In Defense of Ambivalence
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Abstract: A recurrent theme in Harry G. Frankfurt’s work is the concept of wholeheartedness. According to Frankfurt wholeheartedness is the fundamental ideal of every human being – an intrinsically desirable state. Ambivalence, on the other hand, is interpreted as a disease of the will – never to be valued for its own sake. In this paper we question Frankfurt’s account of ambivalence. We begin by offering a brief overview of his philosophical thoughts. Section One presents the concept of wholeheartedness and ambivalence respectively. In Section Two we discuss a challenge to Frankfurt’s original account: the regress problem. In Section Three we consider Frankfurt’s arguments against ambivalence. Section Four explores wholeheartedness as a theory of quality of life. Finally, in Section Five, we criticize Frankfurt’s account and claim that it is not at all obvious, as Frankfurt thinks, that wholeheartedness is more desirable per se than ambivalence is.¹

What are the characteristics of a person? In the groundbreaking article “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person” (1971) Harry G. Frankfurt argues that the essential nature of a person is found in the structure of her will. In contrast to animals, a person is capable of reflective self-evaluation. She can consider what her own character and personality are like. A person can examine her inner life and endorse or reject her own traits; she can identify with, or feel alienated from her desires. Thus, a person necessarily plays two roles: on the one hand she is the subject (the one doing the reflection); on the other she is the object (the target of her reflection). In order to grasp Frankfurt’s argument, one must pay attention to his understanding of desire.

Desires, on Frankfurt’s account, are motivational states an agent may satisfy, suppress, or put aside in order to meet more urgent demands (2002a, p. 88). Desires are of different orders. The object of an agent’s higher-order desire is one of her own lower- or first-order desires; while the object of a first-order desire is a condition that the agent might, or might not, realize through action. Both human beings and animals can have desires of the first order, but only a person has the capacity for forming desires of a higher order. A first-order desire makes no reference to any other desires the person has. It may take the form of an inclination, or a will. A person’s will, according to Frankfurt, should be seen as an effective desire: i.e. it moves (or would move) the person to act in accordance with it. A person has a second-order volition when she has a higher-order preference for or against the bringing of a first-order desire all

¹ Thanks to Olav Gjelsvik, Ingvar Johansson, Joel Parthemore, Włodek Rabinowicz, Andreas Seland and Caj Strandberg for written comments on an earlier draft of the paper. We would also like to thank Erik Brandstedt, Johan Brännmark, Frits Gävertsson, Victoria Höög, Björn Petersson, Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, Stefan Schubert and the other participants at the Higher Seminar in Practical Philosophy at Lund University.
the way to action (1988, p. 164). All second-order volitions are higher-order desires, but not all higher-order desires are second-order volitions. A person has a second-order desire whenever she wants to have a specific desire (first-order). She has a second-order volition just in case she wants a particular (first-order) desire to be her will. Frankfurt dubs a creature lacking in second-order volitions a *wanton*. A wanton is governed by her first-order desires; she does not care about her own will and she has no opinion about her drives and motives.

On Frankfurt’s analysis, one can speak of free will whenever there is agreement between what a person wants her will to be and what it actually is (1971, p. 15). Wantons lack volitional attitudes; hence they cannot have freedom of the will, although a wanton may still experience freedom to act. Wantons lack not just volitional attitudes but all higher-order desires; the only form of desires that they are capable of having are first-order desires. In their most basic sense such desires just are wanting, or not wanting to perform some action.

What we intend to discuss is *not* whether Frankfurt’s theory is a reasonable approach to the concept of personhood or freedom of the will. Neither will we examine in detail whether he offers a plausible view on the structure of the will. Rather, what we wish to discuss are some of Frankfurt’s evaluative or normative ideas concerning certain types of conflicts; more specifically, complications within the hierarchical model of the will as it is described above.

1. Wholeheartedness and Ambivalence

It is a common condition of human life to be subject to conflicting desires. Frankfurt analyzes various forms of inner conflict in his works on the structure of the will and the movements of the mind. We shall look at a couple of his examples meant to illustrate the sense in which the will of a person can be fragmented, incoherent, or disjoint.

1) Consider a reluctant smoker in whom there is a conflict between how she wants her will to be, and how it happens to be. Frankfurt would say that the unwilling smoker experiences a simultaneous first-order desire to smoke and a competing first-order desire not to do so. In addition, she experiences a second-order preference to act in accordance with the desire not to smoke. She has resolved, without reservations, to endorse this desire. There is an inconsistency between the person’s preference for a first-order desire (to resist the temptation to smoke), and the desire she acts on (to smoke). She knows which will she would like to have, but she is not capable of acting in the way she would prefer. Her conflict consists in her incapability to do what she wants, namely, quit smoking.

2) Another type of conflict arises when there is an inconsistency at the higher levels in the will hierarchy. This type of conflict is not between higher- and lower-order desires, that is, between preferences and desires, but among the preferences themselves; more specifically, among the person’s preferences that also happen to be her volitional attitudes. She just doesn’t know which will she wants to have. Frankfurt argues that such a person fails to be
wholehearted because there is no clear answer as to what she really wants (1988, p. 165).  

This lack of wholeheartedness can take two forms: The person may be ambivalent (2a), that is, she can have two separate volitional attitudes towards the desire that is her strongest motivation (i.e. her driving force). Imagine that my strongest inclination – i.e., my will – is to smoke, and that I have an ambivalent attitude toward this. On the one hand, I appreciate having this inclination as a result of my great admiration for Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, whose hard-boiled style I want to imitate: a project that cannot genuinely be fulfilled without the cigarette habit. On the other hand, I am negatively disposed because I know that smoking seriously damages one’s health. In this case my conflict consists in my being both for and against the same object.  

