TO WILL ONE THING

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I. Preliminaries

Before committing suicide, Othello says, “Speak of me as I am; . . . speak of one who loved not wisely, but too well.” Thinking of his love for Desdemona, we are not likely to agree with his assessment that he loved her “too well,” especially if loving well is supposed to require some kind of dependability or concern for her well-being; we would be loath even to grant that he loved her “too much.” Othello’s love for his wife seems, rather, to have been firmly subordinated to his love for his honor. Perhaps, then, his statement could be saved by saying that it was his honor that he loved too well, and that in devoting himself so completely to it, he did not love wisely. He needed a better way of coordinating his two concerns, one that wouldn’t give him cause for regret—a way of loving well that was also wise.

Whatever the merits of this reading of Othello, it raises an important question. To the extent that love and care are central ethical concerns, it is important to identify what would constitute loving or caring well. What qualities or virtues are called for in this? One popular answer is that loving well requires that an agent’s loves possess a certain kind of synchronic unity regarding what she loves. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, invoking Jane Austen’s treatment of the changeability of love in novels such as Persuasion, love is the part of human life in which “one specific and central, although all too often unrecognized, virtue has its place,” the virtue of “constancy.” Harry Frankfurt, on the other hand, assigns a similar perfective role to “wholeheartedness,” which, though applicable to a wide range of motivational factors, primarily refers to a kind of lack of reservation regarding what we love. Both of these indicate that someone’s love possesses a certain consistency. Such a person’s love or concern for someone or something does not quickly change or vary with mood or season. I will take it, then, that there is some kind of quality of unity residing in the neighborhood of these, which I will follow Frankfurt in calling “wholeheartedness” and which is perfective of love and part of loving well. The main questions I will ask in this paper are these: how should this state of unity be defined, what does it consist in, and under what conditions is it worthwhile to pursue it?

We might first ask: what strikes us as desirable about wholeheartedness? A certain sort of argument, frequently used by Frankfurt, goes as follows. Loving someone or something involves, among other things, treating it as a final end of some kind, in a fairly persistent manner. Loving a person, for example, is supposed to involve treating her good as worthy of pursuit, and doing so consistently...
over some significant stretch of time. Someone who is not wholehearted, however, may act lovingly toward her beloved at one time, and at another anxiously resist and reject the promptings of love. Such a person experiences a particular kind of problem in loving: she is divided against herself, so that like Othello she both supports and undermines her most important concerns.

Another kind of argument, drawing on Augustine, goes as follows. Someone who is not wholehearted finds it difficult to really, fully make up her mind to pursue the good. Even when she is very certain of how the good stands, other concerns pull at her attention and her will in a way that distracts her and interferes with her attempts to live in accordance with it. What she cares about, or the manner in which she cares about it, does not cohere with the good as she conceives it, and as a result she continually interferes with her most important concerns. Someone who is wholehearted, on the contrary, is wholly engaged with the good, loving it without the inner conflict that besets the double-minded person, not hindering herself from achieving and enjoying the good as she sees it. Her concerns cohere with one another, and she gives to each its due, unified by her one great and central love for the good.

These two arguments each highlight a common aspect of wholeheartedness: it perfects love by ensuring that, in a specific respect, we are undivided; applied to love, it means that we are wholly involved in our concern for what we love or care about, without inner resistance to acting on its behalf, enjoying what we love to the utmost and achieving all that we can on its behalf.

The two arguments, however, also appeal to distinct and divergent conceptions of wholeheartedness. One of their points of conflict provides a useful entrée into the subject. Frankfurt takes exception to Kierkegaard’s statement that to be wholehearted is “to will one thing.” He says that wholeheartedness does not “literally” require us to will just one thing by, say, pursuing a single ideal or loving a single person. Those who do this “are only being single-minded. . . . What counts is the quality of the will—that is, its integrity—not the quantity of its objects.” What matters isn’t how many objects she cares about, but whether her attitude toward them is consistent. Someone who loves music, chess, and her mother does not thereby become ambivalent or double-minded. Over a certain range of cases, this is accurate enough, but Frankfurt moves to his conclusion too quickly. It is, after all, not plain our final ends must cohere in this way, as Frankfurt himself admits elsewhere, and not plain that this is the sort of “willing” involved in “willing one thing.” We can also speak of someone “willing” to live in accordance with a certain standard, to live out a certain conception of life, or to follow some central love, willing this in such a way that all other interests and concerns are subordinated to or otherwise integrated within it. A person who is wholehearted in this sense wills just one thing, a conception of how to live that comprehends and authoritatively structures all of her other concerns.

