

Amy Kane on the high noon train

Before boarding the train out of Hadleyville, Amy Kane goes to see Helen Ramirez, her husband's ex-lover. To Helen Ramirez, Amy's pacifism makes no sense. She can see only the reasons for Amy to stay and help Will Kane in his struggle. "I don't understand you," she says. "If Kane were my man, I'd never leave him like this. I'd get a gun. I'd fight." We can also imagine a conversation Amy Kane might have had with a more monistically minded Quaker. "You say you understand the reasons never to commit violence," we can imagine this Quaker saying to Amy. "But now you tell me that you feel the pull of a reason to go back and fight by the side of your husband. You're contradicting yourself. To be against violence and also for it: that's self-contradictory." The point of Humean pluralism is that it's not necessarily self-contradictory. We can care about some things in ways that lead us to affirm a moral reason to take one course of action, and we can care about other things in ways that lead us to affirm a moral reason to take another, incompatible course of action. It's only unwarrantedly dichotomous thinking that leads to the insistence that one or the other of those things we care about must be demoted to the realm of the non-moral or erroneous. A state of mind in which you are morally drawn to incompatible courses of action is not self-contradictory. To be in such a state is to be in a situation in which "deliberation is necessary"—at least until high noon, when it's time to act.

I said at the beginning of this book that the danger of a mistaken prioritarianism is holding out too long for an unrealistically perfect justification. But prioritarians are prey to the opposite danger as well—of giving up too soon. That you've found a fundamental moral reason to do something is not sufficient for concluding that you ought to do it. There might be a fundamental moral reason not to do it as well. And when someone points to a moral reason to do something incompatible with what you think there is a moral reason to do, she is not necessarily contradicting you. You may both be right. There may be moral reasons on both sides. To recognize that is to recognize, not necessarily a state of contradiction, but a call for deliberation.

Moral judgment—like deciding in general how to live—is an art, not a science.