Absence of wholeheartedness can also be caused by an inconsistency in my set of volitional attitudes (2b). Suppose that when I plan out my life I want to choose different paths, paths that happen to be incompatible with each other. I want to be like Bogart and Bacall, and live like they did, but in addition, I feel like living the life of Gandhi and Mother Theresa. Isn’t this similar to what it feels like to be an adolescent struggling with questions of identity and individuality, all the while being drawn in conflicting directions? In this case, one does not, at least not primarily, experience a conflict towards a single object, but rather an internal split in relation to two incompatible objects.  

In the first type of conflict (1) the tension is, so to speak, between the preferences with which I identify and those with which I do not; as such, it is external, according to Frankfurt. In the latter type (2a and 2b), the tension is located within the range of preferences with which I identify; as such, Frankfurt argues that the first type of conflict is less serious, because there is after all, no doubt about what I genuinely want; the conflict is between me and something outside of me. The latter kind is worse because I lack an answer to what I really want. The conflict is within. I am, in Frankfurt’s words, divided.  

The question we wish to ask is whether one can reasonably argue, as Frankfurt does, that a person’s life is better when she lives a wholehearted life than when she is ambivalent about the life she is living. We will consider whether there might be situations or circumstances within a person’s life that speak in favor of ambivalence rather than wholeheartedness. We shall put wholeheartedness up against ambivalence, which, in our interpretation, will also

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2 Frankfurt states that wholeheartedness is only inconsistent with conflict among the “highest-order preferences” (1988, p. 165), that is, with not knowing what one really wants. As far as we can see, this version of wholeheartedness does not exclude a conflict between two competing second-order volitions, so long as a third-order preference for or against one of these volitions is also present. It also does not prevent conflict between different second-order preferences that do not concern which first-order desire the agent wants to be her will.

3 Observe that this does not concern a contingent or occasional incompatibility (i.e. my wanting two different objects that cannot possibly be united). Rather, there are two diverging objects that are incompatible on a deeper level; Mother Theresa just would not have been Mother Theresa had she smoked like Lauren Bacall; the conflict is not about the simple fact that she happens to have been a non-smoker. Nor is it the case that, when I want to be like Mother Theresa, it is partly because she did not smoke. In that case, I would be ambivalent, i.e. I would have a “pro” and a “con” attitude towards the same object. It is rather that I have two separate attitudes directing me toward two different and necessarily incompatible objects.
include other forms of motivational conflict that can be perceived as a lack of wholeheartedness: i.e. vacillation, indecision, and internal conflicts as they are described in (2b). We have chosen this strategy partly because it seems the easiest way to solve the task, and partly because it is Frankfurt’s preferred method as well.

2. The Regress Problem
Frankfurt’s theory has evolved over quite a long period and undergone several modifications, partly in response to critiques of the theory, making it difficult to assess. One obstacle it has faced has been explaining what makes the second-order preferences so special and, in what sense, people let them decide with which components of themselves they identify. If I think about it; must I not ask myself whether I am in favor of these attitudes, must I not have a third-order preference towards my volitional attitudes of the second order to be able to identify with them in any genuine sense and make sure that I am not a wanton with respect to them? If so, the question may be repeated at any level in the hierarchy of attitudes – to the fourth-order preferences, the fifth-order preferences, and so on.

Originally, Frankfurt thought that the problem could be solved, and the regress stopped by the agent in an act of determination; she decides to take a stand for one of her desires in a way that echoes throughout the entire structure of higher-order preferences. However, Gary Watson (1982, p. 108–109) has argued forcefully that this solution lends itself to arbitrariness and does not solve the problem. Embracing one rather than another of my desires does nothing to explain why I do so – why this desire has a unique position in terms of representing my identity beyond my pre-existing volitional attitude towards it.

In consequence and as a further development of his conceptual framework, Frankfurt equates wholeheartedness with being pleased with oneself (i.e. self-satisfaction), to be understood as a sort of passively qualified contentment. To be comfortable or self-satisfied, in Frankfurt’s words, is to be in a state of absence of any interest “in bringing about a change” (1992, p. 12). To be satisfied with something does not require:

[...] that a person have any particular belief about it, nor any particular feeling or attitude or intention [---] There is nothing that he needs to think, or to adopt, or to accept; it is not necessary for him to do anything at all (1992, p. 13).

In this way Frankfurt assumes that, in this way, the infinite regress is broken.

The contentment is not altogether passive since Frankfurt demands from it that it should be well thought out and reflected upon: “the fact that the person is not moved to change things must derive from his understanding and evaluation of how things are with him” (1992, s. 13). For Frankfurt, it is a requirement that the self-satisfaction results from an evaluation of the situation and of oneself, something that is clearly an activity: it must be performed. This

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4 Put forth by Gary Watson (1982) among others. Frankfurt was aware of the challenge when he first formulated his theory (1971, p. 16).
might seem contrary to the idea that contentment does not require any thoughts or attitudes.
Yet it is through these kinds of rationality requirements that he escapes a critique to the effect
that a human being might be a wanton in relation to her contentment.

To sum up: in order to have free will, a person must be wholehearted. To be wholehearted,
in turn, is to be self-satisfied, an attitude that should be seen as qualifiedly passive: “a
satisfied person might willingly accept a change in his condition, but he has no active interest
in bringing about a change” (1992, p. 12). A satisfied person is one who feels neither
opposition to his inclinations, nor any restlessness or eagerness to change them. This may
seem like a very limited form of self-satisfaction; it is not so much that you are pleased with
yourself, but that you are not dissatisfied enough to want to change yourself!

