

# A Wholehearted Defense of Ambivalence<sup>1</sup>

## i. introduction

Ambivalence is something that we all experience, and yet for most of us, it is a source of significant unease. We do not like to be torn between competing courses of action, knowing that by pursuing the one, we'll have to give up on the other. This is particularly true when giving up on one alternative means that we'll have to give up on something that we're deeply committed to. For example, consider a person torn between relocating for an exciting new job in the field she's passionate about and staying close to her aging parents, who she loves and cares for. It seems that the agent cannot choose in a way that does justice to both elements of who she is: if she takes the job, then she'll have to give up her role as a caregiver for her parents, but if she refuses the job, then she'll no longer be able to regard her career ambitions in quite the same way. In other words, it will turn out that however she chooses, she will be alienated from some aspect of who she is.

When we're faced with a practical conflict of this sort, it's easy to feel, as this agent no doubt does, at odds with ourselves. It's also easy to feel deeply frustrated, unsure of oneself, and bitter. And these are not idle thoughts, but are instead the natural expressions of the psychic distress experienced in cases of ambivalence. For when we are genuinely “of two minds” about an important decision, it seems that, necessarily, our wills cannot be *wholeheartedly* expressed in our subsequent choices. And because “wholehearted” agency is plausibly thought to be agency *par excellence* or “agency at its best,” being ambivalent would seem to be the hallmark of a defective practical agent.

At least, that's what we've been told by so many in the Western philosophical tradition. Famously, Plato critically discusses agents whose souls are divided in a way that is characteristic of ambivalence. Moreover, he famously links *unified* agency—i.e., the full integration of one's soul—with justice and, further, with his conception of the good life more generally (cf. *Republic* 352b5 – d5; 435b5 – c; etc.).<sup>2</sup> But because ambivalence necessarily involves a failure to integrate oneself in this way, an ambivalent agent's soul is *unstable* and *at war with itself*, and so the agent cannot be just. As Plato puts it, such an agent is “incapable of action because of inner faction and not being of one

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve, Hackett (2004).

mind with himself; ... it will make him his own enemy,” (*Republic* 352a5). To be a good agent, it seems, just is to have one’s soul structured in a way that eliminates ambivalence.

Several centuries later, Augustine makes a similar claim.<sup>3</sup> According to Augustine, when our wills are torn (which they invariably are for all those who are not wholeheartedly resting in God’s grace), we find ourselves in a “monstrous situation” in which “we are dealing with a morbid condition of the mind ... [containing] two wills. Neither of them is complete, and what is present in the one is lacking in the other.” And this state, Augustine claims, renders us “dissociated” from ourselves and more importantly (for Augustine at least), from God, (*Confessions* VIII. ix. 21 – 22). Naturally, of course, it isn’t healthy for us to be alienated from ourselves (or potentially from God) in this way. An ambivalent mind, Augustine therefore concludes, threatens the proper functioning of our rational agency in the same way a potentially terminal disease threatens the proper functioning of our bodies.<sup>4</sup>

However, Plato and Augustine are not the only philosophers who take ambivalence to be a direct threat to our agency: Descartes, Spinoza, and Kierkegaard (among others) all seem to agree.<sup>5</sup> More recently, contemporary action theorists like Harry Frankfurt and Christine M. Korsgaard have also agreed with Plato, et al. that agency at its best involves a *wholehearted* or fully integrated practical identity.<sup>6</sup> Echoing Augustine, Frankfurt tells us “the mind is healthy—at least with respect to its volitional faculty—insofar as it is wholehearted,” (Frankfurt 2004, 95). Frankfurt then contrasts an agent who is “healthy” with an agent who is ambivalent. Concerning the latter, he writes, “his will is unstable and incoherent, moving him from contrary directions simultaneously or in a disorderly sequence,” (Frankfurt 2004, 92). And this makes it clear that for Frankfurt, an agent’s failure to

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford University Press (1992).

<sup>4</sup> Augustine’s discussion of these issues immediately follows his famous prayer that God “grant [him] chastity and continence, but not yet,” (VIII. vii. 17). After describing what he takes to be the general problem with being ambivalent, he goes on to explicitly compare his ambivalence between a lustful life spent in pursuit of sexual pleasure and a life devoted to God to “sickness” and “torture,” (VIII. xi. 25).

<sup>5</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1996), see especially Meditation IV, where Descartes suggests that a will that vacillates with respect to the good is less free; Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. G. H. R. Parkinson, Oxford: Oxford Philosophical Texts (2000), see especially *Ethics* III and his discussion of vacillation of the affects. See also, Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of the Heart is to Will One Thing*, Wilder Publications (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Harry Frankfurt, “Identification and Wholeheartedness,” *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1988): 159-176; Frankfurt, “The Faintest Passion,” *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1999): 95-107; Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, Princeton University Press (2004); Christine M. Korsgaard, “Self-Constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant,” *Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999): 1-29; Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency Identity, and Integrity*, Oxford University Press (2009).

wholeheartedly integrate his or her unstable and incoherent will is something to be avoided, since instability and incoherence are not—and *cannot* be—ideal ways to be constituted as an agent.

Unlike Frankfurt, Korsgaard doesn't address the phenomenon of ambivalence directly. But she does hold that activity as such is a form of self-constitution (cf. Korsgaard 1999, 2009). That is, for Korsgaard, what we are doing most fundamentally when we engage in *any* rational activity is the act of *making ourselves* as rational agents.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the goodness of any action is determined by how well the agent constitutes herself in virtue of choosing that action. However, we fail to constitute ourselves as fully integrated practical agents when we are ambivalent, since in such cases, our wills are torn between mutually incompatible alternatives. So it seems that no choice made by an ambivalent agent can be completely good *qua* action.

Yet despite the widespread agreement about the badness of ambivalence among an otherwise motley-yet-extremely-impressive assortment of characters (who I will call *unificationists*), it is my view that ambivalence as such is no threat to agency *par excellence*. The fact that an agent fails to be fully integrated, lacks purity of heart, or is less than wholehearted in her choices, tells us nothing about whether her will is properly functioning. Moreover, in many cases wholeheartedness is itself a defect in an agent's will. After all, if an agent wholeheartedly endorses some course of action for which she has insufficient justification, it is plausible that because her will is not appropriately responsive to rational considerations, it is not properly functioning. This, of course, does not mean that all instances of wholeheartedness mark a defective will, or that no cases of ambivalence can be bad for our agency. Nor does it mean we should relish the experience of being ambivalent. It does entail, though, that we have nothing to fear from ambivalence as such, and that it gives us no reason to doubt ourselves as properly functioning agents in times of uncertainty.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This is similar to Frankfurt's claim that "it is these acts of [resolving one's will] --- that create a self out of the raw materials of inner life," (Frankfurt 1988, 170).

<sup>8</sup> A number of philosophers have hinted, if not explicitly claimed, that they reject this tradition's emphasis on unity or wholeheartedness (though not always in precisely the same way that I want to here). Cf. Cheshire Calhoun, "Standing for Something," *Journal of Philosophy* 92.5 (1995): 235-260; J. David Velleman, "Identification and Identity," *The Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, eds. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, MIT Press (2002): 91 – 123; Susan Wolf, "The True, the Good, and the Loveable: Frankfurt's Avoidance of Objectivity," *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, eds. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (2002): 227-244; Jacqui Poltera, "Is Ambivalence an Agential Vice?" *Philosophical Explorations* 13.3 (2011): 293-305; and Logi Gunnarsson, "In Defense of Ambivalence and Alienation," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17.1 (2014): 13-26. Of these, Wolf's view comes closest to the one I will develop in the remainder of the paper. But whereas Wolf finds herself "ambivalent about ... ambivalence," (Wolf 2002, 239), I am more confident that when it comes to ambivalence per se, there is nothing to be ambivalent about.

## ii. ambivalence

Before getting to the question of whether ambivalence is necessarily a kind of agential failing, I want to begin by circumscribing the precise phenomenon at issue. To do this, let's first note that whatever ambivalence comes to, it's not mere *indecision*, *uncertainty*, or *volitional conflict*. No doubt, in paradigm cases of ambivalence, we are indecisive, uncertain, and conflicted. But none of these is sufficient for ambivalence of the sort that might be a genuine defect in one's will. After all, it's obviously the case that one should be undecided or uncertain about what to do in many cases, particularly cases in which one lacks good evidence as to what to do next. But the fact that I'm unsure of what to do next when I can't, for example, make sense of IKEA's assembly instructions doesn't mean I'm ambivalent about what to do. Nor does it mean that my will is somehow defective. Perhaps all it means is that I'm bad at reading directions, or (more optimistically) that IKEA's bad at writing (or drawing) them.

