

Loving, Valuing, Regretting, and Being Oneself:
Prologue and Introduction

Oded Na'aman

Keeping Things Whole/Mark Strand

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been.

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.

(Strand 2014, 78)

After Mark Strand's passing in November 2014, the *New York Review of Books* published a short speech about his poetry that was originally delivered by Joseph Brodsky 28 years earlier. Brodsky delivered the speech as an introduction to a reading by Strand at the American Academy of Poets in New York City on November 4, 1986. In his opening remarks, Brodsky describes his attitude toward Strand's poems.

It's a tall order to introduce Mark Strand because it requires estrangement from what I like very much, from something to which I owe many moments of almost physical happiness—or to its mental equivalent. I am talking about his poems—as well as about his prose, but poems first.

A man is, after all, what he loves. But one always feels cornered when asked to explain why one loves this or that person, and what for. In order to explain it—which inevitably

amounts to explaining oneself—one has to try to love the object of one’s attention a little bit less. I don’t think I am capable of this feat of objectivity, nor am I willing even to try. In short, I feel biased about Mark Strand’s poems, and judging by the way his work progresses, I expect to stay biased to the end of my days. (Brodsky 1986/2015)

Brodsky suggests that while one may have reasons to love—reasons that justify, warrant, and make sense of one’s love—recognizing and articulating these reasons may require a certain distance from one’s love and therefore a certain distance from oneself. And although Brodsky claims to be incapable of distancing himself in this way, and says that he is not willing even to try, he does go on to offer a very eloquent explanation of his reasons for loving Strand’s poetry. Indeed, even in the last sentence of the passage quoted above, and immediately after rejecting the demand to justify his love, Brodsky predicts, on the basis of the progress of Strand’s work, that he will continue to have reason to love his poetry.

Perhaps at the end of his speech, having articulated and grasped his reasons for loving Strand’s poetry, Brodsky loved it even more and was closer to it than ever before. Reflection on one’s reasons to love may require distance and momentary disengagement from the object of one’s love, for reflection on one’s love involves questioning one’s attachment to the object of love. But while such questioning may eventually undermine one’s love, it may also lead one back to it with greater fervor. If, on the other hand, one fails ever to consider the reasons for one’s love, then one runs the risk of being blinded by love to the point of misunderstanding its boundaries or misconceiving its object. Loving a person or a thing involves moving one’s attention back and forth, from one’s object of love to one’s reasons to love, and it requires doing so appropriately, that is, in accordance with one’s reasons. While there are tensions between these points of view—

one internal, the other external to our love—we cannot forgo either one. In love, too, we must move to keep things whole.

*

This dissertation is about the relation between the persons and things that are of fundamental importance in an individual's life and the normative reasons for which they are important. Particular individuals, relationships, activities, projects, places, causes, ideals, cultures, and traditions, are fundamentally important to us. We direct most of our attention and concern to them, and we normally say that they give meaning to our lives or that they make our lives worthwhile. They are the things we are most devoted to and whose absence, destruction, failure, or loss we most regret and mourn. We are attached to them.

And yet we may reflect on our attachments to such things, justify our attitudes toward them, as well as defend the actions we take for their sake or with regard to them. In other words, there are normative reasons for and against the importance of such things in our lives; there are reasons for and against our particular attachments. It might therefore seem that what truly is of most fundamental importance to us are not those particular persons, activities, projects, causes, ideals, cultures, and traditions, to which we are attached, but the facts that give us reasons for holding them in such high regard.

For example, it might seem that what is most important to me is not my close friend, but the facts that give me reason for being her friend; or that what is most important to her is not her tradition, but the facts that give her reason for endorsing it; or

that what is most important to him is not his project, but the facts that give him reason to pursue it. After all, if it were not for the facts that give us reason for attachment, our attachments would not have been worthwhile or justified. Thus the fact that we may acknowledge our reasons for having certain attachments might seem to suggest that the facts that give us reasons for attachment are more fundamentally important to us than the objects to which we are attached.

