

**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.”<sup>1</sup>

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.”<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> *Theaetetus* 155d.

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

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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.”<sup>3</sup>

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 tofea-

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<sup>3</sup> 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

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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.<sup>4</sup> 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-

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

**4** When philosophers or economists or others attempt to analyze the various structures and strategies of practical reasoning, they generally draw upon a more or less standard but nonetheless rather meager conceptual repertoire. Perhaps the most elementary as well as the most indispensable of these limited resources is the notion of what people *want*—or, synonymously (at least according to the somewhat procrustean convention that I shall adopt here), what they *desire*. This notion is rampantly ubiquitous. It is also heavily overburdened, and a bit limp. People routinely deploy it in a number of different roles, to refer to a disparate and unruly assortment of psychic conditions and events. Moreover, its various meanings are rarely distinguished; nor is there much effort to clarify how they are related. These matters are generally left carelessly undefined in the blunt usages of common sense and ordinary speech.

As a result, our understanding of various significantly problematic aspects of our lives has tended to remain partial and blurred. The standard repertoire of concepts is handy, but it does not provide adequately for the clarification of certain very important phenomena. These phenomena must be brought into sharper focus. Therefore, the usual array of conceptual resources needs to be enriched by the articulation of some additional notions. These notions, too, like the notion of desire, are both commonplace and fundamental. To an unfortunate extent, however, they have been neglected.

**5** It is frequently insufficient to identify the motives that guide our conduct, or that shape our attitudes and our thinking, just by observing vaguely that there are various things we *want*. That often leaves out too much. In numerous contexts, it is both more precise and more fully explana-

tory to say that there is something *we care about*, or—in a phrase that I shall employ (perhaps a bit willfully) as closely equivalent to this—something *we regard as important to ourselves*. In certain cases, moreover, what moves us is an especially notable variant of caring: namely, *love*. In proposing to expand the repertoire upon which the theory of practical reason relies, these are the additional concepts that I have in mind: what we care about, what is important to us, and what we love.

There are significant relationships, of course, between wanting things and caring about them. Indeed, the notion of caring is in large part constructed out of the notion of desire. Caring about something may be, in the end, nothing more than a certain complex mode of wanting it. However, simply attributing desire to a person does not in itself convey that the person cares about the object he desires. In fact, it does not convey that the object means anything much to him at all. As everyone knows, many of our desires are utterly inconsequential. We don't really care about those desires. Satisfying them is of no importance to us whatever.

This need not be because the desires are weak. The intensity of a desire consists in its capacity to push other inclinations and interests out of the way. Sheer intensity, however, implies nothing as to whether we really care about what we want. Differences in the strengths of desires may be due to all sorts of things that are quite independent of our evaluative attitudes. They may be radically incommensurate with the relative importance to us of the desired objects.

It is true, of course, that if we happen to want something very badly, it is natural for us to care about avoiding the discomfort that we will suffer should our desire be frustrated. From our caring about *this*, however, it does not follow that

we care about satisfying the desire. The reason is that it may be possible for us to avoid the frustration in another way—that is, not by obtaining the desired object but by giving up the desire instead; and that alternative may appeal to us more. People sometimes quite reasonably attempt to rid themselves entirely of certain desires, rather than to satisfy them, when they believe that satisfying the desires would be unworthy or harmful.

It will not help to augment the notion of what people want by ranking their desires in an order of preference. This is because a person who wants one thing more than another may not regard the former as being any more important to him than the latter. Suppose that someone who needs to kill a little time decides to do so by watching television, and that he chooses to watch a certain program because he prefers it to the others that are available. We cannot legitimately conclude that watching this program is something that he cares about. He watches it, after all, only to kill time. The fact that he prefers it to the others does not entail that he cares more about watching it than about watching them, because it does not entail that he cares about watching it at all.

Caring about something differs not only from wanting it, and from wanting it more than other things. It differs also from taking it to be intrinsically valuable. Even if a person believes that something has considerable intrinsic value, he may not regard it as important to himself. In attributing intrinsic value to something, we do perhaps imply that it would make sense for someone to desire it for its own sake—that is, as a final end, rather than merely as a means to something else. However, our belief that having a certain desire would not be unreasonable does not imply that we ourselves actu-

ally have the desire, nor does it imply a belief that we or anyone else ought to have it.

