

Morality's Place: Kierkegaard and Frankfurt

Christian Piller

University of York

Abstract

In this paper, I look at Søren Kierkegaard's defence of an ethical way of life in the light of Harry Frankfurt's work. There are salient general similarities connecting Kierkegaard and Frankfurt: Both are sceptical towards the Kantian idea of founding morality in the laws of practical reason. They both deny that the concerns, which shape our lives, could simply be validated by subject-independent values. Furthermore, and most importantly, they both emphasize the importance of reflective endorsement of one's way of life. This endorsement is understood by both not as an exercise of reason but as an exercise of our will without which boredom, anxiety and, ultimately, the dissolution of the self threatens. We can, I argue, directly impose Frankfurt's hierarchical account of psychological attitudes on Kierkegaard. Frankfurt helps us to elucidate Kierkegaard. This interpretation, however, also shows the limits of any attempt, inspired by Kierkegaard, to justify moral rules without appealing to a religious foundation of morality.

Keywords: choice, ethics, Frankfurt, Kierkegaard, morality.

What happens today might help us to understand what happened yesterday. This is certainly one source of our interest in the history of philosophy, as we try to read it afresh in the light of what has followed. In this paper I look at Søren Kierkegaard's book *Either/Or* (Vol. II) in the light of Harry Frankfurt's work. There are salient general similarities connecting Kierkegaard and Frankfurt, which make such a project look promising. Both are sceptical towards the Kantian idea of founding morality in the laws of practical reason. They both deny that the concerns, which shape our lives, could simply be validated by subject-independent values. Furthermore, and most

importantly, they both emphasize the importance of reflective endorsement of one's way of life. This endorsement is understood by both not as an exercise of reason but as an exercise of our will without which boredom, anxiety and, ultimately, the dissolution of the self threatens.

We can, I will argue, directly impose Frankfurt's hierarchical account of psychological attitudes on Kierkegaard. In fact, awareness of Frankfurt's work makes such an interpretation almost inevitable, as it illuminates Kierkegaard's thought without, in any sense, doing violence to it.¹ Looking at Kierkegaard in the light of Frankfurt's work will also have benefits for assessing the merits of Kierkegaard's defence of the ethical way of life. I will take some steps towards such an assessment in the second part of the paper.

I

Either/Or, published in 1843, is edited by the fictitious Victor Eremita who has collected the papers and letters of two people whom he has given the names A and B. We know that B is a former judge whose name is William. Judge William responds to A's description of the aesthetic life, which we can understand as a life devoted to enjoyment, by urging him to enter the ethical life. His response is at least indicative of Kierkegaard's own view concerning the superiority of an ethical life when compared to an aesthetic life. Judge William's religious faith plays no important role in his argument. This has two effects. On the one hand, it increases the relevance of what Judge William claims for the general debate about the justifiability of the ethical; on

the other hand, it, to some extent, disassociates Judge William from Kierkegaard himself.

The crucial *Equilibrium* chapter begins as follows: ‘My Friend, What I have so often said to you I say now once again, or rather I shout it: Either/or, *aut/aut*.’ (EO, 161)² Judge William’s starting point is the importance of choice, not of any choice, but rather of what I will call ‘real choice’. Judge William tells us that although he uses the words ‘either/or’ often as others use them, and that ‘it would indeed be foolish pedantry to give up using them in this way’, sometimes, he says, ‘these words appear before me and my soul always becomes serious’ (EO, 163). I do choose whether to sit down or remain standing, but not every choice is a ‘real’ choice. We need a conception of ‘real choice’; otherwise, one of the main theses of the *Equilibrium* chapter would be implausible. The thesis I mean is the following: Real choice is, by its very nature, ethical. In Kierkegaard’s own words, ‘... an aesthetic choice is no choice. The act of choosing is essentially a proper and stringent expression of the ethical. Whenever in a stricter sense there is [a] question of an either/or, one can always be sure that the ethical is involved’ (EO, 170).

The universal expression of an aesthetic way of life is, according to Kierkegaard, to enjoy oneself. Seeking enjoyment, everyone agrees, is not always easy, and Kierkegaard does not doubt that aesthetic choice might involve, as he puts it, ‘rigorous cogitation in weighing the alternatives and a multiplicity of thoughts which attach themselves to every link in the chain’ (EO, 168). Aesthetic choice involves a weighing up of alternatives and, thereby, it involves rational thought. An aesthete

could be as accomplished in his choosing as any decision theorist would want him to be. So, what is missing for him to make 'real choices'?

