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DIVIDED WE STAND
(MISSING ME, MISSING YOU)

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If I should ever be pressed to explain what a philosopher is, I would probably take Pieter as an exemplar. So that, rather than giving some definition, I would just (if I could) point at him and say: 'Now, *there* is a philosopher!' For what is essential, I believe, is a certain attitude, a 'love' or 'affection' for knowledge and wisdom. A philosopher should thirst for knowledge, crave it, seek its company, be devoted to it, absorb it, render it his own, and pass it on. I am not a close friend of Pieter, just a fairly recent colleague. But that he has this peculiar 'passion' and quality – this I know for sure.

Given Pieter's broad taste and appetite for knowledge, it is only natural that we share some common figures of interests, most notably, Harry Frankfurt and Theodore Dalrymple. This last figure, however, has lost my interest. So much so, that I consider it a waste of paper even to criticize him. No doubt, Pieter would disagree, for his love for knowledge cloaks all thinkers with equal compassion. Unfortunately, my love sometimes runs out.

Let us therefore stick to Frankfurt. I would like to take this opportunity to comment upon one of the most essential and intriguing phenomena in moral psychology that he has described: the condition of ambivalence. I would even say that those who are able to give an adequate account of what ambivalence amounts to and how we, as individuals, can cope and overcome deep ambivalence would come close to solving the problem of selfhood and identity. Or so I hope to *suggest* in this short contribution, a contribution that is short enough so that I don't need to substantiate this provocative claim...

Ambivalence as excess – So, what is ambivalence according to Frankfurt? That seems easy. Here are some relevant passages:

'People are sometimes ambivalent. That is, they are sometimes in part opposed to a motivational tendency with which they are also in part identified. [...] An ambivalent person is simultaneously on both sides of the struggle within himself. His will itself is divided [...]' (Frankfurt, 1999: 138).

'Now I want to consider a somewhat different, but still analogous, type of psychic instability or conflict. I shall call it "ambivalence". Here what is divided is neither a person's reason nor his affects, but his will. Insofar as someone is ambivalent, he is moved by incompatible preferences or attitudes regarding his affects or his desires or regarding other elements of his psychic life. This volitional division keeps him from settling upon or from tolerating any coherent affective or motivational identity. It means that he does not know what he really wants' (Frankfurt, 1999: 98-99).

'It has to do with the possibility that there is no unequivocal answer to the question of what the person really wants, even though his desires so form a complex and extensive hierarchical structure. There might be no unequivocal answer, because the person is *ambivalent* with respect to objects he comes closest to really wanting: In other words, because, with respect to that object, he is drawn not only toward it but away from it too' (Frankfurt, 1988: 165).

Ambivalence is a state of not knowing what to love or care about, but this is so *because* one loves (or cares about) something and doesn't love (or

care about) the *very same thing at the very same time*. This poses a fundamental problem for agency. Love or care, on Frankfurt's account, provides the necessary ground for orientation, for genuine action. One is active to the extent that one can guide or control one's 'actions' in conformity with what one cares about. If one 'acts' on a desire that doesn't correspond, or isn't in line, with what one most fundamentally cares about, one is rendered a *passive* bystander. Therefore, if there is uncertainty about what you love or care about, the precondition for agency crumbles. What we lose under ambivalence is a standpoint, and therefore genuine conflict becomes impossible. With first-order desires pulling us in different directions, we no longer know which one of these should win, and when, conversely, we would lose. In fact, due to over-identification, each victory would be a loss (Frankfurt, 1999: 138).

Now, Frankfurt defines ambivalence in contrast to wholeheartedness. This image, however, suggests that ambivalence is about half-heartedness, but that is a misleading picture. Ambivalence, as I see it, is the result of an excess of heart. This makes sense, given that on Frankfurt's own view, one can make oneself whole again by *giving up* on a certain part. There is too much 'self' in case of ambivalence. We suffer from over-identification, an abundance of 'who we are'. So much so, that we get in our own way.

