

What Ethical Rationalists Believe, and Why Harry Frankfurt Should Be One

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I. Defining Ethical Rationalism

Harry Frankfurt attacks ethical rationalism—the view that ethics derives from sound practical reasoning—in several recent publications.¹ However his criticisms are based on a simple misunderstanding. Once corrected, his criticisms prove unfounded, and the prospect of a renewed ethical rationalism, incorporating some of Frankfurt’s most important contributions to philosophy, may appear. Such a view in turn can rescue Frankfurt’s own ethical views from the potential charge of subjectivism, which he recognizes but fails to extricate himself from.

Frankfurt defines ethical rationalism as any view which seeks to “prove that moral principles and moral commands can be rigorously elicited from the requirements of rationality alone.” (259) On that basis, his main argument for rejecting it is that even if it were true that all immoral persons were thinking irrationally when they chose their immoral actions,² this fact alone would only prove that they were cognitively deficient, not that they were immoral.

Frankfurt fails to define morality or immorality in this article, so his objection here may simply rest upon some intuitive notions of these concepts. If he went no further, ethical rationalists could simply reply that their intuitions differed, and the dispute would hit an unproductive impasse. However Frankfurt clarifies his argument by noting that it would not be enough for ethical rationalism if irrationality was a necessary condition of immorality; it would also have to be a sufficient condition. And this it is not. “Explaining to a person that he has violated the requirements of rationality may lead him to regret and be ashamed of his error, but in itself provides him with no basis at all for feeling guilty about what he has done.”³

Frankfurt’s main mistake is now clear. His definition of ethical rationalism was ambiguous, but apparently he thought that ethical rationalists were trying to derive moral judgments from *theoretical* reason, and to show that immoral actions arose from inconsistency in

¹ Frankfurt (2000): 259-273; (2004), especially page 47, note 6; (2006b) especially pages 26, 29-30, and 39.

² Which he doubts though without explaining why, see Frankfurt (2000): 260-261.

³ Frankfurt (2000): 261.

belief. But Frankfurt has erred here, for ethical rationalists such as Kant have always insisted that morality can be derived from the requirements of *practical* reason, not theoretical reason.⁴

Sound theoretical reasoning requires that we avoid inconsistency, or contradiction, in belief. Sound practical reasoning requires that we avoid inconsistency, or contradiction, in our wills. While a belief is a judgment about what is the case, a willing is a kind of activity, a striving towards or an approval of a certain future state of affairs and a mode of achieving it. As such it involves emotions, or at least pro-attitudes, in a way that beliefs need not.

The claim that all mistakes in theoretical reasoning were immoral would be truly astounding if anyone had ever made it, but Frankfurt gives us no reason to think that anyone ever has. The claim that all immoral actions were founded upon some mistake in theoretical reason would also be quite surprising, but again need not be defended by ethical rationalists. Indeed, if these claims were really the core of ethical rationalism, it would be strange that the view was as “creative and robust” as he concedes that it is. It would indeed be odd if we felt guilty every time we found we had made an error in math, or felt moral repugnance towards people with inadequate scientific theories, and a view which implied that we ought to be would be roundly rejected. But it is far less mysterious that we could feel guilt for having contradicted our wills—that is, for doing something which one some level we actually do disapprove of (and not just something that we would disapprove of if we were ideal observers, or behind a veil of ignorance, or something of the sort). Nor is it mysterious that we would condemn others for doing so, for if ethical rationalism is right, they have already condemned themselves in just this way, and our condemnation is in a sense merely an agreement with their better selves, the values of which we presume to share.