It would be a mistake to understand this distinction simply in terms of the importance of what one chooses, such that the seriousness of the consequences of one's decision for one's life would draw the line between purely aesthetic and real choices. Someone like the character called A, the aesthete, has to decide whether to marry or not, whether to take a public office or not, and even though A would decide against doing any of these things, it cannot be a lack of importance in what one decides that would disqualify such decisions from being real choices. Without a clear conception of real choice we have not understood why the 'either/or' of choosing shows its serious face only on occasion. Similarly, we are left in the dark about why real choice has to be ethical. Is Kierkegaard simply endorsing Kant's idea that free choice has to be bound by the laws of practical reason and that, by being governed by the Categorical Imperative in this way, one cannot but choose what is morally right? Looking at Harry Frankfurt's work will help to solve these puzzles.

In his 1971 paper 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person', Harry Frankfurt asks what it is to be a person, and his answer appeals to the reflective nature of persons.³ Persons are reflective in the sense that they can have mental attitudes towards their own attitudes. If we believe, we normally believe that we believe what we believe. More interestingly, if we want something, it might well be that, after reflection, we also want to want the thing we want. Then we would have endorsed our wanting and, arguably, we would have answered the question whether we should want what we want. We would have solved the problem set by the possibility of reflection,

which allows us to step back from our attitudes, and consider and evaluate them. If persons are reflective, and the result of reflection is an endorsement or, as it may be, a rejection of our attitudes, then second-order attitudes, especially second-order desires – desires that have our own wanting as their objects – are essential for being a person. A tiger might want food, but, it is plausible to assume, it never steps back and ask itself whether it really wants to want food: ‘No animal other than man [...] appears to have the capacity for reflective self-evaluation that is manifested in the formation of second-order desires’.⁴

A second-order desires is a desire to have (or not to have) a certain desires. A second-order volition is, in Frankfurt’s terminology, a desire to be moved by one of one’s first-order desires. If I find myself desiring two incompatible options, a second-order volition, i.e. a desire that a particular one of these first-order desires may move me to action or, in short, may be my will, can decide this conflict. Beings who either lack the capacity for second-order reflection or, if they have it, do not exercise it, Frankfurt calls ‘wantons’. Such a being can be rational in weighing up the benefits of various alternatives and think about what will happen if it follows either this or another course of action. If there are desires on either side, the wanton, Frankfurt tells us, ‘... does not care which of his conflicting first-order desires wins out. His lack of concern is not due to his inability to find a convincing basis for preference. It is due either to his lack of the capacity for reflection or to his mindless indifference to the enterprise of evaluating his own desires and motives.’⁵

With being a person, Frankfurt thinks, comes moral responsibility. As one acts freely, if one acts as one wants to act, Frankfurt introduces free will as the capacity to will as

one wants to will. A person is free if she is such that whatever desire she wanted to be her will, it would move her to act and be her will. A free agent's second-order attitudes determine which of her first-order attitudes moves her to act. The condition of moral responsibility is wider than that of free will. To be moral responsible for what one does, one only needs to have the will one wants to have and one will be responsible even if, had one wanted to have a different will, such a different second-order volition would not have been effective.

A wanton is interested in the world. He has first-order preferences and wants, for example, to maximize enjoyment. The wanton can also possess the rational capacities required for deliberating which action will bring the most of what he wants. A wanton, however, is restricted to the first-order level: he does not care whether this or that desire for this or that enjoyment will move him. Lacking the capacity for second-order reflection, or the simple fact that such a capacity, if present, is not exercised, removes him from the realm of moral responsibility. Returning to Kierkegaard, we can say that the wanton chooses without making real choices. The tiger, for example, does choose whether to lie down or keep walking. Such a choice, however, does not involve moral responsibility, as the tiger never considers whether he should resist or endorse whatever moves it. 'Real choice', in contrast, is the result of reflective engagement with one's volitional first-order nature. Making real choices makes one moral responsible. Thus, whenever someone makes a real choice, we can be certain that the ethical is involved.

