1. Introduction

As Harry Frankfurt writes, the notion of identification is fundamental to any philosophy of mind and action (Frankfurt 1999: 103). The idea of identification (and its converse, alienation) with one’s mental states is a key notion for the understanding of responsibility and several fundamental conceptual oppositions: internality/externality, activity/passivity, explicable/inexplicable, and endorsement/disavowal.

Harry Frankfurt famously argued that identification is a consequence of reflection, the distinctive capacity of persons. Reflection is the capacity to have self-directed second-order mental states. For Frankfurt, identification with a mental state S on the part of its subject A requires that (i) A has a second-order desire to have S, and that (ii) A is unreflectively satisfied with the second-order desire (i.e., A has no interest in changing or questioning the second-order desire), (see Frankfurt 1999: 103-105).

The hierarchical model of identification is intuitively appealing, but ultimately unconvincing. There are two major problems with it. First, it takes identification as the process by which ‘psychic raw material’ with mere causal powers is given normative authority (see Frankfurt 1999: 137). This is troublesome because identification operates on mental states that are already governed by norms. Identification does not induct them into the normative sphere.

Second, Frankfurt offers an unconvincing view of the scope of reflection. According to him, reflection appears to be a matter of having second-order mental states about individual first-order mental states. The distinctive capacity for reflection, however, operates in a more complex way, in part by widening the objects of first-order thought and in part of addressing at the second-order the agent’s psychology and functioning as a whole, rather than in a piecemeal fashion.

The basis for an alternative and more convincing account of identification can be found in Moran’s account. Moran’s account is not explicitly cast as a criticism of the hierarchical model and it might not have been meant as such. I think, however, that it offers some important insights that deserve further elaboration.

The major strength of Moran’s view is that it locates identification at the level of our ordinary, first-order, responsiveness to reasons; a level that seems to be ignored by Frankfurt, whose focus vacillates between two distant poles, the transition from the causal to the normative, on the one hand, and second-order piecemeal reflection, on the other.

2. Moran’s Account: Transparent Identification
Moran’s discussion of identification (Moran 2001, 2002) starts from the plausible idea that the states that are genuinely our own, rather than mere occurrences in our psychological life, are those states with respect to which we are active. This does not mean that they are up to us in the sense that we can acquire or dispose of them at will. The connection between identification and agency must avoid any crude voluntarism. Moran’s solution revolves around the idea of responsiveness to judgment. An agent identifies with any attitude that is immediately responsive to the agent’s sense of the reasons in support of that attitude. This means that, under normal conditions, the agent is going to abandon the attitude right upon the acknowledgement that it is not supported by good-enough reasons. In identifying with an attitude that agent sees it as the expression of her own reasons.

The reasons at stake in identification are not about the attitude as a mental state, but about its content. The justification of the attitude is thus ‘transparent’. It pertains to the reasons that support the attitude in terms of its internal standards, rather than instrumental or strategic considerations directed at the attitude as a mental going-on.

This does not mean that the agent necessarily acquires the attitude as a result of deliberation and reasoning. Nor that the agent would be able to offer a complete and articulate justification for it. But the agent retains the attitude only as long as she takes it to be justified (even if she does so unwittingly and implicitly).

The active stance that makes one identify with judgment-sensitive attitudes, such as beliefs and intentions, does not amount therefore to voluntaristic production. The agent holds the attitude by being responsive to its perceived justification. If an attitude proves to be recalcitrant on the face of the agent’s judgment that it is unjustified, the agent becomes alienated from the attitude, which is now her own only as an empirical occurrence in her psychological life (usually a bothersome occurrence, in the form of fixations, obsessive thoughts, or overpowering urges).

