

A PLEA FOR AMBIVALENCE

By: MICHAEL J. ZIMMERMAN

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Article:

"I am morally superior to George Washington. He couldn't tell a lie. I can and don't." — Mark Twain¹

Mark Twain's sense of morality was almost as fine as his sense of humor. Certainly the above quotation captures, with the pith typical of Twain, an important insight. Someone who can commit a wrong but deliberately refrains from doing so warrants a sort of moral recognition that someone who is constitutionally unable to commit the wrong does not. (Twain's statement itself is heavily laced with irony. His point is that the apparently sanctimonious manner in which Washington confessed to chopping down the cherry tree served in fact only to disqualify him from the highest form of praise for not lying. Another source of the humor resides, no doubt, in the suspicion that Twain was not being wholly truthful about himself.)

Whether someone can in fact be constitutionally unable to tell a lie is a moot point. It is likely that Washington was exaggerating somewhat, but maybe it is literally true of some people that they cannot (bring themselves to) tell a lie. Perhaps, too, it was literally true that Martin Luther could "do no other," although, again, I suspect not. It is a question of psychological capacity, and in many cases I don't know what the answer to it is. Could a normally loving parent kill his child for no good reason - say, to earn twenty dollars? Nothing easier, you might claim. He need only wield a knife, just like when cutting into steak. But it isn't "just like," of course; he may have no physical disability, but perhaps the love that he feels psychologically incapacitates him so that he literally cannot perform such an act (a matter not simply of difficulty but of impossibility).

Whether or not psychological conditions can in this way render someone unable to do something, it is clear that they can render someone unable to feel something, and such an inability can have similar moral significance. Consider someone who knows no fear; such a person cannot of course conquer his fear, for he has none, and so he cannot earn praise for doing so. In general, someone who is not tempted cannot overcome temptation and thus cannot earn the pertinent praise. His inability disqualifies him.

But if he is not a candidate for such praise, is he not a candidate for praise nonetheless? Isn't someone who is fearless admirable in a way in which a fearful person is not? Isn't someone who cannot tell a lie admirable in a way in which someone who can is not? If not, the sort of perfection that some take to be essential to divine beings would merit no praise, and this seems mistaken. In this respect Twain seems to have gone too far. Why say that he is morally superior to Washington? Why not just say that he is morally different, in that both merit praise, but of different sorts or for different reasons? True, there is a necessary interconnectedness here, since the two different grounds for praise cannot coexist: if one merits praise for the same reason as Washington, then one cannot merit praise for the same reason as Twain; if one scores high on one scale, one must score low on the other.² This means that ambivalence toward Washington and Twain cannot be avoided, if one is to assess them adequately from the moral point of view.

Or so I contend. There are very many who, I am sure, would agree with me, and it may seem that I am pleading for the obvious. Yet there are also many who would apparently disagree. Twain himself seems to do so; while sensitive to his own particular virtue, he appears to be insensitive to Washington's.³ Kant, too, is well known for a similar apparent insensitivity. He claims that only action that is performed from a sense of duty manifests moral worth, that other motives that are commonly taken to be morally significant, such as sympathy, in fact

invest an action with no moral worth at all.⁴ Here Kant appears to be maintaining that there is only one moral virtue, that of conscientiousness, and that other traits that are often taken to be virtuous are in fact not so. This has struck many as unduly high-handed and narrowminded.⁵ Let us by all means acknowledge the virtuousness of conscientiousness; let us even accord it a special place among the virtues. We can still acknowledge the virtuousness of other traits. If we do, we will recognize that a person is in principle open to a variety of moral assessments and, again, he may score high on one scale and low on another, so that ambivalence is called for. But that, I would contend, simply reflects the complexity of morality; to deny the appropriateness of such ambivalence is to oversimplify morality.

If such oversimplification were rare, I would not now be trying to expose it. But it occurs frequently. Often the evidence is not wholly incontrovertible, but consider these recent examples.

Ronald Milo, 1984: "[T]he commonly recognized excuses reflect our conviction that it cannot be fair to blame someone for doing something if he could not help doing it. . . . But when a person fails to control his desires and emotions in circumstances where most people are able to exercise self-restraint, then his lack of self-control counts as a shortcoming that justifies blame."⁶ Here the suggestion seems to be that what frequently excuses may on occasion not excuse. The idea that there may be both excuse (for one thing — the uncontrollable action) and blame (for another thing — the shortcoming) is not entertained.