Something that we recognize as having intrinsic value (a life devoted to profound meditation, perhaps, or to courageous feats of knight errantry) may nevertheless fail to attract us. Moreover, it may be a matter of complete indifference to us whether anyone at all is interested in promoting or achieving it. We can easily think of many things that might well be worth having or worth doing for their own sakes, but with regard to which we consider it entirely acceptable that no one is especially drawn to them and that they are never actually pursued.

In any case, even if a person does attempt to obtain something or to do something because of its intrinsic value, it still cannot properly be inferred that he cares about it. The fact that a certain object possesses intrinsic value has to do with the *type* of value the object possesses—namely, a value that depends exclusively upon properties that inhere in the object itself rather than upon the object's relationships to other things; but it has nothing to do with *how much* value of that type the object has. What is worth having or worth doing for its own sake alone may nonetheless be worth very little. It may therefore be quite reasonable for a person to desire as final ends, entirely for the sake of their intrinsic or noninstrumental value, many things that he does not regard as being at all important to him.

For instance, there are numerous quite trivial pleasures that we seek exclusively because of their intrinsic value, but that we do not truly care about at all. When I want an ice cream cone, I want it simply for the pleasure of eating it. The pleasure is not a means to anything else; it is an

end that I desire for its own sake alone. However, this hardly implies that I care about eating the ice cream. I generally recognize quite clearly on such occasions that my desire is inconsequential, and that its object is not at all important to me. A person cannot fairly be presumed to care about something, then, even if he wants it just for its own sake and thus regards fulfilling his desire for it as among his final ends.

In designing and managing their lives, people need to confront a number of significant issues. They must make up their minds concerning what they want, which things they want more than others, what they consider to be intrinsically valuable and hence appropriate for pursuit not just as a means but as a final end, and what they themselves will in fact pursue as final ends. In addition, they face a distinct further task. They have to determine what it is that they care about.

**6** What, then, does it mean to care about something? It will be convenient to approach this problem indirectly. Let us begin, then, by considering what it would mean to say that we *do not really care about* going ahead with a certain plan that we have been intending to carry out.

We might say something like that to a friend who needs a favor badly, but who appears to be hesitant about asking us for it just because he is aware that doing him the favor would require us to give up our plan. The friend is embarrassed. He is reluctant to take advantage of our good nature. In fact, however, we would like to do him the favor; and we want to make it easier for him to ask. So we tell him that doing what we had been planning to do is not anything that we really care about.

When we give up going ahead with a certain plan, we may do so with either of two attitudes. On the one hand, we may give up the plan without entirely abandoning the interest and the desire that had led us to adopt it. Thus even after we decide to do the favor for our friend, carrying out our earlier intention might be something that we still want to do. Carrying out that intention has a lower priority now than it had before, but the desire to do what we had planned to do continues. Accordingly, deciding to forgo the plan entails some disappointment, or some degree of frustration. It imposes upon us, in other words, a certain cost.

On the other hand, it may be that in giving up the plan we entirely abandon our original interest in it. We lose all desire to carry it out. Then fulfilling that desire no longer occupies any position at all in the order of our priorities. We simply do not have the desire anymore. In that case, doing the favor imposes upon us no loss, and therefore no frustration or disappointment. It entails no cost of that kind. Accordingly, there is no reason for our friend to be uneasy about asking us to do him the favor and hence to give up our original plan. It is this that we might be intending to convey to him, when we tell him that we really do not care about whatever it was that we had been planning to do.

A certain caution is required here. We cannot show that a person cares about something merely by establishing that his desire for it would continue even if he should decide to forgo or to postpone satisfying that desire. The desire might be kept alive by its own intensity, after all, and not because he especially wants it to persist. Indeed, it might persist despite conscientious efforts on his part to dispel it: he might have the misfortune of being stuck with a desire that he does not want. In that case, although the desire remains alight and

active within him, it does so against his own will. It does not continue because he cares about it, in other words, but only because it forces itself upon him.

When a person cares about something, on the other hand, he is willingly committed to his desire. The desire does not move him either against his will or without his endorsement. He is not its victim; nor is he passively indifferent to it. On the contrary, he himself desires that it move him. He is therefore prepared to intervene, should that be necessary, in order to ensure that it continues. If the desire tends to fade or to falter, he is disposed to refresh it and to reinforce whatever degree of influence he wishes it to exert upon his attitudes and upon his behavior.

