

11-2-2017

All You Need is Love? Frankfurt and Hegel on Love as Freedom

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Disciplines

Family, Life Course, and Society | Gender and Sexuality | Marriage and Family Therapy and Counseling | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

This accepted article is published as Padgett-Walsh, K., All You Need is Love? Frankfurt and Hegel on Love as Freedom. *Philosophical Forum*, Nov 2017, 48(4); 449-461. DOI: [10.1111/phil.12170](https://doi.org/10.1111/phil.12170) . Posted with permission.

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All You Need Is Love? Frankfurt and Hegel on Love as Freedom

Etymologically, ‘freedom’ and ‘friendship’ are closely connected. In German, *frei* (free) and *Freund* (friend) both derive from *frijon*, an earlier term for love (Benveniste 1973, 262-267).¹ A similar etymology occurs throughout the Indo-European world, in Latin, Greek, Slavic, Celtic and Persian. In each language, ‘freedom’ derives from a term originally referring to loving relationship with others.

Despite this etymology, few philosophers have thought that freedom and love might be connected in an essential way. Harry Frankfurt is an exception. To be autonomous, he contends, is to follow the commands of love. In this paper, I argue that Frankfurt’s account has important strengths but that it also oversimplifies the connection between love and freedom. Frankfurt ignores the interpersonal dimensions of love and thus fails to account for the ways in which love can reflect and perpetuate oppression. A richer approach, I propose, can be found in Hegel’s writings on ethics. Like Frankfurt, Hegel conceives of freedom partly in terms of love. But Hegel also recognizes that actual loving relationships are always shaped by social and political conditions. Love thus has limits; it can provide a partial degree of autonomy, but it can also be deformed by oppressive social and political realities.

Love as Autonomy

Does love contribute in any essential way to the living of a free and autonomous life? Kant thought not. The love that individuals feel for one another is pathological, on his view, and thus utterly lacking in moral value (Arroyo 2016). Like all feelings and desires, moreover, love has the potential to corrupt moral dispositions and thereby undermine our ability to act autonomously. There is often a trade-off, then, between feeling love and acting autonomously.

This trade-off, Marilyn Friedman argues, is especially common in the experiences of women (Friedman 1998). Women are often expected to adjust their interests to conform to those of their partners, to defer to their wishes and decisions without adequate reciprocity. In many heterosexual relationships, the man's wants and needs take precedence over the woman's, with the couple's long-term planning reflecting his goals more than hers. Such erosions of agency, Friedman argues, serve to diminish the autonomy of partners within actual loving relationships, typically along gendered lines. Instead of supporting women's autonomy, she concludes, love can thus serve to reflect and reinforce persisting forms of oppression.

Why, then, think that love might contribute in an essential way to autonomy? By connecting love with freedom, Frankfurt hopes to offer greater insight into the normative authority of love. Love is normatively significant, he argues, because it is more than just an immediate feeling or desire (Frankfurt 2004). To love is to care at such

a deep level that it is essential to who one is as a person, and the value of love is that it helps to make us who we most truly are. Frankfurt conceives of autonomy in terms of wholeheartedness (Frankfurt 1999). We are wholehearted when our deepest concerns, including our loves, are reflected in both our desires and our actions. Wholehearted actions are autonomous in that they are in no way imposed upon us, but rather come from our authentic selves. We are most fully ourselves, and in that sense free and autonomous, when we act wholeheartedly out of love.

One strength of Frankfurt's account is that it thus illuminates the normative authority of love. A second strength of his account is that it helps to address the problem of alienation within Kant's conception of autonomy. Kantian freedom, Peter Railton has argued, requires that we detach from our own feelings and desires, thereby becoming alienated from ourselves (Railton 1984). Michael Stocker similarly challenges what he calls the "schizophrenia" of Kant's theory: if duty is the only moral motive, then our attachments to others have no moral significance as such (Stocker 1976). These critiques focus on the detachment from and subordination of desire that is prominent within Kant's account of freedom. Kant identifies autonomy with pure reason alone, and he regards everything falling outside of pure reason as heteronomous. Kantian autonomy thus comes at the cost of alienation from who we are and what we care about.