Judge William accuses A, the aesthete, of having a superficial view of choice and, consequently, of life in general: 'And now as for you – this phrase [either/or] is only

too often on your lips, it has almost become a byword with you. What significance has it for you? None at all. You, according to your own expression, regard it as a wink of the eye, a snap of the fingers, (...) an abracadabra.’ Judge William contrasts the aesthete’s conception of choice with that of real choice. This contrast introduces a further thought: ‘If you understand me aright I should like to say that in making a choice it is not so much a question of choosing the right as of the energy, the earnestness, the pathos with which one chooses. Thereby the personality announces its inner infinity, and thereby, in turn, the personality is consolidated.’

We find two ideas in these passages. The first is that real choice requires energy, earnestness and pathos, whereas choices made by the aesthete are made by the wink of an eye or the snap of the fingers. Judge William’s criticism, in my view, is not that the aesthete’s choices lack significance. As I said earlier, we cannot deny that a person in the aesthetic stage of life leads a whole life: he decides whether to marry, to have children, to take one job or another. Judge William criticises the way these choices are made, not what they are choices for; he criticises the kind of choosing characteristic for the aesthete. The aesthete is not fully involved in his choices. He lacks second-order endorsement; he does not care about what moves him. The pathos and energy of real choice, Kierkegaard talks about, are the result of second-order involvement. Such involvement is important, because what moves one determines who one is. This is the second of Kierkegaard’s ideas: real choices both show us and determine who we are. ‘The choice itself is decisive for the content of the personality, through the choice the personality immerses itself in the thing chosen, and when it does not chose it withers away in consumption.’ (E/O, 167)

In Frankfurt's later work the notions of caring about something as well as the notion of loving something, which he understands as a form of caring, gain central place in his thought. 'Caring about something is not to be confused with liking it or wanting it; nor is the same as thinking that what is cared about has value of some kind, or that it is desirable.' 'The notion of what a person cares about coincides in part with the notion of something with reference to which the person guides himself in what he does with his life and in his conduct... Caring, insofar as it consists in guiding oneself along a distinctive course or in a particular manner, presupposes both agency and self-consciousness. It is a matter of being active in a certain way, and the activity is essentially a reflexive one'.⁶

In which sense, is the one who cares active in virtue of his caring about something? When we find ourselves in difficult choice situations and weighty reasons speak for as well against doing something, then we are not passive by-standers to this conflict. Having assessed which attitude to endorse and from which to distance ourselves we seek to influence how the conflict is settled. Wanting to be moved by certain considerations and not by others is thus an active attempt of building one's character. When one wants to become more serious, or more just, one wants to have a certain motivational and volitional structure. One wants to be a certain kind of person, one who is moved by some and not by other considerations. Becoming more serious or more just often involves, as we all know, a serious effort on our part.⁷

By caring about something our lives become structured and meaningful. 'Caring', Frankfurt says, 'is indispensably foundational that connects and binds us to ourselves. It is through caring that we provide ourselves with volitional continuity, and in that

way constitute and participate in our own agency. Regardless of how suitable or unsuitable the various things we care about may be, caring about something is essential to our being creatures of the kind that human beings are'.⁸

Kierkegaard says, in the last passage I have quoted above, that choice itself – real choice – is decisive for the kind of person we are and without choice – real choice – personality and character withers away. The same idea resurfaces in Frankfurt when he claims that through caring we constitute our own agency – real agency, typical for humans who exercise their capability of second-order reflection and endorsement.

One of the characteristics of living in the aesthetic stage, Judge William tells us, is the boundedness to the presence and the immediacy of action: 'But what is it to live aesthetically and what is it to live ethically? What is the aesthetical in man and what is the ethical? To this I would reply: the aesthetical in man is that by which he is immediately what he is, the ethical is that whereby he becomes what he become' (E/O, 182). Reading Kierkegaard through Frankfurt helps to elucidate the distinction Kierkegaard draws here. First, the immediacy by which a wanton, a being without second-order reflection, acts is broken in beings like us. We can step back from our impulses and ask whether what we feel inclined to do really is what we ought to do. Second-order reflection and endorsement mediates between our impulses and our actions. Secondly, the activities involved in caring about something are future directed. However, so are, it might be pointed out, our first-order desires. The difference is that in caring about something, I not only have future-directed concerns regarding the object of my caring but because caring involves second-order attitudes, I am also concerned about my own volitional nature. For example, should I realize

that, on the first-order level, I grow indifferent towards something I care about I will try to revive and stimulate my interest in it. Whereas a being that lacks second-order concerns lives in the immediacy of the presence and is moved by whatever inclination turns out to be the strongest at the moment, a real person has, beside her first-order concerns, also herself as a constant project. The idea of oneself becoming (or remaining) a certain kind of person is, according to Kierkegaard, central to the ethical stage. In a situation of real or, as Kierkegaard sometimes says, of ‘absolute’ choice, I do not choose this or that (primarily), but what I choose is myself (cf. E/O, 218).