Similarly, conflicts between an agent's desires or values do not, by themselves, suffice for ambivalence. I might be conflicted about whether to finish working on this paragraph or go get lunch right now, since I currently want to do both. But this conflict doesn't entail that my will is somehow defective. Instead, it just means that my will is currently unsettled, as it is in many related cases (e.g., when I'm looking at a menu, when I'm unsure of what to get my partner for her birthday, when I'm thinking about where to go for my next vacation, etc.).

Of course, the fact that *mere* indecision, uncertainty, and conflict are not sufficient for ambivalence shouldn't lead us to conclude that conflicts of a certain sort, or that indecision or uncertainty of a certain sort aren't at the heart of ambivalence. As we've already seen, Plato tells us that it is *inner* faction that renders us at war with ourselves, and that this particular kind of conflict necessarily frustrates our agency. But despite the fact that we *identify* with many of the things we want or value, many of our desires, and even some of our values, are at the *periphery* of our practical identities (i.e., they are not *inner* in the relevant sense). For while it's true that I do want many things (e.g., a fancier computer or smartphone), it's also true that when push comes to shove, those desires do little constitute who I am as an agent. So too, I value some things (e.g., baseball, good landscaping, etc.) even though these values do not structure my practical identity in any significant way.

In other words, many of our desires and values are not *internal* to our practical identities, and so conflicts between these desires and values cannot constitute a *deep* or *significant* threat to my agency, the way that Plato, et al. have taken ambivalence to be a deep and significant threat to the proper

functioning of our agency. Indeed, it's exactly along these lines that Harry Frankfurt has offered an admirably precise account of ambivalence.

Ambivalence is constituted by conflicting volitional movements or tendencies, either conscious or unconscious, that meet two conditions. First, they are inherently and hence unavoidably opposed; that is, they do not just happen to conflict on account of contingent circumstances. Second, they are both *wholly internal to a person's will rather than alien to him*; that is, he is not passive with respect to them. *An example of ambivalence might be provided by someone who is moved to commit himself to a certain career, or to a certain person, and also moved to refrain from doing so* (Frankfurt 1999, 99; emphasis added).

On Frankfurt's view, it turns out that what ultimately distinguishes ambivalence from other forms of practical conflict or faction is that it implicates division at the "deepest" or most "central" (or as Plato puts it, the most "inner") elements of our agency. And this is key, since it rules out conflicts of the sort one faces when confronted with a dessert menu filled with tempting options as being instances of ambivalence. Only conflicts that occur between those bits of our practical identities that constitute the core of who we are as agents can be regarded as instances of ambivalence, since only conflicts of this sort could plausibly be threats to the proper functioning of our agency.

Of course, this only helps us to identify *where* ambivalence arises within our practical identities. But to fully understand ambivalence, we'll also need to know more about the precise nature of the conflict that occurs between our internal attitudes. Concerning this latter issue, Frankfurt identifies two kinds of conflicts that might occur within an ambivalent will:

In conflicts of the one sort, [volitional movements] compete for priority or position in a preferential order; the issue is which [volitional movement] to satisfy *first*. In conflicts of the other sort, the issue is whether a [volitional movement] should be given *any* place in the order of preference at all—that is, whether it is to be endorsed as a legitimate candidate for satisfaction or whether it is to be rejected as entitled to no priority whatsoever. When a conflict of the first kind is resolved, the competing [volitional movements] are *integrated* into a single ordering, within which each occupies a specific position. Resolving a conflict of the second kind involves radical *separation* of the competing [volitional movements], one of

which is not merely assigned a relatively less favored position but extruded entirely as an outlaw (Frankfurt 1988, 170).

Following J. S. Swindell, the conflicts that Frankfurt identifies here might be sorted into conflicts of “willing” and “identifying” respectively.<sup>9</sup> Conflicts of the former sort are more familiar. We are often conflicted about how we should order those volitional movements that we identify with. I identify with my concern to be a good teacher for my students, but also identify with my concern to be a good partner, friend, and parent. Each of these makes considerable claims on my time. How should I balance them? I’m not always sure, and as a result, I sometimes find myself ambivalent about what to do in cases in which these two elements of who I am are pitted against one another. But though this kind of ambivalence can be psychically distressing, according to Frankfurt, we can resolve ambivalence of this sort simply by “integrating” the volitional movements we identify with into a single commensurate list.

The second kind of conflict that Frankfurt discusses is perhaps less common than the first (though it is still familiar enough). It involves being unsettled about whether some volitional element can really continue to be *one’s own* or whether that motive should instead be rejected as alien. Here the issue isn’t one of balancing or “ordering” competing motivations. Instead it’s a matter of whether one (or more) of the competing motives can continue to be counted as “internal” in the relevant sense. For example: the question of whether to continue a relationship or not, or of whether you really love the other person or not. Since it’s not clear these conflicting movements can be integrated into a single ordering, to resolve ambivalence of this sort, an agent must “outlaw” one of the motives entirely, which for Frankfurt involves giving it *no* place in one’s deliberative economy.

This means that ambivalent agents’ wills can be divided in two ways. As a result, it also means that the phenomenon of ambivalence cannot be neatly reduced to a single form of conflict. But perhaps this shouldn’t be too surprising, given the variation of feelings that we describe as ambivalence. In any case, the fact that the sort of ambivalence at issue cannot be so reduced is not a reason to think we cannot say something sensible about it. Indeed, in what follows I will argue that neither of the two forms of conflict that Frankfurt identifies with ambivalence constitutes an agential failing. Because I think the two kinds of conflict that Frankfurt is worried about are of a

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<sup>9</sup> J. S. Swindell develops this point, as well as a full taxonomy of ambivalence, in Swindell, “Ambivalence,” *Philosophical Explorations* 13.1 (2010): 23-34. For a critical discussion of Swindell, see David Svoboda, “Swindell, Frankfurt, and ambivalence,” *Philosophical Explorations* 14.2 (2011): 219-225.

piece with the sort of conflicts that have worried other unificationists, I think this result has significant implications.<sup>10</sup> It's not just that Frankfurt is wrong to think of ambivalence as intrinsically bad; rather, all those who are concerned about inner faction or a failure to be fully integrated are mistaken to think that conflicts of this sort are inherently self-defeating. With this in mind, I now turn to the unificationists' positive arguments against being ambivalent.

### iii. two unificationist arguments

There are two key unificationist arguments: the *Resolution Argument* and the *Self-Defeat Argument*. Though arguments of this sort are at the heart of the unificationist project more generally, they find their clearest presentation in Frankfurt's work. Accordingly, I'll focus on his statement of the arguments, while noting deeper connections between his unique brand of unificationism and its historical and contemporary alternatives.

#### iii.a. the resolution argument

Frankfurt's *Resolution Argument* begins with the idea that an ambivalent will cannot *fully* resolve the question of what to do.<sup>11</sup> The simple version of the argument is as follows. Because (i) making a decision involves *making up one's mind*, and (ii) to make up one's mind just is to *decisively resolve* the question of what to do, an agent who cannot resolve her will is therefore unable to make decisions at all. And from this, it apparently follows that ambivalence is problematic. After all, being able to make decisions (i.e., to decisively resolve practical conflicts) seems to be at the heart of what it is to be an agent. Of course, to evaluate the soundness of this argument, we'll need to consider its key premise, that an agent plagued by an ambivalent will cannot satisfactorily resolve practical questions. I'll argue that this premise is false, and that consequently, the *Resolution Argument* gives us no reason to think that ambivalence is a threat to one's agency.

In unpacking the precise nature of ambivalence, we've already seen two constraints Frankfurt puts on the resolution of our wills. Recall that in "conflicts of willing," resolution requires that we be

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Jech has recently argued that although Augustine's and Kierkegaard's proposed analyses of wholeheartedness are importantly different than the account proposed by Frankfurt, Augustine, Kierkegaard, and Frankfurt are all worried about the same purported malady. This suggests that although the historical antecedents to Frankfurt's view weren't always careful to specify what precisely ambivalence involves (Kierkegaard is a notable exception in this regard), they were meaning to pick out the same thing. For more, see Jech, "To Will One Thing," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50.2 (2013): 153-166.

<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Christine Korsgaard has recently claimed that "in order to be an agent, you need to be unified—you need to put your whole self, so to speak, behind your movements," (Korsgaard 2009, 213).

able to integrate the conflicting motives or values in a single ordering. A failure to do this, it seems, would entail a failure to fully achieve resolution. In “conflicts of identifying,” resolution requires that we are able to extrude or “outlaw” (at least) one of the conflicting motives or values entirely from our practical identity. Frankfurt develops this latter point by considering cases in which we are conflicted about what we love:

In order for a conflict [concerning what an agent loves] ... to be resolved, so that the person is freed of him ambivalence, it is not necessary that either of his conflicting impulses disappear. It is not even necessary that either of them increase or diminish in strength. *Resolution requires only that the person become finally and unequivocally clear as to which side of the conflict he is on.* The forces mobilized on the other side may then persist with as much intensity as before; but as soon as he has definitely established just where he himself stands, his will is no longer divided and his ambivalence is therefore gone. He has placed himself wholeheartedly behind one of the conflicting impulses, and not at all behind the other, (Frankfurt 2004, 91; emphasis added).

