sup>

Korsgaard proposes this as an account of normativity in general, and makes the further claim that this account of normativity can explain the normativity of the moral law. But what I am interested in here is whether this could be a good account of the normativity of valuing. Here is how the story would go: what we value gives us the most fundamental principles to use in deliberation. Without such principles, deliberation, and hence practical reason, and hence agency would not be possible. In order to be practical agents, we must regard these principles as normative for us; but we are, inevitably, practical agents, and so we must regard these principles as normative for us. Therefore, they are normative for us.

First, let me say a bit more about what I take to be involved in regarding a principle (or a policy, a rule, a standard, or a maxim) as normative for oneself. When one regards a principle as normative, one takes oneself to have reasons to act (or feel, or think) in accordance with it. The force of those reasons will depend on the nature and content of the principle. In some cases, the agent will think (explicitly or implicitly) that the principle provides him with considerations in favor of acting in accordance with it; in others, that he ought to so act, or that he must, has to, or is obligated to. The scale from “considerations in favor” to “obligated to” is two-dimensional. It tracks, at the same time, a gradation in the normative stringency or “insistence” of the principle,<sup>84</sup> and the size of the gap between what the principle asks from one and what one is (or would otherwise be) motivated to do. One typically sees something as an obligation when it is both the case that it is stringent

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<sup>83</sup> Christine Korsgaard, *The sources of normativity*.

<sup>84</sup> To illustrate what is meant by stringency: “You ought not to kill people” is more stringent than “You ought not to borrow your roommate’s clothes without asking for her permission”.

that one fulfill it, and that one has motives in the opposite direction. But a principle can have for an agent the same force or stringency as an obligation, without there being a conflict between what the principle asks, and what the agent is motivated to do. This is, I think, the case when someone says, like Martin Luther, “Here I stand. I can do no other” – when it is unconceivable for one to violate a principle.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, one can regard the responsibilities of love as having the same force or stringency as, say, a moral obligation, without experiencing the (potential) conflict between what one has to do and what one is inclined to do characteristic of obligation. The strength or stringency the principle has for the agent translates, psychologically, into the intensity of the guilt or shame that the agent will, under normal conditions, believe to be warranted and experience if he violates the principle.

Back to Korsgaard. Her account relies on some strong and controversial claims about the source of reasons in general. One could take issue with every step of her argument: with the claim that in order to have reasons, there must be principles; that autonomy requires that the principles be self-imposed; that it follows, from the fact that we cannot conceive of ourselves as practical agents unless we see our self-imposed principles as normative, that they are actually normative for us.

Let’s assume, contra Korsgaard, that self-imposed principles are not the only source of reasons available to an autonomous agent. I believe that Korsgaard’s account contains an insight open even to someone who disagrees with her general claims about

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<sup>85</sup> The cases I describe here are what Frankfurt has called “volitional necessities”. I disagree with Frankfurt on what is going on in such cases. He believes that the necessity is given by the structure of the agent’s volitional system: that the agent literally “can do no other,” because of what he wills. I believe that the necessity is rather a normative one: that the agent “can do no other” in the sense that it is unconceivable to him, given the strength of his commitment to a principle, and the stringency the principle has for him, to violate it.

reasons, agency and normativity. Suppose one thinks that the reasons we use in deliberation are given by what is, as a matter of fact, valuable. We take the fact that our proposed action would involve taking someone else's property to be a reason against the action; and it is a reason because stealing is, in fact, wrong – and not because of some self-adopted principle. We take the fact that lighting one more cigarette will bring me closer to cancer as a reason against it; and this is because cancer is bad, and not because of a self-imposed principle; and so on. Now, let's assume that there are reasons of this kind. Suppose that one took into account, in one's deliberation, all such reasons - all reasons that arise from what is objectively good or bad, right or wrong, etc. One would often still be confronted with a choice about what to do. Objective values do not settle the question about what to do; more often than not, a variety of possible actions are open.

Now, if our assumptions are right, then it is not true that, in order to be an agent *at all*, one needs to regard self-adopted principles as normative. However, in order to be an *effective* agent, one may need to regard self-adopted principles as normative. Since, even if there are objective values, they would underdetermine decisions, an agent who would have no other strategies for making decisions would often get stuck in the first steps of the deliberation process, and not reach any practical conclusions – like a computer running on an incomplete program. We could have been the kind of agents who, when objective values underdetermine decisions, made a random choice between permissible options. But, had we been those agents, our lives would have been very different. We wouldn't have been capable of long-term projects, relationships, commitments; we wouldn't have been able to shape a life, or to shape a life in a way that expresses who we are.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Michael Bratman makes a similar point in his paper "Valuing and the will".

Now, if we think of an effective agent not just as an individual capable of action, i.e. an individual whose deliberation results in action, but more richly, as an agent capable of bringing into existence complex structures of actions, possibly of shaping a life,<sup>87</sup> then the idea that, in order to be an effective agent, one must regard one's self-adopted principles as normative may become appealing.

A first thought here is that, in order to build structures of action that stretch over time, an agent needs to adopt principles for deliberation and choice that supplement the ones objectively established. Moreover, those structures cannot come into existence unless the agent abides, with sufficient consistency, to those principles.

One can imagine an agent who is effective in the way described, but who does not regard his principles as normative: he simply always deliberates, makes choices, and acts in ways consistent with them. It is pretty clear though that, as a matter of *psychological* fact, we are not thus constituted: we are subject to temptations, we often have conflicting desires, we are often lazy or weak, etc. So it seems true that, given our psychology, in order to be effective agents we need to have self-adopted principles and regard them as normative. We can shape our lives or create unified structures of action by bringing into play the motivational resources that are available to us as creatures capable of seeing ourselves as subject to norms - the motivational resources of "ought."

Now, if this is true of our make-up, then as a matter of psychological necessity we need to regard self-adopted principles as normative in order to be effective agents. Korsgaard's argument was that it is a constitutive necessity for us as agents to regard self-adopted principles as normative for us, and that therefore those principles are, in fact,

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<sup>87</sup> I do not mean to imply that, in order to be an effective agent, one must actually shape one's life according to a life-plan or narrative. But an effective agent has the *capacity* for long-term structures of actions which, at the limit, may – and, for some people, does – take the form of shaping a life.

normative for us. It doesn't seem plausible that there is such a constitutive necessity, and, if there were one, it is not clear that actual normativity would follow from it. Does actual normativity follow from the psychological need described?

It doesn't follow directly; we are in need of an argument here. One argument that could be made is that it is in our nature as agents (either constitutively, or psychologically) to aim at being effective agents. If that is an aim we necessarily have, and if regarding self-adopted principles as normative is necessary to achieve that aim, then we must do it; and perhaps this is as close as we can get to establishing that those principles are, in fact, normative. But I don't think there is much hope for this argument. There doesn't seem to be any such necessity to aiming at being an effective agent.

A more modest, and I think more promising, line of argument is to look at what is good about being an effective agent. What does the fact that we see self-adopted standards as normative enable us to do? If the things it enables us to do are very valuable to us, if they are things that most of us want, and perhaps need, and / or if they are things that significantly enrich our lives, or maybe are even essential to a good life, or are building blocks of a moral community, we would have good reasons to see self-adopted standards as normative for us. And this, I think, is enough to explain their normativity. The more significant the good, the better the reasons to see the standards as normative; the better the reasons, the stronger the normative force.

Before pursuing this line of argument, let me take a step back and look at a couple of alternative ways of explaining the normativity of valuing. Though I think that in the end they don't work, they too offer some insights about what is good about taking one's values

as normative. All of them stress, albeit in very different ways, the relationship between valuing and one's identity.

