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# THE DUTY TO TRUTHFULNESS: WHY WHAT WE CARE ABOUT IS A MORAL MATTER

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THE DUTY TO TRUTHFULNESS:  
WHY WHAT WE CARE ABOUT IS A MORAL MATTER

by

JEREMY SAKOVICH

Under the Direction of Eric Wilson, PhD

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I argue that Harry Frankfurt's view of the domain of ethics is flawed. On Frankfurt's view, what we care about falls outside the proper scope of ethics because we are bound to what we care about, not by the force of moral necessities, but by non-moral 'volitional necessities'. I show, however, that being moved to care within the constraints of our volitional necessities requires meeting a moral obligation of self-honesty. Developing Kant's idea of a duty to truthfulness, I show that the duty to truthfulness is a duty to self-honesty. I then contend that self-honesty is a moral duty because self-honesty is essential for self-respect. Thus, because we fulfill a moral obligation to ourselves in the course of caring about things within the constraints of our volitional necessities, what we care about is a moral matter within the domain of ethics.

INDEX WORDS: Frankfurt, Kant, Identification, Honesty, Truthfulness, Ethics



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WHY WHAT WE CARE ABOUT IS A MORAL MATTER

by

JEREMY SAKOVICH

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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Georgia State University

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2016

THE DUTY TO TRUTHFULNESS:  
WHY WHAT WE CARE ABOUT IS A MORAL MATTER

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is in honor of all those in my life who care about helping me become and remain an honest man; and to all those who care enough to be honest with me. There is nothing like sharing the truth with those you love. Special thanks to my wife, my family, and my friends who have supported me as I have pursued this project. Thanks to John Wingard for helping me along as an undergraduate student. And, last but not least, to Oscar – your commitment to honesty and integrity have shaped me more than you know.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In his essay, “The Importance of What We Care About,” Harry Frankfurt contends that suitable research into the nature of what we care about requires a branch of philosophical inquiry distinct from both ethics and epistemology. Because he thinks that epistemology is the study of what to believe, and ethics is the study of how to behave, “It is not properly within the scope either of epistemology or of ethics to investigate the various distinctive conceptual questions to which [our] preoccupation [with what to care about] leads.”<sup>1</sup> Frankfurt’s central reason for thinking that what we care about falls outside ethics is his view that we are moved to care about what we care about by necessities that derive from subjective features of our own wills, and from principles of personal integrity and consistency rather than from objective moral necessities.<sup>2</sup> Here Frankfurt gives an example showing that necessities deriving from what we care about and moral necessities are distinct:

If a mother who is tempted to abandon her child finds that she simply cannot do that, it is probably not because she knows (or even because she cares about) her duty. It is more likely because of how she cares about the child, and about herself as its mother, than because of any recognition on her part that abandoning the child would be morally wrong. Consistency therefore does not require her to suppose that the action which she cannot bring herself to perform must be found to be similarly impossible by every mother whose circumstances are similar to hers.<sup>3</sup>

Frankfurt suggests in this passage that it is a standard of consistency, not morality, which moves the mother to refrain from abandoning her child. Were the mother to abandon her child, she would be abandoning something she cares about and, thus, in some sense abandoning herself. The demands of acting consistently with respect to what we care about, according to Frankfurt,

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<sup>1</sup> Frankfurt (1988), 80.

<sup>2</sup> Frankfurt (1988), 91.

<sup>3</sup> Frankfurt (1988), 90.

constrain our wills with a kind of necessity. The mother in Frankfurt's example, then, may take it that she *cannot* abandon her child, even though she may feel tempted to do so. The necessities of our wills are what Frankfurt calls 'volitional necessitates'. Our volitional necessities "constrain us from betraying the things we care about most and with which, accordingly, we are most closely identified. In a sense which a strictly ethical analysis cannot make clear, what they keep us from violating are not our duties or our obligations but ourselves."<sup>4</sup> Thus the mother's caring about her child in Frankfurt's example is not important for the mother because the child is valuable or because caring about children is objectively good or morally right. Rather the activities of caring and of acting consistently with respect to what she cares about are important for her because it is in virtue of those activities that she remains the person that she is.

Some philosophers, however, take issue with Frankfurt's view of what we care about. Specifically, certain philosophers maintain that Frankfurt is mistaken to claim that what we care about is not determined by caring about what is objectively valuable and good. John Cottingham, for example, takes issue with the subjective nature of Frankfurt's view of what we care about. Cottingham thinks that Frankfurt's view implies that "we are left with something's merely being 'good for me', if I decide wholeheartedly to pursue it."<sup>5</sup> Cottingham contends that, if Frankfurt is right, and what we care about is only a matter of keeping to standards of personal integrity and consistency, then we are left with "no more than a depressing tautology – that people care about what they care about – but with nothing genuinely normative."<sup>6</sup> Cottingham's

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<sup>4</sup> Frankfurt (1988), 91.

<sup>5</sup> John Cottingham, "Integrity and Fragmentation," *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2010), 12. Cottingham is really taking issue both with Frankfurt's view of integrity and with the view of integrity held by Bernard Williams – see p. 10. Cottingham finds it problematic that both Williams and Frankfurt appear to be skeptical about objective value and objective moral claims.

<sup>6</sup> Cottingham, 12.

objection, however, involves a strong commitment to objective value and goodness; a commitment which might strike some as metaphysically problematic.

