

# Introduction

We *are* already a set of disparate elements; whether or not we then *become* a whole of which they are parts depends on the success of our attempts at self-unification, on the measure of artistry we import into our existence. (Landy, 2004, p.123)

A few years ago, before I committed to novels as the ideal form of bedtime reading, I was reading something from the literature of virtue ethics before I slept. My memory is hazy, but I suspect it was by Julia Annas, whose work I admire. It was late and I was reading for pleasure, not a specific project, but I could not shake off a claim I encountered: one's whole life is the ideal frame of reference when thinking ethically.

My tired eyes could have justifiably skipped over this idea, for surely ethics is about life in some capacity, and it must be terrible after years, even decades, to realise that one has overlooked something of ethical importance, or allowed some important project to sink into the background. Troublingly, however, my mind remained utterly blank: What would it even mean to think of my life as a whole?

Usually, I resolve to address questions in the morning only to forget them: there is no notebook on my nightstand. But this question remained with me. Initially, I struggled against my selective memory. I had no clear sense of my past life as a unity, so I turned to the future. Again, I discovered little: scrappy ambitions, part-intimations, fragmented conceptions of success, but no sense of my life as a whole. My interest in the claim I had encountered was exacerbated by this foray into the empty rooms of my mind; I seemed unable to think it, which – by its own lights – amounts to an ethical failure.

In reading more, I noted that several distinct ideals were frequently blurred together. In particular, the passive ideal frame of reference internal to one's ethical thinking is to

be contrasted with the active ideal of a life that one has shaped into a unity. The latter ideal is consistent with my psychological shortcomings. Even though I had a poor grasp of my life, I could work to unify it: my ends and goals should harmonise, my relationships and commitments should complement each other, and my character should facilitate these unities.

Still, I struggled to grasp why this is ideal. A compartmentalised or double life did not seem obviously compromised in virtue of its organisation, especially if deliberately shaped around a core commitment to honesty, or emotional integrity. Nor was I willing to blindly swallow references to unity and harmony, with their resonant histories, without further thinking.

This thesis arose out of such thoughts. Quickly, I realised that it is important to distinguish between the organisation inherent in lives, such as the relationship between one's job, social roles, and wider values – matters which organise one's time and constrain one's actions – and the organisation of character and mind. For internally conflicted people can lead unified lives by accident, and the lives of unified people can break down due to unanticipated external pressures. Each form of organisation, in the circumstances of a life, and in one's mind, reciprocally impacts upon the other, a fact that motivates the interest within virtue ethics in lives alongside its obvious interest in the development of character.

However, it began to seem natural first to think about mental organization, and eventually I lacked space to write about the organisation of lives. The character of one's mind directly affects the life one can pursue. More contentiously, but not implausibly, even if one is unable to change one's circumstances one can certainly work on oneself. This thought has appealed to philosophers since Socrates, and many are seduced by the idea that philosophy generates a distinct form of relationship with, or work on, oneself. Once shorn of arrogance, it is plausible to think that a valuable

form of self-directed attention underpins both personal flourishing and good ethical reasoning. A forceful question that one inevitably faces, however, is this: to what personal end should this attention be directed?

In both philosophical writing, and ordinary speech, one such end is described in terms of organisational harmony. Contrast, for example, the organisation of virtuous traits (must they form a unity? what would that mean?) – a longstanding object of interest in philosophy – with the distinct ideal invoked when one praises of a friend who has “got it together” after loosing their job or experiencing a troubled breakup. The ideal of a unified self has wide appeal, to the point that ‘harmony’ and ‘unity’ are common self-help tropes. Philosophy is not the only genre where phrases can bear rhetorical weight only to collapse under scrutiny.

My initial incomprehension surfaced again with respect to personal ideals of the unified or integrated mind. Why are ideals of unity and harmony often lauded? To me it seems obvious that conflicts and ambivalence are inescapable features of any mental landscape. That thought helped motivate my research. Still, one cannot argue from the fact that an end state is seldom or never realized, to the normative claim that such a state represents a false ideal, without further premises. My aversion to talk of unity might just be a revealing artefact of my own psychology.

That remains a possibility. Indeed, it remains possible that my incomprehension before the idea of my life as a whole is equally revealing. Reticence is often a sign of immaturity, and with the perspective of a few more years my opinion of the ‘origins’ of this work may change. Motivation aside, however, I hope to have replaced my vague intimations with arguments in the following chapters.

