The Benefits of Ambivalence and the Context of Suicide Intervention

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Abstract: Critics of ambivalence see it as something of inherent disvalue: a sign of poorly functioning agency. Instead, this chapter challenges this assumption, outlining the potential benefits of ambivalence for well-functioning agency, using criteria of rationality, agential effectiveness, autonomy, and authenticity. Furthermore, by exploring the interplay between philosophical debates on ambivalence and psychological research on suicide, the chapter shows how insights from each field can inform the other. For example, it follows that fostering ambivalence, rather than eliminating it, can sometimes support more effective suicide interventions, while ambivalence alone should not be seen as a marker of deficient agency and thus as justification for paternalistic measures.

8.1 Introduction

We all have times when we want to avoid ambivalence. When we are stuck on a decision – whether it is big or small – we usually prefer to have one clear direction to go in, rather than oscillating between two equally tempting paths and being conflicted about what to do. There are even times when we know what we would like to feel, or what we would like to be motivated towards doing (e.g., editing a paper, going on a run, confronting the problematic friend), but we just cannot help to also feel pulled in the opposite direction, hindering our potential progress.

This chapter aims to join an ongoing philosophical investigation into whether – and to what extent – ambivalence is detrimental to a person and their agency. The answer to this question carries critical implications for how we should theorise about ambivalence, but also how it should be practically approached, both generally and in cases of ambivalence about suicide. Despite the intuitive appeal of viewing ambivalence as harmful, we will focus on its potential benefits. We argue that ambivalence can, under certain circumstances, contribute positively to well-functioning agency. Furthermore, we establish a reciprocal relationship between the literature on ambivalence and suicide intervention. That is, research on the benefits of ambivalence can inform research on suicide, and *vice-versa*. We suggest that the philosophical exploration of ambivalence offers significant insights into the ethical considerations surrounding suicide intervention, while psychological research on suicidal agents provides valuable case studies that are important for our understanding of the nature and value of ambivalence. This is particularly evident in research suggesting that there are

no straightforward ways to 'resolve' ambivalence in suicidal cases and that, in some instances, fostering ambivalence may be beneficial for suicide prevention.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a concise introduction to our understanding of desire and ambivalence. Section 3 establishes the criteria we consider most appropriate for evaluating the potential harms and benefits of ambivalence. Section 4 presents a more nuanced and positive account of the relationship between ambivalence and agency, challenging the assumption that ambivalence is necessarily detrimental or only beneficial when appropriately resolved. Section 5 explicitly connects these reflections to the domain of ambivalence about suicide, both from the internal perspective of the agent and the external perspective of intervention, highlighting the reciprocal insights that emerge. Section 6 concludes.

8.2 Desires & Ambivalence

This section introduces the notion of ambivalence as we understand it alongside the notion of desire. To begin, it is important to clarify that our focus is on *volitional ambivalence*—a phenomenon characterized by the presence of two or more conflicting desires. For example, an ambivalent agent is not just one whose feelings on a topic are mixed, but one whose feelings can be explained in part by desires that pull in different directions. It is not just that I might feel both positively and negatively about a sibling, but instead I must have something like a desire for their success and also for their failure. It follows from this understanding that to be ambivalent about suicide is characterized by both a desire to die by suicide and a desire to live.

To get clearer on the matter, the notion of 'desire' itself requires some elaboration. 'Desire' for us serves as a broad term encompassing phenomena such as preferences, volitional tendencies, motivations, longings, or inclinations. Furthermore, desires can in principle take various forms: they may be long-standing or fleeting, carefully considered or spontaneous, conscious or unconscious. However, not all types of desires are pertinent to the notion of ambivalence we aim to address.

Harry Frankfurt – one of the authors most critical on the benefit of ambivalence – famously characterizes ambivalence as:

> (…) conflicting volitional movements or tendencies, either conscious or unconscious, that meet two conditions. First, they are inherently and hence unavoidably opposed; that is, they do not just happen to conflict on account of contingent circumstances. Second, they are both wholly internal to a person's will rather than alien to him; that is, he is not passive with respect to them. (Frankfurt, 1992, p.8).

