

## 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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,”<sup>2</sup> 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

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1 over some significant stretch of time. Some-  
 2 one who is not wholehearted, however, may  
 3 act lovingly toward her beloved at one time,  
 4 and at another anxiously resist and reject the  
 5 promptings of love. Such a person experi-  
 6 ences a particular kind of problem in loving:  
 7 she is divided against herself, so that like  
 8 Othello she both supports and undermines  
 9 her most important concerns.

10 Another kind of argument, drawing on  
 11 Augustine, goes as follows. Someone who  
 12 is not wholehearted finds it difficult to re-  
 13 ally, fully make up her mind to pursue the  
 14 good. Even when she is very certain of how  
 15 the good stands, other concerns pull at her  
 16 attention and her will in a way that distracts  
 17 her and interferes with her attempts to live in  
 18 accordance with it. What she cares about, or  
 19 the manner in which she cares about it, does  
 20 not cohere with the good as she conceives it,  
 21 and as a result she continually interferes with  
 22 her most important concerns. Someone who  
 23 is wholehearted, on the contrary, is wholly  
 24 engaged with the good, loving it without the  
 25 inner conflict that besets the double-minded  
 26 person, not hindering herself from achieving  
 27 and enjoying the good as she sees it. Her con-  
 28 cerns cohere with one another, and she gives  
 29 to each its due, unified by her one great and  
 30 central love for the good.

31 These two arguments each highlight a com-  
 32 mon aspect of wholeheartedness: it perfects  
 33 love by ensuring that, in a specific respect,  
 34 we are undivided; applied to love, it means  
 35 that we are wholly involved in our concern  
 36 for what we love or care about, without inner  
 37 resistance to acting on its behalf, enjoying  
 38 what we love to the utmost and achieving all  
 39 that we can on its behalf.

40 The two arguments, however, also appeal to  
 41 distinct and divergent conceptions of whole-  
 42 heartedness. One of their points of conflict  
 43 provides a useful *entrée* into the subject.  
 44 Frankfurt takes exception to Kierkegaard's  
 45 statement that to be wholehearted is "to will  
 46 one thing."<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup>  
 What matters isn't how many objects she  
 cares about, but whether her attitude toward  
 them is consistent. Someone who loves mu-  
 sic, 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 conclu-  
 sion 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."<sup>5</sup> 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 ow-  
 ing much to Frankfurt's work, use this time  
 to develop a classical model of wholehearted-  
 ness 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 wholeheart-  
 edness: *Wholeheartedness is the state of an  
 agent who possesses undivided internal com-  
 mitment to her conception of the good.*<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.”<sup>8</sup> 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,”<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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

1 must be addressed. The account must first  
 2 specify the kinds of demands that love and  
 3 other concerns make and then clarify how these  
 4 demands may render someone's volitional state  
 5 either coherent or divided and fragmented.

6 I will begin with the fact that our concerns  
 7 make claims upon us: they claim, in an obvi-  
 8 ous way, time, resources, attention, and action.  
 9 But one concern may also make claims upon  
 10 other concerns, directly. Consider how one  
 11 concern may condition another. If a person  
 12 loves *X* and loves *Y*, and she loves *X* as a  
 13 means to or part of loving *Y*, or if her love for  
 14 *Y* limits or guides her love for *X*, then her love  
 15 for *Y* may be said to *condition* her love for *X*.  
 16 For example: someone might love a tool that  
 17 enables her to engage in something else she  
 18 loves, if it performs its function well, and so in  
 19 this way a painter might love a certain brand of  
 20 paintbrush or a fencer love a certain sword; a  
 21 lover might love her beloved's voice or sense  
 22 of humor or another aspect as part of loving  
 23 him, or again may love a letter written to her  
 24 by him or even a child she has had with him,  
 25 as part of loving him; someone's love for her  
 26 family may limit the importance she gives her  
 27 love for teaching and for her students, or vice  
 28 versa; or someone's religious devotion may  
 29 provide ideals of friendship or marriage that  
 30 guide how she loves her friends or spouse.