An argument proposed by Korsgaard cashes in the relationship between valuing and the agent's identity understood as practical identity (rather than metaphysical).<sup>88</sup> By practical identity she means the conception the agent has of himself: a description of who he is under which he values himself and finds his life worth living. One can conceive of oneself as a human being, a person, a parent, a friend, a lover, a citizen, a firefighter; typically, one's self-conception is composed of several such descriptions. These conceptions involve reasons and obligations: a parent ought to take care of his children, a citizen has a reason to be interested in public life, and so on. Korsgaard's argument starts from the claim that our self-reflective nature forces us to have a conception of ourselves. For this reason, she claims, the obligations built into our self-conceptions - especially the ones that are part of our most central self-conceptions, the ones that we cannot shed - are normative for us. Serious or repeated violations of the norms implicit in a self-conception will make it impossible for an individual to continue to think of himself under that description; he will have to give up that identity. And, even though some identities can be given up, one cannot be an agent unless one has *some* identity. Violating the norms threatens the agent's identity, and the loss of identity means that the agent is, for all practical purposes, dead.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, Lecture 3.

<sup>89</sup> Here is how she puts it: "It is the conceptions of ourselves that are most important to us that give rise to unconditional obligations. For to violate them is to lose your integrity and so your identity, and to no longer be who you are. That is, it is to no longer be able to think of yourself under the description under which you value yourself and find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking. It is to be for all practical purposes dead or worse than dead." (*Sources of Normativity*, p. 102)

If violating one's values would indeed mean one's death as an agent, this would be a good reason to accept their normative force. The death metaphor might be getting at something true, but Korsgaard's interpretation of it is not satisfying. First, even though having some self-conception may be needed for agency, and perhaps, as Korsgaard claims, there are some core identities that are inescapable, most of them are not. For those that are not, one can very well imagine an agent who, whenever an identity is inconvenient, sheds it off and takes on a new one. Now, this may be psychologically difficult or even impossible for beings like us, and so the agent we are imagining would have to have a different psychological make-up than we do. But the point is that the impossibility of shedding identities does not come from the nature of *agency*: violating an identity doesn't, by itself, threaten an agent's capacity to be an agent. Since all he needs is *some* identity to act from, he can always, in principle, give one up and take on another.

There are a couple of elements in Korsgaard's argument which I think are suggestive, but I think she puts the wrong spin on them, and I would like to take them in a different direction. First, I do think that violating the norms implicit in one's self-conception threatens one's identity; but this is not because, *after* you've violated them, you cannot maintain that self-conception. Rather, what threatens the self-conception is the fact that, *unless* one takes its norms seriously, unless one genuinely sees oneself as subject to them, one does not have that identity in the first place. This is why some violations threaten the identity, whereas some do not: some violations are consistent with seeing the conception as normative for one, whereas others are not – they show that the agent does not, in fact, take the norms seriously.

Whether or not Korsgaard is right that one cannot be an agent unless one has a practical identity of the kind she describes, I think that our self-conceptions do play an important role in our lives, that our values are building blocks of our self-conceptions, and that the normativity of our values stems in part from their place in our self-conceptions. More on this later.

A different way of explaining the normativity of valuing appeals to the role it plays in the agent's *metaphysical* identity. One reason why people are reluctant to see desires as reason-giving is that they seem to be forces that act *upon* the agent, rather than expressions of the agent's will. What one values, though, seems to be at the core of the agent's identity, and therefore valuing has a different status than desire: valuing is the voice of the agent, and hence it has the authority of expressing the agent's will.

Michael Bratman suggests that an agent values X "when it has a desire for X (a desire that may itself be a first-order policy) and a self-governing policy in favor of treating that desire as providing an end that is justifying (perhaps to a certain, specified degree) in motivationally effective deliberation."<sup>90</sup> This is one of the attitudes that make possible the kind of coordination, organization and stability over time needed by sophisticated agents like us. Moreover, he claims, it is one of the attitudes that constitute an agent's identity over time. Bratman assumes a broadly Lockean conception of personal identity, and points out that policies that favor or reject various desires – of which valuing is a subtype – have it as their role to support various continuities of desires and of the policies themselves, and as such they constitute and support the temporally extended structure of agency. Given that valuing is part of what metaphysically constitutes the

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<sup>90</sup> Michael Bratman, "Valuing and the will," p. 260.

temporally extended agent, valuing has the authority to speak for the agent. Now, Bratman himself, as far as I am aware, does not make this further move, but one could make the argument that valuing can give rise to reasons because it represents the agent's will<sup>91</sup>.

The thought that valuing constitutes personal identity is, I believe, the wrong direction to look into for an explanation of the authority and normativity of valuing; focusing on the *metaphysical* identity of the person doesn't help. If one accepts a broadly Lockean view of personal identity over time, attitudes like valuing do not seem to have a special place among our attitudes. Valuing, and other policies, might have a special role in ensuring cross-temporal continuity of our *agency*. But as far as metaphysical personal identity is concerned, valuing is on a par with other mental states: a desire that lasts in time, or the fact that a (perhaps fleeting) desire I have now is the result of a desire I had earlier, or of a thought that I had earlier, or the fact that I now remember a past desire, or a past perception – all these connections between present and past mental states ensure the kind of psychological continuity that constitutes identity over time. Perhaps Bratman wants to defend a particular kind of Lockean conception of personal identity, on which only the cross-temporal connections made possible by valuing and other policies form the right kind of psychological continuity needed for identity over time; but that view is in need of an argument.

We have, again, a powerful intuitive idea: that valuing is at the core of our identity, and that somehow that fact gives valuing a special status among our attitudes, a special

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<sup>91</sup> He does argue, in other writings, that intentions and plans give rise to reasons, but his argument there is that they give rise to reasons because of their role in our agency: ensuring cross-temporal coordination and organization. Since valuing is itself a policy, like intentions and plans, he would probably say that valuing gives rise to reasons as well. But I don't know that he uses the role of valuing in constituting personal identity in an argument about the reason-giving force of valuing.

authority and normative force. But we don't seem to have a satisfying explanation of that idea.

We can resume now the line of argument I suggested earlier, and ask again the question: what is valuable about taking the norms implicit in valuing to be binding for us? One thing already mentioned is that seeing self-adopted standards as normative enables us to have long-term projects, relationships, commitments; and most people would agree that these are of great value to us.

But there is also something valuable in itself about the attitudes that fall under the category of valuing: about various kinds of love, respect, appreciation, passion for a vocation, commitment to a cause, and so on. One thing people often say if asked why these attitudes are valuable is that they can give meaning to one's life.<sup>92</sup> In the next chapter, I will give an interpretation and defense of this claim.<sup>93</sup> Now, assuming that valuing attitudes are indeed thus valuable, what does this mean for their normativity? As I will argue, the normativity of valuing is essential for its capacity to make one's life meaningful. If that is true, then, given the value of having a meaningful life, we have a strong reason to accept the normativity of valuing.

Valuing-type attitudes contribute to valuable relationships not only because they ensure stability and coordination of the agent's motivations over time; but also because they shape the nature of those relationships. A relationship based on love is of a different

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<sup>92</sup> This answer doesn't threaten the idea that valuing attitudes are valuable in themselves. The claim is not that the attitudes are valuable *as a means* to a meaningful life, but rather, that they are valuable because they are an essential part of a good life. The existence of an explanation for why something is valuable is compatible with its being valuable in itself.

<sup>93</sup> In chapter 2 I explore in some detail why love, as one particular case of valuing, is valuable.

kind, and has a different value than one based on mutual interest; a relationship based on respect has a different value than one based on fear of punishment; a vocation has a different value than a career. But one of the differences between these kinds of relationships, which partially accounts for their differences in value, is given by the norms involved in the attitudes that ground them. The value of the relationships made possible by attitudes like love is one reason to accept the normativity of love. Furthermore, as I will argue in the next section, the best way to understand special obligations which arise within such relationships is as stemming from the normativity of the valuing-type attitudes that form the basis of the relationships.

## **II Special responsibilities of friendship**

If your best friend just had a life-threatening accident, you would rush to the hospital without thinking twice. If you learned about the accident right before a crucial meeting at work, you will likely be torn between your friend and your job. You will be torn because you want both to be there for your friend, and to do your job well; but also because you will think, rightly, that you *ought to* be there for your friend, and also *ought to* attend the meeting.

The idea that we have special responsibilities of this sort is quite familiar from everyday experience, where such conflicts are common.<sup>94</sup> However, the nature of these responsibilities is puzzling. Why is it that I ought to be there for my friend, and why is it that I ought to do my job well?

