

Love and the Value of a Life

Kieran Setiya

University of Pittsburgh

In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch placed among the facts “which seem to have been forgotten or ‘theorized away’” in contemporary philosophy “the fact that love is a central concept in morals”: “We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central” (Murdoch 1970, 2, 45).

Murdoch’s complaint could be made today. Although philosophers sometimes write about love and ethics, they do so mainly in connection with partiality or close relationships. They are interested in the obligations and prerogatives of love. Love is a fact with which morality must engage and by which it is potentially challenged. But its domain is local. Outside the context of close relationships, love can be ignored. It is not at the root of obligation, as such, but an aspect of our personal lives that calls for moral reflection. On this approach, one could have an adequate view of the nature and grounds of morality without having much to say about love.

It may be a mistake to put love at the center of ethics or to give it an essential role in the explanation of moral duty. But there is a tradition

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of thinking otherwise, on which Murdoch goes on to draw: the tradition of morality as love for one another. The commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself belongs to the statement of the laws in Leviticus, and its influence can be traced, through Christianity, to St. Augustine, Kierkegaard, and the ethics of agape.¹ But it is even less discussed in secular moral philosophy than the golden rule.

This essay will not defend the ethics of love. But it prepares the way. Its method is exploratory: I argue from attractive premises to puzzling conclusions, conclusions that force us to confront the place of love in moral philosophy. Although my target is love's moral import, much of the essay is independent of that. In section 1, I discuss the rationality of love: whether there are reasons for love and what they could be. Rejecting meritocratic conceptions, I argue that another's humanity is enough to justify loving them, though there may be other reasons, too. In the following section, I argue that it is rational to act with partiality to those you love, moved by features of the circumstance apart from their relationship with you. The love that is justified by another's humanity involves the disposition to act in this way. Nor is the rationality of being so disposed conditional on love. In section 3, I draw out a consequence of these claims for a contested issue in moral philosophy: should the numbers count?² If I could either save one stranger from drowning or a group of three, am I required to save the greater number? My conception of love conflicts with the claim, which many find obvious, that I should save three instead of one.

1. Love Is Not Irrational

Though we are said to love things that are not human beings, to love justice, or philosophy, or baseball, we will focus on love for one another. Even here, we should be struck by the variety of love. As well as romantic love, there is the love involved in friendship, parental and filial love, love of one's brother or sister, of a distant relative, of one's colleagues or the members of one's religious community, and love of one's neighbor, if there is any such thing. Philosophers who try to state the essence of love typically do so in ways that are highly abstract, or that apply, in full, only to some varieties of love. Thus, Robert Nozick wrote, in a well-known essay,

1. On love of neighbor in Judaism, see Goodman 2008; and for Christian conceptions, Outka 1972 and Wolterstorff 2011.

2. This issue was made prominent by Taurek 1977; see also Anscombe 1967.

“What is common to all love is this: Your own well-being is tied up with that of someone (or something) you love,” which covers many cases, if not all, but he went on to emphasize the desire for union with the beloved, which applies at most to some (Nozick 1989, 68, 70). If I love my children selflessly, I may hope for union with them only if it is in their interests. My desire to be with them is conditional on whether they benefit from their relationship with me.

Perhaps inspired by the model of parental love, a recurring theme is that to love someone is to care about them, so that their interests count as reasons for you to act: “Loving someone or something essentially *means* or *consists in*, among other things, taking its interests as reasons to serve those interests” (Frankfurt 2004, 37).³ But this is not sufficient for love since I may care about the interests of strangers without loving them. And it also seems unnecessary. David Velleman (1999, 353) calls the picture of love as the desire to benefit, or the desire for union, “a sentimental fantasy—an idealized vision of living happily ever after.” Not only is it “easy enough to love someone whom one cannot stand to be with, . . . [in] most contexts, a love that is inseparable from the urge to benefit is an unhealthy love, bristling with uncalled-for impingements” (Velleman 1999, 353). This is overstated and a bit unfair. Concern for the good of another need not involve the desire to benefit her in ways that infringe on her autonomy, or when the benefit is not a matter of urgent need. But Velleman is right that there can be love without the desire for union—he gives the example of a difficult relative—and that there can be love without the desire for another’s good. Romantic love can be both selfish and possessive, and while it may then be flawed, it does not cease to be love.

No adequate conception of love can ignore or deny its diversity. What then can we say, in general terms, about the nature of love? It will be enough for us that a common element of love, in many of its forms, is vulnerability to the needs and interests of another human being: the special way in which most of us care about our children, parents, friends, and romantic partners.⁴ In its degree and its directedness, this goes beyond moral concern. We would do more for our loved ones than for

3. See also Kolodny 2003, 136–37; Jollimore 2011, 112–13; and for a long list of related views, Velleman 1999, 352.

4. Velleman (1999, 361) suggests that love “makes us vulnerable to the other” but also that it “arrests our tendencies toward emotional self-protection [and] disarms our emotional defenses.” The first point seems right; the second is as narrow and sentimental as the claims that Velleman rejects. It may be despite myself that I am emotionally vulnerable to someone I love: my emotional defenses are down but not “arrested” or “disarmed.”

just anyone, and their suffering affects us more. This is true even of distant friends, or ones we rarely see. At the same time, love is shaped by our relationships to those we love. To echo Velleman (1999, 353), while I may “think of myself as an agent of [my children’s] interests,” I do not relate to my friends, or to my wife, in that paternalistic way.

Our question is whether there are or can be reasons for love, in this paradigmatic form. This is often denied, as by Harry Frankfurt in *The Reasons of Love*: far from being a response to reasons, or to “the inherent value of its object,” love is “the originating source of terminal value” (Frankfurt 2004, 38, 55). There are several issues to distinguish here. Frankfurt makes two claims: that love is the ultimate source of practical reasons and that love is not a response to objective value. The first claim may entail the second, but the converse does not hold. One could deny that there are reasons for love without finding in love “the origins of normativity” (Frankfurt 2004, 48). In any case, I will set aside the argument that there are no reasons for love because there are no reasons that do not depend on love; Frankfurt’s critique of objective value is not our present concern. We should also distinguish the claim that there are reasons for love from the more specific contention that they consist in valuable qualities of the beloved, qualities she has apart from her relation to you, such as beauty, vivacity, or intelligence. Some of Frankfurt’s arguments are directed specifically at the latter: “I can declare with unequivocal confidence that I do not love my children because I am aware of some value that inheres in them independent of my love for them” (Frankfurt 2004, 39). This is consistent with there being reasons for love that turn on Frankfurt’s relationship with his children, not their intrinsic character.

