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TAKING OUR SELVES TOO SERIOUSLY:

Commitment, Contestation,

and the Dynamic Life of the Self

He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. (Emerson 1841)

Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it. (Wilde 1892)

1: Introduction

A certain vision of the self has dominated philosophical treatments of rational agency throughout the Western humanist tradition. It is one way to view the human subject as capable of acting for the sake of norms or values to which it is or sees itself as personally committed. Robert Pippin calls this picture of responsible agency *the reflective model* (Pippin 2012, 15). It promotes the notion, supposedly borne out by our lived experience of choice, that we as individuals prospectively determine, and so are responsible for, our conduct through first-personal reflective deliberation. The model tells us that “to be a human agent is to be the sole source,” the antecedent cause and conscious author, “of one’s actions” (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 79). It answers the question “What is a human action?” by explaining what it means for persons to do what we do for our own reasons. It is meant to vindicate our sense that human acts are distinct from other natural events by representing them as rational responses by conscious beings to their subjective judgment of what to do and why: I take my own decisions and act for my own reasons when I move myself as I will according to what I think matters. Christine Korsgaard puts it like this: “When you think of yourself as an agent, you think that your effects are your own,” such that “you are their cause, and these effects are yours, and the world is different, because you’ve made it so" (Korsgaard 2009, 84-85).

Put this way, the reflective model seems so commonsensical that one wonders how it can be doubted. But in his recent work on political psychology, as well as in his 2010 book about Friedrich Nietzsche’s psychological enterprise, Pippin shows how the model and associated normative ideals have been felt to be in crisis in popular American consciousness as shown in Hollywood westerns and films noir. He notes that it has been under attack from many quarters since the 19th-century, “under the influences, first, of the so-called ‘Masters of Suspicion’—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—and in our own day under the influence of everything from structuralism and various ‘antihumanisms’ to evolutionary biology and the neurosciences” (Pippin 2012, 22).[[1]](#footnote-1) Research into the role of implicit cognition in shaping our attitudes and driving our behavior provides troubling empirical support for skepticism about the reflective model (Kang 2009; Schwitzgebel 2010). Pippin concludes these inquiries with a provocative question: what would it mean to live in light of the limitations on our agency suggested by the model’s fading credibility?

In what follows, I try to illuminate Pippin’s question by suggesting that some of the central issues at stake concern personal integrity understood as a normative achievement closely tied to commitment, which Pippin rightly views as essential to the possibility of acting for the sake of values. I want to build on Pippin’s conceptual and phenomenological case against the reflective model in order to loosen our allegiance to it, which I hope to show a humanist ethos does not require. I do so by criticizing the model’s implications for how we should conceive and live out personal commitments.

I distinguish two models of personal integrity. The first, *wholeheartedness*, regards harmonious unity of the self as psychologically healthy and volitional consistency as ethically ideal. I argue that it does so at the substantial cost of framing ambivalence and conflict as defects of character and action. To avoid these consequences, I propose an alternate ideal of *humility* that construes the self as multiple and precarious and celebrates experiences of loss and transformation through which learning, growth, innovation, and dynamic relationship become possible. This ideal not only sustains prospects for integrity but is more suitable than wholeheartedness for recognizing practices of contestation, such as those involving potentially destabilizing encounters with difference common within pluralistic societies, as vital for rich, well-lived lives.

2: Commitment, Integrity, and Erotic Horizons

There is no personal integrity without commitment and no commitment without attachments. Surely the relevant sort of attachments are passionate investments in relationships with persons, projects, or ideals that help make our lives our own.[[2]](#footnote-2) But though commitment is necessary for integrity, it is not sufficient: one may be committed to the right things in the wrong way. I want to pursue the idea that having integrity depends on the *way* one is committed.[[3]](#footnote-3) We want to know what makes some ways of living out commitments more choice-worthy than others, and we will approach the question by appraising two related answers.

Robert Pippin calls psychologically robust, normatively orienting ties of the relevant sort *erotic* ties or attachments. Such ties shape an agent’s “’stance toward life,’ an orientation such that things in a life matter or they don’t” (Pippin 2010, 11-12). We will adopt Pippin’s usage of *erotic* to denote the kind of psychological and ethical phenomena at issue. *Erotic* in our sense does not entail lustful, sexual, or romantic attraction, but derives from the ancient Greek *eros* (ἔρως), whose range of meanings includes diverse manifestations of love or richly motivating attraction to objects of one’s deep concern.

Someone’s erotic ties to a person, project, or role attune her to the responsibilities associated with it and motivate her to carry them out. Such ties have this function partly due to the fact that they are, as Pippin puts it, “prereflective and prevolitional” (Pippin 2010, 69). We explore what this means at length below. For now, we can say that erotic ties establish what a person cares about at a personal level so basic, and typically implicit, that she encounters relevant choices about what to do or to believe as already charged with meaning and value. For instance, she immediately recognizes a given act as appealing, another repellent, or a given attitude as obvious, another not worth considering.

We should distinguish erotic ties from conceptions of how one should live them out, or *erotic ideals*. Someone’s erotic *tie* manifests the mattering to her of a person, project, ideal, or other object of deep attachment. It helps determine her normative and motivational relationship to what matters to her by soliciting or foreclosing patterns of conduct affecting the object of her concern. But when it matters to someone *how* things matter to her, she then has erotic ties to her own styles of attachment, an ideal shaping her relationship to the ties themselves. Erotic ideals thus are second-order erotic ties; they govern our relationships to our own commitments. Examining erotic ideals therefore helps us theorize integrity.

But what are erotic ties like? Following Nietzsche and Heidegger, Pippin explains that temporally extended social practices require erotically attached participants. Such practices endure “because human beings come to be committed to certain norms” by undertaking them “’as if your life depended on it,’ with a full or deep (or one might even say ‘existential’) commitment to the practice” in question (Pippin 2010, 11). In other words, “in all distinctly human forms of life, we can…detect some basic, full-blooded or deep, ‘orienting’ commitments.” He identifies such attachments partly in terms of a distinction between two senses of commitment:

The first we might call a thin or surface commitment of the sort involved when one agrees to play a game or participate in a social practice such as voting, and it consists in what obligations one is in fact undertaking from the point of view of any other player or participant. If you undertake to vote, you obligate yourself to vote in the proper precinct, not to vote twice, and so forth, whether you consciously acknowledge that or not…But there is another feature of your commitment that is rather a ‘depth’ commitment and, in this analogy, can be said to concern your commitment to the game itself, to its significance. (*Ibid.,* 27).

Pippin’s talk of “depth” and “thinness” concerns how we take up and live out roles and responsibilities within practices that matter to us. On his view, both types entail obligations that participants understand one another to undertake, or *default obligations* whose prescriptive content corresponds to a prior normative understanding participants share. But while a thinly committed agent goes through the motions, a deeply committed one undertakes default obligations “as if her life depended on it”—she is more prepared to sacrifice what she otherwise values for the sake of honoring them.[[4]](#footnote-4)

3: Wholeheartedness: Taking Ourselves Seriously

We want to know what style of commitment has integrity’s special value as a virtue of character. We naturally think that someone whose commitments have depth in Pippin’s sense *takes them seriously*, and so this seems a decent pass at what having integrity means. We feel disposed to find integrity in someone with the seriousness about his own perspectives on what matters and what it requires of him that precludes, at one extreme, dismissing or abandoning them willy-nilly, gnashing his teeth at his own feelings, judgments, and concerns just for the hell of it like Dostoevsky’s Underground Man.[[5]](#footnote-5) Indeed, Pippin’s discussion suggests that an agent’s integrity reflects the depth of his commitments. His seriousness is reflected in his readiness to sacrifice other valued goods to honor default obligations around the object, since weak or “thin” erotic ties cannot sustain the willingness to prioritize it over others. So, it appears that integrity means taking a stand on what matters and maintaining it with the intense devotion of someone who takes her commitments seriously. As Pippin says, “*Depth* would then be another word for a passionate *identification* with a commitment” (Pippin 2010, 28).

But there is a wrinkle: this erotic ideal curiously complements the reflective model of selfhood Pippin criticizes. Such a model often lies behind arguments for erotic ideals privileging depth commitment, many versions of which exist in work on agency and integrity (Williams 1973; McFall 1987; Velleman 2005; Korsgaard 2009). This is because depth-commitment ideals tend to rest on a broadly Kantian theory of rational agency, which the reflective model reflects.

