

The Tragic Character of Frankfurt's Moral Theory

A Brief Introduction

What should we say that the goal of Harry Frankfurt's writings has been? Or, if that question is too broad to admit of answer, perhaps we can focus on that area which has received his increasing concern over the past two decades, and ask what has been the goal of his writings in the theory of action? Here we might distinguish two different kinds of goals – his dialectical goals, such as what he hopes to achieve with reference to current debates and which positions he hopes to displace or undermine – and his “moral” goals, that is, the actual goals he proposes that we adopt within his philosophy. Now Frankfurt does not “show his wounds,” as we might say. His writings rarely include more than one or two specific references to the debates he wishes to influence or to the specific targets of his arguments, and it is not always clear that the references he does include provide a very full picture of where he has situated himself. Nor does he provide lengthy explanations of what he is up to and what kinds of concerns are driving him.

Nonetheless we can constructively speculate about what his immediate goals were and provide an account which bears some resemblance to the truth even if it is not entirely accurate. The general atmosphere of ethics during the last century was extremely austere, in the sense that a starving mother's cupboards, stocked with Spaghetti-O's and Ketchup, are austere. Breathing in this atmosphere, the question was not, for Frankfurt, whether to replace the simple kitchenette with the verdant celebratory feast of pre-modern ethics. Yet he appears to have felt the inadequacy of so straitened a conception of moral life as then prevailed.¹ As a result he endeavored to provide the kind of moral structures needed to capture those aspects of our lives that are most important to us – what we love and care about – without recourse or reference to “natures,”

¹ Taking “moral” in a sense that Frankfurt himself does not appeal to, but which more nearly captures his area of concern than any other word will do

“immaterial essences,” or “noumena,” or even the grandiloquent and inspiring dialectical machinery of Marx. Using the simplest tools possible he endeavored to provide for a moral life that was both satisfying and frugal.

Such, or something like this, must have characterized Frankfurt’s goals when he began writing about “care” and “love” and “wholeheartedness.” The concepts in play in ethical debates of this period were utterly unsuited to providing an account of human life, or any guidance to the matters that actually dominate our lives. They were too narrow, too brittle, and too restricted in scope to make any philosophical analysis of human action worthwhile. But Frankfurt plainly did not desire to conjure up the metaphysical presuppositions haunting ethical thought in previous centuries. And thus his project emerges as an attempt to satisfy our need for thick “moral” or “ethical” concepts without incurring any significant metaphysical or theological debts.

Now, what of the “moral vision” contain in Frankfurt’s philosophy and proposed to his readers? He intends to provide us with reasons for doing certain kinds of things and for refraining from doing other things by demonstrating that there is a certain ethical ideal that we cannot help caring about. This project, which must be important to each of us, is seeking to become wholehearted.² Whatever our goals might be, whatever ends or persons we might care about or love deeply enough to devote our lives to their welfare, we must be concerned about whether we are wholehearted in these concerns. For if someone is not, then he will undermine what matters most to him, and ensure that, no matter how matters turn out, his life shall be unsatisfactory. This goal of establishing unity within the self is, actually, not so new; in one form it goes back to the concerns of the Post-Kantian German philosophy (concerns present in different ways both in Hegel and in the German Romantics), and in another form, it goes back to Augustine. But, despite occasional references to the *Confessions*, Frankfurt strips it of this historical baggage. It is

² In another moral tradition, this might be called the virtue of constancy.

not reason, in the Kantian sense of a reason proposing moral laws, that brings us into conflict with our own desires; it is simply reflection upon ourselves that spawns this opposition. The goal is not a “beautiful soul” whose feelings according with what he discerns his duty to be, but simply a state in which we are happy with who and what we are and what we care about. Schiller wished to change who we were, so that we could be happy following the Kantian moral law; Frankfurt wishes to undo the damaging effects of self-doubt and worries about “getting it right.” Similarly, the problem is not that sin and rebellion against the truth has vitiated our minds and wills so that habit now prevents us from clinging to the Good that we can identify by means of reason and revelation; the problem is just that *something* or another has left us unable to wholeheartedly pursue whatever objects we care about.

In several respects Frankfurt’s moral project resembles those whose project is defining action in terms of belief and desire. Although Frankfurt has pointed out that this project leaves the notion of desire “heavily overburdened” and “a bit limp,”³ he values frugality as much as his opponents do (as the comparison with the Romantics and Augustine should make clear). But, like them, he has drawn every source of reasons into the internal volitional structure of the agent, and he will even go so far as to say, “Caring about something may be, in the end, nothing more than a certain complex mode of wanting it.”⁴ The dispute is more about the structural complexity and temporal properties of our interior volitional states than about their ontology. What it most certainly does not include is any kind of intellectual power that could provide reasons for action, whether Aristotelian “right reason” or Kantian “pure practical reason.” Nor must we deal with any sort of human nature determining what we should care about. Care establishes the bed-

³ Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, I.4, p. 10.

⁴ Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, I.5, p. 11.

rock from which all human meaning stems.⁵ The only *necessarily* universal human end is wholeheartedness.⁶

So what should we make of these two projects? Can Frankfurt succeed in his goals? My conclusion is that his two goals cannot be harmonized because he cannot successfully motivate the universal value of wholeheartedness with the frugal resources that he has gathered. In fact, wholeheartedness is much less desirable within his moral universe than it appears. The universal desirability of wholeheartedness depends upon the capacity of reason (or some other source of normativity) to provide us with ends.

I argue that this is because despite the attention that Frankfurt has devoted to the topic of wholeheartedness, he does not appear to appreciate the existential costs of his theory. His theory is both more interesting and more radical than anyone appears to have realized. Given how he conceives of care, identification, and wholeheartedness, moral luck sentences many agents to face dilemmas in which there are no satisfactory options available, including wholeheartedness. If our moral universe is as he describes it, it is tragic: It is a universe in which there are often *no* satisfactory options available. If, on the other hand, wholeheartedness at least were universally desirable, then the universe would not be tragic in this sense because there would always be at least one goal that we could pursue. It would be quite unfortunate that many people are incapable of achieving this state, but this isn't tragic – just unfortunate. Finally, I will argue that this provides us with reason for rejecting that dissociation as he describes it is dissociation at all.

To establish my argument, we need to understand certain features of Frankfurt's theory of wholeheartedness and ambivalence. My argument depends upon Frankfurt holding, or being committed to, three things:

⁵ Using "meaning" to signify what Frankfurt calls "importance."

⁶ Or, wholeheartedness is one of only two necessary ends – the other being finding things to love and care about.

- (1) Care is foundational for agency, reflective of, and accountable to, nothing.
- (2) Dissociation is generally caused by a desire conflicting with what an agent cares about. Identification is occasioned by the absence of any grounds for dissociation.
- (3) Persistent ambivalence is generally due to incoherence within what an agent cares about.