Robert Adams, 1985: "[Alan] Donagan . . . concludes, 'A graduate of Sandhurst or West Point who does not understand his duty to noncombatants as human beings is certainly culpable for his ignorance; an officer bred up from childhood in the Hitler Jugend might not be.' I disagree with Donagan's conclusion. The beliefs ascribed to the graduate of the Hitler Jugend are heinous, and it is morally reprehensible to hold them. . . . No matter how he came by them, his evil beliefs are a part of who he is, morally, and make him a fitting object of reproach."⁷ Here Adams doesn't think of holding dual attitudes toward the Nazi, a refusal to condemn in one way but a readiness to reproach in another.

Judith Thomson, 1989: "[A person] is to blame [that is, has no adequate excuse] for doing such and such . . . if and only if [his] doing the such and such gives some reason to think [him] a bad person. . . . Here is Edward, who [uncontrollably] tortured a baby to death for fun; it cannot be thought that he had an adequate excuse [grounded in lack of control] for doing that, since his having done it does give us reason, excellent reason, to think him a bad person."⁸ Here Thomson explicitly disavows the sort of ambivalence I am advocating. Prior to this passage she entertains but rejects the possibility that judgements of blame or excuse (of some sort) should be independent of judgments as to whether a person is bad (in some other way).

Many other illustrations could be given of instances where philosophers appear to have been insufficiently sensitive to the complexity of morality, to have insisted on a single evaluative judgment where several judgments seem to be called for. At this point, though, I need to be more precise about just what this complexity consists in. We can start with distinctions. First, we can distinguish between what is evaluated: a person, a person's character, a trait, a motive, an action (this list isn't meant to be exhaustive). Then we can distinguish between modes of evaluation. Here we meet with a wealth of available terminology. On the positive side: "good," "right," "praiseworthy," "laudable," "virtuous," "admirable," "commendable," and so on; on the negative side: "bad," "wrong," "blameworthy," "culpable," "vicious," "reprehensible," "reproachable," and so on. At the extreme, we could apply each of these epithets to each of the listed objects of evaluation and claim that in each case we get a distinct judgment. For example, the judgment that a person is praiseworthy would be distinct from the judgment that his act is praiseworthy, which itself would be distinct from the judgment that his act is right, and this would be distinct from the judgment that his motive is admirable, and so on. Further complexity would be introduced by allowing for the possibility that a certain object of evaluation (an act, say) merits a certain epithet ("right," say) in one respect or for one reason but doesn't merit this epithet or merits its contrary (here, "wrong") in another respect or for another reason. It will be appreciated that, by employing such distinctions, one can in principle form a myriad moral judgments. Moreover, when, on one and the same

occasion, these judgments conflict, in the sense that some of the epithets belong to the positive (or negative) list while others do not, then one will have attained ambivalence.

Now, I don't wish to plead for such extremism, to maintain that we must accept the distinctness of all such judgments. It may well be that, in certain cases, despite the superficial difference in object evaluated or in epithet used to express mode of evaluation, there is in reality only one judgment rather than two. For example, is there really a distinction to be drawn between the judgment that a person is praiseworthy for an action and the judgment (to use Kant's terminology) that that person's action has moral worth? I don't mean to settle this issue here. Its resolution would require a full-fledged, systematic moral theory, one which provides criteria for the application of each epithet to each object. That is a monumental undertaking. I have tried my hand at a small part of it elsewhere; I have argued for the claim that ambivalence is appropriate in cases like that of the graduate of the Hitler Jugend and have tried to rebut certain arguments to the contrary.⁹ I don't intend to repeat myself here but wish merely to note the following. While simplicity in a theory is attractive, oversimplification (of the sort that I am alleging in the cases of Twain, Kant, and the others) is to be avoided. And so the question is, when is a simplifier an oversimplifier? It is at this point that argumentation is required. Even in the absence of such argument, though, it is surely reasonable to urge caution and to suspect distinctness in judgments unless good reason is provided for denying it. If so, the burden of proof will rest on those who resist ambivalence rather than on those who embrace it.