Consider why. Erotic ideals specify constraints on how things should matter to us, whereas theories of agency articulate norms governing action as such. But robust views of the nature of action and the active self will have consequences for what erotic ideals seem possible and desirable for selves so envisioned. Pippin’s discussion of commitment evokes one such strategy for making sense of being an agent capable of responding to normative demands and so of having integrity. Call this broadly Kantian view *the horizonal view of agency.*

Let *horizonal* denote a type of picture within the philosophy of action that establishes conditions for the possibility of being a subject capable of acting for the sake of a normative standard whose authority one recognizes and so takes on in a binding way. On such views, norms are subjects’ own conceptions of what meanings or values are at stake in, and so govern, their conduct, for which they are therefore responsible.

Horizonal views may theorize phenomena differently, but they commonly regard human activity as normatively intelligible only by reference to standards that are essentially *prior* to it. Thus action, in particular cases and as an ontological category in whose terms subjectivity is conceived, can only be rendered meaningful and evaluated in terms of criteria residing in a normative understanding, *horizon*, or “background” of intelligibility already given uptake by engaged subjects (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, 102-131). When the activity is a discrete pattern of conduct, relevant norms may reside in the agent’s own personal practical commitments, whether embodied in the pragmatic and institutional contours of the community she inhabits (Taylor 1991; Haugeland 1982, 16-17; Lear 2006) or in the principles she has endorsed implicitly or upon reflection (Korsgaard 2009; Herman 1993). Regardless, a practical requirement’s authority is thought to rest on its dialectical priority to the conduct being evaluated: it has force because, in some sense articulated differently among views of this type, it is *already in force*, already out there, like the horizon.

Horizonal views therefore share a basic explanatory strategy for issues of subjectivity, one embodying a Kantian view of the democratic basis of legitimate authority, namely that it derives from an ideally unanimous consensus about a normative demand (Nagel 1995). This is why the reflective model complements erotic ideals privileging consistency and uniformity in judgment, affect, and action. Being an active subject just is to have and exercise powers of self-legislation. Actual subjects are responsible for living up to the standard defined by *an ideally well-ordered subject*, one guided only by norms robustly authorized by its first-personal locus of deliberative control. Here, in the horizonal notion of implicit or “background” authority, the reflective model of the self finds its deep ontological rationale. If ideally constituted agents are stable centers of volitional control, their internal constitution is free of intractable conflict—it is unified and whole. Their personal integrity reflects the structural integration of their psychic parts through the creation and enforcement of self-imposed requirements by the will construed as a center of deliberation. Erotically speaking, relative to a paradigm of stable, bounded wholeness, polyvalence and ambiguity, on the side of norms, and anxiety and ambivalence, on the side of subjects, are deficient modes that obscure the normative import and undercut the coherence and efficacy of action.

Take a paradigm case. In his 2006 Tanner lectures “Taking Ourselves Seriously” and “Getting It Right,” Harry Frankfurt defends an erotic ideal of “self-integration” or “wholeheartedness” in terms of a horizonal vision of agency. Frankfurt observes that humans care about what sorts of creatures we are. We question the motives by which we wish to be moved. We are rational, self-directing agents because the reflexive structure of our consciousness makes us aware of our own perceptions and drives, enabling us to guide our conduct by forming attitudes towards the grounds of our belief and action. But there is a cost: this critical distance produces a psyche whose structural complexity introduces “risk to varieties of inner fragmentation, dissonance, and disorder” (Frankfurt 2006, 18).

In a horizonal spirit, Frankfurt asserts that such fissuring constitutes a deficiency or paradigmatic failure of agency. But he thinks we can try to mitigate it by willingly identifying with or rejecting elements of the “psychic raw material,” the motivational and cognitive dispositions, we inherit from our forebears and formative conditions (*Ibid.,* 6). In his view, reflectively appraising our first-order motives is what endows humans with a will and “makes it *possible* for us to take ourselves seriously” (*Ibid.,* 4)*.* And, crucially, we are first-personally capable of and responsible for determining whether our dispositions have authority over us. Frankfurt aligns with the reflective model, insisting that only I can authoritatively answer the question, “What should I do, and why?”, and that my answer *ipso facto* determines who I am. Caring, commitment, and taking-seriously thus hang together: “When we do care about something, we…want to go *on* wanting it, at least until the goal has been reached. Thus, we feel it as a lapse on our part if we neglect the desire, and we are disposed to take steps to refresh the desire if it should tend to fade. The caring entails, in other words, a commitment to the desire” (*Ibid.,* 18-19).

Frankfurt draws some implications about the relationship between freedom, commitment, and the caring self:

Caring about something implies a diachronic coherence, which integrates the self across time…By our caring, we maintain various thematic continuities in our volitions. We engage ourselves in guiding the course of our desires (*Ibid.,* 19).

If Frankfurt is right that caring is “constitutive of our essential nature,” then the very possibility of agency, of playing an “active role” in our own volitional lives, depends on caring’s consistent willing (*Ibid.*). An ideally well-ordered agent successfully purges her psychic life of internal conflict, unifying her psyche by observing stable practical requirements with which she identifies:

…we become responsible persons…only when we disrupt ourselves from an uncritical immersion in our current primary experience, take a look at what is going on in it, and arrive at some resolution concerning what we think about it or how it makes us feel (*Ibid.*, 6).

Frankfurt’s voluntaristic account of responsible agency is broadly Kantian: we are only legitimately bound by those ends we consciously adopt and to whatever they instrumentally entail. The source of authority is subjects’ self-determining activity and derives from an ideally unanimous normative demand:

[The] willing acceptance of attitudes, thoughts, and feelings transforms their status…We have taken responsibility for them as authentic *expressions of ourselves…*The fact that we have adopted and sanctioned them makes them intentional and legitimate. Their force is now our force. When they move us, we…are *active* because we are being moved just by ourselves (*Ibid.,* 8).

Frankfurt derives an ethical ideal from this sketch of agency’s formal requirements. He calls it *wholeheartedness* or, following Spinoza, inner harmony or “*acquiescence to oneself*—that is, in acquiescence to being the person that one is, perhaps not enthusiastically but nonetheless with a willing acceptance of the motives and dispositions by which one is moved in what one does.” Where there is an absence of conflict between our first-order motives and our second-order evaluations of them, “we are thoroughly wholehearted both in what we are doing and in what we want…We are acting just as we want, and our motives are just what we want them to be” (*Ibid.,* 17). In short, when we are who we will ourselves to be, we are who we are most willing to be.

Frankfurt claims not only that inner harmony provides “all the freedom for which finite creatures can reasonably hope,” but that “being just the kind of person one wants to be” in this fashion is “unquestionably…a very good thing.” This is because “accepting ourselves reestablishes the wholeness that was undermined by our elementary constitutive maneuvers of division and distancing.” So, psychic wholeness is a worthy aim because it reinstates an intrinsically choice-worthy condition: “We have successfully negotiated our distinctively human complexity. The unity of the self has been restored” (*Ibid.,* 15-18).

Thus, wholeheartednesss is more than a functional state of agency involving “unanimity” or “harmonious accord” among one’s first- and second-order drives. It is an erotic ideal, an ethical conception of how we as agents should live our commitments. We saw that being wholehearted consists in “a willing acceptance of the motives and dispositions by which one is moved,” and that consciously identifying with one’s motives commits one to the ends they entail (*Ibid.,* 17). Since a wholehearted person does this without internal conflict, she is single-mindedly committed to her ends. She therefore models integrity if that means taking one’s commitments, and oneself as constituted by them, seriously. After all, by remaining motivated both to satisfy her commitments’ requirements *and* to be so motivated, the wholehearted person seems to take her commitments and the self that pursues them as seriously as possible.

Note that taking our commitments seriously here means being *unwaveringly single-minded* in our pursuit of what we think they require—default obligations as we understand them. Pippin and Frankfurt both think one’s commitments are those desired ends of action one identifies with and thereby takes responsibility for (Pippin 2010, 28-29).[[6]](#footnote-6) For Frankfurt, this involves reflectively endorsing the motive favoring the end. Taking the resulting commitment seriously means pursuing its fulfillment via default obligations. One thereby *integrates* *oneself* by resolving the conflict between competing motives that prompts deliberation and by aligning one’s conduct with one’s reflective endorsements.[[7]](#footnote-7) The wholehearted person therefore takes her commitments and herself seriously by consistently endorsing and so prioritizing certain of her own motives. She unwaveringly adheres to the relevant norms she sees herself as thereby taking on. One who wholeheartedly obeys established demands therefore embodies integrity construed as taking one’s commitments and oneself seriously.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Note that, like Frankfurt, we are considering wholeheartedness as a regulative ideal. Two clarifying points follow.