Susan Wolf tries to take a similar position to Cottingham while only committing herself to a thin notion of the objectivity of value. In particular, she attempts to carve out enough space in an account of what we care about to be able to say that it is better to care about some things rather than other things in virtue of the fact that what we care about is itself valuable. Wolf's target in Frankfurt's account of caring is the following claims where Frankfurt concludes that it is caring itself that is valuable; not what we care about:

What makes it more suitable, then, for a person to make one object rather than another important to himself? It seems that it must be the fact that it is *possible* for him to care about the one and not about the other, or to care about the one in a way which is more important to him than the way in which it is possible for him to care about the other. When a person makes something important to himself, accordingly, the situation resembles an instance of divine *agape* at least in a certain respect. The person does not care about the object because its worthiness commands that he do so. On the other hand, the worthiness of the activity of caring commands that he choose an object which he will be able to care about.<sup>7</sup>

And,

[I]n addition to the fact that *my children* are important to me, there is also the rather different and no less significant fact that *loving my children* is important to me. My love for them is a valuable element of my life... It would be a mistake to suppose, however, that the value to me of loving them derives from their importance to me, or that my love for them is a response to my understanding that they are valuable to me... [I]t is not fundamentally because I recognize how important to me my children are that I love them. On the contrary, the relationship between their value to me and my love for them goes essentially the other way. My children are so valuable to me in the first place just because I love them. The point is that loving is valuable *inherently*, and for its own sake. To love is valuable in itself, and not only in virtue of the value of what is loved.<sup>8</sup>

Wolf hopes to show that there is reason to think that we can give an account of value that is sufficient to imply that some objects are themselves worth caring about without positing the robust Platonic sorts of objective values that Cottingham seems to lean on. On her view, we can

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<sup>7</sup> Frankfurt (1988), 94.

<sup>8</sup> Frankfurt, "Duty and Love," *Philosophical Explorations*, Vol. 1, 6.

say that some things are worth caring about more than others, and that a person is better off when loving and caring about what is worth loving and caring about.<sup>9</sup>

A third philosopher, Barbara Herman, also takes a similar stand against Frankfurt's view, but she aims her concern less at objective value and more at objective morality.<sup>10</sup> What most concerns Herman is that Frankfurt's account of us as agents leaves a gap between agency and morality – that is, his account, she thinks, implies a kind of moral skepticism about objective moral reasons. Herman seems to think that, to connect agency to morality, there needs to be something beyond the bare norms of practical reflection which Frankfurt employs throughout his account of agency. On her view, the norms of practical reflection are not enough to establish a connection between agency and morality because the norms of practical reflection are set by the conditions of agency and identity rather than by reason or the moral law. On her view, “One fails to act morally unless the content of one's reasons is determined by nonrelative moral value.”<sup>11</sup> In the end, however, Frankfurt is not fazed by the kinds of charges these philosophers bring against his view because he thinks that notions of objective moral reasons and objective values are extraneous to the nature of what we care about.<sup>12</sup>

While I am sympathetic with the concerns raised by Cottingham, Wolf, and Herman, like Frankfurt, I think their arguments fail to undermine Frankfurt's position. On my view, the real problem with Frankfurt's view of what we care about is not fundamentally a problem regarding his understanding of the relationship between the nature of what we care about and objective

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Wolf, “The True, the Good, and the Lovable,” in *Contours of Agency*, eds. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 227-244.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Herman, “Bootstrapping,” in *Contours of Agency*, 253-274. Part of the debate between Herman and Frankfurt is a debate about the limits of an internalist account of agency.

<sup>11</sup> Herman, 263.

<sup>12</sup> Frankfurt, so far as I know, offers no direct reply to Cottingham, but he replies to both Wolf and Herman in “Reply to Susan Wolf,” and “Reply to Barbara Herman,” in *Contours of Agency*. Generally, Frankfurt simply denies that either Wolf or Herman show there is a need for him to include any notions of value or objective morality in his account of what we care about. What Frankfurt says in response to the concerns of Wolf and Herman can be applied to Cottingham's critique of Frankfurt without much work.

morality or objective value. Frankfurt is correct that it is good for us to care about things in some sense even if what we care about is not valuable or good. It would be wrong to misunderstand Frankfurt's insight on that point. We are, in virtue of the nature of our wills, driven to care and love without having to make explicit appeals to moral considerations. The problem with Frankfurt's view of what we care about, I think, is that Frankfurt fundamentally misunderstands the nature of ethics from the outset. Ethics is not *only*, as Frankfurt tends to construe it, a matter of following impersonal objective principles in determining the course of our external actions. Ethics is deeply personal in nature – it is not only a matter of how we treat others, it is also a matter of how we treat ourselves. Ethics is about *how* we live the lives we live; it is about *who* we are. Historically, the study of ethics involves an attempt to understand the relationship between a person's inner character and his outward actions. While Frankfurt is obviously committed to the view that he is doing something other than moral philosophy, he is wrong. Frankfurt's work in developing the nature of what we care about is an aspect of moral philosophy, and what we care about is a moral matter.

The reason for seeing Frankfurt's work on the nature of what we care about as an aspect of moral philosophy is that Frankfurt's view of what we care about depends on our being creatures for whom adhering to standards of personal integrity and consistency are essential. Frankfurt sees himself as doing work that helps make sense of how creatures like us achieve integrity and consistency so that we can “create a self out of the raw materials of inner life.”<sup>13</sup> On his view, we simply fail to be a person in a significant way if we fail at achieving integrity and consistency. I think these points about integrity and consistency are important, and that Frankfurt is right about them. But both integrity and consistency are *impossible* without self-honesty. For creatures that possess the capacity for honesty, both integrity and consistency, as a

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<sup>13</sup> Frankfurt (1988), 170.

matter of conceptual necessity, require the exercise of the capacity for honesty. Because we are creatures with the capacity for honesty, for us, integrity and consistency require that we be honest with ourselves. And honesty is a moral matter. Honesty is a moral matter because honesty is a way of showing respect to and for another *person*; self-honesty is a way of showing self-respect to ourselves *as a person*. Moreover, respect for persons is an inherently moral on Frankfurt's own view of respect where respect is a matter of recognizing the features of someone else's reality. On my view, when we are not honest with another person, we knowingly undermine that person's reality by imposing a false reality upon them. When we are not honest with ourselves, we undermine our *own* reality by denying the truth about ourselves. In other words, when we are not honest with ourselves we treat ourselves as less than the person that we are and thus we disrespect ourselves and violate a moral obligation to respect persons. By being honest with ourselves, however, we fulfill an objective duty to truthfulness which derives its moral necessity from our moral obligation to respect persons.

