

INTENTIONS AND AGENCY*

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In my paper I investigate Harry G. Frankfurt's philosophy of action from the point of view of the concept of intentionality in action. Many influential philosophers of action assume that agents have a separate faculty to form intentions. Most notably, Michael E. Bratman, David J. Velleman and Gary Watson claim that this ability is centrally important to our ability to act. To be agents, it seems to be necessary to actively influence our behavior, and intentions play a significant role in this process. However, very controversially, Frankfurt's philosophy seems to imply that we do not have a separate ability to form intentions. Rather, our intentions are reducible to a certain type of complex desires. So it seems that in the same way as he reduces reason to desires (most notably in his book *The Reasons of Love*), he reduces our ability to form intentions to a special way of desiring as well. In the paper I discuss some difficulties of this view, and I try to point out some advantages of the contrary view according to which we have a separate faculty to actively form intentions.

Keywords: Philosophy of action – Intentions as complex desires – Ability to act

In this paper I would like to consider the concept of intention and intention formation in the light of some recent development in the philosophy of action. I will focus on Harry G. Frankfurt's views on action. Famously, he has a non-rational, Humean theory of motivation and action, built on a hierarchical account of desires. As Velleman notes, an important aspect of Frankfurt's theory is that it is a non-standard theory of action that tries to give an account of the agent's active participation in his agency.¹ According to standard accounts,² when we act, we have a desire and a belief that a certain course of action will contribute to satisfying our desire. Taken together, our desire and belief cause an intention to perform a certain course of action. According to Velleman, the problem with the standard account is that it "fails to include an agent – or, more precisely, fails to cast the agent in his proper role".³ Certain psychological events occur in us (a desire and a

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¹ J. David Velleman: "What Happens When Someone Acts?" In: Velleman: *The Possibility of Practical Reason*. Oxford University Press, 2000, 123 -144, originally in *Mind* 101, 1992, 461-481.

² See for example: Donald Davidson: *Essays on Actions and Events*. Oxford University Press, 1980.

³ Velleman, 123.

belief) and they cause other events (intentions), but the agent himself does not do anything. Frankfurt's non-standard account tries, but fails, to account for the active participation of the agent. I will argue for this claim by analyzing both his classic hierarchical account of desires and his most recent views on caring. The main problem with his thinking is that he sticks to his claim that we are only moved by desires. He would say that we do not have a separate faculty to form intentions but our intentions are reducible to certain complex, sophisticated sets of desires. His insistence on this claim makes his attempt unsuccessful because we need something that is different from desires to explain the agent's active participation. In other words, intention formation has to be independent from our desires.

1

Since the ability to form intentions is centrally important for the agent's active participation in action, I would like to begin by looking at the concept of intention. Michael Bratman's important theory of action is an intention-based theory according to which self-governance (or autonomy) is central to action. Now, how does one govern himself? Bratman agrees with Watson that "a form of valuing is central to self-government".⁴ With this, we get to intentions: this form of valuing is basically a kind of intending.⁵ Suppose for example, that I value health. According to this theory, valuing health means that I intend to live healthily, and I intend to do several things that contribute to my goal, for example I intend to quit smoking, to exercise, to eat healthy food, etc. Bratman draws our attention to the fact that human beings are temporally extended creatures, and this fact is centrally important for action. An intention to do something is not merely an intention to do something at a given moment but it organizes our agency through time. We should not intend to do something without considering how this fits into our long term goals. Though it is possible to intend to do something only at a given moment, we should not do so simply because we are temporally extended creatures. That is, typically our intentions have a *diachronic aspect*. Though sometimes we form merely *synchronic intentions*, in such cases we usually intend to do something insignificant. Shall I drink a glass of wine or water after dinner? If, as an answer to this question I form the intention to drink a glass of wine without having any special concerns in connection with nutrition, my intention will be merely synchronic, that is, it will not be connected with my future plans. However, if I form the intention not to drink wine because I value abstinence, my intention will have a diachronic aspect, since it is not simply an intention not to drink wine now, but not to drink it in the future as well. In cases of important and significant matters our intentions are typically diachronic.

