Defeated Ambivalence[[1]](#footnote-1)•

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Abstract:Ambivalence is often presented through cases of *defeated ambivalence* and *multivalence*, in which opposed attitudes suggest mutual isolation and defeat each other. Properly understood, however, ambivalence implies the existence of poles that are conflictually yet rationally interlinked and are open to non-defeated joint conduct. This paper considers cases that range from indecisiveness and easy adoption of conflicting attitudes when hungry, stressed, or exhausted, to tragically conflicted deliberation and to cases of shifting between self-deceptively serious attitudes. Analyzing such cases as variants of *defeated ambivalence*, I argue that the phenomena of defeated ambivalence are marginal to ambivalence even though they are by the same token exemplary of it. The poles in such cases are connected as opposing attitudes in such a way that the attitudes and the opposition are both undermined. The article focuses on two forms of *vague multivalence*, one of which is taken from Heidegger’s analysis of curiosity.

The most well-known figure of ambivalence is Buridan’s ass, dying (on Spinoza’s version[[2]](#footnote-2)1) of hunger and thirst alike as the result of being situated exactly between a pail of hay and a bucket of water. Ambivalence may be defined as the simultaneous holding of two opposed attitudes towards the same thing by a single person who maintains the attitudes as mutually opposed. This definition goes back to a vague yet substantive notion of ambivalence as requiring tension-fraught attitudes that stand in tension precisely in view of the person holding them. This notion suggests other partially convergent definitions. In what follows we shall encounter some forms of ambivalence that deviate from the above definition, as well as some that complement it or surpass it. In particular, attitudes of certain types (such as desires and beliefs) can stand in conflict by being directed towards opposed objects, e.g., incompatible states of affairs. Here again we must require that the person holds the attitudes as conflicting. Ambivalence is a multifarious phenomenon: people can, for example, doubt their beliefs, have mixed emotions, or, as already suggested, want that which they do not want, e.g., to have a baby and not to have a baby, or to immediately approach the water bucket rather than the hay pail. People can also maintain opposing attitudes of different types (eg in ambivalence between liking someone and thinking little of him), as well as hold attitudes that combine particular types or transcend them; that is, in any case, if ambivalent people are at all possible.

There are two received views on ambivalence. Both of them go hand in hand with the tendency to take Buridan’s ass as the paradigmatic example. According to one line of thought, strict ambivalence is impossible; according to the other, ambivalence is possible, but a deplorable state. The first approach shapes the model of Buridan’s ass such as to suggest that ambivalence in a strict sense (namely, that there is someone for whom two desires stand in conflict) does not exist and indeed is inconceivable. Naturalists, for example, often interpret desire in a quasi-mechanistic way. Rather than indicating the existence of an ambivalent subject, the ambivalent paralysis supposedly testifies to a clash between foreign and conflicting sensations or forces, such that our donkey is similar to a block of wood that one person wants to push leftward, the other rightward, and that both people push with equal force. States of vacillation, even when ended by a momentary action, are understood in the same way, such that the donkey is one moment pushed more forcefully towards the right, the other moment towards the left.

This cluster of views goes back to Hobbes, who analyses deliberation as an alternation of the movements of the passions. Although Reid has already criticized this view, it remains a popular view among philosophers, though rarely explicitly defended in writing.[[3]](#footnote-3)2 The image of the torn donkey, however, suggests that ambivalence is possible and that it is a dysfunctional, confused, and miserable state. We can see how Kierkegaard conceives of ambivalence as at once a division and the unity of being divided and suffering:

Or is not despair [*Fortvivlelse*] actually double-mindedness [*Tvesindethed* 130]; or what else is it to despair but to have two wills! Whether he, the weak one, despairs over not being able to tear himself loose from the evil or he, the presumptuous one, despairs over not being able to tear himself completely loose from the good -- they are both double-minded, they both have two wills.[[4]](#footnote-4)3

Kierkegaard is sensitive to the conflictual unity of his “double-minded” person, her despair being expressive of the two “wills” and their relation. He thus finds himself both acknowledging ambivalence and reducing it to mere division. The same cluster of phenomena also suggests a different way to deny that ambivalence is possible while still acknowledging it. Note first that accounts of subjectivity and rationality often take these notions to imply that a person’s attitudes are consistent, i.e., that it is part of having an attitude that one does not have a conflicting attitude. Yet people are ambivalent in a sense that involves that (in maintaining any of the opposing attitudes) the person is ambivalent from her own point of view between the poles. This poses a special problem for such accounts. When, under this perspective, ambivalence is modeled on the ambivalence of a hungry and thirsty donkey, then the connections with dysfunctionality and confusion are again emphasized. But it is precisely this inherent dysfunctionality and confusion that suggests that agency, subjectivity, and rationality are undermined under ambivalence and that they are undermined together with the ambivalence itself. This is because, on this perspective, ambivalence becomes a kind of pure opposition between attitudes that are not really maintained, each of them being a pole of a mutually destructive pair of attitudes. Thus, side by side with the suggestion of division, we can get the impression that the conflicted person is not so much divided as transformed into a meaningless plurality of confused glimpses of thought, feeling, behavior, and attitudes, and thus in a sense is annihilated.