Supposing that consistency and integrity both require honesty, and that honesty is a moral matter, why think that *what* we care about is a moral matter? What we care about is a moral matter because the obligation to self-honesty entails an obligation to be honest *about* what we care about. It is not necessarily that we are obligated *to* care, or that we are obligated to care about what we have obligations to care about. Rather, it is *because* we are creatures that care about things and for whom things are important that we have an obligation to be honest with ourselves about what we care about and about what is important to us. When we are not honest with ourselves about what we care about and about what is important to us, we violate our moral obligation to treat ourselves with respect. Or so I will argue.

I proceed as follows. In Section 2, I lay out the main features of Frankfurt's view of what we care about and I show that Frankfurt's view of caring requires self-honesty. In Section 3, I draw on Kant's idea of a duty to truthfulness and contend that the duty to truthfulness is a duty to self-honesty. I then argue that self-honesty is a moral duty because being honest with ourselves is a necessary condition for self-respect. Thus, when we are honest with ourselves, we fulfill a moral obligation to respect ourselves. In Section 4, I conclude that, because we can only care about things by being honest with ourselves and because, by being honest with ourselves we fulfill a moral obligation to respect ourselves, what we care about is a moral matter that falls inside the boundaries of ethics.

## **2 IDENTIFICATION, NECESSITY, AND HONESTY**

In this section, I lay out the essentials of Frankfurt's account of what we care about. I show that, on Frankfurt's view, what we care about determines the scope of that with which we can identify. On his view, what we can identify with is determined either by our volitional necessities or by identifying with and thus caring about something which falls within the constraints of our volitional necessities. I begin in part 2.1 by reviewing Frankfurt's notion of the will. Then I outline Frankfurt's account of how identification occurs either when we are moved by a volitional necessity or when we identify with something within the constraints of our volitional necessities. Then, in part 2.2, I argue that identifying with what we care about requires self-honesty.



## 2.1 IDENTIFICATION AND VOLITIONAL NECESSITIES

For Frankfurt, the scope of what we can care about is limited by what he calls ‘volitional necessities’. And the process by which we decide what we care about is called ‘identification’. Making sense of Frankfurt’s account of volitional necessities and identification, however, requires a brief explanation of his view of the hierarchical nature of our volitions and desires. On Frankfurt’s view, first-order desires represent the lowest level of the hierarchical structure of our volitions and desires. The will of the person is the first-order desire that is effective in moving him to action. First-order desires “are simply desires to do or not to do one thing or another.”<sup>14</sup> Higher-order desires and volitions – volitions and desires a person has *about* his will – afford him the ability to want the will he has or to not want the will he has. Because we are creatures with the reflexive capacity to care about things, we are capable of having higher-order desires and volitions. Given our capacity for higher-order desires and volitions it is possible that no first-order desire become effective in moving us to act. In such a case, we might say that our will is divided. When our will is divided, that is, when our volitional structure is disrupted such that no first-order desire moves us to action, we are ‘ambivalent’. It is also possible, however, for us to achieve a kind of volitional unity between our higher-order desires and the first-order desire that moves us to action. When this kind of unity occurs, we are ‘wholehearted’.

Ambivalence consists in a kind of *dissatisfaction* with ourselves; wholeheartedness consists in a kind of satisfaction with ourselves and results in our autonomy. The problem with Frankfurt’s hierarchical account of our volitions and desires is that it is difficult to make sense of *how* a person achieves wholeheartedness and autonomy in a way that is not arbitrary. For a

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<sup>14</sup> Frankfurt (1988), 12.

person is not wholehearted or autonomous unless he has the will *he* wants.<sup>15</sup> But if he only wants the will he has because he has gotten bored with the process of reflecting about what he wants, for example, then the desire that moves him to action might well be a desire with which the person is not actually satisfied. Frankfurt developed the idea of identification to address the question of how a person endorses a desire in a way that is not arbitrary.

Identification, on Frankfurt's view, occurs through a person's reflective satisfaction with his desires. It is worth noting that Frankfurt has changed his view of identification over time. In his earlier accounts he construed identification to require the reflective endorsement of some desire or another through an action such as the making of a decision.<sup>16</sup> Frankfurt's later work, however, moved away from the construal of identification as an active notion requiring an action. On Frankfurt's later view, identification is more passive and does not require a person to perform an action or make a decision in order to identify with a desire. Identification occurs simply when a person is satisfied with a higher-order desire by which he endorses his will. He says, "The endorsing higher-order desire must be... a desire with which the person is *satisfied*. And since... satisfaction with one psychic element does not require satisfaction with any other, being satisfied with a certain desire does not entail an endless proliferation of higher orders and desires. Identification is constituted neatly by an endorsing higher-order desire with which the person is satisfied."<sup>17</sup> Here on Frankfurt's later account of identification, the idea of satisfaction plays a crucial role.

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<sup>15</sup> Gary Watson argued that Frankfurt's early account of the hierarchical structure of the volitions and desires of a person implies an unacceptable regress problem in which it cannot be said that the person is responsible for deciding the will he has in a non-arbitrary manner. See, "Free Agency," in *Agency and Answerability*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 2004), 13-32.

<sup>16</sup> For an example of Frankfurt's earlier account of identification see, "Identification and Wholeheartedness," in Frankfurt (1988).

<sup>17</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 105.