My goal is to argue that there is a tremendous existential cost to maintaining all three of these, insofar as when they are conjoined to common and plausible assumptions about life they appear to entail the following:

- (C1) Any ambivalent agent faces a tragic dilemma without any satisfactory options.
- (C2) Reflective wholeheartedness is not a satisfactory ideal because it is not inherently desirable.

And finally, and most seriously:

- (C3) Frankfurt's concept of dissociation, conceived of as a complete externalization ridding the agent of responsibility, is an illusion.

On, then, to my first task: establishing that Frankfurt holds, or is committed, to (1) – (3).

§1

For Frankfurt, caring reflects, and is accountable to, nothing. According to Frankfurt it is impossible to answer the question “How should we live?” except on the basis of what we already care about. Thus:

The question of what one should care about must already be answered...before a rationally conducted inquiry aimed at answering it can even get under way. It is true, of course, that once a person has identified *some* things to as important to him, he may readily be able on that basis to identify others. The fact that he cares about certain things will very likely make it possible for him to recognize that it would be reasonable for him to care about various related things as well.⁷

Caring does not, as caring, reflect judgments about the way things are. Nothing can justify caring about something except the general importance of caring about something, about whatever

⁷ *The Reasons of Love*, I. 11, p. 26.

objects it is possible for you to care about. But caring is the foundation of our moral lives (taking “moral” in a wider sense than Frankfurt would) insofar as it is rock bottom for our reasons for action.

Frankfurt insists that his view is not in fact so subjective as some critics make it out to be. He commonly appeals to various species-wide volitional necessities that provide us with common conceptions of what is important to us. But unless his appeals to evolution are intended to establish fitness as the ground of goodness, this point is not relevant to what I have to argue here, and does not appear to me to be especially helpful for rebutting his critics; for these are not usually concerned with whether individuals have the power to determine what is worth living in accordance with by subjective whim, but rather with the apparently deeper roots of what is good or just. It is this deeper lack of rootedness that they are concerned with and that my own argument depends upon.

It is true that Frankfurt’s reply to Susan Wolf’s critical assessment of his divorce of value from love appears to allow for a richer way of conceiving the relationship between an agent and what he cares about, but it isn’t clear what this amounts to. Wolf says that “it is better to love what is worthy of love than to love what is not.”⁸ To this Frankfurt replies,

Given [Wolf’s] distinction between worth and affinity, I believe that there may actually be no advantage to a person in loving what is worthy as she understands it. People certainly do have an interest in loving things for which they have an affinity. They benefit by modes of loving that provide them with rich opportunities for fulfilling their most satisfying capacities, and that enable them to flourish. However, it may be no better for them to love something that is worthy by some measure other than affinity than to love something that is not.⁹

Were Frankfurt to develop this thought, it would constitute a significant contribution to current moral theory. It is unfortunate that, to this point, he has not done anything of the kind. Even

⁸ “The Good, the True, and the Lovable,” *Contours of Agency*, p. CITATION.

⁹ “Reply to Susan Wolf,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 245.

when he decided to write a book-length treatment on the topic of love, he did not devote any space to considering what this concept of “affinity” might amount to beyond “the mere possibility of loving something,”¹⁰ which even Frankfurt does not consider to amount to affinity. We certainly have an intuitive idea of what this amounts to. Ray Charles obviously had some kind of affinity for music such that caring about music was better for him than caring about counting blades of grass, a task for which he would have been peculiarly ill-suited. But this doesn’t exempt Frankfurt from expanding upon this comment if it has any importance for the concept of love. It is notable that when he considers how we can answer the question, “How ought we live?” he does not mention affinity as a ground for love. So, whatever the relationship between affinity and the activity of loving or caring about something, affinity does not act as a *ground* for love or for care. If it did, then we could settle the question without recourse to what we already care about, which Frankfurt claims is the only possible method for answering the question.

§2

Identification and dissociation are supposed to mark out which of our desires are “really” ours and which are not. If someone is moved to action by a desire with which he does not identify – the standard example being the unwilling drug addict – then this action is not, strictly speaking, his, although it occurs in his history. Now it is tempting to read Frankfurt’s early work as if he conceived of identification with a desire as “something’s seeming to [the agent] to be a reason” or the agent’s “rational endorsement” of the desire in question, but he does not commit himself to such a view and now explicitly denies having any view like this.¹¹ What, then, is Frankfurt’s positive account of identification? According to what he says in “The Faintest Passion,” identification is no more than an agent’s being “satisfied” with a desire, where the deci-

¹⁰ “Reply to Susan Wolf,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 246.

¹¹ For the first, see T. M. Scanlon, “Reasons and Passions,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 178; for the second, Richard Moran, “Frankfurt on Identification: Ambiguities of Activity in Mental Life,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 193.

sion to be satisfied is “constituted by the absence of any tendency or inclination to alter [his psychic system’s] condition.”¹² There is no separable act of identification beyond the negative condition of no longer resisting the desire.¹³ Elsewhere he says that identification is “in very large measure” our “default condition,” both “ubiquitous” and “intimately familiar” to us.¹⁴ Frankfurt’s view, then, is almost the opposite of those who believe that the second-order desires grounding identification represent a kind of rational evaluation. Reflective identification consists in being satisfied in this way and also having “made up one’s mind” to allow this. But even here, identification just *is* not being opposed to a desire, and making up one’s mind is not an evaluative judgment. What the decision does do is make identification possible after doubt has arisen; the decision signifies that the agent has cleared away the worries due to which he held back from the desire. Reflective identification is not characteristically accomplished by an agent saying “I shall constitute myself *thus*,” but thinking, “Ah, well, that’s all right then,” and being satisfied again with the desire in question.

Dissociation is the “positive” concept of the two, and if identification consists in “the absence of any tendency or inclination” to change one’s psychic system, then dissociation must require the opposite; a desire must be external to an agent if he is never able to become satisfied with it, that is, if he possesses what Frankfurt describes as “an anxious disposition to resist” this desire.¹⁵ So if someone dissociates himself from his desire to smoke, then this will be because he cannot make peace with the idea of this being his will and he finds himself steadily opposed to the thought of his performing this activity.

Dissociation requires that an agent have a general disposition to resist allowing a desire to

¹² “The Faintest Passion,” *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 104.

¹³ See too “Reply to Richard Moran,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 218: “It is not by virtue of any act on our part, however, that such identification comes about.”

¹⁴ “Taking Ourselves Seriously,” *Taking Ourselves Seriously & Getting It Right*, §4, p. 8.