In fact, the idea that moral normativity might be somehow grounded in the normativity of theoretical reasoning is odd at its core. For then we must ask where the normativity of theoretical reasoning comes from. And one of the most plausible answers is the one that Frankfurt gives in his (2006a): that the truth is useful, at least all else equal and in the long run, in helping us pursue our chosen goals. That is to say, as rational beings, we must have a pro-attitude to it as we must have a pro-attitude towards other necessary means to our ends. And as I shall show below, the idea of a necessary pro-attitude is precisely that aspect of practical

⁴ There may be persons who have believed that correct theoretical reasoning is sufficient to guarantee ethical behavior. But for reasons such as those Frankfurt gives, this is a very dubious claim, and this paper will only consider more plausible and more frequently discussed versions of ethical rationalism.

reasoning that ethical rationalists think is at the heart of ethical normativity. So they may actually want to say that the normativity of theoretical reason is based on the normativity of practical reasoning rather than the other way around.

Now I will make a stronger case not only that ethical rationalism escapes this and other of Frankfurt's criticisms, but that some of his earlier contributions of philosophy can lead us to a new, stronger defense of ethical rationalism, and even that Frankfurt is already on the verge of becoming an ethical rationalist without acknowledging it.

II. Consistency and Personhood

Frankfurt (1988) famously claims that a person is a special kind of agent which has unified its set of desires through the possession of second-order desires about which first-order desires he wishes to be motivated by. Such second-order desires resolve potential or actual conflicts between the first-order desires, not necessarily by eliminating the disapproved ones, but rather by taking sides amongst them, so to speak, and identifying the person with some subset of the first-order desires and not with others. Such identification constitutes the person's values, and in some sense the person herself. The second-order desires must be definitive; if conflict between desires persists at the higher level, the agent has still not taken sides and decided which desires are really hers.

Where Frankfurt defines a person as an agent with unified desires, I would urge we instead speak of a unified set of pro-attitudes generally, which we can also call unity of approval, or of will. "Desire" suggests an interest in having something for oneself, and in being motivated to take action to get it. As Anscombe puts it, "the primitive sign of wanting is trying to get."⁵ However, if I approve of something, there needn't be anything I am trying to get. Desire is a kind of approval, but the reverse is not true. Approval is more general, and is better language for objects which we cannot control. It makes little sense to say that I now desire that I acted differently yesterday, rather I should say that I disapprove of what I did yesterday. I can also approve of other persons' doing things I judge myself incapable of or as not my role, whereas to say I desired to see these things come about might misleadingly suggest that I thought I could or

⁵ Anscombe (1957): 68.

should do something about it.⁶ If our desires are consistent but our pro-attitudes are not, we are still not fully unified as persons. We continue to experience a kind of dissonance if we approve of what we did yesterday but disapprove of someone else doing the exact same thing today, and thus fail to take a side in this conflict between our values.

Even before making this switch in terms, but especially after doing so, very strong parallels exist between Frankfurt's claims and those of ethical rationalists. Both insist that an agent is lacking in some valued quality if she fails to unify her will. Indeed, I would suggest that the "rational agents" which ethical rationalists insist are also moral agents are essentially the same as Frankfurt's "persons." Christine Korsgaard seems to think so when she uses the Frankfurtian language of personhood in her argument for moral normativity in her (1996). She claims that a person with immoral commitments fundamentally disapproves of herself, and hence has a "disintegrated," that is to say non-unified, personality. Now it might be objected: why should I want to have a unified personality? But I *can't* want that, for in her Frankfurtian-influenced rationalism, there would be no "I" to want it. If you have an "I," i.e. a coherent personal set of values, that "I" cannot approve of the immoral life. In beings lacking any such unified personality, there is only a disunified aggregate of impulses, leading to some behavior which the more unified, rational agents amongst us disapprove of.⁷ Any pretense of an argument from the agent so acting can then be dissected using logic to show exactly where the fissures in the agent's attitudes lie, and this will both give us confidence that we are right, and possibly show the agent why she should change her ways.

If it can be shown that unethical acts cannot be wholeheartedly approved of, then we can say, *a priori*, that such actions are ones which no agent, or using Frankfurtian language, no person, can wholly approve of. This gives ethics as much objectivity as we could ever want it to

⁶ If anyone should disagree with these claims, and thinks that it makes sense to use "desire" in all the contexts where I claim that "approval" is more appropriate, then this has been merely a diversionary dispute over grammar.

