

# Frankfurt on Identification and Satisfaction

## *A Critical Response*

Bas Peeters

In his seminal 1971 essay *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person*, Harry Frankfurt provides an insightful account of free will and the problem of determinism, that is not metaphysical, but rather psychological and practical. First and foremost, though, Frankfurt offers a philosophical analysis of the nature of personhood. He does so by providing an alternative to the account of personhood advanced by Peter Strawson. In the Strawsonian view, a person is defined exclusively as a subject having both physical and mental properties, so that the concept of a person can simply be equated with the concept of a human being. Frankfurt argues against this view, assuming that mere membership in the biological species *homo sapiens* is not sufficient enough to decide on the question of personhood. Instead, he claims that the essence of a person is to be found in the structure of the will.

According to his analysis we as human beings can be persons, because we do not only have first-order desires, but also possess the capacity to form second-order (and other higher-order) desires. As Frankfurt puts it, ‘besides wanting and choosing and being moved *to do* this or that, men may also want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives’ (1971, p. 7, emphasis in original). Consider, for example, Sharon, an occasional smoker of medical marijuana who, although she genuinely enjoys the feeling of being alive that occurs with the inhalation of the cannabis smoke (which can be understood as a first-order desire), is convinced that she could be a better mother for her children if she were to break the habit. By having second-order desires (in the example, Sharon’s wanting not to desire to smoke medical marijuana) we are able to step back for a moment from our motivations and make those motivations the objects of reflection. However, this ‘capacity for reflective

self-evaluation’ (ibid.), as Frankfurt calls it, is in itself necessary but *not* sufficient for human personhood. In fact, it is the capacity for reflective self-evaluation that distinguishes human beings from the rest of the animal kingdom. Frankfurt argues that, in order to be considered a person, an individual should not only have second-order desires *in general*, but also specifically, desires to have certain desires to be his will. In Frankfurt’s terminology, such ‘second-order volitions’ are that subset of second-order desires, which are directly concerned with which of our first-order desires should be effective in moving us into action. Suppose that Sharon now has become addicted. Although, as a consequence of her addiction, she has a competing second-order desire to continue desiring to smoke marijuana, she also still wants to refrain from desiring it. So instead of succumbing to her addiction, she decides to enter a drug rehabilitation program. In this case, Sharon’s second-order desire not to desire to smoke marijuana constitutes a second-order volition, since it is effective in making the first-order desire to not smoke marijuana her will. A creature which is capable of having second order desires but unable to form volitions of the second order, is labelled by Frankfurt a ‘wanton’: someone whom we cannot regard as a person. A wanton is someone who is not ‘concerned with whether the desires which move him to act are desires by which he wants to be moved to act’ (Frankfurt, 1971, p. 12). That is to say, a wanton is indifferent with regard to which first-order desires constitute his will.<sup>1</sup> Examples of wantons include very young children (Frankfurt, 1971, p. 11), but also, though not explicitly mentioned by Frankfurt, old people with dementia and the severely mentally disabled, all of whom could be said to be incapable of assuming a higher-order attitude toward their desires.

At first glance, Frankfurt's hierarchical concept of a person seems intuitively attractive, allowing for inner conflicts, for complex motivational structures, but most importantly, for the idea that personhood consists in the 'default' (Frankfurt, 2006, p. 173) condition of 'being identified with the content of one's own mind' (ibid.) by the willing acceptance of our motivational attitudes.<sup>2</sup> Despite its apparent attractiveness, Frankfurt's hierarchical theory faces two major problems, however. First, the notion of 'hierarchy' is not merely *descriptive*, but also *normative*: a second-order desire (or volition) is not only 'higher' than a first-order desire by having it as its intentional object, but also 'higher' in the sense of having more authority. Frankfurt's hierarchical model seems to fail to explain this purported special 'status', thereby endowing higher-order desires and volitions with greater authority for no reason but 'glaring favouritism with respect to the higher parts of the soul' (Stoeker, 2015, p. 104).<sup>3</sup> Second, as Gary Watson points out in *Free Agency* (1975), Frankfurt's hierarchical theory is vulnerable to the problem of infinite regress. After all, if we need second-order desires (and volitions) concerning what first-order desires we want, in order to be considered persons, why not also have third-order desires about second desires, fourth-order desires about third-order desires, and ..., *ad infinitum*? Or, put differently, if there is an unresolved conflict among our second-order desires, how then can we avoid descending into wantonness without our second-order desires being endorsed by even higher-order desires? Frankfurt attempts to solve the problem of progressive ascent to hierarchically yet-higher-order desires by introducing new ideas into his theory, including decisive commitment, identification, wholeheartedness and satisfaction. However, it remains questionable whether and to what extent he has succeeded in his attempt.