Besides wanting to fulfill his desire, then, the person who cares about what he desires wants something else as well: he wants the desire to be sustained. Moreover, this desire for his desire to be sustained is not a merely ephemeral inclination. It is not transient or adventitious. It is a desire with which the person identifies himself, and which he accepts as expressing what he really wants.

7 Perhaps that is not all there is to caring about things. It is certainly true that caring admits of many shades and nuances that this rather limited analysis does not make explicit. But if it is at least part of a correct account, then the fact that we do actually care about various things is of fundamental significance to the character of human life.

Suppose we cared about nothing. In that case, we would do nothing to maintain any thematic unity or coherence in our desires or in the determinations of our will. We would not be actively disposed to sustain any particular interests or aims. To be sure, some degree of stable continuity might

nonetheless happen to come about in our volitional lives. However, so far as our own intentions and effort are concerned, that would be just fortuitous or inadvertent. The unity and the coherence would not be the result of any purposeful initiative or guidance on our part. Various tendencies and configurations of our will would come and go; and sometimes they might last for a while. In the design of their succession and persistence, however, we ourselves would play no defining role.

Needless to say, what it is in particular that we care about has a considerable bearing upon the character and quality of our lives. It makes a great difference that certain things, and not others, are important to us. But the very fact that there *are* things that we care about—that we do care about something—is even more fundamentally significant. The reason is that this fact bears not just upon the individual specificity of a person's life, but upon its basic structure. Caring is indispensably foundational as an activity that connects and binds us to ourselves. It is through caring that we provide ourselves with volitional continuity, and in that way constitute and participate in our own agency. Regardless of how suitable or unsuitable the various things we care about may be, caring about something is essential to our being creatures of the kind that human beings are.

The ability to care requires a type of psychic complexity that may be peculiar to the members of our species. By its very nature, caring manifests and depends upon our distinctive capacity to have thoughts, desires, and attitudes that are *about* our own attitudes, desires, and thoughts. In other words, it depends upon the fact that the human mind is *reflexive*. Animals of various lesser species also have desires and attitudes. Perhaps some have thoughts as well. But ani-

mals of those species—at least, so it appears—are not self-critical. They are moved into action by impulse or by inclination, simply as it comes, without the mediation of any reflective consideration or criticism of their own motives. Insofar as they lack the capacity to form attitudes toward themselves, there is for them no possibility either of self-acceptance or of mobilizing an inner resistance to being what they are. They can neither identify with the forces that move them nor distance themselves from those forces. They are structurally incapable of such interventions in their own lives. For better or for worse, they are not equipped to take themselves seriously.

On the other hand, the self-awareness that is characteristic of human beings makes us susceptible to an inner division in which we separate from and objectify ourselves. This puts us in a position to assess the motivating forces by which we happen to be impelled, and to determine which of them to accept and which to resist. When various motivating forces within us conflict, we are generally not passive or neutral with regard to how the conflict is to be settled. We do take ourselves seriously. Accordingly, we generally enlist on one side of the conflict or on the other, and seek actively to affect the result. The actual outcome of the struggle among our own desires may therefore be for us either a victory or a defeat.

**8** Creatures like ourselves are not limited to desires that move them to act. In addition, they have the reflexive capacity to form desires regarding their own desires—that is, regarding both what they want to want, and what they want not to want. These higher-order desires pertain directly

not to actions but to motives. People are commonly concerned about their motives; they want their actions to be motivated in certain ways, and not in others. Insofar as they find certain of their own motivational tendencies objectionable, they attempt to weaken and to resist them. They accept and identify with only some of the desires and dispositions that they encounter in themselves. They want to be motivated in their actions by these, and they do not want those that they consider undesirable to be effective in moving them to act.

Sometimes people are unsuccessful even in strenuously conscientious efforts to avoid being moved into action by desires that they would prefer to be motivationally ineffective. For instance, someone may act out of jealousy, or out of a desire for revenge, although he disapproves of these motives and would strongly prefer that he not be driven by them. Unhappily, as it turns out, their force is too great for him to withstand; and in the end he submits to it. Despite his resistance, the unwelcome desire is effective in moving him to act. Given that he has opposed it as well as he could, it may then reasonably be said that the desire has moved him—and that he has consequently acted—against his own will.

