

## Fitting Inconsistency and Reasonable Irresolution

Simon D. Feldman and Allan Hazlett

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The badness of having conflicting emotions is a familiar theme in academic ethics, clinical psychology, and commercial self-help, where emotional harmony is often put forward as an ideal. Many philosophers give emotional harmony pride of place in their theories of practical reason.<sup>1</sup> Here we offer a defense of a particular species of emotional conflict, namely, ambivalence. We articulate an conception of ambivalence, on which ambivalence is unresolved inconsistent desire (§1) and present a case of appropriate ambivalence (§2), before considering two alternative defenses of emotional conflict (§3). We then argue that inconsistent desires can be fitting (§4) and that it can be reasonable not to resolve inconsistent desires (§5), before considering an objection (§6) and concluding the discussion (§7).

### 1 Ambivalence as unresolved inconsistent desire

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following definition of “ambivalence”: “The coexistence in one person of contradictory emotions or attitudes (as love and hatred) towards a person or thing.” So we might begin with the following definition: S is ambivalent about p if and only if S both desires that p and desires that not-p. On this definition, ambivalence is inconsistent desire.<sup>2</sup>

We assume for the sake of simplicity that all desire is propositional. Desiring to  $\phi$  is understood as desiring *de se* that you  $\phi$ , where the object of a *de se* desire is a centered proposition, centered on the desirer. Desiring some object  $x$  – a cupcake, a job, world peace – is propositional, because in each case there is a contextually-determined property  $F$  that you want  $x$  to have, such that your desire is more perspicuously rendered as the desire that  $x$  is  $F$ . In some cases, saying that someone desires  $x$  is ambiguous, because context does not make clear what the relevant property is – someone may want a bottle of wine in that they crave a drink, or they may want a bottle of wine in that they seek an addition to their wine collection, or they may want a bottle of wine in that they need something with which to brain an adversary.

Ambivalence, on our conception is not merely inconsistent desire. Consider a recovering drug addict who desires not to take drugs, and who judges that it would be best not to take drugs, but who still desires to take drugs, on account of their addiction. Although they have contradictory desires, and in that respect have conflicting emotions, the recovering drug addict is wholeheartedly on one side of the conflict: in judging that it would be best not to take drugs, they have come down in favor of their desire not to take drugs and against their desire to take drugs.

For a case of ambivalence, imagine that you are confronted with a terribly delicious but terribly unhealthy cream-filled éclair. You both want to eat the éclair (because it will be delicious) and want not to eat the éclair (because it will be unhealthy) – you have inconsistent desires. But not only do you have inconsistent desires: you also cannot make up your mind about what would be best, eating the éclair or not eating the éclair. You are neither wholeheartedly in favor of eating the éclair (as you

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<sup>1</sup> See Velleman 2005, Zagzebski 2012, but especially Frankfurt 1988, 1998, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Below, we will use “desire” and “want,” “desiring” and “wanting,” etc., interchangeably.

would be if it were not at all unhealthy) nor wholeheartedly against eating the éclair (as you would be if the éclair were poisoned). We have various more or less metaphorical ways of explaining your situation: we might say that you are “of two minds” about whether to eat the éclair or that “part of you” wants to eat it and “part of you” doesn’t.<sup>3</sup> You may vacillate between moments of relative single-mindedness – imagine that there are always éclairs in the breakroom; you might spend part of the drive to work planning to eat the éclair and other parts of the drive to work planning not to eat it – or you may find yourself in a state of more or less constant internal conflict – the éclair presents itself always as both to be eaten and not to be eaten.

This suggests the following account of ambivalence:

S is ambivalent about whether p if and only if (i) S both desires that p and desires that not-p and (ii) S neither judges that it would be better were it the case that p nor that it would be better were it the case that not-p.

To put this another way, ambivalence is unresolved inconsistent desire – where *resolving* a pair of inconsistent desires, i.e. desires that p and that not-p, requires judging either that it would be better were it the case that p or that it would be better were it the case that not-p.

Note that action is insufficient for resolution. You often must make up your mind without a judgment about what is better. In the case of the delicious but unhealthy éclair, you might end up flipping a coin or choosing capriciously at the last second, without ever coming to a conclusion about whether it would be better to eat the éclair. Our account entails, then, that ambivalence is compatible with action. But this as it should be: in the case just described, in which you come to no conclusion about whether it would be better to eat the éclair, you remain ambivalent about eating the éclair, even after you have chosen to eat it or not to eat it.