At times I think philosophers exaggerate the extent to which their work consists of argument in the formal sense. Much of what I offer here is just exhortation to look

differently upon the ideal of a mind free of conflicts and ambivalence. But if my arguments are right, I am safe in saying that often a change in one's *response* to a knot in mental life is more important than the removal of the knot itself. As with personal conflicts, so with philosophical problems, perhaps.

## The Structure of my Argument

My argument divides into three main parts. In part one, chapters one and two, my primary task is to outline and motivate the ideal of mental organization - which I call the "integration ideal" - which I examine in the subsequent two parts. In chapter one, I describe the integration ideal and locate it within a historical context; in chapter two, I illustrate that the ideal is of philosophical and practical interest irrespective of one's view about the structure of value. In the second part, chapters three to six, I criticize this ideal by criticizing three different ways in which it is articulated in contemporary philosophy. My arguments in each of chapters three to six have a similar structure. First, I challenge the link between the integrated mind and its purported benefits; secondly, I argue that there are contexts when being integrated incurs its own costs; and thirdly, I argue that there are contexts when being disintegrated confers benefits. In the third part of the thesis, chapters seven to eight, I ask whether it is possible to salvage an alternative ideal of integration by reinterpreting the notion. I offer my own account of integration as a capacity, and amplify what this ideal amounts to by asking how it relates to moral virtue.

## Chapter One

Ideals of an integrated and conflict-free mind are common, and can be developed in many directions. My task in chapter one is to define and motivate a version of this ideal, and give it some historical context. I do the latter by considering the ideal, in its

maximalist form, as presented in Plato's *Republic*. Plato's conception of mental organisation encompasses many kinds of mental state and experience. He develops an ideal of the harmonious soul, which lacks conflicts between its parts because reason rules. Plato thinks that one's integrated soul enables one to act well, to possess well-being, and to be virtuous. Using Plato as a starting point, I then provide my own statement of the integration ideal, its central features being absence of conflict and of various kinds of ambivalence. This ideal then serves as the target of my arguments, while retaining the Platonic points of focus: action, well-being, and virtue.

## Chapter Two

One premise I share with Plato is that many mental states – a term I intend to be as colourless as possible – are oriented (as I shall put it) to value, by which I mean they are accompanied by, or open to, a belief about the value of their object i.e. they are judgement sensitive attitudes. Acceptance of this premise threatens to drain the integration ideal of independent interest, for one might think that the good or bad of integration depends entirely on another philosophical dispute: that between value monists and value pluralists. Specifically, if value monism is true, and mental states are oriented to value, then isn't the ideal state of mind just that which follows from being duly attentive to the one and only value? Thus integration would not be a self-standing ideal. Meanwhile, if value pluralism is true then can one not be warranted in being mentally conflicted simply because values themselves conflict? Thus integration would be a false ideal. My task in chapter two, therefore, is to show that the integration ideal is worthy of independent consideration, irrespective of one's view about the topology of value.

I argue that value monists may have reason not to subscribe to the integration ideal, so the ideal is not a simple consequence of their commitment to monism. Not all mental states are oriented to value, for example, some non-rational desires and affective states,

and it is not clear that rational ideals should dominate one's life. A similar argument applies to value pluralism, for some issues of mental organization are orthogonal to the issue of value topology. But in any case, even if values unavoidably conflict, it is not – I argue – incoherent to try to actively shape one's mental life to *avoid* these conflicts. This is a further reason why the standing of the integration ideal cannot be settled simply by grasping the correct theory of the topology of value.

## Chapter Three

In chapter three, I focus on Michael Smith's conception of the ideal organization of desire. According to Smith, even non-occurrently conflicting desires ought to be integrated together. His view appears to reflect the character of everyday forms of justification and explanation.

Smith's view is worth considering for several reasons: it aids my later examination of ambivalence; is a manageable target when arguing that conflicts need not impair agency or undermine well-being; relates integration to rationality in a manner similar to Plato's conception of soul; and allows me to respond that even integrated people can be harmed as a result of their mental organisation.

Smith's argument involves an analogy with coherentist views of belief. I reconstruct the argument to offer a critique. Siding with Niko Kolodny, I argue that one's concern with coherence *simpliciter* is not rational in the case of belief, so if the analogy with belief holds, it does not support Smith's ideal for desires. But it is not clear there is an end towards which desires 'tend' that is analogous to truth in the case of belief. One might think desire-satisfaction is a good candidate, but I argue it is highly contingent that integrated desires are easier to satisfy; that one's focus on the organisation of desires can contribute to alienation from one's desires; and – drawing on cases of neurotic desire – that some forms of unified desire are harmful. Thus if there is a viable

ideal of mind, rightly named integration, it does not involve this kind of unity, as this unity is compatible with one's being in a bad way.

