

Frankfurt and Kierkegaard on BS., Wantonness, and Aestheticism:

A Phenomenology of Inauthenticity

John Davenport

I. Introduction: Kierkegaard, Frankfurt, Love and Authenticity

In this essay, I will consider Frankfurt's conception of love in the context of his wider claims about "caring" in order to show that (a) his conception of love depends on his contrasting account of inauthenticity, and yet (b) he clearly needs the richer account of the authentic/inauthentic distinction offered by Kierkegaard. Several of the connections between Frankfurt and Kierkegaard traced in this volume were first broached in Edward Mooney's insight that Frankfurtian "caring" resembles the process of self-articulation in which an "ethical" self is formed according to Kierkegaard's pseudonym Judge William in *Either/Or* vol. II.¹ Following Mooney, I have referred to Frankfurt's distinction between first-order desires and "higher-order volitions" to help explain the Judge's cryptic "choice to choose" in ethical terms,² and the related notion of volitional "earnestness" found in several of Kierkegaard's works (both pseudonymous and signed).³ I have also argued that Frankfurt's distinction between "ambiguity" (or division in the higher-order will) and "wholeheartedness" sheds light on different types of spiritual division and "sinfulness" in the *Concept of Anxiety*, though Kierkegaard's conception of volitional unity is superior to Frankfurt's.⁴ The connections I explore below support these prior comparisons by showing that Frankfurt's and Kierkegaard's analyses of *inauthenticity* are similar in key respects.

Frankfurt's Problem and Forms of Love. There are also several important differences between Kierkegaard and Frankfurt, especially concerning the status of values worth caring about, or "ethics" in its widest sense. Frankfurt's mature view is that caring cannot be based on the inherent importance of anything prior to caring about it: instead, life-goals, ideals, and particular others only *become* important to us because we care about them, and we care about them for their own sake either because we can, or because it is our "personal essence" to care about this kind of end or person.⁵ Thus, "it is only in virtue of what we actually care about that anything is important to us."⁶ On this view, it is useless to ask what we *should* care about independently of our existing cares; even moral norms provide no autonomous motive unless we care about morality.⁷ I reject this type of "existential subjectivism," and have critiqued Frankfurt's arguments for it in detail.⁸ It forces Frankfurt to conclude in *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting it Right* that the virtually universal human instinct of self-preservation generates a "love of life" that needs no further reasons (TOS 35-38). This directly undermines his earlier distinctions between passive desires and authoritative motives or between mere *strength* of desire and *authority* for the agent (see ANL), which was central to his project. In particular, Frankfurt's effort to resist Bernard Williams's argument that we require "ground projects" in order to have *reasons* (beyond instinctive fear of death) to go on living (TOS 36), and his insistence that loves are generally grounded in no prior reasons beyond their own self-affirmation (TOS 40) force Frankfurt back to the claim that a wanton desire to continue living is authoritative for us.⁹ Such an implication that conflates wanting something with caring about it has to count as a *reductio* for Frankfurt, because his main claims about higher-order volition.

In my view, Kierkegaard offers the solution that Frankfurt needs: while objective judgment about value is not sufficient for "love" in the sense of an autonomous motive, because such

valuations must be taken up "subjectively" through the agent's own commitment, such personal "appropriation" must also be a response to the perceived reality of others and the world.¹⁰

Kierkegaard is not always read this way; for there are some passages in Kierkegaard's signed *Works of Love* that may give the impression that he also holds that a psychic state of love makes its own reasons for loving devotion (and idea that also has roots in Pascal's "reasons of the heart"). For Kierkegaard says that agapic love (kjærlighed) shares the "perfection of eternity" in transcending other kinds of love that can only love "the extraordinary" or great (WL 65). "Thus, the perfection of the object is not the perfection of the love" when it is like God's love, which extends to grace beyond merit. By contrast, "Erotic love [Elskov] is defined by the object; friendship is defined by the object; only love for the neighbor is defined by love [Kjerlighed]" (WL 66). These passages, in which Kierkegaard is stressing that interhuman agapic love exceeds what could be deserved on the basis of contingent differences between human persons, may have inspired Andres Nygren's famous thesis that whereas loves with an eros-structure of lack-seeking fulfillment are "property -based," agapic loves are gratuitous in relation to their object, or not property-based (in Alan Soble's helpful terminology). For the need to express agapic love is a pure generosity "so great that it seems as if it itself might almost be able to produce its object" (WL 67; compare WL 158), much like divine generosity in freely creating *ex nihilo*. This has also been called the thesis that love "bestows" the value it sees in its beloved, rather than discovering it; and Frankfurt was clearly inspired by this idea in developing his own conceptions of caring and love: "When a person makes something important to himself, accordingly the situation resembles an instance of divine agape at least in certain respects" (IWCA 94) – and he footnotes Nygren's *Eros and Agape* as his source for this point.

In fact, the contrast that Nygren and Soble draw between erosic and agapic structures of motivation is different than Kierkegaard's contrast between "preferential" loves and agapic love, which still responds to something objectively valuable and essential (not a varying basis of merit) in each person: namely, the image of God that Kierkegaard calls the "watermark" (WL 89). This shared capacity that Kierkegaard also calls "spirit" includes each person's potential for freely willed love, no matter how fallen they are – a potential "built up" or encouraged when they are loved (WL 217). What first looks like bestowing value for Kierkegaard actually refers to taking people back to that original God-given potential in them by way of believing in them, hoping for their return, enduring their hatred in trust that they can eventually rediscover their highest gift (WL 219-24; compare WL 253 on "the possibility of the good for the other person"). One could not rightly love a pet rock or a bird in this way, but only a person.

Despite this central construct, there remain other deep continuities between Kierkegaard and Frankfurt: for example in their agreement that there is a kind of love that is distinctively volitional (WL 81), and which is directed to the good of (other) persons as unique individuals (WL 69) – though for Kierkegaard these potential objects of volitional love are also *equally* all persons with a distinctiveness that does not reduce to the physical or social respects in which they are manifestly unequal (WL 68). Yet Frankfurt's paradigms of willed essentially particularistic loves are cases that Kierkegaard would call "preferential," e.g. love of one's child or spouse (thus Frankfurt effectively challenges Kierkegaard's apparent view that these loves must be based on contingent properties of their object that make that object fungible; although Frankfurt does not consider whether love of child and spouse could also express neighbor-love).

These preliminary observations show how complex the links are between Kierkegaard's and Frankfurt's accounts of love. Frankfurt and Kierkegaard both hold that volitional love focuses on the other as an irreplaceable individual, and aim purely at the other's good for its own sake rather than at the lover's happiness. But, unlike Kierkegaard, Frankfurt (following Nygren) takes this to imply that volitional love is not a response to the value of the beloved (partly because he assumes

that any such value will be a universal that could be instantiated just as well in others), whereas Kierkegaard does not.¹¹ Like Rudd and Walsh and contra Soble in this volume, I will critique Frankfurt's subjectivist account of the relation between love and values, but from an indirect angle. I will focus on Frankfurt's and Kierkegaard's related conceptions of authenticity – and their suggestively similar portrayals of inauthenticity – in works that do not focus so directly on love. In particular, I will consider Kierkegaard's famous essay on "The Present Age" and Frankfurt's popular essay "On Bullshit" (a term hereafter abbreviated as 'BS' except when quoting). These comparisons will show that aspects of Frankfurt's own diagnoses of wantonness and BS should lead him to Kierkegaard's conception of authentic selfhood as requiring cares and loves to be sufficiently in touch with (and guided by) values that are *real* in a sense that is irreducible to the self's psychic states and natural facts of biology: as Anthony Rudd has recently argued in detail, "Our loves need to be understood...as responses to the experienced value of things," a value they have independent of our contingent desires and *prior* to being loved, even if we miss it.¹² This thesis is compatible with the caveat that serious devotion may make more of the beloved person's qualities stand out for us, or make normally hidden aspects clearer and more salient to us than they are to strangers – so we save a legitimate non-subjectivist sense in which 'only love sees true.'

Personal Authenticity and Projective Motivation. In short, then, I will compare Frankfurt's and Kierkegaard's *phenomenologies of inauthenticity*, which in turn shed light on conditions of authenticity and thereby clarify love as part of authentic identity. But authenticity is a complex and multi-dimensional concept; this is why, as Charles Larmore notes in his valuable discussion, "Few philosophers still consider giving authenticity a philosophical articulation;"¹³ most assume that the concept is confused and lacking in unity. While an adequate account requires more space than I have here, a few suggestions about positive conditions for authenticity will help frame the later analyses.

While the term is now used loosely in many ways, we should distinguish an *existential* concept of "authenticity" coming down from the romantic tradition(s) that refers to an agreement between the identity one shows in social relations and a deep or "true" identity that may easily be hidden from others, or covered over for the agent himself. We can say this much about phenomena of authenticity in its core existential sense without prejudging among rival *conceptions* of that concept. For its original sense from Greek meant that you are the author of something, and so it bears your authority within it: you stand behind it. In the related legal sense, an authentic document or act is truly derived from a genuine authority: it is not fake. Thus in the original sense, our authentic identity must derive from our inner authority, whatever that may be, which licences us to express our commitments and values openly to others. This is the core sense Kierkegaard has in mind when he complains in "The Present Age" that during his time, authors not only write anonymously – some even "write anonymously over their own signature," because they have not put "their whole soul" into their work; it lacks a sense of any conviction, any expression of a deeper life-view (TA 103).

This outline clarifies why the idea of authenticity has seemed so closely related to autonomous motivation, sincerity in our relations to others, integrity in the conduct of our life, or genuine emotional response to the values in our situations:¹⁴ being authentic connotes *being true* to something authoritative, something that can even obligate categorically. It is often said to consist in being true to *yourself* in the sense of 'following your own heart,' or not selling out your deepest interests for temporary advantages, or remaining loyal to principles: this is what Kierkegaard calls "faithfulness to oneself" (TA 7; compare 13). Here authenticity is understood as primarily a mode of self-relation: for example, the hero in the movie *Cinderella Story* gives up football for poetry and writing. Since such loyalty to a deeper calling often requires acting contrary to social expectations

or the demands of preexisting roles into which one has been cast, authenticity becomes associated with transcending conformism and cultivating originality: these capacities may be necessary means to finding that calling. Thus in the film *Billy Elliot*, a young boy growing up in a Welsh mining community with macho ideals of manhood has to resist social pressures in order to discover and take up his nascent love of dance. This influential idea was popularized by John Stuart Mill after Rousseau: "Where, not the person's own character, but the traditions or customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness" because "the free development of *individuality*" is stifled.¹⁵

The core concept of existential authenticity "implies being fully or purely oneself" or acting "in such a way that the self one is appears without deformation and in keeping with its intrinsic character," as Larmore suggests.¹⁶ But it is simplistic to assume that this intrinsic character lies there hidden within us, in like a pearl in an oyster, just waiting to be found once we cast off conventional assumptions and traditional roles. Yet this is clearly the root of Frankfurt's idea that discovering what we simply have to care about, our "volitionally necessary" loves, makes us authentic – though he follows Mill in calling this "individuality" (NI 110). As Larmore explains, this romantic view has been subject to withering critique. Paul Valéry, for example, argues that Stendhal's "*Natural-Self* to which culture, civilization, and custom are enemies" depends on the false view that we can identify "natural" loves that are unaffected by social learning.¹⁷ And Larmore agrees that naturalness is measured by communal paradigms: "...behavior and sentiments seen as 'spontaneous' always carry the stamp of cultural codes deep within them."¹⁸ In this, he follows Pierre Bourdieu's and René Girard's arguments that "imitation enters into the very heart of our being" because reason itself is intersubjective, "rooted in belonging."¹⁹

What Mill means by "individuality" has more to do with originality and critical reason. He argues that "originality is a valueable element in human affairs" because it prevents rote repetition of past practices, prompts us to reconsider the grounds of our socially shared beliefs, and saves people from falling or being forced into pre-scripted identities (many will not fit well into "the small number of moulds which society provides in order to save them from the trouble of forming their own character").²⁵ In other words, originality is a mark of autonomy, understood as the freedom to be responsible for one's character. But Mill does not conceive this as an origination of identity *ex nihilo* without any socially shared bases; rather, he means that people should not act like "automatons in human form," mindlessly following custom; nobody concerned for *aretê* and social progress recommends that "people should do absolutely nothing but copy one another." For excellence requires that people use "their own judgment" in deciding their own "plan of life."²⁶ This does not entail that there are no objective grounds for such decisions, or that past exemplars can do nothing to help us discern them.