Having marked this possibility, we will consider, first, the view that Frankfurt most explicitly rejects: that there are reasons for love and that they are qualities of the person one loves that distinguish her from other people. In *Love’s Vision*, Troy Jollimore (2011, 25–26) defends a qualified version of this claim: “Loving someone is, in large part, a kind of positive, appreciative response to her in virtue of her attractive, desirable, or otherwise valuable properties. . . . Love is thus a matter of reason, insofar as it is a response to something external that attempts to be adequate to the nature of its object.” But love is “something between an appraisal and a bestowal”: “It is an appraisal insofar as it takes itself to be responding to independent, preexisting values”; what is bestowed is “the sort of close, generous, and imaginative attention that allows valuable features of this sort fully to reveal themselves” (71–72). On this view, the valuable qualities of another constitute reasons for love, to which one responds in

loving her appropriately. Love then involves appreciative vision, attention to the beloved that brings out qualities otherwise “muted, subtle, or difficult to discern” (71).⁵

In light of the diversity of love, we should be wary of equating it with appreciative vision. That is often involved in love, but it is not essential. Parents can be unsparingly critical, and while that may not be for the best, it need not conflict with their claim to love. What is more, their children may be happy to reciprocate. But we can set this aside. More troubling is the claim that distinctive qualities of the person you love are what justify you in loving her. The idea that there are reasons for love and that such reasons consist in the merits of the beloved is notoriously problematic. Jollimore (2011, 15–18) gives a lucid account of these problems in the opening chapter of his book.⁶ If you have qualities that are reasons for me to love you, and that justify my love, does it follow that anyone who is aware of these qualities should love you, too? (The problem of universality.) That I should love anyone who has these qualities? (The problem of promiscuity.) That if someone else has more of these qualities, I should love her instead, or more? (The problem of trading up.) That if you lose these qualities, I should stop loving you? (The problem of inconstancy.) None of these implications seems right. It is therefore tempting to reject the picture of love as a rational response to reasons, which are distinctive virtues of the person you love.

Jollimore is not convinced. He responds to the difficulties by insisting that reasons for love need not require it: reasons can make “objects or options *eligible* for choice without making it *mandatory* that agents select those particular options” (Jollimore 2011, 93–94).⁷ In a different idiom, we can distinguish “insistent” from “noninsistent” reasons.⁸ The latter make it appropriate or rational to respond in a certain way, without requiring that response. By contrast, insistent reasons to ϕ are either decisive, implying that one ought to ϕ , or contribute to such requirements, as *pro tanto* reasons. Insistent reasons combine to yield stronger reasons and fix what one should do, all things considered. If we think of people’s merits as noninsistent reasons for love, we solve most of the standard problems. It does not follow from the fact that your qualities make you

5. For love as a response to reasons, see also Jollimore 2011, 95, 118.

6. See also Kolodny 2003, 139–41.

7. See also Jollimore 2011, 118, 121; his terminology is adapted from Raz 1999 [1997].

8. See Kolodny 2003, 163, following Kagan 1989, 378–81.

worthy of love, and in that sense justify me in loving you, that others should love you, too, that I should love anyone who shares those qualities, or that I should love those who have more of them instead of, or more than, you (Jollimore 2011, 123–34).

The problem of inconstancy, however, remains. If reasons for love are noninsistent but not redundant, it must be possible to lack such reasons, and so for love to be unwarranted. On the most natural view, it is rational to love someone only if one's beliefs about them would, if true, provide a reason.⁹ Suppose I love you because you are funny and considerate, but as time goes by, you change. You no longer make me laugh, and you think only of yourself. Does it follow that I should not love you anymore? Not immediately. For love may inhibit the cold reappraisal of your qualities, and it may involve a disposition to find new virtues as you change.¹⁰ Consider, then, the more extreme case in which I see that my reasons are gone, and I cannot find replacements. This may be rare, but as Jollimore (2011, 139) concedes, it is not impossible. Here the quality theorist must deny that it is rational to love. And this is a mistake. It is not that love *must* continue in the face of radical change—that love is not love which alters when it alteration finds—but that unconditional love is not irrational. (Here and throughout, I use “irrational” in the broad sense that connotes a failure of practical reason, not the narrow sense that suggests internal conflict or culpability.)¹¹ It is not irrational to love my wife with a constancy that would survive the loss of her admirable qualities, the things that drew me to her in the first place or that attract me now. Nor is it irrational to love one's children, come what may.

In his most direct response to this concern, Jollimore (2011, 139–41) argues that we can love people for qualities they used to have. We need not focus on present virtues: that you were once funny, or kind, can be a reason for me to love you now. In effect, this transforms the temporary into the permanent. The property of having once been kind is one you cannot lose. If this is my reason for loving you, the problem of inconstancy cannot be raised. But this only takes us so far. Even if it works, the

9. In principle, it might be rational to love someone in the absence of such beliefs, even though I should not love them, all things considered, if there is no reason for love. In effect, the absence of distinctive merits would be a defeating condition. Although I don't discuss it explicitly, the arguments below refute this view. It, too, conflicts with the rationality of unconditional love.

10. These points are stressed by Jollimore in responding to the problem of inconstancy; see Jollimore 2011, 138–39.

11. I discuss this contrast in Setiya 2012, 8.

turn to history cannot solve a related problem: that of error. It is not irrational to love my wife with a constancy that would survive not only the loss of her admirable qualities but the discovery that they were never real. If someone can lose these qualities, there is a more peculiar case in which they were absent all along. You never acted from true kindness, always with an ulterior motive; your “jokes” were unintentional; my memories are false. The point is not that my love *must* survive in this scenario: it is rational for it to end. But it is not a mistake to go on loving my wife when I learn that I was wrong about her from the start. This kind of commitment conflicts with the need for valuable qualities, even past ones, as reasons for love.

There is a deeper complaint here, against love as a response to positive qualities. To repeat what I said before: if reasons for love are noninsistent but not redundant, it must be possible to lack such reasons, and so for love to be unwarranted. There must be people who are not worthy of love, or circumstances in which, not being aware of their virtues, it is irrational to love them. This implication is profoundly troubling. It can seem less so if we concentrate on friendship and romantic love, or conflate reasons for love with reasons for maintaining a relationship. That there are people I shouldn't marry or date or be friends with seems not so strange. But are there people whose parents shouldn't love them? What prevents that, if only merit justifies love?¹²

It can also seem less strange that there are people we should not love if we think of love as concern for another's interests and conceive those interests in morally neutral terms. Suppose it would make my child happy to succeed in some awful project. It may be true that I should not want to help him or promote the satisfaction of his desires. But the expression of parental love is not compelled to take that form. When I love my child, my concern for his well-being may be morally conditioned.¹³ It may be out of love that I try to prevent him from doing something wrong, to undermine his projects, even at the cost of utter misery. If he succeeds, it may be out of love that I try to change him, to make him repent or turn himself in. What I want for my child is not pleasure but the goods of life, and so the good of moral virtue. According to Jollimore (2011, 142), if “one's beloved were to become evil . . . love for

12. The response I am inviting is the opposite of Freud's, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: “A love that does not discriminate seems to me to forfeit a part of its own value . . . not all men are worthy of love” (Freud 2010 [1930], 82).

13. On this point, see Wolterstorff 2011, 76–78.

him might require its own extinction.” Of course, love might end, and this might be rational. But it is not required. It is not a mistake to love one’s child in the face of terrible wrongdoing, though one’s love for him may be transformed.¹⁴

What I have argued so far is that if there are reasons for love, they do not consist in a person’s particular merits. The standard problems show that such reasons are not insistent. And unless they are redundant, noninsistent reasons struggle with constancy and error. It is not irrational to persist in loving someone, even as you learn that their positive qualities have faded or were never there. Love is not in that way meritocratic.