In this essay I shall argue, *contra* Frankfurt, that his notion of identification is too strong and that of satisfaction too weak to serve as criteria for personhood, and that this – at least, in the case of satisfaction – should be conceived as such even from within the context of Frankfurt's own philosophical oeuvre. Before offering such an argument, however, I will first discuss how Frankfurt advanced these notions as a means to overcome the problem of infinite regress. After that, I will demonstrate how both attempts – albeit successful in terms of solving the *regressus ad infinitum* problem – fail to establish sufficient grounds for human personhood.

## §1 Identification

We wanted to know what prevents wantonness with regard to one's higher-order volitions. What gives these volitions any special relation to 'oneself'? It is unhelpful to answer that one makes a 'decisive commitment,' where this just means that an interminable ascent to higher orders is not going to be permitted. This is arbitrary. (Watson, 1975, p. 218; emphasis in original)

In *Identification and Wholeheartedness* (1988b) Frankfurt responds to Watson's criticism by acknowledging that his earlier account of 'decisive commitment', in which a person decisively identifies himself with one of his first-order desires, is indeed flawed, by being 'terribly obscure' (1988b, p. 167) and unable to explain how such termination of the regress to increasingly higher-order desires is, in fact, *not* arbitrary. As a result of his 'unfortunate and confusing choice of words',<sup>4</sup> decisive commitment might seem to consist merely in 'an arbitrary *refusal* to permit an interminable ascent to higher orders' (ibid.), but this does not mean, according to Frankfurt, that it actually *does*. Frankfurt therefore concludes that it is not himself but Watson who is in error.

To demonstrate how 'the potentially endless sequence of evaluations [of increasingly higher order]' (1988b, p. 169) can be terminated without arbitrariness, Frankfurt introduces the concept of 'identification'. By relying upon an analogy between identification and arithmetic, Frankfurt argues that terminating the sequence at a point at which there is no disturbing (or possible) conflict or doubt, is not arbitrary: although it is possible – in the case of arithmetic – for a person to perform yet another calculation (and continue the sequence of possible further calculations) in order to confirm the result of the initial calculation, Frankfurt explains, such behavior would ultimately prove to be futile, given that there is no conflict, 'either between results already obtained or between a result already obtained and one [that might be reasonably expected to be obtained] if the sequence were to continue' (ibid.). For Frankfurt, the cut-off point (at which the sequence is terminated) is a point of decision (because, etymologically, the verb 'to decide' means 'to cut-off'), at which a person *actively* decides to terminate the sequence of evaluation:

The decision determines what the person really wants by making a desire on which he decides fully his own. To this extent the person, in making a decision with which he identifies, *constitutes himself*. The pertinent desire is no longer in any way external to him. (...) It comes to be a desire that is incorporated into him by virtue of the fact that he has it *by his own will*. (1988b, p. 170; emphasis in original)

At first glance, Frankfurt's notion of identification appears to be nothing more than a rephrasing (or annotated version) of his account of decisive commitment. However, the authority (possessed by a particular second-order volition) does not consist any longer in merely identifying with the desire, but rather in having also decisive reasons for the act of identification.

Identification is the decisive act of 'putting a particular second-order volition in charge' (Bransen, 1996, p. 5), endowing it with authority or priority with respect to the desires that are its object: by volitionally endorsing desires that are 'legitimate candidate[s] of satisfaction' (Frankfurt, 1988b, p. 170), after having reflected upon their desirability, and rejecting unwanted desires ('[those having entitlement] to no priority whatsoever', *ibid.*), an individual constitutes himself as a person. By doing so, Frankfurt emphasizes again, a person distinguishes himself from a wanton by replacing 'the liberty of anarchic impulsive behavior with the autonomy of being under *his own control*' (1988b, p. 175, emphasis added). In other words, a person makes up his mind instead of 'doing what comes naturally [to him]' (*ibid.*), that is, figuratively speaking, 'going wherever the wind takes him'.