Note as well that the present conception of ambivalence clashes with ordinary language. We sometimes say that we are “ambivalent” to indicate that we just do not care either way – indicating not a surplus of desire, but a deficit. But that is not what is going on in the case of the éclair. So this is not the present sense of “ambivalence.”

## 2 A case of appropriate ambivalence

Suppose you are thinking about whether to have a child – in the sense of “having a child” on which this entails creating a child<sup>4</sup> – but you are ambivalent about whether to do so.

On the one hand, you want to raise a child. You want to experience the joys and pains of parenting. Or you want to nurture and care for someone from the very beginning of their life. Or you want to have a family – you want to play games and go on walks and eat dinner together. Or you are curious about having a child – you really want to know what your child will be like, what living with them will be like, what they will say and think and do. Or you are committed to a religious or moral rule that prescribes procreation. Or you are “baby crazy” and just want to experience the cuteness of your own baby and do lots of snuggling and tickling. Or you have cultural or religious or intellectual

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Frankfurt 2004, p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, in a broader sense of “having a child,” there are ways to have a child that do not entail creating a child, e.g. adoption. We focus on the case of thinking about whether to create a child because some of the specifically moral reasons for ambivalence seem particularly salient in that situation.

traditions that you would like to pass on to another generation of your family tree. Or, more realistically, it is some combination of these reasons and other reasons of these kinds.

On the other hand, you do not want to have a child. You want to go out to dinner, to go on freewheeling vacations, to sleep through the night, and not ever to be shit upon by a baby. Or you worry that raising a child will get in the way of your other interpersonal relationships. Or you think that having a child is immoral because of all the carbon emissions they generate. Or you worry about how your child might not have a happy life; you know that they might be miserable, or killed in a school shooting, or roasted alive by climate change, or bullied and maligned on account of their gender identity, sexual orientation, race, religion, immigration status, whatever. Or, more realistically, it is some combination of these reasons and other reasons of these kinds.

Moreover, you cannot make up your mind about whether it would be better to have a child or not to have a child – you neither judge that it would be better to have a child nor judge that it would be better not to have a child. You are neither wholeheartedly in favor of having a child nor wholeheartedly in favor of not having a child. You are, according to our account (§1), ambivalent about whether to have a child.

However, your ambivalence, in this case, seems entirely appropriate. It makes perfect sense to be ambivalent about whether to have a child for these kinds of reasons and, as your therapist will tell you, it is completely normal to be ambivalent in this situation. Your ambivalence seems like an apt response to the question you are confronting. Your reasons for wanting to have a child are good reasons – those are genuine considerations that speak in favor of having a child. And your reasons for wanting not to have a child are good reasons – those are also genuine considerations that speak in favor of not having a child. But neither of those competing sets of reasons is decisive – neither establishes that it would be best either to have a child or not to have a child. Your ambivalence manifests your sensitivity to the landscape of reasons and values that bear on the question of whether to have a child – the ways in which having a child would be good and the ways in which not having a child would be good. Or so we shall argue here.

### **3 Alternative accounts**

We'll first consider two alternative defenses of emotional conflict, articulated by Frank Jackson (§3.1) and Pamela Greenspan (§3.2).

#### **3.1 Jackson's argument**

Jackson (1985) argues that in some cases of apparent internal conflict between desires (i.e. inconsistent desires) the conflict is merely apparent (i.e. the desires are not really inconsistent). In his central case, you are considering whether to drink some wine with dinner, which is an attractive prospect, when you realize that you will not be able to mark a set of exercises after dinner if you drink the wine, and so decide to go without the wine (p. 106). This looks like a case in which you want both to drink the wine and to mark the exercises. However, Jackson argues that you do not really want to drink the wine (pp. 106-7). He explains this using what he calls the "feature theory of internal conflict." (pp. 110-3; cf. Pettit 1991), on which we are to draw a distinction between wanting a particular kind of state of affairs to obtain and wanting a particular state of affairs to be of a particular kind (p. 111). In the former case, the object of your desire is a *state of affairs* (i.e. that said state of affairs obtain); in the latter case, the object of your desire is a *feature* of the relevant state of affairs (i.e. that said state of affairs have that feature) (p. 110). In the case of the wine and the exercises, your

two desires are, first, a desire that the state of affairs in which you mark the exercises obtain and, second, a desire that the state of affairs in which you drink the wine be one in which you drink the wine.