Sometimes, of course, the desires by which a person is motivated when he acts are desires by which he is entirely content to be moved. He may be effectively moved by a desire to be generous, for example, and this motive may be welcome to him; it may be the very desire by which, in the circumstances, he would like his conduct to be governed. In that case, when he performs the generous act, he is not only doing exactly what he wants to do, and in that sense acting

freely. It is also true of him that he is desiring freely, in the parallel sense that what he is wanting as he acts—namely, to be generous—is exactly what he wants to want.

Suppose now that someone is performing an action that he wants to perform; and suppose further that his motive in performing this action is a motive by which he truly wants to be motivated. This person is in no way unwilling or indifferent either with respect to what he is doing or with respect to the desire that moves him to do it. In other words, neither the action nor the desire that motivates it is imposed upon him against his will or without his acceptance. With respect neither to the one nor to the other is he merely a passive bystander or a victim.

Under these conditions, I believe, the person is enjoying as much freedom as it is reasonable for us to desire. Indeed, it seems to me that he is enjoying as much freedom as it is possible for us to conceive. This is as close to freedom of the will as finite beings, who do not create themselves, can intelligibly hope to come.<sup>5</sup>

People want certain of their desires to move them into action, and they usually have certain other desires that they would prefer to remain motivationally ineffective. They are concerned about their desires in other ways as well. Thus they want some of their desires to persist; and they are indif-

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<sup>5</sup> Since we do not create ourselves, there is bound to be something about us of which we ourselves are not the cause. In my opinion, the critical problem with respect to our interest in freedom is not whether the events in our volitional lives are causally determined by conditions outside ourselves. What really counts, so far as the issue of freedom goes, is not causal independence. It is autonomy. Autonomy is essentially a matter of whether we are active rather than passive in our motives and choices—whether, however we acquire them, they are the motives and choices that we really want and are therefore in no way alien to us.

ferent, or even actively opposed, to the persistence of others. These alternative possibilities—commitment to one's own desires or an absence of commitment to them—define the difference between caring and not caring. Whether a person cares or does not care about the object of his desire depends upon which of the alternatives prevails.<sup>6</sup>

**9** There are many things that become important to us, or that become more important to us than they would otherwise be, just by virtue of the fact that we care about them. If we did not care about those things, they would either be of much less importance to us or they would be of no importance to us whatever. Consider, for instance, the people who are our friends. These people would be considerably less important to us if we had not come to care about them as much as we do. The success of a basketball team has a certain importance to its supporters, to whom its success would not be important at all if they did not happen to care about it.

Needless to say, many things are important to us despite the fact that we do not recognize that importance and therefore do not care at all about them. For instance, there are large numbers of people who have no idea that they are exposed to background radiation, and who have no idea even that there is such a thing. These people naturally do

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<sup>6</sup> The inner lives of human beings are obscure, not only to others but to themselves as well. People are elusive. We tend to be rather poorly informed about our own attitudes and desires, and about where our commitments truly lie. It is useful to keep in mind, then, that a person may care about something a great deal without realizing that he cares about it. It is also possible that someone really does not care in the slightest about certain things, even though he sincerely believes that he considers those things to be extremely important to him.

not care about the level of background radiation to which they are exposed. It does not follow that the level of radiation to which they are exposed is without importance to them. It *is* important to them, whether they know anything about it or not.

However, the things that are important to a person despite the fact that he does not actually care about them, or even know about them, can have that importance to him only in virtue of standing in a certain relationship to something that he *does* care about. Suppose that someone genuinely does not care a bit about his health, or about any of the effects that radiation may produce. Suppose that he really is completely indifferent to whether the environment, or other people, or he himself, is or is not affected in those ways. In that case, the level of background radiation is not important to him. It truly does not matter to him; he has no reason to care about it. So far as he is concerned, it makes no difference whether the level is high or low. That is important only to people who care about the magnitude of the radiation either for its own sake or on account of conditions to which it may in pertinent ways be related.