In the following section I will defend my claim that identification is too strong to serve as a criterion for personhood.

### §1.1 Obsessive Self-Control

By emphasizing such a strong exercise of self-control, Frankfurt's concept of identification is at risk of jeopardizing personhood rather than protecting it (Wagner, 2011, p. 38). According to Marya Schechtman, we intuitively consider 'overly rigid self-control [as being] an impediment to being oneself' (2005, p. 49). In line with this objection, we can argue *a fortiori* that,

in the words of the famous playwright of Lajos Egri, 'we only reveal our true selves in conflict [that is, if we are not in full control of our conflicting desires, of our own self]' (Cowgill, 2010, p. 77). Identifying and rejecting desires, therefore, can easily turn into excessive self-concern to the extent of pathological self-doubt and losing our (authentic) spontaneity (Wagner, 2011, p. 38). And, without having trust in ourselves (particularly, by having doubts about our capability to make decisions concerning desires), we lose ourselves as persons: because, how are we supposed to decide for ourselves without self-trust, that is, if we do not trust ourselves that we *can*?<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, by being overtly concerned with our *motivations* for action, we might lose track of our primary concern, namely deliberating about what we should do. Basically, we forget to *act*.

In *Identification and Identity* (1993), David Velleman compares Frankfurt's notion of identification to the process of repression (in a Freudian sense), and he does so by invoking the famous example of the obsessional neurotic Rat Man. As a consequence of 'the chronic co-existence of love and hatred' (1909, p. 239) both directed towards his father, Freud explains, the Rat Man's personality is constantly divided into distinct loving and hating selves. However, what caused the Rat Man's obsessional neurosis, was not so much his indecisiveness or ambivalence, but rather his response to it. By repressing his hatred and acknowledging only his love, the Rat Man allowed the two emotions 'to survive unmixed hence to continue pulling the patient so violently in opposite directions' (Velleman, 1993, p. 101). In a Frankfortian reading of Freud's case history of the Rat Man, Velleman contends that the Rat Man identifies with the love for his father and extrudes the hostility towards him as an 'outlaw'. By doing so, Velleman suggests that what is true for Freud's theory of repression, also applies to Frankfurt's notion of identification, stating that '[the] point of agreement between Freud and Frankfurt suggests that the Rat Man suffered, not from the disease of ambivalence, but from something like Frankfurt's cure. What made him ill was his effort to dissociate himself from one of his emotions, which is just what Frankfurt prescribes for cases of ambivalence [namely] the 'radical separation of (...) competing desires'' (*ibid.*, p. 102). Although Frankfurt is right to claim, in his reply to Velleman's criticism in *Contours of Agency* (2002), that repression of a desire involves 'secreting it in his unconscious' (p. 125), whereas iden-

tification does not require – or does not even allow for – such act, in which some desires are not let into the consciousness, Velleman, however, is still right in claiming that the practice of identification (as much as Freud’s theory of repression) involves a pathological defense mechanism, reflecting an unhealthy level of control over our ‘volitional life’.

From what I have argued in this section it should be clear that identification is too – even unrealistically – strong a requirement to impose on a theory of personhood insofar as it seems to require of individuals that they are prepared at all times to investigate their volitional structure to the extent of obsessive self-control. In the next section, I will provide a second argument against Frankfurt’s account of identification, thereby drawing upon ideas from existential thought, such as authenticity.

### §1.2 Self-Deception and Inauthenticity

There is still a deeper (and more important) truth behind the truism that ‘a person is often truly [himself] when [he] fails at self-control’ (Schechtman, 2005, p. 50). In the assignment of an ‘outlaw’ status to any desire the agent does not identify with, it becomes something external to him, or as Susan Wolf puts it, to the ‘real self’ (1993, p. 35), whereas those desires that are endorsed by the agent as expressing his will, are internal to the self. However, according to Frankfurt, this does not necessarily mean that the desire that is external to his real preferences simply disappears from both action and thought (because the desire can still persist as an element of his experience), but that the conflict between his desires is moved to a different level:

