

Against Frankfurt's Care Ground of Importance

Adam C. Pelser

Baylor University

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Moral theorists who reject objective moral normativity have made several attempts to explain what might ground (non-objective) morality and normativity more generally. One influential attempt in recent literature is that offered by Harry Frankfurt. In *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right*, Frankfurt argues that "importance is never inherent" (2006, p. 23). He explains, "In my view, it is only in virtue of what we actually care about that anything is important to us." He then acknowledges the obvious fact that some things are important to us despite our failing to care about them and qualifies his view accordingly: "What people do not care about may nonetheless be quite important to them, obviously, because of its value as a means to something that they do in fact care about" (2006, p. 20). The principle Frankfurt here commends, henceforth Frankfurt's Care Ground of Importance principle or CGI, can be stated as follows:

For any x that is important to S, the importance of x to S is grounded either in S's caring about x or in S's caring about something else, y, the importance of which to S entails (perhaps unbeknownst to S) the importance of x to S.¹

Frankfurt argues on the basis of CGI that there is no care-independent (i.e., objective) ground of moral normativity. Although he does not make the connection between moral normativity and importance explicit, he seems to be reasoning as follows: if there are moral norms, they are, by virtue of being authoritative life-guiding norms, important; hence, if there is

no care-independent ground of importance, then, *a fortiori*, there is no care-independent ground of moral normativity.

Here a familiar problem arises. In the absence of objective moral norms, what grounds do we have for criticizing, as it seems obvious we ought, terrorists, rapists, torturers, mass murderers, and genocidal dictators, not to mention the perpetrators of more minor offenses? Rather than focusing on such real examples of apparent moral depravity, Frankfurt considers Hume's 'madman' who chooses to allow the destruction of the whole world in order to protect his finger from a scratch. According to Frankfurt, while we cannot say that the madman has done anything objectively evil, we can condemn him as "volitionally irrational," "lunatic," and "inhuman" (pp. 29-30). In the following pages I shall argue, first, that the main argument Frankfurt offers in support of CGI and, hence, against moral objectivity, fails and, second, that CGI undermines Frankfurt's treatment of "volitional irrationality" as a morally significant defect of some agents.

1. Objecting to Frankfurt's Case for the Care Ground of Importance

Frankfurt's main argument for CGI begins with his consideration of what is perhaps the most plausible counterexample to CGI; namely, the apparent importance of moral norms considered above.² As Frankfurt puts the worry, "Is it not unmistakably apparent that people should at least care about adhering to the requirements of morality, by which all of us are inescapably bound no matter what our individual inclinations or preferences may be?" (2006, p. 21).³ In response to this worry, Frankfurt argues that the normative authority of reason is not sufficient to ground moral normativity, since moral disapprobation carries a different kind of force than criticisms of poor reasoning and since following moral norms involves choice and

character, neither of which is involved in following the dictates of reason (e.g., assenting to the conclusion of logical proofs).

Having shown that “moral authority cannot be satisfactorily established by invoking just the bloodless support of strict rationality” (2006, p. 22) Frankfurt argues that there is no other plausible care-independent ground of moral normativity, since there is no possible care-independent ground of importance.⁴ His argument for this claim constitutes the heart of his main argument for CGI. The argument begins with Frankfurt’s insight that only what makes an important difference is important. He then argues on this basis that:

we cannot know whether something is important until we already know how to tell whether the difference it makes is important. The unlimited regress to which this leads is clearly unacceptable. If it were possible for attributions of inherent importance to be rationally grounded, they would have to be grounded in something besides other attributions of inherent importance. The truth is, I believe, that it is possible to ground judgments of importance only in judgments concerning what people care about. Nothing is truly important to a person unless it makes a difference that he actually cares about. Importance is never inherent. (2006, p. 23)

Frankfurt here sets out to answer the ontological question of whether there is any mind-independent ground of importance (of, e.g., moral normativity) and then argues that there is not since we cannot know what is important without already being able to tell whether it makes an important difference, thereby landing us in an “unacceptable” regress. Clearly, however, the regress Frankfurt here suggests is epistemological, not ontological. The mere fact that we cannot tell what is important without already being able to tell whether the difference it makes is important, if indeed this is the case, reveals nothing about whether anything is important

independently of our being able to recognize it as such. Even if we were unable justifiably to identify what is important, it would not follow that nothing is important. And even if, as Frankfurt suggests, awareness of what we care about were our most reliable source of evidence for our beliefs involving attributions of importance, it would not follow that the importance of what we care about is (ontologically) grounded in our caring about it. In other words, given that CGI is a claim about the ontological ground of importance, CGI does not follow from Frankfurt's argument, which at best establishes the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of achieving knowledge or rational belief of importance apart from knowledge of what we care about.

