Eidos 1 (3) 2018
A JOURNAL FOR
PHILOSOPHY
OF CULTURE

DOI: 10.26319/3124

Tamara Nehrub
Institute of Philosophy
University of Warsaw

The Person as a Self-Conflicting Unity

Review of Hili Razinsky's *Ambivalence: A Philosophical Exploration* (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 296 pages.

In *Ambivalence: A Philosophical Exploration*, Hili Razinsky defines a conception of ambivalence in contrast to what she perceives to be its denial or marginalization as a specifically prominent form of mental attitude by predominant philosophical theories. In light of this, Razinsky wishes to analyze the existence of this phenomenon in the context of considering it as a basically rational character of mental attitudes. Of the claim is that rethinking ambivalence in the manner provided in this book will shed new light on the problems of personhood, rationality, and their relations.

Hili Razinsky works as a researcher at Language, Mind and Cognition Group (LanCog), Centre of Philosophy, University of Lisbon. She has also had fellowships at King's College London, The Centre for Advanced Study in Sofia, Ben-Gurion University, and The University of Haifa (Israel). Her essays such as "Conscious Ambivalence" (2016), "On Martha Nussbaum's Aeschylus and Practical Conflict" (2015), "A Live Language: Concreteness, Openness, Ambivalence" (2015), "An Outline for Ambivalence of Value Judgment" (2014), "The Behavioral Conflict of Emotion" (2014) give testament to her long-standing interest in the concept of ambivalence, and it's relationship with the concepts of personhood, rationality, consciousness, belief, emotion, action, value, language and communication.

Have you ever noticed how many conflicting thoughts come to your mind per day? How many times have these thoughts contradicted with your actions? Hili Razinsky starts her book by offering the claim that we all are fundamentally ambivalent beings. We desire things that are repelling or frightening to us, we hold beliefs and doubt them, we are happy and unhappy about the same thing. The author argues that ambivalence is a "dynamic array of life" and an ordinary yet philosophically significant mode of intentionality.

Throughout her work Razinsky explores the character of ambivalence by drawing upon the ways in which a wide range of philosophers, thinkers and scholars have dealt with it.

Her starting point is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics,* in particular its emphases respectively on the "gold mean" and the conception of "*akrasia*" (weakness of will). Aristotle conceives of the "golden mean" as a virtuous state of character, and suggests that both scarcity and overabundance are detrimental. In line with her argumentation, Razinsky claims that virtuous persons for Aristotle are inherently ambivalent in aiming at their target: they have to be in a state of avoiding extremes, state between "excess" and "lack". In turn, Razinsky describes *akrasia* in the context of the deficit of self-restraint that is involved in the individual's experience of excessive desires. As a result of some particularly potent passion, the unrestrained persons go against their reason. Moreover, she is interested in Aristotelian practical syllogism, and the way in which it can be used to compromise ambivalent desires.

Razinsky argues that idea of ambivalence is also present in Søren Kierkegaard's and Martin Heidegger's works, where it is treated as the archetypal form of human disease or sin. Ambivalence constitutes the wrong way of life; for these two figures, while finding "authentic self" necessitates taking a fuller and more committed notion of personal responsibility for affirming one's own decisions and actions.

The book then turns to Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenology. His *Being and Nothingness* considers human life in the context of the inherent ambivalence and manifestation of Sartrean "bad faith". According to French phenomenologist, we force ourselves to believe in something we are in fact not convinced of. We constantly lie to ourselves that we don't have other options and passively accept what is going on. As a result of this Sartrean version of ambivalence, we waste our lives in roles of employment we hate, we spend our time with a person we do not love, and so on. In light his analysis "ambivalence is a central way to consciously be as you are not."[1]
In turn on Jacques Derrida in his *Of Grammatology* analyzes the historical age, which is characterized by the use of certain concepts that involved an inherent tension (logos, the subject, sign, writing, supplement). Hili Razinsky is convinced that the foresaid terms are forms of an oppositional unity of ambivalence, rather than mixtures of ideas in irredeemable contradiction.

Friedrich Nietzsche analyzes more specific modes of life, and thus different modes of ambivalence, as Razinsky argues. Furthermore, the Dionysian and the Apollonian concepts are not opposing. They are in dialectical relations: they complement and need each other.

Hili Razinsky also discusses ambivalence in the context of post-colonial political theories, as personified by Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* and Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Fanon refers to an ambivalent subject whose self-contempt and self-appreciation lie in accepting "virtue is white". Said diagnoses ambivalent relations of Europe and Orientalism as a discourse which provided a rationalization of European colonialism. It is based on a self-serving history in which "the West" constructed "the East" as extremely inferior. Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and exercising authority over the Orient under the slogan of rescue: it is a particular form of ambivalence which allows for these kinds of rationalization.

