Experiencing the Conflict: The Rationality of Ambivalence

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1 Introduction

Attitudinal ambivalence is generally understood as the simultaneous holding of negative and positive evaluations toward the same object. This essay concerns what being in such evaluative conflict means for a subject: what its distinctive psychological features are and whether experiencing ambivalence can be rational in some circumstances.

Although it is an empirically well-documented phenomenon (Schneider and Schwarz 2017; van Harreveld et al. 2015) and an important aspect of ordinary experience, ambivalence has not received enough philosophical attention. Frankfurt's (1999) and Frankfurtian (Swindell 2010) accounts understand ambivalence as a conflict between desires. It is also argued that ambivalence can be generated by conflicting emotions (Greenspan 1980; Koch 1987) or value judgments (Razinsky 2014). However, these philosophical theories of ambivalence have not sufficiently highlighted that ambivalence is more than the mere co-occurrence of two opposite attitudes. As I will argue, experiencing ambivalence entails having a distinctive kind of *attitude* characterized by cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Understanding ambivalence as a distinctive attitude elegantly unifies the different perspectives from which ambivalence can be observed.

The rationality of ambivalence has been debated (Frankfurt 1999; Marino 2011). This debate is mainly focused on whether ambivalence is rational in contexts where an agent is committed to acting, which I will call practical situations. However, it should not be neglected that an ambivalent attitude can be elicited in situations where a decision is not required. In this paper, I will provide considerations in defense of the rationality of ambivalence in both types of situations: practical and nonpractical.

This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part (sections 2–4), I will provide a comprehensive, empirically informed account of ambivalence. I will state three necessary conditions according to which ambivalence can be experienced (section 2). I will show how these conditions are sufficient to distinguish ambivalence

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from other evaluative conflicts (section 3). Then, I will consider the distinctive cognitive, affective, and behavioral features of an ambivalent attitude (section 4). The second part of the paper (sections 5-7) addresses the question of the rationality of ambivalence. In particular, I will argue that an ambivalent attitude can be responsive to reasons in nonpractical (section 6) as well as in practical situations (section 7).

2 Three Conditions for Experiencing Ambivalence

Although its specific nature is debated, there is substantial agreement among philosophers and psychologists that attitudinal ambivalence involves some kind of *evaluative conflict*. More precisely, it is largely acknowledged that experiencing ambivalence entails the simultaneous occurrence of positive *and* negative evaluations toward the same object or situation (Schneider and Schwarz 2017; van Harreveld et al. 2015). Consider, for instance, a slice of Sachertorte: on the one hand, people tend to evaluate it positively because it is pleasant and tasty, but, on the other hand, it may affect people's health and fitness and is thereby also negatively perceived. For these reasons, Sachertorte typically provokes an ambivalent attitude in people.

The two opposite evaluations that contribute to ambivalence can be of different types. For instance, as some authors (Greenspan 1980; Koch 1987) have argued, ambivalence can be generated by two opposite emotions (e.g., amusement and sadness). However, ambivalence might also be derived from two conflicting value judgments (Razinsky 2014) or a combination of emotion and judgment. Some authors (Frankfurt 1999; Swindell 2010) suggest that attitudinal ambivalence is fundamentally a conflict between *desires*. Nevertheless, it is disputable whether ambivalence *exclusively* concerns conflicts between desires or whether conflicts between desires constitute paradigmatic cases of ambivalence. First, one should consider that it is controversial in the philosophy of emotions as to whether emotions can be reduced to desires (see Deonna and Teroni 2012, 28-39). Second, the question of whether normative judgments are fundamentally desire-like attitudes is also a matter of metaethical dispute. For these reasons, I remain pluralist about the types of evaluations that can generate ambivalence: ambivalence can be understood as resulting from a conflict between responses such as desires, emotions or value judgments.