There are at least three problems with this.

First, one may wonder where the value is in this kind of contentment. Having an active and
positive volitional attitude towards one’s motivating forces seems, intuitively, to be more
valuable for a person than barely even bothering. In addition, it is easier to understand how an
active and positive attitude can make something a part of my identity than how a passive and
neutral attitude can bring this about. (We will shortly return to the issue of value.).

Second, this understanding of wholeheartedness as “tantamount to” (Frankfurt, 1992, p.
12) self-satisfaction, is not easy to reconcile with another aspect of Frankfurt’s philosophy of
life; namely, the part that stresses the value of what we care about. In his article “The
Importance of What We Care About” Frankfurt writes that:

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. Thus he concerns himself
with what concerns it, giving particular attention to such things and directing his behavior accordingly.
Insofar as the person’s life is in whole or in part devoted to anything, rather than being merely a
sequence of events whose themes and structures he makes no effort to fashion, it is devoted to this

It seems as though one is being given two, diametrically opposed images of how one should
live: on the one hand, one should be satisfied in not caring too much, on the other hand, one
should care to the point of devotion. These two ways of elaborating the ideal state of
wholeheartedness appear incompatible.

One option might be to hold that contentment should have the highest priority, while
devotion should be weakened. However, this is definitely not the image that Frankfurt
presents in his publications on the value of caring and devotion (of which love should be seen
as one form). Another possibility is to read Frankfurt as saying that the contentment in
question concerns the care and devotion that one feels: active devotion is required in order to
be genuinely free, but only passive contentment towards this devotion is needed. It is hard to
see how this could result in a whole and unified personality; but for now this is how we will
interpret Frankfurt’s theory. 5

The biggest challenge to equating wholeheartedness with self-satisfaction is reconciling this to Frankfurt’s earlier idea that one can be wholehearted even when one is in opposition to one’s strongest desire (i.e. the desire to smoke). When I am ambivalent, I do not know where I stand, and I do not know with which of my desires I ought to identify – something I do know if I have a clear and distinct negative attitude towards my strongest desire. How can this be described as my being content or satisfied with myself and not wanting to bring about a change? – I am rather wholeheartedly displeased! Frankfurt’s original account does not entail that the wholehearted person has a free will, since she can have a will she prefers not to have, but the idea of freedom of the will – or at least the absence of any lack of freedom – seems to follow naturally from the idea of satisfaction. Surely, one does not want one’s will to be different from what it is, if one is satisfied with it – a thought reminiscent of Frankfurt’s definition of free will.

We do not know exactly how Frankfurt would solve this difficulty, but we assume that he has not changed his view that a wholehearted person is a person without internal conflicts. This allows the possibility that such a person may experience a conflict towards external desires, that is, desires from which she wholeheartedly distances herself.

3. Arguments against Ambivalence
Frankfurt attacks ambivalence in three ways. One might think that his attacks are also meant

5 Notice that this is done with a strong reservation. The basic obstacle as we see it is how Frankfurt’s two ideals of wholeheartedness on the one hand and the ability for devotion – caring – on the other relate. As we have shown already wholeheartedness primarily concerns the structure of a person’s will. A person is wholehearted just in case she has no inconsistency of attitudes towards her own most powerful driving forces i.e. what is crucial to wholeheartedness is the second-order desires whose objects are the person’s first-order drives. That said, when Frankfurt discusses examples of devotion and love he almost always offers examples of attitudes whose objects are external (for example Hitler’s devotion to Nazism, or a person’s bizarre dedication to never stepping on the cracks in the sidewalk, 2002b). This suggests that devotion can be a desire or an inclination of the first order. Yet Frankfurt explicitly denies that animals are capable of feeling care and devotion; they can have inclinations, but “they lack the additional psychic complexity that is required in order to have the capacity to care about anything” (1999, p. 158). On Frankfurt’s account a person’s devotion (i.e. to playing the piano) is, in a sense, directed at an object that is normally external. However, if the person really cares about playing the piano, it is not just that she wants to play the piano, she thinks it important to do so, i.e., she is inclined to give support to her desire to play. She has a positive preference towards her affection for piano playing. It is even the case that this positive preference: “essentially consist[s] in [the person] having and identifying with a higher-order desire of this kind” (1999, p. 161). From this, one might get the impression that wholeheartedness and devotion are the same thing after all. Frankfurt equates a person’s identification with a second-order preference to devotion. What speaks against this interpretation – and thus in favor of reading wholeheartedness as a form of contentment to be located at a higher level in the will hierarchy than devotion – is that further down at the same page Frankfurt claims a “person may care about something even though he wishes that he didn’t” (1999, p. 161). Clearly, such a person is not self-content or satisfied. Altogether, this offers a perplexing ideal for how people should live their lives; one the one hand, they should care about things to the level of devotion, and thus have preferences in favor of retaining the desires that follow from this devotion; on the other hand they need not care about those preferences, but simply feel satisfied with them. We should have a “readiness to be satisfied with loving what we actually do love” (2004, p. 49). Considering what Frankfurt has earlier said about how one should interpret this form of contentment or satisfaction, it seems as though one is left with the picture of a person who cares for the lower levels of her will hierarchy, but who, deep down is quite apathetic.
to serve as arguments in favor of wholeheartedness: (1) Ambivalence is impractical. (2) Ambivalence is an enemy of truth. (3) Ambivalence is self-betrayal.