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<sup>94</sup> I am focusing on conflicts because, in the absence of conflict, people will usually simply *want* to visit their injured friends, and will visit them. The sense that one *ought to* visit one's friend typically arises only when there is a conflict with something else one ought to do, or with something else one wants to do. But I am not interested here in conflicts as such.

A first answer is straightforward: because he is my friend, and because it's my job. This is an interesting answer if we construe the why-questions as questions about the reasons people take themselves to have for helping their friend or doing their job well; we will come back to this. But it is a rather unsatisfying answer if what we want is to understand the source of the responsibilities we have with respect to our friends or our jobs. Why is the fact that he is your friend a reason to rush to the hospital? Moreover, why is it an "insistent" reason – that is, why does the fact that he is your friend make it the case that you *ought* to support him?<sup>95</sup>

Special responsibilities have been the focus of some recent debates in normative ethics, primarily because they seem to pose problems for both Kantian and consequentialist moral theories. They seem, for instance, to pose a challenge to these theories' interpretations of the idea that morality is impartial. If the responsibilities we have towards our friends are (as they seem to many) moral responsibilities, then it looks like morality often requires us to be partial: I have a special duty to support my friend when he has been in an accident, while I do not have the same duty to support all accident victims. Many have argued that neither Kantian, nor consequentialist ethics can make room for this partiality in a satisfactory way.

My interest here in special responsibilities, however, is driven by a different concern. I believe that an investigation of the sources of these responsibilities can give us some insight into what is involved in valuing things like our friends or our jobs; in turn, an

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<sup>95</sup> This way of phrasing the question may be prejudging the answer, in that it already presupposes that it is the *fact that he is your friend* that gives rise to your responsibilities towards him. I don't mean to be prejudging the issue, but it doesn't look like one can give substance to questions about the sources of such responsibilities in a completely neutral way.

I will use "ought to" and "have to" interchangeably.

understanding of the attitude of valuing will help get clearer on the nature of these responsibilities.

The question about the sources of special responsibilities is interesting in its own right, and it is a large question, even if one focuses only on special responsibilities of love and friendship, as I will in this section. A thorough investigation of the various conceptions of friendship that have been proposed, and of their implications for special responsibilities, is more than I can do here. Instead, I will draw one possible picture, and say a couple of things about why its obvious alternatives would not work, with the hope that the picture will appear appealing enough even in the absence of a detailed rejection of all other alternatives.

Good friends rarely ask themselves about the reasons why they should help their friends, but imagine that you are a good friend in a philosophical mood, and ask yourself, “Why ought I to visit my friend at the hospital?” “He needs my help” may come to mind first; but, by itself, this won’t do as an answer, since a million other people need your help as well. You might answer (as some philosophers have) that you ought to visit your friend because he expects you to, and therefore you would hurt him by violating his expectations, in a way that you wouldn’t hurt the one million other people; or because your past interaction with him as a friend built up to something like a mutual promise to help each other when in need, and you ought to keep that promise.

Obviously, expectations by themselves do not give rise to an obligation. Your secret admirer at work might believe that you are an extremely kind person, or be under the impression that you take an interest in him, and therefore he might expect you to visit as

well, but you are under no obligation to do so. If the expectation does create a responsibility, it must be legitimate, and its legitimacy must be of the right kind; the trick is to explain when the expectation is legitimate in the right way.

Imagine that your secret admirer is someone to whom you have, albeit unintentionally, given reasons to think that you are his close friend. In some sense, his expectation that you would visit him in the hospital is then legitimate: he has good reasons for his (unfortunately false) belief that you are his friend, and his expectation is based on that belief. But it doesn't follow that you owe it to him to visit him in the hospital; you owe him, at most, a clarification.

The situation is similar, I think, even if you have *intentionally* made him think you are his best friend - but, in fact, are not, and do not want to be. His expectations are reasonable and justified. But it does not follow that you owe it to him to *be* his best friend, and to visit him at the hospital. It follows that you owe him whatever we owe to people we intentionally deceive, but this does not necessarily include friendship, or acts of friendship.

Perhaps some will disagree with this, and argue that, if I intentionally lead someone to believe that he is my best friend, then I do have an obligation to visit him in the hospital. Be this as it may, it seems clear that the obligation I have towards my friend to visit him in the hospital is not of the same nature as the obligation I have towards the person I intentionally deceive; the reason I have to visit my friend is very different from the reason I have to visit the person I deceive.

To see why this is so, let's go back to the spontaneous response to the question: why should I help my friend? The response was: because he is my friend; and this seems to

be the right answer. This is a sufficient reason why I ought to help my friend: simply because he is my friend.

What we are looking for, then, are not the reasons why I should help my friend. We already have an answer to that question in the apparently flat and uninformative: “he’s my friend.” In various circumstances, there may be additional reasons to help our friends: they expect us to, or they’ve helped us in the past, we’ve sort of promised to help them, etc. But we don’t need to have those reasons in order to see ourselves as bound to help our friends. Typically, “he’s my friend” is a sufficient, insistent (though not always decisive) reason to help him. What we need is an explanation of *why this is a reason*. If this is what we are looking for, then expectations and promises are the wrong direction to look into.<sup>96</sup>

Consider a few platitudes about friendship. In a close friendship, one cares about one’s friend for his own sake. In so caring, one is disposed to be happy when the friend is doing well, sad when he is not doing so well, concerned when he is in trouble, willing to help when the friend needs help, ready to offer emotional support, but also to give him

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<sup>96</sup> Unless promises are seen as constitutive of friendship – an option I will consider later.

There are other reasons to think that expectation is the wrong way to go: even if my friend thinks I am out of the country, and does not expect me to come to his help, I still ought to help him. This doesn’t completely settle the issue; perhaps one can still find room for expectations by changing the content and/or the function of the expectation: my friend expects that, if in town, I will come to his help. If I violate his expectation, there is the risk that he will find out and be hurt. However that may be, I think that the more important reason why we should not focus on expectations is the fact that, even though sometimes they may be part of the explanation for why we ought to help a friend, they will not help with explaining why the fact that he is my friend is a sufficient, insistent reason to help him when in need. To put it differently: even if expectations do play a role in explaining the obligation that I have to help a friend in a particular case, they play that role in virtue of being legitimate in the right way; but what makes the expectation to be helped legitimate in the right way is the fact that it is *my friend’s* expectation. What needs to be explained then is, if you like, why the fact that it’s my friend’s expectation makes it legitimate in the right way. (All this doesn’t imply, of course, that only one’s friend’s expectations can give rise to obligations, or that all my friend’s expectations give rise to obligations. If my best friend expects me to buy him a helicopter, he’s just crazy. The idea is that a friend’s particular expectation to be helped when in need – and other, similar expectations – are legitimate in the right way because they are my friend’s).

space in the right contexts, and so on. If one genuinely cares about one's friend in this way, these dispositions will be relatively stable in time, and will not falter at the slightest difficulty or inconvenience. One will be willing to balance the friend's interests with one's own, and give them comparable weight in one's decisions.

This description of what is involved in friendship seems right, as far as it goes. But it doesn't go far enough. While it explains why people usually help their friends, do not abandon them for no good reason, etc., it does not explain why one *ought to* help one's friend when in need, not abandon him for no reason, etc. Why would the fact that I am disposed to help someone when in need entail that I also ought to help him, or that I should continue to be so disposed in the absence of reasons to the contrary? The mere presence of a set of such dispositions does nothing to explain the obligations we take ourselves to have towards our friends even in the absence of expectations on their part. And if, instead of dispositions, we talk of desires, the same problem arises.

This might lead one to think that we cannot find an explanation for the responsibilities of friendship if we look at the mental states involved in friendship; perhaps we should look somewhere else. Some have argued that friendship should be modeled as a kind of promise, or a contract.<sup>97</sup> I think any such attempt is bound to fail, for the following reasons. In order for a promise or a contract to be in place, it is sufficient that certain actions be performed: if I say "I promise to pay you \$100," in the right context, I thereby obligate myself to pay you \$100; similarly if I sign the right papers in the right context. It doesn't matter whether I intend or am motivated to keep my promise. Even if, right as I'm uttering the words "I promise to pay you \$100," I am laughing inside, thinking to myself

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<sup>97</sup> See Richard White, "Friendship and commitment".