The conception of wholeheartedness I shall provide below concerns this kind of willing. Frankfurt clearly draws inspiration from this older view while also seeking to correct it; I will do the opposite, and though frankly owing much to Frankfurt’s work, use this time to develop a classical model of wholeheartedness and say something about the desirability of pursuing it.

II. A Definition of (Classical) Wholeheartedness

I begin by offering the following, somewhat skeletal, definition of classical wholeheartedness: Wholeheartedness is the state of an agent who possesses undivided internal commitment to her conception of the good. This definition will require some unpacking.
Internal commitment is the kind of commitment we remark upon in a committed teacher or committed friend. These individuals are bound by their own dispositions and attachments to grant these objects importance in their deliberations. Internal commitment is not the externally binding obligation that holds someone who has obligated herself to do something, but the internal bond imposed on someone by her caring about something. Love is the most potent and characteristic example of human commitment, and its sway over our thoughts, feelings, and actions is especially powerful. Augustine uses the metaphor of weight to describe the power of love upon the will: “My weight is my love. Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me.” Metaphysical background aside, this is one of the clearest points of agreement between Frankfurt and Augustine, and it is worthwhile to explain four propositions that form the background to both pictures of wholeheartedness. Certain features of love establish it as a stable feature of our lives that is free, but beyond our immediate control: (1) It is not generally within our power to initiate love, which often arises without directly choosing it; (2) once we begin to love, it is not generally within our immediate power to cease loving, and even with extended effort often difficult to do so; (3) insofar as certain courses of action impact what we love, loving something can constrain our will by making engaging in or refraining from certain courses of action unthinkable to us. This could make love seem a kind of prison, Sappho’s “bittersweet creature against which nothing can be done,” but although we cannot control love, (4) love is less an external constraint upon the will than a “configuration of the will” whereby the will binds itself to certain ends, so that we never feel less constrained than when we pursue what we love. It is in virtue of (4) that love is internal, while (2) and (3) make love a form of internal commitment, and it is (1) that, conjoined with these, can make the phenomenon appear rather threatening.

Care functions in ways broadly similar to love, at least concerning its hold upon the will. I will speak of the two of these as “concerns,” to avoid the awkwardness of constantly referring to both. These concerns, taken together, largely define our internal commitments, and I will use the term “volitional state” to refer to the state of an agent’s internal commitments, that is, generally to mean the state of an agent’s will insofar as her ends are defined by what she loves and cares about.

I use the phrase “conception of the good” to specify someone’s conception of a life worth living. Although someone’s conception of the good includes evaluative elements, the good as I see it is largely made up of what someone loves and cares about—that is, by her concerns, and as such may be very personal. Such concerns may themselves be normatively loaded in some respects, as I think they are, but I will not dwell on whether this is so or what significance it might have. Someone’s conception of the good also includes what she believes that she has reason to love or care about and guidelines for how to care about certain objects. It is probably quite common for a person’s conception of the good to consist in no more than a certain way of treating the collection of her concerns, without these being related to one another in any systematic fashion. She cares about her family members and her friends, about certain kinds of recreation, about certain kinds of music or books, about her health and her life, and her conception of the good may just be an idea of the collection of these faring well, with a largely unknown implicit ordering.

III. What Does Wholeheartedness Correct?

It is, however, a good question to ask just what it means to say that someone is either “wholehearted” or, on the contrary, “double-minded.” There are two principal points that...
must be addressed. The account must first specify the kinds of demands that love and other concerns make and then clarify how these demands may render someone’s volitional state either coherent or divided and fragmented.

I will begin with the fact that our concerns make claims upon us: they claim, in an obvious way, time, resources, attention, and action. But one concern may also make claims upon other concerns, directly. Consider how one concern may condition another. If a person loves X and loves Y, and she loves X as a means to or part of loving Y, or if her love for Y limits or guides her love for X, then her love for Y may be said to condition her love for X.