(1) Frankfurt argues that ambivalence should be seen as a combination of indecision and greed; a wish to have the cake and eat it too, “which naturally makes it impossible to get anywhere. The flow of volitional or of intellectual activity is interrupted and reversed; movement in any direction is truncated and turned back” (1992, p. 9). One could understand this such that it is not primarily a practical problem, that is, as an obstacle within the ambivalent person’s decisiveness, but it is hard not to interpret it as at least in part a practical problem, as when Frankfurt writes that “conflict within the will precludes behavioral effectiveness, by moving us to act in contrary directions at the same time” (2004, p. 96).

Frankfurt’s view on the problem of ambivalence is partly reflected in Buridan’s ass cases. In the original version an ass is starving to death because he is unable to choose between two equally distant and equally tempting bales of hay. The thought is that ambivalence works the same way: if two alternatives are equally good, the agent gets nowhere.6

Thus, ambivalence leads to paralysis. How serious a threat is this?

Although there may be a statistical relation between, on the one hand, ambivalence and reluctance to act, and, on the other, wholeheartedness and eagerness to act, such a relation alone is not sufficient to affect how one should evaluate the intrinsic value in wholeheartedness or ambivalence. That ambivalence can have undesirable consequences does not mean there is something wrong with it per se as Frankfurt holds. Any statistical relation will not preclude the possibility of instances where wholeheartedness leads to paralysis or where ambivalence co-exists with a proclivity to act.

Suppose that a person is guided by a single desire that she has a strong disinclination towards. Suppose she feels a strong attraction for a person: an attraction she feels is highly inappropriate and forbids herself to give in to. This may well result in an aversion and a paralysis: her attraction draws her to the person, but her moral standards prevent its success. If her moral standards were even stronger, she would be avoiding the person altogether. Had they been weaker, she would have given in to her passions. In both cases, she would have chosen to act. As things stand, she cannot move in either direction. She has stopped halfway: not close enough to the person to satisfy her strongest desires, not far enough away to do as her morality requires. On Frankfurt’s account, she is wholehearted, because she has no doubt as to her moral positions, no conflicting volitional attitudes in relation to her attraction. She

6 Thanks to Olav Gjelsvik who made us aware of the parallel to Buridan’s ass examples. The comparison illuminates a further problem in Frankfurt’s treatment of ambivalence, since he almost exclusively chooses a radical version of ambivalence as the target of his critique, that is, a form of ambivalence that simply consists in having two, equally strong, second-order preferences. At the same time, given Frankfurt’s definitions of wholeheartedness and ambivalence respectively, the latter can come in different degrees, while the former cannot. I can be ambivalent because I have two competing, but not equally strong, second-order volitions. We consider it very likely that the form of ambivalence people experience most often is of the less radical kind, and that much of Frankfurt’s critique of ambivalence does not apply (at least to the same extent) to the weaker form.
has one, single volitional attitude, even though it could have been stronger. One might say that the person in question, by overcoming her temptation, demonstrates strength of character. What one cannot say is that this wholeheartedness is any more likely to act than an ambivalent person would have been.

This person is determined in regard to what she wants, in how she conceives of herself and about what her true ideal is (in the sense that she has no conflicting volitions) – she is wholehearted. However, she is in an emotional stalemate, and is no more prone to act than the ambivalent person would have been. The wholehearted person makes a decision for or against a desire, and when she does this she is robust in her decision. In Frankfurt’s view such resoluteness of mind makes one more capable of acting. The point we want to press here, is that one may find examples like the previous one where this does not seem to be true.

One can also find examples where the ambivalent person is most prone to act. Suppose that I am a lesbian, but also consider myself to be a true Christian. I believe what the Bible says about homosexuality, but cannot help falling in love with persons of the same sex. In my view it would be bluntly impossible to fully unify my identity in the one or the other direction. This is something I have to accept, but I am far from lighthearted in my acceptance. I am never blessed with the feeling of wholeheartedness. I am in a constant struggle with my split psyche, but instead of working very hard to make myself wholehearted about my sexual orientation or my religious views – I fight as hard as I possibly can to be taken as a good Christian and at the same time allow myself to love whoever I want to, all the while not letting my ambivalence prevent me from being an active person: I follow the golden rule, I study the Bible in private, I do much more than is normally expected of voluntary work in the Church. At the same time I do everything I possibly can to make my partner happy – we have an open relationship, I even fight in public for gay rights. I am always in a state of mixed feelings about who I am, constantly questioning my way of living, feeling deeply insecure whether I do the right things, or not. Nevertheless, I am stubborn and refuse to take a stand and choose between my internal drives and desires, and I do not let my split mind paralyze me from activity. Quite the contrary, I am overcompensating for my ambivalence by being utterly active. I force myself to be a pro active person because I am so well aware of my inadequate background conditions. This is how I survive being me without falling into deep depression: I let my ambivalence be my driving force to act.

A similar example can be found in the stereotype of the heavily overweight person who is considered to be very active and full of enthusiasm always. We may easily imagine that this person is ambivalent about how to act: on the one hand she feels a deep desire to give in to depression because of her gluttony, on the other hand she wants others to see her as happy. This inner motivational conflict is what leads her to be active – she overcompensates for her ambivalence and in this way she is more prone to action than she would have been was she wholehearted about her desires.
(2) Frankfurt writes:

[...] ambivalence, like self-deception, is an enemy of truth. The ambivalent person does not hide from some truth or conceal it from himself; he does not prevent the truth from being known. Instead, his ambivalence stands in the way of there being a certain truth of him at all. He is inclined in one direction, and he is inclined in a contrary direction as well; and his attitude towards these inclinations is unsettled. Thus, it is true of him neither that he prefers one of his alternatives, nor that he prefers the other, nor that he likes them equally (1992, p. 10).