What is the nature of intentions, then? Is diachronic intention formation a rational process? Is it the case that our intentions are formed on the basis of our practical judgments? For example, if I form the intention not to smoke a cigarette, is it because I have

⁴ Michael E. Bratman: *Structures of Agency*, Oxford University Press, 2007, 239. See also: Gary Watson: "Free Agency". In: Watson: *Agency and Answerability*. Oxford University Press, 2004, 13-33 (originally in the *Journal of Philosophy*, 72/8, April 1975, 205-220).

⁵ Bratman, 239.

made a rational judgment that since smoking is unhealthy, I *should* not smoke? Or is it the case that I strongly desire to live healthily and as a consequence I simply form an intention not to smoke? The question is this: how are our intentions connected to our practical reason, our values and our desires? Is intention formation a rational or a non-rational, cognitive or non-cognitive process? Or does it have both aspects? If yes, which one of them is primary?

The answer to the questions above depends on what we think about human nature. If we think that human action necessarily involves deliberation based on reasoning and judgments, we will claim that our intentions should be based on our reasons and judgments. That is, when we form an intention it is because we *judged* that we should do so, or because we have a *reason* to do so. In that case intentions are *reducible to judgments*. But if we think, as Frankfurt does, that humans are basically creatures that are only moved by desires, we will claim that intention formation depends on our desires, that is, when we intend to do something (either in the synchronic or diachronic sense) it is because we *desire* something. In his view, then, intentions are reducible to desires. Of course, one cannot deny that humans deliberate, reason, and make judgments about what to do. But Frankfurt can account for this fact by claiming that our reasoning and judgments are somehow caused by our desires, and that they merely *rationalizations*. He might be right that we are not governed by “universal reason” but as I will try to point out, his views imply that active participation in our agency is only an *illusion*. Instead, I will argue that we need to have a faculty to form intentions that is not reducible either to our desires or judgments.

Let us examine Frankfurt’s views on action and their development over the recent years. He has a classic Humean view on human nature according to which we are only moved by desires. He worked out a highly sophisticated theory of motivation which includes hierarchical structures of desires to account for the complexity of human motivation. These structures involve both synchronic and diachronic elements. Let us first look at the synchronic hierarchical structures that Frankfurt talks about. In his classic paper ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person’⁶ he distinguished between first-, and higher order desires; the former are desires to do something, and the latter are desires about first order desires, for example, to have or not to have certain first order desires. He also talked about higher order volitions which are a special type of second-order desires. When one forms a second order volition, one “wants a certain desire to be his will”.⁷ Frankfurt thinks that the formation of higher order desires and volitions is distinctive of human kind. He also thinks that the formation of higher order volitions is the manifestation of the uniquely human capacity of “reflective self-evaluation”.⁸ One can be a human being and a person only if he is able to form second order volitions. An agent with no second-order volitions is only a *wanton*, somebody who is careless and indifferent to his

⁶ Harry G. Frankfurt, ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person’. In: Harry G. Frankfurt: *The Importance of What We Care About*. Cambridge University Press, 1988, 11-26 (originally in the *Journal of Philosophy*, 68/1, January 1971).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

own motivations to act.⁹

Can we interpret Frankfurt's theory in terms of intention formation? Higher-order phenomena are "intention-like", unlike raw desires. However, Frankfurt would prefer to say that we do not have a separate faculty to form intentions and we are only moved by desires. But a wanton and a person are still different. In a wanton a desire occurs spontaneously and it moves him to act without any „reflective self-evaluation". For example, he desires to drink a glass of wine, and he is automatically moved to do so by this desire. There is something wrong with the wanton. We are not creatures that are automatically moved by spontaneously occurring desires. We deliberate and we actively participate in the process. According to Frankfurt's classic view, this participation is based on our ability to form higher-order desires. That is, when we reflectively evaluate ourselves, we either endorse one of our desires or refuse it as not expressing our will. It is crucial that both endorsement and refusal are just a special type of desires. When I endorse the presence of a desire in myself, it means that I desire its presence on a higher order. For example, I might desire a glass of wine, and desire to have this desire: I am satisfied with it and I take it to express what I want or to use Frankfurt's term, I identify myself with it. And consequently when I decide to drink a glass of wine I want to do what I really want to do. But if I refuse my desire on the higher level, the situation is different. In that case I form a higher order desire not to have the desire to drink a glass of wine, perhaps because I have a contrary desire to abstain and I endorse *that* desire on the higher level. In order to be fully human creatures that reflectively evaluate their behavior, we have to act in accordance with the desires we form on higher levels. When my desires of various orders are in agreement with each other, that is, when I have the same desires on the higher orders as on the first order, I am *wholehearted* person. This volitional unity also provides the agent with *freedom of the will*. If I want the same on the first-order and on the higher-order, it means that I want that I really want and Frankfurt thinks that this means that I want it freely.

