

Ambivalence: A Philosophical Exploration. BY HILI RAZINSKY. (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017, Pp. ix + 285.)

The fact of ambivalence is familiar enough. We want the extra piece of pie, but we also don't want it. We love someone, and yet find ourselves unable to completely commit. We discover feelings of immense relief at the passing of an elderly loved one who had a rough go of it at the end, but can't help but to feel deeply ashamed by these feelings.

Despite this, the keen awareness most of us have to the phenomenon of ambivalence brings little succor. It is deeply unsettling to be ambivalent—to be torn between mutually incompatible commitments, or courses of action, or ways of being. Conflicts of these sorts seem to reveal that there is some deep and perhaps irresolvable incoherence in our selves. For this reason many have regarded it as an especially serious kind of agential failing. How can we be healthy as agents if we cannot successfully excise psychological elements whose presence threatens to pull us apart?

Hili Razinsky's *Ambivalence: A Philosophical Exploration* stands athwart this traditional response to the phenomenon of ambivalence. As she understands ambivalence, "a person is ambivalent ... if she holds two opposed mental attitudes toward one and the same object," (16). In such cases, the conflict that occurs between the agent's opposed attitudes is not incidental. Rather, the opposed attitudes are necessarily connected, as polarized reactions to a single possibility. The ambivalent agent, on this view, is both attracted to and repulsed from the object of her thought or desire. However, Razinsky denies that this kind of opposition is naturally detrimental to unified or integrated agency, she sees the divisions themselves as forming the basis of who we are as agents. For Razinsky, ambivalence might be unsettling, but it is not, as St. Augustine puts it, "a disease of the mind" (*Confessions* 8.9). Indeed, on Razinsky's view, what you are ambivalent about and whether, and if so, how you resolve that ambivalence might reveal rather than impede your rational agency.

A striking thing about Razinsky's understanding of ambivalence here is that it is quite broad, in that it can exist not only between motives or intentions or emotions—all attitudes that are directly implicated by practical agency—but also between beliefs. On first exposure to this capacious understanding of what's at stake in ambivalence, one

might think that it goes too far. After all, incoherence in beliefs, say simultaneously consciously believing p and $\sim p$, seems if not straightforwardly impossible, quite clearly irrational. Yet wanting it to be the case that a while simultaneously wanting it to be the case that $\sim a$ seems not only possible, but utterly banal. What this means is that the task Razinsky sets for herself is quite ambitious: she is attempting to offer a theory of a broad range of psychological oppositions that occur in creatures like us. (Of course, her theory isn't meant to encompass *all* of the possible ways in which creatures like us experience psychological opposition, but even with this caveat, her account is still impressive in its breadth.)

Razinsky motivates this broad understanding of ambivalence not by mere stipulation—she does not just say, “opposition in one’s beliefs is itself a form of ambivalence.” Instead, she explores, primarily through a thoughtful discussion of self-deception, how the kind of conflict that arises in ordinary cases of what we might call “practical ambivalence” has real similarities with forms of opposition that occur in the realm of beliefs. This methodological commitment on Razinsky’s part—to follow the phenomenon where it leads—is a welcome change from much of the literature on ambivalence. The more common approach is to imperiously declare that *ambivalence* is a precise kind of conflict, and then to hand wave counterexamples and alternative explanations of the phenomenon by way of “well, *that’s* not what I’m talking about.” It’s of course fair enough for a philosopher to very narrowly circumscribe the object of their concern, but the experience that most of us have with being ambivalent is incredibly varied and complex. So whatever precision or clarity is gained by *ex ante* proscriptions on what is and what isn’t within the purview of a theory of something like ambivalence, it comes at the expense of the richness of our lived experiences—which is, you know, why philosophical reflection is such a vital endeavor in the first place.

What, then, do we learn from Razinsky’s wide-ranging explorations into the varied and complex phenomenon of ambivalence? Most notably, perhaps, we get a response to the familiar argument that’s most recently due to Harry Frankfurt (precursors to this argument go back at least to Augustine, if not to Plato himself). According to this argument, ambivalence is incompatible with genuine *resolution* of one’s will. To answer this challenge Razinsky introduces what she calls “compromise actions.” Compromise

actions are both significant forms of action and issue an ambivalent will. Their possibility depends on the fact that our desires rarely have strict satisfaction conditions. Instead they have tolerances, and if the resultant state of affairs fits within the tolerance in question then, even if the desire is not strictly satisfied, it might still be the case that it has been promoted. (After all, you can promote a desire even if you fail to satisfy it because you can do things that make its satisfaction more likely relative to a contextually dependent baseline.) In the case of the ambivalent agent, who has conflicting motives, she is able to autonomously act in meaningful ways because she can perform acts that, even if they compromise satisfaction of either motive, fall within the acceptable range.

So, for example, when a person both wishes and does not wish to practice law finds a firm who will let him work part-time, he performs a compromised action. He has, on her view, made an autonomous decision and yet not done in a way that obviates his ambivalence. Razinsky acknowledges that this is initially puzzling, since even a part-time lawyer still is a lawyer. As a result, in taking the part-time job, he has apparently satisfied the former desire and thwarted the latter. But this quick response fails to recognize that the etiologies of his wishes might reveal this decision neither fully vindicates his desire to be a lawyer nor fully undermines his desire not to be one. If his desire to be a lawyer is tied, for example, to his parent's desires for him and to their conception of what a successful life is, then by not jumping into that life completely, he is giving real voice to the fact that his own wish was not to be a lawyer. The compromise action is thus self-governed because it quite literally reflects the extant conflict in the young man's self.

Razinsky doesn't say too much more about compromise actions of this sort, but what she gives us here is quite suggestive. Concerns about ambivalence often fail to appreciate that in cases of genuine ambivalence, the presence of competing motives reveal genuine normative constraints on how the agent can proceed. Suppose I wish to take a more prestigious, better paying job but also wish to refrain, since in so doing, I'll have to end an otherwise promising new relationship with someone I have come to love. Even if I ultimately opt for the new job in this case, the fact that I rightly value my new relationship nevertheless gives me reason to pursue the job in ways that respect the value of that relationship. I cannot end the relationship as if it were nothing, even if we assume that rationally, taking the job is the thing to do. In other words, how I am reasonable in

proceeding crucially depends on me respecting the oppositional motive in my subsequent actions.

Or we can put this point another way. It's relatively uncontroversial that rationality might require us to retrospectively feel ambivalence. But if Razinsky is right about compromise actions, then this suggests something parallel in the case of deliberation: that *how* one acts is constrained by the presence of competing values that an agent might be rationally ambivalent about. This seems to me to be a genuinely important point. There are (not surprisingly) other important points in Razinsky's book, but I'm already pushing my word count. So I'll conclude.

We find ambivalence so unsettling, I think, because its presence starkly reminds that we can't always get what we want. But this goes too far, and Razinsky's *Ambivalence* helps us to see why. Ambivalence does not disclose just how incoherent and fractured we are as agents. Rather, as Razinsky shows, it illuminates a space in which there is room for autonomous self-expression. Compromised actions are not compromises of agency. They instead reveal a deep spring of human creativity: the people we make ourselves into emerge from our limitations.¹

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