For this to make sense, we need to reduce desires to preferences or rankings. Here is Jackson:

Let  $S_L$ ,  $S_W$  be the states of affairs that would obtain if I were to choose, respectively, to mark the logic exercises or to have the wine. Then my preference for the marking derives from the fact that I rank  $S_L$  over  $S_W$ . But this is consistent with my ranking  $S_W$  over  $S_W$ -without-the-wine; and I do in fact judge  $S_W$  the better for including wine. (p. 111)

Your desire to do the marking is understood here as a ranking of  $S_L$  over  $S_W$ , and your desire to drink the wine is understood here as a ranking of  $S_W$  over  $S_W$ -without-the-wine. To put this another way, your desire to mark the exercises is understood as a preference that you mark the exercises rather than drink the wine, and your desire to drink the wine is understood as a preference that you drink the wine rather than not drink the wine. In other words, you rank marking the exercises first, drinking the wine second, and doing nothing (i.e. doing the same as you would were you to drink the wine, but without drinking the wine) last.

Now, Jackson's account presents a challenge to our account (cf. §5) only if *all* apparently inconsistent desires are not really inconsistent, in which case there are no genuine cases of ambivalence (cf. §1). However, there is no reason to think that Jackson's treatment of the case of the wine and the exercises should be extended to all other cases of apparently inconsistent desires. In the case of thinking about whether to have a child (§2), for example, at least on the most natural interpretation of the case, you do not prefer having a child to not having a child, nor do you prefer not having a child to having a child. We can imagine related cases in which you do secretly or subconsciously or "really" or "deep down" (as we sometimes say) prefer one option to the other. But our case, which was easy to imagine, was not like that. Indeed, it seems like we can imagine a version of the case of the wine and the exercises in which you are ambivalent. In Jackson's version, you turn out not to be conflicted at all about whether to drink the wine or mark the exercises, because you turn out to prefer the latter to the former. Your mind has thus been made up in favor of marking the exercises. However, consider a version of the case in which your mind has not been made up: you neither prefer marking the exercises to drinking the wine nor drinking the wine to marking the exercises, and (more important) neither judge that marking the exercises would be better than drinking the wine nor that drinking the wine would be better than marking the exercises. Jackson presumably does not consider such a case, as you would violate the decision-theoretic axiom of completeness in that case. But that is the kind of case we need to consider if we want to consider cases of ambivalence.

### 3.2 Greenspan's argument

Greenspan (1980) argues that emotional conflict is not always irrational, by appeal to an idea about the "logic of emotion." In some cases of emotional conflict, "I need not even try to resolve the conflict," because both emotions could be "appropriate." (p. 230) On her view, this can happen when both emotions are supported by adequate reasons, since support by adequate reasons is sufficient for the appropriateness of an emotion (p. 236). Emotions are thus contrasted with judgments: whereas judgment that  $p$  is rational relative to a person's "total background," i.e. all the evidence relevant to the question of whether  $p$ , desire that  $p$  is rational so long as there are reasons that speak in favor of desiring that  $p$ , regardless of what other reasons there are that bear on desiring that  $p$ . An emotion is

appropriate so long as there are adequate reasons *for* it, regardless of reasons *against* it (ibid). Greenspan explains this by appeal to the fact that conflicting judgments can be combined and reconciled by forming an all-things-considered judgment, whereas emotions cannot be so combined and reconciled (p. 234). When faced with a complex body of evidence relevant to the question of whether p, it is possible to form an all-things-considered judgment about whether p – belief that p, disbelief that p, or suspension of judgment about whether p, or perhaps some more specific degree of belief that p. But when faced with a complex situation, it is not possible to form an “all-things-considered desire.” Judgments, which are all-things-considered, are appropriate relative to the “total background,” but emotions, which are not all-things-considered, are appropriate only relative to particular portions of the “background.” (pp. 236-7)

Although this is on the right track (cf. §4), there are two problems with Greenspan’s account. First, Greenspan’s account suggests that the ambivalent person’s desires are irrational, in as much as they are responsive only to an arbitrary subset of the relevant reasons. To say that an attitude is an “all-things-considered” attitude implies that it is responsive to *all* the relevant reasons – that in its formation or sustenance *everything* relevant has been considered. How could it be rational to form or sustain an attitude – whether a belief or a desire – without considering everything relevant? To put this worry another way, Greenspan’s account raises a difficult question: *why* is it not possible to form an “all-things-considered desire”? Why would there be – or why would we settle for forming – an attitude that is responsive only to reasons in favor and not to reasons against? Forming such an attitude seems irrational – think of someone who formed a belief-like attitude in that way – whatever attitude it might be – giving credence, as it were, to any proposition for which there was evidence, regardless of counterevidence or other sorts of defeating evidence.