First, pursuing wholeheartedness offers no guarantee that the self will be immunized against inner conflict. Frankfurt admits that a totally stable, untroubled inner condition is not feasible for creatures like us whose mature psyches are necessarily fragmented. He grants that conflict may remain between our drives—such as between empathy, endorsed, and anger, repudiated—even after we reflectively identify with the part of ourselves by which we consent to be moved (Frankfurt 1988, 172). Nevertheless, crucially, the stable state of inner harmony in which wholeheartedness consists is to be seen as the highest aspiration for our erotic lives, which become better for us to the extent that they fulfill it.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Second, proponents of the reflective model, a psychological picture, tend to defend it with a horizonal theory of agency and normative authority, an ontological view that draws support from phenomenological analysis of choice and action (Korsgaard 2009). Frankfurt’s view invests the subject with a certain form of robust psychic self-control, namely the mature human power of actively identifying with our own drives whereby we confer on them the imprimatur of our “true selves.” Frankfurt treats identification as irreducibly first-personal and, significantly, a *fait accompli* once enacted. Only I may perform the identification, and once I have, it can only have the self-constituting import that I intend. As Frankfurt puts it, the result of identification is not to eliminate conflict, but “to alter its nature,” to make it, as if with psychic illocutionary force, one in which one *has taken a definite stand* (Frankfurt 1988, 172). It is here, an intimate site of special agency where I find and use the private mechanism for my own self-constitution, that I wield sovereign authority over who I am by perforce *resolving* the question, at least for now, of what I wish to be.

In short, wholeheartedness frames inner conflict as inherently unhealthy, and a form of sovereign control as possible, for subjects, with the latter offered as the means by which the former may be brought under the dominion of an ideally stable self.

4: What’s Wrong with Being Wholehearted

I want to foreground some ethically salient implications of wholeheartedness. They concern the way that an ideal of unwavering adherence to established demands urges us to regard the prospect of changes around the attachments generating the demands.

The human psyche is plastic and erotically dynamic. The patterns of identification whose firm maintenance Frankfurt identifies with agentive success are persistently subject to transformation. We fall in and out of love with people, places, and projects. Our lived understandings of what our cares and concerns mean and demand of us evolve in myriad unforeseeable ways. We ourselves change along, or in tension, with the roles and relationships we inhabit. I submit that how well an erotic ideal accommodates these phenomena, including the attitude towards them it prescribes, conditions its choice-worthiness.

Recall that wholeheartedness is said to constitute success for anyone to whom things can matter. Frankfurt promotes an inner state undisturbed by conflict as intrinsically desirable, and one marked by ambivalence as deficient and unworthy of choice. But two questions arise, psychological and ethical. First, what can agents really control within our erotic lives? Second, if we are equally capable of ambivalence and wholeheartedness, why privilege the latter?

These questions are connected in a way that casts doubt on accounts like Frankfurt’s. He grants that agents are capable of both stable identification and ambivalence. The reflexive “fragmentation” of the psyche by our taking our drives and perceptions as conscious objects guarantees this. So, taking our second question first, why attach the highest ethical priority to steadfast adherence to commitments already made? What is so valuable about relating in that way to how we find ourselves already caring?

We saw that Frankfurt touts restoring the “unity of the self” compromised by the mature structural complexity of our psyches (Frankfurt 2006, 15-18). One problem is that any condition preceding the splintering of the mind into self-consciousness could not be anything like the achieved unity of wholeheartedness. How can agents inhabit a mental space that exists only prior to the psychic fragmentation that inaugurates agency? If we come to be as reflective beings through our patterned responses to competing drives, then in principle, a non-fractured condition is not a possible object of reflexive awareness. An interior space does not assume new proportions after the enclosing structure is demolished—it ceases to exist. How can one inhabit something that has vanished forever? We must be able to somehow envision a prospective condition in order to say we find it appealing. Doing so seems impossible in this case. By hypothesis, it permits no conscious point of reference.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Frankfurt may deny that the sought-for condition of psychic unity is identical with the primitive condition “restored” by wholeheartedness. But then it is less clear why we should care so much about the ideal promoting it. Once we detach the ideal from a picture of what was possessed but tragically lost, one meant to inspire us to recapture it, the importance of being whole becomes obscure. So why regard unperturbed self-satisfaction as “unquestionably…a very good thing?” (Frankfurt 2006, 15). Frankfurt has another answer, one notably different from a preoccupation with restoring a lost primal wholeness:

…suppose that we are doing what we want to do, that our motivating first-order desire to perform the action is exactly the desire by which we want our action to be motivated, and that there is no conflict in us between this motive and any desire at any higher order. In other words, suppose we are thoroughly wholehearted both in what we are doing and in what we want. Then there is no respect in which we are being violated or defeated or coerced…We are acting just as we want, and our motives are just what we want them to be. Then so far as I can see, we have on that occasion all the freedom for which finite creatures can reasonable hope (*Ibid.*).

The problem here is with using a state of (ideal) harmony between first and second-order desires to derive an (ideal) immunity from “being violated or defeated or coerced.” Being free from external or sinister control does not follow from serenely endorsing one’s own first-order motives. One easily imagines cases of psychological and behavioral conditioning so thorough that the subject happily embraces the patterns of identification embodied in her own resulting mental and emotional states. Consider a severe case of capture-bonding in which an abductee identifies with his captors so deeply that he not only wants to remain with them but hates the thought of separation. This is a familiar worry about Frankfurt’s account of freedom as the capacity to form second-order volitions. But since he uses that doctrine to ethically sanction his ideal of wholeheartedness, familiar objections apply. Since wholeheartedness is no guarantee that one is not being “violated or defeated or coerced,” one cannot recommend it on these grounds.

But there is another, deeper, problem with wholeheartedness that arises whether or not it is tied to a romantic quest for primal psychic wholeness or to dubious prospects for autonomy. It involves basing integrity on “seriousness” in Pippin’s sense of fulfilling default obligations or *a fortiori* in the case of Frankfurt’s ideal of doing so single-mindedly, “in thoughtful conformity to stable and appropriate norms” (Frankfurt 2006, 2). The problem emerges around the figure of sovereignty in Frankfurt’s account of how reflexive identification supplies us with reasons:

Some of the psychic raw material that we confront may be so objectionable to us that…we are resolved to keep it from producing any direct effect upon the design and conduct of our lives…By a kind of psychic immune response…we push them away, and we introduce barriers of repression and inhibition between them and ourselves…This means that we deny them any entitlement to supply us with motives or with reasons. They are outlawed and disenfranchised…The fact that we continue to be powerfully moved by them gives them no rational claim. Even if an externalized desire turns out to be irresistible, its dominion is merely that of a tyrant. It has, for us, no legitimate authority…The fact that we have adopted and sanctioned [feelings and attitudes] makes them intentional and legitimate. Their force is now our force. (Frankfurt 2006, 10; 8)

This legislative vocabulary of freedom and tyranny is doubly problematic. In response to our psychological question—what can we control?—the reflective and horizonal model of selfhood invests subjects with a measure of sovereign power of a sort that Judith Butler and others have shown to be untenable (Foucault 1978; Connolly 1991; Honig 1993; Butler 1997). Regarding our ethical question—why privilege stable identification over flux?—the model sponsors an erotic ideal, wholeheartedness, that denigrates prospects of loss and transformation in our erotic lives, treating them as agentive defects.

Frankfurt’s discussion of the fragmentation accompanying self-consciousness casts it in a negative light, suggesting that it “impairs our capacity for untroubled spontaneity,” which “exposes us to psychological and spiritual disorders that are…not only painful; they can be seriously disabling. Facing ourselves, in the way that internal separation enables us to do, frequently leaves us chagrined and distressed by what we see, and well as bewildered and insecure concerning who we are.” In a word, “inhibiting uncertainty or ambivalence” can lead to “a nagging general dissatisfaction with ourselves.” Frankfurt concedes that these forms of psychic discomfort are typically “too commonplace to be regarded as pathological,” allowing that they are “so integral to our fundamental experience of ourselves that they serve to define, at least in part, the inescapable human condition” (Frankfurt 2006, 4-5). But the ethical message is clear when he hastens to contrast them with the byproducts of psychic differentiation that he esteems: freedom, wholehearted commitment, and love.

5: Humility: Taking Seriously What One Loves

We should beware how erotic ideals like wholeheartedness devalue phenomena around experiences of loss and transformation. The ability to form and fortify attachments exists alongside, and depends upon, the ability to inspect, adjust, or abandon them. Frankfurt acknowledges this but insists that ambivalence is a symptom of psychic decline. Yet conflict over the meaning and value of our commitments spurs growth and enables the development of richer relations with what we care about or love. In this way, contestation, doubt, anxiety, and other destabilizing experiences furnish plural subjects with futures to dream up and live into.