“There’s no way I’ll pay you,” and have no intention to pay you, this is irrelevant to the promise and its bindingness. I am still obligated to pay you. The same is true of contracts.

But friendship is different. In order for a friendship to be in place, it is essential that the friends have intentions, beliefs and motives characteristic of friendship. No amount of outward manifestations of friendship can bring about a friendship, in the absence of the right mental states: no matter how much time we spend together, how many activities we share, and how many times I tell you that we are friends, there is no friendship involved if, say, I do not in fact want us to be friends. There may be some obligations that arise from these outward manifestations; but they are not obligations of friendship; they are not the kind of responsibility that I take myself to have when, thinking about my friend in the hospital, I say to myself: “I have to visit him.” A genuine promise and a false promise are equally binding, and binding in the same way; a false friendship and a genuine friendship are not.

To understand the special responsibilities of friendship, we have to look back inside, at the way in which friends care about each other. But we need to focus on something else than the dispositions and desires involved in caring.

Here is the view I will defend. One of the things constitutive of friendship is that friends value each other as friends. It is this component of friendship that gives rise to the special responsibilities characteristic of friendship. First, I will use the account of valuing proposed in chapter one to describe what it is to value someone as a friend. Next, I will explain how this form of valuing gives rise to responsibilities.

There are different ways in which one can value an object. One can value a work of art, for example, as a work of art, or as a gift from one's lover, as an expensive possession, as part of one's home, etc. One can value a dog as one's pet, as an exemplar of a rare breed, or as a sentient being. One can value a person as a person, as one's employee, or as one's friend.

My valuing a work of art as a work of art is different from my valuing it as an expensive possession in that the thoughts, feelings, and actions I will be disposed to perform, and the thoughts, feelings, and actions I will see as appropriate or warranted, will be different in the two cases. When I value it as a work of art, I will probably (at least attempt to) aesthetically appreciate it, contribute to its preservation when that is needed, enjoin other people to appreciate it, etc., and I will also see myself as having reasons (perhaps insistent reasons) to do so. If I value it (only) as an expensive possession, I will also try to preserve it, possibly try to exchange it for a more expensive one, but I will not necessarily try to appreciate it aesthetically, and so on.

What accounts for this difference in the way I can value the same object is that, when I value something, I see it via an evaluative concept - typically, a thick evaluative concept. The reasons I take myself to have when I value something are based on the norms implicit in the evaluative concept that informs my way of seeing and my valuing of that object.

When I value someone as a friend, my attitudes, thoughts and actions towards him, as well as the attitudes, thoughts, and actions that I will take myself to have reasons for, will be guided by the norms implicit in the concept of a friend. In valuing someone as a friend, I will, for example, be disposed to help him when in need, but also see myself as

having a *duty* to help him. The idea that friends help each other is built into our notion of friendship. In seeing someone as my friend, I see myself as bound by the norms that we regard as constitutive of friendship,<sup>98</sup> and helping each other is one of them.

In other words, valuing someone as a friend involves seeing his need as an (insistent) reason to help him, the fact that he enjoys basketball as a reason to watch the game with him, the fact that he leaves town soon as a reason to visit him, etc. Valuing one's friend in this way is an essential constituent of friendship. Spending time with the friend, engaging in common activities, liking each other, trusting each other, sharing things, exchanging confidences, etc. are typically important ingredients of friendship. But no close, "genuine" friendship is in place in the absence of the friends' valuing each other as friends. If the characteristic interactions of friendship form the body of a friendship, mutual valuing is its heart.

Now, the interactions characteristic of friendship – the sharing of confidences, the close proximity, etc. may give rise, by themselves, to obligations that we do not have towards strangers. But there is nothing "special" about those obligations; that is, they are not obligations particular to friendship. They are obligations that we have towards any people, which happen to be instantiated in the case of friendship: the obligation not to create expectations you cannot fulfill, not to betray a confidence, to help a person who needs help when you are the person best situated to help, etc.

However, not all responsibilities of friendship are of this kind. Some of them depend essentially on the existence of a friendship. Those are the obligations that we

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<sup>98</sup> I can also see myself as bound by the norms constitutive of this *particular* friendship, which can be different from, or a modification of, the norms involved in the generic conception of friendship implicit in our concept of friendship. That is, the way I value my friend can be informed by our (my friend's and mine) shared, likely tacit, conception of what *our* friendship consists in.

recognize when, asked why we have them, we respond: “because he is my friend.” What those are may depend on the specific nature of the friendship, but some typical examples are: providing emotional support when needed, being attuned to the friend’s sensitivities, actively seeking to promote his interests, etc. These obligations, I believe, cannot be explained by the pattern of outward interactions characteristic of friendship. They arise from the way in which friends value each other. They wouldn’t be in place in a “friendship” that consisted merely of the outward manifestations of friendship.

Now, how do the special responsibilities of friendship arise from valuing? Here is the story I would like to suggest. Valuing someone as a friend consists in part, as I noted, in a commitment to the norms characteristic of friendship. As I argued in section one of this chapter, the commitment characteristic of valuing is binding for us, due to the role it plays in our agency, to its centrality to our self-conceptions, and to its contribution to meaningfulness. In addition, the commitment involved in valuing someone as a friend is what makes possible close friendship. This commitment is the foundation for a pattern of interactions – including actions, feelings, ways of conceiving of each other, motivations - characteristic of friendship.<sup>99</sup> Those interactions wouldn’t be what they are in the absence of that commitment. Suppose, for example, that one day you play tennis with someone you just met at the club, and another day you play tennis with a close friend. Let’s imagine that everything that takes place on these two occasions is exactly the same: you make the same moves, say the same things, have the same feelings. Nevertheless, these two interactions are very different, and not only in the numerical sense: they have different meanings, just like moving something that looks like a pawn on something that looks like a chessboard in

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<sup>99</sup> Needless to say, this commitment is very different from that of a promise or a contract. The motivations characteristic of friendship, e.g. wanting to benefit the friend for his own sake, are incompatible with conceiving of the friendship as a promise. (Though, of course, it is possible to make promises to friends.)

a world where there is no game of chess is a different action, with a different meaning, from moving a pawn on a chessboard in the context of a game of chess. The meaning of the latter action is given by its place within a pattern of moves that form the game, and that pattern is made possible by the rules of the game, and by the player's commitment to the rules for the time of the game. Similarly, the meaning of a tennis match with a close friend is given by its place in the pattern of interactions that forms the close friendship, and that pattern is made possible by the friend's commitment in valuing each other as friends.<sup>100</sup> The commitment ensures the stability of friendship, enables the friends to depend on each other, trust and rely on each other, and on the continuation of the relationship in making individual and shared plans, etc.

My argument here, like in section one, is that the norms an agent sees himself as subject to in valuing something are binding for the agent because of the value of the things valuing makes possible for the agent. Valuing someone as a friend is at the basis of close friendships, and it is to a large extent the distinctive value of close friendships that gives the norms implicit in valuing a friend their hold on us. Moreover, in the case of friendship, what the agent's valuing makes possible (if met with similar valuing on the friend's part) is of value for both the agent and the friend, and this brings in an extra layer of normativity – an obligation not to endanger something valuable to another.

One of the assumptions this chapter's argument rests on is that valuing is essential for a meaningful life. Next chapter will attempt to make good the promise to justify this assumption.

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<sup>100</sup> Again, that commitment is, of course, different from the commitment involved in playing a game of chess.

## Chapter 4: Valuing and the good life

I will start from the assumption that meaningfulness is an important aspect of a good life<sup>101</sup>, and will argue that the attitude of valuing is needed for meaningfulness, and thus for a good life.<sup>102</sup> My argument has two main aims: the first is to underscore the role and significance that valuing has in our lives, and thereby to support and further clarify claims made earlier about the normativity of valuing; the second is to show that understanding the nature of valuing along the lines I suggested earlier helps us to better understand how a life can be meaningful.