Nor are the arguments for the quality theory especially strong. It is true that if you ask me why I love my wife or child, I may have something to say, and what I cite in answer to your question may look like reasons: “because she is funny”; “because he is full of joy.”¹⁵ But there is a certain awkwardness in putting things this way. It is more natural to say that this is “what I love” about him or her than why I love them. My remarks can be interpreted not as attempts to justify love but as expressions of it. Jollimore is right to connect love with appreciation, at least in a familiar range of cases. It is often part of romantic or parental love to be sensitive to, and moved by, the positive qualities of one’s partner or child. It is then a consequence of love that you can point to distinctive merits in the person you love. In doing so, you show the quality of your attention to that person. That is why it is especially apt, and especially touching, to respond by citing subtle virtues, not manifest strengths, and to focus on idiosyncrasies, not properties that are widely shared. Your awareness of these qualities shows the depth of your appreciation.

It does not follow from any of this that there are no reasons for love, just that they do not consist in our distinctive merits. To anticipate, my view is that another’s humanity is sufficient reason to love them: no one is unworthy of love. But there are complications here, best explored through the idea of relationships as reasons for love. In “Love as Valuing a Relationship,” Niko Kolodny (2003, 146) rejects the quality theory but defends the existence of such reasons: “Love is . . . rendered *normatively*

14. Not surprisingly, reflection on love in the face of evil has been part of the agapic tradition. What does it mean to love one’s enemy? “However difficult to apply in practice, for the sake of the neighbour one may have to resist his exploitation as well as attend to his needs” (Outka 1972, 21).

15. For this argument, see Jollimore 2011, 18–20; and for a reply to which I am sympathetic, Kolodny 2003, 138–39.

appropriate by the presence of a relationship. Love, moreover, partly *consists* in the belief that some relationship renders it appropriate, and the emotions and motivations of love are *causally sustained* by this belief (except in pathological cases).” It is crucial to separate two parts of Kolodny’s view. The first is a theory of relationships as insistent reasons for love. The fact that you are my child, or that we have a certain history together, can be a reason to love you that makes it unreasonable not to.¹⁶ This claim seems plausible to me, though I will not defend it at length. If someone fails to love their own child, or their love for their partner or friends is utterly capricious, this shows a defect of character. Nor is there a substantive distinction between defects of character in one’s response to the facts and defects of practical reason.¹⁷ There is no room to say that the indifferent parent is ethically flawed but not irrational, at least not in the broad sense of “irrational” that connotes a failure to respond to reasons. As Kolodny insists, it does not matter to this point that love is not a voluntary act. We can have reasons to respond in ways that are not voluntary, or up to us, as in reasons for emotion and belief (Kolodny 2003, 138).

Kolodny’s second claim is much more dubious. He denies that it is possible to love someone without believing that one’s relationship with them is a source of practical reasons.¹⁸ The idea of relationships as insistent reasons for love does not entail this claim about the nature and conditions of love itself. And the claim is open to objection. The obvious problem is that relationships of friendship and romantic love partly consist in, and so cannot precede, the emotional vulnerabilities of love itself. How can the love involved in friendship rationally begin? It cannot be justified by friendship or involve the belief that we are already friends. Friendship cannot be a reason for the emotional vulnerabilities through which it comes to be.

Kolodny (2003, 169–70) replies to this objection with an incremental view. We first interact as acquaintances in ways that justify, and are seen by us to justify, ongoing interaction and the beginnings of concern. As we build our relationship, the reasons intensify and the responses deepen. Eventually, we reach the point that his theory of love describes. No doubt some relationships are like this. They grow steadily and reciprocally. But does it have to be that way? What about momentous, instan-

16. On relationships as insistent reasons, see Kolodny 2003, 167–68.

17. This is the argument of Setiya 2007.

18. He goes on to specify, in some detail, the content of this belief; see Kolodny 2003, 150–53.

taneous love? Or love that is unrequited and unjustified by a history of interaction? What about Dante and Beatrice?¹⁹ *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (Goethe 2012 [1774])? Stendhal’s “passionate love” for Mathilde Dembowska (Stendhal 1975 [1822])? Rather than treat such love as pathological, since the relationship is not plausibly thought to justify its force, we should deny Kolodny’s second claim, which does not follow from his first. We should disentangle the idea of relationships as insistent reasons for love from the alleged condition of love, that one take one’s relationship to be a source of reasons. In doing so, we make room for love at first sight and from a distance.

The simplest view to take here, and the one that I accept, is that it is sufficient to justify love that its object is another human being. It would be a mistake to love a baseball card more than I love my child, but there is no one it is irrational to love.²⁰ Any one of us would be justified in loving any other. It is consistent with this claim that relationships are insistent reasons for love, but not that they make love “normatively appropriate” if that means it would be inappropriate otherwise. Kolodny’s argument for the latter claim turns on the fact that love can seem out of place. What should we make of the wife who loves her abusive and uncaring husband (Kolodny 2003, 137)? Suppose I wake up with feelings of intense concern for one of my son’s classmates, a child I hardly know?²¹ What these examples show, however, is not that love can be irrational, but that it can take misguided forms. What is irrational is to love someone in the wrong way: possessively, perhaps, or self-destructively. It is not a mistake to love them at all. This point reflects, again, the diversity of love, which need not aim at benefit unconditioned by morality. The abused wife should not want to advance her husband’s interests, as he conceives them; most likely, she should end the marriage. It is easy to imagine

19. This case is raised against Kolodny in Stump 2006, 26–27.

20. For the baseball card example, see Jollimore 2011, 22–23. A more difficult case is love for nonhuman animals. Nothing I say in the rest of the essay depends on this—my claim is that humanity is sufficient, not necessary, to justify love—but I doubt that it is rational to love one’s dog with the degree of partiality one has for one’s wife or child. To anticipate section 2: in ordinary circumstances, you should not save your dog at the cost of a stranger’s life.

21. This is a variation on Kolodny 2003, 144–45. Kolodny’s treatment differs in two ways. First, the child he considers is a complete stranger, known only by his name on the class roster. I think it matters to love whether its object is available for singular thought. Since I am not acquainted with him, this may not be true of the child in Kolodny’s case. Second, his topic is whether my feelings for the child could even count as love. Our question is whether, if they did, such love would be irrational.

oneself saying to her, “You need to move on; forget about him; let go.” And that might be right. Her husband should not occupy her thoughts. But she need not cease to love him, and so to wish for him, sincerely and profoundly, a better life. The case in which I love a stranger’s child may seem disturbing. But again, it is easy to misconstrue. It would be wrong to love the child as I love my own, to regard myself as the agent of her interests, or to invade her privacy. But love does not require these things. It need not compel attention or affect what one does from day to day. Compare my attitude to friends I have not seen or thought about for years. Still, I care about them more than I care about just anyone; in fact, I continue to love them. Is it wrong to feel that way about the stranger’s child? My obligations to lost friends may differ from my obligations to her, but it is not irrational to be moved by the child’s well-being as I am moved by theirs. I do not need a relationship to justify this response.

That we do not need such reasons is confirmed by cases of amnesia. Kolodny (2003, 141–43) suggests that forgetting a relationship would tend to extinguish love. He may be right about this, but the effect is not inevitable: as I have argued, love is possible in the absence of such beliefs. Imagine, then, a case in which I forget how I relate to my wife and child. Awakening from a coma, having lost all memory of our past relationship, I still know them by name and find myself deeply stirred. For reasons I do not understand, I love this woman and this boy. Is my love for them irrational? Assuming that it is not, relationships are not required as reasons for love.