For example: someone might love a tool that enables her to engage in something else she loves, if it performs its function well, and so in this way a painter might love a certain brand of paintbrush or a fencer love a certain sword; a lover might love her beloved’s voice or sense of humor or another aspect as part of loving him, or again may love a letter written to her by him or even a child she has had with him, as part of loving him; someone’s love for her family may limit the importance she gives her love for teaching and for her students, or vice versa; or someone’s religious devotion may provide ideals of friendship or marriage that guide how she loves her friends or spouse.

From this it follows that we may have conditioning concerns, conditioned concerns, mutually conditioning concerns, surd concerns that neither condition nor are conditioned, and, of course, conflicting concerns. I will call these claims that our concerns make upon one another “demands.” Our concerns will conflict whenever one concern demands to condition another in a manner or respect resisted by the second, and the conflict will be most intense if both concerns demand to condition the other while resisting being conditioned in turn. Concerns that do not currently conflict may be either integrated or unintegrated. Concerns are integrated when their harmonious relationship is well-defined, in terms of how each concern conditions the other concern. Concerns are unintegrated if at present their relationship is undefined and may yet develop into a state of conflict or integration. When a person’s concerns are unintegrated, she may find them conflicting in various particular circumstances, due to her current uncertainty regarding their relationship for her will.

Now, within this realm of potential conflict among concerns, we find the domain within which wholeheartedness has its application. Wholeheartedness, as defined above, requires someone to possess internal commitment to her conception of the good, commitment that is undivided. Now it is possible for someone to simply lack commitment to the good as she conceives it, to fail to pursue the good because she doesn’t care about it. The wholehearted person will not, of course, fail in this way. She cares about her conception of the good. But insofar as we speak of wholeheartedness as “perfecting” love, it doesn’t concern lack of commitment. It concerns, as Frankfurt said, the quality or integrity of commitment, and corrects a different problem that someone might possess in pursuing the good: achieving unity within the structure of her concerns.

For consider what occurs when concerns make conflicting claims or demands. We can distinguish several different kinds of conflict among these, which I will treat in order of increasing severity.

Conflicts of scheduling involve two or more concerns that conflict because each claims something—time, money, attention, physical presence, etc.—that we cannot adequately supply to both simultaneously. Think, for example, of a child who loves both video games and good grades, or an adult who loves both baseball and her family, or both reading and kayaking. Such conflicts may usually be adequately resolved through planning or the exercise of judgment regarding a particular occasion, or in the last instance by following Wendell Berry’s advice regarding self-limi-
tation, when he said “we can make ourselves whole only by accepting our partiality, by liv-
ing within our limits, by being human—not by trying to be gods.” There is no intrinsic conflict between the two loves in such cases, and the conflict is created only by our finitude. Someone whose concerns conflict in this way, who fails to show care for their mutual com-
bination, will be generally dissatisfied with the way that she neglects one or the other of these, or both of them in succession. If she is especially attached to her concerns and they are particularly resistant to being conditioned, she may find the problem difficult to solve.

Conflicts of character arise when each of two or more concerns requires a specific kind of character, and the specific excellences or virtues or traits relative to each concern conflict with one another, so that time and attention devoted to one tends to make it harder to properly appreciate or engage with the other. Each concern therefore demands that the other be limited in its claims. The qualities necessary for appreciating one kind of music may, for example, inhibit someone from appreciating another kind of music, and loving one pursuit might demand spontaneity, but another steadiness and deliberateness. The classical dispute between the active and the contemplative lives illustrates the same problem. Pursuing a political life may require the development of dispositions and tastes, even if these are genuine excellences, that are incompatible with those demanded by the contemplative life of the philosopher who is withdrawn from the hustle and bustle of the world. In some cases, such conflicts are personality or temperament relative; it is only persons with a certain kind of natural charac-
ter who experience the conflict. In other cases, the difference seems to be deeper, and to lie in the nature of the characters themselves. Someone seeking to resolve a conflict of char-
acter needs to allow one concern to be given clear priority (either giving the other a sec-
ondary role or abandoning it completely) or otherwise fail to care for either well—because while her concerns draw her again and again to the two different objects, her character will never be suited to either. Here, too, someone must recognize the conditions of finitude, and practice the wisdom of self-limitation.

