Love's Lack of Alternate Possibilities

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Alternate possibilities tend to be desirable. In many cases, we might think someone only had a choice in a matter if an alternative was also available. On the golf course, we might say that someone only has an ability to hit a draw with their driver if they can also hit the ball straight or with a fade. Love, however, does not seem to require alternate possibilities. Not only are alternate possibilities unnecessary for love, but I'll suggest that the genuine possibility of certain alternatives directly opposes what it means to love.[1]

By and large, philosophers have faithfully depicted this aspect of love. Nozick suggests that "your own well-being is *tied up* with that of someone (or something) you love" (1989, 68); Velleman writes that "[love] *arrests* our tendencies towards emotional self-protection" (1999, 361); taking inspiration from Shakespeare, Zangwill says that "love is a bond… He [who is in love] is one who is *tied*, like a prisoner" (2013, 302, all emphases added). I believe that these are more than just evocative phrases. In this paper I will first develop a principle about love's lack of alternate possibilities, drawing from Frankfurt's foundational book, *The Reasons of Love*. After detailing this principle of love, I will offer support for the claim while investigating its proper jurisdiction. Finally, I'll offer an explanation of why many philosophers misunderstand the role love plays in Williams' famous argument concerning a man and his drowning wife.

Section 1: The Lack of Alternate Possibilities Principle

In the second chapter of *The Reasons of Love*, Frankfurt makes several interesting and provocative claims; he argues that we have mistakenly assumed that we love something because it is valuable. For Frankfurt, we instead value something precisely because we love that thing (2004, 38-40). His conception of love is likewise controversial. On his picture, love is essentially volitional: "a configuration of the will that consists in a practical concern for what is good for the beloved" (2004, 42-43).[2] While there are serious questions about these claims, I believe what Frankfurt says about love's role in our moral psychology is deeply illuminating. Below, I've stitched together a few key lines from the fourth section of chapter two:

> It is a necessary feature of love that it is not under our direct and immediate voluntary control…A person may discover that he cannot affect whether or how much he cares about [someone] merely by his own decision. The issue is not up to him at all. The necessity by which a person is bound…is not a cognitive necessity, generated by the requirements of reason. The way in which it makes alternatives unavailable is not by limiting, as logical necessities do, the possibilities of coherent thought…It is a volitional necessity, which consists essentially in a

[1] I say that love and certain alternate possibilities are in opposition rather than incompatible in the same way Strawson suggests the reactive and objective attitudes "are not altogether *exclusive* of each other; but they are, profoundly, *opposed* to each other" (1962, 25). This aligns with what I will say later about alternate possibilities revealing a malady in love, not wiping it out entirely.

[2] Thus, love can be emotionally *cool* in addition to conforming with our typical experiences of heated love.

> limitation of the will. [Finally,] love comes in degrees. We love some things more than we love others. Accordingly, the necessity that love imposes on the will is rarely absolute (2004, 44-46).

We can distill these remarks into a single principle concerning love's Lack of Alternate Possibilities (*LAP*). The *LAP* principle of love states that to the degree one loves someone or something, certain alternate possibilities with respect to that thing are not volitionally *live*.[3]

Consider straightforward, uncomplicated, and total love: love for dogs or young children. Since I am caregiver only to the former, I will focus on the love I feel for my dog. As I attempt to establish this principle of love, I'll move through these connected claims from Frankfurt with an eye on pure, uncomplicated love as our most basic case.[4]

Section 2: The Scope of Love's *LAP* Principle

In this section, I'll focus on three natural applications of love's restriction of alternate possibilities:

(a) the possibility of treating the object of love poorly[5]
(b) the possibility of not loving the object of love
(c) the possibility of loving something or someone else of the same category.[6]

On the lack of type (a) possibilities:

Following Frankfurt, loving my dog does not render me incapable of imagining bringing or allowing him pain; it restricts or eliminates my ability to *will* that he needlessly suffers. Here we can see one direct way in which love limits alternate possibilities. Without being able to say anything more philosophically sophisticated, I simply cannot work myself into a state where I could genuinely endorse my dog being harmed. It is an unavailable possibility.[7] Even as I write, imagining him limping with a hurt paw makes me feel compelled to nurse the wound; I want to carry him to his bed and remedy what ails him. It is because of my love that I cannot imagine allowing him harm, and from what I understand, every parent feels the same way about their children.[8] (It's important to clarify that love restricts the possibility of treating its object poorly *without good reason*; a parent might demonstrate how

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[3] While, as Frankfurt says, a wider range of alternate possibilities regarding that thing may be live in other cognitive ways: i.e., being conceivable, etc. The sense of 'alternate possibilities' in this principle is not metaphysical, logical, or epistemic.
[4] Focusing first on unmuddied love for one's young child or dog puts us in a position to remain neutral on a philosophical account of love's nature. I believe that a virtue of love's *LAP* principle is its theory-neutrality.
[5] Without having some greater good in mind.
[6] These three dimensions do not complete an exhaustive list.
[7] Following Frankfurt (1969 & 1971), I do not believe that love's lack of alternate possibilities means that love cannot be freely felt. I highlight to this idea later in this section.
[8] I also endorse the contrapositive of this principle: that a parent who does have the volitionally live possibility of harming their child for no good reason cannot be said to truly love them. This intuition should be even more clear in the case of a parent who acts on this will to harm just for harm's sake. I think it would be at bedrock incoherent to assert the possibility of genuine love in a person like this. Cases of delusion are not counterexamples; the deranged mother who drowned her children because she believed God instructed her to do so may love her children but simply love God more. She might have thought that drowning them was the only way to secure their eternal salvation. Thus, she would have seen herself as having good reason to do something otherwise 'un-willable.'

it feels to be mocked only to aid their child's moral development, for instance.) This lack of certain alternate possibilities constitutes psychological bedrock for those we love.

Here we have our foundational application of the *LAP* principle; my love for my dog renders certain alternate possibilities with respect to how he is treated volitionally unavailable. But we might still wonder about the scope of this principle. In general, the lack of type (b) and (c) possibilities mirrors the previous pattern: the degree to which one loves something restricts one's possibilities of not loving that thing or of some other thing in the same category. A critical caveat needs to be issued in type (c) cases, however: the degree to which love should restrict the possibility of loving something else of the same category depends on the nature of the relationship between the lover and that object of love.[9]

On the lack of type (b) possibilities:

I suspect this application of the *LAP* principle will be intuitive to many; love should restrict the degree to which you can genuinely wish to not love that thing. My love for my dog follows this pattern: the more I came to love him, the less possible it became for me to genuinely question whether I wanted to love him.

But what do we want to say about muddier cases? Consider cases of conflicted love; perhaps a wife really does seem to love her husband, but over the years, she has begun to genuinely wonder whether she's happy about her love for him. (We might imagine that he's no longer the man she married.) I don't think it's right to say that the wife's contemplation of alternate possibilities means that she does not love him. But it does stain her love. It degrades it in some critical way; it's less than what we might call 'five-star' or 'gold-rated' love.

In support of this directional claim, consider a case at the farthest end: an abused wife who genuinely loves her husband, yet fully rejects her love at a second-order level. She feels condemned to love him and wishes she didn't (perhaps it would be easier to leave him in that case). This appears to be what we might call *unwilling love*, mirroring Frankfurt's notion of *unwilling* action. In a seminal article on free will, Frankfurt distinguishes the willing from the unwilling addict by examining the alignment of their first and second-order desires (1971). Both addicts have a first-order desire to take a drug (they want to take it), but the willing addict is distinguished by his second-order endorsement of his first-order desire (he wants to want to take the drug). Even though he is physiologically determined to take the drug, by endorsing his desire, he makes his taking the drug his own free action. The unwilling addict, however, has a second-order desire *not* to take the drug, yet succumbs to his more powerful first-order desire to take it. Even though both might have been determined to take the drug by their addiction, it seems clear that the willing addict's alignment of first and second-order desires makes his action more genuine in some sense than the unwilling addict's.[10]

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[9] There are two possible ways to understand this suggestion. The first might be to think that there are different types or subscripts of love that fit different relationships (see Zangwill 2013, 300). Alternatively, one might think that the love felt in different relationships is all the same love, but it expresses itself differently due to the standards of each given relationship.