It [i.e., identification] eliminates the conflict *within the person* as to which of these desires he prefers to be his motive. The conflict between the *desires* is in this way transformed into a conflict between *one* of them [i.e., the desires] and the *person* who has identified himself with its rival [desire]. (1988b, p. 172, emphasis in original)

In *Identification and Externality* (1988a) Frankfurt further examines the notion of identification in connection with the distinction between internal and external desires using the following example: ‘suppose a person wants to compliment an acquaintance for some recent achievement, but

that he also notices within himself a jealously spiteful desire to injure the man’ (pp. 66-67). By decisively identifying himself with the desire to compliment his acquaintance and by excluding his jealous desire to injure the man from the order of candidates for satisfaction, Frankfurt argues, the person renders the first and second desire, respectively, internal and external to himself, so that, in the end, the person does not *want* to injure the man (anymore).

But how, if at all, has the act of externalizing the desire made him ‘not wanting’, that is to say, not having the desire anymore (given that Frankfurt in 1971 (p. 7) proposes to use the verbs ‘to want’ and ‘to desire’ interchangeably)? And, as has been previously noted, with the person at the same time still experiencing the desire, it becomes even more problematic. Frankfurt, however, according to whom the external desire is not a constitutive part of the person, argues that the person experiences the desire as an ‘external force’, as coming from outside of himself. But then, if Frankfurt is right in thinking that the external desire is somehow not part of ‘the person’, of whom are they? (Should we assume the existence of free-floating desires?) The question is obviously rhetorical. Although a person might consciously repudiate a certain desire, it is far from being intuitively true to conclude that this desire is not *his* anymore: because, whether he wants it or not, it simply *is*.

Suppose the person in Frankfurt’s example is, in fact, a high-school student who is jealous of the achievement of his fellow student-cum-rival in being given a higher grade for a specific assignment. However, instead of following his jealous desire to injure this fellow student, he decides to identify with his desire to compliment him, thus wanting it to constitute his will. In this example, where merely the order in which the desires are textually introduced, is reversed compared to Frankfurt’s example, the decisive identification with his desire to compliment seems not so obvious anymore but rather unfounded. After all, why does the person have a desire to compliment his rival in the first place? But more importantly, given that he does have such a desire, why does he decide to identify with it? The intuitive response seems to be that the person wants to conceal his jealous desire (cf. Macbeth’s attempt to conceal his desire to kill Duncan, ‘Let not light



see my black and deep desires', I, iv, 57-58), not only because acting on it would amount to acknowledging his 'defeat' (while coming across as a 'bad loser'), but also because he wants to be perceived by others – and himself – as a good and socially respectable person.

In this interpretation of Frankfurt's example, the person seems to be more concerned with what he wants *others* to identify him with, than with what desires *he* wants to identify himself with. As a consequence, what Frankfurt conceives as the 'real self', is really but an ideal self-image or public *persona*, in a Jungian sense, that is to say, the (mask of) personality an individual presents to the world. Similarly, David Velleman argues in *Identification and Identity* (1993) that, in Frankfurt's conception of identification, we mistake 'the ideal implicit in our self-conception[s]' (p. 100) for ourselves. At first glance, Frankfurt's conception of identification may ring true intuitively as a fact of our experience, because we do *indeed* protect ourselves against unwanted desires and identify with those we want to be effective. A second look, however, reveals identification as a 'common defensive *fantasy*' (p. 109), because 'we (...) engage not in self-definition but self-deception [when] we identify with some of our motives by imagining ourselves as *being* those motives' (ibid., emphasis in original). According to Velleman, when a person imagines that he is nothing but some of his motives, he identifies (and thereby reduces himself to) a mere part of himself, hence – and in this sense he is like Jean-Paul Sartre's waiter in *Being and Nothingness* (1956, p. 59) – he is playing *at being* a person. As a result, the agent does not only reject a part of his being a person (which, at least, should be conceived as such, intuitively), but he also identifies himself with the remaining part and believes that his being a person actually *consists* in that remaining part.

In an attempt to preserve, at least in part, Frankfurt's notion of identification, it might well be argued that identification is too strong a criterion to require of human personhood, so that it cannot serve as a necessary condition for being a person, *but* that, at the same time, it is not necessarily incompatible with personhood. To do so, however, would be to entirely miss the point of the present discussion, and this ultimately comes down to not being

radical enough: identification cannot be compatible with personhood, because any agent who constitutes himself as a person through identification, does so, inauthentically and self-deceptively, or – to continue the analogy with Sartre's waiter – by acting in bad faith.