This associates authenticity with the idea of *enlightenment* or thinking for oneself by drawing on innate resources of reason and one's life-experiences to form critical judgment with practical relevance for one's historically conditioned situation. An authentic person is one who does not take custom or convention at face value, but who looks for a more authoritative basis in critical reasoning (which may respond to insights from emotional experience). This helps answer Larmore's worry that the "cult of authenticity" may also lead to "contempt for the expectations of others" and thus to "social anomie;"²⁷ for a person who reasons critically about such expectations is not barred from solidarity. Indeed, authenticity is closely associated with "integrity" and "sincerity" in the sense of presenting one's true emotions, devotions, and values to others (or at least to intimate companions). Sincerity in this sense, like Kierkegaard's concept of earnestness, does not demand "total lucidity with regard to who we are," or what our cares, values, and emotions are (pace Larmore and Sartre²⁸). The authentic person simply does the best he can to understand what he cares about, and on this basis, expresses his cares openly.

To put these aspects together, we also have to distinguish two 'levels' of personality or practical identity. The idea of an inner-core self suggests that an identity not immediately on the surface of our life, or not solely determined by our culturally prescribed station and customary habits, must either be found or fashioned by our effort, or both.²⁹ This is the aspect of authenticity evident in the development of heroes in familiar epic quest narratives; for example, in the *Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn has to find his inner potential to be the returned king. The central message of epic literature as a genre is that our *social identity*, including our interpersonally recognizable roles, habits, and personality traits that others would use to describe us, should have at its core an *existential identity* that is to a significant extent a result of our effort to define it. Thus the close association between authenticity and existential autonomy understood as the control and powers needed to be responsible for our inward identity; authenticity, then, is an enhanced version of personal autonomy.

The aspects of originality and enlightenment operate on this inner or intrasubjective level, dictating that one should find inspiration for one's inward identity in critical reasoning, one's sense of unique potentials, or even private vision. The "proto-virtues"³² of loyalty to the heart, integrity, and sincerity are instead found in the *relation between* our existential identity and our more outwardly accessible social identity. Thus Mooney can say that authenticity is relational and evaluative: I can either live by, or betray, "the values I...overtly affirm or tacitly endorse."³³ A person can ask "whether she is in line with the self she most deeply, most truly, takes herself to be."³⁴ Such social authenticity has a reflexive aspect: when Peter denied Jesus out of fear of arrest, he was being inauthentic not only to his friends and his proclaimed savior, but more immediately to his 'true self;' thus his intense remorse. But this simply shows that the social sense depends on the existential sense: our diagnosis of Peter requires that he has an authentic inner identity as a disciple of Jesus at least partly in place. This is the authority that social authenticity respects; if it is not developed, then as Mooney says, the human being is in "indifferent oblivion regarding the options of being true or false to oneself."³⁵ In other words, if the agent is existentially inauthentic, then she lacks what I call the *categorical condition* (see below) for social authenticity to be an issue for her.

This does not entail that an agent could be completely authentic at the existential level yet utterly false in social relations. Failing to stand up for our central commitments or falsifying our autonomous purposes to others may erode our own sense of this inner identity or loosen our grip on its ultimate bases. This view is most plausible if a person's existential identity itself must respect or be guided by authoritative sources, such as norms and values, with bases in reality outside the self to which our access is (partly) mediated by our social world – as the aspect of enlightenment suggests. An authentic existential identity consists in part of projects and ideals that are central to our sense of what our life is *for*, which finds its ultimate touchstone in the contours of what is worth our devotion or love. So examining the concept of authenticity yields the solution to "Frankfurt's problem" proposed above.

This solution is further supported by the common association between authenticity and the agent's sense that her life is rich in first-personal meaning *to her* as the person living it is. A fully meaningful life is not the same as a happy life (consider Abraham Lincoln's many causes for sadness); nor is it the same as a virtuous or morally righteous life. But we suspect a deep connection between authentic devotion to worthwhile ends and ideals, authentic appreciation of values worth caring about, and a sense of robust significance in one's activities. For an authentic life cannot seem utterly pointless to its agent; such "absurdity" in the existential sense is a bar to full authenticity.³⁶ A moderate originality condition also makes more sense in this light: an authentic identity cannot be formed simply by copying others' identities because that indicates too little concern to discover what is really valuable in the world and what our most distinctive capacities for response to reality may be.

Frankfurt conceives the first-personal meaning of one's life as a result of caring about people, projects, ideals, and ambitions that motivate productive work;³⁷ Bernard Williams similarly conceives a rich or fulfilling life as one in which commitments to family, friends, "intellectual" and "creative" goals, and to political causes play a central role.³⁸ He defines "ground projects" as final ends for which one would sacrifice one's life, although he also recognizes other character-shaping commitments that are not this absolute.³⁹ This idea of "identity-defining commitments,"⁴⁰ cares, or higher-order volitions as central to one's "practical identity" has become widespread;⁴¹ yet no 20th-century account adequately explains how such cares, commitments, or personal projects are formed or what they consist in. If they are simply interests and emotional dispositions that result from our contingent history and the social forces that shape us, or desires that are instinctive in our kind, then they seem less than fully autonomous. But if they are simply the result of arbitrary choices, then again it is hard to see them as manifestations of self-governance or self-rule.

Here Kierkegaard's widespread remarks on will and passion inspire a possible answer: forming new final ends, reinforcing our determination to pursue goals already set, and altering projects central to our identity when necessary, are *active processes* of our agency, not merely changes that happen to us. Although they are distinct from making decisions in the familiar sense (e.g. deciding on opera rather than a movie tonight), the processes of setting, sustaining, and reshaping central life-goals involve kinds of "willing" that control our deep character. "Willing" in this sense is related to the older notions of "strength of will" and heroic striving or persistence in the face of adversity. I call this "projective willing" to indicate that it projects ends beyond those suggested by passive desires, forming projects and generating new motives that do not derive (entirely) from prior needs or attractions, including even the general desire for happiness (*pace* the eudaimonist tradition). But I do not mean that the agent's emotions or cares project the perceived values to which they respond; on the contrary, our projective striving is grounded in perceptions or judgments of objective value. In projecting new aims or renewing commitment to standing projects, the agent can express values that need not passively move her by way of "erosiac" attraction. On this view, the operative motives that Frankfurt calls "cares" and "loves" are established and altered by the agent's projective efforts over time.⁴² This explains why Frankfurt finds them to be "active" or "volitional," having an inherent "authority" that (unlike passive desires) needs no endorsement by separate higher-order attitudes (ANL 133, 137). The projective theory also avoids the problems of reification and essentialism inherent in Frankfurt's alternative hypothesis that our loves originate from "volitional necessities" of our individual practical identity (ANL 138; NI 108-16; RL 46).⁴³

I believe the projective conception also provides a better way to understand Frankfurt's notion of "higher-order volitions" through which we "identify" with certain first-order motives and alienate others,⁴⁴ and to make sense of his argument that cares and loves are distinct from passive desires.⁴⁵ As I noted earlier, his aim in developing these concepts was to explain how we can be active or autonomous in our identity-defining commitments and thus deeply responsible for an inward character that is distinct from contingencies of temperament and personality traits that we might be actively resisting. It is because Kierkegaard shares this aim that his contrasts between "aesthetic" and "ethical" life-views or volitional orientations shed light on Frankfurt's themes. For both Kierkegaard and Frankfurt, ongoing failure to care or to will deeply prevents human beings from becoming authentic personal agents with distinct inward identity. Yet Kierkegaard offers a more convincing and consistent account of the relation between caring and values. In what follows, I work towards this conclusion starting from Frankfurt's criticism of BS and its implicit relation to his account of "wanton" lack of care. The underlying existential dangers in both can be explained by recognizing their similarity to forms of aestheticism that Kierkegaard explains in *Either/Or* and in *Two Ages*. Several important *phenomena of inauthenticity* shed light on each other and should be understood together.

II. Frankfurt on BS and Volitional Wantonness

In the last decade, Harry Frankfurt's essay *On Bullshit* became very popular⁴⁶ after it was reprinted as a book.⁴⁷ We might compare its unusual success to the sensation that Kierkegaard produced with his pseudonymous "Seducer's Diary" in *Either/Or* near the beginning of his authorship.⁴⁸ Yet the serious intent of both books were missed by many of their readers. Frankfurt's critique of BS continues a line of thought beginning with Socrates's critique of the Sophists and culminating with existential critiques of neutrality, insincerity, and superficial mass consciousness. But even philosophical discussions of the essay's significance have largely overlooked its (conscious or unconscious) debts to the existential tradition. Frankfurt's account of BS is similar to Martin Heidegger's analysis of "idle talk" and "curiosity" as aspects of "the They" and to his source, Søren Kierkegaard's excoriation of the volitionally dissolute "public" in his famous essay on "The Present Age."⁴⁹ Yet this connection will require us to rethink several related themes in Frankfurt's work.

Frankfurt's Thesis and Cohen's Two Criticisms. As many reviewers have remarked, in his essay on BS, Frankfurt's key thesis is that a BSer is different and potentially worse than a liar. He describes the intentional state of a liar L as one who tries to bring about that his interlocutor believes something X, and believes that L believes X, and that L has communicated this belief, when in fact L thinks X is false. Frankfurt distinguishes this from another act (called "bullshit") in which the agent does not care whether X is true *or* false, though he conveys the sense that he does care and believes X. As Frankfurt puts it, this "lack of connection to a concern with truth" in one's speech is the distinguishing feature of BS (OB 33). Unlike the liar, the BSer is not trying to get others to believe that something false is true. Frankfurt is surely right about the importance of this distinction (whether or not he is correct about common usages of "bullshit," as hundreds of online commentators fail to see). For, like the liar, the BS.er also falsely represents himself as "endeavoring to communicate the truth;" yet what he intentionally conceals is not his belief but rather that "the truth-value of his statements are of no central interest to him" (OB 54-55). For example, in Frankfurt's sense, you could BS person A by making her believe that you are telling a clever lie to person B, when in fact you have no idea whether your statements to B are true or not.