We noted before that accounts of agency implicitly establish ethical priorities, where ideal selves embody the paradigm by properly exercising the constitutive powers it assigns them.[[11]](#footnote-11) For instance, because Frankfurt’s reflective model of agency equates integrity with “seriousness” understood as steadfast conformity with norms already taken on, it diminishes the role and value of conflict and ambivalence. To avoid this implication, we want a vision of agency that flows from an acknowledgement of our *erotic finitude*. By this we mean the varieties of fallibility, defeasibility, or susceptibility to unintended or unforeseen flux that recur in our experiences of attachment. These include many species of self-deception, cognitive bias, and plain confusion about own attitudes, character, or commitments.

I cannot adequately develop such a model here, though I try elsewhere.[[12]](#footnote-12) For now, we call a *precarious model* of subjectivity one that emphasizes the finitude of our agency, including that of our achieved and enacted understandings of the meaning and value of our commitments and their objects. By contrasting a model based on a recognition of precarity with the reflective model already discussed, we consider afresh our psychological question: what can human beings control around our own erotic lives?

To start with, precarious models are expressly anti-voluntarist by repudiating ascriptions of sovereign power to humans.[[13]](#footnote-13) Human agency is finite in the twofold sense that our deeds are persistently ambiguous and the self-understandings in which their recognized significance is entangled are substantially belated. These features of human action must always be weighed against its chances of embodying our envisioned aims. Now, not all instances of breakdown involve, for example, the overt, catastrophic collapse of a way of life examined by Jonathan Lear in his book *Radical Hope.* Some, perhaps most, instances are relatively mundane, such as the infelicity of ignorance passing itself off as knowledge—a central theme of Socrates’ paean to philosophy in Plato’s *Apology*—and self-defeating pathology passing itself off as competence or success—gendered behavior around what Michael Kimmel calls “marketplace manhood,” for instance, in which shame, fear, and insecurity fraudulently masquerade as competitive prowess (Kimmel 1994). Erotic finitude is a persistent dimension of human existence at whatever scale.

Many philosophers offer resources for understanding human agency in this way as a contingent normative and psychological achievement that enables, and whose social and psychological conditions outstrip, the subjective ability to formulate and execute our intentions. For instance, Judith Butler examines speech and power and Robert Pippin treats the psychological grounds of commitment in ways that highlight the phenomenological deficiency of the reflective model underlying wholeheartedness (Pippin 2010; Butler 1997a, 1997b, and 2004).[[14]](#footnote-14) Pippin’s recent work emphasizes the belatedness and opacity of self-knowledge, as does Quassim Cassam’s exploration of its indirect sources (Pippin 2010; Cassam 2015).[[15]](#footnote-15) Pippin argues, for instance, that the fatalism of postwar American film noir animates a popular phenomenology of how agents’ attempts to decisively avow our intentions and formulate our commitments are thwarted by the revealed significance of our enacted deeds and character (Pippin 2012). We often operate without a clear or reliable understanding of why we act either during or after the fact. The meanings of what we do and how we think and feel about it are belatedly disclosed to us. They are constitutively dependent upon factors at least partly beyond our control or awareness, such as the opaque acts and intentions of others, whose meanings are bound up with those of ours in the many convoluted ways to which the history of social and political struggles as well as film and literature attest.

I propose a vision of integrity guided by due recognition of the self’s abiding precarity. The erotic ideal is one of *humility*. The term emphasizes that objects of deep concern elude even our best and most carefully curated lived understandings, and that *humble* *subjects* live in light of this, showing deference for the finitude of their efforts to correctly understand and honor their commitments. In this way, humble agents practice greater reverence for what they love than for their own accustomed way of loving it. As a style of committed activity, humility reflects an attunement to the precarious conditions of our agency. It does so through a kind of agonistic self-cultivation, a practical stance that welcomes potentially transformative encounters with difference that disrupt our settled ways of seeing and being.

Recall our opening observation that integrity requires commitment, which in turn requires strong attachments to persons, projects, objects, or ideals. We saw that one can be attached to someone or something in the wrong way. Consider the fanatic, for instance, the resoluteness of whose determination to fulfill her responsibilities to what she loves as she understands them is (horrifyingly) beyond question. I suggest we cannot adequately distinguish the person of integrity from the fanatic if the essence of integrity lies in steadfastly embracing established demands. There is more to integrity than being right or acting like it. One may identify and comply with the right norms for the wrong reasons or in the wrong way. Understanding integrity as a practice of humility recognizes the importance of one’s style of commitment without ignoring the content of one's convictions or overstating the significance of merely being right.

To see how, consider what living in light of the self’s precarity might practically mean. It would be critical, constructive, and prefigurative in spirit, animating practices of interrogating one’s attachments and imagining and enacting alternatives. Such a meta-ideal has many familiar antecedents. Alongside the Socratic gadfly of Plato’s *Apology* and the flourishing “individual” of John Stuart Mill’s “On Liberty” is Nietzsche’s “free spirit,” the subject of Part Two of *Beyond Good and Evil*.Nietzsche’s discussion of the free spirit illuminates what is at stake in an agonistically inflected humility, where a passionate contest is not waged with ideological rivals so much as against one’s own accustomed stance. In Section 382 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche celebrates a dynamic practice of self-overcoming in this spirit. He envisions a “great health” whereby one overthrows old constraints and “plays naively—that is, not deliberately but from overflowing power and abundance—with all that was hitherto called holy, good, untouchable, divine” (Nietzsche 1974, 347).[[16]](#footnote-16)

Admittedly, however we may feel about her bold irreverence, we may wonder how seriously Nietzsche’s free spirit can really be taking things. In *On Being Authentic*, Charles Guignon argues that the self seen as radically contingent and polycentric, lacking a stable or unified center of planning and action—a precarious model—cannot vindicate serious discourse of commitment and integrity (Guignon 2004, 119). He critiques as *unserious* precisely what Nietzsche and others supposedly find exhilarating about playful, ironic self-creation, arguing that it presupposes “an image of the self standing outside the demands of responsibility and integrity” (*Ibid*., 123-124).

Here we part ways with Guignon. Humility in our sense promotes the circumspect style of attachment Nietzsche describes as *serious play*: “A man’s maturity—consists in having found again the seriousness one had as a child, at play” (Nietzsche 1966, 83). Frankfurt is right that our commitments are constituted by the stands we take on what matters to us, and that, in a sense, integrity is about taking our commitments seriously. But taking a serious stand means taking the people and projects that matter to us more seriously than the stands or the selves embodying them to which we often form further attachments. For crucially, we tend to become attached to our own attachments, invested in our *selves* as such.[[17]](#footnote-17) Taking what we care about seriously—integrity—requires owning up to how “our cares exceed our understanding of them,” for

[T]o be an embodied being as we are, open to moods that can direct us and reveal the world as meaningful, just is to be a being who extends beyond what we can know about ourselves (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 215).

This is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s remark in *The Gay Science* that

Above all, one should not want to divest existence of its *rich* *ambiguity*; that is a dictate of good taste…the taste of reverence for everything that lies *beyond your horizon* (Nietzsche 1974, 335).[[18]](#footnote-18)

Philosophers like Christine Korsgaard describe the self as a “practical identity” forged by our attachments and expressed through our convictions about what they require. If Nietzsche is right that what is needful is “having the courage for an attack on one’s convictions,” or “to *live dangerously*,” to “live at war with your peers *and yourselves*!”, then it is ethically dangerous to take one’s convictions, and by extension oneself, *too* seriously (*Ibid*., 228).[[19]](#footnote-19) But then taking what we care about seriously may require inviting, even embracing, the loss of oneself, of one’s normative ease of orientation, for its sake. Recall that “existential depth” of commitment in Pippin’s sense entails a readiness to sacrifice for the sake of the erotic object. On an agonistic reading of integrity as erotic humility, one must be prepared to sacrifice oneself, the accustomed form of one’s devotion, for the sake of that to which one is devoted.[[20]](#footnote-20)

We will see below that, contrary to Guignon’s suggestion, such an ethical orientation is not at odds with community. Judith Butler’s work on mourning envisions “the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss” through being open to “hearing beyond what we are able to hear” in a political culture that esteems some lives and deaths over others. We have raised doubts about the figure of a background or “horizon of intelligibility” as the basis for our reflection about what is at stake in integrity. But this is not a counsel of despair that imperils shared experience or solidarity. On the contrary, as Butler suggests in her still-timely work on the political psychology of terror after 9/11, “Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (Butler 2004, 20).