What Frankfurt says here is problematic in several respects.

In the first place, when he wants to show that it is more difficult to reveal the truth about a person in cases of ambivalence than in cases of wholeheartedness, he presents a far more obscure picture of the notion of ambivalence than he has done in several of his other works. Our characterization of ambivalence in the above examples was based on the ambivalent person as being torn, or, as Frankfurt would say “radically divided” in relation to an object, in the sense that the person in question is “drawn not only toward it but away from it too” (1988, p. 164, 165). As we have seen Frankfurt thinks that the practical problem about ambivalence is that it makes us want to “act in contrary directions at the same time” (2004, p. 96). In the long quote above the problem seems rather to consist in the mode of being moved back and forth and feeling unable to ultimately decide what to do. This impression is reinforced when he later in the same work writes that “A person is ambivalent, then, only if he is indecisive concerning whether to be for or against a certain psychic position” (1992, p. 9). To feel split and torn or inclined to move in two opposing directions at the same time, on the one hand, and not knowing whether one is for or against the object (or switching between being for and against the object) on the other, can be interpreted as two different things.7

Second, even one who sees ambivalence as a form of indecision and instability can hardly claim that there is no truth to tell about where the person in question stands in relation to the object. It might not be true about the person that she prefers one of the objects, or that she prefers all of the objects to the exact same degree. But it is clearly a truth about her that she is indecisive and uncertain as to which side she ought to choose. It is not at all obvious that this fact about the ambivalent person is less of a truth than the truth one can tell about the wholehearted person.

Third, if we broaden the perspective and ask whether ambivalence from a general point of view is in opposition to truth we would say that there are many situations where it is the lack of ambivalence that is an enemy of truth. Consider Philippa Foot’s well-known trolley problem (1967): a person sees that a runaway trolley is about to kill five people further down the track. She can choose to flip a switch, which will lead the trolley down a different track where one person is stuck. Should she flip the switch in order to save five people knowing that she will probably kill a person?8

7 A similar observation has recently been stated by Jennifer S. Swindell (2010).
8 Many are disturbed by examples like this one, and regard them solely as philosopher’s constructs. However,
Suppose that the person in the example chooses to switch over. Given this scenario it is not unreasonable to subsequently feel hesitation and ambivalence due to one’s disposition to save five by sacrificing one life. There are moral drawbacks to both alternatives. If one chooses not to flip the switch more people will die, on the other hand, to flip the switch is to give the individual less rank than the group. Even though the person in the example sees more reasons to flip the switch than not to do so, she might feel uncertainty because she believes that she sacrifices an important value whatever she does – either the value of helping more people or the value of respecting an individual. The moral truth about the situation is complex – there is a strong moral reason to switch over the trolley, but there is also a reason (customarily dubbed “pro tanto reason”) not to do it, a reason that stays present, so to speak, even though it comes in the shadow of the first reason.

The truth about the situation, provided that you choose to switch over is that it saves one value but harms another. If one wants one’s attitudes to be rational and mirror the moral truth about a situation, it can be claimed that ambivalence is actually better suited to capture truth in this case than wholeheartedness is. Thus, it is wholeheartedness that is an enemy of truth.

(3) Frankfurt claims that not only is ambivalence an enemy of truth but it is also the ambivalent person’s own enemy, because it may force her to betray and give up herself.9 Frankfurt argues that our cares and concerns define us as individuals. We are the people we are by virtue of our attitudes. The attitudes that are part of our essence in this way also serve as requirements, telling us to live in a way that allows for their realization; they are part of our core, so to say, and being faithful to ourselves is to live in accordance with them.

If I’m ambivalent, I have two contradictory attitudes toward one of my strongest desires. Suppose that I am ambitious but at the same time have an ambivalent attitude towards me being this way; I would like to lead a life where I can live in accordance with my high ambitions, but at the same time I would prefer not to. I have an inclination to live a life in fame and glory but I also have within me an inclination to live unnoticed and withdrawn. I have two different volitional attitudes towards these tendencies: I want to be a person who is ambitious but I want to be a person who is the exact opposite as well. Imagine that circumstances force me to take a stand in the conflict, such as Prince Carl of Denmark in 1905 when he was forced to choose whether he would accept to become the King of Norway. It is being said about him that he was reluctant to the very last moment, even though his

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9 See for instance 1992 (p. 9) and “Autonomy, Necessity, and Love” (included in 1999, p. 129–141). The main focus of this article is the concept of love, and again, it is unclear as to how Frankfurt sees the relation between wholeheartedness and love. However, others have also interpreted his paper partly as an attack on ambivalence; see for instance J. David Velleman (2002, p. 95).
surroundings and his wife, Maud of Great Britain, strongly recommended him to accept the offer. A plausible interpretation of the situation is that there was in him both a yearn for the honor of being a king, and a proclivity for a much simpler life, and that it was within him a struggle as to which of these inclinations he should realize. If he accepted, he would be forced to betray the side of his personality preferring simple ideals, and if he did refuse, of course he would betray another side of himself. When he accepted and was elected King Haakon VII of Norway his ambivalence forced him to give up an essential part of himself.

