Much of contemporary philosophy of religion is centered on debates between (atheistic) naturalists and theists on issues including the existence of God, the existence of human souls with the prospect of an afterlife, and the nature and ground of morality. Within the scope of the latter, one often rehearsed objection to naturalism highlights its seeming inability to account for objective moral normativity. In an influential recent attempt to answer objections of this sort, Harry Frankfurt (2006) argues that while there is no such thing as objective moral normativity (as standardly conceived), it nevertheless is possible to criticize those who seem capable of willing and performing “unthinkable” acts as irrational in a special sense of the term. In the following brief remarks, I shall argue that Richard Foley’s general theory of rationality undermines Frankfurt’s attempt to reduce immorality to irrationality, thereby indirectly lending support to (theistic) moral realism. This paper is thus an attempt to bring influential work in contemporary epistemology into conversation with equally influential work in contemporary ethical theory on an issue of importance for the philosophy of religion.

In Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right (2006), Frankfurt argues that “importance is never inherent” (23). He explains, “In my view, it is only in virtue of what we actually care about that anything is important to us” (20). Frankfurt 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” (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

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,
Having argued for CGI, Frankfurt proceeds to argue that there is no care-independent (i.e., objective) ground of moral normativity, since there is no care-independent ground of importance.² 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 irresponsible overpaid bank CEOs and steroid-using professional baseball players? 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” (29-30).³

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 care about and love. In other words, when it comes to caring about and loving what humans must love as a consequence of their

² Although I will not take the time here to consider Frankfurt’s main argument for CGI, I argue elsewhere that it fails; see my “An objection to Frankfurt’s care ground of importance” (under review).
³ In defense of his claim that the madman is inhuman, Frankfurt argues that the necessities of the will the madman lacks “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” (2006: 38).
nature the madman gets it wrong. As a result, the madman is able to do what is for us “unthinkable” (31). Frankfurt thus attempts to vindicate naturalistic moral anti-realism by (eliminatively) reducing immorality to volitional irrationality.

It is difficult to see, however, why we should think that the madman is irrational in any sense of the term. As Foley explains in the first line of his *Working Without a Net*, “Rationality is a goal-oriented notion” (1993: 3). This means, roughly, that a person is rational insofar as she is effectively pursuing the relevant set of goals. For Foley, rationality is also essentially perspectival; that is, rationality is relative to a particular perspective. He explains, “My strategy has been to introduce a general way of thinking about questions of rationality of whatever sort. All such questions concern a perspective, a set of goals, and a set of resources” (116). Foley’s work focuses on one such variety of rationality, egocentric rationality, which, according to Foley, is the epistemically central variety. On Foley’s account, an agent is egocentrically rational with respect to one of her beliefs just in case upon sufficient reflection she would take her holding of the belief to be an effective means of achieving “the goal of having an accurate and comprehensive belief system” (94). Egocentric rationality is thus relative to the goals and perspective of the agent him/herself.

Whatever his other faults, Frankfurt’s madman is, for all we know, egocentrically rational. Nothing about the madman’s condition as Frankfurt presents it suggests that he holds beliefs that on deeper reflection he would reject on account of his goal of having an accurate and comprehensive belief system. For all we know, the madman really does believe in accord with his actions and would continue to believe on reflection that protecting his finger from a scratch is more important than saving the world from utter destruction. However strange this belief may seem to most of us, holding it is not in conflict with the madman’s deepest epistemic standards. It is, perhaps, largely for this reason that we consider him ‘mad.’
Of course, Frankfurt nowhere accuses the madman of egocentric irrationality. Frankfurt claims instead that the madman is volitionally irrational. The question before us then is not whether the madman is irrational in any of the common uses of the term. He is not. The question before us is, rather, whether the madman’s defect is such that it ought to be considered a (newly conceived) kind of irrationality at all.

Given a goal-based theory of rationality, whether the madman is irrational in any sense depends on the nature of the relevant goals. Here it is helpful to follow Foley in distinguishing two competing types of goal theories, both of which might be made consistent with Foley’s goal-based theory of rationality (see p. 6). There are first goal theories according to which an agent’s goals are understood in terms of that which the agent values, or, to use Frankfurt’s terminology, cares about. Alternatively, an agent’s goals might be understood in terms of that which is objectively valuable or important.

