

The Reasons of Love

Harry G. Frankfurt

Princeton University Press

Princeton and Oxford

Copyright © 2004 by Princeton University Press
Published by Princeton University Press,
41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press,
3 Market Place, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1SY

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Frankfurt, Harry G., 1929–
The reasons of love / Harry G. Frankfurt
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-691-09164-1 (alk. paper)

1. Practical reason. 2. Love. I. Title.

BC177.F69 2004

177'.7—dc21 2003050428

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

This book has been composed in Adobe Caslon

Printed on acid-free paper.∞

www.pupress.princeton.edu

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

One

The Question: "How Should We Live?"

1 We have it on the authority both of Plato and of Aristotle that philosophy began in wonder. People wondered about various natural phenomena that they found surprising. They also puzzled over what struck them as curiously recalcitrant logical, or linguistic, or conceptual problems that turned up unexpectedly in the course of their thinking. As an example of what led him to wonder, Socrates mentions the fact that it is possible for one person to become shorter than another without shrinking in height. We might wonder why Socrates should have been made at all uncomfortable by such a shallow paradox. Evidently the problem struck him not only as more interesting, but also as considerably more difficult and disturbing, than it strikes us. Indeed, referring to this problem and others like it, he says, “Sometimes I get quite dizzy with thinking of them.”¹

Aristotle gives a list of several rather more compelling examples of the sorts of things by which the first philosophers were led to wonder. He mentions self-moving marionettes (apparently the Greeks had them!); he mentions certain cosmological and astronomical phenomena; and he mentions the fact that the side of a square is incommensurable with the diagonal. It is hardly appropriate to characterize these things merely as puzzling. They are startling. They are marvels. The response they inspired must have been deeper, and more unsettling, than simply—as Aristotle puts it—a “wondering that the matter is so.”² It must have been resonant with feelings of mystery, of the uncanny, of awe.

Whether the earliest philosophers were trying to fathom the secrets of the universe, or just trying to figure out how

¹ *Theaetetus* 155d.

² All of my quotations in this chapter from Aristotle are from his *Metaphysics* 982–83.

to think clearly about some quite ordinary fact or how to express some commonplace observation accurately, Aristotle reports that their inquiries had no further and more practical goals. They were eager to overcome their ignorance, but that was not because they thought they needed the information. In fact, their ambition was exclusively speculative or theoretical. They wanted nothing more than to dispel their initial surprise that things are as they are, by developing a reasoned understanding of why it would be unnatural—or even impossible—for things to be any other way. When it becomes clear that something was only to be expected, that dissipates whatever sense of surprise it may initially have engendered. As Aristotle remarks concerning right triangles, “there is nothing which would surprise a *geometer* so much as if the diagonal turned out to *be* commensurable.”³

I am going to be concerned here with, among other things, certain discomforts and disturbances by which human beings are rather typically beset. These differ both from the sorts of discomforts and disturbances that may be caused by logical difficulties, such as the one Socrates mentions, and from those that tend to arise in response to fea-

³ Aristotle is talking here, of course, about the Pythagorean theorem. There is a nice story about this. When Pythagoras made his extraordinary discovery, he was profoundly shaken by the nearly incredible, and nearly unintelligible, but nonetheless rigorously demonstrable fact that the square root of two is not a rational number. He was stunned by the recognition that there is something that, in Aristotle’s words, “cannot be measured by even the smallest unit.” Now in addition to being a mathematician, Pythagoras was the leader of a religious cult; and he was so deeply moved by his theorem—by its revelation of the mysteriously nonrational character of mathematical reality—that he ordered his followers in the cult to sacrifice a hundred oxen. The story is that, ever since then, whenever a powerful new truth is discovered, the oxen tremble.

tures of the world like those on Aristotle's list. They are more practical and, because they pertain closely to our interest in trying to manage our lives sensibly, more urgent. What presses us to inquire into them is not disinterested curiosity, or puzzlement, or wonder, or awe. It is psychic distress of another variety altogether: a kind of nagging anxiety, or unease. The difficulties we encounter in thinking about these things may sometimes, perhaps, make us dizzy. They are more likely, however, to cause us to feel troubled, restless, and dissatisfied with ourselves.

The topics to which this book is devoted have to do with the ordinary conduct of life. They pertain, in one way or another, to a question that is both ultimate and preliminary: how should a person live? Needless to say, this is not a question of only theoretical or abstract interest. It concerns us concretely, and in a very personal way. Our response to it bears directly and pervasively upon how we conduct ourselves—or, at least, upon how we propose to do so. Perhaps even more significantly, it affects how we experience our lives.

When we seek to understand the world of nature, we do so at least partly in the hope that this will enable us to live within it more comfortably. To the extent that we know our way around our environment, we feel more at home in the world. In our attempts to settle questions concerning how to live, on the other hand, what we are hoping for is the more intimate comfort of feeling at home with ourselves.

2 Philosophical issues pertaining to the question of how a person should live fall within the domain of a general theory of practical reasoning. The term "practical reasoning" refers to any of the several varieties of deliberation in which

people endeavor to decide what to do, or in which they undertake to evaluate what has been done. Among these is the particular variety of deliberation that focuses especially upon problems of *moral* evaluation. This species of practical reasoning naturally receives, from philosophers and from others as well, a great deal of attention.