Put succinctly, an agent is ambivalent when they hold two conflicting desires of a specific kind.

First, these desires must conflict for reasons beyond mere contingent facts. For instance, my desire to have a scoop of pistachio ice cream may conflict with my desire to have a scoop of lemon sorbet, but this conflict arises only due to circumstantial limitations—such as the amount of money in my pocket or the dimensions of the ice cream cone preventing me from having both. There is nothing inherent to the two desires that precludes the possibility of enjoying both under different circumstances.

Second, in Frankfurt's conception of ambivalence, it is essential that the conflicting desires are not alien to the agent: they must genuinely belong to them. Justin Coates (2022) refines this criterion by emphasizing that the considered desires must be integral to the agent's *practical identity*: ambivalence arises between desires where, regardless of how the conflict is resolved, the agent is forced to relinquish something deeply meaningful to them. Independent of the exact conceptualization, fleeting or superficial desires, such as the preference between ice cream flavours mentioned above, are less likely to qualify as instances of genuine ambivalence in this sense. In contrast, the conflicting desire to die by suicide and the desire to continue living are unavoidably opposed and will often (insofar as we are interested in them here) fulfil the criteria of being such that the person identifies with or cares about them in a relevant sense.

Part of the reason for our focus on this kind of ambivalence is because of its particularly strong and possibly problematic nature. If we want to provide a defence of ambivalence, then such a defence would be most interesting and most successful if it targets one of the strongest kinds of ambivalence. Furthermore, we think there is a lot of interesting progress to be made in understanding the implications of this kind of ambivalence, in part because of the important role that desires play in our mental lives. Desires are not mere isolated mental states that float freely within an agent's mind; rather, they exert a profound influence on various aspects of a person's wider mental life, cognitive, affective, epistemic, or hermeneutical. A person's desires can shape their beliefs, intentions, perception, attention, emotions, and other attitudes, serving as a driving force behind their actions and decisions.

Desires motivate behavior, providing a foundation for reasoning and deliberation. When a particular desire becomes salient, it often shapes and constrains the agent's mental landscape, prompting reflection and planning. For example, a desire for ice cream might cause a person to start considering a new route home that goes via the gelateria - sometimes even distracting the person from whatever they're supposed to be working on instead. Or consider someone committed to receiving a PhD in philosophy, who might dedicate years to studying, choose their academic and personal priorities based on this goal, and constantly reflect on how their decisions align with their broader aspirations. Furthermore, desires exert

a significant influence that extends beyond conscious and voluntary mental behaviours, affecting us "(1) through involuntary shifts in attention, (2) through changing dispositions to learn and recall, (3) through changes in subjective confidence, and (4) through distortion by emotions and wishes" (Arpaly & Schroeder, 2014, p. 227). Desires impact imagination, attention, and the vividness with which things are mentally represented to agents. When a person's desires centre around a particular subject, their attention is involuntarily drawn to related instances, their memory of relevant information is heightened, and their learning about it is shaped accordingly. Desire imbues the world with a distinctive salience and character that would otherwise remain absent. When the person wants an ice cream, this might be as simple as meaning that they're more likely to notice signs for ice cream shops, to imagine the different flavours, to remember a particularly good place for waffle cones, etc. For the prospective PhD, we can imagine similar changes over the longer term: the desire to get a higher education degree in philosophy can increase their chances of noticing relevant information, cause them to imagine and plan more, make the possibilities more vivid, etc.

If anything, this important role of desire serves to highlight how difficult things can be when we are ambivalent in the manner that Frankfurt and Coates describe. In the next section, we look at this difficulty in more detail.

