The Moral Virtue of Doublemindedness

DONALD BEGGS

Abstract
The conscientious are morally conflicted when their moral dilemmas or incommensurabilities, real or apparent, have not been resolved. But such doublemindedness need not lead to ethical disintegration or moral insensitivity. For one may develop the moral virtue of doublemindedness, the settled power to deliberate and act well while morally conflicted. Such action will be accompanied by both moral loss (perhaps 'dirty hands') and ethical gain (salubrious agental stability). In explaining the virtue's moral psychology I show, among other things, its consistency with wholeheartedness and the unity of the virtues. To broaden its claim to recognition, I show the virtue's consistency with diverse models of practical reason. In conclusion, Michael Walzer's interpretation of Hamlet's attitude toward Gertrude exemplifies this virtue in a fragmentary but nonetheless praiseworthy form.

> It was glorious to see –
> if your heart were iron.
> *Iliad* 13 (Lombardo trans.)

What moral virtue would be acquired were one to generalize then emulate the seemingly doubleminded orientations of soldiers which Aquinas and Kant recommended, respectively, to be a 'kindly severity against [the enemy's] will', and to have 'some sort of trust in the attitude of the enemy'?[1] However that generalization might best be articulated, surely it should point to a determination to make the best of a bad situation while remaining true to oneself, a situation typified, as these quotations suggest, by an agent's inherent moral conflict.

---

[1]   Thomas Aquinas, *On Law, Morality, and Politics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 2nd ed., Richard J. Regan trans., 166 (*ST* II-II, Q. 40, A. 1). Aquinas is quoting Augustine. Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace', in *Political Writings* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 2nd ed.), H.B. Nisbet, trans., Hans Reiss, ed., 96.

Donald Beggs

Along these lines, in advising princes to learn how not to be good, Machiavelli did not promote single-minded ruthlessness. Rather, he encouraged leaders for the sake of the commonweal to be, when necessary, immoral doublemindedly. Broadening the domain of such value conflicts, Bernard Williams remarked that for the 'various forces and passions to co-exist in some semblance of a stable political order under democratic forms requires a good deal of "double-mindedness".'[2] Part of Williams's point can be put this way: if reasonable citizens in a democracy should sometimes be coerced by other reasonable citizens, then both sides should learn to embrace doublemindedness. But there are far more occasions for praiseworthy doublemindedness than these martially and politically oriented remarks suggest.

In the first section of this paper, I explain how doublemindedness can be a moral virtue and how it differs, for example, from ambivalence. Setting forth the moral psychology and ethical content of this virtue gives its claim to recognition appropriate force. In the second section, this virtue is shown to be compatible with incompatible theories of practical reason. This will deepen the virtue's claim to recognition by showing its coherence with reason and will broaden that claim by showing its consistency with a variety of theories. In conclusion, Michael Walzer's interpretation of Hamlet's attitudes and actions toward Gertrude makes vivid essential aspects of the virtue. Although present only fragmentarily in Hamlet, we will see that even this virtue's incomplete form makes the Prince more admirable than if he lacked it altogether.

1. The Moral Psychology and Ethical Content of Doublemindedness

Conscientiousness is habitually perspicuous assessment of the relative moral weights of the reasons that steer one toward or away from one's practical alternatives. I define the moral virtue of doublemindedness (DM) to be an agent's settled power to deliberate conscientiously when morally conflicted and, having failed to resolve that conflict, nevertheless to reach a practical conclusion which entails moral loss for the agent (perhaps because her act harmed an innocent other) as well as ethical gain (because agental integration

---

[2]   Bernard Williams, 'Conflicts of Liberty and Equality', in B. Williams, *In The Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 126.

412

is stabilized or enhanced). Agents are morally conflicted when faced with moral dilemmas (real or apparent), equally weighty incommensurabilities or incomparables (real or apparent), very narrow moral differences between mutually exclusive practical alternatives, or compounded moral complexity. To deliberate conscientiously in such situations respects relevant persons, values, principles, and so on.

DM is not reducible to conscientiousness. Conscientiousness is simple even if the thoroughness of its activity encounters complexity or subtlety. DM, on the other hand, has four distinct and defining markers. (1) The virtue can be instantiated only after conscientiously taking up a moral dilemma (or etcetera), and (2) only if action ensues from that practical deliberation. As a result, (3) a DM agent properly anticipates and experiences moral loss, perhaps because innocent others are harmed or an important value of the agent's has been violated. Finally, (4) agental unity is stabilized or enhanced, an ethical gain. Marker (1) alone entails that DM and conscientiousness cannot be identical since someone could be conscientious after acting but not before. For example, the press of circumstance may not permit thorough examination of the facts, even though after the fact a conscientious agent will review details of the previous action situation. In addition, marker (3) is not only not necessary for conscientiousness, its avoidance is thought to be part of the point of conscientiousness.

Few authors have approached the concept of DM – I just referred to Michael Walzer as one. But some of those have gone so far as to contrast a morally unacceptable single-mindedness with an unnamed, virtuous alternative. David Carr, for example, does not use the expression 'doubleminded' or any of its cognates, but he does contrast the doublemined experiences of a virtuous person when facing a morally fraught situation with the experiences and character of the merely single-mindedly continent. He says that 'continence may be an inability to face the emotional and moral complexity' of normal existence; the continent 'may be single-minded to a fault'.[3] Carr pushes further, emphasizing that 'Aristotle's concept of continence might be considered a morally required developmental stage on the way to virtue'.[4] In my view, DM requires conscientiousness in a similar way, as a precondition. A difference is that while continence should be replaced by virtue, as a virtue DM incorporates

[3]   David Carr, 'Virtue, Mixed Emotions and Moral Ambivalence', *Philosophy* **84**:327 (January 2009), 45. Carr does not say, nor should he, that single-mindedness as such is vicious.