Second, Greenspan’s account is implausible as a description of paradigm cases of ambivalence. In the case of thinking about whether to have a child (§2), it is not that you want to have a child, in as much as you fail to respond to the considerations that speak against having a child, whilst at the same time wanting not to have a child, in as much as you fail to respond to the considerations that speak against not having a child. There are, perhaps, cases like that: you want to eat the foie gras, but only when you manage to stop thinking about the goose, otherwise you find it disgusting and do not want to eat it. But that is not what is going on in the case of thinking about whether to have a child. In that case, you are responding to all the relevant reasons – and *still* both want to have a child and want not to have a child, without judging either of those options better. Your ambivalence is not the result of your selectively attending to arbitrary subsets of the relevant reasons – one subset supporting the one desire, and the other subset supporting the other desire. Your attention is not narrowed, but rather broadened, by reflection and deliberation. Your eyes are wide open to all the considerations that speak for and against having a child – and yet you remain ambivalent.

We agree with Greenspan’s positing of a crucial difference between judgment and emotion, but we disagree with her articulation of it. Greenspan locates this difference in the nature of rational judgment and rational emotion – judgments are rational relative to your total evidence; emotions are rational relative to a subset of your total evidence. On our view, to which we turn in the next section, the difference between judgment and emotion is explained by a metaphysical difference between the objects of judgment and emotion: the truth is consistent, but the good is inconsistent.

#### **4 Fitting inconsistent desires**

In this section, our central claim is that the good is inconsistent: sometimes it is both good and bad that p (§4.1). A consequence of this is that sometimes it is both good that p and good that not-p. We argue that, if it is good that p, then it is fitting to desire that p (§4.2). We conclude that, when it is both good that p and good that not-p, it is fitting to both desire that p and desire that not-p.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.1 The inconsistency of the good

We maintain that the good is inconsistent, i.e. that sometimes it is both good that p and bad that p. We use “it is good that p” and “it is bad that p” as terms of art here, to speak of true propositions, both actual (“It’s good that the refugees escaped”) and merely possible (“It would be good were the refugees to escape”), as well as actually true propositions both past (“It’s good that the refugees escaped”), present (“It’s good that the refugees have escaped”), and future (“It’s good that the refugees will escape”).

Instances of the inconsistency of the good are familiar and commonplace: enacting such-and-such climate change legislation would be good (for the environment), but also bad (for the economy); a vacation in Norway would be good (because pleasant), but also bad (because expensive); eating this éclair would be good (on account of its deliciousness), but also bad (on account of its being unhealthy).

We assume that it is bad that p if and only if it is good that not-p. Given this assumption, a corollary of the inconsistency of the good is that sometimes it is both good that p and good that not-p.

This, on our view, is what is going on in the case of thinking about whether to have a child. It is both good to have a child and bad to have a child, and, consequently, it is both good to have a child and good not to have a child.

It is useful to contrast the plausible claim that the good is inconsistent with the implausible claim that the best is inconsistent. It can both be good that p and good that not-p, but it cannot both be best that p and best that not-p. One and the same thing can be both good and bad, but one and the same thing cannot be both best and worst, or, for that matter, best and not best. To put this another way, the inconsistency of the good involves *pro tanto* goodness, where something is *pro tanto* good if and only if it is good in some respect or to some degree. When it is both good that p and good that not-p, it is *pro tanto* good that p and *pro tanto* good that not-p.

It is illuminating to contrast the inconsistency of the good with the consistency of the true. We agree with the standard assumption made by classical logicians that no proposition is both true and false, as well as its corollary, given the assumption that it is false that p if and only if it is true that not-p, that it cannot be both true that p and true that not-p. Goodness, on our view, is different from truth with respect to consistency: some propositions are both good and bad, and sometimes a proposition and its negation are both good. Likewise, we agree with the standard assumption made by classical logicians that propositions are never true “in some respect” or “to some degree” – i.e. there is no analogue of *pro tanto* goodness when it comes to truth.

