

Agonizing Decisions and Moral Pluralism

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Perennial debates in moral philosophy are often compelling because of how they bear on the question of where justification ends. For instance:

Does morality originate in reason or sentiment? If morality originates in reason, then it will be at least theoretically possible to provide a thoroughly rational justification for all of our moral judgments. If morality originates in sentiment, then moral justification will end with concerns of ours that are not rationally required. The danger of a mistaken sentimentalism is giving up too soon: we might think a moral commitment of ours is as justified as it can be, when in fact it is based on something that can be shown to be irrational. The danger of a mistaken rationalist is unrealistic expectations: we might think a moral judgment is illegitimate because it cannot be shown to be fully rational, when in fact it is as justified as can be.

Is morality universal or relative to culture? If it's universal, then if two cultures assign differing moral status to a single practice it will always be at least theoretically possible to show that one of them is wrong. If it's relative, then two cultures with differing views may both be as justified as can be. The danger of a mistaken relativism is, once again, giving up too soon: resting content with a practice that further moral scrutiny would reveal to be unjustified. The danger of a mistaken universalism is insisting on the impossible: refusing to accept the legitimacy of a practice because it fails to achieve a justificatory standard that is in fact unreachable.

Its bearing on the question of where justification ends is also what makes so compelling the debate between moral monists and moral pluralists. Moral monists hold that

there is one and only one basic moral end. Moral pluralists hold that there is a plurality of potentially-conflicting basic moral ends.¹ If monists are right, in every situation it will always be at least theoretically possible to justify a certain course of action by showing that what is of fundamental moral importance supports it. Full monistic justification will always end at a single point. If pluralists are right, there will be some situations in which, even after we have given the best justification for a course of action that it is possible to give, we will still have to acknowledge that to follow that course will be to act in conflict with something of fundamental moral importance. If pluralists are right, the best justification may still not be able to make all of the moral ends meet. The danger of a mistaken monism is refusing to accept a course of action as truly justified because it conflicts with something of fundamental moral importance, when in fact the situation may be one in which conflict between ultimate moral ends is ineliminable. The danger of a mistaken pluralism is accepting as justified a course of action that conflicts with a basic moral end, when it is in fact possible to find a way to act that is consistent with everything of fundamental moral importance.

Our thinking about morality has both monistic and pluralist aspects.² There is, however, a powerful argument for the claim that the pluralist aspects are predominant. In what follows I will try to convince you of this argument — to bring you to appreciate the

¹ Moral pluralism can be taken to hold merely that there is a plurality of ultimate moral ends and to remain neutral on the question of whether those ultimate moral ends can ever imply incompatible actions. I am stipulating that moral pluralism holds not merely that there is a plurality of ultimate moral ends but also that these different ultimate moral ends will sometimes imply incompatible actions. Moral pluralism can also be taken to hold that the different ultimate moral ends have a lexical ordering. I am stipulating that there is no such lexical ordering. I discuss these points about moral conflict and lexical ordering in more detail in [xxx].

² I discuss the variability of our moral concepts in more detail in [xxx].

cogency of one reason for thinking that commonsense morality is deeply pluralistic.³ The argument is anchored in a set of phenomena well-illustrated by a critical scene in the movie *High Noon*.

In the movie, Grace Kelly plays Amy Kane, the wife of Marshal Will Kane, played by Gary Cooper. As a Quaker, Amy is opposed to violence of any kind. Indeed, she tells Kane that she will marry him only if he vows to resign as marshal of Hadleyville and put down his guns forever. He agrees. But shortly after the wedding Kane learns that four villains have plans to terrorize the town, and he comes to think he must try to stop them. He picks up his guns in preparation to meet the villains, and in so doing breaks his vow to Amy. Seemingly unrelenting in her passivism, Amy decides she must leave Will. She boards the noon train out of town. But then she hears gunfire, and, just as the train is about to depart, she gets off and rushes back to town. Meanwhile, Kane is battling the villains. He manages to kill two of them, but the remaining two seem to have him cornered. Then one of them falls.

Amy has picked up a gun and shot him in the back.

³ I am arguing here for the descriptive thesis that commonsense thinking about morality has a predominantly (but not exclusively) pluralist character. I will not be making prescriptive claims about how we *ought* to think about morality. My method here is to present cases, ask what our intuitions are about those cases, and then ask what views of morality best account for those cases. Recently, this kind of armchair methodology has rightfully been questioned, and unflatteringly compared to more empirical approaches to the study of the structure of commonsense morality (Knobe and Nichols, 2008). I believe that the conclusion of the argument I put forward here converges with recent work in moral psychology (see [xxx]), but I readily admit that it would be desirable to have empirical data to support more directly the putatively commonsensical intuitions on which I base my argument. So perhaps the argument here could be taken to be advancing the *prima facie* plausibility of a hypothesis about commonsense morality that further empirical work is needed to establish more firmly.

We briefly glimpse Amy's face immediately after she has pulled the trigger. She is distraught, stricken. When the camera angle changes to a view from behind, we see her head slowly drop under the weight of what she's done.

What is going on with Amy at that moment? It's possible, I suppose, that she believes she shouldn't have pulled the trigger, that she let her emotions run away with her, that her act has resulted from weakness of will. But I doubt that's it. I expect that we think that when she heard the gunshots she decided — agonizingly — that the right thing for her to do was return to town and help her husband in his desperate fight. But then why is Amy dismayed? If she performed the action she thought was right, shouldn't she feel only satisfaction about what she has done?

If we assume moral monism, Amy's reaction will seem paradoxical or inappropriate. For if there is one and only one basic moral end, then to think that a course of action is the morally right one will be to think that everything of fundamental moral importance supports it. And it would be strange — inappropriate in some way — for someone to feel dismayed about doing something that was in line with everything of fundamental moral importance. If the moral justification of an action ends at a single point, then what could be the point of feeling something like remorse about performing that action?

But I don't think we take Amy's reaction to be inappropriate. Far from it. As Grace Kelly plays it, Amy responds to what she has done in just the way we would expect.⁴ What would be strange — unconvincing in the movie and jarring in real-life — would be Amy's feeling no dismay or remorse at all about shooting the man.

⁴ As Michael Smith points out, when we say that we 'expect' someone to do something we can mean either that we believe she *will* do it or that we believe that she *should* do it (Smith 1994, 85). I think Amy's response here is what we would 'expect' in both senses. But for the argument I present in the rest of this paper, it is important only that we expect such a response in the sense of thinking the agent should have it.

And this is perfectly explicable, if we assume moral pluralism. For if there are multiple potentially-conflicting basic moral ends, then thinking a course of action is the right one can be consistent with thinking that it conflicts with something of fundamental moral importance. Pluralism can thus allow that Amy has decided that in this situation saving Kane from the villains has a fundamental moral importance that overrides the prohibition on killing, while still continuing to believe that there is something fundamentally morally terrible about killing. And there is nothing strange about feeling remorse — about experiencing something akin to a sting of conscience — about acting against something one takes to be of fundamental moral importance. Indeed, feeling remorse in such a situation is just what we should expect. This is why we take Amy’s response to her own action to be, not strange or paradoxical, but appropriate.