In this passage, Frankfurt contrasts ambivalence with *wholeheartedness* and relies on this distinction to help explain why resolution is impossible for an ambivalent agent. For Frankfurt, wholeheartedness entails that an agent’s will structured is in a way such that it is “unequivocally clear” as to which motive the agent identifies herself with. And this unequivocal clarity has important implications: to be wholehearted about a motive is to be “behind” it fully and not at all “behind” conflicting motives. As a result, when we wholeheartedly endorse one course of action over another (i.e., when we settle our wills in a way that resonates throughout our volitional structure), it seems that we become *rationaly* alienated from the unendorsed motives. How could I, after all, be rational in acting on a motive at I am in no way behind? And this, you might think, *resolves* my ambivalence because it renders the unendorsed motive inconsequential *for me*. Accordingly, for Frankfurt, wholehearted endorsement of one tendency over another is action-guiding, since wholehearted endorsements provides us with *reason* to pursue the former course of action and, upon pursuing that course of action, it *speaks for us*—it is *our own*. Of course, none of this is possible when we are ambivalent, since in cases of ambivalence the question of which motive should move me to action is still open—to be ambivalent just is to fail to be wholehearted in the



way Frankfurt describes. To be ambivalent, then, is to fail to be behind one motive in a way that unificationists take to be necessary for agency at its best.

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The problem here is that it's far from clear that *rational* resolution comes *only if* we wholeheartedly endorse a single ordering of motives (in conflicts of willing) or one option over another, or one motive over another (in conflicts of identifying). Indeed, we might reasonably ask, why isn't possible to resolve ourselves simply by determining what it is that we have most reason to care about or what it is that we have most reason to do, and then go from there. No doubt, this will not completely solve the psychic distress of being of two minds, but as Frankfurt himself admits, even a wholehearted endorsement of one course of action over another will not necessarily diminish the conflicting constituents of our psychologies. So again, couldn't a less-than-wholehearted choice, when made for reasons, rationally commit us to the projects that follow from our decisions, and so, resolve the question of what to do?

Frankfurt thinks not. This is because, on his view, such an arrangement would be inherently unstable, and as a result, it could not resolve our ambivalence at a fundamental level. When an agent

... cannot bring himself to identify decisively either with one of the opposing tendencies of will or the other ... [that agent] is volitionally fragmented. His will is unstable and incoherent, moving him in contrary directions simultaneously or in a disorderly sequence. He suffers from a radically entrenched ambivalence, in which his will remains obstinately undefined and therefore lacks effective guiding authority. As long as he is unable to resolve the conflict by which he is torn, and thus to unify his will, the person is at odds with himself.

Suppose, for example, that he is ambivalent with respect to loving a certain woman. Part of him loves her, but part of him is opposed to loving her; and he himself is undecided concerning which of his two inconsistent tendencies he wants to prevail. ... Since he is unresolved whether to support his love of the woman, or to identify himself with and to mobilize his energies behind his opposition to that love, he is unresolved as to whether he does truly love her. Thus his will is indeterminate, (Frankfurt 2004, 92 – 93).

For Frankfurt, then, it's not enough that an agent makes a choice concerning two inconsistent tendencies. If that choice does not issue from a motive that has been wholeheartedly endorsed, then any apparent resolution that it brings is illusory.

The underlying argument Frankfurt has in mind here is something like the following. Suppose that I am ambivalent with respect to the question of whether or not to  $x$ , and I decide to  $x$ . But further suppose that I do so not because I wholeheartedly endorse  $x$ -ing but because I must simply make a decision one way or the other, and in the circumstances, I come to believe that  $x$ -ing is best (but not unequivocally or categorically "the best"). In this case, you might think that the mere fact that I chose  $x$  does nothing to stop me from reflectively questioning the legitimacy of my decision to  $x$ . Since the ability to reflectively question the legitimacy of a decision is, for Frankfurt, the *sine qua non* of a motive or plan of action that an agent can dissociate herself from, such motives or plans of action cannot *be the agent's own*. And if the motive that moves me to action is not my own (in the relevant sense of "my own"), then it is hard to see how I am rationally committed to taking the means to that end, or how it could guide my projects or my conception of my life more generally. Consequently, you might conclude that a decision issuing from an ambivalent will cannot resonate in the agent's practical identity in a definitively (i.e., authoritatively) action-guiding way.

But though this is a rhetorically powerful argument for the claim that ambivalence in our wills shows them to be, to some degree, defective, ultimately, I do not think that it is a sound one. To see this, first consider that when you make a promise to a friend, you are thereby rationally committed to taking the necessary means to keeping that promise. And this is because promises typically have action-guiding authority such that in ordinary circumstances, they resolve the question of what to do. Now, of course, if you make a promise under duress or because another agent has threatened you, then the promise itself fails to provide you with reason to comply. But, unlike duress or coercion, being ambivalent about what one promises doesn't clearly undermine the rational weightiness or action-guiding authority of the promise itself. That is, the mere fact that your will was divided at the time of the promise doesn't mean that the decision to make the promise itself (along with the subsequent action of carrying out the act of promise-making) lacks action-guiding authority. For example, if you promise your friend to help her move, then even if you did so with a divided will, the promise still has action-guiding authority for you, and it still precludes you from (rationally) failing to deliver on the promise to help. And this is true even if, after making the promise, you look back on your decision with uncertainty or regret, or if you are still not sure that your ordering of motives—the ordering that might have led you make the promise in the first place—is determinate

or stable, or if you come to see yourself as dissociated from the motives that moved you to promise in the first place. It seems, then, that an ambivalent promise can settle one's will in a way that authoritatively *resolves* the practical question of what to do.

Promises are not, I think, an isolated case. Rather, they simply highlight something that is present in other cases: even decisions issuing from an ambivalent will can resolve the practical question of what to do. For although he's certainly right to think that we can always question those choices that issue from a divided will (and as a result, be dissociated from those choices), this is not, as Frankfurt claims, inconsistent with also thinking that such decisions resolve the matter of what to do. More starkly, we can say that the fact that an agent is able to dissociate herself from some motive or decision, as is the case when her decision issues from an ambivalent will, is not relevant to the question of whether or not that motive or decision might be rationally authoritative for her.

The resources needed to help further this point have been developed by none other than Frankfurt himself, who asks us to consider a situation analogous to that of an ambivalent individual making a decision: "the situation of someone attempting to solve a problem in arithmetic," (Frankfurt 1998, 167). In such a situation, Frankfurt notes that the individual doing the calculation can always worry that he has made a mistake. So what could justify the agent's providing an answer, without consulting his calculations *one more time*, just to make sure? Well, one possibility is that the individual is simply indifferent, and so unmoved by the worry that he might have been negligent or otherwise incompetent in calculating. "I've done it enough, so at this point, I don't really care whether I'm right," he might say. But this sort of indifference in the case of our wills, Frankfurt points out, is clearly problematic. So we can't rationally resolve a divided will by being indifferent to our own agency in this way.<sup>12</sup>

Another possibility for resolution in the arithmetical case, however, is that the "sequence of calculations might end because the person conducting it *decides for some reason* to adopt a certain result," (Frankfurt 1998, 168). This might either be because "he is unequivocally confident that this result is correct," or "perhaps he believes that even though there is some likelihood that the result is not correct, the cost to him of further inquiry ... is greater than the value to him of reducing the likelihood of error," (Frankfurt 1998, 168). In either case, Frankfurt thinks that the individual has resolved the problem that arises from his uncertainty about being correct. And this can be extended, Frankfurt thinks, to the practical realm. Presumably, the idea is simply that we can resolve our divided will by *deciding for some reason*.

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<sup>12</sup> For more on this point, see Swindell (2010).

Now Frankfurt himself identifies “decisive commitment” (i.e., deciding for some reason) with being wholehearted, so on first glance, it may not be obvious that this idea supports my contention that we can rationally resolve divisions in our wills without wholehearted endorsement. But it seems that on this point, Frankfurt is failing to draw the right conclusions from his own lessons. Notice that what resolves the problem in the case of mathematical calculation isn’t anything analogous to wholehearted endorsement of an answer.<sup>13</sup> Instead, it’s simply that the agent decided *on the basis of reasons* that he was in a position to stop. And the agent does not need to become “finally and unequivocally clear” (Frankfurt 2004, 91) about the answer in such a case, as Frankfurt requires for wholeheartedness, in order to do this.