The inconsistency of good is a first-order evaluative claim. It is neutral when it comes to meta-ethical questions about the nature of value and of evaluative language. It is consistent with realism and anti-

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<sup>5</sup> Note that our argument is compatible with the possibility of genuinely inconsistent desires (cf. §3.1) and that our central claims is ethical, rather than psychological (cf. §3.2).

realism, cognitivism and non-cognitivism, pluralism and monism, and various absolutisms and relativisms.

## 4.2 Fitting desire and the good

We maintain that, if it is good that *p*, then it is fitting to desire that *p*. Indeed, we believe that it is fitting to desire that *p* if and only if it is good that *p*. There are two (incompatible) ways you might arrive at this principle.

First, this principle is a natural way to articulate a “buck-passing” or “fitting attitudes” account of value, on which what it is to be good is to be worthy of desire.<sup>6</sup> In that case, our biconditional principle provides an account of goodness in terms of fitting desire. Second, this principle is a natural way to articulate the “guise of the good thesis,” on which desires are representations of goodness.<sup>7</sup> In that case, our biconditional principle provides an account of fitting desire in terms of goodness.

There are three related reasons to accept the principle that it is fitting to desire that *p* if and only if it is good that *p*. First, this is the most natural explanation of why it can make sense to criticize someone on the basis of the fact that their desires are not for the good – think here of the sadist who wants to cause other people to suffer. Second, this is the most natural explanation of why we struggle to make sense of someone’s desires until we understand the good that the desiring person sees in their objects – as in Anscombe’s case of the man who desires a saucer of mud. Third, this is the most natural explanation of why evaluative thought can serve as the basis for desire – think here of someone who wants to consume krill oil because they believe that it will be good for their health.

We argued, above, that it is sometimes both good that *p* and good that not-*p* (§4.1). We have argued, here, that, if it is good that *p*, then it is fitting to desire that *p*. Therefore, when it is both good that *p* and good that not-*p*, it is fitting to both desire that *p* and to desire that not-*p*. When the good is inconsistent, inconsistent desire is fitting.

Indeed, when the good is inconsistent, having consistent desires – either desiring that *p* but not desiring that not-*p* or desiring that not-*p* but not desiring that *p* – constitutes evaluative insensitivity, either to the goodness of the proposition that not-*p* or to the goodness of the proposition that *p*. Having inconsistent desires, by contrast, constitutes evaluative sensitivity; you are responsive, in desire, to both the goodness of the proposition that *p* and to the goodness of the proposition that not-*p*. Consider the case of thinking about whether to have a child. On our view, someone who only wanted to have a child, who did not at all want not to have a child, would be missing something, namely, the various ways in which not having a child would be good. But, in the same way, someone who only wanted not to have a child, who did not at all want to have a child, would be missing something, namely, the various ways in which having a child would be good. Inconsistency, in this case, is the fitting response to the evaluative situation.

Recall the contrast between the inconsistency of the good and the consistency of the true (§4.1). It is correct to believe that *p* if and only if it is true that *p* – this is what we mean when we say that truth is the “aim of belief” or that belief “aims at truth.” We have argued that it is sometimes fitting to both desire that *p* and desire that not-*p*, given that it is sometimes both good that *p* and good that not-*p*.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Brentano 1902, p. 16, Ewing 1947, p. 152, Scanlon 1998, Chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Anscombe 1963, Stampe 1987, Oddie 2005, Tenenbaum 2007, Hazlett forthcoming. Compare Greenspan’s (1980) view that emotions involve taking “positions” on their objects (p. 229).

However, given that it is never both true that p and true that not-p, it is never correct to both believe that p and believe that not-p. It is never correct to have inconsistent beliefs.

We have assumed here that it really would both be good to have a child and good not to have a child. The conclusion that it is fitting to both desire to have a child and desire not to have a child depends on this assumption. But we can defend something similar, and equally probative vis-à-vis our thesis that ambivalence can be appropriate, even without this assumption. For even if it would not really both be good to have a child and good not to have a child, there are certainly people for whom both of those options *seem* good – and thus desiring both options is reasonable for them. From the ambivalent person's perspective, in cases like this, it seems both good that p and good that not-p, and thus there is an obvious sense in which, from that perspective, it seems fitting to both desire that p and desire that not-p. Inconsistent desire can thus be reasonable, even when it is not fitting.