[4]   Ibid., 44.

conscientiousness. My endorsement of significant aspects of Carr's discussion is not affected by the fact that I believe that some of the continent can conscientiously inhabit 'emotional and moral complexity'. So, I will argue that DM can be possessed by either the fully virtuous or the firmly continent who are not single-minded about the relevant moral situation.

Carr presents a possible virtuous Ximene in love with Cid and yet in deep moral distress because of his violence toward her father. With this he contrasts a single-minded Ximene.

> [I]t takes a virtuous Ximene to appreciate that her conflicted simultaneous love and resentment of Cid have objective grounds and cannot be wished away and that require honest and courageous confrontation. [. . .] A] more single-mindedly continent Ximene [would lack] not only the self understanding but also the moral imagination [. . .] that the wisdom of virtue demands.[5]

One of Ximene's principal virtues, implied and so unnamed, is DM. The virtuous Ximene conscientiously confronts a moral dilemma and courageously acts (markers 1 and 2). Throughout this she will sympathetically anticipate the educative internal conflict (she hopes) her beloved will undergo, and she regrets causing this distress (marker 3).

How does Ximene's conscientiously courageous confrontation of Cid combined with pained sympathy for his distress contribute to her agental unity (marker 4)? For the remainder of this section, I will address this question in a general form and from various perspectives.

The basic idea is that the experience of moral loss after conscientious action will either enhance or erode agental unity, and such enhancement is praiseworthy. Consider the range of types of example of grappling with moral complexity (etcetera) which result in moral loss for the agent. In some cases, there will be significant and unavoidable moral wrongs or harms to others, and the agent's experience of 'dirty hands' is an explicit acknowledgement of such moral loss. Sometimes choices among moral goods must be tragic.[6] Less significantly, similar to Ximene's case, the moral loss might amount to no

---

[5] Ibid.
[6] Alisdaire MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 208; Martha Nussbaum, 'Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy', in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 137.

414

more than what Christopher Gowans has called 'moral disquiet' or 'moral distress':

> mental pain in response to the recognition that they have done something morally wrong – not necessarily in the sense of having violated the correct conclusion of moral deliberation but in the sense of having transgressed some moral value.[7]

Or, the loss may be simply that a significant ethical good must be denied, say, career for family. So a DM agent's moral loss can range from significant wrongdoing, which is best all things considered ('dirty hands'), to agent-centered, worrisome 'what-ifs'.

When one acts conscientiously in spite of internal moral conflict and there is nevertheless moral loss, then, having done one's best, one reaffirms one's life narrative. Such internally sanctioned reaffirmations have a strong likelihood of contributing to reasonable, not rigid, agental stability. Bearing such burdens well and their being occasions of becoming more volitionally integrated is DM's marker 4.

The alternative to agental integration in the types of cases indicated is character erosion. Why? First, we need a distinction. The rational consistency of a motivational set refers to logical relations among its concepts, principles, and precepts; the reasonable integration of a motivational set refers to desirable forms of practical stability. If conscientiousness has not begun to unravel or to be disabled in spite of living through repeated episodes involving mutually exclusive moral alternatives, those experiences will contribute to stabilizing or integrating the reasonable agent's motivational set without necessarily making the set's elements more rationally consistent. But a satisfactorily integrated motivational set which may be explicitly not rationally consistent is one in which incommensurable (etcetera) elements, whatever their moral weight or authority, continue to be motivational.

What then is the alternative to the continuation of reasonably integrated motivational sets? Moral insensitivity and chronic ambivalence are the primary ways of denaturing the effectiveness of elements in a motivational set. The former is a loss of the intensity of the force of relevant elements, their authority, and the latter is an oscillation among elements' relevance, their scope.[8] And each, of

---

[7] Christopher W. Gowans, *Innocence Lost: An Examination of Inescapable Moral Wrongdoing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 97. DM's markers 1–3 are obviously present.

[8] To simplify discussion I will refer only to these two forms of deterioration. Nothing about DM requires restriction to these two, although they do seem to me to be primary.

415

course, encompasses a spectrum. Insensitivity can be for others an annoying indifference, or it can be pathological brutishness; the ambivalent will disappoint friends and coworkers, but they can also be such as rightly to precipitate therapeutic intervention.

There are senses in which the insensitive and the ambivalent are stable, but such agents are stable in the wrong ways. Neither we nor the ambivalent agent may know what he will ultimately do, if anything, but we do know not to rely on someone whose ambivalence has become fixed in character. And the fixedness of insensitivity arises from a significant blindness to the good and/or a significant deafness to the right. In contrast, DM's stability derives from being conscientiously open to the good and/or the right. This practical disjunction between virtue and vice is brought about by repeated internal moral conflict which contributes to either stabilizing or destabilizing an agent. Yet there simply is no reason to suppose that all agents who are regularly doubleminded degrade into ambivalence or insensitivity. Accepting the burdens of virtue will at least maintain both the force and relevance of elements in a motivational set, will preserve the agent's dynamic stability in a praiseworthy way.

Possession of DM is not inconsistent with occasional ambivalence. Carr refers to the sort of ambivalence that is sometimes a difficulty for virtuous agents but not a condition of their character. This allows him to see that the sorts of moral experiences described above can have the integrating effect I claim they can.

> [R]ightly seen, far from impeding the development of virtue, emotional ambivalence and personal conflict may provide the rich psychological and moral soil, that—in the light of practical wisdom—is actually required to enhance the possibilities and prospects of virtuous character and conduct.[9]

Carr is in effect saying that internal moral conflict for the virtuous will tend to be integrative.[10] Adding that observation to the previous rationales to suppose that marker 4 occurs, there is sufficient reason to set the burden of proof on the side of those who deny that acting conscientiously while contending with internal moral conflict can have ethically good integrative effects.