Of course, the impossibility of forming rational beliefs about what is important would be an unfortunate consequence of any view of the ground of importance. From the assumption that the ground of importance is independent of what we care about, desire, or believe, however, it does not follow that we cannot know what is important. It is not inconsistent, in other words, to claim that importance is grounded in something other than what we care about and that our knowledge of importance is grounded in knowledge of what we care about. Moreover, some rational belief or knowledge of what is important might be epistemically basic, achieved not by way of inference from other judgments (concerning, e.g., what we care about), but rather by way of a rational faculty of evaluative perception, or some other basic epistemic source.⁵ Frankfurt offers no reason to think that such non-inferentially justified belief in importance (be it perceptual or otherwise) is implausible, let alone impossible. Frankfurt thus not only fails to show that a care-independent ground of importance is threatened by a vicious ontological regress; he also fails to demonstrate that such an objective ground of importance would undermine our knowledge of importance by generating a vicious epistemological regress.

2. Frankfurt's Care Ground of Importance and Volitional Irrationality

I have so far shown that Frankfurt's main argument for CGI and, hence, against moral objectivity, fails. Even more damaging to Frankfurt's defense of CGI is the fact that the principle undermines Frankfurt's own treatment of volitional irrationality as an objective and morally significant defect of human formation. As explained above, Frankfurt (2006) argues that Hume's 'madman' who, according to CGI, cannot be in violation of any objective moral norms, is nevertheless "volitionally irrational," "lunatic," and "inhuman" (pp. 29-30). Frankfurt's notion of volitional rationality is closely tied to his notion of volitional necessity. For Frankfurt, what we cannot help but care about sets boundaries – volitional necessities – on our ability to act in the sense that some actions become impossible, as a result of our caring about or loving certain things, for us to will (or do) despite the fact that in some sense we maintain the capacity so to act. The volitionally irrational agent is the one who finds it possible to will and act in ways that the rest of us cannot, because of the volitional necessities imposed upon us by what we cannot help but care about and love, seemingly on account of our very nature.⁶ In other words, when it comes to caring about and loving what humans must love as a consequence of their nature the madman gets it wrong. As a result, the madman is able to do what is for us "unthinkable" (Frankfurt, 2006, p. 31).⁷

The problem for Frankfurt here is that CGI is not consistent with any claim that the madman has somehow missed what is (objectively) important. What is important *to the madman*, according to CGI, is grounded in and thus determined by what the madman cares about. It follows from CGI that, as Frankfurt himself acknowledges,

Once we have learned as much as possible about the natural characteristics of the things we care about, and as much as possible about ourselves, there are no further substantive

corrections that can be made. There is really nothing else to look for so far as the normativity of final ends is concerned. There is nothing else to get right. (Frankfurt, 2006, p. 50)

Yet, Frankfurt treats the madman's volitional irrationality as though it were an objective defect:

Caring more about a scratched finger than about "destruction of the whole world" is not just an unappealing personal quirk. It is *lunatic*. Anybody who has that preference is *inhuman*. When we characterize the person in Hume's example as "crazy," or as "lunatic," or as "inhuman," these epithets do not function as mere vituperative rhetoric. They are literal denials that the person is a rational creature....He is volitionally irrational. He has a defect of the will, which bears upon how he is disposed to choose and to act. (Frankfurt, 2006, pp. 29-30)

Frankfurt (2006) argues that moral norms are objective, not in the sense that they are "entirely outside of our minds" but rather in that they are "outside the scope of our voluntary control" (p. 34). Yet, his criticisms of the madman as volitionally irrational and inhuman implicitly appeal to a stronger (mind-independent) concept of objectivity.

Let us first consider how CGI undermines Frankfurt's criticism of the madman as irrational. Then I shall evaluate his criticism of the madman as inhuman. Frankfurt's commitment to CGI precludes his claiming that the so-called volitional irrationality of the madman is any sort of objective defect. It follows from CGI that volitional rationality is at best a relative notion.⁸ The most Frankfurt can say in criticism of the madman is that he is volitionally irrational *from our perspective*. Read in this way, Frankfurt's criticism of the madman loses much of its force. Indeed, the assumption of CGI renders Frankfurt's criticism of the madman far less forceful than is warranted by the madman's moral constitution.