Conflicts of identity concern the good in general or one’s particular vocation. In these conflicts, two or more loves each demand to define one’s life as a central love, that is, they each specify a distinct and fairly com-
plete conception of the good (or at least the architecture for such a conception) or a fairly specific identity for someone to pursue and practice. Their completeness prevents them from being combined. Examples of such con-
fronts include Augustine’s struggle between his pursuing a life of power and pleasure and his pursuing a life of contemplation, or the conflict we may suppose or hope Gauguin to have experienced between caring for his family and developing his vocation for art in Polynesia. Such definitions of life often specify different characters, and so create conflict on that level as well. These conflicts of identity may be very sharp, but with the exception of the conflicts I will mention just below, they generally involve genuine goods and can be resolved if one rival or set of rivals is subordinated to another. A life of contem-
plation can include action, pleasure, and honor, even if it cannot grant them a place as life-defining goods or goals, and most artists find better ways to combine art and family than Gauguin did. Someone pursuing too many definitions of life will, naturally, find it impossible to live a coherent life, constantly undermining and betraying her own purposes, unless and until she makes up her mind which identity to pursue and practice as her mode of pursuing the good.

Conflicts of exclusive values do not allow for such solutions. In such conflicts, one love demands that what the other treats as valuable not be allowed to function as an end for action at all. These pose sharp disagreement about
the nature of the good, such that to commit to one entails rejecting what is most important to the other. For example, benevolence and sadism—a general love of benefiting human beings, and a general love of inflicting pain upon them—cannot be coherently combined in one heart. At a more philosophical level, someone may be attracted to both Nietzsche’s “revaluation of values” and to Christianity, may love certain aspects of each, but the two cannot in any meaningful way be combined with one another. In both cases, what is cherished in one is despised in the other. To love one demands outlawing the other; but to love both at the same time must often mean hating and despising oneself, and perhaps revealing oneself only in one’s dreams. Such loves demand decisive exclusion of the other.

Whenever at least one concern in one of these conflicts forms part of an agent’s conception of the good—and in the majority of cases, both concerns are part of it—then this conflict will divide an agent’s commitment to her conception of the good. When both are parts of her conception, then it is the incoherence of her conception that divides her against herself. Such conflicts pose what I term the fragmentation problem. A divided person’s will is fragmented between ends in such a way as to make it impossible to fully will her conception of the good. It is the internal commitment involved in love and care that prevents us from viewing the fragmentation problem as generally equivalent to, or soluble in the same way as, problems regarding plurality and incommensurability within the good.12

Someone facing the fragmentation problem will find her commitment to the good divided by a plurality of incompatible concerns, pulling at her will, attention, and affections. As Frankfurt has said, she suffers from “an incoherent sort of greed,” wishing “to have things both ways.”13 As he also says, this is not a state with which any agent “can possibly be satisfied.”14 To the degree that someone suffers from fragmentation problems between rival concerns involving her conception of the good, her practical life must be dissatisfying, incoherent, and disappointing to her; her deepest concerns draw her in different and incompatible directions, and she undermines her own good through her wandering vacillations.

IV. Why Utilize the Classical Conception?

Someone might object to the “classical conception” as represented here for at least two reasons. First, why should we favor it over Frankfurt’s view? Why should we focus upon an agent’s conception of the good in this way, and why about an agent’s total volitional state rather than her wholeheartedness about any of her various individual concerns? Second, doesn’t the classical conception here rather change the subject? If Othello’s goal was to love Desdemona well, then will not the appropriate solution focus upon those qualities perfective of just such a particular love, rather than clouding the issue with talk of agents’ conceptions of the good and the like?

We should adopt the classical conception over Frankfurt’s because it possesses two significant, and related, comparative advantages over his. It operates at a deeper level of explanation and therefore offers a more fundamental analysis of wholeheartedness, and, because it operates at this level, it addresses the fragmentation problem, a problem Frankfurt’s treatment obscures.