Deniers might try to shift the burden back by making their point indirectly (and then only by making very strong assumptions). They might claim that DM violates or is inconsistent with valuing

[9]   Carr, op. cit., 46.
[10]   It is not a problem for my existential claim for DM that Carr's context for this conclusion does not include the continent.

416

either the unity of the virtues or wholeheartedness. Close examination of these notions, however, will show both objections to be inconclusive at best. If so, then direct and indirect arguments against the likelihood of ethically good agental integration through conscientious action under conditions of internal moral conflict will be turned aside.

Harry Frankfurt distinguishes wholeheartedness from an 'imposed equilibrium'.[11] Someone whose will has been focused by factors external to their motivational set can only simulate the genuine satisfaction characteristic of wholeheartedness. But since the sort of value conflicts which are constitutive of DM are inherent to the agent (marker 1), then whatever agental unity characterizes possessors of DM it cannot be 'imposed' in Frankfurt's sense. On the other hand, Frankfurtian wholeheartedness is consistent with 'virulent psychic conflict'.[12]

Wholeheartedness cannot map onto Aristotle's *sōphrōn*. For the *sōphrōn* 'everything is in harmony with the voice of reason' whereas for the *enkratēs* internal turmoil is common.[13] So wholeheartedness encompasses a variety of sorts of agental unity which can include internal moral conflict and need not exclude the *sōphrōn*: the wholehearted may be firmly continent or fully virtuous. Yet continence is not an imposed equilibrium for the *enkratēs* will 'know where he stands' in light of his motivational set in spite of there being 'inner opposition to his will'.[14] The firmly continent are not chronically ambivalent and, though they are not fully virtuous like Ximene, they may be wholehearted.

So far, since wholeheartedness is consistent with some cases of inherent conflict it does not exclude DM. Can the DM, like the wholehearted, be 'fully satisfied' that their inherent psychic elements determine their cognitive, affective, attitudinal, and behavioral processes rather than others with which they conflict?[15] But such others must be considerations of external factors such as lead to an 'imposed equilibrium'. And nothing about the DM must prevent them from being satisfied that they have conscientiously done their best in light of their motivational set.

---

[11]   Harry G. Frankfurt, 'The Faintest Passion', in *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, 1999), 104.
[12]   Ibid., 100.
[13]   *NE* I.13.1102b. I cite Martin Ostwold's translation, *Nichomachean Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs: Library of Liberal Arts, 1962), 31.
[14]   Frankfurt, op. cit.
[15]   Ibid., 103.

Donald Beggs

The DM can be satisfied but can they be fully satisfied? How can anyone be fully satisfied when they possess a virtue marked by regret? But that the wholehearted must (by definition) be fully satisfied with their motivational set does not entail that they cannot regret the harm of an innocent person which that set warranted. Such harms may motivate attempts to make the set more rationally consistent, or for good reasons they may not. If the wholehearted can be fully satisfied even though their motivational set has 'virulent' inherent conflict – and no non-contentious assumption makes impossible their concluding that some of these are inherently intractable – then nothing stands in the way of attributing to some who are wholehearted the moral virtue of doublemindedness. Indeed, the wholehearted being fully satisfied in spite of persisting inherent conflict could be explained by the fact that their motivational set is well integrated although not rationally consistent. Being fully satisfied may be a sign that the wholehearted who are frequently conflicted have DM. So it is at least doubtful that DM is inconsistent with wholeheartedness.

Would finding a form of doublemindedness to be a virtue threaten the unity of the virtues? It would take us too far afield to try to settle what such unity means, so I will limit discussion to McDowell's 'Virtue and Reason'. Virtuous persons know what to do morally, according to McDowell, not by applying principles 'but by being a certain kind of person'.[16] For McDowell, since moral 'generalizations will be approximate at best' then virtuous persons can reach appropriate practical conclusions only in light of their 'entire conception of how to live'.[17] And such conceptions are neither susceptible of codification nor can they properly lead to a ranking of moral principles.[18] It follows for McDowell that persons with such entire conceptions embody the unity of the virtues.

> [W]e cannot disentangle genuine possession of kindness from the sensitivity which constitutes fairness. And since there are obviously no limits on the possibilities for compresence, in the same situation, of circumstances of the sorts proper sensitivities to which constitute all the virtues, the argument can be generalized: no one virtue can be fully possessed except by a possessor of all of them.[19]

---

[16]   John McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason', in *Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, eds., 162.

[17]   Ibid., 156.

[18]   Ibid., 157.

[19]   Ibid., 144.

418

For the virtues help us to attend appropriately to disparate and possibly mutually exclusive yet equally good alternatives, yet virtuous persons navigate well those fractured terrains only because they are the kind of person they are.

Good persons with an 'entire conception of how to live' understand that there is not 'always one right answer to the question what one should do', that 'ethical reality is immensely difficult to see clearly'.[20] So McDowell's understanding of the unity of the virtues can be seen to include related factors that precipitate the problems to which possessors of DM respond appropriately. First, good persons' moral principles may be uncodifiable because they are irreconcilable (etcetera). McDowell would prefer that the primary explanation of uncodifiability be the inarticulability of our best and most basic moral attitudes and insights. But to the extent that reflection can shape our most basic moral insights or their close derivatives into expressibility, into moral generalizations, nothing McDowell says guarantees that these generalizations will be rationally consistent, commensurable, or fully codifiable. And however that may be, 'immensely difficult' practical deliberations may at times result in conflicting practical conclusions just because of what's inherent in the good person's motivational set. This will bring about moral distress for that good person (markers 1–3).

