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In 1884 the now largely forgotten theologian and Tyndale scholar J.L. Mombert wrote of ‘the imperfection which marks all human effort, especially when it aims to avoid it’. We do not imagine that Lisa Tessman is familiar with Mombert’s work, but his aphorism, especially the especially, might well serve as an epigraph for her *When Doing the Right Thing is Impossible* (Oxford University Press, 2017). Intended for a general audience, Tessman’s book is both interesting and wide-ranging, covering as it does recent work not just in philosophy but also in psychology, cognitive science and evolutionary biology.

The basic thesis of the book is easily stated, as implied in the title. We are sometimes confronted with impossible situations, when whatever we do, we will be breaking some fundamental moral obligation, even as we fulfil another one. Ought does not imply can for Tessman. Using examples of hard dilemmas, some familiar, some unfamiliar, Tessman argues that in a significant body of cases, accounts that would attempt to resolve the dilemma by subsuming or absorbing the obligation we are breaching into some calculation which somehow exorcises that obligation just does not do justice to what we feel or should feel. Thus, for example, if a doctor physically cannot save some patients in a hospital which is about to be destroyed by flood, leaving them to die, as or even because she is rescuing some other patients (as in Hurricane Katrina for example), she may still feel compunction or even guilt about the unsaved ones, and in Tessman’s view, she would be right to do so. The breached obligation still hangs over us. It was impossible to do the right thing or at least one of the right things. That some such impossibly demanding situations do occur is, in Tessman’s view, just part of the human condition. In such situations we will still feel distraught about what has happened and what we have failed to do. Nevertheless, realising that impossibilities of this sort are part of our life as creatures of a type from time to time faced with conflicting non-negotiable demands or with needs or vulnerabilities that cannot be simultaneously assuaged, may at least help us to forgive ourselves and others when we fail in such circumstances.

Where Tessman goes significantly beyond the somewhat schematic account just given is in her examination of the nature of moral reasoning in practice and also on her analysis of non-negotiable moral

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demands. On the first of these she draws constructively on recent work by psychologists such as Jonathan Haidt and Joshua Greene. On the dual process model of cognitive functioning, where system 1 is our intuitive system, (where we react quasi- automatically) and system 2 (where we think and reason), most of what people value, including their moral values, affects them at an intuitive level, and is acted on automatically. Although Haidt and Greene disagree about the efficacy of reasoning about morality, both stress the significance of the original intuitive reaction, which is not reasoned about, but simply felt and acted on. Reasoning, if it occurs at all, comes later in the process.

Of course, the empirical psychological work is not philosophy, and it says nothing about the justification of the values we adopt (though it might make philosophers pause in their thinking about moral reasoning). However Tessman interestingly connects the psychological research with what Tamar Gendler has called an alief, that is a proposition which is representational and affective, and on which we act, but which is a-rational, not the outcome of rational scrutiny as an explicitly excogitated belief might be. Tessman argues strongly that most of us have moral beliefs which amount to aliefs. They are non-negotiable; we do not reason about them, but simply accept them as binding on us and act accordingly. An example of Tessman's is where a neighbour wants to quieten a noisy child next door. Shooting the child would certainly produce the required outcome, but for most of us it would be unthinkable. Someone who even thought about it seriously, even if they decided not to, would be morally deficient. Arguing about it would degrade its authority, which is so important to us. (At least that is what Tessman and many of us think.) So what we have here could be seen as an alief, neither rational nor irrational, but arational, perhaps, in a Wittgensteinian sense, too deep for reason.

Tessman spends some time exploring evolutionary psychological accounts of the development of morality, whereby groups that cooperate under well embedded and internalised moral principles tend to do better than groups that do not, and she also emphasises the way in which sharing values helps to bind groups together. In both types of case there are likely to be aliefian principles which are held sacred. However as (in Tessman's view) morality is a matter of human construction, much of it unconsciously arrived at, these sacred principles may not be entirely consistent, and there could be cases where two sacred principles conflict in practice, which will lead to a dilemma in which one cannot fulfil at least one of one's obligations. Actually such cases could arise even if moral principles were

not purely or always matters of human construction; where perhaps the evolutionary development of moral codes in part tracks values of a transcendent nature, there could still be cases where, empirically, one was faced with jettisoning one sacred obligation (saving one's own child at the expense of letting two others drown, or vice versa).

Tessman does not think that all moral aliefs of all tribes, or even of this one, are necessarily valuable, which raises the difficult question of how a system of core values of a tribe might be improved, given that, in the first instance, they are regarded as non-negotiable. As already intimated, Tessman is not optimistic about the efficacy of rational reflection. Morality depends on automatic affect laden intuitions at some point; and though this has the advantage of binding people together and getting them to internalise key reactions, it carries with it the risk of groups conflicting with each other and also of the wrong sort of value being sacralised (killing heretics, for example). Transparency about the effects of one's aliefs and the method of reflective equilibrium, attempting to balance one's commitments in a rational way, can take us so far, but only so far. It has to be said that Tessman leaves things rather up in the air at this point, though in fairness this topic is not what her book sets out to analyse.

However it is a topic which she does raise and it is one that Haidt has approached in a similar spirit to Tessman, (principally in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012.) Haidt is worried about the way within contemporary Western societies polarisation between groups with different aliefs seems to be on the increase, specifically between liberals and conservatives in the political and social arena. Like Tessman he thinks that direct reasoning will not solve fundamental differences of value – because reasons at that level tend to function as rationalisations; but engaging in relationships and enterprises of various sorts with people from different value communities can help us to see things from other points of view. In this way a type of constructive negotiation might take place, in which differences are at least mollified in a spirit of mutual respect. Unfortunately even (or perhaps especially) in places of education vilification and silencing of opponents is becoming far more common than it used to be, which makes the building of mutual relationships and enterprises far less likely. To counter this tendency in the academic world, Haidt has instituted a network called The Heterodox Academy (<https://heterodoxacademy.org>). Its aim is to uncover and discuss cases of censorship in academia and to foster occasions where the other point of view can be respectfully heard. The other

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person will be seen not as a demon, but as someone with sincerely and deeply held views (aliefs, even) which are different from yours, and who should be treated with respect, and vice versa – a situation of good people, divided, as in Haidt's title. Tessman does not, of course, mention or endorse any of this, let alone *The Heterodox Academy*, but one merit of her book is that it leads naturally to thoughts of this sort.