There are two sets of questions one can hear about meaning and life. On the one hand, there are questions like: “Does life have a meaning?,” or “What is the meaning of life?” On the other hand, people sometimes worry: “Is my life meaningful?,” “How can I live a meaningful life?,” or, if one is a guru or religious leader of some sort, one may offer advice on how to attain meaning in your life. Questions in the first set are out of favor nowadays. They are questions about whether life in general has meaning - as opposed to the particular life of a particular individual - and, when phrased as: “What is *the* meaning of life?,” they rest on the controversial assumption that there is one single meaning of life.<sup>103</sup> Questions in the second set do not necessarily assume that life in general has a

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<sup>101</sup> For a defense of this assumption, see Susan Wolf, “Happiness and meaning: two aspects of the good life”.

<sup>102</sup> For a different account of the centrality of valuing in a good life, see Stephen Darwall’s chapter “Golub’s smile” in his book *Welfare and rational care*.

<sup>103</sup> David Wiggins makes this last point in “Truth, invention, and the meaning of life”. Susan Wolf notes, in “Happiness and meaning,” that questions about meaning have been traditionally understood as questions

meaning. Moreover, they might even express a very different concern from the first set. Although some people still ask – especially in a religious context – “Does my life have a meaning?,” many who think that there is a difference between meaningful and meaningless lives would be reluctant to say that there is *a meaning* for one’s life. The distinction between meaningful and meaningless lives, they would say, can be drawn without assuming that there is such a thing as the meaning of one’s life.

This chapter is not about the meaning of life. I am interested mainly in the differences between meaningful and meaningless lives, and the role the subject’s attitude of valuing plays in them. I think, however, that there is a continuity between the first and the second set of questions,<sup>104</sup> and that, although there are dangers in failing to see the differences, there are also benefits to seeing them as expressions of similar concerns.

Philosophers disagree both on what we mean when we say that a life is meaningful, and on what it takes for a life to be meaningful. One strategy for discussing meaningfulness would be to start with a conceptual analysis of the expression “meaningful life,” and, once the meaning of that expression is clarified, to find its conditions of application. This won’t be my strategy. I will start with some standard examples of meaningful lives, and with what seems (and has seemed to many) to be a plausible view of what it takes to have a meaningful life. I will then argue that the best spelling out of that view will take an agent’s attitude of valuing to be central to his having a meaningful life.

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about the human condition: whether or not life is meaningful does not depend on the particular shape of that life, but on the place or role of human life in the universe.

<sup>104</sup> Susan Wolf expresses a similar viewpoint in “Happiness and meaning,” where she claims that traditional worries about the meaning of life and contemporary concerns with meaningfulness are expressions of the same kind of longing for meaning.

Along the way, the argument will shed some light on what we mean when we say that a life is meaningful.

Paradigmatic cases of meaningful lives often cited in the literature include the lives of Einstein, Mother Theresa, Picasso.<sup>105</sup> One thing these lives have in common is that they contain things of objective value: revolutionary scientific discoveries, extraordinary charity work, excellent artistic creation. So it may be tempting to think that this is what makes them meaningful. However, even though such objectively valuable ingredients make these lives in some sense valuable, they are not sufficient to make them meaningful – to give them the *particular* kind of value we ascribe to a life when we call it meaningful. The life of an Einstein who had no interest in science, but happened to be a genius and worked in science only to impress his sulky lover, or that of a Mother Theresa constantly bored with her charity work, do not seem to be all that meaningful, even if they accomplish the same objectively valuable scientific discoveries or charity work. Or imagine a guy who lives his whole life in a room with a purple button. He happens to like purple, so he spends a lot of his life pressing the button, over and over again. Unbeknownst to him, every time he presses the button he causes a person's life to be saved, so by the end of his life he has saved the lives of a million people. His actions produce as much good in the world as Mother Theresa's, but his life is not thereby meaningful. It doesn't seem any more meaningful than the life of the person who spends all his time counting blades of grass with no further results.

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<sup>105</sup> See Richard Taylor, "The myth of Sisyphus"; Susan Wolf, "Happiness and meaning: Two aspects of the good life"; David Wiggins, "Truth, invention, and meaning".

Examples of this kind have led many philosophers to say that objective value is not sufficient for meaningfulness; that an agent's life is meaningful only if some subjective conditions are met as well. In Susan Wolf's well-known phrase, "meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness."<sup>106</sup> The question is, what are the relevant subjective attitudes, and how do they contribute to meaningfulness?

There are several reasons why one might think that the agent's subjective attitudes are essential for a meaningful life, and the differences between them are significant.

One view would be that there is something objectively valuable about some of the attitudes an agent can have towards things of value - appreciation, active engagement, enjoyment, pleasure, desire, love, caring, awe - and that the kind of value we ascribe to a life when we call it meaningful simply is composed of both the objective value of things such as scientific discovery or charity, and the objective value of attitudes such as appreciation or love. In order to be meaningful (or perhaps fully meaningful), a life needs both. If you are Mother Theresa but are bored by your charity work, your life is still valuable (and perhaps partially meaningful), but you are missing on something else that is valuable: enjoyment, or an appreciation of the value of your work, or the like.

This view doesn't seem plausible to me. There are two possible versions. One is that meaningfulness is an additive value: the more things of objective value a life has (whether those consist in external facts, or in the subject's attitudes), the more meaningful it is. The other version says that both external facts and internal attitudes are necessary for meaningfulness; in order to be meaningful at all, a life also needs the right attitudes. The

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<sup>106</sup> Susan Wolf, "Happiness and meaning: two aspects of the good life," p. 211. Also see John Kekes, "The meaning of life"; Joseph Raz, *Value, respect, and attachment*; David Wiggins, "Truth, invention, and the meaning of life"; Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith, "On luck, responsibility, and the meaning of life"; Charles Starkey, "Meaning and affect".

additive version seems implausible because it says that the life of the guy who spends his life pressing the purple button is to some extent meaningful. But it's not. It's no different from the life of a mouse who would live in the same room and step over the button to get to the cheese, thereby saving the lives of millions; and we wouldn't call the life of the mouse meaningful. One might say here: you're right about the mouse, but that's merely because we only attribute meaningfulness to lives of persons, so the fact that the mouse's life is not meaningful says nothing about the meaningfulness of the purple-lover's life. But the point is that there has to be a reason why we only attribute meaningfulness to the lives of people. And a view that sees the value of the agent's attitudes for meaningfulness as on a par with and additive to that of, say, contributing to the welfare of others cannot explain why only the lives of persons can be meaningful. There is something about the value of things like contributing to the welfare of people, scientific discovery, etc. that goes beyond their value *qua* contribution to welfare or scientific discovery, and makes a specific contribution – meaningfulness – to the life of the *person*. It is a contribution it could not make to the life of a non-person, and the only way to explain this is by appealing to the capacities that a person has and a mouse lacks.

The all-or-nothing view is implausible because it doesn't have the resources to explain why *both* external facts and the subject's attitudes are necessary for meaningfulness. If they contribute to meaningfulness only because they are objectively valuable, then they should be interchangeable – a sufficient amount of external facts should compensate for a lack of the right attitudes.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> One might wonder if we need to assume, for this argument to work, that objective values are commensurable. I don't think we do. My point is that, if the *only* reason the right subjective attitudes are needed for a meaningful life is that they are objectively valuable, if their only contribution to meaningfulness consists in their objective value, then their contribution to meaningfulness is not distinctive. Any other thing

A different view would be that, in the absence of the right subjective attitudes, the value of your accomplishments, relationships, or other things of objective value is somehow lost on you. If you're always bored by the charity work, then your work is still valuable, in that it contributes to other people's well-being, but it does not have the right kind of value for your life that would contribute to its meaningfulness. This view seems more plausible; but we need an account of that right kind of value, and an explanation of the role that the relevant subjective attitudes play in it.

A version of this view is that the objective and the subjective are both necessary for the emergence of the right kind of value that makes a life meaningful. In David Wiggins' words, value properties are *lit up* by the focus the man who lives the life brings into the world.<sup>108</sup> There is, Wiggins argues, no *one* true answer to the question: "How should I live my life?" At the same time, not any answer will do. The world constrains the possible answers (it "impinges" upon us<sup>109</sup>), but it underdetermines them, thus leaving us both with the opportunity and with the necessity to invent meaning.