However, in an insightful response nicely titled "Deeper into Bullshit,"⁵⁰ G.A. Cohen argues that Frankfurt confuses the BS-er's *own* indifference to the truth-value of his communications (explicit or implied) with "the bullshitter's not caring whether his audience is caused to believe something true or false."⁵¹ Cohen's point is that these can come apart: someone who is herself concerned about the truth or falsehood of some claim X might want her audience to believe X, but for reasons *other* than wanting them to know a truth or to believe a falsehood. For it might just be materially advantageous for her in some way if the audience believes X, whether it is true or false; for example, consider exaggeration in advertizing. But this kind of BS does not seem obviously worse for human society than outright lying.

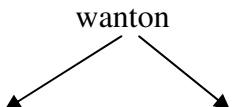
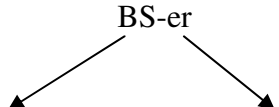
Cohen also objects that "while Frankfurt identifies the liar by his goal, which is to mislead with respect to reality, he assigns no distinctive goal to the bullshitter" but only a standard "tactic." Although "Frankfurt's bullshitter asserts statements whose truth-values are of no interest to him, and he conceals *that* fact," he act this way for "a variety of goals."⁵² This point reveals a problem in Frankfurt's analysis, though Cohen misdiagnoses it. Cohen acknowledges that the "standard" goal by which he and Frankfurt define the liar need not be the liar's "ultimate or final goal;"⁵³ it rarely is, since it is perverse simply to intend that someone else be mistaken just for the heck of it. Similarly, we should define Frankfurtian BS by a standard *proximate* goal, and the kind of communicative act

so defined could still be done for a variety of final ends: e.g. getting paid, amusing an audience, staving off boredom, creating a diversion, taking revenge, or even exposing fashionable intellectual nonsense by parody.⁵⁴ So it is consistent with Frankfurt’s approach that BS-ing be used as a means to many different final ends. The problem in Frankfurt’s account is that does not offer a standard proximate goal: as Cohen says, the BSer “lacks any goal such as that by which the liar is defined.”⁵⁵

Frankfurt responds to Cohen that “The defining feature of the sort of bullshit that I considered is a lack of concern with truth, or an indifference to how things really are.”⁵⁶ This could be construed as a *negative* proximate goal that guides the communicative acts in question: if the communicative act has a declarative (as opposed to interrogative or imperative) illocutionary mode, yet the agent is *not* trying to produce true or false belief through her communication, then her act is an instance of BS. But this negative condition is too wide: for it would count as BS all cases in which a person says whatever comes to mind without concern about truth or falsity, even if merely to entertain a small child, or to comfort an ailing elderly friend, or for other benign purposes in contexts where “small talk” is appropriate enough. Instead, Frankfurt means to isolate an existentially problematic phenomenon in human life: he affirms that “Characterizing something as bullshit is naturally construed as a serious pejorative.”⁵⁷ What we are really interested in isolating is the underlying intentional attitude that deserves such disapproval or rebuke.⁵⁸ To accomplish this, we need to find a more positive description of its definitive proximate end.⁵⁹

BS, Wantonness, and the Categorical/Evaluative Distinction. The problem we have found in Frankfurt’s negative condition for BS is interestingly similar to a problem with his closely related notion of the “wanton,” who is defined as lacking 2nd-order volitions concerning her own 1st-order motives (in contrast to “persons” who take an active stand with respect to their own 1st-order motives, *identifying with* some and *alienating* others) (FW 16). While this conception of identification with first-order desire has been the topic of intense debate in the literature on personal autonomy ever since Frankfurt introduced it in 1971, there is an obvious analogy between the wanton who has no higher-order will and the BSer:⁶⁰ just as the BSer remains unconcerned about the truth-value of what he is saying, and thus does not care whether the beliefs or attitudes that his listeners acquire from him are true or false (or probable/improbable, warranted/unwarranted, etc), the wanton is unconcerned about which 1st-order desires move her to action. We might express this relation by saying that Frankfurt’s BSer has a “wanton” attitude to the truth: he identifies neither with a project of honesty, nor a project of lying. Thus the attitude that disposes to BS-ing is wanton in at least one important aspect.⁶¹ In both cases, what interests Frankfurt is the absence of a categorical condition for other contrastive states, as this table illustrates:

Table 1:

	<u>Attitudes towards motives</u>		<u>Attitudes towards truth-value</u>	
Lacking the categorical condition	wanton 		BS-er 	
Meeting the categorical condition	Identifying w. motive M ₁	Alienating motive M ₁	Aiming at true belief	Aiming at false belief

A “categorical” condition, as Ronald de Sousa explains, is a teleological orientation towards some type of value V that is intrinsic to an intentional state of natural kind K (which de Sousa calls K’s “formal object”).⁶² In this schema, the V-standard applies when the categorical conditions for being an instance of K are met: such an instance has fulfilling V as its natural goal, but may fail by this

standard. For example, beliefs are about the world and try to correspond with reality; they fail if they are false. Thus trying and failing to attain V is distinct from not even being in the V-game; for example, merely imagining what it would be like if a certain proposition P were true does not fail if P is false. The contrastive standard of truth or falsehood evaluates only propositions aiming at truth. This can be broadened from intentional states to the kind of beings for whom these states are natural. For example, Aristotle's claim that "man is a rational animal" must be taken in the categorical sense: it is natural for us to form beliefs, but our beliefs are often irrational or unwarranted: "The evaluative sense presupposes the categorical sense: to be either rational or irrational (evaluatively) is to be rational (categorically)."⁶³

De Sousa applies this schema to emotions: they naturally aim at a kind of "appropriateness" relative to the agent's situation. Thus an inappropriate emotion is still meets the categorical conditions of emotional intentionality, whereas non-emotional states are neither emotionally rational nor irrational because they lack the categorical precondition for such evaluative contrasts.⁶⁴ So there is kind of "intrinsic rationality" (or cognitive function) in all emotions because it is constitutive of them to aim at a type of axiological correctness, even when they are inappropriate.

This two-level pattern is repeated for several other kinds of intentional states. A tradition from Socrates to Habermas holds that communicative action is naturally oriented towards truth (or belief warranted by evidence alone) as its ideal. The liar who aims at deception is categorically communicative in this sense, since she participates in social practices to which this truth-standard is intrinsic; but she exploits it by violating its requirements for strategic advantage. In other words, she plays the game, which involves at least implicit acknowledgment of the rules, but she cheats. Her deficient case of communicative action is parasitic on the norm, as Kant famously argued. This is distinct from ignoring or rejecting the standard that defines the practice altogether, as a BS-er does on Frankfurt's analysis. Similarly, a small child who says something that he believes is false only because he wants to copy an older sibling is not lying, for he does not yet know how to play that game. Yet we would not count him as BS-ing, because that implies that the agent *ought* to meet the categorical condition of communicative action. It is important that there are different ways to lack a categorical condition.

Suppose we applied de Sousa's model to higher-order volitions in Frankfurt's sense. Like the BS-er who is not really engaged in the communicative game (on the robust Habermasian understanding of it), beings that Frankfurt calls "wanton" lack a categorical condition of "personhood." He specifies this only as forming higher-order volitions, but de Sousa's analysis suggests a teleological standard that we might call *appropriateness* in one's own first-order motives (the motives that are most accessible to interpretation by others, which therefore figure most saliently in one's social identity). Then higher-order volitions would be constituted in part by the standard implied in their natural function, namely to govern the first-order motives on which we act and the social persona these give us. Frankfurt has constantly resisted the idea that there is any rational standard implicit in the function of superintending one's first-order motives,⁶⁵ but de Sousa's analysis implies that there should be. The analogy evident in Table I between two ways of leaving the categorically inferior state (the pairs of arrows) suggests that the options in both cases involves an *evaluative* distinction resting on a categorical one.

Frankfurt first illustrated the idea of wantonness with his famous "wanton addict" who "cannot or does not care which of his conflicting first-order desires wins out;" this is due either to "his lack of capacity for reflection or to his mindless indifference to the enterprise of evaluating his own desires and motives" (FW 18-19). The ambiguity here arises because Frankfurt defines wantonness negatively: so he does not distinguish between *essentially* wanton beings (such as "nonhuman animals ...and very young children" -- FW 16) who cannot form higher-order volitions and *contingently* wanton older humans who have (or could develop) the power to identify with

certain motives and alienate opposing desires, but who do not. For the first class, it is psychologically impossible to form a higher-order will; for the second, the absence of higher-order volitions demands another explanation. Frankfurt focuses on the second class in contrasting a wanton addict both with an “unwilling” addict who alienates his addictive craving and with a “willing” addict who identifies with his compulsive desire (FW 17-18; 24-25). For the suggestion is that the wanton *could* become either willing or unwilling to be an addict. But this second class of wantons who could overcome wantonness must be subdivided into those who simply fail to care about their first-order motives (call them ‘unawakened’ or ‘accidental’ wantons), and those who *intentionally refrain* from forming commitments involving higher-order volitions (‘voluntary wantons’). For example, Pippin and Merry start off in the *Lord of the Rings* as accidental wantons interested primarily in fun-loving tomfoolery, and then grow into more caring agents; whereas Stendhal famously aimed at spontaneity and immediacy. We can expand this taxonomy as follows:

1. Essentially wanton animals (psychologically unable to form higher-order volitions):
 - (A) Non-human animals;
 - (B) Human beings who are too young or mentally incapacitated to form higher-order volitions;
2. Contingently wanton animals (with the requisite mental capacities for higher-order will):
 - (A) Accidentally wanton human beings to whom it has not yet occurred to form higher-order attitudes towards their own 1st-order motives;
 - (B) Voluntarily wanton human beings who voluntarily omit to form higher-order volitions
 - (i) through tacit or unacknowledged refusal to engage this capacity when it is called for, or
 - (ii) through explicit and reflectively acknowledged refusal according to plan (*intentional* wantons).

This further subdivision of class 2B recognizes that 2nd-order volitions may be avoided either through more or less self-deceptive inattention or in more explicit awareness of this stance (which constitutes a minimal 3rd-order volition not to permit any 2nd-order volitions).