8.3 Ambivalence & Agency

Harry Frankfurt (1992, 2004) is interested in the *intrinsic value or disvalue* of ambivalence. In particular, he argues that ambivalence has disvalue because ambivalent agents lack unity of will, and their decisions can therefore never fully reflect their will. For Frankfurt, unity means that an agent's will is free from internal conflict and directed toward a singular commitment. Wholeheartedness requires that the agent's will is structured such that it is 'unequivocally clear' which motive the agent identifies with and 'stands behind'. Unity and wholeheartedness ensure that an agent's decisions and actions are genuinely their own. Otherwise, the agent's will is divided, leading to incoherence, self-defeat, and self-betrayal. Consequently, the agent fails to effectively pursue and attain their goals and to fully endorse their desires and resulting actions. For these reasons, Frankfurt characterizes ambivalence as an 'illness of the will'. The inherent disvalue of ambivalence in the realm of volition lies equivalent to the disvalue of self-contradiction in the realm of beliefs: it necessarily requires accepting and rejecting the same judgement, with this inconsistency setting the agent up for failure (1992, 2004).

Justin Coates (2017) challenges Frankfurt's view, arguing that the two compared realms of conflicting volitions and beliefs are fundamentally distinct: while a divided will may lack internal coherence, an agent torn between two incompatible courses of action experiences

a conflict very different from believing a logical contradiction such as p and ¬p. In particular, ambivalence does not necessarily set an agent up for failure in their practical capacities in the same way as they are set up for failure in cognitive capacities when holding contradicting beliefs. If this is true, then there might be nothing inherently disvaluable about ambivalence. Furthermore, authors such as Justin Coates (2017, 2022) and Patricia Marino (2011) highlight the broader benefits ambivalence may have for a well-functioning agent, proposing that in some circumstances, unity or wholeheartedness could themselves represent defects in agency.

We hope for this chapter to contribute to ambivalence's defence, largely in the next section, by saying something more about the ways in which it can both be better for us and better for us *as agents*. That is, it is not just that being ambivalent happens to work out well for us, and that spending time being pulled two ways can happen to end up leading to a better outcome – more or less accidentally. Rather, we want to emphasise how ambivalence is an integral *part* of the rational process. Not a flaw that needs to be overcome, that should be avoided where possible, but as much of a normal part of agency as any other, that contributes to its functioning.

Before proceeding to this next step, we will say something a bit more about what we mean when we say the ways in which ambivalence could be good for us or us *as agents*.

It seems most useful to adopt a broad definition of the value or disvalue of ambivalence that allows for a multidimensional analysis, incorporating various criteria that are considered in the debate (Coates 2017, 2022; Feldman & Hazlett, 2021; Marino, 2011; Rorty, 2014). We therefore propose evaluating ambivalence, in contrast to wholeheartedness, based on how it undermines or supports the following four intertwined conditions:

- *Rationality*: A well-functioning agent forms the right sorts of mental states given the input they receive from the world. They form good beliefs in terms of the evidence they are given, appropriate desires given the values that things in the world have, etc. The agent's internal state coheres well with the world as they see it and they are responsive to reasons.

- *Agential Effectiveness*: A well-functioning agent is not hindered by paralyzing effects of indecisiveness or ineffective cycles of contradicting actions. Agential effectiveness is understood as the agent's ability to perform coherent actions based on reasons and thus directly relates to the practical success of an agent's actions.

- *Autonomy*: A well-functioning agent is able to govern themselves, to make decisions, and to act in accordance with their own reasons, free from external coercion.

• *Authenticity*: A well-functioning agent does not experience pervasive alienation from their choices but experiences them as an expression of who they consider themselves to be. Authenticity refers to the alignment between desires and actions with the subject's 'true' self - what they deeply care about and consider representative of who they are.

These criteria are not supposed to carve out clear and distinct boundaries of different kinds of agency and rationality. They are overlapping, and a full analysis of the ways in which they interact would be more work than we are able to provide here. We also do not mean for these to be the only ways to understand the above terms – rationality, for example, being particularly controversial. For now, we simply wish to emphasize some of the ways in which we can evaluate the functioning of agency. In the next section, we argue how ambivalence can benefit the agent in each of these ways.