For our purposes, the point in this story is that lack of wholeheartedness does not (necessarily) indicate that the agent in question is guilty of some personal failure. As ambivalent I am forced by my choices to betray a part of me and my ideals. Nevertheless, the remedy in such conflicts is not wholeheartedness. In order to see this, assume that the reluctance and cleft really was part of Prince Carl’s personality and that this kind of deep-rooted attitudes, in general, is part of our personal essences (as Frankfurt too believes), well then it should also follow that Prince Carl would have deceived himself if he forced himself to wholeheartedly accept to become the King of Norway. A change in his personality from ambivalence to wholeheartedness would therefore also be a self-betrayal and a kind of self-effacement. It follows that if I am an ambivalent person, I am true to myself if I continue to be so.

4. Wholeheartedness as a Theory of Quality of Life

In the last few years it has become customary to make a rough division between theories about the quality of life into hedonism, preferentialism and perfectionism. The next question we want to take up is where to map down Frankfurt’s theory of wholeheartedness in this theoretical landscape, given that we understand it as an ideal of what it means to lead a good life.

Frankfurt writes:

My view is just that it is intrinsically desirable to be wholehearted and that, other things being equal, being wholehearted is better than being ambivalent. This naturally does not mean that it is always a good idea to be wholehearted. After all, other things are intrinsically desirable too, and wholeheartedness may interfere with them (2002b, p. 250).

“All things being equal” can mean at least two different things here. First, it could mean that wholeheartedness has an intrinsic value (for the person) unless the situation is such that it deprives the wholeheartedness from its intrinsic value. In this case, the wholeheartedness serves as a conditional intrinsic value. It could also mean that wholeheartedness per se always has intrinsic value, but that there are certain circumstances, in which it may be outweighed by other intrinsic values. Put differently, it works in the same manner as pro tanto reasons; it is always present and relevant, even when it ends up in the shadow of even stronger intrinsic values. The last sentence in the above quote speaks for the latter interpretation: one can
imagine cases where it is a disadvantage to be wholehearted, because this attitude negatively affects other intrinsic values. One may, for instance, envisage cases in which wholeheartedness leads to fanaticism and bigotry – as Susan Wolf argues in her critique of Frankfurt’s theory (2002, p. 239). And, as long as it is not completely paralyzing, a certain degree of ambivalence may counteract the trend and instead make us open-minded and allow for new perspectives. Anyway, says Frankfurt, in such cases, it is hardly because ambivalence has a value in itself that we should accept it, but rather the insight that it can be a better path to other things that we value and that wholeheartedness “interferes” with these values (2002, p. 250–251, 1992, p. 11). It is always the case that wholeheartedness has a positive intrinsic value even when it has a negative instrumental value that is greater than its intrinsic value.

This indicates that Frankfurt’s theory hardly can be reduced either to hedonism or preferentialism, at least not in their monistic variants. One who holds that there always is a prudential pro-tanto reason to be wholehearted takes this to be the case even if it would be associated with more positive experiences and greater satisfaction of preferences to be ambivalent. Thus, it is not that it feels good to be wholehearted or that it is this way you want to be that makes it valuable.

What remains is perfectionism, which claims that there are ways of living one’s life that are worthy of being wanted or valued because they are objectively good, and thus independently of what we feel for them or whether we view them as valuable to us.¹⁰

We think one can distinguish two categories of objective values in Frankfurt: (a) the value of autonomy and (b) the value of an ideal image of a human being.

(a) It is quite obvious that wholeheartedness has its value in Frankfurt’s theory in particular as an explanation of what it is to be oneself, and have control over one’s own life – these features are normally seen as sub categories of the concept of autonomy. When we are moved to action by desires with which we do not identify we are not acting autonomously. In order to live an autonomous life one must identify with one’s own desires. Those desires one cannot identify with can be regarded as external and therefore not part of one’s true self.¹¹

There are at least two problems with this approach. First, Frankfurt has a view of what it

¹⁰ The locating of Frankfurt’s theory of wholeheartedness within perfectionism which is a kind of objectivist theory is dictated by how one should interpret it if one reads it as an ethical or a normative theory about the quality of live, and not as a metaethical or metaphysical theory of the nature of normativity. Regarding the latter issue Frankfurt thinks that one should understand his theory as both subjectivist and objectivist (2006, p. 46). It is our love (first and foremost the love of life) which is the source of our reasons for action. Without this subjective attitude nothing can have any meaning for us. This love is objective in the sense that we all have it. It is unthinkable that a person could lack it altogether, and that she could live a meaningful life without it. Yet again, we concentrate on the ethical or normative components of Frankfurt’s theory and not on the metaphysical, to the extent that it is possible to make this distinction.

¹¹ According to Frankfurt the wholehearted person is autonomous because she fully identifies with her own desires, thus she is whole, and she has a true self. But why should we feel so certain that how the person defines herself offers the true picture about who she genuinely is? There is not enough space here to go deeper into this particular problem. Let this serve only as a remark: Telling the truth about a person is probably a more manifold project than Frankfurt seems to indicate.
means to identify with a desire that cannot always do justice to the intuitive value of being autonomous and exercising the ability to live one’s own life. Second, the value of autonomy can, in any case, only explain the value of *certain* forms of wholeheartedness.

Suppose that I have been subject to indoctrination during my entire childhood. I feel an aversion to, say, promiscuity which is the result of a very strict religious upbringing. If the influence from my environment is sufficiently strong it is also conceivable that I do not tend to get rid of the aversion, although I know where it comes from. I realize that the desires in me are so strong that it is impossible for me to get rid of them.