6: Integrity as Agonistic Humility: Applications

We can explore Butler’s “tenuous ‘we’” by considering illustrations of living out commitments in an agonistic spirit of “serious play.” They involve contesting the lived understandings woven into our ethical lives.

Our discussion so far has presupposed that the self—who we are, what we stand for—embraces the robust attachments to ideals, persons, and projects that shape our consciousness and conduct in myriad ways.[[21]](#footnote-21) This broad idea is common to both the reflectivemodel of selfhood articulated by Frankfurt, Pippin, and others and the precarious model underlying humility. But on the precarious model, humans lack mastery or sovereign control over our conduct and its meaning.[[22]](#footnote-22) We always may find we have misconstrued our attachments, their objects, or our own deliberate efforts to act in light of them. Since we cannot infallibly govern our relations to the attachments that constitute our selves, we cannot infallibly control, shape, or perceive our selves, either.[[23]](#footnote-23) Studies of implicit attitudes, for instance, show that our beliefs and conduct often predictably diverge from our avowed understandings (Kang 2009, 2). The role of affective forecasting and impact bias in guiding our behavior suggests that we are often mistaken about what we want or why or how much we want it, and make further mistakes based on this ignorance of self (Wilson and Gilbert 2005). In these and other ways, we are strangers to ourselves. Often our words or deeds revisit us as those of an unfamiliar person. It is on such everyday terrain that we encounter our finitude. The agonistic vision of integrity as humility, which promotes soliciting criticism and experimenting with the self’s boundaries, helps realize the ethical value of these uncanny phenomena.

Consider gendered interactions, an area where it is wholesome for folks to (want to) solicit criticism of their attitudes and practices. In “Walking the Walk and Talking the Talk,” Mark Lance writes about “rebuilding competences” around flirting that have been distorted by patriarchal customs that damage men’s skills for interacting with women:

…the linguistic enters into the practice of flirting not merely through the fact that most flirting is talk, for an absolutely crucial dimension of flirting…lies in the ability of participants to recognize legitimate challenges to ongoing patterns of behavior, regardless of whether that behavior is itself linguistic…[T]he difference between decent and piggish behavior rests precisely on how smoothly one switches back and forth between this fundamental involvement in the practice of flirting, and the related critical mode of listening, attending to objections, seeing what the other person is getting at, noticing emotional uptake, and modifying one’s behavior in light of all this. Morally competent flirting requires, that is, a smooth ability to move back and forth between flirting and discourse about flirting and to integrate the results of that discourse into the practice of flirting itself (Lance 2010, 7).

There are different settings, styles, and flavors of flirtation. But skills in such rituals are normally used more or less automatically. It is probably not true that “most flirting is talk,” though much of it is. Gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, and other body language implicitly signal intentions. Such nonverbal, even unintended, cues can turn small talk into flirting. Lance’s discussion of the pragmatic contours of not being a pig rightly presumes that straight men may better avoid sexist flirtation by developing the ability to alternate “between flirting and discourse about flirting” so that their efforts are more open to interpersonal appraisal. But since men engage in sexist behavior without realizing it, they should correct for this by welcoming criticism of body language, facial expressions, subtle affects, the placement of eyes, words used—the wide range of conscious and unconscious behaviors that shape and express male heterosexual identity. “Criticism” should not be confined to verbal challenges or overt corrective suggestions. Men who want to unlearn sexist habits should also try to properly register nonverbal cues like evasive body language in the women they address or other men’s unspoken signs of disapproval.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Humility is therefore a virtue of character requiring the development and exercise of abilities to solicit and properly respond to all the ways the self, one’s conscious and unconscious acts, attitudes, habits, and dispositions, can register as needing another try. Here we have been focusing on moral deficiencies, like that of the straight masculine self shaped by patriarchal norms, but equally relevant is being held to spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic, athletic, or other nonmoral standards and the discursive or performative interventions such cases allow.

That we ethically appraise subtle, unconscious, or habitual behaviors helps address a possible concern about our erotic ideal of humility. It may be objected that the ideal *undermines* integrity by encouraging the development of weak, superficial, or unduly provisional relations with our own commitments. Surely integrity is about sticking to your principles rather than looking for opportunities to alter or abandon them, it might be said.

First, it is an open question just how unconditional one’s commitments should be. Cheshire Calhoun argues that it is also a partly an agent-relative, contextual one, that the style of commitment most suitable for someone depends on the stage of her life, cast of mind, tastes, needs, temperament, personality type, or other differentiating factors (Calhoun 2009). If humility in our sense means that one should be more prepared to opt out of one’s commitments than some think appropriate, this may be because one size does not fit all around questions so intimately connected to the overall shape of one’s life. Freed from the notion that one possible style of commitment is universally binding, we may judge an erotic ideal on its merits against more or less rigid alternatives.

However, I doubt that our character ideal of humility forces the issue. Consider one’s commitment to a close friend. It is one question whether I should remain committed to this person; it is another thing to ask what I owe her, how I should treat her now or later, or the importance of our bond relative to competing goods. As Dreyfus and Kelly put it, “the question of identity is never concluded. Feeling a certain commitment to my identity as the father of my son doesn’t by itself tell me how to take up that role” (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 12-13). Our attachments are not exhausted by what we take them to mean or require at a given time. As Gabriel Marcel stresses, while we live, our future is open (Keen 1967, 24). This means our lives are not identical with our identities. Rich potential for renewed life is manifest when we encounter others who solicit our attention and elicit a self-giving response. We thus find ourselves moving toward possibilities that lie beyond the horizon of the self so far achieved. Therefore, we cannot agree that “wholehearted love definitively settles, for each of us, issues concerning what we are to care about” (Frankfurt 2006, 51).

In short, humility does not necessarily require us to seek opportunities to abandon our commitments, only that we stand ready to take them up differently. Consider the gendered practice of street harassment, or “catcalling,” in which straight men publicly make objectifying remarks or unsolicited advances toward women. When a straight man learns that catcalling, however intended, is not flirtatious but an unwelcome form of harassment, it may transform his understanding and practice of manhood. He may come to view his own accustomed masculinity as a foreign imposition by a culture that devalues women. Or he may not feel less at home in his manhood as such, thinking it salvageable or not the real issue. Then again, he may associate what he learns about catcalling, and a newfound discomfort with how he has been going on, with a vaguely felt same-sex attraction, feeling a greater affinity than before with queer folks, now distanced a little from his heterosexual self-image. And so on.

Racial bias is another area where perception and judgment operate implicitly, making harmful conduct second nature and interrogating the self an ethical priority. Empirical studies show our behavior to be substantially shaped by motives and stereotypes we are unaware of and which we do not reflectively avow. With race as with gender we need others to help us discover who we have been trained into being, what we are really doing, and what other possibilities exist. Our inner disunity, far from the regrettable liability Frankfurt makes it out to be, is a precious asset in conditions that call us to be otherwise—as may any material conditions of human life amidst difference. Who and what I am is distributed across a constellation of competing ways of imagining my relations with myself and others. Only as something still becoming can I be called to account and helped to dream up and build new ways of being.

We are theorizing the phenomena behind the ordinary thought that we can be less prone to denial and resentment, and live and act in better ways, when we do not take personal challenges so personally. Flexibility around our own character is itself a virtue of character when it reflects humility toward our own understandings of what is at stake in our cares and conduct. Yet there is a strong tendency in contemporary moral psychology to see an achieved self with vigilantly policed boundaries as the supreme task of agency, the core calling of personhood, and even the deep point of morality itself (Velleman 2005). It also informs theorizations of intersubjective recognition in political theory (Taylor 1991; Honneth 1996).[[25]](#footnote-25) The tendency rests on a feeling that without the guidance provided by a stable and abiding sense of what our deep attachments mean and require of us, we shall be confused, paralyzed, internally disordered, or lost. An assault on our convictions is an existential threat.