Frankfurt takes it that “What satisfaction... entail[s] is an absence of restlessness or resistance.”<sup>18</sup> Satisfaction “is a matter of simply *having no interest* in making changes. What it requires is that psychic elements of certain kinds *do not occur*.”<sup>19</sup> But even though he moved to this more passive account of identification, Frankfurt did not abandon his earlier view that reflection is also essential for identification. Indeed, reflection is necessary for a person to understand his own satisfaction with how things are:

[W]hile the absence of such elements does not require either deliberate action or deliberate restraint, their absence must nonetheless be reflective. In other words, the fact that the person is not moved to change things must derive from his understanding and evaluation of how things are with him. Thus, the essential non-occurrence is neither deliberately contrived nor wantonly unselfconscious. It develops and prevails as an unmanaged consequence of the person’s appreciation of his psychic condition.<sup>20</sup>

Self-reflection, then, plays an essential role in identification because it is through a person’s self-reflective evaluation of his own condition that the person comes to hold an endorsing desire with which he is satisfied. It is by reflecting on his own psychic condition that a person identifies with his desires because it is only by reflecting on his own condition that he can realize that he is satisfied with his desires and that he does not want certain things to change for himself.<sup>21</sup> The scope of the desires with which a person can be satisfied, however, is limited and constrained by the nature of that person’s will. Recall Frankfurt’s example of the mother tempted to abandon her child. Even though the desire to abandon her child entered into the mother’s motivational set, she could not identify with that desire because she cared about her child. What she cared

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<sup>18</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 103.

<sup>19</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 105.

<sup>20</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 105.

<sup>21</sup> It is possible, of course, that reflecting might cause a person to realize that his desires are inconsistent and this realization might cause him to become dissatisfied where he might have felt satisfied were he to have *not* reflected on his desires. But failing to reflect in such a case would be an instance of the person acting ‘wantonly’. Thanks to Eddy Nahmias for drawing attention to this possibility.

about – her child – set a limit to the desires with which she could identify. Identification, then, is constrained by a person’s will. This constraint, of course, does not preclude the possibility of a person being moved to act by a desire with which that person does not identify, but when a person is moved in such a way, that person is moved *unwillingly*.

On Frankfurt’s view, identification is constrained by a person’s will because the desires with which a person can be satisfied are limited by what that person in fact cares about. In many cases, it is not up to a person what he cares about: “It... cannot be assumed that what a person cares about is generally under his immediate voluntary control.”<sup>22</sup> When a person cares about something, what that 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.”<sup>23</sup> For Frankfurt, “A person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He *identifies* himself with what he cares about in the sense that he makes himself vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced.”<sup>24</sup> In some cases, however, what a person cares about places restraints on his will with such force that his caring about something moves him to action with a kind of necessity. When a person is constrained and moved to act in virtue of what he cares about, that person is subject to a volitional necessity: “A person who is subject to volitional necessity finds that he *must* act as he does.”<sup>25</sup> Here Frankfurt further explains the nature of constraint involved in a volitional necessity:

To the extent that a person is constrained by volitional necessities, there are certain things that he cannot help willing or that he cannot bring himself to do. These necessities substantially affect the actual course and character of his life. But they affect not only what he does: they limit the possibilities that are open to his will, that is, they

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<sup>22</sup> Frankfurt, (1988), 83.

<sup>23</sup> Frankfurt (1988), 82.

<sup>24</sup> Frankfurt, (1988), 83.

<sup>25</sup> Frankfurt (1988), 86-7.

determine what he cannot will and what he cannot help willing. Accordingly, the volitional necessities that bind a person identify what he cannot help being... [T]he essential nature of a person consists in what he must will. The boundaries of his will define his shape as a person.<sup>26</sup>

While volitional necessities do constrain a person's will, the constraint in question does not threaten the person's autonomy or his ability to be wholehearted. The constraint of a volitional necessity does not diminish autonomy or impede wholeheartedness because the person who is moved by a volitional necessity "accedes to it because he is *unwilling* to oppose it and because, furthermore, his unwillingness is *itself* something which he is unwilling to alter."<sup>27</sup> In other words, when a person is moved by a volitional necessity, that person is necessarily satisfied with his will and would necessarily be unsatisfied with having some other will. It follows that acceding to a volitional necessity entails identification because, in acceding to a volitional necessity, a person is satisfied with his will. And, in some sense, then, for a person to be satisfied with his will is for that person to be satisfied with himself.

## 2.2 ***WHY IDENTIFICATION REQUIRES HONESTY***

Identification, then, occurs either when a person has an endorsing desire with which he is satisfied or when a person is moved by a volitional necessity because, in virtue of what he cares about – in virtue of what is true about him, he would necessarily be unsatisfied to be moved otherwise. In either case, identification requires self-honesty. In cases when identification occurs because a person has an endorsing desire with which he is satisfied, that satisfaction

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<sup>26</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 114.

<sup>27</sup> Frankfurt (1988), 87.

derives from that person's "understanding and evaluation of how things are with him."<sup>28</sup> In order for a person to be satisfied because of his understanding and evaluation of how things are with him, however, he must understand and evaluate how things are with him. And for a person to understand and evaluate how things are with him, he must come to that understanding by way of self-evaluation. And understanding by way of self-evaluation requires self-honesty because achieving understanding via evaluation requires honesty.

But why does understanding arrived at via evaluation require honesty? That depends on both what evaluation and honesty are. Let me start by trying to make sense of what occurs when a person evaluates something. When a person evaluates something, what he first does in the course of his evaluation is admit features of what he is evaluating. Suppose a music critic sets out to write a review of the latest Radiohead record. Her task naturally requires listening to the record to gain a sense of what she is evaluating. As the songs play, she takes notes on each of them by jotting down little bits about their tempos, moods, melodies, rhythms, and so forth. By taking notes she is 'admitting features' of the record for the purpose of evaluating the record. 'Admitting features' here might be construed as a matter of picking out, locating, distinguishing, characterizing, and categorizing that which is under consideration and, by so doing, positing them for further consideration. These acts of admitting the features of that which is being evaluated are the fundamental acts of evaluation. But simply locating the features of that which is under evaluation does not complete the process of evaluation. When the music critic is finished with the process of picking out the various features of the record she intends to review, she must then make value judgments about those various features. Perhaps she judges that the first song is "too fast", or "the melody is boring", or that "the drums sound terrible", or the entire record is just "a rehashed version of *The Bends*" (Radiohead's second album) rather than "a

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<sup>28</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 105.

fresh return to the edgy pop rock roots of the British band”. Her evaluation, then, involves both picking out (admitting) some feature to be considered – the tempo maybe – and then making value judgment about that feature.