This way of acknowledging and denying ambivalence may be observed in Harry Frankfurt’s 1992 analysis. In this paper Frankfurt delineates the phenomena that deserve to be regarded as ambivalence by contrasting them with “conflicts” between the tendencies of a mere wanton, as well as between a wanton tendency and the person’s volition that it should not take effect. A genuine ambivalence must consist, we are told, in a person -- a creature with mind and will -- fully having both conflicting attitudes. Thus, for Frankfurt, ambivalence is an inherently personal conflict of attitudes; and yet his account of ambivalence undermines this constitutive character:

The problem is rather that since his mind is not made up, his will is in fact unformed. He is volitionally inchoate and indeterminate.[[5]](#footnote-5)4

It thus appears that ambivalence is not possible, as if accepting that a person is unitary enough to be ambivalent between two opposed attitudes implies that the person must be divided between two isolated attitudes and/or that these attitudes cancel each other, leaving no room for full-blown intentionality. It also appears that the concept of ambivalence excludes significant action based on any of the opposed attitudes and that an ambivalent agent is blocked from any behavior, feelings, thoughts, and related attitudes that go beyond suffering, confusion, and the expression of ambivalence per se.

This pair of notions even informs philosophical positions that acknowledge ambivalence (in the sense of a person’s having full-blown opposed attitudes and having them as opposed) and that do not equate conduct under ambivalence with stagnancy and dysfunctionality. David Pugmire’s analysis of emotional ambivalence proposes detailed observations that reveal an ambivalence worthy of the name in the observed phenomena,[[6]](#footnote-6)5 and yet the chapter analyses ambivalence as a matter of “shallow,” unconsolidated, and unreal emotions, explaining in particular that “a person cannot both do something and not do it.”[[7]](#footnote-7)6 Other philosophers, e.g., J.S. Swindell, allow for an ambivalence in which the person in important respects favors one of the poles, yet still see any ambivalence of a more symmetric character as paralyzing.[[8]](#footnote-8)7 Some, such as Michael Stocker, allow for rational conflicts only to explain that these conflicts are not about how to act,[[9]](#footnote-9)8 thereby connecting disharmonious attitudes towards action, with tragedy.[[10]](#footnote-10)9 Moreover, when ambivalence, with its irreducible pairs of opposed attitudes, is acknowledged, this usually goes hand in hand with explicating it in terms of two *isolated* attitudes, values, aspects of the object, or reasons.1[[11]](#footnote-11)0

The Conflictual Unity of Ambivalence and Ambivalent Behavior

All the same, whatever may be the case with the lives of donkeys, human lives are full of situations in which persons maintain two opposing attitudes. Ambivalence is neither reducible to duality or confusion, nor is it inherently crippling. On my account,1[[12]](#footnote-12)1 when one is ambivalent, the opposing poles are connected in a rational manner and are thus connected precisely by their mutual opposition. The idea is that a person’s *engagements* (to group together mental attitudes, instances of behavior and of consciousness, and any other concrete aspects of a person’s intentionality)1[[13]](#footnote-13)2 are interlinked in various ways and that ambivalence comprises a way for one’s attitudes to be interlinked. The opposed poles connect as poles of ambivalence, which is to say that it is part of each of the opposing attitudes that it stands in conflict with the other attitude. Complementarily, the mental interlinkage between the poles is bound up with further engagements according to the concrete case. Thus a person (intra-connected and open to reconnection) is unitary and rational in a sense that is explicated by Donald Davidson’s notions of mental holism and basic rationality.1[[14]](#footnote-14)3 Yet, in contrast with Davidson’s view, ambivalence is a central form of rational connection between attitudes. Moreover, because in every particular case the connection between the poles of ambivalence makes sense in terms of further interlinkages in the person’s life, ambivalent conduct is a unitary whole. Furthermore, under this account it may be expected that ambivalence often forms creative, integrated, functional, and perceptive courses of conduct in which both opposing attitudes, including the concrete character of their opposition, are shaped and expressed.

Even a single (momentary or enduring) engagement by the ambivalent person can connect both opposing attitudes in a significant manner. Consider, for example, the possibility that Michelangelo expressed ambivalence in his *Creation of Adam*. Cannot this work be an artistic expression of an ambivalent judgment on his part as to whether God “touches” human beings? Similarly, it is possible that in painting *The Creation* Michelangelo wanted to propose this intimate relation (indeed this mutual relation1[[15]](#footnote-15)4) yet also wanted to avoid such a proposal, and that he was fulfilling both conflicting desires together in his painting.

The irreducibly conflictual unity between a person’s opposing attitudes can in various ways take shape in that which he further judges, feels, or does. Since ambivalence is an irreducibly conflictual mode of existence, no instance of ambivalence would leave a person entirely comfortable and contented. We might, for instance, imagine Michelangelo disappointed in his fresco both for showing too much of a touch and for showing too little. Moreover, ambivalence doubtless does not always involve -- or even always permit -- a significant joint expression of both attitudes. Ambivalent judgments sometimes leave a person all but clueless. Emotionally ambivalent persons sometimes live limited lives on account of their ambivalence, and people who want what they yet do not want may waver ineffectually.1[[16]](#footnote-16)5

Here, however, we seem to return to our initial difficulty. For, even given that some phenomena demonstrate the sort of ambivalence in which a person is unitarily engaged, there is still the question of cases in which people are paralyzed by their conflicting desires, or in which a person judges both that she should do something and that she should avoid it, in a way that looks as if each of the conflicting attitudes stands by itself. To make things worse, are not precisely such cases typical of ambivalence? If they are, not only must they be accounted for, but they must be accounted for in the same way as other modes of ambivalence.

If my account is on the right track, the various forms of dysfunctional, unperceptive, and seemingly divided ambivalence should not be taken as paradigmatic of ambivalence. All the same, it is not for nothing that they are taken as such, and we must understand them in a way that appreciates their importance. Let me first agree that the sort of ambivalence that is suggestive of division and confusion and that involves impoverished and blocked actions and life routes is always an inherent possibility of ambivalence. Taking another stand, Michelangelo might have never created *The Creation of Adam* or might even have abandoned his commitment altogether, leaving the Vatican for good. Certainly he would have had to change in many other ways to shape his ambivalence in this manner, yet this seems possible. As regrettable as it would have been, were Michelangelo to have taken this approach, it would depict him (just like the ambivalent painting of *The Creation*) as ambivalent rather than split, holding each conflicting attitude as opposed, and thus related, to the opposed conflicting attitude, and intertwining them through his further engagements. His leaving the Vatican, like the great frustration the ambivalence might evoke in him, would make sense only in view of both conflicting attitudes together.