It might be thought that when it persists in this way, love is justified by its origins: I used to know of a relationship that is a reason for love. But again, we can imagine otherwise. To take a more fantastic case, suppose that, instead of suffering amnesia, I discover that we came into existence an hour ago and that our “memories” are false: we have no past relationship. Is love then irrational? I think the answer is still no. If you were to learn that your shared past is an illusion, would you stop loving the people you took to be your friends and family? Would you be making a mistake? (If you struggle to imagine how you could discover this, suppose instead that you remain deceived. Do you lack sufficient reason to love these people? Should you stop?)

We know from the rationality of love at first sight, and from a distance, that love can be justified without an existing relationship. The same point holds in the more peculiar cases I have described. It is rational to love someone without believing that you have a relationship with them,

and the absence of a relationship is not a defeating condition, in light of which love must end.

No doubt some will be unmoved. Taking a more cynical view of love at first sight, or in the face of a bad relationship, amnesia, or skeptical delusion, they will insist that we need relationships as reasons for love. I argue against this further in section 2. For now, suppose that we do not. The cases considered so far support a simple view. That you are another human being is enough to justify loving you, if not to require such love. This reason does not fade in the absence of a relationship or of any distinctive merit. The upshot is a conception of love that has affinities with Velleman's theory in "Love as a Moral Emotion." For Velleman (1999, 366), "respect and love [are] the required minimum and optional maximum responses to one and the same value," that of personhood or rational will. The object of respect and love is not a property, as this formulation might suggest, but its instance in a particular human being. In effect, personhood is seen as an insistent, decisive reason for respect, and a sufficient, noninsistent reason for love. One way to illuminate the picture of love I am proposing is to compare it briefly with this account.

First, Velleman says that love is "optional," suggesting not only that it is permitted but that it is not required. When he asks why we love some people and not others, he does not appeal to reasons but to contingent facts of salience and the limits of emotional energy (Velleman 1999, 370–72). In contrast, I am open to the view that relationships can be insistent reasons for love.

Second, where Velleman cites personhood as the ground of love, my view cites humanity. The difference matters to love for human beings who are not persons in the Kantian sense, such as infants and the severely impaired. But the contrast may be overdrawn. I hold that humanity is sufficient reason for love, not that it is necessary; I do not object to love for rational beings that are not human. And Velleman (1999, 365) allows that "love is felt for many things other than possessors of rational nature," claiming only that love for persons is distinctive in being a response to the value someone has "by virtue of being a person or, as Kant would say, an instance of rational nature." Although I am skeptical of this, I need not press the point. The rest of my argument goes through if we replace "humanity" with "personhood": it does not turn on cases in which they come apart. More generally, my view is that whatever property gives us moral status of the sort that commands respect, it is this property that justifies love. Any theory of moral status that attributes it to rational human beings will do the work my argument requires.

As this remark suggests, I think Velleman is right to connect love and its reasons with the morality of respect. It is not clear to me exactly what he means when he calls love a “moral emotion” and describes it as “an arresting awareness of [the] value” of personhood or rational will (Velleman 1999, 360). On my account, love need not involve a belief in the value of humanity, a belief that it justifies love or demands respect. But a weaker thought is tempting. If humanity is a reason for love, just being human is enough to warrant the intense concern that we devote to our close friends and family. Can it then be rational to hold other human beings in absolute disregard? Can we take something to be a sufficient reason for love but not a conclusive reason for respect? Although it is not a contradiction, this claim may be normatively incoherent. At least, there is room to make the case. The idea that every human being is worthy of love, that it would be rational for anyone to love them, is a picture of the value in human life that may have moral implications.

We will come back to the morality of love. I end by noting a final contrast with Velleman, about the reasons for which we act when we act from love. Considering the case in which a man could save a stranger or his drowning wife, but cannot save both, Velleman writes that of course he should save his wife but “the reasons why he should save her have nothing essentially to do with love” (Velleman 1999, 373).²² These reasons turn instead on the “mutual commitments and dependencies of a loving relationship” (373). For Velleman, there is thus a great divergence between what justifies love, which is rational personhood, and what justifies partiality in action. In the following section, I defend an opposing view, on which the reasons for which we act when we act from love need not appeal to relationships, but can draw simply, and directly, on the needs of those we love.

2. Acting from Love

In his well-known discussion of the drowning wife, Bernard Williams was concerned to deny that morality is involved in the husband’s decision, that it must give permission for him to save her. As he put the point, in a memorable passage: “[This] construction provides the agent with one thought too many: it might have been hoped by some (for instance, by his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his wife, not that it was his wife and that in situations of this kind

22. The example comes from Williams 1981 [1976], 17–18.

it is permissible to save one's wife" (Williams 1981 [1976], 18). As ensuing treatments have shown, Williams's claim about this case is puzzling. His phenomenology seems right: the husband should not dwell on or pause to debate whether it is permissible to save his wife. But it does not follow that he will save her whether or not it is permissible to do so, or that love requires him to act that way.²³ He can save her because she is his wife while being disposed to refrain if the only way to save her, in the circumstance, is by doing something morally wrong.

Our topic is not Williams on moral permissibility but a more radical claim that others have made. In a letter quoted by Liam Murphy, Derek Parfit wrote: "It's odd that Williams gives, as the thought that the person's wife might hope he was having, that he is saving her because she is *his wife*. She might have hoped that he [would save] her because she was *Mary*, or *Jane*, or whatever. That she is his wife seems one thought too many" (Murphy 2000, 140n36). This complaint is echoed by Harry Frankfurt (2004, 36n2): "I cannot help wondering why the man should have even the one thought that it's his wife. Are we supposed to imagine that at first he didn't recognize her? Or [that] he didn't remember that they were married, and had to remind himself of that? It seems to me that the strictly correct number of thoughts for this man is zero." Frankfurt's description is perhaps unfair. It is absurd to imagine these thoughts going through the man's head, but as we saw with Williams, that does not mean he is not aware that the woman is his wife or that this is not among the reasons for which he acts. Still, that is close to the position I accept. In acting from love—as, for instance, in saving one's wife—one need not act on the basis of one's relationship to the object of love. That she is your wife may not be "one thought too many" but it is one thought more than you need.

There are two arguments for this. The first builds on the results of section 1. There I argued that the fact of another's humanity is enough to justify love. When you love someone for this and no other reason, and you act from love, you do not act on a relationship to the one you love. Perhaps you cross the room to speak to someone you love at first sight. The thought of a relationship is, in this case, one thought too many, simply because it is false. It cannot be essential to acting from love that one act for that reason. What about the cases of amnesia and the illusory past? Is it irrational to favor the interests of your wife and child, or the people you

23. For compelling arguments to this effect, see Herman 1993, chaps. 2 and 9.

took them to be, in situations of this kind? That is hard to believe, on the assumption that you still love them, as you did before, and that you are justified in doing so. If partiality in emotion is warranted without the need for a past relationship, so is partiality in action.²⁴ Awakening from a coma with your memories destroyed, or discovering that they were fake, you love the person in front of you, and you are justified in doing so. Would it then be wrong to give more weight to their interests than to those of other people to whom you have no emotional response? Are you justified in feeling love only so far as you do not act on it? Surely not. If love is warranted, what is warranted is a response that affects how you behave, and the reasons for the response transmit to that behavior. Velleman is wrong to draw so sharp a line between the reasons for love and the reasons for acting from love. We do not need relationships to justify either one.²⁵

The second argument is independent of these concerns. It does not rest on, and in fact supports, the view that we do not need relationships as reasons for love. In exploring this argument, it will be useful to have before us a schematic example of partiality in action. Three strangers are stranded at sea, about to drown. Your wife, M, is drowning, too. But the strangers are too far away for you to save all four. If you save your wife, the strangers will drown. If you let her drown, you can save the three.²⁶ The circumstance is otherwise unexceptional. You have no special obligation to the strangers; nor do they have a right to aid beyond the rights of any human being. Their life or death would have no unusual consequences, good or ill. They are not about to cure a terrible disease or start an unjust war. Nor is your wife. Finally, neither the strangers nor your

24. See also Kolodny (2003, 176), though he draws the opposite conclusion, that neither response is justified except by the relationship.