## Chapter Four

To focus my approach to the integration ideal, I shall examine two philosophers who argue that the avoidance of ambivalence is necessary for unimpaired agency and for well-being. Ambivalence is a suitable focus for several reasons. First, ambivalence is a familiar phenomenon. Secondly, ambivalence is a complex phenomenon that ranges over affective life, motivational states, and one's values, in both diachronic and synchronic manifestations. Thirdly, ambivalence looks as if it is closely tied to action: episodic ambivalence may interfere with an action, whereas habitual ambivalence is taken to radically impair agency. Fourthly, ambivalence is taken to be unpleasant and is thus associated negatively with well-being. Finally, to understand ambivalence one has to distinguish it from other kinds of mental conflict. Thus it is a useful focal point in a broader discussion of the ideal of integration, as integration and conflict are contraries. I have two goals in chapters four and five: to describe the varieties of ambivalence, and to argue that ambivalence is a familiar and unthreatening experience. In both chapters, I will argue that there is no direct connection between ambivalence and its purported consequences: impaired agency and diminished well-being.

In chapter four, I analyse ambivalence, and distinguish between deliberative and affective ambivalence. I then focus on deliberative ambivalence, and Harry Frankfurt's arguments to the effect that it is bad. He thinks deliberative ambivalence is a form of irrationality, undermines action, and is a form of self-betrayal; he contrasts ambivalence with the state of being wholehearted – his articulation of the integration ideal.

The main thrust of my argument sees me develop David Velleman's suggestion that usually it is one's response to one's own ambivalence, not one's ambivalence itself, that generates agential problems or compromises well-being. I consider some of the factors that can problematize one's ambivalence, but I am cautious when trying to define which kinds of ambivalence would be experienced as a problem. I am motivated by Patricia Marino's idea that from an agent's perspective, both ordinary and intractable conflicts have the same subjective character, and thus the objective character of one's ambivalence is orthogonal to its experienced place in one's mind. Furthermore, ambivalence may constitute part of one's identity, so its removal could constitute a tragic loss.

In the final part of the chapter, however, I argue that there is one form of ambivalence that really is specially harmful, because it manifests underlying distortions in one's ability to be motivated and thus to make decisions based on one's desires. This is the grain of truth in Frankfurt's hostility to ambivalence, and articulation of the integration ideal. I term this "obstructive ambivalence" and argue it is seldom reasonable, is marked by dissatisfaction, and is not readily removed by rational deliberation.

## Chapter Five

In chapter five, I turn to what I call affective ambivalence, and the work of David Pugmire. Pugmire argues that an integrated mind, one free of background conflicts and ambivalence, is necessary for deep emotions, and that one's emotions cannot be stably configured in ambivalence without substantially impairing one's agency. One is indeed harmed if one's emotions cannot be deep, so taking on Pugmire's view furthers my attempt to show that the absence of integration is neither necessarily harmful, nor impairs agency.

Like Smith's, Pugmire's arguments rest on a coherentist analogy. Pugmire thinks one's emotions have to be stably integrated into one's harmonious mental life if they are to be valuable. Against this, I argue that some deep emotions may arise in a compartmentalized and thus not fully integrated mind; or, more strongly, may presuppose disintegration. I also challenge the viability of his comparison with belief. Pugmire thinks ambivalence is almost impossible, because as he conceives it, it would embroil one in conceptual tensions and render one unable to act. I argue this is mistaken. Specifying conceptual connections between any emotions is difficult. Moreover, one might be ambivalent in a broadly ramifying way, and thus retain the conceptual links between one's emotions because they are all experienced ambivalently. The link between ambivalent emotions and action is also indirect. Pugmire is wrong to think ambivalent emotions straightforwardly undermine one's motivations, or that having internally conflicting motivations will directly make decisive action difficult. He is also wrong to think that appeals to various kinds of emotional self-management illustrate that people are unable to be ambivalent. This self-management must presuppose ambivalence, but more importantly the forms of self-management he describes are often more likely to undermine one's well-being and agency than ambivalence itself.