Such voluntary wantons are more disturbing than both accidental and essential wantons, for they play some positive role in their wantonness; intentional wantons (type 2Bii) even try to remain wanton. Similarly, some statements that would count as BS under Frankfurt’s wide negative condition are simply made in ignorance of communicative norms, whereas others are distinguished by the agent’s positive intention *not* to concern herself with the truth-value of her claims or consequent beliefs in her listeners – that is, her intention is to *omit* caring about the warrant that her claims have or lack. Such a person, we might say, practices *detachment* from the primary concerns to which communicative action normally commits us.⁶⁶ In her communicative action, she intentionally avoids aiming at the normal proximate goal of conveying truth (or when free-riding on this normal expectation, aiming at falsehood).⁶⁷

This could be for several reasons: (1) Perhaps, like Eddie Murphy in the film *Beverly Hills Cop*, he is merely using BS as a means to some material advantage; we can call such an agent an instrumental BSer. As Cohen noted, such agents BS intentionally, though they would not BS if they believed other means would be more effective in securing their ends. (2) Things are worse if the agent is in the grip of an ideology that values spontaneity in communication without the ‘narrow shackles’ of concern for truth or better warranted beliefs. (3) Worse still, perhaps she is a skeptic who thinks that the very ideas of truth and warrant are bunk. As Jonathan Lear argues in response to Frankfurt, the BS which fills many public addresses in the United States today is often more brazen than Frankfurt indicates, since the speaker is rather open about the fact that she cares little whether the content of her claims are true or false.⁶⁸ Instead of trying to hide her unconcern about

the truth-value of what she says, or lull her audience into mistaken confidence that she knows what she is talking about (like the ancient Sophists), this type of BS-er corrupts society by inviting audiences to join her in enjoying rhetorical flourish while ignoring the possible truth or falsehood of what is said. She encourages her listeners to focus on form of delivery rather than the substance. Even if what she says happens to be accurate, she seduces them to participate in her cynical refusal to care about, or even believe in, objective truth.⁶⁹ Against concern about truth-values, such a Nietzschean BSer aims not at deception, but rather at promoting the value of power or charisma. He invites us to join in his higher ideal, which scoffs at the mere liar who remains bound to the old illusion of objective truth and falsehood. No doubt this kind of skeptical sophistry is corrosive, as Frankfurt suggest in his follow-up book *On Truth*.⁷⁰ It is especially destructive to deliberative democracy, which then disintegrates into mere tyranny of majority desires, the collective rule of blind prejudice and brute preference. This is what Kierkegaard means by the anonymous “public” that he reviles as spiritually hollow in *The Present Age*.

(4) But Kierkegaard is even more concerned about self-deceptive BS. Consider an agent who is too dissolute to face the difficulties involved in caring about the truth-value of controversial and important ideas or beliefs -- especially those that could make a deep practical difference in the conduct of her life -- but who finds herself carried along by the common expectation to interact through constant speech; so she complies with vacuous talk.⁷¹ This is the type of BS-er that Kierkegaard has in mind when he asks in *The Present Age* “what is it to chatter?” and answers “It is the annulment of the passionate disjunction between being silent and speaking” (TA, 97). Note that the distinction between categorical and evaluative levels is found again here: the chatterer lacks the passion either for authentic speech *or* silence. He lacks the conviction necessary for genuine “conversation between man and man;” his talk becomes pure gossip, “garrulous confiding” about nothing that really matters to him, for “the aim is to find something to chatter about” (TA, 99). In other words, this dissolute BS-er tacitly aims at self-distraction more than any further goal. It is possible to do this in writing as well as speech. Those noted earlier who “write anonymously over their own signature (TA, 103) say nothing they genuinely care about with spirit. So they are not in the essential sense “authors;” they lack the categorical condition to be either a good or bad author.

This comparison brings us closer to isolating a distinctive proximal goal of the communicative act-type that Frankfurt considers damaging to human society and to the agents who perform it. In forms (2), (3), and (4), BS involves intending distinctive ends that have to do with avoiding communicative norms. In these noninstrumental forms, BS resembles species of the general pattern of attitudes and motives that Kierkegaard calls “aestheticism.”

III. Frankfurtian BS., Acedia, and Kierkegaardian Aestheticism

Aestheticism and BS. In Kierkegaard’s broad sense of the term, “aestheticism” is not (as the label might suggest) simply a way of life focused on the beautiful, but rather an encompassing attitude or practical orientation towards choices that (tacitly or more reflectively) seeks to avoid deep responsibility for serious life-choices. More advanced aesthetes in Kierkegaard’s cast put this in a positive light (via self-deception) as the task of avoiding the “boredom” they fear in conventions of social life and the repetitiveness resulting from vocational or interpersonal commitments. Instead, they seek interesting nuances in the passage of moments, cultivating what Martin Heidegger calls a “curiosity” that is an aspect of inauthentic social life in his view. Curiosity looks

not in order to understand what is seen...but *just* in order to see. It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty...Therefore curiosity is characterized by a specific way of *not tarrying* alongside that which is closest [or most important]...In not tarrying, curiosity is concerned with the

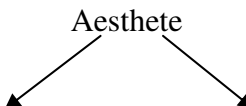
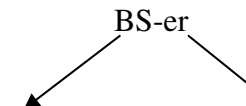
constant possibility of *distraction*.⁷²

This spontaneity in "immediacy" (among naive aesthetes) and the effort to cultivate it among their more reflective cousins puts aesthetes *beneath* good and evil as states of character: unlike the resolutely evil agent who knows that she is violating moral norms but accepts this price (or even delights in it for sheer rebellion), the aesthete does not take seriously the moral appropriateness or inappropriateness of her acts or their underlying motives. She may (speculatively) recognize the authority of ethical ideals and standards, but she does not personally appropriate them or give them motive-force in her life.

We find here another range of causes from accidental failure through voluntary but tacit consent, to fully intentional action. The aesthetes presented in *Either/Or I* range from pure sensualists like Mozart's "Don Giovanni" who use others for erotic pleasure⁷³ and prudent "shopkeepers" who care only for material advantage, to more self-aware figures like the young man "A" who writes the morose and obsessive "Diapsalmata" and cynical treatises like "The Rotation of Crops." This typology culminates with the sentimental and complex "Johannes" who keeps his "Seducer's Diary."⁷⁴ Like the accidental wanton, the most unconscious or childish of these aesthetes may not recognize his failure to form commitments that could be deeply good or evil. Others, like "A" in his treatises, self-consciously advocate an aesthetic life while repressing awareness of its frivolity. By the time of his Preface to the "Seducer's Diary," however, "A" is clearly more disturbed; against his will, he is awakening to the hollowness and absurdity of the Seducer's way of life (EO I 303-13, esp. 310). The Seducer himself is farther along: he has embraced superficiality in full reflective determination to cultivate emotions and experiences that seem beautiful or full of amoral meaning; he forms the paradoxical *project* of remaining wanton.⁷⁵ While the category is named for the Seducer's attitude towards beauty, the essence of aestheticism in all these forms is the absence of commitments involving higher-order volitions taken up *as* ethically good or evil. Thus, as Harvey Ferguson has helpfully argued, aestheticism does not reduce merely to spontaneous living in the flow. In Kierkegaard's critique, both the "way of reflection" as speculative detachment and "the way of immediacy" as a (false) index of one's real existential identity are rejected.⁷⁶

If we compare this range of aesthetes to our taxonomies of wantons and BSers, the key analogy should be obvious: Frankfurt's BS-er is to the value of Truth as Kierkegaard's aesthete is to the Good in general. These agents fail, avoid, or refuse outright to care about the value-ideal that is implicit in communication on the one hand and in projective willing on the other. Extending our previous table, we can add the following:

Table 2

	<u>Attitudes towards ends worth caring about (or identity-defining commitments)</u>	<u>Attitudes towards truth-value of communicated contents</u>
Lacking the categorical condition	Aesthete 	BS-er 
Meeting the categorical condition	Ethically good projects/cares Ethically evil projects/cares	Aiming at true belief Aiming at false belief

Of course, this analogy involves the controversial thesis that there *is* an ethical *telos* naturally connected to projective volition and higher-order will. But if the relevant phenomena fit this analogy, then it provides some support for this thesis. When avoiding ethical considerations

becomes a central goal of one's life, a disposition to BS is likely to become an ongoing defense mechanism, and thus an *aspect* of aestheticism.

Johannes in "The Seducer's Diary" is the paradigm aesthete: his romantic attentions to his "Cordelia" are neither a simple deception nor a straightforward lie (for he really is attracted to her), but rather a kind of BS that hides his detachment from both her emotions *and* his own.⁷⁷ Most people are earnest emoters in this sense: they want their emotional responses to events, situations, and acts or sufferings of other persons to reflect the positive or negative values in those acts and events, because such expression of value is intrinsically important (much like truth). Sensitive emotional response may be beneficial to us in several ways, but accurate expression of the values we encounter in the intentional object of the emotion is inherently appropriate. So normal agents guided by this *telos* of emotion do not view emotional expression of the salient values as a *mere means* to any further end or goal.⁷⁸ By contrast, Johannes the Seducer is an emotional BS-er: his emotions towards Cordelia are not feigned or simply pretended; but he does not care whether he accurately expresses their axiological objects, because he cultivates these emotions only as a means to a kind of quasi-artistic end. He has the vice of "sentimentality" in David Pugmire's sense: one who uses emotions for ends that are insensitive to the emotion's accuracy, with "indulgent and insistent" intentional disregard for this gap between reality and emotional construal of it.⁷⁹ Johannes is a spectator of emotional drama, aiming to take *sentimental pleasure* in contemplating Cordelia's erotic pathos and his own 1st-order emotional response to her feelings (both in the moment and in later reflection): for these passions appear beautiful in their tension, and therefore "interesting" (EO I 424). This serves his project of preserving "the interesting" in all things and thereby avoiding ethically significant commitment (EO I 438).⁸⁰

Boredom and Acedia. Another connection between the habits of BS and aestheticism is suggested by their respective attitudes towards boredom. As we saw, more reflective aesthetes understand their cultivation of "the interesting" as a way of avoiding "boredom" through keeping a series of novel experiences going. However there is more than one form of boredom. Ordinary boredom is just a state of disappointed expectation of aesthetic or intellectual goods: when kids are hoping for some entertainment or thrill and the ride is closed, they say that are "bored." Similarly, adults may be bored with a class, lecture, movie, or novel that was not as enlightening or moving or informative as they expected. In these cases, an ordinary human desire for interesting activity is frustrated. This differs from boredom as a *mood* without the absence of any particular expected good as its intentional object. The empty listlessness of a hot summer day when we cannot pin down why everything seems dull differs from the tedium a child may experience on a long car ride. Mood-boredom in turn can be due to external circumstances that block intrinsically worthwhile activity (such as prison), or due to an internal lassitude of the will. The latter type, which I call *existential boredom*, is what Frankfurt has in mind when he writes that boredom is more than an unpleasant feeling; it is a loss of psychic "vitality" due to not caring about anything going on around us (RL 53-55). In this sense, a wanton who literally cared about nothing and therefore made no effort "to maintain any thematic unity or coherence" in her desires (RL 16) would be bored in the existential sense. Such agents lead lives that are insignificant to them. In less extreme cases,

...they may be emotionally shallow; or they may lack vitality; or they may be chronically indecisive. To the extent that they do actively choose and pursue certain goals, they may devote themselves to such insipid ambitions that their experience is generally dull... In consequence, their lives may be relentlessly banal and hollow and – whether they recognize this about themselves – they may be dreadfully bored (RL 6-7).⁸¹

Such deep existential boredom comes from lacking significant purpose; it is a symptom of *acedia* – the vice of sloth – as Gabrielle Taylor interprets it. In Taylor’s sense, “acedia” is not simple laziness, idleness, or complacency (as it was classically understood),⁸² but rather a voluntary failure to form cares or commitments that could define a meaningful life. Thus Goncharov’s character Oblomov sees

that there are worthwhile things to achieve in life, which he will not achieve because he will not make the effort, because he cannot get himself sufficiently engaged with what he thinks worthwhile to push him into activity.⁸³

Acedia so understood is very similar, Taylor rightly notes, to the attitude of “Kierkegaard’s aestheticist” who sees “nothing worth engaging with.”⁸⁴ However, while Oblomov seems similar to the Kierkegaard’s “A,” the sophisticated Seducer actively refuses to recognize objective values beyond aesthetic pleasure because caring about them involves true attachment, investment of self, and thus risk of suffering. Either way though, both face another problem: *acedia*, like sophisticated aestheticism, leads to existential boredom, which is compatible with what Taylor calls superficial busyness.⁸⁵ Haunted by the absence of an identity based on earnest devotion to concrete final ends, both “A” and the Seducer seeks to escape the displeasure of existential boredom by various kinds of distraction: e.g. playing with roles and relationships without real engagement, curiosity without deep interest, seductions carried out as light minded experiments without any commitment to love. All such distractions are forms of BS in the *existential* sense, since they amount to so many ways of refusing to endorse the *truth or weight* of values that we ought to care about for their own sake.