¹⁵ “Taking Ourselves Seriously,” *Taking Ourselves Seriously & Getting It Right*, §6, p. 10.

constitute her will. This means that second-order desires are, in themselves, insufficient to achieve dissociation. Only in a very persistent, satisfactory, second-order desire would do this. According to Frankfurt, persistence is one of the defining properties of what someone cares about, as opposed to what she desires. Likewise, there is no question about whether someone is satisfied with what she cares about. This is why caring, which Frankfurt defines as “persistent mode of guiding oneself,” is so important for Frankfurt’s conception of identification.¹⁶ In general, it is what someone cares about that prevents her from identifying with a desire, because of all the objects that are *internal* to her psychic life – desires, decisions, judgments, thoughts, and so on – only care has the reflexivity characteristic of second-order desires and the persistence of a settled state of character required for Frankfurt’s concept of dissociation. Volitional necessities, of course, are those things that we cannot help caring about. So they too govern what we are willing to identify ourselves with. Moreover, what we care about is always already internal: “When a person cares about something...he is willingly committed to his desire. The desire does not move him against his will or without his endorsement.”¹⁷

In one of his earlier attempts to explain identification Frankfurt relies upon an analogy between identification and arithmetic. We cease worrying about our finding the right sum not when we have a proof that we have performed the sum properly, and a proof for this proof, etc., but when we no longer have grounds to doubt our result. If someone carefully examines his calculations or computes the result using an alternative method and still reaches the same result he will be satisfied not because this constitutes a proof but because at this point it is unreasonable to continue worrying about the matter. Thus Frankfurt says that when an agent commits herself to a desire she does so “in the belief that no further accurate inquiry would require [him] to change

¹⁶ “The Importance of What We Care About,” *The Importance of What We Care About*, p. 83.

¹⁷ *The Reasons of Love*, I.6, p. 16.

[his] mind.”¹⁸ It is clear how this analogy might mislead the reader. What activity could be more cognitive than mathematics? But of course the only part of the analogy that is meant to carry over is the lesson about what is required for us to be *satisfied* with a decision, and I find nothing to distinguish the earlier from the later Frankfurt on this topic. The analogy illustrates how we can commit ourselves to something once we see no reason to resist going along with it without requiring any additional positive act of endorsement or evaluation. Suppose that someone responds to the question, “Well, how much do we owe them?” by saying, “According to my figures, it is two hundred seventy seven dollars – but don’t hold me to that.” What is it that would justify this response? Plainly, it cannot be his knowing that some other sum is correct, or else he would answer with that sum instead. Rather, he answers this way because he continues to experience doubt about whether he has gotten it right; he experiences some kind of lingering disposition to resist adopting the answer. The answer will not really be his so long as he has any inclination to resist accepting it. But when does he accept the answer? When he no longer experiences any resistance to it.

The question here is not about what goes into *performing* a sum properly in the first place, but what the psychological conditions are for committing oneself to or holding oneself back from an answer. And this appears to be the same in the early Frankfurt as in the latter: the final word on whether someone identifies with a proof is not a further judgment but a lack of resistance, and resistance itself need not be based upon any mathematical reasoning, but merely the a persistent inclination not to accept the answer. The only judgment involved in identification is the one that is “constituted by the absence of any tendency or inclination to alter [his psychic system’s] condition.”¹⁹ It isn’t a judgment that there *are* no grounds for doubt but just his not

¹⁸ “Identification and Wholeheartedness,” *The Importance of What We Care About*, p. 169.

¹⁹ “The Faintest Passion,” *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 104.

finding any.²⁰ There is no separable act of identification at all beyond this negative condition of no longer resisting the desire.²¹

§3

My final “premise” – that Frankfurt is committed to persistent ambivalence generally depending upon a conflict within what an agent cares about – is more controversial than my first two because as far as I know Frankfurt has never explicitly said this, and it is possible he does not even believe it. The success of my argument depends upon him nonetheless being committed to this claim in virtue of other claims he has made. I should be perfectly upfront: My argument will not succeed if this isn’t so. But I find it difficult to see how we can resist reaching this conclusion from his principles. Frankfurt’s explicit discussion of wholeheartedness allows for a person to lack wholeheartedness in what are, *prima facie*, two ways. He says:

In discussing ambivalence, I am concerned with conflict sufficiently severe that a person: (a) cannot act decisively; or (b) finds that fulfilling either of his conflicting desires is substantially unsatisfying.²²

What he seems to mean is that an agent may either indecisively fail to identify with or dissociate one or another of his conflicting desires or he may inconsistently refuse to dissociate either of two conflicting desires he has previously identified with. Frankfurt nearly always discusses type (a), when an agent cannot act decisively. In fact he emphasizes the agent’s inability to decisively commit herself to a goal to the point where his first premise in the preceding passage – that the indecision is due to a conflict of desires – is reduced to “the desire to commit” and “the desire not to commit.” This is unfortunate as it makes it difficult to see how it amounts to “self-defeat” (Frankfurt’s favorite justification for declaring ambivalence inherently undesirable) and it masks

²⁰ As he puts it in another place, “It is a matter of simply *having no interest* in making changes” (“The Faintest Passion,” *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 105; emphasis in original).

²¹ See too “Reply to Richard Moran,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 218: “It is not by virtue of any act on our part, however, that such identification comes about.”

²² “The Faintest Passion,” *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 99n11.

the implications of his theory.

Let us call this first type of ambivalence *volitional indecision*. It covers a person who fails to identify himself decisively with any of his second-order desires relating to some particular first-order desire. In this case there is “no unequivocal answer” as to what he really wants to do.²³ He wavers between pursuing some goal *X* and turning aside from it, but has no persistent feelings on the matter. He may act on his desire to pursue *X* or not act on it without really being sure that he is doing what he ought to do and later turn aside from what he had just decided, and do the opposite. Second, it is possible that different desires an agent has committed himself to are in conflict with each other, perhaps in a way unknown to him. Let us call this other source of ambivalence *volitional incoherence*. He may not yet realize that the career he has committed himself to and his desire to pursue this career, are inconsistent with his love for his family and his desire to go on loving them and acting in a loving manner towards them. He may find that successfully pursuing his career requires him to sacrifice his family, while successfully caring for his family requires that he be less than successful in his career. His devotion to the one undermines his devotion to the other, leading to self-defeating behavior.

Now my claim amounts to saying that all volitional indecision is reducible to volitional incoherence. Why should we think so? Consider the agent who is vacillating and dithering between whether she ought to commit herself to some course of action. Why doesn't she just *make up* her mind? If she is persistently doing one thing and then doing another, she must have conflicting dispositions to do each of these things. But what can these conflicting dispositions be except what she cares about? Conflicts of this kind are, after all, the common reason why people vacillate, and it is why Sartre's young man cannot make up *his* mind whether to care for his mother or serve his country. Someone who couldn't make up her mind even when she cared

²³ “Identification and Wholeheartedness,” *The Importance of What We Care About*, p. 165.

nothing for either alternative strikes us as neurotically indecisive, as overly attached to her freedom; that is to say, she appears to care about keeping her options open – which is a perfectly intelligible matter to care about – but to an excessive degree. But the very fact that she is seeking out something else to care about, beyond keeping her options open, suggests that she must care about devoting herself to some goal other than this. Otherwise she would not experience a persistent conflict over whether to commit herself to the goal in question. So the only plausible answer is that her indecisiveness is rooted in a conflict within what she cares about.