This feeling is understandable, as threats to one’s sense of self are intimate dangers and losing a grip on who we think we are can be scary and disorienting. But it can lure us into denial about the limits of our reflexive knowledge and power. It takes the form of grand visions of the self that overstate the efficacy of the will, the veracity of introspection, or the benefits of single-mindedness, eroding the grounds for a humility that prefigures new possibilities of being by welcoming becoming.[[26]](#footnote-26) Here again Nietzsche is an eloquent spokesperson for such an ethical orientation: “Those who have greatness are cruel to their virtues and to secondary considerations” (Nietzsche 1974, 219).[[27]](#footnote-27) Humility in this Nietzschean sense resembles the Axial Age spiritual ideal of *kenosis*, self-emptying or self-surrender (Armstrong 2006, 104-110), as well as what Charles Guignon calls “releasement,” or self-loss, as contrasted with the ethic of self-possession or “enownment” associated with the pursuit of authenticity as steadfast adherence to one’s antecedent convictions. Still more salient is the affinity between Gabriel Marcel’s notion of *disponibilité*, a term often translated as “availability” that means “being receptive to an appeal addressed directly to me as a person,” including “the readiness to allow ourselves to be committed by…another person or by some challenge,” and humility, which solicits us to pursue transformational encounters with the embodied reality of another.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Relaxing one’s grip on the self shows a proper circumspection about one’s own finitude. That the self’s precarity is partly due to its dependency on fluid psychic and social conditions suggests a politically resonant contrast between wholeheartedness and humility. One cannot seriously interrogate, let alone rehabilitate, interactions shaped by bias without treating one’s own and others’ dispositions, implicit attitudes, automatic body language, avowed beliefs, and all the stuff of commitment and character as provisional. As Lance’s discussion of piggish flirtation suggests, the fact that bias operates sub-personally means that the embodied skills we bring to disputes over whatever skills are under consideration are themselves potentially implicated in harms for which we may be responsible.

To borrow Thomas Nagel’s expression, there is no view from nowhere on whose basis to conduct ethical interventions. All roles and relationships, and those who inhabit them, are structurally implicated in power relations. We must treat them as such in order to take responsibility for being unexpectedly harmful. Many of the world’s ethical and religious traditions offer resources for making clear and secure boundaries of the self the supreme ethical project. Ironically, such projects tend to undercut their own aims by fostering self-deception, for they erroneously presume that we may hope to be precisely who we take ourselves to be. Moreover, efforts to shore up the self, especially over against those defined in opposition to it, lie close to the source of much oppression and interpersonal violence (Connolly 1991).

Earlier we saw that, if steadfast adherence to one’s conceived convictions is the essence of integrity, it is hard to distinguish the person of integrity from the fanatic. Fanaticism does begin to look like the vice corresponding to the virtue of humility. But rather than equate the pursuit of wholeheartedness with fanaticism, we observe an alarming resemblance between the two styles of attachment. A fully wholehearted person shares with the fanatic one of her worst traits: she disclaims or is openly hostile to the possibility of thinking, feeling, or being otherwise. Seen in this light, her aspiration to wholeheartedness appears pathological. She seems more attached to her own attachments than to their objects; she fetishizes her self. Meanwhile, as Pope John Paul II explains,

Humility is the proper attitude towards all true greatness, including one’s own greatness as a human being, but above all towards the greatness which is not oneself, which is beyond one’s self. (Wojtyla 1981, 172)

7: Growth, not Closure

A serious criticism remains to be addressed. We may be thought too dismissive of the reflective model in general and seen as caricaturing Frankfurt in particular. A critic may say that the precarious model of agency is but a version of the reflective model, and that humility is a version of wholeheartedness that lays special emphasis on the role of self-criticism in refining one’s convictions in pursuit of greater psychic and normative coherence.

This worry is sensible but misses the mark. We reject Frankfurt’s core normative commitment to an internally stabilized self as the ideal condition of psychic life. Humility instead celebrates an open, outward-facing process that welcomes experiences that threaten the self’s boundaries. Re-examining our habits and presumptions, testing and evolving them in light of new experiences or perspectives actively sought, belongs to a healthy and ethical life. But any such process must look past its own unresolved activity to who and what lie beyond as the proper focus and source of importance. What matters is intrepid public engagement, not privately curated internal serenity. To address the worry, it may therefore help to examine why wholeheartedness and humility support many of the same prescriptions but flow from opposed ethical *teloi*.

Wholeheartedness ultimately aims to resolve conflict within the self, whose equilibrium is only risked in hope of achieving greater inner harmony. Frankfurt concedes that ambivalence can be useful but insists that the psychic wholeness it threatens is overridingly good. In doing so, he deploys as elsewhere a robust, if ethically suspect, vocabulary of ability/disability:[[29]](#footnote-29)

Being wholehearted is not always warranted. There are circumstances in which it is only reasonable, no matter how uncomfortable it may be, for a person to be drawn in several directions at once. But while accepting ambivalence may sometimes be helpful or wise, it is never desirable as such for its own sake. And to remain persistently ambivalent concerning issues of substantial importance in the conduct of life is a significant disability. (1999, 102)

Our two ideals involve dramatically contrasting pictures of the sites and structures of human agency. For wholeheartedness, the achieved self is the site of paramount importance. Agents as such inhere between the powers of reflective identification under their solitary control and a wilderness of psychic forces (1988, 172). Alternatively, for humility, the self is interlaid with the plural world where it lives into an open future alongside others. Its deeds are bound up with theirs in a febrile tension that ethical reflection must not dismiss or devalue. A brief historical comparison may help illustrate.

Wholeheartedness echoes the ancient ethical pursuit of *ataraxia*, an abiding state of cognitive and emotional tranquility, shared among philosophical schools during the Hellenistic and early Roman periods. An erotic ideal in our sense, ataraxiais expressed by the Epicurean vision of a lack of inner distress or conflict, “the freedom of the soul from disturbance,” achievable in principle, though rarely if ever in practice, through a rigorous program of personal discipline involving contemplation and ascetic habituation (Epicurus 1994, 128-31). The close affinity between this ancient Epicurean aspiration and Frankfurt’s erotic ideal is shown by his decision to borrow the term for it from Spinoza’s description of an idealized subjective state of inner harmony (Frankfurt 2006, 17).

Humility diverges sharply from ataraxia both in spirit and substance. It exalts an ongoing public activity rather than the cultivation of a private psychological state. It defines an agonistic ethos, albeit with a non-violent, dialogical inflection, not one of repose. The locus of activity is a questioning, vulnerable presence vitally invested in relations with others, not a combatant clashing with existential enemies or a commanding will set over against unruly drives and perceptions, as in Homeric or Epicurean and Frankfurtian visions.

As we have seen already, a suitable antecedent for humility is Gabriel Marcel’s rich notion of *disponibilité*, a stance that brings one into mutually vulnerable, non-strategic relations with others that Marcel calls “communion” and regards as “the primordial nature of interpersonal relations” (Glenn, Jr. 1984, 538). It is through the communion made possible by *disponibilité* that flexible and resilient connections across individuals’ differences become viable. *Disponibilité* and humility are both postures of openness to the other, a vulnerable receptiveness to being deeply affected by his often surprising attitudes and responses. As the term “communion” beautifully suggests, such co-participation is not constrained by imaginative or conceptual limitations established prior to the encounter. *Disponibilité* enables individuals to transcend their own horizons because its generous, even profligate, self-giving is precariously embodied and futural. A simple example is active, vulnerable listening, whose ethical import for issues of civil citizenship I explore elsewhere (Golden 2017).

Both humility in our sense and Marcelian *disponibilité* are ethical visions of mutual involvement in concrete, open-ended relations across differences. Both aim to dismantle psycho-social barriers to the shared vulnerability underlying trust and hope by activating “the ability to assimilate something new” through a “receptiveness to the abundance of the world” and others (Bollnow 1984, 187). Accordingly, similar dangers attend an *ind*isponible stance and the reflective model’s tendency to view as the essence of agency the efficacy of a willing subject over against pre-given volitional objects (Korsgaard 2009, 109). To practice humility is to pursue liberation from “the willfulness that tends to view the future in terms of its own preconceived ideas, which it is bent upon realizing.” The forlorn anxiety of control is laid aside in favor of “a trusting openness to the unforeseeable gift of the future” (Bollnow 1984, 189; 191-192).

However, our vision of humility departs from Marcel’s over the issue of the final end at stake. While *disponibilité* is to be enacted in the ultimate hope of securing pan-human unity by transcending differences, reconnecting human beings to an eternal order of stable, harmonious being, humility sees and wishes for no end to the flux of embodied becoming.[[30]](#footnote-30) And there are other differences. As an erotic ideal, humility is prescriptive, while *disponibilité* per se is a phenomenological description of a mode of comportment toward what is other than oneself. Unlike *disponibilité*, humility presupposes the analysis of power, human nature, and ethical value offered here. *Disponibilité* is the readiness to respond to appeals addressed to one from elsewhere; humility is a vision of what such a response must be like alongside a sense of why it matters, one that urges us not only to welcome surprising encounters with difference, but to initiate them, too.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The contrast between humility and wholeheartedness can also be seen in how they get us thinking about conflict over what our attachments mean and require. Frankfurt denies that convictions should be lived out inflexibly or immunized from “deliberation and rational critique” (Frankfurt 1999, 116). But it is unclear why contestation should be an essential part of pursuing wholeheartedness. If confusion, doubt, and other forms of psychic instability to which they lead are obstacles to an idealized inner state, they must be *ipso facto* harmful barriers to our flourishing. Whereas this default negative view of the disruptive and unfamiliar is precisely what humility disavows.