Frankfurt writes:

[It] is possible, as I have already observed, that someone should become resigned to what he judges to be his defects. A person may acknowledge to himself that passions of which he disapproves are undeniably and unequivocally his; and he may then cease to feel, if he ever felt, that these passions are in any way alien or that they intrude upon him. The fact that a person disapproves of a passion is not, accordingly, a sufficient condition of the passion’s externality to him (1976, p. 247).

Frankfurt talks about *passions* in this quote, but elsewhere (see for instance 2006, p. 7–8) it is clear that what he says here applies to attitudes, thoughts and feelings in general. We think that it is reasonable to interpret *resignation* as a very weak or watered down form of wholeheartedness. And what is more: this form of wholeheartedness can hardly be said to exemplify any value of autonomy. When I find out that my desires are caused by extreme indoctrination and that all of my attempts at removing them are in vain, I can choose to accept these facts and resign. However, the life I am living on the basis of this knowledge is barely an autonomous life led by a person with self control – in the sense that I live a life that I myself have genuinely chosen. To admit and accept that my environment has a stronger influence on my life than I have myself in the way just described cannot easily be seen as a self-determined life.¹²

The other problem we see is that even if one chooses to see wholeheartedness as an unreserved relation to one’s own motivational states, the autonomy value can only justify certain forms of wholeheartedness, namely those variants where I *embrace* a desire without reservations, and not the cases where I *reject* a desire I have. I am only autonomous in case I approve of my desires, not when I reject them. Thus the general value of wholeheartedness must be found elsewhere than in the notion of autonomy.

(b) Frankfurt has an ideal image of how an individual should be: she must be wholehearted and nothing else.

What kind of ideal this is, is open for discussion. However, it is our opinion that it looks like, or at least is akin to an *aesthetic value*. First, as has been emphasized already, it is an

¹² Laura W. Ekstrom writes: “Certain reasons for joining oneself to a desire – not only external manipulation, but also guilt, laziness and inattention – are intuitively autonomy-undermining” (2010, p. 381). Our proposal is to add “resignation” to this list.
intrinsic value – wholeheartedness is superior to ambivalence quite by itself and independently of any benefits it might bring. Aesthetic values are judged very much in the same way. Second, it’s not about the content of the human will, but rather its form and structure. It is not what you want that is important but the way you want it. If we talk about the quality of life, you may devote yourself to whatever you want in this life; just see to it that you do it wholeheartedly! Third, when Frankfurt construes his ideal image he uses terms and concepts that are at least partly taken from the aesthetic domain. It is attractive to live in a “vital” and “healthy” way, a way in which your personality is “robust”, “united”, “consistent”, “rich” and “harmonious” rather than “fragmented” and “marred” by ambivalence.

What is it to be faithful to oneself? It is not at all obvious that the life as a wholehearted person is more attractive and that such a life would be more valuable than an ambivalent one. Everything depends on how and when one is wholehearted or ambivalent. There are forms of wholeheartedness which are hardly attractive. Susan Wolf (who herself claims to have an ambivalent attitude towards ambivalence) writes:

[…] wholeheartedness in the face or the context of objective doubt, seems indistinguishable from zealotry, fanaticism, or, at the least, close-mindedness (2002, p. 239).

What Wolf says here bears resemblance to our earlier observation that the moral situation may be such that a certain form of ambivalence comes closer to the truth than wholeheartedness does. In addition we believe that the accusation of narrow-mindedness and fanaticism may apply in a situation where there is no guarantee that there are any objective reasons for doubt. It is monotonous and uninteresting to discuss music or art or literature with someone who has a strong preference for a particular direction towards which she does not feel the slightest hesitation. It is not at all certain that there are objective reasons for her to reconsider her affection: nevertheless, she appears to be dogmatic and inflexible.

The same applies to philosophical workshops; it is uninspiring and tiresome to attend seminars and workshops with people who lack any form of doubt that they are defending the complete truth of a philosophical theory and that the enthusiasm they feel for it is perfectly appropriate. The reason as to why one comes to have this reaction is probably that this kind of philosophical wholeheartedness has an unfortunate effect: the wholehearted philosopher makes no room for other people’s contribution, she is normally not listening at what others have to say and is less likely to understand and learn from others. This leads to a vicious circle: others lose their interest of arguing with her and the wholehearted theorist thus becomes increasingly convinced that there are no counter-arguments. All in all this leads to a thoroughly objective parochialism. Be this as it may, the view that we hold is that entirely independent from this, that is to say, even if the wholehearted theorist actually is more right in her assumptions than her critics, her strategy is hardly an attractive way to carry out thinking. The presence of some doubts with regard to the attraction one feels to one’s favorite ideas and theories is appropriate and becoming in virtue of what it is in its own right.
Compare the settled mind of the wholehearted person to the Kafkaesque movements of a troubled mind, unwilling to settle with an answer, pulling itself in opposite directions, today it leans one way, tomorrow the other way, and in general it does not know what to think about life and the self. We see Kafka, Pessoa and their protagonists, as symbolizing the ambivalent person. These persons and characters illustrate the ambivalent individual’s resistance to mapping herself down, an unwillingness to fit a form, a person’s deep aversion to put up with the present situation. The very posing of unpleasant questions is, in some sense, the whole point. Given that you are having an ambivalent mind, the faithfulness to yourself is never to choose the “safe side of the fence”, but rather to respect unclassifiable moods, and allow yourself (perhaps ambivalently like Wolf) to be pulled in opposite directions. In this way the individual accepts her vulnerability and despair – just like the before mentioned prince listened to his inescapable ambivalence and thus waited, and waited, before he made his final decision about becoming the King of Norway.