How does all of this relate to honesty? Why think that evaluation requires honesty? Honesty is so commonplace, I think, that it is difficult to untangle and articulate what occurs when a person is honest. An analogy is useful. Suppose you take money out of an ATM. It is normal for you to assume that the money is genuine; that it is not counterfeit. Thus when you go to purchase a movie ticket with your cash, for example, you may never call into question whether the money is “real”. You take the money to be genuine – you take it at face value. Suppose, however, that the movie theater attendant uses a pen with a special ink to test whether the money is genuine. To your surprise, the ink from the pen turns a color which indicates that the money you handed the attendant is counterfeit. In this case, it would be wrong to say you were trying to cheat the movie theater. You took the money to be genuine, and you did so with good reason. The money came straight out of an ATM, after all. Your act of handing the cash over to the attendant was a genuine act of trying to pay for your movie ticket even though the bills with which were attempting to make your purchase were fake. Thus you were being honest in your dealings even though you were dealing with bad currency. Honesty, in this case, consisted in the act of spending money with no intent to spend counterfeit money; it is a feature of your relationship to the money and not a feature of the money itself. But it also involved the activities of withdrawing money from the ATM, putting it in your wallet or pocket, taking it out of your wallet or pocket, and handing it to the attendant. Because you had money in your account (presumably), and because you assumed the bank loads ATMs with real cash, you never questioned whether the money was genuine or not. You were honest throughout. If we apply

this analogy back to the case of the music critic reviewing an album, it becomes possible to see that the critic's evaluation of the record involves the same sort of honesty that your case of paying for the movie ticket did. Her writing notes about the songs (admitting features of the songs) is similar to what occurs when you take money out of the ATM; her making judgments about the songs is similar to what occurs when you hand the money to the attendant. Just as the money you took it to be true that the money you handed to the attendant was real, the critic might take it that her evaluation of the album is accurate (at least as a representation of her views). But just as the money you handed the attendant was counterfeit, the critic's review of the record could be wrong. In any case, her evaluation requires honesty in that it requires her to admit a feature of what she is considering, to take that feature to be genuine, and to assert her judgment about the feature she is considering. By the time she publishes her review, she is settled in her affirmation and understanding of the merits of the album.

But what does this mean for Frankfurt's account of identification? Frankfurt takes it that a necessary condition of identification is that a person be satisfied with his psychic condition as a result of his understanding and evaluation of that condition. When a person understands what he is evaluating, the person is being honest about his condition. By evaluating his condition and finding it satisfactory, the person considers his condition, makes a judgment about his condition, and is settled in affirming his understanding of his condition. Because affirming the truth of a belief with confidence is just what it means to be honest and sincere, the person who is satisfied with his condition confidently affirms the truth of his belief about his condition to himself. His confidence in his satisfaction with his condition comes from his confidence in the truth of his belief that he is satisfied. In some sense, then, self-evaluation is itself a form of self-honesty because self-evaluation entails admitting things to oneself for the purpose of arriving at a



confident judgment about oneself. Suppose, for example, a person is evaluating one of his desires. In evaluating his desire he must admit to himself the nature of the desire. What is it that the desire is moving him to do? Is it a desire to eat? Or to murder? Or to flee? Is it strong or weak? Because admitting is an essential feature of being honest, in evaluating his desire for the purpose of understanding the desire, the person is necessarily being honest with himself about the desire. When the person affirms to himself the nature of his desire, there is no doubt that the person was honest with himself *at least to some extent*. His honesty, however, does not entail that his evaluation of his desire was *accurate*. Accuracy is not guaranteed by honesty.

Further, there is a difficulty regarding the notion of self-deception. The nature of deception seems to be such that it is only possible for a person to be deceptive if he has *some* belief about what is true. It follows that it is only possible for a person to be self-deceptive if he has some view of the truth about which he is hiding from himself. It is reasonable to think that self-deception occurs when a person refuses to be fully transparent with himself about what he is considering or when he simply refuses to consider evidence for belief in the first place. To the extent that being rational entails assenting to the truth, the self-deceived person is cutting off his ability to be rational by not allowing himself to look the truth full on. That is not to say that the self-deceptive are *deciding* not to believe. Because belief formation is causal, most philosophers reject the possibility of doxastic voluntarism.<sup>29</sup> Doxastic voluntarism is the view that belief formation is a matter choice. The view implies that a person can simply *decide* to assent a belief. Robert Audi, however, argues that, in terms of belief formation, there is the possibility of a limited form of doxastic voluntarism in the sense that we have some control over the evidence

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Bernard Williams, "Deciding to Believe," in *Problems of the Self*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

we consider which might in turn cause the formation of beliefs.<sup>30</sup> While it is not possible for a person to simply *decide* to form or refrain from forming some belief, it is possible for a person to refuse to look toward evidence that would cause him to form a belief which he prefers not to form. If Audi is right, the idiom seems true of the self-deceiver: “he only sees what he wants to see.” In any case, it is impossible to self-evaluate without being self-honest because even self-deception seems to depend on having some view of the truth. Because identification requires an authentic satisfaction with a desire, however, it seems that identification is only possible when a person is honest with himself enough to have genuine self-knowledge about his own state of satisfaction. Thus, when identification occurs because a person is satisfied with his understanding and evaluation of his condition, identification is only possible because that person was honest with himself. It does not seem possible, then, that a person identify *dishonestly*. Here again, honesty is not a matter of what is *true* about the person, but rather a matter of what the person takes to be true about himself.