One Kantian reply to this critique rejects the suggestion of a hostility between reason and desire. As Lara Denis argues, Kant allows wide latitude for developing non-moral interests, since he regards only the misprioritization of desire, not desire itself, as vicious (Denis 1997). Kant holds that we should actively cultivate certain desires and emotions, specifically those that tend to facilitate moral action. But while this shows that Kantian autonomy does not require an antagonism between reason and desire, it does not successfully resolve the problem of alienation. Autonomy requires that we at all times stand “under a discipline of reason, and in all our maxims we must not forget our subjection to it” (Kant 1996, 206). Even when our desires accord with the commands of reason, freedom still ultimately requires following those commands. This represents a kind of self-subjection that is alienating without necessarily being antagonistic.

Another reply to the critique denies the suggestion of a fundamentally divided conception of agency in Kant’s ethics. Kant certainly realizes that we are not purely rational beings. His goal is not that we become unfeeling robots, Barbara Herman argues, but rather that we learn to better harmonize the empirical self with the rational self (Herman 1993, 202-205). The problem remains, however, that the rational self’s autonomy is not freedom for the whole self. Indeed, Herman explicitly acknowledges that autonomy cannot, on Kant’s view, describe us as actual empirical agents. This is because Kant regards freedom as a kind of internal autocracy, wherein the rational

self has absolute authority over the empirical self (Kant 1997, 137-42). So, even though Kant does recognize the richness of human agency, he nonetheless restricts his conception of freedom to the rational self. He locates freedom exclusively in one capacity, an important one for sure, but by no means comprising the entirety of the self. Kant thus rejects the possibility that the whole agent, rather than just one part of herself, might be capable of freedom.

Frankfurt, in contrast, responds to the problem of alienation by proposing an amendment to the Kantian account of freedom. He explicitly conceives of freedom along Kantian lines, as autonomous self-government (Frankfurt 1999). A free agent is one who is subject only to the commands of her own will. But whereas Kant insists that a free will is determined by pure reason alone, Frankfurt argues that a free will is instead determined by love and care. An agent is autonomous whenever her volitions derive from the essential character of her will. And the essential character of one's will is not, as Kant thought, constituted by pure reason, but by one's deepest concerns, especially one's loves. Instead of requiring detachment from our deepest commitments and concerns, Frankfurt proposes, freedom thus consists in being absorbed within those commitments and concerns. When one loves, that love is essential to one's agency, no less than the faculty of reason. Amended in this way, the Kantian conception of freedom no longer requires that we become alienated from our affective selves. We are autonomous when we heed the

commands of love and actively embrace our commitments and concerns, rather than trying to detach ourselves from them.

However, Frankfurt oversimplifies the connection between love and freedom. The problem is that by defining love as a species of intrapersonal care, Frankfurt disregards the interpersonal dimensions of love. He thereby fails to address the ways in which love can reflect and reinforce oppression. Aristotle identifies one such interpersonal dimension of love when he describes the true friend as “another self,” one with whom one’s life is fundamentally shared (Aristotle 1999, 142). On Aristotle’s view, the distinctive value of such relationships is that they enlarge and extend the self by creating joint experience and awareness, i.e. by creating an integration of selves (Osborne 2009). The boundaries of the self are not, in love, those of the narrow individual. Rather, the boundaries of the self grow to encompass those that we love.

Frankfurt studiously ignores this dimension of love because he thinks that we must abstract away from all of the diverse forms of love in order to understand love’s value generally. Love, on his view, is essentially a mode of caring, a “concern for the existence and the good of what is loved” (Frankfurt 2006, 40). It is wholly internal to individuals, rather than something that might also be partially constituted by actual relationships with others. This definition captures something important about love, but it also ignores the distinctive value of love as enlarging the self. Is love still freeing when it is richly

interpersonal, rather than just a mode of individual care? What does it mean to be wholehearted, to be most fully oneself, when that self is deeply integrated with another self? Frankfurt assumes a narrowly intrasubjective model of love (and freedom) and thus fails to consider the implications of the knitting together of selves that occurs within actual relationships.