Or so the argument for moral pluralism — which I will call the “agonizing decisions argument” — claims to show. It’s an abductive argument. It starts with the claim that there are certain phenomena that are in need of explanation: namely, that people in situations such as Amy can experience remorse about doing what they think is right and that we think it appropriate that they do so. It then maintains that moral pluralism explains these phenomena better than moral monism.

I label the decisions at the heart of this argument “agonizing” because of the word’s origin. In Ancient Greece, an *agon* was a contest or struggle between different people (for, say, athletic prizes). The etymology of the word thus contains the notion of conflict between two independent forces, and we can imagine that this pluralist resonance contributes to its aptness as a description of certain kinds of decisions.

This kind of argument originated, I believe, with Bernard Williams (Williams 1973a), and it has been developed in a number of fruitful ways by various philosophers since then.

Usually, however, the argument has been tied to commitments that are — and should be recognized to be — independent of the position of moral pluralism. Such discussions have been wedded to positions on the existence of moral dilemmas (Hill 1996, Blackburn 1996), on virtue ethics (Hursthouse 1999), on weakness of will (Wiggins 1978-9), on moral realism (Foot 1983), on particularist meta-ethics (Stocker 1990), on the rationality of decision-making (Hurley 1989), on moral relativism (Kekes 1995), on the role of emotions in moral judgment (Bagnoli 2000), and so on. There is much of great value in these discussions, but here I want to elucidate the structure of the argument as it supports moral pluralism *per se*, an issue of enough importance that it deserves attention in its own right.

The agonizing decisions argument relies on cases like Amy Kane's having the following four features.⁵

First, Amy is dismayed not merely about what has happened but about what she has done. Amy's reaction is a species of what Williams calls "agent-regret," not merely "bystander-regret" or "situation-regret" (Williams 1981). A bystander witnessing the event

⁵ Are the agonizing decisions people like Amy Kane face instances of moral dilemmas? It depends what we mean. In ordinary conversation, "dilemma" is often used to describe a situation in which a person faces a morally very difficult decision, a situation in which there are powerful reasons to act in one way and powerful reasons to act in an incompatible way. Philosophers, however, often use "dilemma" to mean something more strict than that; Sinnott-Armstrong has convincingly argued that on this more philosophical understanding, a dilemma should be understood as a situation in which two moral requirements are in conflict and yet neither of them is overridden (Sinnott-Armstrong 1988). A situation that is a dilemma in the ordinary sense may not be a dilemma in the strict philosophical sense, and that's because a person may eventually come to see that in the difficult moral situation in which she finds herself one of the requirements does override the other. The agonizing decision argument, as I develop it here, is anchored in situations that the agent takes to be a dilemma in the ordinary sense but does *not* take to be a dilemma in Sinnott-Armstrong's strict philosophical sense. As I develop it, this argument turns on the idea that even when an agent thinks one requirement truly does override all others we may still think it appropriate that she feel remorse for acting on that requirement.

might very well be upset by seeing someone gunned down in the street. We might all wish that the situation in Hadleyville were different. But Amy Kane is experiencing something else. Her reaction to the man's death is bound up with a sense of responsibility for what has happened — a responsibility bystanders and witnesses of regrettable situations do not share.

Second, Amy's dismay is not conjoined with the wish to undo what she has done. Amy believes that, given the circumstances, she has done what she had to do, what she ought to have done. She does not wish to go back in time and do things differently.⁶

Third, Amy's dismay has moral significance. To see this point, imagine a situation in which a person has an essentially first-personal reaction toward something she's done, that reaction is negative, the person does not wish to undo what she has done, and yet the reaction lacks moral significance. The sort of case I have in mind is one in which an agent does something she thinks is called for but finds disgusting. Once while hiking through an Australian swamp I had to pull leeches off the cheek of a companion, and thinking about it now years later still gives me the creeps. Amy Kane herself might feel intense disgust about squashing a fat spider even though she thinks the spider needed to be squashed. But the essentially first-personal dismay Amy experiences upon shooting the man is different. We expect her to be experiencing a negative reaction that is more similar to a pang of conscience than mere squeamishness or disgust. Unlike responses to bad things one has witnessed as a bystander or to one's own spider-squashings, her dismay is not only regretful (in the sense of wishing the situation were different) but also shares some of the phenomenological qualities of our reactions to our own wrongdoings. This is why I think it is fair to say that Amy's bowing her head after shooting the man is a manifestation of *remorse*.

⁶ For astute discussion of the conjunction of agent-regret and the wish *not* to undo what one has done, see Rorty (1980).

Fourth, we may take this remorse to be appropriately felt, even if we agree with the person's judgment about what he or she ought to have done. We don't think that someone who has a remorseful reaction to doing what he or she thinks is right in a morally difficult situation is necessarily in the grips of excessive fastidiousness or neurotic irrationality. We think that having this reaction can speak well of the moral character of a person. Indeed, what we would find askance is the complete absence of such a feeling in a person who had to act in certain kinds of morally difficult situations. Hill makes this point well when he asks us to consider our reaction to an agent in one of these agonizingly morally difficult situation who "said sincerely, not masking deeper feelings: "There was nothing better to do, as far as I could tell. It's a pity that someone had to do this (or something as bad) and people died. But I am content, even proud, that I wanted to avoid doing anything wrong, and I did. My life is no worse for doing what I did, I have no more reason to feel concern for the people I killed than you do, and, other things being equal, I would happily take up the job of making the hard choice again if someone had to do it." Something seems missing here: attitudes and feelings we suppose any decent person would have" (Hill 1996, 187). It seems to us that something is missing here because we think remorse is *fitting* to the situation.⁷ And the reason we think it fitting is because we think it is evidence that the agent takes to be morally valuable something that he or she had to act in opposition to. We take remorse to be appropriate because we take it to be evidence that the agent places value on a moral consideration in conflict with the moral consideration he or she acted on. Hill's point that we may approve of this remorse and disapprove of its absence also strengthens the claim (made in the preceding paragraph) that those reactions have moral significance in a way mere

⁷ See D'Arms and Jacobson (2000) for further discussion of how an emotion can be fitting to a situation. For a rich discussion of when the kind of moral ambivalence I am concerned with here can be appropriate and epistemically responsible, see Rorty (forthcoming).

squeamishness and disgust do not. We take the presence or absence of this remorse to signal something important about the agent's moral character. Not so for mere squeamishness or disgust. Your moral assessment of my character would not change merely upon discovering that I had overcome my repugnance toward leeches.

Amy's case thus reveals that the following ideas are all consonant with our moral thinking. An agent can face difficult decisions in which there are morally cogent reasons to do x and morally cogent reasons to do y but no possibility of doing both. Even if the agent comes to decide that doing x is right, she may still feel bad about doing it. This bad feeling can have a morally significant, remorseful quality — a quality more phenomenologically similar to pangs of conscience than feelings of squeamishness or disgust. And we may judge it appropriate for the agent to feel bad in this way. We may take this response not to indicate irrationality, unreasonability, neurosis, or any other psychological shortcoming. To the contrary. We may judge the lack of such a response in agonizing, morally difficult situations to be inappropriate. We may judge the lack of such a response to indicate a moral shortcoming in the character of the person who lacks it.