The second way in which identification can occur is when a person identifies with his desire because he accedes to a volitional necessity. Such cases of identification via volitional necessity also require self-honesty. Recall that a volitional necessity is something that moves a person to act with a kind of necessity that cannot be ignored by that person. In such cases, the person who is moved by the volitional necessity cannot help but care about what he cares about – he “is susceptible to a familiar but nonetheless somewhat obscure kind of necessity, in virtue of which his caring is not altogether under his own control.”<sup>31</sup> As an example of the sort of necessity in question, Frankfurt references Martin Luther’s supposed proclamation before the

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<sup>30</sup> See Robert Audi, “The Ethics of Belief: Doxastic Self-Control and Intellectual Virtue,” *Synthese*, Vol. 161, No. 3: 403-418. And his “Doxastic Voluntarism and the Ethics of Belief.” In *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty*, edited by Matthias Steup, 93-114. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>31</sup> Frankfurt (1988), 86.

Diet of Worms, “Here I stand; I can do no other.” Frankfurt then says, “An encounter with necessity of this sort characteristically affects a person less by impelling him into a certain course of action than by somehow making it apparent to him that every apparent alternative is unthinkable.”<sup>32</sup> In Luther’s case, “the impossibility to which Luther referred was a matter neither of logical nor of causal necessity. After all, he knew well enough that he was in one sense quite able to do the very thing he said he could not do; that is, he had the capacity to do it. What he was unable to muster was not the *power* to forbear, but the *will*.”<sup>33</sup>

The reason a person moved by a volitional necessity is self-honest, it seems to me, is that such a person, like Luther, will be aware of and admit to himself what it is he must do. When a person accedes to a volitional necessity, he does so by admitting and affirming to himself (and perhaps to others as Luther did), the nature of his compulsion. The desire that represents the will of a person who is moved by a volitional necessity is necessarily a desire with which the person is honest with himself about wanting to have. He is so overcome by the force of what he cares about that not acting according to what he cares about would be tantamount to acting against that which he is as a matter of fact committed to. A person who accedes to a volitional necessity, then, is moved almost as if by his own *inability to be insincere* about himself. In such cases, a person is necessarily honest with himself because he is moved by what he considers to be most true about himself. When we are moved by volitional necessities our will might be said to force us to be honest with ourselves by moving us to act according to what is true about us. So, when identification occurs via acceding to a volitional necessity, identification involves self-honesty because the movement of a volitional necessity just is the authentic, honest, and sincere expression of a person’s will.

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<sup>32</sup> Frankfurt (1988), 86.

<sup>33</sup> Frankfurt (1988), 86.

### 3 KANT'S DUTY TO TRUTHFULNESS

Now that I have shown that identification requires self-honesty, I will argue that we have a moral obligation to self-honesty. I proceed first by explicating and developing Kant's notion of a duty to truthfulness to show that a duty to truthfulness is the duty to self-honesty. I then further clarify and articulate a conception of self-honesty, and argue that we are morally obligated to self-honesty because, only by being honest with ourselves are we able to treat ourselves with respect.

#### 3.1 THE DUTY TO TRUTHFULNESS AS SELF-HONESTY

In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant divides up duties to the self between duties we have to ourselves as animals and duties we have to ourselves as moral beings. Of the first of the duties we have to ourselves as moral beings Kant says, "The greatest violation of a human being's duty to himself regarded merely as a moral being (the humanity in his own person) is the contrary of truthfulness, *lying*" (6:429). Kant then distinguishes what counts as lying in the doctrine of right from what is considered lying in ethics. He says, "In the doctrine of right an intentional untruth is called a lie only if it violates another's right, but in ethics, where no authorization is derived from harmlessness, it is clear of itself that no intentional untruth in the expression of one's thoughts can refuse this harsh name" (MS, 6:429). Kant then makes one more distinction between lies that are internal and lies that are external: "By an external lie a human being makes himself an object of contempt in the eyes of others; by an internal lie he

does what is still worse: he makes himself contemptible in his own eyes and violates the dignity of humanity in his own person” (*MS*, 6:429). Kant’s prohibition against external lies – lies that one person tells another person – has long been the subject of controversy and debate among philosophers, but Kant’s notion of an internal lie has received far less attention. There are two reasons, to pay attention to Kant’s prohibition against internal lies: (i) the duty to truthfulness is listed as a duty we have to ourselves, not a duty we have to others: “The human being as a moral being... is under obligation to himself to *truthfulness*” (*MS*, 6:430); (ii) Kant thinks that external lies are a consequence of internal lies. As Kant scholar Allen Woods says, “We miss much of Kant’s discussion [of the duty to truthfulness]... if we do not appreciate the importance for him of the inner lie, and even the way he thinks the outer lie is often rooted in the inner lie.”<sup>34</sup>

Wood’s remark highlights Kant’s point that “the ill of untruthfulness spreads into [our] relations with other human beings as well, once the highest principle of truthfulness has been violated” (*MS*, 6:430). For these two reasons, and because external lies are not immediately relevant for my argument, I will focus on the duty to truthfulness as it relates to Kant’s prohibition against inner lies.

Kant says, “It is easy to show that the human being is actually guilty of many inner lies, but it seems more difficult to explain how they are possible; for a lie requires a second person whom one intends to deceive, whereas to deceive oneself on purpose seems to contain a contradiction” (*MS*, 6:430).<sup>35</sup> Despite this obvious conceptual oddness of self-deception, I will, for my purposes here, assume that self-deception is possible. If self-deception is possible, and if

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<sup>34</sup> Allen Wood, *Kantian Ethics*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 255.

<sup>35</sup> Sissela Bok, for example, says “Self-deception offers difficult problems of definition. Is it deception or not? Intentional or not? Is there even communication or not? If a person appears to deceive himself, there are not two different human beings of whom one intends to mislead the other. Yet, arguably, two ‘parts’ of this person are involved in a deceptive relationship.” From *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), Ch. 1, see note 16. Also, *The Philosophy of Deception*, ed. by Martin Clancy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) has several helpful essays on the notion of self-deception.

an inner lie is a violation of the duty to truthfulness, then *not* violating the duty to truthfulness by an inner lie must occur when a person engages in a kind of inner truthfulness, or self-honesty. In other words, the positive fulfillment of the duty to truthfulness occurs when we are honest with ourselves.