The nature of identification can also be presented in terms of responsibility. An agent identifies with those attitudes for which she takes ‘internal responsibility’, that is, the responsibility to see to it that she holds them only in so far as she takes them to be satisfying their internal normative standards. This responsibility is different from the external one, the responsibility that the agent takes for the effects of her actions. The agent might be externally responsible for the acquisition of a judgment-sensitive attitude, but only if she acquires it as a result of self-directed manipulation. The need of this manipulation, however, shows that she is unable to identify with the attitude. External responsibility for judgment-sensitive attitudes is thus a sign of the failure to take up internal responsibility for them.

Moran’s account is exposed to the accusation of hyper-intellectualism, since it appears to give an exaggerated role to the authority and control of reasons over both the attitudes and the self. In response to this criticism, it is to be noted that Moran does not claim that the attitudes with which one identifies are necessarily generated by an explicit
deliberation. They are however attitudes that could be the conclusion of deliberation and, as such, they are amenable to justification in terms of reasons. Moreover, the availability of this justification matters for the retention of the attitude, in that the agent identifies only with the attitudes that she takes to be justified, regardless of how they have been acquired.

It is nonetheless true that Moran’s account fits primarily judgment-sensitive attitudes, such as beliefs and intentions, and thus it might appear intellectualistic in its focus. But Moran has shown how the account can be extended to include also attitudes that are not directly judgment-sensitive, such as feelings, moods, and emotions (see Moran 2002: p.206 ff, see also Smith 2005). Nonetheless, there is a point to his focus on belief and intention, since in virtue of their judgment-sensitivity they offer the paradigmatic instances of identification.

3. Frankfurt’s Account: the Hierarchical Model

Frankfurt’s famous account of identification revolves around the idea of hierarchy of mental states. A necessary condition of identification with a state S is that the subject has a second-order desire to have the first-order mental state S. Frankfurt’s discussion revolves around two central themes. First, the conferral of authority to mere psychic forces. Second, the role of reflection in the constitution of the person. In this section, I will argue that there are troubles with relating identification with both themes.

Consider the access to the normative dimension first. Although absent from Frankfurt’s original presentation of the hierarchical model, this theme has become prominent in its later development. According to Frankfurt, the effect of identification is to give ‘authority’ to ‘psychic raw material’, i.e., first-order desires that by themselves exercise only psychological force.

Although Frankfurt is right in claiming that emancipation from mere causal psychic powers is essential to personhood, it is doubtful that this is achieved by making those powers the content of second-order mental states.

First, the emancipation appears to be global in scope, rather than produced by piecemeal second-order identifications with individual first-order desires. Being a person is, in part, a matter of trading in the normative, but this occurs primarily within ordinary, first-order reasoning. This reasoning amounts to the responsiveness to first-order considerations that carry rational authority. It is neither the playing out of mere psychic causal forces, nor the giving of normative status to these psychic phenomena. The operation of ordinary, first-order, personal-level psychology already occurs within the normative sphere.

Second, there is the question of how ascent to a higher order is sufficient to confer authority on first-order psychic raw material. If the difference between first and second-order desires concerns merely their respective targets, second-order desires are just psychic raw material, hence they are as much devoid of authority as the first-order
desires. The question arises therefore of how the operation of raw material upon raw material makes the latter carry rational authority.

A somewhat similar worry was famously raised by Gary Watson against the original formulation of the hierarchical view. Watson’s worry was that, if in order not to a wanton with respect to first-order desires, one is to have second-order desires about the first-order ones, then third-order desires are necessary in order not to be a wanton at the second-order level, and so on in an infinite regress. Frankfurt’s reply by insisting on the satisfaction of second-order desires. Identification with first-order desires does not amount simply to making them the content of second-order desires, but to making them the content of second-order desires for which no further question arises. This reply successfully addresses the worry that an actual regress might disrupt normal mental functioning. Although we have the potential to keep ascending to higher-order mental states, we usually stop at lower levels not by a refusal to address the question, but by the unreflective absence of any interest in changing the higher-order state.

It is unclear, however, how the appeal to satisfaction addresses the question of how the transformation of psychic raw material is achieved. The satisfaction suggests that the conferral of authority can be accomplished in one step only, but it leaves unexplained how a piece of psychic raw material, even if it is of the second-order, can confer authority on another piece of psychic raw material.