Hili Razinsky also examines philosophical accounts of ambivalence in contemporary thinkers like Bernard Williams, Martha Nussbaum, Philippa Foot, Harry Frankfurt, Joan Stambaugh, Patricia Greenspan, and Philip Koch.

All the aforementioned thinkers utilize the category of ambivalence in their own manner. However, the general argument Razinsky proposes is all of these theories accentuate only one aspect of ambivalence, abstracting it from any broader perspective, a perspective which is necessary for its fuller appreciation. As long

1) Razinsky, *Ambivalence: A Philosophical Exploration*, 110.

as we deal with human beings in their everyday life and language[2] separately, Razinsky argues, we would be incapable of postulating a point of view which would allow us to build a self-sufficient and robust concept of ambivalence. Razinsky's book is, in this context, a good attempt to consider this problem. The author employs fertile discussions of a range of social, economic, and cultural phenomena which involve ambivalence, such as emotion, action, desire, belief, and value judgment.

The book consists of three parts. An introductory part provides preliminary remarks and gives an outline of the central problem (chapters 1 and 2). The part entitled "Life with ambivalence" is focused on the rational character of ambivalence, particularly on the unity of mind and the relation between mental attitudes to ambivalence (chapter 3); the relation of attitudes, behavior, and ambivalence in terms of post-Davidsonian accounts of basic rationality (chapter 4); and ambivalence in the context of questions about consciousness, harmonious and plural persons (chapter 5). The last part of the work, entitled "Structures of ambivalence" investigates how rationality is related to particular patterns of theoretical an practical rationality such as factual belief (chapter 7), value judgment (chapter 8), and ambivalent desires and their impact upon actions (chapter 9).

The methodological approach of this book derives from conceptions drawing upon the works of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, Edmund Husserl, Sigmund Freud, Jean-Paul Sartre, and from Donald Davidson's understanding of rationality. As the author herself admits, the book does not belong to any particular philosophical tradition, but rather incorporates aspects from a diverse range of philosophical backgrounds.

According to Razinsky, ambivalence can be described as a unitary tension–fraught attitude toward something or someone. Being an ambivalent person means possessing two opposing attitudes to one and the same object. However, Razinsky admits that any definition would not exhaust the concept, and it must be somehow complemented by other ones. It is possible to speak about ambivalence of value judgments, ambivalence of beliefs, ambivalence of desires, and emotional ambivalence. Ambivalence could be primary[3] and secondary[4], inherent[5] and contingent[6], strong and weak, from the first person's and from the third person's perspective, and so on.

Ambivalence means possessing two opposite attitudes. However, they do not have to be mutually isolated. A good counterexample here would be Plato's idea of the soul as a chariot consisting of a charioteer and two horses driving in different directions. Ambivalence should be considered as a unitary complex of two opposite emotions, which could not be reduced to one of them, nor can they be simply separated. It always involves integrated aspects and sometimes to such an extent that it could hardly be described as consisting of two emotions.

Razinsky approves that ambivalence does not only extend beyond irrational moods or epistemic states, but includes rational structures, which often make ambivalence a highly rational phenomenon. She analyses three prejudices, according to which ambivalence could not be seen as rational or significant behavior. Firstly, "the objection from subjectivity" states that personhood and rationality should imply harmonious mental unity, hence the existence of an ambivalent person, understood as a subject with two opposing attitudes, is impossible. Ambivalence here is reduced to pluralities of independent attitudes. Secondly, "the objection from behavior"

---

2) Language could be ambiguous in a way it is connected to possibility of meaningful contradictions. People often are ambivalent regarding meanings.

3) Primary ambivalence is logically prior to the poles. We could name ambivalence would be primary if in attributing it to the person the one pole would implicitly or explicitly be evoked and connected to the other.

4) In secondary ambivalence the opposing attitudes are relatively separate and logically secondary to its poles. It is possible to understand the one attitude without taking into account the other.

5) Ambivalence is inherent if the opposing attitudes are concerned with the object from the same respect (or under the same description), or independently of any.

6) Ambivalence is contingent if the convergence between the two descriptions raises the opposing attitudes toward it is independent.

states that ambivalence frustrates significant behavior in a way it makes the person incapable of action. Finally, "the objection from objectivity" implies a concern with truth which makes attribution of opposing judgments to people incomprehensible.

