Wholeheartedness and Identification. Frakfurt’s Proposal

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Abstract

In this paper I intend to discuss Harry Frankfurt’s proposal of wholeheartedness and identification concerning an agent’s way of making decisions. The text that I am going to both summarize and analyze is Frankfurt’s article “Identification and Wholeheartedness”, published in the volume Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions (1987). The author uses concepts such as consciousness, reflexivity, first/high-order desires, decisive commitments, identification and wholeheartedness in order to construct a system which might explain our decision making. I believe that while his system is a very complex one, it still lacks, at least with regard to the mentioned concepts, some clarification concerning the concepts it introduces, clarification which may help us understand better how his proposal really works.

My paper has three main sections: in the first section I present and analyze Frankfurt’s proposal, in the second section I write down my personal perspective and in the third one I formulate the conclusions.

Keywords: identification, wholeheartedness, reflexivity, consciousness, emotions, responsibility, character.

I. Wholeheartedness and Identification

Frankfurt starts his text concerning the “mind-body” problem and he reveals a slight change in the usage of this expression that might help us understand better the way in which we look at the relationship

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between our body and the fact that we are conscious. I believe his approach is quite relevant taking into consideration the way in which both philosophy and psychology have changed throughout the years, referring to the “mind-body” problem as to the “consciousness-body” problem would be quite helpful.

Frankfurt uses the ideas of Jean Piaget and William James to conclude that mentality is no longer equated with being conscious:

The pursuance of future ends and the choice of means for their attainment are the mark and criterion of the presence of mentality in a phenomenon. (James 1983, 21)

[Psychology] is not the science of consciousness only, but of behavior in general… of conduct. [Psychology begins] when the organism behaves with regard to external situations and solves problems. (Brinquier 1980, 3-4)

There are unconscious phenomena (within human behavior) which prove that being conscious and mentality are not the same thing. But now the question arises: what is consciousness? We’ve established it is not mentality and generally it is supposed to be a characteristic unique for humans and “members of certain relatively advanced species” (Harry Frankfurt 1987, 158).

Frankfurt takes into consideration Antony Kenny’s proposal: being conscious means being able to discriminate:

I think that consciousness… is a matter of having certain sorts of ability. To be conscious is, for instance, to see and hear. Whether somebody can see or hear is a matter of whether he can discriminate between certain things, and whether he can discriminate between certain things is something that we can test both in simple everyday ways and in complicated experimental ways. (Kenny 1972, 43)

Now we further ask: what does it mean to discriminate? It would seem, at a first approach and maybe in the most general sense, that being able to discriminate is to be affected by different things in different ways. For example, if I am affected by the presence of my phone on the table next to me, it means I can discriminate; therefore I am conscious that my phone is there. If, on the other hand, my state is the same whether the phone is there or not (I see no difference between the initial state when my phone wasn’t there and the after state, when my mother
brought it and put it on the table), I am not conscious, because, I do not discriminate. The same goes for sounds, colors etc. – we have a different state for each and one of them, we respond differently to them.

The author discovers a problem here: even if we accept discrimination as a very important part of consciousness and we should definitely do that, it is not the way in which we think of consciousness: usually we contrast between being conscious and being unconscious (being asleep). But even when people, for example are asleep and they do respond to stimuli, they somehow discriminate. Otherwise, we could not wake them.

But here is where Frankfurt makes a very important distinction. If we take the notion of Kenny’s consciousness, we end up saying that every entity is conscious: like the piece of metal which changes once the temperature changes (becomes hotter, colder, expands, contrasts etc.). As long as discrimination (the ability to react differently to different objects) is the definition of consciousness, the piece of metal is conscious. Frankfurt emphasizes very well here that Kenny’s view is too general and there is a difference between consciousness and causal isolation. Regarding the piece of metal, we talk about causal isolation, while consciousness in everyday use cannot be only discrimination.

What is missing then? The author proposes a very interesting feature, distinct from discrimination: reflexivity. Being conscious means on one hand that I respond differently to different stimuli, but it also involves that I am aware of those responses. The difference between me and the piece of metal when the temperature rises is not the fact that both entities respond to the stimuli (I sweat and the metal also raises its temperature). The difference is that I am aware of the response of my body towards the heat, I feel warm.