Frankfurt frequently speaks as if there is no good explanation for why some people are ambivalent about their concerns and some are not.15 Why should someone dither in this way over committing to a concern, going back and forth between accepting and rejecting it? He says, somewhat mysteriously, that according to Augustine, ambivalence is an effect of original sin.16 What could the connection be between vacillation and sin, even original sin? The mysteries of original sin do not disappear when we turn to Augustine, but this particular obscurity becomes entirely clear. For Augustine, human-
ity in its fallen state is such as to love in a disor-
dered way; we love some things more than we
should, others less, and we do not love in the
right manner. Worse, love is such as to bind the
will even after we have come to think better of
it.\textsuperscript{17} Ambivalence is therefore not fundamental,
but the result of being persistently drawn to
conflicting ends. Thus, whereas both Frank-
furt and Augustine refer to ambivalence and
fragmentation as a “disease,”\textsuperscript{18} Frankfurt seems
to content to describe the symptoms. Frankfurt’s
view therefore obscures the fundamental dif-
fERENCE between a vacillation that arises from
uncertainty and lack of knowledge (should I
commit, even in ignorance of possible conse-
quences?) and a vacillation that truly arises
within the heart of the agent (how can I do this,
knowing how it will impact such-and-such?),
assimilating these to each other and obscuring
the particular defect of agency that produces
irrational ambivalence.

Thus, Frankfurt’s conception obscures
the importance of solving the fragmentation
problem for wholeheartedness. Wholeheart-
edness is praised in the highest terms, but
he provides no discussion of the necessity,
if we are to be wholehearted, of making our
concerns coherent with one another. Local
ambivalence, when it does not involve simple
factual uncertainties, generally reflects failure
to solve the fragmentation problem. When
someone fails to love well, she needs to ask
what else she cares about, and how it relates
to what she fails at.

The second objection asks whether the
classical conception addresses the original
point, that is, loving well; for it might seem
as if in providing this account, I have changed
the subject from the original topic. Does the
question of how someone like Othello might
love a Desdemona well not concern those
qualities called for and manifested in loving
some particular individual or object well, and
not require making the agent’s conception of
the good central to the account? But Othello,
let us remember, spoke of loving “too well.”

Whatever the poet meant in writing this, mak-
ing excessive sacrifices for the sake of one
love ordinarily involves a terrible mistake.
Even when it does not lead to obviously griev-
ous consequences, such misguided devotion
strains our relationship with what else we
love and can warp or distort the activity or
relationship itself through misunderstanding
the significance and nature of the goods at
stake. Those who dress up their dogs and
lavish them with clothing or accessories they
are incapable of appreciating do not really
love their dogs better than those who do not
do such things; one senses that what such
individuals really want is a purpose to devote
themselves to, and Fido has merely become
the target for purpose. Loving too well is not,
then, loving even better than loving well; it is
loving less well. Insofar as wholeheartedness
is part of loving well, it isn’t inappropriate to
shift to a wider perspective than that afforded
by a particular love. When one love is granted
its demands because it is good for them to
be granted, or gives way to the demands of
another love because it is in his case good
that it give way, this is loving well. Is this
correction not exactly what Othello needed?
One must look to the agent’s total conception
of the good, because love cannot be whole-
hearted if our acting on behalf of what we love
is regarded as cause for regret and repentance.
Someone might face a difficult dilemma and
regret choosing the option she did, without
repentance; she would do the same again,
because it was the least bad and most accept-
able solution to the difficulty. But the one who
regrets and repents is not wholehearted.

V. The Integration of Concerns

Wholeheartedness, then, perfects love (and
care) insofar as it integrates those concerns
that are parts of our conception of the good
and protects them from conflicts from without,
thereby liberating an agent’s powers to
be fully engaged in the pursuit and practice
of the good, as she conceives it.
It is common, not only to the classical conception of wholeheartedness, but to the classical conception of agency itself (as developed and utilized by authors such as Plato and Aristotle), to suppose that an agent typically possesses some one central object of concern, which I have here called a “central love,” such as pleasure, honor, and contemplation. Such an object integrates concern not only by acting as a standard of goodness but also by acting in the manner I have ascribed to central loves, being granted the right to condition all other concerns. Someone who unifies her heart in this way seems, more than anyone, to have good reason to claim to possess undivided internal commitment to her conception of the good.