The notion of honesty is fundamental to the notion of self-honesty. Honesty, however, is somewhat difficult to unpack. It is difficult to say precisely what happens when a person is honest. If honesty is the contrary of lying, however, and if lying is an intentional *untruth*, then honesty appears to an intentional truth. Honesty is the activity of intentionally admitting and affirming the truth. A person who is being honest is acting in a way that entails the intentional *admission* of some aspect of what he believes is true and he is, by his honesty, *affirming* some belief as true. Honesty, then, is a subjective epistemic notion because, in being honest, a person is intending to admit and affirm his own belief or beliefs as true. It is also important to note that, although honesty and truthfulness are related to truth, truthfulness is distinct from truth. Sissela Bok makes the same point about lying as follows, “whether you are lying or not is not *settled* by establishing the truth or falsity of what you say. In order to settle this question, we must know whether you *intend your statement to mislead*.”<sup>36</sup> Truthfulness is distinct from truth, then, because a person can be honest in expressing a false belief and because a person can express the truth when intending to express what is false. The point here about honesty is that a person who is being honest is intending to do something with the truth much like what a mirror does with the light. Like a mirror that reflects the light, so is the honest person who lets the truth reflect off of him. And like a mirror that might be cracked, dirty, warped, or colored, an instance of honesty necessarily reveals features of the person who is being honest. It reveals what that person believes. The difference between a mirror and a person is that, because a person can take into

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<sup>36</sup> Bok, 6.

account the ways in which the truth hits him, he can also take into account the ways in which the truth is distorted by him. A person is not only capable of letting truth reflect off of him, a person is also capable of seeing the way in which the truth reflects off of him and he is capable of letting himself reflect the truth *about* himself. In other words, a person is capable of self-honesty.

Self-honesty, like self-deception, is conceptually odd. What is going on when a person is honest with himself? Are there *two* people? The answer to this latter question is no. The simple fact of the matter is that self-honesty is possible for us because we can be honest *about* ourselves. Self-honesty is nothing other than what happens when we are truthful in our thoughts about ourselves. Being self-honest involves the activities of admitting, considering, picking out, classifying, and characterizing ourselves. In so doing we become able to affirm to ourselves our very own features. Rigorous self-honesty, of course, does not *guarantee* that a person will be right about himself. And, self-honesty does not guarantee that there will be anything for a person to be right about. Sometimes the facts are indiscernible to a person no matter how honest he is and sometimes there are no more facts to discern. But if a person somehow affirms a belief about himself that is true, but that he arrived at by guess-work and not by honest self-reflection, the belief he holds about himself is one he holds by accident and is not a case of self-knowledge. The case of expressing a true belief about oneself by accident is analogous to the student who gets the correct answer on a multiple-choice test by guessing. Just like a student who arrives at the correct answer on a test by accident, a person can express true beliefs about himself without being said to have *knowledge* of himself. In that sense, self-honesty is a necessary condition for self-knowledge. While more work is needed in to give a full articulation of self-honesty, the sketch here is enough to get a sense of what self-honesty involves. It remains, however, to be shown that there is a *moral* obligation to self-honesty.

### 3.2 *SELF-HONESTY IS A MORAL DUTY*

The reason self-honesty is a moral obligation is because self-honesty is a form of self-respect. It is impossible for us to show ourselves respect when we are deceiving ourselves. To the extent that we are obligated to respect ourselves, we are also obligated to be honest with ourselves for the purpose of respecting ourselves. But are we obligated to self-respect? That depends, of course, on whether we are obligated to respect persons. I do not need here to ground a moral obligation for respect, however, because Frankfurt already takes it that we have a moral obligation to respect. What I need to show for my argument is that Frankfurt's view of the obligation to respect others also generates for us an obligation to respect ourselves. Let me begin with Frankfurt's account of our moral obligation to respect others.

The notion of respect does not play a significant role in Frankfurt's work on agency, but it shows up in his writings on equality. In his contributions to political philosophy, Frankfurt makes the unpopular move to reject the idea that equality is a substantive moral ideal. He says, "I categorically reject the presumption that egalitarianism, of whatever variety, is an ideal of any intrinsic moral importance."<sup>37</sup> Rather, "Whenever it is morally important to strive for equality, it is always because doing so will promote some other value rather than because equality itself is morally desirable."<sup>38</sup> What, then, is moral desirable? On Frankfurt's view, "what is of genuine moral concern is not formal but substantive. It is whether people have good lives, and not how

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<sup>37</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 146.

<sup>38</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 147.



their lives compare with the lives of others.”<sup>39</sup> The good life, then, is what matters for morality and “evil lies simply in the unmistakable fact that bad lives are bad.”<sup>40</sup> For a person to enjoy a good life requires that he be “accorded the rights, the respect, the consideration, and the concern to which he is entitled by virtue of what he is”<sup>41</sup>. On Frankfurt’s view, a person who feels he is being treated unequally is typically offended because he feels he is not being respected.

Frankfurt then argues that, when a claim for equality is morally substantive, the substance of the claim for egalitarianism “is grounded in the more basic requirements of respect and impartiality.”<sup>42</sup> The moral imperative for respect and impartiality, on Frankfurt’s view, derives from the moral importance of being rational.

According to Frankfurt, being “respectful is a special case of being rational” because “being guided by what is relevant... treating relevantly similar cases alike and relevantly unlike cases differently – is an elementary aspect of being rational”<sup>43</sup>. Now, for this line of thinking to work for Frankfurt, he needs to show that it is *morally* significant to be rational by treating each other with respect in terms of being guided in our treatment of others by what is relevant.

Suppose, for example, that a person makes a mistake in reasoning, that mistake is, in a sense, not rational, but it does not follow that the person is morally culpable for the mistake. If failing to be respectful is a failure to be rational, then “there must be something else about deviations from respect, besides the fact that they are breaches of rationality, that has a more immediate and a more specific moral import.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 148.