In light of these observations, we may feel “cornered,” as Brodsky puts it—compelled to choose between a view on which the objects of our attachments are of fundamental importance to us and a view on which there are reasons for and against our attachments. The former view may seem to invoke a Humean picture of normativity, according to which reason is the slave of attachments, as it were. On such a view, there can be no rational basis for our attachments, which are the bedrock of rational justification. The latter view, by contrast, seems to adopt a broadly rationalist approach, according to which reason is the charioteer and attachments are his winged horses. On such a view, the importance of the objects of our attachments can only be secondary to the importance of the facts that give us reason to be attached to them.

The Humean view seems to imply that we cannot truly endorse, disown, adopt or let go of our own attachments on the basis of judgments about reasons for and against them. The rationalist view, on the other hand, might seem to preclude disproportionate devotion to one object of attachment at the expense of another, equally worthy object. And when an object of attachment is lost, reason might seem to prescribe a worthy substitution and rule out the possibility of irredeemable loss.

These upshots are unacceptable. The fact that we reflect on the normative status of our attachments, that we justify, criticize, endorse, or disown attachments, suggests that we are committed to there being reasons that count for and against attachments. But the fact that we care most about the objects of our attachments, and that devotion and the possibility of loss are essential to the phenomenon of attachment, suggests that the objects of our attachments, and not the facts that give us reason for attachment, are of fundamental importance to us.

This dissertation aims to do justice to both observations by rejecting the apparent dichotomy between the idea that there are reasons for attachment and the idea that objects of attachment are of fundamental importance. The Humean view and the rationalist view sketched above are caricatures that should be dispensed with. The facts that give us reason for attachment to a particular person, activity, or goal, are not the facts to which we are attached, they are not the focus of our concern, and we need not act for their sake. Thus, the first and primary claim to be promoted and examined here is that our reasons to love and value certain particular persons and things are reasons to attribute fundamental importance to them, reasons to devote ourselves to them as the particulars they are, and reasons to regret or mourn their irredeemable loss.

The second major idea of this dissertation is that there are normally genuine conflicts between, on the one hand, our reasons for and against attachment and, on the other hand, our commitments to the objects of our attachment. At the very least, being properly attached to a person or thing precludes constantly considering the justification for one's attachment. But commitment to what one values or loves might require much

more than lack of self-doubt. Loving a person may often involve believing in him or her, and in the relationship we share with him or her, even when it seems to us that we have reason to forgo our love and withdraw from the relationship. Similarly, valuing a certain goal, project, tradition, or culture may often involve pursuing it or engaging with it even when it seems to us that we have good reason to give it up or disown it. And even when we should indeed let go, withdraw from, or terminate an attachment, in doing so we may be failing our commitment to the object of attachment. This would be a warranted failure, but a failure nonetheless.

Although we can have reasons to ascribe fundamental importance to the objects of our attachments, and such reasons partly explain the genuine importance of these objects, the objects of our attachments normally command devotion and commitment that withstand strong reasons against the continuation of our attachment. By rejecting the strict dichotomy between reasons for attachment and the fundamental importance of objects of attachment, we may come to see the different ways in which the two sets of normative considerations—external and internal to our attachments—are mutually reinforcing, as well as the ways in which they come into conflict. Thus, this dissertation aims to shed light on the rationality of a meaningful life, but it also accounts for inevitable crises of meaning without which a meaningful life would not be such a tremendous achievement.

*

We begin with love. In the first chapter I consider three puzzles about the idea that there are reasons for loving a particular person: a puzzle about love's partiality, a

puzzle about love's particularity, and a puzzle about love's necessity. The puzzle of partiality concerns our reasons for ascribing greater significance and attention to our beloveds than we ascribe to other individuals who are no less deserving of it. The puzzle of particularity concerns our reasons for loving particular persons as such given that our love is justified on the basis of our beloveds' properties. The puzzle of necessity concerns the rational basis of our commitment to beloveds that we are not rationally required to love. I argue that we may disarm these puzzles by drawing a distinction between reasons *to* love and reasons *of* love. While reasons *to* love warrant, justify, or make sense of our love for a person, as well as rationally enable our commitment to him or her, reasons *of* love are the reasons a lover takes him- or herself to have with regard to the beloved as the particular person he or she is.