The second factor in McDowell's understanding of the unity of the virtues which precipitates a need for DM is that conscientious moral deliberation does not guarantee clear conclusions. This can mean either that a conscientiously derived practical conclusion is ambiguous or that it is unclear which one among equally morally justified and relevant practical conclusions ought to have precedence. But the latter just is one of the structures that requires DM. And the former can lead to the latter because sometimes ambiguity can be resolved into a set of mutually exclusive alternatives each of which is clearer than their common source. So someone embodying the unity of the virtues can sometimes have deliberated conscientiously

---

[20] Ibid., 144n6 and 161. Here I avoid certain issues that, while important in their own right, would unduly complicate my exposition. I made a similar but simpler assumption at n8. Thus, I now refer to good persons rather than more narrowly to McDowell's fully virtuous persons so as to include the firmly continent. As McDowell's emphasis on 'full possession' implies, the firmly continent are not utterly lacking all semblance of all virtues. Their firmness reflects some degree of unity of their less-than-fully virtuous but otherwise praiseworthy traits.

in spite of inherent conflict, and may have acted knowingly in ways that harmed innocent others (markers 1–3).

So unity of the virtues is consistent with DM's markers 1–3. But then either such agent's unity is enhanced or stabilized, or moral insensitivity or chronic ambivalence will ensue. McDowell's understanding of the unity of the virtues has a place for DM. Indeed, it seems that DM creates conditions conducive to the unity of the virtues.

There is a further reservation about whether the unity of the virtues is consistent with DM. McDowell says that 'salience . . . [is] seeing something as a reason for acting which silences all others'.[21] But as we just saw achieving salience is 'immensely difficult'. When conscientious deliberation cannot achieve salience, when would-be saliencies seem equally most weighty, then the DM are able to proceed in an appropriately moral manner. What happens to good persons who lack DM and with some frequency cannot achieve salience? Over time, some of those good persons who encounter somewhat frequent inherent moral conflict may slip into moral insensitivity or ethical disintegration. But agency need not be damaged by not uncommon inherent conflict because there is a salutary and praiseworthy alternative.

Finally, is the unity of the virtues consistent with DM's openness to value pluralism and objective dilemmas? McDowell says that for a contemporary agent who has 'a full-fledged possession' of practical reason's conceptual and dispositional resources 'the idea of transcending historicity is profoundly suspect'.[22] And those who are only firmly continent will also find this to be true. But both must contend with the pluralisms characteristic of modernity, first given voice by Machiavelli and analyzed by many since, especially Isaiah Berlin. McDowell goes on to say that since there is no 'mode of inquiry that transcends historicity', including the natural sciences and ethics, then 'how the concepts are taken to hang together rationally [. . .] is the product of [. . .] historical evolution'.[23] If so, then it would be contentious to insist that the rational hanging together of modes of inquiry are to be called failures if simple logical consistency is ever violated. A complete conception of how to live hangs together sufficiently if we understand that coherence to be the reasonable

---

[21] Ibid., 158.
[22] John McDowell, 'Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics', in *The Engaged Intellect: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 38.
[23] Ibid.

420

stability of the motivational set. For the virtuous an entire conception of how to live is best understood as in continual, conscientious modification, just as the seaworthiness of a vessel at sea is regularly monitored and repaired.[24] Hanging together well, motivational integration, is seen in practical stability, and this can value, without being enslaved to, logical consistency. But would it not impugn the firmly continent to insist that all of McDowell's conscientious seafarers are fully virtuous? If the unity of the virtues need not be threatened by modernity's pluralisms, then DM helps to explain why.

My discussions of Frankfurt and McDowell show that objections to DM based on its supposed inconsistency with wholeheartedness or its supposed incompatibility with the unity of the virtues are at best inconclusive, and may be set aside. So strong direct and indirect objections to DM are answered.

On my account of DM desirable degrees of agental unity should be judged for some balance of functional and subjective factors, not according to some single-minded Cartesian or Kantian standard. Amélie Rorty seems to agree with this. She has said that self-integrative agents will more likely be responsibly responsive to the moral heterogeneities and vicissitudes of existence if they acquire 'Tory habits, and Whig critical capacities'.[25] Rorty argues that since important constituents of these, such as empathy and autonomy respectively, often pull in opposite directions, then there must be strategies for their reconciliation if 'a long-range integrative project for a conflicted agent' is to succeed.[26] Yet if we find it troubling that empathy and autonomy cannot always be reconciled, and nevertheless we believe that certain Whig and Tory attitudes should continue to be cultivated, then reconciliation is understood too narrowly to mean only rational consistency. Giving proper emphasis to the integration of the motivational set gives Rorty-type projects of reconciliation a better chance to succeed.

Recognition of DM may entail a claim even stronger than Rorty's: a disposition for conflicted practical reason has a role in self-integration for both the fully virtuous and the firmly continent. That is why David Wiggins says that in deliberation

over and over again, in normal life, we may reach accommodations between [mutually irreducible or irreconcilable]

---

[24] Ibid., 35.
[25] Amélie Rorty, 'Self-Deception, Akrasia and Irrationality', in *The Multiple Self,* Jon Elster, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press 1986), 119.
[26] Ibid., 120.

demands and live with conviction the accommodations that we find. The picture makes room for the thought that this is a part of the process by which [. . .] we acquire or make our own characters.[27]

In other words, it is morally praiseworthy to possess a disposition for conflicted, conscientious practical reasoning because that can contribute to agental integration in the 'normal life' of modernity.