8.4 Benefit & Harm: Whole-Heartedness vs. Ambivalence

Based on the different ways of thinking about well-functioning agency discussed in the previous section, we now argue in greater detail for the claim that ambivalence is not necessarily disvaluable and, in some cases, can even be beneficial, regardless of whether it is ultimately resolved through wholehearted decisions. Furthermore, we identify cases in which unity of will and wholeheartedness in decision-making can themselves prove detrimental. As the analysis of cases will demonstrate, there is rarely a rigid or absolute verdict to be made: the evaluation of benefits and harms is a gradual and dynamic manner. Nonetheless, we particularly aim to show what Patricia Marino phrased as follows: "Valuational inconsistency is not dangerous, and can be worth keeping; the valuationally inconsistent person may have an internally divided self, but an internally divided self can be a fully rational and good self." (2011, p. 53) In the sections, we will systematically argue for this claim in reference to the proposed criteria of (1) rationality, (2) agential effectiveness, (3) autonomy and authenticity.

8.4.1 Rationality

At first glance, it might seem that ambivalence renders the agent irrational, as they are holding two desires that are in themselves contradictory. If a person cannot have both A and B, how can it be rational to want both? This question implicitly assumes a definition of rationality based on the internal structure of mental states, specifically, the avoidance of contradictory desires. From *this* perspective, ambivalence appears irrational and, therefore, undesirable. However, this approach risks assuming the very conclusion it seeks to establish. Instead, we propose a more productive framework of understanding rationality in terms of an agent's capacity to respond to good reasons for or against a given action. Based

on *this* understanding, we argue that conflicting desires can, in certain contexts, positively contribute to an agent's rationality.

And while we concede that there is a sense in which ambivalence is disvaluable, we want to argue that there are additional ways that these same opposed desires can contribute positively to a person's rationality. In some cases, it is warranted to be ambivalent when there is a genuine tension among our desires, mirroring complexities in the world as it relates to our own values and goals. Ambivalence, in this sense, can be seen as fitting: life situations and decisions are often multifaceted, layered, and contradictory (Feldman & Hazlett, 2021). As such, we can have good reasons to hold conflicting corresponding desires.

Consider the example of an academic, called Aoife, who deeply values her work and has invested substantial effort in building her career. To advance in her field, she must relocate to a new institute in Italy, a move that suits her adventurous character but conflicts with her equally deep desire to remain close to her family, friends, and partner in her hometown. Both desires - the pursuit of a fulfilling career and the commitment to her relationships - are central to her identity and unavoidably exclusive. This situation illustrates how ambivalence can reflect the multifaceted nature of Aoife's circumstances and identity rather than a flaw in her will. These two conflicting potential lives are both valuable in a way that speaks to important aspects of her character. That she desires both speaks well to the way her desires are responsive to reasons.

Properly functioning as an agent in this context means acknowledging and endorsing the reasons on both sides. In fact, an agent who fails to experience this ambivalence might demonstrate an insensitivity to the significant values at stake. As Coates (2017) notes, such insensitivity would result in a failure to take seriously the residue of unchosen alternatives. If Aoife were not torn between her career and her relationship, she would risk disregarding the genuine value of one of these options. This lack of ambivalence would suggest a failure to fully engage with the moral and practical dimensions of her situation, thus, making her irrational.

Ambivalence can not only be an expression of rational agency, but increasing ambivalence can in some cases make an agent more epistemically responsible, as it allows them to evaluate more carefully the range of available options. Remember the variety of ways that desire influences an agent's mental landscape – not just affecting her decisions but the things in the world she pays attention to, the ease with which she learns about particular options, the imaginative capacities she has in regard to what effects her decisions might have. Having desires that pull in different directions can be a vital tool in understanding what those directions really look like. Ambivalence therefore can allow agents to explore and evaluate their options more thoroughly. It not only facilitates the acquisition of propositional knowledge but also enhances the ability to vividly imagine and emotionally connect with the

realities of each choice. Ambivalence can signal an agent's ability to hold multiple perspectives and carefully weigh competing outcomes.