⁷ Or more modestly, which partly unified agents disapprove of insofar as they are unified. Of course we may still speak, colloquially and inexactly, of "immoral persons" or "irrational persons," but only by habit and courtesy. If the extensions Korsgaard and I make of Frankfurt's ideas are correct, such entities are not persons, strictly speaking. This does not necessarily mean we have no moral obligations with respect to them, but we are not obliged to take their values completely seriously, for they have no coherent set of values to offer, and in some sense fail to take such values seriously themselves. Such obligations and respect are necessary in light of the fact that all of us fail at times to be fully rational agents, though perhaps some more than others. Of course, none of us are completely consistent, and hence complete as persons—there is no suggestion here of dividing up human beings into person and non-person categories, but simply of recognizing what the more consistent parts of our personality judge would be best, and following this rather than our worst sides. As Socrates said, we should listen to the wise, not the unwise—but it is possible that we each contain an aspect of both within us.

have. It also explains both our feelings of guilty conscience when we act wrongly, and our condemnations of others who violate moral rules egregiously. For we know that they have already condemned themselves, and they are typically aware of this fact at least subliminally⁸, yet march on blithely, careless of the failure to have a unified will, which we might call, with Korsgaard, a disintegration of their personhood. What I am suggesting here is that by adapting Frankfurtian arguments about personhood, ethical rationalists acquire a powerful new argument for their own position. I will now show that some weakness of Frankfurt's views on ethics can in turn be corrected with ethical rationalism.

III. Contradictions in the Will, and the Is-Ought Problem

I have argued so far that, according to ethical rationalists, unethical commitments always involve some kind of contradiction, which amounts to a tension, a cognitive dissonance, and hence lack of wholeness and wholeheartedness in the will of the person in question. This may be precisely what is revealed in "pangs of conscience," which needn't be interpreted as secret messages from God or nature, but rather our own (and hence less easily-escapable) awareness that we ourselves disapprove of what we are doing or proposing to do. We may manage to ignore the voice of conscience, but the fact remains that there is something to be ignored, and not just an inconvenient theoretical or empirical fact, but our own actual disapproval of our action, or perhaps more precisely of the principle of performing such an action in the situation we find ourselves in, which Kant calls our maxim of action.

This understanding helps deflect another one of Frankfurt's objections to ethical rationalism, namely that it "goes irretrievably wrong in its essential conviction that moral conclusions can properly be inferred from non-moral premises." (2000: 262). There are well-known reasons why such a derivation would be suspect. Fortunately ethical rationalism requires no such derivation, and the supposition that it does rests upon an easily-made confusion, which it is profitable to diagnose.

For ethical rationalists, to make an ought-judgment is simply another way of acknowledging one's wholehearted disapproval of omitting the said action (or approval of omitting it, in the case of "ought not"). One does not look at an agent who robs or swindles

⁸ They have perhaps developed psychological strategies or coping mechanisms to help them avoid facing this fact, but these strategies must be such that the offending agents again disapprove of the use of such strategies by persons generally, and hence condemn themselves again on a higher order level.

others for personal gain, note that she is contradicting her will, and then conclude that “she ought to act differently” is a proper response. Rational agents already disapprove of such actions, and on being told of another agents’ inconsistency only learn of a new instantiation of what they already disapprove of in general, with corresponding particular feelings. Likewise if someone points out to the offending agent that she is contradicting her will, this is not supposed to create in her some *new* feeling of approval for changing her ways, but really involves pointing out that she already approves of doing so—based on, for example, her approval of others’ forbearance in permitting her the necessary means for her to pursue her ends, or enabling their pursuit when necessary, and so forth. Moral correction isn’t a case of producing pro-attitudes out of the blue after presenting agents with empirical facts, but of making effective certain pro-attitudes we already necessarily have towards moral behavior, but which have in some cases been rendered ineffective by contrary attitudes within us.