The mere occurrence of an evaluative conflict is not a sufficient condition for ambivalence. Generally, in an evaluative conflict, one of the two evaluations may prevail. Instead, specific to ambivalence is the fact that none of the evaluations in conflict prevail; in other words, the subject assigns the same weight to both. For example, if, after giving the question full consideration, a subject determines that she should not eat Sachertorte because fitness is more important than temporary gustatory pleasure, then the cake is not ambivalent for her. In contrast, Sachertorte remains a source of ambivalence for subjects for whom fitness and pleasure carry the same weight. This condition is crucial to distinguish ambivalence from other types of evaluative conflicts such as weakness of will or recalcitrant evaluations.

Arguably, a further condition is necessary for a subject to experience ambivalence. An evaluative conflict in which no evaluation prevails might be seen as temporary or solvable. In contrast, a subject will feel ambivalence toward an object or

a situation if she is aware that the two opposite evaluations are *irreducibly* opposed, i.e., the subject will be conscious that the two evaluations favor two mutually exclusive actions or attitudes. As has been argued (Razinsky 2014), the characteristic of ambivalent objects is one of “mutual undermining” between conflicting evaluative properties. For example, in the case of Sachertorte, the same features that make it so tasty and pleasant (chocolate, sugar, butter, etc.) can damage one’s fitness or health; that is, its tastiness and pleasantness *have a cost* in terms of fitness and health; for this reason, the two evaluations are irreducibly opposed. Arguably, experiencing this mutual opposition is what distinguishes ambivalence from other related experiences such as ambiguity or confusion, where the conflict is perceived as only temporary.

Therefore, attitudinal ambivalence, as it is understood in this essay, is a very specific type of evaluative conflict. Three conditions must be present for a subject to experience ambivalence. First, the subject’s evaluation of an object or a situation is both positive and negative. Second, the two evaluations hold the same weight for the subject. Third, the subject is aware that the conflicting evaluations are irreducibly opposed.

3 What Ambivalence is Not

The three conditions stated in the section above are sufficient to distinguish ambivalence from other related phenomena. Understanding why the following similar experiences are not cases of ambivalence may help to better define the domain of ambivalence.

It is important to contrast ambivalence with *ambiguity*. In ordinary language, the two terms tend to be used as synonyms. However, upon closer phenomenological consideration, the experience of an object as ambiguous and the experience of an object as ambivalent are different. Indeed, an object or situation is ambiguous to the extent that its true nature is for some reason unclear. For instance, suppose you have just met a person with a pleasant demeanor although her kind manner causes you to suspect that this person’s aim is to take advantage of you; this person is experienced as ambiguous insofar as she *appears* to be nice but may not be as nice as she appears. This type of ambiguity is arguably not a case of ambivalence. In such a case, the opposing evaluation is due to a lack of information, which impedes the subject from correctly evaluating the object. In other words, the subject experiences an *epistemic gap* between the actual nature of the object and how that object manifests itself to her; this experienced epistemic gap induces the subject to perceive the evaluative conflict as solvable through the acquisition of new relevant information. In contrast, in the case of ambivalence, the subject acknowledges that the object clearly presents itself: she possesses all the relevant information required for its evaluation. Therefore, cases of ambivalence are distinguishable from cases of ambiguity.

As I argued, ambivalence occurs whenever an object is positively and negatively evaluated *at the same time*. This is not the case when two opposite evaluations are relative to the same object but refer to different contexts. For example, suppose that Mark is a cold person in public yet very kind with his family. Arguably, this does not mean that Mark is ambivalent. Mark could be described in ambivalent terms only if

as his behaviors could be evaluated as both kind and cold *in the same circumstance*. Thus, the two cases are distinct. To the extent that two opposite evaluations are circumscribed to different contexts, they pacifically coexist, i.e., there is an implicit reference to a broader picture that reconciles the two aspects of the object. In contrast, in ambivalence, the two opposite evaluations are irreducibly opposed. Therefore, opposing contextualized evaluations do not constitute ambivalence.