When we consider the kind of examples that Frankfurt himself is fond of, the same considerations appear accurate. Why is it that a man who cannot make up his mind whether to love some woman? Is it not because he is afraid that committing to the relationship will interfere with other things that he cares about – his freedom, perhaps, or his fear that the relationship will ultimately fail and prove to be too painful to be worthwhile? Or suppose that we shift the example somewhat, and take it further into the territory of Frankfurt's peculiar conception of love, and consider two parents who are asking themselves whether they wish to adopt a child. On the one hand they are powerfully moved by the needs of the many children who require adoption. On the other hand they are worried about the costs of adopting another child; they are concerned about the added strain of providing for another child, about the novel parenting difficulties this might entail, about the reactions of their other children and even those of their friends and family members, and about the literal financial costs as well. They waver between doing the one and doing the other and cannot find peace on either side. Can we doubt that the concerns preventing them from pursuing adoption are precisely what they care about?

§4

Frankfurt ascribes great importance to wholeheartedness. Let us investigate it and ask

why he thinks this and whether this claim is correct. According to Frankfurt someone's true interests are defined by what he cares about, so that a satisfactory life is possible only if he pursues the goals that he cares about with some degree of success. But if he is not wholehearted then he shall undermine the goals he cares about, and so undermine his own true interests. Effectively loving something requires *wholehearted* love. So without wholeheartedness a satisfactory life is impossible. I am willing to grant Frankfurt this. But a proof that ambivalence is necessarily unsatisfactory is not a proof that wholeheartedness is always desirable.²⁴ Answering "Why not?" will establish my claims that for Frankfurt, (C1) Any ambivalent agent faces a tragic dilemma without any satisfactory options; (C2) Reflective wholeheartedness is not a satisfactory ideal because it is not inherently desirable; (C3) Dissociation, conceived of as a complete externalization ridding the agent of responsibility, is an illusion.

Let us begin by asking, in virtue of what features is a Frankfurtian agent vulnerable to ambivalence? What is it that makes it easy for us to become ambivalent and difficult for us to escape from this state? There are two reasons why we cannot save ourselves from this "disease of the will"²⁵: One problem is cognitive, the other, volitional. The cognitive problem is due to the specifics of Frankfurt's internalism: There just is no good answer to what the fragmented agent should do. On Frankfurt's view, Sartre's young man, divided between caring for his mother and serving his country, can only solve his difficulty if he is able to discover that he cares more deeply about one goal than the other.²⁶ What he certainly cannot do is determine which he *ought* to care about more deeply, if this is supposed to imply something more than which one he

²⁴ It is, actually, equivalent to a proof that any satisfactory or desirable life requires wholeheartedness.

²⁵ As Frankfurt echoes Augustine's "disease of the mind" in "The Faintest Passion," *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 100.

²⁶ "The Importance of What We Care About," *The Importance of What We Care About*, p. 85.

does care about more.²⁷ Supposing him to possess significant commitments to each object, there is no answer as to which one he should devote himself to. He must somehow make up his mind, but make it up by means of an arbitrary act of will that is not grounded in any reason. Fragmentation “cannot be overcome merely by acquiring additional information.”²⁸

This is only the beginning of the difficulties for the ambivalent agent. Now it is true that she “cannot possibly be satisfied” with being ambivalent.²⁹ The volitional problem consists in the fact – unrecognized by Frankfurt – that according to his premises, she cannot possibly be satisfied with making up her mind about the matter, either. Frankfurt avoids this problem by predominantly discussing the ambivalence of indecision. But as we’ve seen, the ambivalence that manifests itself in vacillation is reducible to a form of volitional incoherence, and this manifests special difficulties. For what is unsatisfying for an agent is determined by what she has a persistent disposition to resist, and if some desire is contrary to something that she cares about she cannot be satisfied with it (as part of what it means to care about something is to wish to go on caring about it) and she must dissociate herself from it. But then she cannot be satisfied with any desire to separate herself from one of her cares. So, given her present dispositions, it is this desire to amputate that must be dissociated. But if this desire is produced by something else that the agent cares about, then she is in a pretty pickle. For she will possess a consistent disposition to resist *any* desire hostile to either of these cares. The idea of amputating either of them therefore cannot satisfy her. This is the volitional problem. A fragmented agent cannot be satisfied either with being fragmented or with the amputation that would make wholeheartedness possible.

²⁷ But I should point out that, as the matter appears to me, caring about something *more* than another object cannot be quite enough to ground a rejection of the latter. Even if someone cares about one more than the other, he will undermine his commitment so long as both goals possess a certain degree of importance to him. Someone might care both about a marriage and about fulfilling some adulterous fantasy that would destroy his marriage; the fact that he cares about his marriage more will not protect him from at some point (perhaps even more than once) undermining it through his commitment to experiencing the pleasures of the adulterous fantasy.

²⁸ “The Faintest Passion,” *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 100.

²⁹ “The Faintest Passion,” *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 106.

To do so she would require some other kind of motivational power beyond what is supplied by her caring about various things. Indeed, it seems as if her problem is worse: it seems as if she cannot even be satisfied with what she *does* care about. If so, we might wonder whether or not she truly identifies with either of her conflicting ends. Perhaps this ambiguity about whether she can successfully identify with *anything* is why Frankfurt says that “[there] is no final unequivocal truth, no straightforward fact of the matter” concerning what such a person’s goals are.³⁰

It is instructive to compare Frankfurt with Augustine on this point. Although Augustine is perhaps the only past thinker to ascribe as much importance to wholeheartedness as Frankfurt does, it is precisely here that the Bishop of Hippo differs from him, with wide-ranging consequences. Although in Augustine’s account the ambivalent man is miserable, he does not face either of these problems. Augustine believed that sin was punished by a loss of cognitive and volitional power, but this is a very different difficulty than the one that Frankfurt places the ambivalent man in. He might have lost his ability to discern what his good is, but this knowledge is not *in principle* inaccessible to him, any more than walking is in principle cut off from someone kept invalid by a burning fever. He might, after all, be healed. Similarly, although the fragmented agent cannot hold tight to anything with his shattered will, this is not because his contradictory goals exert equal authority. On the contrary, their authority is only under the aspect of the good, and so the actually good goal completely displaces the authority of the false goal. There is no question which goal it would be more satisfying to achieve, or of there being any grounds for regret in choosing it. What the ambivalent man needs is a physician of the soul. But this is a state of cognitive and volitional health that is distinct from his actual state while remaining authoritative for it. This is what Frankfurt’s ambivalent agent cannot possibly have. His cure must remain an act of violence whereby he is changed, but not precisely *healed*, because the

³⁰ *The Reasons of Love*, III.13, p. 93.

new state lacks the special significance and authority that health has to a sick man to him in relation to the ambivalent man's present situation and circumstances.