Moreover, given CGI, it is difficult to see how the madman's defect is one of rationality in the first place. The madman simply wills and acts within the boundaries set for him by his own volitional necessities, i.e., by what he cannot help but care about and love. As Frankfurt himself explains in his earlier writing on the subject, "What is unthinkable for some people may be for others not only *perfectly reasonable* but exquisitely correct" (Frankfurt, 1988b, p. 187, italics mine). It is, therefore, hard to see what the madman's defect has in common with standard conceptions of irrationality such that it deserves to be classified as another species of the same genus.

Standard claims of irrationality pick out some inconsistency in agents themselves – between two or more of an agent's beliefs, or between an agent's beliefs and her emotions, or between her beliefs and her desires, goals, or will.⁹ The madman suffers no such inconsistency. His beliefs and his will are in tune with what he loves. Of course, we might call an agent 'irrational' despite his having highly integrated and consistent mental and volitional states, if, for example, his worldview was built around a wildly imaginative theory involving government or religious conspiracies or alien abductions.¹⁰ In such cases, however, accusations of irrationality imply that it is objectively important for humans to get the world right, at least according to the evidence available to them, and that there really is something wrong with agents who fail to do so to a significant degree.

We also sometimes use 'irrationality' as a synonym for 'insanity,' as, for example, when we say that a person suffering from some pathological disorder is 'irrational.' It is likely that Frankfurt has something like this conception of irrationality in mind, given his characterization of the madman as both "irrational" and "lunatic." Yet, the notion of rationality at work here relies on an appeal to a concept of objective normality or proper function: "Rationality as sanity

does not require possession of particularly exalted rational faculties; it requires only normality (in the nonstatistical sense) or health, or proper function” (Plantinga, 1993, p. 137). Frankfurt’s CGI is incompatible with any such reliance on notions of objective normality, health, or proper function. If there is a *proper* or *healthy* way for humans to function, surely it is important that they do so function, regardless of what they care about.

Contrary to Frankfurt’s diagnosis, therefore, what seems to be wrong with the madman is not that he is irrational, but rather that his cares are disordered. He cares inordinately about what lacks objective importance – a scratch on his finger – and he fails to care appropriately about what really is important – the preservation of the whole world. After all, Frankfurt (2006) admits that “[s]ometimes, normative disagreements cannot be rationally resolved. It may even be true that other people are required by what they care about to harm or to destroy what we love” (p. 50). Frankfurt would do well to heed Richard Foley’s warning that we must be careful to avoid “the impulse to turn every human shortcoming into a failure of rationality” (Foley, 1993, p. 6). Concerning this impulse, Foley (1993) writes, “If we cannot say of those who are pursuing weird, perverted, or otherwise unacceptable goals that they are irrational, we have a tendency, especially when doing philosophy, to be puzzled as to what we can say of them by way of criticism.” Foley correctly concludes about such individuals that “Their failures are failures of character or of outlook, failures that result in their caring for the wrong things. They are not necessarily failures of rationality” (p. 6).

Frankfurt does acknowledge, of course, that volitional irrationality is morally significant. He argues that moral anger is an “understandable and appropriate” response to the madman (Frankfurt, 2006, p. 47). To claim that volitional irrationality is morally significant in this way, however, sounds suspiciously like an appeal to objective moral normativity grounded in

something other than what each individual cares about. Frankfurt attempts to account for what is wrong with the immoral individual without appealing to such objective moral norms, noting that “the transgression of an immoral agent consists in his willfully rejecting and impeding the realization of our moral ideals. In other words, he deliberately injures something that we love. That is enough to make anyone angry” (Frankfurt, 2006, pp. 47-48). Yet, while this may show that anger is understandable, it does not show that it is appropriate. Given that there is nothing of objective importance, we want to know what if anything might warrant moral anger toward volitional irrationality. CGI prevents Frankfurt from offering a satisfying response to this question.