Moreover, it might also be true of an agent’s wholehearted endorsement of one of her motives that she does so for a reason, but this alone isn’t sufficient for wholeheartedness. In order to be wholehearted, Frankfurt tells us, the agent must also *identify* herself with the motive that she endorses as rationally authoritative. But nothing analogous to “identification” is needed to resolve the question of whether or not one should recalculate. Again, what matters in that case is simply that the individual has decided to stop for a reason, e.g., because he thinks he’s been suitably careful in his calculations to merit giving up on endlessly repeating them for the sake of perfect (and unattainable) certainty. It seems, then, that if we’re to take Frankfurt’s analogy seriously, then we can jettison his insistence on wholeheartedness because something less can do the trick. A divided will can resolve the practical question of what to do as long as the decision issuing from the ambivalent will is made for reasons, even if the agent does not wholeheartedly identify her practical self with those reasons.<sup>14</sup>

This means that, for example, when I feel ambivalent about grading students’ papers—I have other important demands on my time, after all, and careful attention to students’ work is very time consuming—resolution of my practical question of what to do is possible without any wholehearted endorsement on my part. As I’ve argued, what really matters for resolution is not that I

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<sup>13</sup> What would wholehearted endorsement even look like in this context?

<sup>14</sup> Of course, not just *any* reason will suffice; you must settle your will for the *right* kinds of reasons. But this is no different than in the arithmetical case. For in that case, you won’t want to decide to stop for just any old reason—e.g., that you’re tired or bored for example, or that you’re indifferent about being correct. Only reasons of the sort Frankfurt invokes (e.g., that given your competence in basic arithmetic, the likelihood of error is low enough to move on) will legitimate the decision to stop. Analogously, in the practical case, one will want to select a course of action on the basis of the reasons that make that course of action choiceworthy (in cases of conflict between merely permissible courses of action) or rationally necessary (in cases in which one possible course of action is rationally required). Thus, that mere fact that one option is more convenient or less taxing will not typically be a reason that will resolve the agent’s will.

wholeheartedly endorse the decision to spend hours pouring over papers that students cranked out in 45 minutes or less; instead, what matters is that, however I choose, I do so for reasons. This is because, as Frankfurt pointed out in the case of mathematical calculation, reasons resolve my dilemma because they confer action-guiding authority to my decisions: once I've chosen to grade student papers on the basis of reasons, I now have reasons to continue to do so even after my motivation to continue flags. That is, the initial reason upon which I decide, along with my subsequent decision to act on the basis of that reason are together generative of new reasons for action (in the same way we saw promises to be generative of new reasons for action earlier). But in deciding to grade papers rather than work on another project, I need not have excised my ambivalence—I certainly don't need to be finally or unequivocally behind my choice. Indeed, I need not have become wholehearted in any way, since I can still recognize that my desire to get other work done is as much a part of me as the desire to take my students' papers seriously.

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You might think that this case is a problem for Frankfurt only because I have failed to acknowledge that when I decisively identify with the motive to grade papers at a specific time, I need not regard general motives to engage in other projects as alien.<sup>15</sup> In other words, you might think that I have failed to recognize that in this case, the conflict at stake is actually a conflict of willing and *not* a conflict of identifying. As a result, resolution in this case will only require that I am able to integrate my preferences onto a single list that definitely specifies which preferences have priority.

This is perhaps right, though I think that reflecting on what it would mean for competing motives to be “integrated into a single ordering, within which each occupies a specific position” (Frankfurt 1988, 170), might be instructive at this point. After all, it's not entirely clear what this sort of integration requires. In the case at hand, does it only mean that I am able to order the competing motives, irrespective of other motives that I might have? Could I, for example, achieve integration by ranking the motive that leads me to grade papers (call this, my 'grading' motive) as having more authority than the motive that leads me to work on other projects (my 'other projects' motive)? Perhaps. But notice: this ordering will only make sense given a contingent background of other motives, as well as more general background conditions. For instance, it's only near the end of the term that this conflict even arises. In October and February, respectively, it doesn't make sense for me to be overly concerned with getting things graded. This suggests that the ordering is conditional

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<sup>15</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for making this point.

or defeasible in a way that will allow for me to not always sublimate my ‘other projects’ motive to my ‘grading’ motive—e.g., possibly, the list needs a temporal indexing of some sort.

However, even granting the defeasible priority of my ‘grading’ motive at the end of terms, it’s not—nor should it be—*determinate* that the ‘grading’ motive has necessary priority over the ‘other projects’ motive. If I owe a paper to an editor, or have revisions that are due, then I’ll work on those projects rather than grading, even if it’s the end of term. But this suggests that special circumstances can also trump the defeasible priority of ‘grading’ motives. At this point, though, it’s not clear that I’ve really “integrated” anything onto a single list. Rather, I seem to recognize that given these two motives, along with all of the other motives and values that are internal to me, I have reasons to do two things that sometimes conflict. And the weightiness of these reasons depends not only on the intrinsic choiceworthiness of the ends themselves, but also on the context in which the conflict occurs: *is it at the beginning of a term or near the end; am I coming up for tenure; am I coming up for tenure but already secure when it comes to “excellence in research”; that I promised someone a draft of a paper by a certain date; etc.*

The kind of deliberative flexibility that is required here suggests that an appropriate way to deal with the conflict is not to definitively or invariably order one’s motives, but is to instead adopt a more particularist approach.<sup>16</sup> Very plausibly, I can recognize that in *this* context one motive has priority while also acknowledging that in another context—perhaps even a fairly similar context—the other motive would have priority. It is possible that this is consistent with Frankfurt’s account of what needs to be done in order to resolve ambivalence in conflicts of willing. But notice that if it is, then Frankfurt’s technical notions of “wholeheartedness” and “decisive commitment” no longer track our ordinary conceptions of these concepts.<sup>17</sup> After all, on this reading, to be wholehearted in the face of conflicts of willing, an agent need not be “single-minded.” She doesn’t even have to be definitive in ordering the competing motives. Nor do those motives really need to be “integrated” at all. All she needs is to decide for a reason (of the right sort). Crucially, this suggests that the agent need not excise her ambivalence in order to resolve conflicts of this sort. On this interpretation of Frankfurt’s notion of resolution, then, ambivalence would be consistent with a certain kind of wholeheartedness, and consequently, it would be no threat (even by Frankfurt’s lights) to the proper

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<sup>16</sup> In particular, what seems important for settling these questions is not some prearranged list, but an exercise of normative competence. For more on this point, see Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2004), especially Chapter 11, “Rationality, Value, and Meaning.”

<sup>17</sup> Timothy Schroeder and Nomy Arpaly raise a similar worry about Frankfurt’s notions of alienation and externality. See Schroeder and Arpaly, “Alienation and Externality,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 29.3: 371-387 (1999).

functioning of our agency. Frankfurt's ideal of wholeheartedness is either not in conflict with ambivalence, or is in conflict with ambivalence only because Frankfurt insists upon a flawed account of what's required to resolve practical conflicts. In either case, we have no reason to think ambivalence is a threat to the proper functioning of one's agency.

The related problem for Frankfurt's view emerges even more clearly in conflicts of identifying—e.g, the case that Frankfurt considers in which a man is radically ambivalent about his love for a woman. To fill in that case, suppose the man is ambivalent about his feelings for his mistress: he genuinely loves her and he also thinks that he shouldn't love her; indeed, we can imagine that in light of his love for his wife, he is simultaneously repulsed by his strong feelings for his mistress. Thus, his love for his mistress renders him alienated from the motives and tendencies that lead him to conclude that he shouldn't love her, while those motives and tendencies simultaneously render him dissociated from his love for her. Accordingly, he is ambivalent about the question of how he should feel about her, as well as the question of what he should do about his relationship with her. But suppose that he weighs the reasons for and against continuing his relationship, and he decides that he has sufficient grounds for ending the affair, even though he had enjoyed it a great deal. And suppose that on the basis of this deliberation, he decides to end the relationship and does so.

In this case, with the details fleshed out a bit, wouldn't the fact that the man *decided for reasons* itself resolve the practical questions of whether he should love her and whether he should continue his relationship with her? It certainly seems so to me (at least if we're assuming that he decided for the right kind of reasons). Of course, this resolution doesn't eliminate the man's psychic distress or stave off the regret that he might feel in those circumstances. It also doesn't prevent the man from feeling alienated from his decision, which is a natural consequence of the fact that the man still identifies himself with his love for the woman.<sup>18</sup> But that's not the point, since even wholehearted endorsement of one option over the other couldn't do *that*. All that's needed to show that the *Resolution Argument* is unsound is that his practical question of what to do can be resolved in an authoritatively action-guiding way. And plausibly the man's decision to end the affair on the basis of reasons is action-guiding, even if he is ultimately ambivalent about that decision.