The richness of this interpersonal dimension of love is the central theme of the recent memoir and novel *Levels of Life*. There, Julian Barnes relates his immense grief over the death of his beloved wife of many years: “I wish you had met her, and so met more of me” (Barnes 2013, 108). The love he is describing is not merely a deep-seated care, but also a profound integration of selves. His grief is not just that of losing an object of care, but of losing an essential part of his very self. And the experience of such a union stands in stark contrast to, for example, the experience of unrequited love. When love is unrequited there is a longing to connect more deeply with the other, but that union is not achieved. One possesses the feelings, desires, and even care of love, but that love is, by definition, frustrated and stunted. It is a mere shadow of what is experienced within actual loving relationships, and it thus lacks the depth and value of the union described by Barnes. Unrequited love does perhaps count as a species of love, but only minimally so, in contrast to the richness of love as the sharing of selves. Yet, Frankfurt focuses only upon the normative significance of ‘my

love' to the exclusion of 'our love,' i.e. love as fundamentally shared within a relationship.

Frankfurt also disregards a second important interpersonal dimension of love, namely that of the social forces that shape love. Does following the commands of the heart still make one autonomous if those commands are predicated upon oppression? Frankfurt's account of love as freedom is abstracted away from social context and so it treats social realities as irrelevant to our prospects for autonomy. Aristotle again highlights the significance of this interpersonal dimension of love when he observes that inequality creates real barriers to friendships of the good, barriers that he regards as insurmountable (Aristotle 1999, 127-128). Significant imbalances of power tend to corrupt existing friendships and inhibit the formation of new ones. Inequalities of wealth, for instance, typically cause friends to focus too much upon considerations of utility in their relationship. As a result, such inequalities often cause friends to experience disproportionate levels of affection. A poor friend will love a rich friend more than he is loved in return, and this lack of symmetry impedes the deep sharing of selves that is essential to friendships of the good.

Ignoring the social context that frames love can cause us to ignore the realities of actual relationships. Because humans are fundamentally social animals, the kind and degree of care that agents experience depends in part upon how they are situated within an actual social world. Consider the example of *plaçage*, a practice that flourished in

New Orleans during the 18th and 19th centuries. *Plaçees* were black mistresses of light skin, openly kept by wealthy white men. Most *plaçees* were free, but laws preventing interracial marriage ensured that the relationships lacked legal recognition. With few legal rights, *plaçees* were always very much subject to their patrons.

Some relationships of *plaçage* were apparently quite loving, though others certainly were not. But even at its most loving, *plaçage* was premised upon deep oppression. Though elegant, Quadroon balls were ultimately not far removed from the slave auctions where black women were routinely bought and sold. A *plaçee* could never be formally recognized as a wife, with the rights and protections that such recognition entailed for a woman and her children. *Plaçees* had only limited control over their matches, and they had no legal standing to protect them from abuse and abandonment.

Love is no doubt possible within the context of *plaçage*, but is it immune to that context? Does a *plaçee*, trained from childhood to the role and then kept by a man to whom she is utterly subject, suddenly become autonomous in her subjection if she happens to fall in love with that man? Consider Jonathan Lear's example of a slave who falls in love with her owner (Lear 2002). The history of actual slavery is one of fear, violence, and rape, hardly conditions conducive to the development of loving relationships. However, let us nonetheless imagine a case in which a slave does come to love her owner. If Frankfurt is correct, then loving slaves are fully autonomous whenever

they follow a master's commands out of love, since actions motivated by love are, on his view, autonomous. The fact that such love takes place within a context that denies the slave's personhood is, apparently, irrelevant to the slave's prospects for autonomy.

Indeed, Frankfurt's explicit view is that a loving slave does act fully "autonomously when, out of love for his master, he serves his master's ends" (Frankfurt 2002, 294). Slaves would, then, do well to love their masters; a slave who loves a master is lucky because that love allows her to become autonomous, despite her subjection. Frankfurt qualifies this conclusion only by noting that loving obedience is not necessarily the only way in which a slave might act autonomously. A loving slave might also act autonomously by running away or refusing to submit. All of these actions can be genuinely autonomous, he contends, loving obedience no less than the others.

This attempt to isolate freedom of the will from actual social and political conditions is untenable. Who we are and what we care about depends to a significant degree upon the relationships, practices, and institutions into which we are socialized. And contexts of oppression shape people's identities and concerns at a deep level. This is true of oppressors as well as oppressed, masters as well as slaves. Let us imagine, alternatively, a slave who is obedient not out of love, but because he has come to deeply identify with that role. Does wholehearted commitment to his position of servitude make him fully autonomous in that role? It may perhaps make him happier in his

obedience, but the problem remains that the role with which he identifies is itself deeply unfree. If he has internalized his subjection, then he has not really escaped it. And if he one day ceases to identify with that role, he will still nonetheless be a slave, trapped in his servitude.