[10] Various conclusions are drawn from this juxtaposition: that the willing addict's action is free, that it's action for which he can be blamed or held responsible, etc. I'm not interested in the particular sense in which his action is more genuine, only the sense in which it is, in some sense, more genuine than the unwilling addict's.

I suggest the same is true of love. The willing lover who endorses her love aligns her first and second-order wills in a way that makes her love more genuine than the unwilling lover, who loves against her own second-order volition. She loves but wishes she did not. Unwilling love, while still genuine, is not what it could be. What is lacking in unwilling love—and thus prevents it from being love of the highest standard—is the lover's inability to secure alignment throughout her volitional hierarchy.

On the lack of type (c) possibilities:

This is a much more complicated application of the *LAP* principle. Whether love restricts one's possibilities of loving someone *else* seems to clearly depend on the standards of the relationship between the lover and beloved. Consider two types of cases: ones in which love is understood to be exclusionary and ones where no such standard exists. A quintessential example of the former is marriage, and of the latter, friendship.

In a monogamous marriage, the *LAP* principle is right at home. Because of the nature of one's relationship with one's wife, love seems to preclude *all* alternate possibilities of loving someone else in that particular way. So to the degree that a husband loves his wife, the possibility of loving another woman in that particular way should feel restricted. If we think of a man who is madly in love, we picture a man whose heart is incapable of being drawn to another, though he is of course capable of recognizing and appreciating beauty in other women. (He might even feel capable of desiring them, though not of *loving* them.) For the man madly in love, other women fail to create a volitional tremor. But the husband who finds his love lacking may well be able to seriously envision loving others. And to the extent that these visions are volitionally *live* to him, I think we should say that his love for his wife duly suffers.[11]

Love's *LAP* principle seems to be on weaker footing in non-monogamous relationships. My love for a friend does not appear to be cheapened by my willingness to love another friend. The same can be said about parental love for multiple children. But I think even here, love has its limits. Love for a third child certainly does nothing to diminish love for the previous two. But can each relationship's love remain as deep upon welcoming a twelfth child? An eighteenth? Can love for two dozen friends survive an additional dozen without being diminished in any way? It's not that something intrinsic to these loving relationships requires a limit on how many of them we can have. Rather, I suspect the limitation lies in our capacity to produce enough love to go around. So there is a sense in which, given some number of existing friendships, children, or other such relationships,

[11] Consider another challenging instance of this application: the husband who finds himself wishing that his wife was different than she is. He doesn't wish to love a different person; he wants to love *his wife*, but wishes she was different. In a case like this, the husband's first-order love is out of full alignment with his second-order volition concerning the object of this love. The oddity is that this misalignment is still wholly about his wife (and maybe some alternate version of her). In a case like this, it seems that the greater the divide between who the object of love really is and who one wishes she was, the more directly one is yearning to love *someone other* than who stands before you. Perhaps this a fourth application-type of the *LAP* principle, or perhaps it's a subset of type (c) possibilities. Perhaps it's a hybrid of type (b) and (c).
To use an example from the fine arts, in S8:E7 of The Simpsons, Lisa discovers she has an inexplicable 'crush' on Nelson, a poorly-mannered and dull boy at school. (He is funny and mischievous at least, which draws Lisa's eye.) After an extended effort to refine him, Lisa realizes that she has been trying to change nearly everything about who Nelson is, and it's this moment when she realizes that she simply doesn't love him (her exact term is *like*, but seeing as Lisa is only eight, we might imagine an older version of her realizing this same insight about *love*).