One way in which an agent's attitude of valuing might be needed for his having a meaningful life is as a condition for the existence of value. If you think that a meaningful life is a life that (perhaps among other things) contains things of value, and your general theory of value says that it is by valuing things that individuals create value, then you will think that the attitude of valuing is necessary for a meaningful life.

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of objective value could make the same contribution to meaningfulness, and so the subjective attributes are replaceable.

<sup>108</sup> David Wiggins, "Truth, invention, and the meaning of life," p. 165.

<sup>109</sup> Wiggins, p. 165.

But suppose you think that at least some things are valuable, even valuable for a particular agent, independently of being valued by the agent; for example, that the disinterested Einstein's contributions to physics are valuable tout court even if he doesn't value them, or that a person's well-being is valuable to her even if she doesn't value it.<sup>110</sup> You could still think that it is only when an agent values things that they "light up" for him – that they become valuable in the right way that contributes to the meaningfulness of his life. The question is, what is the "right way"?

In working towards an answer, let us look first at the role the experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness play in a meaningful life. Imagine that Mother Theresa's whole life is dominated by the feeling that there is no point to her charity work. She cares about the children she helps, about their health and happiness. But at the same time, she believes that a life can be meaningful only if there is a God and an afterlife, and she is convinced that there is no God or afterlife. So she thinks that her life is meaningless, that the lives of those she helps are meaningless, and that in helping them she merely prolongs other meaningless lives. The satisfaction she feels in saving the lives of people she cares about is always tainted by a sense that there is no real point to saving them, that her satisfaction is unwarranted, yet another absurd reaction to the world. Or imagine that for Einstein the experience of scientific discovery is no different from the experience of solving crossword puzzles; he thinks that there is no point or value to scientific progress,

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<sup>110</sup> This view is compatible with many different accounts of value, including one that insists that it is by valuing that we (this time, we as a society or community or the human kind) create value by valuing things. What it denies is that the agent himself, as an individual, must value a thing in order for that thing to be valuable and thus contribute to the meaningfulness of the agent's life.

since we die anyway, and that scientific work is just a somewhat pleasant way of passing one's time before one dies.

If we discovered that this was the way Einstein and Mother Theresa lived their lives, I think we would be much less inclined to say that their lives were meaningful. The experience of meaningfulness seems an important aspect of the meaningfulness of one's life. When we want our lives to be meaningful, we don't want them merely to measure up to some objective standard: we want to experience life as meaningful. This desire is a desire for a subjective experience; in this respect, it is similar to the desire for pleasure. But it is different from the desire for pleasure in that it is at the same time sensitive to the objective circumstances of one's life: we don't want the illusion of a meaningful life, we want an experience that is truly an experience of a meaningful life. Unlike concern for the mere feeling of pleasure, concern about meaningfulness is at the same time a concern about the way one's life actually is. But it would be misleading, I think, to say that it is a concern about how one experiences one's life, combined with one about how one's life is. The person who wants meaning in his life and worries about meaningfulness is more like a person who wants to see, and worries about whether he can see: what he wants is not merely to have a visual experience; at the same time, what he wants is not for the outside world to be a certain way; he wants to *see* it. He wants to have a visual experience that is a reflection of the way the world is. Similarly, the person who wants his life to be meaningful to him wants it to appear meaningful to him, and this appearance to reflect something about the way the world is.

What are the objective conditions that would warrant the experience of meaningfulness? Let's take a closer look at what is involved in the experience of lack of

meaning – at what one takes to be missing in one’s life when one experiences it as meaningless. Here is how Tolstoy describes it: “(...) When I thought of the education of my children, I said to myself: ‘Why?’ Or, reflecting on the manner in which the masses might obtain their welfare, I suddenly said to myself: ‘What is that to me?’ Or, thinking of the fame which my works would get me, I said to myself: ‘Alright, you will be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Molière, and all the writers in the world – what of it?’ And I was absolutely unable to make any reply. The questions were not waiting, and I had to answer them at once; if I could not answer them, I could not live. I felt that what I was standing on had given way, that I had no foundation to stand on, that that which I had lived by no longer existed, and that I had nothing to live by...”<sup>111</sup>

Tolstoy’s experience of meaninglessness seems to be the experience of lack of reasons to live, of lack of reasons for the actions, desires, interests, feelings etc. that made up his life. What had previously seemed good reasons to work and to invest himself emotionally and intellectually – the education of his children, the welfare of the poor, literary success – have now lost their reason-giving appeal, and he thereby finds himself with no clue as to how to live, and no reasons or impetus to live at all. The prospect of death undermines, for Tolstoy, the reason-giving force of what he had previously lived by.

By contrast, someone who experienced a similar life as meaningful would see meaning in what he does: we can imagine, for example, that he would see the work he puts into maintaining the estate to be a way to preserve and enrich a beautiful property, his efforts to understand the needs of the poor and the best way to help them as a way to increase their welfare, his literary creation as a way of adding to and perhaps surpassing

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<sup>111</sup> Tolstoy, “My confession,” p. 12.

the literary achievements of previous generations of writers. And he would see the preservation of a beautiful estate and increasing the welfare of the poor as worthwhile, as good reasons for his actions and good guides as to how to live. He might have a further story about why they are good reasons – a story about God’s will and benevolence, or about self-fulfillment or self-actualization, or about living in harmony with the universe – or he might not. In any case, his experience of his life as meaningful does not depend on the explicit availability of such a story: his experience is one of seeing meaning to what he does. That meaning might be backed up by a big-picture story about the universe, but it need not be.

There are two elements that both seem important in experiencing life as meaningful. One is that of experiencing actions and events that make up one’s life as having *a* meaning. And I think that this experience is quite similar to experiencing words, sentences or stories as having a meaning. When you see the word “sun” as meaningful, you see it as a sign that stands for something else, for its meaning. When you look at the written word “sun,” and see it as meaningful, you see more to it than a string of letters, or a string of marks on paper: you see those marks as a representation of something else. In seeing it as such, the word appears intelligible to you: you understand its meaning.

I think that something similar - though not identical - is involved in experiencing life as meaningful, and that the need for meaningfulness in life is a need for life to be intelligible in a way similar to that in which words or stories are intelligible for us. We want there to be more to life and its events than the brute facts; we want them to make sense.

But we also want that meaning to be a good one: to be one that shows life to be worth living and our endeavors to be worthwhile. Someone who saw himself and others as puppets in the hands of a mischievous puppeteer could see life as intelligible in the sense described above: his life would have the overall purpose of entertaining the puppeteer's mischievous audience, his pleasures would be a way of being set up for pain, his endeavors a way of being set up for failure. His life would be intelligible, but we wouldn't call it a meaningful life: its meaning does not make it richer or worthwhile.