But it is still not enough, even if we add reflexivity to discrimination, to explain how consciousness arises and what makes it different from unconsciousness. All things considered, in everyday use we have a certain second level of awareness: firstly, we have a primary response and then secondly, we become aware of that primary response. According to Frankfurt, consciousness is self-consciousness.

Now, it is important to understand that self-consciousness in the sense in which Frankfurt makes reference to is “a sort of immanent reflexivity in virtue of which every instance of being conscious grasps not
only that of which it is awareness, but also the awareness of it.” (Frankfurt 1987, 161). In other words, he does not talk about consciousness of a self, a subject or ego, or consciousness that there is awareness. This reflexivity regards the consciousness awareness of itself. When I see the color green, I am in a way affected by it and I am aware that I see the color green as such.

This is where the first part of the text ends. On the second section, Frankfurt begins with yet another problem: what consciousness is for. As he himself admits, although we talk about it every day and we seem to behave with familiarity with it, we are incapable of knowing what consciousness is and whether it is indispensable to us. The author offers an adequate response: consciousness is essential to purposeful behavior. What does this mean? Reflexivity is our ability to do something about our own condition. We can respond to certain conditions in a way in which our own interests are not affected. We have the possibility to avoid, ameliorate or even change certain circumstances, whenever our interests are in some danger – we act in a purposeful way, we make purposeful changes.

There is yet another characteristic of reflexivity or self-consciousness: this characteristic is unique to humans – we care about what we are. We constantly ask ourselves about what we wish to be and how other people see us, how they think of us. If we go even further, we will discover that there can be differences between our own desires: some of them motivate us because we want them to do so and some motivate us in spite of what we want. This specific part of Frankfurt’s text is quite tricky, because this rather simply idea, that sometimes we act and yet we do not “wholeheartedly” want to be motivated to act as we do, lays down the plan for the ideas he is going to present in the next sections. If we accept this, it becomes clear that we are somehow passive regarding our own actions – we end up by not endorsing our own motives. What we want – the object of motivating desire and the desire itself may actually not be something that we really want.

It seems a little bit awkward up to this point, but in section III Frankfurt tries to make his point clearer. How do we get to use this model of his for everyday use and what does it actually implies? First, we remind ourselves, as we saw in the two sections above that he uses
self-consciousness or reflexivity. Here is where we have his schema: there are the lowest first-orders desires to perform one action. The first-order desire which actually leads to actions is, “by virtue of effectiveness” (Frankfurt 1987, 164), designated to the will of the person who actually has this desire. Moreover, people have second-order desires which directly concern what first-order desire they want and in the same way, second-order volition for this type of desires. In other words, we have two different levels of desires and volition or apparently even higher degrees, which, according to Frankfurt, make it natural and even easy to understand that sometimes there is a certain incoherence into a person’s volitional aspects.

Let’s take an example. Frankfurt proposes a smoker, but it may easily be said to apply to any sort of addicted person. If someone wants to restrain himself from drinking, one has a higher degree desire to restrain himself from drinking. But, even if that happens, his desire to drink is so strong (and here is where we are talking about first-order desire: the first desire which makes him drink something) that he ends up doing the opposite thing of his own volition. At this point there is an inconsistency between a person’s higher-order volition concerning what desires he chooses and his first order-desires – as long as the latter proves itself to be more effective, moving him to act.

In this type of situations, where there is a clear lack of harmony between what a person really wants and does emphasize the fact that a person’s will is not under her own control, somehow she does something she definitely does not want to do, an external force imposes her to behave in a certain way – her actions lack wholeheartedness.

But there is yet another sort of incoherence, when we may observe the lack of wholeheartedness within a person’s action. Frankfurt brings into the picture a sort of inner conflict – the person’s ambivalence between higher order preferences. This is the case when a person is drawn to and also from the object she wants. Also, it may also be the case that an agent has a conflict between his own preferences, whether this conflict is manifested or not. Either way, there is no unequivocal answer, apparently, to the question: what does the person really wants?