The pluralist claims that the best explanation of these thoughts is that commonsense takes there to be a plurality of potentially-conflicting basic moral ends. For if commonsense were monistic, we would not judge it appropriate for a person to feel remorseful after having acted in the way she thought was right. Monists can endorse the wish that the world had been different so that it would have been possible to further promote a single ultimate moral end. They can affirm the appropriateness of situation-regret in cases such as Amy's. But they cannot accommodate the appropriateness of an agent's thinking she has done the right thing while also feeling responsible for acting against an ultimate moral end. Pluralists, in contrast, can explain our judging that it is appropriate for an agent such as Amy to feel

remorseful, and they can do so by attributing to us the idea that that remorsefulness indicates that the agent is sensitive to more than one ultimate moral end. The pluralist explanation of our thoughts about an agent such as Amy is that we judge her remorsefulness to be evidence that she takes to be of moral significance not only the consideration that has led her to act in the way she did but also another consideration that she has had to act contrary to. The pluralist explains the idea that her remorse is appropriate as being the result of our approval of an agent's being sensitive to a plurality of potentially-conflicting basic moral ends.⁸

⁸ Approval of remorse in these situations also constitutes a significant reason to prefer pluralism over a specificationist view of moral principles. Specificationists hold that moral principles contain specifications — provisos, qualifications and the like — that are detailed enough to ensure that the principles will never actually imply incompatible actions (Richardson 1990, Schafer-Landau 1995). A specificationist might hold, for instance, that there is no rule simply not to lie. There is, rather, a rule not to lie unless lying will avert disaster, or unless the lie is benevolent and trivial, or unless the lie is necessary to keep a significant promise and does not hurt any third party, etc. The specificationist idea is that if these specifications are fully spelled out, then my coming to think X is my all-things-considered duty will also involve my coming to think that X doesn't violate any moral rules, since the rule that X might have seemed to violate actually contains specifications that make X entirely in conformity with the rule. So while the pluralist takes us to think that we sometimes have to break one moral rule in order to conform to another, the specificationist takes us to think that to act morally is to act in conformity with all the moral rules just so long as those rules are suitably specified. Specificationist thus deny that ultimate moral ends will come into conflict not because they think the world has been theologically arranged to ensure that a plurality of simple basic rules will always converge on the same action but rather because they think that rules contain specifications that are detailed and mutually sensitive enough to ensure that no rule ever manages to step on another's duty's toes. In contrast, pluralists contend that ultimate ends can step on each other's toes. Now it might seem to be quite difficult to determine which of these two positions is correct. For both pluralist and specificationist views can explain the difficulty of making certain kinds of moral decisions: pluralism says that the difficulty comes in deciding which rule to violate, while specificationists say the difficulty comes from trying to determine the full extent of the qualifications of the seemingly conflicting but actually ultimately compatible rules. But if I think I have acted in accord with all the moral rules, as the specificationist claims, why would it be appropriate for me to continue to feel remorse? It seems that if the specificationist were right, when I did what I ultimately thought was the right thing to do I would have no cause to feel what we take it to be appropriate for Amy Kane to feel. For if all these

One way of putting the pluralist point here is that cases like Amy's elucidate the idea that moral conflict sometimes cannot be completely dissolved, even if it can be resolved. If a conflict is dissolved, it disappears. What appeared to be a conflict turns out not to be a real conflict after all. No one on either side is dissatisfied, nothing unrequited. If a conflict is resolved, a satisfactory way of dealing with the opposing forces may have been reached, but everyone may not have gotten exactly what he or she wanted. Conflict resolution doesn't succeed by showing the two sides that they are not really in conflict after all. It takes the conflict as real and then seeks the best way of dealing with it. Monism implies that when a person facing a difficult case comes to think that a certain decision really is the right one, she will no longer experience the situation as involving opposing moral forces but rather take the moral conflict to be dissolved. She will now see what a single fundamental moral force implies. In contrast, pluralism implies that even if someone comes to think that one particular course of action is the right one, she may continue to experience the situation as one that involves conflicting moral forces. One's coming to a conclusion about what one ought to do, on the pluralist view, will not inevitably bring in its wake a dissolution of the experience of moral conflict. The best one may be able to do is resolve the situation, while still leaving something morally unrequited. And it is just this sense of leaving something morally unrequited — the sense of having acted against something morally important — that leads Amy to bow her head. Her action may very well be justified, but that does not mean she has managed to make all of the moral ends meet.

Such, in any event, is how the agonizing decision argument goes. Objections can be raised, but I believe that pluralists can mount strong responses to all of them.

specifications were fully spelled out, we would see that all moral ends really do fit together perfectly — that there is nothing to feel remorse about.

Monists may object that the negative reactions of people who have had to act on agonizing decisions are merely the shadows of uncertainty, not the residue of a conflict between ultimate moral ends. The situations facing these agents are difficult ones. They might be unsure that the decisions they ended up making were right. And the unpleasant aftertaste of those decisions, according to this objection, signals only their lingering concern about whether they decided incorrectly, not the belief that they acted correctly but in opposition to something of ultimate moral importance. Simon Blackburn suggests this response when he diagnoses the “heavy heart” with which one must make agonizing decisions — “the umbrella of doom” under which one finds oneself acting in these situations — as based on the “fear that with hindsight one will see” that the “alternative [course of action] will prove to have been the right one” (Blackburn 1996, 129).⁹

To assess this monist “uncertainty” objection, we need to distinguish between two kinds of uncertainty — two different ways in which a person may be unsure about whether she has done the right thing. One kind is uncertainty about non-moral facts, and the other is uncertainty (given the non-moral facts) about one’s moral judgment.

The worry uncertainty about the non-moral facts gives rise to is that since we are making our decisions with only partial information, it is possible that if we had known more, we would have realized that we should have decided differently. For this monist objection to work, however, it would have to be the case that whenever one really did know all the non-moral facts and acted as she thought she ought, then she would not feel any remorse, or if

⁹ Blackburn is actually talking about moral dilemmas in the strict philosophical sense, while I am talking about morally difficult situations that are not dilemmas in that sense (see footnote above). What Blackburn says about moral dilemmas can be taken to suggest this epistemic objection to the difficult cases argument, but I do not know if Blackburn himself would endorse the objection.

she did feel it, that it would be inappropriate for her to do so. But this view of when such remorse is appropriately felt runs directly counter to what I take to be our ideas about people facing agonizing decisions. Amy Kane knows all the relevant facts, and yet she still feels remorseful about what she has done. And even cases that might initially seem more supportive of the monist uncertainty objection turn out to fit better with the pluralist account.

Consider, for instance, the story Sartre tells of a student of his who had to face an agonizing decision.