For decades Thomas Nagel has insisted that many moral conflicts individuals experience are necessary and probably irresolvable. It seems to me curious, then, that the best attitude toward this condition that he has recommended seems to amount to: Get used to it; don't be so needy for a single theory that will resolve all of your inherent moral conflicts.

[I]t is as irrational to despair of systematic ethics because one cannot find a completely general account of what should be done as it would be to give up scientific research because there is no general method of arriving at true beliefs.[28]

But what would it mean to get used to persistent and irresolvable internal moral conflict without becoming fixed in harmful ambivalence or blameworthy moral insensitivity? When Wiggins says we should 'reach accomodations' with ourselves (and, I would add, our communities) he assumes DM's praiseworthy integrative effect. Nagel says something similar with a political emphasis: we should 'countenance' what deeply morally offends but which is legitimately imposed upon us by democratic government.[29] Yet in the shadow of inescapable moral conflicts internal to both selves and societies Nagel complains: 'how can we put ourselves back together?'[30] So he seems unable to let go the neediness for a general, single theory; he seems resigned to a 'motivational logic [that] simply lacks the character of an integrated moral outlook'.[31] But, as I have argued, that lack should not be thought to refer only to rational inconsistency but mainly to an absence of reasonable processes of agental integration.

[27] David Wiggins, 'Incommensurability: Four Proposals', in D. Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 3rd ed.), 377f.
[28] Thomas Nagel, 'The Fragmentation of Value', in *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 136.
[29] Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 163.
[30] Ibid., 16.
[31] Ibid., 117.

Lacking a comprehensive and rationally consistent moral theory is not inconsistent with possessing a praiseworthy, integrated motivational set. After all, the wholehearted and those who embody the unity of the virtues may agree that they are better possessing DM.

2. Locating Moral Doublemindedness in Theories of Practical Reason

My account of DM presupposes no particular model of practical reason. So to elucidate DM by refracting it through different models of practical reason will deepen and broaden the virtue's claim to recognition. There are, however, some preliminary worries. First, if DM is consistent with a lack of thoroughgoing rational consistency, as I argued in the previous section, then its claim to being rational can be disputed. In response, I say that if DM is consistent with several significant and distinctively different models of practical reason, then it is as rational as we could reasonably wish. Second, I will not show that DM is consistent with a plurality of theories of practical reason, but since DM can be shown to be consistent with several diverse models, then its claim to be recognized as a moral virtue is not plausibly denied on the ground that it might be inconsistent with some other theory of practical reason.

Third, a strong objection attacks DM as such. Suppose two courses of action have equally weighty reasons in their favor but not only does the choice of one exclude the other, the satisfaction of one value or principle entails a loss in terms of the other. This is a typical situation that DM enables one to address well. The strong objection is that, under these conditions, it will be irrational to choose one course of action over the other. Given that conscientious deliberation concludes equal weight for each mutually exclusive action, on what grounds could a preference be based? A choice of one over the other, under these conditions, would be arbitrary. If so, then DM's practical reasoning terminates in an irrational choice. Can a moral virtue pivot on an agent's irrationality?

This objection fails to consider an important distinction. By hypothesis, the alternatives and the reasons for them will have been conscientiously scrutinized. The values at stake, the applicable principles, or the orientation toward salience, will have been integrated into the agent's motivational set. And the values or principles will likely have become more robust and more fine grained in light of sometimes difficult specifications of them in various contexts – McDowell's conscientious seafarers. So when values or the alternatives

423

they point to conflict, or when values to which the agent is equally committed are incommensurable (etcetera) yet are equally relevant as well as mutually exclusive, then these conditions do indeed render the agent unable to discover the uniquely most rational preference. But that does not mean the choice of one of these alternatives will be irrational. Whichever alternative is chosen will have been conscientiously considered. It cannot be irrational in these circumstances to have deliberated and acted conscientiously but be unable to give a sufficient reason for honoring one value or alternative over another. It cannot be irrational for a good person to have done what they did when no one can show that there was something better they ought to have done or show some better deliberative route they could have taken.[32] The practical structure of DM is not ideally rational but it is not irrational, and given frequent moral complexity, wide-spread pluralisms, and so on, it may be ideally reasonable.

Nor should this response to the objection be thought to endorse a form of satisficing. If DM is a significant contributor to the form and content of an action, then the agent aims to do what is best. But insofar as someone is properly satisficing less than the best is good enough. If under the circumstances satisficing is permissible then DM is not relevant; but, if DM is relevant then satisficing is not permissible.

Let us turn now to different models of practical reason to see how DM might be consistent with them. I will look briefly at practical reasoning as making and executing plans, then in somewhat more detail I will take up three mutually inconsistent perspectives on practical reasoning.

If practical reasoning is best understood as planning and carrying out, if practical reason should be seen as what enables one to live one's life according to a, or according to one's, plan, then DM is not possible if rational choice precludes the possibility of incommensurable (etcetera) final ends, or if conscientious deliberation entails that one cannot be blamed for ensuing actions. Rawls's early understanding of practical reason was such a planning theory. He asserted both that practical reason is inconsistent with irreducibly plural ends and that its proper use invalidates moral blame.[33] But other theories

---

[32]   Cf. Kant: '[I]f someone is aware that he has acted in accordance with his conscience, then as far as guilt or innocence is concerned nothing more can be required of him'. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Mary J. Gregor, trans. and ed., 530.

[33]   John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), §§63–64.