If there were someone who literally cared about absolutely nothing, then nothing would be important to him.<sup>7</sup> He would be uninvolving in his own life: unconcerned with the coherence and continuity of his desires, neglectful of his volitional identity, and in this respect indifferent to himself. Nothing that he did or felt, and nothing that happened, would matter to him. He might *believe* that he cared about

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<sup>7</sup> This leaves open the question, to which I shall respond in due course, of whether there would nonetheless be certain things that *should be* important to him and that he *should* care about.

certain things, and that those things mattered to him; however, by hypothesis, he would be wrong. Of course, he might still have various desires, and some of those desires might be stronger than others; but he would have no interest in what, from one moment to the next, his desires and preferences would be. Even if it could meaningfully be said of such a person that he had a will, it could hardly be said of him that his will was genuinely his own.

**10** It is by caring about things that we infuse the world with importance. This provides us with stable ambitions and concerns; it marks our interests and our goals. The importance that our caring creates for us defines the framework of standards and aims in terms of which we endeavor to conduct our lives. A person who cares about something is guided, as his attitudes and his actions are shaped, by his continuing interest in it. Insofar as he does care about certain things, this determines how he thinks it important for him to conduct his life. The totality of the various things that a person cares about—together with his ordering of how important to him they are—effectively specifies his answer to the question of how to live.

Now suppose he wonders whether he has got it right. That is, suppose that somehow he becomes concerned about whether he really should care about the things that, as a matter of fact, he does care about. This is a concern about reasons. In raising the question of whether he should conduct his life on the basis of what he actually cares about, he is asking whether there are reasons good enough to justify him in living that way, and whether there may not be better reasons for him to live in some other way instead.

Trying to get a grip on this question might well make us even dizzier than Socrates became when he confronted the supposedly paradoxical fact that one person may become shorter than another even though his height remains the same. Indeed, once we begin asking how people *should* live, we are bound to find ourselves helplessly in a spin. The trouble is not that the question is too difficult. Asking the question tends to be disorienting, rather, because it is inescapably self-referential and leads us into an endless circle. No attempt to deal with the problem of what we have good reason to care about—to deal with it systematically and from the ground up—can possibly succeed. Efforts to conduct a rational inquiry into the matter will inevitably be defeated and turned back upon themselves.

It is not hard to see why. In order to carry out a rational evaluation of some way of living, a person must first know what evaluative criteria to employ and how to employ them. He needs to know what considerations count in favor of choosing to live in one way rather than in another, what considerations count against, and the relative weights of each. For instance, it must be clear to him how to evaluate the fact that a certain way of living leads more than others (or less than others) to personal satisfaction, to pleasure, to power, to glory, to creativity, to spiritual depth, to a harmonious relationship with the precepts of religion, to conformity with the requirements of morality, and so on.

The trouble here is a rather obvious sort of circularity. In order for a person to be able even to conceive and to initiate an inquiry into how to live, he must already have settled upon the judgments at which the inquiry aims. Identifying the question of how one should live—that is, understanding just what question it is and just how to go about answering

it—requires that one specify the criteria that are to be employed in evaluating various ways of living. Identifying the question is, indeed, tantamount to specifying those criteria: what the question asks is, precisely, what way of living best satisfies them. But identifying the criteria to be employed in evaluating various ways of living is also tantamount to providing an answer to the question of how to live, for the answer to this question is simply that one should live in the way that best satisfies whatever criteria are to be employed for evaluating lives.

Clarifying what question the inquiry is to explore consists in identifying the criteria on the basis of which the exploration is to be pursued. But this comes to the same thing as affirming the judgments concerning what makes one life preferable to another, at which the inquiry aims. One might say, then, that the question is *systematically inchoate*. It is impossible to identify the question exactly, or to see how to go about inquiring into it, until the answer to the question is known.

Here is another way to bring out the difficulty. Something is important to a person only in virtue of a difference that it makes. If everything would be exactly the same with that thing as without it, then it makes no sense for anyone to care about it. It cannot really be of any importance. Of course, it cannot be enough for it merely to make *some* difference. After all, everything does make some difference; but not everything is important. If something is to be important, obviously, the difference that it makes cannot be utterly inconsequential. It cannot be so trivial that it would be reasonable to ignore it entirely. In other words, it must be a difference of some importance. In order for a person to know how to determine what is important to himself, then, he

must already know how to identify certain things as making differences that are important to him. Formulating a criterion of importance presupposes possession of the very criterion that is to be formulated. The circularity is both inescapable and fatal.

