Philosophers have long been interested in the questions of what to believe (epistemology) and how to behave (ethics). Frankfurt offers a third question central to our human interests – what should we care about? He thinks this question is outside the domains of epistemology and ethics.

There is a strong connection between what we care about and what we think is best to do. So, why isn’t this question part of ethics? Frankfurt answers that ethics concerns our relations to others, and his question, in contrast, concerns what is important to us. Frankfurt claims that we often care about non-moral things – such as personal projects, family traditions, or the pursuit of some particular craft or type of knowledge – more than we can about morality. And Frankfurt claims that such preferences are sometimes justified. Moral considerations are not always overriding.

“In any event, it is clear in both cases that the question concerning what is most important is distinguishable from the question concerning what is morally right.” (81-82)

Frankfurt notes the difficulty of analyzing importance and care.

What we care about does guide our lives, but our lives can also be “guided” by habits and things beyond our control. Frankfurt claims that caring assumes agency and self-consciousness (i.e., reflexive activity). It also involves an identification with the object of his care:

“A person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He identifies himself with what he cares about in the sense that he makes himself vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced.” (83)

Frankfurt also distinguishes caring from desiring and valuing. One can desire or value something without caring about it; and one can care about something without desiring or valuing it. Caring also introduces a unity, or at least cross-temporal bond, that does not come with simply being a creature with beliefs and desires. A decision may lead to a new care, but merely deciding to do or care about something does not constitute caring for that thing. Caring involves more than such a quick act of will. Frankfurt’s discussion of Sartre’s example is supposed to illustrate this. But, is this passage correct?
“The difficulty he is in is due either to his not knowing which of the alternatives he cares about more, or to his caring equally about each. It is clear that in neither case is his difficulty reliably to be overcome by making a decision.” (85)

IV.

- Sometimes our care for something is so great that acting contrary to the interests of that care is unthinkable.

  “An en encounter with necessity of this sort characteristically affects a person less by impelling him into a certain course of action than by somehow making it apparent to him that every apparent alternative to that course is unthinkable.” (86)

Frankfurt describes this as a failure of will, but not a failure of power. In his terminology, this is a “volitional necessity”.

Though people in such situations must act as they do, it is inappropriate to describe them as being passive to their action. Nor is such a person in any sense weak, perhaps like an addict (see the comment about power just above).

  “Unlike the addict, he does not accede to the constraining force because he lacks sufficient strength of will to defeat it. He accedes to it because he is unwilling to oppose it and because, furthermore, his unwillingness is itself something which he is unwilling to alter.” (87)

- Significantly, a person identifies with her volitional necessities. This is why she does not feel passive to them, weakened by them, etc. They are self-imposed. But, they are also not voluntarily imposed.

  “Thus volitional necessity may be both self-imposed in virtue of being imposed by the person’s own will and, at the same time, imposed involuntarily in virtue of the fact that it is not by his own voluntary act that his will is what it is.” (88)

V.

Frankfurt emphasizes that volitional necessities can be liberating. This might sound odd, given that they involve something like a compulsion. But, Frankfurt notes that rationality and love, though they are also liberating (e.g., “ways of achieving freedom”), also involve a submission to something beyond our voluntary control. Love differs from rationality, though, in that it is personal.

  “These necessities constrain us from betraying the things we care about most and with which, accordingly, we are most closely identified. In a sense which a strictly ethical analysis cannot make clear, what they keep us from violating are not our duties or our obligations but ourselves.” (91)

VI.
But what makes some things worth caring about over others? If someone cares about something, then it thereby becomes important to him. So, we should have some interest in finding out what things we should care about.

There are two ways something could be important to a person. First, the thing could be important for reasons independent of his care. Second, the thing could be important simply because he cares about it. We could make two parallel claims about the grounds for caring about something. That is, the object of care is important for reasons independent of us and this provides us with reason to care about it. Or the object of care is important simply because it is important to us that we care about it. We want what we care about to coincide with what we judge to be important. But many things become important only because we care about them.