§5

Given these two problems then – the one cognitive the other volitional – it is not surprising that Frankfurt should consider ambivalence to be all but permanent. What he does not appear to be sensitive to is the precise nature of the tragic dilemma faced by the fragmented agent. This nature of this dilemma follows the pattern that Hegel and Alasdair MacIntyre take to exemplify both a certain way of life and a certain kind of tragic drama exemplified by Sophocles' *Antigone*. In the *Antigone* we find that Polyneices, the son of Oedipus, has been killed attacking the city of Thebes. Creon, the king of Thebes, has ordered that his body be left exposed “unwept, unburied, a dainty treasure for the birds.”³¹ But the law of the family requires that Antigone bury her brother so that, like his brother, he shall “have his honor among the dead.”³² Antigone responds to Creon's edict saying that “It is not for him to keep me from my own.”³³ The drama then follows the tragic outcome that follows from Creon's adherence to the law of the polis and Antigone's to the law of the family.

According to the Hegel/MacIntyre interpretation of the *Antigone* the tragic dilemma consists in the merely contingent unity between two sources of valid ethical claims, the family and the polis. When things are going well, there is no difficulty between the two. Each plays an essential role in the life of the other. But it is also possible for the law of the family to come into conflict with the law of the polis; when this happens, we encounter a tragic dilemma. According

³¹ *Antigone* 34-35.

³² *Antigone* 29.

³³ *Antigone* 54.

to MacIntyre, “our situation is tragic in that we have to recognize the authority of both claims.”³⁴ It is not open to a citizen to disobey the laws of the city. But equally, it is not open to a sister to refuse her brother burial. In this situation we cannot avoid choosing one ethical community over the other; but obeying the claims of one doesn’t excuse us from the claims of the other community, “[for] to choose does not exempt me from the authority of the claim which I go against.”³⁵ Both claims are valid, neither may be disobeyed, and the one demands what the other forbids. So according to this interpretation, the tragic hero lacks any satisfactory options. He is burdened with a dilemma and the need to make a choice; but, because of circumstances beyond his control, he will go wrong no matter which choice he makes.

Now consider the situation faced by one of Frankfurt’s fragmented agents. The fragmented agent, in virtue of her fragmentation, cannot possibly *figure out* what she ought to do. The most the agent can discover is that she cares about both objects. Her only option is *to make up her mind*. But, from her current perspective, the claims of the one are just as good as the other. So she cannot be satisfied with making up her mind; she has as much reason *not* to do this as she does to do it. The fragmented agent then is trapped within a tragic dilemma that requires her to choose between incommensurable goods, neither of which it is permissible to sacrifice. Quite often, she will attempt to avoid picking sides, and will not make up her mind. But if she refuses to sacrifice one she must undermine the claims of both. The situation of the fragmented agent is tragic in that every choice before her is unsatisfying. It may well be that it is more desirable for her to undermine only one of her cares rather than both. But this cannot be said to be *desirable* in-itself. Given what Frankfurt says about dissociation, it is also clear that she is in

³⁴ *After Virtue*, p. 141. For reasons that need little explanation I will only refer to MacIntyre’s version. Hegel’s reading of the *Antigone* can be found in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Miller, pp. 266-293. It involves several claims that would go beyond what is required here that involve connections to his account of the rational requirements of *Sittlichkeit* and the specific character the laws of the family vis-à-vis the laws of the city.

³⁵ *After Virtue*, p. 141.

constant danger of disintegration as a person: At every moment it seems that she is threatened with having her entire volitional structure ruptured, so that there no longer is an “inside” or an “outside” but a seething mass of conflicting goals and desires united only in their constant warfare with each other. Should she act, it will be arbitrary, senseless, and tragic.

Let this stand as establishing the first conclusion.

§6

Yet Frankfurt appears blind to the inevitably tragic choice faced by the fragmented agent. He is always confident that what the agent really needs is just *wholeheartedness*. If he is correct that wholeheartedness is universally desirable, then he is also correct to pay no mind to the question whether his moral universe is tragic. If there is always some course of action that is desirable in itself then there can be no tragedy, not in the sense that we are now using the term “tragedy.” A tragic dilemma requires that *every* choice be unsatisfactory. So Frankfurt’s ideal plays an important role in shaping the nature of the world as he describes it. Frankfurt’s moral universe, in which wholeheartedness is extremely difficult to attain but always desirable, may be stern and even harsh but not tragic. However, when we examine the impasse that the ambivalent is constrained by, it becomes clear that wholeheartedness is not as universally desirable as Frankfurt has made it out to be. Whether it is completely desirable depends, to a large degree, upon “moral luck.” Some agents inhabit a moral universe without tragic conflicts; others, less fortunate, find their worlds defined by such a conflict.³⁶

Frankfurt thinks that achieving a reflective wholeheartedness is so worthwhile that in the end there is nothing more to “getting it right” than this. But granted that it is indeed better to be wholehearted than not, Frankfurt is unwilling to acknowledge the existential costs of his theory.

³⁶ Given how love unites the interests of the beloved with those of the lover, those who love someone facing the tragic dilemma shall themselves be drawn into the same conflict. To the degree that they identify with the interests of their beloveds their own lives cannot be entirely satisfactory, either.

It would also be better for Antigone and Creon if the laws of the family and the polis were in agreement. But given the actual situation, it would be foolish for us to make light of the tragic dilemma they face by saying no more than, “Well, what you really need is a coherent set of laws!” It’s grown late for that. It only remains to dishonor one for the sake of the other.

Frankfurt’s ideal of wholeheartedness, then, is unsatisfactory. It is not actually intrinsically desirable. According to Frankfurt wholeheartedness is so desirable that “[to] be wholehearted *is* to love oneself.”³⁷ But this cannot really be correct. What is important to an agent is determined by what she cares about. It will follow that *if* an agent is wholehearted, then wholeheartedness is desirable. This is because it is important to her not to screw up what she already cares about. These ends are important to her and lacking wholeheartedness would mean interfering with these ends. But if she is not wholehearted, then any desire for wholeheartedness is repugnant from the perspective of what she cares about. For it will entail just this interference with her ends. Frankfurt neglects this because, I suggest, he misunderstands what kind of wholeheartedness the fragmented agent desires. He is quite correct to say that fragmentation is not a state with which any agent “can possibly be satisfied.”³⁸ It is inherently undesirable. Even the fragmented agent wishes that she were not fragmented. But what she hopes for when she wishes this is that her ends did not conflict. She is, after all, marked by her wish “to have things both ways,”³⁹ and this desire is *constitutive* of her fragmentation, being entailed by her caring about incompatible objects and not just another volition added on top of her other volitions. Her hope for wholeheartedness does not include a wish for *amputation*, but for reconciliation. The necessity of amputation is merely the painful reality.