one's current love for those individuals should, to some degree, restrict one's live possibilities of loving even more.[12]

There are two final remarks I want to offer before examining a final case of the *LAP* principle. While I have argued that love entails a lack of certain alternate possibilities, a lack of those same possibilities does not entail love. One might simply be a good, moral person and thus not be capable of willingly allowing an innocent creature harm. The possibility of treating a person poorly may be volitionally restricted by pity or by a fear of reprisal, or only because of a perceived commandment by God. But these restrictions of the will are achievable without love.[13]

Secondly, it is not important to me whether we consider lack of certain alternate possibilities a necessary or sufficient feature of what love *is*—rather, I aimed to explicate a principle of love that illuminates how it shapes our related psychologizing. In fact, a positive feature of my principle is that it can be readily adopted by all conceptions of love. Frankfurt's volitional understanding of love clearly aligns with this principle, but so should other prominent accounts. Jollimore conceives of love as a "way of seeing the beloved"—of "opening one's eyes to the beloved and thus of opening one's eyes to the world" (2011, 25). This too appears ready to adopt love's *LAP* principle. Jollimore himself suggests that "love requires us *not* to see, notice, dwell on, or be moved by certain aspects of the world" (2011, 25, emphasis added). Love's *LAP* principle should also be amenable to Kolodny's proposal that "love consists (a) in seeing a relationship in which one is involved as a reason for valuing both one's relationship and the person with whom one has that relationship, and (b) in valuing that relationship and person accordingly" (2003, 150). To the degree that one recognizes and values a loving relationship, one's alternate possibilities regarding that relationship should be restricted. Finally, Velleman's account of love aligns with this principle as well. Not only does Velleman say that love is "the awareness of a value inhering in its object," but that he is "inclined to describe love as an *arresting* awareness of that value" (1999, 360, emphasis added). Love as awareness of the value in our beloved arrests, I suggest, our volitionally live alternate possibilities.

Section 3: Possibilities as Signal

Williams' discussion of a man and his drowning wife is a primary case in the literature on love and its relationship with morality. The worry is that love's partiality is incompatible with morality's impartiality and that "the disparate character of moral and non-moral motivation" renders cases like the drowning wife hard to parse in a way that satisfies the demands of both love and morality (Williams 1981, 2). The situation is simple: a man sees two people drowning. One of them is a stranger and one is his wife. He can only save one. We assume that the stranger has no special characteristics[14] and that the man genuinely loves his wife.

[12] And when one does begin to love more, I think this tends to diminish one's existing love to some degree. I do think this is a somewhat poignant conclusion.

[13] There is some important difference between being unable to will harm to befall someone because you love them and simply because you're a strictly moral person who also simply doesn't care about *them* at all.

[14] Like being a scientist on the verge of finding a cure for cancer or being the captain of the sinking ship who, if saved, could secure the rescue of everyone else aboard, etc.

From morality's perspective, we would hope that the man's action—saving his wife over the stranger—was at least morally permissible. But Williams suggests that acting in accordance with moral principle provides the husband 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 it is permissible to save one's wife" (1981, 18). Thus, the problem: it doesn't seem like there's anything wrong with contemplating what morality permits, yet this contemplation seems undesirable from his wife's point of view (and from ours as well). How do we square these two perspectives?

Standard analyses of this case focus on the role that *morality* plays in the man's deliberations.[15] I instead want to suggest that, fundamentally, the issue is the genuineness of the husband's *deliberations* simpliciter (not that his deliberations regard the role of *morality*). In other words, when Frankfurt suggests that there is something "fishy" about the man's search for a general rule that could justify his action, this fishiness lies in the fact that he is deliberating at all, not in the content of his deliberations.