I have been concerned to show that Frankfurt’s hierarchical account of motivation elucidates Kierkegaard’s thoughts about the ethical. Nevertheless, unease might persist simply because of the apparent a-historical nature of such an approach. Frankfurt’s central thought, however, namely that we are able to evaluate and assess our inclinations, is by no mean a new idea. Christine Korsgaard has argued for views relevantly similar to Frankfurt’s.⁹ She firmly belongs to the Kantian tradition. Her portrayal of someone who acts on the desires of the moment, and thereby fails to exhibit full-fledged agency or real choice, because he does not question his inclinations from a higher perspective, can serve as a good illustration of Frankfurt’s wanton.

‘Jeremy settles down at his desk one evening to study for an examination. Finding himself too restless to concentrate, he decides to take a walk in the fresh air. His walk takes him past a bookstore, where the sight of an enticing title draws him to look at a book. Before he finds it, however, he meets his friend Neil, who invites him to join some of the other kids at the bar next door for a beer. Jeremy decides he can afford to have just one, and goes with Neil to the bar. When he arrives there, however, he finds

that the noise gives him a headache, and he decides to return home without having a beer. He is now, however, in too much pain to study. So Jeremy does not study for his examination, hardly gets a walk, doesn't buy a book, and doesn't drink a beer. If your reply is that Jeremy is a distractible adolescent and following desire is not always like this, Kant's reply in turn will be that it is only an accident when it is not.'¹⁰

Korsgaard claims that as long as someone lacks second-order endorsement or, in Kantian terms, a will, which deals with first-order inclinations, one will fall short of agency, as we understand it.¹¹ Kant's influence on Kierkegaard is visible in the following description of the aesthetic life: 'But he who says that he wants to enjoy life always posits a condition which either lies outside the individual or is in the individual in such a way that it is not posited by the individual himself' (E/O, 184). Here Kierkegaard comes very close to saying that a person in the aesthetic stage of life lacks, in Kant's terms, an autonomous will. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's account of autonomy differs from Kant's account. Whereas Kant holds that an autonomous will in being a law to itself is independent of any properties of the objects of volition, Kierkegaard has a less demanding conception of autonomy. Autonomy is achieved if one's aims in life are posited by oneself. I suggest that this is best understood in Frankfurt's terms, i.e. to have an autonomous will is to have effective second-order volitions.

II

I have outlined an interpretation of Judge William's critique of the aesthetic way of life that focuses on a way of choosing, which, it is claimed, is absent from the

aesthetic stage way of life.¹² Frankfurt's ideas have helped to elucidate this conception of choice and tied it to the notion of moral responsibility. What has Kierkegaard, thus understood, achieved? Has he established the superiority of the ethical and thereby vindicated morality? More in particular, has he established that one ought to get married, try to serve the public interest or, more generally, be benevolent and just? Certainly not – these matters have not even been a topic yet.

Kierkegaard's claim that in any real choice the ethical is already involved is, I have tried to argue, a point about the structure of real choice and not a claim about the object of real choice. Kierkegaard explicitly endorses this view, 'My either/or [i.e. real choice] does not in the first instance denote the choice between good and evil; it denotes the choice whereby one chooses good and evil or excludes them' (E/O 173). Only someone who makes real choices is, as a morally responsible agent, a proper participant in the ethical realm. 'It is, therefore, not so much a question of choosing between willing the good or the evil, as of choosing to will, but by this in turn good and evil are posited' (ibid).¹³

Kierkegaard's argumentative target, the ethical way of life, need not be ethical in, for example, the sense of a commonly accepted morality. Further steps are necessary in order to establish any specific duties like, for example, that one ought to keep one's promises. Essential to the ethical life is 'choosing to will', i.e. to lead a life in which one's first order inclinations are monitored, evaluated and either endorsed or rejected.