The Phenomenon of Defeated Ambivalence

One might, however, object that it is only an accidental feature of some forms of dysfunctional ambivalence that they also imply a conflictual unity between the opposing attitudes. This view seems to be supported by the existence of various forms of especially dysfunctional ambivalence. Unlike the way in which we would regard Michelangelo (were we watching him standing frustrated for days and days under the empty ceiling of the Sistine Chapel), we do not take them to link the poles of ambivalence in an unsuccessful manner when they could also link them quite differently. When ordinary ambivalence paralyzes someone or induces her to an impoverished life, a description of the ambivalence may be elucidatory even if it ignores its dysfunctional character. Rather than amounting to a partial understanding, it appears that any “understanding” of the ambivalence of Buridan’s ass that ignores its paralysis would in fact leave one completely in the dark. I believe that there is truth to this. Hence, my aim is to analyze the character of inherently dysfunctional ambivalence such that we can see (1) how such cases are related to ambivalence in general, (2) how they are related to the basically rational unity of human lives, and (3) why they are taken as exemplary forms of ambivalence.

The kinds of cases that the proposed account ought to capture may be elucidated by considering tragic conflicts in which a person vehemently does not want either to act in a certain way nor to avoid such action, judging that whatever she may do would be terrible. Some such conflicts nonetheless favor action on one pole1[[17]](#footnote-17)6 but let us focus on those that do not. Such situations would be frustrating and confusing, yet *at the initial stage* they constitute ordinary cases of ambivalence in which the person judges ambivalently both that she ought not to do X and that she ought to do it. At this point, insofar as the person’s point of view is considered, “both ‘ought’s” (to quote Bernard Williams) “do apply”1[[18]](#footnote-18)7 at the same time that the two judgments intrinsically put each other in question.1[[19]](#footnote-19)8 The agent clearly maintains both conflicting attitudes, yet she does not hold them separately from each other, either as judgments or as desires and emotions. Similarly to Michelangelo, each of the poles would be constituted by its relations with the other pole.

Thus, to begin with, the person cannot find a reasonable way to act. Yet her attempts, her suffering, and so forth demonstrate two opposing attitudes and their oppositional interlinkage. The situation being tragic, however, the person would often go on and on deliberating about how she should respond, and thus be engaged in a devastatingly unfruitful manner. We may well expect this to lead to her gradually losing hold of both of her conflicting attitudes. Does she really take it, even ambivalently, that she ought to do X (or that she ought not to)? Is she really (ambivalently) motivated this way? Or are the thoughts that she ought to do X and that she ought to avoid it that keep coming up by now nothing but obsessive thoughts or *mere* ideas? Moreover, we might wonder whether she any longer understands what it could mean either that she ought to do X or that she ought not. She thus loses hold of her attitudes, yet is far from dispensing with them altogether. Indeed, tragic ambivalence that evolves in this manner appears to intensify to the effect that tragic ambivalence in its advanced form serves as a second kind of paradigmatic ambivalence, similar in some ways to that of Buridan’s ass.1[[20]](#footnote-20)9

We can speak of *defeated ambivalence* to refer as a whole to the multifarious cases in which a person appears to maintain opposing attitudes in a way that is inherently “divided” as well as blocked. The attribute “defeated” is intended to propose, on the one hand, ambivalence as a defeated way to maintain the conflicting poles and, on the other, ambivalence being defeated, such that the person’s engagements “echo” past ambivalence in which the opposing attitudes have annihilated each other, or again an ambivalence that has never quite come to be. This ambiguous denomination will be adequate if the thesis of this paper is right: We are here concerned with phenomena to which it is inherent that the person seems to be split between conflicting attitudes, and thus the expression of (or action on) any of the poles is spoilt or made insignificant. Such phenomena, embodying the image of ambivalence, are in fact liminal forms of ambivalence in which the person does not quite maintain the opposed attitudes. On my proposed account, this does not imply that in such cases the person is split or confused in a manner that is not basically rational, but rather that she is engaged in some or other basically rational way that connects the opposing attitudes or “attitudes” as if they were separate.

Defeated ambivalence includes various forms of ambivalent paralysis, wavering, and impoverished conduct. It may be petty or tragic, enduring or circumstantial. It encompasses engagements in which we might say a person “does not know what she wants,” and this not for epistemic reasons, but because more than actually holding both opposed attitudes, she is toying with them, or is overwhelmed with conflicting possibilities or demands, or is exhausted to the point of indifference. One way or the other, defeated ambivalence is hardly ambivalence, yet it does border on ambivalence. To put it differently, it is ambiguously held and ascribed as ambivalence, and this ambiguity is irreducible. In particular, defeated ambivalence is unlike engagements that may be mistaken as ambivalence from some external perspective. Further, it is unlike cases in which a person’s intentionality and basic rationality have deteriorated into a confused whole of traces of ambivalent attitudes, conduct, and consciousness.2[[21]](#footnote-21)0

I thus argue that defeated ambivalence aptly names a cluster of ways in which people are engaged in a manner that is tangentially ambivalent and basically rational. More specifically, such engagements involve conflicting attitudes that are mutually connected in ways that are (1) definite, and(2) mutually crippling, and that make them appear as (3) mutually isolated.