To put it another way, if a correct judgment that “A ought to X” is simply another word for wholehearted approval of A’s doing X, then this correct judgment can be arrived at—that is, made conscious and likely to be effective in guiding our behavior—by a process of rooting out in us any attitudes which are bound to lead to a conflict within our wills. Attitudes which do not lead to such a conflict can remain effective in us. This will leave us with a set of non-conflicting attitudes, which according to ethical rationalism are the correct moral attitudes to have. No oughts are derived from is’s here, or values from facts. Rather, at the level of statements describing our attitudes, we can say that oughts are being derived from oughts, values from values, when we look at it from the internal rather than the external perspective.⁹ It is simply the case that some “ought” statements of the form “A ought to X,” if equivalent to “I (or, I can) wholeheartedly approve of A doing X” are necessarily false, while others are true. If it seems plausible that an agent, to the extent that he is rational, can only wholeheartedly approve of having true rather than false beliefs, and wholeheartedly approve of himself seeking to have wholehearted approval of his own behavior, then he is inexorably drawn towards believing certain “ought” statements and not others, and of having the corresponding attitudes.¹⁰

It might be objected that ethical rationalism makes a questionable substantive claim here about what the word “ought” means. While this can be debated, it is unnecessary to appeal to

⁹ See Korsgaard 161 for further thoughts on this distinction.

¹⁰ None of this should be taken to suggest that it is irrational to have conflicting desires. But it will often be irrational to approve of acting to simultaneously satisfy conflicting desires.

linguistic intuitions here. If someone insists that “ought” means something other than a wholehearted disapproval of omitting some action, I need not contest this. Ethical rationalism can be recast as the claim that it is impossible to rationally approve of some actions, and impossible to rationally not disapprove of others. If this is correct, then if someone claims that some true statement of the form “A ought to X” does not map onto the latter, this would merely show the irrelevancy of such an “ought” claim, for it would be unnecessary for a rational being to approve of the governance of his actions by this claim. Why rational agents should be held to it is then difficult to imagine, and why we would ever respond to their failure to abide by such a moral judgment with the contempt and indignation that Frankfurt says is intrinsic to moral judgment is incomprehensible. But if such responses are expressions of our necessary disapproval of the action in question, and perhaps are also attempts to awaken the offender’s own disapproval of the same, though slumbering and ineffective, they are eminently sensible reactions.

IV. Making Room For Love Without Subjectivism

Frankfurt is wary of the rationalist view that we should subject not merely some of our pro-attitudes, but even our deepest loves, to some kind of scrutiny, rejecting or modifying those which fail to pass a test of consistency. Acting out of strong, unchosen feelings of love is both ethical and immune to the scrutiny of reflection, according to Frankfurt. Of course, he is aware that this sympathy-based ethics is open to the criticism that it endorses subjective and arbitrary ends.¹¹ Rather than reject this charge directly, Frankfurt first insists that some forms of love (for children, spouses, etc.) are based on common biological impulses, and hence are both ubiquitous and possess a force which is unlikely to seem weak or subjective to persons in its grip.¹² But this is simply to concede the charge of subjectivism, and does nothing to address the concern that a few individuals may be born without the loving impulses that some of us have, and may instead possess hateful and harmful impulses.

Frankfurt further claims that we cannot choose what we love, so it cannot be subjected to rational scrutiny in any case. Even granting that Frankfurt is partly correct here, we can still control circumstances which influence the likely future course of our emotions, and which

¹¹ Frankfurt (2006b): 26.

¹² Frankfurt (2000): 271-273.

specific actions to perform in light of them. Abandoning responsibility for judging our natural impulses or how we act on them, however strong, leaves us unable to judge that a parent's expression of love for a child is morally superior to a sociopath's expression of contempt for a victim. Both are acting on strong natural impulses, and while we commend the former, a community of psychopaths may equally commend the latter. At this level, there is no objective fact as to who is better.