Unfortunately, consciousness is often mistakenly disregarded in the attribution of ambivalence. Razinsky claims that the key for understanding of ambivalence is its intrinsic relationship with consciousness and intentionality.

The book reconsiders the relation between ambivalence and behavior in terms of a post-Davidsonian account of rationality, in accordance with which any personal engagement exhibits intentionality and reason. As Davidson argues, in order to describe an attitude as rational, it has to be understood in terms of its connection to other actual and potential engagements of the person. The unity of the subject consists in his/her plural attitudes that are connected, thus positing a form of mental holism. Razinsky takes this idea as a fundament for her understanding of rationality, but extends it by means of the implementation of the new concept of ambivalence. This book analyses ambivalence as involving a unitary phenomenon possessing two poles, which are mutually connected and opened to connection to a flexible array of other attitudes and further engagements of the person (thoughts, sensations, acts). The unity consists in linking, and thus forming the plurality.

Razinsky provides the notion of "unity in plurality" and writes: "Ambivalence should be understood both as an irreducible form of unity and as an irreducible form of opposition of plurality."[7] The view that persons are either unitary or plural causes explaining ambivalence by means of harmonizing or disintegration exclusively.

The author analyzes unity in plurality as a conceptual unity in a contrast to Philip Koch's notion of a normative unity that consists in substantial mental interlinkage. In order to act, person have to integrate varied relations into non-ambivalent ones, into "norm". Koch presents ambivalence as a state of unorganized plurality and a failure of the process of organization and normative unity. However, the notion of unity in plurality treats actual mental interlinkages as vague and changeable. For Razinsky ambivalence is a central, unitary and integrative mode. It is a manifestation of subject's unity.

Moreover, she shows that a quasi-simple unity also pushes the concept of ambivalence to the margins of human mental life. In philosophical contributions by David Velleman or Martha Nussbaum, ambivalence is to be a state of pure plurality of subjects, or the opposed attitudes of two different quasi-subjects. This could be illustrated by the example of the Wolf Man. Here we deal with two hypostases that are completely unrelated to each other (one acts in a conscious way, while another in automatic and unconscious) and with an ambivalence that is foreign to them.

"On the one hand, ambivalence implies a plurality of contrary points of view toward a common object, but, on the other hand, ambivalence amounts to a unitary outlook, since two attitudes do not constitute an instance of ambivalence unless a single subject has both attitudes and holds each as opposed to the other: he must be ambivalent between them."[8] Thus, in an example provided by Razinsky, only a unitary Hansel would like Gretel and dislike her at the same time.

There is a similar situation with a harmonious person's perspective that does not include the oppositional plurality of its attitudes as a part of the subject's perspective and stands as a third-person perspective. The author also discusses the notion of co-consciousness (William James, Barry Dainton), which is sometimes replaced by "representational unity" (Tim Bayne, James), "synthetic unity" (Andrew Brook), and integrative or content-related unity. However, all these are examples of synthetic unity in contrast to "unity in plurality" as a substantial concept.

---

7) Razinsky, *Ambivalence: A Philosophical Exploration*, 17.

8) Ibid., 98.

The ambivalent life and behavior could have a direction, Razinsky argues, in the sense that the conflicting attitudes are preserved and transformed in a fruitful manner. She strongly relies on the insights of Sigmund Freud in presenting these ideas. There are interpretations that mistakenly accused Freud of dividing the person into independent sub-persons. However, Freudian ambivalence is a mode of unity in plurality rather than a sub-persons view. For example, *Eros* and *Thanatos* – love/life and destruction/death – are co-dependent upon each other, and every structure of living involves ambivalence between them, on this reading of Freud. Razinsky claims that Freud does not consider ambivalence as a basis for making a full or partial decision between the seemingly opposing poles. He gives, quite to the contrary, an important role to compromise formation, *Kompromissbildung*, where the same behavior satisfies the conscious and unconscious desire at the same time. Therapeutic success does not cancel one's ambivalence, but makes it accessible to consciousness.

With this in mind, the author considers the notion of our unity in plurality in relation to a compromising action that has for the subject double fulfillment. It joins both desires (attitudes) while maintaining the tensional opposition between them.

Moreover, ambivalence could not be modeled as a committee. This would presuppose some form of mechanical institutional operation of a plural mind whose parts may act or deliberate together, as it is in quasi-simple unity.

Razinsky summarizes her book in the following way: "Our attribution of ambivalence implies that ambivalence is basically rational in the same way that the attribution of judgments conduct."[9] The main thought of this book is that human lives are always ambivalent, as was already indicated. Human life is a process, a perpetual motion from one state to another. Thus, a person, not being a constant, represents a contradiction, which is laid down in the conditions of human existence itself.

