

YOUR MOM DOES NOT LOVE YOU FOR WHO YOU ARE

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There are good reasons to think that mothers love their children, and love them for who they are. There are also good reasons to think that contingent events can decisively influence who one becomes. This entails, I argue, that your mother does not love you for who you are.

It seems true: mothers love their children. And it seems true: mothers love their children for who they are. But I will argue: your mother does not love *you* for who *you* are.

What would it mean to be loved for who you are? Minimally, your lover's love must be modulated by the presence or absence of your defining features. That is, if the characteristics that make you who you are change, but your lover's love does not, then you are not loved for who you are.

What makes a person who they are? Clearly, some aspects of one's identity are more important than others. I can change in trivial ways – get a haircut, or learn a new word – that leave my identity intact. Other changes are more significant: a longtime smoker may strongly identify as such, and dropping that habit may, in some non-trivial sense, change who that person is. But some traits are what you might call *centrally constitutive* of one's identity: losing one of these traits renders one a different person. Many deeply religious people regard their faith as importantly constitutive of their identity. Because their religion plays such a significant role in their lives, by changing their attitudes, values, and aspirations, one cannot excise this feature from them without also fundamentally changing them. Let us say then, to be loved for who you are is to be loved for at least one of your centrally constitutive features.

Now, consider Smith. He is an avid runner. Much of his time is spent running, or thinking or talking about running. Smith's friends are runners, as is his wife. The only thing of comparable importance in Smith's life is his relationship with Jesus Christ. Smith is deeply religious. These two features, Smith's devotion to running and commitment to Jesus, are centrally constitutive of his identity. He so absolutely identifies with them that he could not imagine himself in their absence: *he* would no longer exist. That person would be someone else. Also: Smith's mother loves him very much.

Suppose, counterfactually, that Smith, as a young child, was in a terrible accident that took his legs and his father's life. Though surely traumatic, the loss of one's legs is not yet the loss of a centrally constitutive feature of one's identity. So too, is the case with the death of a loved one: Smith, the healthy child who woke up that morning, is the same person who, later that day, lays legless in a hospital bed beside his widowed mother. However, this event would radically alter Smith's life trajectory. Time passes. In the course of his physical therapy, Smith develops an interest in medicine. And, absent his pious father's influence, Smith never comes to know Jesus Christ. Instead, impressed by his studies in medical school, Smith loses interest in the supernatural. Given the accident, Smith develops different centrally constitutive features. His life is organized around practicing medicine and promoting rights for the disabled. In this case too, Smith's mother loves him very much.

Something is amiss. If Smith's mother loves him in either scenario, yet the features that are centrally constitutive of his identity differ between the two, then it appears as though she does not love Smith for who he is. If she did, then her love would be modulated by the presence or absence of those distinguishing features. Thus, Smith's mother does not love him for who he is. Nor, I hasten to add, does yours.

One may be tempted to interject: You have misunderstood mothers' love! Mothers love their children for who

they are, whoever they are. Smith's mother would love him whether he were religious, or athletic, or disabled, or none of these things. And when she loves him, she loves him for these identity-constituting features. She loves the religious Smith *because* he is religious and *because* he is an athlete. And if tragedy intervenes, and Smith instead becomes an advocate for the disabled, it will be this constitutive feature of Smith's identity that is the ground for her love. Thus, the objection goes, it is perfectly consistent to hold that mothers love their children whoever they are, and that this love is based on those features that are centrally constitutive of their children's identities.

The apparent force of this objection depends on an equivocation. There are two very different things one might mean in saying, 'a mother loves her child'. On the *de dicto* reading, to say that a mother loves her child is to say that she loves whatever entity satisfies the description 'my child'. On the *de re* reading, to say that a mother loves her child is to say of some determinate individual, that she is loved by her mother.

The equivocation that undermines the objection is now apparent: It is true, in the *de dicto* sense, that mothers love their children, and love them for who they are. But this fact is fully compatible with the claim defended here, that your mother does not love you for who you are. This is possible because 'you', understood *de re*, are not identical to 'your mother's child', understood *de dicto*. Thus, even if you satisfy the description, 'your mother's child', and even if your mother loves her child for who that child is, it does not follow that your mother loves you for who you are. She does not.

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