Sartre's Student. The student lived alone with his mother in France during World War II. His mother was ill and dependent on the student both materially and emotionally. The boy's father had collaborated with the Germans, and the boy's older brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940. The student was thus faced with the choice of leaving for England to join the Free French Forces in their fight against the Germans, or of remaining with his mother and helping her to carry on. What should he have done? (Sartre 1956)

I expect most of us, if placed in the student's shoes, would find this situation agonizingly difficult. And the difficulty would not be merely that of trying to steel oneself to do what one judged to be right. There would also be the prior difficulty of trying to decide what, in fact, was right to do. It is the difficulty of deciding that Sartre himself emphasizes. Indeed, Sartre leaves the student in a state of moral perplexity, which suits his existentialist purposes. But let us move beyond what Sartre says and imagine that the student does eventually come to a settled judgment about what he ought to do. Let us imagine he decides that the right thing to do is join the Free French Forces, even though it means abandoning his mother. When the time comes to act, he does just that.

What attitude do we expect¹⁰ the student to have toward his own conduct? His reaction would probably be complex, but I believe we would think it appropriate for him to feel morally-significant first-personal dismay about leaving his mother — to be remorseful. I believe we'd find it troubling if he didn't feel any remorse at all.

Now it may initially seem that Sartre's case is easy pickings for the monist's uncertainty objection. The student couldn't have known in advance whether his fighting for the Free French would have any positive effect at all on the anti-Nazi cause. Perhaps he'd play an instrumental role in a decisive battle; perhaps his efforts would be a complete failure or he'd be killed on his first mission. Nor could he have known for sure how much additional hardship his mother would endure as a result of his leaving. And, according to the uncertainty objection, it's easy to explain his lingering dismay about his decision as resulting from this agonizing uncertainty about what would happen.

But now consider the situation years later. Imagine that the student eventually comes to realize that the role he played with the Free French was instrumental to the anti-Nazi cause, helping to save hundreds of lives and advance the cause of freedom throughout the world. These results confirm his original judgment that it was right for him to fight. But do we expect his awareness of these facts to completely dissolve his remorse about abandoning his mother? I doubt we do. I expect, rather, we think it is still appropriate for the student to feel remorse about leaving his mother to die alone, even if he also believes that promoting the anti-Nazi cause was all things considered the right thing for him to do.

The second version of the uncertainty objection holds that the lingering negative reactions agents like Amy Kane and Sartre's student may feel toward their decisions reflect their uncertainty not about the non-moral facts but about whether (given the non-moral

¹⁰ See footnote on 'expect' above.

facts) they have come to the correct moral conclusion about what to do. The idea here is that what concerns the agent is that she may have not yet found the complete justification (given the non-moral facts) for how she ought to act, and that if she were to think she had ascertained that complete justification, her negative reaction would disappear. This objection holds that the experience of a dismaying moral residue indicates only uncertainty about whether one has fully grasped all the moral implications of the different available courses of action, and that it does not indicate the experience of a conflict between different ultimate moral ends. The unpleasant moral aftertaste the agent feels reflects the fear that if she had only put the facts to herself in a new way, if she had only turned the issues over once more, brought to bear on them some new moral light, she would have seen with certainty what ought to be done; and once she had obtained that certainty, there would no longer be any unpleasant aftertaste to her actions. There would no longer be any dismaying moral residue.

In response, pluralists can readily acknowledge that the kind of moral uncertainty described in the preceding paragraph can and often afflict someone forced to make an agonizing decision. But what the monist has to claim in order to mount an objection to the agonizing decisions argument is that this moral uncertainty absorbs *all* of the moral residue in difficult situations. It has to diagnose the dismay of agents such as Amy Kane and Sartre's student as nothing but concern about whether one has deployed correctly a single moral value — and that thinking one's way to a complete justification for one's actions will reduce that negative reaction to zero. But while there may be some dyed-in-the-wool Utilitarians or Kantians who experience agonizing decisions in this way, this does not seem to describe accurately the experience of most people. Consider a person in a situation similar to that of Amy Kane or Sartre's student who, after coming to a decision, said "I'm sure this is the right

thing to do, but I still feel guilty about it.”¹¹ The monist objection we are now considering will have to hold that this person is either confused or expressing an inappropriate reaction. But this statement certainly doesn’t sound ineluctably confused; it seems as though it could be a perfectly reasonable thing to say. That leaves the proponent of this monist objection no option but to hold that the person who feels morally significant agent-regret about doing what she is sure is right is experiencing something inappropriate — that such a person’s attitude toward her own action is something it would be better or more fitting for her not to have. But “I’m sure this is the right thing to do, but I still feel guilty about it” does not seem to constitute a request for help in being disabused of an inappropriate response, nor would we think such a disabusing necessarily called for. To see this, imagine that while the student is not completely sure, he tends to think that he ought to fight for the Free French. And he feels remorseful about what this means for his mother. According to both the pluralist and the monist objection we are now considering, the student’s remorse may be appropriate. But the monist objection also implies that if the student were to lose his doubts and come to have certainty that fighting with the Free French was right while continuing to feel remorseful about how his actions affected his mother, that remorse either would shift to something like situation-regret, or would now become inappropriate. But that seems to run plainly counter to commonsense. The student might lose one lingering concern — “Did I do the right thing?” But we expect him to retain another one — “My poor mother!” Indeed, it seems likely that we would find it inappropriate for the student to *stop* feeling bad

¹¹ I am using “guilty” in this sentence rather than “remorse” because the latter word has fallen out of favor somewhat in everyday talk. There are differences between remorse and guilt (see, for instance, [xxx]), but my purpose here of pointing to the appropriateness of a negative, first-personal, morally-significant reaction, they are unimportant.

about leaving his mother just because he came to greater certainty about his action's having been the right one.

Pluralists can make a different point about moral uncertainty as well. The difficulty of figuring out what's right to do in situations in which all the (non-moral) facts are known is itself most convincingly explained by there being a conflict between different ultimate moral values. This is one of the most important lessons of Williams' famous story of Jim, who can kill one innocent person or stand by and do nothing while someone else kills twenty (Williams 1973b). It is perfectly clear, given the non-moral facts Williams presents, that Jim's killing the one will have better consequences (barring some very idiosyncratic utility function) than his not killing. So any monistic consequentialism (except for the very idiosyncratic) will imply that the decision about whether it is morally right for Jim to kill the one will be easy as pie. But regardless of whether on full reflection we come to think Jim ought or ought not to kill the one, we will understand and appreciate it if Jim finds the decision very difficult — agonizing, even. The best explanation for our acknowledging the reasonability of Jim's finding this decision difficult is that we think that the (agent-neutral) consideration of what will produce the best consequences is not the only morally relevant feature of the situation. Also relevant is the (agent-relative) consideration of what Jim himself will cause to happen.¹² It's the existence of the two different moral reasons that explains the reasonability of Jim's finding the decision to be unsettlingly difficult — and it's that difficulty that accounts best for his uncertainty about what is right to do.