## §2 Satisfaction

In *The Faintest Passion* (1992) Frankfurt admits that his account of identification is indeed flawed – but – in the sense that it proves unsuccessful in warding off the threat of infinite regress. But, instead of rejecting it on the basis of its insufficiency, Frankfurt decides to preserve the 'rather troublesome notion' (p. 12) of identification (as he did earlier with respect to the notion of decisive commitment) and he proposes to do so by further clarifying its structure – as though his earlier analysis of identification did simply not allow for adequate understanding. In the previous section I argued that the notion of identification – if understood *correctly* – is intrinsically problematic, so that its defense at most could only amount to preservation for the sake of mere preservation. Below I will claim that Frankfurt's 'revised' notion of identification is also in conflict with his own philosophical presuppositions regarding the active nature of personhood.

In *The Faintest Passion* Frankfurt takes a strikingly different approach in finding a basis for higher-order desires and volitions, than he did in his previous works. By introducing the concept of (identification as) 'satisfaction', Frankfurt demonstrates *again* that there is no need to continue the ascent to higher orders, thereby supposedly solving the problem of infinite regress. However, this 'again' – forgive my naturally suspicious mind – makes me wonder at what costs. Before jumping to premature conclusions, let me consider what Frankfurt exactly understands by 'satisfaction'. On Frankfurt's account, satisfaction is 'a state of the entire psychic system – a state constituted just by the absence of any tendency or inclination to alter its condition' (1992, p. 13). Let's return to the example of Sharon. If we imagine Sharon, now fully recovered from her addiction, to be satisfied with the higher-order repudiation of her desire for marijuana, then we must imagine her as

wholly unconflicted about her desire not to give in to the temptation. In particular, this means that Sharon never questions the undesirability of giving in, even in cases in which smoking marijuana might have proven helpful, for instance, in relieving her insomnia.

But how could such a state possibly terminate the ascent to higher orders? To answer this, let me quote Frankfurt here at length:

To be satisfied with something does not require that a person have any particular belief about it, nor any particular feeling or attitude or intention. It does not require, for instance, that he regard it as satisfactory, or that he accede to it with approval, or that he intend[s] to leave it as it stands. There is nothing that needs to think, or to adopt, or to accept; it is not necessary for him to do anything at all. This is important, because it explains why there is no danger here of a problematic regress (1992, p. 13).

So, according to Frankfurt, satisfaction does not require the agent to do anything at all. Because, if the agent did, that is, if he would have some deliberate psychic element such as a deliberate attitude or belief, as a constituent of his being satisfied, his 'satisfaction with respect to one matter would depend upon satisfaction with respect to another; satisfaction with respect to the second would depend upon satisfaction with respect to still a third; and so on, endlessly' (ibid.). In other words, if satisfaction is to be preceded by some deliberate endorsement, why should there be no pre-endorsement endorsement? By the time of writing *The Faintest Passion*, Frankfurt must thus have realized that any active account of human personhood (such as the original version of his notion of identification) is susceptible to the problem of infinite regress. The alternative account, however, faces two very different but no less threatening problems.

First, if the satisfied agent has no active interest in bringing about a change, why then should the agent still be considered a genuine person? After all, if he simply does not care about his psychic condition (ibid.), then being satisfied seems to come very close to the indifference of the wanton. On Frankfurt's account, however, 'the essential non-occurrence [of psychic elements] is neither deliberately contrived nor wantonly unselfconscious' (1992, pp. 13-14), because

the absence of (deliberate) psychic elements is in itself reflective. But, how, if at all, can this absence be reflective, given that '[no] adequate provision can be made for reflexivity without resorting to the notion of hierarchical ordering' (1988b, p. 165, note 7)? Does the agent's reflexivity not primarily manifest itself in the formation of higher-order desires? And if it does – and it does,<sup>6</sup> how could this possibly amount to doing nothing at all (Rostbøll, 2004, p. 140)?