Despite its apparent simplicity, the hierarchical model leaves it unclear how we should interpret the nature and relation between the first and the second-order attitudes. There are several possible interpretations. Unfortunately, none of them appears to justify the claim that the exercise of reflection is the truly distinctive property of personhood. According to the first interpretation, both the first- and second-order attitudes are instances of mere psychic forces. If identification is supposed to produce the transition from causation to authority, it is hard to see how this can be achieved by the mere injection of extra psychological force. Moreover, under this interpretation it is unclear why the capacity for second-order attitudes should usher in full-fledged personhood. All that the capacity does is to add some more psychological force and thus increase the chances of success (and possibly the stability) of the strengthened desire under conditions of conflict. But this added complexity in the interplay of psychological forces appears to have nothing to do with personhood.

A more promising interpretation is that the second-order desire either produces or manifests the emancipation from the psychic forces. This interpretation appears to correspond to Frankfurt’s more recent claims on the transformation of psychic raw material. It is very plausible to claim that the transition is fundamental to personhood. This interpretation, however, puts pressure on the idea of the hierarchy. The alleged second-order desire appears to be of a different nature, not just of a different level, than the first-order one. Although we might use the word ‘desire’ to refer to both psychological phenomena, this is a tempting equivocation, but an equivocation nonetheless. On the one hand, we have desires as urges that exercises a mere causal force, on the other, we have desires as acknowledgements of reasons for action. The two need
not be related and, in any event, the desire-as-acknowledgment is not usually about the desire-as-urge. What get approved at the alleged second-order level are considerations for pursuing a certain goal. The pursued object or state of affairs might happen to be the same as the one toward which the subject would be pushed by the urge if she were not to exercise agential governance. The coincidence in the objects, however, does not mean that the rational desire is about the urge, or any other mental going-on. To this extent, there is no hierarchy. At most, the existence of the urge prompts the agent’s attention toward rational considerations in support of the object of the urge. But this is not an instance of a second-order mental state.

In order to be of a second-order, a desire should be directed to the urge as a mental state. For instance, the agent might desire to have the urge because it enjoys the experience of it, or for strategic reasons (e.g., being offered an incentive if she ‘acts’ on the urge). Or conversely, there might situations in which one does not desire to have the urge as a particular mental state. But in none of these situations, the ‘approval’ or ‘disapproval’ of the urge concerns, if not indirectly, the object of the urge itself.

In any event, even if there are genuine second-order desires directed at psychic raw material, the approval of an underlying urge is hardly a necessary condition for the exercise of the sort of intentional agency distinctive of persons. The capacity to have desires concerning one’s urges might demonstrate some sophistication in agency, but it is as such immaterial to the different between wantonness and personhood. For one, it is often the case that persons acknowledge reasons to do x regardless of the existence of any desire-as-urges for x.

This is not to deny that psychic raw material poses a challenge, and that persons have a distinctive capacity to deal with this material by either suspending its force or dealing with it as an alien power. This, however, does not lend support to the hierarchical view. Persons do not deal with the psychic forces by ascent to higher-order attitudes. Nor is the rational agency of persons restricted to the dealing with psychic raw material.

The only way to secure a genuine hierarchy of mental states is to take the first-order desires not as psychic raw material, but as desires-as-acknowledgments. The latter ones could indeed be the object of desires of the same kind, although of a different order. But how is this genuine hierarchy supposed to contribute to the questions of identification, responsibility, and personhood? The problem is that a second-order desire appears to be redundant from the point of view of identification. What does it mean to approve of a first-order desire-as-acknowledgement? To approve of such desire is to take that is justified and supported by good reasons. But this is what is already going on at the first-order. The desire-as-acknowledgment is responsive to the reasons that the agent takes as valid. If it were not so, the agent would not form the desire to begin with. Hence, to move to a higher level for approval is redundant. What else is there to approve of? One case in which the approval does not seem redundant is when the agent considers a past desire of hers. The fact that certain considerations were taken as valid in the past does not guarantee that they are indeed correct; hence the question of the present approval of the past desire arises. However, even in this case, what it takes to approve of the past desire
is primarily answered by considering the first-order issue at the present time. The approval of the past desire is thus more properly described as a present first-order acknowledgment of the reasons that supported the past desire, rather than a second-order approval.