Let this stand to establish the second conclusion.

³⁷ *The Reasons of Love*, III. 15, p. 95.

³⁸ “The Faintest Passion,” *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 106.

³⁹ “The Faintest Passion,” *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 99.

§7

Now it remains to establish what Frankfurt's conception of dissociation amounts to. This discussion aims at establishing (C3), that unless Frankfurt makes large modifications to his philosophy – such as rejecting (1), that care has no foundations – then dissociation, conceived of as a complete externalization ridding the agent of responsibility, is an illusion. Arguing for this point shall be quite complex compared with what has preceded and will progress through several stages. To clarify matters for the reader I shall explain what the main points to be established are before we begin.

To begin with we shall develop the worry that Frankfurt's conception of dissociation is a bit of wishful thinking by considering a significant difference between the tragic picture and his own account and a criticism in J. David Velleman's "Identification and Identity" that pushes Frankfurt upon this point.

This worry is enhanced when we consider a distinction used by those who counsel addicts of various kinds between true and false recovery. For it seems as if this distinction points to an interconnection between free will (as Frankfurt conceives of this) and wholeheartedness that is not captured by Frankfurt's philosophy. But when we ask what kind of concept of dissociation *would* capture this distinction, it seems as if it would have to be one similar to the one Scanlon discusses in "Reasons and Passions," that allows desires or what we care about to possess cognitive content of some kind, a notion of dissociation alien to Frankfurt's own philosophy.

Frankfurt then is faced by a dilemma: So long as he retains the other parts of his philosophy, he must embrace the tragic picture entirely and abandon his concept of dissociation; or, he must make significant changes elsewhere in his philosophy.

§8

Frankfurt's account fits in with the Hegel/MacIntyre interpretation of Sophocles in many respects, but there is one with a notable difference. According to this interpretation of Sophocles, the tragedy of the hero's dilemma is that, even when the hero chooses one good over the other good, she must suffer the just consequences of rejecting the claims of the other good. The rejected law, of either the city or of the family, retains authority, even if only the authority of force. Although Antigone rejects the claims of the city, she is not exempt from its threats; and likewise Creon is not exempt from the power of the authority he rejects; what is rejected "is the other essential power, and is therefore not destroyed, but merely wronged."⁴⁰ Now it might be thought that Frankfurt's concept of dissociation protects him from this particular aspect of Sophoclean tragedy. Whatever pain the agent faces is limited to the pain of decision. Once she has made up her mind, the other is rendered an outlaw, without rightful claims. Now it is true that the agent, by making up her mind for one, has rejected the claims of the other. She has opposed her will to these claims. Does such rejection protect her from suffering the "pathos" of the tragic hero?

In one respect Frankfurt's account does follow the tragic picture, and in another it does not follow it. It is alike the tragic picture in that the agent may continue to suffer from what he has rejected: Even when we have "resolved to keep [the dissociated desire] from producing any direct effect upon the design and conduct of our lives" and "[we] refuse to recognize them as grounds for deciding what to think or what to do," nonetheless "we continue to be powerfully moved by them" and their force over us is sometimes the "irresistible" force "of a tyrant."⁴¹ Similarly when Antigone rejects the claims of the city, she comes to see the power of the city as illegitimate to her. Faced by the conflicting demands of the family and the city, she "is no longer

⁴⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 286.

⁴¹ "Taking Ourselves Seriously," *Taking Ourselves Seriously & Getting It Right*, §6, p. 10.

uncertain which side [she] is on” in the conflict.⁴² In this way the conflict is transformed “into a conflict between *one* of them and the *person* who has identified [herself] with its rival.”⁴³ It goes without saying that if this is the way that dissociation functions then the effect of the decision “is not necessarily to eliminate the conflict...or even to reduce its severity.”⁴⁴ Doing this did not help Antigone much either. Whatever dissociation is, then, it does not prevent the agent from suffering the claims of the rejected volitional force.

But Frankfurt’s account is unlike the tragic picture in that the rejected power appears to be completely alien and without any rights, whereas in the tragic picture the rejected good is “wronged” and retains its just authority over the hero. That is, for Frankfurt, the agent suffers, but her suffering is not “just” because she is not responsible for anything that results from an externalized desire. She is not responsible for how it interferes with her life. He Frankfurt’s account followed the tragic one here, we would expect something different; we would expect that the dissociation would not in fact alienate the agent’s responsibility, but retain it, and that dissociation would be treated as being something of an illusion whereby an agent protects himself from feeling any responsibility for something of his own, but which he does not wish to accept. Creon surely wished to deny that he had any responsibility to live up to the demands of the laws that Antigone invoked; but ultimately it was the punishment for violating these laws that led him to acknowledge their legitimacy. Had he remained in denial then he would be the analogue of one of Frankfurt’s agents, denying his responsibility for the punishment he suffered.

J. David Velleman has pressed Frankfurt upon this point, although perhaps without yet seeing the full implications. In “Identification and Identity,” Velleman notes that for Frankfurt “the well constituted self” is marked by its wholeheartedness, but that Frankfurt doesn’t intend

⁴² “Identification and Wholeheartedness,” *The Importance of What We Care About*, p. 172.

⁴³ “Identification and Wholeheartedness,” *The Importance of What We Care About*, p. 172.

⁴⁴ “Identification and Wholeheartedness,” *The Importance of What We Care About*, p. 172.

this to include “the complete absence of conflicting motives.”⁴⁵ It separates us from these desires and from responsibility for them but doesn’t eliminate them nor prevent them from moving us to act. He finds this idea troublesome and calls attention to one of Freud’s patients called “the Rat Man.” This “Rat Man” had “the desire to dissociate himself from his own hatred and hostility”⁴⁶ for his father, while “acknowledging only his love.”⁴⁷ The result of this was a severe neurosis “which often involved repeatedly doing and undoing an action, or thinking and contradicting a thought.”⁴⁸ The Rat Man’s desire to dissociate his feelings of hatred from himself led him to “conceal their true significance” by “[insisting] that they were merely “trains of thought” rather than hostile wishes.”⁴⁹ He insisted upon this even though those “trains of thought” continued to result in actions, claiming that “these thoughts were entirely foreign and repugnant to him.”⁵⁰ Velleman appeals to the similarity between what the Rat Man did with what Frankfurt recommends, and notes how similar Frankfurt’s dissociation is to Freud’s belief that a wish becomes an “obsessional or compulsive idea” when the ego “[places] itself in complete opposition to it” and “[regards] it as something to foreign to itself.”⁵¹ He concludes that although there are some differences between what Frankfurt recommends and the repressive practices of the Rat Man, “the suspicion remains that this prescription...would hardly have been more healthy.”⁵² Externalization appears to represent “the fears that move us to defend ourselves against our own

⁴⁵ “Identification and Identity,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 100.