Existential BS and Heideggerian ‘Idle Talk.’ We have traced the problem underlying Frankfurt’s concern about BS to its root. As Cohen saw, common instrumental BS as a mere means to other ends is contingent on circumstance; the ordinary BS-er is likely to take this attitude towards truth-value occasionally or intermittently. This evinces a certain shallowness analogous to the typical hedonism or materialism of the unreflective aesthete. By contrast, existential BS is a deeper attitude that denies, refuses, or at least demotes the objective importance of truth (and thereby any other agent-transcending value) as a final end for human life. It is not merely a matter of *passive* “indifference to truth,”⁸⁶ but of active (even if not reflected on) opposition to caring about truth, even in the way that liars have to care about it.

Thus existential BS is not intermittent or occasional: it is an orientation that comes to pervade one’s attitudes towards anything that might matter in one’s life. It is a way of life aimed at avoiding the kinds of cares and commitments that require serious and sincere communication with others. This is the distinctive goal that gives us a positive definition of BS. It has to be a self-effacing, self-deceptive project simply because there are so many goods worth caring about in the realms of reality outside oneself: in the practices or professions (such as the arts or sciences), in relationships with other persons, in social movements and political causes, and perhaps in religious callings – to list only the most familiar. But caring about goods we could pursue in these contexts comes with a high price: it requires commitment to ideals of excellence and the interpersonal relationships involved in their pursuit, and hence concern about both (a) the truth of what one communicates to others in these activities and relationships, and (b) about making the sincerity of one’s interest clear to them. As suggested, it also requires willingness to experience those emotions that are appropriate given one’s cares and commitments in relation to the actual situations one confronts in the world. By contrast, existential BS is a shield against the ways that persons, social life, or the natural world call us to cares and to earnest communication with others about the values to which our projective devotions respond.⁸⁷

Because the underlying goal that constitutes existential BS characterizes not only isolated speech-acts but an whole way of being that levels off the deep practical significance of goals, activities and relationships worthy of sincere devotion, its influence can spread, becoming a social phenomenon. In this social form, existential BS is comparable to the phenomenon that Martin Heidegger calls “idle talk” in which the anonymous “they” (*das Man*) say things without the “primary relationship-of-Being towards the entity talked about.”⁸⁸ The “primary relationship” or natural attitude to which Heidegger refers is what he calls *disclosure*, or letting things or others reveal their true character without distortion by our preconceptions. Although it is part our *telos* and essential to “authenticity” or being able to “stand by oneself” as Heidegger conceives it, this kind of clarity is never easy to achieve. Heidegger borrows from Kierkegaard the idea that we may reach such clarity by grasping our own mortality, or choosing in the face of death.⁸⁹ Probably this is not the only way to achieve clarity about how things are and what our possible responses may be; but there is something to the idea that facing death can help us come to terms with what matters most to us, or what is most worth caring about – in other words, that it helps us cut through the BS that builds up a barrier between us and the deep values that are most relevant for projective motivation.

Anticipating Frankfurt, Heidegger also notes that “idle talk” is distinct from intentionally lying; its function is to “close off” possibilities for understanding how things really stand. And “[t]o do this, one need not aim to deceive. Idle talk does not have the kind of Being which belongs to consciously passing off something as something else.”⁹⁰ Rather, idle talk, like gossip, passes off questionable claims as something taken for granted, or as something everybody knows, and thus discourages earnest critical inquiry or deep understanding of the reasons for or against such a claim. For example, consider the way that the Heritage Foundation has taught most Americans to assume that “liberal” means favoring a nebulous something called “Big Government,” which is a menacing albeit vague combination of high taxes for the sake of waste and Orwell’s “Big Brother.” When common in a society, such catchphrases and images foster knee-jerk reactions that control average, everyday thinking: as Heidegger puts it, “[t]he dominance of the public way in which things have been interpreted”⁹¹ intervenes between us and how things really are. In Frankfurt’s terms, what this means is that the average Joe is caught in an invisible net of BS that undermines the deliberative processes that alone can justify democratic law-making. Ideologies are especially strong nets of this kind, because people caught in them are unaware of their pervasive influence and the blinders they impose. People living in societies ruled by such ideologies are trained away from “the primordially genuine relationship-of-Being towards the world” (i.e. our natural orientation towards truth) and are kept “floating unattached” to hard facts, floating with others in the superficial camaraderie of BS.⁹²

IV. Authentic Willing Clarified in Kierkegaard’s Attack on Aesthetic Culture

At this point we can return to our hypothesis that one condition of authenticity is achieved by the striving will in projecting new ends and reforming old ones, in devoting oneself and unifying one’s energies through the work of sustained commitment. “Will” in this sense refers to the kind of effort that Oblomov would not make. Nowhere in the existential tradition is this idea clearer than in Kierkegaard’s riveting, direct, and devastating critique of “The Present Age” of his own culture. In this signed work, Kierkegaard portrays mid-19th century Europe as a period of reflective detachment, indolence, shrewd egoism, and superficiality that has lost the passionate engagement and heroic will-power of the preceding revolutionary age (PA 69). The revolutionary age had its demons, but it was not lukewarm. In the present age, aestheticism is linked to ubiquitous BS. Kierkegaard suggests that the irresoluteness of Europe in his time is related to its being an “age of publicity,” in which announcements and committee meetings substitute for action and bureaucracy saps decisiveness: he asks “if a whole generation could be presumed to have the diplomatic task of procrastinating and of continually frustrating any action and yet make it seem as if something were

happening..." (TA 70); it almost sounds as if he were describing the U.N. today! True political revolution, like true scholarship, has been replaced by simulacra (Ibid). In this situation, even a bad decision is better than no resolve, or the mere illusion of willing: "Even if it is a rash leap, if only it is decisive, and if you have the makings of a man, the danger of life's severe judgment upon your recklessness will help you become one" (TA 71).

This is a direct affirmation in Kierkegaard's own name of Judge William's pseudonymous claim in *Either/Or* II that "choosing oneself" in earnest commitment to a task, role, or relationship will strengthen conscience and make ethical considerations more salient, even if one's particular choices are not always for the best options at the start. In fact, the main goal of "The Present Age" sections of *Two Ages* is to develop this central thesis of *Either/Or* II that personal authenticity starts with the primordial "choice" to make serious choices or form commitments to projects, roles, and relationships in light of their ethical value (broadly understood). But in this text, Kierkegaard makes two crucial additions to the Judge's analyses. First, he develops the social dimension of aestheticism through clarifying the normative basis of willing. Second, he defends the converse of the Judge's thesis: just as volitional initiative helps clarify ethical sensibility, volitional weakness loosens our cognitive grasp on values because the importance of many contrasts can be well appreciated only from an engaged perspective. In other words, Kierkegaard diagnoses BS and idle talk partly as *symptoms* of volitional shallowness. Unfortunately these symptoms in turn worsen the spiritual disease. Because willing requires conviction concerning the worth of goals and persons to whom we dedicate our efforts, a dulled normative sensibility makes it harder to muster the will to "stand" for anything.⁹³ Thus existential BS and aestheticism are two sides of a vicious circle. This is the true root of the connection we saw indicated by the analogy between BS and wantonness in Frankfurt.

These two developments of the Judge's thesis are woven together in "The Present Age." Like the aesthetes of the pseudonymous works, typical people in Kierkegaard's culture are described as "spectators" rather than "participants;" they have forgotten that "a person stands or falls on his actions" (TA 73). They have grown incapable of the sincere admiration of greatness that heroic pathos requires (TA 72). These problems are linked because willing (in the projective sense) is a response to what Kierkegaard calls "primitive experiences" of value (TA 73), by which he means the sense of coming in contact with inexorable reality, being riveted with an impression of eternal validity, without which there is "no hero, no lover, no thinker, no knight of faith, no great humanitarian..." (TA 75). This crucial point explains why it becomes harder to will earnestly when society popularizes forms of cynicism that prevent people from trusting enough to have such experiences. Sensitivity to value and passionate response, in contrast to fleeting status and wealth, constitute a kind of existential "asset" (TA 74), following the biblical metaphor of spiritual riches. Art and literature free from indulgent artifice and haughty skepticism build up such assets by putting us in touch with values outside us: "a well-grounded ethical view" supporting an ideal of "nobility" and "unselfishness" can inspire volitional initiative (TA 74).

The Russian novelist Solzhenitsyn recognized a similar existential function for art in its capacity to break through "the lie" on which violence depends: when opposing ideology, "One word of truth is of more weight than all the rest of the world."⁹⁴ But it is not only the lies of totalitarian violence that art must fight in order to free us from delusion: sometimes it must cut through BS. Kierkegaard describes a more subtle miasma that "lets everything remain but subtly drains the meaning out of it" by obscuring ethical contrasts in "equivocation" and vague insinuation (TA 77). Terms that were fully meaningful only in relation to resolute devotion still remain in use, but they are robbed of the live significance they once had (TA 81). In our time, we see this when terms like "patriot," "family values," "job creators," and even "racism" are so overused that they reduce to mere catchphrases or emotive triggers. As Heidegger says, *das Man* is an average or everyday sense of things in which the deeper meanings that could form the basis for personal appropriation or

heroic striving are levelled off. The dominance of such an encompassing web of BS in the “ambiguity and equivocation” of polite society conceals the lassitude of the individual’s will, making this illness difficult to detect and “root out” (TA, 80).