I think there are other contexts in which we use the word "meaningful" in a similar way. Think of the expressions "a meaningful quote," "a meaningful movie," "a meaningful gift," "meaningful sex." Being intelligible, having a meaning as representations or expressions of something else is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for these items to be meaningful in the sense intended in these expressions. It is important both that these items have a meaning, and that the meaning be of a certain quality. A quote or a movie couldn't be meaningful in the sense of these expressions unless they meant something; at the same time, if what they meant was a platitude we wouldn't call them meaningful. But perhaps one could say that in these cases the intelligibility condition has less to do with the use of "meaningful" in these expressions than with a necessary condition for being a quote or a movie at all. So this first aspect of "meaningful" may be easier to see in talk about meaningful gifts or sex. A meaningful gift is, first of all, a gift that represents or expresses something; so is meaningful sex. But, of course, *what* is represented or expressed also matters: a gift that represents an insult is not a meaningful gift, and sex that expresses anger or power is not what we want to call meaningful sex.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Sometimes we call a gift meaningful even if its meaning is not a positive one. As Tom Hill pointed out to me, we might call Santa's stones in the stockings a meaningful gift as well. But I think that that is a different

I have talked about experiencing life as meaningful, and about seeing various actions and events within a life as meaningful. What is the relationship between the two? First, let me say what I don't think that relationship is. Seeing a life as meaningful isn't simply a matter of seeing various actions within it as meaningful. There are many trivial activities that can be seen as meaningful, but seeing them as meaningful has nothing to do with a meaningful life. My slamming the door after a fight with my partner or my inserting a coin in the parking meter<sup>113</sup> are cases in point. If my life is composed only of such activities, and I see them as meaningful, this doesn't mean that I see my life as meaningful. I can see all of these activities as worthwhile, and I can have a story about why there are good reasons for each of them, but that need not add up to seeing my life as worthwhile, or seeing good reasons for living my life. On the other hand, in order to see one's life as meaningful one need not have a story about one's *life as a whole* - considered as a single item - that explains its meaning, the way we have a story about why an action like thanking the waiter is meaningful. One could have such a story, but it is not necessary. That is because there are elements of a life whose meaning is such that it radiates to one's life as a whole. The reasons one has for inserting the coin in the parking meter are typically not reasons that can make life worth living; but the reasons one has for, say, raising one's children, loving one's partner, building a community or following one's vocation can be such that they are at the same time, and thereby, reasons to live. This is how I understand the common sense platitude that love, friendship, or meaningful work can give meaning to one's life.

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use of "meaningful" from the one that is typical to the expression "a meaningful gift". My point is that there is *one* use of the word "meaningful" that implies that the meaning is a good one, and that that is the use present in talk about meaningful lives.

<sup>113</sup> I owe this example to Susan Wolf.

I would speculate that the experience of meaninglessness is often the result of the assumption that life can be meaningful only if we have a story about the meaning of life as a whole, and of a failed attempt to apply to life as a whole story patterns that we use, successfully, to make sense of events within a life. A very familiar way of making sense of actions and events is in terms of their purpose, so it is not surprising if people try and expect to make sense of life in terms of a purpose (it's not surprising if they fail either). Similarly, we understand many events by placing them in a larger context – by seeing their relevance to something bigger, or more important, which explains why some think that in order to have meaning life must be somehow linked to an infinite being, i.e. one for which the need to place it in a larger context does not arise.<sup>114</sup>

The idea that the experience of meaningfulness is, in part, the experience of having good reasons for living one's life seems consistent with standard cases of meaningless and meaningful lives. It is hard to see good reasons for living a life that consists of nothing but the toil of pushing a rock up a hill over and over again, or of growing corn to feed the pigs to buy more corn to feed more pigs. By contrast, most people find contributions to science or enhancing the lives of others to be good reasons to live a life.

What kind of reasons for living one's life is one after, when one seeks meaningfulness? The concern for meaningfulness is not a concern for *justifying* one's life to others or to oneself. One can think that life is in no need of justification - that (to borrow a phrase from David Velleman) one has the right to live by default, without having to justify the choice to live - but still worry about meaningfulness.<sup>115</sup> At the same time, what

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<sup>114</sup> See e.g. Nozick's view in ch. 6 of his *Philosophical Explanations*.

<sup>115</sup> David Velleman talks about a right to live by default in a very different context. In the paper "Against the right to die," he argues that an institutionalized right to euthanasia, by making staying alive a matter of

one is after are not merely enticing reasons – or, in any case, not any old kind of enticing reasons – for living one’s life. Insisting that life is fun, and that that is a good enough reason to live, would hardly speak to Tolstoy’s concern.

There are, of course, other possibilities, and I would like to suggest that the relevant reasons are reasons that integrate life into a story that makes sense of it and shows it to be worthwhile. We will come back to this point later.

What kinds of attitudes of the subject are needed for meaningfulness, and why? How do they contribute to meaningfulness?

Let’s look at what is missing in the cases of meaningless lives described above. The modified Einstein lacks the desire for and interest in scientific discovery; he doesn’t care about it. The bored Mother Theresa lacks enthusiasm or excitement about her charity work, and takes no pleasure in it. Various philosophers have focused on each of these attitudes, and taken them to be essential for meaningfulness. Richard Taylor argues that Sisyphus’ life can be made meaningful by giving him a *desire* to push the rock up the hill.<sup>116</sup> Harry Frankfurt argues that it is by *caring* about things that we make them important to us, and thus make our life meaningful.<sup>117</sup> Joseph Raz suggests that it is by forming, and endorsing as valuable, *attachments* to valuable things.<sup>118</sup> Susan Wolf argues that a meaningful life is a life of *active engagement* with things of objective value.<sup>119</sup>

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choice, would take away from the patient the option to stay alive by default – that is, without having to justify to himself or others a choice to live.

<sup>116</sup> Richard Taylor, “The myth of Sisyphus”.

<sup>117</sup> Harry Frankfurt makes this point in the article “The importance of what we care about” and in his book *Reasons for love*.

<sup>118</sup> Joseph Raz, *Value, respect, and attachment*, chapter 1.

<sup>119</sup> Susan Wolf, “Happiness and meaning: Two aspects of the good life”.

While these suggestions fit (more or less) with our intuitions and accommodate various cases of meaningful or meaningless lives, I find these accounts unsatisfying in that they fail to explain *why* these attitudes are essential for a meaningful life; how do they contribute to meaningfulness? As I mentioned, I believe that the needed subjective attitude is valuing. In what follows, I will try to explain why it is needed, and how it contributes to meaningfulness.

One way in which an agent's attitude of valuing contributes to meaningfulness is by providing her with a language in which to interpret her life. It can do so by virtue of the norms she is committed to in valuing something. Those norms establish the significance of various facts that make up her life. Suppose, for example, that Mary values teaching as her vocation. In light of that, the fact that she lives in a village where children have little access to and interest in education will mean for her the opportunity to use her talent as a teacher and show them the benefits of learning; the fact that their parents are reluctant to send their children to school will mean for her a challenge to open their minds; the fact that, after years of hard work, she manages to do that will be a great accomplishment, and a reason to feel fulfilled; her years of hard work will have the significance of a rewarded effort.

Now, one may wonder why one needs to *value* something in order to have the resources to interpret (things in) one's life as meaningful. Isn't this what our *concepts* do for us - concepts such as vocation, friendship, quest, success, accomplishment, useful, purpose, and so on? I think that, even though such concepts play a role in shaping the way in which one values something (as a vocation, as a friend, etc.), it is the valuing that makes the language *one's own*. If Joan, who hated teaching, and couldn't care less whether underprivileged children can read, ended up living in Mary's village, with no other means

of subsistence than teaching, the same things would have a completely different meaning to her: the children's lack of interest in school would be a pain (or perhaps a relief, if she chooses to show up for class and let them do whatever they want as long as she can do whatever she wants); the parents' reluctance to send them to school would be a threat to her already meager income; if she ends up working hard, she nevertheless earns next to nothing, so her years of hard work will mean wasted time.

Imagine that Mary and Joan meet and talk about Joan's life, and Mary insists: your life *is* meaningful, your years of hard work were not a waste, you accomplished a lot by teaching these children how to read, and you should feel proud and fulfilled. I think their conversation would be analogous to that of two people who both look at a page covered with signs that happen to mean different things in their respective languages. Each of them insists that *he* is right about what the page really means. But the page doesn't "really" mean anything; it means one thing in one language, and another thing in the other's language, and nothing at all in lots of other languages.

A critic might object at this point that Joan's life is also "full of meaning" in the sense described above: teaching means boredom, years of hard work mean wasted time, her ending up in a village of illiterates means failure, and so on. If a meaningful life is a life full of meaning in this sense, then a wasted life will turn out to be meaningful.

But a life's being "full of meaning" is only a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for living a meaningful life. The fact that one values certain things gives one the resources to interpret the events in one's life. But when we want a life to be meaningful, we don't merely want it to make sense; we want it to make sense in a way that makes it worth living.

It wouldn't make sense to say: "Boredom makes my life worth living."<sup>120</sup> Although this is not unintelligible in the way "alks jdfo waie" is, it is close to the way in which "This square is diligent" doesn't make sense: boredom is not the kind of thing that can make a life worth living. Boredom is not the kind of thing that humans can value for its own sake, and our language reflects that.