⁴⁶ “Identification and Identity,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 102.

⁴⁷ “Identification and Identity,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 101.

⁴⁸ “Identification and Identity,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 101.

⁴⁹ “Identification and Identity,” *Contours of Agency*, pp. 101-102.

⁵⁰ “Identification and Identity,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 102; quoting Sigmund Freud, “Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et al., Vol. X, p. 184. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-1974.

⁵¹ “Identification and Identity,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 102; quoting Sigmund Freud, “Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis,” p. 162-3.

⁵² “Identification and Identity,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 103.

emotions.”⁵³ That is, it is a defensive posture against our own emotions, but does not actually succeed in rendering them *not ours*.

Frankfurt protests that Freud’s patient should certainly have accepted that he was ambivalent rather than deceive himself about this fact, but argues that it is obvious that he would be better off wholehearted than ambivalent in either way.⁵⁴ The patient’s mistake was not in seeking to be wholehearted, but in seeking it in the wrong way and failing to achieve it. He claims that what he calls dissociation “does not entail repressing the wish or making it unconscious, and it is in no way pathogenic.”⁵⁵ I do not generally give much credence to Freudian psychoanalysis, and for my own part I am puzzled by Velleman’s own prescription for ambivalence. Certainly, if Frankfurt’s premises are correct, then Velleman’s proposal of allowing our contrary feelings to “mingle” is no cure, but perhaps something like a coping mechanism and a way to make the best of a bad situation. But even if there is no Freudian solution here, there is a valid point that we can draw from the criticism: Given that these emotions persist and even continue to move us to act, by what right do we declare them to be “outlaws” and utterly beyond our responsibility? If in fact these “outlawed” desires are still ours it is not desirable to deceive ourselves about their status. I take it that this is what actually drives the Freudian criticism that Velleman develops and his worry that, if this is all that Frankfurt’s conception of identification amounts to, then it seems an awful lot like the agent is merely “playing” at being the sort of agent who is constituted by the desires that the agent has ostensibly identified himself with.⁵⁶ Frankfurt cannot simply *stipulate* that his notion of dissociation, carried through, does not in fact result in the psychological disorders mentioned. No doubt, as he conceives of the matter, it does not. But that is not the

⁵³ “Identification and Identity,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 104.

⁵⁴ See “Reply to J. David Velleman,” *Contours of Agency*, pp. 125-127.

⁵⁵ “Reply to J. David Velleman,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 126.

⁵⁶ Although for Velleman, this criticism is directed towards our motivation for accepting the theory, and not directed at the theory itself, I shall use the criticism more directly.

question we are interested in. We wish to know what will happen to *us* if we follow Frankfurt's advice. Can someone actually render a desire external to himself in this way? Does "[coming] to stand decisively"⁵⁷ for one or another of conflicting desires in the way that Frankfurt describes actually dissociate ourselves from the other one? Velleman's doubt is based on the suspicion that it does not, in fact, work, and the relevant energies remain those of the agent himself. Frankfurt's protest appears beside the point.

Suppose we consider Sartre's young man, who is struggling between the decision to care for his mother and to serve his country in war against the Nazis. Let us suppose that he not only makes up his mind that he wishes to care for his mother, but that in order to ensure that he is as effective at this as possible takes a decisive stand against any patriotic sentiments supporting his going to war. He comes to regard his desires to fight the Nazis as external and hostile to himself. "Such sentiments are worthless," he decides, "as my own participation in the war is utterly pointless. It would accomplish nothing for France, but do unmitigated injury to my mother. My desires to fight the Nazis are entirely based upon a selfish desire to participate in a great and noble cause, to partake in its glory, which will succeed or fail regardless of my efforts. My mother, however, shall suffer greatly if I leave, but not if I remain. It is clear to me which side I am on." When he feels any desire to fight the Nazis he feels an anxious disposition to resist these desires. He knows that acting upon them will only endanger his mother, whom only he can care for.

But we need also to suppose also that his desires to serve the resistance do not diminish much, or perhaps not at all, and that he continues to experience a conflict of desires, sometimes even engaging in dangerous activities in support of the French resistance against the Nazis. Confronted by one of his friends who knows of his decision about this, he claims that he is not responsible for these actions, and that indeed, these actions don't represent who he *really* is. They

⁵⁷ "Reply to J. David Velleman," *Contours of Agency*, p. 126.

are just irresistible compulsions that come upon him from time to time. “As for me, I only desire to care for my mother; *I* have no desire to fight alongside the Resistance, although I do help them from time to time.” Should his friend believe him when he told this? Or should he rather insist that the young man is merely playing the part of someone who has made up his mind, deceiving himself as well as others, but has in fact not yet resolved the issue? It is hard to see why we should not insist that the relevant desires are still *his*. Wholeheartedness seems to involve little more than dissociating all the relevant competitors for a desire, but dissociating a desire doesn’t seem to result in dramatic changes in how someone lives.

This, then, is Frankfurt’s problem: On the one hand he wishes to allow the rejected desires to retain their power to disrupt the life of the agent; but on the other, he wishes to deny that these desires belong to the agent, or that the agent is in any way responsible for what results from them. Combining these two claims is an exercise in self-deception.

§9

This charge of self-deception is confirmed by another observation. The problem of identifying a genuine change of heart is an issue of great importance to many people who counsel those trapped by smoking, drinking, pornography, or other such behaviors. Although there are some schools of thought according to which the rule is “once addicted, always addicted,” there are other schools of counseling – especially those rooted in the religious traditions of Christianity and for which Augustine’s *Confessions* are something of a blueprint – that emphasize the need for such a change of heart, and it seems to me that common sense tends to agree with this view of wholeheartedness and individual transformation. When someone appears to have left the behavior behind, a true change of heart can be distinguished from a false one by the fact that the truly changed man no longer desires to smoke, for example, in the way that he did before,

whereas the other continues to have the same desires but is holding on merely by force of will. So when someone has genuinely turned against drinking, then although he may still experience some desire to drink, he has attached himself to different ends now so that it is these and not his desire to drink that dominate his thinking. But if his heart has not actually changed then he still faces exactly the same craving to smoke as before. The only difference is that he is “managing” it now and forcing it down by the power of his will. Ultimately his ends have not changed and we could say that he is only “playing” at having a change of heart, putting on an act that even he hopes is genuine. He has not actually become wholeheartedly opposed to his drinking. And if he not only experienced undiminished conflict but was still going upon drinking binges, then how much greater could our grounds for doubting his recovery be? He is still as much a slave to the bottle as before. Whatever he says, his will still appears to cling to the desire. He is not wholehearted. According to this bit of counseling wisdom, then, whether someone finds freedom of will is dependent upon whether or not she is wholehearted. It also appears to be the common sense view of the subject. But in Frankfurt, wholeheartedness and freedom of will are not bound together in this way. So even if he made additions to his account to accommodate these concerns, this would not solve the problem if the changes did not alter what he says about dissociation and wholeheartedness.