In the case of thinking about whether to have a child, we've considered three options: only wanting to have a child, only wanting not to have a child, and both wanting to have a child and wanting not to have a child. We've been arguing in favor of the third of these options. But what about the other option: neither wanting to have a child nor wanting not to have a child? Such *indifference* about whether p is the conative analogue of suspension of judgment about whether p – we could just as well say that the indifferent person “suspends desire.” Suspension of judgment is a reasonable response to a situation in which it is unclear to you whether it is true or false that p. Likewise, indifference seems like a reasonable response to a situation in which it is unclear to you whether it is good or bad that p. But the case we have been considering is not like that: in the case of thinking about whether to have a child, it is not unclear to whether it would be good or bad to have a child; on the contrary, it is clear to you that it would be both good and bad to have a child. This is not a situation that calls for indifference; it is a situation that call for inconsistency.

## 5 Reasonable irresolution

We have argued that inconsistent desires are fitting when the good is inconsistent (and reasonable when the good seems inconsistent) (§4). On its own, this is not particularly interesting. Recall the case of the delicious but poisoned éclair (§1). In this case, it is fitting both to desire not to eat the éclair, on account of its being poisoned, and to desire to eat the éclair, on account of its being delicious. The reason this kind of case is not particularly interesting is that it is clear how to resolve your inconsistent desires by judging that it would be best not to eat the éclair. Things get interesting, however, when it is not clear how to resolve inconsistent desires, i.e. in cases of ambivalence.

We shall argue that it is sometimes reasonable not to resolve inconsistent desires, i.e. that *irresolution* can be reasonable. We maintain that irresolution is reasonable in at least four distinct kinds of situations.

First, irresolution seems reasonable when it seems that it is neither better that p nor better that not-p. If two options are equally good, a judgment that one is better than the other would be false – and, so, if it seems that two options are equally good, then it is reasonable to judge neither that the one is better than the other nor that the other is better than the one. Imagine that it seems more or less clear to you that the goodness of the pleasure you will get from eating the delicious but unhealthy éclair (§1) is equivalent in quantity to the goodness of the health benefit you will get from not eating the éclair. Although you must choose whether to eat the éclair, it would be unreasonable to judge, given how things seem to you, that one option is better than the other.



Second, irresolution seems reasonable when it seems that there is no fact of the matter about whether it is better that  $p$  or better that not- $p$ . This can happen when there seems to be a conflict of incommensurable values. It might seem to you, for example, that the goodness of gastronomic pleasure and the goodness of health simply cannot be compared in terms of quantity, as we imagined above, in which case eating the éclair and not eating the éclair will not be equally good – but neither will one be better than the other or the other better than the one. Again, in that case, you must choose whether to eat the éclair, but it would be unreasonable to judge, given how things seem to you, that one option is better than the other.

Third, irresolution seems reasonable when you cannot tell, and cannot reasonably be expected to tell, whether it is better that  $p$  or better that not- $p$ . This happens whenever situations are sufficiently complex as to resist reasonable analysis given the circumstances. The case of the delicious but unhealthy éclair could easily be a case of this kind: the éclair is delicious and unhealthy, but exactly how delicious and how unhealthy is unclear – and there might be multiple kinds of uncertainty here, some quantifiable in terms of probabilities (e.g. the correlation between regular éclair-eating and such-and-such illness, the chance that this éclair will not taste good at all), but some not amenable to such analysis (e.g. whether and in what sense eating this éclair involves you in the regular eating of éclairs, what specifically this éclair will taste like). You might reasonably waver between your two options, in this case, not because you suspect one is not really better than the other, but because you cannot answer the question of which option that is. Again, you must choose whether to eat the éclair, but it would be unreasonable to judge, given the complexity of the situation as it presents itself to you, that one option is better than the other.

Fourth, irresolution seems reasonable when you have reason to believe that your values would substantially change were it the case that  $p$ , which problematizes evaluation of the proposition that  $p$ . In such a case, there is no stable set of values relative to which you can determine whether it is better that  $p$  or better that not- $p$ .<sup>8</sup> An éclair so delicious that eating it causes you to abandon any concern you had for your health presents a case of this kind.