But is the integration of concerns around some single object the only manner in which someone may become wholehearted? “Surely,” one might object, “one might do as well with plurality of concerns, if only these cohere with her conception of the good and with one another?” I admit that someone with a plurality of coherent concerns could avoid conflict, if these conditions were met. There are, however, considerations that make it doubtful whether such a person is genuinely wholehearted.

One must wonder where such a person will find the volitional power to achieve and maintain such a condition of coherence—by what means are her concerns arranged into such an orderly state? We know what it is for someone to give herself to some one concern, to make one great devotion to an ideal or cause, and to achieve wholeheartedness by that means, rare though it may be. Such was Abraham. When such a person considers conflicts among her less central concerns, her conception of the good may either supply an answer to the conflict or not. If it does, then she knows what to do, and resolves the conflict wholeheartedly; if it does not, then her choice of resolution is not important for her wholeheartedness. She makes up her mind for one thing, and does the rest within the framework of that concern. Perhaps even such individuals as this rarely or never achieve complete wholeheartedness; still, they seem the best situated to do so and make the best progress toward becoming so. Such a path to wholeheartedness is not available to someone who maintains a plurality of ultimate concerns.

Still, beyond this provisional argument, which is wholly focused upon the situation of one who is seeking wholeheartedness rather than the one who possesses it, there are reasons to think that wholeheartedness may be more difficult to attain or maintain for someone with a plurality of concerns than for someone who possesses some single central object of concern. I hope to provide a fuller account of the argument for this at a later date, but for the present, I will provide a simpler, and much briefer, version of the argument.

Suppose someone possesses no single central concern that unifies her practical life. Instead, she possesses a plurality of such ultimate concerns. Her concerns and her conception of the good are in harmony, and furthermore these concerns do not at present conflict with one another. She then possesses undivided internal commitment to her conception of the good. Her deepest concerns possess two important features: they are persistent sources of energy for agency, because of how they establish their objects as “gravitational” forces in her life, and they provide her deepest practical premises for action. These features render her continuing unity uncertain. If circumstances press her concerns so that they conflict, it is not clear how she can resolve the conflict, or even end it, and the outcome of such conflicts retrospectively renders her earlier, apparent wholeheartedness suspect. Her volitional state is like that of a political state that lacks commonly accepted standards for legitimacy, such as majoritarian rule within constitutional limits. In such a state, when matters are faring well, each faction accepts the way
things stand for their own reasons, but when circumstances force it outside the realm one faction deems legitimate, its lack of unity shines forth.

The volitional state of someone who doesn’t lack such a central concern is unified because each concern “accepts” the right of the central concern to condition its claims. It does not follow immediately, and may not follow at all, that this central concern must also be the person’s highest concern, though central concerns have often been thought to be such. What is essential isn’t its status as a *sumnum bonum* but its possessing the right to condition other concerns. Such a concern may not be a highest *end*, either—not in the traditional sense, anyway. It might be an ideal or principle of some kind that we would hesitate to describe as an end. But by hypothesis we are considering a person whose volitional state contains no element playing such a role. Her heart is not set upon virtue, or the categorical imperative, or universal benevolence, or any other unifying ideal. What, then, of her?

Suppose that she has just two ultimate concerns—her love for philosophy and for her family. A good long time proceeds without difficulty while she devotes herself to these two concerns wholeheartedly, but then she reaches a point when her circumstances press her concerns against one another. Perhaps the difficulties created by a poor job market force her to choose to neglect one or the other. She will possess two sets of first practical premises to work from, which require different courses of action, and each set of premises will be powerful to her, to the point that she will find it difficult, or perhaps impossible, to settle upon any course of action that she will not later regret and despise herself for taking. So, suppose that now she decides on a course of action, to neglect her vocation or her family; whence will come the volitional resolve to effect her decision? She has no basis within her conception of the good for favoring one over the other. Shall her concerns give way to her decision, or will she lack the commitment to coordinate her concerns? Does she make a decision at all, or only fool herself into thinking she has? Perhaps instead she will patch together a series of compromises between her different concerns, but if circumstances are truly pressing her concerns against one another, then it is hard to see how such compromises will not become only so many more causes of unhappiness in her life, as she seems to provide neither concern with the devotion it requires. Her current division makes us regard her earlier apparent unity with suspicion; a fortuitous lack of conflict hid a dormant division.