Frankfurt's insistence upon basing ethics on love, while refusing to consider some objective criterion for judging its instances, leads him to ignore crucial moral issues. Consider the following passage:

...there are likely to be some people who genuinely and wholeheartedly love what we ourselves fear and despise. That presents a problem. It should not be assumed, however, that we cannot deal effectively and sensibly with this problem except by marshaling evidence and arguments. In fact, we really do not need to decide who is right. The problem for us is to protect our children and our lives.¹³

But that is very much *not* the only or even the main problem, any more than the basic problem with Nazi Germany is that it didn't have enough tanks in the right place on D-Day. Frankfurt here confuses the job of the police officer or soldier with that of the philosopher or citizen, and hence confuses might with right as much as Callicles or Thrasymachus ever did.¹⁴ The problem of ethics is to find out whether we have good grounds to conclude that what we are doing is really justifiable, and simply stating that we love something is not enough. Hitler, in his own perverted way, loved his country. We very much need to decide who is right.

Fortunately ethical rationalism offers a way to do this, and one very much in agreement with most of what Frankfurt says about the reasons of love. According to rationalism, the love of the Nazi, or other standardly unethical persons who threaten us is not and cannot be truly wholehearted, despite any appearances to the contrary. In threatening what we hold dear the Nazi is doing what he would disapprove of others doing, and hence implicitly disapproves of his own action. The same is not true as we fight against him, love our children, and so forth. If there truly were two wholehearted loves in conflict, say over scarce resources, we would have a more serious problem, but then a wholehearted love would again have to be consistent with acknowledging similar demands of others, and hence a commitment to just and equitable sharing.

¹³ Frankfurt (2004): 30.

¹⁴ In Plato's Gorgias and Republic Book I respectively.

The problem we have as ethicists arises when a question is raised as to who, in a conflict situation whether both sides claim to have wholehearted loves, is really correct. Rationalism provides a pathway to an answer, one which Frankfurt unfortunately and prematurely rejects.

Frankfurt is not merely afraid that rationalism cannot provide a test to distinguish right from wrong, but that even if such a test existed, it would be irrelevant, since it is absurd to think that, say, a mother's love for her child cannot be acted upon until she can prove that her pro-attitudes are consistent.¹⁵ But this is also based on a misunderstanding; rationalism needn't require that the mother's love be proven to be consistent, simply that it is consistent, or at most, that she have evidence of its consistency. But she has this in abundance: it is manifest that her approval for her child is wholehearted, universalizable, and both exemplary of a common and commendable human attitude yet unique as a particular and irreplaceable instantiation of it. Should it occur to her to compare the two, it would be easy to immediately perceive that the Nazi's love of country isn't universalizable in the same way. It is morally repugnant in its attempt to claim a special privilege, while her love for a child entails no such conflict with other mothers and their children. Her love for her child may be unique, but she can recognize, correctly, that it is like the love of other mothers for their children, which she approves of in light of its similarity to hers for her child, and this potential for universal approval of like attitudes is just what correctly underlies her judgment that her love is good, according to ethical rationalists. Of course the love of a mother for her child could also be wrong—if she takes advantage of other parents or children in order to selfishly benefit her own, regardless of the harm caused. We would regard this as an overstepping of moral bounds precisely to the extent that the mother herself could not rationally approve of other parents behaving the same way with respect to her family, while the mother who loves her child but who cares for it in ways compatible with the success of similar caring of other parents for their children is morally sound.

We may put the point this way. Frankfurt fears that rationalism requires us to be motivated by argument, conscious awareness of the some logical claim. But this is absurd, and needn't be part of ethical rationalism.¹⁶ One can be a rational agent simply by being responsive to rational considerations: pursuing the proper means to one's ends, responding to an observed

¹⁵ Frankfurt (2000): 271, (2004): 29.