So, to draw a conclusion we have two types of incoherence, both concerning the lack of wholeheartedness: the one in which we had the
example with an addicted person, someone who is compelled by an *external* force to act in a certain way (these forces are external in the sense that the person does not identify them to his volition complex and does not want her behavior to be in any way determined by them). The second type of incoherence concerns *internal* forces – the person comes to be ambivalent about her own preferences, something within her is not in harmony and she does not know what she truly wants.

Frankfurt believes that this type of model that he presented, based on hierarchical structure of desires, helps us understand better how an agent is passive to his own actions due to his own desires (take the example of the smoker once again). Moreover, it seems that we get to explain some concepts like weakness of the will, ego-ideal and so on. But, keeping all this in mind, there is still one important issue that we need to look at: how does a reflective creature, with second-order desires be wanton in respect to them in contrast to an unreflective creature concerning her first-order desires? The author brings back the notion of reflexivity which he emphasized earlier, because the hierarchy he just presented it is simply not enough.

In having different levels of desires, we fail to explain how someone gets to be identified with one or another of them. In other words, when we add different levels of desires, we do not solve the problem of how a person becomes defeated by her own desires, how she fails to act wholeheartedly. The only thing that this hierarchical model does is to add more soldiers to an existing war.

In the fourth section of the text, Frankfurt tries somehow to solve the problem which he himself and also other philosophers like Gary Watson have pointed out:

> Since second-order volitions are themselves simply desires, to add them to the conflict is just to increase the number of contenders. (Watson 1975, 218)

Here is where he introduces the notions of “decisive commitment” and “resonance effect”. In order to explain these new concepts, he uses an example, which I will now analyze.

We have a student who is trying to solve a problem of arithmetic, which requires a calculation. The student may perform the calculation
once, twice and one hundred times more in order to check if he got the correct answer. As long as we presume that a mistake can always be made at a certain point and then some mistakes can even be repeated, when does our student stop? What makes him say, at one moment in time, that he got the correct answer and no further calculation are necessary?

Here is where we are confronted with two main options: the first is that our student gets bored, loses interest or is just distracted by something. He wants to sleep, to eat and he behaves like a wanton: he does not choose a result, neither he endorses one, he is completely indifferent with it. The second one is the one which really interests us: he puts an end to his sequence of calculation because he decides, for some reason, to do it. The reasons may be different: he is confident that this is indeed the right answer, or the cost for further inquiry is greater than reducing the possibility of error by repeating the calculation on and on again. No matter what stands behind his decision, what is important is the fact that he made a decisive identification.

Frankfurt explains this decisive identification is an unreserved commitment that adopting the view (in this case choosing one particular answer) is a very reasonable alternative. Our student anticipates that in the future, each time he makes this calculation the answer will be the same one. When a commitment seems to be the same for any time in the future, it means that it is decisive. Decisive means no reservation, it means that the person who made that specific commitment is 100% sure that no matter how further she goes with the inquiry, the result will always be same. In the case of the student, once we made a decisive commitment, he strongly believes that no matter how many other calculation he makes, the answer will be the one he had already chosen. This is what Frankfurt calls “the resonance effect”.

How do we relate this example with the problem of desires? The author makes a very interesting proposal: in both cases, arithmetic and desires, a person decides to put an end to a certain sequence in a not arbitrary way, at a certain point, where she sees no conflict. Maybe the person has no doubt; maybe she sees no reason to continue as long as this particular result is a quite good one. On the contrary, if an agent gets to this moment and decides to continue, even if a potentially good answer is provided, he would confront himself with a conflict. When we
put an end to a sequence of reflections concerning our own desires because we have no conflict or doubt it is not an arbitrary decision. It is a reasonable one, one which needs to be taken. Is there any arbitrariness left? Frankfurt says that as long as every time we employ a principle we are presented to the possibility of error, no arbitrariness is impossible. The best thing that we can hope for is to reduce it as much as we can.

I find the fifth section of the text rather puzzling and also extremely interesting. Here is where I believe that Frankfurt introduces some intriguing ideas. He states that once a person has made a decision between two different desires, once she has chosen a side to be on, she identifies with that particular desire. A person may not be responsible for a certain desire which occurs within her, but responsibility comes along once that a person makes that desire her own, it becomes what she really wants.