31 From this it follows that we may have  
 32 conditioning concerns, conditioned con-  
 33 cerns, unconditioned concerns, mutually  
 34 conditioning concerns, surd concerns that  
 35 neither condition nor are conditioned, and, of  
 36 course, conflicting concerns. I will call these  
 37 claims that our concerns make upon one an-  
 38 other "demands." Our concerns will conflict  
 39 whenever one concern demands to condition  
 40 another in a manner or respect resisted by the  
 41 second, and the conflict will be most intense  
 42 if both concerns demand to condition the  
 43 other while resisting being conditioned in  
 44 turn. Concerns that do not currently conflict  
 45 may be either integrated or unintegrated. Con-  
 46 cerns 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 living within our limits, by being human—not by trying to be gods.”<sup>11</sup> 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 combination, 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 character 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 character needs to allow one concern to be given clear priority (either giving the other a secondary 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 complete 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 conflicts 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 contemplation 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



1 the nature of the good, such that to commit to  
 2 one entails rejecting what is most important  
 3 to the other. For example, benevolence and  
 4 sadism—a general love of benefiting human  
 5 beings, and a general love of inflicting pain  
 6 upon them—cannot be coherently combined  
 7 in one heart. At a more philosophical level,  
 8 someone may be attracted to both Nietzsche’s  
 9 “revaluation of values” and to Christianity,  
 10 may love certain aspects of each, but the two  
 11 cannot in any meaningful way be combined  
 12 with one another. In both cases, what is cher-  
 13 ished in one is despised in the other. To love  
 14 one demands outlawing the other; but to love  
 15 both at the same time must often mean hating  
 16 and despising oneself, and perhaps revealing  
 17 oneself only in one’s dreams. Such loves  
 18 demand decisive exclusion of the other.

19 Whenever at least one concern in one of  
 20 these conflicts forms part of an agent’s con-  
 21 ception of the good—and in the majority of  
 22 cases, both concerns are part of it—then this  
 23 conflict will divide an agent’s commitment to  
 24 her conception of the good. When both are  
 25 parts of her conception, then it is the incoher-  
 26 ence of her conception that divides her against  
 27 herself. Such conflicts pose what I term the  
 28 *fragmentation problem*. A divided person’s  
 29 will is fragmented between ends in such a  
 30 way as to make it impossible to fully will her  
 31 conception of the good. It is the internal com-  
 32 mitment involved in love and care that prevents  
 33 us from viewing the fragmentation problem  
 34 as generally equivalent to, or solvable in the  
 35 same way as, problems regarding plurality and  
 36 incommensurability within the good.<sup>12</sup>

37 Someone facing the fragmentation problem  
 38 will find her commitment to the good divided  
 39 by a plurality of incompatible concerns, pull-  
 40 ing at her will, attention, and affections. As  
 41 Frankfurt has said, she suffers from “an inco-  
 42 herent sort of greed,” wishing “to have things  
 43 both ways.”<sup>13</sup> As he also says, this is not a  
 44 state with which any agent “can possibly be  
 45 satisfied.”<sup>14</sup> To the degree that someone suffers  
 46 from fragmentation problems between rival

concerns involving her conception of the good,  
 her practical life must be dissatisfying, inco-  
 herent, and disappointing to her; her deepest  
 concerns draw her in different and incompat-  
 ible directions, and she undermines her own  
 good through her wandering vacillations.