I explore the latter idea by examining a form of unconscious defence against difficult emotions: "projective identification", a concept at the heart of Kleinian psychoanalytic thinking. After introducing the concept, my argument mirrors that made against Smith; namely, there are times when the absence of affective ambivalence is directly harmful. I suggest that defences like projective identification can do away with affective ambivalence, but at the cost of being greatly insensitive to what is going on within oneself (to whether one is angry, sad etc.), and to the mental lives of one's interlocutors. Thus not only is affective ambivalence possible, and not in direct tension with action and well-being, but its presence can indicate one is not gripped by distorting defence mechanisms.

## Chapter Six

In chapters three to five, I contest the alleged link between integration, action, and well-being. In chapter six I push my argument further, arguing that the presence of conflicts and ambivalence can manifest good character. I situate my argument in a line of ethical thought, exemplified by Iris Murdoch, which resists the “choice and argument” model of agency in which choice and deliberation are prioritized, or are regarded as the only modes of ethical thinking.

Although I argued, in chapter four, that deliberative ambivalence is not necessarily in tension with acting well, it is obvious that one often needs to act decisively. Yet there are many different ways in which decisive people act – many ways in which actions are modified adverbially – and one may act ambivalently, even if one is not ambivalent with respect to one’s decision. Indeed I argue not only that acting in this way is possible, but that there are contexts where it is good. I offer the positive example of Captain Vere from Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd, Foretopman*, and a negative example of Agamemnon at Aulis, as envisioned by Aeschylus. I argue that these men differ in terms of their ethical sensitivity.

There are three components to ethical sensitivity: sensitivity in deliberation, in action, and over time. Prior to action, one must reason imaginatively. In action, one manifests good character in one’s affective posture, tone, etc. and must maintain an awareness of the reasons that bore on one’s situation prior to decision. One may object that psychological limitations make it hard for people to be sensitive whilst they act. I respond by pointing out that I am describing an ideal; that psychological claims do not automatically justify failures of sensitivity; and that momentary lapses of sensitivity can be recovered from at a later time, but the fact one values these recoveries merely illustrates that these lapses are exceptions from an underlying ideal sensitivity. One

needs to be sensitive to past actions over time. One is able to be so by manifesting a rich array of remainders and past-directed attitudes, by remembering what one did, and, in some cases, by making reparations. I situate this view against the background debate about whether countervailing reasons should be ‘silenced’ in a virtuous person as they act, and argue against the silencing view. Thus having a good character may involve being ambivalent. Then I discuss descriptive ambivalence in which one maintains or develops a variety of descriptive perspectives on one’s situation in difficult contexts. This is linked to forms of creative action and the wider issue of what constitutes good practical reasoning.

## Chapter Seven

My arguments in chapters three to six may appear to have undermined the viability of the integration ideal. But can we salvage the basic thought that a certain form of mental organisation, concerned with the way aspects of one’s mental life hang together, is ideal, and potentially connected to moral character? If my remarks in chapter six are plausible then there are grounds to look for another kind of integration, one that might underpin Captain Vere’s moral sensitivity, for example.

My attempt to salvage a new interpretation of integration rests on an initial distinction between a “Parts Conception” of integration, where integration consists in the absence of conflicts and ambivalence between one’s various states of mind, and a “Character Conception”, where integration is understood in terms of the relations between those states and oneself. The latter conception, unlike the former, is compatible with those states being in conflict with each other.

At the end of chapter five, I discussed how projective identification might do away with inner conflict at the cost of ethically relevant failures of self-awareness. These failures are failures of integration on the Character Conception. Thus one natural way

of developing a new ideal would be to turn to the Kleinian notion of the “depressive position”: a form of mental organisation in which processes like projective identification are relaxed and one is able to tolerate and acknowledge a variety of possibly conflicting experiences; like pleasure or excitement, these experiences need not be *per se* negative.

After noting the ambiguous normative status of the depressive position within the Kleinian tradition where it originates, I present some objections to the suggestion that if integration is interpreted as ‘being in the depressive position’, this will serve to rehabilitate integration as an ideal. Though I dismiss the first two – that one cannot stably aim for the depressive position, and that a conscious focus on it is liable to have an inflexible role in mental life – the third sticks: the depressive position lacks sufficient generality for an ideal of mental organization because leaving it can be pleasurable, instrumentally valuable, and ethically appropriate in some contexts.