The author talks about two types of conflicts between desires: first we have the competition for priority (which desire to satisfy first). Once we solved this conflict, we are faced with a single ordering; each desire is integrated to occupy a specific position. The second conflict means separation of desires – one of them gets to be treated as an intruder. So, we order, integrate, separate and reject desires – these acts are the ones which govern our inner life.

In contrast to Aristotle, for Frankfurt the responsibility of an agent has to do with a person taking responsibility for her own characteristics. A person is to be responsible not for having characteristics, but with identifying with them. If I am to choose between two opposite desires which are in conflict and I indentify myself with it, I choose it, I take its side, and it is what I want. The conflict between these two desires may never be over, but the fight is now between something I choose to be, I identify myself with and the other.

I find this particular part of the text interesting, because it shifts from that hierarchy of desires to responsibility and identification with one’s desire. We shift from desires in conflict to a person (which identifies herself as a desire) and another desire. It is interesting to see the way in which Frankfurt proposes at this stage such a change, but it is rather puzzling. It doesn’t seem so clear how an agent gets to be identified with his own desires. We order, integrate, separate, reject and then somehow we identify with one. As innovative as this rather complex system looks like, it is not an easy mechanism to employ.
The sixth section concerns with “reflexivity of deciding” (Frankfurt 1987, 174) – deciding is an action done to oneself (an agent decides to decide things in a certain way). Here is where Frankfurt talks about the meaning of “making up a decision”. This is where we find out that the only thing decision makes is to create an intention, without any guarantees of being carried out. The author states that a person can always change her mind and even if agents make decisions in order to solve a conflict and become an “integrated whole” (Frankfurt 1987, 174) that conflict is always there. If a person does not succeed to integrate herself, to solve the conflict it was intended to solve, we are again confronted with a lack of wholeheartedness. In spite of the agent’s decision, the conflict is still there, because he has other intentions, even if he is aware of that fact or not.

The seventh and last section answers an apparent question which the last section raised for us. Why do we make up our minds at all? A function of decision is both to guide other preferences and decisions in the future time and also to form the hierarchical structure of the person’s identity (structure which was previously discussed). Frankfurt talks about the function of decision as integrating the person both dynamically (coherence and unity of purpose for the future decisions and actions) and statically (the reflexive and hierarchical structure).

In either ways, one thing becomes clear: an agent is seeking, through decision making, to solve or avoid a conflict. One person identifies herself with motives and desires and here is where wholeheartedness comes along. Whenever we make a decision, we perform an action, whose performance includes reflexivity, desires and volitions of higher order. Frankfurt finishes his text by saying that making a decision seems rather different from knowing how to implement it, but it is rather unclear how we accomplish the latter by first accomplishing the former in the same structural way.

II. Personal Perspective

As far as I’m concerned, I believe that Frankfurt’s text is a very interesting one. Firstly, because it discusses the idea of hierarchical
desires, in order to explain some of the actions we usually believe and even say to be done by us, but in such a way that we do not accept them as “entirely” ours. This is how a person in a certain situation behaves, when being asked about a certain action performed by her: “why did you do such and such?” In everyday life her answer is either: “I couldn’t stop myself” or “I’ve done this and it seemed to me that I wasn’t the person who was actually doing it”.

But, as appealing as this structure may seem, I think that maybe something is missing, even when we take into consideration everything that Frankfurt pointed out (discrimination, reflexivity, first or high – order desires). This structure, as complex as it may look and also be, it fails, in my perspective, to give a clear account of what “identifying oneself with a desire” means. Wholeheartedness and identification are closely related and we cannot have one without the other. The problem arises when I try to understand and clarify what identifying with my desire really presupposes.

If I, as a smoker, have two different desires, both of them being of a second-order and I clearly state that I do not want to smoke anymore starting tomorrow, I identify myself with this desire. Once I have done this, does it mean that I accept this desire as being mine or being what I really want? And even if this is the case and this simple explanation is the exact answer, do I do this every time I need to decide? Is this structure generally accepted for every situation I find myself in? Or maybe it is only with certain desires, the ones from a higher-order? Do first-order desires function the same way or not?