This collective state of hollow banter and self-congratulatory conceit reflects and helps maintain the volitional void of its individual members. Aesthetic amorality is characterized for Kierkegaard by ambiguity and flux in which nothing is held absolute and no stand is taken: “Morality is character; character is something engraved, but the sea has no character, nor does sand, nor abstract common sense [*das Man*], either, for character is inwardness” (TA 77-78). By contrast, even a radically evil agent has character in her inward commitment to harm: “As energy, immorality is also character” (TA 78). For earnest evil at least has volitional continuity. “Character” here stands for a stable set of devotions that tend to last because they are ever-renewed in projective striving; it consists in *volitional* dispositions. As Joel Kupperman says, character involves “loyalty to commitments and projects” and a willingness to change them only for one “own reasons.”⁹⁵ Similarly, Frankfurt describes “cares” as binding past and future together for the agent because they involve “a certain consistency or steadiness” maintained by higher-order volition (IWC 83-84): if one cares about some X, the desire for X’s good “must endure through an exercise of his own volitional activity” rather than simply by its own inertia (OC 160). For caring about X involves “identifying” with one’s desire for X (OC 161),⁹⁶ and decisive identification involves “coherence and unity of purpose over time” (IC 175). By contrast, inauthenticity is characterized by the absence of passionate engagement and thus by narrative discontinuity. For Kierkegaard, a volitional pathos that makes inward character can have different grades of moral worth, yet without it,

The distinction between good and evil is enervated [or blurred] by a loose, supercilious, theoretical acquaintance with evil, by an overbearing shrewdness which knows that the good is not appreciated or rewarded in the world.... No one is carried away to great exploits by the good, no one is rushed into outrageous sin by evil, the one is just as good as the other, and yet for that very reason there is all the more to gossip [or BS] about, for ambiguity and equivocation are titillating and stimulating... (TA 78)

This passage, which anticipates much of Heidegger's remarks on “ambiguity” as part of *das Man*,⁹⁷ implies the same distinction that Judge William describes in terms of two levels of “choice” in the second letter in *Either/Or II*. The aesthete fails to appreciate the importance of moral distinctions because she avoids the kind of willing that Kierkegaard calls “pathos,” “spirit,” or “inwardness” (a term which implies that caring involves a relation to oneself as well as to the objects of one’s care).⁹⁸ But while *Either/Or II* diagnoses this kind of failure in the individual agent, “The Present Age” emphasizes that it is sometimes partly a result of cultural pathology: prevailing social conditions can obscure the ethical distinctions that are required for projective willing to break out of aesthetic paralysis.⁹⁹ Ethical BS or idle talk that dulls all value-contrasts without our even realizing it acts on the will like the magic harp that lulls the giant to sleep. Then even a stark encounter with genuine evil can, for all its harm, be helpful in shocking the quiescent will out of its slumber.

Like Rousseau before him, Kierkegaard sees status-oriented society as playing this soporific role by creating an atmosphere of artificial politeness or decorum in which sincerity about one’s views and direct expression of one’s commitments is replaced by simulacra of concern. In Rousseau’s analysis, society corrupts the individual by encouraging invidious comparisons that lead to “envy” as desire for relative equality, and thence to desires for domination.¹⁰⁰ For Kierkegaard, the problem is instead that what we might call *existential envy* blocks earnest respect for the heroism of others, which is ennobling and can provide a basis for the agent’s resolve (TA 82). This envy is a kind of paralysis that makes one afraid to make life-decisions or commit to a concrete identity lest others mock it: “Reflection’s envy holds the will and energy in a kind of captivity” (TA 81). Unlike the more honest envy that at least recognizes another’s superiority, this is “characterless

envy” that “makes sport” of any kind of excellence to which identity-defining vocations, practices, or interpersonal relationships can aspire (TA 83-84). This is what Kierkegaard means by “leveling” (TA 84).¹⁰¹ Even the passions in aestheticism that can be taken up and transformed in ethical caring are beaten down in such leveling,¹⁰² which is the opposite of ethical equality before God (TA 88). For the existential leveler “fears more than death ... reflection’s judgment upon him, reflection’s objection to his wanting to venture something as an individual” (TA 85). By fear of public scorn, “Envy turns into the principle of characterlessness” (TA 83): it teaches us to see *caring* in Frankfurt’s sense (which generates volitional character) as inferior, simplistic, old-fashioned, or hopelessly out of touch with current fashion. Without strong value-contrasts between excellence and its opposites, or a keen sense of goods beyond our own material self-interest and pleasures, the agent’s will is robbed of the necessary basis for projective motivation. The result is shrewd or ironic detachment in place of active participation or “belonging” through one’s own free endeavour:

the individual does not belong to God, to himself, to the beloved, to his art, to his scholarship; no, just as a serf belongs to an estate [involuntarily], so the individual realizes that in every respect he belongs to an abstraction in which reflection subordinates him (TA 85).

In other words, the individual becomes mere thing, possessed by a vaporous “aggregate” that can think and choose for him; only the collective can determine how things will go, so there seems to be no individual responsibility. In this special sense, “the public” is defined as the *opposite* of free association from earnest passion, or authentic democracy. This “public is not a *people*” (TA 92, my italics); one cannot “belong” to it as lovers belong to each other; one can only let oneself be absorbed into it through an abdication of responsibility. In Heidegger’s sense of *das Man*, “the public” is the anonymity in which people hide when they lack the courage for autonomy or self-rule (TA 89).

This does not mean that *all* solidarity or self-definition through group membership necessarily causes inauthenticity. Being a loner is neither necessary nor sufficient for authenticity. Authentic collective action is possible, but it requires active engagement from each participant, which requires their personal appropriation of shared goods to be pursued by joint action as their own purpose. Being a (positively) “free” participant in concrete groups can “reinforce and educate the individual, yet without shaping him entirely” (TA 92). Like authentic art, this kind of existential *bildung* requires rather than suppresses individual response and initiative: each member of the group cultivates her own interpretation of its common life and benefits from the unique interpretation of others. Likewise, in religious faith, the individual is “educated to make up his own mind instead of agreeing with the public” by default. So “strong communal life” and even action by “the people” as a whole are possible for Kierkegaard (TA 91); like Mill and Kant before him, he even associates them with enlightened thinking for oneself. Kierkegaard contrasts such “contemporaneity with actual persons” in joint efforts with the anonymous public that suppresses individual alterity (PA 91). Like Buber after him, Kierkegaard believes that such vital community arises from encounters in which the participants are freely present in “resolute mutual giving” (TA 79). It requires the kind of “personal human discourse” or sincere self-revelation that is blocked by BS (TA 104). It is impossible when “chatter” replaces “essential speaking” or earnest communication (TA 97).

Thus Kierkegaard’s analysis of authenticity emphasizes the need for norms with the universal and overriding significance of ethical ideals, and more generally, for values outside the self that can inspire “excellence” (TA 78, 89). Traditional romantic conceptions err in imagining that sources for the authentic existential identity can be found solely within the individual, and especially in the “immediacy” of affective promptings. As Ferguson says, for Kierkegaard,

the realisation of all higher forms of life...depend[s] on the suppression of immediacy through wilful identification of the self with values that have their course and justification outside of momentary states of pleasure. The self shapes itself in relation to its own commitment to these values.¹⁰³

So it is ultimately because the culture of the "present age" blocks respect for the alterity of values that command us from beyond our own psyche, undermines awe in the face of "something sacred" (TA 64), that it closes off the option of authentic existence. Its "formlessness" prevents the primitive experience of "essential truth" that requires passion to see (TA 100; compare TA 61 on "form" and "passion" in the age of revolution).

V. How Existential BS Conflicts with Caring About Self-Transcending Ends

We have seen that Frankfurt's critiques of BS and wantonness can be explained in the more fundamental terms of Kierkegaard's analysis of inauthenticity in the single aesthete and the general public. Kierkegaard's diagnosis implies a model of authenticity in terms of projective motivation that is in deep concord with Frankfurt on two points.

First, it suggests that most of the goals, activities, or relationships (both dialogical and social) to which we devote ourselves when we "choose the ethical" lie literally outside us – in the other, or in the world, though of course we can also will our own good.¹⁰⁴ Frankfurt agrees, since "selflessness" is a defining feature of caring on his account: our attention is focused outward on our ideal or on the person(s) we love (IWC 89). Indeed, the object of care is entrancing in a way that we find liberating, especially in the case of "volitionally necessary" cares from which we cannot choose 'at will' to disengage (IWC 88). In another essay, Frankfurt suggests that the difference between caring and desires that are initially passive (or wanton unless we identify with them) is found in the devotion of cares to something beyond the self as a final end. An agent's "active love" aims at goods that "are altogether distinct from and independent of his own" (ANL 134). Later he recognizes that this the kind of pure motive that distinguishes care-love can also be directed at the agent's own good.¹⁰⁵ But "aesthetic, cultural, and religious ideals" to which people may be devoted are not egoistic, even if they are not based on moral duties (RL 8); in these cares, and in love of family members, the agent focuses on something beyond herself. Although discovering and articulating one's love is "inherently important" to us because it gives our lives shape and meaning, this existential benefit depends on our outward focus on what or who we care about: "The value of loving to the lover derives from his dedication to his beloved," or his taking her well-being as his final end (RL 59).

Second, the cares that constitute the center of an authentic identity have a reflexive side. Kierkegaard's emphasis on "inwardness" and Frankfurt's stress on the higher-order volitions involved in caring both suggest that authenticity requires certain self-directed attitudes and efforts. These must be distinct from the sort of morose obsession with self that we typically find in various sentimental and narcissistic states, which are instead symptoms of aestheticism. Some forms of self-reflection are *authenticity-reducing*, and these include existential BS as a way of life, a basic attitude that aims to avoid caring about truth. In 1991, Frankfurt argued that the weakest human passion is not "love of truth," as Housman wrote, but specifically "our love of the truth about ourselves" (FP 95).¹⁰⁶ The many varieties of self-deception in human experience all indicate the difficulty of commitment to self-disclosure, or caring to know how we really are.

But as Kierkegaard helped us recognize the project that defines BS as a way of life, or more broadly all voluntary wantonness, requires a refusal to care about the truth regarding one's practical identity. In turn, this usually requires *BS-ing oneself* about one's identity, i.e. telling oneself stories

about one's roles and activities that are sometimes true, sometimes false, but chosen only with regard to aesthetic criteria such as how pleasing or flattering they are, or whether the *self-image* they paint fits in well with other expectations. Thus Frankfurt is surely correct in "The Faintest Passion" that it is vitally important to care about our true nature or identity, even though we may lack privileged access to it (and here friends can help us). Indeed, it seems that one could never escape a life of BS or wantonness without caring to some extent about one's character, who one really is, or what one stands for. This is because volitional caring about any plausible candidate X entails caring₂ that one has this care₁ – which may be explained in terms of these two conditions:

- (a) caring to understand one's own practical identity (or to know that self-sustained commitment to X is part of one's identity), and
- (b) caring about the worthiness of this devotion (and the resulting worth of the practical identity that it partially constitutes).

This is a plausible interpretation of Frankfurt's 1982 claim that "it is necessarily important to people what they care about" and that "if anything is worth caring about, then it must be worth caring about what to care about" (IWC 92). These are among several passages in which Frankfurt (perhaps inadvertently) implies that care or love *can* be based on objective evaluations of their objects.

Thus if (a) and (b) capture the 2nd-order caring that is natural to full personhood, we have to revise Frankfurt's more recent subjectivism in light of his own earlier essays: earnestly caring about anything or anyone requires honesty about one's own character, which includes caring about the truth regarding one's own projects, commitments, *and* their value – which is at least partly a function of the *intrinsic value* of their objects. This revision brings Frankfurt into concord with Kierkegaard's view that willingness to face one's "eternal significance" as an ethical chooser, or to consider one's life-goals in light of universal ethical ideals, is a transcendental condition for avoiding a life of wantonness or aestheticism, since without it we cannot earnestly commit to anything or anyone. This explains why BS in its existential form as basic attitude is not only contrary to caring about truth-value in one's speech, but also undermines caring about *anything*. For if caring about X implies caring about the truths concerning X and X's worth as an object of devotion, then caring about truth is a transcendental condition for the possibility of caring about anything else.