424

of practical reason as what guides planned living are consistent with either or both claims, and so have room for DM. For example, there is nothing in Michael Bratman's 'Taking Plans Seriously' that is inconsistent with agents having irreducibly plural ends or being morally blamed for actions that he describes as following from rational planning decisions or which were elements of reasonable plan executions.[34] So DM is not compatible with all theories of practical reason understood as what enables agents to live according to plans, but it is consistent with at least one that has been well-developed over time.[35]

Next, suppose practical reasoning should be limited to instrumental or consequentialist models. I begin with a very simplified example. Assume an omniscient and benevolent agent is given an end and that her charge is to maximize outcomes in light of that end. But there is nothing in the structure of reality that I am aware of that necessitates that a uniquely best outcome must always be possible for all ends whatsoever. Since there might be two equally best outcomes that could not both be realized, then in such cases ideally-knowing agents who are ideally motivated face a dilemma. Concerning the moral dilemmas of consequentialists, Michael Slote says that 'one can be morally anguished by being in such a position even if one sees one's way clearly as to how to minimize the amount of harm done'.[36] He emphasizes what I have called DM's marker 3: 'it is possible to be morally unhappy with, or rationally rueful of, situationally best actions with terrible consequences'.[37] Consequentialists should arm themselves with a virtue that blocks both the ethical disintegration of chronic ambivalence and the moral failure of insensitivity. But if there are frequent enough cases in which a uniquely best outcome is not possible, this ideal consequentialist's character could not degrade toward moral insensitivity or chronic ambivalence. In the first place, conscientiousness is an aspect of ideally motivated, ideal-epistemic states. And, in the second place, given that benevolence is fixed *a priori*, this agent cannot be liable to

[34] Michael Bratman, 'Taking Plans Seriously', in *Varieties of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), Elijah Millgram, ed., 203–219.
[35] It must remain for another occasion to determine whether the later Rawls could acknowledge DM.
[36] Michael Slote, *Beyond Optimizing: A Study of Rational Choice* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 106. The idea for an omniscient and benevolent agent is borrowed from Slote.
[37] Ibid., 158.

425

ambivalence or insensitivity, for these defeat effectively aiming at good outcomes. But all this is to say that an ideal consequentialist in a moral dilemma has DM's markers 1–4 by hypothesis.

I said earlier that DM and satisficing are not compatible. But that is true only in first-order instanciations of DM. The permissions of satisficing take the pressure off agents to bring about the best. In contrast, since consequentialist possessors of DM may want equally best but incompatible outcomes, then there can be cases in which it will not be readily evident that to step back from maximizing or optimizing and to settle for satisficing is a good consequentialist decision. When it is not apparent that stepping back from maximizing is permissible, then for those cases the agent will want to have developed DM. Moreover, satisficing is not being satisfied with 'whatever'; satisficers should be conscientious with respect to deciding which alternatives are and which are not permissible. So another second-order satisficing role for DM lies not in the selection of permissibles but in separating the permissibles from the impermissibles.

What role might DM have within two non-consequentialist theories of practical reason, one deriving from Aristotle and one from Kant? First, I will consider David Wiggins's claim that the principal activity of practical reason is its inquiry into ends, the ultimate ideals life plans aim to realize. Then, I will argue that it is at least as plausible as alternative interpretations to claim that Kant's theory of practical reason is best not construed as requiring single-mindedness as an outcome of conscientious deliberation. Genuine devotion to duty will be strengthened by DM because two equally weighty maxims with empirical content that pertain to the same situation may each seem correctly to reveal a right alternative, and both cannot be realized.

Wiggins posits that 'the main business of practical reason is ends and their constituents, not instrumental means'.[38] He adds that valid understanding of ends and means always includes the qualification that they remain somewhat 'indefinite and unforeseeable'.[39] Wiggins broadens this Aristotelian perspective, which accommodates the ineliminably 'indefinite', to include a plurality of incommensurable final ends. Here 'incommensurable' means that 'there is no (however complicated or conditionalized) correct [. . .] explanatory [. . .] account' of how different relevant ends could 'trade off against one another'.[40] Nonetheless, this model of practical reason allows that conscientious deliberative conclusions can be reached

[38] Wiggins, op. cit., 374.
[39] Ibid., 372.
[40] Ibid., 370.

426

under such conditions 'in the light of our ideas, our ideals, and [. . .] of that life [. . .] in which we can best find meaning'.[41] Here, 'in the light of' may be merely 'somehow'[42] (suggesting Rorty's Whig autonomy); and 'meaning' depends on 'shared, partly inexplicit norms of reasonableness'[43] (suggesting Rorty's Tory habits).

Where can DM be found in the exercise of Wiggins-type practical reason? Although an agent trading off final ends may or may not believe, with Wiggins, that 'there is no correct' explanation for the outcome of that trade off, such an agent conscientiously trading off final ends will find himself doubleminded. And the fact that such a trade off is moral entails moral loss. But if morally good alternatives must be denied, or there are inescapable moral wrongs, then this agent's unity will be protected or enhanced by DM.[44]

We might naturally suppose that many will want 'to spare themselves some of the torment of thinking, feeling and understanding that can actually be involved in reasoned deliberation'.[45] 'Torment' is a symptom of loss for the conscientious. But

> [t]he person of real practical wisdom is the one who brings to bear upon a situation the greatest number of genuinely pertinent concerns and genuinely relevant considerations commensurate with the importance of the deliberative context.[46]

Such 'tormented' conscientiousness is not character-based ambivalence but steadfast practical reason, a manifestation of DM. So consequentialist and Wiggins-style models of practical reason are at least consistent with DM, and are probably improved by explicit inclusion of DM.