It therefore seems that to pursue wholeheartedness requires pursuing a kind of wholeness and integration that involves granting some unifying concern the right to condition all other concerns.

VI. The Pursuit of Wholeheartedness

Is wholeheartedness a virtue? This question seems hard to answer. If wholeheartedness is a virtue, then there should be no such thing as a wholehearted viciousness, and some important authors have argued this, such as Plato and Kierkegaard. They have argued that there is some feature of human agency or human ends such that the only end that one can pursue wholeheartedly is the good itself; one can never pursue a false conception of the good wholeheartedly. There will always be some sort of remaining discordance or disharmony “in the soul.” This, I think, is a hard question, and answering it would require not only making substantive arguments regarding the content of the good and our relationship to it, but also important investigations into the metaphysics and epistemology of value. I am inclined to agree with these writers that there is no wholehearted vice, but I am not very sure of this, and I believe that in any case someone can make very good progress toward achieving
wholehearted commitment to a very unsound conception of the good. In place of this question, therefore, I will substitute and answer another, more practical question: when should we pursue wholeheartedness?

Consider Abraham as he figures in the famous Binding of Isaac. Near the end of Abraham’s life, after God has fulfilled his promise to give Abraham offspring, God orders Abraham to go to Mount Moriah and offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering to him. At the last moment, after Abraham has bound Isaac and reached for the knife, God orders Abraham to release his son. Philosophers have discussed this story for a variety of reasons; I mention it here because it seems to provide a notable example of wholeheartedness, in its difficulty and moral ambiguity. Abraham, despite loving his son, was nonetheless so completely devoted to God that he did not withhold his son from him. Some have taken this as a proof of Abraham’s virtue, others, as proof of his wickedness; Abraham, for his part, seemed to have no doubts. It is not plain what exactly Abraham expects to come from sacrificing his son. He tells Isaac that God will provide the sacrifice, and the author of Hebrews says that Abraham expected God to raise Isaac from the dead, if he should slay him. But what seems plain is that Abraham follows God wholeheartedly; he displays no hesitancy at any moment, and there is no question when the objects of his concern conflict which he favors, no doubt that even his love for his son cannot divide his heart against his decisive commitment to and trust in God.

Is such devotion virtuous? If Othello illustrates the disease of double-mindedness, Abraham may make us leery of the cure. For even if we think that Abraham’s judgment was correct, it isn’t clear that someone could not have such trust and wholehearted devotion where judgment is incorrect. In that case, if even a vicious Abraham can be described as wholehearted, then it is not so clear that wholeheartedness is desirable, or a virtue. Paying a little attention to the lessons of history, especially that of the most recently completed century, shows all too well the dangers of wholehearted devotion to ideology; one often wishes that people had shown rather less wholeheartedness, because greater ambivalence would have made it harder to offer up common decency as a sacrifice.

Under what conditions, then, is it rational to pursue the kind of volitional integration involved in wholeheartedness? When someone is wholehearted, this includes trust in the goodness of her conception of the good that makes her other concerns complacent. This seems especially plain when wholeheartedness is achieved through a central unifying concern. When her trust is misplaced, it is these other, more obviously desirable, concerns that pay the price. In Abraham’s example, everything depends upon whether he was right to trust his solution to the fragmentation problem, elevating devotion to God above all else. For, if he was wrong in this, wrong to be certain of God’s promise, wrong that he would certainly have descendents through Isaac, then Abraham would have had as much to regret as Othello. Hence, whether wholeheartedness is desirable for someone depends to a great degree upon whether her conception of the good is sound.