It is also important to distinguish ambivalence from conflicts due to *recalcitrant evaluations*. A recalcitrant evaluation (typically an emotion but any kind of automatic evaluation) is an evaluation that conflicts with a subject's best reflective judgment (Brady 2009; Benbaji 2013). Suppose that after considering both evaluative aspects, one were to decide to eat the slice of Sachertorte in disregard of its possible harmful consequences. Further suppose that, while eating the cake, one were to feel guilty for diminishing one's health and fitness. Such recalcitrant guilt does not constitute an experience of ambivalence to the extent that the subject has overridden the evaluation by deliberation. Through reflection, the subject decided that the negative aspect of the object was not as relevant as the positive aspect. Therefore, in this and other cases of recalcitrant evaluation, the conflicting evaluations do not hold the same weight for the subject. Instead, experiencing ambivalence requires the two evaluations to be considered equally relevant.

For similar reasons, ambivalence is not a case of *akrasia* (or *weakness of will*). Unlike the ambivalent person, the akratic agent, having given an object or situation full consideration, assigns more value to one of two conflicting evaluations even though she acts against such understanding. According to some, this makes weakness of will an irrational attitude: the agent does not do what she thinks is the better thing to do despite having fully considered both evaluations. Whereas the akratic agent tends to blame herself for not doing what she believes is the better thing to do, the ambivalent person tends to blame the *situation*, which impedes her ability to pursue two equally valuable ends. In this respect, ambivalence and weakness of will are quite distinct phenomena.

Finally, ambivalence is distinct from *neutrality* or *indifference*. Whereas ambivalence entails the coexistence of positive and negative evaluations, neutrality denotes the absence of any evaluation. Therefore, unlike ambivalence, if a subject is neutral, it means that she does not experience any evaluative conflict.

4 Ambivalence as Attitude: Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Components

Having distinguished ambivalence from other related phenomena, it is worth elaborating on the distinctive features of attitudinal ambivalence. In what follows, I will proceed from the following consideration: ambivalence is more than the co-occurrence of two opposite attitudes. Experiencing ambivalence entails having a distinctive attitude characterized by *cognitive*, *affective*, and *behavioral* components. I will consider these three complementary aspects in turn.

Let us start from the cognitive (or representational) content of ambivalence. As I have argued, ambivalence involves simultaneous opposite evaluations of the same

object. Thus, if a subject experiences ambivalence, it is likely that she represents an object as possessing two opposite evaluative properties. For example, to the extent that the slice of Sachertorte is perceived as ambivalent, it is represented as *pleasant* but *unhealthy*. However, the presence of two opposing evaluative properties might not be sufficient to represent an object as *ambivalent*. As I argued, a subject who experiences ambivalence is also aware of the mutual opposition between the evaluative properties. Therefore, a relational property of *opposition* between the two must also be part of the representational content of an ambivalent attitude. The presence of such relational property marks the difference between the experience of ambivalence and cases where the evaluative conflict is only apparent or temporary.

As I stated, the hallmark of ambivalence is the experience of an irreducible evaluative conflict. From an affective point of view, being conflicted is tendentially unpleasant, especially in decision-making contexts where a subject is forced to favor one of the conflicting evaluations. There is some empirical evidence in support of this perspective showing that people committed to choosing in an ambivalent situation report negative emotions such as regret, anxiety, or fear (van Harreveld et al. 2009). However, it is worth noting that the unpleasantness of ambivalence is neither universal nor independent of the context (van Harreveld et al. 2015). It is documented that the discomfort induced by ambivalence varies according to culture; for instance, Asian people, who are more used to dialectical thinking, have developed more tolerance toward evaluative conflicts and report less discomfort than Western people (Williams and Aaker 2002). Moreover, the feeling of discomfort is attenuated or absent in contexts in which an individual is not committed to choosing. For example, some studies have reported that people find that expressing an ambivalent opinion about a controversial question to be desirable to the extent that they wish to appear fair and knowledgeable (Haddock and Maio 2004; Pillaud et al. 2013). Therefore, unpleasantness might not be an intrinsic feature of ambivalence but rather quite dependent on the context and individual differences.