In order to avoid the redundancy, the second-order desire must take the first-order desire just as a psychological occurrence. But as such, there are problems with the idea of an approval that is not concerned with the question whether the psychological occurrence is justified. The agent might have instrumental or strategic reasons to want certain desires regardless of their being justified, but when this happens we cannot speak of identification and (internal) responsibility. Rather, the distancing introduced by a non-redundant higher-order attitude stands in the way of identification. Likewise, the ability to enter in instrumental relations with one’s own states of mind can be hardly a fundamental mark of personhood. This is not to say that the hierarchical skills can only be used to create distance or with a perverse intent. An understanding of one’s psychological functioning is important for the self-policing of the one’s mental life. But what this policing must ultimately aim at is to secure or restore those conditions of psychological health and good functioning at the first-order level in which identification consists and that make second-order approval redundant.

Finally, I want to point out a problem with the famous exemplification of the hierarchical model in the scenarios of the unwilling and willing addicts (Frankfurt 1988: 11ff). Addiction offers a very partial, if not misleading view of identification. The drug-addiction imagined by Frankfurt is a case of psychological force that is outside of the agent’s control. Addiction is a fit example of psychic raw material. However, by definition, it cannot be transformed into a source of authoritative considerations, since its operation is outside of the agent’s rational control. To this extent, the addiction scenarios do not lend support to the role of identification in the transformation of mere causes into reasons for action. Moreover, the sort of identification at stake in the case of the willing addict cannot be the kind of identification that according to Frankfurt plays such an important role in the philosophy of mind and action. The willing addict ‘identifies’ with the direction in which the uncontrollable psychological power is taking him only in the sense that he wants to be led in that direction and he is willing to take steps to that effect if the addiction were to disappear. The willingness of the agent to take steps to make up for the lack of the addiction can be sufficient to attribute responsibility for the outcome of the addictive behavior even if the agent could not have done otherwise, but this fact does not speak to the truly interesting phenomenon of identification.

In terms of Moran’s distinction between the two kinds of responsibility, the willing addict is responsible for the addiction only in the external sense. She takes steps to secure that she is addicted to the drug (or more generally that she keeps desiring taking the drug)—at the very least she monitors the situation and is ready to intervene and regenerate the desire, if the desire is to disappear. But the steps she takes are instances of instrumental self-management. She cannot take internal responsibility for the desire, since addiction, by its very nature, is not sensitive to its justification.
The scenario of addiction also shows that the personal-level desire that Frankfurt is trying to characterize is not truly second-order. This is because the addiction—the alleged first-order desire—is a psychological phenomenon of a different kind, not just of a different order, from a judgment-sensitive desire.

4. Transparency vs. Hierarchy

Let me now consider how Moran’s account of identification avoids the problems that beset the hierarchical model.

Consider first the transition to normativity, the transition between the space of causes and the space of reasons. Moran does not run into the difficulties of Frankfurt, since he does not take identification to secure entry into the space of reasons. Rather, identification is a primary manifestation of personal-level, norm-guided psychology.

Identification with a mental state is not the conferral of authority to the mental state, but the expression and manifestation of the mental state’s sensitivity to rational considerations and judgment. There is no identification with psychic raw material.

Second, consider the issue of reflection. According to Frankfurt, the reflective capacities of persons are exhibited in the hierarchical structure of higher-order attitudes. Identification is the primary instance of reflection for Frankfurt. As indicated above, the hierarchy is a source of problems.