One of the main strengths of this book is a detailed map of terms and theories connected with the phenomenon of ambivalence Razinsky depicts. It could be useful for further research on such topics as emotions, values, personhood, rationality, as well as the relations between them.

However, this book misses one of the important aspects of the problem in question. From my point of view, ambivalence seems to be bound up with discomfort, skepticism and doubt.[10] These could lead to indecision, but not as something dysfunctional, rather as an essential component of motivation for the intellectual creativity as a result of psychological sublimation. Unfortunately, these concepts and their relationships have not been sufficiently developed in this book. Prospects for further research on the problem I see in their more detailed exploration.

As was already mentioned, Razinsky claims that ambivalence is a fraught-tension between the poles of unitary plurality that cannot be separated or reduced to each other. It is a network, a flexible array of all possible and actual interlinkages of engagements of the person. Nevertheless, she often describes ambivalence through a series of binary oppositions: "Even when ambivalence is best suited to be presented as two complexes, we understand each emotion's interlinkages with the engagements in its complex. The structure of two opposing attitudes allows us to think of emotional ambivalence as two opposing emotions and because an emotion may be understood in terms of a complex of related engagements, it is possible to speak about emotional ambivalence in terms of two opposing complexes."[11]

---

9) Ibid., 8.

10) Notably, the concept of ambivalence was introduced into psychiatric parlance by Eugen Bleuler (1910). He distinguished its three main types: volitional that refers to an inability to decide on an action, intellectual or the skeptical belief, and emotional type.

11) Razinsky, *Ambivalence: A Philosophical Exploration*, 72.

Certainly, I would agree, that it is possible to speak about polarity between certain pairs of emotions, but not between all. Hili Razinsky mentions, that sometimes it could be hard to describe ambivalence as consisting only of two opposing emotions. I believe that this could be exemplified by the problem of indifference: to love someone, to hate him, and, at the same time, be indifferent about him. Moreover, in her earlier paper the author defines ambivalence just as holding of opposed mental attitudes without specifying their quantity.[12]

The tradition to use this term only for two poles tension has deep roots even in its etymology. The prefix "ambi" (or "ambo") might imply an element which combining capacity is equivalent not to the number two, but rather to "both". "Value," like the French "valeur" or the German "Gewalt", derives from the Latin "valere" ("to be strong, vigorous, in good health, well"; "to have force, to be able"; "to be worth") derives from chemistry and atomic physics, where it is used to signify the normal number of bonds that a given atom can form with other atoms— its capacity to combine with other elements. Nowadays, the term "ambivalence" has already come out of use in these disciplines. Instead, there are such concepts as "monovalent", "bivalent", "trivalent".

There is an example of ambivalence as a multiplicity of three provided by Freud in his *The Theme of the Three Caskets*.[13] He seeks to explain the presence of a peculiar motif, mainly the situation of a choice among three things or women. He starts with defying this idea in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*: Bassanio is forced to choose between three caskets to win Portia as his bride. Then Freud goes to *King Lear*, *Myth of Paris*, and *Myth of Psyche* – they all are based on the choice among three women. Thereby, the above illustration demonstrates the problem of ambivalence as a co-existence of three opposing complexes of engagements.

Moreover, Razinsky uses as synonyms to "ambivalence" such terms as "self-contradicting" and "self-conflicting". I am convinced that it is necessary to distinguish the relation of contradiction from the relations of conflict. If two ideas contradict each other, that means they are logically opposite and establish mutually exclusive relationship. For example, as the relation "white" and "non-white" (the law of the excluded middle).

In contrast to this, the relation of conflict excludes that they both could be true, but does not exclude both of them from being simultaneously false; it does not deny the possibility of existence of the third or the middle. For example, the relation of "white" and "black". I consider, that exactly this term would be appropriative for describing ambivalence. It constitutes a transition point, a variability, and a development – all that Hili Razinsky defines as a "compromise".

To summarize, Razinsky's work provides helpful insight into considerations of the problem of ambivalence in general. On the one hand, the author exhaustively reveals the problems of ambivalence, its rational character, the relations of ambivalence with consciousness, factual belief, value judgment and desire, the differences between the notions of "unity in plurality" and harmonized, plural persons. On the other hand, she provides insights into avenues of further research of related problems, such as doubt, cynicism and irony.

12) Hili Razinsky, "An Outline for Ambivalence of Value Judgment," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 48, no.3 (September 2014): 469.

13) Freud Sigmund, *The Theme of the Three Caskets*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1958). Available at: https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud_ThreeCaskets.pdf