Why is it, then, that this stance is so frequently ignored (even if, as I have acknowledged, it is also frequently adopted)? My guess is that those who resist ambivalence concerning a certain matter often do so because they regard such an attitude as paradoxical, as one that cannot be coherently maintained, as one that requires dissolution. But if this is their view, it is utterly mistaken. We are, or should be, familiar from childhood on with the occasional appropriateness of ambivalence, whether having to do with moral matters or with others. If I am having a good time on vacation but also miss home, then both when on vacation and when I return home I will be liable to mixed feelings. Nothing more natural — or appropriate. If I disavow one or the other feeling, then I will be acting inappropriately. It would admittedly be inconsistent of me if my mixed feelings concerned one and the same aspect of the object of my feelings, or if they rested on one and the same ground, but that is not the case in the present example. I enjoy the vacation because of where I am; I feel sad because I am away from home. Any hint of paradox in this ambivalence surely vanishes when it is made clear that the ambivalence has a multiplicity of sources and objects.

While dissolution of such ambivalence is, therefore, not to be insisted on, it may yet be that a certain sort of resolution of it can be achieved. The appropriateness of conflicting judgments does not in and of itself preclude the appropriateness of some single, more comprehensive judgment. It may be that, on the whole, I am sad to be going home; I would prefer to stay on vacation. This seems perfectly intelligible, and it doesn't require that I inappropriately suppress the fact that I miss home. There is a straightforward moral analogue that W. D. Ross has given us. An act may be both *prima facie* right and *prima facie* wrong. These conflicting *prima facie* values render ambivalence toward the act appropriate. Nonetheless, if its *prima facie* wrongness outweighs its *prima facie* rightness, then it will be overall wrong, and the comprehensive judgment that it is overall wrong does not itself involve any ambivalence. The accuracy of this higher-order judgment does not, however, in any way invalidate the lower-order ambivalence. While there is a sense in which this ambivalence is resolved by the higher-order judgment, it is not dissolved by it.

Here is another case. Suppose that someone acts negligently but means well — he desperately pulls someone free from an accident when he should have realized that this would result in paralysis. How should we judge this person? The negligence requires a negative judgment, the benevolence a positive judgment. Even if we also judge that, on balance, the person is to be criticized, we must not lose sight of the appropriateness of ambivalence on another level.

With this in mind, consider this remark by Richard Brandt: "There are some things no decent person will believe to be right . . . , and if we must defend our act by saying we believed what no decent person would

believe, we may have condemned ourselves more than excused ourselves." ¹⁰ Read in one way, this seems quite right: if we believe what no decent person would believe, we are to be criticized (in one respect); if we truthfully say that we acted conscientiously, we are to be commended or, at least, not criticized (in some other respect); and the former judgment may be weightier than the latter. But if this passage is meant to suggest that somehow the partial, positive judgment (concerning an excuse) must be repudiated in face of the partial (and, because weightier, also overall) negative judgment (concerning condemnation), then Brandt is surely mistaken; for the positive judgment still stands.

Sometimes, of course, the intelligibility of an overall judgment is uncertain. In such cases, ambivalence may seem to preclude not just dissolution but also resolution. In the case of a judgment of the overall rightness or wrongness of an act, such a judgment is normally regarded as perfectly intelligible (except possibly in certain cases of moral dilemma). But what about Brandt's case? Is there a sense in which the person is more to be condemned than excused? Here I am dubious. ¹¹ This may be an area in which no overall judgment is possible because the various partial judgments concern matters that are strictly incomparable. But it is easy to overestimate the likelihood of strict incomparability. We may well agree with Isaiah Berlin, for example, that conflicts between such values as liberty and equality are, as Bernard Williams puts it, "ineliminable and not resolvable without remainder," ¹² but are they strictly incomparable? Williams himself doesn't think so. A trivial gain in equality is not worth an enormous sacrifice of liberty, he says ¹³, and this seems very sensible. If Williams is right, an overall judgment as to whether to promote liberty or equality is, in such cases, in principle attainable. Of course, there can be cases where it is not determinable which value is to be promoted, and it may be (as some have urged ¹⁴) that this is due not to ignorance on our part but to the so-called limited incomparability of these values. But in such a case, I would claim, if it is admitted that the values are themselves strictly comparable (that is, that there are other cases where it is clear that they can be compared and that one or the other value predominates), then in these cases where no decision can be reached as to which is to be promoted, we should not infer that an overall judgment with respect to them cannot be made; rather, we should infer that there is an overall judgment to be made here, namely, that the values counterbalance one another. They can be weighed against one another, and in these cases the overall judgment is that the scale is evenly balanced. ¹⁵ Still, in other cases, such as Brandt's, it may be correct to conclude that no comparison is possible and that therefore no overall judgment can be reached. Certainly I find such a position appealing when faced, say, with the question as to who is more virtuous, Twain or Washington. Is Twain morally superior to Washington? Not in my view. Nor is he inferior. Nor are they evenly balanced. They're just different, each virtuous in his own way and therefore, of necessity, not virtuous in the other's. ¹⁶