Finally, let us consider the behavioral consequences of an ambivalent attitude. It is common in the literature to state that ambivalence leads to action paralysis or vacillation (Frankfurt 1999). This platitude finds support in some empirical evidence highlighting that evaluative conflicts weaken the relationship between reported intentions and behavior (Armitage and Conner 2004); for this reason, ambivalent attitudes are found to be less predictive of behavior than univalent attitudes. Ambivalence also has important effects on information processing. It has been documented that ambivalent attitudes lead to more systematic reflection to reduce the discomfort caused by evaluative conflict (Jonas et al. 1997).¹ Systematic cognitive processing, in turn, tends to generate stronger correspondence between attitudes and intentions compared to nonambivalent attitudes, which means that ambivalence might not necessarily be a weak type of attitude relative to behavior. Finally, ambivalence that is generated by conflicting emotions has shown interesting consequences. For example,

¹ In contrast with these results, another study (Nordgren et al. 2006) reported that an ambivalent condition favors biased information processing, that is, the subjects tend to collect evidence only for one side of the evaluative conflict to quickly reduce the discomfort.

Rees and colleagues (2013) documented that priming subjects with ambivalent emotions causes their judgments about different topics to be more accurate insofar as the opposed emotions increase the receptivity of the subjects to alternative perspectives. Fong (2006) reported a significant correlation between ambivalent emotions and creativity. Specifically, Fong theorizes that conflicting emotions inform a subject that she is in an unusual environment; this, in turn, will lead to major flexibility of thought, which increases the subject's disposition to make creative associations between apparently unrelated objects.

The three components discussed in this section might be considered three distinct types of ambivalence: cognitive ambivalence, affective ambivalence, and behavioral ambivalence. However, the three types of ambivalence often co-occur and are strongly interdependent.² For example, affective ambivalence is plausibly elicited by the cognition of an object as ambivalent, and an ambivalent behavior in turn might be an attempt to deal with emotional discomfort. The concept of "attitude", as it is understood in social psychology, comprises all these points of view on ambivalence (see van Harreveld et al. 2015). Thus, I understand them as three aspects according to which an ambivalent attitude can be observed.

To summarize, experiencing ambivalence means having a certain kind of attitude toward an object or state of affairs. The object is represented as ambivalent, i.e., as possessing two evaluative properties in a relation of opposition. As some empirical evidence shows, being in an ambivalent mental state is tendentially but not necessarily unpleasant. Additionally, ambivalence is characterized by diverse behavioral consequences such as weak intentions, systematic information processing, accurate judgments, and creativity.

5 Can Ambivalence Be Rational? Framing the Issue

Thus far, I have provided a comprehensive empirically informed account of ambivalence. We are now in a position to assess whether ambivalence is a *rational* attitude in some circumstances. The question is debated (Frankfurt 1999; Marino 2011) and requires some preliminary remarks to clarify the kind of assessment that is at stake.

"Being rational" has many meanings. Here, I understand rationality as *reason-responsiveness*. Accordingly, an attitude is a rational response to an object under specific circumstances to the extent that it is responsive to certain normative reasons that favor that attitude. Therefore, an ambivalent attitude is rational only insofar as it is favored by certain normative reasons relative to the context in which the attitude emerges. Thus, the reasons that can justify an ambivalent attitude must be relative to the particular *situation* in which a subject is present. As I understand it, a situation is an agent-relative condition that is spatially and temporarily circumscribed. In the normative construal of a situation, the evaluative point of view of an agent is assumed. Such

² Philosophical (Deonna and Teroni 2012) and empirical (Scherer and Moors 2019) research on emotions highlights how cognitive content, emotional arousal, and behavioral tendencies are highly intertwined.

evaluative point of view includes what the subject cares about, what she regards as important, and the knowledge she possesses. However, in addition to subjective values, the situation is composed of objective features that favor or disfavor certain kinds of responses *in light of the agent's values and knowledge*. In other words, a situation contains some normative constraints that render a subject's response rational or irrational. On this basis, we can state the conditions of rationality for ambivalence as follows:

(R) an ambivalent attitude A toward an object in a situation S is rational if, and only if, A is responsive to some reason in S.