In the second chapter, we will consider the phenomenon of valuing. I will explain why different individuals reasonably value different objects in different ways, and why one and the same object may be valued by some and not by others. The distinction introduced in the first chapter, between reasons *to* love and reasons *of* love, is extended so as to explain the variety of objects and ways of valuing. Individuals stand in different relations to different objects and therefore have different reasons *for* valuing, while a person's particular responses to an object he or she values are properly explained by the reasons *of* valuing the person takes him- or herself to have with regard to it.

Furthermore, I argue that while we may have reason to be practically and emotionally responsive even to objects we do not value, we have *singular* reasons—reasons one has as the particular person one is—only with regard to the objects we value.

The final idea introduced in the second chapter is that proper valuing may require devotion, that is, attachment that is not overly concerned with the reasons that support it and that is, at times, blind to reasons against it. Part of our commitment to what we value is a commitment not to desert it whenever there seems to be sufficient or even conclusive reason to do so.

This somewhat paradoxical aspect of valuing requires some illustration. Consider reasons to be devoted to justice, for instance by struggling to make one's society more just. It might seem that if one's struggle for justice is bound to come to naught, then one lacks reason to be devoted to justice in this way. But devotion to justice might require that we reject the idea that justice is impossible. Martin Luther King was not making a historical claim when he declared that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Rather, he expressed his commitment to justice, his faith that justice will prevail despite evidence to the contrary. John Rawls shared this faith, as seems clear from the last paragraph of his introduction to the paperback edition of *Political Liberalism*:

If a reasonably just society that subordinates power to its aims is not possible and people are largely amoral, if not incurably cynical and self-centered, one might ask with Kant whether it is worthwhile for human beings to live on the earth? We *must* start with the assumption that a reasonably just political society is possible, and for it to be possible, human beings must have a moral nature, not of course a perfect such nature, yet one that can understand, act on, and be sufficiently moved by a reasonable political conception of right and justice to support a society guided by its ideals and principles. (Rawls 1993/1996, lx, my italics)

The force of Rawls's "must" is not the force of empirical evidence that justice is possible and that human beings have a moral nature, nor is it a psychological force, compelling us to make such assumptions regardless of whether they are justified. Rather, the locution expresses the force of faith, the strength of a commitment to justice that cannot be undermined by external considerations. This is an important aspect of valuing to which I

wish to draw attention, and it also plays a role in the third and last chapter of the dissertation.

The third chapter is twice as long as each of the first ones, partly because it is about the great dark side of love and valuing combined: regret and loss. I argue that we have genuine reasons for regret and discuss three major kinds of regret: regret about past mistakes, regret about significant loss, and regret about one's attachments. I claim that our reasons for regret are importantly dependent on the attachments we have in the present. A change in a person's attachments may give her reason to affirm or celebrate an action that, at the time, she had most reason not to undertake. I also argue that we may regret a significant loss involved in a justified choice without wishing we had chosen otherwise. And, finally, I argue that we may affirm the objects of our attachments while regretting some of the necessary conditions for their existence. In this context, I discuss political predicaments where we seem to be implicated in wrongs committed by institutions we value. In particular, I discuss crimes committed against the Palestinians during the founding of the State of Israel and under Israel's present military rule. I claim that Israelis' devotion to Israel should lead them to fight for its moral worth and legitimacy, to struggle to make it a worthwhile, justifiable object of attachment. But if such revision is impossible, if the wrongs in question are essential to what Israel is, then Israelis should forgo their attachment to Israel, and they should do so with a grave sense of loss.

The overarching theme of the third chapter concerns the relation between one's understanding of oneself as an individual person and one's regrets. The attachments that

shape our lives and that in light of which we understand who we are are often the bases of our regrets, whether they are attachments we engage with in the present or attachments we no longer engage with but still entertain. For instance, we may give up a pursuit and yet continue to value it, and its significance for us may be manifested in the reasons for regret or sense of loss we take ourselves to have with regard to it.

But I also argue that one and the same person may have very different attachments in different moments in his or her life. In this sense, one's self is not defined or constrained by one's present attachments, but reaches beyond them. To be sure, there is a sense in which we are what we love and value, as Brodsky suggests, but there is also a sense in which we are always more than that. The tensions between these two notions of self reflect the tensions between our reasons *for* attachment and our reasons *of* attachment. But the distinction between the two notions of self also makes sense of why one must acknowledge both kinds of reasons in order to be one self.