We need not collapse the distinction political freedom and freedom of the will in order to recognize that they are not radically independent of one another. Frankfurt thinks that love is freeing, but he fails to consider the ways in which love is formed and deformed by the social world. What is problematic is that he regards social realities of oppression as irrelevant to love, and hence to our prospects for autonomy, as though the heart is immune to the contexts in which it is embedded. Because Frankfurt ignores the interpersonal dimensions of love, he thus fails to consider whether love that is premised upon internalized subjection is truly freeing.

Love as Finding Oneself in Another

Frankfurt's essential insight is that freedom consists in acting wholeheartedly, since we are most fully ourselves when we act out of love. Is it possible to retain this insight while at the same time recognizing the interpersonal dimensions of love? I propose an alternative Hegelian account of the connection between love and freedom. What is distinctive about this account is that, by recognizing the sociality of love as well as freedom, it explains how love can

contribute to human freedom but also reflect and perpetuate oppression.

Like Frankfurt, Hegel's account of love as freedom is rooted in a critique of the alienation and "self-coercion" within Kant's conception of freedom (Hegel 1971, 244). Kantian freedom is alienating, Hegel contends, because it requires that agents be mastered by reason, even though reason is only one component of who we really are (Hegel 1991, 217-218). The charge is that, in his attempt to avoid making reason a slave to desire, Kant instead subordinates everything empirical about agents to pure reason. He theorizes freedom for one part of the self by explicitly excluding the possibility of freedom for our whole selves.

Hegel's conception of freedom, in contrast, emphasizes unity and integration of the self. His terminology is at times reminiscent of Frankfurt's. Freedom is "being with oneself" and "identity with oneself," a self-relation in which the whole self stands behind and takes ownership of its actions and projects (Hegel 1991, 42). When we are fully autonomous, Hegel proposes, we are united with ourselves rather than alienated from who we actually are. We identify with our actions and see them as genuinely our own rather than in any way imposed upon us. Freedom is thus an integration of the self, not in the Kantian sense that desires conform to the commands of reason, but in the sense that no part of the self is fundamentally subject to any other.

Unlike Frankfurt, however, Hegel thinks that we cannot adequately address the problem of alienation simply by amending Kant's conception of freedom. The problem of alienation is not just one of detachment from feelings, desires, and care, but also from the social world that frames them. From the moment we are born, we are already participants in a complex social world, one that shapes our interests and abilities at a deep level. We develop our particular identities and concerns through participation in the relationships, practices, and institutions that are available within our concrete social contexts. This is not to deny that we are individuals, but rather to note that who we are as individuals depends in a myriad of ways upon the social world in which we are situated. Our social contexts do not determine everything about us, but they do play an essential role in constituting our identities and concerns. Hegel's critique, then, is that Kantian freedom requires alienation not only from individual desires and cares, but also from the rich web of social relations that frames those desires and cares.

If this is correct, then the nature and quality of our actual social relations are directly relevant to our prospects for freedom. Autonomy requires not just internal wholeheartedness, but also identifying with and being at home in one's social world. As Hegel puts it, freedom is "being with oneself in another," i.e. being unified with oneself through union with others (Hegel 1991, 42). And such union requires that the relationships, practices, and institutions of the social world be ones

that admit of reciprocal union. Otherwise, autonomy would be consistent with thoroughly internalized subjection. It is true that agent who is alienated from her own desires and cares is not fully autonomous, but nor is an agent who is oppressed by the practices, relationships, and institutions of her social world. And wholehearted love for an oppressor does not alter the underlying context of dehumanization and lack of reciprocity that frames such love.