25. Note that the reasoning here is specific to the case of love. I do not claim that reasons for emotion always count as reasons for the behavior that emotion would naturally prompt: one might have reason to be angry but no reason to express one's anger in action. Velleman (1999, 353–54) motivates the divergence in the present case by contrasting the attitude of love, which is directed at an individual, with the desire to benefit her, which aims at a specific outcome. As we saw in section 1, however, this contrast is overdrawn, since the desire to benefit someone need not have the unhealthy, invasive character to which Velleman objects. A disposition to be moved by the needs of the beloved—to be moved to act, that is, not just to feel—is paradigmatic of love. It is in fact unclear how sharply we differ on this score. Velleman (1999, 373) suggests that reasons for love may come apart from reasons for acting from love, but what he actually says is that the reason why you *should* save your wife turns on your relationship with her. As will become clear, I agree with the second claim, but not the first.

26. This case is adapted from Anscombe 1967, 17.

wife are moral saints or ethically depraved. Like many, I believe that, in this circumstance, it is permissible to save your wife: you would be justified in doing so. Something stronger may be true, that you *should* save your wife, all things considered. It would be wrong to let her drown, even to save three lives. But I will focus on the weaker claim. The grounds that I invoke do not explain why you should save your wife instead of the strangers: they are sufficient, not decisive, reasons to act.

According to the weaker claim, you would be justified in saving your wife, in the circumstance described. If you know that you are in this circumstance, it would be rational to save her. There is a further question. When you dive into the water, by what facts about the circumstance is it rational to be moved? Should you save her because she is your wife or on the ground of her relationship with you? I do not think you have to be moved in this way in order to be rational. When you dive into the water and save your wife from drowning, it is rational to be moved simply by the fact that she is in need and by other facts about the circumstance—the lack of exceptional conditions—not by the fact that she is your wife.

Some take a hard line here, holding that it is not merely inessential to acting from love that one act on a relationship, but that it is antithetical. As Kolodny (2003, 157) notes, the idea of saving your wife because of your relationship can seem to “[reflect] a kind of alienation from one’s beloved,” a failure to act out of genuine concern for *her*. There is something oddly and perhaps disturbingly self-regarding in deciding to save your wife because of how she relates to *you*. According to Philip Pettit (1997, 155): “The characteristic explanation of a lover’s behaviour towards a beloved is not the recognition of the fact of loving her, nor the recognition of the fact of any related features, but the fact of loving itself.” Unlike Pettit, I do not say that being moved by the belief that you love someone, or that she bears some relationship to you, is incompatible with acting from love. Love, and the commitment to act on it, may be genuine but conditional. What I say is that it is rational to act from love without being moved by such beliefs: to act for the sake of someone you love, moved by a concern for her that is not contingent on how she relates to you. That is how I would want my wife to act if she were in your place: to save me not because I am her husband or because we have the relationship we do, but spontaneously, just because it is me. As Pettit (1997, 158–59) argues, the reason for which she acts, in that case, is a singular

thought—“Kieran is drowning”—that need not mention my relationship to her.²⁷

The conclusion I am urging is that when you save your wife from drowning in the case described above, it is not irrational to be moved by features of the circumstance—that she is in danger, that you have no special obligation to the others, and so on—that do not include the fact that she is your wife. When you are moved in this way, your love for M makes you responsive to her needs, regardless of her relationship with you. It is in that way unconditional.

In light of this, we can give the further argument promised in section 1, against the need for relationships as reasons for love. Suppose that we need such reasons. Another’s humanity is not enough to justify love. Instead, what makes it rational to love someone is a belief about their relationship with you. In general, however, when an attitude is rational only because you believe that *p*, it is a condition of acting rationally on that attitude that you be moved, in part, by that belief. (Such motivation need not be self-conscious: you need not think of the belief as a ground on which you are acting, but your action depends on it.) It follows from these assumptions that it is irrational to save your wife, acting from love, unless you are moved by a belief about your relationship. But, as I have argued, that is not the case. Since it is rational to act from love, when you save your wife, without being moved by the belief that you love her or that she is your wife, we do not need relationships as reasons for love.²⁸

The emerging picture is this. As I argued in section 1, and as I have argued again, while relationships may be insistent reasons for love, such reasons are not required. Nor is love justified by a person’s distinctive merits, past or present. The fact of their humanity is sufficient. I need no more reason to love my wife than that she is another human being. What is more, it is not irrational to act with partiality to those you love, moved by features of the circumstance apart from their relationship to you.

27. See also Keller 2013, 92–96. The point here is not just that acting from love is distinct from acting for the sake of love, where that means acting in order to develop, sustain, or strengthen love. (Compare Stocker 1981, 754–55, on acting for the sake of friendship.) That fact could be absorbed by denying that the reasons for which you act when you act from love are teleological, while insisting that they cite your relationship (Stocker 1981, 763). Nor is it that your relationship serves as an “enabling condition” for reasons, not a reason to act (Keller 2013, 134–36). The point is that your relationship need not be part of what moves you at all.

28. A similar argument works against the quality theory, assuming that it is rational to save your wife without regard for her distinctive merits.

The love that is justified by your wife's humanity involves the disposition to act in this way.

My argument rests on a final claim, which is harder to articulate and defend. Perhaps the best way to approach it is by comparison. The position I accept is in one way less radical than Pettit's. He insists that, in acting from love, one is not moved by a belief about love or one's relation to its object. I have argued only that one need not be. But Pettit (1997, 156) does not deny that when you act from love, love plays a role in justifying what you do: "A lover in the proper sense will have no need for ... reflective thoughts [about love or relationships] in order to be motivated to pursue the beloved's good. And this, despite the fact that the lover's behaviour may be justified by the fact that they love the person favoured."²⁹

The role of love here may be compared with the role of desire in a common conception of instrumental reasoning. When you act on the desire for E, you do not act on the belief that you desire E. Instead you are moved directly by the belief that M is a means to E and by the desire for E itself. Still, the desire plays a justifying role. It would not be rational to act on your belief about means if you lacked the relevant desire. Nor is it rational to act on the mere belief that you desire E, and the belief that M is a means to E, since the first belief could be false. On this conception, desire plays a "background" role in practical thought. The rationality of being moved by means-end beliefs is conditional on the desire for E, but that desire does not appear in the content of a belief by which you are moved.³⁰ For Pettit, love plays a similar role. Its presence makes it rational to favor the interests of those you love, as when you save your wife from drowning, but it need not figure in the content of a belief on which you act.