<sup>40</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 148.

<sup>41</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 149.

<sup>42</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 152.

<sup>43</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 152.

<sup>44</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 152.

Frankfurt's way of showing that the irrationality of disrespect is a moral failing is to show that disrespect involves a "refusal to acknowledge the truth about"<sup>45</sup> another person. On his view:

Failing to respect someone is a matter of ignoring the relevance of some aspect of his nature or of his situation. The lack of respect consists in the circumstance that some important fact about the person is not properly attended to or is not taken appropriately into account. In other words, the person [who is disrespected] is dealt with as though he is not what he actually is. The implications of significant features of his life are overlooked or denied. Pertinent aspects of how things are with him are treated as though they had no reality. It is as though, because he is denied suitable respect, his very existence is reduced.<sup>46</sup>

Disrespect is morally egregious, then, because it involves "an assault upon [another person's] reality" and because such an assault involves an attack on the very core of a person; it denies his own existence and "the solidity of his own sense that he is real."<sup>47</sup> Disrespect, then, in essence involves the imposition of a false reality on another person. Because lying also involves the intentional imposition of a false reality on others, lying must also, at least at times, be tantamount to disrespect. Thus, to the extent that respect involves affirming another person's existence by affirming the important features of that person's existence, honesty is essential for respect.

If honesty is essential for respect, is self-honesty essential for self-respect? Self-honesty is essential for self-respect because self-honesty consists precisely in affirming the facts about ourselves (as we see them) to ourselves. When we fail to be honest with ourselves, we necessarily fail to respect ourselves because we necessarily fail to affirm our own reality. Self-deception, then, is a form of disrespect because it entails that we are not paying attention to our own reality. By Frankfurt's own view of the notion of respect, then, he is committed to

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<sup>45</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 153.

<sup>46</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 153.

<sup>47</sup> Frankfurt (1999), 153.

accepting that self-honesty is necessary for self-respect. Because self-honesty is a form of self-respect, self-honesty is a moral duty to ourselves that derives from our moral duty to treat ourselves with respect.

#### **4 CONCLUSION: WHAT WE CARE ABOUT IS A MORAL MATTER**

The argument I have been advancing has been aimed at drawing a conclusion about the proper scope of ethics. Frankfurt's view is that his own work on the nature of what we care about falls outside of the domain of ethics. What I have tried to show is that Frankfurt is wrong about the boundaries of ethics and that what we care about is a moral matter that falls within those boundaries. If I am correct, then the scope of ethics must include Frankfurt's project about the nature of what we care about. That is, ethics must include questions regarding what we do with ourselves, and not only questions regarding how we interact with one another. My argument proceeded by explicating Frankfurt's view that the nature of what we care about is not a moral matter. I then worked to show that caring about something by identifying with it requires self-honesty. The next step in my argument relied on Kant's idea of a duty to truthfulness where the duty to truthfulness is a duty we have to ourselves, and not a duty we have to others. I argued that the duty to truthfulness was a duty to self-honesty. Then, using Frankfurt's own notion of the moral imperative of respect, I argued that self-honesty is a moral duty because self-honesty is necessary for self-respect. When we are honest with ourselves, I contended, we fulfill a moral obligation to respect ourselves, even if we do not think of ourselves as following a moral obligation. What we care about is a moral matter, then, because we are obligated to be honest with ourselves about what we care about. That is not to say that I have

argued that we have any obligations to care about anything in particular or even that we are obligated to care about our moral obligations. Nor have I claimed that there are objective values that determine what we should care about.

Nonetheless, what we care about is a moral matter because genuinely caring about anything requires that we treat ourselves with respect by being honest with ourselves about what we care about. Frankfurt himself says, “someone who is engaged in self-deception in a matter concerning what he is or what he is doing is conceding thereby that he is not satisfied with himself.”<sup>48</sup> Because satisfaction is a necessary condition of identification, the person who is not satisfied has not identified with what he cares about. Such a person is ambivalent as a result of self-deception. Frankfurt goes on to say, “Psychic unity obviously cannot be achieved by dividing oneself [by way of deceiving oneself].”<sup>49</sup> Thus because self-deception, on Frankfurt’s view, undermines psychic unity, self-deception impedes identification. And self-deception, as I argued above, is a form of disrespect. The question remains as to why we should consider respect a moral matter?

One way to answer this question is to suggest that respecting ourselves is a moral matter because when we respect ourselves, we are respecting a *person*. I must admit, however, that I have no *argument* for why respecting a person is any more a moral matter than respecting a hurricane. It is possible, I think, to deny that persons have inherent value and worth without generating any obvious logical contradictions. We do not offend logic by denying that we lack objective worth or value, we only offend ourselves and our intuitions. Whatever is the case about our worth, every argument is based on assumptions. Mine is based on the assumption that

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<sup>48</sup> Frankfurt, 106 (1999).

<sup>49</sup> Frankfurt, 106 (1999).

respecting human persons is a moral matter. This assumption seems in line with Frankfurt's own view of respect as a morally significant way of treating persons.

In the end, my conclusion in this essay implies that the scope of ethics entails our quest for self-knowledge and our own worthiness of respect as persons generates a moral obligation to pursue self-knowledge. By not pursuing self-knowledge, we fail to respect ourselves by failing to admit the truth about ourselves. Kant claimed that the first command of our duties to ourselves – including the duty to truthfulness – is to “*know (scrutinize, fathom) yourself*” (*MS*, 6:441). For Kant, the command for self-knowledge is a command to “know your heart – whether it is good or evil, whether the source of your actions is pure” (*MS*, 6:441). He says, “Only the descent into the hell of self-cognition can pave the way to godliness” (*MS*, 6:441). Whether or not godliness is something to be pursued, only in being honest with ourselves can we come to know the nature of own wills and the nature of what we care about.

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