Therefore, given (R), arguing that ambivalence *can* be rational means that there are some situations in which an ambivalent attitude is responsive to reasons. Conversely, arguing that ambivalence is *inherently* irrational is to state that there is no situation in which an ambivalent attitude is responsive to reasons.

It must be conceded that (R) makes the rationality of ambivalence at least *prima facie* plausible. Subjective values tend to conflict in particular circumstances, which makes some situations ambivalent. For example, for a person who cares about both fitness and eating a good dessert, the possibility of eating a piece of Sachertorte is an ambivalent situation. To the extent that there are ambivalent situations, ambivalent responses in those situations are likely justified. On this basis, it might be argued that ambivalence is rational in such conflicting circumstances. Nevertheless, the mere occurrence of an evaluative conflict is not sufficient to justify an ambivalent attitude. As I argued, a subject who has an ambivalent attitude represents two evaluative properties as irreducibly opposed. Aware of the irreducible conflict, the ambivalent subject refuses to favor one of the two evaluations. Therefore, if ambivalence is rational, such rejection of prioritizing must be justified by some further reason beyond the mere evaluative conflict. Stated otherwise, if an ambivalent attitude is rational, it must be proven that not solving the conflict is legitimate given the circumstances.

So understood, the rationality of ambivalence does not entail the *objectivity* of ambivalence, i.e., its mind independence. Whether some ambivalent attitudes are rational because there are mind-independent ambivalent objects or because humans just represent some objects as ambivalent is a question that I will leave open here.

Situations in which ambivalent attitudes can be provoked are of two types: *practical* and *nonpractical*. In practical ambivalent situations, two subjective values conflict, and the subject is committed to acting. By comparison, in *nonpractical ambivalent situations*, two subjective values conflict, but the subject is not committed to act. In what follows, I will show that ambivalence can be rationally justified in both nonpractical and practical contexts. I will first defend the rationality of ambivalence in nonpractical contexts, which appear less controversial; then, I will argue that ambivalence can be rational even in practical situations.

6 Ambivalence Can Be Rational in Nonpractical Situations

The philosophical literature often neglects to address the idea that ambivalence can be provoked in contexts where the subject is not committed to making a decision. It is possible that some situations do not demand action but simply an appropriate

emotional or *cognitive* response. Can an ambivalent response be rationally justified in such a situation?

One could argue that, from a cognitive point of view, an ambivalent attitude is never rational because it entails *logical inconsistency*. As I argued, an ambivalent attitude occurs whenever a subject represents an object as possessing two opposite evaluative properties. In deontic logic, assigning two opposite normative properties to the same object means that the subject believes that the object is both *compulsory* and *not compulsory* at the same time. Therefore, under such logic, the ambivalent subject's belief would be understood as inconsistent.

From a formal point of view, there might be some strategies to resolve the logical inconsistency. For instance, one could argue that the two evaluative properties belong to different normative domains (e.g., *pleasantness* and *healthiness*), regulated by distinct deontic operators. In this fashion, the subject does not hold a contradictory belief. Nonetheless, this might be an ad hoc move. Thus, I shall consider two relevant cases where an ambivalent attitude is plausibly a rational response. From the examples, I will draw a general lesson in favor of the cognitive rationality of ambivalence.

The first example is a situation in which an honest opinion about a controversial subject is demanded. In particular, suppose a judgment about the French Revolution is asked. It is largely acknowledged that the French Revolution can be seen as an ambivalent phenomenon: on the one hand, some fundamental civil rights were enhanced, but, on the other hand, the affirmation of those rights had a high cost in terms of violence and the destruction of tradition. Importantly, this is not a case of ambiguity insofar as we have sufficient historical knowledge to understand how the events have gone. It is likely that no further information would solve the evaluative conflict: the French Revolution is the type of event that reveals an irreducible contradiction within Western society. Therefore, an ambivalent response to the French Revolution is expected and reasonable in light of the irreducible conflicting nature of the phenomenon. For reasons of honesty and fairness, it is not expected that a subject would express a nonambivalent attitude toward such a controversial historical event. This relevant link between intellectual fairness and ambivalence is also confirmed by the above-mentioned empirical evidence reporting that ambivalent attitudes give a positive impression of fairness and knowledgeableness, while non-ambivalent opinions appear biased and suspicious (Haddock and Maio 2004, 435, Pillaud et al. 2013). However, one could object that in such circumstances, a *neutral* opinion is what fairness requires rather than ambivalence, but this might be inaccurate. As I argued, neutrality entails indifference toward the evaluative nature of an object, and a subject who cares about the most fundamental democratic values can hardly be indifferent toward the ambivalence of the French Revolution. Therefore, in this kind of scenario, an ambivalent attitude is a rational response given some of the noted plausible responses.