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<sup>18</sup> It's worth noting, however, that it's not altogether clear that being psychologically alienated from one's motives is necessarily bad. As Peter Railton (1984) has pointed out, morality sometimes requires this of us. And no doubt it's not just morality, but also our love for others and for our own selves will almost surely make it rationally required of us that we sometimes feel alienated (and so 'unresolved' in that sense) from the motives that we act on. See Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984): 134-171.

Here the unificationist might object. Sure, it's *possible* that an ambivalent will might be resolved. But isn't it clearly better that the will be resolved wholeheartedly? In the case Frankfurt considers, for example, although it might be true that the man can resolve his will by deciding for reasons, doesn't it seem preferable that he does so in a way that excises his ambivalence? Perhaps he recognizes that pursuing either of his loves would be good, and that either choice would go better if it doesn't leave him tied up in knots over the road not taken. So, in this case, it seems better that he satisfices—that he simply choose to pursue one of his (rationally defensible) loves and cuts off the other. Of course, the objector acknowledges, this doesn't show that ambivalence *must* be excised to resolve the will. But it does show something that is friendly to the spirit of unificationists: that it's *best* for agents to excise ambivalence from their wills.<sup>19</sup>

In response to this objection, it's important to note that nothing I've said should be construed as an argument that wholeheartedness is bad *tout court*. On the contrary, I do think it's often a good thing that agents are wholehearted in their decisions. For example, it can be good to be wholehearted in cases in which focus or single-mindedness is necessary for success. It can also be good to be wholehearted in cases in which continued ambivalence would literally undermine an individual's psychological health or wellbeing. In each of these cases, though, it is *instrumentally* good that the agent is wholehearted. That is, the fact that she is wholehearted in these cases isn't germane to the proper functioning of her agency.

But this is precisely what is going on in the case considered above. If Frankfurt's man loves two women and cannot go on living duplicitously, he must decide. And if either relationship would be sufficiently good, then it seems he has good reasons for going either way. But once he makes the decision, say, the decision to end the affair, then he has reason to put it behind him for the sake of managing his present relationship. This, of course, isn't to say that he has no reason to be ambivalent; it's instead to recognize that the value of his relationship with his wife is sufficiently great to make it reasonable for him to take steps to not be ambivalent. To do otherwise, we can imagine, would make him a failure as a husband, and also, I suspect, a moral agent. But it would not, I think, make him a failure *qua* agent, since what matters for that is that he decides for reasons, and this is consistent with continued ambivalence on his part.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for making this point.

<sup>20</sup> I think it's worth acknowledging that the appeal of wholeheartedness in this case depends, in part, on the fact that it's generally wrong to cheat on your partner. In cases of this sort, there is a distinctively moral reason for the man to resolve his will in a particular way, and then, having done so, to work to excise any recalcitrant feelings he might have for his former mistress. To be ambivalent here would, it seems, reveal a (further) moral flaw. But not all conflicts between



Moreover, even though reflection on cases of this sort invites the idea that wholeheartedness can be good, I think there are cases of another sort that counter this sentiment, cases in which a failure to be ambivalent is itself what threatens one's identity and ends. I will discuss one such case at length in the next section. For now, however, I think it's fair to conclude that the unificationists' resolution argument fails: wholehearted endorsement of one's motives or tendencies is not needed to resolve the practical question of what to do, since even the deliverances of an ambivalent will can, if properly attuned to what reasons there are, settle the question of what the agent should do in an authoritatively action-guiding way.<sup>21</sup> When it comes to resolving the will in a way that resonates throughout the agent's volitional structure, it seems that a divided, ambivalent will needs wholeheartedness like a fish needs a bicycle.

### iii.b. the self-defeat argument

The *Resolution Argument* failed to show that ambivalence renders an agent's will defective. But it's not the only weapon in the unificationist's arsenal. Indeed, a second argument that Frankfurt develops against ambivalence is one that unificationists have developed over and over again. This second argument is the *Self-Defeat Argument*, and it purports to show that unless our agency is unified, i.e., unless we are wholehearted in our willing, our will is at odds with itself in a necessarily self-defeating way.

This general line of argument is precisely what Plato was getting at when he claimed that a lack of agential unity "will make [us] incapable of action because of inner faction and not being of one

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agents' loves need involve conflicts between morally permissible and morally impermissible ends. As I noted at the outset, an agent might find herself torn between self-realization and her obligations to family. Here the choice is not between permissible and impermissible but between prima facie permissible goods. And it's cases like this where ambivalence seems more appropriate. No doubt, the conflicted agent must resolve her will. But she if she's properly attuned not only to reasons that will rationalize the course of action that she does in fact choose, but also to reasons that would rationalize the alternative course, then she will have reason for ambivalence.

<sup>21</sup> You might think that by claiming that "a will properly attuned to the reasons *there are*" can adequately resolve questions of what to do, I am begging the question against Frankfurt, who is an internalist about reasons (i.e., he holds that the reasons that exist in any set of circumstances crucially depend on the motives that an agent has wholeheartedly endorsed). It's not clear to me, however, that this criticism is ultimately correct. After all, my argument does not rely on the falsity of existence internalism about reasons, since it's compatible with internalism as such that the reasons that the "reasons there are" for an agent's will to be "properly attuned to" are all connected to her actual motivational set in the right way. Now as for whether only those motivations that an agent has wholeheartedly endorsed can give rise to reasons, that's precisely the issue at stake here. But even if one adopts an internalist account of reasons, it won't show that an agent who is not wholehearted cannot have reasons. For plausibly, an agent's status as a bare rational agent isn't itself dependent on whether she has ever wholeheartedly endorsed any of her motives (how could one ever become a rational agent otherwise?).

mind with [ourselves]; ... it will make [us our] own enemy,” (*Republic* 352a5). Korsgaard also takes up Plato’s line of argument when she claims that in cases of unresolved agential conflict, “the deliberative procedures that [ideally] unify the soul into a single agent break down, and the person *as such* cannot act ... Platonic justice [i.e., agential unity] is the constitutive principle of action.”<sup>22</sup> This makes it seem that ambivalence is self-defeating because it precludes rational action altogether.

As Frankfurt develops the *Self-Defeat Argument*, it aims for a related (but weaker) conclusion in two movements. First, he focuses on everything that goes wrong when an agent is ambivalent; second, he turns to what goes right when an agent is wholehearted. For Frankfurt, ambivalence is seen as necessarily self-defeating, whereas wholeheartedness, by contrast, is thought to secure a meaningful kind of freedom.

Frankfurt constructs the argument as follows:

... divided wills are inherently self-defeating. Division of the will is a counterpart in the realm of conduct to self-contradiction in the realm of thought. A self-contradictory belief requires us, simultaneously, both to accept and to deny the same judgment. Thus it guarantees cognitive failure. Analogously, conflict within the will precludes behavioral effectiveness, by moving us to act in contrary directions at the same time. Deficiency in wholeheartedness is a kind of irrationality, then, which infects our practical lives and renders them incoherent.

But the same token, enjoying the inner harmony of an undivided will is tantamount to possessing a fundamental kind of freedom. Insofar as a person loves himself—in other words, to the extent that he is volitionally wholehearted—he does not resist any movements of his own will. He is not at odds with himself; he does not oppose, or seek to impede, the expression in practical reasoning and in conduct of whatever love his self-love entails. He is free in loving what he loves, at least in the sense that his loving is not obstructed or interfered with by himself, (Frankfurt 2004: 96 – 97).

As stated, it might seem as if Frankfurt is on to something of genuine importance. After all, isn’t ambivalence, when its consequences are laid bare, just obviously a threat to the proper functioning of one’s agency in the same way self-contradiction is a threat to the proper functioning of one’s

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<sup>22</sup> Korsgaard (2009): 152.

doxastic capacities? Furthermore, even if no individual instance of ambivalence itself was self-defeating in a way that was sufficient to radically undermine your freedom, a pattern of ambivalence—a regular inability to settle your will—would threaten your ability to live your life in the way you see fit, which you might think is (in part) constitutive of a well-lived life for creatures like us.<sup>23</sup>

Yet despite the power of these challenges, I'm still less sanguine than Frankfurt that (i) ambivalence is bad for the agent in the way that theoretical incoherence is bad for an epistemic agent, and (ii) that wholeheartedness, because it is a form of freedom from inner turmoil, is necessarily a good thing. To see this, first note that it's not at all clear that being ambivalent is, necessarily, a threat to an agent's welfare, or that wholeheartedness perfectly secures her welfare. An ambivalent agent might be less likely to “rush into” a big decision, and so might be less prone to kinds of calamities that often attend the sorts of actions that people wholeheartedly rush into.<sup>24</sup> It's unfortunately the case that for me at least, I have been wholehearted in some of my worst decisions; had my will been divided, then although I might have still ended up making many of the same deleterious decisions, I might have done so with more caution. And plausibly, I might have avoided some of the more disastrous consequences those decisions had in my own life and in the lives of those I care about. The fact that I would have been less “free” in the sense of freedom allegedly secured by wholeheartedness seems a small price to pay in overall evaluations of welfare.