In what way, then, does Hegel think that love is essential to freedom? Like Frankfurt, he recognizes that love is more than just a feeling or desire, but he also insists that love, when most fully realized, is more than just a species of intrasubjective caring. Love is certainly comprised of feelings, desires, and care, but it is not fully encompassed by such internal states. Instead, Hegel proposes, love is also partially constituted by actual relationships with others. More specifically, love consists partly in creating and sustaining a shared identity with another. Love creates the shared self-understanding described by Barnes, that of “knowing myself as the unity of myself with another and of the other with me” (Hegel 1991, 199). In love, it is not just intrasubjective care that is essential to oneself, but also actual connection and integration with others. Hegel’s view is that love thus creates a “whole that is more than the sum of its parts” (Westphal 1993, 413). To love is to understand oneself in relation to another such that one’s identity is in part constituted by shared union with them.

Love is “finding oneself in another,” Hegel proposes, the discovery and development of oneself through shared identity with another (Hegel 1971, 278-279). Its value lies in taking us outside of ourselves and expanding the boundaries of the self. For this reason, we experience love as “the most immense contradiction” (Hegel 1991, 199). It is both the loss of self and the discovery of self. In love, “we are not one-sidedly within ourselves, but willingly limit ourselves with reference to another, even while knowing ourselves in this limitation as ourselves” (Hegel 1991, 199). Love is loss in that it creates the vulnerability of one’s identity being partially constituted by relationship with another. Those whom we love can inflict deep wounds because they are part of our own selves. But the union of love also creates joint growth; when people come together in love, they construct a shared identity that expands the narrow boundaries of their original selves. The contradiction, then, is that it is precisely by breaking down boundaries of the self that one develops the new identity of union with another. Love is discovering oneself by losing oneself.

In this way, Hegel concludes, love gives us our first and primary experiences of freedom (Hegel 1991, 199). It enables us to become less alienated from ourselves through identification with something outside of the narrow bounds of the self. Love, finding oneself in another, is the development of an integrated self through union with another. Freedom, being with oneself in another, is the integration of self

through identification with one's actual relationships, practices, institutions.

However, the scope of freedom is wider than the scope of one's relationship to oneself or to another person can ever be (Hegel 1979, 255-256; Hegel 1991, 215-218). To be fully self-determining is to be at home with oneself through one's participation not just in loving relationships, but also in a broad range of practices, institutions, and relationships that support freedom. Hegel thus describes freedom as a "modification" of love (Hegel 1971, 244). It is most fully achieved when the kind of unity experienced in love becomes not just integration with oneself or another person, but also with the broader social world within which one is embedded. Only then can we, as deeply social beings, be genuinely at home with ourselves in the world.

This account emphasizes the deep connection between love and freedom, but it also explains how love can be in tension with freedom. Love alone is not sufficient for freedom because freedom depends upon conditions that are not encompassed by love (Hegel 1979 478). Actual loving relationships are always embedded within broader social frameworks that may be more or less free. Love may, for instance, be framed by deep oppression, as in the examples of slavery and *plaçage*. When a slave loves her master, she does experience a unity and sharing of selves with him, but that unity is fundamentally asymmetrical. As Aristotle recognized, such asymmetry deforms the sharing and integration of selves that occurs within loving relationships.

When love is deformed in this way, Hegel contends, it involves some degree of “deadening” or silencing of one of the partners (Hegel 1971, 304). The sharing of selves is limited by the lack of reciprocity, such that one partner is in an important sense not fully “present” to the other (Hegel 1971, 218, 247). Such loves do expand the boundaries of the self, but in such way that they also reflect and perpetuate an unjust social context. If this is correct, then the deference, subordination, and lack of reciprocity that Friedman describes within many heterosexual relationships represent malformations of love as well as serious impediments to autonomy. The locus of the problem is not an essential zero sum trade-off between autonomy and love, as Friedman suggests. Instead, the problem is that persistent oppression warps loving relationships so that they reflect and perpetuate that oppression rather than fully supporting the autonomy of both partners.

Hegel himself failed to adequately grapple with actual oppression in his own time. His account of marriage, for instance, encodes an oppressive gender essentialism with a rigid differentiation of family roles (Hegel 1991, 206-207). Hegel did, in theory, recognize that men and women are equals, but he failed to consider the real inequalities that result when men alone are allowed to be active in the public sphere while women are confined to the home (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 1999; Stone 2012). Moreover, while Hegel did reject the idea that any one race was inherently more rational than any other, he also insisted that races differed in essential ways owing to

geography, and that those differences carried moral weight (Zambrana 2017). And though he praised the Haitian Revolution, which resulted from a successful slave uprising, he also viewed Sub-Saharan Africans as childlike and in need of exposure to the supposedly superior culture and education of Europeans (Buck-Morss 2009). He thus argued that trans-Atlantic slavery should only be eliminated gradually (Zambrana 2017).