Although I agree that beliefs about love need not be involved in acting from love, I do not see how love could do the work that Pettit describes. How could love make it rational to act on another's interests in the way you do when you save your wife if it would otherwise be irrational to do so? Take the disposition you manifest when you save your wife from drowning at the cost of three lives, a disposition to give more weight to her needs than to those of other people, limited by special obligations, unusual consequences, and extremes of virtue and vice. This disposition leads you to save her in light of beliefs about the circumstance

29. See also Pettit 1997, 159.

30. This account draws on Pettit and Smith 1990.

that do not include the belief that she is your wife. Is the rationality of being so disposed conditional on love? Unlike Pettit, I believe that it is not.

We can defend this claim, and see more clearly what it means, if we ask how love relates to the disposition in question. Does love involve this disposition, or is it a state of mind—a sentiment or attitude—distinct from it? On the most plausible conception, being disposed to give priority to her interests partly constitutes your love for your wife. Unlike desire, which along with belief is an “input” to means-end reasoning (on the conception sketched above), love is not an input to a pattern of thought in which you are also moved by beliefs about the circumstance. Rather, it consists, in part, in your propensity to be so moved. If this propensity is irrational, it is irrational to love your wife. One way to put this point is that the structure of love and its relation to practical thought are more like that of a character trait than of an attitude like desire.³¹ Virtues and vices are defined by the grounds to which they make one sensitive, the facts one is likely to detect or comprehend about one’s circumstance, how one responds to them in agency and affect. Traits of character are not material for practical reasoning, premises for practical inference of other kinds, but reflect or control the shape of one’s practical thought.³² The same is true of love.

No doubt, in ordinary cases, there is more to love than the disposition to be moved by another’s needs in the way you are when you save your wife. Love has affective dimensions and egoistic ones: it influences how we feel and what we want for ourselves. These aspects vary widely. As we saw in section 1, love comes in many shapes and forms. It does not follow from this that the rationality of the dispositions involved in love turns on the presence of the others, that these dispositions are rational only when they come together. Suppose it is true that, in loving your wife, you are disposed to feel about her in certain ways, to desire her company, and so on. The question is whether it is rational to give priority to her life over the lives of three, when the circumstance is otherwise normal—no special obligations, unusual consequences, extremes of virtue or vice—only because these affective dimensions are in place. This is what I deny. It would not destroy the rationality of your action, when you dive into the water and save your wife, if your love for her had lost its affective force, if it had become increasingly dispassionate and narrow in scope, no more

31. Compare Pettit 1997, 154–55.

32. I defend this conception of character at greater length in Setiya 2007, 70–75.

than a deep sensitivity to her needs, constrained by duty. Nor do I see how being disposed to feel a certain way about your wife could make this sensitivity rational—could make it rational to save her life at the cost of three others—if it would otherwise be wrong. What justifies you in saving your wife is not your emotional state or your desire to be with her. I conclude that the disposition to give priority to her needs is categorically rational, in this sense: its rationality does not depend on any further attitude or any aspect of love beside itself.

In this section, I have argued for two principal claims. First, that what is justified by another's humanity is not just love, but love of a kind that involves partiality in action. When you save your wife from drowning in the case we have discussed, it is rational to act from love on the basis of beliefs about the circumstance that fail to register the fact that she is your wife. Second, that the disposition you manifest in doing so would be rational even in the absence of other dispositions that constitute love. Its rationality does not turn on its affective environment, or on emotional responses apart from the response involved in the disposition itself. This is what I mean when I say, in contrast with Pettit, that the disposition to save your wife is not justified, or made rational, by love.

3. On Whether Love Counts

It is time to acknowledge a surprising consequence of this account. Go back to our example. Three strangers are about to drown; your wife, M, is drowning, too. But you cannot save all four. If you rescue your wife, the strangers will drown. The circumstance is otherwise unexceptional. You have no special obligation to the strangers; nor do they have a right to aid beyond the rights of any human being. The life or death of those involved would have no unusual consequences, good or ill. Nor are there pressing questions of virtue, vice, and moral desert. In this circumstance, it is permissible to save your wife: you would be justified in doing so, even at the cost of three lives. So far, many would agree. But now ask *why* you would be justified. It is striking that, according to the argument of section 2, the rationality of your action does not depend on your relationship to M. You are rationally disposed to save her when you recognize features of the circumstance—that she is in need, that there are three strangers, no special obligations, and so on—apart from the fact that she is your wife. This kind of partiality is justified by the fact that she is another human being. What is more, the rationality of your action does not depend on aspects of love that go beyond the disposition you manifest

in saving M, a disposition to give priority to her needs. It is rational to be so disposed even if you lack the affective or other dimensions of love. It follows that it would be rational for a stranger, S, confronted with the same situation—able to save M or three others, but not all four—to share your disposition: to give more weight to her interests than to those of other people, and thus to save her on the basis of beliefs about the circumstance that ignore M's relationship to him. That M is another human being is enough to justify this disposition. In general, though, when the disposition to ϕ in light of certain beliefs is practically rational, and those beliefs are true, it is not the case that one should not ϕ . This is not to say that one should do so, since it might also be rational to refrain. But it does mean that, in saving M instead of the others, S does not fail to act as he should, despite the fact that all four of them are strangers to him. Like you, S has sufficient reason to save M from drowning, at the cost of three lives.

For the most part, this argument consists in the direct application of claims from section 2. There is one step that may give pause. Is it really inconsistent with the rationality of being disposed to save M, and the absence of false beliefs, that S should refrain from doing so? Might the fact that M is a stranger be a decisive reason to let her drown, in order to save the three? The answer is that if this were a decisive reason not to save M, it would not be rational for you to be disposed to save your wife on the basis of beliefs that ignore her relationship to you. Where the fact that p is a decisive reason not to ϕ , it is irrational to be disposed to ϕ on the basis of beliefs that are consistent with believing that p . True, there are cases in which it is rational to ϕ , given what you know, although the fact that p is a decisive reason not to ϕ . But these are cases in which the rationality of your action turns on ignorance of whether p or on the belief that not- p . Neither condition is met by the disposition you manifest in saving your wife. You are not ignorant of your relationship nor are you moved by the belief that she is your wife. It follows that being a stranger to M is not a decisive reason for S to let her drown, even though the cost of saving her is three lives. It is inconsistent with the rationality of being disposed to save M, and the absence of false beliefs, that S should refrain from doing so.

We can state the reasoning here informally. You are justified in saving M by facts about the circumstance apart from your relationship with her: that she is in need, that you have no special obligation to the others, and so on. S shares these reasons with you. Their force is not contingent on the relationship; nor does the rationality of acting on them depend on aspects of love beside the disposition to do so. Thus,

they are sufficient to justify S in saving M. If he were to save her for these reasons, he would be acting as he should.

We have derived from the account of love in section 2 a form of skepticism about saving the greater number. In the case of S, who can save one or three, most believe that he should save three. Like Elizabeth Anscombe (1967) and John Taurek (1977), we have been led to deny this.³³ There may be circumstances in which S should save the others, as when they have a special claim or right to aid and he would wrong them by saving M.³⁴ Perhaps he should save them when the consequences of not doing so would be awful, or where M is morally depraved. But in the situation we are considering, none of this obtains. In terms of our discussion: where you would be justified in saving your wife by facts about the circumstance apart from her relationship with you, S would be justified in saving her, too.