Conclusion: Authenticity and Love. For both Frankfurt and Kierkegaard, there is no such thing as *inauthentic love* that is still love, or more than a mere semblance. Agapic love for Kierkegaard is always earnest and makes other loves earnest when it infuses them; for it responds to conscience. And all love in Frankfurt's volitional sense has something akin to an agapic structure, which Frankfurt calls its "selflessness" or independence of desire for the agent's own satisfactions. It is already affirmed in arising from one's volitional identity and its inherent limits. However, Kierkegaard recognizes that authentic devotions are impossible without the apprehended objective worth of final ends (or excellence of activities involved in their pursuit) being at least part of the reason for committing oneself to them. Authentic willing is a personal response to goods that are disclosed in experience, not arbitrarily posited by caring – and in the religious stage or life-view, it is a response to paradoxical goods that are revealed to us. This is why idle talk and vapidty are so harmful, as Frankfurt's related critiques of BS and wantonness also imply when we trace the roots of their failings. This requires rejecting Frankfurt's subjectivist thesis in *The Reasons of Love* that things become important to us, or worth caring about from our perspective, only because we already care about them. Frankfurt has fallen for the romantic myth of authenticity as loyalty to one's own inscrutable heart: he imagines that there are goals or persons that one simply *must* love

or care about, and that our task is only to discover this volitional destiny, since without caring and loving, we cannot have a life that is robustly meaningful to us. This is not an accurate description of how cares, loves, or projective motives in general are really formed, sustained, and modified over time in authentic lives.

Frankfurt should instead have developed the key implication of his essay on BS, namely that we ought to care about the truth-value of what we communicate because on significant issues, *truth and truthfulness are among the goods objectively worth caring about*. In a *Times* interview, Frankfurt seems to concede this point: he admitted, “I had always been concerned about the importance of truth...the way in which truth is foundational to civilization and the various deformities of it that were current.”¹⁰⁷ Likewise, BS is harmful to self and society because it refuses to care about something that we all *ought* to care about. In Frankfurt’s own words:

indifference to truth is extremely dangerous. The conduct of civilized life, and the vitality of the institutions that are indispensable to it, depend very fundamentally on respect for the distinction between the true and the false. Insofar as the authority of this distinction is undermined by the prevalence of bullshit and by the mindlessly frivolous attitude that accepts the proliferation of bullshit as innocuous, an indispensable human treasure is lost.¹⁰⁸

This is challenging stuff, worthy of juxtaposition with Kierkegaard’s own critique of “idle talk” and Heidegger’s remarks on “the They.” But not only does it imply that truth is objectively worth caring about; it implies that all our 1st-order cares, identity-defining commitments, and projects should be based on truth about their value that is (in principle) commonly accessible to all rational beings. So authenticity is not entirely reducible to self-regarding attitudes: it is impossible for the total skeptic about intrinsic values in the world outside his agency. Such a skeptic’s “heart” is either empty or unstable, without any firm content to which he could be loyal. Since authenticity requires devoting ourselves to goods beyond our material interests, our self-development, and even our own experience of meaning, an authentic agent must believe that such goods exist.

Endnotes

¹ See Edward Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation* (SUNY Press, 1991), p.99, and *Selves in Discord and Resolve* (Routledge, 1996), pp.66-67. Along with C. Stephen Evans and Robert Perkins, Mooney is also among first to explain the errors of reading Kierkegaard as an irrationalist (see *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, pp.7-9).

² See "The Meaning of Kierkegaard's Choice Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical," in Davenport and Rudd, eds., *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 2001): 75-112.

³ See "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics: Kierkegaard and MacIntyre," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*: 265-324; and "Earnestness," in *Kierkegaard's Concepts*, ed. Jon Stewart and William MacDonald (Springer, 2014):

⁴ I argue in detail for the superiority of Kierkegaard's conception of wholeheartedness to Frankfurt's in Davenport, *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality: From Frankfurt and MacIntyre to Kierkegaard* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012): chs. 3-4.

⁵ See Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton University Press, 2004), pp.21-28. This book is a much longer version of an essay titled "On Caring" that was first published in *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge University Press, 1999): 155-80, see esp. p.172.

⁶ See Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right*, ed. Debra Satz (Stanford University Press, 2006), p.20.

⁷ *Ibid*, pp.21-24. As Rudd points out, this has the counterintuitive implication that evil agents are not bound by practical reasons contrary to their unjust or cruel cares (see *Self, Value, and Narrative* p.103).

⁸ See Davenport, *Will as Commitment and Resolve: An Existential Account of Creativity, Love, Virtue, and Happiness* (Fordham University Press, June 2007), ch.14.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.5. Rudd notes the same contradiction: "Frankfurt, having initially distinguished persons sharply from mere animal choosers...ends up making that distinction only a relative one (we too are determined by our biology, just in a more complex way)" – see *Self, Value, and Narrative* p.103.

¹⁰ This is how I read the pseudonymous account of "Truth is Subjectivity" in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

¹¹ On these points, see John Crosby's very helpful comparison in his essay, "Personal Individuality: Dietrich von Hildebrand in Debate with Harry Frankfurt," in *xyz....* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 19-31. Kierkegaard's view is like von Hildebrand's in holding that volitional love is a response to the unique value of persons, but von Hildebrand may have a clearer account of this value.

¹² Anthony Rudd, *Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 89.

¹³ Charles Larmore, *The Practices of the Self*, tr. Sharon Bowman (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 4. Larmore notes that Charles Taylor and Alessandro Ferreira are key exceptions in recognizing the importance of authenticity in its existential sense. This must be contrasted with the narrower use of "authenticity" in some recent analytic literature following Frankfurt simply as a label for acting on

motives with which one identifies. In this artificial sense, "authenticity" is a term of art for a procedural condition of "autonomy." This common usage actually verifies Larmore's point.

¹⁴ On this aspect of existential authenticity, see Rich Anthony Furtak, "The Virtues of Authenticity: A Kierkegaardian Essay in Moral Psychology," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 43 no.4 (Dec. 2003): 423-38.

¹⁵ J.S. Mill, *On Liberty and other writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 2005): see *On Liberty* ch.3: "Of Individuality as one of the elements of well-being," 57 [my italics].

¹⁶ Larmore, *The Practices of the Self*, 7.

¹⁷ Ibid, 2, quoting from Valéry's essay on Stendhal in *Oeuvres complètes* (Gallimard, 1957): I, 570.

¹⁸ Ibid, 2.

¹⁹ Ibid, 34.

²⁵ Mill, *On Liberty* ch.3, 64-65.

²⁶ Ibid, 58-59

²⁷ Larmore, *The Practices of the Self*, 5. This risk of anti-social egotism also seems to be the reason for Poul Martin Møller's view that some "affectation" or modeling oneself on others is needed if one not to become close-minded and "encapsulate himself solely within the sphere of his own thoughts," as discussed in Bruce Kirmmse's insightful essay on the 19th century history of the concept of affectation: "Affectation, or the Invention of the Self: A Modern Disorder," in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard*, ed. Edward Mooney (Indiana University Press, 2008): 24-38, p.28 [quoting Møller's "Preparations for an Essay on Affectation," in *Posthumous Papers of Poul M. Møller*, 3rd ed. by F.C. Olsen, in 6 vols. (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 1855-56), vol.3, pp.169-70].

²⁸ Ibid, 21. Larmore thinks thinks Sartre and Valery are correct that it is willing sincerity that is incoherent, as if somehow the very conscious awareness of this goal is self-defeating (20-21). I do not agree that sincerity or authenticity can only be non-targetable ends, as the final section of this paper partly explains.

²⁹ Thus Anthony Rudd argues in *Self, Value, and Narrative* that in Kierkegaard's view, our core identity is partly received (as passive or given facticity), and partly self-shaped by efforts that both discover the given elements and work on them. This agrees with my interpretation of *Sickness Unto Death* my essay in the *Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford University Press, 2013)

³² I use this term to indicate that these traits are not sufficient by themselves for some positive level of moral worth in character, but are ethically significant as essential preconditions of both good and evil in volitional character: see my "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics," p.294, p.296, and note 99. Authenticity is something like a master proto-virtue in this sense, enjoining all the others.

³³ Mooney, "On Authenticity," in *Excursions with Kierkegaard*, 163-64.

³⁴ Ibid, pp.154-55.

³⁵ Ibid, 152.

³⁶ See Thaddeus Metz, "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," *Ethics* 112 (July 2002): 781-814, pp.786-77, citing Susan Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of a Good Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997): 207-25. This meaningfulness condition is also the one I stressed in some past remarks on authenticity in contrast to autonomy (see *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality*, 99). I also mentioned reflective articulation of goods for caring about (Ibid, 100-1).

³⁷ Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, p.23, pp.51-52, p.58.

³⁸ Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism: for and against* (Cambridge University Press, 1973): 77-150, pp.110-16. Like Frankfurt on "cares," Williams suggests that agents are "identified" in a distinctive way with their "commitments," which involve something more than mere desires or "tastes." Yet the Humeanism that emerges in his later essays leaves Williams no adequate way to explain their volitional "seriousness" or "depth" in one's life..

³⁹ Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," reprinted in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981, pb 1985): 20-39, pp.11-13. He also refers to such motives as "categorical desires."

⁴⁰ See Jeffrey Blustein, *Care and Commitment* (Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁴¹ See Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, pp.100-2.

⁴² See Davenport, *Will as Commitment and Resolve*, ch.13.

⁴³ I critique Frankfurt's arguments for volitionally necessary cares in "Norm-Guided Formation of Cares without Volitional Necessities," in *Autonomy and the Self*, ed. Michael Kühler and Nadja Jelinek (Springer, 2012): 47-75.

⁴⁴ Frankfurt offers different explanations of the phenomenon of volitional "identification" with motives in "Freedom of the will and the concept of a person," "Identification and externality," and "Identification and wholeheartedness," all reprinted in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), and later in his Presidential Address to the APA titled "The Faintest Passion," reprinted in *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge University Press, 1999): 95-107.

⁴⁵ See Frankfurt, "Autonomy, Necessity, and Love," reprinted in *Necessity, Volition, and Love*: 129-41. I borrow the term "erosiac" from Alan Soble's work on love; see the full explanation in Davenport, *Will as Commitment and Resolve*, ch. 4.

⁴⁶ According to Bob Thompson, *Washington Post*, July 28, 2005 (p.C01) the book had sold 250,000 copies then; see online story. Princeton University Press confirmed that as of June 2006, the book had sold 400,000.

⁴⁷ Harry Frankfurt's essay "On Bullshit" was originally published in *Raritan* 6 (1986), abridged in *Harpers* (Feb. 1987), and then reprinted in his collection, *The Importance of What We Care About*: 117-33. Recently it was reprinted virtually unchanged as a small book, *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press, 2005). I cite the book version by parenthetical page references.

⁴⁸ See Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* Vol. I, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1987): 301-445..

⁴⁹ Ibid, 152.