We might, then, be tempted to follow this conclusion with another, that wholeheartedness should be pursued only to the degree to which someone has warrant for thinking her conception of the good is sound. It is best to stand back, first of all, and perhaps make no firm commitments to any conception of the good, none of which provide the questioning agent with warrant sufficient for certainty. If no particular good or potential object of concern seems sufficiently compelling, then why not engage with a variety of goods and concerns, without the hope or monomania that marks wholeheartedness, at least until the goodness of some conception of the good shows itself to be so compelling as to warrant wholehearted pursuit?
But this would be too quick; commitment to a way of life is sometimes, as Stephen Evans argues, an all-or-nothing affair, akin to pursuing marriage or therapy for depression. One may lack sufficient warrant to be certain that the therapy or the marriage will be successful, but halfhearted commitment to either is likely to undermine its success. Similarly, to pursue a way of life halfheartedly can fall short of pursuing it at all, and can preclude a meaningful testing of its claims. There may therefore be no means of acquiring such warrant before making up one’s mind to pursue a particular way of life, and trusting in its goodness. It therefore seems that, as Evans concludes, “wholehearted commitment, far from precluding an honest test of risky commitment, is sometimes a condition for such a test.” The goods internal to a way of life may be either so difficult to attain, or so dependent upon trust, that halfhearted engagement is incapable of unveiling them.

Someone who therefore wishes to solve the fragmentation problem by articulating and committing herself to a conception of the good that resolves the conflicts between her different concerns will have to do so without full information or warrant sufficient for certainty. She may not know what falsehoods, misinterpretations, and self-deceptions her evaluation is subject to. Her community can provide some check against these failures, but communities themselves can fail, and “in times of cultural flux and aporia” (as Matthew Crawford says) “it is not clear what ‘our rules’ are,” because there may seem to be no recognizable communal standards to rely upon; her decision may, in fact, partially consist in deciding which and what kind of communities she wishes to identify herself with. She must, then, commit in trust.

This does not mean that her decision to seek wholeheartedness must be arbitrary or blind. Her decision may have rational warrant, but warrant insufficient for certainty, and may be based in insight, but insight that falls short of understanding. Her decision, then, may be reasoned, it may be rational, and it may be responsive to genuine goods, but it is not without risk. Nor does it imply that her decision is made once and for all, if following her commitment, or through her commitment, she discovers her conception’s unsoundness, any more than someone who commits wholeheartedly to a method of treatment is incapable of later rejecting it—though one hopes we will correct ourselves before imposing so great a cost upon ourselves as an Abraham whose trust was not rewarded would have suffered. We pursue our conceptions of the good as good, and so even the wholehearted agent is free to break with a conception once she discovers that it is, in certain respects, bad or incoherent.

Hence although someone may never have certainty regarding these matters, if she possesses sufficient reason for favoring one conception over another, and thinks it likely to lead her well, then she ought to accept the risk inherent in finitude, and commit herself to it. What this degree of warrant consists in, I will not here attempt to specify. The more severe her double-mindedness, however, and the greater her fragmentation problem, the more pressing it is for her to do so. In such trust we find our best chance for loving well and achieving the good.

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NOTES

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6. The classical conception may, in fact, opt for something stronger, replacing “her conception of the good” with “the good” *simpliciter*, so that the definition would be *wholeheartedness is the state of an agent who possesses undivided internal commitment to the good*. This strengthened form is explicit in Kierkegaard’s treatment of purity of heart, but may be implicit in other formulations. The reason for this is that the classical conception of wholeheartedness is typically joined to a classical conception of agency, according to which the will is naturally attracted to the good and influenced by reason in such a way that, like Huck Finn, agents cannot in the end be entirely committed to a false conception of the good. At some point, the agent feels her error, because she cannot escape the truth.

7. Although distinct, the two senses become intertwined in the case of vows between those who love each other—for example in the vows shared in a wedding or between “blood brothers.”


12. Such as in Thomas Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value,” *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 128–141. Less severe conflicts, such as scheduling conflicts, bear a greater resemblance to these more general problems of plurality and incommensurability.


15. See, for example, Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love*, p. 99.


17. For example, cf. *City of God* XIV, especially XIV.7, 9, and 11.

18. Augustine uses “disease of the mind” (*aegritudo animi*) at *Confessions* VIII.9.21; Frankfurt reinterprets the phenomenon as a “disease of the will” in “Faintest Passion,” p. 100.