Notice the pronounced tension in Frankfurt’s ethical vision between its guiding *telos* and his concession that psychic unrest is good because it is an important part of pursuing wholeheartedness. It is unclear how an ideal of wholeheartedness can make adequate room for the value of that which undermines it, such as perplexity, doubt, and self-criticism. For even if wholeheartedness does not license the *dishonest* avoidance of unsettling encounters with the reality of “other concretely existing human beings,” it is hard to see why the ideal does not give us reason to otherwise actively avoid or insulate our convictions from external disturbance.[[32]](#footnote-32) If reaching beyond one’s horizons toward that which may disrupt them is to be seen as fundamentally worthwhile, it seems it must be on some other basis than valuing inner serenity, which scarcely results from immersive engagement with plural others. While the ideal of humility offers the needed vision of value, it seems wholeheartedness cannot.

Frankfurt is right that deep concern involves being disposed to resist losing the connection to what one cares about or loves (Frankfurt 2004, 16; 2006, 18-19). But the object of our concern is not identical with our accustomed relation to it. He who loves another wants the relationship to survive. Even the ambivalent lover tries to nourish the bond and if he is lucky this will turn out to be good for him. But if what he loves is the beloved, and having a rich ongoing relationship with it, then he should not prioritize his own standpoint over a good that transcends and grounds it, confusing the two.[[33]](#footnote-33) After all, tightening one’s grip on an intimate bond increases the risk that one will neglect, damage, or lose it.

We noted earlier that fans of wholeheartedness may think that humility overrates conflict, just as we saw that their ideal seems to make a fetish of the self’s current boundaries. However, humble subjects cherish not conflict per se but the invigorating growth in understanding, and the experiential joys bound up with it, that are possible only through the loss and transformation catalyzed by disruptive experience. Conflict, broadly construed, is to be valued as a material condition for and constitutive part of the open-ended development of the concretely situated self. It is not an obstacle to the good envisioned by humility, but an integral part of it. Still, if anything is supremely worthwhile from an erotic standpoint, it is the unfolding of our potential for growth in rightly responsive relations to the world and other people in whose midst we come to be. In terms both Marcelian and our own: we flourish erotically when we help one another participate ever more deeply in the mystery of becoming.[[34]](#footnote-34)

8: Concluding Remarks

I have argued that the ideal of wholeheartedness undercuts taking seriously, not our selves, which it does too well, but the issues themselves on which the current self is one possible stand among many. The people, projects, and other goods to which we commit ourselves transcend us, outstrip achieved understanding, exceeding any one (and anyone’s) articulation. This is supported by the fact of persistent principled disagreement over the meaning and value of our values and by recurrent experiences of precarity within our committed lives.[[35]](#footnote-35) These discredit our pretensions of having finally made sense of what we cherish, just as the pervasive possibility of loss painfully reminds us that we are not all powerful:

Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate

That Time will come and take my love away

(Shakespeare, Sonnet LXVI)

Butler’s expression “tenuous ‘we’” captures the fact that bonds between us defy final formulation. In moments of crisis, partners or rivals may find themselves unable to helpfully articulate what binds them together. They may be left with the sense that they love each other, or remain devoted to the same project, as yet unable to part ways. Silence, pregnant with fugitive meaning, can speak volumes at such times. As Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly put it, “our cares exceed our understanding of them” (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 215). Jonathan Lear argues too that a special human way of being shows itself when our sense-making practices approach catastrophic breakdown.[[36]](#footnote-36) Dreyfus and Kelly add that humans encounter our own finitude not only in crisis but in experiences of joy or creativity, as when an exhilarating activity sweeps us up, drawing us out of ourselves or activating powers we are surprised to find we have. And our discussion of the ethical complexities of renegotiating our interactions around gender and race shows the everyday precarity of character and commitment.

Frankfurt is right that humans uniquely engage in “activity that connects and binds us to ourselves…and in that way constitute and participate in our own agency” (Frankfurt 2004, 17). But it is not through what he calls *caring* that this happens. For Frankfurt, caring about something means identifying with desires that move us to promote or pursue it, “want[ing] the desire to be sustained” (*Ibid.*, 16), and its value lies in its production of a coherent self. But if the self is a fixed structure of drives within the psyche, it is a brittle thing. Our relations of attachment, not our private mental structures, are what survive robust ongoing flux in the drives we articulate around them. Recall the man we met earlier, whose lived understanding of his own masculinity is destabilized by interpersonal pressure to recognize his unintended sexism. His masculinity may endure ambiguously across the gap that opens up between his transformed self-understandings.[[37]](#footnote-37)

In a way, Frankfurt’s account of love supports this way of framing things. He argues that the constraints of love are largely unchosen, deriving from a variety of natural causes rather than from one’s detached appraisal of the beloved’s objective merits. We love the beloved *himself*, in his unencumbered particularity, not the generic attributes he currently instantiates. Hence one’s love can survive robust changes in the beloved himself, or in one’s understanding of one’s desires or reasons for loving him (Frankfurt 2004, 43-44). Frankfurt does not explore the ontological implications, but they involve the idea that the embodied reality underlying the self—the life-as-lived as distinguished from the self-as-specified—is curiously overfull, not exhausted by its occurrent properties.[[38]](#footnote-38)

We have seen that such a fluid and resilient model of selfhood lends greater support to erotic humility than to wholeheartedness, which flows instead from the reflective model. This suggests another tension in Frankfurt’s account, one resembling that in Pippin’s account between two sets of insights about agency.[[39]](#footnote-39) Both accounts presuppose horizonal theories of agency but offer resources for thinking past it as well as the reflective model to a more radically contingent vision of selfhood, one better able to help us answer Pippin’s question about what responsible agency means in light of the crisis of the reflective model.[[40]](#footnote-40)

I hope to have begun answering Pippin’s question. I suggest that having the courage of one’s convictions means allowing them to be put them to the test. Taking seriously what we cherish means not taking our selves too seriously. Instead it requires standing ready to reimagine, rearticulate, or abandon our lived understandings of who we are and what we are doing. Welcoming such disorientation shows existential courage, an ability to face up to what Lear calls our “ontological vulnerability.” As a vision of living well in light of human vulnerability, integrity as erotic humility contributes to an ethics of care whose agonistic spirit situates it as part of a humanist democratic ethos (Baier 1987). And because exercising humility is an intersubjective process requiring qualities like honesty and reciprocal charity, it is a pro-social virtue welcoming contestation without fetishizing the ego, hanging false hopes on consensus, or aiming in bad faith for discursive closure.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The work of stabilizing the self’s boundaries can hinder efforts to reexamine our concerns in novel or changing situations. Human beings need habits and convictions as provisional bases for engagement, but trying to secure one’s footing among others, viewing this as its own reward, is erotically narcissistic. If having integrity means taking seriously what we care about, then it is not true that “the character ideal of integrity…is clearly an example of…‘enownment’” (Guignon 2004, 162). This is because our cares transcend the stands we take on how to properly relate to them. Integrity is not about taking one’s commitments seriously. It is about taking seriously what they are about. One cannot let the self grow without letting it go. In Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi’s words:

Transcendental philosophy shall not wrest this heart from my breast and put a pure drive for *selfhood alone* in its place. (Jacobi 1994, 517)

The unstable self is not a flawed vehicle for securing stable commitments. Rather, commitments are limited, and limiting, resources for responsive engagement with the surrounding reality of the world and other people. One erotic ideal, wholeheartedness, places living together in service to the self. Another, humility, places the self in service to the lives we share. Wholeheartedness thus fixes upon the right things but gets them the wrong way around. If it counsels us to seek the enriched understanding that comes through struggling with the meanings that matter to us, it values it only as a tool for psychic and normative closure. On this view, when closure in our intimate relations eludes us, then so much the worse for our highest hopes of self-realization.