Frankfurt's classic theory is built only upon the concept of desires and gives some of our desires a primacy. However, some doubted that desires can have a primacy and authority. The mere fact that a desire is of a higher order does not give it a special status. Famously, Gary Watson argued that: „since second-order volitions are themselves simply desires, to add them to the context of conflict is just to increase the number of contenders; it is not to give a special place to any of those in contention".¹⁰ The point is that the agent simply might not care which of his higher order desires win the contention or in other words which of them moves him to act in the end. Frankfurt used the term wantonness to refer to people who act without deliberation and who are indifferent to their own motivation, but since one can be indifferent about which of his higher order desires moves him to act, one can be a wanton as regards his higher-order desires and volitions as well. As a result, Watson suggests that it is not enough to operate only with the concept of desires; we need something that is essentially different from them. Maybe it is true that desires have a hierarchical order, but this hierarchy has to be grounded in something with a fun-

⁹ Ibid., 16-17.

¹⁰ Watson, 28.

damentally different nature from desires. For him, these are *evaluations* and *evaluational judgments*. That is we have to have normative reasons to do a certain action or not to do another. In the example, one might have a reason not to drink a glass of wine because he values abstinence. This evaluation is prior, and gives rise to, a hierarchy of desires: the fact that I judge abstinence valuable creates a higher-order desire in me not to drink. As he puts it: evaluations are prior and of the first order”.¹¹ Our higher order desires and volitions do not have a special status because they are of a higher order, but they are of a higher order because they are grounded in our evaluations.

We saw that a crucial problem with Frankfurt’s classic view is that the hierarchy has to be grounded in something that has a special status and an authority. And there is another important problem, also noted by Watson, namely that agents normally do not ask themselves „which of their desires they want to be effective in action; they ask themselves which course of action is most worth pursuing”.¹² That is, when we deliberate we should think about which course of action is worth pursuing and not our own selves. On the basis of his theory, we need to ask which course of action is the most valuable, and an evaluation involves forming a set of intentions¹³ to do and not to do certain things. This theory has the advantage that it can account for the fact that we do not exist in singular moments only but we are temporally extended, and our intentions in each given moment are connected to our intentions in other moments. When we evaluate something it amounts to saying that we have intentions to do certain things and these intentions are stable and exist through a certain length of time.

2

I think Frankfurt’s recent views on caring can account for the diachronic nature of our volitional life and it also tries to ground the hierarchical structure of desires in something that has a purported authority. When we care about something, we not only endorse a desire, but additionally, we also desire or want to have this desire in the future. As he puts it: “besides wanting to fulfill his desire, [...] the person who cares about what he desires wants something else as well: he wants his desire to be sustained”.¹⁴ While a synchronically wholehearted agent is satisfied with a desire at a certain moment only, his diachronic counterpart is satisfied with it for the future, too. The main difference between the two, then, is that the wholehearted agent who cares has some reflexive temporal attitudes toward his volitional unity or wholeheartedness, while the one who does not care about anything does not have any attitudes like these.

Frankfurt’s theory of caring can be interpreted as an attempt to ground the hierarchy of desires in something that has an authority about what to do and yet has a primarily non-

¹¹ Ibid, 30.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Watson’s view implies an internal connection between evaluations and intentions, but this connection in some cases permits “deliberately opting for the lesser good”. See: Gary Watson: ‘The Work of the Will’. In: Watson (2004), 123-157, 134, originally in Sarah Stroud and Christine Tappolet (eds.): *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality*, Oxford University Press, 2003, 172-200).