Let me compare this interpretation with the attempts of another interpreter. George Stack writes, 'In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard seems to describe at least three types of

crucial or 'absolute' choices: (1) the choice to choose, (2) the choice of the 'ethical', of good and evil, *or* the choice to exclude these determinates from one's conception of oneself and all actuality, and (3) the choice of oneself'.¹⁴ Stack has difficulties to reconcile these 'three conceptions of choice'. He says, 'Kierkegaard abruptly 'prescribes' that the object of choice (once the decision to choose is made) ought to be oneself, even though he had previously said that an individual may choose 'the wrong' and yet still be capable of authentic existence because the choice was made with the energy and 'inwardness' of the personality' (*ibid*).

Let me lift Stack's puzzlement by showing how the three types of absolute choice he mentions are unified by reading Kierkegaard the Frankfurt way. Kierkegaard argues that real choice involves second-order endorsement. Thereby we create or sustain a particular version of ourselves, i.e. we choose not only certain ways of acting, we also choose being a certain kind of person. In investing ourselves in our choices, we become morally responsible beings, which, on the one hand makes good and evil applicable to us and, furthermore, in having us so invested, the world becomes significant for us, such that evaluative vocabulary that goes beyond what is simply liked or disliked becomes meaningful to us. Stack thinks that Kierkegaard's claim that real choice is ethical must tell us something about the objects of choice, whereas I argue that it only captures its structure. Thus, he is puzzled that Kierkegaard seems to switch from one object, which is whatever the agent chooses to do, to another, which is the agent him- or herself. His puzzlement deepens, because Kierkegaard allows that despite real choice having to be ethical one can choose what is wrong. 'He who chooses the ethical chooses the good, but here the good is entirely abstract, only its being is posited, and hence it does not follow by any means that the chooser cannot in

turn choose the evil, in spite of the fact that he chose the good' (E/O, 173). Real choice is ethical because of its structure. Whether what we choose in such choices is good or bad is left open.

Why should one choose the ethical in this thin and, as Kierkegaard says, 'abstract' sense? We can discern two strands of considerations. First, the aesthetic life tends to be self-defeating. The constant search for pleasure, eventually, will only find boredom, emptiness, and despair. For Frankfurt, the aesthete's lack of identification with any of his first-order desires shows that the aesthete does not really care about anything. How can we convince someone who does not care to start caring? For Frankfurt, this is an impossible task. The aesthete might take boredom and despair as they come. He need not care about this either. 'What is not possible is for a person who does not already care at least about something to discover reasons for caring about anything. Nobody can pull himself up by his own bootstraps'.¹⁵ For Frankfurt however, the fact that arguments are useless at this point is unproblematic, because, in fact, we all do care about something, we all are persons, and we all accept responsibility for our actions. The personal style of *Either/Or* mirrors this point. Judge William aims at showing A that he already does care about some things. Judge William wants to move A into the ethical sphere by showing him that he already occupies it, and, if Frankfurt is correct, this is the only thing, one can do.¹⁶

Where does this interpretation leave our traditional conception of morality? According to Frankfurt, moral rules are undoubtedly important, but neither can they provide a comprehensive answer to the question how one should live, nor do they necessarily trump other considerations. 'Morality is most particularly concerned with

how our attitudes and actions should take into account the needs, the desires, and the entitlements of other people. Now why must *that* be regarded as being, without exception, the most compelling thing in our lives?’¹⁷ A life that accepts the constraints of morality is not yet a life worth pursuing. One needs to fill it with projects one can identify with and, in Frankfurt’s view, with love. To love someone or something is a way of caring about it, which is nonnegotiable. We discover what we love when we experience that we can do no other and identify with the necessity love confronts us with. On this view, neither the wanton nor the evil person will ‘repent’ under the pressure of purely philosophical argument. ‘It is possible, I am sorry to reveal, that immoral lives may be good to live. [...] Unless a person cares about being moral, or about something that depends on being moral, being moral will not make his life better for him. [...] It will not be reasonable for him to do what he is morally obliged to do, or to care that his conduct fails to meet the requirements of the moral law. What reason would he have, after all, to care about something that makes no important difference to him?’¹⁸