By saying that the conflictual connections have a definite character, I mean that the opposing attitudes must be understood as essentially a part of a conflictual connection that has some specific aspects. A definite connection undermines both the conflict and the conflicting attitudes. This is because each attitude is supposed to be held as opposed to the other. Yet, to the extent that it cannot be considered other than as an aspect of a given conflictual array or structure, it does not provide a direction that transcends one’s actual conduct and that stands in tension to that of the opposing attitude.

It might seem paradoxical that the character of the definite connection between the poles of defeated ambivalence is such that the attitudes appear, in some pronounced ways, isolated from one another: any opposing poles would be connected as if one were going, separately, in two mutually exclusive directions. In accordance with this, if these phenomena also serve as ideal examples of ambivalence, it is for reasons that are similar to those that make theater (or the paintings in Egyptian burial caves) ideal representations of life. From this point of view, defeated ambivalence, with its definite stultifying connection between “isolated” attitudes, presents, as if side by side and independently, an attitude, an opposed attitude, and a conflict.

While there is no clear line between ordinary and defeated ambivalence, there are many unambiguous instances of ambiguous defeated ambivalence. We shall focus on two very different cases. Examined together, they also suggest how other forms of defeated ambivalence should be understood. There is, however, also something in common to these two instances, namely, that both involve more than two opposing attitudes.

Vague Multivalence

The word “ambivalence” can be translated into “both of the two valences,” and yet we are sometimes conflicted between a larger number of attitudes. Using the term *multivalenc*e to refer to multi-attitude internal conflicts, we may note that one form of multivalence involves a person with a number of opposed attitudes of the same character, e.g., a case in which there are three, four, or five incompatible things that the person wants to do. People often consider several options for action that they understand as mutually exclusive, without reaching the point of forming a desire or judgment regarding any of them. They are not, then, multivalent in the required sense, not maintaining several actual attitudes between which they are conflicted. When a person is multivalent by way of having attitudes to several things that she takes as incompatible, in maintaining any such attitude she also maintains a negative attitude towards each of the other favored things. This implication points more generally to the fact that the notion of multivalence does not only extend that of ambivalence but also depicts a form of ambivalence: a multivalent conflict implies pairs of opposed perspectives that are opposed directions of conduct and consciousness, and hence multivalence is in an important sense *ambi*-valence. In multivalence of desire of the simplest form it happens that there are, say, four ways a person wants to spend the summer. But if she is multivalent, then she takes the fulfilment of each attitude to exclude the fulfilment of the others, and in accordance with this, she also does not want to spend the summer in these other ways.

Although we are sometimes tri-valent or quatri-valent in ways that impede our actions or limit our lives, such multivalence is open to more successful interlinkages as much as two-pole ambivalence is. The case, however, changes when one does not maintain two or three or six opposed attitudes but is multivalent between a vague and indefinitely multiplying number of poles. Ambivalence can comprise *vague multivalence* in different senses, and in fact, ambivalence typically forms a multiple and multiplying array of interlinked conflicts and attitudes.

One cluster of ways in which multivalence can be vague is, however, of special concern to us, since this sort of multivalence is vague as part of its being defeated (regardless of whether we call the multivalence defeatedor its ambivalences). Like defeated ambivalence in general, multivalence that is vague (in the sense to which our use of the term will be limited) seems to form a paradigmatic or pronounced ambivalence. Yet the structures of the two cases to be considered demonstrate a marginal form of ambivalence and multivalence.

When the phenomena of defeated ambivalence have the character of vague multivalence, the latter aspect is part of the former. Rather than being accidental, the indefinite multiplication expresses an inherently “divided” and dysfunctional way to be ambivalent, such that the person keeps forming new attitudes as if she cannot but be opposed to (and isolated from) any attitude that she already maintains. In accordance with this, the specific character of the emerging poles is more or less accidental to the ambivalence, and here the case of vague multivalence differs both from a case in which a person actually finds herself with four desirable or attractive or useful ways to spend the summer, and from the defeated ambivalence of Buridan’s ass or that of the exhausted tragic agent. The exhausted tragic agent may initially be confronted with two specific opposed attitudes that gradually lose ground in her life. Buridan’s ass is perhaps afflicted by a mental disposition that makes it liable to ambivalence between two specific opposed options that otherwise would not form competing attitudes in its life -- the donkey would just go first to either the bucket or the hay pail -- or, under more unusual circumstances, form ambivalence that would not prevent it from acting. Because of being hungry and thirsty, it is nervous; thus the pair of options becomes a source of defeated ambivalence. In this respect, the first instance of vague multivalence to be considered is similar to that of Buridan’s ass, for there too hunger underlies the forming of defeated ambivalence.

Half-serious Ambivalence Allowing for Stagnation

While hunger can form a defeated ambivalence, ambivalence can also be defeated by being intentionally pursued. In “On the Meaning of Ambivalence,” Joan Stambaugh describes ambivalence as follows: “There is no motion involved here as in an emotion, but rather a *state*, a *stasis*, an *impasse*. Ambivalence takes us nowhere. It blocks us.”2[[22]](#footnote-22)1

This is because, so Stambaugh explains, ambivalence is a mode of self-absorption in which the ambivalent person is aversive to the very need to take an attitude. By being conflicted between the opposing attitudes, he remains attached to his own ego. While this account cannot hold as an analysis of ambivalence, it may well depict an important form of defeated ambivalence. This requires, however, that the self-absorption is not supposed to explain away the ambivalence and its poles, as if that which seems like ambivalence is in fact a wholehearted engaging in a pretense of maintaining the conflicting attitudes.2[[23]](#footnote-23)2 It is only thus that Stambaugh’s account may be revealing, since phenomena of mere pretense suggest neither ambivalence nor self-absorption. The phenomena of interest involve (if anything) “pretending to oneself” or self-deception, which are not pretension or deception with a special addressee. Even to deceive himself that he, ambivalently, maintains the two attitudes, or again to intentionally engage in having them, a person must to some extent actually be conflicted between the attitudes.2[[24]](#footnote-24)3

It is also noteworthy that a desire for self-absorption in the relevant sense suggests a contrary desire of the person to take an attitude, and that defeated ambivalence of the sort delineated by Stambaugh also comprises a successful non-defeated way to express ambivalence between self-absorption and involvement. The person never really moves beyond his original questionings and worries, yet at the same time he is involved in the world by caring about the concrete objects in the two conflicting ways.