This might be, but the heart of Frankfurt's attack on ambivalence isn't really relying on the idea that if we are wholehearted, our lives will be better off in some ways. In fact, Frankfurt (1999, 2004) himself concedes that ambivalence might have instrumental value in some (perhaps many) cases. Instead, we should understand unificationists like Frankfurt as making a direct argument that our *agency as such* is threatened by ambivalence, even if that threat has no negative instrumental (dis)value.

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<sup>23</sup> Of course, if you're really ambivalent, then it's not clear that you'll have a settled conception of a good life in the first place. This is because ambivalence involves incoherence at the deepest levels of an agent's practical identity—the precise aspects of our practical identities that Frankfurt takes to constitute our conception of a good life. Indeed, according to Frankfurt (2004), you cannot determine what constitutes a good life without first determining what you love. But if you are ambivalent about what you love, then it might seem that you cannot have a settled conception of what a good life would be for you. It is therefore no wonder that Frankfurt claims that, wherever possible, ambivalence should be excised from our wills, or at least, it should be managed the way one might manage a long-term illness.

<sup>24</sup> Although, as an anonymous referee has rightly pointed out to me, an ambivalent agent might also drag her feet in a way that makes her worse off. This is no problem for what I say here, however, since all I want to do here is note that ambivalence can have value for an agent, but this is consistent with ambivalence being disvaluable for agents in some circumstances (though insofar as ambivalence can be bad for someone, it is not because it represents a failure in the structure of their will). In so doing, I ally myself with Wolf (2002), Poltera (2011), and [suppressed], who each explicitly note this in their discussions of the value of ambivalence.

Accordingly, the real heart of Frankfurt's attack on ambivalence begins (and ends) with the claim that a divided will is analogous to self-contradiction in the realm of thought. For if ambivalent renders us incoherent in this way, then Frankfurt's case practically makes itself.

But Frankfurt's insistence to the contrary notwithstanding, it's not at all clear that ambivalence in the will is analogous to self-contradiction in thought. No doubt, when an agent's will is divided the agent lacks a kind of internal harmony that many of us prize. Surely, however, finding yourself in a situation in which, given facts about your practical identity, there are two divergent courses of action that are each independently worth pursuing is *very* different than believing a self-contradictory proposition to be true. For one thing, setting issues related to dialetheism aside, most of us think that if an agent was to believe the conjunction of  $p$  and  $\sim p$ , she would believe something that is *necessarily* false. After all, given certain plausible assumptions (e.g., the principle of bivalence), only  $p$  or  $\sim p$  (but not both) can be true. So the belief that  $(p \ \& \ \sim p)$  cannot possibly turn out to be true.

However, is the same thing true in the practical domain? When confronted with a choice between either  $a$ -ing and  $\sim a$ -ing, an agent might be ambivalent as to which course of action she should pursue. But her regarding  $a$ -ing and  $\sim a$ -ing to be choiceworthy, perhaps equally so, and being torn between  $a$ -ing or  $\sim a$ -ing even though it is impossible to both  $a$  and  $\sim a$ , is hardly the same as believing  $(p \ \& \ \sim p)$ . One plausible explanation for this, I think, is simply that our beliefs aim to represent the world as it is, and the world cannot be accurately represented as somehow conflicting with itself—unicorns cannot exist and not exist, for example.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the conjunction of two beliefs that represent the world in this way necessarily will fail to accurately represent the world. However, the “axiological” world is not like this. A reasonable pluralism will allow that many states of affairs have something going for them—even states of affairs that are not compossible. As a result, the kind of conflict involved in ambivalence can be thought of as responding to this axiological truth.<sup>26</sup>

This points us towards an even deeper difference between the theoretical and practical realms in this respect—viz., that whereas believing  $(p \ \& \ \sim p)$  is sure to guarantee self-defeat in one's cognitive faculties, being torn between  $a$ -ing and  $\sim a$ -ing is *sometimes necessary for practical success*. That is, in some circumstances, we are properly functioning as agents only if we are ambivalent. In the case of tragic practical conflict, for example, an agent who fails to be torn between the alternatives will,

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<sup>25</sup> Indeed, this way of conceptualizing things seems to follow straightforwardly from conceptions of the cognitive/conative divide that rely on the notion of “direction of fit.”

<sup>26</sup> For helpfully encouraging me to develop this point, I owe a great deal of appreciation to John Martin Fischer and Neal Tognazzini.

necessarily, be an agent who fails to take seriously the moral residue that results from either of her decisions. But agency *par excellence* requires this of us. To see this point, I want to consider in some detail Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, who through no fault of his own, found himself in precisely this sort of practical conflict. And as we'll see, his mistake wasn't the content of his choice, but how his will came to be structured in making that choice: he makes himself wholehearted in Frankfurt's sense, and is worse off *qua* agent for it. (Though this is a lengthy digression, I hope it will become clearer that there is significant philosophical payoff—viz., we'll see that practical conflict of the sort Frankfurt thinks guarantees self-defeat can actually be characteristic of a will that is properly functioning.)

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In Aeschylus's tragedy, Agamemnon is put to an awful test.<sup>27</sup> As king, Agamemnon is obligated to launch a naval expedition against the Trojans; this is the only way to avenge the Trojans' offense against Greek hospitality. However, for her own reasons, the goddess Artemis will not allow the expedition to proceed without an acceptable sacrifice. And the precise sacrifice that she requires is Agamemnon's daughter. Thus, Agamemnon tragically finds himself forced to choose between killing his daughter Iphigenia and abandoning the expedition. After a brief display of ambivalence and anguish, Agamemnon subsequently decides to kill his daughter with almost no further deliberation.

Despite the psychological difficulty of such a choice, it is presented as, in some sense, the only choice that is open to Agamemnon, who, we are told, "slips his neck into the strap of fate" (Aeschylus 218). On this point, some have read Aeschylus as claiming that Agamemnon is fated to perform the action by supernatural forces that are wholly outside of his control.<sup>28</sup> However, Martha Nussbaum (2001) instead claims that it is only *rational* necessity that binds Agamemnon's choice. As she puts it, "... the choice to sacrifice Iphigenia, seems clearly preferable, both because of the consequences and because of the impiety involved in the other choice. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that Agamemnon could rationally have chosen any other way," (Nussbaum 2001, 34). And if Nussbaum is correct about this, it means that when Agamemnon slips his neck into the strap of fate,

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<sup>27</sup> *Agamemnon* is found in Aeschylus's *The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles, Penguin Classics, (1984). For helping me to see the practical import of Aeschylus's work, I am especially indebted to Martha Nussbaum's groundbreaking work on these issues. See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy Revised Edition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, (2001). For another important discussion of these issues, see Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1993).

<sup>28</sup> See Williams (1993) for one such interpretation.

Aeschylus takes him to be shouldering the painful burden that he must shoulder—at least if he is to remain a recognizably rational agent. This, in turn, means that not only does Aeschylus see the decision to sacrifice Iphigenia as rationally required, but so should we.

Consequently, the question is *not* whether Agamemnon *should* have refrained from killing his daughter, since it is plausible that was the best thing to do in the circumstances. Instead, the real question is something along the following lines: how should Agamemnon, and by extension those of us who bear witness to his tragic choice, understand and respond to the decision itself? Taking up this question, Nussbaum herself suggests that for Agamemnon “both courses [of action] involve him in guilt,” (Nussbaum 2001, 34). If this is correct, then it seems that no matter how he chooses, Agamemnon must recognize and deal with the fact that he is responsible for his choice. That is, Agamemnon cannot take himself to be justified in killing Iphigenia simply because her sacrifice was the only course of action that was rationally open to him.

Of course, Nussbaum’s claim, which assumes that there are genuine tragic moral dilemmas, is quite controversial. Some might reasonably argue that if Agamemnon genuinely lacks rational alternatives, then he is in fact *justified* in sacrificing his daughter.<sup>29</sup> However, if Agamemnon is justified in so acting, then it’s hard to see how he could be genuinely blameworthy for his actions. But notice: even if this is correct, and Agamemnon is *not* blameworthy for the death of his daughter, it doesn’t follow that all is well in Aulis. For even if Agamemnon is not ultimately blameworthy for killing Iphigenia, it nevertheless seems that it would be appropriate (maybe even necessary) for him to feel remorse, frustration, guilt, and perhaps even disgust at his role in her death. After all, even if he is fully justified, it is nevertheless by *his own action* that a “father’s hands are stained, [with] blood of a young girl streak[ing] the altar,” (210-211). The real heart of Nussbaum’s initial claim, then, is that however he decides, Agamemnon will have to do business with the morally significant fallout of his choice.