Let us reconsider the example of Aoife, torn between moving to Italy, which excites her sense of adventure and career ambition, and staying in her hometown, where she enjoys close personal relationships. Her ambivalence might compel her to learn more about both options, making her more sensitive to relevant facts about Italy and her hometown alike. She is more likely to listen in on conversations about Italy, pay attention to tourist adverts, or ruminate over what she would be missing when she leaves. By desiring both outcomes, Aoife can better imagine the practical and emotional aspects of each possibility, simulating what life would be like in each scenario. This vivid imagining helps her appreciate the full depth of each choice. Without ambivalence, she might fail to recognize the emotional weight or significance of either path. Thus, ambivalence is not always an obstacle to rational decision-making, but can be a valuable tool for navigating complex, value-laden decisions.

That said, ambivalence can sometimes mislead agents, causing them to overestimate the availability or benefits of a particular option. For instance, being torn between the indicated two options might be misleading for Aoife, in case she later discovers that the position in Italy no longer exists or does not offer the adventurous benefits initially expected. Such mistakes, however, can happen whether or not the agents are ambivalent. As long as it can sometimes give agents a new tool to act rationally with, then our point stands.

8.4.2 Agential Effectiveness

A serious concern about ambivalence is that it can paralyze an agent, trapping them in indecisiveness or leading to cycles of contradictory actions that negate one another. This criticism is rooted in the idea that ambivalence undermines the agent's ability to make decisions and act effectively toward their goals, which is central to being a well-functioning agent. Again, Harry Frankfurt provides a strong critique of ambivalence along these lines:

"In order for a conflict (...) to be resolved, so that the person is freed of his ambivalence, it is not necessary that either of his conflicting impulses disappear. It is not even necessary that either of them increase or diminish in strength. Resolution requires only that the person become finally and unequivocally clear as to which side of the conflict he is on. The forces mobilized on the other side may then persist with as much intensity as before; but as soon as he has definitely established just where he himself stands, his will is no longer divided and his ambivalence is therefore gone. He has placed himself wholeheartedly behind one of the conflicting impulses, and not at all behind the other." (Frankfurt 2004, p. 91)

Thus, for Frankfurt, episodes of ambivalence require a wholehearted resolution - a complete alignment of one's actions with one's values and goals by committing to one of the conflicting desires as one's own. Consider the example of Aoife again: if she remains ambivalent about

her choice, she might be at risk of becoming unable to make any decision or of vacillating between both options, such as taking the job in another country but continuously travelling back to her hometown – thus, leaving her worse off in terms of her new job as well as her relationships. From Frankfurt's perspective, resolving this ambivalence by committing wholeheartedly to one path would restore the scholar's capacity to act decisively and effectively in line with her core values.

This critique emphasizes the potential risks of ambivalence. However, the necessity of resolving ambivalence through wholehearted commitment remains a subject of debate. Not all reasonable resolutions of ambivalence require fully endorsing one option at the expense of the other. Coates (2017) suggests that individuals can navigate ambivalence without unifying their will, instead choosing to prioritize one desire as the basis for action in a given context while continuing to identify with the alternative. For instance, Aoife might weigh the reasons for and against each option and make a practical decision for taking the new job. What matters, then, is not the unification of the will or wholehearted commitment to a single option but the agent's ability to *constructively* manage ambivalence. Securing agential effectiveness involves finding sufficient reasons to act in one direction or another and this could happen wholeheartedly or not.

Still, would it not be better to resolve ambivalence in a wholehearted manner, even if it is not strictly required? Not necessarily. As we discussed in the previous sub-section, wholeheartedly committing to one option can, in some cases, be irrational because it risks making the agent insensitive to valid reasons for reconsidering their decision. The desires that are not selected as the basis for action should not always be entirely discarded, as their continued presence allows the agent to remain open to new information or changing circumstances that might warrant reevaluating their choice. In this sense, maintaining some engagement with the rejected alternatives ensures that the agent's decision-making remains sensitive to their axiological truth and reflective of the complexities of their situation (Rorty, 2014).