Italo Svevo’s novel *Zeno’s Consciousness* depicts a person who embraces defeated ambivalence in order to adhere to his ego and ambivalently flee engagement. Zeno’s life-fabric is composed of instances of defeated ambivalence as well as of the somewhat similar phenomenon of *inherent weakness of the will*. We can draw an analogy between the relation of inherent weakness of the will to weakness of the will (*akrasia*) *simpliciter* and the relation of defeated ambivalence to ambivalence. Let me propose that weakness of the will is primarily a form of *hierarchic ambivalence*, by which I mean that a person is conflicted between an attitude to something and a negative attitude towards that attitude. Hierarchic ambivalence is handled akratically or weakly when the person chiefly acts on his low-order attitude.2[[25]](#footnote-25)4 While it can be shown that hierarchic ambivalence, including ordinary cases of weakness of the will, involves a full-blown and tension-fraught interlinkage between full-blown attitudes, people can also be weak-willed such as to only liminally have the high-order attitude, their conflict regarding the low-order attitude being only half-serious at the same time that it is, we may say, too serious. Zeno is a smoker who arduously, yet not quite convincingly, condemns his love of smoking and his desires for a cigarette. Always busy with trying to quit, his dissatisfaction with smoking is real enough to make his conflicted attempts and failures a sad game of half-deliberate defeat.

Zeno’s defeated ambivalence regarding his studies and future profession is from an existential point of view even more disturbing. Being conflicted between law and chemistry, Zeno’s conduct can be described as functional in so far as we consider limited time-spans, yet these time-spans may be compared to the prolonged steps of a Buridan’s ass, should we imagine the donkey moving its legs first towards the pail, then in the other direction and so forth. Should he go for law? Or is chemistry to be his vocation? Zeno’s self-absorption only rarely takes the character of actually engaging with such questions. Instead, he seems to have chosen law, moving from one academic year to the next, only to abandon his course for the attractions of chemistry once the final exams are approaching. When it comes time to take the final chemistry exams, he will again -- for a time -- take up law.2[[26]](#footnote-26)5

Stambaugh is an acclaimed translator of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Together with multivalence that is based and centered on hunger, we will encounter in what follows a form of defeated ambivalence that Heidegger calls “curiosity” (*Neugier*) and that is central, on his account, to the inauthentic mode of existence (theThey or *das man*).

Two Cases of Vague *Multivalence*

Consider a person who arrives home very hungry. He wants to eat. Yet what will he eat? He can make a soup. It is a cold day, and soup would be nice. All the same, making soup takes time and he is *so* hungry. He can, however, have some cookies in the meantime; but then, if he is going to stuff himself with junk food anyways, why not just get a pizza? He starts putting his shoes on, then stops. Out into the cold again? Why not make a sandwich and get it over with. He opens the refrigerator. The zucchini reminds him that he wants soup....

Heidegger brings another sort of case to our consideration when he writes:

When curiosity has become free, it takes care to see not in order to understand what it sees, that is, to come to a being toward it, but *only* in order to see. It seeks novelty only to leap from it again to another novelty. The care of seeing is not concerned with comprehending and knowingly being in the truth, but with possibilities of abandoning itself to the world.... It makes sure of knowing, but just in order to have known. The two factors constitutive for curiosity, *not-staying* in the surrounding world taken care of and *distraction* by new possibilities, are the basis of the third essential characteristic of this phenomenon, which we call *never dwelling anywhere*. Curiosity is everywhere and nowhere. This mode of being-in-the-world reveals a new kind of being of everyday Dasein, one in which it constantly uproots itself.2[[27]](#footnote-27)6

While the hungry person is ambivalent, or multivalent, regarding supper, Heidegger’s curious person is interested in, and yet not interested in, one topic after another. In both cases the person forms a multiplying series of attitudes towards different objects. Do these attitudes exist simultaneously? The first case is similar (up to its defeated character) to ambivalent vacillation, and vacillation implies simultaneity: it cannot be interpreted in terms of changing one’s mind since it is an aspect of vacillating between one’s attitudes that the attitudes presumably being forgotten or abandoned are still relevant and can “re-appear” and form new connections.2[[28]](#footnote-28)7

The second case, however, is more substantially serial. On the not-quite-apt assumption that the person abandons each of his concerns without a trace, this vague multivalence consists in a series of instances of (defeated) ambivalence, without forming simultaneously conflicting multiple attitudes to different objects. The serial character of such curiosity expresses, however, an approach in which each concern is simultaneously undermined, being taken as something to be soon abandoned. One’s curiosity includes both caring for any of its objects and a simultaneous *attitude* of disinterest, or carelessness, to it. Moreover, the opposition between the poles is further complicated by the ambivalent character of the pole of carelessness: the person both takes the object and his investment in it as unimportant, and he rejects the object and investment, responding to a “threat” of developing a deep interest. Always caring, yet in this ambivalent way careless, about something or other, the curious person proceeds from one ambivalence to another.