The denial that S should save the greater number in cases of this kind is one element of what has come to be known as “numbers skepticism.” But that term suggests more radical claims, which I do not accept. To begin with, it is consistent with my view that S would act both rationally and permissibly if he were to save the group of three, simply because there are more of them. The conclusion of my argument is that he has sufficient reason to save M, not that his reason is decisive. While it is rational to love M, as another human being, it is equally rational to love the others. And for all I have said, it is rational to love none, and to give equal weight to the interests of all. A stranger whose practical thought is in this way rational would act so as to save the greater number, on the ground that more needs will then be met. The sense in which the numbers do not count is given by denying that they must, not by the claim that is irrational to care how many lives you save. Here I disagree with Taurek (1977, 310), who makes the stronger claim: “The numbers in themselves simply do not count for me. I think they should not count for any of us.”

Taurek (1977, 303, 306) goes on to say that, faced with a choice between saving one and saving three, he would elect to toss a coin. If it comes up heads, he would save one; if it comes up tails, he would save three. Some find in these remarks a doctrine of fairness that requires us

33. Taurek’s own examples involve the distribution of medicine that one owns, and so introduce complexities about the strength of property rights; see Kavka 1979, 288–91. Our case avoids this.

34. See Taurek 1977, 298, 300–301, 310–13; the absence of such constraints is the principal theme of Anscombe 1967.

to give equal chances to the four who could be saved. That is not how I read Taurek. He is describing what he would do, not prescribing a principle for others. But whatever Taurek's view, the principle of equal chances does not follow from the argument above. The point of this argument is that just as you could simply save your wife, no coin toss required, so S could simply save M.

More generally, the idea of numbers skepticism suggests complete antipathy to aggregation and to arguments that appeal to the "impersonal good." This is certainly part of Taurek's stance.³⁵ And it is emphasized in recent work, which draws on Scanlon's (1998, 229–41) contractualism. Like Taurek, the contractualist is skeptical of aggregation: the principles describing what we owe to each other must be justified to each individual, a justification that cannot aggregate claims. It is a puzzle for contractualism how to avoid Taurek's verdict about saving the greater number.³⁶ Whatever the outcome of that debate, the argument above does not depend on it. This argument does not appeal to the danger of illicit aggregation, to the demands of justification to all, or to doubts about the intelligibility of the impersonal good. It is perfectly consistent with my view that there are conditions in which the numbers should count, in which it would be wrong for S to save your wife because of facts about the aggregate or impersonal good. He may have sufficient reason to save her at the cost of three lives, but not at the cost of a hundred, or a thousand, or a million. What follows is only that, where S would have decisive reason to let M drown, in order to save the others, you would not be justified in saving her by facts about the circumstance apart from her relationship to you. Where you would be justified in saving M, but S would not, the fact that she is your wife must play a justifying role. (Likewise, it is the fact that M is your wife that explains why you are not merely justified in saving her, but ought to do so; here you differ from S.)

Finally, it does not follow from my argument that S acts rationally in saving M, no matter what his reasons. What would be rational is for him to save her because he shares your disposition, the one that was specified in section 2. It would not be rational for S to save M because she is to the left of him, while the others are to the right, or to save her just because he feels like it. If the disposition he manifests in saving M is the disposition to satisfy his whims—if his reasons are irrelevant or worse—it is irrational

35. See Taurek 1977, 303–10.

36. For a critical appraisal, see Otsuka 2006.

for S to save your wife, leaving three to drown.³⁷ Nor does it follow that the disposition to respond to her needs could rationally vanish as quickly as it came. There may be insistent reasons for love to persist, at least to some degree. If he saves your wife from drowning, S cannot regard her as a stranger, though the contours of his commitment are unclear.

The fact that S could save your wife irrationally prompts a further question, about what it is permissible to do. Presumably, if he acts on grounds that justify his action, S acts permissibly, as you act permissibly in saving your wife. But suppose his motivation is irrational, since he acts on a whim or for some illicit reason? Some deny that the grounds on which we act are relevant to the permissibility of our actions, except through their predictive or expressive significance; what matters is the existence of sufficient reason.³⁸ Others suggest that while sufficient reason may render a type of action permissible in a circumstance, whether one acts permissibly turns on one's reasons for acting.³⁹ I won't attempt to settle this dispute. It is enough to deny that S should save the greater number and to hold that he acts permissibly if he saves M on suitable grounds.

Although my conclusion differs from Taurek's, my argument follows a thread in his discussion. Considering "pairwise comparison"—the idea that when aggregation is not at stake, we should compare the size of harms—Taurek (1977, 301) writes as follows:

If it would be morally permissible for B to choose to spare himself a certain loss, H, instead of sparing another person, C, a loss, H', in a situation where he cannot spare C and himself as well, then it must be permissible for someone else, not under any relevant special obligations to the contrary, to take B's perspective, that is, to choose to secure the outcome most favorable to B instead of the outcome most favorable to C, if he cannot secure what would be best for each.⁴⁰

The same point could be made with numbers, as when M could save her own life or the lives of three. To paraphrase Taurek: if M is not required to

37. Does it matter to the rationality of his action *why* S is disposed to give priority to M? Only if his reason affects the content of his disposition, and so the reason for which he acts when he saves her from drowning. There are delicate questions here about when and why a reason is ineligible that I won't try to resolve.

38. This is the view proposed in Scanlon 2008, chaps. 1–2, following Thomson 1991, 292–96; Thomson 1999, 514–18. These discussions are bound up with more specific issues, about the doctrine of double effect, that we can set aside.

39. For a defense of this idea, see Hanser 2005.

40. Because he rejects pairwise comparison, Taurek is immune to the intransitivity argument of Otsuka 2004, 421–26.

sacrifice herself to save the others, it must be permissible for someone else, not under any special obligations to the contrary, to take M's perspective, that is, to save her instead of three if he cannot save them all. Taurek's principle can seem obtuse. Why can't the fact that M would be saving *herself* be morally relevant? What about the idea of an "agent-relative permission" that allows M to refuse this sacrifice without permitting a stranger to refuse it on her, and others', behalf?⁴¹ But our reflections suggest that Taurek is right. Shifting from what is permissible to what is rational, the point is that it is rational for anyone to love M, and so to "take her perspective," simply because she is another human being. If this is rational, it is rational to take M's needs as reasons of special weight, and therefore rational to save her in the circumstance described.

At the end of section 1, I said that my conception of love involves a picture of the value of a life. The picture is one in which every human being is worthy of love, so that it would be rational for anyone to love them. The subsequent arguments spell out part of what this picture might involve. We can come to grips with it by asking: From the point of view of a stranger, do the needs of every human being count the same? Are the reasons that derive from them equally strong? If the answer were yes, it would be irrational for a stranger to give more weight to the needs of M than to those of anyone else.⁴² According to my argument, however, this is not the case: it would be rational for S to give more weight to M. Does it follow that M matters more? S may be moved more strongly by her needs, but do they provide him with stronger reasons in the normative sense? If the answer were yes, it would be irrational for S to give as much weight to the interests of others. And again, that is not the case: it would be rational for S to respond in the same way to the interests of all concerned. It follows that, from the point of view of a stranger, the reasons that derive from the needs of different people are not equal in strength, nor are some stronger than others. Instead, such reasons are incomparable.⁴³ This is consistent with the claim that everyone matters equally, in a sense: no one matters more than anyone else, and each is equally deserving of concern. Still, there is a radical consequence for morality. If every human being is worthy of love, and it is rational to treat them with partiality, then

41. This objection is forcefully pressed in Parfit 1978 and Kavka 1979, 286–88.

42. One should be moved to the same degree by reasons of equal weight, and more decisively by stronger reasons. I defend and elaborate these claims in Setiya 2007, 12–13, though the terminology differs.