---

[41]   Ibid., 377.
[42]   Ibid., 373.
[43]   Ibid., 374.
[44]   Cf. McDowell on Aristotle: he 'does not say that a rational animal can *always* integrate its conceptions of the apparent good, in a given situation, into a unified practical verdict [. . . Aristotle supposes] that some situations may defeat the integrative efforts of practical reason. This is a good thing [for otherwise] Aristotle would here be casting doubt on the very possibility of tragic predicaments'. 'Incontinence and Practical Wisdom in Aristotle', in *The Engaged Intellect,* 73, original emphasis. If McDowell is right, then DM would prevent such defeat of practical reason. McDowell misses this, probably, because in this context he conflates logical consistency and practical stability in his understanding of 'integrative'.
[45]   Wiggins, 'Deliberation and Practical Reason', 237.
[46]   Ibid., 233.

Donald Beggs

What about Kantian practical reason? Some argue that a conscientious Kantian could not even seem to be confronted by a conflict of duties, while others argue contrariwise. W. A. Hart has something sensible to say to both positions. He says both that persons never face genuine conflicts of duty but that something like DM is appropriate when it seems they do.

> Where a Kantian moral agent is confronted by what seems to him a serious conflict of duties, it is hardly conceivable that he will decide that his duty is to do A and that B has no claim upon him whatsoever. What we would expect and what would be more in keeping with the seriousness of his quandary is that he decide that his duty is a complex package of doing-A-while-showing-a-proper-awareness-of-the-claim-of-B, or doing-A-and-making-reparation-for-not-doing-B. It is only the over-schematic representation of the moral agent's situation which makes it seems [sic] as if his choice must be an all-or-nothing one between A and B.[47]

These 'complex packages' and the 'seriousness' of the agent suggest that DM is at work. Indeed, three of the four components of DM are clearly present: the agent acts having conscientiously developed a 'complex package', and this brings an experience of moral loss. Marker 4 is not explicit. But Hart would have no compelling reason to deny that enhanced agental integration would be an effect of conscientious exercises of apparently conflicted practical reason. For Hart's Kantian, part of that integration could take the form of renewed determination to find a path away from the shadows of dilemmas toward the bright anti-realism of only uniquely correct duties.

Hart goes on to say that agents in such situations will do 'at best, the best of a bad job. And any decision about the balance to be struck between the two moral claims is open to the charge that it is deeply, even culpably, flawed'.[48] This seems both right and wrong. It must be right that the conscientious Kantian did the best anyone should expect under the circumstances. But it cannot be right to say that the agent doing that is wrong *simpliciter*. That would commit the fallacy of composition. The blamable wrong is doing the moral wrong X, or not doing the ethically good Y. But it cannot be wrong to have done Hart's hyphen-described act, the

---

[47] W. A. Hart, 'Nussbaum, Kant and Conflicts Between Duties', *Philosophy* **73**.286 (October 1998), 615.
[48] Ibid., 616.

428

'complex package', even though it incurs legitimate blame.[49] Conscientious Kantians should have the latitude to embrace DM.

Further, if the kingdom of ends is a regulative not a constitutive idea, then not all apparent conflicts of duty can be assumed to be *practically* resolvable. From the participant's point of view, not the observer's, one can be right to act after conscientiously attempting but failing to resolve an apparent dilemma. This is not a problem with such an agent but for such an agent. Yet Hart blames agents who face seeming dilemmas and who attempt to resolve them conscientiously.

> [I]f the moral agent has, as a Kantian would have, grounds for thinking that there cannot be a genuine conflict of duties, then the fact that he appears to be confronted by such a conflict is bound to strike him as an index of his own moral shortcomings and lack of moral imagination.[50]

Yet it remains true that Kantian moral theory is only theory if it is not practiced, and content is necessary for the categorical imperative to become a maxim. Conflicts of duty may all be only apparent from the observer's perspective of pure practical reason, but some merely apparent conflicts of duty will be intractably actual from the perspective of the practical reason of responsible persons. Kant takes the form of the categorical imperative to be necessarily one. But nothing guarantees that the language games in which one duty must be fleshed out will be commensurable. It follows that acting on one's duty maxims will be facilitated by DM. After all, no matter how certain and correct a Kantian is that she acts in accord with duty, we cannot blame her that she cannot know whether she acts from duty. Hart's emphasis on 'shortcomings and lack', if internalized, will precipitate moral insensitivity or ethical ambivalence.

---

[49] A related problem is that Hart, perhaps like McDowell, seems to conflate logical consistency and practical stability in his analysis of practical deliberation. This may explain his fallacy of composition. For this conflation fails to distinguish an agent concluding A + B from an agent concluding both A and B. The former reaches one conclusion, the latter two. Hart takes it that there is not really a difference, that the two must be identical in practical deliberation (613f). But that ignores the difference between an observer's point of view, for whom A + B = A and B, and the agent's point of view, for whom the difference between the single conclusion (A + B) and the two conclusions (both A and B) may remain real. Were that not the case, then the agent should reject any claim B might continue to have on her, pace Hart, having concluded to A.

[50] Ibid., 618.

Donald Beggs

A place for DM has been located in diverse models of practical reason. This coherence with reason deepens and broadens the reasons to recognize DM. And this breadth is explained by the ubiquity of dilemmas, real or apparent, by not uncommon narrow differences between conclusions of conscientious moral deliberation about single situations, and by the fact that 'incommensurability is something entirely commonplace'.[51] If aligning DM so emphatically with theories of practical reason should be thought to give it an intellectual function unbecoming a moral virtue, two of McDowell's ideas should ease that worry. First, he argues persuasively against a sharp separation between the intellectual and moral virtues, a sharpness he claims derives from misreading Aristotle. His most emphatic way of putting this point is to claim that for Aristotle there is merely an 'expository division' between the moral and intellectual virtues.[52] Second, perhaps we should say that DM is what McDowell and others have called an executive virtue. 'If an agent is to act in accordance with his own best judgment, or to execute a reasoned decision made in the absence of a best judgment, he needs executive virtues like firmness of will'.[53]