The above cases thus provide us with two forms of multivalent ambivalence. Still this is not quite true. For both protagonists are ambivalent only in a defeated sense. Thus, it is not entirely fair to say that the hungry person actually formed desires to get a pizza or cook a soup rather than merely conceived of these options. Complementarily, we may wish to say that rather than comprising a pole in a multivalence, each desire undercuts the other desires, and that it is only added to the already existing desires because our person is not quite capable of endorsing any of them. Wanting the pizza or the soup in a way that inherently pulls back, each such desire demonstrates (even when we disregard the other positive “desires”) the liminal ambivalence that requires an ambivalent formulation of the desire both as two conflicting attitudes and as less than an attitude. Again hunger causes a defeated multivalence, making one draw from the desire to eat a multiplying set of definitely conflicting desires, and a conflict par excellence between positive desires that cannot be promoted under the ambivalence.2[[29]](#footnote-29)8

The multivalence of curiosity provides another way to fail in pursuing and having one’s conflicting attitudes. Does our character care about any of his objects of curiosity, or does he care only about being a cool guy who attends to the coolest trend? Complementarily, being part of the *they* and caring for the *they*’s object of interest may be a safer way to care. Or is it too safe to constitute caring? We must stay ambivalent. Nor can we say that the curious person clearly has an attitude of disinterest to the objects he pursues. For, to the extent that he has no real interest in the object of curiosity, his indifference is just a fact about him rather than an attitude that he is taking. Conversely, his intentional disinterest and carelessness reveals his interest.

Always caring yet indifferent to something or other in a way that undermines as well as inscribes both attitudes, always toying by taking seriously and yet by taking care that this is only a game, the series of engagements expresses an engagement of “curiosity” as well as a broader approach to being oneself with others in the world. Living as one of the *they* is an engagement that can only be taken because it is tension-fraught -- to be “das man” is already not to completely be *das man*.2[[30]](#footnote-30)9 In particular, the curious person is playing a game of real concern without quite knowing that it is a game and without quite knowing that it is not a game he is playing. As such, the curiosity and its ambivalence comprise an aspect of a non-defeated ambivalence as to how to live: the engagements of curiosity are enough of a mere game and enough of real concern for the person to move forwards, forming a route through which she is and yet is not merely one of the crowd.

Precisely by the same token, one’s ambivalence towards the objects of curiosity is inherently stagnant and dysfunctional. Despite his disinterest, the person spends time, attention, and care on each of them. Despite his interest he readily ends each pursuit and is left passive and ignorant.3[[31]](#footnote-31)0

Not only does the hungry person tend to remain hungry for too long, and the curious person spend his time on topics that remain remote to him, but we cannot see their dysfunctional engagement as a feature that is accidental to the ambivalence (i.e., we see it as part of a definite character that the ambivalence has). Surely, ambivalence of both sorts can be dissolved -- the curious person can change his life, and the multivalence of hunger usually ends by eating, but in this case the ambivalence is gone, rather than merely its dysfunctionality. It is also true, however, that both agents can also come to form a non-defeated ambivalence.

Yet, even when short ascriptions of the poles may be the same as those of (some of) the original poles, and when the emerging poles are in some important ways reconnected with each other and with further attitudes in ways that go back to past reconnections, to identify the new engagement as a break with the blocked flow of conflictual eating desires or the inherently temporary fascination under curiosity, is all the same to see it as a case of forming different attitudes and as a different ambivalence. For instance, as a part of forming his way out of the crowd and its curiosity -- perhaps some external crisis opened him to reconnecting his life -- our protagonist may develop a genuine involvement with his last object of curiosity. At the same time, let us further assume, his new attitude is not wholehearted but rather goes together with disinterest that is not unconnected to elements of his past disinterest (say, fear of involvement, as well as seeing the interest as arbitrary, and again the need to share the point of view of the crowd). For example, he becomes deeply involved in philosophical work, perhaps for years to come, but skepticism about this way of life and what it achieves is essential to his writing and teaching, temporal work patterns, joking, etc. Even though the ambivalence and its poles evolve in a basically rational way from his last ambivalence of curiosity, it would blur our understanding of both to regard the change as the giving of a new form to the same conflict, or as learning to deal with the conflict in a new way.

It is worthwhile, however, to complicate matters somewhat and acknowledge changes that may be seen as changes in the character of the defeated ambivalence. First, it might be that the new ambivalence is partially defeated. There is a variegated field of phenomena that defies the division between ordinary and defeated ambivalence (and is elucidated by both structures, their differences, and their relations). Defeated ambivalence of a curious or hungry sort may in accordance with this evolve into an in-between ambivalence. To identify the opposing attitudes with their past form might then go hand in hand with attention to the ongoing defeating character.

Second, because defeated ambivalence is irreducibly tangential to ambivalence and is basically rational, it can change to ordinary ambivalence in a way that may be regarded as the reshaping of the same old attitude. Imagine, for example, a version of the story above where the last object of curiosity is what lets the person change in the first place. Although the curious person unintentionally finds philosophy, or maybe a worthwhile political cause, in his path, this engagement connects with some of his concerns and opens new possibilities for him in a way that makes him a committed philosopher or activist, yet again in a way that is imbued with insistent indifference. The role of the philosophical or political involvement in the person’s changing suggests that from the start it transcended its role within the curious ambivalence. With further details the case can suggest an ongoing ambivalence whose defeated character has changed. Although defeated ambivalence implies a well-determinate sort of connection, this well-determinate character is undermined together with the intrinsically undermined character of the defeat in defeated ambivalence.3[[32]](#footnote-32)1

Returning to our main issue, in analyzing ambivalent curiosity and the indecisive multivalence of hunger as defeated ambivalence, we cannot but see them as perfect conflicts. One has opposing attitudes and they seem not to intermix. The conflicting poles are glaringly devoid of (conflictual) unity of other forms as well. People are, for example, often seriously engaged, while guarding themselves from the temptation of single-minded devotion, or alternatively a person may laugh at her devotion, or lament it. In contrast, the curious person is univocally interested, i.e., until he throws it all away, or just forgets about it. Again, a chef who is ambivalent between two great dinners for a special guest may go to the market to let the goods on offer help, and may delve into conflictual meditations in front of the stalls. Nothing like this is the case for the hungry person. This person, we would say, cannot settle his mind on a dish, and that is all. It is just what we would expect from a perfect conflict.