**11** There can be no well-ordered inquiry into the question of how one has reason to live, because the prior question of how to identify and to evaluate the reasons that are pertinent in deciding how one should live cannot be settled until it has first been settled how one should live. The question of what one should care about must already be answered, in other words, before a rationally conducted inquiry aimed at answering it can even get under way. It is true, of course, that once a person has identified *some* things as important to him, he may readily be able on that basis to identify others. The fact that he cares about certain things will very likely make it possible for him to recognize that it would be reasonable for him to care about various related things as well. What is *not* possible is for a person who does not already care at least about *something* to discover reasons for caring about anything. Nobody can pull himself up by his own bootstraps.

This means that the most basic and essential question for a person to raise concerning the conduct of his life cannot be the *normative* question of how he *should* live. That question can sensibly be asked only on the basis of a prior answer to the *factual* question of what he actually *does* care about. If he cares about nothing, he cannot even begin to inquire methodically into how he should live; for his caring about nothing entails that there is nothing that can count with him as a reason in favor of living in one way rather than in another. In that case, to be sure, the fact that he is unable to

determine how he should live may not cause him any distress. After all, if there really is nothing that he considers important to him, he will not consider *that* to be important to him either.

As a matter of fact, however, nearly everyone does care about something. Nearly everyone cares about staying alive, for instance, and about avoiding severe injury, disease, hunger, and various modes of psychic distress and disorder; they care about their children, about their livelihoods, and about how others think of them. Needless to say, they generally also care about many other things as well. For nearly everyone, there are a number of considerations that count as reasons for preferring one way of living over another.

Moreover, a number of the considerations that count as reasons for these preferences are the same for nearly everyone. This is not a coincidence, nor is it an artifact of some rather special set of historical or cultural conditions. People care about many of the same things because the natures of human beings, and the basic conditions of human life, are grounded in biological, psychological, and environmental facts that are not subject to very much variation or change.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, it may easily seem that an empirical account of what people actually care about and consider important to themselves—even if all those things were to be entirely the same and in the same order for everyone—would miss the whole point of our original concern with the problem of what sort of life one should live. How could a purely factual account like that even diminish, much less definitively allay, our initial disturbing uncertainty about how to conduct our

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<sup>8</sup> People do differ quite a bit, of course, in their orderings. Although many things are important to nearly everyone, people's preferences and priorities among the things they all care about are by no means the same.

lives? Merely knowing how things are, it would seem, does nothing to justify them. Why should the fact that people generally employ certain criteria in evaluating alternatives—or that they always do so—be considered sufficient to establish that those are the criteria it is most reasonable to employ? Becoming aware of the status quo hardly appears to give us, in itself, a good enough reason for accepting it.

We need to understand, however, that the ambition to provide an exhaustively rational warrant for the way in which we are to conduct our lives is misconceived. The pan-rationalist fantasy of demonstrating—from the ground up—how we have most reason to live is incoherent and must be abandoned. It is not the factual question about caring that misses the point, but the normative one. If we are to resolve our difficulties and hesitations in settling upon a way to live, what we need most fundamentally is not reasons or proofs. It is clarity and confidence. Coping with our troubled and restless uncertainty about how to live does not require us to discover what way of living can be justified by definitive argument. Rather, it requires us simply to understand what it is that we ourselves really care about, and to be decisively and robustly confident in caring about it.<sup>9</sup>

**12** The degree to which confidence in our beliefs or attitudes or ways of behaving is warranted often depends quite properly upon the strength of the reasons by

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<sup>9</sup> Being confident must not be confused with being fanatical, or with having a closed mind. Even the most decisively and robustly confident person may be capable of recognizing that additional evidence or experience might come along that would lead him to change his attitudes or his beliefs. His confidence may imply that he considers such a change to be unlikely, but it does not mean that he is determined to prevent it.

which the confidence is supported. In certain matters, however, it would be foolishly misguided to insist that confidence is appropriate only to the extent that it is securely grounded in reasons. For instance, normal people are as a rule not at all uncertain concerning whether to care about their own survival, or about the well-being of their children. We care about such things without inhibition or reserve, and without any anxiety concerning whether it can be shown to be proper for us to do so.<sup>10</sup> We do not suppose that the sturdy confidence that typically characterizes our attitudes regarding them actually depends—nor do we suppose that it should depend—upon a conviction that the confidence can be vindicated by rationally compelling arguments.