The second example I shall consider concerns the aesthetic domain. Suppose you watch one of the famous Italian-style comedies of the 60s and early 70s such as *Divorce Italian Style* (1961) or *The Easy Life* (1962). The content of these movies is notably ambivalent: the same scenes are superficially *comic* and *funny*, but they are also *sad* to the extent that they represent death, corruption, or dishonesty. As

a result, the movies tend to provoke mixed feelings in the audience: amusement is often accompanied by a sense of bitterness. Importantly, for the present purposes, the movies are not simply funny and sad, but the two evaluative properties stand in a relation of opposition: the comedies aim to represent that having fun and being care-free have an evaluative cost because these states of mind require a lack of sympathy and a loss of moral values. Thus, a deeper understanding of these works requires a grasp of the mutual opposition between the evaluative properties. Therefore, an ambivalent response is likely expected in the appreciation of such movies. Not having an ambivalent attitude toward the content of such a movie entails not fully appreciating its aesthetic features. This means that an ambivalent attitude can be desirable for aesthetic reasons.

The two above examples constitute a good case for the reasons-responsiveness of ambivalence in some nonpractical situations. Some situations demand an ambivalent response that represents a phenomenon as possessing two evaluative properties in relation to opposition. Overriding or ignoring one evaluative aspect of such a phenomenon entails a lack of appreciation of its nature. This is the general lesson to be obtained from the discussed cases.

7 Ambivalence Can Be Rational in Practical Situations

In the former section, I have provided some reasons for which ambivalent attitudes can be rational in situations that do not demand a decision. I have argued that there are some objects toward which ambivalence is an appropriate cognitive or emotional response. However, it is more controversial whether ambivalence can be rational in contexts that demand a decision. In this section, I will argue that ambivalence can be rational even in practical situations.

As I defined it, a practical ambivalent situation is one that requires an agent to act despite the evaluative conflict. The necessity of making a decision might constitute a strong point against the reasons-responsiveness of ambivalence in such circumstances. On this basis, philosophers such as Harry Frankfurt have argued that ambivalence constitutes practical irrationality (Frankfurt 1999). Indeed, Frankfurt seems to be mainly concerned with the behavioral aspect of ambivalence. In particular, he argues that, to the extent the ambivalent person has conflicting desires, she tends to be paralyzed whenever she encounters conflicting situations or to not pursue her values effectively:

“A person is ambivalent, then, only if he is indecisive concerning whether to be for or against a certain psychic position. Now this kind of indecisiveness is as irrational, in its way, as holding contradictory beliefs. The disunity of an ambivalent person’s will prevent him from effectively pursuing and satisfactorily attaining his goals.” (99)

In contrast, Frankfurt argues that a consistent and unified self tends to more effectively pursue what she wants. Based on these considerations, an ambivalent attitude is irrational.

The objection to the practical rationality of ambivalence can be summarized as follows. First, it is assumed that practical conflicting situations rationally require effective decisions. Second, it is argued that ambivalent responses either impede action (i.e., lead to action paralysis) or favor ineffective conduct. Based on these premises, it is concluded that ambivalence is never a rational response to practical conflicting situations.

The view that ambivalence is inherently linked with action paralysis and ineffectiveness of action finds some support in the empirical evidence that shows how ambivalent attitudes are tendentially weak and less predictive of behavior (Armitage and Conner 2004). However, ambivalence can be conceptually dissociated from these undesirable behavioral consequences, or so I shall argue.