Yet conflictual unity is there, as is already implied in their identification as (intentional) conflicts. For the hungry person, the conflictual interlinkage emerges at every single step, such that each new wish or new expression of a wish rationally responds to the disadvantages of the other desires and evokes them. Rather than merely yearning for a pizza, or judging in favor of a sandwich, he is rejecting the one in endorsing the other, a procedure in which the poles are further united (but also undermined) by his disappointment with the options, suffering, and mild despair. Under curiosity, conflictual unity is interwoven with isolation through a different use of temporality, just as it forms another mode of inaction and a different interplay between attitudes and their undermining. Here any curious interest is through and through also a disinterest, and vice versa, yet the interlinkages expressive of this extreme conflictuality always suggest either the interest or the disinterest, or none at all.

I conclude that the phenomenon of defeated ambivalence does not allow for the understanding of ambivalence as a split. Defeated ambivalence is more similar than ambivalence per se to a split in which the attitudes are isolated and can only defeat each other. Yet this structure, which also makes it similar to confusion, to pure conflictuality, and to a harmonious array of thoughts, depicts the phenomena that fall under it as only liminally ambivalent, and their opposing poles as rationally interlinked in a conflictual manner.

1. • For reference please use the published paper at *International Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 60, No.2, Issue 238 (June 2020) pp. 173–188, doi: 10.5840/ipq2020602151 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 1 Benedict Spinoza, *The Ethics*, II, the scholium to proposition 49, as found in *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 85–265. This image, going back to Aristotle’s *On the Heavens* has been coupled with that of a person situated between two identical dates. See Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*/*Tahâfut Al-falâsifa*, ed. and trans. M.E. Marmura (Provo UT: Brigham Young Univ. Press, 2000), 23, discussion 1, §46. Although the literature often does not clearly distinguish between the two kinds of cases, I take it that Al-Ghazali’s identical dates exemplify the availability of two suitable means to a single end, which *generally speaking* does not form ambivalence in any sense. See more in Hili Razinsky, *Ambivalence: A Philosophical Exploration* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), ch. 2, n12. Many other issues that in this paper are only presented as a background get a fuller treatment there. While my examples below refer to male figures, one does not have to be male to be ambivalent in defeated and non-defeated ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 2 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part I (Raleigh NC: Hayes Barton Press, 2005), Ch. VI, p. 39. Thomas Reid, *On the Intellectual Powers of Man*, vol. 1 (Dublin: George Philips, 1786), Essay I, Ch. 4, pp. 57–58. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 3 Sören Kierkegaard, “Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions,” *The Essential Kierkegaard*, eds. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 164–69 at p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 4 H. G. Frankfurt, “The Faintest Passion,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 66 (1992): 5–16 at p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 5 David Pugmire, “Conflict, Mixed Emotions, and the Indivisible Heart,” *Sound Sentiments: Integrity in the Emotions* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 169–94, see section 5 there. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 6 Ibid., p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 7 J.S. Swindell, “Ambivalence,” *Philosophical Explorations* 13 (2010): 23–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 8 Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1990), ch. 4, pp. 85–126. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 9 Ibid., p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 10 For example, and respectively, M.C. Nussbaum, “Aeschylus and Practical Conflict,” *Ethics* 95 (1985): 233–67; M.J. Zimmerman, “A Plea for Ambivalence,” *Metaphilosophy* 24 (1993): 382–89; Stocker, ibid., ch. 8, p. 265; and P. S. Greenspan, “A Case of Mixed Feelings: Ambivalence and the Logic of Emotion,” *Explaining Emotions*, ed. A. O. Rorty (Berkeley CA: Univ. of California Press, 1980), pp. 223-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 11 Defended in Razinsky, *Ambivalence: A Philosophical Exploration*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 12 Mental elements are intentional in this sense if, interdependently with their being ascribable, they are also anchored in first-personal life (they may be actually unconscious, not reflected upon, self-deceived about, and so forth). An engagement is typically intentional also in the sense of having an object (Brentano’s view of intentionality). Again, an engagement can be more specifically an intention, desire, or behavior in order to achieve something, as well as itself being intended or desired by the person. Ambivalence is an intentional conflict that typically has an object. It is not generally intended, although it may be. Attitudes on my analysis are perspectives-dispositions. They are dispositions to behavior, consciousness, and other engagements, yet unlike ordinary dispositions they are also perspectives, and are typically object-directed. Attitudinal dispositions are not well-determinate. Finally, behavior can be intentional in different ways, including by being undertaken in order to fulfil something. I shall usually use the term “action” to refer to an instance of behavior as fulfilment or an attempt at fulfilment. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 13 See, e.g., Davidson, “Expressing Evaluations,” *Problems of Rationality* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 19–39, and “Incoherence and Irrationality,” *Problems of Rationality*, pp. 189–99. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 14 Adam stretches up his hand in a way that ambivalently suggests the contact is reciprocal. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 15 Ambivalent life routes and instances of consciousness and behavior can also be *uni-directional*, i.e., primarily expressive or fulfilling of one pole rather than the other. The notion of uni-directionality must, however, be understood as relative. When a person acts, for example, on a desire that she would rather avoid, she often does this in a way that also shows her distaste, and her wider conduct demonstrates both her desire and her negative attitude to it.