Moran’s account does not run into these problems since it does not rely on any hierarchy of mental states. For Moran, identification is a matter of the first-order stance that one takes in having judgment-sensitive attitudes, rather than of the second-order stance one takes toward attitudes as objects of reflection.

Moreover, if second-order reflection is supposed to yield the endorsement of an attitude, such endorsement ultimately collapses into first-order identification. To endorse or accept a judgment-sensitive attitude is nothing other than letting the attitude be because and only insofar as it meets its internal standards. To accept the attitude at face value is to accept its reasons. Accepting an attitude is nothing other than having the attitude in its characteristic first-order mode, i.e., by being responsive to the reasons that support the attitude. Reflective endorsement is thus ultimately supposed to collapse into first-order identification. The collapse is another manifestation of the transparency of judgment-sensitive attitudes. Likewise, reflective disavowal collapses into the first-order rejection of an attitude that is no longer taken to be justified. Because of the ultimate collapse of reflective endorsement onto the first-order attitude, no problem of regress arises in Moran’s view. Holding the attitude in the deliberative first-personal stance is a natural fixed point of reflection.

This is not to deny that one can make one’s own attitudes the ‘opaque’ objects of second-order attitudes. But this sort of reflection manifests a lack or incapacity of identification. These second-order attitudes are those that do not collapse into the
first-order ones, in the sense described before. They do not take the first-order attitudes at
face value, so to say, since they do not engage with them in the internal mode. In these
cases, the relation with the attitudes takes an instrumental, strategic, or manipulative
form, as it happens for instance in cases of self-management or psychological theory.
This is not to say that there cannot be second-order endorsements of the external kind. In
these cases, the agent approves of the first-order attitude and is willing to take steps to
sustain it, but only for reasons other than those that justify the first-order attitude in its
own internal terms. This prevents the collapse of the external second-order endorsement
into the first-order attitude, but it also shows that the endorsement does not amount to
identification.

The capacity for this external distancing is useful in that it allows the agent to operate, for
purposes of self-policing, on attitudes that prove to be insensitive to transparent
judgments. However, it is neither the distinctive property of persons nor constitutive of
the agent’s real self.

Ironically, an accusation of hyper-intellectualism might turn out to be more justified
against Frankfurt than against Moran. Frankfurt’s view of identification might avoid the
excesses of rationalism, but the ascent to higher-order does not ultimately account for the
incorporation of the attitudes into the agent’s real self. It rather invites a troublesome
distancing between the agent and her own attitudes. The second-order attitudes
championed by Frankfurt model better the cases in which the agent relates to her attitudes
in a theoretical mode, via the mediation of some other attitude of hers, rather than by
being directly involved in them.

This conclusion should not be surprising if we consider the standard exemplification of
the Frankfurt’s style identification by the case of the willing addict. Given that addiction
is not a judgment-sensitive attitude, the agent can relate to it only externally, and not in
the internal, deliberative mode. This suggests therefore an erroneous model of
identification in which the first-order attitude is indeed the opaque object of another
attitude.

5. Normativity, Reflection, and Personhood

Although Moran’s account of identification avoids the problems of the hierarchical
model, it seems silent on a most appealing feature of Frankfurt’s model, i.e., the
connection between identification and two essential and distinctive features of
personhood, the bestowal of normative authority on mere psychological powers and the
power of self-reflection. If identification takes the first-order and transparent form
championed by Moran, identification appears to be available to wantons as much as to
persons.

In response, I want to argue that Moran’s style identification operates in a space
intermediate between the entry into the normative sphere, on the one hand, and external
self-reflection, on the other. Moreover, it is a sort of identification that can coexist with
different forms of reflection and self-consciousness.
Consider first the process by which psychological states with mere causal force are given normative authority. Although this is a crucial process in the achievement of personhood, I believe that it is a mistake to think of identification as either exclusively or primarily involved with this transformation. First, if there is identification with any of these states, this is only as a result of the transformation. The identification does not produce the entry into the normative sphere. Second, it is not necessary that the target of identification be some attitude derived from psychic raw material.