We agree that there are indeed circumstances where wholeheartedly committing to one option might be most beneficial. Fully embracing a decision can reduce psychological stress, limit the cognitive burden of ongoing deliberation, and alleviate the grief associated with lost opportunities, or prevent regret over past decisions. For example, our protagonist Aoife might decide to commit entirely to her career ambitions if the process of maintaining ambivalence becomes emotionally exhausting or disrupt her ability to focus or engage in actions related to either option. Thus, such wholehearted resolutions can sometimes be beneficial for a well-functioning agent and as such an agent can have good reasons to strive for wholeheartedness.

Our aim has not been to deny the value of wholehearted resolutions of ambivalence altogether but rather to challenge the assumption that ambivalence necessarily undermines agential effectiveness. When approached constructively, ambivalence can foster richer engagement with one's values and promote reasons-based decision-making. The critical point is that the harm or benefit of ambivalence depends thereby on how it is managed and not on the ambivalence itself (also see Hausen & Weichold, this volume). For example, cases of chronic indecisiveness, where individuals struggle to make choices, do not reflect a flaw in ambivalence itself. Instead, they highlight the need for effective strategies to navigate ambivalence. Importantly, mastering ambivalence does not always require a wholehearted resolution. It requires the ability to act on reasons and navigate complex decisions without being paralyzed by indecision – wholeheartedly or not.

8.4.3 Autonomy & Authenticity

We define autonomy as the capacity of a well-functioning agent to govern themselves and to act in accordance with their own reasons. Harry Frankfurt (2004) argues that unresolved ambivalence threatens autonomy by dividing the self, thereby preventing the agent from fully endorsing any particular course of action as genuinely their own. If autonomy is about self-governance and the identification with one's own action, then this might seem impossible in case the agent is ambivalent. However, we aim to also highlight ways in which ambivalence can support the self in this way.

Ambivalence can enhance autonomy by making different options more salient, imaginatively vivid, and emotionally accessible, encouraging deeper reflection on the values and reasons behind each choice. For instance, her ambivalence might force Aoife to engage thoughtfully with both possibilities which makes her final decision more an action of her own than spontaneously but wholeheartedly committing to one option over the other. Similarly, Marino observes: "An inconsistent person may be more obviously acting autonomously than a consistent one, since an inconsistent person must reflect before acting, whereas a consistent person—especially an unconflicted one—may be acting simply on impulse." (2011, p. 56)

Similar considerations apply to the condition of authenticity. Authenticity, as understood here, entails not only regarding one's reasons for acting as one's own but also aligning them with the values and goals that constitute one's 'true self', that is, those aspects that are considered most central to one's identity. At first glance, ambivalence might appear incompatible with authenticity: conflicting desires may seem inherently self-defeating or self-betraying, preventing the agent from living in alignment with the core aspects of their identity. Moreover, being torn between opposing desires might seem fundamentally problematic, undermining the coherence and clarity that often characterize an authentic sense of self. For instance, if Aoife feels equally drawn to both staying in her hometown and

moving to Italy, it might initially appear that her inability to wholeheartedly pursue either path compromises her ability to act in a way that reflects her true self.

This interpretation is misguided, as ambivalence does not necessarily undermine authenticity (Poltera, 2010). On the contrary, decisions made through reflective deliberation prompted by ambivalence may not only demonstrate autonomy but also be profoundly authentic to the individual. Authentic decisions often arise from a genuine engagement with conflicting values, rather than the absence of ambivalence or an impulsive, wholehearted choice of one alternative over the other. Moreover, remaining ambivalent does not inherently preclude authenticity. If a person deeply identifies with two conflicting desires as integral to their identity, then their ambivalence may itself reflect their most authentic self. While such inner conflict may sometimes give rise to negative emotions - such as self-doubt, self-hatred, or anxiety - this does not make the person less authentic. Importantly, this kind of psychological distress is not a necessary consequence of ambivalence. For instance, our protagonist Aoife may decide to pursue one path, such as moving to Italy, while still valuing the alternative and making peace with the fact that life often entails difficult choices that preclude 'having it all.'