¹⁴ Harry G. Frankfurt: *The Reasons of Love*. Princeton University Press, 2006., 16.

rational nature. With this move he can preserve his central Humean claim according to which humans are only moved by desires. Now, can we interpret this theory in terms of intentions? Frankfurt would still claim that we do not have a faculty of intention formation separate from our desires. However, caring seems to be “intention-like”, since it expresses what the agent really wants. If I decide to do something it should reflect what I care about, for example if I decide to write this paper on philosophy it should be because I care about philosophy as such. My concern for philosophy manifests itself in a set of desires: I desire to read books and papers on philosophy, to write philosophy, participate in discussions and conferences, etc. At the heart of my volitional life, then, is what I care about, which amounts to saying that my agency is organized by what I desire in the complex mode of caring.

Frankfurt recently has developed his view further by claiming that the most important mode of caring is *love*.¹⁵ He thinks that besides being the most important mode of caring, love is central to our practical reason because it helps us answer the question how we should live. He defines love in the following way: “Loving someone or something essentially *means* or *consists in*, among other things, taking its interests as reasons for acting to serve those interests”.¹⁶ The link between caring and love is simply that to love means to care about the interests of the beloved. When somebody loves his children it means that he cares about their well-being non-instrumentally, that is, their well-being is important for him for its own sake and not for some other reason.

Frankfurt’s ideal agent, then, is the person whose actions reflect what he cares about or loves most in life. According to him, these are in the center of our *volitional identity*. Furthermore, there are *volitional necessities*: there are things we cannot help wanting and there are other things we cannot make ourselves to want. For example, if somebody loves his children he cannot but want what is good for them and he cannot want to harm them. Essentially, caring and love are *limitations of the will*. Frankfurt asserts again that if one’s motive that moves him is such that he truly wants to be motivated by it, he enjoys freedom of the will: “This is as close to freedom of the will as finite beings, who do not create themselves, can intelligibly hope to come.”¹⁷

What is the nature of our intentions and the process of their formation, then? Frankfurt would say that we do not have a separate faculty to form intentions; rather, our actions should depend on what we desire in the complex ways specified above in connection with caring and love. The ability to organize our agency through time depends on our ability to care and love wholeheartedly. What’s more, caring and love is not only the organizing principle of our agency, they have *an authority* about what we should do. Now, what is exactly the source of the authority of caring and love? The answer to this question is connected to Frankfurt’s views on personal identity. As we have seen, caring and love are in the center of our identity. It means that if we do what caring and love dictates to us, we do what we really want. The authority of caring and love is based on the fact that they are central to our identity, and as a consequence when I act in the way they dictate, my

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶ Ibid., 37, italics in the original.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

action expresses what *I* want.

Frankfurt thinks that the only options of wholeheartedness are *indifference* and *ambivalence*.¹⁸ We already encountered a form of indifference in the case of a wanton: a wanton is a person who is indifferent to his very own desires as a result of a lack of higher-order desires. A different type of indifference is when somebody lacks caring and love. Such agents are unable to answer the question how they should live, and as a consequence, nothing is important for them and they do not have any aims in life. The other option to wholeheartedness is ambivalence which means that somebody is torn between two equally strong concerns between which he is unable to choose. His will is divided; and he cannot make up his mind upon what to do. There are two competing authorities in his mind that try to push him in two different directions. In contrast, the wholehearted agent has a volitional identity that has an authority about what to do and from which our decisions can flow spontaneously.

3

In the rest of the paper I would like to criticize Frankfurt's views on caring and love. Though it seems that he has a good solution to the problem of the diachronic nature of motivation and he also offered an account of the authority in which our actions should be grounded in, his insistence on his central Humean claim according to which we are only moved by desires creates problems for him.

First, if he is right that our actions should be grounded in caring and love, the reflective nature of deliberation becomes illusory. Though it was him who claimed that reflective deliberation involves an ascent to hierarchically higher orders, his theory on caring questions this ascent since it seems to imply a contrary movement of descent into deeper levels of motivation. The main reason for this is his claim that what we care about and love is the result of our circumstances: of our biological nature and of our personal history. Caring and love does not occupy a hierarchically higher order and is not the result of reflection. On the contrary, in a sense, it is at the *lowest level* in our psychology, since it is at the heart of our volitional identity. It is not the result of reflection but it is created through a deterministic process part of which is our biological and psychological constitution and the circumstances that influenced our development. Now, Frankfurt claims that when we deliberate, at a point we do not consider what we should do but we have to understand what it is that we care about most. At heart, the question about what we should do is not a *normative* but a *factual* question, then.