Let’s take this idea further. We think of addicts all the time and maybe they are really the best example. But, in reality, a true addict rarely understands the state he is in. He may actually accept that yes, he has a problem and most likely he or she should stop. What good does that do to the person? Most of the time, none whatsoever. In so many cases in real life, a true addict ends up being helped by others understand his problem – his identification with that high-order desire – to quit smoking, drinking or taking drugs – comes as a result of a punishment (the authorities) or even a necessity (the person is in danger of losing something very important to her – family, friends etc.)

My question here for Frankfurt is this: how does this type of addict identify himself with his high-order desire? Can this agent really ever
say that this is what he wants? Or what others want for his own “good”? Who is able to say that? Maybe we answer by saying that his instinct of self-preservation should be stronger than his desire to slowly kill himself. But, a real addict admits that his addiction doesn’t allow this instinct to make place in his life. The only important thing for him is to keep taking or doing whatever he is doing. So, does the agent identify himself or the other people around him do that? Do we still have responsibility for his own characteristics as long as the agent needs help (usually therapy)? Moreover, we should never forget that in the case of a person who is an alcoholic, for example, the need for alcohol will never go away (some of them drink everyday because their bodies do not function otherwise).

One conclusion up to this point is that addicts are a very good example, but also they represent a very good counterexample. When is this identification with one’s desire really there? What role do other people play and in which way are we still taking about the agent’s responsibility for his own characteristics?

We can think of integration as the requirement of an agent to exercise his will and of condition of personhood and there is a very interesting connection with responsibility as Frankfurt pointed out. Actions can be passive, but they are nonetheless causally relevant and someone’s responsibility becomes his approval of said characteristics and dispositions.

What I am trying to point out, by giving these examples and discussing these cases is that Frankfurt’s proposal, though interesting and also relevant in quite many situations, has some serious issues concerning his main concepts. It is not easy to talk about responsibility, reflexivity or identification, especially in philosophy. This particular text focuses on finding a solution for our actions, when it seems to us that we are not the ones doing them. Our own desires seem not to be ours, because we wouldn’t normally behave in certain ways. But I here return to addicts: they behave as they like. Many of them admit to having a problem, but they are feeling happy and even distracted from many problems. A lot of them also manage to do things normal people (and by “normal” I mean people who are not addicts) do not do: write, sing, etc. and most of the times quite well. It is the societies which make them
change and seek help – our reasons, though important, should represent a problem here. Why? It seems to me that in situation like these, when we try to make others understand that what they are doing is wrong, and they should “listen” to their high-order desires, the idea of wholeheartedness is tricky and questionable.

I do not intend to raise an ethical question which could take us too far. I only want to suggest that although relevant, identification with one’s desires, a concept so important for Frankfurt’s wholeheartedness, it is rather complicated. It fails to explain those examples which need a reasonable understanding in the first place. And yet, maybe at some point, we will be able to find the answer we need.

Even under the interpretation I have presented above, I do not think that the author is completely clear about the questions asked. Moreover, there is one point in the sixth section of the text, where Frankfurt states that a person needs to become an “integrated whole” in order to solve a conflict and to discuss about wholeheartedness. The same problem here as I noted above: how do we become a whole? What does this mean? The idea of wholeheartedness does not fail to offer good perspectives for further explanations of how we make decisions between our own desires. In spite of this fact, we need more clarification concerning the way in which we make these decisions. Identifying with oneself is an interesting expression, but in order to create and also consolidate such a system of volition, as the one that Frankfurt presents in this paper, we need more than interesting expressions. We should discover the way in which the mechanism works in most cases, rather than in some and why it is better than others. What makes it the relevant or the correct one?

III. Conclusions

Wholeheartedness means having a high order intention without doubt or some sort of conflicting intentions. Integration implies that an agent exercises his will; decisiveness means no reservation, nor doubt. If we add these concepts, at this stage of understanding and explanation from Frankfurt’s point, to reflexivity as a necessary condition for
consciousness, we have in front of us a complex system, whose aim could be, at a certain point actually achieved. How do we establish authority upon our own desires? This is a question that still needs an answer, as far as I’m concerned, because the author’s view is lacking the clarity for a relevant explanation of how the mechanism works in at least most of everyday situations.

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