The case of thinking about whether to have a child (§2) could be understood as any one (or more than one) of these four kinds of cases. It seems to us that a great many people who think about whether to have a child cannot tell, and cannot reasonably be expected to tell, whether it is better to have a child or better not to have a child. The multitude of different kinds of considerations that are relevant to the question, the extent to which the question involves speculation with limited information, the way in which the decision you make might change what you care about, and the intensely personal and quasi-existential character of the question – all this conspires to make arriving at a reasonable conclusion exceptionally difficult, and, in our view, something beyond what can reasonably be expected in many cases. Irresolution can be reasonable – and the case of thinking about whether to have a child is an intuitive case in point.

We mentioned that, in the case of the delicious but unhealthy éclair, the reasonableness of irresolution does not mitigate the need for a decision about what to do. So, too, in the case of thinking about whether to have a child. When it is up to you whether you will  $\phi$ , then you will have to decide whether to  $\phi$ , even if you are ambivalent about whether to  $\phi$ , and thus judge neither that it would be better to  $\phi$  nor that it would be better not to  $\phi$ . How such decisions are possible is an important

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ullman-Margalit 2005, Paul 2014, Callard 2018, Chapter 1.

question, and one that has puzzled philosophers, but that topic would take us beyond the scope of the present discussion.

We argued, above, that inconsistent desires can be fitting – and that, even in some cases in which they are not fitting, inconsistent desires can be reasonable (§4.1). We then argued, here, that irresolution can be reasonable – that it can be reasonable not to resolve inconsistent desires. We conclude that ambivalence is sometimes appropriate – as in the case of thinking about whether to have a child (§2).

## 6 Wholeheartedness

In his influential critique of ambivalence, Harry Frankfurt (1988, 1998, 2004) contrasts ambivalence with “wholeheartedness.” For Frankfurt, as for us, ambivalence is a species of inconsistent desire. However, for Frankfurt, ambivalence is defined in terms of the notion *identification*. In the case of the recovering addict (§1), there is inconsistency “*between* what the person really wants and other desires ... that are *external* to the volitional complex with which the person identifies,” (1988, p. 165) whereas in ambivalence the “incoherence is *within* this volitional complex,” (Ibid.) such that the incoherent desires “are both wholly internal to a person’s will rather than alien to him.” (1998, p. 99) When you *identify* with a desire of yours, you approve of it (1988, p. 65), you desire that it not be extinguished or abandoned (1988, p. 161), and you desire that it move you to act (1988, pp. 164-7). Desires with which you do not identify are external to your will and alien to you (1988, pp. 58-61). A person is ambivalent, on Frankfurt’s view, to the extent that there is inconsistency among those desires with which they identify, and thus “there is no univocal answer to the question of what the person really wants.” (1988, p. 165) By contrast, on his view, a person is *wholehearted* to the extent that there is no such inconsistency. An ambivalent person can thus become wholehearted by abandoning – by ceasing to identify with – one or the other of their inconsistent desires. In so doing, the ambivalent person will have made up his mind, where “[a] person who makes up his mind ... seeks thereby to overcome or supersede a condition of inner division and to make himself into an integrated whole.” (1988, p. 174) Becoming wholehearted “requires ... that the person become finally and unequivocally clear as to which side of the conflict *he* is on.” (2004, p. 91)

What has this to do with our defense of appropriate ambivalence (§§4-5)? You might think that our argument was insufficiently sensitive to the value of wholeheartedness. “An ambivalent person,” Frankfurt argues, “is simultaneously on both sides of the struggle within himself.” (1989, p. 138) And that sounds like a bad thing. But is it? We shall argue that wholeheartedness isn’t valuable when ambivalence is appropriate, as in the case of thinking about whether to have a child (§2).

First, *becoming* wholehearted in such cases seems unappealing. Suppose you are ambivalent about whether to have a child. You can become wholehearted by siding unequivocally either with your desire to have a child or with your desire not to have a child, thereby choosing sides in the struggle within yourself. However, it is easy to imagine that such a choice would not eliminate the struggle, but merely transform it into a struggle between an “internal” and an “external” desire. Consider, for example, the person who decides that what they really want is to have a child and dismisses their desire not to have a child as irrational and fleeting fear of the unknown, or, for another, the person who decides that what they really want is not to have a child and dismisses their desire to have a child as ideology foisted on them by their overbearing parents. In this kind of case, an internal struggle has been transformed into an alienated struggle. It is unclear why the latter is preferable to the former. Indeed, it is easy to imagine that the alienation that accompanies wholeheartedness is subjectively

worse than the ambivalent alternative, in as much as alienation is distinctively uncomfortable and frustrating. In as much as ambivalence is an alternative to alienation, it seems like a good thing.