Though this might sound harsh, we should not understand Frankfurt as trying to undermine, to any extent, our confidence in the importance of moral rules. Frankfurt’s target is the philosophical ambition to persuade us that moral rules ought to guide us as a matter of rational necessity. Our reasons, Frankfurt claims, depend on our caring and loving and, thus, on contingent matters. If we try to bracket these contingencies, and construct the figure of a moral sceptic who simply does not care about others, we can condemn him, but we will not succeed in moving him by argument. ‘The origins of normativity do not lie, then, either in the transient incitements of personal feeling

and desire, or in the severely anonymous requirements of eternal reason. They lie in the contingent necessity of love.’¹⁹

Could Kierkegaard agree?²⁰ Love and its relation to ethics is one of Kierkegaard’s main topics in his later writings, especially in *Works of Love* (1847). When Kierkegaard talks about love in *The Purity of Heart* (1847), he says of the act of loving that ‘it may possibly become [for the person who loves] a helpful educator, who will finally lead him by the possession of his beloved one or perhaps by her loss, in truth to will one thing and to will the Good. In this fashion a man is educated by many means; and true love is also an education toward the good.’²¹ At this stage in Kierkegaard’s thought, the question how one should live is firmly set in a religious context. From a religious perspective, the contingency of any concern for the claims of others and their well-being, on which, if Frankfurt is right, moral motivation depends, is unproblematic. Any lack of such concerns is just part of a sinful world. It does nothing to undermine the authority of moral commands, once they have gained a religious foundation.²²

Frankfurt and Kierkegaard depart from each other, when it comes to the justification of moral rules. For Frankfurt, such justifiability will always be limited by our actual concerns and commitments. For Kierkegaard, the ethical becomes part of the religious stage of life where it finds both a foundation and a deeper interpretation. (Similarly, the real value of enjoyment, which Kierkegaard does not negate, has a place within the ethical way of life.) In his writings, Frankfurt encounters Kierkegaard, as far as I know, only once. He comments on the *Purity of Heart*, ‘Purity lies, as Kierkegaard doubtless intended to convey, in wholeheartedness. To the extent that a person is

wholehearted, no part of his will is alien or opposed to him... His heart is pure in the sense that his will is purely his own'.²³ In the *Purity of Heart*, Kierkegaard argues that purity of heart is to will one thing, the Good. Frankfurt raises a point against Kierkegaard by distinguishing single-mindedness, which, obviously, might not always be appropriate, from wholeheartedness. On Kierkegaard's conception of the Good, no such distinction applies. The love of the non-religious person might be 'an education towards the Good', the love of the religious person, however, is for the Good and, if we accept his religious premises, it seems right to say, that in this case it is a love for just one thing.

¹ Thus, it is a surprise that in the *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by A. Hannay & G. Marino, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1998, Frankfurt is nowhere mentioned. John Davenport in his 'The Meaning of Kierkegaard's Choice between the Aesthetic and the Ethical: A Response to MacIntyre', in: J. Davenport & A. Rudd, eds., *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, Open Court: Chicago: 2001, 75-112, is, as far as I know, the only Kierkegaard scholar who sees the connection between Kierkegaard and Frankfurt.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Vol. II, transl. by W. Lowrie, Princeton, Princeton University Press: 1944, pbk. ed. 1972. All references in the text to *Either/Or* are to the Lowrie translation.

³ Harry Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person', *Journal of Philosophy* 68, 1971, 5-20, repr. in G Watson, ed, *Free Will*, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 1982, 81-95.

⁴ Frankfurt, *ibid*, 82.

⁵ Frankfurt, *ibid*, 89.

⁶ Both quotations are from H Frankfurt, 'The Importance of What We Care About', in his *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1988, 80-94, 83.

⁷ This is not the place to get involved in a critical discussion of Frankfurt's views. Nevertheless, let me add that it is by no means unproblematic to tie the active self to one's second-order attitudes. If the wanton's self is portrayed as a pure by-stander to a struggle of desires, what change is brought about by introducing higher-order desires? Why are we not by-standers anymore when there is conflict between

desires of different levels? The answer to these questions lies in the activities involved in caring about something, to which I pointed above and which I will develop some more later on. For this challenge to Frankfurt, see G Watson, 'Free Agency', *Journal of Philosophy* 72, 1975, 205-220. Frankfurt answers in his 'Identification and Wholeheartedness' in his *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1988, 159-176. For a discussion of these issues see D Moran, Frankfurt on Identification: Ambiguities of Activity in Mental Life, in: S Buss and L Overton, eds, *Contours of Agency*, MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass: 2002, 189-217.

⁸ Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, Princeton University Press, Princeton: 2004, 17.