#### IV. WHY UTILIZE THE CLASSICAL CONCEPTION?

Someone might object to the “classical con-  
 ception” 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 ap-  
 propriate 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 advan-  
 tages 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 ad-  
 dresses 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> What could the connection be between  
 vacillation and sin, even original sin? The mys-  
 teries 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 disordered 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.<sup>17</sup> Ambivalence is therefore not fundamental, but the result of being persistently drawn to conflicting ends. Thus, whereas both Frankfurt and Augustine refer to ambivalence and fragmentation as a “disease,”<sup>18</sup> Frankfurt seems content to describe the symptoms. Frankfurt’s view therefore obscures the fundamental difference between a vacillation that arises from uncertainty and lack of knowledge (should I commit, even in ignorance of possible consequences?) 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. Wholeheartedness 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, making excessive sacrifices for the sake of one love ordinarily involves a terrible mistake. Even when it does not lead to obviously grievous 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 wholehearted 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 acceptable 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.

1 It is common, not only to the classical  
 2 conception of wholeheartedness, but to the  
 3 classical conception of agency itself (as  
 4 developed and utilized by authors such as  
 5 Plato and Aristotle), to suppose that an agent  
 6 typically possesses some one central object of  
 7 concern, which I have here called a “central  
 8 love,” such as pleasure, honor, and contem-  
 9 plation. Such an object integrates concern not  
 10 only by acting as a standard of goodness but  
 11 also by acting in the manner I have ascribed  
 12 to central loves, being granted the right to  
 13 condition all other concerns. Someone who  
 14 unifies her heart in this way seems, more  
 15 than anyone, to have good reason to claim to  
 16 possess undivided internal commitment to  
 17 her conception of the good.

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

30 One must wonder where such a person will  
 31 find the volitional power to achieve and main-  
 32 tain such a condition of coherence—by what  
 33 means are her concerns arranged into such an  
 34 orderly state? We know what it is for someone  
 35 to give herself to some one concern, to make  
 36 one great devotion to an ideal or cause, and to  
 37 achieve wholeheartedness by that means, rare  
 38 though it may be. Such was Abraham. When  
 39 such a person considers conflicts among her  
 40 less central concerns, her conception of the  
 41 good may either supply an answer to the con-  
 42 flict or not. If it does, then she knows what to  
 43 do, and resolves the conflict wholeheartedly;  
 44 if it does not, then her choice of resolution is  
 45 not important for her wholeheartedness. She  
 46 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 avail-  
 able 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 constitu-  
 tional 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 *summum 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

1 wholehearted commitment to a very unsound  
 2 conception of the good. In place of this ques-  
 3 tion, therefore, I will substitute and answer  
 4 another, more practical question: when should  
 5 we pursue wholeheartedness?

6 Consider Abraham as he figures in the fa-  
 7 mous Binding of Isaac. Near the end of Abra-  
 8 ham's life, after God has fulfilled his promise  
 9 to give Abraham offspring, God orders Abra-  
 10 ham to go to Mount Moriah and offer his son  
 11 Isaac as a burnt offering to him. At the last  
 12 moment, after Abraham has bound Isaac and  
 13 reached for the knife, God orders Abraham to  
 14 release his son. Philosophers have discussed  
 15 this story for a variety of reasons; I mention  
 16 it here because it seems to provide a notable  
 17 example of wholeheartedness, in its difficulty  
 18 and moral ambiguity. Abraham, despite lov-  
 19 ing his son, was nonetheless so completely  
 20 devoted to God that he did not withhold his  
 21 son from him. Some have taken this as a proof  
 22 of Abraham's virtue, others, as proof of his  
 23 wickedness; Abraham, for his part, seemed to  
 24 have no doubts. It is not plain what exactly  
 25 Abraham expects to come from sacrificing  
 26 his son. He tells Isaac that God will provide  
 27 the sacrifice, and the author of *Hebrews* says  
 28 that Abraham expected God to raise Isaac  
 29 from the dead, if he should slay him. But what  
 30 seems plain is that Abraham follows God  
 31 wholeheartedly; he displays no hesitancy at  
 32 any moment, and there is no question when  
 33 the objects of his concern conflict which he  
 34 favors, no doubt that even his love for his son  
 35 cannot divide his heart against his decisive  
 36 commitment to and trust in God.