Perhaps there are such arguments, but that is not to the point. The fact that people ordinarily do not hesitate in their commitments to the continuation of their lives, and to the well-being of their children, does not derive from any actual consideration by them of reasons; nor does it depend even upon an assumption that good reasons could be found. Those commitments are innate in us. They are not based upon deliberation. They are not responses to any commands of rationality.

The commands to which they do in fact respond are grounded in a source that is constituted not by judgments and reasons, but by a particular mode of caring about things. They are commands of love. The basis for our confidence in caring about our children and our lives is that, in virtue of necessities

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<sup>10</sup> To be sure, we may be uncertain concerning how much to care, or concerning whether to care more about one thing or about another. We are nonetheless quite confident that our lives and our children are important to us, even though we may not know exactly how important to us we want them to be.

that are biologically embedded in our nature, we love our children and we love living. We generally continue to love them, indeed, even when they disappoint us or when they bring us suffering. Often we go on loving them even after we have become persuaded that the love is unreasonable.<sup>11</sup>

People do not all love the same things. The fact that I love my life and my children does not mean that I love yours. Moreover, there are likely to be some people who genuinely and wholeheartedly love what we ourselves fear or despise. That presents a problem. It should not be assumed, however, that we cannot deal sensibly and effectively with this problem except by marshaling evidence and arguments. In fact, we really do not need to decide who is right.

The problem for us is to protect our children and our lives. One way to accomplish this, of course, would be by persuading our opponents that they are wrong. But we surely cannot count on being able, by neutral and universally acceptable rational methods, to make a convincing case that they have made a mistake. This does not imply that it must therefore be unreasonable for us to defend what we love against those by whom it is threatened, or that we cannot be justified in promoting its interests despite the resistance or indifference of those to whom it does not appeal.

We do not consider parents to be acting unreasonably or unjustifiably if they continue to love and to protect their chil-

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, it is possible for our readiness to obey the commands of love to be undermined by experiences or by thoughts that we regard as giving us reasons to care less about our children or about our lives. Some people do turn against their children, after all, and some do choose to end their lives. The fact that they think they have good reasons to stop loving life or to stop loving their children does not mean that it was reason that accounted for or that warranted the love while it lasted.

dren with unshaken confidence and devotion even after discovering that their children are regarded by others with distaste or contempt. Nor are parents generally condemned for doing this even when they are utterly incapable of arguing plausibly, much less of proving, that the hostility to their children is unwarranted. We do not think that a person is being irrationally stubborn, or that his behavior is reprehensibly arbitrary, if he insists upon defending his own life even when he cannot refute the complaints against him of those who wish that he were dead.

Why should we be any more embarrassed by the impossibility of mobilizing rigorously demonstrative justifications of our moral ideals, or of the compelling importance to us of other things that we love? Why should the unavailability of decisive supporting reasons disturb our confidence in the vision of life that is defined by what we care about, or inhibit our readiness to oppose those whose vision of what is important threatens our own? Why should we not be happy to fight for what we wholeheartedly love, even when there are no good arguments to show that it is correct for us to love it rather than to love other things instead?

**13** So far I have characterized what I refer to as “love” only as a particular mode of caring. In the next chapter, I will attempt to explain more fully what I have in mind. The category of love is, of course, notoriously difficult to elucidate.<sup>12</sup> My task will be relatively manageable, however, since I will not endeavor to provide anything like a compre-

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<sup>12</sup> The prospect of undertaking to identify it with some precision makes me think of a rather unsettling bit of advice that I understand was offered by Niels Bohr. He is said to have cautioned that one should never speak more clearly than one can think.

prehensive analytical account of the diverse and complex range of conditions to which the term “love” is customarily made to refer. My own usage of the term coincides with part of that range but is not designed to coincide with all of it. Thus I need to define only the more limited set of phenomena that is especially germane to my discussion. Certain features that are salient in various other conditions that are familiarly called “love,” and that may even be definitive of those conditions, are inessential to these phenomena. Therefore, they are not included in my account.