By contrast, the humble agent views and values endangering her convictions as leading to richer concrete involvement with the people and projects that matter to her. She understands that her current stance is not identical with the stuff it connects her with. She does not wish to elevate her self above its deep, unsettling relations with others. She prioritizes the relationships, not what she currently makes of them, and though there are limits to conceptually unpacking the distinction, she understands the difference.[[42]](#footnote-42) As finite creatures living out our commitments with humility, we invite the ineluctable erosion of the boundaries to which we otherwise cling in futility. Truly caring for the self effaces it. In the words of Kinky Friedman, you have to find what you love and let it kill you.[[43]](#footnote-43)

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1. See Harris (2012, 5-6) for discussion of advances in neuroimaging and their implication that “our wills are determined by prior causes,” and that “seeming acts of volition merely arise spontaneously (whether caused, uncaused, or probabilistically inclined, it makes no difference) and cannot be traced to a point of origin in our conscious minds.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cheshire Calhoun (2009, 614) distinguishes “*substantive commitments*,” “ones whose objects are candidates for inclusion in a life plan, or that give shape to a life, or define an identity, or answer the question of what one’s life is about,” from what she calls “*normative commitments* to particular values and practical principles”. These can commingle and here I treat “the self” as including both. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It may be thought that integrity has at least as much to do with commitment to the right things as with commitment in the right way. Lynne McFall (1987, 11-16) defends this view. But surely one may be committed to the right things in the wrong way—frivolously, fanatically, or by accident—and so lack integrity in a sense that matters. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Pippin’s distinction suggests a continuum of intensity of someone’s attachment to the goods at stake within her practice, reflected by the practical weight they have for her relative to other goods she values. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Underground Man accuses himself of lacking integrity: “There is truth in you, too, but no integrity…You boast about consciousness, yet all you do is vacillate…” (Dostoevsky 1993, 38). See again footnote 3 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “[Depth commitment] involves a *wholehearted*, passionate commitment to and identification with *a desired end*” (emphasis mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Frankfurt’s view therefore combines two pictures of integrity distinguished by Cheshire Calhoun (1995, 235) as the “integrated-self” and “identity” models. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Pippin is also committed to such a view. Depth commitment entails a readiness to sacrifice valued goods for the sake of adherence to norms governing one’s social practices. Co-practitioners guide and make sense of their activity through the lived understandings of what is to be done and why by which they attune to the norms in the background. Frankfurt’s analogue to Pippin’s default obligations are the “volitional necessities” governing one’s conduct—patterns of subjective identification not under one’s direct volitional control. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In Section 4 below, we return to the ethical value of this feature of the view. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. One might say we have the concept *a priori*, but I am unsure what this means, and anyway it does not seem to be Frankfurt’s view. Another possibility, perhaps closer to what Frankfurt intends by his celebration of psychic and volitional unity, is the elevation by various authors of the supposedly integrated subjectivity of early childhood. One thinks of Nietzsche’s reference to “the child” as the final stage in the spiritual growth of those who create new values (Nietzsche 2006, pp. 16-17; “On the Three Metamorphoses”) or Jesus Christ’s promotion of children as embodying spiritual health (Matt. 18: 2-4 New International Version). Models of childhood subjectivity at least offer points of reference available to human experience. But it is hard to see how they vindicate or even much clarify Frankfurt’s position. For one thing, models of childhood and their supposed attractions vary greatly. For Nietzsche, the figure of the child is redolent of “forgetting,” “a new beginning,” and “sacred yes-saying” (*ibid.*). Meanwhile, Christ exalts a child’s “lowly position,” not her lack of interior depth as such (*ibid.*). These two images of childhood are different, and neither implies the absence of inner conflict and complexity constitutive of Frankfurt’s wholeheartedness. For another thing, as we saw above, the fact that mature agency develops from a prior condition of childhood hardly entails that we can reflectively understand or appraise it, as Frankfurt’s position requires. How could we, given that being in a pre-reflective condition precludes reflexive awareness? Indeed, must adult recollection of childhood experience not necessarily involve at least a great deal more distorting confabulation than usually attends memory? In any case, to the extent that we *can* grasp what it might entail, I think a vision of untroubled inner harmony is deeply unattractive as an ideal for responsible human agency; more on this below. Thanks are due to one of this paper’s referees for drawing my attention to some of these issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Another example may be found in the thought of Gabriel Marcel, which we revisit below: “Because intersubjectivity is the precondition of human consciousness, and communion the mode of authentic life, Marcel can characterise philosophy as a series of meditations on the meaning of ‘with’” (Keen 1967, 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See my “Sociable Sovereigns” (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. By contrast, Frankfurt refers to “the voluntaristic account of practical normativity I am developing” (2006, 20, footnote 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See also Geuss (2008) and Foucault (1978, 92-102). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See also Carruthers (2011.) Pippin (2010)’s term “the expressive model” denotes a view of the self that resembles our precarious model. Cassam (2015) critiques a rationalist “transparency method” for self-knowledge that is or closely resembles a horizonal account of action. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “The great health.—” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This is indeed one of the main points of Frankfurt’s idea of second-order volitions. He thinks they endow the psyche with coherence and stability. I want to highlight the ethical hazards. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “’Science’ as a prejudice.—“ (emphasis mine) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “Preparatory human beings.—” (emphasis mine). This anticipates Oscar Wilde’s (facetious?) remark, “The well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves” (Wilde 1925, 212). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Note that this echoes the paradoxical existential movement Kierkegaard ascribes to the Knight of Faith in *Fear and Trembling*. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Charles Guignon defines this “Real Me” as “the constellation of feelings, needs, desires, capacities, aptitudes, dispositions, and creative abilities that make the person a unique individual” (Guignon 2004, 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This applies both to individuals and communities—an ontologically and ethically problematic dichotomy. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. William E. Connolly describes the self as “a microsocial structure of voices, replete with foreign relations.” Our present discussion takes its cue from his call to envision “a post-Nietzschean ethical sensibility…that treats encounters with excess, resistance, and remainders in culture as prized sources of creativity and change, rather than simply lacks, deficiencies, and failures to be resolved” (Connolly 1974, xiii-xvii). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Humility in our sense involves soliciting contextually appropriate forms of criticism. Further requirements depend *inter alia* on participants’ relative social positions. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Markell (2003) for a critique of the discourse of recognition in political theory that is largely simpatico with our analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Guignon 2004, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. “Where cruelty is needed.—” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Bollnow 1984, pp. 182-185. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Frankfurt 2006, pp. 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Humility might therefore represent a middle way between an austere Sartrean ethics of anxiety and solitary freedom and Marcel’s own semi-Platonic spiritual vision of communally restored human unity (Bollnow 1984, pp. 178-180; Gabriel 1984, 304). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Marcel insists that the receptivity manifest in *disponibilité* “is already something active; it is already, in a way, an action.” But, though active, responsive reception lacks the initiation ethically stressed within humility (Marcel 1984, 201). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Bollnow 1984, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Gabriel Marcel calls such devotion to an enduring relationship with another “fidelity,” and finds it specially revealed when promises or vows between people “call into being a relationship which is pledged to be creative, no matter what changes time may bring.” Marcel’s related belief that “merely to be constant may be a betrayal of fidelity” echoes our misgivings about construing integrity as adherence to established demands (Keen 1967, 35). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Keen 1967, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The former reflects what in his later work John Rawls calls the Fact of Reasonable Pluralism (Rawls 1993, 36; 144; *et passim*). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Lear uses the term “ontological vulnerability” for what is revealed about human beings when the sense we make of our lives is in severe crisis (2006, 50). Lear describes “this possibility of things’ ceasing to happen” as one “that marks us as human” (9). Lear’s notion thus closely resembles Judith Butler’s idea of “linguistic vulnerability,” which she believes makes us “beings who require language in order to be” (Butler 1997a, 1-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Paul (2014) for discussion of relevant issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Here we leave aside possible affinities between our discussion of enduring lived relations and Derek Parfit (1984)’s account of “survival” as contrasted with personal identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See note 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. We saw earlier that the reflective model of selfhood ontologically depends upon horizonal accounts of rational agency. Whereas, as Korsgaard (2009)’s work illustrates, horizonal accounts rely on the reflective model for phenomenological support. Discrediting the latter thus undermines confidence in the former. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. In XXX (2017), I examine humility so construed alongside the democratic citizen virtue of civility in order to develop a model of interaction based on an ethos of critical charity suitable for efforts to transform social conditions in the United States after the 2016 Presidential Election. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. For discussion of how the surplus of meaning confounds constructivist and voluntarist accounts of erotic phenomena, see William Connolly: “In Nietzsche’s work, as I read it, ‘life’ (as with other nonconcepts of its type) is an indispensable, nonfixable marker, challenging every attempt to treat a concept, settlement, or principle as complete, without excess, remainders, or resistances” (1974, xiii). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. I am gratefully indebted to many who offered thoughtful feedback and criticism throughout this paper’s development, especially Mark Lance, Gerald Mara, Mark Murphy, Terry Pinkard, and the two anonymous referees whose insights greatly improved the argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)