It is not surprising how widespread are the occasions of double-mindedness, but it is surprising that we have not seen the need to acknowledge its morally praiseworthy form. Although no part of my existential claim about DM depends upon this diagnosis, two factors seem to have worked together to obscure DM. Seeing that it entails moral loss, we too quickly conclude that it is either morally objectionable or deliberatively defective. Then, failing to see the distinction between DM and ambivalent character obscures the possible self-integrative effects for a doubleminded agent who acts conscientiously. Indeed, attacks on doublemindedness as corrupt character have a long history. 'A doubleminded (*dipsuchos*) man is unstable (*akatastatos*) in all his ways' (James 1:8). From James's point of view a single outcome is inevitable. The doubleminded will sear their conscience, tipping from doubleness into deeper evil. James's admonition may have been sound for an audience who needed to establish Tory solidarity through a faith not (yet) able to countenance critical Whig attitudes. Ironically, Kierkegaard's more fervent and comprehensive rejection of doublemindedness is in the name of solidarity's other. But there can be no inconsistency in

---

[51]   Wiggins, 'Postscript to Essay X: Reasoned Choice, Freedom, Utility', in *Needs, Values, Truth,* 381.

[52]   McDowell, 'Aristotle's Ethics', 53.

[53]   McDowell, 'Incontinence and Practical Wisdom in Aristotle', 61.

430

decrying what leads to ethical disintegration or moral insensitivity while advocating the virtue that stands firm against these.

3. Toward a Phenomenology of DM

Hamlet regards Claudius; the mousetrap snaps; he dithers on. In contrast, his interaction with the Queen reveals DM. This is so in part because toward Gertrude Hamlet is simultaneously and intentionally cruel and kind. In his seminal 'Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands', Michael Walzer argues that Hamlet's situation shares important features with the situations of conscientious political actors who decide that they must engage in significant moral wrongdoing, who must dirty their hands. Walzer does not think that Hamlet's cruelty toward his mother, his moral wrongdoing, constitutes political dirty hands. He says, 'I don't want to argue that it [the dilemma of dirty hands] is only a political dilemma. No doubt we can get our hands dirty in private life also, and sometimes, no doubt, we should'.[54]

When Walzer cites the prince, 'I must be cruel only to be kind', he picks out Hamlet's DM with respect to his mother.[55] Without fixing on an expression as I have done, Walzer details the admirable doublemindedness: '"I must be cruel' contains the excuse, since it both admits a fault and suggests that Hamlet has no choice but to commit it. [. . .] The rest of the sentence is justification, for it suggests that Hamlet intends and expects kindness to be the outcome of his actions'.[56] Here are DM markers 1–3. His cruelty wrongs his mother, yet through that he seeks a 'greater kindness'.[57] This doublemindedness toward Gertrude cannot be explained simply with reference to (the complexities of) Hamlet's character. He seeks the good, righting Denmark's rottenness, and along with this he actively cares for Gertrude's wellbeing, a non-political good. Yet Gertrude's good is not 'so complete a justification that Hamlet is able to say that he is not *really* being cruel. 'Cruel' and 'kind' have exactly the same status'.[58] Thus, Hamlet's interaction with Gertrude arises from and proceeds through a doublemindedness concerning kindness and

---

[54] Michael Walzer, 'Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* **2**.2 (Winter 1973), 174.

[55] Ibid., 170; *Hamlet* 3.4.178.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., 171.

[58] Ibid., original emphasis.

cruelty: it does not lead to moral insensitivity toward her, as it did in Ophelia's case. And in his practical attitude toward Gertrude Hamlet seems to rise above those aspects of his character that might best be described as chronic ambivalence. With respect to Gertrude, we may cite again a passage from Wiggins:

> [t]he person of real practical wisdom is the one who brings to bear upon a situation the greatest number of genuinely pertinent concerns and genuinely relevant considerations commensurate with the importance of the deliberative context.[59]

We admire Hamlet precisely in, but of course not only because of, this partial manifestation of DM.

Hamlet's praiseworthy but conflicted practical reasoning concerning the Queen contributes to agental integration. The manifestation of the relevant qualities was occasioned by the moral costs of his deliberation about how best to interact with his mother. He anticipates the moral cost of doing the right thing, Hart's 'complex package', with respect to Gertrude, and that helps him pluck up how best to do it. Then he feels the cost of overriding the voice that counsels kindness to his mother. Such 'a painful process [. . .] forces a man to weigh the wrong he is willing to do in order to do right, and which leaves pain behind, and should do so, even after the decision has been made'.[60] Since in saying 'should' Walzer cannot be prescribing ambivalence or insensitivity, then DM is implicit in his analysis. Hamlet's early death is of a piece with the failure of his wider project of self-integration. But lacking all DM he would have been false to the moral problem of how here and now to love his wrongdoing mother.

Although DM in some form may be necessary for tragedy, it may also be a crucial accompaniment of enduring moral triumph. Thomas Mann's Joseph does not merely wear his Egyptian Tory habits well but becomes Egyptian because they are shaped and guided by the tolerant austerity of his critical Whig orientation. Compare the conclusion of the *Oresteia*: the goddess's intervention transforms the jury's impotent doublemindedness into an unnamed moral virtue necessary to reconstitute justice.

DONALD BEGGS (dbeggs@asu.edu) *is an Honors Faculty Fellow, Emeritus, at Barrett Honors College, Arizona State University. He has published articles in the history of early modern philosophy, environmental philosophy, social philosophy, and political philosophy.*

---

[59] Wiggins, op. cit., 233.
[60] Walzer, op. cit., 17.

432