¹⁶ I concede that Kant's insistence that we be "motivated by the thought of duty alone" essentially claims this; but this is surely one of his most dubious claims, and can be separated from the more reasonable claim that our maxims ought to be universalizable. I would even offer the bold speculation that this bizarre claim, from the arch-rationalist of modern ethics, has done much to hinder the cause of ethical rationalism in the past two centuries.

conflict between ends by adjusting them to reduce or eliminate the conflict, and so forth, without always or even typically being conscious of such responsiveness. Perhaps in order to be fully rational one must be capable of, and occasionally engaging in, thinking explicitly about what one is doing, and adjusting one's behavior, or perhaps one's habitual mechanisms of responsiveness to reasons, in light of such conscious awareness. But being perpetually aware of the logic of practical action is not the only way to be rational, and it is surely not the most efficient way of doing so. One does not need to work through a syllogism in order to be rational when picking up a hammer to pound in a nail; one does not even need to think to oneself that there is some syllogism or other which justifies this choice of means for one's end. However some syllogisms can be used to explain why it was rational to pick up the hammer and not the screwdriver, given certain agreed-upon premises about the relationships between each of these and a nail. Likewise the logic of pro-attitudes can be used to explain why it is that a parent's love for a child is morally good while the Nazi's monomaniacal love for a country or party is not.

V. Harry Frankfurt, Rationalist

Frankfurt occasionally makes claims supporting a kind of ethical rationalism, though an incomplete one, of just the sort I have been outlining here. He comes close to drawing the connections Korsgaard and I make between an inability to consistently approve of some principle of action and the judgment that the action is immoral, when he describes the role of self-confidence in justification. This occurs precisely when he insists that our reasons for action needn't be justified by objective, universal facts, but simply because we find ourselves at times to be fully self-confident as we bestow our love upon various objects, with no perceived reason to reject the objects of our love or the manner in which we respond to them. If we did perceive such reasons, we would lose our self-confidence in ways that ethical rationalists could identify as a contradiction in the will:

The psychic integrity in which self-confidence consists can be ruptured by the pressure of unresolved discrepancies and conflicts among the various things that we love. Disorders of that sort undermine the unity of the will and put us at odds with ourselves. The opposition within the scope of what we love means that we are subject to requirements that are both unconditional and incompatible. That makes it impossible for us to plot a steady volitional course. If our love of one thing clashes with our love of another, we may well find it impossible to accept ourselves as we are.¹⁷

¹⁷ Frankfurt (2004): 50.

An ethical rationalist could roundly approve of this statement, and would only amend it to broaden its scope and implications. It is not merely conflict between our loves which subject us to “unconditional and incompatible” requirements, but any conflict between our pro-attitudes. Such conflicts also prevent us from plotting a steady volitional course, and from fully accepting ourselves and what we do. And the prize if we get it right is not merely acquiring a steady volitional course and self-confidence, not even merely personhood, but morality itself. Immoral agents may pose as self-confident of course, but only by repressing from their consciousness the fact that they are doing something to others which, under some salient description, they could not approve of others doing to themselves. When this fact threatens to make itself known, this may be just what we call a conscience. Conscience can be repressed, but the fact that there is something there to be repressed shows that the agent has not achieved full unity of self, and actually isn't completely self-confident. For a truly self-confident person would not be afraid to face the facts about her behavior which might show that she actually disapproves of it on some level; and the fully unified person would find that she does fully approve of her actions, without simultaneously approving of conflicting attitudes within her.

I conclude that in some sense Frankfurt already is an ethical rationalist, as he agrees with many of its core assumptions, and partially acknowledges the validity of its methods. Yet of course he also denies that ethics can be so derived from such methods. This is itself an inconsistency which it would be rational for Frankfurt to correct by adopting a more vigorous and unhesitant rationalism.

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