Moreover, even if the person who becomes wholehearted manages to avoid alienation, it is easy to imagine that their choosing sides in the struggle within themselves amounts to a betrayal of one or more of their values. Consider, for example, the person whose ambivalence about whether to have a child derives from the fact that they are committed both to personal autonomy and to the preservation of their family line. To side unequivocally with their desire to have a child entails betraying their commitment to personal autonomy; to side unequivocally with their desire not to have a child entails betraying their commitment to preserving their family line. Ambivalence, in such a case, is more *authentic* than wholeheartedness. Our values tell us who we are; they reveal what is distinctive about us as individuals. What is distinctive about our imagined person, among other things, is their commitment to both personal autonomy and preserving their family line. There is thus a sense in which *they* cannot really be wholehearted in the present case: given who they are, ambivalence about whether to have a child is inevitable. Just as it is inauthentic to pretend to be on only one side of a struggle within yourself – which is a familiar way of dealing with ambivalence – it is inauthentic to change yourself such that there is no longer a struggle within yourself. And in as much as authenticity seems like a bad thing, if ambivalence is an alternative to inauthenticity, ambivalence seems like a good thing.

Second, *being* wholehearted – whether by becoming wholehearted or by having always been wholehearted – when ambivalence is appropriate seems unappealing. Again, imagine that you are ambivalent about whether to have a child. From your perspective, people who are wholehearted about whether to have a child seem to be missing something. Those who are wholeheartedly in favor of having a child seem to be missing all the genuine considerations that speak against having a child, while those who are wholeheartedly against having a child seem to be missing all the genuine considerations that speak in favor of having a child. By your own lights, a wholehearted embrace of either option would be overly simplistic and incomplete given the circumstances.

For this reason, it is easy to imagine that the ambivalent person does not regret their ambivalence. Indeed, regretting your inconsistent desires seems more like something the wholehearted person would do: if you wish you wanted only to have a child and would prefer to be rid of your desire not to have a child, for example, you are not ambivalent about whether to have a child, but rather wholeheartedly in favor of having a child. Ambivalence, in any event, is not inherently a state that you regret being in.

Frankfurt (1998) writes:

There are circumstances in which it is only reasonable, no matter how uncomfortable it may be, for a person to be drawn in several directions at once. But while accepting ambivalence may sometimes be helpful or wise, it is never desirable as such or for its own sake. (p. 102)

And Michael Lynch (2004) writes that ambivalence can be “perfectly understandable, even an inevitable response to a terrible situation.” (2004, p. 123) We think there are three related mistakes in these passages. First, we disagree with the suggestion that ambivalence is necessarily uncomfortable. Inconsistent desire, of course, has this going against it: the person with inconsistent desires will not get everything that they want. But wholeheartedness is not the same as consistent desire. And is not

getting everything that you want such a bad thing? It seems, in any event, like a perfectly familiar and ordinary thing. This leads us to a second point: situations in which ambivalence is appropriate, on our view, are commonplace. Such situations are not exceptional, as Frankfurt and Lynch suggest. Third, situations in which ambivalence is appropriate are not particularly “terrible.” Perhaps there is a sense in which it is better to be confronted with a simple situation in which all genuine considerations speak in favor of a particular course of action or outcome than to be confronted with complex situations in which genuine considerations speak both in favor of and against a particular course of action or outcome. But when compared to the ills that regularly befall human beings, situations of the latter kind seem relatively benign.

## 7 Conclusion

We have argued that ambivalence is sometimes appropriate, specifically when the good is inconsistency and irresolution is reasonable. Our discussion suggests that the ideal of emotional harmony, which we mentioned at the outset, is a mistake: emotional conflict is often something to be sought out and celebrated, rather than something to be avoided or eliminated. This calls for a critical re-evaluation of those accounts of practical reason, courses of psychological treatment, and self-help regimes that are premised on the badness of emotional conflict.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> We presented this paper in 2012 at SUNY-Albany and at Connecticut College; thanks to our audiences on those occasions.

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