In light of these considerations, might Frankfurt do better to avoid the talk of irrationality (and immorality) altogether and simply judge the madman as inhuman on the grounds that what he cares or fails to care about reveals a (perhaps non-rational and amoral) difference of specific nature?¹¹ As with irrationality, CGI prohibits Frankfurt from judging that the madman is inhuman on the basis of his failing to care about what is objectively important and, hence, worth caring about. The most Frankfurt can say, given CGI, is that the madman is not essentially like the rest of us; that is, he is not one of us. On this view there is nothing objectively *wrong* with the madman; he is merely different from the rest of us, albeit different in ways that inspire “bewilderment” and “revulsion” in us (Frankfurt, 2006, p. 40). As we saw above, however, Frankfurt diagnoses the madman with a defect, as opposed to a mere difference, of the will. To judge that the madman is defective, if being defective is to be understood as dysfunctional or improper at all, is to presuppose the (objective) importance of caring about certain things; namely, those that (most) humans cannot help but care about. This Frankfurt cannot do, on pain of inconsistency, without giving up CGI.

Moreover, Frankfurt's criticism of the madman as inhuman seems to entail that not only imaginary madmen such as Hume's are (literally) inhuman, but so too are the real moral monsters of human history, including Nero, Hitler, Stalin, Jeffrey Dahmer, and even many less infamous, ordinarily decent people (dare we include ourselves?) who, as chronicled in John Conroy's *Unspeakable Acts, Ordinary People*, for example, likewise seem to be capable of doing unspeakable and, indeed, unthinkable acts. Surely the right thing to say about such individuals is that they are morally deficient humans, that is, that they lack something essential to a morally ideal human life, not that they are literally inhuman. What seem perfectly appropriate moral criticisms of such agents are not appropriate criticisms of non-humans. We ought to reject as troublingly impoverished any account of moral normativity that would render us unable to criticize morally defective agents, except by pronouncing them excluded from the human community. And, as we saw above, couching such criticism in terms of irrationality does not help.

Thus, not only does Frankfurt fail to provide any positive support for CGI, but the principle undermines, either by directly conflicting with or by emptying of meaning, all attempts to judge the worst moral agents as volitionally irrational or otherwise objectively defective.

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¹ The Care Ground of Importance principle, CGI, should not be confused with what Yitzhak Benbaji has called “Frankfurt’s Care Importance Principle” or “CIP.” CIP states that if *S* cares about *x*, then *x* is important to *S*, precisely because *S*’s caring about *x* makes *x* important to *S*. While CIP states that *S*’s caring about *x* is a sufficient condition for *x*’s being important to *S*, CGI states that *S*’s caring about *x* (or some *y* the importance of which entails the importance of *x* to *S*) is a necessary condition of *x*’s importance to *S*. See Benbaji (2001); cf., Frankfurt (1988a, p. 92).

² I admit that it is not clear whether Frankfurt intended this passage as an argument for CGI at all. It is, at any rate, the closest thing to an argument for CGI that is to be found in his recent work.

³ Here Frankfurt assumes that the class of things people should care about is co-extensional with the class of important things.

⁴ Recall the above discussion of the relationship between moral normativity and importance.

⁵ For a sketch of one such view of evaluative perception, see Adams (1999, pp. 356-63).

⁶ Later on Frankfurt (2006) writes, “These fundamental necessities of the will are not transient creatures of social prescription or of cultural habit. Nor are they constituted by peculiarities of individual taste or judgment. They are solidly entrenched in our human nature from the start” (p. 38).

⁷ Here, Frankfurt defines the “unthinkable” in terms of his notion of volitional necessity. For Frankfurt, what we care about sets boundaries on our ability to act in the sense that some actions become volitionally impossible for us to will (or do) as a result of our caring about or loving certain things, despite the fact that in some sense we maintain the capacity so to act.

⁸ While he seems reticent to do so in this most recent work, Frankfurt (1988b) readily admitted the relativity of volitional irrationality in his early writing, noting that: “To be sure, we do sometimes take what we find unthinkable as defining a criterion of normality. The unthinkable seems to us to be not merely personal but to have for some reason a more general import. Even in those cases, however, we are likely to acknowledge that the scope of the criterion is limited. We know that preferences or types of conduct that are irrational in one cultural locale may often be entirely rational in another” (p. 186).

⁹ See Plantinga (1993, pp. 132-7) for a helpful catalogue of standard conceptions of rationality.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Bob Roberts for suggesting this point.

¹¹ By treating the criticism of inhumanness as distinct from the criticism of irrationality, I may be departing here from Frankfurt. It appears that Frankfurt views his criticisms of irrationality and inhumanness as more or less equivalent. He seems to think, in other words, that the madman is inhuman precisely because he lacks something essential to *rational* human nature. As I have already treated his criticism of the madman as irrational, however, I will not discuss it further here.