    Michelangelo appears to have been ambivalent about his work in several ways. Amihud Gilead insightfully explores Micheangelo’s Platonic worries in “A Philosophical Approach to the Riddle of Michelangelo’s Florentine *Pieta*,” *Cogent Arts and Humanities* *3* (2016): 1188446 (https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2016.1188446), taking as his point of departure Michelangelo’s ambivalence towards the Fiorentine pietá. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 16 See Nussbaum, “Aeschylus and Practical Conflict.” I disagree, however, that her characters (borrowed from Aeschylus) were really trapped in tragic situations or that Aeschylus wholeheartedly took the situation, excluding their response, to be tragic. Nussbaum emphasizes that the virtuous ambivalent agent feels and expresses both attitudes (even if he acts unilaterally), yet she describes this dual expression as divided, and here too I disagree. On the last point see Hili Razinsky, “On Martha Nussbaum’s ‘Aeschylus and Practical Conflict’,” *Ethics* 125 (2015): 1164-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 17 Williams, “Ethical Consistency,” *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 166–86 at p. 177 and pp. 183–84. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 18 For my analysis of ambivalence of value judgement, see inter alia Razinsky, *Ambivalence: A Philosophical Exploration*, ch. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 19 The tragic agent’s defeated ambivalence can gradually change in a variety of ways (even if the occurrence of the horror or its approach are disregarded), including to desperate confusion, resigned indifference, and crazy resolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 20 It is intrinsic to basic rationality that it can always loosen in the sense that some of the person’s engagements at a time invite interlinking in a way that is actually lost on the person. For example, a person may have two attitudes that are in some respect opposed and that could be opposed for her, yet in fact are unconnected in her life, e.g., a person may be unwillingly contradicting herself. Basic rationality can also loosen in ways that are both more acute, and more widely affect the person’s life, and some such phenomena can superficially yet mistakenly suggest defeated ambivalence (partially because defeated ambivalence can be tangential to confused engagement with already defeated attitudes). I consider such a form of deteriorated consciousness in Hili Razinsky, “Conscious Ambivalence,” *Human Studies* 39 (2016): 365–84. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 21 Stambaugh, “On the Meaning of Ambivalence,” *Philosophy Today* 24 (1980): 161–70 at p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 22 An engagement is here understood as *wholehearted* if and only if it is neither ambivalent nor a part of ambivalence. A person is wholehearted (regarding something) if and only if her relevant attitude is wholehearted. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 23 David Velleman’s “On the Aim of Belief” includes an interesting discussion of practices of make-believe that do not consist in mere pretension. David Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press: Oxford, 2000), pp. 244–81. Tamar Gendler argues in “Self-deception as Pretense,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 21(2007): 231–258, that self-deception consists in harmoniously pretending or imagining as false something that one believes true. For such analysis to have an initial appeal in regard to defeated ambivalence between half-serious attitudes, it would have to be inverted such as to consist in imagining true the maintaining of an emotion one is aware of not having. This is closer to Ariela Lazar’s “Deceiving Oneself or Self-deceived? On the Formation of Beliefs ‘Under the Influence’,” *Mind* 108 (1999): 265–90, in which she analyses self-deceptive beliefs as fantasies of sorts, taking Madame Bovary as the prototype of a self-deceiver. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 24 More generally, hierarchic ambivalence between an attitude X and a negative attitude Y towards X forms weakness of the will if (1) it is not the case that the person also approves X or disapproves Y, and (2) when X and Y propose mutually exclusive engagements, the way these “proposals” play a part in the person’s conduct is such that she chiefly expresses X rather than Y. A negative higher-order attitude towards an attitude X typically disposes one to engage in getting rid of X or to avoid principal aspects of its expression. Attitudinal dispositions are indeterminate and an attitude is not expressed alone but rather is connected through its expression to other attitudes of the person. In particular, hierarchic ambivalence*, including weakness of the will*, permits that the low-order attitude is expressed very differently than it would were one not hostile to it. All the same, for someone’s engagement to be conceived as akratic, it would be fair to say that such modifications do not, on the whole, positively express the aspects of the high-order attitude (Y) that propose such engagements one is disposed against in maintaining X. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 25 In fact, Svevo also depicts Zeno’s actual studies as very unsatisfactory. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. 26 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Stambaugh, revised and with a foreword D. J. Schmidt (Albany NY: State Univ. of New York, 2010), section 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. 27 See also Greenspan, “A Case of Mixed Feelings,” p. 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. 28 Luckily we always (intentionally or unintentionally) find a way out, but in so doing we do not express the multivalence and usually it is not quite true to say we act on the poles. Thus, even when the way out involves adhering to one of the desires, it at the same time transforms it, which it would typically do as if from the outside rather than by directly reconnecting the desire. For example, if the hungry person quickly leaves the house, focusing on taking long steps to the pizzeria and avoiding or disregarding any undermining thoughts, these efforts at control largely express his desire to eat, rather than a desire to have a pizza. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. 29 In the following section (“Ambiguity,” section 37) Heidegger acknowledges that it is only in an ambivalent (non-defeated) manner that a person lives as *das man* and is thus curious, although his ambivalent tone there also suggests that *das man* is not ambivalent, his conduct only imitating the individualist or authentic mode of living. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. 30 He remains ignorant in so far as knowledge is supposed to shape one’s further understanding and involvement. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. 31 A case such as the above, in which the political engagement is enough to shake one’s ambivalent life as one of the curious crowd, may also suggest that from the start, this concern broke the chain of defeated multivalence and comprised more than a merely curious interest. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)