8.5 Suicidal Ambivalence

Finally, we aim to connect the previous discussion of the ways in which ambivalence can be beneficial for agents with one particular case study: that of suicidal ambivalence. Suicidal ambivalence characterizes a person's desire to die by suicide and the conflicting desire to continue living. This is a useful case to focus on, because these two research areas can both inform each other, as indicated in the introduction. That is, understanding the benefits of ambivalence can tell us something about the ethics of intervention in cases of suicide, and that looking at cases of suicide can help us to consider the more theoretical merits of ambivalence.

One point of clarification before developing the previous claim in more detail. We take it that some cases of suicide are worth preventing. This does not mean that in all possible instances an agent is better off in some relevant sense if their suicide is prevented. However, we assume that at least sometimes they are. These are the cases that we believe to be most important when it comes to questions such as the ethics of intervention, and that is the reason for our focus on it here.

8.5.1 The Benefit of Ambivalence and Suicide Prevention

In terms of demonstrating why work on the value of ambivalence is useful when it comes to theorizing about the ethics of suicide prevention, a lot of the work has been done already. We

have argued, above, that ambivalence can be beneficial for well-functioning agency. It is not just that it can work out well for them, but it can be an important and valuable part of being a rational creature.

Recent research suggests that ambivalence as we have described it is common in suicidal ideation and behavior. Thus, ambivalence might shape the decision-making process before, during, and after suicidal behavior, making it a crucial element in understanding and addressing suicide.

If we only pay attention to the ways in which ambivalence is bad for an agent – the ways that ambivalence might make an agent less rational, functional, autonomous, etc. – then this might make suicide interventions more justifiable than they would be otherwise. Agents who demonstrate ambivalence might therefore be more at risk of particular kinds of paternalistic intervention that would not affect non-ambivalent agents. Of course, it might be that certain kinds of paternalistic intervention are impermissible in any case, or that there are some kinds of intervention that are worth putting in place for everyone, and that are not particularly intrusive. But if there are some kinds of intervention that *are* intrusive – and that only become justifiable if the agent in question appears to not be acting rationally or functioning well as an agent – then we have shown that ambivalence, on its own, is not enough to do that justificatory work. Ambivalence is *not* a clear defect in agency, but can be a sign of an agent's proper functioning – a way of properly responding to the values in the world, that might accurately reflect both a complicated world and a complicated but authentic agent. There may be other factors that make an agent more worthy of such interventions, such as the desire to die on its own. But ambivalence is not it.

There are other reasons why understanding the benefits of suicidal ambivalence might have an impact on suicide prevention, and that is through thinking about the process of how such prevention works. Bryan (2022), for example, emphasizes the importance of increasing ambivalence in individuals feeling driven to take their own lifes. When someone is overly determined or even wholeheartedly committed to end their life, they might shift in a rapid manner from uncertainty/ambivalence to certainty. This partly relies on the dynamic nature of suicidal ideation that is hard to predict. Encouraging ambivalence in this context, or limiting a person's means to kill themselves, or making means less lethal, can be lifesaving, as it prevents individuals (maybe not from attempting) but from dying by suicide and thus provides time and space to re-introduce ambivalence through interventions.

Ambivalence can initiate a crucial period of self-reflection and reconsideration, helping individuals see that their current state is not permanent or that there are other viable paths and solutions. This ambivalence can disrupt the tunnel vision that often accompanies suicidal ideation (Shneidman, 1998), where the individual sees death as the only solution to their problems. The ultimate goal in cases of suicidal intervention is to resolve the

ambivalence in a direction that supports life and well-being. This is not about achieving wholeheartedness in the decision to live or die, but rather about guiding the resolution of ambivalence towards choosing life (see studies on motivational interviewing by Britton 2012, 2019).

Interestingly, there is an asymmetry in the will to live and the will to die. The wish to live and the wish to die do not behave like two ends of the same pole pushing in two different directions and being equally relevant for suicidal behavior. As Craig Bryan (2016) argues, suicidal behavior is primarily driven by the absence of a strong will to live rather than the presence of a strong will to die. Moreover, research suggests that a strong wish to live serves as a protective factor against suicide, whereas a weaker wish to die does not necessarily predict suicidal behavior (Bryan, 2022, pp. 188-189). Patients whose wish to live is equal to or greater than their wish to die are less likely to die by suicide (Brown et al., 2005).