The aptness of a pluralism-based account of moral uncertainty is also apparent in the more realistic story told by Hill.

¹² For discussion of agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons, see [reference deleted].

Hill's Professor. A professor has a student who shows in tutorial conversations signs of deep depression. The student is later found dead, and the circumstances are such that others can easily see his death as accidental. Indeed, the official ruling is that the student's death is accidental, but the professor believes (without being absolutely sure) that it is suicide. A few weeks after the death, the student's mother comes to see the professor. The mother, a devout Roman Catholic, is deeply worried about her son's soul, and she asks the professor whether he has any reason to suspect suicide. Should the professor tell the mother what he really believes or should he assure her that he had no reason to think the boy committed suicide?¹³ (Hill 1991)

Some people may find the decision of whether or not to lie to the mother an easy one. But I think many would expect to find this to be a difficult decision, one that a person could reasonably be uncertain about. What would explain this uncertainty? The pluralist will plausibly claim that it is not uncertainty about how to apply a single moral end, but rather the awareness of conflict between the moral end of easing the mother's pain and the different moral end of telling her the truth.

¹³ Hill's case is another revealing example (as was Williams' case of Jim and the Indians) of the difficulty of making some moral decisions that monisms have trouble explaining. We can certainly imagine this case as one in which the ratio of pleasure-to-pain would clearly be better if the professor lies to the woman, and in such an instance a Utilitarian would be committed to saying that lying is obviously the right course of action — and that it is easy to figure that out. We can also see this case as clearly one in which an agent has to choose whether to lie to someone or to tell her the truth, and in such an instance a Kantian (or Kant, anyway) would be committed to saying that telling the truth is obviously the right course of action — and that it is easy to figure that out. But it's not perfectly and immediately obvious which course of action is right (even if we assume that more happiness will be created by lying). This case (like Jim and the Indians) is one in which we can imagine its being very difficult to determine what ought to be done. And while the monistic views of Utilitarianism and Kantianism seem to predict that such difficulty would not arise, the pluralist view that this difficulty is due to the fact that in this case two ultimate moral ends are in conflict is simple and persuasive.

A different monist objection holds that agents can have the same reactions as Amy Kane and Sartre's student, those reactions can be appropriate, and yet those agents can be in situations in which they are clearly not responsible for acting in opposition to any moral end. This would undermine the agonizing decisions argument, for if we think it appropriate for someone to have a certain reaction without having acted in opposition to any moral end, then the fact that we think it appropriate for Amy Kane and Sartre's student to have the same reaction will not necessarily indicate a commitment to more than one moral value. McConnell suggests this monist reply in his discussion of one of Williams' examples of bad moral luck. In this case, a man we can call Unlucky Bill is driving perfectly safely and yet, through no fault of his own, runs over and kills a young sledder who has completely unexpectedly skidded under Bill's car. "[G]iven the physical arrangement," McConnell writes, "it would have been impossible for Bill to have seen Johnny coming. Bill was not at fault, legally or morally, for Johnny's death. Yet Bill experienced what can only be described as remorse or guilt about his role in this horrible event." Moreover, according to McConnell, this is a situation "in which we will say that an agent's remorse is not inappropriate even though we think that the agent is not warranted in believing that he has done something wrong" (McConnell 1996, 39). We do not need to postulate a plurality of ultimate moral ends to explain Bill's negative reaction. His negative reaction can very well result from his sensitivity to only one end — that which is instantiated in the life of Johnny. But if a situation of Bill's type can occur, then the cases of Amy Kane and Sartre's student might also be instances of it — instances of a person's feeling remorse even though she has not been involved in any conflict of moral ends.

The pluralist can respond, however, by pointing to the significant differences between Unlucky Bill, on the one hand, and Amy Kane and Sartre's student, on the other.

First and most importantly, neither Amy Kane nor Sartre's student wishes to undo what he or she has done, but Bill clearly does wish to undo what he has done. Amy Kane and Sartre's student thus have a different attitude toward the event they feel remorse about, and it's that difference — their not wishing to undo the event even though they feel remorse about it — that makes those cases evidence for pluralism even though Unlucky Bill's is not. Unlucky Bill, Amy Kane and Sartre's student might all experience agent-regret. But we can and should distinguish between agent-regret for events one has caused intentionally and voluntarily and does not wish to undo, from agent-regret for events one has caused involuntarily or unintentionally and does wish to undo. While agent-regret of the latter kind does not help make the case for pluralism (as the case of Unlucky Bill reveals), agent-regret of the former does.

The pluralist can also respond by contending that we take there to be a *better* fit between the actions of Amy Kane and Sartre's student and their negative reactions than there is between the actions of Unlucky Bill and his "remorse or guilt." If Bill feels not only situation-regret but also "remorse or guilt," we are likely to suspect that he thinks that there was something that he somehow should have done to prevent Johnny's death. We are likely to suspect that he is holding himself responsible to at least some extent. And if we believe that Bill truly was in no way responsible, we will take it to be appropriate to try to move Bill from feeling "remorse or guilt" to feeling only situation-regret. The way in which we might try to help Bill move toward only situation-regret is by trying to convince him that he could not have done anything differently, and so is not responsible for the boy's death. We expect the feelings of "remorse or guilt" to travel in tandem with thoughts about one's own responsibility.

The monist might try to revive the objection by presenting a difficult case in which moral conflict seems to be generated by only one moral end. As Marcus puts it, “Under the single principle of promise keeping, I might make two promises in all good faith and reason that they will not conflict, but then they do, as a result of circumstances that were unpredictable and beyond my control” (Marcus 1980, 125). Imagine, for instance, that I have promised to help A move house, that I have promised to take B to a doctor’s appointment, and that events unfold so that it is possible for me to do one of these things but not both. If I keep my promise to one of them, I will appropriately feel remorse that I broke my promise to the other. But, as this monist objection has it, we do not need a plurality of moral ends in order to explain this reaction. The single moral end of promise-keeping is enough. And this shows that the monist can explain as well as the pluralist the phenomena that are supposed to anchor the agonizing decisions argument.

To see the flaw in this objection, consider that for it to work, the conflict-of-promises case must involve only one ultimate moral end. If the decision in this case involves taking into account more than one ultimate moral end (e.g., if coming to the right decision about which promise to keep involves a sensitivity not only to the moral importance of promise-keeping but also to the moral importance of, say, gratitude, friendship, or the promotion of humans’ physical well-being), then the case will not serve the monistic cause.