Keeping an eye on love's lack of alternate possibilities explains this fishiness. If a man truly loves his wife, there shouldn't *be* much to deliberate about, regardless of whether his deliberations center on moral, professional, or legal concerns. The fact that he is deliberating—and that his deliberations are *genuine*—makes us rightly question whether he really does love his wife. If love closes off certain alternate possibilities, then love for one's wife should make deliberations of this kind stale and lifeless. Certain possibilities—like saving the stranger instead—shouldn't be live in the first place. His deliberations shouldn't get off the ground, and if they do, they should quickly stall out. But the fact that he is *seriously* thinking about whether it's permissible to save her suggests that not saving her is a volitionally live possibility. His contemplation isn't off-putting because it is morally wrong or even irrational, but because it signals something lackluster about his love.[16] This suggestion is obvious in the situation where his wife is drowning before his eyes, but it also explains our uneasiness with a husband contemplating his action days, weeks, or months later. With love's *LAP* principle in mind, we should ask: If the man *really* loves his wife, what is there *really* to deliberate about?[17]

Conclusion

Later in the chapter I've been drawing from, Frankfurt offers a somewhat remarkable set of comments about confidence. These remarks arise without warning and fade away quickly, but they

[15] Do we elevate partial love over morality? Morality over love? Can we square the two in some compatible move?

[16] Setiya (2014, 265-273) focuses on the rationality of a case like Williams'.

[17] I suspect that the following goes wrong in standard analyses: They look at the man who is deliberating (especially if it's in the moment of emergency) and rightly get a bad feeling about the fact that the husband is searching for justification. Then, because the case was posed as a contest between love and morality, one naturally thinks the bad feeling (Frankfurt's fishiness) latches on to the heart of the matter: that the husband is engaging in *moral* deliberation about what is permissible. But on my suggestion, when we are told that the man is deliberating about what it's permissible to *do*, we assume that this question concerns what alternate possibilities are *live* to him. The fact that he's deliberating (especially in the moment) implies the live possibility of not saving his wife, and this produces a bad feeling because it makes us doubt that he *could truly* love his wife if not saving her is a live possibility. The issue isn't that his deliberations concern moral permissibility or rationality. The issue is about what his deliberation reveals about his love. Here I directly oppose Velleman when he says "Of course the man in Williams's story should save his wife in preference to strangers. But the reasons why he should save her have nothing essentially to do with love" (1999, 373).

contain both another deep insight about love and a subtle tension between love and action: "In the end, our readiness to be satisfied with loving what we actually do love does not rest upon the reliability of arguments or of evidence. It rests upon confidence in ourselves" (2004, 49). In some sense, my confidence in my love has more to do with *me* than the object of my love: "Any anxiety or uneasiness that [one] comes to feel on account of recognizing what he is constrained to love goes to the heart, then, of his attitude toward his own character as a person. That sort of disturbance is symptomatic of a lack of confidence in what he himself is" (2004, 50).

If we love something, yet lack higher order endorsement of that love, Frankfurt suggests we need to figure out *ourselves*, not the object of our love. This suggests that by its nature, love aims to exist quietly. At first, this seems perfectly synergistic with Frankfurt's wider insights on action. If we find ourselves acting in accord with what we desire, yet cannot secure second-order endorsement of those desires, this is a problem for our self-identity.

In earlier work, Frankfurt introduced the concept of a wanton: someone who never decisively identifies which first-order desire(s) he wants to constitute his will—which desires he wants to move him to act (1971, 10-11). The implication is that someone who doesn't regularly examine which first-order desires they want to be effective is missing something essential to being a person. But while we've seen so much that is analogous between love and action within Frankfurt's work, these remarks raise a curious disanalogy: Why is regular introspection about which of one's first-order desires are motivationally casual a necessary aspect of being a free agent, but regular introspection about one's (first-order) love seems symptomatic of a malady? Why is second-order deliberation about one's desires a quintessential aspect of being a person, while second-order deliberation about one's love is one thought too many?

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