Finally, further insight might be gained by considering research on ambivalence in medical and clinical settings (Moore et al., 2022), for example, when patients reveal contradictory or oscillating attitudes towards treatment choices. In such cases, we may encounter genuine ambivalence, where patients simultaneously endorse multiple, incompatible options while also seeking ways to reconcile them. Similarly, discussions on self-illness ambiguity - where individuals struggle to distinguish between their own agency and the influence of their illness in decision-making (Dings & de Haan, 2022) - might offer valuable insights. These perspectives could enhance our understanding of how ambivalence relates to rationality, agential effectiveness, authenticity and autonomy, also in the context of suicide.

8.5.2 Learning from Cases of Suicidal Ambivalence

In this second part, we argue that considerations on suicidal ambivalence can teach us something valuable about ambivalence more generally. In particular, it is an important example of the real-life difficulties of resolving ambivalence.

Non-idealized agents cannot resolve ambivalence from an objective standpoint. When an agent chooses between two desires that they have, they cannot appeal to what is objectively better for them, or what is objectively best overall. The best the agent can do is make a judgement about the options from what they believe from their perspective. Even if they were able to do that much, sometimes this will point them towards what is objectively best, and other times it will fail to do so. Our perspectives, after all, are not always correct.

This problem with resolving ambivalence has been brought up in the literature before. Jacqui Poltera (2010), building on work from David Velleman (2006), discusses an example of a homosexual man growing up in hostile surroundings. He is caught between the desire to embrace his sexuality and the desire to repress it. From an external perspective, it might seem easier to see the right thing to do – the thing that would be best for him overall, that

would be the best reflection of his authentic self: to embrace it. But it is hard to see what we would be able to point to (in terms of the agent's own perspective) that would cause the agent to resolve their ambivalence that way. The internalized homophobia might make it very difficult for the agent to identify with his identity, and it might seem to him that the right thing to do is to repress his sexuality instead. Even when the agent is trying to do the right thing and trying to be authentic to what he really wants.

Research on suicidal agents gives us another important example of how misleading our own attempts to resolve ambivalence can be. It is notoriously difficult to predict which patients will attempt suicide out of the number who are at risk, and there are no clear or agreed-upon factors. One potential candidate for a (albeit weak to moderate) correlation, according to Teismann et al (2016) and Chu et al (2017), is 'perceived burdensomeness'. If an agent conceptualizes themselves as being more of a burden on others, this is one possible factor, among many others, that could make them more likely to move from thinking about suicide to attempting it. But this means that when such an agent tries to resolve their suicidal ambivalence, then thinking about what their moral obligations are, or what might be better for people overall, will point them in a direction that might not prove better for them overall: towards, instead of away from, suicide. Where the best thing for them and others might be to live, there might not be a clear internal route that they are able to take while perceiving themselves in that way. The realities of our inability to resolve ambivalence in a way that works out well for us is made clearer by the case of suicidal ambivalence. This is another good cautionary point, then, against in principle supporting wholeheartedness over ambivalence.

8.6 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we made a case in favour of ambivalence's place in properly-functioning, rational agency. Even in cases of ambivalence about suicide, we argued that there is nothing inherently about the ambivalence itself that is a sign of poorly functioning agency or irrationality. This means that one potential ground for intervention is taken away. If intervention is justified, it must be on other grounds, such as facts about the desire to die itself, regardless of whether the agent is ambivalent about it. It is important, we think, not to ascribe irrationality to someone without good enough justification.

In terms of what this tells us about ambivalence, the practical facts of the desires of suicidal agents also gives us reasons why, in real life, ambivalence can be better than whole-heartedness, and that ambivalence should not always be something we look to resolve. When an agent is ambivalent, it is important to recognize that ambivalence for its value in decision-making, and in its value for helping them see the complicated world as it really is.

This can be better than just choosing to resolve the ambivalence in a wholehearted but overall harmful manner.

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