There are contexts where it is not suitable to be ambivalent, for example, when it comes to the love we feel for our children. In general, a good parent should be free from mixed feelings in her love for her kids. Wholehearted love of the children one has custody of is probably a better source for a good life than ambivalence would have been in the same situation.

Although wholehearted love for one’s children can be an admirable trait of character this does not amount to the conclusion that ambivalence is always less attractive than wholeheartedness. The play of the inner dialogue, the self-criticism and the inescapable ambivalence within Franz Kafka, Fernando Pessoa and their fictional characters may very well strike us as fascinating and touch us in ways that the wholeheartedness of other authors and protagonists cannot. In comparison, consider the life and work of writers such as Vladimir Majakovskij or Mikhail Sholokhov. Greta Garbo was simultaneously an actor with great luminosity and an ambivalent attitude towards the value of acting. There is something fascinating to this contradictoriness; these people have somehow made the movements of their minds, their ambivalence and inability to stop reflecting into an art. Perhaps it feels more comfortable to be wholehearted, but from a perfectionistic point of view this does not settle its value.

13 In these examples ambivalence has an instrumental value as well, since it has given rise to great art. However, the same goes for wholeheartedness – very often when wholeheartedness seems to be in place it has instrumental value, for instance in the relation between a caretaker and a child. But we think there are examples, as in the case of Prince Carl of Denmark, where ambivalence is attractive even though it seems – on the face of it – not to have any good consequences.

14 There is, to some extent, a parallel between what we say here and Isaiah Berlin’s (1953) classification of thinkers and writers into the categories of hedgehogs and foxes. (From Archilocos “The fox knows many little things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing”.) The fox is a multifaceted character who is able to perform a wide variety of hoaxes and tricks in order to solve obstacles and in general to live his life, while the hedgehog is capable of only one thing: roll into a tight ball. The analogy is that on the one hand, there are “author foxes” who have a wide register and do not see the world from only one perspective or a single idea (for example, Aristotle, Montaigne and Shakespeare), while the “author hedgehogs” have a single perspective, and boil everything down to one single idea (for example, Plato, Hegel and Nietzsche). (Maybe Frankfurt fits the latter category?)
5. Concluding Remarks

In his later work Frankfurt seems to be aware of this last type of objection. Unfortunately, the way he tackles the problems makes his theory of the value of wholeheartedness and self-satisfaction appear as contradictive.

In what may be seen as an attempt to knit together the various strands of his theory Frankfurt writes in *The Reasons of Love*:

His wholehearted self-love consists in, or is exactly constituted by, the wholeheartedness of his unified will. To be wholehearted is to love oneself. The two are the same (2004, p. 95).

In a footnote on the same page Frankfurt makes the following addition:

The wholehearted person need not be a fanatic. Someone who knows without qualification where he stands may nonetheless be quite ready to give serious attention to reasons for changing that stand (2004, p. 95).

So to be wholehearted is to be satisfied with oneself, being satisfied with oneself is to love oneself (this self-love is the prime example of caring about someone or something), to love oneself does not exclude an openness to reconsider one’s attitude.

The equation of self-satisfaction with self-love strengthens a problem we have pointed to earlier on, namely that Frankfurt explicitly wants to accept that someone who wholeheartedly rejects her strongest driving forces, as the person who tries to quit smoking, still may count as wholehearted, because she knows where she stands and has taken a clear position towards her motivation. However, it is difficult to regard such a person as satisfied with herself, and it is even more difficult to regard her as one who loves herself.

In addition, it reinforces the problem of interpreting how the feeling of satisfaction relates to caring. As has been discussed earlier in this paper satisfaction is located at a higher level than caring (which occurs both at the level of preferences and desires). This interpretation finds support in Frankfurt’s belief that a person can care about something, and wish that she did not. Thus she needs not be wholehearted in her devotion. But if Frankfurt equates self-satisfaction with self-love, then he seems to have returned to the view that wholeheartedness is an active attitude, something which not only corresponds poorly with how he has previously described self-satisfaction, but is also a return to the regress problem that he tried to avoid by ensuring that satisfaction was seen as fundamentally passive.

Consider Frankfurt’s wish to describe self-love as open for reconsideration, or at least compatible with such openness. This is also difficult to fit into the picture he has offered of what it is to care for an object, something he presents as a kind of “commitment” or alliance with the attitudes one has towards the object, and that apparently means that one wants to embrace them. However, it is even worse that Frankfurt proposes parental love as a pattern when explaining what love is (2004, p. 43). One thing is quite clear, namely that I as a parent
do not love my child if I am fully prepared ("quite ready") to reconsider this love should someone give me a good argument for it. Of course, Frankfurt does not hold this view. But if parental love really is the archetype of what love is and what it is to care about someone or something and how to know where to stand, then it seems that the most patent manifestations of wholeheartedness, both when it comes to the relation to children and ideas, do not leave much space for willingness to change oneself. If so, there is a tension between being wholehearted and being flexible.

Our conclusion is that Frankfurt’s theory on the value of being wholehearted lacks the unity he thinks that the structure of a person’s will, at least at the higher levels, should have if she wants to live a good life. And quite independent from these theoretical problems, we also hold that it is not at all obvious that wholeheartedness is ethically more desirable per se than ambivalence is. What has the highest intrinsic value and occupies the most important place in a good life is determined both by the context and by the way in which one develops and exercises one’s wholeheartedness and ambivalence respectively.

LITERATURE