Indeed, this point is found in Aeschylus’s text itself, since whether Agamemnon acts wrongly and is so blameworthy or is simply “stained” by his decision, one thing is very clear: Aeschylus is highly critical of Agamemnon’s action. In particular, he seems especially critical of *how* Agamemnon makes and executes his decision to sacrifice Iphigenia. Despite an initial show to the contrary, Agamemnon does not seem to sufficiently struggle with or agonize over the tragedy of his choice in a way that is manifested in how he carries out Iphigenia’s doom. And this last bit is key: it’s not enough for him to be sad or to lament his choice—Agamemnon does this initially, after all. He must

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Earl Conee, “Against Moral Dilemmas,” *The Philosophical Review* 91.1 (1982): 87-97.

also recognize that the morally significant considerations that rationalize the sadness and lamentations in the first place are still action-guiding, even if they are outweighed by competing considerations (as they are in Agamemnon's case). For even if these are not the considerations that should (all things considered) move him to action, they nevertheless put significant constraints in *how* he should execute his decisions and *how* he should respond to himself in the wake of those decisions.

To help see the precise nature of this criticism, it's helpful to review the exact content of Agamemnon's deliberations and activity. Speaking of his predicament, Agamemnon says,

Obey, obey, or a heavy doom will crush me! –  
Oh but doom *will* crush me  
    once I rend my child,  
        the glory of my house –  
    a father's hands are stained,  
blood of a young girl streak the altar.  
Pain both ways and what is worse?  
Desert the fleets, fail the alliance?  
    No, but stop the winds with a virgin's blood,  
        feed their lust, their fury? –feed their fury!–  
Law is law! –  
    Let all go well, (206-217).

Looking only at the first few lines of Agamemnon's speech, one can sense his awareness of the tragedy and also the rational necessity of his situation. But notice how quickly the tone shifts. He quickly moves from considering whether to feed the winds' lust and fury to an emphatic answer: *feed their fury!* And quite distressingly, we can almost hear Agamemnon rationalizing to himself the brutality that is to come: "Law is law!" These final statements suggest that Agamemnon, having briefly struggled with the impiety of filicide, is now ready carry out the required act. But surely a loving father, or indeed, *anyone* with a minimum of concern for other persons wouldn't turn so quickly from lamentations about one's situation to the deadly "impurity" (218) of killing one's own daughter.

This quick shift portends Agamemnon's subsequent failure to fully appreciate Iphigenia's value and dignity. Aeschylus describes this failure when he tells us that just as Agamemnon makes his fateful decision, "his spirit [veers] black, impure, unholy," and "he stopped at nothing, seized with the frenzy blinding driving to outrage," (218-221). This outrage leads him to not only sacrifice Iphigenia but to sacrifice her as he would "a yearling" that must be gagged, lest her cries "curse the house," (234-236). Because he treats her as an animal, it is clear that having made the decision, Agamemnon fails to see how the reasons for refraining from sacrificing Iphigenia constrain how he kills her, and thus, he no longer recognizes her value in the way that a father should recognize the value of his child (and more generally, in the way that persons should recognize value in others).

It's clear, then, that the real problem with Agamemnon's behavior is not what he does but how he does it. In the face of tragic practical conflict, Agamemnon takes "the easy way out" and resolves his will by simply dissociating himself from a central aspect of his personal identity. In other words, Aeschylus takes his initial ambivalence to be short-lived and seems to regard Agamemnon as subsequently making and executing his decision wholeheartedly.<sup>30</sup> For after the fateful decision is made, he carries it out with a brutal and single-minded efficiency that would not be possible for a man who was still torn between his duties to his people and his duties to his child. Of course, even if he had maintained his ambivalence, given the rational necessity that he was faced with, Agamemnon would have still carried out the deed. But in such a case, his actions and their meaning would have been fundamentally different. Rather than treating Iphigenia as an animal, he would have treated her as his daughter; he would've apologized for what he must do; begged her understanding and forgiveness; cried with her for her life, and for their shared torture; he would have left her ungagged, and cursed his house with her; his knife would've been guided not by the "frenzy" of a warlord but by the quickness of a father.

Bernard Williams has made a related point about backwards-looking attitudes like remorse and agent-regret.<sup>31</sup> The idea here is simply that if an agent is properly attuned to the values at stake, then in cases of practical conflict of the sort under consideration, a properly functioning agent will

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<sup>30</sup> Frankfurt has suggested that Agamemnon is forced to betray himself, since he is forced to choose between two motives that are "equally defining elements of his own nature." And while I agree that Agamemnon betrays himself at Aulis, it's not clear that this is because Agamemnon still identifies with his love for his daughter. After all, when he "veers ... unholy" with "outrage," it seems that what's so unholy and outrageous is that he has wholeheartedly endorsed his decision to sacrifice Iphigenia, not that he is ambivalent. For more, see Frankfurt, "Autonomy, Necessity, and Love," *Autonomy, Volition, and Love*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1999): 139 n. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Vol. 39 (1965): 103-124; "Moral Luck," *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1981): 20-39.



respond not with self-satisfaction or even a sense that she has done the unequivocally right thing. Rather, her response will involve some infusion of regret, since even in doing the right thing, her agency was implicated in causing serious harm.

Nussbaum echoes this point in her discussion of Agamemnon. According to Nussbaum:

The good agent will also feel and exhibit the feelings appropriate to a person of good character caught in such a situation. He will not regard the fact of decision as licensing feelings of self-congratulation, much less feelings of unqualified enthusiasm for the act chosen. ... And after the action he will remember, regret, and, where possible make reparations. His emotion, moreover, will not be simply regret, which could be felt and expressed by an uninvolved spectator and does not imply that he himself has acted badly. It will be an emotion more like remorse, closely bound up with acknowledgement of the wrong that he has as an agent, however reluctantly, done, (Nussbaum 2001, 43).

Evidently, being a properly functioning agent is not simply a matter of selecting and bringing about some end. We must do so in a way that leaves us emotionally vulnerable to a wide range of retrospective responses—responses that reflect and express the normative significance of our choices.

Williams' and Nussbaum's points are, I hope, relatively uncontroversial,<sup>32</sup> so to them, I'd only add that a properly functioning agent will also take the very features of the conflict that retrospectively rationalize remorse and agent-regret into her initial deliberations in ways that, at the very least, affect how she makes and executes her decision. The after-the-fact failure of Agamemnon to feel remorse that Nussbaum points us to is of a piece with his first, and to my mind, greatest failure: Agamemnon's failure to appropriately respond to Iphigenia's significance in his deliberations about what to do and how to do it. And this failure *just is* Agamemnon's failure to maintain ambivalence in the face of an unspeakably tragic dilemma. So just as an agent can be legitimately criticized for failing to experience regret after making decisions of a certain sort, so too, she can be legitimately criticized for failing to be ambivalent when making those decisions in the first place.

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<sup>32</sup> One might disagree with the details of Williams' and Nussbaum's analysis and yet still think the general point holds: one is not a good agent if one's emotional responses to choices that have suffering as part of their foreseen consequences is not muted in some way by remorse.

Furthermore, it seems that instead of saving him from self-defeat, Agamemnon's wholehearted choice and execution of that choice *guaranteed* that his practical identity was destroyed. By contrast, a response guided by ambivalence actually would have ensured that Agamemnon's will was properly responsive not to just what he has most reason to do in the moment of choice, but to the *entire* normative landscape that confronted him. That is, in these circumstances, it is ambivalence and not wholeheartedness that would have characteristic of agency at its best.

What this shows is that Agamemnon not only could have avoided an inherently self-defeating action by remaining ambivalent throughout his choice, but that it is precisely in becoming wholehearted in his commitment to the war effort that he is led to act in such a fundamentally self-defeating way. After all, Agamemnon's love for his daughter had previously been a significant aspect of who he was *as an agent*, so by alienating himself from that love in the moments just prior to carrying out the sacrifice, and by coming to regard that love as not even putting some minimal constraints on how he might proceed, he makes himself into a new man. Not literally a "new man" in terms of personal identity; instead a new man in terms of practical identity.<sup>33</sup> Since this is only possible because he gives up on a central aspect of his self, it seems that in circumstances like those that Agamemnon finds himself in, wholehearted endorsement of one motive or of one way of being as an agent is itself inherently self-defeating.