Frankfurt’s CGI amounts to a rejection of goal theories of the latter sort. Obviously, if there is no objective value or importance, then rationality in general, and volitional rationality in particular, cannot be a matter of effectively pursuing what is objectively valuable or important. Indeed, 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, not by what the rest of us care 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. (2006: 50)

Perhaps, then, we should understand Frankfurt’s notion of volitional irrationality in terms of the goals of the agent under evaluation him/herself, in this case the madman. In other words, perhaps the madman’s fault is that he fails to effectively pursue his own goals in some way. We have already seen that the madman is not egocentrically irrational in the sense that, from his perspective, holding the
beliefs that he does (at least those relevant to his ‘madness’) is an effective means of pursuing his goal of having an accurate and comprehensive belief system. Moreover, the madman’s defect bears little resemblance to standard senses of practical irrationality because his beliefs, his will, and his actions are all, presumably, in tune with what he cares about and loves.

Of course, as Foley suggests, evaluations of rationality are not relative to goals alone, but to perspectives (and sets of resources) as well. While still focusing on the madman’s goals, perhaps we can deem him irrational from some perspective other than his own. It follows from CGI, in fact, that volitional rationality is at best relative to the perspective of the evaluator. The most Frankfurt can say in criticism of the madman is that he is volitionally irrational from our perspective. Read in this way, however, 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, it is not clear that the madman is irrational from any outside (or, objective) perspective at all. As long as rationality is evaluated in terms of the agent’s own goals, as opposed to some objective or communal set of ends, the madman comes off quite rational. At least, if he is irrational in some sense from our perspective—say, because holding the beliefs he does is not really an effective means of pursuing his goal of having an accurate and comprehensive belief system—that does not seem to be the reason for our considering him ‘mad.’ For, even from our perspective the madman’s relevant defect is not that he is failing to pursue his own goals effectively, but rather that there is something deeply disconcerting about his goals, desires, cares, etc., in the first place.

One final way that we might understand the madman’s defect as one of rationality is by evaluating him not in terms some ‘objective’ set of human ends, nor in terms of his own goals, but rather in terms

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4 While he seems reticent to do so in this most recent work, Frankfurt 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 unthinkability 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” (1988b: 186).
of the (non-objective) goals of his community and from the community’s perspective. Perhaps this is close to what Frankfurt has in mind when he links being volitionally irrational with being literally inhuman. Once again, 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. He does not share our goals and, as a result, his beliefs, desires, and actions are ineffective means of achieving our goals. So, for example, the human community has as one of its primary goals the protection and preservation of the world, such that any decision to act in a way that would jeopardize the continued existence of the world would rightly be considered irrational from the community’s perspective, unless justified by some overriding concern. Needless to say, the protection of one individual’s finger from a scratch would not be, from the community’s perspective, an overriding concern.

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: 40). However, Frankfurt diagnoses the madman with a defect, as opposed to a mere difference, of the will. He writes:

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. (2006: 29-30)

To judge that the madman is rationally 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 on account of his supposed failure of rationality 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, Osama bin Laden, and even many less infamous, ordinarily decent people (dare we include ourselves?) who, as chronicled in John Conroy’s (2000) *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 (we) 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 troubleingly impoverished, therefore, 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 couching such criticism in terms of irrationality does not help. As the above application of Foley’s theory of rationality bears out, the defect of Frankfurt’s madman does not even bear a Wittgensteinian family resemblance to standard notions of rationality. The only set of goals and the only perspective by which the madman might be seen as irrational, given Frankfurt’s naturalistic commitment to CGI, are those of the community. But according to this standard the madman turns out to be, not defective or dysfunctional, but merely different—a clear mischaracterization.

In light of the above considerations, I conclude that Frankfurt would have done well to heed Foley’s warning that we must be careful to avoid “the impulse to turn every human shortcoming into a failure of rationality” (6). Concerning this impulse, Foley 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” (6). In contrast to Frankfurt’s naturalistic reduction of immorality to irrationality, Foley correctly concludes
about such individuals as the madman 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” (6).
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