Examples of ambivalence – When ambivalent, we simultaneously love and do not love a particular object: we care about it and yet we don't. This is hard to understand. In fact, it is impossible, for to love something *is* to love it. Not loving it, therefore, seems to require a different ground or source. Since, according to Frankfurt, reasons are the result of caring about something, ambivalence requires a *second* object of love or care. For instance, when we love a person, our ambivalence with regard to this love would have to come from another, *different*, object of care (e.g. our health or freedom). Frankfurt, however, distinguishes two cases, a wavering ambivalence toward one object, and a conflict between cares (Frankfurt, 1988: 165). Yet, he cannot account for the first without it being an instance of the other. This is so because one's 'reserve' or 'hesitation' that moves one to not-loving a certain object is not a matter of mere psychic, raw repulsion, but something one is identified with. This requires that it is rooted in care or love.

Now, on many occasions, we have a conflict of interests or desires. We want to go to a birthday party and we want to stay at home and read a book. In fact, it is because we want to finish the book that we don't want to go to the party, and it's because we want to go to the party that we don't want to stay at home. This is different from the conflicts between first-order desires that Frankfurt described in his famous piece on 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person'. The unwilling addict both wants to smoke and wants to quit, but he does not identify with both, whereas in the birthday party/book case we do. So is that a good example of ambivalence?

It seems not. Frankfurt denies the label of 'ambivalence' to *contingent* conflicts (Frankfurt, 1999: 99) and in the party/book scenario there is a contingent conflict between two competing desires. Therefore, we should settle on what we like to do now, with the possibility of satisfying the other desire later.¹ In fact, in this particular case, the fact that I could finish the book at any other time could prompt me to go to the birthday party, which, after all, only takes place once a year. Sometimes, however, there is no real chance of 'making up' and 'taking rain cheques': pursuing a career or 'choosing' a partner may be something that *precludes* alternative options. If we do not seize on the opportunity now, it may be too late. Yet, even in such cases we should say that the conflict is contingent (it need not arise) and that the wholehearted love for object A does not preclude the wholehearted love for B. You may be perfectly 'in love' with one career but regret that it conflicts with your, again perfect, love for another. Overcoming such unfortunate conflicts is and should be a matter of prioritizing.² It is about figuring out what one loves or cares about most.

But there is a different type of ambivalence that seems to refute such a solution. Frankfurt mentions the predicament of Agamemnon being torn between the love for his daughter and his country (Frankfurt, 1999: 139). Of course, there is contingency here as well: it is a set of some very peculiar and particular circumstances that accounts for Agamemnon's dilemma. Normally (and logically), these objects of affection do not conflict. So, the non-contingency should be cashed out differently. Here is a hint at what it could amount to: *his wholehearted love for his daughter*

precludes his wholehearted love for his country. Loving his daughter makes it impossible for him to wholeheartedly love his country (and vice versa). My choosing to go to the birthday party does not detract from my wholehearted love for reading books, whereas Agamemnon's wholehearted commitment to his country would *contradict* a similar commitment to his daughter.

If we imagine what such a conflict would look like from the inside, we understand that Agamemnon is truly stuck. His problem is precisely that he *cannot prioritize*. Why not? Frankfurt's conceptual toolbox offers a neat explanation for this: Agamemnon experiences 'volitional necessity'³ on both sides of the conflict. To give up his daughter is simply unthinkable. And the same goes for letting down his country. He has reached the boundaries, the contours of his will, of his (conative) identity. Agamemnon, as a father and as a statesman, cannot go on. In Frankfurt's dramatic terms, his story ends here: there *is* no sequel.