⁵⁰ G.A. Cohen, “Deeper into Bullshit,” in *Contours of Agency*, ed. Buss and Overton (MIT Press, 2002): 321-39.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 330.

⁵² *Ibid*, 329.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 328.

⁵⁴ For example, consider Alan Sokal’s famous and invaluable hoax article, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” *Social Text* #46/47 (spring/summer 1996): 217-252..

⁵⁵ Frankfurt, “Reply to G.A. Cohen,” in *Contours of Agency*: 340-44, p.341..

⁵⁶ Frankfurt, “Reply to G.A. Cohen,” p.340.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 343.

⁵⁸ When the agent does not intend to communicate truth or falsehood as an essential part of her goal in communicating, this is usually either (i) because the context does not call for such concern, or allows for benign chatter; or (ii) because the agent *herself* does not care about the truth-status of the ideas she is expressing. For, a person who cares about the truth-value of the ideas that she is communicating normally also cares about the truth-value of the beliefs that her interlocutors acquire from her communication.

⁵⁹ Cohen sees this, but does not supply the answer. Instead, he moves to a discussion of nonsense in the content of communicative acts, which is interesting, but not relevant for my present purposes.

⁶⁰ This link has not, to my knowledge, received attention in the large secondary literature on Frankfurt’s ideas concerning personal autonomy. Connections have now been made in some recent popular collections: e.g. *Bullshit and Philosophy*, ed. Gary Hardcastle and George Reisch (Open Court, 2006).

⁶¹ Although a BSer could care about other values and BS for the sake of them. These are cases of common instrumental BS, which does not indicate the deeper attitude or project that I call existential BS.

⁶² Ronald de Sousa, “The Rationality of Emotions,” in *Explaining Emotions*, ed. Amélie O. Rorty (University of California Press, 1980): 127-52, pp.128-30. Also see the later version in de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotions* (MIT Press, 1987, pb. 1990), pp.158-61.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p.130, and *The Rationality of Emotions*, p.160.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, pp.132-34, and *The Rationality of Emotions*, pp.159-62.

⁶⁵ In “Freedom of the will and the concept of a person,” Frankfurt first describes 2nd-order volitions as expressions of “reflective self-evaluation” (p.12) and says that such critical awareness involves rational capacities (p.17); but he then adds that 2nd-order volitions need not express any practical evaluation of 1st-order desires and may be mere preferences (p.19, note 6). This anticipates his later claims that cares need not be at all responsive to rational evaluation of their objects.

⁶⁶ Most of the so-called “informal fallacies” are dialectical errors precisely because they violate dialectical expectations that are implicit in the shared assumption that the communicative exchange aims at truth or better-warranted belief as its primary final end.

⁶⁷ More precisely, where the context and illocutionary mode of her speech-act involves an apparent

validity-claim, and thus ordinarily requires some good-faith effort to communicate what she believes honestly, this BS-er deliberately *refuses* to care about whether the content of what she says tracks (directly or inversely) what she regards as the truth of the matter at hand.

68 Jonathan Lear, "Whatever," *The New Republic* (March 21, 2005): 23-25.

69 In *On Bullshit*, Frankfurt notes the connection between the rise of BS and skepticism about the possibility of "any reliable access to objective reality" (p.64).

70 Harry Frankfurt, *On Truth* (Alfred Knopf, 2006), pp.7-9. Yet this sequel is disappointing because it lacks the critical edge of *On Bullshit*. And that is because it focuses almost entirely on the *instrumental* values of truth-telling or honesty and so emphasizes the social harms that result from BS when widely used as a mere means to all sorts of other ends (p.4, p.6, pp.15-17). As if having realised his earlier inconsistency, he now says very little about the intrinsic value of truth. Though he clearly does think that we need truth to "understand how to live well" (p.36), his own subjectivism blocks him from challenging postmodernist suspicions that normative or evaluative judgments have no objective truth-value (pp.28-29). He is limited to asserting that *nonnormative* factual knowledge is important for forming commitments and for "validating the purposes and goals that we choose and that we set ourselves to pursue" as instrumentally rational (p.31). For he agrees with those who think that choice of *final* ends cannot "be justified rationally at all" (p.31).

71 For a harrowing example of such a character taken to an extreme, see Charles Williams's description of Evelyn in *All Hallows Eve* (Pellegrini & Cudahy; 1948; reprinted by Eerdmans, 1981).

72 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. Macquarrie and Robinson (Harper and Row, 1962), I,5 ¶36, H172, p.216.

73 See "The Immediate Stages of the Erotic" in *Either/Or* I: 45-135, esp. p.85, where Don Giovanni/Don Juan is described as an ideal type of the sensual without even the psychic components of the erotic; he represents maximal immediacy, the "spirit of flesh" incarnate (p.88).

74 These aesthetes are all BSers of different sorts: those who live only for pleasure or material reward are like the Greek sophists who seek to persuade their audience by any rhetorical device as a means to other political ends. The reflective aesthetes, by contrast, are not merely instrumental BSers; they lose themselves in reflection in order to avoid the moral seriousness of weighty life-choices and commitments. In other work, I now also recognize a further kind of "heroic" aesthete (in *Either/Or* II) who does form positive cares for nonmoral ends (e.g. various kinds of greatness) but who avoids recognizing the ethical norms that regulate such cares: see the full taxonomy of aesthetes in ch.3 of my *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality*.

75 See "The Meaning of Kierkegaard's Choice Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical," *op. cit.*, and Davenport, "Entangled Freedom: Ethical Authority, Original Sin, and Choice in Kierkegaard's Concept of Anxiety," *Kierkegaardiana* 21 (2001): 131-51.

76 Harvey Ferguson, "Modulation: A Typology of the Present Age," in *Immediacy and Reflection in Kierkegaard's Thought*, ed. Paul Cruysberghs a, John Taels, and Karl Vertstrynge (Louvain University Press, 2003): 121-41, p.129.

77 For example, Johannes says, "Plainly and simply to deceive a girl, for that I would not have the stamina" (EO I 437).

78 The thesis that emotions are naturally for their own sake, or for the sake of *appropriateness* in response to the world and others in it, deserves a detailed defense. I have begun this task in "The Binding Value of Earnest Emotional Valuation," *International Journal of Decision Ethics* 2 no.1 (Fall 2006): 107-23.

79 David Pugmire, *Sound Sentiments: Integrity in the Emotions* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 127. As Pugmire explains, because the sentimentalist uses an emotion as a mere "means to an emotional experience," she betrays her real "indifference" to the theme of the emotion, i.e. what it is about (134). Note the similarity to the BS-er's indifference to truth.

80 Of course this means that he does not meet the categorical condition for real emotions; he experiences only their simulacra. In this sense, his project is self-defeating.

81 However, I would not grant Frankfurt's additional claim that "persons who are scrupulously moral" could be this hollow (p.6); for moral motivation requires cares that are incompatible with wantonness. The truth in his observation comes from the fact that there is a rich array of nonmoral ends worth caring about.

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- 82 Gabrielle Taylor, "Deadly Vices?" in *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues*, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford University Press, 1998): 157-72, p.161.
- 83 Ibid, p.163.
- 84 Ibid, pp.165-66.
- 85 Ibid, p.168. As Taylor says, in this state, "since her commitment to whatever she is doing is merely a shallow one, it will not generate reasons for embarking on a coherent, life-guiding plan of action" (Ibid, p.169).
- 86 Frankfurt, "Reply to G.A. Cohen," p.343.
- 87 As described here, existential BS. obviously has important similarities to Jean-Paul Sartre's conception of "bad faith."
- 88 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, I.5 ¶35, H168, p.212.
- 89 See my essay in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben (Indiana University Press, 2011).
- 90 Ibid, H169, p. 213. So it seems that Heidegger scooped Frankfurt on this point. Heidegger's analysis of "idle talk" is also heavily indebted to Kierkegaard's critique of speculative philosophy that attempts to replace religious faith, especially as stated by the pseudonym Climacus in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.
- 91 Ibid.
- 92 Ibid, H170, p.214.
- 93 In Cheshire Calhoun's sense: see "Standing for Something," *The Journal of Philosophy* 92 no.5 (May 1995): 235-60.
- 94 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Prize Lecture*, tr. Nicholas Bethel (London: Stenvalley Press, 1973), p.55.
- 95 Kupperman, *Character*, p.14.
- 96 In at least ten passages, Frankfurt either directly links caring and volitional identification or describes them in parallel terms. Yet after returning to a weaker structural or synchronic conception of identification in terms of "satisfaction" in "The Faintest Passion," he concluded that caring did not require identification or the converse: see his "Reply to Gary Watson" in *Contours of Agency*, p.161. In personal conversation with me, he recanted that and returned to his more consistent earlier position.
- 97 In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes "an intent, ambiguous watching of one another, a secret and reciprocal listening in," in which each hopes to maintain his status as a sophisticated person who of course knows what is going on and is among the "in" crowd, and yet can be accepted only via smug disdain for any genuine commitment to action that requires long follow-through and readiness to denounce anyone who defects from this false camaraderie by any move towards personal initiative (H174, pp.218-19). With its presentiments of life under a totalitarian ideology, this description is even more unsettling than Kierkegaard's account of conscience-killing ambiguity in the "anonymous public" (to which Heidegger is obviously indebted).
- 98 As Kierkegaard says in discussing four examples, the agent "does not relate himself in the relation but is a spectator" (TA 79).
- 99 On this feedback relation, see the last section of my "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics."
- 100 See Rousseau, "Discourse on Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men," in *The Basic Political Writings*, tr. Donald Cress (Hackett Publishing, 1987): 25-82, Part Two, pp.64-68.
- 101 Thus what Kierkegaard means by "leveling" is not redistribution for material equality, but rather *existential leveling* in which strong evaluative judgment in Charles Taylor's sense is undermined or short-circuited. Also see PA 96 on the contrast with religious equality.
- 102 As Norman Lillegaard argues, some of Kierkegaard's aesthetes do have passions that provide constancy in their lives, which could become the basis for their ethical transformation. For example, "Claudine" in the novel *Two Ages* is faithful in erotic love, although her passion remains immediate or unchosen; she does not make the [projective] "effort" to integrate the desires given to her by "nature and history" in a rational "self-concept;" see Lillegaard, "Thinking with Kierkegaard and MacIntyre about

Virtue," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre* 211-32, pp.213-14.

¹⁰³ Ferguson, "Modulation: a Typology of the Present Age," p.129. Compare Kierkegaard's claim that satire "must have the resource of a consistent and well-grounded ethical view, a sacrificial unselfishness, and a high-born nobility that renounce the moment" (TA 74).

104 See the discussion of proper self-love in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*.

105 Frankfurt, "On Caring," p.168. Yet the distinction between caring and mere desires or inclinations drawn in "Autonomy, Necessity, and Love" does not really *explain* the inherent authority or activeness of care-motives. As noted earlier, I explain this distinction by referring to the structural contrast between projective and erosiac motives.

106 That this talk is connected with the essay on BS is evident from the detailed discussion of lying near its beginning (FP 96-97).

107 Peter Edidin, *The New York Times*, Feb. 14, 2005; www.nytimes.com/2005/02/14/books/14bull.html

108 Frankfurt, "Reply to G.A. Cohen," p.343.