43. I explore the prospect of incomparable reasons in Setiya 2007, 77–79.

Taurek is right, at least to this extent: we are justified in saving one when we could save three. This fact does not reflect the value of relationships, or an agent-relative reason, but the irreplaceable worth of human life.

4. Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, I said that its method was to argue from attractive premises to puzzling conclusions. The premises are claims about the nature of love, and of its reasons. The conclusion is close to Taurek's. Faced with the choice between saving one and saving three, all of whom are strangers to you, it is not the case that you should save three. If that conclusion is absurd, as many believe, one of the premises of the argument must be false.

We can set out the steps, schematically, as follows. First, another's humanity is sufficient reason for love; you need not bear a special relationship to them. Second, what is justified by another's humanity is a disposition to give priority to their needs in the absence of special obligations, unusual consequences, or extremes of virtue or vice. The rationality of being so disposed does not depend on aspects of love beside the disposition itself. Finally, when the disposition to ϕ in light of certain beliefs is practically rational, and those beliefs are true, it is not the case that one should not ϕ . It follows that a stranger has sufficient reason to save your wife, even at the cost of three lives.

Although I have argued for the first two steps, in sections 1 and 2, I would not claim that my case for them is irresistible. Some philosophical arguments are designed to compel assent, others to explain why someone might believe that p without aiming to convert the skeptic. My argument falls toward the latter end of the spectrum. I hope that it will move those who feel the pull of Taurek's view but are uncertain of his reasons. It will not persuade those who think he is just confused, or that it is evident that the stranger must save three. Now that they know where the argument is going, skeptics will deny that it is rational to love just anyone; that it is rational to act with partiality to those you love, except on the basis of their relationship with you; or that it is rational to be so disposed if one lacks the affective and other dispositions characteristic of love.

I don't have more to say about this now. Even though it can be resisted, I think there is value in setting out the argument above. What I want to do in closing is to reconsider the absurdity of Taurek's view. How great an objection is it to the picture of love that emerged from sections 1 and 2 if it denies that one should save the greater number? Is there any

way to make this plausible, to weaken our attachment to numbers in cases of the relevant kind? I think we can learn here from an aspect of Taurek's essay that is insufficiently discussed.

Although his argument has prompted much reflection on our duties to friends and loved ones, Taurek does not in fact appeal, as I have done, to the case in which you save your wife. The example he gives involves you and David; and while he refers to David as a friend, he does not have in mind a deep commitment. David is a mere acquaintance, someone you know and like, not someone with whom you spend much time or with whom you share your life.⁴⁴ Your relationship with him is superficial: it is not a source of obligation (Taurek 1977, 296–97). Think of David as the person who makes your coffee at Starbucks, or who drives the bus you take to work, someone you like but with whom you exchange no more than friendly words and a casual smile. Still, it seems to me, as it does to Taurek, that you have sufficient reason to save him, even at the cost of several lives. Try to picture it. On one side, three anonymous faces; on the other, David, whose face you know. You are not obliged to save him. Should you let him drown in order to save the others? If the circumstance is otherwise normal—no special obligations, unusual consequences, or extremes of virtue or vice—I don't see that you should.⁴⁵ As Taurek argues, however, if you can save David, whom you know and like, against the claims of three, “the moral force of such [claims] must be feeble indeed” (Taurek 1977, 298). As I would put it, such claims are incomparable. It is not that there is a reason to favor those you know and like over those you have never met. It is rather that, in the absence of special conditions, there is sufficient reason to give priority to the needs of any human being. This is what you do for David, not irrationally, and what you might do for anyone else.

None of this is meant as a further argument. The point of approaching the case in this way is to shift our perception of it, not to prove that my conclusion holds. There is a perspective from which the denial that one should save the greater number seems not callous or indifferent to the value of human life but to express an intelligible conception of that value. This conception is one in which love is, as Murdoch (1970, 2) claimed, “a central concept in morals.” It is part of the value of a life that every human being is worthy of love: it would be rational for

44. David is called a “friend” in Taurek 1977, 296–97, 299; and “someone [you] know and like” in Taurek 1977, 295–98.

45. For the opposing claim, see Parfit 1978, 289–90.

anyone to treat them with the partiality we devote to our friends and partners, parents and children. This fact has practical implications. We often have the opportunity to help others at little cost to ourselves, and the obligation to do so. My conclusion does not conflict with this. But it does suggest that, in deciding who to help, we need not give weight to numbers and relationships alone. Even if your money would save more lives in distant countries, it does not follow that you should give to Oxfam rather than to local charities or individuals in need, not because there is insistent reason to favor those who are close to home, but because it is rational to give priority to anyone.⁴⁶

Finally, we can ask how this conception of human value bears on the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. Is there any point to this formula once we reject the severe interpretation on which it demands complete impartiality?⁴⁷ Why not talk instead about reverence or respect? In my view, these questions are premature. To answer them, we would need to say more about the nature of self-love as the model for love of one's neighbor. And we would need to explore the argument sketched toward the end of section 1. According to that argument, what is required of us in relation to every human being is not love of the kind you have for your wife or child, but a species of respect. It deserves to be called "love," first, because the demand for it is explained by the fact that we are worthy of love; second, because, like love, it cares about the other for her own sake, not in relation to anything else; and third,

46. There are complications here. First, in order to be rational when you save the few, you must act on the disposition to give priority to their needs. Second, if the wealth that enables you to help other people depends on social injustice, they may have claims on you that distinguish this case from the one we have discussed. Like Anscombe (1967), I have assumed that there are no special obligations to consider. For much the same reason, Taurek's conclusion does not apply to questions of social policy, where claims of justice in distribution are impossible to avoid. See the discussion of the coast guard in Taurek 1977, 310–13. This is one reason why it matters whether our obligations to those in need are obligations of justice or not.

47. Although it has been put forward—as in Cottingham 1983; Reeder 1998—this interpretation is not orthodox. In the Jewish tradition, "love your neighbor" is often equated with the golden rule: "as yourself" means "as you wish to be loved by them" (see Goodman 2008, 12–15; and for doubts about this equation, Outka 1972, 292–94; Goodman 2008, 152; Wolterstorff 2011, 98–99). For Aquinas, "as" denotes the manner, not the degree of love: to love your neighbor as yourself is not to give your interests equal weight (see Oderberg 2008, sec. 3). And in his classic study of agape, Gene Outka never imagines that love of neighbor might prohibit partiality. It restricts the scope of our special relationships—you cannot harm an innocent stranger in order to help your friends—but it neither explains nor precludes them (Outka 1972, 268–74).

because the reason for it is the same as the reason for love. You should regard your neighbor as worthy of love, and so as claiming respect, on the same ground that justifies your self-love: not the fact that you are you, but the fact of your common humanity. I do not know whether anything like this could be true, or what it would say about the character of respect. Nor is it essential to the argument of this essay. But the prospect of such insights, however dim, is part of why I am willing to take seriously a picture of love that leads me to deny that numbers count, at least in cases of a certain kind, a position I hope seems less absurd than it did before.

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