The idea that valuing contributes to meaningfulness is relatively uncontroversial, both amongst philosophers and non-philosophers. It is by loving or caring about things that they become meaningful to you, many will say. But in developing this thought, philosophers stress mostly the point that by caring about things, they become *important* to you; your valuing things makes them *valuable* to you – and, in this sense, meaningful to you.<sup>121</sup> My account underscores a different aspect of the contribution that valuing makes to a meaningful life: an agent's attitude of valuing makes his life intelligible to him, by organizing what happens in his life in a structure by virtue of which the "brute facts" gain meaning. Valuing thus allows us to interpret life and make sense of it. At the same time, by making things valuable to us, valuing enables us to have positive interpretations of life, according to which life is worthwhile.

The norms one is committed to in valuing play a crucial role in making life intelligible. It is those norms that make it possible for events and things to have meaning, just like the norms governing the use of words make it possible for words to have meaning.

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<sup>120</sup> Unless one can tell some story in which boredom gains a different significance, like, say, scorning the gods who want you to be fully captivated by the life *they* have chosen for you – in which boredom with it is an expression of freedom.

<sup>121</sup> See Harry Frankfurt, "The importance of what we care about," "On caring," *The reasons of love*; Joseph Raz, *Value, respect, and attachment*.

If the only valuing – type attitude we were capable of were desire, our world would be much poorer: the only meaning things could have for us would be “desired – undesired.”

Equally important for intelligibility is the *commitment* to the norms. In the absence of commitment, the norms would fall flat. They would be as ineffective as semantic norms in a community where people chose randomly which word to use when. The norms make possible a structure; the commitment keeps the structure in place.

In his paper “The Absurd,” Thomas Nagel argues that the sense of absurd arises from the clash between two perspectives we can take on our lives. On the one hand, as deliberative agents, we need, and take ourselves to have, reasons for action. On the other hand, as reflective agents, we are inclined to, and even find it unavoidable, to try and take an outside perspective on our practice of reason-giving, as a whole, and to ask whether it is justified. We cannot help asking whether, from the point of view of the universe, we have reasons for anything.<sup>122</sup>

From that outside, transcendental point of view, the fact that our practice of reasons is the way it is, or that we have one at all, can only appear arbitrary, Nagel claims. From the point of view of the universe, there are no reasons for us to act and live. Thus we find ourselves caught between our need for reasons for action, and the awareness that, from a

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<sup>122</sup> One might ask here whether there even is such a thing as the point of view of the universe. (I owe this observation to Tom Hill). On the interpretation of Nagel’s argument that I find most charitable, “the point of view of the universe” is the perspective we can take on reasons when we try to reflect on our practice of reason-giving as a whole, and ask whether there are good reasons for that practice’s being the way it is. Now, one might think that asking this question from this perspective is unintelligible: if you really are outside of any reason-giving practice, then you don’t have the conceptual resources to ask the question; the concept of a reason is available to you only inside the practice. Nagel says that from the perspective of the universe, the practice can only appear arbitrary; but, strictly speaking, this is false: you need to be inside the practice to be able to make the distinction between arbitrary and non-arbitrary. In Nagel’s defense, I would say that it seems possible to be at the same time inside and outside the practice: to use the conceptual resources of the practice to ask a question about the practice as a whole. The question I would ask is whether what happens when we ask such a question should matter to us. I will argue, in what follows, that it shouldn’t.

transcendental perspective, there are no such reasons. This is, according to Nagel, where the sense of absurd comes from.

He argues that there is no way out of this dilemma (short of suicide), but that this need not worry us: the sense that life is absurd is merely an awareness of our human condition – and, one might add, of the nature of reasons – but it does not pose a problem that calls for a solution. After all, from the point of view of the universe the absurdity of our lives doesn't matter either.

Not everyone shares, though, Nagel's viewpoint that the sense of the absurd does not pose a problem, and those who don't might wonder if there is indeed no way of avoiding it. Since, on Nagel's interpretation of the absurd, the absurd is not in the world, but rather in us, in the contradiction between the different perspectives we can take on life, the only way one could avoid the absurd would be by refusing to take one perspective or another. Nagel himself considers the options, but finds them unfeasible. In particular, he says, we cannot, by an act of the will, avoid adopting the point of view of the universe. Once aware of the possibility of this point of view, we cannot try to forget it; and before we are aware of it, we cannot try to prevent ourselves from becoming aware of it, because we don't know about it yet.

The sense of absurd does not prevent us from going on with our lives as before, says Nagel. "What sustains us, in belief as in action, is not reason or justification, but something more basic than these – for we go on in the same way even after we are convinced that the reasons have given out. If we tried to rely entirely on reason, and pressed it hard, our lives and beliefs would collapse – a form of madness that may actually

occur if the inertial force of taking the world and life for granted is somehow lost. If we lose our grip on that, reason will not give it back to us.”<sup>123</sup>

The picture suggested here is that, even when reason finds out and insists that nothing is, ultimately, a reason for action, life kicks in and pushes one along, forcing one to act as if there were reasons for action.

I think that this picture brings out an interesting question about what it is to see something as a reason for action. One might think that to see something as a reason for action is to believe that it is a reason. As deliberative agents, we believe that we have reasons for action; but, as self-reflective agents, we can also reason our way to the belief that, from the point of view of the universe, there are no reasons for action; and the situation we thus place ourselves in is absurd. Though absurd, our situation is not tragic, because life goes on as before. The lives we live are absurd, but we live them. This suggests that reason is the one that can answer the question of what we have reasons to do, but – luckily, albeit absurdly - life doesn't listen to reason.

I think it's worth taking seriously the possibility that life gets the question of reasons right, and that Reason, when it departs on its own and leaves life behind, can get it wrong. It could be that the absurd arises when one over-intellectualizes reasons, and when one identifies seeing something as a reason with believing it to be a reason. Nagel might be wrong that adopting the point of view of the universe is an unavoidable consequence of our self-reflectiveness. It may be an unavoidable consequence of our over-intellectualizing reasons – that is, of our tendency to think that it is Reason that can and should determine what constitutes a reason for action. In the passage quoted from Nagel, life seems to be a

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<sup>123</sup> Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, p. 20.

brute force that acts on us no matter what Reason decides about reasons. One different way of thinking about it is that what we are forced, by life, to take as reasons, are, in fact, the reasons, no matter what reason might decide in its purely theoretical exercise. If this is right, the absurd can be avoided – not by refusing to think from the perspective of the universe; but by refusing to take that perspective as the correct perspective on what we have reason to do, as determining what we should see as reasons.

I believe that one reason why valuing is essential for the meaningfulness of one's life is that, when one values something, one's commitment to seeing it as valuable renders the transcendental perspective, the point of view of the universe, moot. When one values something, one sees it as a reason in a way that is immune to the shift in perspective brought about by the reflective adoption of the point of view of the universe.

I think the experience of the absurd is similar to the one you have when you stare at an image or repeat a word long enough for it to lose its meaning and seem gibberish. You cease to see or hear it as a word, as a unit of meaning – i.e., to interpret it via semantic rules; instead, you perceives it as a mere string of letters or sounds. Your knowing that what is in front of you is a word, and even your capacity to define the word if asked to, doesn't remove the experience of its meaninglessness. Similarly, I think that one experiences life as absurd when one lingers long enough in the purely intellectual perspective on reasons for the norms that enable meaningfulness to lose their grip on one, that is, long enough so that one ceases to see the world via those norms. One's belief or knowledge that many things in one's life, including life itself, are valuable, is not enough to counter this experience of absurdity, just like the knowledge that the image one is staring at is a meaningful word is not enough to dispel the experience of it as meaningless.

One needs to see the object as valuable, to value it – to see it via the norms that confer its significance. You can even imagine someone who, after staring long enough at words in that way, became convinced that *that* is the right perspective on words, that it reveals the truth about words - namely, that they are, in fact, meaningless, nothing more than a string of letters. The nihilist who becomes convinced that his life has no meaning seems to me to be in a similar predicament.

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