37 Is such devotion virtuous? If Othello il-  
 38 lustrates the disease of double-mindedness,  
 39 Abraham may make us leery of the cure.  
 40 For even if we think that Abraham's judg-  
 41 ment was correct, it isn't clear that someone  
 42 could not have such trust and wholehearted  
 43 devotion where judgment is incorrect. In  
 44 that case, if even a vicious Abraham can be  
 45 described as wholehearted, then it is not so  
 46 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 ideol-  
 ogy; 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 some-  
 one 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 wholehearted-  
 ness 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.<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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;<sup>22</sup> 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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- 1 1. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act 5, Scene 2, lines 342–344.
- 2 2. Alasdair MacIntyre, “Comments on Frankfurt,” *Synthese*, vol. 53, no. 2 (1982), pp. 291–294; p. 292.
- 3 3. See Kierkegaard’s *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas Steere (New York: Harper
- 4 & Row, 1956).
- 5 4. Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 95–96.
- 6 5. Cf. Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love*, p. 62, regarding “disruptive conflicts.”
- 7 6. The classical conception may, in fact, opt for something stronger, replacing “her conception of the
- 8 good” with “the good” *simpliciter*, so that the definition would be *wholeheartedness is the state of an*
- 9 *agent who possesses undivided internal commitment to the good*. This strengthened form is explicit in
- 10 Kierkegaard’s treatment of purity of heart, but may be implicit in other formulations. The reason for
- 11 this is that the classical conception of wholeheartedness is typically joined to a classical conception of
- 12 agency, according to which the will is naturally attracted to the good and influenced by reason in such
- 13 a way that, like Huck Finn, agents cannot in the end be entirely committed to a false conception of the
- 14 good. At some point, the agent feels her error, because she cannot escape the truth.
- 15 7. Although distinct, the two senses become intertwined in the case of vows between those who love
- 16 each other—for example in the vows shared in a wedding or between “blood brothers.”
- 17 8. *Confessions*, XIII.9.10 : “pondus meum amor meus.”
- 18 9. Sappho, Diehl 137: “γλυκύπικρον ἀμάχανον ὄρπετον.”
- 19 10. See Harry Frankfurt, “Autonomy, Necessity, and Love,” in *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge:
- 20 Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 138.
- 21 11. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 3rd edition (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996), p. 95.
- 22 12. Such as in Thomas Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value,” *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge
- 23 University Press, 1991), pp. 128–141. Less severe conflicts, such as scheduling conflicts, bear a greater
- 24 resemblance to these more general problems of plurality and incommensurability.
- 25 13. Frankfurt, “The Faintest Passion,” in *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 99.
- 26 14. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 27 15. See, for example, Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love*, p. 99.
- 28 16. Frankfurt, “Faintest Passion,” p. 100; Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love*, p. 99.
- 29 17. For example, cf. *City of God* XIV, especially XIV.7, 9, and 11.
- 30 18. Augustine uses “disease of the mind” (*aegritudo animi*) at *Confessions* VIII.9.21; Frankfurt rein-
- 31 terprets the phenomenon as a “disease of the will” in “Faintest Passion,” p. 100.
- 32 19. C. Stephen Evans and R. Zachary Manis, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edition (Downers Grove, IL:
- 33 IVP Academic, 2009), p. 205.
- 34 20. Evans and Manis, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 205.
- 35 21. This conception of goods and goods internal to activities owes much to the work of both Alasdair
- 36 MacIntyre (in *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1980; and *Whose Justice? Which Rational-*
- 37 *ity?*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) and Talbot Brewer (in *The Retrieval of Ethics*, Oxford:
- 38 Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 39 22. Matthew Crawford, “Work and Self-Knowledge,” a section in “The Value of Manual Work,” *Acta*
- 40 *Philosophica*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2012), pp. 181–186; p. 185.
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