However, even more puzzling than the fact that there *is* a clear sequel to the Agamemnon story (the one in which he gets murdered by his wife Clytemnestra), is the vexing question of how it is indeed *possible* for Agamemnon to break free from the deadlock of deep ambivalence. Frankfurt, in my view, just offers us a picture of what this 'solution' should look like, rejecting one object of care and wholeheartedly embracing the other, but he does not tell us *how* Agamemnon could ever 'get' to that point. Volitional necessity makes it impossible for a person to transgress the contours of her 'self': there are certain things that she cannot bring herself to do. Since ambivalence occurs at the level of care or love, and given the fact that care or love is the ground for agency, an agential stalemate is unavoidable. What reason could Agamemnon ever have to decide in favour of his country when his love for his daughter is absolute, i.e. yields volitional necessity and *absolute* reasons to the contrary? We can only make sense of it by stipulating that his love, apparently, wasn't that strong, and that 'necessity' left room for negotiation. For Agamemnon, the unthinkable proved to be thinkable, after all. Yet, what is missing from Frankfurt's account is an analysis of how such a transition – from ambivalent to wholehearted – could come about.⁴ Even more seriously: we can only make sense of what it means to overcome ambivalence, by denying that it was a

genuine case of (deep) ambivalence in the first place. (The only good example of deep ambivalence would be Sophie Zawistowska facing 'Sophie's Choice' where it is clear that she is forced to make a decision and that this decision means the end of her. She does not overcome or solve her ambivalence; she is torn apart by it.)

Ambivalence as a disease of the will – Some have maintained that Frankfurt exaggerates in calling ambivalence a 'disease of the will' (Frankfurt 1999: 100). Surely, ambivalence is part-and-parcel of everyday life and, secondly, being ambivalent from time to time is considered especially healthy. Now, Frankfurt fully acknowledges that a state of ambivalence is quite common (Frankfurt, 1999: 107), but he remains firm on the idea that it is a 'disease'.

David Velleman famously takes the example of the Rat Man to show that the latter's 'wholeheartedness' – identifying exclusively with his love (and not his hatred) for his father – is typically *unhealthy*, resulting in neurotic behaviour (Velleman, 2002: 101-4). The way towards a healthy psychological make-up is to let these ambivalent feelings and attitudes 'mingle with' each other and to recognize oneself *as* ambivalent on these matters (Velleman, 2002: 103). Susan Wolf, for her part, considers herself ambivalent about ambivalence (Wolf, 2002: 239). For her, autonomy has to do with an orientation toward the True and the Good, so that, should the Good be divided over two objects that are *worth* caring about, this should be reflected by ambivalence in the subject's mind (i.e., against the monomaniac's rigid concern for psychic purity).

With regard to Velleman, Frankfurt himself offers a knock-down refutation of the Rat Man example. For sure, Frankfurt says, the Rat Man's wholeheartedness is pathological, but this is due to his *repression*, not his wholeheartedness. In fact, his predicament makes clear that he suffers from ambivalence, where one side of the conflict is repressed. Moreover, Frankfurt agrees that the Rat Man should come to terms with this ambivalence but not by means of an easy 'mingling' of conflicting feelings and attitudes (by opening up the floodgates of our subconscious and let the hate be watered down by love...). The Rat Man, for his part, should figure out on what part of the conflict he stands. There is no such thing as

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‘accepting one’s ambivalence’ for that would be akin to accepting contradictory beliefs: it is impossible. Ambivalence, at most, is a starting point: it presents us with a problem that *needs to be solved*.⁵

With regard to Wolf, the reply is that ambivalence – in and of itself – is not healthy, but a disease. The idea that we should sometimes be ambivalent is a *moral* ‘should’, and this does not invalidate the *normative* ‘should’ that Frankfurt deems far more essential. We, from a first-personal perspective should strive for wholeheartedness, for it is better *for us* – *ceteris paribus* – to avoid ambivalence. Indeed, the result is that we could be wholehearted immoral beings, but this does not tell against the validity of Frankfurt’s moral psychology. In fact, it has the clear advantage of us being able to hold such wholehearted ‘moral pigs’ deeply responsible for their actions.

Both Velleman’s and Wolf’s attempts fail to the extent that there is no easy way of maintaining that we should ‘accept’ or ‘embrace’ our ambivalence. It haunts us.