But if the decision in this case involves *only* the moral end of promise-keeping, then it’s very hard to see how the agent could come to the conclusion that it is right to keep one of the promises and not to keep the other. If the moral end of promise-keeping is the *only* relevant moral end, then this case will be a strict moral dilemma, a case in which there are two conflicting moral requirements and neither one of them is overridden (Sinnott-Armstrong 1988). Indeed, this is the kind of case Marcus herself seems to have in mind, as

she writes, “All other considerations may balance out. The lives of identical twins are in jeopardy, and, through force of circumstances, I am in a position to save only one” (Marcus 1980, 125). Now maybe instances of such perfectly symmetrical moral conflict do occur, but the agonizing decisions argument turns on a different kind of case. At the heart of the agonizing decisions argument is the idea that a person can appropriately feel remorse about doing something she thinks is morally superior to (and not simply as good as) a conflicting alternative. It’s the conjunction of the judgment that doing X is morally superior to any alternative *and* the appropriate feeling of remorse that is the phenomenon the agonizing decisions argument contends is best explained by pluralism. That a single moral end can give rise to some cases of strict moral dilemma and that as a result monists may be able to explain how an agent may appropriately feel remorse about not acting on a non-overridden moral requirement does not show that monists can adequately explain how an agent can appropriately feel remorse about acting on a moral requirement that *does* override all alternatives. While pluralists can readily allow that in some cases only one moral end is relevant to difficult decision-making, the point of the agonizing decisions argument is that there are other cases that are best explained only by supposing there is more than one.

A related monist objection comes from Hurka, who claims that the appropriateness of a negative reaction toward doing what one takes to be the morally best course of action does not advance the pluralist cause because monists can accommodate the appropriateness of such a reaction just as easily. Hurka writes:

Imagine, to take the simplest example, that you have a choice between giving five units of pleasure to one person, A, and giving ten units of pleasure to a different person, B. Here the lesser good is not included in the greater good as a proper part; it is not the case that if B enjoys the ten units of pleasure, A will enjoy the five units.

Given this, it can surely be rational for you, if you produce the ten units for B, to feel some regret at not having produced the five units for A. There is, on the face of it, only one generic good at issue in your choice, namely, pleasure. But ... if you have chosen a greater instance of one good for one person over a lesser instance of the same good for another person, you can rationally regret not having produced what would have been better for the second person. (Hurka 1996, 563)

One way for a pluralist to respond to Hurka is to question whether the view he is discussing here really is monistic after all. But Hurka defends his view's being monistic, and I think that defense stands a good chance of succeeding.

What the pluralist can plausibly deny instead is that the agent in Hurka's case both has formed his moral judgment in a monistic way and is appropriately feeling not merely situation-regret but agent-regret of the morally-significant kind we have been discussing. It's completely plausible that the agent in this case will wish that A could have been made more happy. But if everything of moral importance in this case boils down to fungible units of pleasure, we will not think the agent should feel *remorse* for choosing B.

To see the underlying weakness of the objection, consider the important differences between Hurka's case and the cases we've discussed in which remorse for doing what one thinks is right is appropriate. In the cases we've discussed, the difficulty of deciding what is right to do outstrips difficulties in determining the (non-moral) facts. Even if we suppose that Amy Kane and Sartre's student are no longer in any doubt about the facts of their situations, we may still expect them to find the decision about what is right to do to be agonizing. As I've argued, epistemic uncertainty doesn't account for all of the unpleasant aftertaste of some morally difficult decision. Now the pluralist can easily explain this lingering aftertaste by pointing to the normative mismatch between the two available courses

of action. According to the pluralist, what exerts justificatory force toward Amy Kane's shooting the villain is a generically different thing from what exerts justification force toward her not shooting him, just as what exerts justificatory force towards Sartre's students' staying with his mother is a generically different thing from what exerts justificatory force toward the student's joining the Free French. And it's this difference — the mismatch between the kinds of things on either side of the justificatory question — that makes it difficult to determine what is right to do.

In Hurka's monistic case there is no normative mismatch. One and the same generic good exerts all the justificatory force on both sides of the question of what ought to be done. In Hurka's case, consequently, if we take all the facts to be fixed, determining what is right to do is easy. If the agent in Hurka's case is confident that one course of action will produce greater moral value than any other, he won't have any difficulty whatsoever determining what is right to do. The moral part of his or her decision-making (unlike Amy Kane's or Sartre's student's) shouldn't be unsettling in the slightest. This is an easy case, not an agonizing one.¹⁴

But just because making the decision in Hurka's case does not involve any moral agony, the agent will not think there is any moral remainder or residue after acting in the way he thinks is right. If you think there is no normative mismatch — if you think that the justificatory forces on all sides are generically the same — you will think that the justification for acting in a certain way is precise and clean, leaving no remainder or residue. Even if you think that you had failed to produce certain things of value, you will not think that any justificatory reason has been left to dangle. The lack of normative mismatch will ensure that

¹⁴ See footnote above about Williams' Jim and the Indians and the difficulty of making some moral decisions.

what normatively underlies your regret at failing to produce certain things of value will be exactly the same thing that underlies the justification of your having done what you did. While there may be things of value that acting in the way you did fails to promote, the justification for acting in that way is based entirely on the same values that explain your wishing those other things had been promoted. The regret you may feel is not regret about not acting in accord with a certain value. It's regret that there couldn't be more of one and the same value.

Hurka's agent bears opportunity costs. Opportunity costs are not pleasant. We wish we could achieve our goals without having to pay them. But if all the relevant costs and benefits in a situation are of a single fungible kind, and if an agent has determined that one course of action in that situation is the most beneficial or least costly, then the agent should not be expected to feel remorse about paying the opportunity costs that course of action involves. If all the relevant costs and benefits are of a single fungible kind, then the agent's feeling no remorse about what he did will give us no reason for thinking that the agent does not fully appreciate something of relevant value. In contrast, we expect Amy Kane and Sartre's student to experience something more than the mere unpleasantness of paying opportunity costs. We expect them to feel remorse because something of moral importance has not been fully compensated for. If they told us that the unfortunate aspects of their actions are fungible vis-à-vis the fortunate aspects, we would question whether they had fully appreciated something of fundamental moral importance.

Remorse is appropriate only when agents take themselves to have resisted some justificatory pull, to have left some normative itch unscratched. In Hurka's case, the agent will not take himself to have acted in opposition to anything of moral importance, not to have left anything justificatorily unrequited. It's certainly reasonable for this agent to wish

that the situation had been different so that he could have made both A and B happy and avoided opportunity costs. But wishing there were no opportunity costs to a certain course of action one thinks is right is not the same as experiencing remorse about following that course.¹⁵

The final objection to the agonizing decisions argument that I want to consider is that the cases it is based on are too unusual to serve as probative of commonsense moral thinking. Amy Kane is a fictional character in a life-and-death situation virtually none of us ever has or ever will encounter. Sartre's student may have been real, but the circumstances he faced were so dire that we shouldn't expect our everyday moral ideas to apply to them in any illustrative way. Our moral thinking didn't develop to address cases as extreme as Amy's or the student's. Thus, the picture of our moral thinking intuitions about such cases will produce is likely to be distorted, stretched beyond its breaking point.