Moreover, although Agamemnon's wholehearted endorsement of the war effort secured the kind of freedom that Frankfurt champions (by alienating himself from his daughter, it seems that Agamemnon "enjoys the inner harmony of an undivided will" and that "is tantamount to possessing a fundamental kind of freedom"), there is nothing particularly attractive about such freedom in this context. Freedom from inner strife, conflict, or faction, as Plato, Frankfurt, and Korsgaard have all prized is only good *insofar as there is no reason to be engaged in inner strife, conflict, or faction*, and in Agamemnon's case, there clearly are reasons to be so divided. Of course, such freedom might be attractive as a way of coping with the psychological distress of being torn, but in such a case, it would not be characteristic of a will *par excellence* but of an agent in a tough situation doing whatever it is that he or she must do to get by. Agamemnon's wholeheartedness is perhaps understandable as a human reaction to the horrible circumstances that he finds himself in through no fault of his own, but it hardly seems to me to be the reaction of an agent whose will shows no defect.

Accordingly, Frankfurt's *Self-defeat Argument* fails. Being torn between multiple competing practical commitments is not analogous to self-contradiction in a belief; nor does it necessarily

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<sup>33</sup> For further development of this point, see J. David Velleman (2002).

ensure that an agent's activity is a self-defeating one. In fact, as we saw with Agamemnon, only maintained ambivalence would have prevented self-defeat, since only by maintaining his ambivalence would he have been able to do full justice to the competing elements of his antecedent practical identity without simply abandoning one of those elements. Of course, this simply illustrates my earlier claim: the world that our beliefs do well to reflect is not a divided one—either  $p$  or  $\sim p$  is true—but the practical world is “fragmented” in a way that can render both  $a$ -ing and  $\sim a$ -ing to be choiceworthy, or perhaps as is the case with Agamemnon, *necessary* for an agent.<sup>34</sup>

#### iv. the function of the will

So far I have considered two arguments for the claim that insofar as an individual is ambivalent, her will is defective, and I have found each of these arguments to be unsound. In what follows, I will take a different approach to showing that in some cases, a properly functioning will is an ambivalent one. In particular, I want to directly attend to questions concerning the function of the will.

So, what is the function of the will? Well, if you think it is to unify the agent in her action, to render her wholehearted in action, or to literally constitute her in her action, then it's not surprising that you would think that an agent who is torn between competing practical identities is one whose will is failing to perform its function. If that's the function of the will, then pretty clearly, an ambivalent will is *eo ipso* a defective one. But is the function of the will really to unify the agent? Or is this just something that happens in some of the paradigm cases of willing, and not something that is necessarily characteristic of willing *par excellence*?

The function of the will, it seems to me, is something altogether less grand (metaphysically and rhetorically) than securing wholeheartedness for the agent. Instead, it is simply this: to respond to reasons that an agent recognizes herself to have. That is, an agent's will is properly functioning just in case it is responsive to the reasons she takes herself to have in the circumstances. And because agents can have reasons to be ambivalent about a decision, in particular decisions that pull at significant elements of their practical identities, then it seems that a properly functioning will would be, in such cases, torn between alternatives. This will not mean, however, that the agent's will should be paralyzed, since as we saw with Agamemnon, even when one finds oneself in a tragic dilemma, it might still be the case that the weight of reasons decisively favors one course of action over the other. It simply means that an agent's will is properly functioning when she recognizes the reasons

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<sup>34</sup> Thanks to John Martin Fischer for helping me formulate this point in this way.

for and against some action and those reasons guide her behavior, even though in some circumstances, this is only possible when an agent's will is ambivalent.

And although a will that is responsive to reasons does not necessarily secure the sort of freedom that Frankfurt prized (though it no doubt could in some circumstances), it will provide agents with a more attractive kind of freedom: the freedom to act in accord with the reasons that they take themselves to have. I say "more attractive" because plausibly, this kind of freedom is crucial for an agent's being morally responsible for her action in a way that her being wholehearted is not.<sup>35</sup> After all, being wholehearted with respect to some decision is neither necessary nor sufficient for being morally responsible for that decision. The man Frankfurt described as being torn between his love for a woman and his feelings of alienation from that love is not wholehearted, but he can still be responsible for how he acts on either his love for or his alienation from the woman (if, for example, his feelings of alienation lead him to be cruel to the woman, it seems that he is blameworthy for this). So too, if a wholehearted individual, like Agamemnon is at the time of his decision, has been fated in a way that renders him unresponsive to reasons, then it seems as if he is not morally responsible for his action. So while wholeheartedness seems irrelevant to the kind of freedom that's connected to morally responsible agency (which in my view, is the most important kind of agency), the freedom that comes from having a will that is responsive to reasons is deeply entwined with our status as responsible agents.<sup>36</sup>

However, the best reason to accept my claim that an agent's will is functioning properly insofar as it renders her suitably responsive to reasons was made clear in my earlier discussion of Agamemnon's decision to kill his daughter. In that case, recall that he has all things considered most reason to sacrifice Iphigenia. But not only that, he has weighty reasons to do so in a way that reflects the fact that she is his beloved daughter, that he values her as he ought, that it is the circumstances and not *him* that brings about her death. Unfortunately, as Aeschylus makes clear, although Agamemnon is responsive to the reasons for killing Iphigenia, he is not suitably responsive to those

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<sup>35</sup> One influential analysis of the freedom-relevant (or "control") condition on moral responsibility is John Martin Fischer's so-called "guidance control." For more, see John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers (1994); John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1998).

<sup>36</sup> Some readers might think that morally responsible agency is a rather low bar and so insufficient for agency "at its best." In my view, however, this simply betrays a problematic individualism that stalks contemporary work on agency. We are, in my alternative view, fundamentally social agents who "live and move and have our being" in our relationships with one another—relationships that (with few exceptions) presuppose our status as morally responsible agents. This suggests that being merely morally responsible is not a deficient form of agency but an expression of agency at its best for creatures like us.

reasons that make his particular way of carrying out the execution impermissible. But how can we make sense of this criticism if the work of the will is not to be appropriately responsive to reasons? It seems difficult. Even more so, it seems difficult to make sense of the Aeschylus's criticism of Agamemnon's behavior if we're still thinking that the will's function is to unify the agent. After all, that criticism is predicated on the fact that in the face of practical conflict, Agamemnon appears to have wholeheartedly endorsed the war effort. This suggests that the aim of unification or wholeheartedness is not one that is *necessarily* good: an agent's will might be properly functioning even if she is not wholehearted.

#### v. conclusion

In arguing that the function of the will is to respond to reasons, I have arrived at a relatively weak conclusion. The modal status of this conclusion makes this clear: it is simply that *it is possible* that an agent's will is properly functioning even if the agent is ambivalent. And of course, this leaves open that it is sometimes good or even *ideal* that agents are wholehearted in their actions. Moreover, it's possible that cases in which ambivalence is good are rare. If so, this would give unificationists something to hang their hats on: although ambivalence is not necessarily a defect in one's will, it is only appropriate in those rare cases of practical conflict in which an agent must favor one essential aspect of her practical identity over another.

Unfortunately, however, the difference between Agamemnon's dilemma and the dilemmas faced by ordinary people in ordinary circumstances is smaller than we typically recognize. Consider, for example, the academic considering whether to take a new position across the country and forego the potentially meaningful relationship with someone she's just getting to know; the professional athlete trying to decide between playing the sport with which he identifies and risking worse long-term health outcomes; the struggling musician faced with a payday that comes only at the expense of her artistic integrity. All of these individuals have reason to be ambivalent, since they are all faced with a choice that renders them torn between two motives that they identify with. And yet, none of them is faced with a choice that is utterly unfamiliar (the way Agamemnon's choice might seem utterly unfamiliar). In fact, it might be that almost any important or significant choice will be structured in this way.

What this means is that whenever agents have reason to be ambivalent, they find themselves in situations in which, rather than being an ideal to strive for, wholeheartedness would be characteristic of a defective will. If the professional athlete wholeheartedly decided to continue playing, it would

be a mistake—not because continuing to play is a mistake, but because his long-term health outcomes are something that should be factored into his decision even if they are ultimately outweighed. The same is true of the academic, the artist, and you or me when we're faced with similarly structured choices: e.g, do we work late into the night, or stay up to play with our kids? Success as a professional philosopher and success as a parent aren't obviously compatible, after all. It's hard to know what to do in such cases. Moreover, the process of determining what is to be done requires that we be torn (to varying degrees) between distinct ways of being an agent. But in this paper I'm not suggesting an answer to the question of how one *should* decide in such circumstances, only a condition on how one *shouldn't* decide: so don't worry, be ambivalent.

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