Troublesome selves – So we are faced with a problem. How could we ever overcome deep ambivalence? How, could we do that? And what is left of us when we ‘succeed’? On the one hand, we could take the fact that people overcome instances of deep ambivalence at face value (thereby denying that ambivalence is essentially something that cannot be overcome) and suggest that there is a ‘self’ *over and above* this conflict in terms of essential cares. It is this self that ultimately strikes a balance or cuts the Gordian knot. It is this self that is unifying across all potential conflicts and that pulls together whatever pulls us apart. But who is this self? Is it our fundamental commitment to the laws and principles of practical reason (Korsgaard, 2009)? But how could the Categorical Imperative ever help and unite Sophie in her dreadful decision?⁶ Is it the storyteller inside that, through weaving an autobiographical narrative, brings coherence and continuity in an otherwise fractured and dispersed hodgepodge of scenes (Schechtman, 1996)? Although this might be possible in retrospect (e.g. Agamemnon making sense of who he is *post factum*), it is deeply mysterious how and on what grounds the story should or could continue for the protagonist steeped in deep ambivalence. Deep ambivalence, in this regard, seems the proverbial equivalent of writer’s block.

On the other hand, we should just emphasize that we *are* the conflict, that in Frankfurt’s neo-Freudian terms the ‘self’ is not one faculty, but something that arises at the intersection of conflicting claims and complexes. Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder may be right in saying:

‘We agents are not our judgments, we are not our ideals for ourselves, we are not our values, we are not our univocal wishes; we are complex, divided, imperfectly rational creatures, and when we act, it is as complex, divided, imperfectly rational creatures that we do so. We are fragmented, perhaps, but we are not some one fragment. We are whole’ (Arpaly and Schroeder, 1999: 184-5).

Split between what we are (our psychic ‘raw material’), who we are (the way we conceive of ourselves), and who we want to be (a projected self-image), we somehow stand divided. I like this image. But, admittedly, I like it because its claim to complexity and messiness seems to suggest that there’s no need for any clear answers. Hiding behind complexity, however, strikes me as a cowardly evasion. If this *is* the self, then what does it *do*? Is it the supervening froth on stormy waves? What determines its dynamics? How is autonomy possible? The picture elucidates as much as it obscures.

Concluding note – Ambivalence tests the self under extreme conditions by pushing it towards its breaking point. This is an interesting experiment because it should allow us to pinpoint the piece, part, glue or tie that is supposed to hold it together. But so far, all I have seen is either an intact self or its shattered remains. Somehow, I always seem to miss the relevant transition and that’s a shame because, that way, I always miss my ‘self’. And I miss yours too.

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¹ Frankfurt mentions a choice between going to a concert and helping a friend. He then says that it could be the case that you really care about going to the concert and yet assign far greater importance to helping your friend (Frankfurt, 1999: 160-1).

² '[Wholeheartedness] is compatible with his also being wholehearted with respect to other psychic elements, which contingently (i.e., due to particular circumstances) conflict with these and are more important to him. [...] Being wholehearted with respect to one element is consistent with assigning a higher priority to another' (Frankfurt, 1999: 103).

³ '[Volitional necessities] limit the possibilities that are open to his will, that is, they determine what he cannot will and what he cannot help willing. Now the character of a person's will constitutes what he most centrally is. Accordingly, the volitional necessities that bind a person identify what he cannot help being. [...] The boundaries of his will define his shape as a person.' (Frankfurt, 1999: 114).

⁴ Interestingly, Robert Kane describes this transition from a third-person perspective, focusing on the neurological processes *underlying* the phenomenological stand-off. On his account, the outcome of these conflicting processes is undetermined (or underdetermined), thereby agreeing that, for a first-person standpoint, there is no reason why one option should prevail over the other. Only when the outcome is reached, we can say that this decision is not alien to the person because she was identified with both options.

⁵ 'Is it possible to be satisfied with ambivalence? A person may certainly come to accept the fact that he is ambivalent as unalterable. It seems to me, however, that it is not a fact

with which he can possibly be satisfied. No one can be wholeheartedly ambivalent, any more that someone can desire unequivocally to betray himself or to be irrational. [...] It is a necessary truth about us, then, that we wholeheartedly desire to be wholehearted' (Frankfurt, 1999: 106).

⁶ Sartre mentions precisely this futility of the Categorical Imperative in solving the student's dilemma between caring for his mother or fighting with the Free French (Sartre, 2007: 31).