¹⁵ Monistic utilitarians can endorse, after a fashion, the remorse some feel after doing what they think is right. That remorse, on this utilitarian account, grows out of concerns that when acted on usually promote happiness. In particular, unusual situations, greater happiness can be promoted by acting contrary to those concerns. But it's a good thing that a person feels bad about acting contrary to those concerns even in those unusual situations because that reaction will keep her from acting contrary to those concerns in the more usual cases in which such actions do not best promote happiness. Heeding the reluctance to kill human beings, for instance, usually best promotes happiness. There are some unusual cases in which killing humans does best promote happiness. But it's better that a person feel bad about killing even in those unusual cases because that will make it more likely that she won't kill in the more usual cases. I take this utilitarian endorsement not to be directly in opposition to the pluralist description of commonsense moral thinking I am advancing here. This utilitarian endorsement is consistent with the idea that commonsense moral thinking takes there to be a plurality of potentially-conflicting ultimate moral ends. It just then goes on to hold that such thoughts are something like a useful illusion — that the single end of happiness is best promoted if ordinary people think like pluralists. I do not agree with the utilitarian view of commonsense pluralism, but I will not take on that issue here.

An initial response to this objection is that there are numerous real-life cases we can point to that support the central aspects of the agonizing decisions argument just as well as Amy Kane's and Sartre's student. Hill's Professor is one. Here's another:

Baron's Spouse. A woman is in a marriage that she finds stultifying. She believes that if she leaves her husband, she will be able to grow more as a person. But she is aware that leaving will sever the significant emotional bond she still has with her husband, and that he is likely to suffer pain and depression as a result. Should she stay or should she go? (Baron 1988)

Hill's Professor and Baron's Spouse both face agonizing decisions. But now let us suppose that they both come to considered conclusions about what they ought to do. The Professor decides the right thing to do is tell the mother he has no reason to think her son committed suicide. The Spouse decides the right thing to do is strike out on her own. Even after they have acted in the way they thought was right, we would still expect both them to feel something like remorse about what they've done — to feel dismay of the morally-significant, agent-regretful kind. And the pluralist explanation is once again the most apt: we expect each to be remorseful because while he or she has acted in accord with one moral end, he or she has also acted in conflict with another, independent moral end.

Moreover, the cases of the Professor and the Spouse can be taken as representative of broad classes of cases of agonizing decisions that are far from atypical. It's not all that unusual to face situations in which one has to choose between, on the one hand, doing something that will bring a person more happiness or less distress, and, on the other hand, being completely truthful. Nor is it all that unusual to face situations in which one has to choose between promoting one's own self-development and acting in accord with one's concern for others. And because these cases are not all that unusual, there is no reason to

think that applying commonsense moral thinking to them will be an exercise in intuition-distortion. These are just the sorts of cases to which our moral thinking has developed to respond.

Even so, the Professor and the Spouse, no less than Amy Kane and Sartre's student, are in situations in which different moral ends imply strictly incompatible actions. All of these cases involve stark forced choices. And while we do sometimes face decisions like that, they do not dominate our daily lives. There may, thus, be something incomplete — and perhaps unhealthy — about a philosophical diet that consists of nothing but examples of this sort. Anscombe suggests this line of criticism when she says that a person who focuses his moral theorizing on dilemma-like situations in which one is forced to do something one would normally hold to be wrong “shows a corrupt mind” (Anscombe 1956, 40). Hursthouse suggests something similar when she says that “a too great *readiness* to think ‘I can't do anything but this terrible thing, nothing else is open to me’ is a mark of vice, a flawed character” (Hursthouse 1999, 87).¹⁶

But when we turn away from stark forced choices to other kinds of agonizing decisions, the case for pluralism becomes even stronger. To see this, consider situations in which we are called upon to solve what O'Neill has helpfully termed moral “design problems” (O'Neill 2001).

An example of a design problem is what confronts an architect who seeks to construct a building that is economical, environmentally friendly, and beautiful. In such a situation, the architect is not forced to make a stark choice between different ends. She doesn't have to completely violate one end in order to comply entirely with another. Her

¹⁶ Although Hursthouse isn't hostile to the idea that there are agonizing decisions in which the agent will experience remorse whichever course of action she chooses. Far from it. Hursthouse describes this phenomenon very insightfully (Hursthouse 1999).

design can have elements that are economical, environmentally friendly, and beautiful. She can do things that are in accord with each end. But the architect will almost certainly nonetheless have to make some tough choices because she will not be able to do everything each of the ends considered solely on its own would lead her to do. If she were to give ultimate trumping power to the value of beauty — if she were to ignore environmental concerns and cost whenever they were in tension with aesthetic considerations — the building would be inefficient and prohibitively expensive. If she were always to choose the cheapest option available, the building would be inefficient and unattractive. So what she must do is try to come up with a satisfactory balance of the three ends.

Design problems thus differ in two important ways from the forced choices of Amy Kane, Sartre's student, Hill's professor, and Baron's spouse. First, someone facing a design problem is not required to violate one end entirely in order to live up to another end completely. There are likely some things the architect can do that are beautiful, environmentally friendly, and inexpensive; and while she might have to forgo a bit of ecofriendliness (or aesthetics, or expense) in some aspects, she can put some more ecofriendly features in other aspects. Second, someone facing a design problem is not forced to choose between two and only two stark options. There are many different ways of constructing solutions to design problems — many different building plans the architect may consider. The relevant mindset here is not that of choosing between two fixed choices that have been thrust upon one but rather that of actively constructing — creatively designing — a workable solution for dealing with a complex, multi-faceted problem.

The idea of O'Neil's that I want to endorse is that we face morally significant situations that have features similar to this type of architectural design problem more often than we face the stark forced choices I've discussed in the preceding sections. Someone

might value, for instance, family, work, and friends. But it might be impossible for her to promote all of these to the fullest extent. If she did everything possible for her friends, her work and family would get short shrift. If she did everything possible for her family, her work and friends would get short shrift. But that does not mean she will constantly be forced to make stark choices between friends, family, and work. She can construct a life that enables her to realize all three of these things to some extent, even if she cannot realize each of them to the greatest extent imaginable. Nor are there only two options about how to construct such a life. There are many different ways of trying to solve this problem, many different life-designs she can construct.

Does the experience of these sorts of moral design problems fit better with a pluralist view than with a monistic one? I believe it does. To see this, consider the Busy Day — a scenario in which a person, on one particular day, has powerful reasons to spend as much time as possible with her family, and has powerful reasons to spend as much time as possible at work, and has powerful reasons to spend as much time as possible with a friend. Perhaps it is a child's birthday, the day before a major project at work is due, and a day on which a good friend who has helped the person in the past needs help herself. But of course she can't spend the entire day with her family, at work, and with her friend, even if the importance she places on each of these things give her powerful reasons to do so. So she has to decide how to construct her day so that it is the best it can be. This decision may be difficult for her. But the difficulty here is that of a moral design problem, not a stark forced choice. For first, the person is not required to violate one end entirely in order to promote completely another. She may choose to spend the entire day just with her friend and completely forgo work and family. But she also can choose to spend part of the day doing one thing, another part doing another, and a third part doing a third. She can promote each

of these ends to some extent even if she cannot promote all of them to the fullest extent. Second, the person is not forced to choose between only two options. There are many different ways she can choose to plan her day — many different solutions she can construct to deal with the problem of how to spend her time. That situations can have these two features of a moral design problem rather than a stark forced choice becomes even more apparent when we consider that in reality a person usually makes decisions about how to structure her life over a period of weeks, months, or years, and not simply a day, as I have suggested in order to make the exposition of the Busy Day easier.