These shifts of mental position are commonplace, but one ought not remain reflectively passive in the face of them. This thought motivates my positive suggestion that the right way to see integration, if it is to be salvaged as an ideal, is as a capacity, not an end state. I argue this capacity has two interlinked facets: first, the ability to tolerate difficult states of mind, and secondly, the ability to navigate between different forms of mental organization, the depressive and contrasting positions, in accordance with what the context requires. Both facets of this capacity have rational and non-rational elements.

## Chapter Eight

The integration capacity I describe in chapter seven is surely in some sense a personal excellence, so it will help to fix what kind of personal excellence it is by asking whether it belongs to moral philosophy’s best-known kind: moral virtue. One might

think I answered this question in chapter six, where I suggested that one's ability to tolerate and manifest ambivalent emotions, for example, shows good character. However, one can ask whether this is because one possesses a distinct capacity, or because one manifests ordinary virtue traits (if the latter was true, the integration ideal would once again vanish as a self-standing ideal). The behaviour of my exemplars may seem good, but the character of this is unclear.

I reject the idea that integration is akin to many Aristotelian-type virtues due to the way it relates to a field of characteristic activity and motivation. However, the virtue of courage also has these features. Moreover, courage and the integration capacity appear similar, because the latter requires one to tolerate difficult mental experiences and, like the former, may appear to play an executive role in one's mind. I contest this association and argue that integration is not courage under another name. Nor is it a related, yet hitherto unnamed, virtue. I argue that the toleration internal to integration is not akin to stoic toleration, though that would motivate the claim that it is a virtue. My main argument to the effect that integration is not a virtue rests on the idea that it might underpin specific forms of cruelty. One who is integrated in my alternative sense does not defensively project away their states of mind. Thus they can accurately engage with the mental lives of others: a form of intimacy that underpins forms of knowing harm. However, integration might not be compatible with sustained viciousness. Thus I conclude that the capacity underpins virtue, though it is not sufficient for virtue.

## Why This Matters

My discussion of integration as an ideal may seem rarefied, but it matters. In philosophy, ideals of mental organisation can be investigated separately from ideals of virtuous character. Ordinary talk about 'balance' or 'getting it together' corresponds to the former domain, even if there is no a corresponding domain of philosophy, yet.

This talk concerns one's attitude to the familiar pressures within mental life, including conflicts and ambivalence, not one's moral character directly.

Integration is also a practical ideal. It's a familiar feeling to 'fall to bits', even if this happens infrequently. Thus anyone has *prima facie* reason to be interested in how these experiences should be understood, what they involve, whether they are bad, and how they relate to broader moral concerns. This is especially relevant once one notices the prevalence of social norms that inhibit this thinking: norms of decisiveness, resolve, stoicism, and so on. Not only are these norms often unwarranted or destructive, but it is easy to overlook the fact that they manifest substantive views about how one's mind ought to be organised. These views are worthy of scrutiny. Such scrutiny is of academic interest because these views have a history and seem plausible because of their relationship to background conceptions of mind, value, and ethical life.

This scrutiny is also personally relevant because it is easy to labour under a false ideal that is hostile to ambivalence and conflict. If sustained, one's life can be brought to breaking point by the attempt to avoid conflicts or suppress ambivalence, by the attempt to outrun or avoid difficult emotions or momentary indecision. One's relationships to others, particularly one's most intimate relationships, are directly affected by one's conception of what states of mind are acceptable. If a couple cannot tolerate each other's conflicts and ambivalences; if each partner attempts to remain stoical, or never acts ambivalently even when a situation is complex, their relationship will suffer. This is so even if each person is sufficiently good, or acts on the basis of good reasons. Ideals of mental organisation shape the impact and reach of such reasons. One might grasp all the reasons in the world, yet remain insensitive to one's own emotions, and thus fail to be related in the right way to those reasons, because they fail to move one in the right ways. Over time, one may become aware of this impoverishment, and realise that although one 'made up one's mind', there is more to having a mind than making choices: the meanings and affective contours of those

choices also have to be experienced and in some contexts: tolerated. A person who is integrated in the sense that their mind lacks conflicts between mental states (as on a Parts Conception of integration) can still struggle make up their mind in this sense. Although they may be free of conflict, they may remain in the grip of various mental pressures, or suffer forms of loss, which far outweigh the benefits of their integrated state. On my revised conception of integration (a Character Conception), one may experience conflicts and ambivalence, but one is not shorn of important aspects of one's identity, wracked by loss, or beholden to fragile ideals of coherence; ideals which can mask one's continuing failure to confront the pressures and constraints that saturate any life.