Frankfurt's move is understandable since he cannot answer the criticism discussed above in connection with the problem of higher-order desires by referring to yet other higher-order desires. So if he wants to keep his central claim according to which we are only moved by desires, he has to say that a given hierarchical structure of desires has to be *grounded* in some other desires. But he has to pay a price for this claim: he has to accept that active participation in our agency is an illusion. Though he would be willing to pay this price, in my view this is too pessimistic, and it might be that we are not subjected to our desires to such an extent as he claims.

¹⁸ Ibid., 65-66.

And even if a Frankfurtian volitional essence influences or even organizes our agency through time, it is questionable that it has the relevant authority required for action. This can be easily seen if we consider the case of somebody who realizes that what he cares about most in life is the destruction of his own self. He also realizes that he is wholehearted about this matter, or in other words he has no contrary desires on whichever level. He can still understand that there is something wrong with him but this insight will be completely inert; it will not change anything for him. He will think that his concern to destroy himself is the essence of his volitional identity and he will continue his self-destruction. Frankfurt claims that all values are derived from what we care about in the way he described it, which implies that there are no objective values. However, we can certainly imagine the case of an addict for example who does not at all care about his health and continues his self-destructive habit of drinking or drug abuse while knowing that it is *wrong* that he does so and that he does not care about his health. Watson is right that there should be an independent faculty that helps to judge the value of actions independently of what we happen to desire or not desire.

At best, then, Frankfurt's theory can only work in case caring and love is directed at something good. If somebody happens to wholeheartedly care about and love something good, there seems to be no problem with the way his intentions are formed on the basis of them. However, his views imply that if they are directed at something bad, one has no power to change the situation. There should be an ability that helps us change ourselves and which has a different nature from desires. But is this ability identical to our faculty of practical reason and judgment? It seems that though this faculty is essential, it is not sufficient for action. For example Bratman stresses that reasons underdetermine action.¹⁹ That is, even if an addict judges that he should not drink or take the drug because it is wrong, or in other words if he realizes that he has good reasons not to drink or take the drug it does not imply that he will not do so. He might still end up drinking or taking the drug. But it does not follow, as Frankfurt contends, that caring as a complex structure of desires is what we need.

What we really need is an ability to *actively* influence our motivation. As I noted earlier, Frankfurt's philosophy of action stresses the importance of the agent's active participation in action, but in this paper I have tried to show that he fails to give a good account on how this could work. As Velleman pointed out, we need something that the agent *actively does*, and not merely *happens*. But Frankfurt's recent views increasingly focus on something that occurs spontaneously, and which we cannot simply choose by a decision, namely a complex system of desires. But if action depends on such a phenomenon, the agent's active participation in his motivational life becomes an illusion. At the end of the day Frankfurt's central claim according to which active participation in our agency depends on our ability to form certain types of desires is seriously puzzling. For being able to actively do something seems to imply a capacity to control and voluntarily exercise this particular ability but desires are notoriously spontaneous and are not subject to immediate voluntary control.

What follows from the above is that we need a faculty of intention formation as so-

¹⁹ Bratman, 205.

something different from both desires (however sophisticated structures they may form) and practical reason. Desiring a course of action or the presence of a motivation for it in ourselves does not amount to forming intentions since I can desire something without forming any intentions. But judging valuable something seems to have the same problem: it does not amount to forming intentions, since I can judge something to be valuable without forming any intentions. The *prima facie* reason for this seems to be that the capacity to form intentions is not constrained by either judgments or desires. If all this is true, we can try to locate the agent's ability to actively participate in his agency in his ability to form intentions this way. We need to have a faculty to form intentions²⁰ that is not reducible either to our desires or judgments. It is a difficult question whether we have such a faculty, but Frankfurt's skepticism that we do not seems to be unwarranted.

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²⁰ Besides Bratman, similar views were recently developed by Thomas Pink and Gary Watson, both of whom postulate the existence of a faculty of the *will*. See: Thomas Pink: *The Psychology of Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Gary Watson: 'The Work of the Will'.