Footnotes

1. As quoted by Peter van Inwagen in *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 63-4.

2. Cf. Michael Slote on the "intrinsic connectedness" involved in what he calls admirable immorality in *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), Ch. 4. Consider also the following exchange between Calvin and Hobbes (in the cartoon by the same name, created by Watterson) that appeared in the Sunday papers on December 20, 1992:

Calvin (speaking to Hobbes while making a snowball): I wish Santa would publish the guidelines he uses for determining a kid's goodness. For example, how much does he weigh motives? Does he consider the kid's natural predisposition? I mean, if some sickeningly wholesome nerd likes being good, it's easy for him to meet the standards! There's no challenge! Heck, anyone can be good if he wants to be! The true test of one's mettle is being good when one has an innate inclination towards evil. I think one good act by me, even if it's just to get presents, should count as five good acts by some sweet-tempered kid motivated by the pureness of his heart, don't you?

(At this point, Calvin sees Susie walking by, hurls the snowball at her, and hits her smack on the head.) Hobbes: Of course, in your case, the question is academic.

Calvin: I wanted to put a rock in the snowball, but I didn't! That should be worth a lot!

3. Contrast the sensitivity of Thomas Reid, as reported by Roderick Chisholm in "Human Freedom and the Self" (in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982)), p. 26: "[An ancient] author had said of Cato, 'He was good because he could not be otherwise', and Reid observes: 'This

saying, if understood literally and strictly, is not the praise of Cato, but of his constitution, which is no more the work of Cato than his existence'." Although he denies that Cato himself is to be praised, Reid does allow that there is occasion for praise nonetheless. Susan Wolf, on the other hand, would praise Cato himself, See her *Freedom Within Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 61.

4. *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Ak. 398.
5. Cf. Richard Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1959), pp. 4701: "It might . . . be held . . . that behaviour is never reprehensible (or admirable) 'in the specifically moral sense, except as it manifests defect (or perfection) of conscientiousness. However, to hold this is a mistake ... [A] conscientious man may be blind to the problems of others; he may be insensitive and mistaken on some moral principles .. . [This] is reprehensible in the 'specifically moral sense., " Cf. also Thomas Nagel in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 32-3.
6. Ronald Milo, *Immorality* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 222-3.
7. "Involuntary Sins" (*Philosophical Review* 94 (1985), 3-31), p. 19.
8. "Morality and Bad Luck" (*Metaphilosophy* 20 (1989), 203-221), p. 219.
9. *An Essay on Moral Responsibility* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988), Ch. 4, Sect. 9. There I focus on Adams. I would attempt to handle in similar fashion Wolf's more recent argument, op. cit., p. 61.
10. Op. cit., p. 473.
11. Similarly, on p. 164 of *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993; second edition), James Rachels says that, although courage is admirable, courage deployed in an evil cause is "on the whole wicked." While the acknowledgment of ambivalence is welcome, and while I have some sympathy with the overall negative judgment rendered, nonetheless the claim that the ambivalence is indeed resolvable by way of such an overall judgment strikes me as problematic.
12. *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 72.
13. Ibid. p. 77.
14. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Dilemma* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 66-8.
15. There is still the difficult question as to how one can remove something from one side of the scale — a little liberty, say — and still have the values be evenly balanced. What I think this does is point up the limited usefulness of the weighing metaphor; it does not impugn the accuracy of the overall judgement in question.
16. Whether or not this claim is opposed to the thesis of the unity of the virtues depends on two things: how "virtue" is to be understood, and just what the unity in question is supposed to be. Given my fairly liberal use of "virtue" in this paper, if the unity in question were supposed to reside in the impossibility of possessing one virtue without possessing all virtues, it is clear that my account of Twain and Washington would be inconsistent with the unity thesis so understood. (Indeed, it would even be inconsistent with the much weaker thesis that it is possible to possess all virtues at once.) But if "virtue" were construed more restrictively (so that, for example, one could not have a virtue "in excess" — see pp. 58-9 of Gary Watson, "Virtues in Excess," *Philosophical Studies* 46 (1984), 57-74), then it is not clear that my claim would be opposed to the thesis. I am grateful to Terry McConnell for urging me to address this issue.