However, despite these significant failures, Hegel's thought does provide rich conceptual tools for explaining the connection between love and freedom. Love can also contribute in important ways to the living of a free and autonomous life, but it can also, Hegel realized, reflect and perpetuate oppression. I conclude with a contemporary example that demonstrates the explanatory depth gained by acknowledging the interpersonal dimensions of love and freedom. Kant regarded sexual desires as incapable of contributing to autonomy. In contrast, both Frankfurt and Hegel suggest sexual desires can be autonomous expressions and realize the loving union of partners (Frankfurt 1999; Hegel 1991, 200-203). But do sexual desires still contribute to autonomy when those desires reflect and perpetuate oppression?

For example, feminist thinkers and critical race theorists have persuasively critiqued the domination and humiliation of women and people of color that is typical within contemporary pornography (Collins 2000, MacKinnon 1989). Violent pornography, which constitutes an estimated 90% of the pornography on the internet, is

associated with fantasies about rape, choking, hitting, and other forms of violence as part of sex, and frequent exposure is correlated with committing acts of sexual aggression (Bridges et al. 2010; DeKesedery and Corsianos 2016; Wright et al. 2016). Even brief exposure causes men to exhibit more aggressive and negative attitudes toward women and to desire to watch more extremely violent pornography (Hargrave and Livingstone 2009). Exposure has significant effects not only on men but also women, influencing the “sexual scripts” of all who watch it. Pornography, as one team of researchers put it, creates expectations “that the way the characters perform sexually is a ‘normal’ and appropriate portrayal of reality” (Paolucci et al. 2000, 51). Increasingly, teenagers and young people are learning about sexual behavior and sexual desire by the pornography they encounter on the internet (Braithwaite et al. 2015; Orenstein 2016).

What does pornography, then, “teach” people about sex? Women are most often portrayed as submissive objects, reduced to body parts, who have no desires of their own except to provide gratification to men (Dines 2011; MacKinnon 1989). Black men and women are usually portrayed as hypersexual beings with excessive appetites, the former as abnormally large rapists of white women and the latter as willing victims of abuse by white men (Collins 2000; Cruz 2016; Williams 2004). Asian women are depicted as exotic and willing victims of torture by white men, while Asian men are portrayed in gay pornography as submissive to white men (Chou 2012; Fung 2015).

Latina women are depicted as spicy and always hungry for food and sex, especially anal sex with white men (Bernardi 2006). Such research shows that in obvious and consistent ways, much of the pornography available today manifests oppressive stereotypes and attitudes toward women and people of color.

Are loving partners fully autonomous when they experience and act upon desires that have been shaped by the pornography industry? The presence of love between partners is not enough, Hegel's account of love and autonomy suggests, to negate the domination and dehumanization that pornography today encodes. Loving sexual relationships are less autonomous to the extent that they reflect and perpetuate oppression. It is not the existence of any particular desire that is problematic but, as one researcher puts it, "rather the uniformity with which these narratives reappear and the uncomfortable relationship they have to real social conditions" of racism and sexism (Fung 2015, 241).

Instead of pretending that love is isolated from social realities like sexist and racist sexual scripts, the challenge is to better understand the actual prospects for freedom in light of those realities. Hegel's account, in contrast to Frankfurt's, provides a rich conceptual framework for addressing this challenge. Important theoretical resources are thus gained when we explicitly attend to the significance of the interpersonal dimensions of both love and freedom.ⁱⁱ

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ⁱ The contemporary German *Liebe* has a different root, *liob*, an earlier term for pleasure and joy. See Benveniste.

ⁱⁱ Earlier versions of the paper were presented at the American Philosophical Association, the Rocky Mountain Ethics Conference, the Northwest Philosophy Conference, and the North American Society for Social Philosophy. I am grateful to these audiences, and especially to J.M. Fritzman, Thomas Mulherin, Laura Papish, and Adam Thompson for their detailed and thoughtful comments.