This is not to deny that from the developmental point of view, the acquisition of the capacity for judgment-sensitive attitudes might start with the transformation of psychic raw material (such as impulses, urges, and sensations) into norm-guided mental items. But identification is not the process by which they are transformed. It is rather what is made possible by such transformation.

The main worry with Moran’s account is that, by making identification a feature of first-order reasoning, it does not seem to give due recognition to reflexivity, which, as Frankfurt claims, is even more ‘fundamental and indispensable’ than hierarchy (see Frankfurt 188: 165fn). A notable merit of the hierarchical view is that it gives pride of place to reflection in the form of second-order mental states.

In the closing section of this paper, I would like to question whether reflection must necessarily take the hierarchical shape. One might agree that persons are different from wantons in that they are reflective thinkers and agents, without however taking persons to be necessarily or especially engaged in second-order thinking and reasoning. To think and act within the confines of first-order reasoning does not mean to exhibit the carelessness and thoughtlessness of wantons. Thinking can be reflective in the sense of being thoughtful and deliberate without going beyond the first-order. The first sign of the carefulness is that the thinking is not rushed. The subject can, for instance, entertain hypothesis, formulate conjectures, suspend judgments while exploring alternatives, etc. This much care might already set a subject apart from a wanton, even from a wanton who is not just moved by psychic forces, but acts on the basis of reasons albeit in a careless manner. Another dimension of reflection is given by the agent’s inquisitive and critical dispositions, i.e., her willingness to expand the horizon of her investigation, to explore more and bolder options, to challenge assumptions and premises, and in general not to take the given for granted. The effects of such form of reflection can be far-reaching. In the case of practical reasoning, for instance, these critical dispositions might be sufficient to make the agent go beyond mere instrumental intelligence and question the nature and justification of her ends. The important point is that this can be achieved at the first-order level alone. All that is necessary is that the agent should have some implicit understanding of the basic requirements of reasoning and acting. In its basic form, however, this understanding is already manifested in the judgment-sensitivity of first-order attitudes.

This is not to deny that a more explicit and conceptually articulated sense of the nature of reasoning and of the workings of the mind would be of great help. Critical and inquisitive
thoughtfulness can be strengthened and expanded by the explicit reasoning about mental goings-on. This is achieved by the development of an understanding of both the logic and the psychology of reasoning, on the one hand, and by the appreciation and monitoring of one’s individual psychology. At this level of sophistication, a reflective subject engages in second-order thinking. But this does not normally take the form of a piecemeal approval or disapproval of individual first-order attitudes. Rather, the reflection is ultimately leading toward the development of theories and therapies. The subjects become versed in logic, epistemology, and psychology, and proficient in the use of techniques for restoring or maintaining a healthy mind.

At this stage, reflection takes the shape of self-directed, second-order thinking. But this achievement is not the ultimate goal of reflection. Access to the second-order, together with the capacities for self-management and self-policing, is ultimately at the service of a healthy, thoughtful, outward-looking reasoning and acting. The identification is still a matter of the responsiveness to first-order considerations, even if the access to the second-order helps both with resting the identification on more solid grounds and with making the identification more explicit and articulate. But the contribution of this second-order reflection is not necessarily in the form of a piecemeal approval of individual attitudes. It usually works at the molar level, by keeping the subject articulate and in good working order.

This kind of second-order reflection, although directed at oneself as a thinking subject, is not the same as the reflection about the self that is truly distinctive of persons. What the latter amounts to is a thinking informed by the idea that we are agents with a life that extends over time and strives for a certain amount of unity. This does not mean that persons are distinctively concerned with their first-order attitudes, as the hierarchical view would have it. Rather, this kind of self-reflection provides a framework within which persons engage in their first-order, outward reasoning and acting. Hence, the sense in which a person is a reflective being is that she has the capacity to be thoughtful in living her own life, with the potential of making it an examined one.

References