It is unquestionably important for us to understand what the principles of morality require, what they endorse, and what they forbid. It goes without saying that we need to take moral considerations seriously. In my opinion, however, the importance of morality in directing our lives tends to be exaggerated. Morality is less pertinent to the shaping of our preferences and to the guidance of our conduct—it tells us less of what we need to know about what we should value and how we should live—than is commonly presumed. It is also less authoritative. Even when it does have something relevant to say, it does not necessarily have the last word. With regard to our interest in the sensible management of those aspects of our lives that are normatively significant, moral precepts are both less comprehensively germane and less definitive than we are often encouraged to believe.

People who are scrupulously moral may nonetheless be destined by deficiencies of character or of constitution to lead lives that no reasonable person would freely choose. They may have personal defects and inadequacies that have nothing much to do with morality but that make it impossible for them to live well. For example, they may be emotionally shallow; or they may lack vitality; or they may be chronically indecisive. To the extent that they do actively choose and pursue certain goals, they may devote themselves to such insipid ambitions that their experience is generally dull and without flavor. In consequence, their lives may be relentlessly

banal and hollow, and—whether or not they recognize this about themselves—they may be dreadfully bored.

There are those who maintain that people who are not moral cannot be happy. Perhaps it is true that being moral is an indispensable condition for a satisfying life. It is certainly not, however, the only condition that is indispensable. Sound moral judgment is not even the only condition that is indispensable in evaluating courses of conduct. Morality can provide at most only a severely limited and insufficient answer to the question of how a person should live.

It is often presumed that the demands of morality are inherently preemptive—in other words, that they must always be accorded an overriding precedence over all other interests and claims. This strikes me as implausible. Moreover, so far as I can see, there is no very persuasive reason to believe that it is so. Morality is most particularly concerned with how our attitudes and our actions should take into account the needs, the desires, and the entitlements of other people.⁴ Now why must *that* be regarded as being, without exception, the most compelling thing in our lives? To be sure, our relationships with other people are enormously important to us; and the requirements of morality to which they give rise are therefore undeniably weighty. However, it is difficult to understand why we should assume that nothing can ever, in any circum-

⁴ There are, of course, other ways to construe the subject matter of morality. However, defining it as concerned with our relationships to others—rather than in a more Aristotelian mode, say, as concerned with the fulfillment of our essential nature—has the advantage of making especially salient what many people find to be the deepest and most difficult issue with which moral theory has to contend: namely, the seemingly inescapable possibility of conflict between the claims of morality and those of self-interest.

stances, count more heavily with us than those relationships, and that moral considerations must invariably be accepted as weightier than considerations of all other kinds.

What misleads people in this matter may be the supposition that the only alternative to accepting the requirements of morality consists in greedily permitting oneself to be driven by self-interest. Perhaps they assume that when someone is reluctant to submit his behavior to moral constraints, it must be that he is motivated by nothing more elevated than a narrow desire for some benefit to himself. This might naturally make it seem that even though there are circumstances in which morally proscribed conduct may be understandable, and maybe even forgivable, that sort of conduct can never be worthy of admiration or of genuine respect.

However, even quite reasonable and respectable people find that other things may sometimes mean more to them, and make stronger claims upon them, than *either* morality *or* themselves. There are modes of normativity that are quite properly compelling but that are grounded neither in moral nor in egoistic considerations. A person may legitimately be devoted to ideals—for instance, aesthetic, cultural, or religious ideals—whose authority for him is independent of the desiderata with which moral principles are distinctively concerned; and he may pursue these nonmoral ideals without having his own personal interests in mind at all. Although it is widely presumed that moral claims are necessarily overriding, it is far from clear that assigning a higher authority to some nonmoral mode of normativity must always be—in every circumstance and regardless of the pertinent magnitudes—a mistake.

3 Authoritative reasoning about what to do and how to behave is not limited to moral deliberation. Its scope extends, as I have suggested, to evaluations in terms of various nonmoral modes of normativity that also bear upon the conduct of life. The theory of normative practical reasoning is therefore more inclusive, with respect to the types of deliberation that it considers, than moral philosophy.

It is deeper as well. This is because it embraces issues pertaining to evaluative norms that are more comprehensive and more ultimate than the norms of morality. Morality does not really get down to the bottom of things. After all, it is not sufficient for us to recognize and to understand the moral demands that may properly be made on us. That is not enough to settle our concerns about our conduct. In addition, we need to know how much authority it is reasonable for us to accord to those demands. Morality itself cannot satisfy us about this.

There may be some individuals for whom a commitment to being morally virtuous is a categorically dominant personal ideal. Being moral is, under all conditions, more important to them than anything else. Such people will naturally accept moral requirements as unconditionally overriding. That is not, however, the only intelligible or the only appealing design for a human life. We may find that other ideals and other measures of value attract us, and that they recommend themselves to us forcefully as reasonable competitors for our controlling allegiance. Accordingly, even after we have accurately identified the commands of the moral law, there still remains—for most of us—the more fundamental practical question of just how important it is to obey them.