Second, the alternative to an active account of human personhood is necessarily passive in nature. In *The Reasons of Love* (2004) Frankfurt writes that autonomy, which should be considered as the core of human personhood, 'is essentially a matter of whether we are *active* rather than *passive* in our motives and choices' (p. 20, note 5, emphasis added), and earlier in *Concerning the Freedom and Limits of the Will* (1998), he already concluded that 'the will is absolutely and perfectly active [so that] volition precludes passivity by its very nature' (p. 79). But how then could such passivity with regard to one's desires and motives, which is so peculiar to the notion of satisfaction, be justified from within the framework of Frankfurt's own philosophy?

According to Frankfurt, being satisfied with one's condition does not entail that 'no alteration of it would be acceptable' (1992, p. 12). For me, the word 'alteration', in the sense used by Frankfurt, seems to imply that the person is a 'passive bystander' to the change in his psychic condition rather than the agent who accomplishes it. As a result, agency is reduced to something that merely happens to – or in – the agent. And, if we consider that, according to Frankfurt, satisfaction with one's own motivational state simply entails 'the absence of [...] resistance' against it (regardless of whether or not it is the best possible condition available), then satisfaction may just as easily be understood in terms of resignation (in a Schopenhauerian sense, as 'the denial of the will'), depression or *ennui*. With regard to the latter two, Velleman argues that, in such cases, satisfaction is characterized by 'a lack of will [...] under the weight of a psychic force that is usually regarded as pathological or alien' (Velleman, 2009, p. 13). Being satisfied with one's first-order desires, therefore, does not necessarily consist in taking them seriously as reasons for action, but might equally well arise from (a passive state of) depression or boredom or laziness.

### Concluding remarks

In this essay I have explored Frankfurt's attempt(s) to escape from the threat of infinite regress, which is so intrinsic to his hierarchical system of desire. I have concluded that his notion of identification and of satisfaction failed to do so, not in the sense that they are not successful in halting the ascent to higher-order desires (because they are), but rather because of the high costs accompanying them with regard to human personhood. I have shown that by identifying with some desires and standing opposed to others (thereby rendering the latter external to the self), we fragment ourselves (or, at least, representations of ourselves) in order to be a whole person; to be authentic persons, however, does not mean that we must radically exclude our unwanted desires, and consider them as somehow not being part of ourselves, because, of course (as our intuition dictates), they *are*. Further, I have demonstrated that satisfaction, as put in the words of Michael Bratman, is 'a structural feature of the psychic system' rather than a further desire in Frankfurt's 'psychic stew' (2007, p. 23), thereby preventing it from becoming a mere infinite regression of desires about more desires, but, at the same time, making Frankfurt's account of personhood vulnerable to becoming an account of volitional passivity.

But why should we abhor the progressive ascent to higher-order desires (aside from 'philosophical horror') in the first place? In other words, why can we not stop fearing the regress and accept 'volitional infinitism' (cf. Peter Klein's epistemic infinitism). The answer is simple: because ascending to yet higher levels would make us lose sense of what we really want and hence, make us lose sense of *who* we are.

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### Notes

1. Despite his 'mindless indifference to the enterprise of evaluating his own desires and motives' (1971, p. 13) the wanton is not to be considered as possessing no rational faculties (of a high order) at all, that is to say, as being 'without mind'. A wanton is, or at least can be, rational. After all, in accordance with David Hume's claim that reason in and of itself cannot motivate us to action (being a mere instrument without a finality of its own), it is not reason but the structure of the will that constitutes the essence of being a person in Frankfurt's account of personhood.
2. By willingly accepting our motivational attitudes, 'they are no longer merely items that happen to appear in a certain psychic history', but they are transformed into 'authentic expressions of ourselves' (Frankfurt, 2006, p. 173).
3. For a more elaborate discussion of this argument, see Watson (1975, pp. 118-119).
4. Here, I specifically refer (as well as Frankfurt) to the sentence: 'this commitment 'resounds' throughout the potentially endless array of higher orders' (1971, p. 16), by which Frankfurt suggests that ascending to higher orders is not necessary.
5. For the view that certain forms of self-appreciation (e.g., self-trust, self-esteem, self-worth and self-respect) are necessary for autonomy and personhood, see, for instance, Govier (1993), Benson (1994) and Lehrer (1999).
6. See Frankfurt (1971, p. 7).

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