Action paralysis is not an intrinsic problem of ambivalence. On the one hand, it must be conceded that an action impasse has multiple causes: any kind of indecision or uncertainty can lead to hesitation before making a decision. On the other hand, it is worth noting that the ambivalent person *can* act if forced to choose. What mainly distinguishes an ambivalent agent from a nonambivalent agent is that the former does not believe that the evaluative conflict can be solved by the particular deliberation. However, this does not exclude that the agent takes the responsibility to act if a situation demands it. According to the ambivalent agent, evaluative conflict persists even if one decides to favor one of the two values in a particular situation. Then, if the ambivalent person is committed to deciding, she could endorse the following statement: “I choose A over not-A because I am forced by the situation. Even though I choose A, I still do not evaluate A as being more important than not-A”. Therefore, action paralysis is not a problem of ambivalence per se; however, it may be the consequence of a deeper incapacity of a subject to assume her responsibility to act.

More specific to ambivalence is the refusal to prioritize one of the two values at stake in a practical situation. According to Frankfurt, the continuous switching from one side to another leads the agent to lack identification in her actions and to ineffectively pursue her values. However, as Marino (2011, 56) argues, the vacillation of the ambivalent subject might be the sign of an attempt to obtain a *compromise*.³ Consider the ambivalent situation of a woman (Margaret) who has received an important job offer abroad. Margaret cares about her career but also about her family, which would be affected if Margaret accepted the offer. Margaret might accept the offer but with the commitment to not disadvantaging the family too much, for example, by not forcing the family to move abroad. Constantly moving from her workplace to her family might impede Margaret from having a perfect family life or from attaining the highest career achievements but could be a good compromise to have a happy life in balance between two equally valuable things. The case of Margaret suggests that it is possible to be extremely firm and coherent relative to our

³ In reply to Frankfurt, Marino defends the rationality of “valuational inconsistency”. I agree with her in several points. However, I am not sure whether her account of valuational inconsistency overlaps with what I have defined as ambivalence. By this latter, I mean an attitude toward an object in a specific situation (spatially and temporally circumscribed); in contrast, valuational inconsistency seems to constitute a general condition of the self.

own values *while being ambivalent*, i.e., by making compromises. Then, ineffectiveness of action might not be an intrinsic consequence of ambivalence. This hypothesis also finds support in the above-mentioned empirical evidence showing that some ambivalent attitudes, if accompanied by systematic information processing, are followed by stronger behavioral intentions than nonambivalent attitudes (Jonas et al. 1997).

In sum, there are reasons to think that paralysis and ineffectiveness of action are not inherently related to ambivalence such that ambivalent behavior can be rational in some practical situations. For instance, such behavior might be the sensitive attempt of an agent to obtain a compromise between two things that she values to the same extent.

8 Concluding Remarks

This essay has provided a comprehensive and empirically informed account of ambivalence. I have argued that ambivalence constitutes a specific type of evaluative conflict in which an object is evaluated negatively and positively at the same time; none of the two evaluations prevail, and the subject is aware of their irreducible opposition. On this basis, I have shown that the experience of ambivalence can be distinguished from other kinds of evaluative conflicts such as ambiguity, contextual evaluations, recalcitrant evaluations, and weakness of will. Then, I have argued that experiencing ambivalence means having a distinctive attitude defined by cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Finally, I have sketched some considerations for the rationality of ambivalent attitudes in some suitable circumstances. The outline of my argument can be summarized as follows. First, I have defined the rationality of ambivalence as an assessment relative to the normative constraints of a particular situation. Second, I have distinguished practical situations in which a subject is committed to acting from nonpractical situations in which the subject is not forced to act. Third, I have provided some reasons for which an ambivalent attitude can be justified in nonpractical and practical situations.

In this work, I have suggested that the rationality of ambivalence requires that two evaluative properties stand in a relation of opposition. I have not stated anything specific about how this condition can occur. Thus, more work needs to be done to better understand the conditions of the rationality of ambivalence. However, I hope to have offered a good starting point for identifying situations in which an ambivalent attitude is rationally justifiable.

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