It is easy to read past what Frankfurt says about the agent’s making up her mind not “*necessarily*” affecting the conflict. But he means this. Dostoyevsky struggled with what is now often called “compulsive gambling” throughout much of his adult life, despite the ruinous consequences this had for him. According to Frankfurt the only difference between taking Dostoyevsky to be subject to a completely externalized compulsion of some kind and his simply caring about gambling a great deal – despite the incoherence of this with the other things he

cares about – would be in whether Dostoyevsky was wholeheartedly opposed to the desire or not. If he is opposed to it, then it is a compulsion; and if he approves of it, then it is a care. The difference does not lie in the degree or kind of power that the desire has to express itself in his life.⁵⁸ Like the tragic hero, the Frankfurtian agent is doomed even after he has made up his mind to continue to face the force of the desire he has chosen against. A more suspicious man might suspect that despite what he has been told, the desire has not yet been successfully “externalized” and that the agent is not really wholehearted yet. Although Velleman’s criticism does not do justice to the difficulty of her situation, this gives more evidence to his main claim.⁵⁹ The suspicious reader is likely to agree with Velleman that Frankfurt’s conception of wholeheartedness embodies “the fears that move us to defend ourselves against our own emotions,”⁶⁰ in particular, the fear of knowing the truth of what we are, a fear that Frankfurt himself acknowledges to operate powerfully within the human breast.⁶¹

Frankfurt cannot have it both ways. If someone does truly make a decisive decision about which side he is on with respect to some conflict of desires, then no doubt he is wholehearted. But if, as Frankfurt apparently allows, this is not reflected in a transformed volitional state, then how can he be wholehearted? In what respect does his state differ from a mere simulacrum of wholeheartedness? But this does not appear to me to tell against the idea of dissociation in general or, despite Velleman’s own urgings, against the desirability of wholeheartedness, *unless* we assume that making up one’s mind must always have no effect upon the strength of our feelings and desires. The trouble is that it is hard to see how Frankfurt can allow this to oc-

⁵⁸ According to a statement made by Frankfurt at the University of Notre Dame Philosophy Colloquium April 13, 2007, when I asked him this question.

⁵⁹ See “Identification and Identity,” *Contours of Agency*, pp. 91-123.

⁶⁰ “Identification and Identity,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 104. As Frankfurt himself says: “The facts about ourselves are often hard to take” (“The Faintest Passion,” *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 95).

⁶¹ According to Frankfurt, “The facts about ourselves are often hard to take” (“The Faintest Passion,” *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 95).

cur without overturning the whole fabric of his moral theory.

Why should we say this? We need to ask what conception of desire and care *can* accommodate dissociation of this kind. T. M. Scanlon has made a plausible suggestion: According to him we can only understand a conflict between desires ending in the complete outlawing of the other if it is something like the conflict between an appearance and an assessment, “the kind of conflict that occurs when it seems to me that showing my colleague in a bad light is a reason for mentioning a certain incident in a department meeting, but I judge this not in fact to be a good reason for doing so.”⁶² When an appearance is judged to be illusory, it forfeits *all* of its authority to guide us and does not remain as a lingering source of justification. But if a desire (as opposed to a sensation like hunger) is a “seeming,” then it naturally seems that its power to move us to act ought to be cognitively sensitive. As Augustine observed, a dramatic change of heart appears to require that one appear to have overwhelming reason to pursue some goal or course of action. In the presence of this reason, contrary desires lose their power. This response could never work for Frankfurt, however. Why not? If a universe is tragic, then its dilemma are between conflicting goods that agents lack adequate grounds to establish any distinction of value or truth. Thus in Frankfurt’s reply to Scanlon, he explains that he conceives of desires as no more than vectors or forces, and of course caring – which depends on nothing for its validity – has to be conceived of in the same way. There just are no grounds for determining what to care about. So Scanlon’s picture of dissociation is impossible within Frankfurt’s framework. Also: Given this picture it isn’t easy to see why wholeheartedness *should* effect freedom of will. Why would opposing one vector to a second eliminate the influence of the latter? It is unclear why this need occur. The gears could be arranged that way, but there is no particular reason that it should occur.

⁶² “Reasons and Passions,” *Contours of Agency*, p. 175.

For Augustine, caring about something – or rather, loving something – is (potentially) cognitively sensitive in just the way that Scanlon suggests, and insofar as some desires are defined by Augustine in terms of love, these too will be (at least potentially) cognitively sensitive. Freedom of will is difficult to achieve because desires are only potentially sensitive to reason, but part of the problem is the difficulty sinners have in really believing what they believe. This is why dramatic changes in what Augustine cares about result in dramatic changes in how he lives. It is true that his intellect precedes his will in arriving at the truth. But the only reason that he finds wholeheartedness is because in the end his will can, in principle, be influenced by his understanding and increased enlightenment can cause his false desires to lose their authority over him. If we are less tempted to burden Augustine with Velleman’s charges against Frankfurt, then it seems to be because his desires actually did lose their grip upon his life.⁶³ When dissociation is a marshalling of reason against appearance, against the habit of seeing something a certain way, it becomes much more intelligible how a desire could lose its authority.

§10

This argument does not establish that Frankfurt must abandon the notion of desires as no more than forces or the notion that caring has no foundations, although it does put pressure upon that idea. Frankfurt could make other changes to his philosophy that might relieve the pressure on his notion of dissociation. But he must either modify his philosophy or abandon his notion of dissociation. If Frankfurt retains his notion of caring, then it is difficult to see how he can continue to say that agents lack responsibility for their externalized desires. Instead, he should say that they are practicing a kind of self-deception. Dissociation belongs to a universe in which we can make decisive decisions about our lives on the basis of their true value. A world in which

⁶³ Of course, Freudians usually charge Augustine with a bevy of psychological neuroses. But why take these seriously?

our attitudes do not possess either truth or falsity has no room for this; nor does a world with tragic dilemmas have any space for dissociation, at least insofar as it is tragic. It does seem overwhelmingly plausible to me when we make up our minds, and we cease to care about something, it is the model proposed by Scanlon and Augustine that describes the nature and behavior of our volitional states correctly. But if Frankfurt disagrees with this then he ought to recognize the tragic character of human life in his philosophy and abandon his notion of dissociation, and admit that there is no escape from the hero's dilemma.