So now let us say that the person has made what she takes to be the best decision about how to spend her day — a decision that involves spending some time at two of the things (although not as much at either of them as she would if the other concern were not pressing) but not any time at the third. How will she feel about acting on that decision? It seems plausible that she will experience something like remorse — and not simply the awareness of opportunity costs — about not being able to spend more time with her child/at work/with her friend. It seems plausible that she will feel responsibility for some value-loss, a sense that she has left unsatisfied some desiderata, a sense that she has left undone things that it would have been morally good for her to have done. Even if the person thinks she's done the best she can do given the circumstances, she is still likely to experience a residue of moral unrequitedness.

Would we take the person's sense of value-loss to be appropriate, or to be a sign of fastidiousness, neurosis, self-flagellation? I think we would take it to be appropriate. That the person believes she has failed to satisfy some desiderata can reasonably be taken to be an indication of her proper appreciation of distinct moral ends, and not an indication of morally irrelevant psychological quirks. I suppose we can imagine someone in this situation who

feels no sense of loss other than that of having to pay opportunity cost. But I doubt that we take the lack of any remorse in this situation to be more appropriate than the presence of it. Indeed, it seems to me that we may take the person who lacks any first-personal agent-regretful dismay to be inappropriately centered on the cleanliness of her own hands in a way that detracts from her responsiveness to the things of value.

Now it might be thought that a person will face moral design problems such as I've described only if she has previously made some moral mistakes. According to this line of thinking, if the person had made nothing but impeccable decisions in the past, she would never have found herself in a situation in which she has no choice but to leave some moral desiderata unfulfilled. Even if this were so, it would not speak against a pluralist account. For the pluralist could still plausibly claim that part of what makes past decisions peccable or otherwise is the agent's responsiveness to a plurality of basic moral ends and her facility at coordinating those ends and predicting their demands. And even if someone finds herself confronted by a moral design problem only because she has made moral mistakes in the past, her feeling remorse about doing what she takes to be the best way of dealing with her situation (and our taking that reaction to be appropriate) will still be evidence for moral pluralism.

But it seems to me that we do *not* take the fact that a person faces a moral design problem to be evidence of her having previously made moral mistakes. It would be easy enough, for instance, to fill in the details of the Busy Day scenario in such a way that it would be difficult to see how a person could be faulted for finding herself in a situation in which she faces the moral design problem at issue. Perhaps the person who has family, work, and friendship commitments had her original plans upset by events that she could never have been expected to have anticipated, such as sudden illness or fluky natural disaster.

(Sartre's student cannot be blamed for his mother's frail health, for the Nazi occupation, or for the impossibility of both caring for his mother and going to fight with the Free French. Hill's professor may not have been in position to do anything more than he did do for his depressed student.)

Indeed, there might be reason to think it morally *undesirable* to structure one's life so that one never faces the type of moral conflict that confronts the person with the Busy Day (or Sartre's student, or Hill's professor). There might be reason to think that a life that has no moral conflict will be attained only at the expense of a responsiveness to things of real moral importance.

To see this, consider that the best way to avoid moral conflict is to commit to one and only one ultimate moral end. If a person recognizes as ultimately moral important only, say, family, or work, or friendship, or possessing a particular characteristic, she will not face the kind of moral conflict I've been talking about here. She might still face difficult decisions about how to live up to an ultimate end — how best to be a parent, or to do her work, or to be a friend, or to exemplify a certain characteristic — and she may have to pay opportunity costs as a result. But she will not face the difficulty of having to balance being the best parent she can be against being the best worker, or being the best friend against exemplifying a certain characteristic. And if this person always acted in accord with what she takes to be the best option, she should never experience any remorse at all. If the student cared ultimately only about freedom for France, for instance, he would not have faced the difficulty of having to decide between ultimate ends (even if he might still have faced difficulties and borne opportunity costs in determining how best to help France) and would not have experienced any remorse after acting as he thought he ought. And if the Busy Day person placed ultimate moral importance only on, say, her family, her decision about how to

spend her time would have been easier and should not have occasioned in her any remorse (even if opportunity costs still had to be paid). Such a person would be like an architect who places sole ultimate value on environmental concerns, or on beauty, or on cost. Such an architect may still face many difficult decisions, but they will be decisions about how best to achieve a single goal, not how to balance different goals.

The history of moral philosophy does give us examples of people with moral lives like this, people like Socrates and Epictetus, whose monistic value-systems ensured that they would never experience remorse when acting as they thought they ought. And there may be people walking among us who have monistic value-systems that similarly insulate them from remorse. In *The Orchid Thief*, Susan Orlean movingly described her fascination with these types of people — those whose overriding concern for one thing simplified all the decisions they had to face. Such people, Orlean wrote, “circled their lives around some great desire ... a desire that then answered questions for them about how to spend their time and their money and who their friends would be and where they would travel and what they did when they got there” (Orlean 1998, 40-41). Placing ultimate importance on one thing enabled these people to “whittle” the normative world down to a manageable size (Orlean 1998, 109).

But do we expect these monistic types — these people whose possession of a single ultimate concern insulates them from the experience of remorse — to be leading morally better lives than those who do find themselves confronting moral conflict? I doubt it. I doubt that we take insulation from remorse to be an indication of a morally better life, any more than we think an architect ultimately concerned with only one desideratum is the best one to hire for the construction of our house. And we withhold our wholehearted approval from such monistic types not simply because we think they’ve singled out the wrong

ultimate end. We withhold our wholehearted approval because we think there is more than one thing of ultimate importance, and that being disposed never to experience remorse indicates a lack of proper responsiveness to all of those things.

Consider, for instance, Socrates and Epictetus and their resolutely non-remorseful attitude toward the distress of their families. Or Susan Orlean's orchid thief, John Laroche, a man whose overriding love for the beauty of orchids left no room in his psyche for any agent-regret about anything he did in his botanical pursuits.¹⁷ How attractive yet strange such people seem! Perhaps, like Susan Orlean, we sometimes feel a wistful envy for the moral simplicity of their peculiarly monistic lives. But that simplicity comes at a steep price. These monistic oddballs, regardless of what thing they single out as ultimately important, must be missing something. The moral simplicity of their lives betokens a lack of appreciation of some of the plurality of moral ends we take there to be.

Many moral theories have told us to live in accord with a single ultimate moral commitment, and such theories do promise to show us how to dissolve moral difficulty and inoculate ourselves from remorse. Such theories are revisionist. What they propose constitutes an alteration of ordinary moral thinking. Ordinary moral thinking takes a proper and full responsiveness to moral ends to go hand in hand with a susceptibility to moral agonies — and to the experiences of remorse that may follow in their wake.

¹⁷ Even if he often has situation-regret and opportunity cost-pain that the world didn't differ in ways that allowed for more of certain kinds of orchids.

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