⁹ See Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1996, 49-130. Variations of Frankfurt's hierarchical account of motivation can also be found in C Taylor, 'Responsibility for Self', in G Watson, ed, *Free Will*, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 1982: 111-126, in G Watson, 'Free Agency', *Journal of Philosophy* 72, 1975: 205-220, and in S Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 1990.

¹⁰ Christine Korsgaard, 'The Normativity of Instrumental Reason', in: G Culllity & B Gaut, eds, *Ethics and Practical Reason*, Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1997, 215-254, 247, footnote 64.

¹¹ Remember Frankfurt's distinction between second-order desires, wanting to want something and second-order volitions wanting that one of one's desires be one's will. Although Frankfurt, locates the will on the first-order level as an effective desire, the importance of second-order volition shows his closeness to the Kantian view of agency. These parallels should not hide the fundamental difference between Korsgaard and Kant on the one hand and Frankfurt and, I think, Kierkegaard on the other. Whereas Frankfurt and Kierkegaard appeal to (second-order) psychological states in their answer to whether one should want what one wants, Kantians try to solve this question by appeal to structural features, like the universalizability of what we can choose rationally.

¹² Despite this limited focus, more could be said about the aesthetic way of life, which according to Kierkegaard, consists itself of various stages. One such stage would be the reflective aesthete. Davenport, with whom I agree about the importance of reading Kierkegaard through Frankfurt, understands the reflective aesthete as someone who has made it his project (on a third-order level) not to have second-order commitments. In Kantian terms, it would be like willing not to have a will. Thus described, one can legitimately worry about the consistency of such a project. See Davenport *op.cit.*, 95f.

¹³ Similarly, Frankfurt argues that ‘it is by caring about things that we infuse the world with importance’ (Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, Princeton University Press, Princeton: 2004, 21).

¹⁴ George J Stack, *Kierkegaard’s Existential Ethics*, University of Alabama Press, Alabama: 1977, 111f.

¹⁵ H Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, Princeton University Press, Princeton: 2004, 21.

¹⁶ The task for Judge William is, thus, not purely an argumentative task, it rather is the task of raising self-awareness. This is why he stresses at various places the importance of being honest to oneself.

¹⁷ H Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, Princeton University Press, Princeton: 2004, 7.

¹⁸ H Frankfurt, Reply to Wolf’, in: S Buss & L Overton, eds, *Contours of Agency*, MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass: 2002, 248.

¹⁹ H Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, Princeton University Press, Princeton: 2004, 48.

²⁰ Anthony Rudd in his *Kierkegaard’s and the Limits of the Ethical* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1993) portrays the following picture of Either/Or. In order to avoid despair and find meaning in one’s life, one needs to take on long-term commitments. Usually, these commitments will be tied to social roles, which bring with them their own rules and standards. Thus, to live a meaningful life in a social world, one will have to accept ethical standards, which define one’s role. Rudd ascribes to Kierkegaard an argument, whereas I see something more like persuasion and the attempt to create a higher degree of self-awareness. This difference aside, I share Rudd’s view that in Either/Or we cannot find an answer to the moral sceptic. John Davenport, with whom I agree about the connection between Frankfurt and Kierkegaard, has a more ambitious agenda for Kierkegaard in mind when he concludes that Kierkegaard succeeds in ‘... retaining objective moral standards of right action and ethical norms applying to volitional character’ (Davenport, ‘The Meaning of Kierkegaard’s Choice between the Aesthetic and the Ethical: A Response to MacIntyre’, 105). In contrast to Davenport, I understand Kierkegaard, and likewise Frankfurt, as an externalist about the reason-giving force of moral beliefs. Davenport is right that the morally good agent does what is right because it is right, but like all reasons, morality will only provide those agents with reasons who sufficiently care about those affected by their actions.

²¹ A Bretal, ed, *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1973, 280f.

²² I, thus, agree with Rudd when he writes, ‘The substantive philosophical point that I want to make ... is that such a conception of morality [according to which morality is a set of categorically obligatory requirements on every agent which cannot be overridden by non-moral requirements] can only be

vindicated on religious premises' (Rudd, *Kierkegaard's and the Limits of the Ethical*, 116). See also CS Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethics of Love*, Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2004, who discusses Kierkegaard's ethics in the context of a divine command theory of moral obligations.

²³ H Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, Princeton University Press, Princeton: 2004, 96.